

“We need to get away from neoliberal policies in reconstruction”

Interview with Aseel Sawalha on lessons learned from Beirut

How was reconstruction implemented in Beirut after the war?

When the war ended in 1991, the whole city was divided into east and west Beirut. The green line bisected the city. At that time, there was a lot of destruction. After all these years of war, many areas were still

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empty or vacant or occupied by the displaced. The war officially ended after the peace agreement was signed in Saudi Arabia. Rafiq al-Hariri became the Prime Minister of Lebanon and he started the reconstruction process. The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut’s Central District (SOLIDERE) was formed and put in charge of rebuilding the downtown area. It adopted the slogan “Beirut: An Ancient City for the Future”. SOLIDERE appropriated land in the downtown area, and the original owners were given shares in the reconstruction company, which wasn’t acceptable to many people. But people didn’t really have a choice. One of the challenges was that many of the buildings in the downtown area were vacant, and many of them were occupied by people who had been displaced by the war. So a central fund for the displaced was formed to give refugees compensation for leaving the downtown area. This created a lot of new issues – because many of them ended up buying property, mostly in slums outside the downtown area. None of them moved back to their villages or the places where they came from because there was not enough development there, no schools, no good jobs, etc. In addition, there was a lot of corruption in distributing the compensation and many people didn’t feel that they were fairly

treated. Before the war, they had lived in those places for 20 to 30 years, and they didn’t really receive enough compensation for this.

Reconstructing Beirut took several years. During this time, even the name of the area changed. Previously, it was called the downtown area, but now many people simply started calling it Solidere. The entire area was demolished to make a fresh start.

What should be the key lessons for other reconstruction efforts in the MENA region?

One of the main issues is the formation of a similar company for reconstructing Amman. It has appropriated land and created another downtown in Amman although the original downtown was still there and still functioning. This Abdali project is also very problematic in a different way. One of the things that should be included in other reconstruction efforts is meeting local people’s needs. For example, when they rebuilt the downtown area in Beirut, it became too expensive for established businesses that existed downtown to go back. Also, it is too expensive for people to live in the residential towers they are building there. So it is not catering for local people at all. Instead, new downtown Beirut conveys an image as a city where rich people from other Arab countries can come and shop. However, these people never came, because of the conflict in the area. Also, there are other places in the region for the few rich people to go to. When the downtown

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project was first completed, it offered department stores, cinemas, supermarkets and fancier restaurants. But most of these places are barely surviving and many of them have closed down. It is not a city for locals and it is not a vibrant downtown area as it used to be. Now it is only for the elites.”

What changes are needed to better include local communities in future reconstruction efforts?

I am not a planner, but my suggestion is to include more people and to get away from neoliberal policies in reconstruction. And this is the problem with these reconstruction projects in many parts of the Middle East – in Amman, in Beirut, and now also in plans for reconstruction in Syria. You don't want top-down policies. You want to include local people and people who owned properties there before the war. It might be an idea to provide low-interest loans to help them rebuild from the bottom up. People who were using these spaces, such as traders, would love to return. In Beirut, you can now find some examples of people longing to change their city and working together.

There are some small-scale initiatives renovating a building here and there or opening up small museums. It cannot change the main development project coming from the private sector and the government, but some of these grassroots organisations have something to say and are the users of these places. In my view, these stakeholders should be included in reconstruction planning in Beirut and Amman early on.

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Dr Aseel Sawalha

Dr Aseel Sawalha currently serves as Associate Professor of Anthropology at Fordham University. She has conducted fieldwork for her PhD dissertation in the city of Beirut, Lebanon. Her research explored the ways in which various readings of the past informed and shaped debates over identity, ethnicity, culture and gender relations in the context of urban reconstruction in post-war Beirut.



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