

**WestminsterResearch**

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**Online politics and grassroots activism in Lebanon: negotiating  
sectarian gloom and revolutionary hope**

**Aouragh, M.**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in  
Contemporary Levant, 1 (2), 125-141.

The final definitive version is available online:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2016.1241399>

© 2016 Taylor & Francis

---

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

---

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail [repository@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:repository@westminster.ac.uk)

# Online politics and grassroots activism in Lebanon: negotiating sectarian *gloom* and revolutionary *hope*

Miriyam Aouragh

Communication and Media Research Institute-CAMRI, University of Westminster, Oxford, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article describes the confluence of online activism and street protests in Lebanon. While Arab protesters have systematically been portrayed as *young, urban and wired* since the 2011 uprisings, Lebanese activists are also often regarded as trapped between war and sectarianism. This article challenges both frameworks and looks closer at the ways pre-existing waves of discontent crystallised into the mobilisation of thousands of Lebanese onto the streets of Beirut in 2010 and 2011. To achieve this, the article critiques the over-emphasis on network politics that accompanies internet-related hypotheses. The fashioning of a new kind of politics outside the dominant political factions ('8-14 March' blocs) was crucial for activists in Lebanon. New independent initiatives that locate feminist and queer politics within an overall analysis of imperialism and capitalism, as well as experimentation with digital technologies, helped forge a unique and non-sectarian camaraderie. By conveying the circumstances that have shaped political involvement, this article avoids the projection of non-ideological/networked politics that dominate concepts of online activism. The internet played a dual role in Lebanese grassroots politics, as illustrated through the experiences of the feminist collective Nasawiya.

## KEYWORDS

Lebanese activism;  
cyberspace; online politics;  
Arab Spring; sectarianism;  
Nasawiya

The mass protests that took place across the Arab world in 2011 were explained at the time in different ways, but, overall, they were understood as self-emancipatory uprisings constituting one of the most invigorating phenomena of recent times. Six years down the road it looks as if mainstream media has come back from its earlier celebrations –disappointing refutations of the revolutionary protests that have harboured counter-revolutions can also be heard in activist milieus. Due to their unsettled outcomes, it is much more productive to identify the impending impact of such historic episodes in a long- durée perspective rather than accepting either celebration or (retrospective) regret (Chalcraft, 2016). Such a long view is appropriate given that the mass uprisings would not have been possible without the accumulated effect of many smaller, shorter, quieter episodes in the preceding years: these previous efforts formed the small building blocks for the uprisings, and they themselves need to be retrieved and taken into consideration in any analysis of contemporary politics in the region.

Despite the overwhelming media attention that was focused on the initial uprisings, it is notable that hardly any mass media outlet at the time mentioned Lebanon. One of the few exceptions was an item on BBC Arabic (Figure 1), which showed a video of activists in Beirut's Hamra district busily organising their activities on laptops and using Wi-Fi in cafes.

The video included the now familiar over-emphasis on online media and the image of the young, wired, middle classes as the key ingredients of activism. The online user-generated platforms through which calls for protest were announced and disseminated were central in this narrative. And yet,



Figure 1. BBC Arabic clips of Facebook group and café gathering place. Aired on 28 February, the clip is available on: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWeZPDsCuBl>>.

despite the hyped-up framing of social media revolutions, this particular item was much more in tune with the political realities than may have appeared to be the case at first glance. Despite the clichés about the importance of internet activism, by focusing on Lebanon, the video actually offered a break from dominant assessments. The absenteeism is probably because Lebanon is often regarded (e.g. in policy papers) as being caught between a rock (war) and a hard place (sectarianism), which implies that sectarianism is an all-encapsulating and intrinsic part of Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> The 2011 protests (temporarily) challenged these approaches.

As mass revolts rocked the region, pre-existing waves of discontent (re-)mobilised thousands of Lebanese, who came out onto the streets of Beirut. This article looks at the Lebanese articulation of the sentiment expressed in the Arab protests, *Al Shàb Yurid Isqat al-Nizam* ('the people demand the downfall of the system'). Across the Arab world, including in Lebanon, protesters were negating the generally assumed impossibility of fulfilling a revolutionary potential. The protests in Lebanon were remarkably similar to those in Tunisia and Egypt: for a brief moment something extraordinary was happening. The universality of the chants was clear in the way that they echoed in very different contexts across the region and were sometimes adapted to national circumstances. In Morocco the people chanted '*Al Shàb Yurid Isqat al-Fasad* (the *corrupt* system), and in Lebanon the chant was '*Al Shàb Yurid Isqat al-Nizam al-Ta'ifi* (the people demand the downfall of the *sectarian* system). That period offered a messy confluence of online outrage and large offline street protests. The aim of this article is to deconstruct this two-fold online-offline phenomenon. One of my main objectives

is to convey, through ethnographic examples, how some of the activists I met got involved in activism in the first place. These activists have contributed to a different kind of politics in Lebanon, with new initiatives that take place outside the dominant groups. It is not my intention to lump all Lebanese activists together—there is diversity of views and in some of the coalitions a range of political traditions come together. However, this research is predisposed towards a discussion of leftist activists. Much more than group or community affiliation, it is the subjective experiences of these activists that have shaped their political involvement in particular ways and times.

Discussions of online activism seem to imply a less concerned engagement with ideology, class and political organisations than offline engagement, which is increasingly represented as hierarchic and outdated. These conceptual parameters are almost always Euro-American inspired. How to assess whether the internet limits or accommodates sectarianism—an issue that deeply preoccupied the activists I worked with in Lebanon? The experiences of activists need to be placed within a broader understanding of the imminence of war and the manners in which it coincided with, and thereby intensified, the evolution of the internet without losing sight of the influence of class or ideology not to mention ‘traditional’ forms of organizing. This angle allows us to pay attention to the importance of material infrastructures and the power relations that they enable. To grasp how the technological relates to the political in real-life activism, I engage with the case of a feminist, non-sectarian collective, Nasawiya, that exemplifies the ways activists and the internet transform across events and experiences.

## Theoretical acrobatics

Explanatory models emanating from media and communication studies frequently build on ideas around ‘networking power’ inspired by Castells’ *Communication Power* (2009), itself heavily influenced by the mother-concept of *Networks* earlier. These models sometimes seem to bypass material dynamics such as poverty or infrastructure. The post-modern condition of deterritorialisation (captured in terms like ‘flows of spaces’) encouraged such paradigms. But the idea that communication is a central axis of political power was rejected by critics who consider the internet to be an *extension* of the state and key to capitalism (Fuchs, 2009). The status quo in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has long been affected by colonialism, imperialism and counter-revolution. In any analysis of events in the region, we cannot overlook the centrality of state-controlled capitalist infrastructures and the legacy of imperial hegemony (Aouragh & Chakravarti, 2016). Recent analysis of online activism has tended to focus on visibility and digital connectivity at the expense of content, organisation and political ideology.

These qualifications are especially crucial for the study of technology in the Middle East, where popular projections about internet politics were plentiful. The reality in the region is a far cry from the picture presented by ‘horizontal’, ‘autonomous’, ‘immaterial’ paradigms, that Mejiyas (2012) calls the utopia of *liberation technology*. When we refrain from engaging with the enforced realities of capitalism and imperial dominance, we perform conceptual gymnastics and our theories will lack empirical value. One solution is to place the legitimate critique of the celebration of low-key online engagement (‘clicktivism’), and of reductionist claims regarding the power of communication and information dissemination, *alongside* a discussion of necessary online mobilisation tools, virtual archives, or alternative (citizen media) news.<sup>2</sup>

The 1960s US civil rights movement has become a wearisome point of comparison in critiques of internet activism, one that contrasts physical, dangerous and strong-tied networks with loosely organised, digital weak tied-networks. Yet, this derivative metaphor strikes a very familiar chord in Lebanon, where change comes with personal sacrifice and ultimately depends on physical and collective protest. Rather than oppose *either* weak or strong ties, I consider political struggles to inhabit both perspectives. This means that, depending on other factors, the internet can be useful *and* useless (Alexander & Aouragh, 2011). By adopting an ethnographic view of Lebanese activism, this article shows the relative

importance of both kinds of ties.

The activists I met with during fieldwork use the internet very prominently. The people I quote and refer to in this article are not intended to represent the Lebanese social-political landscape, far from it. Rather, Hani, Moussa, Reem and others present a slice of the activist/political scene of 2010 in particular, and they are politically diverse in terms of confession, political issues and political denominations.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, despite their diversity, they share a rejection of the liberal/reformist and right-wing spectrum and are keen to see the dominant (sectarian, sexist, racist, capitalist) norms of society challenged. The fruition of certain grassroots protests discussed below indicate that Lebanese political activism is fluid and rich. Through participant observation and the interviews I conducted, I came to realise that while the political is personal and thus far more than leisure as sometimes portrayed, political activism is above all a *difficult* task that depends on *collective* strategies and long-term commitment.

Many activists are aware of the complexities they are working against and understand that they cannot be fixed by a one-fits-all activism. Furthermore, when asked about the difficulties faced, respondents often referred to sectarianism. An in-depth analysis of this subject is outside the scope of this article. But, because the debate about sectarianism risks straying into generalisations about Lebanon, I will discuss how impervious sectarianism remains both in the online realm and the potential solutions offered by cyberspace.

### Sectarianism and the emergence of a new left

Whilst accepting that there are important cultural, social, religious and linguistic traits that are broadly shared across Arab countries, we need a specific understanding of Lebanon's political-historic reality, and of why this reality weakens the promise of activism in Lebanon. Lebanese society inherited social fragmentation and regional antagonism from the era of colonial rule and this continues to shape today's politics in Lebanon. A contributing frustration is that domestic parties usually behave according to the interests of their (proxy) sect leaders. Acknowledging this colonial and domestic angle is essential because when tribal, sectarian or confessional divisions are analysed only from a cultural perspective, they leave the impression of a pre-modern (primordial) phenomenon that is impervious to change. As Makdisi (2000) and others have shown, traditional ways of doing politics evolved to a large extent under the influence of external interference. Sectarianism is intimately related to social crises and cynically exploits the dynamics of capitalism. Sectarianism maintains the dominant relations and tends to come to the surface during shifts in the modes of production, i.e. sectarian tensions are not an antidote to modern politics but a reflection of their inherent contradictions (Chit, 2012). Hence, disputes over land ownership or regional tensions are sometimes incorrectly redefined as 'sectarian'.

To obtain an insightful understanding of Lebanon's online media context, sectarianism should be seen not 'simply' as a practice of divide and rule, which only appears from the top to the bottom, but rather as integrated in many aspects of society, including the internet. Moreover, Lebanon has a rich history of anti-sectarian subversion and its movements are well aware of the disastrous outcomes of sectarianism. In order to assess the anti-sectarian and sectarian legacy together we need a *joint* analysis. One of the clearest examples of such a strand is given by Fawaz Traboulsi in his three-way description of Lebanon's political structure as consisting of the institutionalisation of religious sects, a liberal economic system based on the service sector, and a problematic regional relationship (Traboulsi, 2007). This suggests that the very causes and complications of capitalist development are encoded in religious-sectarian semantics. Such an approach—in light of increasing urbanisation and the changing class politics—offers a space within which to ask whether changing 'objective conditions' can affect the sectarian-secular equation.

Although anti-sectarian struggles are written out of mainstream scholarship about Lebanon, disobedience in regard to sectarian classifications is a large part of the collective identity and *raison-d'être* of the left (Haugbolle, 2013: 437). Lebanese leftism is defined by its opposition to the sectarian quota system, which, despite the peace agreement in 1991, was never abolished (Yacoub, 2014). But rather than representing a homogeneous

and self-contained group, the inter-relational position of



different communities occurs in accordance with social shifts. The presence of the left, for instance, impacted the way the nominal positions of different communities changed overtime. Historically, Shia and Druze identities have been fluid; the failure of the secular project (in which both groups were heavily involved) indicates the growing communal consciousness, as Hazran (2013) demonstrates. The crucial role of Druze in the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and Shia in the Communist Party (LCP) hint at their class rather than sectarian motives (idem, p.170). Thus secularism has become constitutive of what it means to be 'leftist'—and as important as anti-imperialism in this regard.

These examples inevitably remind us that society is greatly influenced by social struggles. Lebanese society is well versed in grassroots politics, with or without the involvement of digital media. During earlier fieldwork (2001–2003) about internet usage in Palestinian refugee camps, I had witnessed the mass demonstrations that took place in response to Israel's military actions in Palestine and to the invasion of Iraq. It is against the backdrop of these major events and the concurrent emergence of a relatively new independent left that activists' critiques of sectarianism grew louder. Whereas the demonstrations against the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005 (then named *Cedar Revolution* or *Independence Intifada*) saw the biggest outpouring of people, this period also saw the subduing of grassroots elements and, paradoxically, deepened of existing sectarian schisms by what became two opposing 'blocs'. Thus, decisions around issues that groups could agree about were sometimes hindered by the messy webs of local allegiances.

The link between sectarianism and contemporary activism is partly related to generational proximity to (or memories of) the civil war. The 'post memory' school (Haugbolle, 2010; Larkin, 2012; Sawalha, 2010) provides a significant framework in this regard. Contestations over history as well as the enforced cessation of questions about the civil war continue. This goes beyond reconciliation in relation to the *bad* past—sometimes it is actually a matter of repairing what was already *good*. For example, Sawalha illustrates how the district of 'Ain el Mreisse used to constitute a space of diversity that transcended sectarian politics, but that this space has been threatened by the actions of powerful elites (connected to the *Solidere* project of certain construction magnates) who ascribe a very different meaning to these social spaces' (2010: 69).

Thus, memory, the politics of representation, demands for justice and belief in secular ethics are intertwined. However, Lebanon seems to lack the mechanisms with which it might properly concede this affinity. Larkin (2012) reminds us that Beirut youths growing up after the war rely on inherited narratives. Indeed, some of these chronicles are never-ending and never tired of reiterating the civil war, as if the epic resistance of the past confers upon present parties a kind of transferred glory. When old apprehensions linger in the present, a dynamic arises in which the new generation finds itself only able to exercise a certain degree of freedom. In this regard, the events of 2005 and 2006 provoked references to the civil war. Thus, activists interested in anti-sectarian politics may have stumbled against what AbiYaghi *et al.* (forthcoming) call 'sectarian ghosts'. Yet it is important to remember that in the first decade after the end of the civil war (1991) new political progressive possibilities began to emerge. Yacoub (2014: 93) refers to the activities of the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL) in the mid-1990s, the *No Frontiers Group* at the American University of Beirut (AUB), the *People's Movement* (which protested the growing neoliberalism and the increasingly pro-US policies of the new Hariri government), as the signs of a new left. These experiences stimulated the emergence of the *Democratic Left Movement*, partly out of a split within the Communist Party.<sup>4</sup> Plenty of examples encountered during fieldwork illustrated that activist groups are actively—through public workshops and political magazines (Figure 2)—ignoring ghosts and constructing their own present; their political projects (including secularism) matter *relative* to their current lived experiences.

My respondents were uncomfortable with analyses that were mostly interested in confessional animosity. They would tell me that Lebanese sectarianism is not an overarching system that is immune to domestic or regional pressures. Yet, many of their (negative) examples suggested, in turn, that sectarianism was sustained by a complex system of checks and balances, one that often sabotages their efforts to counter sectarianism. Hence,



I initially regarded the reluctance of activists



Figure 2. Photo fieldwork summer 2010, *Socialist Days* gathering and *Al Manshour* magazine.

to discuss sectarianism as a form of political anaesthesia—not wanting to be confronted with that actuality—especially because they themselves often described how parties neutralised their labours. I soon shared the reluctance of my interlocutors because projections such as anaesthesia are in essence a form of political pathologising—they avoid political complexities and remove the agency of actors. In fact, what this contradiction between refusing an emphasis on sectarianism and acknowledging the role of sectarianism in their activism actually showed was their constant negotiation between gloom and hope.

This relates, in a sense, to the way in which the Arab revolutionary movements came (to some) as a surprise. Revolution was never really a relevant framework and yet it was something my respondents took quite seriously. During fieldwork in 2010 a number of interviewees pointed to the growing pro- tests across the region. This was before those protests had been accorded any serious academic attention—after all, social movements and protests were deemed irrelevant in many studies of Arab politics. As several commentators have noted, scholars who ascribed to notions of ‘authoritarian resilience’ when explaining Middle East politics had allowed the voices from the movements to be neglected, and this increased the need to re-insert ideology into analyses of the reasons, conditions and objectives of activists (Bayat, 2011; Haugbolle, 2012; Pace & Cavatorta, 2012).

It was exactly this dualism of hope and gloom that began to make a difference for Hani, a blogger and graphic designer in his late twenties from Beirut. During our second interview in the summer of 2010, he mentioned that something was brewing: there were groups of protesters who were talking and behaving differently. They could not be simply explained according to the divisive blocs or existing party politics. Hani regarded these protesters with exhilaration, anticipating something significant: ‘One of the most important changes in the Arab world is the growing protests against our regimes.’ His tone and assumptions were a break from the Lebanese activist navel-gazing I had occasionally encountered. He considered their activism to be part of a regional change. In Lebanon this meant standing up to a system rather than against people’s separate community or sect—an ambition that was too often dismissed as naïve because sectarianism was deemed to be too strong to overcome. However, these ideas were extremely relevant, and were soon given credence. Neither Hani nor I had any idea how prophetic his statement would turn out to be, but three months later, as protests first shook Sidi Bouzid and soon erupted in many other cities and towns in Tunisia, followed by Egypt and Morocco and other countries, I remembered his words. They offered another form of Lebanese politics, not only a form of politics that went beyond the singular state but one far surpassing binary ‘blocs’ politics. Reviewing this period, I am reminded of Sami Hermez’ reference to a desire to restore *karama*, dignity (2011: 531), as (a belated) part of the motivation for the protests. This view is one that acknowledges both the hardships of repression but also the possibilities of change.

Meanwhile, wide-ranging debates that took place in 2011 led to the creation of a framework for understanding these dramatic politico-historic shifts. The uprisings certainly produced popular perspectives about political mobilisation that regard the internet as an alternative public sphere that transforms political activism; the BBC report referred to at the start of this article is a case in point. I still wondered whether the online political sphere offered an alternative space for an already growing alternative politics. For it seems that while the 2005 events were divisive, activists were able to unite again on a practical base during the 2006 war.

## The dread of war and the rise of the internet

For at least the first two years following the 2011 uprisings (until the 'Arab Winter' was announced) media outlets dedicated unrelenting time and space to the role of the internet in the 'Arab Spring'. With numerous special issues, conferences and workshops, the promises of the internet were also a central theme for media and communication studies. As discussed elsewhere (Aouragh, 2016), a growing number of contributions to scholarship have demonstrated the growth of internet-based activism in the Arab world. The potential of online politics in regard to the popular uprisings was also discussed by central figures in the Arab internet arena (Sami Ben Gharbia, Wael Abbas, Hossam al-Hamalawy).<sup>5</sup> A recurrence in these (appropriately sober) contributions was the emphasis on a longer history of the technology-activism nexus that took into account a regional sense of solidarity (large protests for Palestine and Iraq) and its manifestation among internet users. Both dynamics were part of the Lebanese activist scene.

When interface script became Arab-friendly, activists were able to connect more intensely with other activists, locally and abroad—the shared language further consolidated fraternal relations across the region. For instance, it allowed groups to exchange advice about ways to bypass surveillance and censorship. Arab Bloggers summits were organised in the region in the mid-2000s. In the region, Egypt was certainly a crucial node, but Beirut became a hub (and sometimes a refuge) in itself. Regional blogger meetings were very political and included debates about state censorship and how to organise solidarity with arrested bloggers across the region (Menassat, 2008a). This political-techno crystallisation allowed additional networks to fertilise. The growing enthusiasm intensified further as grassroots protests grew—and, as Egyptian blogger Noha Atef has argued (2011), some bloggers played a heroic role by exposing state oppression, including the beating and murder of Khaled Said by Egyptian police, which later became the spark for the Egyptian revolution.<sup>6</sup> The existing links between bloggers in Yemen, Morocco, Syria and Lebanon helped broaden the different protests that erupted in 2011. The link between digital politics and offline movements wasn't always logical in the Lebanese context.

Analyzing what sparked the political appropriation of the internet by activists, I discerned two key-moments: the 2005 rift in the political landscape after Hariri's death, which I discussed earlier, and the July 2006 war.<sup>7</sup> It struck me that the 33-day war waged by Israel in 2006—which gave rise to hundreds of thousands of internal refugees, resulted in over 1,400 dead and destroyed large parts of the country—prompted such an upbeat spirit. Involvement in emergency relief during the July war of 2006, paradoxically, rejuvenated some of the self-organising and independent networks that had existed before the 2005 schisms and before the sense of collective defeat that arose after the invasion of Iraq. This is reminiscent of the post-civil-war youths a decade earlier, who were politicised during their participation in the People's Relief Foundation (which itself was founded during the civil war by communist doctors) during the 1996 Israeli attack on the southern town of Qana. Numerous interviews suggested that this moment contributed to the mobilisation of a new generation of activists through a new form of engagement around humanitarian aid, with thousands of internally displaced families scattered and South Lebanon, in particular, the site of enormous damage. Many refugees flocked to Beirut where most of the activists or political groups already resided. The same period saw a synchronisation of Lebanese media (mainstream, alternative, citizen and corporate) with many of the political groups and activists. Most political sides were

reunited online in their anger at the pro-Israeli bias that was evident in international media. The Lebanese blogosphere was encouraged by the crucial need to provide Lebanon-based information in response to Israeli propaganda. Blogs were being created for this purpose, such as *Beirut Journal* and *Siege Notes* (Harb, 2009). This convergence helps us to understand the evolution of the internet. The timing of these specific events also implicated the situated practices that emanated.

In the face of the military invasion in 2006, and the mentioned risk of civil war hovering over the shoulders of activists, the idea of 'online activism' felt rather alien—the internet was prone to being subjected to reductionist assumptions of the kind that lacked a conceptualisation of its dialectical nature. During an insightful interview, 25-year-old activist Reem from Beirut described internet politics as 'what you do on the ground.' She, perhaps counter-intuitively, rejected the assumption that she was part of a 'new' generation of internet-savvy activists. Everything she said confirmed that the online does not negate the offline—because it simply cannot do so. In fact, activists in Lebanon had very little in common with the image conjured up by labels like 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism'. Many were pragmatic about the dawning digital possibilities. Even if visual rhetoric is often part of political mediation, especially in this particular phase of the struggle, they were rarely interested in spectacle itself. Elevating cyberspace as the spectre of creative politics was rare due to the sense of urgency. I wish to tease out this inter-relation further. For instance, despite my preoccupation with cyberspace as (potentially) offering a new activist venue, my interlocutors increasingly drew me to physical places during fieldwork.

### *From Sit-ins to cafes: physical prominence of politics*

Local activism relies on its own rules of engagement. During 2008, activism was particularly fuelled by anxieties about the fragile state of politics and the difficulty of organising around a secular (non-sectarian) position. The activists I met were not *exclusively* involved with the internet in the way that the notion of online activism would seem to suggest. Rather, they instrumentalised the internet as part of their grassroots activism. This overlap has given rise to another familiar debate among activists related to the priority of (physical) place over (virtual) space.

If the many discussions in which I participated in the aftermath of the 2006 devastation showed me one thing, it is that activists recall demonstrations, sit-ins and occupations of public squares more vividly than their online actions. They put huge effort into holding mass protests in physical spaces for almost two years in a row. The occupations of the two big squares in the capital city by the two main blocs can be seen as the antecedents of Tahrir Square, with the obvious difference that elements of the state, in the form of various political parties, were involved in the protests.<sup>8</sup> First, there was the 'Truth' campaign (demanding Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon), which occupied Martyr Square in the centre of Beirut, where Rafiq al-Hariri was buried. After his burial, the square very quickly became associated with the 14 March coalition. Then, after the 2006 war, Riyadh al-Solh Square (a stone's throw away from Martyr Square) became the most important site of contestation, occupied by what was then known as the 8 March coalition, in protest against UN Security Council Resolution

What started as an incidental protest organised by political parties grew into a permanent sit-in that included many groups. This occupation, lasting almost a year, involved different sections of the left.

The Riad al-Solh sit-in, aside from its political purpose, was at the same time a pleasant space. Some corners felt particularly domestic as they were transformed into living rooms, where people brought their comfortable sofas. There was *nargila* (water pipe) smoke and coffee brewing throughout. During New Year's Eve, different parties scattered around the area, especially for the high point of the evening, when the famous singer Sabah—invited by Michel Aoun (see footnote 9)—appeared on stage. This made sense because the political leaders were well aware that they the people had to be entertained; rewarded for their loyalty. The sit-in had a symbolic value; it sent a significant message

about the strength of the political parties and coalitions involved. It was a venue for critics to come together to meet other like-minded people. There were also critical debates about the sit-in being a

public flexing of muscles between powerful groups for agendas that do not benefit ordinary people. Some considered it imperative to challenge the schism between the two dominant blocs (March 8 and 14) that did not necessarily give them a voice and pondered alternative options.

2008 was an extraordinary year for clashes between opposing parties. One respondent described the atmosphere of this time as a 'sense that this country always seems on the verge of war'. Particularly, the role of the most important Lebanese armed group, Hezbollah, was an important part of the discussion. When I returned for fieldwork in 2008, the live speeches by Nasrallah were a fascinating phenomenon the way that people watched almost breathlessly when Hassan Nasrallah appeared in public to make a speech seemed hyperbolic. Once, whilst taking a taxi back from a visit to friends in the Palestinian refugee camp Bourj al-Barajne, the driver turned up the volume and drove slowly, in order to listen to the speech of Nasrallah at length. On another occasion, I was in T-Marbouta in the central part of Hamra waiting for a friend. This vibrant café, where many activists hung out (and still do), was a space for discussion. A projector was brought out, the noise of the people faded and many turned their chairs to watch the speech on the beige wall. As we all listened intently, I asked Khaled, a socialist and fearless LGBTQ activist, whether this level of interest signified a pro-Hezbollah position. He said this was not the point. Between parts of Nasrallah's speech, he explained that, whatever one's politics, what Nasrallah said was important. The speech included warnings regarding the border with Israel. Khaled stated: 'This [Israel] concerns the whole country and will have an impact on all of us'. At that point, in 2008, during a lock-down of the parliament, there were very violent clashes throughout the city. In these weeks the Lebanese blogosphere was dominated by these events, many responding to the spike in the sectarian tension that the clashes had caused (Menassat, 2008b).

Considering decades of aggression and the renewed memories of 2006, Khaled's words were not an understatement. They reflect common fears about what might occur due to the tensions between political parties. The nature of this fear depended on the activists' opinions regarding Hezbollah. The intricate relation between activists and Hezbollah cannot be reduced to a single type: for some it was negatively influenced by experiences on the ground,<sup>10</sup> while for others admiration was limitless (to the point of uncritical support) due to the threat of Israel. These disagreements also fed online debates. Some became frustrated in 2010 when they received no concrete support for issues, such as Palestinian rights, to which the party provided plenty of lip-service. Thus 'the left' is not a homogeneous constituency. Hezbollah's growing investment in state representation as its main target for achieving power meant that it did not support some of the activists' grassroots aims when the party did not see any benefit from them. One related observation made to me later in the same evening was that these internal and armed divisions sucked the energy out of grassroots initiatives. I wondered whether digital media could form a public sphere that pushes against the dominant balance of forces, could put an end, or at least reduce, to historical resentments by reframing it. Can online communities help render sectarian allegiances as something outmoded?

## The emergence of Lebanon's' cyberspace

Is Lebanese cyberspace a *counter-hegemonic* force that challenges the mainstream public sphere? It is indisputable that there is much more media diversity in our digital age. The internet is fed by existing social sources, and may replicate existing antagonisms, but for the same reason it may also be a secular force and accommodate the discourses of anti-sectarian movements. More important is to understand how a Lebanese cyberspace came about in the first place, when and during which conditions did it emerge? Here we discover that Lebanon's rich journalism culture plays a key role. At their peak, Lebanese bloggers became a key source and were read as much as well-known newspapers (Saghbini, 2010). As the internet became more widespread, blogs disrupted the split between mainstream (offline) and alternative (online) media, yet the antagonism remained. In due course, some of the bloggers became integrated as online columnists for some of

the biggest news sites (AL-Akhbar, As-Safir). Interestingly, initially online English-language websites were overwhelmingly affiliated with 14 March, while Arab-language websites were associated with 8 March (Menassat,



2007). Moreover, Alexa-based listings showed that the biggest Lebanese websites were often party- affiliated (and funded). Blogs were also an important link to the homeland for Lebanon's very large diaspora (Haugbolle, 2007).<sup>11</sup> In fact, several bloggers I met were themselves returnees from east Africa or South America.

Thus the way in which the internet operates cannot be grasped without considering the larger socio-media ecology of Lebanon. Two basic qualifications help unravel the development of a Lebanese cyberspace: the media ecology was already extraordinarily diverse and Lebanese activists benefited from a more open media policy. At the time of fieldwork in mid-2000s, there was no clear policy for the internet: the regulation of online public opinion showed many grey areas. These broader freedoms (especially compared to other Arab activists) must be acknowledged, though the continuity of random arrests attest to the looming insecurity (Ghattas, 2015).

Interlocutors I met during my fieldwork often spoke of the Hariri assassination as being a backlash against their activism: it was a phase that was followed by a suffocating entrapment within rival blocs. By contrast, the 2006 war, despite its horrors, saw the revival of independent activism. That period unleashed an enthusing dynamism. Activists worked round the clock, filling the gap left (or abandoned) by the state. Hani's political activism increased when he joined the activist-led relief collective *Samidoun*.<sup>12</sup> His experience of this time left a deep impact on Hani. It did not demoralise him because he felt he made a difference. Under the pen-name *Hanibael*, he passionately commented on politics but transformed from a politically engaged blogger into an on-the-ground activist who used the internet.

This type of grassroots relief has been described as the 'politics of care'. I agree here with Mognieh (2015) that the difference between resisting war and participating in neutral humanitarian relief lies in the factor of political commitment to solidarity and protest. In 2006 such engagement inspired a radical international solidarity campaign against the Israeli war, and was far removed from the 'market of aid' that emerged in the post-war professionalisation of relief. Relief soon encapsulated into all sorts of norms and values of aid, but that momentary space did have an important impact on the life of a number of activists that I met. The specific 'temporality' of the summer of 2006 became an 'opportunity'—a mediation between political structures and personal agency, as described in social movement theories.<sup>13</sup> This is why 'opportunities' includes personal commitments born in particular moments that connect 'prospective' activists with an 'opportunity' for protest (Passy & Monsch, 2014: 27).

For Hani this mostly took place in the media and communication subgroup. He helped set up an online repository that contained information about the families fleeing bombardments in the South (such as their time of arrival in Sanayeh park in Beirut; how long they stayed; when they left; where they headed), which enabled people to find lost family members and provide follow-up care. As Hani put it: 'Our organisational structure was effective. The electronic log was not costly so we could use it as long as we had internet access. If you know how to use it, you *can* actually make a difference.' These examples can be seen as the more basic forerunners of online emergency crowd-sourcing, or *crisis mapping* initiatives that appeared, for instance, during the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.<sup>14</sup> When I asked what difference such micro-level digital contributions made, especially in the face of the larger political crisis, Hani explained,

In Lebanon, each sect has its own media. But no one 'owns' our social media; there is no political party, organisation or authority that controls media. You could say it is a little anarchist, not centralised. There are so many cases we would not have known about [through mainstream media] if it wasn't for exposure online.

The 2006 events sped up the domestication of the internet: they did not yet make it a definitive part of activist spaces and narratives, but they did bring about the end of the phase in which internet usage was reserved for experts. The internet became an item of mass consumption. The trajectory of blogging in Lebanon shows us how political internet usage established (and shaped) news production. Before the advent of social media during the campaigns in 2008 and 2010 the most obvious online public sphere was the

blogosphere. *Lebanon Aggregator*, for example, still offers a

slice of the Lebanese blogosphere, especially its reflection on the 2005 split after the assassination of Hariri and the retreat of Syrian forces.<sup>15</sup> This archive of Lebanese blogs shows no ‘immunity’ to the 8/ 14 March blocs. Such old listings illustrate that activists used cyberspace in many different ways. In a way, this confirms earlier studies about the political blogosphere functioning as an echo-chamber rather than as a bridge between opposing groups (cf. O’Neil, 2009).

These findings made me realise that by focusing on the difference between online and offline politics I tended to ask the wrong question, and in fact was applying a dichotomous approach instead of seeking to understand the overlapping dynamics. To try to achieve a better understanding of online engagement as a form of political agency, I divided the conceptual ‘field’ into political activists who use the internet and internet users that are very politicised. This division is never absolute—many intersections occur and the volatile nature of politics already sharpens the debate about what is considered activism. For some of the activists I encountered, the internet was not the main form of politics. Rather, it became an instrument, an integral part of their life in ways I had not encountered before. Thus, although cyberspace is not exempt from the impact of sectarian antagonism, we can assume that sectarian tension and especially war did speed up the growth and popularity of cyberspace. Moreover, rather than setting these up against each other, offline activism needs online-generated agency. However, such mixed-method mobilisations are not always possible because the benefits of online activism are neither diffused equally nor impervious to material damage. A closer look at the genealogy of Internet politics brings both conditions (war-affected infrastructure and war-induced politicisation) together.

### *Genealogy of cyber-politics*

In a post-war context, where the infrastructure is fragile, regular electricity access is not always available. It struck me in 2008 that video-related content was sporadically available and only sparsely included in mobilisation materials. The low number of views of the most-discussed videos surprised me. I came to realise that this was not the result of poor technological skills. Rather, it had to do with the material conditions with respect to the internet: it did not make much sense to adopt YouTube as part of activists’ overall online tactics because bandwidth was low.

In 2010 YouTube clips (e.g. video collages of protests and the edited clips of historic events) and videos were increasingly embedded in blogs and Facebook posts. However, even then the buffer time (loading) for a clip was around three times the duration of the clip—meaning that one would have to wait 10 minutes to watch a three minutes clip. This was a direct consequence of the damaged infrastructures during the civil war and subsequent military assault by Israel (1996, 2006). Despite these material challenges, blogs and social media were to some degree challenging conventional Lebanese politics between 2006–2010.

Certain individuals who were (re-) politicised during the mid-2000s were a key link between the internet and political activism. One of the political bloggers and critics I came to know was Moussa. He started blogging with Geocities and Yahoo SiteBuilder and then in 2003 moved on to Blogspot: ‘I had to try every new technology that was popping up.’ His first internet access was via a slow dial-up phone line in 1995: ‘The ISP person who downloaded Cyberia through Netscape for me explained, “Ok, this is your browser” and went on to show how to access persiankitty.com.’ Moussa suggested that this X-rated website was one of the popular motivations for teenage boys to enter the net. Moussa became increasingly vocal during the July 2006 war on Lebanon. Like many Lebanese at this time he had no interest in exercising restraint about his response to the atrocities that were taking place and the accompanied Western media bias. He went into radical blogging mode. He thought out loud and felt that maybe this was a substitute for the failure of the activism he himself had personally experienced before. In those past years he had honed his keyboard skills in venting about Iraq, and this had helped him in his own evolution as a blogger. Searching for the right words, he told me: ‘The invasion was like a castration ... it was just overwhelming.’ For him, the retreat of Israel from South Lebanon and the

Palestinian Intifada were part of a struggle that

was *motivating*—whereas Iraq was *humiliating*. To a certain extent 2006 determined his style of blogging. He was taking notes and pictures in the areas hit by Israeli war planes and would feed them to international audiences: ‘I wrote in English because I wanted the West to see our suffering.’

Moussa’s own readership grew and he began picking up ideas from other blogs too and fed these to *Global Voices*, for which he had just started a Lebanon section.<sup>16</sup> The additional bloggers he recruited also became correspondents, further enriching Lebanese representations in the global political blogosphere. It was not just seeding for *Global Voices* that restored some of his hope. Meeting many other clever and joyful bloggers, such as the people behind *Remarkz* and *Jamal’s Propaganda*, was also inspiring.<sup>17</sup> These blogs suggested that cyberspace could be a locus for already opinionated people who were seeking an alternative public space, and also that it was an overwhelmingly ironic or cynical milieu. Taken together, a clearer way to conceptualise the internet is to consider it as part of the *means*—and an indirect source of activism—that aims to end injustice or sectarianism.

This process continued and by 2010 Lebanon saw an increasing number of campaigns led by progressive activists. When compared to the dichotomous choice between the existing political parties, let alone the bleak choice between war and resistance, these campaigns offered a breath of fresh air. Tired of being at the mercy of political parties fixed in blocs, these activists attempted to intervene of their own accord. Wishing to break with sectarianism, they played a key role in mobilising and preparing for the secularism march in April 2010. At an analytical level, this mobilisation offers a reminder of the nature of revolutionary transformations that require a long-durée perspective. They also point to the offline-online dialectic to which I now return.

### The offline represented online: Nasawiya

Attending different protests and political meetings helped me to uncover the different ways in which the internet played a role in my respondents’ daily praxis. They often reflected on their relationship with technology, for instance, how would user-generated content affect their outreach? Does online decision-making reduce organising time? Does engaging with neoliberal platforms negatively impact mobilisation choices in the long run? Is information consumption always relevant? Some of the discussions debated the political component of what later became known as the *fear of missing out* (FOMO) and how reliance on the internet makes this part of activism’s genetics. Some activists mockingly called online engagement and the preoccupation with mediating everything *online masturbation*. 27-year-old Tony from Zahle, who at the time was living in Beirut, insisted on describing himself only as ‘secular.’ For him the increased prominence of the internet was negatively changing the objectives of protest itself, pushing aside strategic planning and self-critique.<sup>18</sup> The focus on online activism, Tony argued, is mostly about ‘making noise.’ Due to the platform type and medium, this is a noise that promotes individual politics over collective work, and one that engenders the ‘professional activist.’ Taking these critiques seriously, I turn to one particular group for whom collective self-empowerment was at the core of their ethics and an approach that encouraged a better balance between offline and online activism.

Nasawiya started in Beirut in 2010, partly as a follow-up to a group called ‘The Feminist Collective.’<sup>19</sup> The name itself (meaning *feminist*) was meant to counter the social and discursive marginalisation of feminism, as both idea and practice. Nasawiya critiques social movements’ lack of engagement with queer politics, an absence that is partly related to the broad projection of Lebanon as a ‘liberal’ society, where women are freer than anywhere else in the Arab world. The group’s organisational structure is unconventional too: it has adopted a collective rather than a hierarchical approach. Challenging the dominant way in which civil society has developed, Nasawiya has avoided the route of many NGOs that rely on foreign or state funding, in order to maintain its independence and ensure its sustainability. Their work contested the objectification of Lebanese women and focused on legal discrimination, such as the inability to transfer their nationality to their husbands or children, a right only granted to men. At the time of fieldwork, they had organised a series of videos on gender and sexuality, as well as a number of

animated stories dealing with sexual harassment.<sup>20</sup> Their discursive and visual communication is unmistakable: they choose to

attack the status quo because the existing legal and political system provides no solution. Hence, rather than avoiding issues that are highly contested, they explicitly target those domains through vernacular means which I want to tease out.

Much of Nasawiya’s work involves solidarity with migrant workers (especially the ubiquitous case of ‘suicides’ among domestic workers, mostly female). The anti-racism groups that had seen small yet symbolic successes were becoming sturdier (Figure 3). One example at the time of my fieldwork in 2010 concerned the (secretly) filmed rejection of a black woman trying to enter a beach resort. Whereas many would have acknowledged the practice of excluding migrants from private beaches or pools, representing this kind of racism explicitly on video was confrontational and therefore received much attention.<sup>21</sup> A simultaneous development has been Nasawiya’s vocal critique of laws that legalised rape within marriage (e.g. the campaign *Delete522*, a reference to the number of the legal resolution) or that prevent women passing on their Lebanese nationality to their child or husband. In terms of the latter, Nasawiya has helped set up a campaign to demand citizenship for children of Lebanese mothers—a very complex and sensitive issue. They exposed how (by obstructing equal citizenship), demographic settings were the country’s tool for exercising confessional control.<sup>22</sup> They rephrased their demand, making it an *unconditional* one: including also Lebanese women married to Palestinian men—the most controversial category.

As noted above, the low-quality and the material inequality of the internet shapes activists’ possibilities. Existing technological infrastructures can impede the effect of technological applications and their functionalities with regards to mobilisation. It therefore helps to activate certain (wired) activists who have much better technological access than others (e.g. on campus). They are *brokers*—between online/offline tactics, Lebanese/international news and activist/civil society groups. I witnessed Nasawiya activists participate in the emergency demonstrations for a Sudanese man on

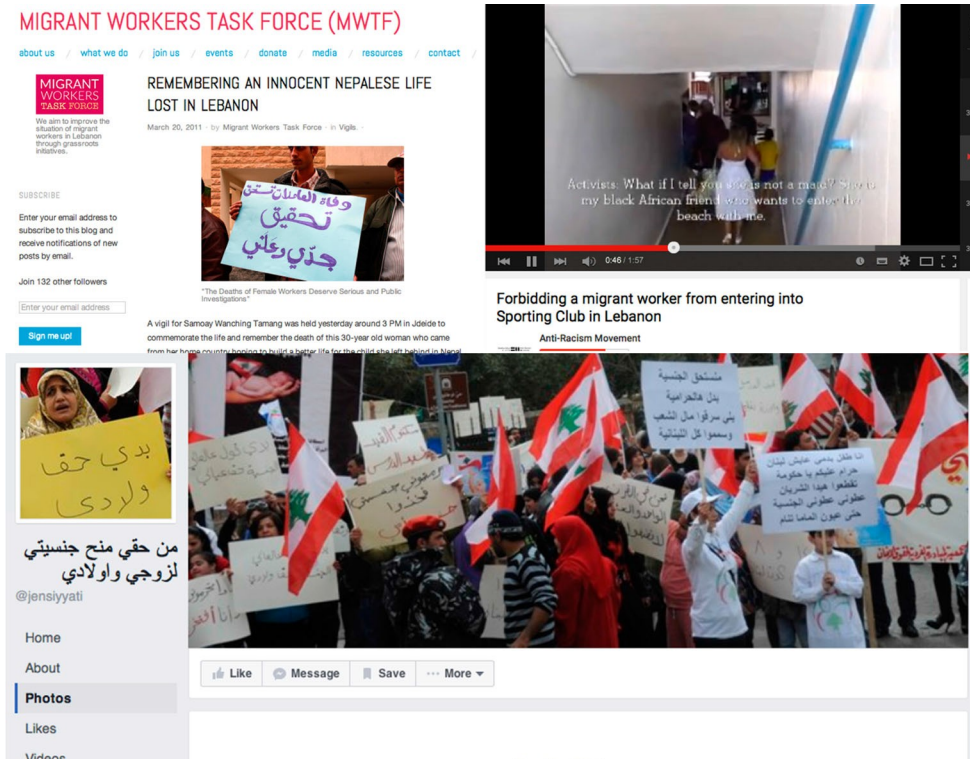


Figure 3. From left to right, Migrants Task Force; still of leaked Beach Segregation; screenshot Facebook page Jinsiyati Lajawzi wa Waladi.



hunger strike in protest of his rejected appeal for asylum. Sometimes they released videos of police brutality or statements concerning their own safety. One of the key organisers, Reem, adds,

If it wasn't for the people screaming online all day long, only a small fraction of the people would have known about the arrest of X in Nahr al-Bared [a fellow activist who was arrested for entering a cordoned Palestinian refugee camp]. Without the swift response on Facebook or blogs urging everyone to contact the security offices, I don't think she would have been released.

Nasawiya may have punched above its weight, an issue that is confirmed by the acts of violence they have been subject to a number of times.<sup>23</sup> The swift responses coordinated online echoed via media contacts abroad and, in fact, mobilised the local media, which, in turn, helped trigger a response and solidarity. The *brokers* are often well-connected activists with a large number of contacts and, as such, they become key during particular or concrete cases and moments. Reem states: 'Our skills are matched by whatever we know about the basics of websites, video-editing, photo-shopping: all the things that you need for activism.'

We now better understand the importance of the technical training members of Nasawiya receive but also offer. Nasawiya's initiative 'Take Back the Tech' relates efforts around gender with technology. At their workshops women of all ages are trained (by women) in programming and editing.<sup>24</sup> Yet, while Nasawiya uses the internet to reach out to girls and women, it is aware of the risk of missing those who are not online. In addition to having a strong presence offline, they therefore prioritise physical meetings and protests. This is put into practice by Nasawiya Café, a place to meet, but also a resource centre. For them on/offline activism is mostly that which you 'do;' their activism occurs mainly with offline counterparts. But as they confront the material manifestations of the unequal, sexist and racist system they wish to dismantle, they manage, mobilise and revamp a great deal of it online.

It is important to remember that the internet is not crucial (or relevant) for *all* activists or at *all* times: some tools play a significant role, while others only become meaningful much later on. Political subjectivities are shaped in part by the internet, whether this is intended (because they prioritise face-to-face communication) or not (because being offline is a consequence of electricity cuts). Thus to understand the Lebanese left better, I consider Nasawiya a crucial example in many ways. The focus on the Lebanese left tends to privilege official parties—or the main split/divisions imposed on them (e.g. Yacoub, p. 99), but grassroots activism, even if small in number, should not be seen as a side issue. Radical progressive experiments like Nasawiya should be taken account of in a 'mapping' of the Arab left. This left needs an inquiry in its own right as these divergent and relatively new actors form the nucleus of a new Arab radical consciousness.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed the dynamics of Lebanese activism since the mid-2000s through the prism of the internet. Through an ethnographic discussion of the links, networks, and ties that forged activist milieus, it has shed light on a time in 2011 that may well be considered a revolutionary moment—a period when internet activism attracted a lot of attention as a result of its supposed novelty in the Middle East. At first sight this seems an innocuous manner in the study of Lebanon. However, a stronger online political presence during the latter phases, compared to previous years, is undeniable. In the course of those phases, activists creatively adapted digital media into political mobilisation strategies. By presenting a view from below, it is possible to grasp the consequences of local conditionality without which it is difficult to assess the translocal characteristics of internet politics. By introducing case studies shaped by a volatile political context, I have shown how the promising potential of activism is only partly locked inside the complex socio-material-confessional system that marks Lebanon. In addition, although the online public sphere is embedded in a poor (post-civil war) information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, activists nevertheless apply novel ways to manoeuvre around these restrictions. I have argued that cyberspace is not immune to sectarian fragmentation, but

that it also enables a resurgence of (internet-powered) activism.

To understand the social roots of progressive politics (i.e. constant efforts to challenge the dominant status-quo), we need to better understand the social transformations that have affected Lebanon. Grasping the realities and differences is crucial because *sectarianism* can be a buzzword that obscures more than it enlightens. It also encourages a top-down geopolitical reading, which, however comfortable, rarely speaks of personal trajectories. In a similar vein, personal grievances or specific political interactions can influence activists' decisions to participate in protest action. I deciphered the aftermath of the assassination of Hariri and the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon as two contentious moments.

As argued throughout this article, there is a dialectical relation between the offline and online political setting. With such a multi-layered analytic treatment layer we realise that the internet matters greatly when employed for mobilisation during revolutionary stages that also affected Lebanon. Nasawiya is insightful in the challenge it presents to such obfuscations. Their social dynamic—inde- pendent from sectarian determinants—sheds a light on a rather different lexicon for activism, one that reframes political expressions by including race, class and LGBTQ rights. The offline–online dia- lectic assumes a natural link but this inter-dependency itself is determined by material realities, such as technological access or quality (speed, censorship). During multiple fieldwork visits, my own use of the same infrastructure that frustrated my respondents revealed the consequences of a capitalist for- profit sector and severely damaged telecommunication infrastructure (hours of electricity cuts); and it also revealed that such conditions lead to tactical adaptation. When there are limited hours of elec- tricity and internet, one becomes more aware of (and avoids) 'meaningless' activities: internet usage becomes more 'task oriented.' A basic style and an efficient method is a *necessity*; it does not indicate a lack of creativity.

The Arab uprisings have had a significant impact on Lebanese activism. The political initiatives and protests that formed the uprisings spoke to the imagination and desires of thousands of people. The upshot of the *Isqat al-Nizam al-Ta'ifi* protests during 2011 created further exposure for *Min Haqqi Ana* agenda. In this view, the internet helps *amplify* activist voice, *visualise* their ideals, and, by turning them into digital artefacts, *archive* their desires. The latter is significant: archiving keeps moments of protest alive. This is relevant as it allows memories and sensations to be preserved for other acti- vists: it offers a source of political strength that can be drawn upon later—even acting as a tem- porary antidote in moments of decline. Finally, the 2011 uprisings were not singular events: the grassroots experiences and existing indignation were already present and part of its creation. While the extremely divided politics of 2005 had drained the air of the oxygen that was necessary for autonomous activism, considering 2006 as the backdrop of the 2010–11 eruption of protest reminds us of the contradictions as well as the 'permanent' character of revolutions.

## Notes

1. Cf. <<http://foreignpolicy.com/tag/lebanon/>>. The well-known exception is the framing of the 2005 protests (which I will return to later in the article) known then as the *Cedar-Revolution* and *Independence Intifada*.
2. The dichotomous debate was entertained by Malcolm Gladwell and Clay Shirky which in due course inspired many similar contributions. See: <https://www.wired.com/2011/12/gladwell-vs-shirky/>.
3. Some of the names have been altered in order to protect their privacy –although some interlocutors remain identifiable by their blog names.
4. The Democratic Left Movement collapsed in the wake of the assassination of Hariri, which had a negative impact on activist networks that had invested in the Movement (Yacoub 2014, p. 101).
5. For their contributions cf. Riz Khan Show on Al Jazeera English (AJE), 21 January, 2011:< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4C56fzPc4i8&feature=related> > as well as <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0n3yIF2P4-w>>, (links last accessed on June 2012).
6. The Kifaya movement and the Mahala al-Kobra strikes supported by the April 6 Movement were crucial. Atef spoke about her experiences at the Oxford Internet Institute seminar Revolution 2.0? in March 2011. The podcast can be found here:<[http://webcast.oii.ox.ac.uk/?view=Webcast&ID=20110328\\_348](http://webcast.oii.ox.ac.uk/?view=Webcast&ID=20110328_348)>.
7. Several researchers studied social movements during the same period. I particularly recommend the

doctoral research of AbiYaghi (2013) and Rima Majed (2016).

8. 8 March Coalition represents Hezbollah, with its leader Hasan Nasrallah, and Amal both Shia and the Free Patriotic Movement, with its leader Michel Aoun Christian. Syria and Iran as considered crucial allies and the Coalition is often described as 'pro-resistance'. The Hezbollah and Free Patriotic Movement cooperation is the crux of this alliance. The 14 March Coalition (Future Movement, with its leader Saad Hariri Sunni, Lebanese Forces Orthodox Christian, Phalange or Kataeb Maronite Christian), with US and Saudi as key allies.
9. Resolution 1559 called for the withdrawal of Syrian troops, the disarmament of Hezbollah and new elections. While some believed that disarmament would make another occupation by Israel possible, the opposition was mainly against the collaboration of PM Seniora with George W Bush administration's imperial project, summarised by Condoleeza Rice's description of the horrors of 2006 as the 'birth pangs of a new Middle East.'
10. One interviewer related how leftists were blocked in 2006 from joining in fighting Israel in the South, another said their convoy could not reach some of the areas to provide civil assistance because they were not affiliated with the party. For others unconditional support continued even when Hezbollah actively began to support Bashar al- Assad's crushing of the Syrian uprising, because they considered Hezbollah's survival to be dependent on the survival of Assad.
11. For similar research about blogs see Jurkiewicz (2011) and Taki (2011).
12. Many of the activists who came together already knew each other from the Palestinian solidarity and anti-war campaigns. For more about Samidoun, see: <http://samidoun.blogspot.com/>.
13. This is part of a long debate in the discipline of sociology and has become an important source for internet studies as well. For a good review, see Meyer (2004).
14. See for instance the work of Urshahi in Nigeria and Haiti here: <<http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/article/review-2011/irrc-884-meier.htm>>.
15. See: <<http://www.lebanonaggregator.com/>>.
16. Global Voices is a community of bloggers around the world who work together and translate voices that are not ordinarily heard in mainstream media: <<http://globalvoicesonline.org/-/world/middle-east-north-africa/lebanon/>>.
17. See: <<http://remarkz.wordpress.com/>> and <<http://jamalghosn.blogspot.co.uk/>>.
18. He eventually wrote a comprehensive critique: see Tony Saghbiny (2015)
19. It is important to return to the earlier period and to recount why this was such a unique experience in 2009–2010, this reflection does not extend to the period after 2011.
20. In this video the meaning of feminism is explained by young men and women. Available at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baGacHimtcc&list=UUf1jJz78tEJaFmFPmJAyBEw&index=4&feature=plcp>>. 'The Adventures of Salwa' is an animated narrative that is shown in schools and community centres, see: <[https://youtu.be/D-S5RLd\\_Ks](https://youtu.be/D-S5RLd_Ks)>.
21. Available, respectively, at: <<http://mwtaskforce.wordpress.com/tag/antiracism/>>; and <<http://antiracismmovement.blogspot.com/>>. The leaked video of the beach segregation is at: <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fylZa\\_xPOGA&list=UUaBBARvSIU9MDzB2\\_Hj7MQ&index=1&feature=plcp](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fylZa_xPOGA&list=UUaBBARvSIU9MDzB2_Hj7MQ&index=1&feature=plcp)>.
22. The group Jinsiyati Lajawzi wa Waladi is online at: <[http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100003333125896&ref=tn\\_tnmn#!/jensiyati](http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100003333125896&ref=tn_tnmn#!/jensiyati)>.
23. They have, for instance, been attacked by Falange militia men during a picket outside the Palace of Justice. The bodyguard of Nadime Gemayel rammed his car into the protesters. See: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/16294>.
24. This became an annual 'girl geek' camp at the time. See: <https://cafethawrarevolution.wordpress.com/2011/09/07/girl-geek-camp-lebanon-turning-women-into-geekettes-one-tweet-at-a-time/>.

## Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Tony Saghbini and Sami Hermez for commenting on an earlier version of this article. I am also grateful to Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi for her insightful comments on this version. The kind editorial guidance of *Contemporary Levant* has also been very much appreciated.

## References

- AbiYaghi, M.N. 2013. L'altermondialisme au Liban: Un militantisme de passage. Logiques d'engagement et reconfiguration de l'espace militant (de gauche) au Liban (phD thesis. Université de Paris1-La Sorbonne).
- Alexander, A. & Aouragh, M. 2011. Sense and Nonsense of the Facebook Revolutions. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 1344–1358.

- Aouragh, M. & Chakravarti, P. 2016. Infrastructures of empire: Towards a critical geopolitics of media and information studies. *Media Culture Society*, 38(4), 559–575.
- Aouragh, M. 2016. Social Media, Mediation and the Arab Revolutions. In: C. Fuchs & V. Mosco, eds. *Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism* (pp. 482–515). Leiden: Brill.
- Bayat, A. 2011. Arab Revolutions and the Study of Middle Eastern Societies. *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 43 (3), 386.
- Chalcraft, J. 2016. The Arab Uprisings of 2011 in Historical Perspective. In: A. Ghazal and J. Hanssen, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History* (pp. 1–17). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chit, B. 2012. Sectarianism and the Arab Revolutions. *Socialist Review*. Available at: <<http://socialistreview.org.uk/388/sectarianism-and-arab-revolutions>>.
- Fuchs, C. 2009. Some Reflections on Manuel Castells' Book 'Communication Power'. *TripleC – Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 7 (1), 94–108.
- Ghattas, A. 2015. Arrest and Prison Time for Journalists and Bloggers over Facebook Posts in Lebanon. *Global Voices*. 8 October. Available at: <https://globalvoices.org/2015/10/08/arrest-and-prison-time-for-journalists-and-bloggers-over-facebook-posts-in-lebanon/>.
- Harb, Z. 2009. The July 2006 War and the Lebanese Blogosphere: Towards an Alternative Media Tool in Covering Wars. *Journal of Media Practice*, 10 (2–3), 255–258.
- Haugbolle, S. 2007. From A-lists to webtiffadas: Developments in the Lebanese blogosphere 2005–2006. *Arab Media & Society*. Available at: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=40>.
- Haugbolle, S. 2010. *War and Memory in Lebanon*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Haugbolle, S. 2012. Reflections on Ideology after the Arab Uprisings. *Jadaliyya*, 21 March 2012. Available at: <http://www.arabic.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4764/reflections-on-ideology-after-the-arab-uprisings>.
- Haugbolle, S. 2013. Social Boundaries and Secularism in the Lebanese Left. *Mediterranean Politics*, 18 (3), 427–43. Hazran, Y. 2013. Re-confessionalising the Shi'ites and the Druzes: The Failure of Secularism in Lebanon. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 40 (2), 162–182.
- Hermez, S. 2011. On Dignity and Clientelism: Lebanon in the Context of the 2011 Arab Revolutions. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11 (3), 527–537.
- Jurkiewicz, S. 2011. Of Islands and Windows – Publicness in the Lebanese Blogosphere. *Oriente Moderno*, XCI (1), 139–155. Larkin, C. 2012. *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past*. New York: Routledge.
- Makdisi, U. 2000. *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in 19th Century Ottoman Lebanon*. Los Angeles: California University Press.
- Majed, R. 2016. The Shifting Salience of Sectarianism in Lebanon: 2000–2010 (DPhil thesis. University of Oxford). Mejias, U. 2012. Liberation Technology and the Arab Spring: From Utopia to Atopia and Beyond. *Fibreculture Journal*, 20. Available at: <http://twenty.fibreculturejournal.org/2012/06/20/fcj-147-liberation-technology-and-the-arab-spring-from-utopia-to-atopia-and-beyond/>.
- Menassat. 2007. In Lebanon, Facebook can Land you in Jail. *Menassat*, 10 January. Available at: [w.menassat.com/?q=ar/news-articles/2750-lebanon-facebook-can-land-you-jail](http://www.menassat.com/?q=ar/news-articles/2750-lebanon-facebook-can-land-you-jail).
- Menassat. 2008a. Bloggers in Arab World Unite in Beirut. *Menassat*, 27 August. Available at: <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/4496-bloggers-arab-world-unite-beirut>.
- Menassat. 2008b. The Word on the Lebanese blogosphere. *Menassat*, 11 May. Available at: <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/weblog-directory/3671-word-lebanese-blogosphere>.
- Meyer, D.S. 2004. Protest and Political Opportunities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30, 125–145.
- Moghnieh, L. 2015. Relief as a Neutral Form of Aid or a Political-communal Mobilization? Doing Politics in Emergencies and War and the Politics of Aid in Lebanon. *Civil Society Knowledge Center-Lebanon Support*. 1 August 2015. Available at: <http://csc.kdaleel-madani.org/paper/relief-neutral-form-aid-or-political-communal-mobilization-doing-politics-emergencies-and-war>.
- O'Neil, M. 2009. *Cyberchiefs: Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes*. London: Pluto Press.
- Pace, M. & Cavatorta, F. 2012. The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective – An Introduction. *Mediterranean Politics*, 17 (2), 125–138.
- Passy, F. & Monsch, G.-A. 2014. Do Social Networks Really Matter in Contentious Politics? *Social Movement Studies*, 13 (1), 22–47.
- Saghbini, T. 2010. Lebanese Bloggers: Pioneers in the Arab World. *Common Ground*, 28 September. Available at: <http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=28549&lan=en&sp=0>.
- Saghbiny, T. 2015. *The Millennium Curse: Why Activism is Failing*. Available at: <https://saghbini.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/the-millennium-curse-arabic.pdf>.
- Sawalha, A. 2010. *Reconstructing Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar Arab City*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Taki, M. 2011. Why Bloggers Blog in Lebanon and Syria: Methodological Considerations. *Oriente Moderno*, XCI (1), 91–103. Traboulsi, F. 2007. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. London: IB Tauris.
- Yacoub, H. 2014. The Lebanese Left: The Possibility of the Impossible. In: H. Jamil & K. Hermann, eds. *Mapping of the Arab Left: Contemporary Leftist Politics in the Arab East* (pp. 82–101). Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung: Regional Office Palestine.