

# The case of Beirut Madinati: How to maintain a wind of change?

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## 1 Introduction

How to take a battle against corruption and for more sustainability from the streets into a political system that in itself is crooked? When the civil platform Beirut Madinati<sup>1</sup> arose from mass protests against the faulty public spending in Lebanon's capital, this was the key challenge the young movement had to confront. Like many other countries in the Middle East, Lebanon suffers from high rates of corruption and bad governance: The global think tank Transparency International ranks Lebanon among the 50 most corrupt countries in the world with high fiscal secrecy.<sup>2</sup> This high level of corruption, prevalent also on the municipal level, peaked in the waste crises of 2015, adding to the electricity and water shortages that constantly pose problems to the inhabitants of Lebanon's capital. People consecutively took the streets and civil movements managed to mobilize thousands of protesters voicing their discontent with the situation and the political parties that caused it. Beirut Madinati finally emerged from these protests, giving their demands a political platform and a voice in the 2016 elections for the Beirut city council. Demanding amongst other things a greener, fairer and more sustainable city, they managed to mobilize support from different sides of the political and sectarian specter and competed in the elections with a surprisingly high electoral outcome of 30 to 40 percent of the votes casted.<sup>3</sup> While Lebanon's winner-takes-it-all electoral system does not transform this electoral success into seats in parliament, Beirut Madinati still prevails and continues its role as an alternative platform and political voice of the protest movements. Especially in the light of the electoral law being renegotiated and consecutively the first national parliamentary elections in eight years being expected to take place in 2017, hopes in Beirut Madinati are high despite the group's official decision not to run in the parliamentary elections.

This paper examines the factors leading to Beirut Madinati's surprisingly big success as well as the strategies in broadening the public discourse and fostering the image of a credible alternative to the established political parties despite being founded merely three months before the elections. It also considers different reactions to their campaign received in the public discourse in order to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Arabic for „Beirut is my city“

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.transparency.org/country/LBN>

<sup>3</sup> For a precise documentation of the results, see: [http://www.localiban.org/article5940.html#outil\\_sommaire\\_10](http://www.localiban.org/article5940.html#outil_sommaire_10)

how Beirut Madinati was perceived by different parts of the general public. Finally, it will give an outlook on how Beirut Madinati is planning to continue its role as a new pole in the public discourse and work as an extra-parliamentary oppositional group. For this purpose, seven qualitative interviews were conducted with members and volunteers of Beirut Madinati as well as a member of Naqabati, a list for the Syndicate of Engineers and Architects, which was launched and supported by Beirut Madinati and succeeded in winning the post for the head of the order.

## 2 Cases and Methodology

Name	Profession	Position in Beirut Madinati
Mneimneh, Ibrahim	Architect/Urban Designer	Former candidate, former member of the steering committee, coordinator of networking and outreach
Abi Younes, Pierre	Graphic Designer/Marketing	Former volunteer
Sibai, Nermine	Lawyer	Former member of the legal committee, former member of the vetting committee, member of the grievance committee
Sehnaoui, Nada	Artist	Former candidate
Arakji, Roua	Member of a start-up company	Volunteer, former member
Tibi, Marwan	Marketing/Analytics	Former candidate, former member of the steering committee, member of the collegial body
Jabr, Abdul-Halim	Architect/Urban Designer/Consultant	Former candidate, member of the alternative municipality workgroup, co-founder of Naqabati

**Table 1: List of interviewees**

In order to obtain a comprehensive picture of different members and opinions within the movement, interviews were conducted with six interviewees active in different organizational levels of Beirut Madinati, specifically two volunteers, two members from the committees as well as two candidates from the 2016 list, one male and female each (see Table 1). The interviewees' political and ideological background before joining Beirut Madinati included national conservatism, feminism, secularism as well as previous participation in protest movements. As will be discussed later, this political diversity as well as a gender-equal representation are characteristic to Beirut Madinati and are therefore equally important to consider for evaluating the movements campaign. In addition to this, a member of Naqabati was interviewed in order to assess to what extent its campaign can be seen as a continuation of the 2016 experience of Beirut Madinati. A comparative analysis of statements by the interviewees is

presented along with the relative statistical frequency in which single items relating to the respective topics were mentioned.

### 3 The making of an alternative

This section provides an assessment of key factors for Beirut Madinati's success including in particular the elements of the campaign members of the movement regard as predominantly important. Furthermore, the means in which these elements were communicated with its constituency and which target groups Beirut Madinati defined for its communication strategy will be examined.

#### 3.1 Discursive elements coining Beirut Madinati's campaign



Figure 1: Frequency of items mentioned on the features of the campaign

A major consensus among the interviewees revolved around the program that preceded the campaign and proved to be the main tool of communication and differentiation from the established parties. Yet, while the program targeted very specific topics in Beirut's municipal work, the interviewees did not regard the single points of content as the major trump in their campaign but rather the existence of a reliable program itself, as the Lebanese public had never been presented with an election program before. A candidate from the 2016 list explained: "[The public] did not react to specific points in the campaign; they mostly reacted to the whole project. I think unless you meet with a professional who deals with water, garbage, urban planning, lighting, sewage and all that, it is rare that anyone would want to discuss a specific point of the program."<sup>4</sup> An interviewee working on the committee level in Beirut Madinati described the program as something to "show and rely on in our negotiations" that gave them "the chance to go back to a text and have an educated discussion", even when facing supporters of opposing parties.<sup>5</sup> It was however seen as important that the program targeted the basics in everyday

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<sup>4</sup> Sehnaoui 2017

<sup>5</sup> Tibi 2017

life that anyone could relate to regardless of their political or religious affiliation. As a volunteer for the 2016 campaign put it:

“I think they worked really hard and they proved that the small stuff that we live everyday is not connected to the bigger issues. We can all have public transportation and then debate about whether we should wage war to Israel or not. But we can still go and have like green areas and parks and communication and then we will talk about the war in Syria. And then we will talk about American policy or the Iranian policy or the Saudi-Arabian policy. But the small stuff we should work on first and then move on to these.”<sup>6</sup>

The positive effect of the program is equally true for internal organization, as all interviewees agreed that there was a broad consensus on the content of the program within the movement. An agreement on the program served as a symbol of identification inside the movement, as well as an implicit precondition for becoming part of Beirut Madinati: “The program is the core of the work. I mean, it was not a joke, [...] anyone who was not in full agreement to the program could not be there”.<sup>7</sup>

The interviewees agreed that the trust in Beirut Madinati’s program as well as the campaign as a whole originated from the fact that they “have people with credibility, expertise and a very huge history in these areas.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, they emphasized that the candidate retained a relatable and approachable image. A volunteer described them as “real, actual people with no big titles or big names or big families, just normal people. With architects, doctors, designers, farmers. They even had a fisherman [...] they has a disabled person in their list.”<sup>9</sup> Beirut Madinati’s relatability and approachability was complemented by their effort to remain an independent group, not allowing the established political parties to undermine their organization: “You have to be non-political, the candidates should not be affiliated with any political party. And if they were in any political party, they have to suspend their membership. Actually cancel, not only suspend their membership.”<sup>10</sup> The campaign relied on volunteers and donations, while their financial record is open to the public on Beirut Madinati’s website. A former candidate recalls the decisive turning point in their crowd funding took as the moment they announced the list: “We had many donors and many supporters just waiting for the list and to see who the people would be, running for those elections. And right after we announced this, our campaign boomed and the whole perception of Beirut Madinati changed. We got more donors, everybody was

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<sup>6</sup> Abi Younes 2017

<sup>7</sup> Sehnaoui 2017

<sup>8</sup> Sibai 2017

<sup>9</sup> Abi Younes 2017

<sup>10</sup> Sibai 2017

getting in the board, it was exploding.”<sup>11</sup> It is also worth mentioning that with Beirut Madinati for the first time in the history of Lebanon an electoral list consisted of male and female candidates to equal parts. According to a former member of Beirut Madinati’s vetting committee the members of the movement “believe in the female in politics [...] in public affairs” which is rooted in Beirut Madinati’s core values.<sup>12</sup> As women in Lebanon are widely underrepresented with just four out of 128 seats in parliament occupied by women, this had been a major point of differentiation.

While most of the mentioned elements were part of an effort to create an independent platform differentiating themselves from the established parties, they made a point of not expressing hostility towards their rivals. By retaining a positive tone in their campaign, Beirut Madinati tried to reach out to followers of different political and religious affiliations. As a candidate from 2016 emphasized: “We never attacked anyone, we never attacked neither the parties themselves nor their affiliates nor their leaders. And this was crucial in the political discourse because it made a change and allowed us to even reach out to certain areas of Beirut that no one would ever think of getting into.”<sup>13</sup> Equally, Beirut Madinati made a point out of not advertising the religious affiliation of their candidates while still respecting the sectarian balance settled in the Taif agreement.

### **3.2 Target groups and means of communication**

While it became clear during the interviews which groups Beirut Madinati was targeting, the interviewees often put different emphases on who they personally tried to reach during the campaign. Some mentioned the often politically unaffiliated young people, others spoke of the entirety of voters in Beirut or, even more broadly, the general public as a whole. A volunteer explains this seemingly inconsistent communication strategy as follows: “We tried to target everyone basically, so each event was targeted at a specific group. For example when we went to Ashrafieh 2020<sup>14</sup>, we targeted the neighborhood of Ashrafieh and the people living there and the people who would come.”<sup>15</sup> More specifically there seemed to be a consensus about targeting the non-voters who do not feel represented by any of the established parties and offering them a platform. A former candidate referred to this target group as ‘the thirsty’: “What I mean is, when I’m talking to the thirsty, I’m talking to those who want a change, believe the change can be done and are willing to do something for it.”<sup>16</sup> Concluding

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<sup>11</sup> Mneimneh 2017

<sup>12</sup> Sibai 2017

<sup>13</sup> Tibi 2017

<sup>14</sup> A street festival in the neighborhood of Ashrafieh

<sup>15</sup> Arakji 2017

<sup>16</sup> Tibi 2017

from these varying narratives it seems that Beirut Madinati tried to target the ones eager for change within their respective neighborhoods and would therefore vary their strategy according to the environment in which they would seek for the 'thirsty'.

As a crowd funded group, Beirut Madinati had only limited access to the traditional media, which is in Lebanon often affiliated with certain political parties.<sup>17</sup> A major larger part of communication with their constituency therefore happened online through social media as well as their website which included their program, a list of their candidates with biographies as well as their code of ethics and information on their finances. A communications team would create info videos and graphics that were then shared online via Facebook and re-shared by their online followers. While this strategy created a large part of the exposure Beirut Madinati created, they were not ignored by traditional media outlets. Beirut Madinati's campaign was subject of the news while their candidates and experts attended talk shows and debates on TV. In fact, according to a study Beirut Madinati conducted<sup>18</sup>, about 60 percent of their voters first heard about the movement through television channels. More rarely, Beirut Madinati would also place their messages on billboards.

Apart from mass and social media, there was a consensus among the interviewees about the importance of direct communication with their constituency. Beirut Madinati would host open houses and local events called *masāhat niqāš* (discussion space) in which they would address the problems and wishes of the residents in their respective neighborhoods. Often volunteers would conduct surveys prior to these events in order to prepare accordingly. In their headquarters, Beirut Madinati set up a call-in hotline which became especially relevant on election day, when people called for information on how to vote for Beirut Madinati in the exceptionally complicated electoral system of Lebanon.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Further information on the role of the traditional media will be given under section 4.2

<sup>18</sup> This study is not available to the public, therefore this information is quoted from an interviewee's statement

<sup>19</sup> Further information about the electoral system and Beirut Madinati's stance on this issue under section 5.2

#### 4 A “progressive empowerment”: Reactions to Beirut Madinati’s campaign



Figure 2: Frequency of items mentioned on reactions towards the campaign

In order to assess the change and influence Beirut Madinati made in the public discourse, interviewees were asked in the second block to describe from their perspective the reactions towards their campaign. As can be seen in *Figure 2*, the large majority of reactions described by the interviewees were positive although their assessment of negative reactions can be seen as equally important for analyzing the impact of their campaign.

The interviewees unanimously emphasized that Beirut Madinati was perceived as serious alternative to the established parties. However, there had been initial skepticism that Beirut Madinati had to confront. “I think it was mostly positive from the beginning but people were skeptical [...] that anything would happen at all”, mentioned a 2016 candidate.<sup>20</sup> Criticism also revolved around the fact that Beirut Madinati was new to the political stage as they were seen as amateurs or naïve in their belief in change. Others were discontent with the policy contents brought up by the movement, labeling them as not realizable, lacking of bigger visions for the whole country or elitist and disregarding the needs of people in lower social strata. Mostly, skepticism came from conservative voters with traditional party affiliations: “There were people questioning who are we and why we are running in Beirut – mostly the founders were not Beirutis<sup>21</sup>. So: ‘Why are you running here, you don't know the culture? Why you? We don't know you, you've never been before in Beirut, we didn't hear about you, you don't have services<sup>22</sup>,

<sup>20</sup> Mneimneh 2017

<sup>21</sup> Lebanese mostly vote in those places where their family was registered in the last census 1932 which has increasingly led to a distortion in local representation. The founders of Beirut Madinati not being Beirutis therefore does refer to them not being registered in Beirut while still living there. For further reading see: *Maktabi, R. (1999): The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who Are the Lebanese? British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 26(2), 219-241.*

<sup>22</sup> Most political parties in Lebanon offer services for their constituency, like paying for education or health care in return for loyal support. For further reading see: *Cortsage, Daniel (2016): The Price of a Vote in the Middle East. Clientelism and Communal Politics in Lebanon and Yemen. New York: Cambridge University Press.*

you don't have locations.”<sup>23</sup> This perception started to shift, however, as the public became more aware of Beirut Madinati and what they stand for: “They saw these new faces, young, professionals, not affiliated with political parties that have been stigmatized by corruption etc. So it was very fresh and people somehow saw a potential for change, despite the fact that they didn't know many of us.”<sup>24</sup>

The interviewees identified different reasons that played into changing the perception of Beirut Madinati over the course of their campaign. Firstly, there were the young people who were not as affiliated with traditional parties, that played a role in spreading Beirut Madinati’s messages, volunteering and convincing their friends and relatives to consider voting for them. However, three interviewees also recalled cases in which elderly people showed their support towards Beirut Madinati. Furthermore, non-Beirutis, although predominantly not being able to vote themselves, were strong multipliers in sharing Beirut Madinati’s content online and volunteering. Especially Lebanese living abroad showed their support online or even by taking a trip to Beirut on Election Day if they were eligible to vote. On a different note, frustration with the established parties and corruption lead to a large number of protest votes: “You have also the category of people who voted as an objection [...]. We have to account for that and be realistic, account for that and not think that every time we run in any context we would get these numbers.”<sup>25</sup>

With this shift in the public perception, Beirut Madinati was further able to strengthen its image as an alternative that lead to what a candidate from the 2016 list called “a progressive empowerment” and a belief that change was possible.<sup>26</sup> Part of this was due to Beirut Madinati’s campaign informing people about “what the law says about the municipality and show that if a different group can come into the municipality and the municipality through the law can do a lot versus what's been currently the role of the municipality when the political parties were in power.”<sup>27</sup> This proved true even for some supporters of the established parties where especially young voters supported Beirut Madinati despite their affiliation: “Their affiliation, it's still there, but regardless [...] because it's the municipality and people are not talking huge politics, were not talking international politics, [...] we're not talking about the security of the people. Because we are talking about sewage, and we are talking about gardens, public

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<sup>23</sup> Sibai 2017

<sup>24</sup> Mneimneh 2017

<sup>25</sup> Tibi 2017

<sup>26</sup> Sehnaoui 2017

<sup>27</sup> Mneimneh 2017



spaces, we're talking about the main and basic rights of the citizens, it was easier for them to leave this affiliation and vote for Beirut Madinati.”<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, Beirut Madinati was not able to reach out to certain groups with strong party affiliations or lower socio-economic status that are more dependent on the parties’ services. While some neighborhoods did not allow Beirut Madinati to host events in their area at all, others were receptive to the established parties’ campaign which was designed to label Beirut Madinati with a specific political couleur: “There were kind of counter attacks from the political parties labeling us as secular, communist sometimes, leftist, [...] so it distances us from the conservative groups [...] or in general Beirutis with conservative inclinations.”<sup>29</sup> However, there were also efforts by the parties to adapt to the new style of campaigning introduced by Beirut Madinati, as they started to talk about fighting corruption, and create a program of their own that strongly correlated with the points brought up by Beirut Madinati. Ultimately, the rise of Beirut Madinati’s popularity saw almost all of the established parties teaming up against the independent list: “They were all together but still, each one of the parties were playing these strings with its own groups. And I think that's the only reason Beirut Madinati didn't reach the bigger mass.”<sup>30</sup>

The traditional media, according to the interviewees played an important but ambivalent role towards the campaign. A 2016 candidate described Beirut Madinati’s approach towards the media as follows:

“[The campaign] was adopted by some TV stations for example and specific newspapers, but it was also a subject of controversy [...] within the editorial staff of many newspapers and other mainstream media, because a big number of them are sometimes directly financed by political parties and they have a conflict of interest in this, obviously. [...] So the approach of mainstream media was delicate to us and we were always thinking about possible traps we could fall in while facing mainstream journalists. And we made sure to be well prepared before any media appearance and thus this was important to us. We had coaches helping us in how to address subjects and how to appear and how to work on our discourse [...]. So we prepared our appearance, our discourse toward mainstream media also very well and this was helpful.”<sup>31</sup>

The cautiousness with which Beirut Madinati approaches media also showed in the preparation for the interviews, as especially the former candidates wanted to make sure the audio data would not be passed on to the media, sometimes referring to guidelines members of the movement are obliged to follow when approaching media outlets.

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<sup>28</sup> Sibai 2017

<sup>29</sup> Mneimneh 2017

<sup>30</sup> Abi Younes 2017

<sup>31</sup> Tibi 2017

## 5 How to continue? Realizations and further proceeding



Figure 3: Frequency of items mentioned on the realizations from the 2016 campaign for further proceeding

As Beirut Madinati decided not to compete in the national elections, the future proceeding of Beirut Madinati still remains partly unclear. This section will therefore examine which conclusions the interviewed members drew from the 2016 campaign and describe their considerations for the future of the movement.

### 5.1 Evaluation of the 2016 campaign

Generally speaking, the interviewed members of Beirut Madinati showed great content with the success of their campaign. Although they did not manage to win a seat on the city council, they still feel like they have made a lasting impact on the political discourse: “I don't think anyone expected this to happen in Lebanon, I think people still don't expect this to happen in Lebanon. And I think what Beirut Madinati did was actually great. Because it was the first time that there was a secular group of people [...] that had this much impact [...]. For us it meant 40 percent of the vote, it was huge, it never happened before.”<sup>32</sup> Two interviewees mentioned that they see this as a political continuation of the previous protest movements on which they will continue to build. While their success did get them further recognition, the interviewees mentioned several things that they would like to see improved. The largest consensus hereby lay on the monitoring of the electoral process, as well as improving the organization of the volunteers: “In [the] election centers we have twelve rooms that you can elect in and in each one there should be a representative from Beirut Madinati or from any competitor list. The

<sup>32</sup> Arakji 2017

other list had twelve representatives, so one representative in each room and maybe more. Beirut Madinati had one out of twelve. So for the next election we should really have the right numbers.”<sup>33</sup>

Further conclusions individual members mentioned resolved around improving the work on the ground in direct contact with the constituency, elaborating the program in order to reach more different target groups, directly confronting the established parties in public discussions as well as increasing the pace of the campaign. This was however also reflected under the given circumstances, namely the short time for preparation and the lack of political experience.

It is worth mentioning that Beirut Madinati conducted an internal evaluation of the campaign where the points mentioned above were discussed and evaluated for further proceeding. This phase of evaluation did however slow the pace of Beirut Madinati’s work, as they needed to restructure to follow their strategies after the campaign: “We had a vision for the campaign. But we didn't have a comprehensive vision for the aftermath. So one, we learned that we had to think about the whole if we gain and if we lose. [...] And that's why we had an interim period and we had to restructure Beirut Madinati. [...] So this took several months for internal issues and that’s why people didn't see a concrete change on the ground for some time.”<sup>34</sup>

## **5.2 Current strategies for implementing Beirut Madinati’s campaign goals**

Upon voting for not competing in the national elections, Beirut Madinati agreed on a strategy to work on a municipal agenda and focus on Beirut. For this purpose, three major boards have been installed all of which relate to realizations from the 2016 campaign: the alternative municipality, the neighborhoods group as well as the elections group. The alternative municipality serves as a body monitoring the actual municipality’s work and proposing alternative ways to dealing with municipal issues. This way, Beirut Madinati plans to continue serving their local constituency as a “watchdog for the municipality and push for projects and improvements in the city.”<sup>35</sup> Besides lobbying for their campaign goals, this body acts as a mean to stay in public focus and to continue building a broad and firm constituency. The neighborhoods group is equally important in this process, as it is designed to improve the work on the ground and stay in touch with the inhabitants of the neighborhoods and their needs.

Lastly, the elections group is working on lobbying the lawmaking process for the electoral law, as there is a large discontent among Beirut Madinati members with the current electoral methods:

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<sup>33</sup> Abi Younes 2017

<sup>34</sup> Sibai 2017

<sup>35</sup> Mneimneh 2017

“We are maybe the only country in the world, or us and Syria, who don't have a preprinted ballot. And this is [...] just simple thing, opportunity for cheating and fraud. So, for example, if we just advocate for that or lobby for something to get this thing part of the new electoral law, it would be a huge shift for everyone because it would require less effort for you to monitor them and this less effort would allow more people to have opportunity to run for elections. [...] These amendments or these improvements to the electoral law, I mean they don't really directly link to the kind of winner takes it all or proportional system, but it can have a huge impact.”<sup>36</sup>

This is also to say that Beirut Madinati until this point did not get involved in lobbying for a certain type of electoral system but rather work on improving the formalities of the electoral process.

### **5.3 Transferring Beirut Madinati's discourse to the national level**

As Beirut Madinati decided not to compete in the national elections their next strategic goal will be to compete in the municipal elections of 2022. However, stepping up to the national level is move that Beirut Madinati eventually plans to take although the preferred pace and strategies for achieving this goal differ within the movement. According to the interviewees' statements, the members of Beirut Madinati were split in half by the decision not to run for the parliament. As strategic decisions in Beirut Madinati are made by a majority of two thirds, the outcome was never questioned but the fact that there are two equally large groups with different opinions on this issue also reflected in the interviewees' ideas for proceeding to the national arena.

There is a basic agreement among the interviewees that the local issues and principles brought up by Beirut Madinati are linked to issues on the national agenda and can be applied in national policies as well: “Local issues would feed national strategies and national policies. Local issues such as the waste management that will lead to having specific laws in the parliament that are dedicated to imposing recycling and sustainable solutions for that problem and making some benefits out of this like many people in the country are doing.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, the group supporting Beirut Madinati's engagement in the national elections had a program prepared that was however rejected along with the decision not to run. Part of this is explained by the concern that Beirut Madinati “will have to go to a level of subject at the national level. Maybe foreign policy, you will have to talk about laws and legislations and corruption [...], it's a totally different game. [...] So you need to have some really base on the ground. Because [in Lebanon], people vote in a totally different way. We have sectarianism entrenched people, we have the

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<sup>36</sup> Mneimneh 2017

<sup>37</sup> Tibi 2017

idea of the leader or the sectarian leader entrench people.”<sup>38</sup> Beirut Madinati does, however, not rule out to support and endorse individual candidates that they feel affiliated to.

A further broad agreement amongst the interviewees was to build on local success to eventually expand to the further goals. However there were different interpretations of this strategy, as proponents of the national agenda emphasized that it is important to “rock the boat” and compete in the elections in order to stay in public focus and build on the local constituency.<sup>39</sup> The other fraction perceives a firm support base as a precondition for further steps and sees the future of Beirut Madinati in “a greater alliance of people who think alike and have some initiatives all around Lebanon.”<sup>40</sup>

However, two further strategies became apparent throughout the interviews that allow Beirut Madinati to influence the national agenda without participating themselves. On the one hand there is the campaign by Naqabati, running for the Order of Engineers and Architects in Lebanon, which operates as an organization co-founded by professionals within Beirut Madinati but is not limited to members of the movement. On the other hand, regarding the national elections, interviewees mentioned that individual members of Beirut Madinati might run for seats in the parliament as independants. This way, they can still count on the support of Beirut Madinati without being affiliated and costing the movement human resources that are needed in the municipal work.<sup>41</sup>

## **6 “An ace up the sleeve”: The success of Naqabati**

In the aftermath of the 2016 municipal elections, Beirut Madinati reorganized to working as an extra-parliamentary opposition laying the focus on municipal issues. However, a group of architects of engineers within Beirut Madianti saw an opportunity for competing in the elections for the governing council as well as the president of the Order for Engineers and Architects in Lebanon and hence founded *naqābatī li-l-muhandisa wa-l-muhandis* (my syndicate for the female and the male engineer). This opportunity turned out to be fruitful as in April 2017 Jad Tabet, Naqabati’s candidate for the president of the order, had been elected into office. The following section examines how Naqabati emerged from the principles of Beirut Madinati and which realizations from the 2016 campaign played into turning Naqabati into a success story. For this purpose a further narrative interview had been conducted with a founding member of Naqabati.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mneimneh 2017

<sup>39</sup> Sehnaoui 2017

<sup>40</sup> Tibi 2017

<sup>41</sup> As of April 2017 no members officially announced their candidacy and were therefore not available for an interview yet.

<sup>42</sup> All quotes in this section are attributed to the interviewee Abdul-Halim Jabr (2017)

The Order of Engineers and Architects in Lebanon plays a key position in so far that it is not only a representative body of professionals working in the field but is actively involved in policy making and planning. In fact, the president of the order is a member of the higher council of planning where he or she is responsible along with representatives from adjacent ministries to review every major project that falls in the domain of engineering and architecture. As Beirut Madinati had already displayed expertise in these fields on the municipal level and counts a large number of professionals in their ranks, they saw “immediately, instinctively without really over thinking it saw a correlation, an affinity between our municipal agenda and the prospect for the Order of Engineers.” This way, specific goals the alternative municipality workgroup is trying to push could also be lobbied from inside the political system.

Although Naqabati sees a large number of their professionals active within Beirut Madinati, it is not entirely a sub organization of the civil movement, but rather an entity co-founded by Beirut Madinati members and further independent civil society actors. The campaign was, however, based on principles that were very similar to the ones Beirut Madinati followed in 2016 while the content created was more specifically targeted at professional issues. Gender equality was represented not only in the list but also in the display of the campaign: “Our most visible candidate was Rana [Chmaytelli], a wonderful mechanical engineer who has an organization called ‘The Little Engineer’ and she teaches kids robotics. So we [...] wanted to say that the new face of the engineer is a woman, is high tech, robotics, and doesn't have an age or seniority associated with it.” Naqabati also made a point out of being independent in a sense that it did not accept party clientelism among its ranks. It was, however, open to professionals affiliated with different parties under one condition: “The political message that Jad Tabet gave [is] that we are open to all political ideas, all political affiliations, except it's a prerequisite that the professional be the voice of his or her profession in his or her respective political party and not vice versa.”

As the Order of Engineers and Architects is situated on the national level, Naqabati had to adapt its program to wider issues concerning professional practices in different geographical and professional domains: “We always talked about rural problems about telecom problems, political issues, empowerment, ecology [...]. We really hammered the green agenda.” Working on rural issues constituted a key point of showing their willingness of being inclusive: “Our candidates drove all over the country to local meetings, around twelve of them. [...] And that's to say that we recognize everybody, we recognize all concerns, suburban, rural, urban, etc., we recognize all branches, all ideologies, all social affiliations.” In order to emphasize this point, to reach professionals with different

educational backgrounds and to fight the image of being elitist, the campaign was held completely in Arabic contrary to Beirut Madinati's 2016 campaign. Another conclusion drawn from the municipal elections was to use the more extensive time period before the elections to prepare and set the pace: "Jad Tabet announced his candidacy when there were eleven others and they are all political and quasi independent, so one month before the elections it was established that Jad is the independent candidate. [...] So we did that in Beirut Madinati but we did it a bit intuitively and naively. This time we did it consciously."

Naqabati targeted three major groups among the professionals: young engineers, women and engineers who are not associated with the building industry. This last group had previously been underrepresented as "the Order of Engineers and Architects traditionally is founded around buildings, construction. [...]. Now, half of the members are totally unrelated to buildings. [...]. So we signaled in all our communication that we are aware of this fact and that we are understand their problems and that we have creative ways for dealing with them." Their means of communication were very similar to those of Beirut Madinati as they consisted of info graphics and videos as well testimonials by the candidates shared through social media while Naqabati's program was the only printed media used for the campaign. Since the target group was much narrower and focused on professional issues, public events like *masāhat niqāš* (discussion space) or rallies were not part of Naqabati's campaign.

Monitoring the election, compared to the municipal election, was an easier process, as far less human capital was needed in order to supervise the 25 ballot boxes and the monitors sent by Naqabati were well prepared for their task.

As a result of Naqabati's efforts, Jad Tabet won the seat of the president of the order by merely 21 votes out of approximately 10000 votes casted, while the candidates for the governing council lost by a narrow margin. This success was mainly attributed to the inclusiveness of the campaign: "We attracted political professionals from different parties and affiliations who voted for Jad and now he's the president of the order." However, the movement is aware of the narrow margin of their win: "We're euphoric now, but we're very mindful that if we were to have one less meeting or one less Facebook post or one less video we would have lost. 21 votes, this is how close it was. [...]. It's such a close vote, that we are euphoric but very analytical at the same time."

## **7 Conclusion**

With Beirut Madinati's 2015 campaign, for the first time in the history of the Lebanese Republic an independent, gender-balanced list competed in the municipal elections and challenged the established

parties. During the brief restructuring phase after the elections, Beirut Madinati evaluated the key factors for their success: They defined themselves as an alternative through practical, relatable goals in the municipal agenda, backed by a professional program that offered comprehensible steps for implementation. By refraining from hostilities against the established parties and maintaining a positive tone, Beirut Madinati even managed to convince affiliates of the established parties additionally to the reform oriented youth. Their quick rise in popularity helped them maintain the pace of their campaign through fundraising and volunteering.

As their success could not be translated into seats in the city council, Beirut Madinati will continue to work as an extra-parliamentary opposition based on the same principles and methods that guaranteed their high voter turnout in first place. To this end, they will continue their role as a “watchdog” for their local constituency, monitoring the municipality’s decision through their alternative municipality workgroup. In order to ensure a continuous contact with their constituency the neighborhoods workgroup will continue working on the ground to help assess the constituency’s immediate needs and demands.

Not participating in the national elections was a subject of discussions and minor disagreements in the movement, but due to its open constitution, there are still ways for individual members to work on transferring the Beirut Madinati’s discourse on the national level. Naqabati’s win in the election for the Order of Engineers and architects shows a first step into the national arena as well as a way to influence professional practices in the country. At the same time, having an elections group working for an improvement of the electoral process itself remains a major point on Beirut Madinati’s agenda.

Although Beirut Madinati needed a period of time to restructure and agree on its vision after the 2016 campaign, it is certain to say that the movement is still prevalent in shaping the public discourse and working on tangible solutions. Adding to the three dedicated work groups are prevalent in lobbying mainly on the municipal level but also on the improvement of the general elections, Naqabati’s win constitutes a first step into the political system. However, while these accomplishments provide Beirut Madinati with tools for lobbying their goals and attracting attention for now, staying in public focus and maintaining the image of a credible alternative will remain a key concern for the young movement in order to further mobilize the large portion of non-voters that do not feel represented in the political system. As Beirut Madinati is not competing in the national elections, bridging the time to the next municipal elections set for 2022 without campaigning for public office which will be crucial and will possibly require further considerations for communication and lobbying strategies.