

How Vagueness of Information Became a Tool for Controlling Public Spaces in Lebanon

Suzanne Baaklini

Influential politicians and businessmen have long tried, and often succeeded, in controlling public spaces in Lebanon, both along the coast and in the hinterland. The Lebanese people are, for the most part, notoriously deprived of access to all kinds of public spaces. There is practically no free access to the sea along the length of the coast, and very few public gardens in the cities, the capital included. With time, what would be considered as scandalous in other countries has become normal practice in Lebanon. For example, the proliferation of private resorts on the public coastal domain does not concern or stir the masses. Only a handful of activists have managed, over the years, to raise questions about this matter. In this activists often have to face an invisible but pernicious enemy: rumours aimed at deflecting people's attention from their right to access public spaces. Lack of communication on the part of the authorities, secrets surrounding controversial projects, insufficient information, clashes between civil activists and authorities, are all factors that have frequently led to the spreading of rumours. Often these rumours have affected campaigning for the right to access public spaces, and, sometimes, the projects themselves.

The scandals related to public spaces are many and varied. One of the latest scandals concerns the coast of Dalieh, well known to Ras Beirut residents, which was recently claimed as private property by companies owned by the late Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's heirs. They apparently planned to build a big resort on this little beach overlooking the Pigeon Rocks (Raoucheh). In other places, the problem has been the result of the authorities' mismanagement of highly controversial cases such as those of the Jesuit Garden's planned parking (which was to be built under the public



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garden, causing its temporary destruction before its final reconstruction); the Beirut pine forest (Horsh Beirut), still closed to the public many years after its renovation; or the planned commencement of a fifty year-old road project, the Fouad Bustros highway through the Hikmeh quarter in Achrafieh, to the dismay of many of this neighbourhood's residents. These issues are often referred to by activists and officials whenever they are asked about their experiences in dealing with rumours.

How do rumours affect campaigning to access public space?

The undefined nature of rumours often makes them a disruptive factor in issues relating to public space. 'Rumours are unconfirmed information spreading through word of mouth,

nowadays amplified by social media, acquiring, with time, force of truth', explains Michel Abs, sociologist and economist, researcher in economic sociology and Director of division at St. Joseph's University, Lebanon. 'Rumours might be spread in good faith by people who misread reality or perceive it in a special way. They can also be initiated purposefully in which case they are straight lies, or otherwise by people having an interest in revealing secret but genuine information. In the case of rumours concerning the public domain, it is always difficult to differentiate between reality and fantasy. Take the Dalieh example: the silence of the party accused of wanting to build on this beach is fuelling the debate. This same debate will take a different turn once someone reveals the outlines of the project.'¹

Mohamed Zbeeb, journalist and co-founder of Mashaa, a group campaigning for the restoration of public space in Lebanon, believes rumours do play a role in such cases, but they are not the main factor that motivates the activists. 'In the Dalieh case, for example, we are only motivated by the concept of the right to free access to the coast', he says. 'The system we live under is not a transparent one, it is true. There is practically no mechanism to search for truth, and activists are often confronted with a great quantity of data and/or rumours. But our opposition to this or that project is based on matters of principle.'

According to Zbeeb, rumours have, nonetheless, greatly affected campaigns for restoring public spaces through the targeting of public opinion. 'For decades rumours have regularly been used to deter the public', he explains. 'In order to be able to control Dalieh, the political party behind the companies that own the place has helped spread the idea that it is awash with drug dealers, prostitutes, rapists and street children. Dalieh was once a beloved venue for Beirut citizens, many of whom swam there until the late sixties. Then, during the war and the years that followed, this place gradually became isolated from the population, partly by the spreading of those rumours of lack of security there. This happened around the time the land was massively being bought up by these companies. Our response was to conduct a study which showed that the number of official complaints about events concerning this location was very low. The same method was used in relation to Horsh Beirut. The municipality still refuses to reopen this public garden under the pretext that it will attract illicit activities. The fact is that this garden is surrounded by popular neighbourhoods comprising communities from different communitarian backgrounds,



The Angry Dolosse Army, intervention by Christian Zahr for Dalieh of Raouche Campaign



Civil campaign to preserve the Dalieh of Raouche

and we think the authorities are interested in preventing different social classes and religious communities from coming together.'

Abir Saksouk, a young engineer and member of the civil campaign to preserve the Dalieh of Raoucheh, believes that rumours exist at all levels in issues relating to public space, especially in the case of Dalieh, 'Rumours can be the result of the ambiguous stance of the authorities who all refuse to take responsibility', she says. 'When we first started discussing the case of Dalieh with the authorities, the minister of Environment as well as officials in the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) said that they were against building in this area and urged us to increase pressure on the Ministry of Interior. The latter, as well as the Directorate General of Urbanism and the municipal council of Beirut, denied any responsibility, thus making it difficult for us to face this "ghost issue"'

She adds, 'I also notice that rumours spread sometimes without being propelled by anybody. Our campaign is named after 'Dalieh el Raoucheh'. That title was confused, in the minds of many people, with the 'Pigeon's Rocks' themselves. These people understandably came to think that a project was going to be carried out on the rocks themselves, which compelled them to react to the issue. It is disturbing to think, however, that most people would be more concerned about the protection of a national symbol, than about preserving their right to free access to a public beach.'

How rumours are used as a political tool

Rumours, in this sense, seem to be used as a political tool par excellence for influencing people's views on public spaces, and for avoiding disturbing questions and debates.

Raja Noujaim, an activist who is involved in many of the issues mentioned above, accuses the authorities of concealing the truth and using rumours to manipulate the masses and to hinder the activists' campaigns. 'Many powerful individuals in the administration secretly work to ensure their interests, in spite of the fact that the law orders them to make their decisions public', he says. 'Rumours take over in the absence of precise information. It's up to us to deal with such rumours and look for the truth from whistleblowers inside the administration who are dissatisfied with the officials' behaviour. Or we can thwart their attempts through getting information provided by expert consultants, as is the case with the Fouad Boutros highway a project that is going to lead to the destruction of many traditional neighbourhoods, and that is mainly promoted by the CDR and the Beirut municipal council.'

The Beirut municipal council is one of the official institutions involved in issues relating to public spaces in the capital. Hagop Terzian, member of the municipal council, categorically denies any implication in spreading rumours about any issue of public interest. 'This type of behaviour might be an option for the secret services but certainly not for a municipal council with the duty to make all of its decisions public', he asserts. According to him, it was rather the council that was a frequent victim of rumours targeting its projects deemed controversial.

Referring to a case he followed closely, that of the Jesuits' Garden, he says, 'Our aim was to build a much needed car park under the present garden, while recreating the garden in a more open and modern fashion. Rumours started to spread, I think originating from political adversaries to the municipal council. It was said we would never rebuild the garden. Then, somebody claimed there were archaeological

relics under the garden. There are in fact some relics in the Jesuit Gardens, which were brought in from another site, but there is no proof of the presence of any archaeological relics under the site. As a result, the parking project was delayed and people are still fighting over parking spaces every night in this area.'

However, he admits that rumours may at times be beneficial. 'I recall I once heard a rumour about a decision from the Mohafez to destroy one of the town's old staircases. We investigated the matter and it turned out that the rumour was true. Thus we had a chance to intervene and stop this controversial project.'

The difficulty of facing rumours

The vague nature of rumours and the uncertainty surrounding their origins make it difficult to respond to them. 'Rumours spread haphazardly; we don't need to know who initiates them in order to respond to them properly', says Michel Abs. 'On the other hand, rumours in public affairs issues are closely linked with the people's deepest preoccupations. Therefore, it is not easy to know how people perceive them and how they develop. According to him, transparency is the only way to combat rumours. He suggests that a more transparent political system would reduce the impact of rumours on the public. 'But one can't bet on that', he adds. 'The only thing working in this political system, except for efforts spent on security issues, is profit generation. Matters of public concern are not at the top of the authorities' priorities. How can they be more transparent when they have things to hide?'

Abir Saksouk and Mohamed Zbeeb both agree that transparency and revealing the truth are the only ways to pre-empt the effect of rumours. They have both worked on changing the stigmatizing portrayal of places like Dalieh. 'A rumour is a story', Abir Saksouk says. 'Instead of desperately trying to deny what is told to people, I find it much more fruitful to highlight the other side of the story, to show what public spaces are really about.' Mohamed Zbeeb, stresses the importance of the concept of civil rights, which for him is, 'above any other matter, and certainly above the illusory benefits of any private project.'

Only Raja Noujaim is of the opinion that rumours may at times be counteracted with other rumours. 'Our adversaries, authorities or investors, use rumours to hinder our campaigns against their controversial projects', he says. 'These adversaries are much more powerful

than us. They also have much better access to the media. I believe that in certain instances, it is justified to fight them with their own weapon, provided the cause served is a noble one. For example, we might give the impression we are working on some issue while we are effectively putting all our efforts on another. In my view, in specific cases, we have no choice, they leave us no choice.'

Abir Saksouk is convinced, for her part, that the use of rumours by civil society organisations is never the best strategy. 'I believe transparency and truth are much more efficient means', she says. 'We have many other tools at hand, starting with the judiciary and the laws. But I know that the civil campaign to preserve Dalieh is made up of very different people, and I respect everybody's views.'

Mohamed Zbeeb states that, 'I refrain from using rumours as a tool, not for moral reasons, but because I think it doesn't serve the purpose.' He explains that 'Provocation is more Machaa's style of work. For instance, we have recently listed in the press the names of all the politicians implicated in violating public property on the coastline. This list shows that all Lebanese political parties are equally implicated in this matter.'

With regard to the reaction of the authorities to rumours, Hagop Terzian says he has often advised the council to adopt, 'a better communication strategy in order to counteract rumours around its projects'. He says that, 'I think that our successes and our transparency are the factors that will help us beat the rumours hindering our projects.' He goes on to explain his approach; 'Personally, regarding projects that I follow closely, such as the recent renovation of a historic staircase in Beirut, I communicate with the public through posting pictures and data on my social media accounts, and through all other available means. When people see what is being done, there is no more room for rumours.'

Well engraved in the mind

One might wonder why rumours seem to have such a strong grip on the Lebanese people. What are the special characteristics of the Lebanese in this matter? Michel Abs stresses the fact that 'the phenomenon of rumour is universal'. However, he also explains that, 'In Lebanon, especially in matters relating to public spaces and public affairs, the lack of confidence between the public and the authorities makes the people wary of the latter's decisions. In a country like Lebanon, where people don't trust their government or even their elected

representatives, rumours of mismanagement spread very easily, fuelled by many dire experiences.'

According to Abs, the problem might even be a matter of local culture, derived from habits dating from the Mutasarrifiya era, when a system based on corruption was put in place, which has never been corrected. Surprisingly, Hagop Terzian agrees. 'Authorities take little trouble to inspire confidence', he says. 'They fail as much in big tasks, such as holding elections on time, as in managing everyday life issues. I hope we will become a society where individuals in power will be held accountable for their actions continuously and at every level. Rumours take undue importance in our society because we only try to look for the truth when it's too late, then we blame everything on fate. We have to become a more rational society, we

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have no more excuses.'

Mohamed Zbeeb goes further into this line of thinking. As he puts it, our conception of public spaces, including public beaches, is marked by years of propaganda. 'Lebanese people have no problems believing rumours about the bad reputation of public places because the idea of safe public spaces was destroyed in their minds by a huge propaganda machine', he says. 'Foreigners would be astonished to know that the Lebanese people don't have free access to the sea at any spot along a 240 kilometre long coastline, but the Lebanese find it very normal to pay for access to private beaches, because they are convinced that security and order can simply not be provided in public spaces. This idea has its roots in another long lasting piece of propaganda: that the State is corrupt beyond repair. Moreover, any person who manages to build on State property goes unpunished. This, of course, is the result of a political system based on communitarian rather than national affiliation. The Lebanese have been, and still are, fed the idea that the State is an adversary, instead of the idea that they are the State's partners or, indeed, the State itself. Corruption is the individual's doing, and everybody in the State should be involved in combating it.'

Mohamed Zbeeb is convinced that the

solution is in the people's hands. 'If we all decide to go to public beaches, we would be able to reverse the conviction of their bad reputation', he says. 'We would restore their initial meaning in our lives. And if the majority of people demand the restoration of their right to access public spaces, then the corrupt individuals in power will not be able to contain such a movement.'

Why, then, do so few people show up when sit-ins are organized for the preservation of the public domain such as in Dalieh? 'We are aware that we are fighting a huge propaganda machine that has been functioning for years', Zbeeb says. 'There are many reasons for the public's disinterest, specifically in the case of Dalieh. First, such issues are never a priority in a country continuously facing existential questions and serious security problems. It is no coincidence that the companies chose those troubled times to drag up this issue. Second, the rumours circulating around the beach don't help people feel they belong to this place. Third, the neighbourhood has greatly changed since the war. Ras Beirut is now full of huge expensive buildings, inhabited by immigrants and foreigners. They are isolated from this little beach that used to be so vital for the original population. Notice that sit-ins for other places like the Jesuit Garden have gathered more people because the residents felt more concerned with them.'

Raja Noujaim has his own opinion on this, 'I think people are not at present more conscious of their civil rights than they were before, but there are more professional activists on the ground', he says. 'I think authorities and investors hide information and spread rumours hoping that those small groups of people will get tired and leave. Continuity, here, is the key for success.'

Is success in restoring public spaces possible in such a context? The activists are more or less optimistic. They point to public consciousness as a major factor in this matter; only progress at the popular level can compel the authorities to enforce the law for public good instead of privileging private interests through bypassing legislations. Only public consciousness can lessen rumour's grip on people's minds. Nevertheless, all this takes time. And in time will there be anything left to fight for?

1. All quoted speech is taken from original interviews conducted by the author.



The Phoenix

That information should be verified before publishing, and if that is not possible, at least flagged as 'hearsay' is not a modern concept only. See this lovely example of Herodotus, who in his writings about the Middle East's flora and fauna also covered the Phoenix. While parts of the story are told as if talking about a real and not a mythic creature, he expresses his skepticism repeatedly, stressing that he could not confirm the bird's existence and genesis with his own eyes but reports only on what people tell him.

'They have also another sacred bird called the phoenix which I myself have never seen, except in pictures. Indeed it is a great rarity, even in Egypt, only coming there (according to the accounts of the people of Heliopolis) once in five hundred years, when the old phoenix dies. Its size and appearance, if it is like the pictures, are as follow: The plumage is partly red, partly golden, while the general make and size are almost exactly that of the eagle. They tell a story of what this bird does, which does not seem to me to be credible: that he comes all the way from Arabia, and brings the parent bird, all plastered over with myrrh, to the temple of the Sun, and there buries the body. In order to bring him, they say, he first forms a ball of myrrh as big as he finds that he can carry; then he hollows out the ball, and puts his parent inside, after which he covers over the opening with fresh myrrh, and the ball is then of exactly the same weight as at first; so he brings it to Egypt, plastered over as I have said, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun. Such is the story they tell of the doings of this bird.'

Herodotus: The History of Herodotus, Translation: George Rawlinson, taken from The Internet Classics Archive.