REEVALUATING 'RESILIENCE': THE CASE OF BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSION

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With 4 figures and 2 photos
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Summary: This paper examines the intricate dynamics of urban resilience and recovery in the context of ongoing and overlapping crises, with Beirut serving as a focal case. Following the 2020 port explosion, Beirut's recovery has been shaped by political instability, economic challenges, and fragmented governance, highlighting the limitations of traditional approaches to resilience and normalcy. The methodology adopts a multi-scalar approach, exploring the roles of local communities, NGOs, and international stakeholders in the city's recovery process. It emphasizes the disparities in reconstruction efforts and the critical role of neighborhood-level initiatives in addressing localized needs. This analysis calls for a reconsideration of the concepts of 'resilience' and 'normality' in a context of ongoing crises, where stability is supplanted by constant adaptation across various spatial and temporal scales. The study underscores the necessity of redefining these frameworks to better understand how cities navigate persistent instability and maintain functionality under continuous disruption.

Keywords: Crisis, reconstruction, urban resilience, trajectories, Beirut, Lebanon

1 Introduction

On August 4, 2020, Beirut experienced one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history when 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored at the port detonated, leaving the city devastated (see Fig. 1) and triggering an unprecedented humanitarian and political crisis. The explosion claimed 230 lives, injured 6,500 people, displaced 300,000 residents, and left 150 individuals with permanent disabilities (Nassar & Nastaca 2021, Hariri et al. 2021). The economic and material losses were estimated at $15 billion (L'orient-Le Jour 2020). Yet beyond this humanitarian and material toll, the explosion exposed a far deeper and more enduring crisis - one rooted in decades of political dysfunction, infrastructural decay, and systemic neglect.

The vulnerabilities laid bare by the blast extended well beyond physical exposure to hazard. They revealed the fragility of Lebanon's governance systems, the erosion of institutional legitimacy, and the chronic absence of state capacity. The explosion starkly demonstrated the government's inability to mount a coordinated and effective response, creating a vacuum rapidly filled by a fragmented constellation of local NGOs, civil society actors, and international organizations. These recovery efforts operated within an environment shaped by entrenched institutional paralysis and geopolitical complexity, exacerbating the unevenness of post-disaster interventions.

Beirut's urban development trajectory is marked by successive cycles of destruction and improvised reconstruction, where public and private actors engage in short-term interventions rather than long-term planning. In contrast to the more centralized response seen in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, where coordinated government-led efforts aimed at rebuilding the city's infrastructure, Beirut's fragmented approach - dominated by local and international actors - has exposed deep tensions in the state's ability to manage post-crisis recovery. Concurrent crises, including the 2019 financial collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, and persistent regional conflicts, have further intensified these challenges. Most recently, the 2024 Israeli–Hezbollah war has deepened the city's vulnerability, further entrenching its condition of suspended recovery. As Charlesworth (2006) observed, Beirut has become "the world's largest laboratory for post-war reconstruction."

Consequently, the reconstruction of Beirut not only reflects the city's social, political, and economic power dynamics but also shapes its trajectory. This unique set of circumstances necessitates a reexamination of the concept of urban resilience, moving beyond the simplistic notion of restoring pre-crisis conditions.In this context, reconstruction is not simply a technical or material process; it is deeply embedded in the city's socio-political fabric. The process both reflects and reinforces existing power asymmetries, shaping the spatial and political trajectories of recov-

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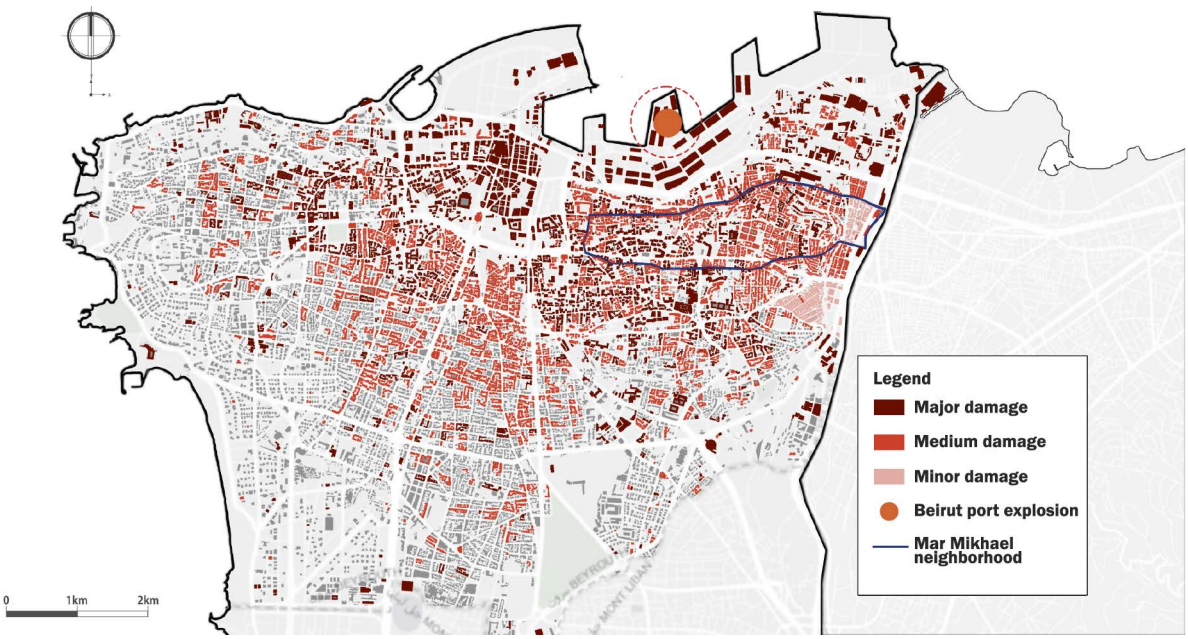

Fig. 1: Impact of the Beirut port blast on surrounding neighborhoods. Source: Own design based on Beirut Urban Lab (2024) data.

ery. These conditions call into question conventional understandings of urban resilience, which often center on a city's capacity to return to a presumed 'normal' following disruption. Such frameworks presuppose institutional stability and a shared baseline - assumptions that are inapplicable in Beirut, where crisis is not episodic but chronic, and where normalcy itself is contested. As Buccianti-Barakat & Hesse (2022) argue, Beirut's recurrent instability and fragmented recovery efforts challenge the notion of resilience as a process of structured adaptation. Similarly, Rafferty (2022) and Ahmed (2016) critique the applicability of resilience theories in conflict-ridden and politically fragile urban environments, emphasizing that resilience in Beirut is less a linear pathway toward recovery than a survival strategy in the midst of enduring systemic dysfunction.

This research situates itself within the broader scholarship on urban resilience and risk in metropolitan environments. Adopting a trajectory-based approach that considers both temporal and spatial scales, the study aims to understand not just immediate recovery but also long-term shifts in urban dynamics post-explosion. This study contends that resilience in Beirut must be reconceptualized - not as a static outcome or a return to equilibrium, but as a dynamic, contested, and situated process shaped by inequality, improvisation, and shifting actor configurations. The analysis interrogates whether the recovery processes observed in post-explosion Beirut reveal alternative articulations of resilience and normalcy specific to cities in prolonged crisis.

Two key objectives guide this inquiry. First, the study aims to critically engage with dominant resilience paradigms by analyzing how recovery in Beirut has unfolded through spatially and politically uneven practices. Second, it seeks to examine the scalar dimensions of these dynamics - probing whether resilience is most meaningfully observed at the level of the household, neighborhood, or metropolitan scale, and how these scales interact in shaping post-disaster responses. The article begins by establishing the theoretical framework on resilience and risk at broader scales, followed by a detailed outline of the methodology. The findings section explores the relationships among key reconstruction actors, while the final discussion and conclusion examine the broader implications of the research's results.

2 Conventional definitions of 'resilience' fall short in explaining Beirut's case study

In recent years, the concept of 'resilience' has gained significant traction in both academic discussions and policy-making, with various factors contributing to its rapid rise (Cascio 2009, Brown 2014, Meerow & Newell 2015). One key reason for its

growing prominence is that resilience theory offers valuable insights into managing complex socio-ecological systems sustainably (Folke 2006, Pickett et al. 2013), particularly in the context of climate change (Leichenko 2011, Solecki et al. 2011, Zimmerman & Faris 2011). The idea has become especially appealing in urban studies, where cities are often conceptualized as highly intricate and adaptive systems (Batty 2008, Godschalk 2003). Derived from the Latin word resilio, meaning 'to bounce back,' resilience as an academic construct remains somewhat ambiguous and open to interpretation (Adger 2000, Friend & Moench 2013, Lhomme et al. 2013, Pendall et al. 2010).

In the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut port explosion, invoking the notion of 'resilience' within the Lebanese context proves analytically fraught. Although widely employed across political discourse, media framings, and academic literature, the concept is frequently underpinned by a largely unquestioned premise: the existence of an operational system with the inherent capacity to withstand shocks, restructure itself, or adapt in response to disruption. This premise, whether framed through ecological models privileging a return to stability (Holling 1973, Pimm 1984), sociological perspectives centered on collective capacity (White 1945, Adger 2000), or evolutionary frameworks emphasizing transformation through change (Aschan-Leygonie 1998, Dovers & Handmer 1992, Reghezza 2006), clashes with the lived reality of Beirut - a city entrenched in overlapping and enduring systemic crises.

The concept of resilience as a simple 'return to normal' has been problematized by scholars such as Reghezza (2006), who reframes recovery not as restoration, but as transformation through adaptation and learning. Rather than aiming to reinstate a prior equilibrium, she argues that post-crisis stability should reflect the integration of new capacities shaped by disruption. This perspective is particularly salient in Beirut, where crisis is not an exceptional rupture but an enduring structural condition. In such a context, invoking a return to normalcy after the 2020 port explosion is conceptually incoherent.

This calls for a shift in analytical lens. Larrère & Larrère (1997) argue that systems are fundamentally dynamic, evolving continuously under the influence of disturbances. This perspective underscores the importance of incorporating temporal scales into analysis, challenging the concept of an 'original state.' Reghezza (2006) further complicates the picture by characterizing metropolitan areas as inherently fragile systems, where the density and interdependence of functions render them particularly susceptible to cascading risks - so tightly interwoven that they resemble a 'knot.' In this light, risk cannot be conceptualized as a discrete, linear, or spatially bounded event (November 2013, Pigeon 2005, Beucher et al. 2008, Meschinet de Richemond 2012), but rather demands a framework that is simultaneously dynamic and multiscalar (Reghezza-Zitt 2016).

Therefore, the case of Beirut presents a distinct perspective by challenging the validity of 'normalcy' and 'resilience' in a setting where crises are not isolated disruptions but rather a persistent structural condition. The notion of 'returning to normal' becomes particularly problematic in Beirut due to the prolonged and overlapping crises (see Fig. 2) that shape its urban fabric. Unlike single-event disasters, which typically allow for a clear distinction between pre-crisis and post-crisis states, Beirut's trajectory reflects a state of enduring crisis. Disruptions - whether economic, social, or political - are not transient but continuous, fundamentally reshaping the way resilience is interpreted. Therefore, the central hypothesis of this research examines whether the recovery processes in Beirut, shaped by its unique socio-political and economic conditions, exhibit distinctive patterns of urban resilience and normalcy. By analyzing these patterns, this study aims to contribute to a redefined understanding of resilience, one that is more suited to urban contexts experiencing sustained and multidimensional crises.

3 Research area and methodology

This research aligns with the broader literature on urban resilience in contexts characterized by multiple and continuous crises. It aims to deepen the understanding of how resilience is articulated and negotiated in such complex settings by adopting a multiscalar and actor-centered approach. The investigation focuses on two interrelated scales: the macro-scale of the city of Beirut, marked by overlapping socio-political, economic, and environmental instabilities; and the micro-scale of the Mar Mikhael neighborhood, one of the densest affected areas following the 2020 port explosion. This dual focus aims to investigate the relationship - if any - between different scales in the aftermath of a large-scale disaster and to identify the most suitable scale for (re)evaluating resilience and assessing the notion of normalcy.

The methodological framework is built upon four complementary sources of data. First, a critical review of grey literature and prior assessments was conducted to identify dominant narratives

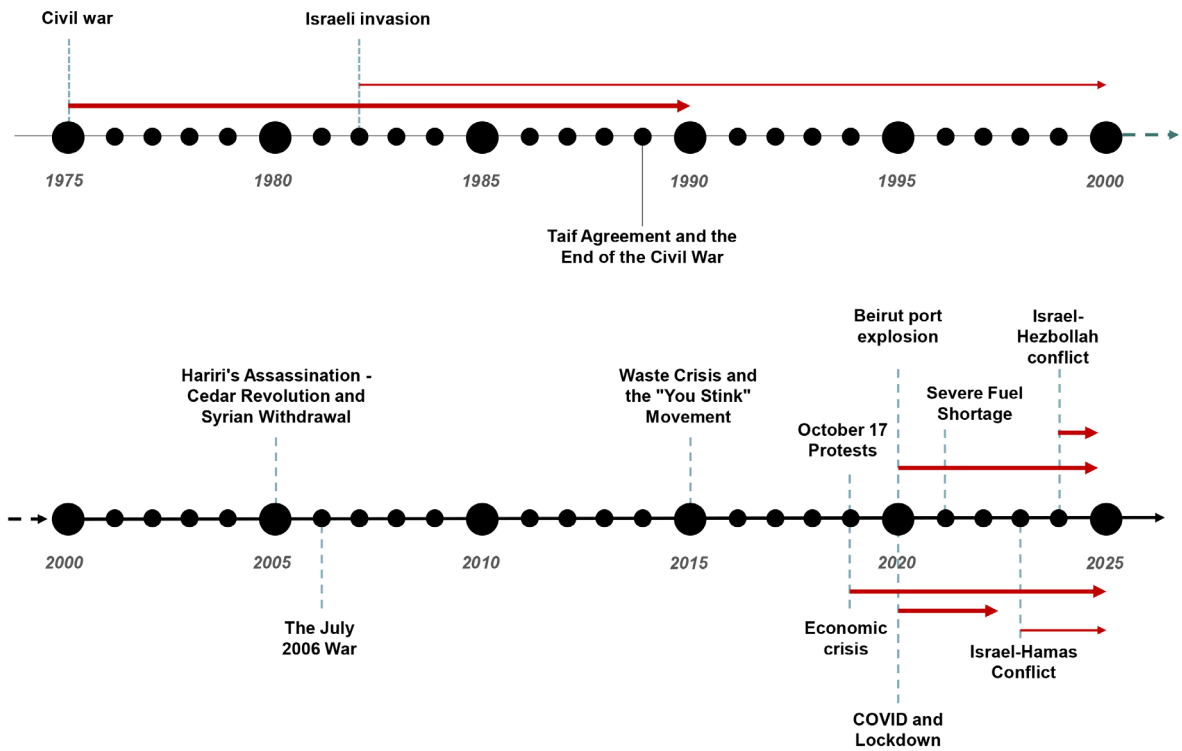

Fig. 2: Timeline of major crises in Lebanon. Source: Own design based on THIMAR-LSESD 2020, KOWEYES et al. 2021.

and conceptual gaps related to resilience and crisis management in Lebanon. This included analysis of Lebanon's recent socio-political history, the consequences of the Beirut port explosion, and key frameworks on vulnerability, dynamic risk, and large-scale urban disasters (MICHEL-KERJAN 2000, 2003, 2007).

Second, a total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse set of local and international actors involved in the post-blast response. The selection of interviewees was guided by a multi-scalar actor mapping process, which classified stakeholders based on the type (governmental, non-governmental, international, community-based, private sector) and the scale of intervention (building, neighborhood, city-wide and international).

This typology was constructed after identifying the key categories of actors who intervened in the reconstruction process. Interviews were then carried out with representatives from each category to capture differentiated strategies, constraints, and modes of coordination across scales (see Fig. 3). However, access to public authorities posed a significant challenge, reflecting broader issues of opacity and institutional fragmentation in Lebanon's governance system. Most state actors either declined to participate or were inaccessible, limiting the ability to engage directly with formal reconstruction narratives. This gap was partially addressed by drawing on interviews publicly given by government representatives in the immediate aftermath of the explosion, though these sources often reflect political positioning rather than substantive policy engagement. Additionally, the absence of an official census further illustrates the state's administrative failure and complicates any rigorous demographic or spatial assessment. In response, the research relied on reports produced by local academic institutions (such as Beirut Urban Lab and Saint Joseph University) and international agencies (World Bank, UN-Habitat, UNDP), which, while methodologically robust, also reflect the growing dependency on non-state actors to generate critical urban data in a context of institutional void.

The third stage involved surveys with residents (a total of 32) to gather their perspectives on post-explosion reconstruction efforts. These interviews provided crucial insight into how individuals navigated the fragmented recovery landscape, including access to aid, housing rehabilitation, and interactions with NGOs or public bodies. Resident responses were used to triangulate and contrast institutional narratives, revealing discrepancies between top-down intentions and ground-level realities.

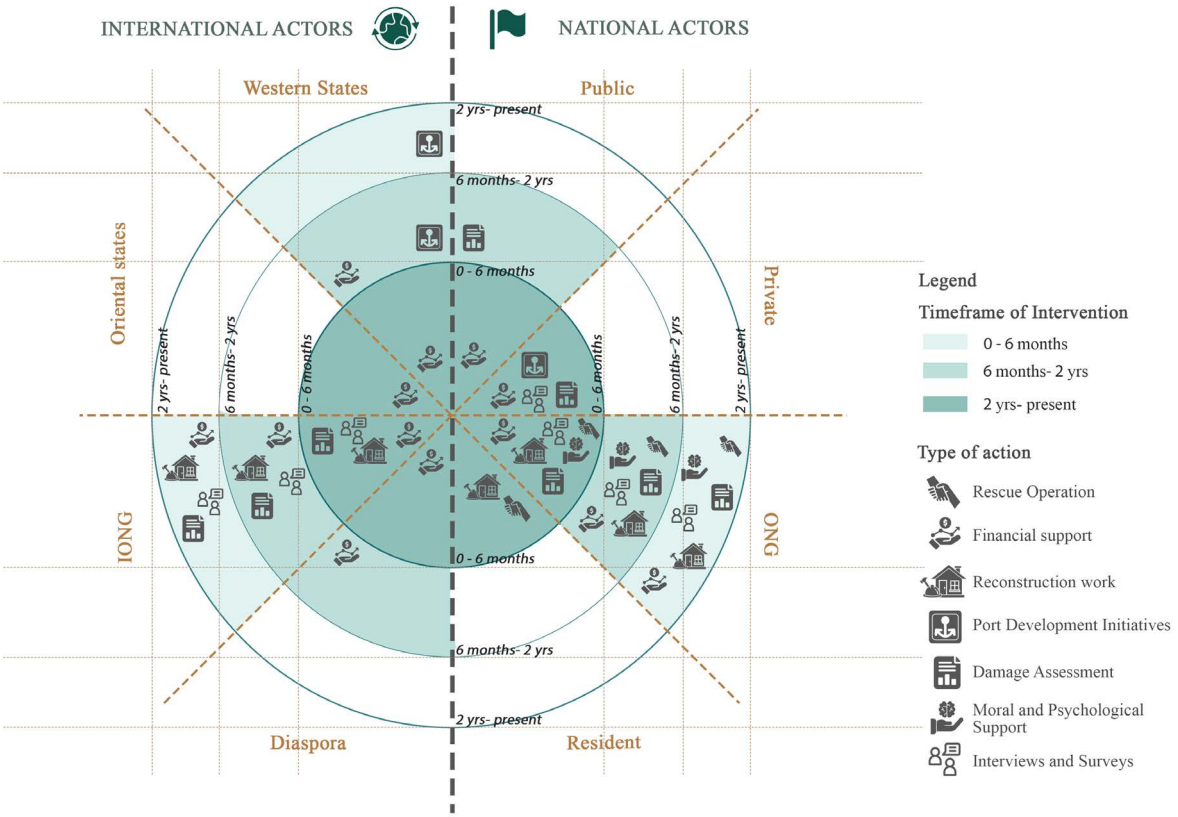

Fig. 3: Types of actions done by national and international actors across different time scales following the Beirut explosion. Source: Own design based on conducted interviews and HADDAD 2022.

Fourth, the author conducted repeated field visits to Mar Mikhael in 2021, 2022, 2024 to document the evolving physical, socio-economic, and symbolic transformations of the neighborhood. These longitudinal observations allowed for contextualized reading of material changes, neighborhood dynamics, and the rhythms of recovery in a setting marked by uncertainty.

All qualitative data were compiled into a database and analyzed thematically, focusing on two main dimensions: the spatial scale of interventions and the roles of various actors involved in the recovery process. This approach examined how actions differed across local, national, and international levels, and how state, non-state, and international stakeholders engaged - whether through collaboration, competition, or overlap. By triangulating actor strategies, resident accounts, and field observations, the analysis provided a nuanced understanding of how resilience is shaped, contested, and unevenly distributed in Beirut's post-blast urban context.

4 Examining Beirut catastrophe through trajectories

4.1 Non-coplanar local and global scales

4.1.1 The household scale: Impressive yet insufficient response

At the household scale, following the Beirut port explosion, the local population demonstrated exemplary mobilization, quickly stepping in to provide aid, clear debris, and support victims. This immediate response was largely carried out by volunteers (CHEHAYEB & SEWELL 2020), often operating without formal organization, yet their effectiveness during the first days was remarkable (VERDEIL 2022). Evaluation reports indicate that over 12,000 volunteers received professional training, while tens of thousands more participated in relief operations (HARIRI et al. 2021: 115). Interviews highlight the immediacy and spontaneity of local responses in the aftermath of the explosion, with assistance coming

from friends, neighbors, and even strangers who helped clear debris and support victims during the earliest stages of recovery. As formal reconstruction mechanisms remained limited or inaccessible, many residents resorted to self-repair - reusing broken windows and doors where possible - particularly as inflation and economic collapse rendered construction materials prohibitively expensive (OXFAM France 2021). Others relied on the physical support of volunteers or relatives to rebuild damaged structures such as collapsed walls. The financial burden of reconstruction was largely borne through informal and decentralized channels, including personal savings, contributions from the diaspora, familial support networks, NGO aid (both local and international), and, in some instances, crowdfunding initiatives.

Article headlines such as "After Beirut Blast, Lebanese Volunteers Deliver Relief the State Fails to Provide" (Homsi 2020), "Doing the Government's Job: Beirut Volunteers Steer Relief Effort" (Reuters 2020), and "Reconstruction de Beyrouth: l'État se défausse sur la société civile" (Rozelier 2021) vividly illustrate the Lebanese civil society's mobilization to fill the void left by the state's inadequacies in crisis management. This dynamic, where civil society assumes roles typically carried out by the state, stems from the Lebanese citizens' loss of trust in public institutions and a shared belief in the state's inability to effectively address the population's needs. As one individual stated, "We are doing what the rulers should be doing [...] Leave us without rulers. Maybe it would be better" (Chehayeb & Sewell 2020).

Despite this impressive mobilization, the response, while swift and spontaneous, proved insufficient in the face of the extensive destruction. The interventions were largely short-term, primarily led by young Lebanese volunteers, and were hampered by inadequate government action and a visible lack of organizational and planning resources.

4.1.2 The neighborhood scale: Uneven and fragmented recovery efforts

At the neighborhood scale, Lebanese authorities implemented structured emergency measures. These efforts involved entities such as the Lebanese Red Cross, Civil Defense, and the Lebanese Armed Forces, which were mobilized on August 7, 2020, to address high-risk areas around the port (Sader 2021, Grünewald et al. 2022). Simultaneously, hundreds of NGOs began stepping in from mid-September to compensate for gaps in state response. However, out of the 536 initially active organizations, only 158 remained operational over time, highlighting a lack of coordination and raising concerns about the efficiency and transparency of interventions (Sader 2021).

In fact, Lebanon's NGO landscape is marked by deep fragmentation, reflecting a complex web of affiliations and operational logics. According to Beirut Urban Lab (2024), around 39% of organizations active in post-crisis response are affiliated with politico-religious groups, while the remaining 61% identify as independent. Yet this non-governmental sector constitutes only one segment of a broader, multi-actor recovery system that combines both domestic and international players - an arrangement emblematic of Lebanon's hybrid governance model. The post-disaster recovery process is thus shaped by a diverse constellation of actors: national NGOs lead in terms of intervention volume, contributing to over 40% of the documented activities. They are followed by international NGOs (20%), national and international religious organizations (each at 13%), academic and professional institutions (6%), and politico-religious organizations (4%). This distribution underscores the plural and often competing nature of recovery efforts in the absence of centralized coordination.

Four years after the Beirut port explosion, the rehabilitation of affected neighborhoods remains highly uneven. Interviews conducted in the field reveal that areas with commercial and tourism-oriented functions - particularly Mar Mikhael - were among the first to exhibit signs of recovery, driven by the rapid reopening of bars, restaurants, and art spaces. In contrast, the restoration of residential zones and heritage buildings has proceeded far more slowly (see Photo 1), hindered by the absence of coordinated public intervention and the complexity of addressing long-term housing and preservation issues without institutional leadership (Alameddine 2021).

This fragmented recovery contrasts sharply with previous reconstruction efforts, such as the post–civil war redevelopment of downtown Beirut or the rebuilding of the southern suburbs after the 2006 conflict, both of which were largely led by politico-religious actors (Verdeil 2020). Today, however, the urban response is marked by a leadership vacuum (public or private) that has impeded the development of a unified reconstruction strategy despite the scale of destruction.

Moreover, the post-blast context has reshaped the landscape of urban governance. While politico-religious organizations have historically played a dominant role in managing urban crises, the current

Photo 1: Heritage building under restoration in Mar Mikhael, four years after the Beirut port explosion. M. Habib, April 25th, 2024.

phase has seen the growing prominence of NGOs - many of them backed by international donors - as central actors in public space. This shift has introduced new dynamics of competition between NGOs and traditional sectarian institutions, blurring the conventional lines between humanitarian relief and urban planning. It raises a critical question: does the rise of internationally funded NGOs represent a new form of territorialized service provision and structural dependency, one that reconfigures power relations within the urban fabric of Beirut?

4.1.3 Greater Beirut scale: Invisible reconstruction efforts

At the scale of Greater Beirut, the aftermath of the explosion saw a rapid deployment of emergency resources, primarily driven by international organizations and local civil society actors, supported by significant financial flows (Verdeil 2022). Yet more than four years later, critical infrastructure recovery remains stalled - most notably the reconstruction of the port, where approximately 70% of facilities are still non-operational (Libnanews 2024). Damage to vital components, including 200 meters of quays, 157,000 m² of storage facilities, and the main grain silo, has had wide-ranging implications: it has deepened Lebanon's food insecurity and caused economic losses estimated at over $700 million (World Bank 2020). As a cornerstone of Lebanon's economic system, the port's prolonged paralysis reflects both the scale of destruction and the structural dysfunctions obstructing recovery (see Photo 2).

Despite geopolitical interest from foreign actors such as Russia, China, Turkey, France, and Germany, their involvement has largely remained rhetorical, with only declarations of intent (La Croix 2021). Even high-profile gestures - such as French President Emmanuel Macron's visit and pledges of support - have failed to translate into sustained action. Foreign interventions, though symbolically potent, often fall short due to fragmented implementation, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited coordination. As a result, the port's future remains mired in uncertainty and institutional paralysis (Hage Boutros 2021).

In conclusion, the absence of a clear, strategic plan from public authorities has resulted in a reactive approach that primarily addresses immediate needs on the ground. This lack of long-term planning in Beirut - a capital city repeatedly struck by crises - raises critical questions. Is this absence of planning a deliberate strategy to perpetuate fragmented management benefiting specific interests, or is it a form of 'non-planning' aimed at preserving a corrupt status quo by avoiding disruptions to existing power dynamics? The state's inability to effectively operate at the national level has directly impacted disaster management and recovery efforts at the neighborhood and household levels, understood as spaces of residence. On the other hand, the fragmented 'self-recovery' initiatives within neighborhoods remain largely unnoticed at the national level, falling short of facilitating a comprehensive reconstruction of Beirut or restoring a pre-crisis sense of normalcy - a concept that is itself complex given the interwoven crises affecting both Beirut and Lebanon.

This mismatch between the magnitude of the disaster and the scale and coherence of the response illustrates a broader governance failure. In the absence of sustained engagement from national and municipal institutions, reconstruction has been reduced to a mosaic of disconnected, donor-driven initiatives shaped by sectoral priorities rather than collective urban recovery. As Rafferty (2022) notes, this fragmented mode of governance - often labeled as symptomatic of a weak state - can in fact serve as a pragmatic arrangement for both local elites and international ac-

Photo 2: The port of Beirut, 4 years after the explosion. M. Habib April 25, 2024.

tors, who benefit from the preservation of the status quo over the uncertainties of structural reform.

This raises a further challenge: can international collaboration genuinely foster resilience when it systematically bypasses the state and remains limited to fragmented, short-term interventions? Effective post-disaster recovery requires more than emergency aid. It demands long-term, integrated strategies that strengthen public institutions, promote transparent coordination with local authorities, and align with locally defined priorities. Rather than circumventing the state, international efforts must contribute to rebuilding its legitimacy and functional capacity - preconditions for any meaningful and durable form of urban resilience.

4.2 The 'non acting' state

The Lebanese state's role in post-explosion reconstruction cannot be adequately described as a mere absence; rather, it embodies a form of strategic inaction. Based on interviews, the state is 'not involved at all,' but this disengagement should not be confused with institutional void. Instead, it reflects a calculated posture of non-intervention, wherein the state and municipal authorities selectively withdraw from action while maintaining a latent but obstructive presence. This 'non-acting' condition is symptomatic of deeper structural tensions - marked by competing agendas among political elites, institutional fragmentation, and clientelist entrenchment - that inhibit coherent public action.

Far from signaling political vacuum, the state's passive posture constitutes a form of territorial control - an over-presence that neutralizes other initiatives and limits access to the reconstruction arena. The stalled international efforts to rehabilitate the Beirut port, such as France's high-profile initiative, exemplify this dynamic. Despite early diplomatic commitments, no concrete implementation followed, illustrating how state inaction can serve as a gatekeeping mechanism that preserves existing power structures while blocking transformative external engagement. The absence of proactive governance thus serves a dual function: it avoids accountability while preserving the status quo that benefits entrenched power holders. As Nagle (2021) observes, Lebanon's political economy is shaped by a network of sectarian elites - 'warlords and tycoons' - who exploit public institutions to accumulate private wealth, converting state apparatuses into mechanisms of resource extraction rather than service provision.

Moreover, this 'non-acting presence' can be read as a tactical withdrawal that enables sectarian factions to consolidate territorial influence. In the vacuum of public provision, basic services such as electricity, healthcare, and housing are increasingly mediated by confessional actors who instrumentalize aid as a form of political currency. As Nagle (2021) further highlights, this dynamic foster systemic dependency: access to essential services is exchanged for electoral loyalty, deepening patterns of clientelism and obstructing any prospects for universal or equitable reconstruction. In this light, the Lebanese state is not absent but complicit - its silence enabling the privatization and politicization of post-disaster recovery.

4.3 'Favored' neighborhoods?

The post-explosion management of Beirut's damaged neighborhoods highlights critical issues surrounding the allocation of funding, which has been largely channeled to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Research conducted by the Beirut Urban Lab (2024) on the distribution of NGO interventions across Beirut's neighborhoods indicates that areas such as Mar Mikhael exhibit the highest concentration of activity. While these areas were undoubtedly affected by the blast, their prominence in recovery discourse is not solely a function of damage severity. Rather, it reflects their symbolic place in Beirut's cultural geography and their heightened visibility within international aid and media circuits.

However, the same data source reveals that other neighborhoods - such as Zqaq El Blat or sections of downtown Beirut - that experienced comparable levels of destruction received disproportionately less attention: "Key informants acknowledged that NGOs concentrated in certain areas (Karantina, Mar Mikhael) much more than in others (Khandak Al Ghamik and Zoukak Al Blat)" (UNDP 2021). This disjuncture suggests that the logic of recovery has been shaped less by technical assessments of need and more by spatial, symbolic, and confessional hierarchies (see Fig. 4).

Several factors contribute to these disparities. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that the territorial reach of NGOs and international organizations often follows existing geopolitical and sectarian lines. In the absence of state coordination, aid actors have defaulted to areas where they already had operational networks or where needs were framed through identity-based urgency, reinforcing pre-ex-

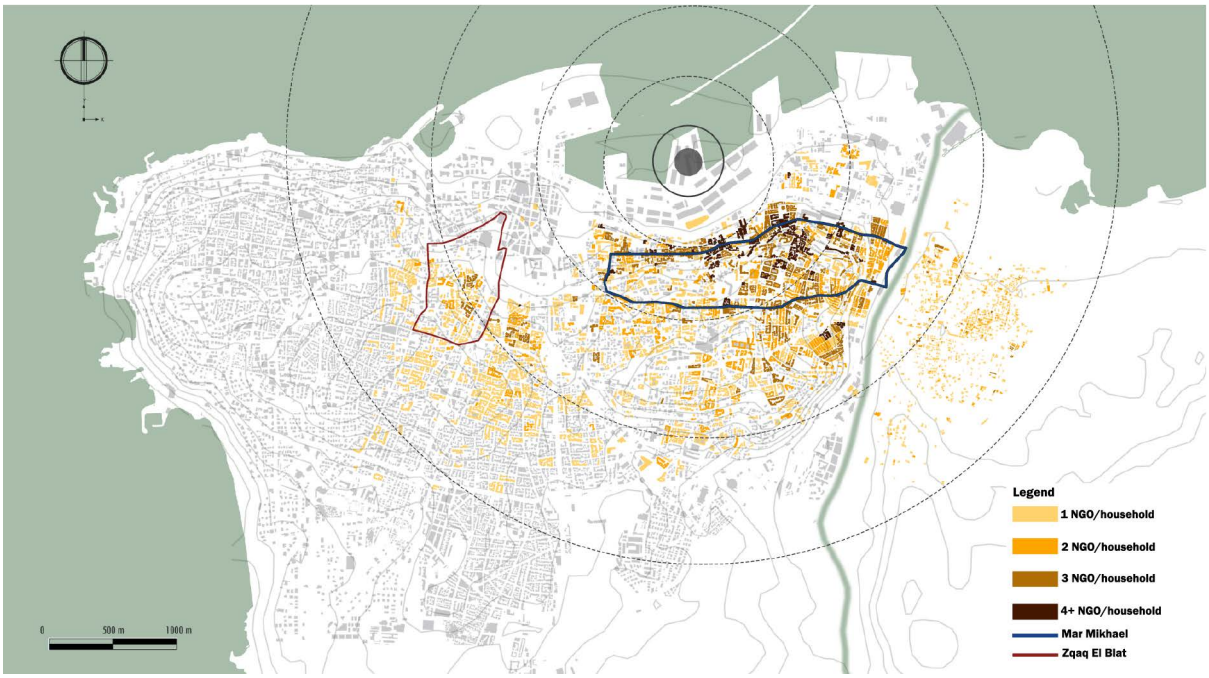

Fig. 4: Number of NGO interventions per household after the Beirut explosion. Source: Own design based on Beirut Urban Lab 2024.

isting territorial logics. As Sader (2021) notes, fears of eviction in historically Christian neighborhoods - amid rising real estate pressures - have led to the channeling of aid as a form of territorial preservation, reinforcing communal boundaries under the guise of reconstruction.

Moreover, the prioritization of cultural heritage neighborhoods, such as Mar Mikhael, reflects a broader politics of visibility and value. These areas, rich in aesthetic and symbolic capital, have benefited from targeted funding at the expense of less 'legible' or internationally visible spaces. As Audureau Coulombel (2020) observes, nearly 90% of blast-affected zones are predominantly Christian - an often overlooked demographic factor that has shaped donor behavior and informed geopolitical calculations tied to the safeguarding of Christian presence in the Middle East. Such selective humanitarianism not only territorializes recovery but also reproduces existing urban inequalities.

These imbalances are not new. They echo earlier patterns of post-crisis reconstruction in Lebanon, where political agendas and spatial selectivity shaped urban recovery. In the 1990s, the Solidere-led redevelopment of Beirut's Central District - framed as a project of economic revitalization - ultimately produced a sanitized, exclusionary urban core disconnected from the social and economic fabric of the broader city. Similarly, after the 2006 war, Hezbollah unilaterally managed the reconstruction of Beirut's southern suburbs, using recovery as a tool to consolidate territorial control and reinforce political legitimacy. Though these two models differed in institutional form - one led by a state-backed private consortium, the other by a politico-sectarian group - both followed top-down logics that deepened socio-spatial fragmentation (Verdeil 2020).

In contrast, the post-2020 context lacked a central actor capable of monopolizing the recovery process. The port blast affected a socio-confessionally diverse zone, which precluded the kind of unilateral intervention seen in 2006. Instead, recovery became a fragmented and largely privatized process, dominated by NGOs, donor agencies, and local networks. Within this vacuum, civil society organizations - whether politically affiliated or not - emerged as the primary agents of reconstruction. While their involvement has been essential in addressing urgent needs, it has also contributed to an urban fabric marked by spatial inconsistency, donor-driven agendas, and the blurring of lines between humanitarian relief and sectarian patronage.

These dynamics have unfolded within a broader context of institutional opacity and financial dysfunction. Although $318 million in international aid was pledged in the initial months following the explosion, this figure represented only a fraction of the estimated $6.7 to $8.1 billion in total damages

(Sader 2021). Lebanon's opaque financial system and banking secrecy laws have further obstructed accountability, enabling discretionary and often untraceable allocation of aid. In the absence of clear state coordination or a transparent funding mechanism, recovery efforts have largely followed pre-existing political and sectarian networks, reinforcing rather than redressing spatial inequalities.

Ultimately, the emergence of so-called 'favored neighborhoods' is not the product of strategic urban planning, but rather the result of a politicized, symbolic, and spatialized recovery process. In a city already marked by fragmentation, the lack of public leadership has allowed identity-based concerns, aesthetic appeal, and geopolitical interests to dictate who gets rebuilt - and who is left behind. Reconstruction, in this context, becomes less a question of restoring the urban fabric than one of negotiating access, visibility, and power in a deeply divided and historically exclusionary city.

4.4 Rebuilding for whom?

The explosion left numerous families and businesses unable to repair or rebuild their homes and workplaces. The ongoing financial crisis in Lebanon, combined with the modest socioeconomic conditions of certain neighborhoods, has further intensified the challenges. "Residents of Lebanon's capital remain deeply affected by the port explosion that devastated the city. While some have chosen to stay and rebuild, others have decided to leave" (Van den Bosch 2023). According to estimates by the Beirut Urban Lab (2024), nearly 50% of apartments in the affected blocks remain unoccupied, and approximately 26% of residents have not returned to their homes since the disaster (Beirut Urban Lab 2023). These figures reflect both the deep inequalities characterizing the recovery process and the loss of trust among a portion of the population - many of whom, traumatized by the event, choose not to return to their residential spaces.

This reality demands a critical reassessment of the widespread invocation of 'resilience' in Beirut's post-blast recovery narrative. Too often, resilience is evoked to valorize the population's ability to survive in the absence of state intervention. Yet this overlooks the fact that resilience, in such contexts, is not a choice - it is a survival mechanism born of abandonment. As G.F. White warned as early as 1945, focusing solely on the physical reconstruction of damaged infrastructure risks ignoring the social and political systems that shape vulnerability. In Lebanon, this warning rings especially true: the state's limited role in housing recovery has exposed deep-rooted policy failures that long predate the explosion.

Resilience in social systems is often conceptualized as either reactive - seeking to restore the previous order - or proactive - embracing transformation to adapt to new realities (Dovers & Handmer 1992, Klein et al. 2003). But Beirut's trajectory resists both frameworks. Post-disaster recovery has neither restored the pre-blast urban order nor led to systemic change. What has emerged instead is a form of resigned resilience, where communities adapt in spite of the system, not because of it. This is not resilience as empowerment, but resilience as forced endurance.

The housing crisis is emblematic of this failure. Although the explosion intensified housing insecurity, it merely brought to the surface longstanding structural dysfunctions. Lebanon has lacked a coherent national housing policy for decades (Public Works Studio 2022). The absence of public investment in affordable housing has left citizens reliant on fragile rental markets and clientelist networks. The explosion thus acted not as a rupture, but as an accelerant of an already unfolding crisis. This was made even more evident during the 2024 Israel–Hezbollah war, when families fleeing violence faced insurmountable housing obstacles in the capital, revealing a crisis that extends beyond Beirut and implicates national-level failures (Le Monde, 2024, L'Orient-Le Jour 2024).

However, the challenge of post-blast reconstruction in Beirut cannot be reduced to economic limitations alone; it is fundamentally embedded in the city's deeply political and sectarian fabric: "the war yet to come in Beirut forecloses the possibility of urban politics outside a sectarian order" (Bou Akar 2018). Beirut's confessional urban geography - where territorial divisions mirror entrenched religious and political affiliations - renders the question of resettlement far more than a logistical or technical endeavor. Rather, it becomes a site of political negotiation and spatial contestation. In such a context, housing reconstruction is not merely about providing shelter; it functions as a geopolitical act that risks unsettling the delicate equilibrium of power between sectarian groups. As a result, any initiative aimed at rehousing displaced populations must contend with a web of informal arrangements, factional interests, and identity-based claims over space. This politicization of urban recovery contributes to persistent delays, exacerbates socio-spatial inequalities,

and transforms reconstruction into a protracted and contentious process - one in which the rights of affected residents are subordinated to the imperatives of political balance and territorial control.

This raises a more fundamental question: what does it mean to 'return to normal' in a context where crisis is the norm? Reghezza (2006) reminds us that resilience is not about restoring a static past, but about negotiating a new equilibrium shaped by the crisis itself. Yet Beirut's post-blast trajectory challenges even that definition. Amid chronic instability, state disengagement, and recurring violence, 'normalcy' has been reduced to survival within dysfunction.

5 Discussion: 'Resilience' conditioned by opportunity

The aftermath of the 2020 Beirut port explosion reveals not a unified model of urban resilience, but rather a mosaic of uneven, fragmented responses shaped by the absence of effective governance. While resilience is often framed as a pathway toward adaptive recovery, in the case of Beirut it more closely resembles a survival strategy, conditioned by the structural void left by the state. Resilience here is not a coordinated process, but a patchwork of disjointed practices driven by necessity, available actors, and unequal access to resources.

Analyzing the post-disaster response across multiple spatial scales - individual households, neighborhoods, and the metropolitan area - reveals significant disparities. At the micro-level, the coping strategies adopted by families are largely self-organized and often precarious. What might be interpreted as community strength or grassroots innovation is, in reality, a form of compelled autonomy - a deeply embedded Lebanese coping culture in the face of institutional neglect. At the neighborhood level, the vacuum left by the state has been filled by a constellation of non-state actors, each pursuing their own agendas. These include NGOs, political parties, religious organizations, and external donors, who, rather than coordinating efforts, often engage in fragmented, competitive interventions. This has produced what we described as 'opportunistic resilience' - a mode of recovery shaped not by systemic planning, but by the ad hoc mobilization of whoever is present and empowered. Meanwhile, at the metropolitan scale, the absence of a comprehensive reconstruction vision reflects the paralysis of national institutions and the erosion of public planning capacity.

These dynamics call into question dominant resilience narratives. Rather than ushering in transformation, resilience in Beirut functions as a mechanism for enduring crisis through constant adjustment. The conventional linear model - crisis, recovery, return to normal - has little analytical value in a city where 'normal' has long meant structural instability. The everyday efforts of residents to restore livable conditions do not reflect recovery, but rather the normalization of dysfunction. Resilience, in this context, becomes a euphemism for the capacity to survive in a system that no longer provides the basic guarantees of urban life.

More broadly, the Beirut case forces us to confront the political implications of resilience discourse. When applied uncritically, it risks concealing the structural causes of vulnerability and reinforcing the status quo. The continued reliance on informal networks, donor-driven interventions, and localized 'solutions' not only fails to address systemic problems but actively reproduces spatial fragmentation and social inequality. Instead of catalyzing reform, resilience becomes a strategy for managing failure - one that places the burden of adaptation squarely on citizens and communities.

At the heart of Beirut's enduring uncertainty lies a deeper question: Is this instability merely the result of weak governance structures that might eventually be reformed, or is it symptomatic of more intractable geopolitical and sectarian dynamics tied to Lebanon's strategic location and regional entanglements? If the former holds true, then institution-building and state reform could offer a pathway out of cyclical vulnerability. However, if instability is structurally embedded in Lebanon's geopolitical condition - constantly subject to foreign interference, sectarian rivalries, and external shocks - then 'resilience' (as we proposed to define) becomes not a transitional phase but a permanent condition. In this scenario, the city is fated to absorb the impacts of recurrent crises - whether military confrontations, natural disasters, health emergencies, or economic collapse - without ever reaching a point of systemic stability. This entrenched volatility further exposes the limitations of the Lebanese state as a reliable guarantor of urban security, planning, and recovery.

Importantly, the fragmented character of Beirut's response cannot be understood from a single spatial perspective. It is precisely the disconnect between individual, local, and metropolitan scales responses that defines the post-blast condition. At the household level, self-reliance; at the neighborhood level, selective interventionism resulting in 'favored neighborhoods'; at the city level, paralysis. This multi-

scalar disjunction illustrates a form of resilience that operates without coordination, without vision, and ultimately without reconstruction.

In light of this, we argue for a reconceptualization of resilience in Beirut not as a hopeful process of adaptation, but as a permanent mode of adjustment within a system in perpetual crisis. It is a resilience without resolution - one that sustains survival while foreclosing structural change. Rather than signaling recovery, it institutionalizes mechanisms of fragmentation, inequality, and informality.

6 Conclusion

Beirut exemplifies an urban condition defined by chronic crisis, where the convergence of political instability, social fragmentation, regional conflict, economic collapse, and abrupt disasters - such as the 2020 port explosion and, more recently, the Israeli–Hezbollah war of 2024 - has rendered the notion of a 'return to normalcy' both conceptually inadequate and practically unattainable. In such a context, normalcy cannot be framed as the absence of crisis, but rather as a continuous process of adaptation within a persistently unstable environment.

This raises a fundamental question: can 'resilience', as defined in such settings, become an obstacle to transformation rather than a vehicle for it? When resilience is enacted through fragmented, ad hoc adjustments rather than embedded within a framework of structural reform and public governance, it risks reproducing precarity instead of alleviating it. Beirut offers a critical case in this regard. Resilience in the city manifests less as a product of deliberate planning and more as a set of makeshift responses that sustain minimal functionality without addressing the structural roots of vulnerability. Emergency measures have been normalized, temporary fixes institutionalized, and urban survival prioritized over long-term transformation - resulting in a form of resilience that keeps the city afloat but suspended in dysfunction.

Viewed through this lens, resilience ceases to represent recovery or progress. It becomes symptomatic of a governance system incapable of exiting the logic of crisis. It reveals a city not rebuilding in any meaningful or transformative sense but adapting incrementally to permanent disruption. Recognizing this shift is essential to understanding why certain urban contexts remain trapped in cycles of instability - where resilience functions less as a promise of renewal and more as a mechanism of endurance.

This situation underscores a deeper conceptual blind spot in prevailing resilience discourse - namely, the presumption of a capable and coordinating state. Yet, in numerous contexts, the state is either absent, incapacitated, or intervenes selectively. Under such conditions, resilience operates not through institutional coherence, but as a substitute for governance itself, relying on a diffuse landscape of actors, fragmented priorities, and asymmetrical power relations to navigate disruption.

To move beyond this conceptual impasse, resilience must be redefined not simply as a technical or operational capacity, but as a political project - one that acknowledges power asymmetries, governance vacuums, and the potential co-optation of resilience discourse. As Chelleri et al. (2015) and Bixler et al. (2020) argue, resilience cannot be constructed in isolation; it must be anchored in inclusive governance, strategic foresight, and the commitment to reform entrenched systems.

Ultimately, reclaiming resilience requires moving past a narrative of mere survival. It demands a critical examination of the conditions under which resilience is invoked, by whom, and to what ends - opening space for more just, transformative, and politically grounded approaches to urban futures.

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