

# Affective atmospheres, urban geopolitics and conflict (de)escalation in Beirut

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Abstract: The article joins literature on urban geopolitics and on affective atmospheres to trace the intensities of feeling that propagate during escalation and de-escalation of urban conflict in Beirut. Based on two months of fieldwork in 2010 in the Lebanese capital, it considers the deadly clashes of May 2008 between government- and opposition-affiliated militias. Political decisions and deliberate interventions involving the urban built environment before and after the clashes, contributed to propagating affective atmospheres of (de)escalation, which in turn impacted on the residents' practical and emotional responses to violence. The paper proposes an atmospheric urban geopolitics that moves away from techno-centric, disembodied approaches to urban conflict, and that instead takes seriously the lived experiences of urban (de)escalation.

I have now applied all the further changes suggested.

Additionally, I inserted endnote 2, because I feel a clarification about the Arabic etymology of the term atmosphere is due, given the linguistic setting and the topic of this article.

SHORT TITLE

Affective atmospheres, urban geopolitics and conflict (de)-escalation in Beirut.

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## ABSTRACT

The article joins literature on urban geopolitics and on affective atmospheres to trace the intensities of feeling that propagate during escalation and de-escalation of urban conflict in Beirut. Based on two months of fieldwork in 2010 in the Lebanese capital, it considers the deadly clashes of May 2008 between government- and opposition-affiliated militias. Political decisions and deliberate interventions involving the urban built environment before and after the clashes, contributed to propagating affective atmospheres of (de)escalation, which in turn impacted on the residents' practical and emotional responses to violence. The paper proposes an atmospheric urban geopolitics that moves away from techno-centric, disembodied approaches to urban conflict, and that instead takes seriously the lived experiences of urban (de)escalation.

KEYWORDS: Urban geopolitics, Affective atmospheres, urban conflict, Lebanon, Beirut

## TITLE

Affective atmospheres, urban geopolitics and conflict (de)-escalation in Beirut.

## INTRODUCTION

‘What always freaks me out, is how quickly the city gets back to normal’ (Interview [in English] with resident, Beirut, November 2010)

Urban geopolitics has established itself as an interdisciplinary body of knowledge that explores the ‘telescoping connections between transnational geopolitical transformations and very local acts of violence against urban sites’ (Stephen Graham, 2004b, p. 191). In Beirut, these connections are tangibly apparent. Past and more recent violence and consequent insecurities are embodied by layer upon layer of Beirut’s built environment (Al-Harithy, 2010; Khalaf & Khoury, 1993; Nagel, 2002; Sawalha, 2010) as “[b]oth the public and private built environments were shaped by daily fighting [...] and acquired new geopolitical meaning” (Monroe, 2016, p. 43). Beirut’s built environment has been terrain and mediator of daily urban violence and the wider (geo)politico-economic discourses, practices and materialities that sustain it (Fregonese, 2012a; N. Hourani, 2010; N. B. Hourani, 2013). Considering the case of Beirut and focusing on conflict as a dynamic process of escalation and de-escalation, this paper builds on and develops the notion of affective atmospheres to broaden and deepen urban geopolitics’ theoretical and methodological perspective. Whereas urban geopolitics has broadly dealt with ‘the *spaces* and *practices* that emerge at the intersections of urbanism, terrorism and warfare’ (Stephen Graham, 2004a, p. 52), this paper now explores the quotidian *intensities of feeling* that those intersections entail.

Building on 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson, 2009), I chart the lived experiences of urban escalation to and de-escalation in Beirut during violent clashes in May 2008 and the role of the urban environment in shaping those experiences. Geographers and anthropologists have only recently established a long overdue connection between urban conflict and affect (Laketa, 2016; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). I argue that developing such a connection benefits both urban geopolitics - by engaging with the "intensive space-times" (Anderson, 2009, p. 80) of atmospheres - and geographies of affective atmosphere – by adding to their repertoire the study of (geo)political tension and violence, a field where there is a paucity of both atmospheric and, more generally, affective research. This paper wishes to foster a new sub-disciplinary dialogue, but the importance of engaging critical geopolitics with atmospheric (and feminist, as we will later see) approaches, lies in the wider implications that this theoretical endeavour has for the contextual understanding of conflict, and of its wider geopolitical associations. The intangible intensities and atmospheres of (de)escalating conflict, feed into spatial knowledges that are situated and embodied. Once analysed together, these knowledges compose a repertoire of understandings and practices of urban space: a 'know how' of the intangible sides of urban conflict. This know-how is utilised by those whose daily lives are disrupted by all sorts of encounters with conflict, in order to react and find ways to avoid being harmed.

The first of the five sections below reviews theoretical critiques of urban geopolitics, including by geographies of affect and affective atmospheres. This is followed by methodological considerations of how to research urban conflict as a *process* of escalation/de-escalation rather than as a bounded *state* of combat (Brand and Fregonese 2013), and of how to narrate that process by accounting for the formation and circulation of atmospheres. Thirdly, comes a

contextualisation of the case study - a week of deadly clashes in part of Beirut in May 2008, The choice of this particular moment of conflict was informed, firstly, by the temporal and spatial concentration of the events. The rapid escalation and de-escalation allowed pinpointing and observing the rapid emergence and circulation of specific atmospheres, as well as identifying the measures deployed soon after specifically to manage these atmospheres. The spatial concentration of the violence around and against specific neighbourhoods and buildings, made the 2008 clashes an effective example to study the affirmation of specific connections between (geo)political contestation and specific urban sites. I also had a very specific “angle of arrival” (Adey et al. 2013, p. 300) and affective disposition to the May 2008 events, as a researcher who cancelled a previous fieldwork cancelled due to the clashes, and then based herself for this fieldwork in a neighbourhood situated at a particularly violent fault line during the clashes. If atmospheres are diffuse in their propagation, they also ‘solidify’ when associated with specific built environments. The fourth section focuses on the phase of escalation of conflict and highlights a number of key events around specific built environments, felt as catalysts of atmospheres and atmospheric shifts which then impacted on individual responses, subjective feelings and emotions. The fifth section focuses on de-escalation and on how two urban interventions – reclaiming a central square through a mass concert and eliminating political propaganda signs from around the city – engineered an atmospheric shift away from tension by, respectively, emphasising national cohesion and preventing of political provocation in public spaces.



## TOWARDS ATMOSPHERIC URBAN GEOPOLITICS

Whereas literature on the urban aspects of the 15-year Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) and its aftermaths in Beirut abounds (Al-Harithy, 2010; Awada, 1988; Bourgey, n.d.; Calame & Charlesworth, 2009; Davie, 1983; Khalaf & Houry, 1993; Nagel, 2002; Maasri, 2008; Sawalha, 2010, among many others), this article situates itself within attempts to understand the dynamics of current conflict in the Lebanese capital. Investigations into Beirut's current urban aspects of security, conflict, and violence have analysed, for example, the relation between sectarianism and planning decisions (BouAkar, 2012), the reinforcement of socio-political division via the securitisation of urban space and its impact on mobility (Fawaz, Harb, & Gharbieh, 2012; Monroe, 2016) and the sensory elements shaping daily divisions and borders in the city (Hafeda, 2011). However, fewer have considered in depth the violent urban clashes occurring in May 2008 (Author 2012; Haddad 2009; Mermier 2013; Stel 2009). In examining them, this paper expands the study of conflict in Beirut, firstly, by focussing on the notion of affective atmosphere and, secondly, by establishing wider connections between the disciplinary fields of urban geopolitics and geographies of affect.

Power and political violence are exercised through interventions on the built environment by a diverse range of state and non-state actors, or even mergers of both (Fregonese 2012a). Beirut, therefore, adds a rich case study for investigations in urban geopolitics, as it offers several examples of the interplay between urban spaces and architectures and the discourses and practices of international politics.

Connections between cities and geopolitics have also tangentially concerned critical urban and conflict studies (Coaffee, 2003; Martin Coward, 2009; Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011; Pullan, 2011; O. Yiftachel, 1998; Oren Yiftachel, 2006; Oren Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003) and Science and Technology Studies (Brand & Fregonese, 2013; Fregonese & Brand, 2009). First mentioned in Francophone scholarship within the context of urban power struggles in Quebec's cities (Hulbert, 1989) and then in the Anglophone regarding urban military operations in Latin America (Demarest, 1995), the developing multidisciplinary literature of urban geopolitics shares an interest for the connections between specific urban sites and wider geopolitical processes (Amar, 2009; Douzet, 2003; Fregonese, 2012b; Stephen Graham, 2004b; Hulbert, 2009; A. Ramadan, 2009; Vincent & Warf, 2002; Yacobi, 2009).

Urban geopolitics has attracted two main strands of academic critique. The first comes from political geography scholarship and targets some of urban geopolitics' early writings and the conceptual and moral implications of their understanding of the relationship between cities, violence and global politics. These critiques highlight urban geopolitics' risk of simply replacing states with cities as new scale of reference for contemporary wars, rather than promoting a more refined understanding of the multiplicity of geopolitical discourses and practices surrounding urban conflict (Flint, 2006; Smith, 2006).

The second critical strand concerns urban geopolitics' analytical over-reliance on few and heavily militarised case studies (Fregonese, 2012b), first and foremost Israel/Palestine (Stephen Graham, 2002, 2005a). Relatedly, Arab cities feature recurrently as the orientalised target grounds of the war on terror, as opposed to a category of 'our' cities which need protection via other securitisation apparatus (Stephen Graham, 2006), or as agglomerations of 'complex'

infrastructures and insurgencies that obstacle the US techno-military dominance (Stephen Graham, 2008). This techno-centric perspective focused on urban infrastructural warfare (Stephen Graham, 2005b), on the “securitization of the urban” and the “urbanization of war” (M. Coward, 2009, p. 415) overlooks the role of more ordinary urban sites, both as targets and mediators of wider geopolitical processes. Harris (2014), for example, suggests that urban geopolitical research on verticality (Elden, 2013; S. Graham & Hewitt, 2013; Stephen Graham, 2016; Weizman, 2002) should give attention to the more ‘normal’ sites that neither necessarily link back to the Israel/Palestine case nor represent ‘a fall-out from warfare doctrines and military technoscience’ (p. 4), and to the value of “ordinary topologies” of contestation such as in Palestine (Harker, 2014) for understanding the (geo) political processes underpinning urban change and contestation (Rokem, 2016).

What, then, remain under investigated in urban geopolitics are spaces and practices beyond the clear expressions or derivations of conflict and militarisation. There is still much to be written about the quotidian, embodied, and micro-scale practices that shape urban politics and conflict, such as dwelling, moving, relating to others, coping and making decisions in situations of vulnerability. These ordinary and often very subtle (at least to the outsider’s eye) practices and geopolitically charged sites contribute to the production of micro-dynamics of tension and escalation that, as theorized in feminist geopolitics (Hyndman, 2001, 2004; Rachel Pain, Panelli, Kindon, & Little, 2010; Rachel Pain & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2012), connect individual daily fears and experiences of violence to wider geopolitical struggles.

Further reflections in feminist geopolitics lead to a third critical strand: urban geopolitics’ lack of accounts of subjectivity and intensity of experience. Pain (2009) claimed that critical geopolitics,

and especially its conceptualisations of fear, remain disembodied, ungrounded, and “unemotional” (2009, p. 1) and called for an emotional geopolitics that would trace “the continuing significance of place to individual and collective emotional topographies” (2009, p. 17). Related work has engaged with the emotional aspects underpinning political action (Routledge, 2012) and nonviolence (Woon, 2011, p. 295), observing how emotions at once enter the “localized ‘playing out’ of globalized fear” (Woon, 2011, p. 285), and shape geopolitical discourse at multiple scales. Harker (2014), for example, makes the case for embodiment and emotions in the political geographies of Israel/Palestine, arguing that work such as by Eyal Weizman on Israel’s architectures of occupation is ‘rhetorically hollowing out Palestinian spaces and landscapes of more intensive relations’ (322). Similarly, Harris also criticises the overreliance of Elden’s *Secure the Volume* (2013) on Weizman’s work and lack of bodies in his narration of the volumetric geopolitics of Israel/Palestine (Elden, 2013). Finally, it is from Adey’s (2013) take on *Secure the Volume* that a dialogue between urban geopolitics and atmospheric approaches can start. Here, Adey (2013a) calls for complementing geographies of militarisation with knowledges about how they ‘are experienced and made present to the lives that live them’ (Adey, 2013, p. 52), in order to go ‘beyond the scientific and geological political-technological imaginations deployed in the bundles of the strategic and the technical’ (Adey, 2013b, p. 52). Most importantly, having already enquired the links between affect and “the emergence, intensification, and (re)deployment of diverse forms of security” (Anderson & Adey, 2011, p. 1093), Adey has then more specifically invited to ‘explore the atmospheric affects of the intensified presence of something like an occupation, or the resonances constituting political change’ (Adey, 2013, p. 53).

This article draws on and develops these critical strands, in order to open the debate to diffuse *atmospheric urban geopolitics*. I use Beirut as a case study to develop urban geopolitics from an atmospheric perspective, capturing the ephemeral intensities that envelop a city during escalation and de-escalation to and from armed violence. Studies on the affective dynamics of (post)-conflict societies are rare (Laketa, 2016; Navaro-Yashin, 2012), there is no such account of conflict in Lebanon<sup>1</sup>, and especially not on the specific notion of affective atmosphere. Since earlier engagements with emotional subjectivities (Thien, 2005), there have been numerous and important attempts in geography to trace the conceptual genealogies and distinctive features of emotions, affect and affective atmospheres (Pile, 2010), and equally significant attempts (and disagreements) to caution against fixing concepts so “inherently amorphous and elusive” (Bondi & Davidson, 2011, p. 595). While such definitional debates are largely beyond the scope of the paper, I will situate my empirical research within this conceptual constellation.

The notion of *affective atmosphere* is, for the very nature of the word, complex to define. Stemming from the indo-European root *au-t* (*blow* or, more aptly, *waft*), we then find it in the Greek ἀτμός (*atmòs* - wind, breath, vapour), coupled with σφαῖρα (*sfaira* – sphere). Originally used in English to explain the gaseous area enveloping celestial bodies, it has then acquired the figurative meaning of “surrounding influence<sup>2</sup>, mental or moral environment” (Online Etymology dictionary, [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=atmosphere](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=atmosphere)). Within geographical scholarship, Anderson’s definition as ‘a class of experience that occur before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-

between subject/object distinctions' (Anderson, 2009, p. 78) is useful. In architecture, Wigley (1998) has defined atmosphere as 'a swirling climate of intangible effects generated by a stationary object' (18). The idea has been used in geography to conceptualise mobility (Bissell, 2010), scientific knowledge (McCormack, 2008) and, more generally, to make sense of 'the collective affects in which we live'(Anderson, 2009, p. 77).

Atmosphere, then is something that is vapourous hence intangible, but has the capability of enveloping and propagating, and be experienced in that propagation. While emotions are imperfect linguistic renditions of the individual impressions of very complex intensities of feeling, atmospheres are instead spatially elusive, disembodied and even transmitted by absence. Atmospheres do not emanate from a singular body (human or nonhuman), and yet they are felt personally. Affective atmospheres are also conceptually distinct from affect. Contrarily to the individual and linguistic nature of emotions, affect is "impersonal and pre-personal" and lies "at the very edge of semantic availability" (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, & Whatmore, 2009), and circulate through resonance and interference rather than via a (re)distribution of meaning. As Bissel put it, 'if emotion is concerned with the subject, affect [...] is not bound to particular individual bodies' (271) and does not rely on assumptions about the characteristics of a specific subject, but rather about the "intensive capacit[y] of a body to affect and be affected"(Gregory et al., 2009). Atmosphere, on the other hand, inhabits a more diffuse and ambiguous realm than the capabilities of bodies of affecting each other: atmosphere at once 'registers in and through sensing bodies, while also remaining diffuse' (McCormack, 2008, p. 413). Atmospheres 'are impersonal in that they belong to collective situations and yet can be felt as intensely personal' (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). Atmosphere remains diffuse and

propagates around collectives of bodies, rather than resonating in between individual bodies:

“On the one hand, atmospheres are real phenomena. They ‘envelop’ and thus press on a society ‘from all sides’ with a certain force. On the other, they are not necessarily sensible phenomena” (Anderson, 2009, p. 78). Spatially, atmosphere is “a form of ‘envelopment’” (Anderson, 2009, p. 80), like a surrounding sphere. Atmospheres surpass the entity/ies from which they emanate, acquiring a life of their own and forming particular space-times engulfing specific situations: they are “indeterminate affective ‘excess’” (Anderson, 2009, p. 80)

Bridging urban geopolitics with affective atmospheres opens a new perspective on urban conflict. One that not only appreciates its everyday and embodied geographies, but that also traces the atmospheres influencing its socio-spatial dynamics. Tackling the affective qualities of highly complex realities such as cities is a risky yet worthy endeavour as ‘it enables us to think further about the intensive spatialities of atmo-spheres’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). At the basis of the May 2008 violence were specific controversies over the use and functions of particular urban built environments. Adopting an atmospheric urban geopolitics allows to ‘think though the materiality of landscapes and environments in ways that avoid rehearsing a division between two distinct ontological domain: one cultural and the other physical’ (McCormack, 2008, p. 414), as atmosphere ‘traverses distinction between peoples, things and spaces’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 78; See also Ash, 2013).

The following pages develop the notion of atmosphere as ‘the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 78) and apply it to violent urban conflict. They also offer a grounded context where to observe the proactive and strategic encouragement of some atmospheres and the anticipatory

discouragement of others. The engineering, objectification and commodification of atmospheres has long interested geographers, specifically relating to urban festivals (Edensor, 2012), securitisation and surveillance (Adey et al., 2013), emergency (Anderson & Adey, 2011) consumption and leisure (Shaw, 2014), and mobility and air travel (Lin, 2015). And yet, despite invitations to conducting further research into the production and trading of atmospheres and their anticipation (Lin, 2015; Shaw, 2014), there has been little political geography research on anticipation in situations of unrest (Young, Pinkerton, & Dodds, 2014) or even in conflict cities – where the slightest atmospheric fluctuation (sounds, sights, rumours) can have weighty consequences. While a number of key atmosphere-shifting events will be highlighted, the bulk of the empirical analysis is about the everyday, subtle and ephemeral responses that these atmospheres trigger among individual residents caught up in the conflict. These responses form indeed a constellation of ‘subjective states and their attendant feelings’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 78) that characterise the affective atmospheres in a conflict city. They allow adding an important conceptual and methodological component to the often disembodied accounts of urban geopolitics.

#### RESEARCHING ATMOSPHERES OF (DE)ESCALATION

Fieldwork and ethnography may enrich our understanding of the grounded and everyday dynamics of geopolitics (Megoran, 2006; Adam Ramadan, 2010), and the researcher’s position in the study of conflict (Hermez, 2015; Nordstrom & Robben, 1995; Woon, 2013). However, the ambiguity and vagueness of atmosphere makes it a particularly slippery subject to research and



write about, as : ‘the purpose is not simply to record data [...] but rather to produce a disposition which encourages *sensitivity to events* [...] both as and after they have happened.’ (Adey et al., 2013, p. 303). This paper builds on methodological work on how to research and write about sensorial dynamics of cities (Adey et al., 2013; Thomas, 2014) to develop an atmospheric urban geopolitics of conflict in Beirut . It draws on fieldwork conducted in November and December 2010, while living in one of the neighbourhoods at the centre of the May 2008 clashes, in a city where I have researched across a number of years (including living in the same area in 2009), and therefore had tuned my own sensitivity to its atmospheres. The methods – briefly outlined below – include an observation journal; archival research (scrutiny of the local press in the lead up and during the clashes; survey of official speeches, press releases and agreements during the events; survey of news or private video footage); and semi-structured in-depth interviews with residents having first-hand experience of the violence, and many other conversations with residents, local politicians and journalists. Interviews and archive research were conducted mainly in all the three languages currently spoken in Lebanon – Arabic, French, and English – plus Italian for interviews with a number of foreign residents who witnessed the clashes. Transcription and translation of the interviews, except for the ones in Italian, which I translated myself – was conducted by a Lebanese UK-based assistant. Archives do not reveal much directly about emotions and affective atmospheres, yet they often contain (especially visual) signs of the ways in which bodies sense the surrounding environment, thus constituting “a trace of history and a fleeting form of knowledge production” (Yusoff, 2007, p. 211 See also: McCormack 2008). Archival research into contemporaneous text and video material allowed not only gaining background information about the timeline of events, but also

identifying specific built environments that became hotspots of conflict, and follow their interplay with the formation of affective atmospheres. An “archive of the feeling body” (Yusoff, 2007) thus takes shape, by noting linguistically rendered emotions (in the press or speeches); corporeal responses to fighting (especially in video footage of news or from private witnesses): a journalist’s voice pausing as the sudden breakout of shooting and turning towards the assumed source of the sound; people suddenly running to cover; the fastening of pace as an army unit arrives and deploys; the camera focusing at the sight of fire and smoke from burning cars.

Living in the neighbourhood of Zoqaq al Blat one of the hotspots of the clashes, I attempted to nurture Adey’s (2013) ‘sensitivity to events’. As I descended daily from my accommodation onto the main street next to a mosque, I observed, often photographed and annotating presences and absences in the neighbourhood and its surroundings:

[...] When walking west [...] towards Sanaya and Hamra, it is easy to see the presence of Amal, one of the Shia parties, stated in the urban space: flags, posters, even bollards coloured with the party colours, graffiti, new and old (a central security council decree after the events of May 2008 ordered to cover up the graffiti and posters, but they came back). [...] The May 2008 clashes started in Zokak el Blat. [...] The street feels OK, maybe because I am a foreigner, but a research participant told [me] that thugs still disturb both young and older people, using political pretexts to harass and sometimes rob people’ (Fieldwork journal, 4 November 2010).

Interviewees were selected among Beirut residents identifying themselves more or less strongly within the two main political fields (March 14 and March 8), or sometimes none. All of them inhabited neighbourhoods or lived and/or worked in buildings that were directly targeted by the violence. As the result of the May 2008 clashes was the takeover and shutdown of the infrastructure and premises of media aligned with specific political forces, I selected for interviews local journalists as well as foreign correspondents, some of whom were in the premises when they were attacked. Walking interviews to elicit memories and impressions through the presence on the sites of experiences (Evans & Jones, 2011) were also used at times. Interviews were therefore 'never isolated conversations, because afterwards I start to pay attention to things that have been told in the interview that happen around the media buildings [taken over during the clashes], such as the level of security, barbed wire, and so on.' (Fieldwork journal, 4 November 2011).

All interviews began and ended with the same questions: 'how did you understand that something was wrong?' and 'how did you understand that things were improving?' Between these questions, participants were invited to recount the succession of events and, particularly, to reflect upon the material changes they saw happening around them, the shifts in atmosphere and which elements signalled that shift for them, as well as their first reactions. When I asked about their views on the cause(s) of the May 2008 clashes most participants, even with very different political views from each other, indicated how the non-human built environment of the city was shaping their feelings and reactions towards danger, fear and vulnerability. Specific elements of Beirut's built environment were recurrently mentioned, unprompted, as having a

role in wider atmospheric shifts. Harris (2014) has called for more ‘polyvocal methodologies’ that account ethnographically for the use, imagination and reproduction of buildings by multiple urban publics. In the analysis, I have incorporated the urban built environment and highlighted its role in producing affective atmospheres.

Finally, interviewing participants about their feelings around past events, one needs to account for the mechanisms of memory and the mediated nature of the interview. Producing a historical account is a process of mediation between sources, audiences, and the positionality of the author (White 1993: 5). This is particularly true in Lebanon where, due to the 1975-1990 civil war, there is no agreed version of recent history as an official reconciliation process has not happened. In this essay, multiple ways to represent history and perform memory are mobilized by divergent ideas of identity and territory across different religious and political groups.

#### THE CONTEXT OF BEIRUT’S MAY 2008 CLASHES

In early May 2008, a controversy over infrastructure between the Lebanese government, drawn from the so-called ‘March 14’ coalition, and the ‘March 8’ opposition, including *Hezbollah*<sup>3</sup> rapidly escalated into deadly street clashes between armed militias.<sup>4</sup> These dramatic events, popularly known as ‘7 May’ (*Sab‘at ayyār*), were a rapid and, for many, unexpected deterioration of the socio-political polarisation that followed the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri on 14 February 2005, and the consequent wave of popular protests that led to the fall of the government (the ‘Cedar Revolution’).

Between 3 and 6 May 2008, the Lebanese government, then led by PM Fouad Siniora, took a series of controversial decisions with respect to *Hezbollah* and its use of certain infrastructures.

The first decision was the removal of General Brigadier Wafiq Shuqeir from his role as security chief of Beirut's Rafiq al Hariri International Airport (BIA). The accusation was that Shuqeir tolerated the installation by Hezbollah of a system of surveillance cameras overlooking the airport's runway 17. This runway, mainly used for private aircraft, is surrounded by the Hezbollah-dominated semi-informal neighbourhood of Al-Ouzai. The government argued that these cameras were a security threat against Lebanon's sovereignty because of their alleged use for spying on – and possibly targeting – private aircraft flying VIPs in and out of Beirut.

Secondly, the government decided to outlaw a network of underground fibre optic cables that Hezbollah had installed in eastern and southern Lebanon, and which had reached parts of Beirut's southern suburbs. The network, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah argued in an emotionally charged press conference, allowed secure communication within the military wing of the party, with less risk of eavesdropping and interference by Israeli surveillance than wireless technology:

'There are wireless communications, either radios or cellulators, that is, the voice goes out on the air, in the various forms that current technology has made possible. There is another simpler form, land lines, which is spread out from one set to another, in which the voice does not go out on the air, but stays contained'

(Nasrallah, 8 May 2008, translated by Wilmsen, 2009)

Keeping the voice in the ground rather than dispersing it in the air was a crucial technical consideration for Hezbollah's geopolitical cause of Resistance (*Al-Muqawama*) against Israel's

occupation of south Lebanon, part of which remains contested, after Israel's withdrawal in 2000. The government instead unambiguously condemned *Hezbollah's* communications infrastructure as a violation of Lebanon's sovereignty.

Confronted with the government's attempt to regulate and limit Hezbollah's control of infrastructure, territory, and ultimately the geopolitical project of the Resistance, Hassan Nasrallah compared the outlawing of the communication network and the events at the airport to 'a war declaration' by the government against his party (Al Jazeera English, 2008). Following the press conference, *Hezbollah* launched a paramilitary operation, the objectives of which were to shut down media outlets affiliated with the governing March 14 coalition, surround March 14 politicians' residences, and neutralise the March 14 armed militants in the streets. The overarching goal was to reverse the government's decisions and reinstate *Hezbollah's* security and surveillance apparatus.

#### 'LIVING ON A SEA OF ARMS': AFFECTIVE ATMOSPHERES OF ESCALATION

How and why did the May 2008 violence begin and escalate? While media and diplomatic mainstream narratives often referred to wider (and disembodied) disputes over Lebanon between regional and global actors like Syria, Iran, Israel and the USA, interviews counteracted and complemented these geopolitical discourses by consistently attributing the precise sparking of the clashes to the disputes over Hezbollah's built infrastructure – the telecommunications network and the surveillance at BIA. On one side there were those who wanted to disrupt the telecommunications networks and 'to change this officer, the Shuqeir guy at the airport, [and] remove the cameras' (Interview with female journalist, Beirut, November 2010); 'The Ministry

of Telecommunications tried to gather information [about the communications network] and then it wanted to [...] disrupt this communication network. And that created the problem' (Interview with journalist, Beirut, December 2010). On the other side, *Hezbollah* resisted the government measures because, in the view of a pro-opposition journalist, *Hezbollah* had been forced into a difficult position: 'they had to [...] either accept the removal of their communications networks [...] and the [...] cameras [at] the airport [...] Or they had to do something about it' (Interview with columnist for a national newspaper, Beirut, December 2010).

What allegedly alarmed the government was not only the building up of *Hezbollah's* paramilitary infrastructure in the areas of Lebanon and Beirut where it had a traditional presence, but also extending to critical state-owned infrastructure (BIA). This particular urban infrastructural conjuncture was felt (perhaps exaggeratedly) as an all-pervading presence by some interviewees. When describing a general feeling that 'something wasn't right' on the eve of the clashes, one said: 'Beirut is living on a sea of arms and militias are all around' (Interview with local architect, Beirut, November 2010). Interviewees described perceiving a shift in the general atmosphere in the streets, including visual and auditory intensities. It starts with changes in the tone of interactions in the public spaces in the city: 'if you hear people talking, you will feel the aggressiveness' (Interview with freelance journalist, Beirut, November 2010).

'The man threatened my husband, using or trying to stress his southern accent [as if] to tell him, indirectly: "listen I'm Shi'a, if you don't move back, remember who I am and what we can do". And this [accent] has been used in several cases,

either on the street or in [shops]. I can hear it. Sometimes it's funny, it makes you laugh because people, [even though] they're not supporters of Hezbollah, but they know it's a tool to blackmail on a small scale; I'm not talking on a political [level], I'm talking about day to day relations' (Interview with news editor, Beirut, November 2010 )

Urban geopolitics invites study of the links between specific urban materialities and wider geopolitical discourses and practices; particular materialities such as flags and political posters, map precise territorial struggles in the city (Yacobi, 2015). At the eve of the clashes, hiding political symbols, flags and other territorial markers was part of attempts by residents aligned with 'March 14' groups to protect their neighbourhoods by minimising political visibility and avoiding confrontation with the March 8 militias deployed in the streets . One pro-March 14 resident mentioned the intimidating presence of political signs shifting the atmosphere even before the clashes started: 'You see the flags of the SSNP<sup>5</sup> in [the neighbourhood of] *Hamra*, and *Amal*<sup>6</sup> flags everywhere else... you just don't feel comfortable, you feel that they control the area' (Interview with news editor, Beirut, November 2010). Another resident remembered the disappearance of March 14 political symbols from her neighbourhood, coinciding with the advance of the March 8 militias towards it: 'All of the March 14 flags were down, all of the *Mustaqbal* flags, all the PSP<sup>7</sup> flags that were around our neighbours' houses: they were all down' (Interview with foreign local resident, Beirut, November 2010).

Anderson discusses the atmosphere around aesthetic objects as something through which 'a represented object will be apprehended and will take on a certain meaning'(Anderson, 2009, p.



79), creating an 'intensive space-time' (Anderson, 2009, p. 79) that acquires an intensity of its own that exceeds the representative meaning of the object itself. This echoes Wigley's point that, in the case of architecture and physical objects in general, 'what is experienced is the atmosphere, not the object as such' (Wigley, 1998, p. 18). The presence of makeshift (para)military camouflage unknown to the majority of residents also constituted a material element charging the space-time of escalation towards the clashes with particular intensities and atmospheres influencing people's action, such as trying to rush home through makeshift checkpoints manned by unrecognisable individuals:

'there [were] all these guys in security camouflage-ish outfits: [they were] not Lebanese army, not ISF [Internal Security Forces], [they don't] look like one of the various Lebanese [militias], [they don't] entirely look like the ones that guard the checkpoint, [or] like the resistance [i.e. *Hezbollah*] [...] Who are these guys that I've got to get through? I don't know, [they] are not from the area – that I've got to get through to get to my house?' (Interview with foreign local resident, Beirut, November 2010)

Sights of war infrastructures linked to restriction of mobility, like barricades and bonfires, were early signs of escalation:

'the main roads were already all closed, they had either stacked tyres, or lorries transported soil and really blocked the main roads with earth mounds. With my colleague, we arrived to a secondary road in Ouzai, hoping to be able to bypass

these blocks, instead...they had scientifically blocked every road' (Interview with journalist, Beirut, November 2010).

Sound is another important sensorial component of the affective atmospheres of escalation. Sound allows stepping beyond the techno-centric eye (and ear) of urban geopolitics, with its focus on sonic booms by jet fighters and the buzz of drones, and towards a more personally sensed experience of sound. The sound of weapon fire is a powerful shaper of affective atmosphere: its longitudinal waves echoing between buildings and confusing the location of the source, it envelops space and is heard collectively; it remains diffuse, and yet registers individually in different, tense, ways. Recognizing the sound patterns of exchanges of fire helps individual listeners detect the type of weapons, hence to assess the gravity of the situation and react corporeally. For example, the differences between celebratory, confrontational gunfire and heavier weapons are key: 'Celebratory [fire] is like four or five in a row, and then stops. This was "pap, parappap, pap"; this was fighting' (Interview with foreign local resident, Beirut, November 2010). The shift from guns to rocket propelled grenades (RPG) is another notorious sign that the situation is worsening, as the same interviewee pointed out: 'You start hearing RPGs, which is a different sound. It's a "boom", it's not fire, it's not "pa pa pa"'. Through sound quality and intensity together with knowledge of different weapon types and practices, residents could identify the approximate location of fire, the distance from their position, and therefore make decisions about their safety. A journalist returning from Hassan Nasrallah's press conference in south Beirut on May 8<sup>th</sup>, explained that 'as we drove further from [the

*Hezbollah*-dominated suburbs], we realised that the shots were continuing. That's when I understood that the issue was degenerating' (Interview with journalist, Beirut, November 2010). These auditory intuitions can be placed within wider histories of auditory knowledge across fields spanning security and military studies and counterinsurgency (Hinchliffe and Lavau, 2013; Scharine, et al., 2009, cited in Adey 2014). With the increase in urban military operations in late-modern war, sound constitutes 'an essential element in offensive urban operations' (Scharine, Letowski, & Sampson, 2009, p. 11). Vision is often obstructed in built-up areas, forcing soldiers to decode sounds and their complex echoing among buildings (Scharine, et al., 2009). Such auditory situational awareness is key for combatants to interpret signals from their surroundings, increasing resilience and pre-emptive capacity within combat situations. Similar reasoning and intuitions, even if perhaps more imperfect, were developed by civilians in May 2008: 'You can almost never tell [where the sound comes from], because of the way the buildings are, the echoes going out. Our friend had said they're shooting in [the neighbourhood of] Sodeco, so I'm thinking 'that's really loud, to hear that from Sodeco'. Lacking the kind of situational awareness that militias often, develop, residents may struggle to understand and interpret the sounds of conflict. My roommate, my flatmate, says I think that's celebratory, and I said 'No'...Because it wasn't [...] this was fighting...the sound was completely different. It was more sporadic, very intense, and it was never completely silent.' (Interview with foreign local resident, Beirut, November 2010).

These relations also use embodied knowledge from past conflicts: practices from the 1975-1990 civil war returned, like stocking provisions, in order to be self-sufficient at home and avoiding going out: '...The city was tense...People were doing things like buying bread...saying: "this is

what you do, this is how you handle these situations.” We are used to it: [you check] how are [sic] your water, your bread, your candles’ (Interview with foreign local resident, Beirut, November 2010).

As Anderson (2009) argues, atmosphere is both propagated by presence and by absence. This interplay of presence and absence was a notable element of escalation in Beirut at the eve of the clashes. Respondents referred to how the streets started emptying of civilians, while another symptom of imminent conflict was the army leaving its usual positions on main urban junctions, which intensified people’s feeling of exposure. The behaviour of the army also influenced residents’ perceptions of increasing insecurity: ‘I saw the army, a row of ten Lebanese soldiers – they had their helmets and heavy gear which made them seem a bit clumsy in their mobility – seeking shelter, hidden behind a low wall’ (Interview with journalist, Beirut, November 2010). In addition to the withdrawal of army personnel, the private security companies protecting March 14-owned residential and media premises, also began to disappear: ‘The first step of being exposed is to see that the army is leaving [...] And then [...] we have small security people [...] they were afraid and they left. [So] there was no [protective] umbrella and you know Future movement: [...] there was no commander in chief at that time’ (Interview with television network editor, Beirut, November 2010).

During the escalation, therefore, a complex ‘entanglement of (nonhuman) materialities and (human) subjectivities’ (Navaro-Yashin, 2012, pp. 41–42) contributed to shape atmospheres of tension and conflict escalation in Beirut. The discovery and government moves to shut down *Hezbollah*’s airport security cameras, the outlawing of its fibre optic network, then the shutdown by *Hezbollah* of pro-government media infrastructure. These major political moves

drove a broader atmospheric shift towards tension and escalation, with the appearance or disappearance of residents from the streets, the concealing of certain symbolic markers and signs to safeguard neighbourhoods, shifts in the everyday tonality of interactions in streets, and the different auditory nuances of exchanges of weapon fire. All these elements shaped the atmosphere of escalating conflict.

What *Hezbollah* saw as a legitimate response to a declaration of war by the government, the government saw as an illegitimate coup. By 11 May, the highway leading to Beirut International Airport was blocked and under the control of *Hezbollah*, as were several neighbourhoods in the western part of Beirut. Buildings belonging to the pro-March 14 Hariri family's Future Media network were shut, targeted with RPG fire or even burned and, according to some reports, the port of Beirut also shut down temporarily. Although deadly fighting continued in other Lebanese cities and in the hills surrounding Beirut until later that month, the situation in Beirut reached a pause once *Hezbollah* established control over selected neighbours – especially around the residences of March 14 politicians – and silenced the pro-Hariri media.

#### HAWA' BAYROUT. PRODUCING ATMOSPHERES OF DE-ESCALATION

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, PM Fouad Siniora announced the withdrawal of the decrees against *Hezbollah's* communication network and the airport security. Subsequently, the army invited all militias to withdraw from the streets. While clashes continued in other towns for days, in Beirut *Hezbollah* complied with the army's request, handed over the occupied neighbourhoods and withdrew.

The National Dialogue Conference in the Qatar (16-21 May) and the resulting Doha Agreement ended the clashes and Lebanon's eighteen-month political deadlock. The relaxed atmosphere in the hotel where the negotiations took place was apparent: parliament speaker Nabih Berri was photographed wearing a white jalabiya, slippers, and handling a worry beads chain; MP Walid Joumblatt sat back on an armchair contemplating a caricature cartoon of himself. The agreement prompted the election of army General Michel Suleiman as the new President of Lebanon. Besides calling for disarmament of party militants and refraining from the use of weapons to mark political events, the Doha agreement also increased the number of March 8 cabinet members, granting them veto power over executive decisions. The agreement also took a decision on the electoral law, to secure the functioning of the imminent general elections. The Doha agreement was also aimed at defusing tension by inviting political leaders 'to immediately abstain from resorting to the rhetoric of treason or political or sectarian instigation'(United Nations Peacemaker, 2008).

While the Doha agreement allowed the absence of war, it could hardly be considered as a return of Beirut to peace. It reaffirmed the sovereignty of the Lebanese state, but this did not simply represent the triumph of the state over an illegitimate non-state actor that had suddenly threatened its power. Rather, as the majority government capitulated, the army refused to be drawn into a confrontation with *Hezbollah* and instead coordinated directly with *Hezbollah* to take back control over the city (Fregonese, 2012a).

Although recognising the "deadly embrace" of war and peace (Gregory, 2010, p. 154) urban geopolitics' techno-centric perspective often translates into a somehow reductive vocabulary to encapsulate urban contestation and militarisation. This ethnography into the affective

atmospheres of the Beirut clashes and its focus on conflict as a not always linear process of escalation and de-escalation, reveals not only a more embodied account of the experience of war, but also a broader spectrum of experiences in between war and peace that urban geopolitics currently hardly grasps: the calm, the euphoria at the return of mobility, and yet the simultaneous feeling that escalation is always possible.

The negotiations and agreement had immediate impacts on Beirut's affective atmospheres, shaping a phase of de-escalation: almost immediately 'when they announced they were going to Doha and talk... it was certainly calm' (Interview with local resident, Beirut, November 2010). This 'calm' was shaped by noticeable changes in the built environment. March 8 supporters ended a vast protest encampment on Riad al-Solh Square that had surrounded the *Grand Serail* (the Cabinet building) building since December 2006. Its presence had impacted substantially on mobility and business in and around the regenerated city centre and was the physical embodiment of the political deadlock and polarisation that the country was experiencing: 'It was really great ...When they started to deconstruct the camp, we could move again' (Interview with freelance journalist, Beirut, November 2010).

Following Doha, people who had fled the violence moved back into their homes and media broadcasting recommenced. The army returned to the streets and the irregular checkpoints were lifted. Nevertheless, while 'things calmed down in Doha, [they did] not in the street' (Interview with news editor, Beirut November 2010), as atmospheres of tension still pervaded the city:

'In the street...it still feels the same [as during the clashes], [the fighters] are not in the street, but you feel that they [could] appear at any second. You still have

this feeling of...you cannot do anything. *Hezbollah* fighters withdrew ... but they still have their arms, they are still ready, they are still controlling and they are still watching' (Interview with freelance journalist, Beirut November 2010).

Even after the clashes, intimidating and thuggish behaviours continued despite the presence of the army:

'They were six guys, young. He told me: "Madam, walk off before you hear something that you don't like". I said: "If you don't stop it, I will tell the army." He came and said, "Oh really? Look [the army]'s over there, go call them." Literally, he was mocking me and the army!' (Interview with news editor, Beirut, November 2010).

Even after the checkpoints came down, the streets remained divisive places where atmospheres of tensions are produced through specific presences and tonalities:

'*Hezbollah* and their [allied] militias the SSNP and Amal are very powerful in the street, they still intimidate people' (Interview with news editor, Beirut, November 2010).

While in the street the Lebanese state had arguably reinstated its control, in Riad al Solh square, now void of the March 8 protest encampment, nationalist sentiments, positive spirit and cohesion were now being marshalled by the government majority. On the evening of 26 May, a free concert with no 'party or sectarian colours', as TV channel Al Arabiya stated, was organized on the square, where several thousand people gathered to celebrate the election of the new President. The highlight of the night was singer Haifa Wehbe performing *Hawa' Bayrut* - Love of Beirut - the word *hawa'* sharing semantic root with both "love" (هوى) and "atmosphere" (هواء), see note 2. The lyrics are evocative of a town divided and two lovers becoming distant. In this



moment, the engineering of nationalist atmospheres was explicitly (and generously) choreographed. Dancing in front of a huge Lebanese flag and a photograph of President Suleiman, Haifa Wehbe wore a (tight) military shirt with a print of Suleiman on the front, and sparkly earrings in the shape of Lebanese flags. Through the use of Haifa as prominent impersonation of the body politic and with choreographic hyperbole, sentiments and atmospheres were being mobilised and manipulated by the state to foster cohesion in a truly difficult time and, importantly, to quell doubts about the army's capability to protect its citizens in light of *Hezbollah's* (clearly military superior) operational capabilities during the clashes. *Hawa Bayrut* was emblematic: originally sung by iconic Lebanese singer Fairuz during the civil war, it acted, just after the May clashes, as a very powerful emotional reminder of the dangers of war. This carefully engineered performance – the choice of song and its lyrics, Haifa's clothes and accessories, the stage choreography – echoes the stirring of nationalist sentiment and the relation to memory explained by Closs Stephens: 'National feelings take hold because they are familiar, and because they tap into past emotions and affects, which return in a swirl of pictures, musical refrains, key colours, gestures and posters.' (Closs Stephens, 2016, p. 192). And yet, even in this atmosphere of national unity, we often witness a disruptive 'break from the codified emotions' (Closs Stephens, 2015, p. 5): despite the outpouring of nationalist sentiment from the stage during Haifa's performance, several bodyguards can be seen on stage and follow her as she greets the crowd<sup>8</sup>, while army men can be seen keeping fans at bay. These security presences reveal a constant fissure in the choreographed atmosphere, a permanent hint of (in)security in the Lebanese state's attempt to recover from its effective defeat by *Hezbollah*.

Besides mass events like the concert, a series of efforts were made to control tensions at the everyday level, to avoid political provocation in public places and maintain an atmosphere of calm in the aftermath of the clashes. In June, at the beginning of his presidential term, Michel Suleiman ordered that all signs and posters around Beirut depicting him should be taken down (Elghossain, 2008). Later that summer, in an agreement reached with other party leaders including *Hezbollah*, Future Party leader Saad Hariri ordered the removal of political posters, graffiti and signs of all types 'first from the Beirut district and then throughout the rest of Lebanon as soon as possible' (Abdallah, 2008). It was common to walk and spot big patches of bright white paint on walls covering up political signs. Such initiatives were part of a wider strategy by political actors within and beyond the state to avoid tension and conflict. These actions on and through the urban built environment, engineered visual presences or absences, aimed to shape affective atmospheres of cohesion to de-escalate tensions. In that delicate moment of conflict, with feelings still running high, a clear atmosphere shift had to occur that allowed people to 'breath[e] a little easier' (Associated Press, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

The politico-territorial notion of the resistance (*Al-Muqawama*) is intimately connected to Hezbollah's use of the fibre optic network and its role in the airport security personnel and infrastructure. Consequently, the government's interference with these specific infrastructures meant compromising the politico-territorial vision and strategy of the resistance. In this sense, the May 2008 clashes are a glaring case study for urban geopolitics. Here, localised urban sites became the ground *on and through which* the Lebanese government and the opposition

(Hezbollah), together with the officially neutral interposition of the army, disputed violently each other's right to control territory, (para)military infrastructure, and to use political violence, in other words, sovereignty and the role of Lebanon as a nation state within the region.

By joining literatures in urban geopolitics and affective atmospheres, this paper sought to extend the perspective of affective atmospheres to conflict and political violence, and highlight how not only "geopolitics affect us" and is entangled in everyday urban life and encounters (Sidaway, 2009, p. 1092), but also how affective atmospheres ought to be investigated as key moments of such urban geopolitics.

Doing so offers three disciplinary and wider contributions. Firstly, objects and built environments play a crucial role as shared grounds from which affective atmospheres of conflict (de-) escalation propagate and/or are made to propagate. While the role of built environments in the formation of atmosphere has been accounted for by geographies of commerce and consumption (Edensor, 2012; Healy, 2014; Lin, 2015; Shaw, 2014), and by geographies of architecture (Kraftl & Adey, 2008), this link is less explored in political geography. Urban geopolitics argue that cities are not just inert backgrounds where geopolitics are played out, and that the urban material landscape in itself is a point of convergence of multiple but interconnected scales, "from superpower geopolitics to city streets" (Sidaway, Paasche, Woon, & Keo, 2014, p. 1182). In May 2008, *Hezbollah* seized control of specific portions of Beirut and even switched off a number of media infrastructures. While this recalls what Graham (2005b) terms "deliberate demodernisation" or the closing down of crucial urban infrastructure as an act of war by traditional powers (first and foremost US air power), what an ethnographic

approach into the affective atmospheres of urban geopolitics in Beirut's May clashes reveals, firstly, are the actual lived and felt experiences of demodernisation. And, secondly, the arbitrary nature of Graham's distinction between terrorist and state powers techniques in targeting crucial infrastructure: this account surprisingly overlooks the violent use of the urban built environment by hybrid actors, like Hezbollah, which are at once inside and outside the state (Fregonese, 2012a).

The paper highlights exactly the agency of the built environment in co-shaping sensorial experiences of urban conflict escalation and de-escalation, and in the emergence and propagation of affective atmospheres. Atmospheres, as demonstrated, are as much about the diffuse and ephemeral as they are about the volumetric, the material, and the choreographic. Urban geopolitics, therefore, ought to account for the built and volumetric environments from which these atmospheres stem, gain momentum, affirm themselves and are manipulated.

Secondly – and building on Megoran's (Megoran, 2006) call for ethnographic approaches in the subdiscipline - political geographers, and especially those studying conflict and violence, can employ more affective approaches in their research, especially as the boundary between researcher and participants is blurred by "The emotional intensity of the events and people studies, the political stakes that surround research on violence and the haphazard circumstances under which fieldwork is conducted" (Nordstrom & Robben, 1995, p. 3).

Researching an atmospheric urban geopolitics allows to populate the techno-military world of urban geopolitics with sensing bodies, and also to add texture to the perspective of the "anti-geopolitical eye" (O' Tuathail, 1996) so to open new ground for the exposure of "other

geopolitics” (Lacoste, 1982) that are perceptive of affective atmospheres. Applied to the case of urban conflict in Beirut, an urban geopolitics that takes on board atmospheric approaches has allowed tracing a geography of the human and non-human actors that provoke atmospheric shifts (changing voice tonalities of fellow residents, presence of specific types of fire weapon sounds, the attitudes of the army, the disappearance of political markers), tap into embodied knowledges and provoke specific reactions from residents (an unknown paramilitary gear that triggers suspicion), constitute foyers of escalation (the airport, the fibre-optic infrastructure) and facilitators of de-escalation (the removal of the political posters and signs, the lifting of the protest encampment from the city centre).

Thirdly, an atmospheric urban geopolitics allows tuning the analysis of urban conflict into the everyday sensitivities of those whose daily lives are impacted upon by conflict. It produces more textured cartographies of contested cities (be it open conflict, exclusionary division, and so on). These cartographies seek to understand (and potentially intervene on) everyday sensory fluctuations, (de)escalations and circulations that, as the Beirut case has shown, define a large part of the knowledges, practices, reasonings, and ultimately survival of those dwelling amidst urban conflict.

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<sup>1</sup>Anthropological accounts of conflict in Lebanon have revealed the intermingled nature of war and everyday materiality, and how war, practices and livelihoods are mutually constituted and

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specific landscapes and knowledges of war produced and internalised (Khayyat & Shibli, 2011).

Such accounts are not, however, explicitly about affect or atmosphere.

<sup>2</sup> Franco- and Anglophone scholarships build on the Greek and Latin roots of the word atmosphere – which portrays an image of spherical encirclement/enveloping/surrounding. It is worth highlighting however – for the sake of the linguistic context and topic of this article – that, in Arabic, the word atmosphere (hawa' - هواء) derives from the same root of the verb hawá هوى , which conveys instead the different spatial meaning of “to fall from above”, “to descend” (as well as the more violent derivations “to befall”, “to crash”). The same root is used, as we will see, to also mean “love, inclination, desire”.

<sup>3</sup> Hezbollah is a Shi'a militant party with an affiliated militia. It originated in the mid-1980s as a resistance movement against the Israeli invasion. Although the disbanding of all militias was ordered at the end of the civil war, the Syrian presence in Lebanon allowed Hezbollah to maintain a paramilitary wing, especially along the southern border with Israel. Post-1990, Hezbollah transformed itself into a more moderate political party, participating in elections, engaging with other religious communities and providing social services. In 2000, Hezbollah's paramilitaries were crucial in securing Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon. Hezbollah's armed wing has however recently been strongly debated. Many view Hezbollah as a legitimate resistance movement and the only capable of defending Lebanon against the Israeli army. Despite high ranking members of Hezbollah being indicted by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) for their alleged involvement in the assassination of former PM Rafiq al Hariri, support for the party was high even after its 2006 war against the Israeli army on Lebanese territory. The May 2008 clashes further polarised opinion for and against Hezbollah's disarmament, and the



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issue has become particularly controversial since 2008 as Hezbollah's weapons were turned for the first time against the Lebanese. Hezbollah's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict has polarised opinions even further and shaken popular support for the party.

<sup>4</sup> The 'March 14' and 'March 8' coalitions, both named after politically important dates, are multi-religious alliances of political parties resulting from the political reshuffling after the assassination of former PM Rafiq al Hariri in 2005. The March 14 alliance is led by Saad al Hariri, the son of the slain PM. Comprised of 18 parties and groups, it opposes Syrian influence on Lebanon. The March 8 coalition voices a pro-Syrian regime position. Formed of 14 parties and groups, its two leading parties were Hezbollah and General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement.

<sup>5</sup> The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (*Al-hizb al-suri al-qawmi al ijtima'i*), SSNP, is a secular, , anti-Zionist nationalist party founded in 1932. Its militants remained active after the end of the civil war and participated prominently in the 2008 clashes in and outside Beirut.

<sup>6</sup> The Amal Movement (*Harakat Amal*) is a political party funded in 1974 and mainly associated with the Shia Muslim community. Its leader, Nabih Berri, has been Speaker of the Lebanese parliament since 1992. While Amal's wartime militia was disbanded, its militants become active during periods of tension. It has 13 parliamentary seats. [Again, March 8]

<sup>7</sup> The Future Movement (*Tayyar al Mustaqbal*) is the political movement founded in 2007 and led by Saad al Hariri. The Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) is led by Druze notable Walid Joumblat and was founded in 1949.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mp3tunes.tk/download?v=bMuVeFlcRXw>



## \*Conflict of Interest Statement

I declare with this submission that there is no financial/personal interest or belief that could affect my objectivity. There is no conflict of interest that I am aware of.

- Urban geopolitics needs to take seriously the lived experiences of urban conflict.
- The article joins literature on urban geopolitics and on affective atmospheres to trace the intensities of feeling during urban conflict.
- Atmospheric shifts marked escalation and de-escalation of violence in Beirut.
- The built environment is key in propagating affective atmospheres of conflict and in shaping atmospheres of de-escalation.
- An atmospheric urban geopolitics produces less militaristic and more embodied cartographies of contested cities