On May 12–14, 2010, the graduate program in urban planning, policy, and design at the American University of Beirut (AUB) organized its annual conference, City Debates, on the theme of security. Titled “Security of/in the City,” the eighth edition of City Debates included more than 25 scholars and covered over a dozen geographic contexts, mostly in the Global South. Most contributions focused on the Middle-East which is notoriously misrepresented in urban studies. They included Egypt, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, but also Indonesia, Brazil, and others.

Security, however, is not proper to Beirut or its region only. Writing from Beirut, security had however been a critical element of our experiences in the city. The end of the civil war in 1990 and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from South Lebanon a decade later considerably reduced the intensity of securitization. In 2005, the security deployment re-intensified with the reemergence of local and regional conflicts within a shifting geo-political global order (see Fawaz, Harb and el Gharbieh, this issue). In many cities, surveillance cameras, barbed wire, and concrete barriers have superseded benches and streetlights as the main elements of a public infrastructure. In others, the public infrastructure has itself been dubbed as the source of insecurity, as parks were closed off and public benches redesigned to secure cities from their poorest constituents (Davis 1990). Almost everywhere, security has been normalized. It has been stripped of its political significance, so that threats are taken at face value and generalized in the name of a hypothesized common good, without much recognition of their historical, geographic, and social contexts.

The theme of securitization in fact originated at a particular global moment when everyday experiences were increasingly punctuated by security interruptions of variegated intensity, whether one moved within cities or travelled international borders.

Echoing this reality, “security” has figured prominently in the work of urban researchers in the last decades (e.g. Graham 2004 and 2011;
Gregory and Pred 2007). A closer look at this literature reveals that despite the common association made between security concerns and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, so-called global terrorism forms only a narrow fraction of the ways in which security has been documented and analyzed. In fact, security has been approached, conceptualized, and assessed in a multiplicity of ways that span across several disciplines to cover issues as divergent as food security, health security, border security, development security, or the security or protection of national and/or religious identities. Security, scholars have shown, is not only a matter of national self-defense perpetrated in the name of a common good (as presented in the global terrorism literature). It is rather a landscape of public, communal, and individual responses to a set of constructed, contested, and negotiated threats.

True to this rich scholarship, the papers presented in City Debates 2010 challenged the typical or so-called evident definitions of security. Participants argued instead for unbundling the complex constructions of threats as well as their ensuing subjectivities (e.g. suspects, criminals, victims), security apparatuses (governments, military, religious political organizations, regimes of occupation, real estate markets, NGOs), geographies (e.g. camps, green zones, political or religious territories), and technologies (e.g. walls, borders, rosters, bunkers). The presentations amounted thus to a set of critical narratives that explored what we call “security as lived.” They unraveled the performative power of security, primarily as the generator of particular forms of spatialities that can extend beyond national territories. In his opening statements, Derek Gregory argued eloquently that it was the perceptions of threats of the US Army’s generals and their ensuing constructions of security that reproduced Baghdad as a divided city. Geographies are however not always imagined and constructed from above, as attested by Parvati Nair’s poignant account of the practices of entrapped African migrants who attempt to maneuver security and cross over to Europe in search for a better life. In Tangier, Nair explained, the imagined geography is one of economic security in the Global North, and its impacts are individual journeys of risk that transform actual urban geographies in tiny increments (see Nair 2008). Scholars explored the production of geographies of fear and their repercussions on everyday urban life, especially in contexts of war and violence. Hiba Bou Akar (this issue) discussed the spatiality of the sectarian order and instances of its subversion in contested Beirut. Nasser Abourahme discussed the multiplicity of security apparatuses that shape the city of Ramallah under indirect colonial rule (see also Abourahme 2011). Others looked more closely at elements of security in particular contexts, such as the walls/borders in Israel/Palestine and Rio de Janeiro, high-end enclaves in Istanbul and control strategies in football mega-events. Approaching the experience of forced displacement, Omar Dewachi discussed the international aid organizations and local security apparatuses active in the spatial management of Iraqi refugees in Syria. A roundtable of scholars explored the same questions in relation to
Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the region. Speakers addressed the ways these new forms of spatialities shape new subjectivities that respond, adapt, or maneuver across the categories of security. These included refugees’ quest for spatial “normality,” migrants crossing borders, disadvantaged youth maneuvering the police apparatus to inscribe their right to the city through graffiti (see Teresa Caldeira 2012), gendered and sexualized subjects that construct and subvert the national security apparatus in Cairo, but also scared high-income city dwellers who retreat to their enclosed quarters. They explored how entities constructed as victims become also part of the security apparatuses that criminalize or violate them in the name of protecting them, while yet others through their spatial practices turn the dominant logic of security and threat on its head creating a new spatial logics in search for their livelihood (Bayat, Simone and Fauzan, this issue).

From these themes, we retain in the four papers presented in this issue of City and Society the focus on cities, subjects, and their intersections. These four papers hence coincide in their focus on examining security as “lived.” Through the lenses of their authors, it becomes evident that the subjects of security, be they religious groups, rich or poor dwellers, or enforcing security agents, all contribute to the organization of spaces of security. In that sense, security is not imposed. It is continuously negotiated, contested, defined, and re-defined through the everyday practices of social agents who rarely agree on what constitutes a threat, to whom, and how. In their quest for housing, livelihood, mobility, well-being, and security, urban actors produce spaces that are simultaneously perceived as secure and insecure, safe and/or dangerous, depending on social agents and their positions in various urban social hierarchies. In other words, rather than thinking of security as a totalizing apparatus that controls all aspects of our daily life in the city, or thinking of it as lacking under conditions of violence or contestations, the papers’ approaches to “lived” security provide more nuanced understandings of ruptures within these totalizing systems or discourses that allow the possibilities for urban politics and the making of everyday life in the city.

This conceptualization of security as “lived” has the merit of unraveling complex layers, multiple constructions, and often inconsistent apparatuses of security that configure urban space within the spatial imaginaries of protection and threat, trespassing and domination. It allows for an exploration of the possibilities of politics from below that range from hopefulness to dystopia. The possibility of change from below is best evidenced in Asef Bayat’s piece that perhaps ushers in the Arab Spring one year before it begun. Bayat argues that “the neo-liberal city is a city-inside-out, where a massive section of the urban population, the subaltern, are compelled to conduct their daily activities in public spaces, and streets, in a substantial ‘out-doors economy’ ” because the city has otherwise become unaffordable to them. Threatened by this massive outdoor deployment of poor classes, the rich retreat to their gated spaces. While numerous authors have decried this social segregation, Bayat argues that this new spatial order enabled “street politics” for previously
excluded populations, providing them with venues to cast wide their networks of solidarity. Bayat calls this the “art of presence,” the ability to assert collective will and discover spaces of visibility in spite of hurdles and constraints. It illustrates, he insists, the response of the subalterns to their status of dispossession.

Simone and Fauzan provide a rich exploration of the ways in which the “majority,” mostly middle class residents of two neighborhoods of Jakarta, secure their livelihoods. In contrast to Bayat, they investigate securitization as an array of intersecting individual initiatives rather than submission to “an abstracted collective” (whether citizenship, religion, ethnicity). These initiatives amount to a plurality of transactions (of different forms, scales, and content) that together secure the possibilities to overcome difficulties and build urban lives despite overwhelming hardships.

While such notions of security provide the possibilities of political action for at least some urban actors in Cairo and Jakarta, Bou Akar’s paper explores how competing and ever-shifting notions of security and insecurity shape the built environment of Beirut’s southern peripheries as frontiers of growth and violence where the spatiality of the sectarian order with its demarcations lines is produced, contested, and re-produced. By examining the spatial practices of religious-political organizations, such as Hezbollah and the Druze PSP, Bou Akar illustrates how areas that provide low-income war-displaced families with secure low-cost housing are also zones of conflict, militarization, and environmental degradation where fears of future wars shape everyday lives. Such spaces highlight how the practices of urban planning, housing and real estate development, militarization, the anticipation of new wars and violence, and the constructed spatiality of sectarian difference shape Beirut’s post-wars geographies.

Fawaz, Harb and El-Gharbieh map the anatomy of visible security systems in Beirut to examine the complexity of constructions that produce them. Based on extensive fieldwork in Beirut, their paper unravels “security” as the accumulation of a set of constructed threats that bring together a multiplicity of forms and agents of securitization, both public and private. Security, they argue, amounts to a complex, overlapping, and contentious set of anxieties that materialize spatially in entrenching segregation and socially, by differentiating among urban dwellers along lines of gender, class, race, or religious/sectarian belonging. The authors argue that the ways in which this form of security is practiced and lived in Beirut reflect indeed the potential for political action, but it is the potential of a catalyst for social and political divisions rather than progressive social change.

These four studies reflect the potential of approaching security as “lived,” and a lens through which one can analyze not only the anatomy of power and government, but the entanglements and subversions, and multiple logics that produce and contest geographies of security in ways we hope can help us find the possibilities for urban politics of change.
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