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The lucrative history of Lebanese land reclamation

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BEIRUT: Beirut's glittering waterfront district today is a far cry from its origins as an open-air dumping ground for the refuse and rubble of Lebanon's Civil War. The Normandy Landfill lay on the ruins of what was once the hotel of the same name, and extended into the sea – an area that was later reclaimed and turned into the current waterfront district, also known as BIEL.

After the war ended, the area was included in a portfolio of land to be rehabilitated by the Council for Development and Reconstruction.

Solidere was tasked with the redevelopment of the space, embarking on a yearslong process of reclaiming the land to transform the dump into a vast 1.7-million-square-meter private waterfront district with an estimated value of around \$10 billion.

Land reclamation projects like that of BIEL have been ubiquitous on Beirut's coast since the Civil War, reshaping it over the intervening decades. Satellite imagery obtained by The Daily Star from a graduate student in waste management systems, Elias Azzi, shows this progressive transformation.

The development of Waterfront City Dbayeh between 1985 and 1998 can clearly be seen, as can an extension to Beirut Port

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business in 1990 and ending in 2015, as well as the reclamation of the Normandy Landfill from 1991 through 2011.

Far from just a historical process, it can be seen today in the Burj Hammoud garbage mountain that extends into the Mediterranean and is currently being demolished to provide filler for new land reclamation.

Criticism of the Lebanese government for using waste in land reclamation also goes back decades. In 1999, The Daily Star reported that waste from Karantina, which may have included toxic refuse, was being used in the process of extending Beirut's Port, according to environmental NGO Greenpeace.

An Environment Ministry statement at the time confirmed that waste was being used, but that appropriate measures were taken to prevent it from coming into contact with the open sea.

Similar statements are being made 18 years later, with a CDR statement to The Daily Star saying that the new Burj Hammoud-Jdeideh landfill was "designed and implemented in accordance with the international standards set forth in the contract [between the CDR and Khoury Contracting Company]."

The CDR declined to make the contract publicly available.

Jad Chaaban, an associate professor of economics at the American University of Beirut with expertise in agricultural environment

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militia protected sea reclamation and illegal land use," he said.

"First it started illegally, but then you had some twists, for example the Cabinet approved the Normandy [reclamation], so they can always say we have [an official] decision," Chaaban added.

Chaaban added that land reclamation is a "win-win situation, especially if you're a politician."

"[There is] a lot of waste, you can't burn it because it smells very bad, you need to dump it somewhere and there is very little land available. ... Each local militia leader first had to sort out the waste problem, and then they found a magic solution: 'Let's also [gain] land from the sea.' So it's a win-win for them," Chaaban said.

The practice of land reclamation has entered the spotlight with the new Burj Hammoud dump, billed as a quick fix to Lebanon's 2015 garbage crisis, according to statements made by the contractors working on the site and the CDR.

Documents obtained by The Daily Star show the new planned landfill sites will extend hundreds of meters into the sea upon completion, and will have a surface area of 600,000 square meters in total, with much of the land consisting of prime waterfront real estate. The documents were produced by Lebanese civil engineering firm Liban Consult, whose plans are the blueprint for the project.

Mutasesem Fadel, a professor of civil engineering at AUB, said that while the practice of using waste in land reclamation is considered acceptable in Lebanon, it remains abnormal internationally.

"It is not normal for waste to be used in land reclamation projects. If they come and say that 'it's totally inert now' and 'we are using it to reclaim land but we are not using it as a structural or foundational material' it can work, but this is not something that people would usually do," Fadel said.

Joe Kanaan, the director-general of real estate agency Sodeco Gestion, estimated that prices for plots on the future reclaimed land could be worth between \$500 and \$100

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significantly if development in the area increased. Even with this conservative estimate, the value of the entirety of the new Burj Hammoud-Jdeideh land would be above \$300 million.

The Liban Consult documents also show a plan for a new coastal highway to be built on "clean backfilled land" in the Jdeideh portion of the landfill, which corresponds to the ambitions of the long-lived LINOR project. While the documents clearly show plans for the highway, the CDR said in its statement that "the relaunch of project LINOR is subject to a decision by the Cabinet," while denying that it would be responsible for any development in the sea "beyond the scope of the present project."

According to Chaaban, even if the plans for the LINOR project are accepted at face value, it does not represent a well-planned solution to Lebanon's transport infrastructure issues. "Is it the best thing to [build] a highway? Or do we want a light-rail network like in Malaysia or Japan? We don't need a highway if you really have a sustainable urban plan, but they sell you all projects as if they are amazing and piecemeal and make you ... forget the need for integrated planning because they want to make money out of it," Chaaban said.

He also decried the incentives given to the Burj Hammoud Municipality for the project in the form of around \$6 million a year in development funds, which he said would likely be used without transparency.

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projects will be divided into a sewage treatment plant, public property and a section for the use of the Burj Hammoud Municipality.

However, Chaaban pointed to the Normandy Landfill as a precedent for the privatization of reclaimed land. "A [Burj Hammoud] municipal council decision can say, 'Well we donate it [the land].' There are many tricks and ways, they can learn from the example of Beirut," he said.

The Burj Hammoud Municipality declined to respond to requests for comment, including whether development funds were being received, how they would be used or whether new land would be made available to private development.

"My taxes are being used to dump in the sea and there is land that will be created because of this illegal dumping that will be at the hands of a few municipalities that can decide on their own if they want to resell it for rent, or sell it to private users, and the private users will win in the end," Chaaban said.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on July 19, 2017, on page 3.

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