

On Lebanon's coast, a garbage dump grows

adapted from an article by Tim Arango and Hwaida Saad



- 1 There was once a nice sea view at the Al Jazira beach club, and umbrellas of palm fronds sticking from the sand are reminders of nicer days. Nowadays, the place is surrounded by an ever-growing garbage dump. Just up the shoreline, Mohammed Jradi, who has been fishing the waters of the Mediterranean off Beirut for 20 years, said the trash had driven even the fish away. "All over the world, there are solutions for this, but not here," he said.
- 2 Last year, the municipality opened the Costa Brava landfill on the shoreline, not far from Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport. And so for many visitors to Beirut, a city whose shabby-chic architecture, great cuisine and French colonial influences are otherwise enchanting, the first thing to greet them was a strong whiff of garbage.
- 3 The landfill also attracted birds — lots of them — not just the sea gulls that normally fly around the coast, but others on migratory patterns from Europe and North Africa. "In other words," wrote one local blogger, "a giant free Lebanese restaurant for birds." More seriously, this posed a problem to civil aviation. When an airliner hit a bird this month, Lebanon's trash problem suddenly became a matter of aviation safety.
- 4 Almost immediately, gunmen showed up on the coast line, apparently deployed by the government to shoot the birds out of the sky, raising the anger of environmental activists. "Lebanon is an important bird area," said Paul Abi Rached, president of the Lebanon Eco Movement, noting that

millions of birds from Europe and North Africa pass through Lebanon each year on migratory patterns. "So what you are killing are not Lebanese birds," he said. "They are the birds of Europe. That is the catastrophe!"

5 The garbage problem has long been a symbol of a failure of Lebanese politics, one that activists say has its roots in the time shortly after the country's civil war, which ended in 1990. Soon after the war ended, the government set up a trash collection company, called Sukleen, that was connected to political parties and over the years became a vehicle for corruption, activists say. This 11 the possibility of other solutions, like recycling, and in a country as small and densely populated as Lebanon it has been hard to find enough space for landfills.

6 Habib Battah, the founder of the news website Beirut Report, said the problems with garbage went back to the decision at the end of the war to privatize trash collection. He said that Lebanon offered a lesson to other postwar societies on the dangers of rushing into privatization too fast, and that he often wished he could bring free-market advocates to Lebanon for a field trip to see what can happen in the absence of strong government regulations. Public services across the board, not just trash collection, have long suffered in Lebanon, he said, forcing political leaders to confront a difficult question: "What do you fix first? The water? The garbage? The internet?"

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