Nothing to Declare

Train Narratives

Dictaphone Group

Tripoli

Abbudiyya’

Byblos

Junye

Mar Mkhayil

Furn al-Shubbak

B‘abda

Hadath

Jumhur

‘Arayya

‘Aley

Bhamdun

Sawfar

Mdayrij

Dahr al- Baydar

Mrayjat

Jditta / Shtura

Saadnayel

Ma‘alqa

Riyaq

Sidon

Tyre

Naqura

Condition of the Train Station Building

- In Use
- Abandoned
- Destroyed

Use of Train Station

- Military base during the civil war
- Military base for the Lebanese Army
- Office of the Railway and Public Transportation Authority
- Residence
- Restaurant
- Library
- Hospital

Borders of the State of Lebanon

Railways tracks

Map of the Railway, Condition of the Train Stations, and Their Current Use

Declaration:
We Were Constantly Looking for Something

In Lebanon, as elsewhere, misery is most visible in the peripheries, and control is most apparent on the margins. We encounter borders every day, both national and internal. They are specific sites for the exercise of violence and the manifestation of oppression. As one person put it, borders are a tremendous opportunity to make people suffer.

The Arab uprisings gave us hope as we found ourselves caught up in networks of solidarity and knowledge. But those hopes were complicated by border regimes between Arab states that dictate which of us can travel and where we can travel to. These borders were drawn, constructed, militarized, and policed with no consideration for the majority of inhabitants of the new states.

A map of the Arab world shows border-crossing train tracks spanning the region. The old Hijaz Railway, which connected Damascus to Medina, once transported Muslim pilgrims accross what is today Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia without the need for visas.

The non-operational Lebanese railway, dating back to 1891 and shut down during the 1975 Civil War, appears to us as a rupture. It is internally a symbol of a weak and dysfunctional Lebanese state, used to justify militarization and corruption.

We decided to take a journey along the abandoned train tracks of Lebanon. Our starting point was a derelict station in Beirut, and continued as each one of us set off on a different trip following one of the three train tracks toward the region that each of us is from.

**Tania headed north.
Petra went east.
Abir took the southern route.**

Our travels revealed past and present uses of these tracks and the stations that dotted them. Some were abandoned. Others were turned into makeshift housing. Some had the markings of being used as military bases and torture chambers.

We encountered multiple boundaries that functioned as borders in their own right. We were stopped by Lebanese Army checkpoints. We relived the geographic divisions of a civil war that never ended.

We reached the so-called national border. No matter the direction, it was indeed at the margins and the far-away unfamiliar landscapes that we encountered the most telling embodiments of extreme oppression.

“To move is to be moved. To travel is, potentially, to change.”[1]

In 2011, amidst the highs and hopes of the Arab uprisings, some of us were invited to join a group of Arab activists at the Annual Arab Blogger’s Meeting in Tunis. This was the first meeting since the uprisings began. There was a common feeling of great need and passion to build regional networks of solidarity and knowledge. However, a group of Palestinian activists were denied entry visas to Tunisia on the basis of their nationality. This incident catalyzed a series of discussions on the effects of borders on the transmittal of both knowledge and experience among people in different countries—and on the deeper political implications of territorial attitudes and practices of sovereignty.

As part of these discussions, we promised ourselves to initiate a project about Arab borders. We would go on a journey, a long and ambitious journey, attempting to cross borders in various ways to enter all Arab countries. Up until that point, we had been mainly working on individual sites, researching in and about the space and ultimately intervening in the form of site-specific performances. We realized that this new research project would have to take other artistic forms, such as a lecture performance. Since the contested space was our starting point and inspiration, we decided to do what we often do: place our bodies in these contested spaces and record what happens.

Our aim was to document our first trip, from Beirut toward the so-called national borders of Lebanon. We followed the three train tracks from Beirut toward the north, south, and east that once freely crossed what are now Arab borders. In the process, we curiously captured the multiple uses of the railroads after years of abandonment. We also stumbled upon individuals and stories that pushed us to question not just the national borders, but the internal borders that were imposed upon us as well. Equally important, our journeys to the northern, southern, and eastern borders raised questions about places unfamiliar to us; places that have long been forgotten.

The project was thus no longer about Arab borders. Alternatively, we used the railway as a tool to reveal historical and present readings of diverse places it passed through. The national border was conceived as a margin, a periphery, a far-away lived landscape that our mere interaction with set the conditions of possibility for further investigations. On a more intimate level, our journeys were an exploration of the relationship between ourselves and unfamiliar landscapes, and of the role of stories, our own and those of residents, in the making of representations of these places.

Our documentation in the form of video and audio recordings as well as note taking were transformed into a lecture performance that was presented in different cities

[1] *Jad Baaklini, «Nothing to Declare: A review» Jadaliyya, November 2013.*

around the world. In that first iteration, we narrated a story–or rather stories–of control, displacement, and (sometimes) hope. But it was only when we performed it in Beirut—and in Arabic—that we realized the potential impact of such a project in Lebanon. As public spaces that were officially abandoned for years, the railway tracks and stations narrate their own defeat. Yet in our constant search for new definitions of "public," the current uses of these spaces redirected our gaze toward a new horizon: one which opens up questions about public domains and informal practices. How does one approach the issue of the revival of the railway within a context where communities have built livelihoods and homes around them? What do the past and current uses of these spaces say about the places they are located in?

We further developed our research in the direction of these questions, exploring three particular areas of inquiry. We looked closely at the town of Riyaq in the Beq'a region. There, we uncovered stories that reveal multiple histories for one place. We also looked at Sayda in the southern region, paying close attention to the city's various refugee communities and the attendant socialized spaces. Finally, we revisited Tripoli in the north, and its relationship to neighboring Syrian cities. We updated our performance texts and recorded them as voice-over that would act as a soundscape to the video diary of our journeys. We also utilized the personal narratives and oral histories of personalities we met on our three journeys along the railroads. These narratives were performed/recorded and included in the final video.

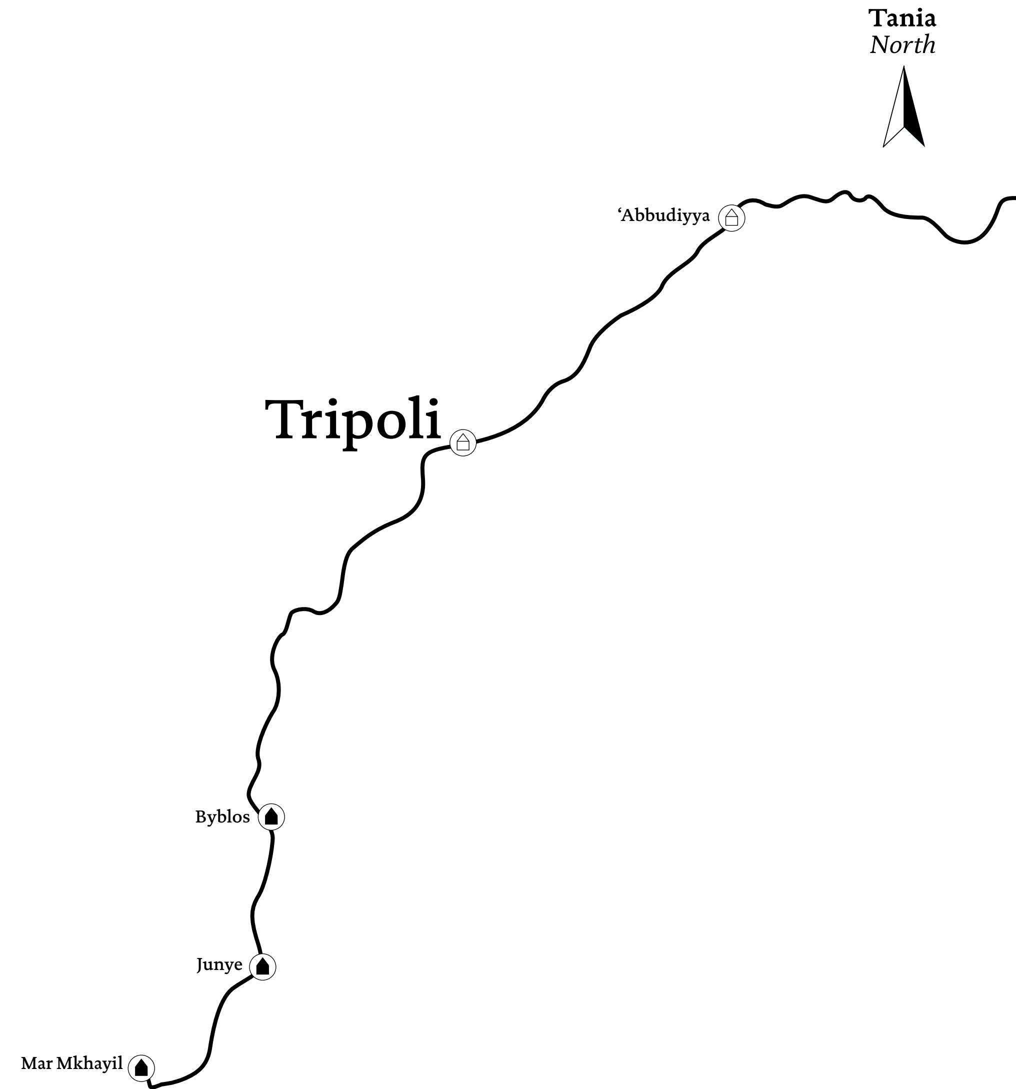
We often found ourselves wondering when the performance precisely took place. Was it during the lecture performance in which we shared our research findings with an audience? Or perhaps it started during the three journeys that we each took along the railroad toward the borders? Is it not, after all, a political performance once you disrupt spaces by placing your body in locations that demand from you a certain disappearance? Or was the performance our live acts of jumping over fences and entering abandoned or restricted public spaces without permission, all the while secretly recording our journeys? What of the different communities with whom we crossed paths? Were they not our collaborators in the performance?

These are questions that remain with us today. We hope that this present documentation of the journey acts as an afterlife of the performance.

Herein, within this booklet that accompanies the video of our journy, we share with you notes from our travel diaries. We map the current and past uses of the train stations on the three lines we followed. The texts are written as on-site interviews so as to tell the stories of these spaces through specific points of view in which we play an editorial role. The characters may be fictional or based on real personalities, but what they say is real. We are left with this reality of a Lebanese state that is made dysfunctional while corrupt elite continue to be uncountable.

طرابلس
TRIPOLI
حمص
HOMS

The Tripoli station is not guarded by railway employees like other stations on the northern line, even though a large part of the station is still standing along with its wagons. Like much of Lebanon, this train station knew different military encampments that left deep scars. To this day, the Tripoli train station remains the witness of the turbulent relationship between the Tripolitanians and the Lebanese state. I looked for the Tripoli Station Cafeteria, as I heard that it has remained open and continued to function for all these years—long after the station was abandoned. There, I met a middle-aged local man who has been a regular customer at the cafeteria for more than thirty years.



The following is what he narrated.

I am one of the regulars here. We are a group of ten men who pass by the café at least once a day. Personally, I have been drinking tea and smoking *arguileh* here for about twenty years. All the customers are my friends so we all sit together, mainly outside and never on separate tables. It is nice inside though, a cozy room with old wooden tables and chairs. But it is a little dark for me, and it feels like a museum. It is a rare sight to see a stranger entering this café. It has been run by a local Tripolitanian family for decades. The current manager took over a few years ago when his father passed away. He does not remember much from when the station was in its prime because he is the youngest of the previous owner's fourteen children. His father, on the other hand, remembered everything. He used to tell us about the times beautiful movie stars passed by this station on their way to Syria or Palestine. He was lucky to have seen Sabah, Asmahan, and Taroub in person. I remember how he used to sell people train tickets from the window of the café just here.

Tripoli was always proud of its station. We built it ourselves, from our own money. At first, we had trains with one cart that were pulled by mules and ran between the city centre and the port. Then we wanted a modern train line that would link our city to the world, and especially with Homs and Aleppo. We had close economic and cultural ties with these two cities. We still do. Therefore, a few families and entrepreneurs from Tripoli joined forces and invested in a train company. Their plan was first obstructed by the French authorities who worried that Tripoli's commerce might become more successful than Beirut. You see, our city was always in competition with Beirut. It had the potential of becoming a much more important city than our current capital, but things went bad for us—especially after Lebanese independence. Now everything happens in Beirut and all the money goes to Beirut. Anyway, we eventually managed to build this station in 1911. However, our trains did not go to Beirut. Instead they went to Homs, which we had closer ties with than Beirut. The train line between Tripoli and Homs was 104 kilometers long and stopped at nine stations: Tripoli, al-ʿAbda, Tal Habash, ʿAkkari, Tal Qalʿa, Wadi Khalid, Kuzlakhayr, Khorebtini, and Homs. The line passed through the beautiful Akkar valley and connected Tripoli to that area where they grow grains as well as the now-Syrian areas. Trade in both Tripoli and Homs expanded due to the train and the import-export doors of were wide open for them. The imported goods that used to reach Tripoli's port would be distributed in Lebanon via the railway.

Of course, independence, the establishment of Syria and Lebanon as two separate nation states, and the relationship between the two governments affected the train route between us and Homs. As you know it is not always rosy between our government and the sister's government. When the relationship gets tense, the train line would be interrupted. Such closures of the border between Tripoli and Homs certainly affected our trade.

You know, they say that in the 1930s a train called the Taurus Express would leave Istanbul once a week at night, stopping in Syria's Aleppo, and then terminating in Tripoli. I wish I could take this trip one day. Can you imagine how beautiful of a trip it must be to go by land from here to Istanbul? Some people have done it, and have even reached all the way to Paris by train. I think they were more mobile than us in the old days, even though we are supposed to have more technology now.

I am going to tell you a beautiful story I once read in the newspaper. The historian Samih Zein has written about an incident that happened here in Tripoli's railway station. Apparently, in the wake of the World War I, British army troops had taken the warehouses in the station as headquarters for themselves. They placed food containers and imposed tight security on them, while people in the region were suffering from a terrible famine. So a group of train workers brought three coffins to the station and filled them with large quantities of supplies, food and clothing in particular, then carried the coffins on their shoulders as you do in funerals. As they passed soldiers and guards, they made sure they looked extremely sad. The guards lifted their guns to salute the dead, unaware that the railway workers were stealing food from them to feed the local community.

The British troops were not the only military presence this station has known. In 1976, the Syrian army established a base here. You can still see the graffiti left here by Syrian soldiers. They scribbled "Asad" and drew some hearts on the walls of the station.

During the civil war, we heard about an attempt to revive the train between Tripoli and Beirut, mainly to transport fuel and cement. But the illegalities that happened on the seashore during that period made sure that some of the railroads disappeared. Private beachfront resorts mushroomed especially in the Junye area. As you know, these were illegally constructed on the beach with the collaboration of the militias who controlled these areas. The government would need a major plan to deal with all these illegalities.

You could say that the government is useless. But then again the railway authority is a very important governmental institution, as it owns properties and has many employees. Some of its employees used to be regular here. They have an office nearby. They all came by at the end of the month, just to collect their salaries, as all of them had other jobs at the same time. Most of them are retired now, and of course the railway authorities are not hiring anyone new. The government simply never interrupted the salaries of the old employees and used them to monitor the illegalities on the train track.

The government convinced us in 2002 that they were about to reopen the train route between Tripoli and Homs. They even put up a sign for the project and held a sort of opening ceremony. I can't really tell you why this project never happened. This is the state. Perhaps you know how it functions, because I have no idea. It's just like that time they bought so many buses of public transportation that were never really used. Now they are just parked. They said they were "over budget" or something like that. They paid millions for the metal that was supposed to be used for the new railroad between Tripoli and Homs. Now the metal is left stacked near the port, just behind this wall here. Most of it has rusted by now. We recently heard that a Chinese company is taking

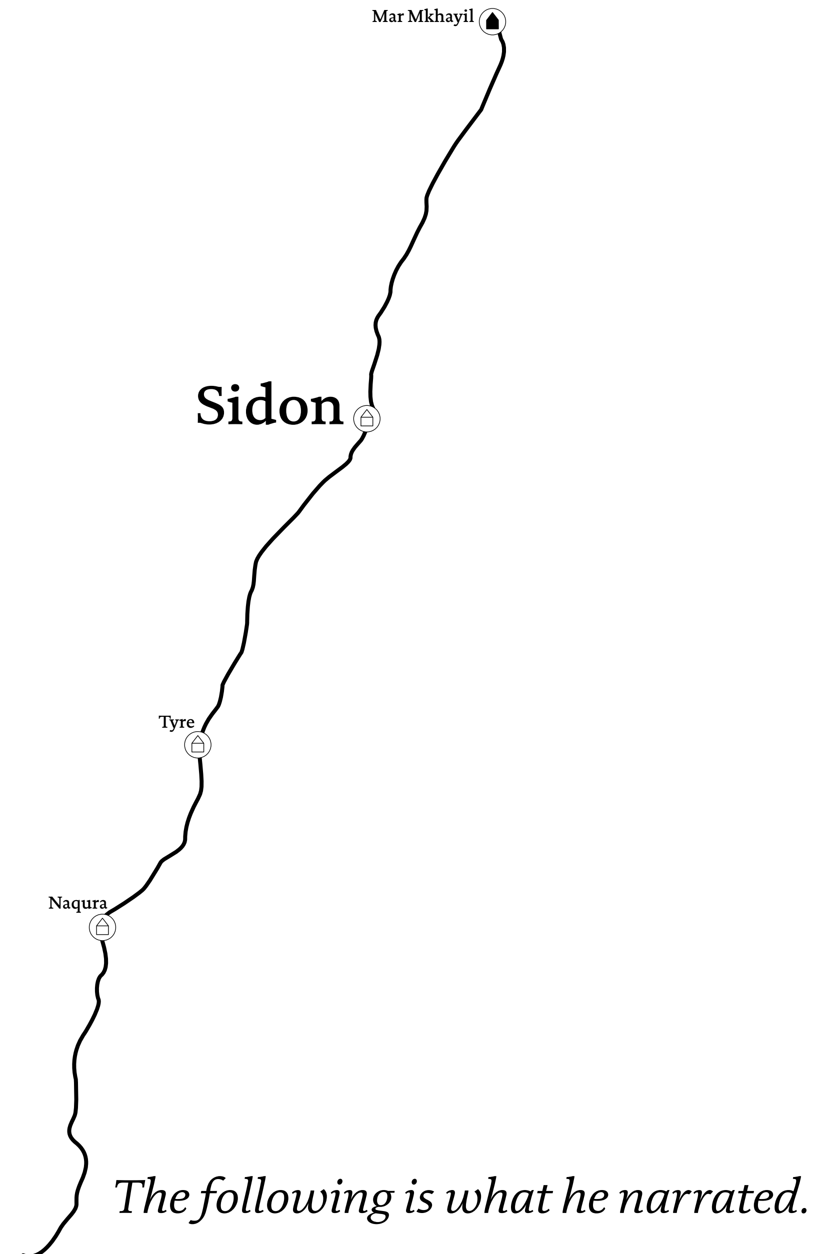
over the project. It used to be a Syrian company that was in charge. However, because of the current situation in Syria, the Lebanese government opened up another round of bids and awarded the project to a Chinese company. But, of course, the Chinese company can't do any work while there is a war in Syria.

A few years ago, for the one-hundred years anniversary of the Tripoli station, a big group of locals who call themselves Friends of the Tripoli Railway Station organized guided tours and other events in the station. They opened the station to the public for a couple of days, which was very nice as it's rarely open for public access. They called on the Lebanese government to do something about the station so it does not continue to degrade. They suggested that the station be transformed into a museum that will bring revenue to the local community but also that would ensure that the remaining wagons are properly taken care of. I don't think they want to turn the station into a museum because they gave up on us having a functioning train station. In fact, they proposed that the government build a new train station adjacent to the old one. It is a dream. Who knows, maybe next time you will come visit us by train! But if you wait for that day, you might come and find us dead. Anyway you are welcome here whenever you want. The café is open from 10 am to 11 pm every day. The owner is here even on holidays. I mean, it was not even closed during the war. So whenever you pass by Tripoli station, you will find us here.

؟ منطقة عسكرية ؟
ممنوع الوقوف

Previous page photo caption:
«Military Zone? Parking Not Allowed»

Before departing on my trip to Sidon, I stumbled upon a photography book that had a collection of fascinating pictures of the railway in Sidon during the 1950s. Pictures not of railway workers nor of train wagons, but of passersby, publics, and users of these spaces. They had captions like "Palestinian vendor on the railroad" or "A woman by the side of the train, 'Ayn al- Hilwe" or "Children from old Saida playing football".
The social practices that these photos captured weaved a narrative about the railway that is different from the one we are familiar with. These photos opened up new windows for understanding Sidon, its communities, and its railway. I decided to meet the photographer, an eighty-six-year-old man, in his studio.



The following is what he narrated.

My story with the railroad in Sayda started in 1947 on a train journey to Haifa, where I went to learn professional photography. I bought my first camera from Haifa. On the way back to Sayda, I did my first photo shoot: a newlywed couple that was with me on the train posed and asked me to take their picture. I became fascinated with taking pictures of people posing outdoors or in public spaces, as opposed to the photographer's studio. So I embarked on a new journey: photographing the people of Sayda during their promenades and on events.

Nabi Yehya was a particularly famous site for my photography. It is where John the Baptist is said to be buried. They say that parts of his remains were buried on the top of this hill. The pagans had cut him into pieces and his remains were buried in different places: in Sayda, in Damascus, and in Cairo. It is a sloped terrain that starts from the Nabi Yahya shrine, and extends down the hill until the Christian cemetery in Haret Sayda. The area has a cool climate because of its location up on the hill. Outside the gravesite was a big open space with seating all around. People from Sayda used to spend the day there, especially in the spring and on "New Sunday" (the celebration of the first Sunday after Easter). It is also the location where the Kurdish community would celebrate Nowruz (the first day of spring). Another important event was Bahr al-Eid. It is where the sea fair was held around the fishermen›s port during Adha and Fitr holidays. For children, Bahr al-Eid meant the swings by the seaside. I photographed so many people there. They would ask me to take their picture on the swings.

Apart from holidays and special events, I took photos of everyday life. I would go to Sukhur Aba Rouh (Iskandar Bay) at the southern coast of Sayda, extending from Dabagha to Ras al-Hara. It is named after the commemoration site of one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, Maqam Aba Rouh. People also call it Bahr or Hammam Badr. It encompasses two natural pools, one big and deep, the other small and shallow. They were used to learn swimming. It was the place where swimmers jumped off, and they loved me taking their pictures while jumping.

But my favorite was the path along the train tracks to the Ayn al-Hilwe refugee camp. The railroad and the wheat fields around them were popular places of promenade during the 1950s. Around the train track was a path starting from Amleh reaching Barghout River in Ayn al-Hilwe. People used to walk through the fields and gardens, which extended on both sides of the track. They used to sit directly on the ground, or on a piece of cloth or newspaper. The large area of land of the actual train station used to be another site for strolling, promenades, bike riding, and hanging out.

At the time (during the 1950s), the train used to pass through Sayda only twice a day. Before the 1948 nakba (Palestinian catastrophe), the train was more frequent. I think the train to Haifa started in 1942, but the journeys

to Palestine came to an end in 1948 when Zionists bombed the train station—as I recall, in the town of Naqura. After this incident, the train to the southern border was not revived and it was only used for the transport of fuel. Around the same time, ʻAyn al-Hilwe was established to house the thousands of refugees from northern Palestine. The camp was constructed on lands along the railroad, not far from the train station itself. I had friends in ʻAyn al-Hilwe, many of whom I had met in cafes in old Sayda. I used to visit them frequently, and used to walk the path of the railway to get to the camp. It was a beautiful path surrounded by stunning orchards.

I recall there was also another camp along the railroad, that of Roma communities. They would settle next to the railroad in makeshift houses as part of their yearly seasonal movements.

This neighborhood along the railroad became to be known as Sikke. These days it is difficult for me to move, and I cannot really visit ʻAyn al- Hilwe anymore. However, I know the neighborhood today is very populated and extends from ʻAyn al-Hilwe to the site of the old Sayda train station. It became so populated during the civil war, when war-displaced communities from other Palestinian camps came to settle in it. They were mostly originally from the village of Hula in northern Palestine, and had moved from the Nabatiyya refugee camp after it was bombed by Israeli planes or from Tal al-Zaʻtar refugee camp after its destruction by Lebanese militias. I hear that recently Sikke is also a home for Syrian migrant workers and Syrian refugees. In brief, poor people live in Sikke. The houses are made of recycled materials, tin roofs, plastic sheets, and car tires.

I also recall well what happened with the train station.

When Israel invaded us in 1982, they bombed the railroad in Zahrani. The railway stopped operating then, and the train station was left empty. Many of the war-displaced communities squatted on station land and built houses. In 2003, they were all evicted. Some people say the government evicted them to revive the railway. I don't know if that is true. The project never happened. Since then, the station has been a base for the Lebanese Army.

Many things changed in Sayda in the 1980s. Many parts of the railroad were turned into roads. But near where I live, the railroad track now runs between intimate neighborhoods, so children play on it. In some parts, the railroad track is full of trees, and some residents put planters and benches along it.

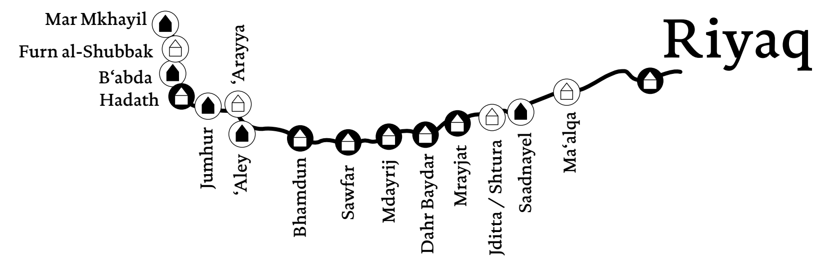
Not long ago, a group of young activists and social workers in Sayda contacted me. They are in the process of launching a campaign to reclaim the abandoned sections of the railroad tracks to re-use them as spaces of promenade, picnics, and strolling. They named their campaign "Promenade along the Railroad." I told them my story with the trains of Sayda. I guess I narrated it the same way I did to you just now. But it seems like no matter who I speak to, I always end up telling the story of Sayda rather than the story of the train.

ياسر
سليمان

محمد ماهر العطار

Previous page photo caption:
Names of Syrian soldiers, their towns of origin, and dates, carved on the walls of the train wagons in Riyaq train station.

Riyaq appeared to me like an abandoned town. In fact, it is partly abandoned: a derelict train station stretching over huge areas, empty French mandate buildings, and streets devoid of people. But the more I got to know it, and the more I discovered its streets and neighborhoods, I discovered a complex town, with a vibrant market, an agricultural economy, and a contested history. The role the town had temporarily acquired during the French mandate years as "the miniature of Paris in Lebanon" still resonates today in mainstream discourses about Riyaq. Therein, a glorious past is lamented, while other ways of life, cultures, economic functions, and narratives are rendered absent.



The following is what was narrated in four different encounters.

Riyaq

An encounter in a ninety-year old man's confiscated land now turned Lebanese Army military base

If you want to know about the history of Riyaq, you came to the right person. I never left this place. I am an old man, a former member of municipality, and can tell you a lot about Riyaq.

We work in agriculture. My family owns a lot of land in Riyaq, and we had workers in the fields. All the fields you see behind us belong to my family. We still have our old house made out of stone and mud. Let me show it to you. I have preserved it, even though none of us in the family lives in it anymore. I also still plant its garden with different crops: Apricots, almonds, and many fruits.

The town you know today as Riyaq used to be an agricultural village called Hawsh Hala. It was the old core. With the arrival of the French and the imposition of the mandate, they turned its name into Riyaq. The name is in reference to the rail, pronounced in French as "rayy."

My family was one of the large landowners in Riyaq. The town was made up of land owners; the workers in the fields were from nearby villages outside of Riyaq. The main feudal families were Maʿkarun, Abu Zayd, Khamis, and others, all of which are landlords originally from Riyaq. We have four churches in Riyaq, one for each Christian sect. And all Christian sects were represented in the municipal council. There were some Armenians in the town who were also represented by one municipal member. They had initially migrated to Riyaq via trains from Turkey during the Armenian genocide. I have a picture of Riyaq during the 1940s. It was full of tents that made up an Armenian refugee camp. Later on, the Armenians became a permanent part of Riyaq's social fabric and bought houses. Most of them left with the beginning of the civil war. But it wasn't only them. About half of the landowners in Riyaq interrupted their work and left the village.

Today, sadly, two thirds of Riyaq residents are not originally from here. They are from Baʿalbak, the south, Akkar, and so on. T hey come here as part of their military service in the Lebanese Army base. Sometimes, they rent houses and stay here. If you look at Ali Nahri, the nearby village, it used to be empty compared to Riyaq. Now it is much better than here. It is built up and developed. Most Christian families of Riyaq left. But in Ali Nahri, the Muslims did not leave during the war.

I was telling you about Riyaq's history. It used to be predominantly an agricultural village, mostly made up of mulberry plantations. The cultivation of Mulberry trees was common practice here since the 18th century, and it was mainly for silk production during the Ottoman Empire.

In 1891, a French company–by the name of Société des Chemins de fer Ottomans Economiques de Beyrouth/ Damas/Hauran–was granted a concession to build a railway line between Beirut and Damascus. The railway project was part of an Ottoman-European agreement

to turn Beirut into a commercial city for the transport of goods from Europe to the inlands of the Ottoman Empire. This is also why the port of Beirut got expanded and modernized in 1894.

Riyaq, a small village in the plains of the Beq'a Valley, was the site for the construction of the largest railway station in the Middle East, and the last major stop for the train before entering what we today know as Syria. Its location on the eastern edge of the plain before the mountain range between Syria and Lebanon was the main reason why Riyaq was chosen to host the first railway station in the Levant. In 1912, this railway was connected with the rest of the Arab world, Europe, and Africa. Can you imagine our train being the basic mean of transportation at that time? The railway became part of the intercontinental rail circuit that transported people and goods, as well as armed forces. Other than hosting a large railway station, Riyaq was known for having one of the biggest train factories in the region. During World War II, this factory was used as a military base in which military weapons were fixed. At that time, a group of engineers from both the train factory and Riyaq's military airbase were assigned to build airplanes for the French military.

Speaking of the airbase, World War I was an important turning point in Riyaq's history. German forces (allied with the Ottoman Empire) took possession of some of the railway lands and established the Riyaq military airbase. Their choice of Riyaq was linked to the presence of the railway station that was frequently used for military transport. The Entente Powers eventually bombed the German airbase and barracks in Riyaq.. After taking hold of the base, French forces enlarged the airbase by confiscating three square kilometers of land, estimated to be around one-third of Riyaq's total area. My family owned some of lands that were confiscated. In return, the French offered us a small amount of compensation, but we refused to accept it.

With the collapse of the mandate, the airbase lands were transferred from the French mandate authorities to the Lebanese state. They remain a Lebanese Army base until today. In the process, our land's have disappeared.

Riyaq
An encounter in a woman's house behind Cinema Rivoli

Are you a student? So many students come here to do research about Riyaq. And many newspaper articles have been written about it. You know, Riayq was not always like what you see today: barely any coffee shops or nightlife. It had a glorious past. During the French mandate, Riyaq was a miniature of Paris in Lebanon. During that phase, a service sector was booming to cater for the French army who were based here. The army officials rented houses in Riyaq. Three cinemas were built back then: Rivoli, Byblos, and Dunia. There were several bars as well, along with four or five restaurants. It was like Beirut. It was even better than Beirut.

Big landowners and feudal lords took care of this sector. My father opened the first cinema in Riyaq, the Rivoli.

You can still see it here, right next to our house on the main road. We are now in the neighborhood of Hawsh Hala, meaning it is the core of the town. We used to show Indian films, Hollywood films, and Egyptian cinema. We still have a beautiful collection of movie posters. I can show them to you. This one has the date on it: 1959. The poster is original, go ahead and touch the paper. The film is called North by Northwest. It is a Hitchcock film. We have many others. I have a dream to one day revive the cinema and frame all these posters and hang them at the entrance in the hall.

As I said, Riyaq was flourishing. At first, it did so with the railway. Much of the residents of Riyaq, Shtura, Zahle and Ali Nahri worked in the train station and its factory. Keep in mind that the French had an important role in the development of Riyaq. They built all of the 1920s buildings you see around you, and planned most of the major wide roads. They also initiated the Agricultural Research Institute, whose building still stands at the entrance of the town.

During the French mandate, the Riyaq airbase was considered to be the jewel of all French airbases, the center of attraction, and largest of all other military units—not only in Lebanon but also in Syria. I recall my father saying that the airbase was the French forces' main military base in the east, so the base had many entertainment facilities, gardens, and even central heating. At that time, these amenities were not found in any other military site in the region. He used to visit the military base, and French military officials were frequent visitors to our cinema as well as the local bars and restaurants.

It was after Lebanon got its independence that Riyaq started to deteriorate! We lost our main clientele. And Riyaq—a booming service town second to Zahle in the Beq‘a—became a marginal border town. Beirut stole its role.

The cinema, however, remained functioning. Even after the French mandate ended, the military airport (which was taken over by the Lebanese Army) played an important role in keeping Riyaq alive. Lebanese soldiers based in other areas would come to Riyaq on their off-duty days and spend money on clothes and food. For example, soldiers from the military base in Ablah were not permitted to go as far as Zahle. So they would come to Riyaq to spend time. In addition, during the 1960s, there was a Christian boarding school in Riyaq, and its students would come to town to shop.

When we opened our cinema, it was one of the earliest ones in the Beq‘a region. People would come from different regions of the Beq‘a to watch films here. This service sector was comletely interrupted with the start of the civil war in 1975, and with the termination of the Beirut-Damascus railway in 1976. After that point, the Syrian army occupied the train station and made our lives miserable. They occupied houses, and they turned the Riyaq train station into their biggest intelligence base in Lebanon. Can you imagine that? I don't really want to talk about this now.

We closed down our cinema in 1980. Now it is being used as a gymnasium.

An encounter in Hayy al-Jami‘

I was born just here, in Hayy al-Jami‘, in 1958. This neighborhood is the origin of the Muslim community of Riyaq.

Before moving here, my family (along with most Muslims in Riyaq) used to live in Heshmesh, a nearby village located in the mountain range that separates Lebanon from Syria. Other families were in the village of Junta, located near Nabi Chit. My family worked in Heshmesh on the land of a bishop feudal lord who owned four thousand dunams of land (one dunam equals one thousand square meters). Life was harsh there in the mountains, as I recall my father telling me. There was little water, houses were made of mud, and mobility was difficult due to the rocky mountain. So my family and many others left the mountains, came to Riyaq after Lebanon’s independence, and worked in agricultural fields here. My uncle, however, worked in the train station.

My father was eleven years old when he arrived to Riyaq. He first worked in agricultural fields as a sharecropper or tenant farmer. That is when he met my mother, whose family had also moved here from Junta and subsequently worked in the fields. After some time, my father started working in gathering wood from areas further away and selling them in Riyaq. There was little wood here in the region, and Riyaqwas becoming a hub. All the residents of Ru‘ayd and Nabi Chit used to come to Riyaq to shop. During this time, my family lived in a rented wooden shack. I recall the shack very well from my childhood years. By the late 1960s, my father bought a small plot of land of five hundred square meters in Riyaq. They never owned land before then. Ninety-nine percent of land in Riyaqwas owned by Christian families.

By the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the sixties, Hayy al-Jami‘ was starting to develop. The first mosque in Riyaq was built then. Money was collected from all the Muslim residents to build it. I remember my mother’s father being one of the people who initiated this project. He collected the money and took care of building it. It is a small mosque. Prior to it, the Muslims of Riyaq would go pray in the mosque of the nearby village Ali Nahri. Now there is another, more recent, mosque in Riyaq. It is bigger, located in the area of Riyaq al-Fawqa, closer to Ali Nahri village.

Beginning in the 1950s, more families were able to gather money and started buying small plots of land in and around Hayy al-Jami‘. My father then travelled to Kuwait, made more money, and came back to build our house in Riyaq. After years, when I got married, I built an extension to the house. I am still living in it since then. A similar process was happening with other families. The neighborhood grew, and a main commercial street developed.

Look around you and you will see how vibrant the town is. Shops, food stores, and restaurants. Especially on

Sundays, when the Christian part of town is closed, the street here becomes extremely busy. All the residents of Riyaq come to buy food from here. We make no difference between Christians and Muslims. Although, to tell you the truth, there used to be discrimination against us. Before the civil war, there was no single municipal member that was not a Christian. Today things are different. We are all represented in the municipality. And no one hangs any party flags so as not to create tension. This part of town even serves residents of the nearby villages who come here to shop. Riyaq is really a connecting point between Firzul, Zahle, Shtura and Ba‘albak. It was more so before the current events in Syria started. Trips to Syria were easier for us than was going to Beirut. We used to go get goods from there to sell them here. But that is not the case anymore. Now Riyaq is very sensitive. Being the closest town to Anjar and Sa‘danayi, it has become a demarcation line.

Apart from Hayy al-Jami‘, other neighborhoods also emerged as of the 1970s. These include Hayy al-Sa‘adi and Hayy al-Sullum. All of these were developed on agricultural lands. The agricultural fields were like a carpet stretching between the old town of Riyaq and the mountain range separating us from Syria. The urbanization started from these fields. Nevertheless, there are many agricultural fields that remain. A large number of Syrian refugees are now working in them. Landlords (both Muslim and Christian) agreed with them to set up tents on their lands in return for their work, along with daily wages. If you think about it, they are doing now what we did more than sixty years ago.

One of the landowners arranged a different setup. He had an agricultural field that he was not cultivating. So he decided to rent it out to Syrians on a weekly basis to hold a Sunday market. It is not far from here, off the main commercial street. Syrians, and now also Lebanese, can rent a location on the land to put a kiosk and sell their products, whether fruits, vegetables, other goods, or second-hand clothes. It is a great project. It is bringing a lot of commerce to the area from different villages; even from as far as Ba‘albak.

There is a Syrian refugee camp on the agricultural fields behind the train station. You can see it as soon as you enter Riyaq. You'll notice blue plastic sheets covering wooden shacks. This is the refugee camp. Sometimes when I am passing near the station, I notice children from the camp entering the station grounds and running around playing in the empty train wagons.

Riyaq
An encounter in the train station

My name is Tony and I was born in 1920, the year when the State of Greater Lebanon was established. I am from Housh al-Umara in Beq‘a. Our neighbor Hanna was one of the first people in the area to work in the train station that was built in Riyaq in 1896. He was an expert in fixing trains and railroads. He always talked about trains with excitement, and that was when my passion for trains firs began.

When I was twenty years old, I started working in the Ksara monastery with the French Jesuits for a couple of years. But I always wanted to work in the train station, especially that working in the station was one of the best jobs a man in the Beqʿa could have. In order to be able to propose marriage to a girl in Beqʿa, families thought that a man should either own land or be a railway employee. There was a young beautiful girl in my village that I really liked. So I really wanted to get employed at Riyaq train station. I asked my French manager in the Ksara monastery to help me get a job there, knowing that the French at the time were very influential in Riyaq. The employment in the station was known for its organized system: discipline, good salaries, and a solid reputation. So working in trains was a dream.

On Wednesday the 5 February 1942, I took the job in Riyaq train station. There, I met Nicola Daher, who was the chief bureau, Monsieur Darras a French chief atelier, and his assistant, Flori. They asked me, "What would you like to do in the train station?" I said, "I would love to learn everything about this machine [the train]."

The workshop had many departments. There were carpenters, blacksmiths, painters, and plumbers. There was even a department for fixing the water tanks and water heaters. They started teaching me, along with other new employee, to do all sort of things. I was most talented at mechanics. So I was assigned to work in the mechanics department. I worked with two men: Abu Aziz and Jadra Maʿkaroun. The space for fixing trains in the atelier was spacious. I remember how astonished I was when I discovered that there is a machine that could lift up the eighty ton train, so we could get under it and fix it. The train that used to go to Beirut was sixty tons, and the one that travelled to Aleppo weighed eighty tons. They brought these trains from Hijaz after guerillas attached the train line, which the Ottomans built to strengthen their control over the holy Muslim cities, during the Arab Revolt, led by T.E Laurence. We fixed these trains in the workshop and used them on the line going to Aleppo. We would sometimes get sent to Tripoli in order to fix the trains there. We would sleep in other stations when we were traveling. In every station there was a room for traveling employees with beds and toilets.

I met a lot of people while working in the railway. We were six hundred employees in the workshop, and a total of seven thousand employees working between the Riyaq station, the Baʿalbak station, the Dahr al-Bayd station, and other small stations in Beqʿa area. There were workers from the diverse areas in Beqʿa: Ali al-Nahri, Riyaq, Baʿalbak, Terbol, Zahle, and so on.

We never differentiated between a Muslim and a Christian, even though sometimes the French chiefs would try to discriminate against Muslim workers. We always refused this. Once, we protested in the station because a French employee was offending a worker just because he was a Muslim. Railway employees in Lebanon tend to be like this. We enjoyed working together and were passionate about our work.

In the beginning of the 1970s, the Lebanese government decided to stop the railway system, but we refused. The railway employees from all the stations protested together. The railway was our way of living, even though it was declining. In fact, all it needed was renovation.

During the period between 1942 and 1975, while I was

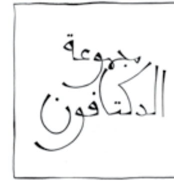
working at Riyaq station, I got married to my dream girl and I raised six children. I was able to give them the best education from my monthly income. I also had many friends and acquaintances. The station gave us the feeling that we were progressive, and we were developing a very important sector, not only in our city but also in the entire country. However, soon after, things changed dramatically.

One day during the 1970s, I heard that a passengers' plane landed at the Riyaq airport, and heard that Henry Kissinger came for a special visit to Riyaq. I don't know what he did here exactly, but I know very well that after he left, Riyaq and Lebanon were never the same. The war broke out and our work stopped. The Syrian army entered Lebanon and took over the Riyaq station, transforming it into their military and intelligence base. They controlled our lives. We tried to revive the station and the railways several times. But instead, that station and my workspace transformed into a torture space. The Syrian soldiers carved their names on these wagons with pride. If you go to the Riyaq station now, you can see their names on the wagons with the dates of the carving. They withdrew from Lebanon in 2005 and left the station. But they didn't leave peacefully. They stole some of the station property. They even set fire to the station's archive the day they were leaving. However, their withdrawal from Riyaq was the best news I had heard in years. Now the station is abandoned and the state is not interested in doing anything about it or reviving the railway.

▼ **Abandoned train station**
Riyaq, Beqaa, East Lebanon
2012

Riyaq Military
Airport
Railway
Station
‘Hawsh ‘Hala
Hay al-Jami‘

This booklet and the accompanying DVD are a continuation of the lecture performance by Dictaphone Group *Nothing To Declare*, researched and performed by Abir Saksouk, Tania El Khoury, and Petra Serhal.



Dictaphone Group is a research and performance collective that creates live art performances based on the mutli-disciplinary study of space.

www.dictaphonegroup.com

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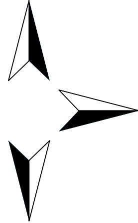

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