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Abstract:

*On the meaning of the public in a propertied landscape. Space matters and state representations. The case of Lebanon.*

Public space in Lebanon is often described as absent, privatised, or securitised, with analyses attributing these issues to neoliberalism, state weakness, and the civil war's legacy. I argue that beyond these macrostructural dynamics, public domain challenges in Lebanon are rooted in the country's land governance history, since the Ottoman code in 1858 (with categories of miri, mawat, and matrouk still in use) and its evolution under French and Lebanese law. Public lands have historically been shaped by privatisation processes tied to power and loyalty structures, from Ottoman tax farming to modern 'zaim' patronage networks. Adopting a multidisciplinary methodology, I combine legal research, archival analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork. Focusing on the rural district of Akkar and the urban context of Tripoli, I trace how public land categories are legally defined, geographically contested, and socially practiced. Findings show that tensions in public space governance stem from historical transformations, legal interpretations, and sociopolitical hierarchies. By tracing these land transformations, I redefine public space in Lebanon as a constellation of "multiple publics" with different logics rather than one failed domain.