**Return to the Valley of Jews**From her crumbling fourth floor apartment, Lisa Nahmoud gazes at the opulent palace of her new neighbour, Lebanon's billionaire Prime Minister, Saad al-Hariri. The multi-level complex with beige granite facades and Ottoman style arcades lies only meters from Lisa's shrapnel pierced building.  "Doesn't he ever see me," she wonders, before lighting another cigarette. It is late August, and smoking seems to be the only relief from the sweltering heat of her bombed-out flat. Lisa is alone in her building - all the other apartments have been crudely sealed with cement and breeze blocks. And except for the Hariri mansion, ringed by multiple layers of heavily armed security agents, she is also alone in her neighborhood, once known as the Valley of Jews.  What had been a dense cluster of red roofed homes has been almost entirely bulldozed. In its place, under a collection of construction cranes, a new district is steadily rising - one of luxury towers and gated condominiums. As Hariri, the first high profile resident moves in, Lisa, the last surviving link to Jewish Beirut, has been asked to leave.   
   
**Jewish life in an Arab capital**  
It is hard to imagine today, but the valley was once a vibrant centre of Jewish life in the heart of an Arab capital. Half way across the world in New York, Lisa's old neighbors - who fled decades ago - still rave about the good life in Beirut. They produce old photo albums with black and white pictures of lavish weddings attended by Muslim and Christian dignitaries at Beirut's main synagogue; they reminisce about family picnics in the mountains and long summers at the beach.      Now, for the first time since the end of the Lebanon's civil war, many Lebanese Jews are planning to revisit their homeland. They are encouraged by the ongoing renovation of Beirut's largest and only surviving synagogue - Magen Abraham. Even Hezbollah has blessed the move. "The Jews have always lived among us," a spokesman for the party told Bloomberg News when asked about the renovation of the synagogue.   
Yet last summer, moments after I descended Lisa's stairwell for the last time, I was stopped by machine gun toting Lebanese security agents after taking a photograph of two gutted buildings on her street. The officers radioed in back up and a plain-clothes agent zipped up on a small scooter.   
A week before, I had been escorted, arm in hand, to a nearby police station after taking the same photograph. The chief officer erased my digital photographs, ordered a background check on my name and then served me a bottle of orange juice with a wry smile. When I insisted on continuing my research in the area, he advised me to obtain a permit. Although city officials discouraged me from applying, my request was approved, and many bureaucratic circles later, I was granted an all-access document bearing the Beirut governor's signature. But all this meant nothing to the plain clothes agent on his scooter. He ordered me to leave the area and not return. "There is a new decision today," he said with a sneer. "We don't want this kind of thing here."  Hariri's men may have reason to be paranoid. His father, also a prime minister, was the most powerful Lebanese politician in the 1990s when he established a post-war reconstruction effort in shell-ravaged Beirut. Yet he was assassinated in broad daylight, smack in the section of the city he rebuilt. Perhaps understandably, his son is taking few risks. But security concerns aside, the decision to demolish the Valley of Jews, one made by his father's redevelopment corporation, may be more difficult to reconcile. The synagogue, Lisa's building and a few decaying others are all that remain of the once densely populated neighborhood, known officially in Arabic as Wadi Abu Jameel.    
   
**Memories of the old neighborhood**  
The Wadi's few remaining streets may now be deserted, but the social buzz that once flowed through them was still alive at a recent banquet held by the Lebanese Jewish community in Brooklyn. Eyes lit up when asked about the old neighborhood and the renovation of the synagogue.   "We are very happy that it is being reconstructed," explains Albert Khaski, amid the din of cutlery and conversation, much of it in Lebanese Arabic. "All the people here got married in that synagogue," he says, looking around the packed hall. Khaski, who is the president of the Har Lebanon Synagogue in Brooklyn, estimates that up to 3,000 Lebanese Jews live in New York. They also fled to Canada, South America and Europe like tens of thousands of their compatriots at the start of the civil war. But unlike the Muslims and Christians who returned in droves at the war's end, Lebanese Jews, for the most part, never went home. Khaski planned to set up a medical practice in Beirut after completing his training in the US, "but the civil war changed the whole program," he says. Four decades later, he and many others are finally planning trips back, waxing lyrically - as the Lebanese love to do - about the mountains and the sea, the Cedars, the food, the cafes and restaurants. "I don't know what I want to do first," says an exuberant Charles El Maan, who left Beirut in 1967. "I want to be everywhere - in the mountains, in the North, the South, the Cedars," he says, mixing Arabic and English.    
   
**The Solidere vision**  
But the Wadi Albert and Charles grew up in is now hollowed by vast barren expanses, asphalted parking lots and bustling construction sites: posted on their perimeter walls are artists' impressions of sleek condominium complexes with staggered rooftops and hanging gardens.   Amid the plumes of dust and creaking heavy machinery, renovation of the main synagogue continues. Now, several months after our initial meeting, Lisa ponders an uncertain future as the building she spent most of her life in has been slated for demolition. The work is being carried out by Solidere, the multi-billion dollar private real estate corporation founded by the senior Hariri.  Solidere approached the Beirut reconstruction project through a controversial scheme where original landowners were forced, in large part, to give up their property deeds in exchange for shares in the publicly traded company. It transformed the old downtown area into a cafe and shopping district, selling off properties at rates several times higher than neighboring areas -   
Solidere argues that its strategy was the best for repairing downtown Beirut when it lie riddled with munitions and abandoned to squatters at the war's end. But critics say Solidere has removed the city's key asset: its original inhabitants. Restoring the area's social fabric, which once included a mixture of religious groups and social classes, should have been a key principle of the reconstruction process, its detractors say.  The argument seems particularly relevant to the city's Jewish population - for while Beirut still contains many Muslim and Christian neighborhoods, the now eviscerated Wadi was the only Jewish one.   
But for Solidere, the Wadi has now become a clean slate and the corporation envisions the area as its premiere residential sector. "It's not for me anymore," says Sabah Dakroub. As one of the few Shia Muslims to have lived in the Jewish neighborhood, Sabah is eager to share fond memories of helping her Jewish neighbors on the Sabbath, by going house to house turning on lights and stoves. "I feel frustrated when I pass by there now," she says. Solidere private security stand guard on every block, around construction sites or even vacant lots, offering stern looks at passersby who loiter or glance in their direction.    
   
**'First Jews, then Christians, then Muslims'**  
Lisa has now vacated her childhood apartment, but still returns to the Wadi every couple of days to feed the alley cats. She paces her old street and visits its last surviving shopkeeper - Abed, a Sunni Muslim. In the Wadi's heyday, Abed's father ran a bakery that catered to the Jewish community's specialized bread needs during religious holidays. Now all that is left of the family business is a crowded one room grocery. "Jews lived like any other Lebanese citizens," he says from behind the vintage store counter, where he listens to French music on an old radio. "They have all their rights," he continues. "Of course they are not like the Jews in Israel." Most Lebanese Jews resettled overseas, but a minority did indeed immigrate to the neighboring Jewish state. Lisa and other remaining Lebanese Jews say they rejected citizenship in Israel. "Yasser Arafat, God rest his soul, was good to us," Lisa says, referring to the late Palestinian leader.   
During the 1970s, Arafat's Fatah established a presence in the Wadi, having clashed with rightist Christian groups in the adjacent hotel district. Jews began fleeing the area to avoid being caught in the crossfire, and as they left, Shia refugees fleeing battles near the Israeli border began to settle in their place.  Lisa says Fatah opened an office facing her building, and recalls one of its lieutenants - a handsome man who used to look up at her on the balcony from the street below. He was in charge of food parcel distribution to Wadi residents when a Shia girl urged him to give food to the Muslims first, then the Christians and lastly to the remaining Jews. Lisa recalls his answer with a smile: "He told her, 'we will give first to the Jews, then the Christians, then the Muslims'."   The Israelis eventually ousted Fatah from Beirut in the early 1980s. During this time, Israeli shells fell on Magen Abraham, forcing families taking refuge there to flee. The structure remained intact, but sharing the fate of so many historical buildings during the chaos of the 1980s, it was gutted and, after years of abandon, overtaken by a giant growth of dense vegetation. Until last year, the rusted outer gate was fastened with a decaying padlock and chain.  
    
**'More than a country'**  
Back in New York, old Wadi residents are eagerly following the restoration of Magen Abraham on the internet, where they have been reunited with Lebanese Jews from around the world through the social networking site Facebook. On a page devoted to the rebuilding of the synagogue, pictures have been posted showing the clearing of the brush, the building of a new red tile roof and a first coat of white paint applied to the yellowed exterior walls. So far, the work is being paid for by private donations - rumored to be from prominent Lebanese Jewish banking families - and $150,000 from Solidere - a grant which it has extended to all religious organizations restoring sites in central Beirut. But funding has fallen short of the total rebuilding cost, which is estimated at $1mn according the Jewish Community Council, an organization created under Ottoman rule in the early 1900s. The long dormant council, which once represented up to 15,000 Lebanese Jews, is now soliciting donations on the Facebook page and through its new website, peppered with optimistic statements calling for the rebirth of the community. Among these is a quote from the late Pope John Paul II: "Lebanon is more than a country, it is a message of religious tolerance and coexistence." But in a recent television interview, the council head, Isaac Arazi, refused to show his face on camera, fearing that his business would suffer if clients knew they had been dealing with a Jew. After our first meeting Lisa too displayed a great deal of hesitancy, asking that I not inform neighborhood police that I had visited her. She folded my legal pad and wrapped it in a newspaper as a precaution when I last left her apartment. Indeed many of the estimated 200 Jews remaining in Lebanon keep a low profile.   
"Others were treated worse than me," says 70-year-old Sireena Nassim Lawi who was forced out of her home in the Wadi at gunpoint in the 1980s. She now lives in a run-down flat in the mountains above Beirut - like Lisa's it has little furniture and no signs of her Jewish faith. Sireena also says she was never compensated for the property she abandoned, located only blocks from Magen Abraham. But even during the worst years, Sireena remained attached to her country of birth. She turned down Israeli soldiers who pleaded to take her back to Israel with them at the end of their occupation tour in Beirut. "They offered to take me and all my stuff. I said no, what do I have to do with them? My friends are here, my life is here." Like the Lebanese Jews of New York, she reminisces about the old days, wistfully describing the commotion of summer when thousands of Lebanese Jews packed the mountain roads heading up to the resorts and casinos. But Sireena has no illusions about a return to that life and is even skeptical about rebuilding the synagogue."They want to fix it, but who are they going to fix it for? No one is coming to pray."   
Many in New York disagree. Early plans to make Magen Abraham a museum have been shelved. Charles El Maan is confident that the synagogue will become a fully functioning place of worship. But while he and others are brimming with excitement at the chance to visit, long-term repatriation seems a remote possibility.   
"To stay over there? I don't know," Charles laughs. Others say they are waiting for peace and would only consider repatriating if the state of war with Israel was lifted.    
Abed the shopkeeper says a trickle of old Jewish residents have come back in recent years, if only for hurried day trips. Some own shares in Solidere and Abed insists that many of the new developments have significant Jewish funding. "This area is still theirs," he says. Still many working class families, like the El Maans, rented but never owned property and thus have no physical stake in Lebanon to return to.  Two years ago, a block of red roofed Ottoman-era apartment houses adjacent to the synagogue was torn down. When I showed Charles a photograph of these buildings I took two years ago - just before their demolition - his eyebrows shot up: "That's my house! Right there! Unbelievable," he says, a dimple-pocked smile on his face. It wanes only momentarily when I show him the next set of pictures where steam shovels reduce the homes to rubble. Far from angry, he seems impressed by the pictures of glass and steel high-rises. "It's a big change - I didn't see it physically, but I think it's very nice - very modern," he says. "Everyone is saying Beirut is even nicer than Switzerland and Paris and London altogether. And better than New York too," he says. "Unfortunately the house is not there but that's okay. We are very happy for the synagogue."