

## Can Lebanon Be Rescued From The Sectarian Brink?

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Welders attempting to fix a broken gate in Beirut's port may have inadvertently triggered a political revolution. A spark from their work might have started the fire which triggered last week's disastrous blast. Which threatens to destroy Lebanon's political system.

The apparent explosion of ammonium nitrate carelessly stored in downtown Beirut reflected negligence on a grand, unimaginable scale. In a blast that wreaked havoc up to five miles away, more than 160 people were killed, hundreds remain missing, thousands were wounded, many seriously. Some 300,000 are homeless. Thousands of buildings—businesses, churches, hospitals, office buildings, apartments, restaurants, and other normal features of urban life—were wrecked. Reconstruction, estimated to cost as much as \$15 billion, more than a quarter of last year's GDP, is well beyond the government's capability.

The authorities' first act after the explosion was to assign scapegoats, arresting port officials. Yet the president and prime minister apparently were warned about the danger only last month. Rather than acknowledge fault, President Michel Aoun blamed unnamed "foreign powers." Prime Minister Hassan Diab called for new elections and resigned, also criticizing others: "I set out to combat corruption, but I discovered that corruption is bigger than the state."

However, the Beirut street did not hesitate to affix responsibility. "Today we mourn, tomorrow we clean, the day after tomorrow, we hang them," was one of many revolutionary slogans that circulated Beirut in the aftermath. Over the weekend, protestors took over three government ministries and erected mock gallows from which they hung effigies of leading political figures.

Foreign Minister Nassif Hitti resigned the day before the explosion, complaining that "Lebanon today is sliding toward becoming a failed state." It could take weeks or months to install a replacement cabinet; parliament might not agree to new elections, which wouldn't necessarily change the political balance anyway. With a discredited, directionless caretaker government confronting a genuine national crisis, collapse, chaos, and even civil war suddenly seem possible.

Like so much of the Middle East, Lebanon emerged from Allied line-drawing after World War I. It once was known as the Switzerland of the Middle East while the capital of Beirut was called the Paris of the Middle East. Tragically, the country slid into bitter civil war in 1975.

An internationally brokered agreement and Syrian military intervention finally ended the conflict in 1990. The result was a confessional government designed to satisfy factions, not citizens,

apportioning positions based on religion. Immense graft followed. The World Bank figured that sectarian looting cost nine percent of Lebanon's GDP.

Until recently the country staggered along, barely. After the civil war Damascus dominated Lebanese affairs. Two-time Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri, who led the first post-civil war government, was assassinated in 2005, triggering massive demonstrations and the so-called Cedar Revolution, followed by the departure of Syrian troops. However, Lebanon's sectarian misgovernance, wasteful patronage mindset, and tolerance of Hezbollah's malign influence remained largely unaffected. Then Hezbollah and Israel went to war. And Syria dissolved in conflict.

Although Beirut was rebuilt, the stench of failure is everywhere—literally. When I visited in 2015 trash was piled on city streets and on the side of roads exiting the city. The famous Druze leader Walid Jumblatt told me: "Lebanon is crumbling under the garbage."

There were public protests even during my time in Lebanon, driven by the young. Corruption was rife. The economic system was rigged, designed to empower and profit the well-connected. Religious quotas benefited established elites, such as Hezbollah and the Maronite hierarchy. Yet the factions proved unable to cooperate even to sustain their rule.

The parliament elected in 2009 divided on election law reform and ultimately postponed the next poll from June 2013 to May 2018. President Michel Suleiman's term expired in May 2014, but the parliament took more than 30 votes before finally agreeing on his successor in October 2016. During the interregnum there was no head of state to whom the government was accountable. The two contenders were both former Maronite "Christian" warlords from the civil war, backed by different Muslim parties. Aoun finally won. The result: a government that was always incoherent, usually ineffective, and recently illegitimate.

Syria's convulsive conflict threatened to pull Lebanon into the abyss—Hezbollah, which operates as a state within the state and exercises disproportionate influence over the government, intervened on behalf of the Assad government while some 1.5 million refugees flooded over the border. Political leaders and cabinet members differed sharply, and predictably, over the proper role of Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, and the U.S. As divisions grew, the International Crisis Group warned: "today's dynamics bear an uncanny similarity to those that preceded the civil war."

Political protests ramped up last October, resulting in the proverbial rearrangement of deck chairs on the Titanic, as established factions attempted to preserve their influence while sacrificing existing cabinet members. Predictably, no serious reforms followed. There also was fear of a new Israel-Hezbollah conflict as tensions rose—spiking a couple weeks ago after a border clash.

Although popular anger forced out the previous government, its replacement performed no better. The confessional political system encouraged corrupt, rapacious deadlock. The Trump administration's assault on the Syrian economy devastated neighboring Lebanon, dragging down the currency—which crashed 60 percent in value in June alone—hollowing out banks and ravaging the middle class. The COVID-19 pandemic dried up foreign remittances.

In a recent report for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, economist Jay Rickards warned: "Lebanon today is broke. The entire country has been picked clean by terrorists, criminals, elites, and the political class." Basic services are kaput: Trash continues to pile up,

electricity is intermittent, water is in short supply. Prices have nearly doubled since October; food costs are up two and a half times. Unemployment is estimated at 30 to 40 percent and the poverty rate is an astonishing 50 percent, with as much as 75 percent of the population in need of assistance. Economists figure that Lebanon's economy could shrink by a quarter this year.

In June the International Crisis Group warned: "The economic crisis is without precedent in the country's history. Highly import-dependent, Lebanon has run out of foreign currency to pay for what it consumes, while the state is printing money to pay salaries and is unable to service the public debt. Banks have imposed tight capital controls, which have staved off financial collapse until now, but only by bringing much of the economy to a standstill, manifested in soaring unemployment." The cost of stabilizing the country's financial system could run \$100 billion or more.

Yet recent negotiations with the International Monetary Fund went nowhere. Noted Jon Alterman of the Center for International and Strategic Studies: "Two negotiators with the International Monetary Fund stepped down, and the foreign minister quit in disgust [last] week. All cited a governmental unwillingness to make reforms." Which came as no surprise. In 2018 the Gulf countries pledged billions in aid if reforms were adopted. None were.

The government already has defaulted on billions of dollars in Eurobonds. Now buffeted by a "perfect storm" of crises, Lebanon risks implosion. Even before last week's disaster ICG feared that "Crunch time may come when the state, strapped for cash as tax revenue collapses, cannot meet the public-sector payroll or when hyperinflation wipes out the real value of people's incomes. State institutions, including the police, may start to disintegrate, and what have been mainly peaceful protests could turn violent."

It is easy to inveigh against corruption and incompetence. Such characterize much of the Middle East. And there is no international panacea to magically deliver Swiss efficiency, German order, or Scandinavian rectitude to Lebanon. Especially since the country's most fundamental political problem is sectarianism.

The Lebanese people deserve a normal political system in which leaders are accountable to voters more than factions. When I visited five years ago, journalist Nadine BaBarem told me the "entire rejuvenation of the system is needed." But fundamental reform then looked implausible. Although religious belief and identification were falling, institutional resistance to dramatic change remained strong. However, perhaps transformation or elimination of confessional government finally is possible.

Equally important, Hezbollah's excessive influence and irresponsible adventurism must be curbed. While Israel's brutal invasion nearly four decades ago scarred Lebanon, today Hezbollah is Lebanon's most malign and destabilizing actor. Another war between the Iran-backed group and Israel would be catastrophic.

Some Lebanese look outside their own country for answers. When I visited some Lebanese wondered wistfully about the possibility of the U.S. sorting out their problems. No one expects that today.

Instead, after the port explosion thousands of desperate Lebanese signed an online petition urging France to take their country back: "We believe Lebanon should go back under the French mandate in order to establish a clean and durable governance." When French President

Emmanuel Macron visited Beirut last week he said that he planned to draft a reform program for Lebanon and would “be back September 1.” He apparently imagines a national unity government of sorts, which would not go nearly far enough.

More important, only the Lebanese can successfully remake their own system. Today there is almost universal loathing for Lebanon’s politicians. Protestors need to turn their anger into political action and force transformational reform. Such may be Lebanon’s only hope.

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