

Lebanon: Collapse!

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Global TechnoPolitics Forum

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FOREWORD

Lebanon, which before its civil war stood as a symbol of what might go right in the Middle East, now stands as testimony to what can go wrong. It began to unravel in 2019, after protests against a small government tax spread across the country. Its credit rating was downgraded to junk bond status, and unemployment among young people reached 30 percent. A massive explosion at the Port of Beirut in August 2020, which killed more than 200 and wounded 6,000 more, only deepened the shortages of food, water, and electricity.

This Forum white paper lays out Lebanon's collapse and what led up to it. The country is small, about several million, but critical beyond its size: it is in the cockpit of Middle Eastern politics, and hosts as many as two million Syrian and Palestinian refugees. This geopolitical position means that foreign aid is easily available to assist the country. But, as the white paper shows, aid is often wasted due to corruption, coupled with a lack of both transparency and efficiency in the governing of the assistance, leaving the international institutions frustrated and the Lebanese population hopeless. Yet none of this is unique to Lebanon, for many developing countries suffer from the same problems.

Accordingly, this report discusses the need for a new option for disbursing aid and the problems in practice. An innovative model by the World Bank, United Nations, and European Union seeks to solve this conundrum by involving and empowering civil society in the governance of foreign aid. The idea is that circumventing authorities will overcome corruption and would deliver trust. While some improvements have been observed, there also have been serious questions about transparency, efficiency, and even the independence of civil society organizations involved.



Utilizing technology for common good is an important part of the Forum's mission. It champions fresh insights not just about innovative ways to govern foreign aid, but also what role technology might play in that process. Blockchain technology enables transparency and trust, this makes it a perfect candidate for providing foreign aid around the clutches of corrupt governments. Lebanon's young, educated, and web-savvy population makes it an ideal setting to test innovative technology-enabled ideas, and that is the Forum's task for part two of this paper.

The Global Techno Politics Forum is an innovative new organization that strives to shape the public debate and facilitate global coordination at the intersection of technology and geopolitics. The Forum is independent and nonpartisan, and the analyses and suggestions in this paper are the authors' alone. Yet, the Forum's work is very much that of the team, and we salute the entire team for this effort.

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Chairman

President

Senior Director of Programs & Studies

ACRONYMS

ABL	Association of Banks in Lebanon
BdL	Banque du Liban
BSE	Beirut Stock Exchange
CEDRE	Conference for Economic Development and Reform Through Enterprise
CSKC	Civil Society Knowledge Center
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSI	Civil Society Incubator
DM	Daleel Madani
EU	European Union
FM	Future Movement (Political Party – Sunni - Saad Hariri)
FPM	Free Patriotic Movement (Political Party – Christian – Michel Aoun)
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISF	Internal Security Forces
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
LCRP	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
LF	Lebanese Forces (Political Party – Christian – Samir Geagea)
LP	Lebanese Pound
LS	Lebanon Support
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
SOLIDERE	Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction de Beyrouth
URDA	Union of Relief and Development Associations
WB	World Bank
3RF	Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework

INTRODUCTION

LEBANON –Economic Collapse & Social Unrest

The year 2019 saw the state of Lebanon unravel. Demonstrations first formed in the streets of Beirut to protest a small government-imposed tax, but then quickly spread across the country. Reflecting deep grievances in Lebanese society, citizens rose up to demand justice and an end to the sectarian system which has ceased to deliver the basics. This paper is an historical background to the recent events and a systemic overview of the causes of Lebanon’s economic collapse and social unrest.

The Lebanese government was already deep in economic woes with a ballooning public debt of over 170 percent to GDP ratio¹, the third highest in the world after Japan and Greece. The shrinking global economy which disrupted capital inflow in 2019, coupled with the slowdown of tourism and funding from the Gulf Region due to the fall in oil prices and sanctions on Hezbollah, ramped up Lebanon’s economic challenges.

By September 2019 credit agencies had downgraded Lebanon from B- to CCC – what is commonly known as a “junk” rating.² Soon banks imposed restrictions and people were largely unable to withdraw US dollars from ATMs. These economic woes were also manifest in over 30 percent youth unemployment.

Against this backdrop, on October 17, 2019 the government introduced a six-dollar monthly tax on WhatsApp to shore up revenues. Shortly after the announcement, hundreds of thousands poured into the streets protesting sectarianism, corruption,

¹ <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/265421603047361021/pdf/9-mpo-am20-lebanon-lbn-kcm2.pdf>

² <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-making-of-lebanons-october-revolution>

and government failure on all levels. The systemic failures rippled across the banking sector: on March 7, 2020 Lebanon declared its first ever sovereign debt default on a US \$1.2 billion Eurobond. Compounding the crises, on March 18th, the government declared a state of general alert and imposed a lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, closing ports and borders (air, sea, and land) and public and private institutions. Then, on August 4th, a massive explosion in the Port of Beirut killed 220, injured 6000 people, and destroyed residential and commercial infrastructure around a two-mile radius. This exacerbated existing systemic vulnerabilities such as food, water and electricity shortages, dysfunctional waste management, corruption, financial mismanagement and deteriorating social indicators. The World Bank assessed damages from the explosion to be \$3.8-\$4.6 billion, with losses to financial inflows estimated between \$2.9-\$3.5 billion³. Meanwhile, the pandemic pushed Lebanon further into a financial crisis as inflation shot up to 85.5 percent and the IMF forecast Real GDP to shrink by 25 percent.⁴

The confluence of events accelerated the economic free fall of the past year, leading to additional business closures, higher unemployment, and inflation. The price of food and basic goods increased significantly as the Lebanese pound lost over 80 percent of its value, making the overwhelming amount of imported goods prohibitively expensive. The already dysfunctional electricity grid took further hits with many households having only a few hours of electricity a day.⁵

The UN warned that almost half of Lebanon's population is now living in poverty, with 22 percent in "extreme poverty", while 10 percent of the population owns 70 percent of the country's wealth.

³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/overview>

⁴ <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/LBN>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCGN4_tpxjs&pbjreload=101

After massive public outcry and street demonstrations, Saad Hariri, the long-time Prime Minister, stepped down in October 2019, and an independent academic, Hassan Diab was elected. Diab presided over the precipitous free fall of the economy and the first ever default on the \$1.2 billion Euro bond. He ultimately resigned in August 2020 after the devastating port explosion, barely eight months after being elected to the post. Diab was followed by the short tenure of Mustapha Adib, the ex-ambassador to Germany, elected through the French initiative to outline a road map for reforms in order to unlock an IMF bailout. But a combination of corrupt power elites entrenched at every layer of state institutions, geopolitical posturing of donors (namely the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, who are intent on a maximum pressure campaign on Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah), and complete erosion of public trust, have continued to stall any meaningful progress toward a rescue plan.

Barely a year later, after mass protests and relentless public pressure forced his resignation, Saad Hariri is once again back in power as the Prime Minister of Lebanon, along with the same political lineup that represents the face of state collapse.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Lebanon was created in 1943 through a League of Nations mandate granted to the French in 1920 following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The unwritten National Covenant at the time enshrined a 6:5 distribution of parliamentary seats in favor of Christians and stipulated that the president be a Maronite Christian, the Prime minister be a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies be a Shi'i Muslim. In 1989, after the civil war, the power sharing agreement was modified to a 1:1 distribution under the principle of “mutual coexistence” thus reducing the influence of Christians who had been given a position of privilege by the French, ostensibly as protectors of Western interests.⁶ Most notably, the new National Reconciliation Accord vested the Sunni Prime Minister’s responsibility with the legislature instead of the Christian president who previously had the sole power to appoint the PM, and to whom he was responsible. The new agreement stipulated that the Prime Minister be designated in consultation with the Speaker and on the basis of binding parliamentary consultation.⁷ The Accord, known as the Ta’if Agreement because it was reached in Ta’if, Saudi Arabia, is largely seen as having reoriented Lebanon towards the Arab world.

The first civil war occurred in 1958 when Camille Chamoun made an illegal bid for a second term as Lebanese President. At the same time, Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser’s Pan Arab, anti-imperialist message was steadily gaining momentum in the region, especially after he struck a substantial arms deal with the Soviet Bloc, raising alarms in the West and leading to a bifurcation in the Arab world. As a result, Chamoun found himself at odds with Pan-Arabist and Lebanese groups supported by Nasser and requested US troop deployment in Beirut under the Eisenhower

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14649284>

⁷ https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_taif_agreement_english_version_.pdf

Doctrine, which was designed as a bulwark against the communist threat: to counter Nasser, but also to deal with internal sectarian differences. Since its inception, the Lebanese small army was not an effective force in defending the territorial integrity of the country, leaving Lebanon vulnerable to foreign influence and forever looking for regional pacts and outside assistance for protection.

This civil war was not long lived. Chamoun was pressured to stand down and the conflict ended, but more trouble was to follow when the creation of the State of Israel led to the ejection of Palestinians.⁸

In 1967, despite playing no active role in the Israeli-Arab conflict, Lebanon suffered devastating fallout when PLO camps in Lebanon were used as a base for attacks on Israel; internal alliances began to form rapidly along sectarian lines. Major civil war erupted in 1975 when gunmen from the Phalangist Party, Israel's Christian Maronite allies, ambushed a bus in Beirut, killing 27 of its mainly Palestinian passengers. The Phalangists claimed it was in retaliation for a previous attack on a church. Soon after, Syrian troops, invited by the Lebanese Maronite President (Frangieh), joined the conflict. This was followed by a full-scale invasion by the Israeli Army in 1978 to try to curb the Palestinians. The Israeli Army invaded again in 1982, finally uprooting the Palestinians. The PLO moved their base to Tunis in 1982, but Israel maintained a buffer military zone in Lebanon through their proxy, the South Lebanon Army (SLA) Christian militia. The rise of Hezbollah as the main resistance force to the Israeli presence is rooted in these events; their continued dominance is a testament to the anemic Lebanese Army, which demonstrated ineffectiveness in defending its borders and fending off foreign attacks.

⁸

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/10/29/beirut-1958-americas-origin-story-in-the-middle-east/>

DEMOGRAPHICS AND POPULATION

Evidence of civilization in the region predates recorded history; Lebanon was once home to the maritime Phoenicians, a culture that existed for over 1,000 years. The region came under Roman Empire rule and eventually turned into the Empire's largest center of Christianity before it was conquered by the Arab Muslims, and subsequently by the Ottoman Empire. Lebanon is a tiny country of 4,036 square miles; bordering Syria and Israel along 245 miles and 49 miles respectively; its geography partly explains the resultant conflicts and the refugee landscape.

According to the World Bank, its population is estimated at 6.8 million, with 2 million living in Beirut. It is host to over 1.5 – 1.7 million Syrian and Palestinian refugees. Due to repeated conflicts and civil war between 1975-2011, 1.5 million Lebanese emigrated in search of better economic pastures and political stability.⁹ Of Lebanon's 6.8 million population, 95 percent identify as ethnic Arabs and 4 percent as Armenians. They are distributed among 18 religious sects; Christian Maronites, Shi'i and Sunnis comprise the largest blocs, each roughly estimated at 30 percent.

Exact numbers are not available since the last census was taken in 1932 at which time a fragile confessional system was agreed upon.¹⁰ A new census is not planned anytime soon and would not be welcomed by any of the ruling sects lest it upset the power sharing agreements based on the delicate demographic balance, which defines not only the religion of the President, Speaker of the Parliament and Prime Minister, but also outlines parliamentary seats, cabinet positions and employment throughout the public sector.

⁹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=LB>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Lebanon

Lebanon is estimated to host over 1.5 million “displaced” Syrians, deliberately described as such, or “guests”, instead of “refugees”, to avoid upsetting the delicate demographic balance of the country, and to dispel any sense of permanence. Lebanon is not a signatory to the UN 1951 Refugee Convention, and in keeping with the pretense of temporary “displacement,” unlike Jordan and Turkey where camps have been established and are run by UNHCR and their respective governments, the Lebanese government has not managed the “displacement” problem at an institutional level.¹¹ Thousands live in makeshift tents in the Beqaa valley, paying what little they have for food and shelter.

In the last ten years the influx of Syrians fleeing conflict has changed the social landscape of Lebanon. The Syrians are vulnerable to predation and are often subjected to discrimination as they compete with the poor for low-cost housing, public services and low-wage jobs.

This is also a reason why Palestinian refugees, (between 175,000 – 475,000, depending on Lebanese versus UNRWA sources), have not been naturalized or been given legal status after over five decades in Lebanon.¹² There is fear that granting them status might disrupt the official demographic status quo, dilute the existing power structure, and plunge the country into yet another conflict. The Maronite Christians would likely lose power as they are suspected to have always been in the minority. The Shi’i bloc could also face challenges with the influx of Syrians and Palestinians, the majority of whom are Sunni, which could partly explain Hezbollah’s support of the Assad regime in the hope of a stable Syria and repatriation of refugees out of Lebanon.

Lebanese and Palestinians had the highest education standards in the Arab world,

¹¹ <https://harpers.org/archive/2020/11/state-of-exception-lebanon-refugee-crisis/>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestinians_in_Lebanon

but the civil war affected the sector when schools were occupied by displaced families and many foreign teachers left. Literacy rates in Lebanon however remain high at overall 95 percent, with youth literacy rates even higher, despite regional and communal disparities.¹³ Its workforce participation rate is 2.4 million, life expectancy is 78 years (which is higher than the global average), and the UN Human Development Index (HDI) places Lebanon 80 out of 189 countries.

“

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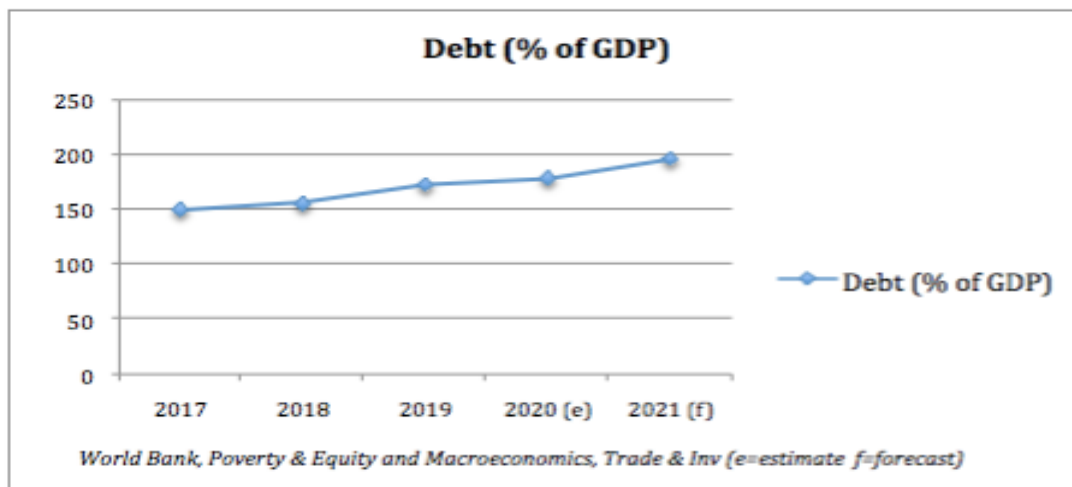
”

¹³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=LB>

¹⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=LB>

ECONOMY

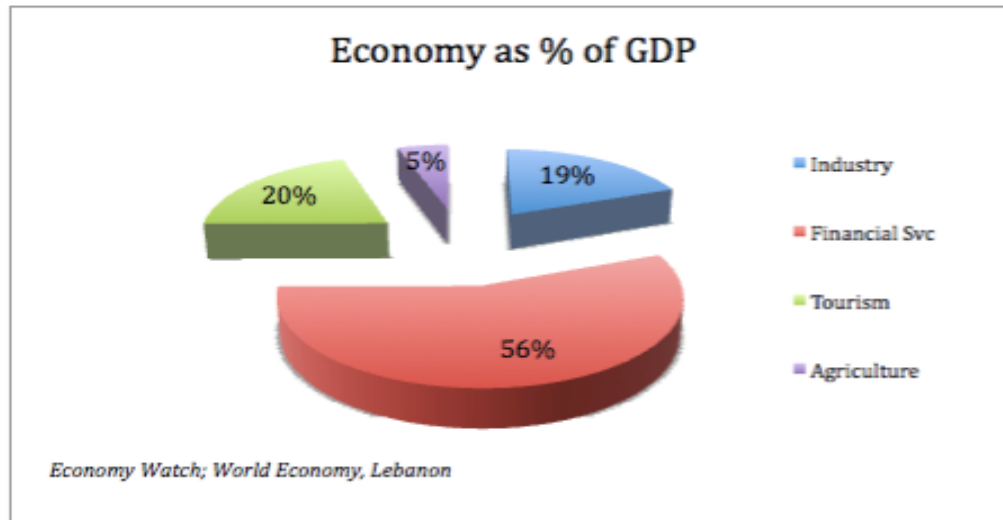
Lebanon is the third most indebted country in the world after Japan and Greece, with economic fundamentals among the worst in the world. The World Bank estimated total debt-to-GDP ratio was 178 percent for 2020¹⁵, with debt servicing costs of over 10 percent per annum, consuming half of the government's revenues. This contributes to a spiral of large fiscal deficits and great income inequality.



The economy revolves mainly around five sectors, all of which are extremely vulnerable to geopolitics and regional events: financial services, tourism, remittances, banking, and real estate, collectively representing 76 percent of Lebanon's GDP and employing two thirds of the workforce. Its banking sector is the regional financial free zone, and many banks are listed on the Beirut Stock Exchange (BSE). The largest real estate company, Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction (SOLIDERE), enjoys special powers of eminent domain and regulatory authority granted by the government. It is positioned with unique

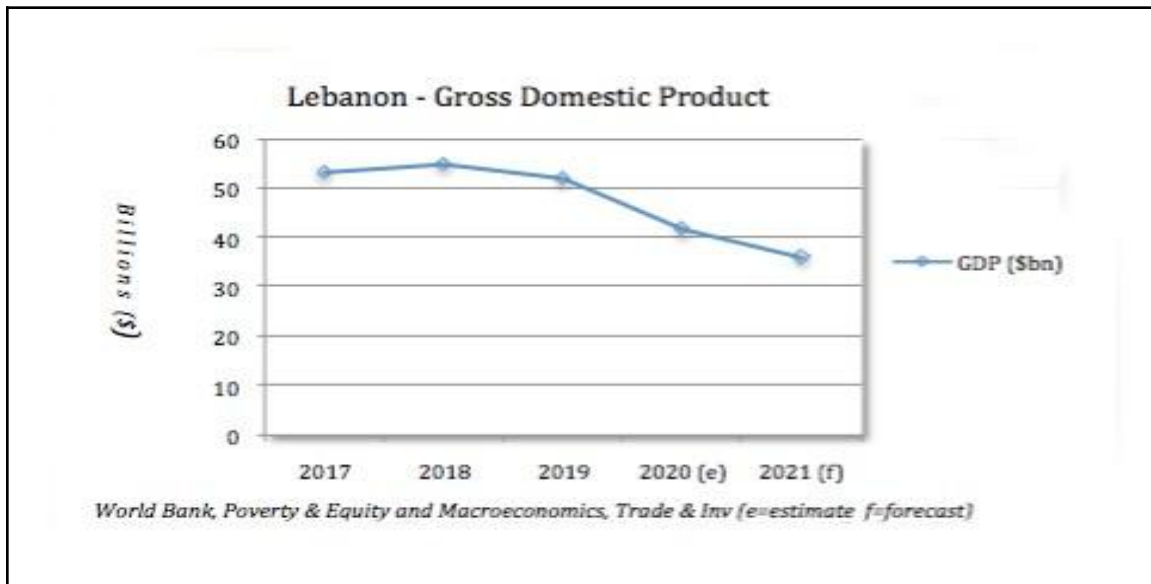
¹⁵ <https://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/265421603047361021/pdf/9-mpo-am20-lebanon-lbn-kcm2.pdf>

advantages as the main player in the Beirut real estate market and has access to the wealthiest regional investors.



Manufacturing and industry make up 19.1 percent of the Lebanese economy, producing pharmaceutical, chemical, metal and wood products. The agricultural sector, comprising coffee, fresh and dried fruits, and olive oil, is underdeveloped at around 5.1 percent.¹⁶ As a result of recent shocks compounded by the pandemic, The World Bank projected real GDP to decline 19.2 percent in 2020 with a further contraction of 13.2 percent in 2021.

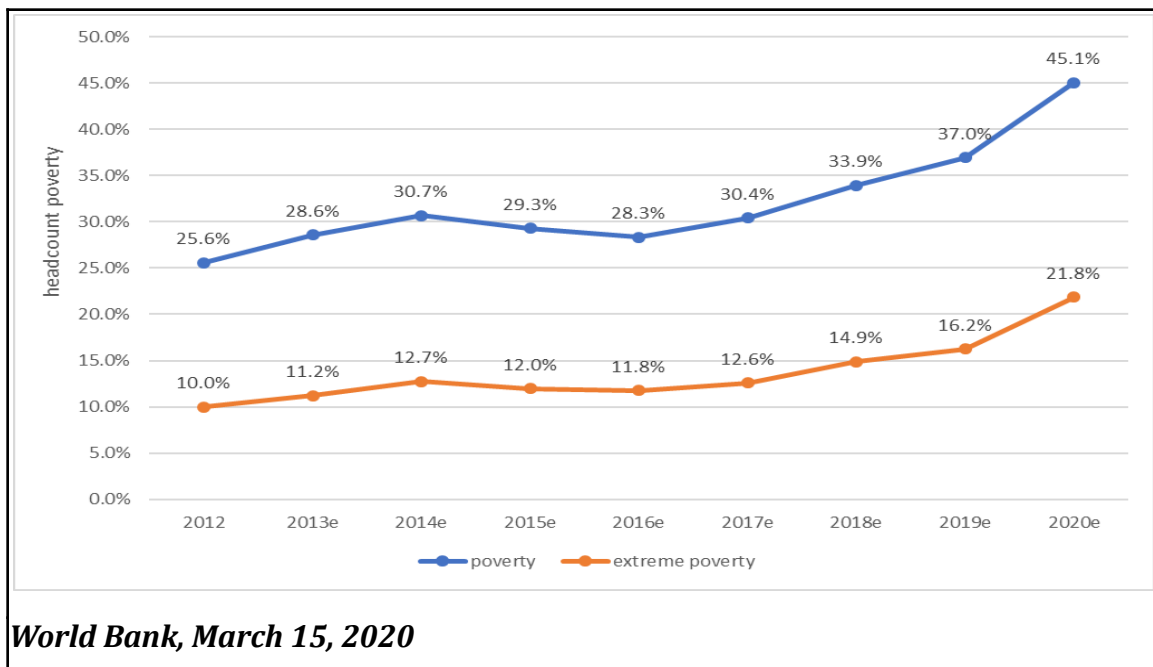
¹⁶ https://www.economywatch.com/world_economy/lebanon/industry-sector-industries.html



Lebanon's imports vastly outweigh exports, creating a sizable budget deficit. Since imports are inherently dollar based, domestic prices are extremely vulnerable to any currency devaluation. Since 1997, the Lebanese Pound (LP) has been pegged to the dollar at 1,500:1 as a confidence building mechanism to encourage foreign investments and capital inflow. When dollars were rationed in 2019, the value of the LP plummeted on the black market, losing over 80 percent of its value, raising alarms, and further eroding public confidence in the economy and the banking sector.

Within a short period, the value of basic goods and staples skyrocketed, and with the compounded effects of the pandemic, unemployment and inflation averaging 142.2 percent for basic food items, the crash affected the bottom rung of the society the hardest. Poverty rates soared to 45 percent with 22 percent in extreme poverty, according to the World Bank.¹⁷

¹⁷<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/01/12/us246-million-to-support-poor-and-vulnerable-lebanese-households-and-build-up-the-social-safety-net-delivery-system>



Lebanon is also highly dependent on remittances, which represented over 14 percent of annual GDP up until 2019 but dwindled following the global economic slowdown and lower oil prices in GCC countries which put downward pressure on employment and incomes.¹⁸

Remittances enable banks via transfers from wealthy Diaspora who gain attractive interest rates on funds which are held in a few accounts. Lebanese banks lend these accumulated deposits to the government at higher interest rates. Excessive government borrowing inflates the banking sector, which profiteers from lending to the state at high interest rates instead of financing private sector innovative projects which might benefit the overall economy.

Capital inflows slowed due to the Syrian war, oil prices crashed affecting the Lebanese in the Gulf, and the threat of U.S. sanctions on banks involved with Hezbollah harshly impacted that sector. In better times, Gulf countries would be

¹⁸ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=LB>

actively engaged in restoring confidence and defending the Lebanese currency by infusing cash. However, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, causing the Saudi Prince MBS to pressure his ally, Saad Hariri, to curb the Iranian influence through Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the U.S. maximum pressure on Hezbollah, have eclipsed the momentum for donor rescue of the economy.

In August 2020, IMF Managing Director, Kristalina Georgieva, released a statement expressing solidarity with the Lebanese people in the face of terrible tragedy and profound economic challenges aggravated by the pandemic, as well as concern at the lack of political will to adopt meaningful reforms.

She called for concrete steps for restoring solvency to public finances in order to unlock billions in donor assistance: 1) “Those who benefitted from past excessive returns need to share the burden of bank recapitalization” 2) Implement safeguards to avoid capital outflows and eliminate the multiple exchange rate system to “reduce rent-seeking and corruption”. 3) Take steps to reduce losses in state-owned enterprises through accountability, transparency and audits of key institutions including the central bank. 4) Expand the social safety net to protect the most vulnerable in society.¹⁹

¹⁹<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/08/09/pr20278-statement-by-imf-md-kristalina-georgieva-int-conference-support-beirut-lebanese-people>

BANKING SECTOR

Beirut is the regional financial hub, historically with a stable and convertible currency and an open-door policy for free flow of capital into and out of the Lebanese economy. The sector comprises 60-92 regional and international privately owned and commercial banks, credit and investment banks, and Islamic banks, all run by well qualified, educated personnel projecting confidence and with branding of international standing. Recently however, this image has been shattered and long-time vulnerabilities uncovered; the banking sector has become the central focus of the current financial crisis.

Protests in 2019 and 2020 witnessed public anger erupting into physical attacks targeting branches, with insults and investigations aimed at Riad Salameh, the multi-decade long governor of Banque du Liban (BdL), the central bank of Lebanon. As the supply of dollars dwindled and access to dollar accounts was restricted, the Lebanese Pound devalued from the official rate of 1,500 LP per dollar to as low as 10,000 LP per dollar on the black market. This triggered high inflation and prohibitive prices for basic necessities, leading to massive poverty and violent riots. According to the central bank, by the end of 2020, only \$2 billion in foreign reserves remained for subsidies to key commodities – wheat, fuel and medicine, and basic goods.²⁰ Today, an international bailout is the only hope, but the IMF has made it clear that any donor funding is contingent upon structural reforms and an independent audit of the banking sector. The evolution of the Lebanese banking sector as a fiscal haven in a region rife with conflict, oil money, and a powerful elite with patronage links is at the heart of the problem.

²⁰<https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-crisis-centralbank-int/lebanon-central-bank-has-2-billion-left-for-subsidies-governor-idUSKBN28V2QN>

After the civil war (1975-1990), the central bank, BdL, emerged as a stable institution with its governor Riad Salameh at the helm. He pegged the Lebanese Pound to the dollar in 1997 and showed leadership during the 2008 crisis by staving off capital flight from Lebanon.

Bank secrecy laws were enacted beginning in 1956 and an organized banking community was established in 1959 – the Association of Banks in Lebanon (ABL).²¹ The secrecy laws created serialized banking accounts, including at the BdL; these accounts were essentially immune to state inspection. Soon, a symbiotic relationship began to form between the central bank (BdL) and the private banking sector (ABL) that entrenched the sector’s untouchability yet obscured the underlying long-term instability that was brewing through creative accounting at BdL. Meanwhile, banks simply invested in public relation campaigns bolstering their image to attract even more funds.

As a result of banking deregulation, an influx of Palestinian capital fleeing Zionism, and petrodollars, the banking sector grew exponentially. Behind the scenes however, massive government debt was forming, much of it held by local private banks in return for exorbitant interest rates generating huge profits.

ABL continued to grow rapidly into a membership of local and international banks, fostering a powerful oligarchy of financiers and import merchants. They aggressively worked against any mandate for regulations, effectively consolidating the banking community into the most powerful lobby in the country.

The laissez-faire operations of the bank banking sector eventually led to a major crisis in 1966, precipitated by the collapse of Intra Bank, Lebanon’s largest at the time. Legislation was introduced creating three regulatory bodies – a deposit

²¹ <https://www.abl.org.lb/english/home>

insurance mechanism for moderate and low deposit holders, the Higher Banking Commission, and the Banking Control Commission; they were entrusted with monitoring and restructuring the private banking sector. Incentives were put in place for long-term lending to encourage investments as opposed to mercantile banking. This led to a quick recovery in the early 1970's, but soon after there were renewed demands for deregulation as the civil war threatened confidence in Beirut as a stable financial hub. Subsequently, a free banking zone was established in 1975, exempting non-resident deposits and liabilities from taxes on interest earned as well as from reserve requirements by the BdL. Furthermore, as ABL had been granted self-monitoring and decision-making powers, it progressively undermined transparency and accountability. Soon, signs of another crisis loomed. The combination of deregulation, corruption, and an oversized service sector with high dependency on capital inflows, which by nature is highly sensitive to geopolitical events, lay in wait for the perfect storm.

Transparency International has ranked Lebanon 138th out of 180 countries on the corruption perception index. As a condition of IMF aid, extensive structural reforms have been mandated and promised within the banking sector but have not yet materialized. An international restructuring firm, Alvarez & Marsal was hired to conduct a forensic audit of the central bank (BdL), yet by November 2020 they withdrew from the contract, unable to conduct their audit due to insufficient access to information by the bank, which cited bank secrecy rules.

Riad Salameh, Governor of the central bank since 1993, had his assets frozen, and was accused of embezzlement of central bank assets and the mismanagement of public funds.²² His substantial offshore investments are alleged to have resulted from public funds. Calls have even been made for his resignation and prosecution by

²²<https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-crisis-cenbank-salameh/lebanese-judge-orders-protective-freeze-on-assets-of-c-bank-governor-idUSL5N2ER3ZH>

the International Criminal Court or at any other appropriate international court with jurisdiction, demonstrating the extent of mistrust in the national instruments of accountability.²³ In an interview with journalist Hadley Gamble on CNBC Middle East, Salameh denied all rumors as well as any allegations that BdL was responsible for creation of government deficits amounting to \$81 billion. He maintained that the “Central Bank is committed to stability and continuity in the credit markets.”²⁴

In January 2021, the Lebanese Public Prosecutor informed Salameh of a formal request made by the Swiss authorities to question him in connection with a \$400 million money laundering investigation.²⁵ It is commonly estimated that billions of Lebanon’s money have been transferred offshore and large amounts are kept outside of the banking system altogether, invested in jewelry and gold, or in shell companies.

**“ Mood on the Street
Instagram Poll - Danielle (@ddoesbusiness)
finance expert: Who is benefiting from
Lebanon’s economic collapse? 1) Israel 2)
Hezbollah 3) The U.S. and its allies for a
weaker Lebanon 4) Corrupt politicians by
transferring money abroad. ”**

²³ <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/lebanons-offshore-governor>

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEO4y-Jy5Pk&feature=youtu.be>

²⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/1/21/lebanon-central-bank-chief-says-hell-comply-with-swiss-probe>

HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah's unique place in Lebanon dates back to the beginning of the Lebanese civil war when it gained prominence as the resistance force to Israel's continued military presence and occupation in Southern Lebanon. It was first created as a Shi'i militant group; in 1985 it established itself politically as Hezbollah (Party of God), declaring an armed struggle to end the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory. At the end of the civil war in 1990, while other militias disarmed, Hezbollah remained as a paramilitary force. It formed alliances with the Syrian regime which was a prominent player in Lebanese politics until 2005 and, with considerable material support from Iran, built a formidable military force culminating in an all-out war with Israel in 2006.

Despite UN calls for state consolidation of political authority and military force, Hezbollah has continued to be an autonomous actor with a dual identity as a political party and as an Iranian-backed military resistance opposed to Israel, its Western backers and U.S.-aligned Arab states. In parallel, however, it has provided services to a largely marginalized Shi'i population, building civilian institutions including hospitals, clinics, schools, youth programs, social welfare, and credit facilities.²⁶ Hezbollah has positioned itself as the defender of the oppressed and the protector of victims of colonial or imperialist injustice in the region.

These efforts have been instrumental in garnering support for them from Shi'i and non-Shi'i Lebanese alike. A study from the Pew Research Center in 2014 concluded that 31 percent of Christians held positive views of the organization.²⁷ Its deepening

²⁶ Shawn Flanigan and Mounah Abdel-Samad, "Hezbollah's Social Jihad: Nonprofits as Resistance Organizations", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (June 2009).

²⁷<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/07/01/concerns-about-islamic-extremism-on-the-rise-in-middle-east/>

political engagement has also transformed Hezbollah into the main representative of Lebanon's Shi'i, the largest of the country's eighteen recognized sects, representing almost one third of the population.

Since Hezbollah effectively became part of Lebanese society and politics at all levels, it has sought partnerships with other Lebanese parties aimed at promoting internal stability, which has also affected foreign perceptions of Hezbollah and its relationship with Western powers. Many of Hezbollah's clerics were educated and trained in Iran, and then relocated throughout the Middle East to share Islam's message and encourage the mobilization of marginalized Shi'i Muslims. In the 1980s, Hezbollah listed France, Israel, and the United States as its main enemies.

But in light of its growing position in Lebanon, in 2009 Hezbollah released a manifesto de-emphasizing their Islamist character and stressing Lebanon's stability and the fight against Israel. Reflecting an increasing focus on Lebanon's internal issues, by 2012, Hezbollah often met with European representatives and toned down their attitude towards Europe from hostile to merely critical. European policies, Hezbollah said, "fluctuate between incapability and inefficiency on one hand and unjustified subjugation to U.S. policies on the other."

By this time, the group had already been working to facilitate cooperation with other sects, signing a memorandum of understanding in 2006 with the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the largest Christian party, with Michel Aoun as its head. Hezbollah has given unwavering support to Aoun, who was ultimately elected president in 2016.²⁸ The alliance was evident during the 2017 scandal when Saad Hariri was forced to resign and to denounce Hezbollah on Saudi Television. Lebanon's Christian president Aoun did not join Saudi Arabia's campaign against Hezbollah. At the time, the TV host Marcel Ghanem responded to the Saudi

²⁸ <https://www.voltairenet.org/article163916.html>

description of Hezbollah: “You call it terrorism, we call it resistance.”²⁹

Apart from their strategic alliance with FPM over the past two decades, Hezbollah has taken an increasingly central role in Lebanon’s politics and has participated in elections since 2005, presently holding 12 seats in the parliament. Along with their ally, the Amal Movement, another majority Shi’i party, which holds 13 seats and its prominent speaker of the parliament, Nabih Berri, they effectively represent a dominant religious bloc in Lebanese politics. With further alliances across other parties, including President Michel Aoun’s FPM and other independent Hezbollah-aligned parties, they now represent 70 out of 128 seats in parliament.³⁰

Hezbollah is also generally acknowledged to have been the main force protecting Lebanon during the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014 and again in 2017 when it was instrumental in the defeat of the Islamic State and protection of the large Christian population living along the Syrian border. Hezbollah has leveraged these involvements to boost its legitimacy as the defender of all Lebanon’s minorities—a claim that the group’s Christian allies have echoed. “Hezbollah defended not only Shiite when they were fighting against [the Islamic State],” said Elie Khoury, the vice president of the FPM’s Youth and Sports Sector. “They defended Christians, Sunnis, Shi’i, and Druze, and all Lebanese.”³¹

Hezbollah has continued to increase cross-sectarian support, even employing many non-Shi’i fighters in its National Brigade. Increasing gains through non-Shi’i communities are part of its calculus to be the dominant political party. To this end, Hezbollah has leveraged the general popular discontent among all Lebanon’s sects. According to a 2019 article, it enjoys more influence among Christians, Sunnis, and

²⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/11/30/where-do-lebanons-christians-stand-on-hezbollah>

³⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-election-parliament-factbox/factbox-hezbollah-and-allies-gain-sway-in-lebanon-parliament-idUSKCN11N1OJ>

³¹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/09/hezbollahs-rainbow-coalition/>

Druze than ever before. In the last parliamentary elections in 2018, besides expanding their own seats, a group of six pro-Hezbollah Sunni deputies were also elected to the parliament while the anti-Hezbollah Sunnis lost a third of their seats.³²

Considering its reach and power it is no surprise that Hezbollah's critics argue that as the dominant force presiding over the current state of the economy, Hezbollah bears responsibility for economic collapse. Critics maintain that Hezbollah presided over Lebanon's slide into bankruptcy and protected the country's most corrupt actors. After the 2018 elections, by consolidating wider alliances in the parliament, they have effectively become part of the ruling elite and are seen as enablers of a corrupt ruling clique who has brought the country to its knees. Hezbollah rejects this claim, stating that the billions stolen long predate their role in government. At any rate, the majority of protestors in the October 2019 revolution did not single out Hezbollah in their demonstrations; instead, they referred to the ruling elite collectively as having failed the Lebanese, demanding they all step down.

The complex position of Hezbollah was evident when they sided with protestors against the WhatsApp tax, showing support for peaceful demonstrations, yet opposed demonstrator calls for wholesale resignation of the government, and have continued to stand with the President.

Its domestic critics and their positions vis-à-vis Hezbollah are best viewed in the context of who backs them and the respective dynamics of sectarian divides. The Christian opposition parties to Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) point to Hezbollah's foreign links to Iran and Syria and maintain that Lebanon cannot be a viable state as long as Hezbollah exists as an armed force. Chief among the vocal opponents are Samir Geagea, the chairman of the Lebanese Forces (LF), a Christian

³² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/09/hezbollahs-rainbow-coalition/>

political party, and Sami Gemayel, the head of Lebanon's Kataeb Christian party (also known as Phalangist), who gave exclusive interviews on Al Arabiya, the Saudi owned and funded network, denouncing Hezbollah.³³ This is in contrast to the position of the FPM, where its Foreign Minister and head of the party, Gebran Bassil, viewed the alliance with Hezbollah as having contributed to internal stability and national unity since they represent Lebanese at all levels, calling them a resistance movement against occupiers, saying that "...all Lebanese are united on this and do not consider Hezbollah as a terrorist although we disagree on its external politics."³⁴

The Sunni Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, reflects this balancing act. On the one hand, he blames Hezbollah, as Iran's arm in the country pushing for disorder and destruction of Lebanon and did so publicly in 2017 when forced to resign on Saudi Television citing Hezbollah as the reason. On the other hand, he realizes the imperative for preserving domestic stability with an eye toward the balance of power. His position is therefore a delicate one, walking a fine line between placating the Saudis in their rivalry with Iran and the reality of maintaining internal alliances. As Lebanon continues its descent into financial crisis, domestic and foreign players are divided over Hezbollah's role. As the most important player in Lebanese politics with its majority coalition in the parliament, its cooperation and inclusion in any financial deal is essential. France has already included Hezbollah in its initiatives for reform to unlock foreign assistance. However, the U.S. and other foreign actors' insistence for a push to curtail Hezbollah's influence has thus far been a hindrance to French-sponsored efforts. Ironically, both the U.S. and Hezbollah have targeted each other directly as being behind the recent crisis in Lebanon. Hezbollah is accusing the United States of financing the revolution while the former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted: "The Iraqi and Lebanese people want their countries back. They are discovering that the Iranian regime's top export is corruption, badly

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xC5z33dY0gQ>

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xC5z33dY0gQ&t=7s>

disguised as revolution. Iraq and Lebanon deserve to set their own courses free from Khamenei's meddling."

According to the State Department's estimation in 2019, Hezbollah receives more than \$700 million in military support from Iran as well as funding from the Lebanese Diaspora and other legal businesses. The State Department also asserts that Iran is the ultimate source of authority for Hezbollah, and Syria serves as the imperative geostrategic linchpin linking Iran to Hezbollah and as a conduit for arms transfers to protect Assad's regime since 2000.³⁵

Imad Mansour, a Lebanese professor of International Affairs at the University of Qatar, echoes claims that Hezbollah has the strongest force in Lebanon, rivaling that of the Lebanese Armed Forces, which 'fuels a radical imbalance of inter-communal military capabilities and encourages an internal arms race.' Most importantly, Hezbollah's continued ties with Iran and Syria pose doubts about the organization's commitment to advancing Lebanon's interests.³⁶

³⁵ Mariam Farida. (2018) Adopting religion to meet political goals: the case of Hizbullah. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*

³⁶ Christine Martin, Consociational Politics: The Influence of Hezbollah on the Stability of Sectarianism in Lebanon

OCTOBER 2019 REVOLUTION



"Power to the People" Since October 17, 2019

Lebanon has been shaken by remarkable popular protests in order to end the current political system and the government that came to power in the early 1990s at the end of the civil war. Protests initially erupted in response to a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls, but rapidly grew to demand much broader structural and economic reforms. The aim of these protests was to transcend sectarian boundaries and to unify people of all backgrounds, ages, and social classes to push for changes: dismantling the confessional Ta'if system in effect since the civil war; ending endemic corruption; and addressing the grossly asymmetric distribution of wealth. Tens of thousands of citizens from all walks of life held hands

in solidarity across a 105-mile human chain from Tripoli to Tyre,³⁷ calling for a shutdown to the sectarian power-sharing scheme, the overthrow of the ruling class, equitable management of public resources, and creation of a civil state separated from the 18 confessions existing in the country.

The revolution faced barriers: an absence of leadership, and organization and control of the mainstream media by entrenched political parties and politicians. When demonstrations began, authorities at first tried to downplay the protests, and then blamed it on foreign intrigue and meddling. Activists quickly turned to social media as a mobilization platform to get their message out and to organize. On October 25th, a week into the protests, Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah Leader, accused the United States and foreign governments of having financed the revolution. The mocking rebuttal promptly followed as people launched a hashtag in Arabic all over Instagram and Twitter: “I am financing the Revolution.”³⁸ On November 16, 2019, the U.S Embassy in Beirut also tweeted a response, assuring they were not involved and that they supported the peaceful demonstrations of Lebanese citizens.³⁹

The protestors organized, shared updates, and streamed protests on Twitter. They documented police abuse on Instagram which escalated to confrontations with Hezbollah supporters, and then to crackdowns by the authorities using the country’s defamation laws to stifle critics of the elite and the banks. According to a Beirut based researcher for Human Rights Watch, “You can go to prison for saying something on social media deemed defamatory or insulting to public officials, the

³⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/27/lebanon-protesters-form-human-chain-across-the-country>

³⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/25/hezbollah-head-says-govt-fall-could-push-lebanon-into-chaos/?gb=true>

³⁹ <https://twitter.com/usembassybeirut/status/1195748443391713282?lang=en>

army, the president and the flag by punishment of up to three years in prison.”⁴⁰

Hopes were raised after the election of Melhem Khalaf as President of the Beirut Bar Association a few weeks after the initial protests. Khalaf was the first independent candidate not affiliated with any political party to win the position in recent years. Khalaf was a law professor, previous Vice-Chairman of the UN International Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the founder of the humanitarian NGO “Offrejoie” (the joy of giving: a non-sectarian organization advocating for a plural, free and fair Lebanon). He has considerable support among youth and has since launched a campaign to rescue the state from the current crisis and its ruling class.⁴¹

“ Mood on the Street

Samer Al-Khoury, protester: "We are basically here for freedom of speech. Basically all the protesters who have been commenting and criticizing the job of government and especially the job of the Lebanese presidency have been called into detention for silly talks whether on twitter or Facebook or any social media place. So we decided today, as revolutionaries, to come here and give ourselves to the judiciary." AP Archive, June 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8-Z71u-3Zs> ”

The election of Khalaf marked a victory for the protesters. He has assembled a group of 700 volunteer lawyers to visit prisons across Lebanon to rescue detainees and to report abuses. He holds legal clinics in his office once a week and has been part of a legal movement posing a challenge to political abuses and corruption.

⁴⁰<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/09/809684634/lebanons-government-is-accused-of-swarming-whatsapp-to-catch-protesters>

⁴¹ <https://www.the961.com/head-of-beirut-bar-association-melhem-khalaf/>

SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

As the main medium of communication to mobilize, organize, and propagate information, social media has been a mixed bag in Lebanon. It has served as both an effective tool for citizen activism and free speech in an atmosphere where traditional media is seen to be co-opted as a propaganda arm of the power elites. Yet social media is vulnerable to hacks and can be weaponized as a tool of disinformation, misinformation, and manipulation for bad actors. As the protests continued and calls for the ouster of the regime got louder and more relentless, public platforms of expression further transformed into instruments of state control. Soon, the Cyber Crimes Bureau began infiltrating WhatsApp chat groups and social media to identify and arrest protestors, exposing the identities of activists, bloggers, and journalists.

Demonstrators engaging in legitimate dissent were labeled security risks and were detained, abused, and harassed by the authorities, who went so far as to criminalize insults against the President on social media, using slander laws in the Lebanese Penal Code to silence and intimidate anyone investigating corruption or implicating the elite.

Lebanese protesters created independent outlets on social media to serve as platforms to mobilize and disseminate information. Three main active accounts diffused news through Instagram: Gino Raidy Blog (@ginoraidy), Political Pen (@political.pen) and Oleksandra El Zahran (@polleksandra). Some journalists like Dima Sadek (@dimasadekofficial) operated as pro-revolution activists, tweeting threats to topple the regime.

In the days following the October demonstrations, hashtag "Lebanon rising" trended as the collective voice of a generation that was drawing attention to the potential of a Lebanon beyond sectarian interests.

Soon after, a pro-government hashtag emerged, employed by supporters of Hezbollah as a counter protest: "In Nasrallah We Trust." Most hashtags were either pro-government or anti-government and not necessarily sectarian. However, it was soon suspected that some of the hashtags might not be authentic and could be the work of bots (automated software that replicates and disseminates information in bulk) controlled by unknown actors. It was further determined that "In Nasrallah We Trust" had a higher likelihood of displaying automated behavior. Evidently, Lebanon has not been immune to the recent geopolitical trend that has contaminated global politics: as social movements become increasingly reliant on social media traction, bots and other means of weaponizing social media have become more prevalent and sophisticated.

Researchers at CitizenLab, a Canadian digital rights organization, found that recent protests in Iraq and Lebanon were accompanied by a flurry of Twitter campaigns originating from influencers and actors in the Gulf, and that even the main activist hashtags were co-opted for manipulation. "It seems like each group is trying to manipulate and use hashtags to share their political vision," said Alexei Abrahams, a research fellow at CitizenLab. Online disinformation campaigns in the Middle East reflect regional alliances. One example was Amjad Taha, a British-Arab commentator living in London and a fierce critic of the Iranian regime. Observers say his tweets often reflect the perspective of Saudi Arabia's government. "He is the most retweeted among anyone on the hashtag [#LebanonRiseUp] ... the defining hashtag of the Lebanese protests," said Abrahams.⁴²

⁴²<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/15/disinformation-the-online-threat-to-protest-in-the-middle-east>

An investigation by two journalists at the Telegraph also reported that the Hezbollah propaganda arm is operating “fake news training camps” in Beirut with the objective of “spreading fear and division around the Middle East.” According to the report, Hezbollah's “electronic armies” are receiving training in Beirut to spread misinformation through online outlets. The report further states, “students come from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Syria to develop skills to digitally manipulate photographs, manage large numbers of fake social media accounts, make videos, avoid Facebook’s censorship and effectively spread disinformation online.”⁴³

The Telegraph report focuses on Hezbollah’s links to groups in Iraq and does not mention Hezbollah activities in Lebanon per se. However, it is not a stretch to believe that as main players in Lebanese politics, Hezbollah would play a dominant part in the social media war as well.

⁴³<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/02/exclusive-inside-hezbollahs-fake-news-training-camps-sowing/>

TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND FREE SPEECH

Lebanese have access to a variety of news platforms including 24-hour cable channels, Internet sites and SMS services, with most households preferring local news channels. However, this does not translate into greater plurality of perspectives; many news sources simply replicate the voices expressed through traditional media.

The term “politicization” of the media dates back to the civil war in 1975-1990 when the majority of newspapers and broadcast stations were created. The media has always reflected the country’s divisions. Some suggest that the current political tensions have intensified the situation and are further entrenching journalists in their political stance.

Being the very first Arab country to permit private television and radio, Lebanon now has six television stations and close to three dozen radio stations operating independently of each other. Dozens of newspapers and hundreds of periodicals are also published. However, most of the country’s news media outlets support and represent the agenda of a political personality or party as most of them are owned, managed, or financed by local or regional interests. Therefore, while the number and range of outlets ensures a pluralistic press system, it transforms many of the outlets into propagandists for their respective patrons. In a report with France 24 on “Middle East Matters” in October 2019, following the 17 October Revolution, Karim Chehayeb, an independent journalist and Human Rights Researcher, stated that the media is trying to control the narrative because the majority of outlets are controlled by media donors.⁴⁴ Some media channels are currently working towards a more reformist image to appeal to a younger generation that is wary of the political

⁴⁴<https://www.france24.com/en/video/20191024-lebanon-media-landscape-there-have-been-attempts-to-give-this-uprising-a-pro-hezbollah-spin>

class; others try to demonize aspects of the protests.

The ambiguity of the Lebanese media lies in its distorted understanding of the meaning of freedom, in which private interests are excessively protected in the name of freedom and take priority over social responsibility. In fact, the notion of “freedom of expression” is exploited to give the media a special status that places it above social regulations and institutions, making the term “freedom of information” one of the most misused notions in the Arabic language.

In addition, self-censorship exists around matters such as Lebanon’s relations with Israel, making it difficult for journalists to report evenhandedly for fear of being attacked by anti-Israeli religious groups. This was particularly true during the war with Israel when a number of journalists reported being labeled as “traitors” or “Jewish agents;” fearing increased likelihood of personal attacks by certain segments of the population who were in opposition to more moderate views.

It is not surprising that in such a climate, social media has gained popularity in Lebanon, especially among youth and activists who rely on the networks to organize and exchange information and to mobilize. However, failing to keep pace with digital developments, the absence of laws to protect the freedom of expression online is a contributing factor to potential harassment and continued self-censorship. Also, the widespread use of messaging apps and social networks as means of collective activism and campaigning has contributed greatly to the slow Internet speeds.

In June 2020, dozens of Lebanese protesters held a rally in Beirut demanding freedom of speech on social media. The protesters gathered outside the Palace of Justice in the Lebanese capital, holding Lebanese flags and chanting "Revolution, Revolution." The protest came after authorities started a new investigation into posts deemed insulting to the Lebanese President, Michel Aoun, including memes

and pictures. Protesters said that instead of pursuing activists on social media or going after journalists exposing corruption and/or expressing their opinion peacefully, authorities should hold government officials and those in power accountable. According to Gino Raidy, an activist with over 100,000 followers on Twitter and Instagram, authorities target those within the easiest reach, subjecting them to investigations and interrogations intended to intimidate, attract media attention, and serve as a deterrent to others.⁴⁵

As a country in a state of digital transition, many media outlets have not yet managed to catch up to new developments in technology; the websites of many media houses do not meet current online journalistic standards. Digital activists face many obstacles, including poor internet speeds aggravated by widespread use of networks for collective activism, limited access to resources, privacy issues, lack of data, general lack of legislation and government support, issues surrounding the sectarian system, and especially censorship.

Despite its use by activists and protesters, digitization has so far had little or no impact on changing the media market or the impact of ownership on media performance and independence.

The media start-ups scene is rather small. Digital media in Lebanon is still developing and despite challenges and recent push backs by the State, journalists find it a “blessing” to be in Beirut as opposed to Turkey and Egypt where media activists can receive long prison sentences. With websites such as *Raseef 22* or *Daraj*, there is reason to hope that the media start-up scene could expand in Lebanon and be officially funded.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200704-freedom-of-expression-is-under-threat-in-lebanon/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/lebanons-media-landscape-struggling-with-digitalization-and-media-freedom/a-48635698>

EXPLOSION!

On August 4, 2020, a massive explosion at the port of Beirut destroyed a two-mile radius of residential and commercial properties, leaving 200 dead, more than 6,000 injured, and 300,000 homeless. Angry protests erupted across Lebanon accusing the government of negligence and demanding answers.

Initial reactions ranged from speculation about Israeli strikes and deliberate strategic hits, to a Hezbollah arms cache gone awry. Public anger reached new heights. On social media, some accused Hassan Nasrallah of exhibiting more concern in the aftermath of Soleimani's assassination yet remaining unmoved in the face of hundreds of Lebanese lives lost. Others held Hezbollah responsible for not having been able to protect Beirut despite the widespread presence of their security forces.

Then-President Trump said the Beirut blast might have been a deliberate attack, but continued that causes remained unknown; he then offered assistance to the Lebanese. A few days after the explosion, Prime Minister Netanyahu also offered assistance, but Lebanon refused since the two countries have no diplomatic relations. Predictably, Iran's top diplomat accused western countries of taking advantage of the situation to dictate policies to Lebanon.

The first head of state to visit just two days after the incident was President Macron of France, representing the ex-colonial power. He pledged 25 million Euros via the French Development Agency and called for a new political order. People gathered in the streets of Beirut to welcome him. 60,000 signed a petition to become a French colony again, thus expressing utter lack of faith in their own ruling class. Macron's visit was intended to spearhead a new initiative, arrange an international donor conference, and to help secure a bailout by the IMF. Indeed, following an

international aid conference for humanitarian response hosted by France, 36 countries pledged \$300 million and sent medical supplies, food, planes, medical teams, and humanitarian aid.⁴⁷

Amidst popular anger, Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his government resigned the following week, just after eight months in office, yet remained in caretaker capacity while Lebanon struggled to form a new government. FBI, French and British teams were mobilized to collect and analyze samples at the explosion site to determine the exact cause. Meanwhile judges at the national level were tasked to question the elite and political figures at high levels to arrive at some answers.

President Aoun and Prime Minister Hassan Diab said the explosion was caused by 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate that had been stored in a warehouse in the Beirut port for over six years without appropriate safety precautions. The failure was generally attributed to mismanagement of the port, corruption of the government, and inaction of the flag registry's country and the ship that carried the cargo seven years earlier.

President Aoun dismissed the need for an international inquiry and promised a transparent investigation into the causes of the explosion. An "Administrative Investigation Committee" was formed consisting of the ministers of defense, justice, and interior, as well as the army commander and heads of the three security agencies. However, from the beginning, investigations were neither transparent nor independent. Human Rights Watch said it best when they reported that by tasking the very same ministries and institutions that should be under investigation to lead the investigation, the cabinet engaged in a "ludicrous perversion of the principles of independence and impartiality".⁴⁸ HRW demanded that Lebanese officials allow an

⁴⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/16/lebanon-ensure-aid-goes-directly-those-need>

⁴⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/node/376795/printable/print>

international investigation.

Months into the blast, investigations struggled to yield results. It was evident that officials were having difficulty questioning those who had interest in the events at the dock, and that politicians were using their influence to seek protection from prosecution.

Both the Lebanese Judges' Association, and the head of the Beirut Bar Association criticized the formation of the Committee. Melhem Khalaf, the head of the Bar Association, stated the investigations were being obstructed in various ways and that the appointment of the judicial investigator was an opaque process mired in political interference. The judiciary in Lebanon is neither financially nor administratively independent from the executive branch and has been identified as a key institution in need of reform. The members of the Supreme Judicial Council, which appointed the investigating Judge, Fadi Sawan, were virtually "handpicked" by the Lebanese government, so when the Judge said his investigation had revealed serious suspicions linked to some government officials, Parliament simply dismissed the findings and replied it found no such suspicions.⁴⁹

In December, investigations were suspended when Hassan Diab and three ministers being investigated for negligence simply refused to show up in court, claiming they are protected by a clause in the Constitution that gives them immunity from charges. If their claim is correct, the Constitution makes it virtually impossible to prosecute any minister for anything.⁵⁰

The investigations into the port explosion reflect the deep-rooted patronage networks, the sectarian nature of Lebanese politics, and the systemic weaknesses

⁴⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-beirut-explosion-investigation-political-backlash>

⁵⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/25/950314947/in-lebanon-judge-suspends-inquiry-into-beirut-port-explosion>

that pose obstacles to delivering justice. Hariri's Future Movement (FM) accused the investigation of targeting the Sunni sect. Interior Minister Fahmi said he would decline to issue any arrest warrants; summons for court appearances were summarily ignored by the defendants. Furthermore, when accusations surfaced against President Aoun and FPM for interfering with investigations after he publicly acknowledged he had known about the ammonium nitrate, he was not charged. To some, it seemed plausible that Hassan Diab, an independent, who had been in office for only eight months, was being used as a scapegoat when none of his predecessors were summoned nor questioned.⁵¹

In February 2021, the Lebanese court dismissed Judge Sawan, pursuant to the request of two of the ministers he had charged citing suspicions over the Judge's neutrality. A new judge was appointed through the same judicial council process as before. These events highlight the red lines of power that even an "independent" judge would have to respect.⁵²

The new appointee, Judge Tarek El Bitar, is described as a man of integrity with no political leanings, however it remains to be seen whether he will be able to conduct the process without political interference. In the end, the Lebanese authorities' failings might prove that an international investigation is the only avenue for the people of Lebanon to get answers and the justice that they deserve. So far, accountability for an explosion that ravaged the capital and shocked the world seems out of reach.

⁵¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-beirut-explosion-investigation-political-backlash>

⁵² <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/lebanon-new-judge-appointed-to-investigate-beirut-port-explosion-1.1169411>

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Mood on the Street

In September 2020, the young Lebanese activist Sara el-Yafi took a poll on her Instagram account: “Why did President Macron visit Lebanon twice in three weeks knowing this is unprecedented diplomatic conduct?” In response, 33% pointed a finger towards business interests: oil, gas, and port of Beirut in general. Another 23% linked Macron’s second visit to assert influence and to secure an upper hand against Turkey. Another 10% expressed mistrust, attributing the visit to the re-election concerns with French-Lebanese voters or backroom dealings with Iran or Israel.

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CIVIL SOCIETY

The rise of the Lebanese civil society organizations (CSO), as voluntary non-sectarian associations took place during the Chehabist era (1958-1964). President Abdullah Chehab ushered in large-scale social development projects and oversaw the creation of the institutions of modern Lebanon. When they were started, CSO associations had broad development objectives. However, the civil war period (1975-1990) witnessed a shift in focus towards services and relief efforts, subsequently expanding to encompass human rights and advocacy work.⁵³

Compared to the rest of the region, Lebanon has always had a vibrant and diverse civil society across a wide range of political and developmental issues. Governed by the 1909 Ottoman Law of Association, civil society actors and non-governmental non-profit organizations have had a great deal of latitude in freedom of assembly and organization that is unique to the region. The right to organize is enshrined in Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution. In the early nineties post-civil war era, an average of 250 organizations were created per year, peaking after each humanitarian crisis. Following the Israeli War on Lebanon in 2006 and the conflict in Syria in 2011, new initiatives, campaigns, and organizations proliferated. Lebanon Support (LS) is an example of such an initiative. Established in 2006 as an NGO, it is a multidisciplinary space to create synergies between researchers, experts, practitioners, and activists through digital technologies, publications, and exchange of knowledge. LS is comprised of three main programs; Civil Society Knowledge Center (CSKC), established through the Norwegian Fund as an information platform for CSO online research and information; Daleel Madani (DM), established as the main CSO portal networking over 1,300 registered CSOs to enhance online

⁵³ https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/civil-society-lebanon-implementation-trap#_ftn8

cooperation in Lebanon; and Civil Society Incubator (CSI), established to foster a nurturing environment for CSOs in response to the shrinking space for civic action in Lebanon.⁵⁴ The Union of Relief and Development Associations (URDA), an umbrella group of 30 NGOs dedicated to human rights and relief of the most vulnerable in Lebanon, is another example.⁵⁵

The most recent figures (2013) from the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities reflect 8,311 registered CSOs, in addition to a number of loosely organized groups. However specific information about the nature and scope of their work is limited. According to a 2015 study, 93 percent of surveyed CSOs are formally registered as non-governmental non-profit organizations; 62 percent work on a national level, while another 38 percent are community based, with the highest coverage in the sectors of social development, health, education, human rights, and the environment.⁵⁶

Despite the liberal legal environment, large number, and diversity of organizations, CSOs are faced with significant barriers to operating and achieving desired policy changes: among others, the restricted political climate, lack of financial and institutional support, and the security perils of online activism.

Government authorities exercise large discretionary powers, making use of provisions in the Penal Code and the Audio-Visual Media law aimed at asserting control over the population, preventing criticism of the elite and quashing dissent. Red lines for free speech are drawn around the army, national symbols, political notables, and religion and religious figures, making it increasingly difficult for CSOs to challenge the establishment. Penalties are often harsh, ranging from banning to large fines to imprisonment. The October 2019 revolution and subsequent unrest in

⁵⁴ <https://lebanon-support.org>

⁵⁵ <https://urda-lb.org/en/home/>

⁵⁶ https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/lebanon/documents/news/20150416_2_en.pdf

2020 saw crackdowns on peaceful protestors as security forces hunted down activists and pushed back with violence and even live ammunition, increasingly shrinking space for freedom of expression as well as political activism and human rights work.

Furthermore, online presence as a mode of action and citizen mobilization is prone to hacking, harassment, cyber theft of personal information, theft of intellectual property, and loss of privacy rights. The Cyber Crime and Intellectual Property Rights Bureau established in 2006 by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) was designed to enhance online security but has effectively served to silence critics and to limit advocacy.

A CSO can expect to wait many months before obtaining registration permits, pending clearance and scrutiny by the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities which is increasingly heavy handed and intrusive in regulating and controlling CSO activities (per decree no. 24/EM/2018). When finally registered, CSOs encounter obstacles obtaining formal rights for operation, including opening bank accounts or accessing financial resources, often having to improvise and operate on the fringes of formal frameworks. Funding from the political establishment is also scant, and due to lack of public government support and financial constraints, many CSOs have difficulty attracting and sustaining qualified staff and must rely instead on volunteers and part-time workers.

Sectarianism as the basis of participation also poses natural challenges to the effectiveness of CSOs as autonomous actors in policy making. Additionally, the Syrian refugee crisis has exacerbated tensions within the Lebanese society, especially due to the political need to consider Syrians “displaced” in order to not upset the sectarian balance. Due to the Lebanese government’s failure to respond to the humanitarian fallout of the refugees, or to meet their basic needs in health,

education, and other social services, CSOs have had to focus on mitigating gaps in these areas to the detriment of advocacy work and engagement toward policy changes.

The Lebanese are well-educated and capable. Decades of conflict and state failure have imbued their society with a sense of solidarity and self-help; Lebanon is fertile for grass roots activism and citizen action. Citizens took initiatives in the country's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, sharing health information with LGBTQ people, refugees, migrant workers, and other marginalized populations. When domestic violence cases rose during the lockdown, feminist groups helped provide protection and services for survivors.⁵⁷

Women in Lebanon have been at the forefront of every important political movement. They have been particularly active during the revolution, organizing in groups, participating individually, or forming human shields to protect protestors and prevent violence. Slogans and demands related to women's rights have been manifest, including the right to pass citizenship to a foreign spouse and their children, a civil personal status law which guarantees equal treatment of women under the law irrespective of religion⁵⁸, and protection from domestic violence.

Feminists were also able to engage critically with the slogans of the revolution and to place their discourse on the table. They drew attention to prevalent patriarchal notions in slogans, even in the national anthem. Women's marches were not confined to Beirut. They marched alongside men, and sometimes alone, closing roads and occupying public spaces. They cooked and offered meals to protesters and

⁵⁷<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/27/grassroots-groups-hold-beirut-together-ye-t-big-ngos-suck-up-the-cash-lebanon>

⁵⁸<https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/01/19/unequal-and-unprotected/womens-rights-under-lebanese-personal-status-laws#>

sitters, and initiated cleaning and recycling campaigns to mitigate the waste management crisis.

Recent resistance movements also witnessed active participation by the youth and students who formed the backbone of the protests, and who had been thirsty for an active role in decision-making and political life, despite the voting age for parliamentary and municipal elections being twenty-one. Issues like unemployment, immigration, and the brain drain are major concerns for youth and students. So are the desire for the downfall of the regime and the vision for a secular, inclusive Lebanon, promoting social justice, human rights, and gender equality.

Student clubs in private universities such as the American University of Beirut, Notre-Dame University, and Université Saint-Joseph, participated heavily in the protests in and off-campus, marching from universities to the main protest squares, and setting up activist tents in downtown Beirut. Other private universities such as the Lebanese American University and the Lebanese International University held protests on and around campus. The Lebanese University (LU), Lebanon's national university, saw the biggest student protests. They formed coalitions with other student clubs and leftist groups and hosted their own tent in Riad Al-Solh square in downtown Beirut to discuss and strategize.

In the aftermath of Beirut's port explosion, in stark contrast to the systemic failures witnessed across state institutions, hundreds of individual and collective initiatives, and thousands of volunteers from all regions, mobilized to provide assistance. Barely a few hours after the traumatic event, a sense of solidarity coalesced as thousands rushed from across the country to bring food, clean streets, and help fix houses.

Foreign governments, expats and foreigners also rushed to donate, to volunteer for relief work, and to mobilize humanitarian aid. Enterprises and non-profits joined forces to map out needs and organize the reconstruction of Beirut with the financial support of donors and the contributions of volunteers. Sadly, the Lebanese state was absent in these efforts. Human Rights Watch urged international donors not to disburse relief aid of any kind, including food, housing, or health care to the Lebanese government due to their “staggering incompetence.” Rather they urged direct funding of independent civil society groups on the ground.⁵⁹

This reveals the utter irrelevance of the Lebanese government and highlights citizen solidarity and grass roots action as Lebanon's true wealth: the one to be built upon, strengthened, and empowered, the true hope of Lebanon if it is to overcome the current crises of corruption, clientelism, and political parading.

“ The freedom to express one's opinion orally or in writing, the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom of association are guaranteed within the limits established by law.”

Lebanese Constitution, Article 13. ”

⁵⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/16/lebanon-ensure-aid-goes-directly-those-need>

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

The geopolitical landscape of Lebanon is a legacy of its Ottoman and Colonial heritage and child of a region rife with conflict, occupation, and great power rivalries. Furthermore, Lebanon is the recipient of the fallout of the Syrian conflict and Palestinian crisis, hosting upward of 1.5 million refugees, making it vulnerable to attacks and interventions.

The resultant fissures have led to an intentionally polarized political system created by competing forces tethered to foreign expediency, making Lebanon more poised for intervention, co-option, disruption, and exploitation than serving Lebanon's own national interests and economic growth. The confessional political system agreed upon to safeguard interests along sectarian and regional interests has continued to disregard domestic needs at large and has fomented a predatory elite who have adopted opaque economic policies for short-term gain at the expense of investing in long-term systemic development and welfare. Indeed, the very nature of the internal sectarian system guarantees orientation towards the two main political rivals in the region: the Islamic Republic of Iran (Shi'i) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Sunni), along with the geopolitical tug of war that involves U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The fractures are characterized internally by the presence of Hezbollah, the powerful arm of the Islamic Republic of Iran present at every level of Lebanon's political life, and by Saudi Arabia, the main brokers of the Ta'if confessional system, and generous donor wielding influence. Saudi Arabia manifested its reach when they kidnapped Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who has triple nationality (Saudi, French, and Lebanese), in November 2017. They forced him to resign and denounce

Hezbollah and Iran on Saudi Television,⁶⁰ reflecting their own political rivalries with regional powers at the expense of Lebanese internal stability.

As to the old colonial powers, France, which was instrumental in securing Hariri's release from the Saudis, has presented itself as the key broker in Lebanon's future: reasserting France's role in the region, hoping to set the terms of recovery; and taking part in creating a new leadership. President Macron arrived shortly after the port explosion to cheering crowds. He took the lead for the dual tasks of marshalling international aid as well as laying out strict terms for key reforms and a timetable for the Lebanese elite as preconditions for unlocking bailouts: a \$10 billion IMF bailout; and another \$11 billion aid package pledged at the 2018 Conference for Economic Development and Reform through Enterprise (CEDRE). Another colonial power is Turkey, whose foreign minister arrived soon after President Macron, promising help to rebuild the port. More importantly, Turkey was meeting with Sunni leaders, seeking to increase its influence through religious networks.

The French President delivered a roadmap for key reforms, complete with an urgent timetable, and stern warnings of the consequences for non-progress, potentially including sanctions on obstructionist members of the political elite.

As a result of competing interests, President Macron's roadmap very quickly fell apart. The interim Prime Minister, Mustapha Adib, stepped down after less than a month in office; he was unable to form a cabinet, blaming the ruling elite. Hezbollah and their ally, Amal Movement (Shi'i), objected to a cabinet of apolitical "experts" being formed without adequate consultation and insisted on naming the finance

⁶⁰<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-hariri-exclusive/exclusive-how-saudi-arabia-turned-on-lebanons-hariri-idUSKBN1DB0QL>

minister. Soon after that, a new set of U.S. sanctions was introduced, for the first time targeting senior political allies of Hezbollah, further hardening their positions. Macron blasted the ruling elite for the “betrayal” of Lebanon and “betrayal” of commitments to the international community. Macron also assigned blame to Hezbollah and Amal, arguing Hezbollah could not simultaneously play a military role in the region on behalf of Iran and be a “respectable party” in Lebanon. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah responded by giving an account of the botched government formation, putting the blame on Hezbollah’s domestic rivals, along with the U.S.⁶¹

European governments, especially France, have long been principal donors to Lebanon with very few strings attached choosing short-term stability over main concerns with regards to governance and Lebanon’s economic model. However, since the 2018 CEDRE conference, donors have tied conditionality to major infrastructure investments and required structural reforms and have withheld funds when the Lebanese government failed to fulfill promises.⁶²

So far, the Lebanese have resisted calls for structural reforms, partly because the international community has a credibility issue. Since donor countries do not want to see yet another failed state in a troubled region, the Lebanese feel that donor institutions will come through at the end with yet another blank check as they have done in the past.

The U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, which by extension targets Hezbollah, is also complicating matters. A staunchly pro-Israel Washington, allied

⁶¹<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/b81-avoiding-further-polarisation-lebanon>

⁶²<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-economy-france/lebanon-wins-pledges-exceeding-11-billion-in-paris-idUSKCN1HD0UU>

with Saudi Arabia, has its priorities set on isolating Iran and Hezbollah rather than bailing out Lebanon. While endorsing demands for reform, the U.S. objects to including Hezbollah as a participant in the initiatives. Instead, Washington has slapped sanctions on Hezbollah and its main ally, Amal, in an effort to isolate them. European officials have objected, maintaining that the U.S. policy is counterproductive and is hampering rescue efforts for Lebanon. Hezbollah's internal and external foes insist that weakening its influence in the country is an essential part of saving Lebanon. Others believe that seeking reforms while weakening Hezbollah simultaneously will achieve neither and that broad structural and governance reforms require broad alliances, domestic consensus and buy-in from all parties involved.

The stalemate exposes a critical limit of Europe's economic leverage to exact reforms. The EU and some of its member states may have a supply of economic incentives to persuade the Lebanese elite into agreeing to reforms, but they have no control over the heavy sticks that the U.S. and some of its allies are wielding against Hezbollah and those who align with it.

Since the October revolution however, the people can claim some victories. For the first time, Lebanese across all divisions (generations, religions, and socio economic backgrounds) stood together and demanded to reclaim their government. They can also claim success in the first days of the protests for having forced a reform plan from the government, and then again to have compelled first Hariri, and then again Hassan Diab, to resign. Furthermore, they can celebrate having brought Melhem Khalaf to power; an independent representing a new generation of legal defenders who has been relentlessly pursuing justice for protestors and activists.

Ultimately however, achieving real political change and transformational reforms has remained elusive. The realities of a powerfully entrenched and increasingly

repressive political system backed by predatory elite, and regional and international interference in an unstable neighborhood mired in conflict, have re-imposed themselves in force. Challenges were compounded by multiple unexpected catastrophes: total economic collapse; a global pandemic and its ruinous social and economic fallouts; and a devastating explosion with immeasurable human and financial cost.

In the end, the year-long protests that brought down the Hariri government were not able to bring about fundamental change. Subsequent replacement governments of political independent Hassan Diab, and then the French-brokered government of Mustapha Adib, were not able to make any headway towards reform. More than a year later, no viable leader or solution has emerged and the country is more impoverished. The IMF bailout is also no closer and no reforms are in sight.

Judging by what has transpired in the past year, the system simply replicated itself, more interested in self-preservation than enacting significant reforms. The audit and reform of the banking sector stalled when the international firm, Alvarez & Marsal, was not given access to information due to “bank secrecy” rules. The investigation efforts of the port explosion were frustrated by “immunity” laws as elites scrambled to protect their own. The same faces are at the helm, holding fast, yet unable to act or even to form a government.

Perhaps the elite are right. Perhaps the same blank checks previously written will materialize again in order to prevent yet another failed state in a strategically important region. However, frustrated with the impasse, in May 2021, the European Union announced they were drawing up sanctions on selected Lebanese politicians seen as blocking reforms and preventing the formation of a new government ⁶³.

⁶³<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/friend-foe-eu-prepares-sanctions-lebanon-first-time-2021-05-12/>

Many Lebanese politicians have homes, bank accounts, personal and financial interests in the EU. Signaling threats to these interests could function as a powerful motivating factor to move the needle.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese have descended into pure survival mode, more desperate by the day. As the remaining foreign exchange reserves drain away, drying up subsidies for fuel, medicine, and basic commodities, soon basic functions of the government will cease, spreading more chaos, more violence, and even, potentially leading to another civil war.

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May 2020, Al-Arabia: Japan will only back Lebanon IMF bailout if it deports Carlos Ghosn, the former Nissan chairman who is wanted for allegedly committing financial irregularities then fleeing the country to his native Lebanon, smuggled in a musical instrument box. Japan is one of IMF's major contributors and could veto the \$10 billion IMF loan.

<https://englishbeta.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/05/31/Japan-will-only-back-Lebanon-IMF-bailout-if-it-deports-Carlos-Ghosn-Nissan-Lawyer>

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TIMELINE OF EVENTS REVIEW

Over a year after massive street protests toppled his government, and after two failed interim candidates, Saad Hariri was once again appointed prime minister, seemingly coming full circle, this time with President Macron's backing for a new political pact and an initiative to rescue a country on the verge of collapse.

The following is the timeline of events from the October 2019 street demonstrations where a rainbow cross section of Lebanese society demanded social and economic justice, a new government, and an end to sectarian rule and institutional corruption.

- Following the October 17th protests, Hariri proposes reforms outlining some of the street's demands: a cut in MPs' salaries; legislation to retrieve embezzled funds; and a provision for \$160 million in housing loans. The reform paper is rejected by the demonstrators, who call it too little too late and demand his resignation along with the rest of the ruling elite.
- Meanwhile Standard & Poor downgrades Lebanon's credit rating and the Central Bank implements capital controls to avoid a run on deposits.
- Protestors block roads and bridges and demand a technocratic government.
- Several names are proposed as potential heads of a national unity government, including former ministers Muhammad Safadi and Bahij Tabbara and businessman Samir Khatib. However, they all swiftly drop out, one after the other.
- On December 19, 2019, former minister of education, Hassan Diab, an independent, and an engineer by training, is tasked with forming a

“single-colored” government of technocrats. As the Lebanese currency continues to sink, pushing prices higher, a new government and rescue plan remain elusive and protests escalate. Security forces and riot police crack down with tear gas and rubber bullets. According to Reuters, 370 are injured, prompting international outcry and Human Rights Watch calls for an end to police impunity.⁶⁴

- On January 21, 2020 Diab forms a government, a 20-member cabinet of technocrats. Meanwhile the economy is in free fall, tourism drops by 80 percent and protests continue against the IMF plan for additional debt. Protestors try to break in and disrupt the parliament.
- The World Bank warns of imminent risk of implosion and finally in March, Lebanon defaults on a \$1.2 billion Eurobond as the Covid-19 state of emergency is imposed, leading to closures of businesses, borders, and ports. Financial aid is the only hope for a source of income at this point.
- In April, Diab approves the IMF plan for economic rescue but protesters are vehemently against taking on new debt, which includes austerity measures. The cycle of currency devaluation, inflation, and price increases continues to spiral out of control. Banks are also not on board with the IMF plan since they have not been consulted. They object on the grounds that reforms infringe on “private property rights,” once again reflecting the interests of power elites at work.
- Meanwhile, the director of cash operations of the Lebanese central bank (BdL) is arrested for currency manipulation and top advisor for the ministry of finance for the IMF negotiations resigns, blaming the ruling elite.

⁶⁴<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-protests/lebanese-security-forces-protesters-clash-for-second-night-idUSKBN1ZI0DS>

- There are more violent clashes with protesters amidst escalating calls for Diab to resign. Journalists and activists are arrested as the state becomes more authoritarian. New measures are implemented against insulting the President on social media.
- As the exchange rate on the black market spirals out of control, there are more resignations in the Finance Ministry, each one blaming the ruling elite. Apparently, several individuals with over \$10 million in bank deposits are blocking reforms. All eyes are on Riad Salameh, the central bank governor for three decades, as the responsible party for the crash and lack of transparency.
- On August 4th, there is a devastating explosion in the Port of Beirut killing 220 and injuring 6000, enraging an already aggrieved population even further; they are demanding justice. Diab's government still does not have approval for a financial plan, nor has it reached an agreement with the International Monetary Fund. 60,000 Lebanese sign a petition to become a French colony again as President Macron visits to a cheering crowd. Diab promises a full investigation into the causes of the explosion.
- Lebanese officials and powerful elites actively work to block investigations into the blast and hinder any attempts by the ruling Judge to question senior political figures or to hold anyone responsible. Security forces open fire on angry protestors, injuring 238 people, prompting Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to issue condemnations for excessive use of force and use of live ammunition.⁶⁵
- On August 10, 2020, Hassan Diab is deemed incompetent and resigns along with his full cabinet, also blaming the ruling elite for blocking reforms.

⁶⁵<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/lebanon-military-and-security-forces-attack-unarmed-protesters-following-explosions-new-testimony/>

- On August 31, following French President Emmanuel Macron’s initiative, the Lebanese ambassador in Berlin, Mustapha Adib, is tasked with forming a new government. The main focus of this initiative is to satisfy preconditions to the IMF bailout, which include issues of transparency, judiciary reform, and an audit of the central bank. Alvarez & Marsal, an international restructuring firm, is hired to conduct a forensic audit on the banking sector in a bid to show transparency and unlock financial aid from donors.
- On September 26, Mustapha Adib steps down as prime minister-designate after Hezbollah and Amal insist on retaining control of the finance ministry, and the U.S. ramps up sanctions on Hezbollah and Amal senior figures and related businesses, further hardening their positions. The Trump administration insists that they not be included at the negotiating table.⁶⁶
- On October 22, a week before the anniversary of his overthrow, Saad Hariri is once again voted prime minister with a slim 65 vote majority, even less than Adib, and is tasked with forming a non-partisan “rescue” government and implementing reforms outlined in the French initiative.
- Alvarez & Marsal withdraw from the contract in November, unable to conduct their audit due to insufficient access to information by the central bank, which cites bank secrecy rules.⁶⁷
- On November 6, 2020, The United States imposes sanctions on Gebran Bassil, head of FPM, close ally of Hezbollah and son-in-law to President Aoun,

⁶⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/26/lebanons-leader-mustapha-adib-steps-down-as-hopes-for-reform-collapse>

⁶⁷<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201203-forensic-audit-firms-withdrawal-casts-its-shadow-over-lebanons-future/>

- ⁶⁸creating new challenges for Hariri to strike a deal for a coalition government.
- May 2021, EU signals first ever sanctions on senior Lebanese politicians as the country descends further into collapse.
 - Ongoing: Hariri faces major challenges forming a government, notably from Michel Aoun's party, FPM, who did not back his candidacy. Hariri's re-election is clearly not what the street wants either but after one year of protests, the movement has lost some of its steam and the momentum has subsided. Furthermore, after a year of activism, the revolution was not able to produce a viable alternative and has failed to translate itself into a proposal for a political alternative for Lebanon. Once again, Hariri seems to be the only candidate standing as the pragmatic choice. He has the support of Saudi Arabia as well as France and is credited with being a good negotiator; the urgency for finding a way out of the crisis is paramount. Furthermore, as Hezbollah did not overtly nominate him, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. can also be on board even though it is understood that Hariri's candidacy would not have been possible without the tacit support of the powerful Hezbollah.

The irony is not lost on the street or on anyone else paying attention: electing as the savior the same candidate who was partly responsible for having engineered the crisis. There is indeed little expectation that Hariri will have the power or the will to implement reforms. Considering he is one component of a ruling elite with vested interests and is a major shareholder in one of Lebanon's biggest banks himself, he will have little appetite for intrusive reforms.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54823667>

⁶⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/22/lebanons-saad-hariri-secures-parliamentary-support-to-be-next-pm>

GOING FORWARD

By now it is clear, not only to the Lebanese citizens, but also to the international community and traditional donors, that the institutions of the state have failed, and that no concrete plan for reform is in sight, despite the year-long protests and the serial crises that have befallen Lebanese state and society. In the face of multiple calamities, the state has been absent. Self-help has prevailed. Mitigation efforts have fallen on the shoulders of ordinary citizens and CSOs, relying on volunteers, grass roots movements, foreign donors and aid organizations.

It is also clear that the Lebanese are hostage to multiple predicaments, all of them out of their control: state capture by the elite; predatory governance at once disregarding the concerns of the people yet beholden to regional rivalries; a geographic position vulnerable to conflict and global geopolitical posturing; and lack of domestic resources to withstand external dominance.

The deficit of confidence is such that, despite the precipitous financial collapse, global financial institutions are insisting on audits and reforms of the central bank and the government before fronting any more money. Additionally, the international community, as well as Lebanese CSOs, are urging that any relief and humanitarian aid be funneled directly to the people rather than being facilitated by the Lebanese government.

The token interventions by the system exhibit the extent of their disconnect from the mood of the street. In a desperate move to stabilize the financial ecosystem, BdL has floated a “Lebanese digital currency project” to shore up confidence. It is essentially a cashless system to induce the return of stashed away money in homes back to banks, and to retain complete control of currency circulating in the economy.

This move ignores the obvious lack of trust behind the citizens' strategy in the first place. The central bank has also pondered sale of state assets and proposed incentives for recovery of stolen assets by the Lebanese elite who have transferred huge sums abroad to avoid state scrutiny. Meanwhile, the real estate behemoth, SOLIDERE saw its stock price triple on the Beirut Stock Exchange (BSE) in the past year, signaling yet another windfall for well-positioned investors looking for future gains in the high-end waterfront property development. But real estate is no lifeline for the vast majority of the ailing population living hand to mouth.

Through international donors and multilateral initiatives, Lebanon has been the recipient of aid for decades: during the civil war, after the Palestinian crisis, and most recently after the Syrian influx.

The UN has been the principle body coordinating humanitarian, development, and security funding through wealthy donors like the EU, U.S.A, Germany, UK, Netherlands, Japan, Norway, Gulf countries and others; funding has been between \$1.2 - \$1.6 billion yearly, mainly through bodies like UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, Norwegian Refugee Council and UNRWA.⁷⁰ The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), a joint UN-Lebanese initiative, has channeled funding through Lebanese ministries and institutions with funding reaching over \$5.6 billion since 2015.⁷¹

The 2018 CEDRE conference pledged \$11 Billion in soft loans for infrastructure projects and capital investments, while an additional IMF bailout of \$10 Billion has been earmarked for state functions.

⁷⁰ <https://www.un.org.lb/lebanon-aid-tracking>

⁷¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/04/LCRP-EN-2019.pdf>

The biggest donors at CEDRE are the World Bank (\$4.85 Billion), followed by European Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Islamic Development Bank, Arabic Bank for Development, Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, France, Qatar, Netherlands and the EU.⁷² This donor list demonstrates the extent of commitment to stabilizing Lebanon's position in the region. In the aftermath of the explosion, 36 more countries stepped forward with \$300 million in emergency humanitarian support.

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**“Lebanon is the Titanic without the orchestra.
The Lebanese are in complete denial as they
sink, and there isn't even the music.”**

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian

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After years of support however, international donors and human rights activists are increasingly wary of opting for the Lebanese government as the primary conduit for aid, and instead are looking for ways to include CSOs to circumvent leaky funding channels. Lebanon has received billions of dollars in aid and soft-loan packages since the end of its civil war in 1990, but benefits have been squandered through corruption and mismanagement, according to HRW.⁷³ Donors have questioned the transparency of funding channels through the Lebanese government.

In an effort to devise a “people-centric” strategy guided by principles of transparency, accountability and inclusion of civil society as the first line of defense

⁷² <https://blogbaladi.com/list-of-donors-at-the-cedre-conference/>

⁷³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/16/lebanon-ensure-aid-goes-directly-those-need#>

and engagement, in December 2020, the EU, UN and WB Group launched an 18-month Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) in response to the Beirut blast.⁷⁴

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“Lebanon’s urgent need for aid should not be an excuse to press international donors to hand over money to the Lebanese government, which has already squandered billions in previous aid and whose staggering incompetence caused this humanitarian catastrophe” Human Rights Watch.

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3RF is structuring funding in such a way as to empower civil society by disbursing aid directly to nongovernmental groups and businesses. Their goal is to have Lebanese CSOs, as well as the private sector, hold seats in steering committees, oversee strategic decisions, govern the fund’s expenditures, and play an instrumental role in monitoring implementation.⁷⁵

Where the Lebanese government has not shown the proper ability to channel aid that would protect the economic and social rights of the population, civil society groups have taken up that responsibility. Where the state has been absent in disaster relief efforts and humanitarian assistance, Lebanese citizens have stepped up,

⁷⁴<https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-reform-recovery-reconstruction-framework-3rf-december-2020-enarfr>

⁷⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/15/innovative-model-foreign-aid-lebanon>

conducting needs assessments, compiling missing persons' reports, delivering essentials like food and water, and providing physical and mental health support. They have shown initiative, claimed public spaces to mobilize and strategize to find ways to exit their predicament, and taken back control of their lives.

As capital controls were put in place and inflation eroded their savings, the Lebanese also looked for ways to exit the collapsing banking system and take control of their financial freedom. This is one reason that since 2019 the amount of Bitcoin traded by the Lebanese has drastically increased. By trading their Lebanese Pounds for Bitcoin (a crypto currency held in an anonymous digital wallet and verified by a decentralized blockchain network), the Lebanese have tried to regain financial control without being tracked or taxed by the government. Buyers and sellers meet on chat groups like WhatsApp; postings are made for those who wish to sell goods or assets or even pay for services in crypto currency. The technology has been getting traction because of the speed and ease of peer-to-peer exchanges, compared to the bureaucracy of the banking system. Bitcoin can also serve as a hedge against inflation. But most importantly, it allows citizens to pull their finances out of the orbit of the government. It is the ultimate revolution against a system that is not delivering.⁷⁶

Lebanese society is the true untapped resource in this story. The sheer force of a well-educated polity, with a strong sense of solidarity, with a history of grassroots activism and a diverse civil society base, can be harnessed to bring about real change in the face of a stale and entrenched power structure that is simply replicating itself in a perpetual state of denial. The situation is not unique to Lebanon. Corruption, lack of good governance or political upheavals are endemic causes of economic and social collapse in other places, countries such as Iran or Venezuela being obvious

⁷⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/2/25/distrust-in-lebanese-banks-spurs-bitcoin-boom>

examples, where citizens could be empowered by other means to mobilize with new tools for transformation.

As aid organizations are looking to include ordinary citizens and CSOs in their work, and as the Lebanese themselves are agitating for change to regain control over their future, innovative solutions must be explored to give them voice, regain space, provide new tools, and restore citizens as sovereigns of their fate.

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The Mood on the Street

“You are sitting with warlords, they have been manipulating us for the past years”, a woman told Macron, who would meet with the country’s top leaders later in the day.

“I’m not here to help them, I’m here to help you,” he replied, before they entered into a long, silent embrace.“

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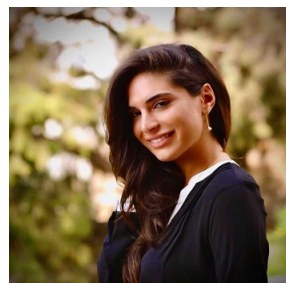
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