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From Revolt to Community-Driven Resistance: Beirut's Year of Hell

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Summary

Abstract:

In Lebanon a series of man-made disasters were committed by corrupt warlords that sustain their rule through a century-old sectarian power-sharing system. Within months activists, who had staged a nation-wide uprising, had to deal with financial collapse and the covid-19 pandemic, shortly before 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded at Beirut's port on 4 August 2020. The explosion epitomises Lebanon's endemic problems and revealed a criminal level of corruption by its governing warlords. But activists and local institutions have since then been challenging the status quo by offering a model of inclusive service provision and advocacy. People who took to the streets are actively engaged in solving the nation's problems and if the European Union wants to support a new and stable Lebanon, the only way it can do that is by cutting ties with the old and supporting the new.

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Introduction

More than a decade has passed since the Arab uprisings sparked a wave of discontent and created political, social and security ripple effects across the region. The trajectories of these protests, their composition and responses from Arab regimes were distinctly different but their narratives had elements of great similarity including freedom, gender equality economic opportunity, and social justice.

Until 2019, Lebanon had seemingly escaped this mass wave of popular mobilisation. In fact, a literature was growing to explain why it was nearly impossible for Lebanon to witness a nation-wide revolution. The forces of deeply entrenched sectarianism and widespread clientelism were often used as rationales for why a revolution in the Lebanese context was not possible. The discontent that sparked a wave of great hope and exuberance in October 2019 created a rupture from the bleak history of war and post-war sectarian politics in Lebanon. A great deal of hope and potential were riding on this revolution. Could it finally put enough pressure for reform and an end to corruption? We will never know. The events that followed, from financial collapse to the covid-19 pandemic leading up to the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020, crushed the spirit and momentum of revolt, at least in that version.[1]

The paper traces the evolution of anti-regime protests in Lebanon – overshadowed by the port explosion as a disastrous critical juncture – and argues that community-driven resistance is emerging as a means for collective action and self-preservation. In doing so, the paper seeks to advance the literature on abeyance by showing what people do to create an alternative to the regime when they are not protesting, transcending the constraints of national and regional geo-politics within which the regime is seated. This paper expands the critique of studying movements as linear modalities of mobilisation and abeyance, arguing that emergence of new actors is not spontaneous but displays continuity of networks and shared experiences.[2] It shows that contestation of political systems does not always take place on the street in the form of revolt but can take the shape of solidarity movements, creation of new institutions and experiencing alternative realities, far from the street and from electoral politics. This form of contestation, particularly in times of disaster, enables us to recognise local community actors' role in resistance.

1. Hell explained: Sectarian warlords and the politics of exclusion

The year 2020 will be remembered as one of the most difficult human experiences for people across the world. But for people residing in Lebanon, 2020 unleashed a hell on earth. The President of the Republic, Michel Aoun, had announced this unleashing in a press conference on 1 September when asked what might happen if no government was formed; his reply was, "We are on our way to hell".[3] At the time of writing, ten months following the explosion of the Beirut port on 4 August, Lebanese politicians have yet to form a government. The investigation has not yet led to any results

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[1] The paper is based on personal activist experience embedded in a critical examination of literature and key events that led up to this analysis.

[2] See for instance Cristina Flesher Fominaya, "Debunking Spontaneity: Spain's 15-M/Indignados as Autonomous Movement", in *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2015), p. 142-163.

[3] Alain Daou et al., "Breaking the Cycle: Issue 2: It Starts with Us", in *Khaddit Beirut* portal, last modified 7 December 2020, https://khadditbeirut.com/?p=810.

nor have any public officials been questioned or detained. Meanwhile, a caretaker government is in charge at a time when the compounded crises of the coronavirus pandemic, financial collapse and security unrest have paralysing effects on people's wellbeing. The year 2020 was the final nail in the coffin for the dignity of the Lebanese people, who had lived near tons of explosives for six years without knowing it.[4]

The port explosion which claimed the lives of 200 people, wounded 6,000 others and rendered around 300,000 people homeless within moments, epitomises Lebanon's endemic problems. A combination of corruption and negligence led to the storage of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate near people's homes, schools, hospitals, and shops.[5] The explosion exposed a criminally culpable regime where public officials had known about the existence of explosive material for over six years, but had done nothing about it.[6] Traced back to individuals affiliated with the Syrian regime, the explosive material exposed how Lebanon's political system and instability is deeply rooted in a geopolitical context. The main player in this context is Hezbollah, which has been involved in the war in Syria alongside the Assad regime overtly since 2013, despite early attempts by the Lebanese government at the time to disassociate Lebanon from the conflict.[7] This policy of disassociation proved impossible and dragged Lebanon into an open border policy all the way up to the present where Lebanese goods and services including fuel continue to be smuggled to fund the ongoing conflict in Syria.[8] The explosion exacerbated the long history of a political system that thrives on exclusion and is organised around sectarian and regional fault lines. How did Beirut get to this explosive event?

Even though there is evidence and critique of the Lebanese model as failing to introduce democratic reforms and achieve peace, recent analysis still contends that the Lebanese model could be successfully applied to end conflicts in Yemen, Iraq and Libya. Stephan Rosiny, for instance, hails the Lebanese model as one of co-existence from which Syria can learn.[9] This is a dangerous assertion because it overlooks the fact that the power-sharing system in Lebanon gave legitimacy to a handful of sectarian leaders who participated in the civil war and then divided the spoils of the state among themselves. There was no opportunity for state-building in the Lebanese case. Instead, consociationalist representation came at the expense of civil society, national interests and shared identity.[10] Now a century later, we can capture three recurrent dimensions of exclusionary politics that manifest in such a system.

To understand the dynamics of national and regional politics at the time of the explosion, we need to historicise the political system. The Ottoman Empire and French mandate that followed it laid the foundation for the 1926 constitution which established the sectarian power-sharing political

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[4] Julie Ray, "Political, Economic Strife Takes Emotional Toll on Lebanese", in *Gallup News*, 19 November 2020, https://news.gallup.com/poll/325715/political-economic-strife-takes-emotional-toll-lebanese.aspx.

[5] See Sam E. Rigby et al., "Preliminary Yield Estimation of the 2020 Beirut Explosion Using Video Footage from Social Media", in *Shock Waves*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (September 2020), p. 671-675, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00193-020-00970-z.

[6] See Reuters, "Lebanon's Leaders Warned in July about Explosives at Port, Say Documents", in *The National*, 10 August 2020, https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/lebanon-s-leaders-warned-in-july-about-explosives-at-port-say-documents-1.1062000.

[7] Waleed Hazbun, "Assembling Security in a 'Weak State:' The Contentious Politics of Plural Governance in Lebanon since 2005", in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (2016), p. 1053-1070.

[8] Mayssa Awad and James André, "Lebanon and Syria: Smuggling and Sanctions, the New Front Line" (podcast), in *France 24*, 16 April 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/reporters/20210416-lebanon-syria-smuggling-and-sanctions-the-new-front-line.

[9] Stephan Rosiny, "A Quarter Century of 'Transitory Power-Sharing': Lebanon's Unfulfilled Ta'if Agreement of 1989 Revisited", in *Civil Wars*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2015), p. 485-502.

[10] See Janine A. Clark and Bassel F. Salloukh, "Elite Strategies, Civil Society, and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (November 2013), p. 731-749.

system.[11] The constitution guaranteed equal representation for sectarian communities in public posts. Lebanon's independence from the French in 1943 ushered in the National Pact, an unwritten agreement to share power disrupted only in 1975 by the outbreak of the civil war. On 22 October 1989, Lebanese deputies met in the city of Ta'if in Saudi Arabia and reached a US-backed agreement to end the war. The resulting treaty was known as the Ta'if Agreement or the National Accord Document (*Wathiqat al-wifaq al-watani*) and represented the outcome of a negotiated deal supported by the Syrian government and the international community. On paper, the Ta'if Agreement included mechanisms that would lead to a transition, but the post-war system turned former sectarian warlords into politicians, while allowing Hezbollah's armed militia to grow.[12]

For thirty years, unobstructed by the US and Europe, the government of Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad tampered with election results to ensure Lebanon's legislature had a pro-Syrian majority, violently suppressed any opposition and controlled public resources.[13] Popular protests in the spring of 2005, which became known as the Cedar Revolution, pushed for the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005. But even in withdrawing, Syria remained a polarising actor in Lebanese politics with the March 8 Hezbollah-led movement thanking the regime and vowing loyalty, and the March 14 camp holding Syria responsible for the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. In effect, the polarisation was over seats and cabinet positions but neither March 8 nor 14 March 14 sought to reform the sectarian system or combat corruption.[14] Instead, after 2005, Lebanese politics became further divided among sectarian lines and the 2009 elections were manipulated and reported to have had the highest rates of corruption and documented bribery in Lebanon's history.[15]

This disappointed a generation of activists who had gained collective consciousness around the time of the Cedar Revolution. They emerged as activists emboldening civil society to take on key reform issues including access to information, electoral reform and gender equality.[16] These groups used advocacy strategies, campaigning and mobilising to push state institutions and parliamentary representatives to amend laws and policies, mainly to no avail.[17] Good governance was largely lacking after 2005, and this left a large group of youth disenfranchised from the political elite both in the March 8 and March 14 camps.

Broadly speaking between 2005 and 2011, activists organised themselves around a range of political reform issues but were met with neglect and lack of response. A case in point was the long history of feminist organising around a range of discriminatory laws and practices facing women in Lebanon. Women's rights organisations campaigned for women's right to pass nationality to their children, protection from violence, reproductive health and representation in politics – all to no avail.[18] Instead, the Lebanese sectarian system monopolised the space through the National Commission for Lebanese Women, which failed to produce any reform that would address the

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[11] See Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon. A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002.

[12] See Roger Mac Ginty, "Reconstructing Post-war Lebanon: A Challenge to the Liberal Peace? Analysis", in *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2007), p. 457-482.

[13] See Raymond Hinnebusch, "Pax-Syriana? The Origins, Causes and Consequences of Syria's Role in Lebanon", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Summer 1998), p. 137-160.

[14] See Ohannes Geukjian, *Lebanon after the Syrian Withdrawal. External Intervention, Power-Sharing and Political Instability*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017.

[15] Daniel Corstange, "Vote Trafficking in Lebanon", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (August 2012), p. 483-505.

[16] For a history on these groups see Carmen Geha, *Civil Society and Political Reform in Lebanon and Libya. Transition and Constraint*, London/New York, Routledge, 2016.

[17] Janine A. Clark and Bassel F. Salloukh, "Elite Strategies, Civil Society, and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon", cit.

[18] See Lina Khatib, "Gender, Citizenship and Political Agency in Lebanon", in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2008), p. 437-451.

structural barriers women face. Another key area was electoral reform: despite the efforts of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections and a coalition of civil society actors, the electoral system continued to be marked by violence, corruption and districting with no oversight from an independent Commission.[19] It was instead managed by the Ministry of Interior, headed by a minister who has often run for election. Through all of these years, the absence of reform was happening right under the oversight of international donors, including the European Union.

Lebanon's political system remained non-reformist but showed resilience, especially after 2011 and the outbreak of civil war in Syria. Despite the expectations that Syria's conflict would spill over, into Lebanon and despite the massive influx of Syrian refugees, the political system remained intact.[20] After 2011, Lebanese politicians postponed by consensus parliamentary elections three times. Lebanon was also without a president for over two years, a vacuum that Hezbollah-backed Michel Aoun eventually filled. The October 2016 election of Aoun as president created a tipping point; this was the first time since the civil war that Hezbollah, with its allies, had a majority grip over parliament and government. This was followed by a decline in civil liberties and economic recession which planted the seeds for the emergence of mass mobilising and political opposition, which extended beyond civil society activists to the country as a whole in October 2019. This mass organising was focused against the regime's network or machinery of sectarianism and corruption (*al-manzoumeh*).

There are three dimensions of continuity from the history of the regime that represent politics of exclusion. The first dimension is *exclusion based on impunity* and its manifestation in the institutions and political practices of post- civil war Lebanon. The modern roots of impunity lie in the amnesty agreement for crimes committed in the war. There is evidence in the literature that power-sharing is a means to achieve a pragmatic political agreement among divided parties, with relative success in the cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa.[21] But in the Lebanese case, the lack of justice after the war enshrined governance through impunity. Months can go by with no functional government, years can go by with no elections, and scores can be assassinated without justice ever being served. This impunity is also greatly gendered and intersects with class and sectarian identities. Women are treated differently by the system depending on what sect they are born into. Laws that regulate child marriage, divorce and inheritance differ because Lebanese personal status is governed by fifteen religious courts and no civil status code exists, although women's rights organisations have demanded this reform for decades.[22] This results in a system where gender-based violence is prevalent and for instance a rapist could escape trial if he proposes to marry his victim.

The second of the dimensions of exclusion which shaped the protest movements is the *formality of informality*. State institutions, parliament and cabinet are not the places where decisions are made. Real power and capacity to deliver services lie outside the state. Backdoor dealing is the norm at the National Dialogue Table where a group of fifteen men meet to discuss strategic issues in times of crisis, or choose not to meet, thereby rendering all political institutions irrelevant and paralysing the state.[23] This formal informality is what we can describe as a powerful but weak state, which

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[19] Daniel Corstange, "Clientelism in Competitive and Uncompetitive Elections", in *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (January 2018), p. 76-104.

[20] Carmen Geha, "Resilience through Learning and Adaptation: Lebanon's Power-Sharing System and the Syrian Refugee Crisis", in *Middle East Law and Governance*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (May 2019), p. 65-90.

[21] Joanne McEvoy and Brendan O'Leary, eds, *Power Sharing in Deeply Divided Places*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

[22] See Dima Dabbous, "Legal Reform and Women's Rights in Lebanese Personal Status Laws", in *CMI Reports*, No. 3 (September 2017), https://www.cmi.no/publications/6341.

[23] See Henrik Hartmann, "National Dialogues and Development", in *National Dialogue Handbook Conceptual Studies*, February 2017, https://berghof-foundation.org/library/national-dialogues-and-development.

Mouawad and Bauman showed as a state complicating the daily experience of citizens, and not a weak state removed from daily life.[24] It is difficult to overthrow or hold accountable someone who is not in an official government position or has not been elected to office, which is the case for several powerful *zu'ama* (sectarian leaders) or party leaders, including Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces, Sleiman Frangieh of the Marada Party and Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah. Because power-sharing rests on the acquiescence of politicians, it is their approval and consensus that facilitates or obstructs the work of state institutions, a phenomenon that has resulted in months-long deadlock or in missing constitutional deadlines for the sake of maintaining consensus. It is impossible for citizens or civil society actors to advocate for reform,[25] ask for information or ensure transparency because state institutions have no power to make decisions; strategic decisions are in the hands of sectarian warlords.

The third of dimension of the politics of exclusion is *widespread corruption*. The state's resources were the incentive used to get warlords to agree to peace in 1990. In effect they treat public positions and resources as their own and use them for clientelism. Countless attempts to combat corruption and ensure equity in services failed miserably. The politicians have the final say in hiring the civil service and they also manage the portfolios of health and education, treating these services as favours and benefits granted to their supporters. Corruption in the electricity sector alone has cost $40 billion in debt.[26] A Ponzi scheme run by the Central Bank fell through in 2020 and depositors lost all their money while the local currency collapsed – rising from 1,500 to 13,000 to the dollar at the time of writing. Successive governments after the civil war piled up public debt to international donors that were in acquiescence with maintaining the role of the Lebanese elite at any cost. Largely a remittance economy, Lebanon also borrowed from Arab Gulf states that began to retreat with the increased power of Hezbollah after 2016.[27] Corruption coupled with negligence and lack of competence in state institutions meant that ammonium nitrates and picric acid were stored under sweltering heat for more than six years at the Beirut port. Warlords have set up an intricate web of services to their loyalists including healthcare, education and jobs.[28] Clientelism exacerbates gendered discrimination, with women making up less than 5 per cent of the parliament on average, despite years of funding from EU and other donors for women's supposed empowerment.[29] Women are almost absent from decision-making roles and are disproportionally affected by unemployment and lack of public services. These networks of institutions mean that politicians have no interest in, nor would they benefit from, any attempt for reform.[30] France is leading international efforts to support Lebanon and for the first time collectively donors have conditioned aid on reforms. The Arab Gulf states, and especially Saudi Arabia, have distanced themselves from Lebanon due to Hezbollah's growing influence over national politics. The International Monetary Fund has made numerous attempts at pushing for reform in exchange for a bailout, to no avail.[31]

[24] Jamil Mouawad and Hannes Bauman, "In Search of the Lebanese State", in *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring 2017), p. 60-65.

[25] See Paul W.T. Kingston, *Reproducing Sectarianism. Advocacy Networks and the Politics of Civil Society in Postwar Lebanon*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2013.

[26] Bassem Mroue, "Minister, No Investor for Lebanon's Ailing Power Sector", in *AP News*, 16 July 2020, https://apnews.com/article/d8ca48aa2eddc1bd7075feabfd725a88.

[27] Edmund Blair, "Explainer: Lebanon's Financial Meltdown and How it Happened", in *Reuters*, 17 September 2020, https://reut.rs/2H0aPkL.

[28] For a comprehensive and definitive view of sectarian welfare and its connection to corruption see: Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism. Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2014.

[29] Carmen Geha, "The Myth of Women's Political Empowerment within Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing System", in *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2019), p. 498-521.

[30] For example, politicians have parallel sectarian charities such as the Hariri Foundation, Makhzoumi Foundation, Sadr Foundation, Moawad Foundation and Azm and Saadeh Foundation.

[31] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Statement by the Managing Director at the International Conference in Support of the Lebanese People*, 2 December 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/12/02/sp120220-statement-by-the-managing-director-international-conference-in-support-of-lebanese-people.

2. From protests to revolution: Three major waves

The three aforementioned dimensions – namely impunity, informality and corruption – reinforce each other and create a deeply entrenched politics of exclusion. They also shape the narrative and strategy of activists and the regime's responses of co-optation and oppression leading up to the 2019 October uprisings.

The discontent against the politics of exclusion and sectarianism enabled the long-time demands of activists to reach the mainstream media and create a ripple effect through protests against the whole political class. The protests rejected the polarised politics of March 8 and March 14, and framed Lebanon's problems as endemic and protected by the entire political elite.

The first wave of protests is known as the *Isqat al-Nizam al-Ta'ifi* (bringing down the sectarian regime) inspired by the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in January-February 2011. The movement was much smaller than in Egypt and Tunisia but organisers were able to articulate a Lebanese version of bringing down the system that mobilised people to the streets.[32] This Lebanese movement was confronted with the reality that there was not one dictator to be removed but an entire system to be toppled. The movement organisers chanted slogans calling for the end of the regime "and its symbols" (*wa-rumuzih*), referring to powerful political leaders who were not actually part of formal state institutions, meaning they could not resign, but who protected and supported the sectarian system. Women were at the forefront of these protests, as bringing down the sectarian system would inevitably ensure gender equality under the law. The top demand under eradicating the sectarian system would be a unified status code and so several women's rights groups joined these protests and held public sessions to make demands for citizenship, civil marriage and civil status.

In classic co-optation fashion, the speaker of parliament Nabih Berri was the first to claim that he and his movement also wanted to change the sectarian system, calling for youth members of his party, the Amal Movement, to join the protests. The then Head of the Free Patriotic Party Michel Aoun saluted the protesters, claiming that his party was a pioneer in fighting sectarianism since its 2005 charter stated the need to separate politics from religion. Walid Jumblatt, a Druze leader and head of the Progressive Socialist Party, also openly took part in supporting the demands of the protesters. Many politicians embraced the famous 2009 quote of Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, who had stepped down the day before the first protest: "We must first eradicate sectarianism from [our] souls (*al-nufus*) and not from [legal] texts (*al-nusus*)."

For activists, this co-optation of the movement's demands by traditionally sectarian leaders was confusing. The people paying lip service to anti-sectarianism were the very same warlords and leaders who were in power, who kept sectarianism in the texts (*nusus*) in a way that discriminated against women and ensured that elections are performed so as to keep them in power. After April 2011, the organisers did not call for another protest, and Lebanon entered a phase of political deadlock. But the aftermaths of these protests included a narrative adopted by a generation of activists, especially young women, who were realising that advocacy and demanding change from this system were ineffective. Lebanon would need radical change because those in power simply

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[32] Sami Hermez, "On Dignity and Clientelism: Lebanon in the Context of the 2011 Arab Revolutions", in *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (December 2011), p. 527-537.

have no interest in shaking the pillars of what keeps them in power: the triangle of impunity, informality and corruption.

Then in the summer of 2015, a combination of hot weather electricity problems and governmental deadlock following the second postponement of parliamentary elections triggered a next wave of protest in Lebanon. A trash crisis began because people living near the Naʿama landfill protested and refused to let garbage dumpsters into their area due to overflow of garbage. The landfill which opened in 1997 was intended to be a temporary solution for trash in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The solution, supposedly an interim one, was still in place almost two decades later despite numerous smaller protests by affected residents of Naʿama.[33] Trash immediately started piling up and anger on the part of residents of the peripheral town Naʿama reached Beirut, leading a group of activists to mobilise with the slogan *tol'it rihitkum* literally meaning "your stench has emerged" – rendered in English as "You Stink".[34]

The protest organisers of You Stink identified the garbage crisis as a political crisis, a failure and a result of corruption and negligence. Protesters claimed that political corruption was starting to reek, just like the stench of garbage, and the group staged marches towards government agencies and threw bags of garbage over security barricades into government compounds. Immediately thousands of people began rallying behind You Stink, as the movement resonated not only with demands to clean the streets but also to "clean" the government of sectarian leaders. The protests became known as the *hirak* ("movement"), which grouped together various movements that demonstrated against the political system. This was a first mass articulation of trash, electricity, unemployment and inflation as resulting from political failure and corruption. Women were also at the forefront of this movement; young feminists joined the protests carrying the slogan "Feminist Block". They articulated a vision for the protests that was intersectional: garbage was corruption, and corruption and sectarianism were the same forces endangering the lives and bodies of women.

The summer *hirak* uncovered how long corruption can go unpunished and how the sectarian warlords were still able to meet over dialogue, but not to regulate the sector and create a solution to the mounting trash. The media reported that more than 100,000 citizens attended, making it one of the largest street protests in Lebanon's recent history. Following the protests, the Beirut *Madinaty* (Beirut My City) electoral campaign was founded by a group of activists, professionals, artists and university professors. For this group, there was the need for a political opposition group to take the momentum from the streets to the competition for the seats of the Beirut municipality. It included 50 per cent women candidates and once more women emerged as founders and spokespersons. Beirut *Madinaty* won 30 per cent of the votes but no seats due to the majoritarian electoral system, but it gave birth to subsequent movements in other areas such as Baalbeck, and created a precedent encouraging other opposition groups to run for parliament in 2018. Contestation had now moved from street politics to electoral campaigning, and many activists had begun to win support from constituencies.[35]

The 2019 October revolution was by far the most historical juncture for anti-regime protests and sentiments. The revolution opened up the space of political participation that had thus far been monopolised by sectarian parties. Because the revolution was not hierarchal, once again women emerged at the centre of not only every protest but every public dialogue, media appearance and police station where activists were illegally detained or arrested. They succeeded in putting forward,

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[33] See Human Rights Watch, *"As If You're Inhaling Your Death". The Health Risks of Burning Waste in Lebanon*, November 2017, https://www.hrw.org/node/311168.
[34] See Carmen Geha, "Politics of a Garbage Crisis: Social Networks, Narratives, and Frames of Lebanon's 2015 Protests and Their Aftermath", in *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2019), p. 78-92.
[35] Ibid.

to a large extent, an intersectional narrative that was inclusive of migrant workers, refugees and members of the LGBTQ community.[36]

The revolution was a major precedent in three ways. First, it broke taboos that the Lebanese psyche had stored so deeply from the civil war and its aftermath. The phrase *"kellon yaaneh kellon"* (all means all of them) that became a mainstream slogan and approach to holding all politicians accountable is a sign of social transformation unlike any other in the country's history. Different groups that would protest or demand reform saw their own leader (*za'im*) as untouchable. But this time the protestors cursed all politicians and showed their faces and names across the city. Second, the intensity, longevity and decentralised nature of the revolution showed that it was not only urban elite and "civil society" in and around the Beirut area who wanted to confront the system and *zu'ama*, there was a national outcry and demand for new political leadership.[37] The movement was also purposeful in that it attacked parliament, banks and politicians' homes – bringing out salient corruption patterns in the public education system, media, health, environment but mainly corruption that uses violence to silence dissent. Third, the revolution was gendered not only in terms of women's leading participation and main roles as mobilisers, spokespersons and advocates, but also in putting the issues of gender equality on the table.[38] There was a clear and deliberative narrative against the version of state feminism that had produced and protected sectarian political parties leaving women's voices out of the spaces where decisions about their lives and wellbeing are made. Historically women needed a sectarian patriarch to adopt them on his list, and they would then have to reinforce his policies and act as his representative. The revolutionaries contested this and even as the protests entered abeyance, there was a rise for a new form of inclusive politics through new political parties and platforms that focused on women's representation and gender-inclusive policies.

3. The explosion and its aftermath: Community-driven resistance

By early 2020, the collapsing currency and economic recession caused poverty to plunge to record highs. In March, the covid pandemic reached Lebanon with an already crumbling and ill-equipped health sector. In that same month, Lebanon defaulted. Even before the explosion, the numbers of protestors had regressed largely due to co-optation and state violence. The politics of exclusion and power-sharing explained above had stifled the revolution. First, it was impossible to hold accountable whoever was responsible for the faltering currency and the loss of depositors' money. Second, it was impossible to ask for the resignation of the main powers, national and regional, who were not officially part of the government created in January 2020. The formal informality of the system had trumped any demands for reform and accountability. Finally, widespread corruption meant that people relied on goods and services; they suddenly stopped cursing and chanting, and retreated to a victim position. The revolution had started to create solid social networks of solidarity, mobilisation and even new friendships which sustained beyond the streets. But nothing could have prepared anyone for the port explosion on 4 August 2020.

To say the least, the port explosion was a rupture, which destroyed the last shred of people's connection and trust in the state. At the same time, it was the ultimate enabling factor for sectarian

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[36] Lebanese law still criminalises homosexuality.
[37] For analysis on the protests see Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, "Why Did the October 17 Revolution Witness a Regression in Numbers?", in *Setting the Agenda*, 31 October 2020, https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/agendaArticle.php?id=199.
[38] See Carmen Geha, "Our Personal Is Political and Revolutionary", in *Al-Raida Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2020), p. 23-28, http://alraidajournal.com/index.php/ALRJ/article/view/1818.

leaders to resort to their evil patterns of impunity, informal back-door dealing (or the lack thereof) and corrupt clientelism. The tragic aftermath of the explosion led to waves of local and international mobilisation like never before. In the midst of massive destruction and devastation, people came together to sweep streets, fundraise, rebuild homes and confront a political class notorious for impunity. Instead of protesting a system widely understood as corrupt, people organised and rallied so that aid would go directly to homes, schools, people in need, and to civil society associations or independent political groups. As opposed to a negligent and corrupt political system, people and communities were resisting by doing well and building networks of solidarity. This time it seemed that the international community, given the magnitude of the disaster, could not go back to propping up a political class and void national institutions. It heeded the call of the people and refused to provide any aid to the government without structural reforms, a condition that remains unmet at the time of writing.

People in Lebanon – not only the Lebanese but diaspora, civil society and international donors – geared up all that they knew and had first to call the culprits by their name: "*kellon yaaneh kellon*". Five days after the explosion, a mass mourning protest was held and organisers declared that they would not wait for a verdict. They knew who was responsible. In an unprecedented scene, protestors set up hanging gallows with puppets of all the politicians (*all of them*) in downtown Beirut. But the regime responded, as unhinged and resilient as ever, with tear gas, live bullets and impunity. It is safe to say that by August 2020, the revolution and people's souls had been crushed. Although the revolutionaries called for a symbolic protest in October 2020, at which thousands showed up, the revolutionary moment itself was gone. The people of Lebanon were facing a new reality.

Constructive resistance literature defines the term as people coming together to create alternative realities, to experience a world they wish to live in and to co-create solutions for common problems. After the explosion, it was clear that people were living under the mercy of murderers; but despite all the international condemnation, the Macron initiative and local outcry, no government was formed and eight months later no investigation has been completed. President Macron had flown into Lebanon days after the explosion demanding that the political class enact immediate reforms and appoint a functional government, he would later say that the politicians lied and are a disgrace because until today Lebanon is without a government. Juxtaposed to this stagnation and continued violence, actors all over Beirut were launching community-driven initiatives, using new tools to help victims restore some sense of dignity and autonomy. Indeed, what happened was a transformation of social relationships in everyday life, where people came together not only to show solidarity but to co-create and find an alternate path to survive and persist.[39] Constructive resistance occurs when people begin to build the society and polity that they desire independently from the structures that govern their live.[40] Rejecting "*all of them*", the organisers of this movement may have started out spontaneously over a shared pain but slowly exhibited patterns of similarity and of deliberative action to resist the prevalent dimensions of exclusion, and replace them with a new politics of inclusion and resistance for the collective good.

The political contention, after the protest on 9 August that was met by violence, had transformed into a community-driven mode of resistance. Almost opposite to the passive notion of resilience

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[39] Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen, "Decolonizing Civil Resistance", in *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (December 2015), p. 517-532.
[40] Majken Jul Sørensen, "Constructive Resistance: Conceptualising and Mapping the Terrain", in *Journal of Resistance Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2016), p. 49-78, https://resistance-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Volume-2-Number-1.-Majken.pdf.

which can be critiqued as covering up injustice and pushing people to adapt without change,[41] this resistance movement after the explosion is aimed at demanding accountability and uncovering the corruption as well as the negligence that caused the corruption, while lifting up the most vulnerable and providing basic services. This is an important theoretical and political distinction. The resilience of the state is apparent in the case of Lebanon which is able to survive shocks,[42] whereas what people are doing and organising are actually acts of resistance and confrontation.

While it is impossible, due to the absence of data so far, to map out all of the initiatives, I propose a typology to be able to conceptualise the different ways in which these new movements are mobilising with and for the community. In terms of a typology, it is possible to identify a range of movements whose networks pre-existed before the explosion but had to get more organized and active the wake of the crisis. This conceptual typology of a community-driven resistance is based on the movement's strategies which need not be mutually exclusive. The four-fold typology selected for illustration and analysis here uses an approach that emphasises intersectionality in the Lebanese context. I call it resistance because it cuts across the fault lines of historical exclusion to offer a different way of working with people, for people, in the face of continued impunity, informality and corruption. This intersectionality is evident in that women are at the forefront of this movement, but also in that the internal ways of organising are gender inclusive. These movements also target historically marginalised people and communities, including migrants and refugees. In the wake of the explosion, "all of them means all of them" has turned into "all of us means all of us." It was a call to put into action the slogans of a crushed revolution, as all over Beirut volunteers of different nationalities rushed to pull out bodies, people attended mass funerals and candlelight vigils were held in most major cities across the world. This typology may include movements with different strategies but the frame and narrative were similar: the politicians were the culprits, nobody is coming to save the people, the people had to do this themselves for "all of the people".

The first type is the *relief and humanitarian aid organisations or groups*, such as Offre Joie which mobilised 6,000 volunteers to rebuild hundreds of homes in weeks. The significance of Offre Joie lies in the model of volunteer-based service and collaboration it led in the heavily damaged Karantina and Mar Mikhael neighbourhoods. By contrast to a totally absent government and weak state institutions, Offre Joie mobilised resources and people to lift up a community in need. In the face of polarised politics and inefficient government institutions, Offre Joie brought youth from across the country, from different backgrounds, and organised them into shifts to work on cleaning and fixing homes. Relying only on in-kind donations, Offre Joie's offices were flooded with support from all over the world and in just a matter of weeks, they had helped rebuild hundreds of homes. Another example is "*Beit el Baraka*" (the house of blessing) which today has rebuilt 3,100 homes offering housing to the forgotten and vulnerable. Beit el Baraka also opened a free supermarket and helps families with medicine, committing to human dignity and social security for all. Nusaned is another local organisation rebuilding shops in the devastated areas of Gemayzeh and Mar Mikhael, seeking to restore the local social fabric and dynamism of an area crushed to pieces.

The second type is *advocacy and human rights organisations* including legal activists, such as Legal Agenda or the Beirut Bar Association, defending the rights of the victims' families or the marginalised groups in the devasted areas. Both these organisations existed before the explosion and turned their focus to aiding the homeless and the vulnerable. The Kafala system in Lebanon puts migrant workers into a situation of modern slavery. Abused by their employers, many of these workers were left on the side of the road after the explosion. Legal Agenda as well as the Anti-

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[41] See Rima Majed, "Interview: Beirut Blast Exposed a Global System", in *rs21*, 30 August 2020, https://www.rs21.org.uk/2020/08/30/interview-beirut-blast-exposed-a-global-system.
[42] Carmen Geha, "Resistance not Resilience: A Proposal for Collective Action", in *An-Nahar*, 17 May 2021, https://tinyurl.com/yfftjxn7.

Racism Movement (ARM) dedicate their resources and expertise to advocate for migrant workers' rights.[43] The Beirut Bar Association (BBA) is leading a volunteer lawsuit on behalf of the families of the victims, presenting a unique case of judges and lawyers serving the community while the actual government-led investigation stalls.[44] The BBA is not only providing legal services but also speaks against corruption in the judiciary. This advocacy movement is also coupled with a rise in journalists uncovering violence, corruption and negligence daily on the news.[45]

The third type is *fundraising platforms*, whether local or international, focused on raising funds for Beirut and condemning corruption and incompetence at the government level, such as Xpatria in Switzerland. Xpatria's mission is to channel diaspora funding to initiatives based in Beirut, whether to individual households or trusted NGOs. In contrast with the government being a black-box of funding where millions go missing over the years, Xpatria and other similar platforms commit to transparency and accountability. Impact Lebanon is a UK-based organisation that existed before the explosion and that also launched a fundraiser providing direct aid to those affected by the disaster. Impact Lebanon also resists the usual ineffectiveness of the state by partnering with a quality assurance company as well as using a strategy to vet NGOs and ensure that local needs are met. Several crowd-funding websites have also mushroomed, dedicating their platforms to not only channelling aid but also matching donors with local trusted associations and families.

Some organisations and movements can *combine more than one of these strategies*. A case in point is *Khaddit Beirut* (Beirut Shake-Up) created on 5 August, the day after the explosion, as a movement of activists, business owners, academics and experts that channelled their activism to meet the needs of the community. Khaddit Beirut (KB) adopts an agile, evidence-based, inclusive and holistic approach that is informed by local needs, accountable to people and focused on sustainable solutions in the areas of communities' health, education, environmental health and local business. In terms of the typology of strategies described here, KB operates in the nexus of advocacy and providing services.

KB is a network of 200-plus activists and experts implementing interventions around Community Health, Community Education, Environmental Health and Inclusive Businesses. Its members embedded themselves with the community in the devastated areas for several weeks and months to identify what institutional models were destroyed in the blast and how they can be rebuilt in an inclusive sustainable way. It mobilises the diaspora to provide its expertise and goodwill to advocate for the needs of the community. KB's main strategy aims at creating scalable models which – in theory – can be adopted by the government at some point, but the end result is not policy change or governmental reform.

By working with constituencies and communities, KB is able to both confront the political class but also support state-building by undertaking four different models of engagement. The first is transforming a primary healthcare centre in the devastated community of Karantina into a community healthcare centre. Where Lebanon's health services are either private or used as a web of clientelism, KB nurses and doctors volunteer to help a community serve its own needs by training health agents and partnering with the staff at the Karantina hospital. Rather than turning away people for not affording healthcare or for the colour of their skin, KB's aspiration for a model

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[43] See Laure Ayoub, "Foreign Workers Revolt Against the 'Republic's Contractor' in Lebanon", in *Legal Agenda*, 21 April 2021, https://english.legal-agenda.com/?p=23972.

[44] After making some progress, the politicians interfered to remove the judge in the middle of the investigation, see AFP, "Lebanon Judge Removed from Beirut Blast Probe: Judicial Source", in *France 24*, 18 February 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210218-lebanon-judge-removed-from-beirut-blast-probe-judicial-source.

[45] See for example Timour Azhari, "No More COVID Jabs in Parliament, Says Lebanon's Deputy Speaker After Scandal", in *Reuters*, 12 March 2021, https://reut.rs/3tdzOnv.

of health is inclusive, free and community-led. The second is transforming schools into communities of active citizenship and solidarity in a time of crisis. KB partners with teachers, principals and parents to understand the needs of students and develop solutions collaboratively. This is an act of resistance to the mainstream state policy that has depleted the education sector of its resources, defunded public schools and segregated students based often on their nationality. The third is modelling a process for inclusive business recovery. The small shops, restaurants and cafes that defined the social fabric of the devastated area for so long were destroyed. Rebuilding businesses is not about securing equipment to reopen but partnering with business owners to rethink their long-term plans. This is also an act of resistance to a government that is completely absent from this sector and imposes structural barriers. Finally, the environmental team at KB is implementing models of community mobilising to address local waste management issues and raise awareness on environmental hazards. The explosion left people paranoid and afraid of the air they breathe and the water they drink. By teaming up with activists and local committees, KB is able to present a model of engaged citizens putting their environmental wellbeing first, as a strategy to resist what the state has done for them.

Conclusion: A call to action

It has only been ten months since the port explosion and it may be too soon to assess the real impact on the lives of people and communities, but there has been a shift in Beirut from revolutionary politics to a community-driven resistance. This has been sparked by several factors emanating not only from the stagnation in national politics but also the international and regional context. The longer reforms stall, the longer aid and foreign investment will have to wait. Meanwhile the financial crisis, the pandemic and a city in ruins are all factors that appear to have pushed activists to shift their strategies. This form of resistance is aimed at the long term but can create an experience that the people of Lebanon have so far been deprived of, an experience aimed not at "all the politicians" but at "all of the people" – leaving nobody behind because of their gender, race or class. Community mobilisation and solidarity is now a mode of everyday resistance in Beirut and it deserves support.

If the EU wants to play a positive role in Lebanon, it should not ask about the funds that were dispersed with little to show in the last thirty years. The Lebanese government has received funding for EU projects on state restructuring, e-government, environment and gender reform, with little or nothing to show. The EU has started and should continue partnering with local institutions in education, health, civil society and also businesses, on identifying their needs. The activists may have turned their attention to devastated streets but the demand for political reform and the end of the politics of exclusion have never been stronger, and the EU should also push for political reform that ensures the representation of women, new political parties and competent individuals who are able not only to support a community in disaster but draw a vision for future resistance based on equal rights and the participation of "all" the people to challenge "all" the politicians.

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