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One year after 'Beirutshima'

One year after the blast at Beirut's port, Lebanon is still suffering. The people are fed up with the ruling elite — and desperate to leave

In Lebanon, time froze at 06:07 PM on 4 August 2020. This somber day has disfigured not only a city, but a whole population. Many numbers have been circulating: 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate, 215 victims, at least 6,500 injured, at least two known cases of victims still lying in a coma, more than 70,000 damaged housing units, more than 300,000 displaced, an estimated USD 8bn in material losses, countless losses of precious human life.

Yet the number that really counts are the more than 7,000,000 traumatised people in Lebanon and abroad seeking justice. One year has passed since that day. Impunity is still reigning over the explosion of 4 August or 'Beirutshima', as many have called it since to hint at the nuclear scale of destruction. Lebanese society is undergoing massive crises coupled with despair and disappointment. It is a hellish combination: the plummeting value of the local currency, banks detaining depositors' money, the Covid-19 pandemic, a blast of almost nuclear proportions.

A few steps back

Lebanon's vicious cycle began in summer 2019, when signs of financial collapse started to loom on the horizon. The banks began to impose restrictions on withdrawals from business and personal accounts. But then 17 October changed the political dynamic. Millions of Lebanese took to the streets in protest against the imposition of new taxes on ordinary citizens. The political class saw the demonstrations as an opportunity to smuggle billions of dollars outside the country and launch a new narrative: It was the protests that had caused the financial collapse.

The political elite in Lebanon emerged from the Civil War that ended in 1990. The protests truly scared them because the Lebanese people showed a united front against the whole political class under one slogan 'kellon yaane kellon', Arabic for 'all of them means all of them'. This was

an explicit accusation against everyone who participated in the political scene since 1990, demanding accountability for mismanagement and corruption. The ruling parties were outraged. In several parts of the country, violent attacks were launched against the protesters by thugs affiliated with the different parties.

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Then, March 2020 came and the pandemic helped the regime clear the angry people from the streets. The ruling parties saw the lockdown as an opportunity to reinforce their position: Security forces burned the tents that protesters had put up across the country as meeting points to discuss political matters and change the discourse. Parties also branded hygiene kits and food boxes with their names and logos and distributed them to their supporters and families in need.

The collapse, however, came faster than anyone could anticipate. By July 2020, the Lebanese Pound had set a new record by dropping to a historically low exchange rate of 8,000 LBP to 1 USD. The government used the pandemic as solution to its problem: Whenever prices increased significantly, especially bread, they imposed a lockdown.

Doom's day

4 August started as a first 'normal' day after one of these irrational five-day lockdowns. At 5 pm local time, businesses closed, and Beirut's streets saw their usual daily traffic jams. At 5:40 pm, a fire erupted in warehouse 12 at Beirut harbor. The fire brigade was called. At 6:07 pm, a first loud explosion happened. Those who heard it in Beirut went outside to see what was going on. Less than 40 seconds later … well, the whole world has seen what happened then. Even in Cyprus, you could hear and feel the detonation.

In a country like Lebanon, marked by continuous unrest and violence, whenever you hear a loud sound, you run. This time it was different. There was nowhere to run to. Within 10 kilometers from the explosion, glass and metallic shards pierced everything in sight.

I live only one kilometer from where the blast happened. I witnessed scenes that no Hollywood production could ever recreate. I ran on a street that was full of blood. Adults and children walking like zombies, half-consciously screaming. The hardest part was not taking care of the dead bodies on the ground. Or seeing hospitals damaged, their medical

staff trying to evacuate patients covered with blood to the streets. Or seeing a blown-up funeral home, their coffins dispersed outside, waiting to receive more dead bodies. The hardest part on that day was running for more than five hours, trying to save the wounded, and not knowing what had happened. Did a new war just start? An invasion? When would be the next explosion?

The aftermath

In the morning of 5 August, the air was heavy. Dust and death filled the atmosphere in Beirut. The cloud of the exploded ammonium nitrate covered the city with a pink layer as it landed on broken housed and cars. Yet, tens of thousands of Lebanese flocked from all its regions with shovels, brooms, and garbage bags to clean their capital and stand in solidarity with the victims.

The state, the silent culprit, did not lift a finger to help the volunteers in the relief and cleaning efforts. Instead, it chose to face angry survivors and protesters with teargas and bullets when they demonstrated on 8 August near the parliament. Not a single officer was held accountable for permanently injuring protesters. More than 35 lost an eye that day.

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Today, more than one year later, the state has totally failed and the economy has collapsed completely. The reserves of the central bank have been exhausted after the ruling class smuggled their money out of the country. Parliament legalised the use of 200 million USD from the reserves – i.e. depositors' money – to import fuel and other goods. The exchange rate with the US Dollar is hitting new records every day, currently reaching 23.000 LBP. Lebanon lacks essential medical supplies. The health sector is buckling. Electric power is provided only for three hours per day.

Last week, as tens of thousands commemorated 4August in Lebanon side by side with the families of the victims, the eyes of general public are fixed on the investigative judge Tarek Bitar to take unprecedented courageous decisions and call out the culprits. Officials have repeatedly admitted that they knew of the presence of ammonium nitrate in warehouse 12. Among these is President Michel Aoun himself who said in a televised interview in August 2020 that he was informed about it on July 20 – 'too late', according to him.

Aoun, a former General and supposedly knowledgeable of the dangers of such explosives, has spent the last ten months bargaining with Saad Hariri. Both are obstructing the formation of a new government that could give the Lebanese people hope. On 5 August, Judge Bitar requested lifting the immunity of several prominent former decision-makers with possible ties to the event. Parliament refused.

Meanwhile, alternative media platforms are conducting far-reaching investigative work around the trafficking and storing of the ammonium nitrate that led to the explosion. The Lebanese people, especially the youth, have lost faith in accountability and justice in their country. They have also lost faith in the international community. They are just dreaming of a visa and a one-way ticket to elsewhere.



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Beirut

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