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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 17 August 2020

Whither the Political Crisis in Lebanon after the Port Explosion?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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On 4 August Beirut witnessed an unprecedented explosion that led to the total destruction of the city's port. The blast took the lives of more than 170 people, wounded thousands, and left nearly a quarter million homeless as a result of the destruction. Its social, economic, and political repercussions have been amplified by the crises already blighting the country, including the collapse of the Lebanese pound, the banking sector crisis, and political clashes between the Hezbollah–Free Patriotic Movement (Aounist) alliance (which dominates parliament and government) and their political opponents.

Background to the explosion and initial consequences

Many theories have circulated as to the cause of the explosion, with President Michel Aoun even insinuating that it may have been a foreign attack. However, the most likely theory is that an accident resulted in the detonation of more than 2,700 metric tons of the highly explosive material ammonium nitrate, improperly stored in a Port of Beirut warehouse despite repeated warnings that it needed to be removed. The main issue is thus not what caused the explosion, which may have been accidental – the main issue is the fact that huge quantities of highly dangerous explosives had been kept in the port since 2013. Why were they there in the first place, and why did none of the successive governments that have come to power since – incorporating every political force in Lebanon – do anything about them?

The fact that these hazardous materials were allowed to be improperly stored constitutes gross negligence (it has been stated below). Since the ammonium nitrate first arrived at Beirut Port there have been two presidents (Michel Suleiman and Michel Aoun), four prime ministers (Najib Mikati, Tammam Salam, Saad al-Hariri, and Hassan Diab), as well as numerous Ministers of Public Works and the Interior, the officials directly responsible for the harbor. In this case, the entire “political class” (*al-tabaqa al-siyasiyya*) has been negligent. Protestors had already taken to the streets on 17 October 2019 to demand the total removal of this class, citing the deplorable state of the country after years of mismanagement. Whether or not this “apolitical” demand has any meaning – and whether or not it is reasonable to expect all the political parties to vacate the country on demand – this speaks to the rage felt across Lebanon towards the political regime and the elites it has produced.

Although previous governments bear the brunt of the responsibility for allowing the ammonium nitrate to remain in the port, the mismanagement crisis came to a head with the government of Hassan Diab which came to power at the beginning of this year. This government – falsely labelled a “technocrat government” despite differences between political stakeholders, some of whom have worked to isolate it both domestically and internationally – is no more than a front for the real decisionmakers, who have used it to shield themselves from a direct confrontation with the Lebanese masses since the October 2019 protests. Its inability to act or to take responsibility has been thrown into particularly stark relief in the wake of the explosion, whose casualties include the port and its grain silos and adjacent neighborhoods. The burden of plugging the gaps left by the



marked absence of state services has fallen almost entirely on social movements and civil society organizations. Rather than a Lebanese state ground down by sectarian cronyism (*muhhasasa*) and corruption, it is merely an impotent government that seems to be the problem. Indeed, the extent to which popular outrage has focused on this particular government will have been reassuring to the real leaders of the Lebanese political system.

Estimated losses have varied, but they generally range between \$10 and 15 billion – to be added to a similar figure Lebanon needs to stimulate its economy and escape the current financial crisis. Much of the damage took place in Christian-majority neighborhoods, reflecting poorly on President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), led by his son-in-law Gebran Bassil. This raises the possibility that the balance of power between the various Christian blocs and parties will shift in any upcoming elections, whether called early or held on the predetermined date after two years. It has also become clear that Hezbollah and the Aounist movement cannot dispense with other forces and govern Lebanon alone, meaning that their share of ministerial portfolios is likely to fall in any future government.

Breaking the deadlock and government collapse

The sheer size of the blast and the tremendous damage caused have produced an outpouring of international sympathy, with aid flooding into Lebanon from across the world. It has also led to the breakdown of the deadlock imposed on Lebanon by American sanctions and the accompanying accusations, following the formation of Hassan Diab's government, that Hezbollah controls Lebanon.

While Emmanuel Macron has transparently attempted to exploit the disaster for political gain as part of France's efforts to play a role in the eastern Mediterranean, his visit to Beirut is the biggest step in this direction thus far. Exploiting popular anger and French cultural influence in some of the Beiruti neighborhoods he visited, he has presented himself as a savior. At a meeting with the heads of all parliamentary blocs at the Pine Residence (the French embassy), he put forward an initiative calling for the formation of a national unity government by the beginning of September. It is difficult to ignore the negative national symbolism of this meeting as Lebanon approaches the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the French Mandate —itself announced from the Pine Residence.

The massive destruction caused by the explosion and the sense of popular solidarity across Beirut and Lebanon as a whole has triggered a wave of ministerial resignations, ultimately leading the Prime Minister himself to stand down. Diab realized that the dismantling of his cabinet was inevitable, especially given that the Speaker Nabih Berri had set a date for the government to be questioned by the parliament on the explosion. Berri seems to have hoped to bring down the government via parliament in order to check the prime minister's call for early elections – a suggestion condemned by both President and Speaker, since early elections would most likely result in a change in the composition of the house, currently dominated by the President's bloc.

Where to now?

The explosion that shook Lebanon has produced several parallel developments. The first began with the Diab government's resignation and the move toward forming a national unity government to undertake the internationally prescribed reforms and help Lebanon to break free of its economic crisis. A national unity government, however, would mean entrenchment of the sectarian power-sharing regime. Moreover, the crisis has allowed both the protest movement and other political actors to demand that early elections be conducted according to a more representative election law – spelling the end for President Aoun, whose era has been characterized by ubiquitous failure.

The second set of developments highlighted by the port explosion concerns the fallout for the various political forces, parties, and blocs. This latest disaster has brought to light the internal polarization Hezbollah has experienced for some time, along two main axes. The first of these axes is generational: while the war in Syria has facilitated the rise of a new generation of leaders across the board, especially within the party's security and military organs, the party's political faces have remained unchanged for three decades, including its representatives in parliament and cabinet. The dichotomy between the leaders of the party's organizational structures – inertia as opposed to action, sacrifice as opposed to prosperity and wealth – has never been clearer. Furthermore, the party's military leadership enjoys a closer relationship with the Shi'i masses than its political counterparts, who are facing difficult questions about corruption and the organization's role in protecting its perpetrators by way of its political alliances. This has recently led to the expulsion of two political heavyweights, Wafiq Safa (head of Hezbollah's Communication and Coordination Committee) and his deputy (nicknamed Hajj Sajed).

The second fissure that has taken place within the party is institutional, and concerns the balance of influence between the military, security, and political organs, the political and executive councils, and the shura council – the most influential of all. In this context, Safa's expulsion will likely affect the balance of power within the party. It remains to be seen precisely how these changes will be reflected within the party's rank-and-file and in its political choices.

The same applies to the FPM and the family of President Michel Aoun. The effects of the explosion within Christian circles have extended to the ongoing conflict between the president's two sons-in-law: Gebran Bassil, the more influential of the two and the party's heir presumptive, and MP Chamel Roukoz, who has joined the opposition. Roukoz counts the President's special advisor Mireille Aoun among his allies, along with her various FPM proteges. This intra-family group is trying to tip the scales in their favor and check Bassil, now a burden upon the movement. This may have implications for possible future agreements between Lebanon's political factions, and raises the possibility that the FPM might cede control of important service ministries like the Ministry of Energy (the electricity sector).

Regionally and internationally, the Beirut explosion has thrown Lebanon back into the heart of the struggle between the major powers active in the region: France, Iran, the United States, Turkey, and

Egypt. Officials from all these states trickled into Beirut in the first few days after the disaster, both to demonstrate their solidarity and to push for political courses of action in line with each state's respective vision for Lebanon's future after the port explosion. These maneuvers make it clear how regional agendas and divisions are playing out in Lebanon. Macron's initiative has been supported by Egypt, whose own foreign minister visited Beirut at the same time; both France and Egypt, driven by the struggle with Turkey over the Eastern Mediterranean, have stoked fears of greater Turkish involvement in Lebanon if the country is left to deal with its economic, social, and political crises alone. For his part, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sharply criticized the French initiative in Lebanon, branding it an attempt to relive France's colonial past.

This polarization has the potential to reshape a political landscape in which Iran – the most powerful player since the Syrian army's departure in 2005 – has long occupied center stage. With the decline of Saudi Arabia's role in Lebanon, there is now speculation that a French-Emirati alliance is emerging, bolstered by a secret rapprochement between Abu Dhabi (as well as Paris and Cairo) and the Syrian regime in order to confront Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean. The paradigm currently taking shape might represent an axis for future regional polarization, both in and outside Lebanon, and is likely to produce novel domestic crises.

In any case, Lebanon appears to be facing a new political reality. On the one hand, no single political force is capable of governing the country singlehandedly, following the collapse of Hassan Diab's government—a mere seven months after its imposition by the alliance between the President and Hezbollah, in total disregard for the demands of the protest movement and opposition political actors. On the other hand, radical reform of a political regime rooted in clientelism and sectarian power-sharing is now unavoidable. All political groups must, however, be willing to make concessions; the alternative is the total breakdown of security and financial collapse.

It has become clear that Lebanese public opinion carries weight, locally and internationally. It is, therefore, the sole guarantee that this new regional order will not strengthen the sectarian power-sharing system in Lebanon. However, this depends upon its ability to secure at least one or two of its demands, such as changing voting procedures; to make the revolutionary movement itself party to any forthcoming national dialogue; and to put forth pragmatic, realistic plans which can be implemented gradually and by consensus in order to move Lebanon away from the sectarian system. Failing this, the current crisis will reproduce the sectarian power-sharing system in the form of an internationally-accepted "national unity government" which, in fact, is no more than a form of confessional power sharing on a wider scale—the very opposite of national unity.