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Lebanon

# Beirut's devastating blast has not shaken the ruling class's grip on Lebanon

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### **Many Lebanese people had hoped for a silver lining to this tragedy of an independent government and new elections.**

The tremendous blast that shook Lebanon on 4 August will be recorded as a major turning point in the country's history, no less so than the much less powerful explosion that killed former prime minister Rafik Hariri on 14 February 2005. [1] Judging from the 15 years it took before a UN-appointed tribunal basically admitted its impotence on the latter event, there won't be any official certainty about the circumstances of the terrible explosion at Beirut's port in the foreseeable future. [2] A few conclusions can, however, be drawn about this highly traumatic tragedy.

The first is that, notwithstanding the blast's particular circumstances, the responsibility for leaving 2,750 tonnes of highly explosive ammonium nitrate [3] warehoused in the heart of Beirut for no less than six years falls on the whole Lebanese ruling class – all those who have been in the Lebanese government during that period. Presidents, prime ministers, ministers of transport, chiefs of key security apparatuses and port administrators are all equally to blame. The list includes leaders of both the official Lebanese state and the parallel state constituted by Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is known to closely monitor Beirut's airport and port and use them at its will.

How did Lebanon get to this point? We need to take in 30 years of political and economic misrule to understand. Before 1975, when the civil war started, Lebanon was known to be a "fiscal paradise": a country of wild capitalism, whose bank secrecy and sham taxation made it an ideal territory for money laundering, capital flight and all sorts of trafficking. The war ended with a political and constitutional agreement between Lebanese factions achieved in 1989 under the joint auspices of the Saudi monarchy and the Syrian regime. It was confirmed the year after by the latter's participation in the US-led coalition that waged the first international war on Iraq from Saudi territory.

During a dozen years, Lebanon was run by this Saudi-Syrian entente: representing the Saudi side, Rafik Hariri closely coordinated with Ghazi Kanaan, the all-powerful head of Syria's security apparatus in Lebanon. [4] Damascus's opposition to the second US-led war on Iraq and the occupation of that country in 2003 led to the end of the entente. Washington started exerting pressure to expel Syrian troops from Lebanon, notably by sponsoring UN security council resolution 1559 of 2004 (Russia and China abstained in order not to veto it). [5]

Hariri's assassination triggered a huge outpouring of popular anger, compelling Damascus to withdraw its troops. It kept pulling strings in Lebanon nevertheless, through a triple alliance composed of its close ally Amal, the Shia sectarian movement led by Nabih Berri, the Lebanese parliament's speaker for life (he assumed office in 1992); Hezbollah, the Lebanese agent of Iran, Syria's regional ally; and Michel Aoun, Syria's former bitter foe who about-turned in 2006. [6]

Over the past 15 years, Lebanon has basically been run by a renewed joint government, involving Rafik Hariri's son Saad and the triple alliance, and continuing a disastrous economic policy of neoliberal reconstruction that had been in place since the end of the war. However, the war that unfolded in Syria since the 2011 Arab spring has considerably weakened Damascus and increased the role of Tehran and its Lebanese representative, as Iran gained the upper hand over Syria itself. This shift in the regional balance of forces translated into the election of Aoun as president in 2016. [7] The botched attempt by the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, to twist Saad Hariri's arm into ending collaboration with Tehran's followers in 2017 was a clumsy reaction to this turn of events.

In any event, the responsibility for the Lebanese economy's collapse falls squarely on the whole spectrum of the country's ruling class, all those who held offices over the past 30 years, as much as it falls on the banking sector with

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which they have all been enmeshed. Riad Salamé, the governor of Lebanon's Central Bank since 1992 and still in place, embodies these entrenched problems. This shared responsibility was addressed by the now famous central slogan of the popular uprising that began on 17 October last year: "All of them means all of them." [8]

With popular anger reaching a climax because of Beirut's recent blast, there has been much hope in Lebanon for a silver lining to the tragedy in imposing two key demands of the October uprising on the ruling class: a government truly independent from it and new elections on the basis of a new electoral law. The expectation was that international pressure would force the implementation of these demands and provide a counterweight to the local ruling class. [9]

Emmanuel Macron's visit to Beirut two days after the blast brought this expectation to a peak. Here was a leader who dared to mingle with the people right after the disaster, many thought, overlooking that it was a great photo-op for a French president beleaguered in his own country. The expectation did not last: Macron's consistent line regarding the Middle East has been to mediate between the US and Iran (where French capitalist stakes are high), as he did when he attempted to organise a meeting between Donald Trump and Iran's foreign minister on the margin of the 2019 G7 summit in Biarritz.

The logic of this position regarding Lebanon is that Macron has systematically acted to maintain Hariri-Hezbollah coalition rule in the country. This is why he intervened decisively to bring back from Riyadh a sequestered Saad Hariri in 2017, and why he has now dispelled the Lebanese people's hope for an independent government and new elections by reportedly favouring a "unity government", which has been interpreted as a plan to "[reinstate] the Sunni former prime minister, Saad Hariri, in return for concessions from Hezbollah". Instead of a big bang, this would mean Macron is actively working to turn Beirut's blast into a backward-propelling force – surely a recipe for increased discontent and further turmoil. [10]

Source *The Guardian* [Comment is free](#).

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[1] *The Guardian* 6 August 2020 "[Lebanon is no stranger to disaster – but this is like nothing we've ever seen](#)".

[2] *The Guardian* 18 August 2020 "[Hezbollah member found guilty over killing of Rafik Hariri](#)".

[3] *The Guardian* 20 August 2020 "['Cancer of the industry': Beirut's blast proves lethal risk of abandoning ships](#)".

[4] *The Guardian* October 2005 "[Embattled Syrian minister found dead](#)".

[5] *Guardian Weekly* March 2005 "[Hopes fade for early Syrian exit from Lebanon](#)".

[6] *The Guardian* 18 October 2019, "[Violence flares in Lebanon as protesters tell their leaders to go](#)".

[7] *The Guardian*, 31 October 2016 "[Iran ally Michel Aoun elected as president of Lebanon](#)".

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[8] *The Independent*, 20 October 2019 [“All of them means all of them’: How Lebanon’s spontaneous protests over taxes led to calls for revolution”](#).

[9] *The Guardian*, 10 August 2020 [“Lebanon’s political corruption can be rooted out – if its international donors insist”](#).

[10] *Deutsche Welle* [“Will protests after Beirut blast bring reform to Lebanon?”](#).