

Lebanon's Political Structure Doesn't Create a Solution to Crises

On February 14, 2005 and August 4, 2020, two explosions changed the fate of Lebanon, the first of which killed Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the second destroyed the Beirut Port. Before the two explosions, political chaos was taking place in Lebanon and the country's social structure was cracking. The explosions caused great outrage among the public. The chaotic situation has not improved and an even more complex power struggle has been triggered.

Rafik Hariri, who served as prime minister between 1992-98 and 2000-04 gained recognition for his steps to erase the scars of the civil war in Lebanon. Just before his assassination, Hariri - who had collaborated with the UN to end Syria's 28-year presence in Lebanon - was threatened by the Damascus regime. The assassination caused great grief and anger among the Lebanese people. Those who have taken to the streets against Syria and its local partner Hezbollah have demanded a radical reform to protect the country from foreign intervention. But political blocs have formed due to opposition (14 March Alliance) and support (8 March Alliance) for Syria, and the reforms demanded by the public have been overshadowed by assassinations of politicians, the Israel-Hezbollah war (2006), and internal conflicts (2008).

The Syrian War, which began in 2011, brought a new era of instability to Lebanon, as more than 1 million refugees arrived and Hezbollah became one of the war's main actors. Public reaction in the local and regional as presidential election crisis (2014-2016), the threat of ISIS (2014), Prime Minister Saad Hariri's forced resignation by Saudi Arabia (2017), failure to form a government (2018) came to light with economic crisis felt throughout 2019. In October demonstrations that broke out against taxing Whatsapp evolved into the demand of a change in the political structure based on religion and sect. Prime Minister Hariri resigned on October 22, but the Lebanese people rejected the way yesterday's militant today's politicians used to play politics.

Lebanon suffered a major blow when 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded in the Beirut Port at a time when it was struggling with successive crises. This last straw has been analyzed as a breaking point in Lebanon's history. The explosion killed more than 200 people, injured 6,000 people, left 300,000 people homeless, and caused \$15 billion in damage. The fact that the explosion occurred 14 days before the Lebanese Special Court announced its decision on the Assassination of Rafik Hariri has made Hezbollah the primary suspect. But officials who did not take measures related to the ammonium nitrate stock, which has been kept in the port for years, were negligent and were responsible.

After the Beirut Port explosion - one of the largest explosions in Middle East history - no serious investigation has been done to identify those responsible, and it has been overshadowed by the government crisis and the biggest economic crisis since the Civil War.

After the explosion, many deputies and ministers resigned, followed by the Government of Hassan Diab on August 10. Mustafa Adip was tasked to form a government, but the government could not be formed due to a dispute over the distribution of ministries. President Michel Aoun tasked Saad Hariri, who resigned a year ago during the October demonstrations. But Hariri has yet to form a government. In all these intense political agenda, the public could not find an interlocutor to answer for the perpetrator of the explosion. The fact that the government could not be established due to the same ideological priorities, that the task was given to Hariri again, and that politicians interpreted the explosion over their ideological priorities, even at a time when solidarity was most needed, further increased the reactions towards the established political structure.

Another issue that overshadowed the Beirut Port incident was that since 2019, Lebanon has been battling one of the biggest economic crises in its history. The Lebanese pound depreciated 80% against the dollar, while on the black market passing 9,000 Lebanese pounds for 1 US dollar. Public debt has risen to over \$90 billion. The World Bank announced an economic shrinkage of 19.2% in the Lebanese economy in 2020 and that this shrinkage would continue in 2021. In Lebanon, where the unemployment rate has risen to 50%, more than half of the population is expected to suffer from poverty by 2021.^[1] The depreciation of the Lebanese pound against the US dollar has increased the price difference between imported and domestic products. Both the decline in purchasing power and the inability to find products in the domestic market make it difficult for the public to meet their needs.

In addition to all this, the Caesar Act adopted by the United States in June to suppress Hezbollah, Western countries reform for economic aid, and the withdrawal of Gulf Capital from the country since 2016, is estimated to lead to a prolonged economic crisis.

France President Emmanuel Macron reacted the quickest in the Beirut Port crisis. Macron visited Lebanon on August 6 and September 1 and held many meetings with politicians while calling for the formation of a technocrat government within 15 days. But Macron's menacing discourse and effort to design politics through aid has drawn reaction from some politicians and the public. Macron's current growing interest in Lebanon compared to its previous crises is evaluated as an effort to strengthen his grip in the eastern Mediterranean equation. Lebanon has a coastline of 120 nautical miles (NM) along the eastern Mediterranean and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that encompasses an area of 5000 square nautical miles (SNM). Therefore, France, which has failed against Turkey in Libya, seeks an opportunity to reassert its role in the eastern Mediterranean through Lebanon. But despite its intensive efforts, it is clear that France does not have the ability to manage the crisis in Lebanon.

As a country that can engage in dialogue with different religious and sectarian actors, does not act with a colonial mindset, and gives priority to humanitarian aid, Turkey is one of the few actors that Lebanon can cooperate with in the region. Four days after the Beirut explosion, Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu visited the country. In addition to providing humanitarian aid in various areas, Turkey will open the Mersin Port for Lebanon until the Beirut Port is ready for use, officials said. Countries and media outlets that see Turkey's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean as a threat have made a series of fake news about Turkey's intense interest in Lebanon. In this news, claims were made that Turkey brought weapons into Lebanon, became the patron of Sunni groups, supported the Muslim Brotherhood, and that its interest in Lebanon was an extension of its "neo-Ottoman" ideology.

It is a fact that the Sunni population living in Lebanon sympathizes with Turkey. Although Turkey appreciates this, it pays particular attention to dialogue with different groups. In addition to building good relations with Sunni groups, it also operates easily in areas where Hezbollah is active. Although the Maronites often identify with France and distance themselves from Turkey, there are different approaches within the group. For example, the Maronite Kataeb Party is known to be in dialogue with Turkey.^[2]

Lebanon's religious and sectarian political structure, dating back to the Ottoman era, has deepened its crises in two major explosions in the last 15 years. And that structure is unlikely to change in the next few years. Moreover, it is not easy for some people to give up a decades-old political habit in which certain families come to the fore. But the majority of the public sees the current system to be responsible for instability and crises, and there is a backlash against Lebanon's elderly politicians, especially among young people. This backlash is felt in the streets after almost every crisis. The insistence of current politicians on maintaining the task, the accumulated public anger, and new regional developments can lead to new and greater crises in Lebanon. In addition, increasing political polarization and conflicts in the Middle East prevent the organization from a multifaceted dialogue process between the parties in Lebanon, supported by different countries.

Although the prospects for a permanent solution seem small, there are some opportunities to support the Lebanese people. About 2 million Syrian and Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon. Many of them are unable to meet basic needs such as housing, health, education, and infrastructure. The UN says 9 out of 10 Syrian refugees live in extreme poverty. After the explosion, most Lebanese began to experience the same problems faced by the refugees. The possibility of famine is often raised throughout the country. Therefore, humanitarian assistance to the Lebanese people, starting with those affected by the explosion and refugees, is very important to conduct through the cooperation of regional and international NGOs. With permanent support for economic development, this can be seen as the first step towards political stability.

[1] Lebanon Economic Monitor: The Deliberate Depression, World Bank, 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/3484>

[2] For the statements about Turkey of Amin Gemayel, honorary president of the Kataeb Party and former President of Lebanon, see: "Lübnan'ın e <https://www.indyturk.com/node/235516/d%C3%BCnya/l%C3%BCbnan%C4%B1n-eski-cumhurba%C5%9Fkan%C4%B1-t%C3%BCrkiye%E2%80>