

# Anatomy of the Lebanese Intifada: Between Hope and Gloom

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**Abstract:** Protestors have been unyielding in Lebanon, denouncing the worsening financial and economic crisis, attributed to the incompetence and corruption of the political class which has governed the country for decades. So far, the parties clinging to power after the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri appear to be resorting to subversive tactics in order to limit any further escalation. In spite of this, there is hope among the various sectarian and social tranches of the population mobilized by the intifada, that it could usher in much needed reform to the Lebanese political and economic system.

Nationwide protests were triggered by the Lebanese government's fresh austerity measures and led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri at the end of October<sup>1</sup>. For the first time since the end of the civil war in 1989<sup>2</sup>, Lebanese demonstrators took to the streets challenging the sectarian kleptocracy ruling the country. Demonstrators from all walks of life, united by similar economic and social grievances are requesting a new social contract. The movement, which remains vulnerable to attempts of politicization and repression, appears nonetheless unrelenting and could lead to long-term changes in the sectarian order.

On October 17 the Lebanese government announced a \$6 monthly tax on Whatsapp calls against the backdrop of steady economic decline and a currency crisis. Little did it know the move would spur such massive protests<sup>3</sup> sparking anger in the Lebanese people at their country's poor state of affairs. Lebanon suffers from a huge debt-GDP ratio, which at 151% is the third worst in the world<sup>4</sup>. The fiscal deficit in 2018 was 11%<sup>5</sup> and according to the Lebanon This Week economic newsletter the central bank's gross foreign exchange reserves have dropped to \$31 billion<sup>6</sup>. Growth is expected to be close to zero this year, according to economist Ghazi Wazni<sup>7</sup>. Lebanon is also considered the 138th least corrupt country out of 175, according to Trading Economics<sup>8</sup>.

### **Economic Collapse**

Lebanon has also been affected by the gloomy regional economic situation, which affects many Lebanese living and working in other countries in the region. In 2017, the Federation of Chambers of Commerce reported that over half a million Lebanese lived in Gulf Countries, a figure which includes more than 300,000 residents in Saudi Arabia<sup>9</sup> alone. In 2016 Lebanese expatriates in the Gulf accounted for 60% of the total remittances to Lebanon, estimated at \$7.62 billion and representing 14.7% of GDP in the same year according to the International Monetary Fund<sup>10</sup>. Although Wazni explains that this figure appears to have dropped to less than \$5 billion today.

This decline combined with a lack of economic growth has hampered the ability of commercial banks to finance the public debt. Growing pressure on the Lebanese Pound is also attributed to an unusual rise in fuel imports in the first 7 months of this 2019, resulting in a sudden and unexpected demand for \$1.7 billion to fund the imports, explains economist Nassib Ghobril, head of research at the Byblos bank. According to financial sources, who agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity, there are suspicions that part of the rise in fuel imported by Lebanon has been re-exported to Syria.

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The Lebanese exchange market is facing a US-dollar crisis with local currency rates jumping from 1500 Lebanese pounds to the US-dollar to about 2000 Lebanese Pounds, when the Lebanese government fell. The liquidity crisis has threatened several vital sectors, such as fuel, wheat imports and medicines. Fuel importers have gone on strike several times, causing citizens to rush to gas stations. In addition, customers can no longer make US-dollar withdrawals at ATMs and international transfers have been curtailed in most commercial banks.

Lebanon is also struggling with dwindling utilities services. In 2010, the government adopted a \$5 billion plan to provide 24 hour electricity and make Lebanon a net exporter by 2018<sup>11</sup>. This was at the behest of Energy Minister at the time, Gebran Bassil, who is leader of the Christian Free Patriotic Movement which is Hezbollah's main Christian ally. Today blackouts endure, water is so scarce people are having to buy water from private companies, and a significant waste crisis has added to substantial environment degradation caused by recent wildfires.

### **Socio-Political Dynamics of the Protests**

The economic free fall and ensuing protests have had massive socio-political repercussions in Lebanon with unemployment and inequality exploding. The protests have also unveiled feelings of deprivation at the national level, which various community-based political parties have attempted to exploit or contain, threatening the fragile stability. This could potentially lead to important changes in the long-term Lebanese balance of power, but only if the protests manage to maintain momentum.

Unemployment has soared in recent years as highlighted by former interior minister Nohad Machnouk who pointed out that more than 50,000 Lebanese are entering the labor market each year, but only 5,000 new jobs are being created. Lebanese Republic President, General Michel Aoun stated in 2018 that the unemployment rate affecting Lebanese nationals had reached 46% of the active population<sup>12</sup>.

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Inequality is on the rise: Le Commerce Du Levant estimated that between 2005 and 2014, the richest 10% of the Lebanese adult population received, on average, 56% of the national income generated during the same period<sup>13</sup>. On their own, the wealthiest 1%, just over 37,000 people, accounted for 23% of the country's income, while the poorest 50%, or more than 1.5 million people, shared just half of the revenues of the top 1%<sup>14</sup>.

The Lebanese are convinced that the political system based on a confessional distribution of the public and political functions between Muslims and Christians contributes to a generalization of the corruption. Constant internal strife, with various factions arguing over state revenue streams, has also impeded effective policy-making and necessary reforms required by Cedre's donor conference, which allocated \$11 billion to Lebanon<sup>15</sup>. Rana, a young protestor interviewed by the author says that "Politicians are corrupt, they only vote for projects that fill their pockets or by allying with foreign countries at the expense of Lebanon. They pit one sect against another during their political haggling, this has to stop"<sup>16</sup>. This endless cycle of decline has resulted in the growing feeling of deprivation which fostered the October protests.

### **Disparate Community-Based Dynamics**

Unlike in the capital Beirut and other regions; south Lebanon and the western mountains have been able to partly contain the wave of protests. In Druze areas such as the Chouf and Aley, under the control of the Progressive Socialist Party, demonstrations were timider until the Druze Party Walid Joumblat called people to join the protests<sup>17</sup>.

Despite its massive participation in the first days of the intifada, the Shiite community appears to have partially backtracked, under pressure from its main parties Hezbollah and Amal. In the early days of the intifada in south Lebanon, demonstrators stood in front of the house of Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah<sup>18</sup>, and ransacked the offices of another Hezbollah MP Mohamad Raad<sup>19</sup>. Shiite Parties responded by sending militants to beat up protestors in Nabatieh<sup>20</sup>. The violence has tarnished Hezbollah's image within its community, with those who spoke to the author criticizing Hezbollah for not doing enough to stop the crackdown.

Yet both the Progressive Socialist Party and Hezbollah have been able to divert the people's anger by promoting narratives of conspiracy and victimization<sup>21</sup>. Hezbollah's general secretary



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Hassan Nasrallah cautioned; "The protest movement is no longer spontaneous and it is being led by known parties and political forces and some sides are funding it<sup>22</sup>." He was speaking in a televised address calling on the militant's group supporters to leave the protest squares.

There has also been a progressive politicization of the protest movement. On October 29, hundreds of Lebanese supporters accused of belonging to the Shiite Amal movement attacked a protest camp set up by anti-government demonstrators in Beirut, beating up protestors with sticks. Sources close to civil society organizations leading the protest movement have also pointed to the infiltration of demonstrations by other political parties. On November 4, protestors blocked main roads throughout the country, closing major highways and city streets. "The continuous paralysis is for the most part the work of some parties which are using the protests as a bargaining chip for current government negotiations," points out a source in civil society.

On one hand, the former March 14 alliance ( including the Progressive Socialist Party, Christian Lebanese Forces and Sunni Future movement minority members in the resigning cabinet) is attempting to gain leverage through the protests against the pro-Iranian and Syrian coalition of March 8, by including Hezbollah and the Christian Free Patriotic movement in the formation of the next government. On the other hand, the March 8 coalition is beefing up its efforts against the crackdown. On November 24, and for at least the third time, Hezbollah and Amal movement supporters attacked anti-government protesters rallying on "the Ring" bridge in Beirut<sup>23</sup>. In the Christian dominated Monot Street, the windows of several cars and shops were smashed<sup>24</sup>, triggering painful memories of Lebanon's civil wars, conflicts which pitted Lebanon's various Christian and Muslim communities from 1975 to 1990.

Hezbollah's sponsor, Iran, has also blamed Israel and the USA of orchestrating the protests in Lebanon. Tehran's fear of losing its grip over regional countries is growing in the wake of protest movements close to home and in countries where it projects power<sup>25</sup>. The Islamic Republic stance could further harden Hezbollah's stance. So far the organization has turned a blind eye to its partisan street attacks on the antigovernment demonstrators, more specifically in sensitive areas such as Monot, Downtown or Ain Remaneh.

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It is also unlikely that Hezbollah will let go of its alliance with the Christian Free Patriotic movement, despite the denouncement by the protest movement of its leader and caretaking foreign minister Gebran Bassil. The latter and his father in law, President Michel Aoun, provide the militant group with a much needed majority within the current Lebanese parliament and more importantly, allow it to deflect any accusation of hijacking the security, defense and foreign dossiers.

The Free Patriotic Movement headquarters in Tripoli have also been attacked, while demonstrators' tents in the Progressive Socialist Party supporting Druze area of Aley were burned down on November 2. Besides an escalation of the political situation and social unrest, further destabilization of the security situation could take the shape of riots and large scale looting. With the dispersal of the security forces in the various regions, kidnappings to raise ransoms might possibly multiply across the country.

### **The Way Ahead**

Further unrest and politicization of the protests could damage the movement's credibility and its capability to attract nationwide support in the medium term. Yet, the ongoing financial crisis, growing pauperization and the increasing disconnect of the political class from the Lebanese population will continue to fuel the movement's momentum. On November 2, news

of the suicide of a father of two in the border town of Ersal because of a \$350 debt blew up on social media, followed shortly by a video of a woman saying she wanted to sell her kidney to feed her family. Such cases will undoubtedly multiply as the economy shrinks further.

These painful grievances are uniting the Lebanese, who have demanded the resignation of the cabinet, the formation of a technocrat government and early elections. They have also called for an end to corruption, and the prosecution of corrupt political elites as well as the freezing of their assets.

Lebanese protestors have so far succeeded in toppling the government of Prime Minister Hariri. It is, nonetheless, unlikely they will be able to achieve the swift overthrow of an entrenched political class, comprised of war lords who have ruled over Lebanon for more than 40 years, and who will certainly respond by either initiating cosmetic governmental changes or resorting to violence. The system is, after all, built on a large clientelist network, expanding deep into the state, from the Department of Justice, to the public administration and security forces, as well as the various local orders and syndicates.

The political leaders' attitude to the formation of the next government has confirmed the trend. So far, The Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah have rejected the option of a

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technocrat government, clinging to a techno-political government instead. The more the incumbent parties hold on to power, the more clashes there will be by way of push back.

The protest movement unfolding in Lebanon is thus significant, as for the first time in Lebanese history it has fostered a sense of nationalism, regardless of people's political or religious affiliation. Until now, the ruling parties, and more specifically Amal and Hezbollah, have attempted to sectarianize the protests by playing the identity politics card. "There are attempts to portray the protests as anti-Shiite" says Rasha, a young protestor from Hezbollah's base. During the night of November 25, pro-government rioters who vandalized the Beirut streets chanted "Shiites, Shiites"<sup>26</sup>. These incidents have perhaps surprisingly not been countered by extremist reactions. On the contrary, Lebanese women and mothers from Ain Remmaneh and Shiyah staged an afternoon protest in areas considered demarcation lines, respectively between Christians and Shiites.

Sunni Salafists have been largely absent from the intifada. This is in contrast to the March 14 Cedar Revolution, which witnessed a large mobilization of Islamists due to massive crackdowns by the security forces in previous years, and a lack of manipulation so far, at least by Sunni leaders. The Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood, despite its working relation with Hezbollah, has also been involved in the intifada.

The Lebanese intifada will be difficult to contain in light of the catastrophic economic situation which appears to have brought the Lebanese together against their corrupt ruling elite. The Lebanese people are today planting the seeds of a new project which will be fraught with perils. While in the medium-term growing repression and violence should be expected from Lebanon's war lords, their grip on power has been significantly weakened. However, the powerful political class will not necessarily be destabilized in the street, but will undoubtedly be challenged by the silent majority fueling Lebanon's protests in the next polls.

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