Lebanon's Breaking Point

by Caroline D. Rose - August 10, 2020

Roughly this time last year, I spent a week in Beirut for field research. I was there to learn about drug markets, specifically how drugs make their way into Lebanon from Syria. I left Beirut with an even greater impression of the country's burgeoning political crisis. Even in 2019, you could feel Beirut was reaching its breaking point. Frequent electricity cuts, trash-littered streets, high inflation, a paralyzed government, sectarian infighting and waning protection of civil liberties created an aura of doom and gloom. The hopelessness was tangible. Whoever you asked, the answer was generally the same: Lebanon was on the precipice of collapse.

It got worse as the year went on. A combination of poor living conditions and chronic governmental mismanagement sparked months of nationwide protests and crackdowns. Frequent resignations and low public trust in officials created a leadership deficit that current Prime Minister Hassan Diab is still struggling to fill. The economy, meanwhile, fell into disrepair. Rampant inflation, sky-high fuel and food prices, and an 80 percent decline in the lira created new levels of destitution. And to top it all off, Lebanon was also devastated by the coronavirus pandemic.

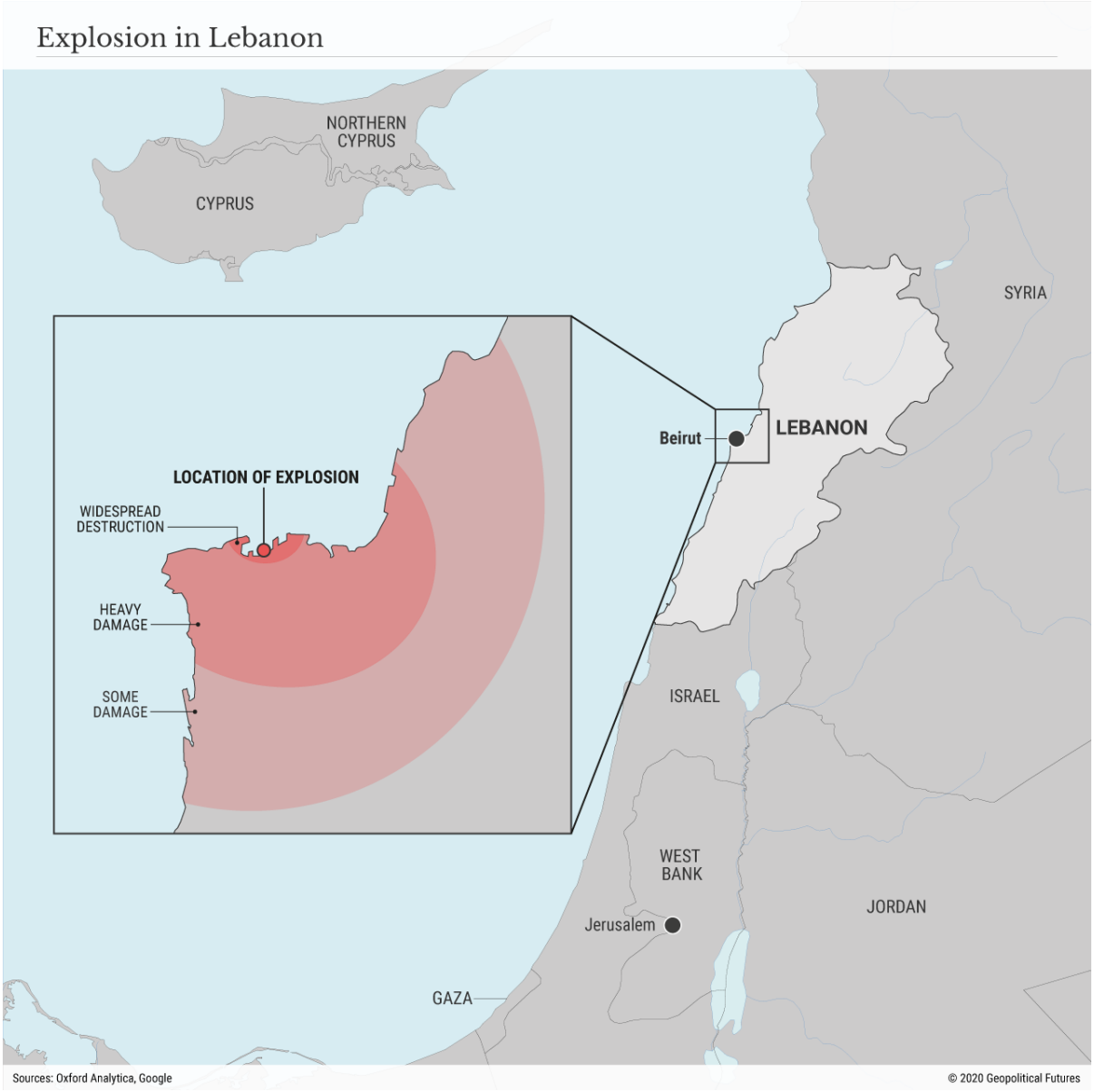
Throughout the year many believed nationwide protests, a currency collapse, or even then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation would send the country over the edge. Yet none did. Its breaking point came last week, when 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stockpiled for six years at the Port of Beirut exploded – with **a yield estimated equal to about 15 percent of the Hiroshima bombing** – and quite literally shattered the city. It exposed new levels of government negligence, fueling resentment that has simmered for a year and **costing the country an estimated $15 billion**.

Conditions are ripe for an uprising, which would have profound geopolitical consequences for the region. Expansionist powers like Iran and Russia would likely use the instability to their advantage. Violence and political infighting could easily spill over into neighboring countries, too, drawing in Western nations, most notably France, in an effort to stabilize the region. Put simply, insecurity in Lebanon will threaten the Middle East with a new dimension of instability and further demand countries' attention.

Little Confidence

Lebanon's economy was in disarray even before the Port of Beirut was leveled in last week's blast. **The port handles about 60 percent of imports**

for a country that relies heavily on imports. Some 90 percent of wheat consumed in Lebanon comes from foreign imports – 80 percent of which enters through the Port of Beirut. Its largest grain elevator (which held 85 percent of the country's grain) was also ruined, making Lebanon's food crisis even worse. The damage done to commercial and residential infrastructure **will take years to recover from**.



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For those familiar with corruption in Lebanon, **the inattention that led to the explosion** comes as

little surprise. Gridlock and insufficient oversight are hallmarks of Lebanese politics. Soon after the incident, reports emerged that Lebanese customs officials appealed six times between 2014 and 2017 about disposing of the stored stocks. All were ignored.

What little confidence the Lebanese people may have had in the government has all but disappeared. Public outrage is clear. When people learned that the appeals were ignored, hashtags that translated to “hang up the nooses” began trending on Lebanese Twitter. **Protests are everywhere** in Beirut. Upset has turned into rage, the financial crisis has turned into financial collapse, and calls for reform have turned into demands for a systematic overhaul.

Into the Hands of France

Whatever happens next will affect the rest of the Middle East. Its **commercial links** to the region will affect some of its top export recipients, particularly the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Syria and Iraq, and will undercut the capabilities of countries that use Lebanese ports. Political violence and unlivable conditions create migrant flows into nearby countries and increase the risk of violent spillover, particularly with Syria and Israel.

As in Iraq and Syria, insecurity in Lebanon will practically invite more external influence. With a foothold already in the country, anchored by its relationship to Hezbollah, Iran will perceive Lebanese instability as both a risk and opportunity. Iran will try to secure its access to the Mediterranean Sea, control over local formal and informal markets, and support of Lebanon’s Shiite political leadership. Israel, in turn, would become more active on its border with Lebanon as it seeks to counter Hezbollah, especially in hotspots such as the Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms.

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Russia, already a **major trade partner** and supporter of the Lebanese Orthodox Christian community, has been steadily trying to increase its influence in Lebanon. For Moscow, instability can open up opportunities to profit from future shares in Lebanese natural gas and construction contracts and leverage its **ample wheat supplies**. Not to mention the fact that Russia wants **additional ports outside Syria** that can be used for commerce and naval buildup against the U.S. Sixth Fleet.

Perhaps most notably, the conditions in Lebanon play into the hands of France, which has had a key interest in keeping a foothold in the Middle East to secure natural resources, vital trade routes and maritime power. After World War I, France and Britain signed the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, a deal that laid the groundwork for 23 years of French administration in Lebanon and 26 years of French military occupation. But even after France's official departure, its imperative to retain influence in Lebanon has remained. As France builds up its naval capabilities in the Mediterranean to counter threats to energy assets, it is committed to protecting its influence in the Levant through Lebanon.

In the wake of the explosion, Paris has led the charge for increased assistance and political intervention in Lebanon, made evident by President Emmanuel Macron's visit to the country days after the blast. (Ironically, many Lebanese protesters have **begged their former colonizer** to intercede as a guarantor in a new political system.) Macron's visit wasn't made purely out of sympathy, of course. France intends to reassert political stability through arbitration. Following meetings with government officials, Macron made sure to publicly criticize the government in Beirut, **meeting with the Lebanese people in the streets**, where he promised to return on Sept. 1 to ensure a new "political pact" was enacted. France also announced it would launch an external tribunal into the government's ties to the explosion, hoping to create an opportunity that can reset the Lebanese political system before the situation devolves much more.

France will likely act alone in Lebanon, though, with tacit, indirect support from the West. Over the past year, **the U.S. has adjusted its Middle East policy,** opting for a more distanced, transactional approach toward Lebanon and its peers. Earlier in the year, the U.S. tried to tie aid to conditional austerity measures, withholding assistance so that Lebanese federal funds don't find their way into Hezbollah's pockets. The urgency of Beirut's economic and political crisis, though, has prompted the U.S. and others to dispatch relief supplies and financial aid to Beirut with no strings attached.

Still, Western governments have not budged on reconstruction aid, and it's unlikely that they will support France's campaign for political intervention. While the U.S. is interested in keeping Lebanon

stable, it's tried its hand in intervention before to little effect. Mounting political pressure at home and coronavirus-related financial constraints have begun to rule out more adventurous policies. The U.S. is trying to reduce its global military footprint, especially in the Middle East. Absent an all-out conflict between Iran, Saudi Arabia or Israel, the U.S. will resist greater engagement in the Levant and offer France quiet, indirect support.

Of course, even that may not be enough to save Lebanon from itself. The atmosphere of resentment and dissatisfaction I encountered a year ago in Beirut has, inevitably, metastasized. Beirutis have started the long road to recovery, sweeping away broken glass, volunteering in field hospitals and with aid deliveries, and helping each other collectively process the trauma of Aug. 5th. It's become clear that the incident at the Port of Beirut is not just another chink in the government's armor. Instead, the blast made things so much worse, with the potential to destabilize the region at large.

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