

LEBANON-in-CONFLICT

Alerts, Background, and Reviews from and about Lebanon

[A joint UMAM D&R and HAYYA BINA Project]

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LEBANON: HITTING THE WALLS... AWAITING OCTOBER 17's SECOND INSTALLMENT



A stretch of the wall in Downtown Beirut that secures the parliament and Grand Serail. The graffiti on the second cement panel to the right reads: "The Walls of Infamy are short-lived."

Anyone taking a walk nowadays in Downtown Beirut, the beacon of the popular protests which broke out on the evening of October 17, 2019 to oppose a governmental decision to impose a tax on WhatsApp calls and other VoIP services, could find themselves believing that this district of the city is orderly divided into two segments by tall, reinforced cement panels and other security

devices: to the west is the segment which houses the parliament and the Grand Serail, headquarters of the Prime Minister of Lebanon, and to the east lie Downtown Beirut's Riad Solh and Martyrs' Squares.

Though the impression of orderliness is correct, what the wall-like lining of these cement panels, or the graffiti that adorns them, does not say, is that the geographical split that they accomplish and illustrate did not happen all of a sudden or overnight. In fact, the progressive building up of this fence occurred gradually and in parallel with the fading of the popular movement's élan on the one hand, and the rejuvenation of the efforts by the Lebanese establishment to retake the initiative and regain control of the situation on the other.

Erecting the fence nowadays dividing Downtown Beirut in two segments meant that the Lebanese establishment had decided not only to turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the messages of protest chanted in the streets and squares for weeks, but that that it would also remain entrenched in its narratives of what brought the Lebanese people to that breaking point.

While the story of that winding down and of the subsequent rejuvenation deserve to be told at length one day, and though neither marks the absolute end to the dynamic unleashed on October 17, it's worth taking the walls which divide Downtown Beirut as a form of backdrop and try to take provisional stock of what the actual situation is and in which direction it's heading.

⁽¹⁾ The Presidential Deal, in Lebanese jargon, is the bargain which took place in Fall 2016 and according to which (Maronite) General Michel Aoun, head of the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah's overt candidate for the presidency, would be elected to the supreme office and (Sunni) Saad Hariri, political heir to Prime Minister Rafic Hariri who was slain in 2005, would fill the office of prime minister. All this, of course, was occurring while Iran's proxy Hezbollah kept its status as counter-part to the Lebanese state.

⁽²⁾ According to the Lebanese system, the presidency of the Republic is earmarked for the Maronite community, the presidency of the parliament to the Shia community and the premiership to the Sunni community. For a movement which took as a slogan "all of them means all of them," in a moment of high sectarian tension, causing (Sunni) Saad Hariri to resign without showing the same stubbornness to bring about the overthrowing of the other two pillars of the ruling trio was seen by some in the Sunni community to be harmful to their cause, and to be blaming them for the situation, while other communities went unpunished.

At the time of writing, it's no exaggeration to say that the only symbolic and politically quantifiable "success" that can be attributed to the popular uprising was the decision of Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign and to acknowledge the failure of the "Let's Work" government – the second cabinet he presided over under the so-called Presidential Deal.⁽¹⁾ There's no exaggeration too in allowing some doubts about the genuineness and significance of that achievement by surrounding the word "success" with some very real quotation marks.⁽²⁾

The fact is that despite all the cheering from the Lebanese "revolutionaries," as they like to call themselves, and all the cheering for them, the resignation of Hariri was not, whatever his entourage may have circulated about it, a positive sign of his support for the movement, a gesture of political/ethical awakening or the result of his agreement with the grievances of the Lebanese people. It was instead meant, and has proven to be, considering his post-resignation maneuverings, to achieve self-serving goals: improving the terms of the Presidential Deal and to subsequently enhance his profile in front of both the Lebanese public at large

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Iraqi political parties debate already-rejected PM candidates

By Ali Choukair
Agence France Presse

BAGHDAD: The day before the deadline to designate a new Iraqi prime minister, political parties were wrangling Wednesday over three candidates: all insiders and all rejected by a months-old anti-government protest movement.

President Barham Salih has until midnight Thursday to appoint a replacement for outgoing premier Adel Abdel-Mahdi, who resigned after two months of unprecedented demonstrations that have rocked the capital Baghdad and Shiite-majority south.

The protests continue to push for the overhaul of the political system in place since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, defying violence that has left around 460 dead and 25,000 wounded.



Hotel business tumbles 90 percent over last three months

By Osama Habib
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Lebanon's hotels and hospitality sector has incurred heavy losses since the outbreak of a popular uprising on Oct. 17.

The sharp drop in the number of tourists and visitors over the past three months has prompted most hotels in the country to close 90 percent of their rooms and pay half salaries to their staff.

"It is one of the worst situations we have passed through in many years. Room occupancy has dropped by at least 90 percent in most hotels in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon," Pierre Akhkar, the president of the Association of Hotel Owners, told The Daily Star.

The reasons behind the poor performance of the hotels include political paralysis and failure to

Front page of *The Daily Star* dated December 19, 2019. The writing on the wall reads: "Down with the Wall of Infamy." Of note, this label is the same given to the West Bank Wall built by Israel during the Second Intifada that began in September 2000. *The Daily Star* wasn't the only Lebanese newspaper to highlight the erection of this wall as a significant moment within the unfolding developments. A sign of the times and of the growing economic crisis, which is not sparing any sector, was the announcement by *The Daily Star*, on February 3, 2020, that it will suspend its print edition!

and his crumbling Sunni constituency. In this sense, it's valid to say that Hariri's resignation was in itself a maneuver! Based on his political track record, it would not be unfair to say: a maneuver which went wrong!

This position is confirmed by the fact that Hezbollah, the main *shareholder* in the Presidential Deal, understood it like this, in this very context, and *allowed* Hariri from October 29, 2019, the day of his resignation, until December 19 of that same year, the day where Hassan Diab was, to nobody's great surprise, appointed as prime minister and tasked to form a new government, enough room to take advantage of his maneuver, hold his head high, and go back to the fold of the Presidential Deal.

Of note, the negotiations between Hariri and Hezbollah did not stop until the very eve of the parliamentary consultations stipulated by the constitution and whose results are binding for the president when it comes

to appointing a prime minister.⁽³⁾ Of note also, is that that same day, December 19, when the presidential palace of Baabda hosted the parliamentary consultations, saw that afternoon the arrival to Beirut of Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale...⁽⁴⁾ Last but not least, good to keep in mind also is that on the evening of December 16, 2019, as the *thawra* ("Revolution"), was entering its third month, the Lebanese security forces started fencing off some alleys leading to Riad Solh Square with the same above-mentioned cement panels and began reinforcing barriers along some streets leading to the parliament.

Feel free to put as much weight behind all three coincidences as you like, but what is beyond any doubt is that (1) Hassan Diab, Lebanon's incumbent prime minister — along with former minister Mohammad Safadi, former minister Baheej Tabbara and businessman Samir Khateeb, whose names were circulated over the last few months as possible candidates to succeed to Saad Hariri to the premiership — weren't Hezbollah's first choices, and that (2) the establishment as a whole felt that the uprising's energy had faded enough to allow it to feel confident enough to start shrinking, geographically, the area in which the protests taking place in Downtown Beirut could occur while at the same time reinforcing — under the justification that these security measures were meant to prevent clashes between the demonstrators and security forces — its policy of denial about the root causes of the developing Lebanese malaise.

In terms of symbolism, erecting the fence meant that the Lebanese establishment

⁽³⁾ *Al-Joumhouriyya*, December 21, 2019.

⁽⁴⁾ <https://lb.usembassy.gov/visit-of-under-secretary-of-state-for-political-affairs-david-hale/>

Various sources close to Hezbollah stated that the visit of Hale would bring in its wake further pressures on Lebanon. To the disappointment of these sources, and perhaps of Hezbollah's decision-making circles, Hale's statements during his visit were very carefully weighed, to the point that one may cynically say that they deprived Hezbollah's media of the opportunity of attacking him and, through him, American policy.

had decided not only to turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the messages of protest chanted in the streets and squares for weeks, but that that it would also remain entrenched in its narratives of what brought the Lebanese people to that breaking point. The designation of Diab lifted any lingering misunderstanding or confusion about the balance of power within the establishment.

In a nutshell, Diab was extracted from his functions as Vice President at AUB and propelled, in his capacity as a “technocrat” into the office of prime minister thanks to the votes of what one may call the “Greater Hezbollah parliamentary bloc,” i.e., that formed of those MPs sitting in the

Lebanese parliament under various partisan colors, (AMAL Movement, Free Patriotic Movement, Syrian Socialist National Party...), but who are compelled to follow Hezbollah's commands when it comes to critical issues.

With all due respect to those experts who spent their time in the aftermath of Lebanon's 2018 parliamentary elections laying out colorful infographics explaining the complex sectarian/partisan make up of the Lebanese parliament, this

assembly is, in the final analysis, constituted of two big blocs: the Hezbollah bloc on the one side and the others on the other side, while understanding that the “others” are not necessarily unwilling to indulge Hezbollah according to their interests. This acknowledgment may bother those who, for one reason or another, want to maintain the

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view that Lebanon's political landscape is a multi-partisan one; however, it is a matter of fact that the bipolarity which was illustrated by the appointment of Hassan Diab as prime minister is practically the expression of the enduring effort that Hezbollah, and behind it Iran, has deployed, since 2005, to translate its de facto and military dominion over the country into legal and constitutional terms. Wasn't it late General Qassem Suleimani, who stated triumphantly a couple of weeks after the above-mentioned parliamentary elections of 2018 that Hezbollah now had 74 seats (out of 128) in the Lebanese parliament?⁽⁵⁾

Indeed, the history, prehistory and contexts, including the legal framework, of that parliamentary victory deserve in turn to be analyzed some day in order to assess at its fair value the *popular will* expressed by these results. But regardless of all this, the number of votes needed by Hezbollah to designate *its* candidate for the premiership, guarantee the vote of confidence for the cabinet presided over by Diab and reassert its precedence over all the other local and foreign actors involved in Lebanese issues, were there and ready to be used.

Interestingly, while the major foreign press did not fail to immediately highlight Hassan Diab's pro-Hezbollah profile, and consequently that of the government he was tasked to form, the domestic reaction to his designation was characterized by a lot of confusion: the "Sunni" opposition to his designation was not openly endorsed by Saad Hariri but rather gave way to further fragmentation within Sunni public opinion, while the "civil society" groupings and figures could not agree on a consensual stand

⁽⁵⁾ An-Nahar, June 11, 2018.

and several groupings of protestors even advocated the idea of giving him a chance regardless of him being Mr. Hezbollah...

On January 21, 2020, a month, almost to the day, after his appointment as prime minister, Hassan Diab announced *his* government. Italicizing "his" is by no means a touch of fantasy... lacking any popular or parliamentary support outside that recruited for his appointment by Hezbollah, and based on uncontested public information, statements, Tweets and oratory jousts by and between the representatives of the political

forces and entities which were willing to participate in Diab's government, it is all but impossible to believe that the cabinet he announced is really a cabinet of "independent technocrats". Assuming that such a cabinet is really what Lebanon needs... the best we can say about this government, regardless of the personal qualities attributed to some of its members, is that it's a leafy tree meant to hide, as far as possible, the Lebanese

establishment's jungle of interwoven, shared and competing interests.

We cannot say the same when it comes to describing where Hezbollah stands, publicly, vis-a-vis this government. The reason is very simple: Hezbollah said it clearly through the mouth of one of its senior mouthpieces. Speaking in south Lebanon on January 26 at the inauguration of the 2020 forestation season sponsored by *Jihad al-Binaa*, Sheikh Nabeel Kaouk, a member of Hezbollah's

“The formation of the [Diab] government [represents] a slap to [President Donald] Trump, [Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo, [Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs David] Schenker and all the administration members who bet on [spreading] chaos, putting the Resistance under siege and subduing the Lebanese people...”

Sheikh Nabeel Kaouk
Member of Hezbollah's Central Committee
January 26, 2020

Central Committee said, without mincing his words:

“This week, the slaps [on the face of the] American administration extended from Beirut to Baghdad. The Iraqi people used their voice as millions of people took the streets to assert that the blood of Hajj Qassem Suleimani and Hajj Abou Mahdy al-Mouhandess has sealed once and for all the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.⁽⁶⁾ As to Beirut, the formation of the government [represents] a slap to [President Donald] Trump, [Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo, [Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs David] Schenker and all the administration members who bet on [spreading] chaos, putting the Resistance under siege and subduing the Lebanese people...”⁽⁷⁾

Never before had Hezbollah, through such a senior official, made such a plain connection between the unfolding turmoil taking place in Iraq and Lebanon. To the contrary, Hezbollah's Head of the Executive Council and first cousin of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Sayyed Hashem Safiyyedin, told the BBC, on November 5, 2019, that his organization doesn't consider there to be a linkage between the protests in Iraq and the protests in Lebanon.⁽⁸⁾ This leads us to wonder if the rationales behind forming this government are shared by those who understand, be it for egoistic or altruistic reasons, the urgency of putting Lebanon on the track to real reforms that might gradually lead to getting it out from the deep black hole where it finds itself, and Hezbollah with its regional, inevitably supra Lebanese, agenda and

⁽⁶⁾ A reference to the demonstrations which took place in Iraq on Friday, January 24, 2020 following a call from Sayyed Muqtada as-Sadr.

⁽⁷⁾ The statement is available through the Lebanese National Agency: <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/458798/nna-leb.gov.lb/ar>

⁽⁸⁾ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hOkdHmg5D4>.

Of note, while Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei blamed the US for being behind “insecurity and turmoil” going on in Iraq and Lebanon as early as end of October 2019, Hezbollah's officials and media outlet made a point not to highlight this narrative, preferring to maintain that the protests per se are legitimate but are victim of evil attempts to divert them from their initial, acceptable drivers.

Re Ali Khamenei's position: “Khamenei says US stoking ‘chaos’ amid Iraq, Lebanon protests,” Al-Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/khamenei-stoking-chaos-iraq-lebanon-protests-191030160139954.html>

Re the distinction between “good” and “bad” popular protests,” “Lebanon's October 17: A Revolution with a Pinch of Salt...,” *Lebanon-in-Conflict*, Issue 001.

calculations. Clearly speaking, the level of tolerance in dealing with Lebanon's uprising and domestic issues that Hezbollah has feigned, often clumsily, and that it adopted before the assassination of Qassem Suleimani was no longer a luxury it could afford after Suleimani's death...

Allegorically speaking, but also factually, this takes us back to the wall currently dividing Downtown Beirut into two parts, and into two time zones... In fact it's interesting to note that the completion of that wall, started just after the announcement of the formation of the new cabinet and following a week of vigorous demonstrations characterized by an unprecedented level of violence by *(un)identified* groups that participated in the demonstrations.⁽⁹⁾ These groups were almost *commando-like* in their operations, and at the same time, there were occasions when the anti-riot forces, and other security apparatuses, did not refrain from behaving in what the Lebanese jargon calls a *militia-like manner* — in a clear reference to the years of civil war where the various militias enforced their own laws. While the erection of this wall may seem a passive attempt at *normalization*, it's interesting to note that it was directly followed by more proactive actions, such as the arrest of several influential figures from the protest movement and the attempt to confine the sit-in in Downtown Beirut to a small area under the justification of opening the roads and alleviating the problems that had been caused by blocking them.

Evidently, Beirut is not the only location in Lebanon where popular protests took place. Shia dissidence in Southern Lebanon was viewed as a first in the history of the years

⁽⁹⁾ Of note, most of these *(un)identified* groups of demonstrators came by bus from north Lebanon to Beirut. According to testimonies collected by UMAM D&R/HAYYA BINA from senior, peaceful, activists from Tripoli through this week of heavy clashes, the buses transporting these groups managed to reach Downtown Beirut before them and started clashing with the security forces. They thereby imposed their own rhythm to the demonstrations which encouraged a lot of demonstrators to leave the squares...

characterized by the hegemony of the Shia Duo, AMAL Movement and Hezbollah. The civic-driven contestation of Tripoli was viewed as a refutation of the entrenched impression that Lebanon's second capital is a hotbed of radical Islam. Regardless of the prospects for both the dissidence and the civic drive to expand in the future, the fact

remains that Beirut's centrality as a melting pot of the *thawra* was uncontested and that the incessant efforts, sometimes paramilitary efforts, to contain the dissidence and mitigate it, were not unsuccessful. As for Tripoli, which at the time of writing still gives the impression of being the most resilient hotbed of protest, we need to also acknowledge that the

actions of its activists are more and more taking a carnival-like shape than that of a revolt.

Is this to say that the *thawra* is over? Realistically speaking, what started on October 17 is indeed breathing its last. However, does this also mean that the page that was opened on October 17 is fully turned? Most probably not and the safest would be to say that October 17's first installment is over and that Lebanon is waiting for a second installment which will not take long in appearing.

Such an assessment is neither a random prophecy nor wishful thinking! While the *thawra*, to the regret of some of those nostalgic for the old Comintern days and some over excited newcomers to the public squares, is winding down, a balance sheet of the gains and losses shows clearly that all the

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main public actors on the Lebanese scene or involved in Lebanese issues have hit a wall.

Hezbollah, which considers the formation of this government a slap in the face of the US administration, had finally cast aside the last vestige of the charade that it was taking part in the Lebanese political game like any other *political actor* and acknowledge, not only that it has the upper hand over Lebanon, but also that its Lebanese decisions are far from being driven by the country's national interests. As it was put by a seasoned analyst, "ultimately, what matters to Hezbollah and the Axis of Resistance is not what will happen to Lebanon, but how Lebanon can be used in the battle between Iran and the US."⁽¹⁰⁾ Needless to say, that by positing itself as the custodian of the Lebanese regime and the guarantor of its survival, Hezbollah indirectly offers proof of the impotence of all the other Lebanese actors, including those considered to be its ideological opponents, in order to defend a regime which serves them as a sheltering umbrella. However weird this may seem, Hezbollah, by standing front and center in the protection of this regime, obliges, literally, both its allies and opponents alike — regardless of all their differences and disagreements.

In light of the turn that events have taken, the second big loser is perhaps the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as an institution on which many, inside and outside Lebanon, have built hopes that, some day, it would be the sole institution accountable for Lebanon's sovereignty and the only force responsible for providing security to the Lebanese. On the political level, the disappointment regarding the role of the LAF is proportional

⁽¹⁰⁾ Raghida Dergham, "Hezbollah-backed Lebanon government should beware of the US," *The National*, January 25, 2020.

to the way it has shifted its positioning towards the *thawra*. It's enough to review the official statements published by the LAF's press office to notice how the tone and semantics have shifted from a full pledge to protect the popular protests and their legitimate claims, to an increasingly authoritarian approach focused exclusively on maintaining order. In the field, the aptitude of the LAF in protecting the popular protests, even when it was still promising to fulfill its mission, appeared to be obviously unequal between various regions, specifically between those where it has free rein to decide the nature and extent of its intervention and those, mainly the Shia ones, where its interventions were either limited or totally absent. A third issue which appeared clearly over the last months and which emerged several times, in broad daylight, are the internal tensions within the LAF which find their origin in the very fact that, despite all the efforts to professionalize it and keep it apart from political meddling, the institution remains, to a large extent, under some degree of political/sectarian influence.

The other big losers are the so-called "non-partisan" civil society organizations and entities which shied away from connecting their claims, including the most "radical" among them, (fighting corruption, recovering embezzled money, reforming the judiciary and preventing political interference...), to the political context in which they are operating and leading their protestations. Plainly stated: the so-called "non-partisan" civil society organizations and entities ignored as a starting point that the regime they strive to reform, for

some of them, to change, is literally under the curation and protection of Hezbollah! It's not that this fact has escaped their attention, or that they didn't know, like all Lebanese do, that the serious corruption, such as that prevailing in Beirut's port and airport or that related to Lebanon's eastern borders, involves Hezbollah directly, but they naively thought that not angering Hezbollah would turn it into an "objective ally" against the rest of the establishment. Hezbollah not only profited from this approach, but it heavily invested in it by manipulating, in the literal sense, some of

If Hezbollah wins this battle of *normalization* this will result in its imposing, until further notice, an unquestionable rule over Lebanon. If they fail, which seems entirely possible, this would mean the outbreak of an October 17 round two — with no guarantee that this second installment, proof of Hezbollah's unsuccessful efforts in normalizing the situation and saving the day, will be as playful, colorful and hope-driven as the first one...

these groups and individuals; they ended up tricking them and striking a deal which matched their interests — the Diab cabinet and its Ministerial Statement — with the rest of the establishment.

Finally, yet importantly, we cannot exclude from the list of those hitting the wall all those who made Lebanon's stability a priority at the expense of addressing the root causes of its failure. It

may be that their political and financial baby-sitting of Lebanon over the years, and especially since the Syrian revolution turned into an armed conflict, has spared them an additional headache in recent years; cynically, this is enough reason to have given precedence to stability over any other dimension. However, the fact is that today, seeking even minimal reforms to the regime will ultimately mean its dismantling and re-composition and to do that they will have to engage with its curator, be it by

means of negotiations or confrontation. In both cases, the result will not be in favor of Lebanon's cherished stability...

While the whole region looks more and more like a boat in a storm, being tossed in all directions, Hezbollah has decided that, until further notice, the best-case scenario for Lebanon is to save whatever can be saved of the pre-October 17 status quo. To do so, it will do its best to allow Hassan Diab's government to score some successes, even at the expense of allowing it to make some concessions and to accept some of the painful recommendations repeated ad nauseam by various international economic institutions. At any rate, this is not a difficult task for an organization that preaches "resistance" and "sacrifice" all day long. Will this "enforced normalization" that Hezbollah seems to be leading, truthful to its warmongering mindset, as a battle, succeed? Unfortunately, both possible answers to this question do not present a positive outcome for Lebanon and the Lebanese: if Hezbollah wins this battle of normalization this will result in its imposing, until further notice, an unquestionable rule over Lebanon. If they fail, which seems entirely possible, and through the concurrence of various factors the most probable outcome, this would mean the outbreak of an October 17 round two — with no guarantee that this second installment, proof of Hezbollah's unsuccessful efforts in normalizing the situation and saving the day, will be as playful, colorful and hope-driven as the first one...

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