On the 19th of October, 2019, a Lebanese newspaper reported that the clashes in central Beirut between protesters and security forces had caused dozens of injuries between the two sides, and claimed the lives of two Syrian workers who were in a building that caught fire in Martyrs’ Square. Amidst the turmoil of the “revolution” and subsequent events, the news of these deaths went largely unnoticed. While the exact circumstances behind the death of the two Syrians are still unclear, their unfortunate demise needs to be contextually interpreted. The emblem of Lebanon’s post-war era was the “reconstruction” of downtown Beirut under Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which saw the participation of tens of thousands of Syrian workers. Downtown Beirut’s “reconstruction” has since become a point of contention, and it was Rafiq Hariri’s own assassination that turned the downtown area into a space reclaimed by the Lebanese as a meeting point for political expression. The convergence of October 17 protests on downtown Beirut and the death of the two Syrian workers need to be seen as part of this historic legacy.

Currently, conferences, meetings, and celebrations are being organized to mark the first anniversary of the October 17 “revolution,” and there is a continuing lack of commemoration of these two Syrian victims. This devaluing of human life of the “other” in overlooking the deaths of “non-Lebanese” is not exclusive to these two lives. It can be seen again in the dismissal of the significant proportion of Syrians, and other nationalities, who lost their lives in the August 4, 2020 explosion at the Beirut Port.(1)

The number of people killed, injured, and displaced by the blast, as well as

(1) The numbers of those killed and missing in the explosion vary, but some sources put the number of Syrians killed at 43; see https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-security-blast-syria/at-least-43-syrians-among-people-killed-in-beirut-blast-al-mayadeen-idUSKCN2540H4.
In the aftermath of the explosion on August 4, there have been various calls for the transformation of the Beirut Port wheat silos into a monument that testifies to its symbolic power and in commemoration of what the explosion destroyed, including the lives it took. The Lebanese Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism supports this demand, especially as this call shows widespread citizen awareness of the importance of memory in the aftermath of trauma, and supports calls for accountability and justice. It also shows a marked departure from the prevalence of general amnesia and amnesty that followed the end of the Lebanese civil war, and upon which the above-described “reconstruction” era was inaugurated.

The Initiative echoes these calls for a commemorative monument, but it invites friends and partners those concerned with the matter to consider the blame for the crimes which allowed for the explosion to occur, has added force to the protests leveraged by Lebanese against the ruling establishment.
the relevance of including a monument to the “Unknown Syrian.” This would symbolize recognition of the grace and offerings of all Syrians and other “non-Lebanese” who have fallen victim in Lebanon; whether they were victims of major events, such as the revolution of October 17 or the explosion on August 4, or if they were victims of work-related accidents or societal violence. This monument would serve as a reminder that the Beirut Port explosion and the many other crimes of the ruling establishment are not the exclusive possession of Lebanese citizens, but rather should be seen as an endowment of pain and affliction that has affected individuals across nationalities. No specific nationality, sect, or political loyalty has the right to monopolize and claim exclusive victimization under the ruling power.

What the call for this monument additionally aims to capture is that Syrians are not the only “non-Lebanese” who have participated with the Lebanese people in times of peace, war, scarcity, prosperity, or other fluctuations in conditions. The Initiative hopes that this call for commemoration of the “Unknown Syrian” on the occasion of the first anniversary of October 17, 2019, challenges these events as being exclusively Lebanese, and evokes recognition of additional “othered unknowns,” regardless of their origins or nationalities.