

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's October 17: A Revolution with a Pinch of Salt... A Quick Primer on the Limits of "Stability"

About this newsletter

This newsletter, *LEBANON-in-CONFLICT*, has borrowed the title of a publication that UMAM Documentation and Research released in 2015, in partnership with HAYYA BINA.

Once more, the idea of the partnership between the two organizations in publishing a newsletter under that title emerged from the need to continue scrutinizing Lebanon's state of conflict.

The first issue of the newsletter was meant to be released at the end of October 2019. That first issue was planned to revisit the "Qabr Shmoun incident" which paralyzed the country for weeks and ended up with a "reconciliation" which, as proved by subsequent events, was itself a kind of expired medication to the deep disorder of which that incident, among other developments, was an expression.

The popular rising which started on October 17, made our initial plan no longer relevant. Obviously, we don't regret it...

In the midst of a turmoil, reflecting upon the past is obviously not the first thing one may think of or deem beneficial. Yet, notwithstanding the exuberance shown by a significant sector of the Lebanese people vis-a-vis their "October 17 Revolution" and the dispiritedness shown by the others, a look back seems imperative.

In August 2015, not long after the end of President Michel Suleiman's term and the failure of the Lebanese parliament to elect a new president⁽¹⁾ — a failure which was by itself the result and the expression of a persistent and agonizing political stalemate — the streets and squares of Beirut and some other cities witnessed an outbreak of popular protest, which was soon dubbed *the Trash Uprising*.

In fact, the closure of a landfill site spiraled into a nationwide trash collection crisis which drove people into the streets and turned those streets and squares into huge popular courts where years of mismanagement, patent corruption, and incompetence were exposed and rhetorically prosecuted. Popular sentiment was that the Lebanese system based on sectarian power-sharing/corruption-sharing was in and of itself a problem and needed to change.

⁽¹⁾ After Suleiman's term ended (May 24, 2015), the presidency remained vacant for around a year and a half year until Michel Aoun was elected on October 31, 2016.

In an effort to contain the Trash Uprising and squash it, the ruling establishment resorted to the usual authoritarian playbook: it attempted to infiltrate the large demonstrations by sending professional thugs to clash with security forces and vandalize private and public property. It tried to create schisms within the protest movement and to seed doubts in the minds of the public — and partially succeeded. It attempted to demonize the protest movement under the catchall accusation that “foreign embassies” were supporting it. And last but not least, it resorted to the arrest of dozens of activists and brought them before military courts. Afterward, in a last-ditch effort to restore normalcy, the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri,⁽²⁾ called on his peers for a “National Dialogue Table”.⁽³⁾ This brought together leaders of various political parties and power brokers, comprising what is generally thought of as the ruling establishment. In spite of deep political cleavages among those present, this extra-constitutional dialogue reasserted the solidarity of the establishment and the tightness of the interests binding them to each other.

In order to strengthen the impression of normalcy, and to contain the residual effects of the anti-government protests and divert attention away from themselves, the Lebanese establishment abided by the national electoral schedule and organized, despite the glaring presidential vacancy, municipal elections in May 2016.⁽⁴⁾ Of note, the decision to undertake these elections was made partly under pressure from the “international community,” which sought to maintain at any price the self-serving facade that Lebanon is a “stable” country, despite

⁽²⁾ Of note, Nabih Berri (born officially in 1938) is the head of the Shia Amal Movement and has been speaker of parliament since 1992.

⁽³⁾ The “National Dialogue Table” that Berri called for was held on September 9, 2019. Convening “National Dialogue Tables” is a kind of emergency convention which was instituted after the 2005 assassination of Rafic Hariri and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in order to discuss critical issues and challenges that go beyond the technical powers of the cabinet. The first National Dialogue Table was held in the Lebanese parliament on March 3, 2006.

⁽⁴⁾ According to the UN, 48.54% of eligible voters participated in these elections, which took place in just over 1,000 municipalities. See: “Women in Municipal Elections 2016,” https://www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/Governance/Publications/Women_elections_july_14.pdf

the obvious ill-functioning of the government, the presence of more than one million Syrian refugees, and the deep political and military involvement of pro-Iran Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict.

Although the movement to reject the political system seemed fragmentary and undecided in 2015, since 2015/2016 a nationwide dissatisfaction has continued to boil over periodically. This dissatisfaction mostly manifests as small-scale and sporadic

protests across the country, focused on specific issues such as poor livelihood conditions, lack of basic services, women's rights, environmental concerns, judiciary corruption, the rights of the disabled persons, and other grievances. This multifaceted societal activism is relevant

in relation to the maturity shown by the protesters of 2019 and the strong articulation of their social and economic demands, if not their political ones.

Recent events make clear that neither the 2016 municipal elections nor the 2018 parliamentary elections⁽⁵⁾ succeeded in dealing with the nationwide catalogue of grievances, nor did they succeeded in preserving the facade of normalcy dear to both the Lebanese establishment and the "international community." Rather, the presiding political class proved itself woefully incapable of handling Lebanon's problems, and failed to display a modicum of competence in matters relating to basic functions of the state such as economic management, and the "international community" neglected the real challenges facing Lebanon. Thus, from 2015 to

Remembering how the 2015 *Trash Uprising* started and ended is key to understanding why the *Hela Hela Revolution* went quickly out of political control, and why it's very difficult, so far, to foresee how it will end.

⁽⁵⁾ Of note, the 2018 elections took place after the mandate of the parliament elected in 2009 was extended for three consecutive times!



A highly expressive photograph, dated June 2019, illustrating the patent asynchrony between the international community's concerns associated with Lebanon and Lebanon's pressing challenges. It features Ján Kubiš, (second from the left), United Nations Secretary-General Special Coordinator for Lebanon, visiting some units of the Lebanese Armed Forces deployed on Lebanon's eastern border, (its border with Syria), and looking far away, probably in the direction of (former!) Syria through military binoculars... (Front page of *An-Nahar*, June 19, 2019).

October 17, 2019, Lebanese resentment of the ruling elite simmered on – until the day the government proposed the “WhatsApp tax.”⁽⁶⁾

When the Lebanese government announced a tax on WhatsApp and other VOIP providers as a way of increasing revenue for the 2020 budget,⁽⁷⁾ they finally pushed the populace over the edge and ignited a massive popular uprising

on October 17, 2019. Since the very first days of the ongoing upheaval, tens of thousands of people from every social class, educational level, and religious background flooded the streets and squares of Lebanon, unequivocally demanding not only a change of government but also sending a message that the status quo would no longer be accepted. Protesters from Tripoli to Baalbek to Tyre called for the corrupt, inept, and dysfunctional political class to step aside and let competent specialists save the economy and avert financial ruin. They asserted that they cannot go back to business as usual without engaging in a deep and painful transitional process. Additionally, protesters demanded the return of stolen public funds, not only to get back stolen capital but as a means of condemning a whole system of corruption-sharing based on the sectarian political governance system that has kept the country nominally more or less stable but in reality has only maintained a Civil War era culture of division and entrenchment.

Remembering how the 2015 Trash Uprising started and ended is key to understanding

⁽⁶⁾ “Outrage at plan to tax WhatsApp services,” *The Daily Star*, October 18, 2019.

⁽⁷⁾ After the sharp response from the country, the government withdrew its WhatsApp tax proposal.

why the *Hela Hela Revolution* went quickly out of political control,⁽⁸⁾ and why it's very difficult, so far, to foresee how it will end.

The most important parameter of the Lebanese equation that has changed dramatically between 2015 (*the Trash Uprising*) and 2019 (*the Hela Hela Revolution*) is the role of Hezbollah. While the military strength of Hezbollah in 2015 was no less important than it is today, its political profile was, objectively, less prominent than it has become since 2015/2016.

Regardless of the romantic narratives that some may espouse, the central contradiction of the *Hela Hela Revolution*, with all the ambiguities which surround it, amounts to the roles and functions that Hezbollah has succeeded earmarking for itself over the last several years, including but not limited to, the roles and functions of *stability guarantor*, of *superintendent of the establishment*, and of *economic controller*.

A couple of indicators may illustrate this shift: by the end of October 2016 Hezbollah succeeded in causing the Lebanese parliament to elect *its candidate* General Michel Aoun as president of the republic. In November 2017 Hezbollah handled the failed Saudi tour de force to pressure Saad Hariri to resign as prime minister (and to get out of the "Presidential Deal"⁽⁹⁾)

very carefully, confirming its reputation of a rational actor that had spared the country from falling into a Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict. In May 2018, Hezbollah was the main winner among all the Lebanese communities in the parliamentary election — which allowed Iran's General Qassem Suleimani, Commander of the Quds Brigade, to claim arrogantly that Hezbollah has 74 MPs in the Lebanese parliament (out of 128).⁽¹⁰⁾ Between late August and early September 2019, after a showdown between Israel and Hezbollah, the latter (with Iran's backing) demonstrated its ability to manage difficult situations, proving that Hezbollah was a

⁽⁸⁾ "Hela Hela Hela Hoo, Gebran Bassil (expletive) Immo," [Gebran Bassil f*** his mother] was the most chanted slogan during the first weeks of the Revolution. Of note, Bassil is the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun, head of the Free Patriotic Movement and Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2014.

⁽⁹⁾ The "Presidential Deal" in the Lebanese jargon is the implicit understanding which allowed the election of General Michel Aoun as President of the Republic against the return of Saad Hariri to the Premiership under the patronage of Hezbollah.

⁽¹⁰⁾ *An-Nahar*, June 11, 2018.

central actor in preserving or disrupting regional stability.

All these factors explain why the tribalesque *loya jirga*-like unwinding of the 2015 *Trash Uprising* would not apply on October 17, and why, as early as October 19, Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, took center stage and overtly placed himself as the superintendent of the establishment and the arbiter of the acceptable limits of popular protest.

In his successive public appearances Nasrallah waved the carrot and the stick, but mainly the stick, in the face of the popular protests and instead of containing them led to more escalation.⁽¹¹⁾ In light of this, it is understandable that, regardless of the romantic narratives that some may espouse, the *central contradiction* of the *Hela Hela Revolution*, with all the ambiguities which surround it, amounts to the roles and functions that Hezbollah has succeeded earmarking for itself over the last several years, including but not limited to, the roles and functions of *stability guarantor*, of *superintendent of the establishment*, and of *economic controller*.

In respect to narratives, like any event, the October 17 popular uprising has lent itself to various interpretive narratives. The importance of reviewing these narratives stems from the fact that suggested exit strategies are based on the starting point narrative. Overall, we can say that the plethora of narratives fall mainly into two main categories:

- A category which focuses on the socio-economic factor. These narratives assert that the reason behind the popular uprising

⁽¹¹⁾ In less than one month, Hassan Nasrallah delivered four speeches: October 19, 2019, October 25, 2019, November 1, 2019 and November 11, 2019.

is almost exclusively economic hardship. Consequently, the way out of the crisis would be finding solutions to the economic crisis. While acknowledging the righteousness of the popular anger, and the legitimacy of their grievances, those who hold to these narratives very early warned protesters that “malignant forces” may try to “hijack” their movement. This vague warning got gradually refined: those malignant forces want to call into question “the Resistance and its weapons...” (“The Resistance and its weapons” being a circumlocution referring to Hezbollah’s tutelage over Lebanon and its State). This narrative is articulated by Hezbollah and by its allies within the establishment — each of the allies formulating it according to its priority. As for Hezbollah, it ran from the beginning a double strategy of communication: a public one addressing the protestors which coupled “containment” and “warning,” and a partisan one addressing its constituency reproducing conspiratorial themes.

- A category comprising more complex approaches revolving around the idea that what started on October 17 is an indicator that maintaining Lebanon’s stability at any price has become obsolete and untenable. This category of narratives asserts that what broke out on October 17 was a mix of economic resentment, political frustration, and generational shift. While the economic component is evident, the two other components are harder to delineate. The political frustration is a shared feeling among large sectors of the Lebanese population who do not necessarily share the same values and agendas but who at least share their exclusion from the political game. As

to the third component, the generational one, while it could be understood at first sight as the emergence of a new generation of Lebanese “discovering” the *res publica*, and claiming its place within, it needs also to be understood as the outcome of a crisis that has simmered for years within the Sunni milieu, and as the rise of a “third generation” inside the ghettoized society within which Hezbollah has tried to confine its own constituency, as well as a quasi-existential indecisiveness within the Christian youth. Obviously, each

of these factors needs further examination, but the issue is that youthful synergy may be what explains the emergence in the streets and squares of Lebanon of some of the 2011 Arab Spring slogans – mainly the famous *Ash-shaab yurid isqat an-nizam* (“The people want to topple the regime”).⁽¹²⁾

Forget for a moment that Hezbollah is an Iranian politico-military proxy and imagine instead that it is the largest commercial company of Lebanon. Now consider what could happen when the state and the largest private sector company simultaneously face economic and financial hardships...

Defending any of these narratives is important in influencing the potential path out of the crisis. Accepting that the issue is mainly economic implies that we do not need to touch the *nizam*, whereas a more complex approach which calls into question the *nizam* itself implies that this *nizam* has in fact become a generator of the crisis. Focusing on solving the problems generated by the *nizam* would simply be a way of guaranteeing its survival instead of addressing the root causes of the problems.

⁽¹²⁾ While *Nizam* is often rendered by “Regime,” it makes sense to keep in mind that it hints to the notion of “incumbent order” at large and not only to the political pillars of that order.

Lebanon is not the first country to reach a point of economic break-up — both under pressure from historical factors (in this case a multi-confessional society, a long legacy of

unresolved issues, and conflicts, etc.) and as a result of State mismanagement, corruption, and other plagues characteristic of failed countries. It now finds itself forced to apply painful corrective and remedial measures. However, the problem in Lebanon and of Lebanon is not only the economic failure of the state. Lebanon is also the playground, headquarters, and showcase of Hezbollah, which is itself going through economically difficult times. In this sense, an analogy is tempting: forget for a moment that Hezbollah

is an Iranian politico-military proxy and imagine instead that it is the largest commercial company of Lebanon. Now consider what could happen when the state and the largest private sector company simultaneously face economic and financial hardships...

Whether we like it or not, Hezbollah is, until further notice, the one stakeholder enjoying the right of veto both within the establishment and outside it thanks to its military might that some describe as being even greater than the Lebanese Armed Forces.

From this perspective the Shia participation in the Lebanese popular uprising seemed to many observers to be one of its most striking features, as it broke a deeply entrenched prejudice which had asserted that the Shia community was a rock-hard block, religiously following the “resistance” credo of Hezbollah or unquestioningly accepting the opportunity of being part of the Amal Movement’s, (Lebanon’s other major Shia party), clientelist network.

The situation “from inside” the community was no less puzzling. When talking about the “revolution,” Nasrallah and other Hezbollah mouthpieces kept trying to distinguish between, on the one hand, a genuine and justified uprising within the revolution, and malignant forces on the other. These malignant forces are said to have introduced

themselves into the revolution in an attempt to divert the genuine uprising from its initial legitimate demands and gear it towards an “anti-resistance” agenda which intersects with American-Israeli policies. However, those who propound such beliefs continue to face the problem of explaining to large sectors of their constituency (1) why the “unadulterated resistance” sleeps in the same bed as the confirmedly corrupt Amal Movement — along with its head, Nabih Berri, his family, and their clique – not to mention instances of corruption within Hezbollah itself, and (2) even more difficult to answer, why Hezbollah, which pretends to have defeated Israel and to keep it in suspense, wasn't able to improve the performance of the Lebanese State and prevent Lebanon from sinking into the economic depression it is now in, knowing that Hezbollah was part of each Lebanese government since 2005, and at times had the upper hand in some of the successive cabinets.

Obviously, Shia participation in the revolution is not the only feature which will leave its imprint on post-October 17 Lebanon, whatever the outcome of this revolution may be. However, this participation is significant because, whether we like it or not, Hezbollah is, until further notice, the one stakeholder enjoying the right of veto both within the establishment and outside it thanks to its military might that some describe as being even greater than the Lebanese Armed Forces.

So far, Hezbollah has done its best to disassociate from the popular protests in Iraq (overtly proclaiming “Iran Out”) from what is happening in Lebanon.⁽¹³⁾ While true that

⁽¹³⁾ On November 5, 2019, Sayyed Hashem Safiyyedin, Head of the Executive Council of Hezbollah told the BBC that his organization doesn't consider that there is a linkage between the protests in Iraq and the protests in Lebanon. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hOkdHmg5D4>

the vocal protest and occasional physical violence exerted in Lebanon by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement or by the security forces under their influence is not to be compared with the violence witnessed in the streets and squares of various Iraqi cities, (and since a few days ago Iranian ones as well), what Hezbollah went discreetly about was made public by Ayatollah Khamenei himself, the Supreme Leader of Iran, in addition to other Iranian officials, who have not hesitated to put the protests in Lebanon and Iraq on equal footing with each other, and to denounce them both as satanic conspiracies.⁽¹⁴⁾

Consequently, while the Lebanese Revolution keeps unfolding, and while some experts and other right-thinking individuals take advantage to promote their academic knowledge and their citizen altruism by offering miraculous solutions,⁽¹⁵⁾ it would be either naïve or simply ill-intentioned to consider that a serious exit strategy from the situation could be found outside of the big regional (im)balance of power...

⁽¹⁴⁾ "Khamenei says US stoking 'chaos' amid Iraq, Lebanon protests," October 30, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/khamenei-stoking-chaos-iraq-lebanon-protests-191030160139954.html>

⁽¹⁵⁾ An example of such miraculous recipes is the "For an Emergency Economic Rescue Plan for Lebanon" which was drafted according to its text by "a group of Lebanese economists, political scientists, and jurists" and was endorsed by a politically heteroclitic group of signatories. <http://lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=254>