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Prospects for peace in crises

Lebanon context analysis,
February–July 2020



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Layout: Marc Rechdane

Front cover image: Volunteers clear debris from the streets following the Beirut Port blast on 4 August 2020.

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Abbreviations

CBO	Community-based organisation
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
CSO	Civil society organisation
DV	Domestic violence
FPM	Free Patriotic Movement
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISF	Internal Security Forces
LBP	Lebanese pound
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PSP	Progressive Socialist Party
UNESCWA	UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
USD	US dollars
WFP	World Food Programme
WPS	Women, peace and security

Preface

This report provides an analysis that captures a snapshot of the time between February and July 2020, and presents a summary of the main causes of tensions associated with perceptions and experiences of key social groups and political actors, their relationships and underlying dynamics that could present entry points for engagement and deepen understanding of evolving dynamics following the protests that began in October 2019.

This analysis was developed with the aim of supporting organisations in planning and design of peacebuilding and development interventions following the nationwide protests that took over Lebanon, and examines the implications of the evolving dynamics on the economic, social, political and health fronts.

The data was collected and analysed *before* the massive explosion in Beirut Port on 4 August. This event has had extensive ramifications on the context in Lebanon and significant implications for the dynamics and outlooks presented in the analysis and for peacebuilding overall.

In light of this, it is useful to view this report as an analysis of longstanding and underlying political, economic, social and environmental issues, which have fed into emerging dynamics that have evolved over time since October 2019, shaping and informing new context.

The Lebanon team recently published a long-read article on the current context in Lebanon, marking the one-year anniversary of the 2019 October protests.¹ The article provides an in-depth analysis of the key dynamics contributing to the interwoven web of crises that have evolved over this last year, including the Beirut blast on 4 August, and considers what is needed to build a lasting and peaceful recovery for Lebanon, based on thorough research undertaken by the Lebanon team.

This report will be followed by regularly updated and targeted context analyses that build on and further develop some of the key findings in this research and that examine the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut Port explosion on conflict dynamics, peacebuilding trends and peacebuilding work in Lebanon.

1 Lebanon protests one year on: Outlooks for recovery and change, International Alert, 17 October 2020, <https://www.international-alert.org/news/lebanon-one-year-on-october-protests>

Executive summary

This report aims to support organisations in planning and design of peacebuilding and development interventions. It provides an update to the context analysis report *Envisioning and contesting a new Lebanon? Actors, issues and dynamics following the October protests*, which covered the period between October 2019 and January 2020, by considering the COVID-19 implications on issues and dynamics, and following the same framing of discussing actors, issues and dynamics. The report covers the period between February and July 2020. It seeks to guide peacebuilding and development programmes, while identifying spaces for strengthening civic activism and political dialogue, amid a highly volatile, uncertain and tense situation.

It draws on semi-structured interviews with women and men of different age groups, interests and areas of activism, as well as different political affiliations – including affiliations with political parties of the establishment and opposition parties. Interviews conducted for this report also complement the field work of the previous report.

The data was collected and analysed *before* the massive explosion in Beirut Port on 4 August. This event has had extensive ramifications on the context in Lebanon and significant implications for the outlooks presented in the analysis and for peacebuilding overall.

The Beirut Port explosion hit the country at a time when it was already grappling with an economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the political stalemate since October 2019,² leaving a heavy toll of human loss, injury and trauma, and destruction, in addition to wide-reaching implications in terms of political and economic fallout, ailing infrastructure and food security issues. The port is a major facility that imports 70% of Lebanon's local consumption,³ and the damage has severely impacted the country's main economic hub. The explosion has placed Lebanon at a critical juncture, both internally and regionally, the political ramifications of which are yet to be seen.

Given the timing of the data collection, this major development is not explored in this report. Conditions are still changing rapidly, dynamics are evolving and new risks are emerging, while at the same time opportunities to support community-based initiatives and solidarity efforts, (re)build social ties and support reform are also unfolding. As such, the issues and dynamics presented in this paper are still relevant today.

Conflict issues

The political elite has upheld its position in the power-sharing political system, despite the protests questioning its legitimacy and effectiveness in management and oversight. Within this context, four major interconnected political issues have surfaced since February 2020 with sectarianism permeating all: the resilience of the political elite; difficulties for reform amid the prevailing power-sharing system; re-emergence of old political polarisations; and the failings within the political model.

Activists' opposition to those in power stems from their perceived corruption, but also from a conviction that the system as it stands cannot perform. The political system's use of sectarianism and apportionment (*muhāsasa*) prevents it from delivering on the socio-economic front and implementing reforms.

The 14 March–8 March divide, along with the escalation of geopolitical tensions, resurfaced after it was partially overtaken by the socio-economic demands of the October movement, particularly between October 2019 and

2 A. Naamani, Lebanon protests and prospects for peacebuilding, International Alert, 16 March 2020, <https://www.international-alert.org/blogs/lebanon-protests-and-prospects-peacebuilding>

3 L. Hatoum, Lebanon's \$15bn blast repair bill adds to economic misery, Arab News, 6 August 2020, <https://arab.news/pq26z>

January 2020 when protesters joined efforts. The political divisions are more pronounced among the political elite, but are also visible to a lesser extent and are approached in a different way within the opposition parties.

As the economic meltdown continues to spiral, Lebanon stands at a crossroads. Most actors, the establishment and opposition parties, as well as the public at large, understand that **the economic model adopted for decades needs to change**.

The government was unable to implement the Financial Recovery Plan and entered into a standoff with the banking system. Beyond the cabinet's plan and the counterproposal of banks, none of the established political parties has presented any concrete steps, while opposition groups have been suggesting a series of monetary measures and actions to manage the repercussions of the crisis since last January.

Poverty is spreading and deepening because of the economic crises and the secondary effects of the COVID-19 containment measures. In June, it was estimated that 55% of the population in Lebanon is suffering from poverty as the economy deteriorates, while the country does not have a comprehensive social protection system. The crisis is hitting vulnerable Lebanese and refugee groups hard.

Spaces for freedom of expression and journalism have shrunk, with security forces stepping up actions against activists, which was perceived by some activists as part of a 'politicisation' of security institutions. In addition, strong-arm men continue to prevail in neighbourhoods, sometimes acting with the knowledge of security institutions that function to an extent according to political allegiances. With the continued compromised presence of the rule of law compared to the previous context analysis, strong-arm men appear at different moments in acts of violence and vandalism in what they sometimes justify as protection of their neighbourhood and community.

The strain on public services is exposing mismanagement of natural resources, which are perceived by many respondents as being exploited by the political elite for political and financial returns, rather than making decisions based on sustainability principles, especially amid weak accountability of public administrations at the national level. Temporary measures govern solid waste management, which has been a consistent source of tension. Similarly, increased electricity cuts have ignited popular anger and led to localised protests and roadblocks.

Key dynamics

Amid volatile internal economic and political conditions and the unstable geopolitical situation, **some political actors have used divisive and threatening tactics for political gain or to negotiate and protect positions of power. Political actors have also used the regional conflicts reaching Lebanon for this purpose, which are interacting with and intensifying internal tensions.**

The protests' momentum against the political elite has waned as COVID-19 has spread and socio-economic conditions have created additional burdens; **activist groups and political parties are still striving to find direction and a cohesive vision and roadmap, while they face challenges in terms of internal capacities and strategic approach.**

The economic crisis is deepening and changing the social fabric. Increased poverty and the collapse of public services delivery, such as electricity and solid waste services, could reinforce and risk reproducing clientelist structures and further entrenching divisions between people based on class and privilege instead of political or sectarian affiliation.

Crises have been associated with a growing trend of localised community-based responses. While the central government is grappling with the socio-economic, environmental and infrastructure crises, local authorities and community-based networks are responding with local initiatives and cooperative projects.

The economic crisis and COVID-19 pandemic are transforming the labour force. The increasing layoffs, wage reductions and loss of purchasing power are not only driving unemployment rates higher but are also leading the skilled workers increasingly to seek emigration. The labour market is shifting to increased informalisation and precarity as a result of limited jobs.

The education sector this year is witnessing several changes that are expected to trigger tensions. The economic crisis and deteriorating living conditions are driving a shift of enrolment from private to public schools. At the same time, private schools are facing their own financial problems, leading some to shut down and others to raise tuition fees or lay off staff. Another dynamic widening the gap between private and public education is the introduction of technology and remote learning due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to growing community tensions, particularly between Lebanese and refugees, as fears of a further outbreak are exacerbating underlying tensions. Such tensions are centred around stigmatisation of refugees (Syrian and Palestinian) in cases of infection in informal settlements and overcrowded areas. The outbreak has also fuelled intra-Lebanese tensions, deepening social, economic, geographic and confessional divides. The second wave is proving more difficult to deal with and has a larger spread, while living conditions are deteriorating.

Prospects for peacebuilding in an uncertain and turbulent context

Despite a vibrant civil society and burgeoning youth networks, young people – especially those from lower socio-economic classes and periphery regions such as Tripoli and Bekaa – continue to be marginalised from decision-making, particularly on the political and socio-economic fronts, resulting in a significant constituency of young people with limited positive outlooks for their future or the capacity to effect meaningful change in their lives. As such, any proposed economic recovery programme should capitalise on the human capital of the country's young people, and tap into their roles and potential in this process.

As the economic crisis is deepening and the complexity of issues and actors involved in it is becoming more visible to the wider public, whose awareness of and interest in topics on political and economic models was shown to have been elevated in the previous context analysis and continues to hold, there is a need to support analysis, critical debate and the translation of complex economic policy ideas into an accessible language. Such efforts can help sustain the political and economic awareness awakened with the October protests and nurture the development of alternative ideas. The need is even more pronounced now as the political elites are consolidating their efforts to protect their own economic interests and those of their clientelist networks, while the protest movement is struggling to keep its momentum due to the economic pressures, COVID-19 restrictions and the brain drain.

The COVID-19 pandemic has interacted with and accentuated all the major conflict issues and dynamics, which warns of escalating tensions within and across communities and deepening socio-economic and political divisions. Amid this turbulent context, it is important to develop and strengthen systems for monitoring causes and triggers of conflicts and tensions, as well as perceptions polling of communities on attitudes towards, and entry points for, peaceful change in order to help identify, prevent and resolve conflicts. Such data should inform

strategic planning, programmatic interventions and specific entry points for peacebuilding (such as creating spaces for dialogue or joint problem solving) and reform, and should be used to inform coordinating actions of key local and national stakeholders.

At the community level, local solidarity initiatives are often capable of reaching more vulnerable or hard-to-reach people, and, in some cases, transcending political, sectarian, socio-economic or familial affiliations. This presents an opportunity for effective coordination bringing together municipalities and local community-based networks. Such initiatives, if connected across localities, linking across regions and geographical divides, could contribute to a comprehensive alternative for the current political economy model, not to mention their potential to increase protective factors and social stability at the local level.

1. Introduction

After 17 October 2019 when people across Lebanon first took to the streets, the country continued to ail under crises. The economic collapse accelerated, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic hit the country, and the political situation further deteriorated. People have been struggling with extremely difficult living conditions and faltering public services. Tensions have remained high at multiple levels and conditions have been changing rapidly.

In early 2020, International Alert produced a context analysis report,⁴ which examined the main causes of tensions, key socio-political groups' and actors' perceptions and experiences, and the dynamics driving them between October 2019 and January 2020. As the previous context analysis was completed before COVID-19 took hold, this report covering the period between February and July 2020 provides an update to the context analysis, taking into account the COVID-19 implications on issues and dynamics, and follows the same framing of discussing actors, issues and dynamics. It aims to guide peacebuilding and development programmes, while identifying spaces for strengthening civic activism and political dialogue, amid a highly volatile, uncertain and tense situation.

This report is divided into three main sections. Section 2 on conflict issues presents a snapshot of the prevalent conditions between February and July 2020. This covers the period from when the first COVID-19 response began as of 15 March; free fall of the local currency; and a waning momentum around the protests, with a few exceptions. Divisions among economic and political actors persisted and became more visible. The influence of surrounding geopolitics heightened, in a region that has been historically blighted by intense protracted conflicts.

Section 3 presents conflict dynamics, many of which have intensified since the previous analysis. The main actors have remained generally the same and hence are not discussed again (refer to previous report). They are: i) political groups represented in parliament with differences among them in terms of their position towards the 17 October protests; ii) activist groups that form a "colourful mosaic", also varying in terms of political positioning; iii) security institutions; iv) the banking system; and; v) municipalities. Section 4, the final section, reflects on the implications of the findings for the evolving conflict context and outlines peacebuilding prospects.

At the time this report was almost complete, a calamity ravaged the country. On 4 August 2020, 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrates, which were stored unsafely in a seaport warehouse at the heart of Beirut, exploded. The explosion was unprecedented in its magnitude and damage, leaving the city resembling a 'war zone'. It destroyed large parts of Beirut, including vital public infrastructure, facilities, and commercial and residential quarters. It killed over 190 and injured around 6,000, and left some 300,000 people homeless.⁵

This shock was accompanied by a strong wave of public anger against the political class that was blamed for its negligence, mismanagement and corruption. The explosion and its repercussions are expected to further accentuate the negative social and economic dynamics (direct economic losses are estimated to be between 10 and 15 billion dollars in direct damage to the port facilities, with much higher losses in infrastructure of the surrounding neighbourhoods).⁶ The dynamics triggered by the explosion, on the international and national levels, and the political and financial implications are not yet known and are not dealt with in this report, the research for which was concluded in July 2020.

4 M. Al-Masri, Z. Abla and R. Hassan, Envisioning and contesting a new Lebanon? Actors, issues and dynamics following the October protests, International Alert, August 2020, <https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Lebanon-Context-Analysis-Oct-Feb-EN-2020.pdf>

5 P. Murphy and J. Jones, Beirut explosion generated seismic waves equivalent of a magnitude 3.3 earthquake, CNN, 4 August 2020, <https://cnn.it/310sgsz>

6 Governor of Beirut: The losses of the port explosion reach 15 billion dollars, Al Arabiya, 5 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/34TCRxB>

Figure 1: Timeline of key events from October 2019 to July 2020

October 2019

- 13** Around 100 wildfires break out affecting vast areas of Chouf's forests and residential areas amid slow government response and lack of equipment to put out the fires.
- 17** News spreads of a new tax imposed on WhatsApp calls. Protests start in Martyrs' Square, Beirut and spread nationwide.
- 18** Vandalisation of symbolic figures and places (Tripoli and South) breaks taboos.
- 25** Hezbollah positions itself against the protests and poses questions about its intentions, which leads the majority of Shiaa supporters to quit the streets.
- 29** Attacks by party supporters on protesters (in Nabatiyeh and Beirut) gain protesters local and national support from protest squares across the country. Former PM Hariri's cabinet resigns, which is perceived by protesters as a win.
- 31** Roadblocks impose successful general strikes across the country, and bring many different groups together. Attempts to calm the protesters by the president (speeches) and the prime minister (economic reforms) fail.

November 2019

- 06** Student protests bring back momentum.
- 12** Alaa Abou Fakhr is shot at a roadblock in Khalde in front of his wife and child, which triggers anger. An accident leads to the death of two people after their car hit a makeshift roadblock used by protesters to block access to the Jiyeh highway.
- 16** Political leaders continue to issue statements that exacerbate protesters' anger on the one hand, and create a lot of echo among their followers on the other. The 'Thawra bus' initiative is launched from Akkar, protesters fill the bus that is set to travel from North to South to show that demands are unified all across Lebanon. When the bus reaches Saida, it is met with opposing opinions, and ends up stopping there.
- 17** The win of independent candidate Melhem Khalaf in the Beirut Bar Association elections is considered a win for the protest movement.
- 19** Protesters organise a human chain around the Lebanese parliament, through which they succeed in preventing members of parliament from holding a legislative session.
- 27** Several attempts to portray the protest movement as a reflection of the 8 and 14 March division. These are reinforced with clashes on the ground between Hezbollah/Amal supporters and protesters in Baalbek and Beirut, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Kateb supporters in Bekfaya, and residents of Chyah and Ein el Remmaneh. These clashes are followed by unity marches led by mothers against the sectarian violence in different regions.

December 2019

- 03** News about cases of suicides linked to the deteriorating living conditions.
- 10** Attack by the parliament security apparatus on protesters and initiation of talks around renaming of Hariri as prime minister.
- 16** A video of an expat insulting Shiite religious figures and officials is circulated, triggering angry reactions among Shiaa communities. Hundreds of protesters, many believed to be from the Khandaq neighbourhood, attempt to attack protesters' encampments in Beirut, Saida and Nabatiyeh, and clash with riot police in downtown Beirut. This video was recalled in different interviews to justify the angry reactions of the young Shiaa men.
- 18** Cement walls and blocks are erected around Beirut central district to separate the adjacent Khandaq neighbourhood.
- 19** Announcements about Hassan Diab being designated as the next prime minister are followed by protests in Beirut and Tripoli, many organised by Hariri supporters.

January 2020

- 14** After weeks of relative calm, mass protests resume across the country. Highways and major roads are blocked in Beirut, Tripoli, Akkar, Sidon and Zahle by protests and burning tyres.
- 18, 19** Escalation of violence and arrest of journalist.
- 21** A new cabinet is formed in Lebanon, headed by Prime Minister Hassan Diab.
- 27** The Lebanon Parliament passes a 2020 budget, amid the debilitating financial crisis.

February 2020

- 02** A protest is held outside the United States embassy in Beirut, by hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians.
- 10** Women's groups at the local level in Lebanon, including other alienated groups, demand that their rights are honoured by the Lebanese government.
- 11** Parliament passes a vote of confidence, supporting the newly formed cabinet by the Lebanese government premiated by Hassan Diab amid high security thwarting protesters' attempts to obstruct the session. Diab's government wins the confidence of the Lebanese Parliament, with 63 votes.
- 12** Lebanon officially asks the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for technical help to restructure its public debt and solve its financial and economic crisis.
- 14** Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri delivers his first speech since leaving office in October 2019, insisting that he is not leaving Lebanon, but mapping out a new future in politics with his party.

15 Protests against official Lebanese request for technical assistance from the IMF.

17 Iranian Speaker of Parliament visits the prime minister and offers help.

21 Lebanon records its first case of COVID-19.

24 Decrease in the amounts of dollar withdrawals from Lebanese banks.

25 IMF ends its talks in Beirut pending the government's plan. An oil-drilling ship arrives in Lebanese waters.

26 US sanctions announced against three Lebanese and 12 Hezbollah-supporting entities.

27 Oil exploration in Block no. 4 launched.

29 Lebanese government implements the first of many measures aimed at combating the COVID-19 virus, closing all educational institutions.

March 2020

02 Lebanon's Prime Minister Hassan Diab states that the government has become unable to protect Lebanese citizens.

05 The USD/LBP exchange rate reaches LBP2,600 on Thursday; hundreds of demonstrators take to the streets.

06 A judge halts an order freezing assets of 20 banks, including their directors, explaining that he wants to first learn how the order could affect Lebanon's current economic position.

07 Prime Minister Hassan Diab announces that Lebanon is defaulting on its March 2020 USD1.2 billion Eurobond series, followed by a cross-default on all other Eurobonds. This is a first time in the history of the country, and pursues sovereign debt restructuring.

09 COVID-19 closes the Lebanese Parliament indefinitely.

15 Amid fears of the further spread of COVID-19 in Lebanon, the government decides to put in place a state of emergency, closure of its land borders, seaports and Rafic Hariri International Airport in Beirut until 29 March.

23 The Lebanese government decides to stop paying back all debts in foreign currencies, in light of the fall in foreign currency reserves and worsening financial and economic crisis.

27 The Lebanese government decides to remove the camps in Martyrs' Square in central Beirut that have been mostly occupied by protesters since October 2019, under the pretext of COVID-19-related general mobilisation measures that restrict large gatherings.

April 2020

- 02** Activists and journalists defy the lockdown that was issued by the cabinet on 15 March to prevent the spread of COVID-19, protesting against the closure of banks, which leads to the arrest of six activists and a journalist by the Lebanese security forces.
- 06** President Michel Aoun urges the international community to provide Lebanon with financial support as it battles to survive the ongoing economic crisis, alongside the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 21** Several protesters in Lebanon return to the streets in large car convoys, gathering around the complex where members of parliament convene in order to pass several laws.
- 21** A mass shooting takes place in Baakline, resulting in at least nine people being killed.
- 27** Due to the currency's rapid devaluation, there are large clashes in Tripoli between the army and protesters, in which one protester is killed, 40 troops are injured and many banks in Tripoli are set on fire.
- 28** Large protests erupt in Tripoli for a second consecutive night, along with other demonstrations in Beirut, Sidon, Nabatieh, Bekaa Valley and Akkar, in defiance of the lockdown to contain COVID-19 in Lebanon. Over a dozen banks and cash machines across the country are vandalised. The military express regret over the killing of a protester the night before and open an investigation into the death.
- 29** Small protests continue for a third night. In Tripoli, protesters lob fireworks and stones at soldiers who push them back with rubber bullets. In Sidon, demonstrators set a Central Bank building ablaze with petrol bombs for a second night.
- 30** The government of Lebanon announces its financial 'rescue' plan to save the country's economy from collapse.

May 2020

- 01** The government makes a formal request for IMF assistance after approving a plan setting out vast losses in the financial system. The banking association rejects the plan, saying its proposals for restructuring the banking sector would further destroy confidence in Lebanon.
- 01** Protests take place primarily rejecting the currency depreciation and the government's response.
- 05** Council of Ministers extends the general mobilisation until 24 May.
- 07** Arrest warrants issued for the general director of oil and other officials in the 'tainted fuel' file.
- 07** Lawsuit file raised against the Syndicate of Money Changers and referred to the judicial investigation.
- 12** A full closure for four days is ordered due to the high number of COVID-19 patients.
- 12** Ramco's – the company contracted for garbage collection in Beirut – migrant workers go on strike to protest a reduction in wages and working conditions.

13 Lebanon begins official negotiations with the IMF via the internet.

14 Mazen Hamdan, the director of cash operations for the Lebanese Central Bank, is arrested on suspicion of currency manipulation.

17 Authorities gradually reopen economy. School year ends.

27 Central Bank announces it will be providing commercial banks with foreign currency to finance food imports and curb food price hikes resulting from the currency depreciation.

June 2020

04 Lebanese Council of Ministers extends the period of general mobilisation in Lebanon to 5 July.

06 Protests take place again in Beirut requesting early elections, while rumours circulate that the call was against Hezbollah and for its disarmament. Protests turn violent as some protesters and supporters of Hezbollah clash, injuring 37 people.

11, 12, 13 After the Lebanese pound significantly depreciates against the US dollar, violence erupts in Beirut, as angry protesters take to the streets; security forces fire rubber bullets and tear gas in clashes with protesters.

17 An investigation is launched by Lebanon's security forces into a claimed missile attack supposedly fired close to former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri's convoy.

17 Caesar law enters into effect.

18 Henri Chaoul, one of the four members of a committee leading negotiations with the IMF, resigns.

25 Protests erupt across Lebanon amid deteriorating economic conditions in the country, with several protesters shutting down various roads in Lebanon. Lebanese pound plummets to a new rate of more than LBP7,000 to the dollar on the black market.

26 US ambassador in Beirut criticises Hezbollah, which creates a row with a judge who takes a decision prohibiting media from covering her public appearances.

26 World Bank puts Bisri Dam project financing under partial suspension.

29 Alain Bifani, the Finance Ministry Director General and negotiator with the IMF, tenders his resignation.

29 Sudani community protests in front of embassy.

30 Minister of Finance declares the political party that backed his appointment refuses to hire Kroll, after the cabinet had decided on it last April. Inflation hits 70% in June 2020 compared to June 2019. The US ambassador/Hezbollah tensions escalate.

July 2020

- 01** Curfew ends, airport reopens.
- 02** Exchange rate reaches LBP10,000/USD.
- 03** Two men are believed to have killed themselves due to deteriorating living conditions and economic hardship.
- 03** Attack on Wassef Harakeh by bodyguards of Minister of Social Affairs using the Ministry's cars in the attack.
- 06** Following the deepening economic crisis and regular power shortages in Lebanon, protesters in Beirut take to the streets, shutting down roads and burning tyres.
- 07** Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah calls for a new front: reliance on farming and individual and community initiatives.
- 10** Several Lebanese protesters, alongside supporters of the Hezbollah group, gather outside the US embassy in Awkar to protest against Washington's involvement in Lebanon, as well as to express support for the Hezbollah group.
- 13** Protesters are attacked by Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) supporters during a demo in the Chouf area in Mount Lebanon.
- 13** Exchange rate goes down to LBP6,000/USD.
- 17** American University of Beirut lays off more than 800 employees. IMF talks are put on hold pending agreement on the Lebanese side over the scale of financial losses.
- 27** Exchange of fire between Israeli soldiers and four Hezbollah members.
- 29** The pro-Hezbollah and Amal movement issues a press release in support of Bisri Dam to ensure drinking water is supplied to Beirut and Mount Lebanon.
- 29** Sonatrach, the company supplying fuel to generate electricity, decides to end its contract.
- 29** World Bank extends the deadline for the government to meet requirements for the Bisri Dam project in order to remove the partial suspension.
- 30** COVID-19 lockdown instituted for two consecutive weekends.
- 30** Power cuts reach more than 20 hours per day and COVID-19 cases resurge.

Methodology

The report is a qualitative analysis of the Lebanese rapidly changing context. Prepared within one month (July), it constitutes an update to a previous analysis conducted six months earlier. It relies primarily on a desk research of relevant literature and particularly on a review of news in media to capture recent developments, issues and dynamics. Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted, complementing the field work of the previous report. They consisted of interviews with three women and six men of different age groups, interests and political affiliations across both political parties of the establishment and opposition parties. The dynamism and volatility of the context proved to be the biggest limitation to this analysis, relating to the logistics of data collection, and the resurgence of COVID-19 cases as data collection was underway. At the same time, an increased number of arrests of activists constrained participation.

While this report builds on previous analysis, it needs to be treated as a snapshot of the context, and its qualitative value is in capturing the perceptions and positions that are reflective of a particular moment. It accompanies the *Envisioning and contesting a new Lebanon?* report⁷ and can be reviewed in conjunction with it.

2. Conflict issues

Over the first half of 2020, Lebanon continued to witness the ramifications of a complex web of political, socio-economic and environmental structural problems, while the wave of protests that began on 17 October 2019 abated as the COVID-19 pandemic spread, lockdown measures restricted public movement and security forces increasingly securitised their response to protests.⁸ This happened amid heightened geopolitical tensions and instability that further polarised political issues in Lebanon.

2.1 Continuous political stagnation with limited prospects for reform

The political elite has upheld its position in the power-sharing political system, despite the protests questioning its legitimacy and effectiveness in management and oversight. Within this context, four major interconnected political issues have surfaced since February 2020 with sectarianism permeating all: the resilience of the political elite; difficulties for reform amid the prevailing power-sharing system; re-emergence of old political polarisations; and the failure of the political model.

2.1.1 The resilience of the political elite despite protests

The traditional political parties put aside their disputes and united to ensure the governing system of clientelism and sectarianism is upheld. When the banking sector and the Central Bank opposed the cabinet's Recovery Plan presented to international donors, members of parliament from almost all political factions joined forces and formed a parliamentarian committee to design a different economic plan that estimates a smaller loss for the banking sector,⁹ thus siding with the banks (see section 2.2, 'Economic crash: Who bears the brunt?'). The traditional political parties put aside their disputes to ensure that solutions to the economic crisis do not destabilise the status quo and to protect their private interests and patronage network. In contrast, activists, experts and some opposition political parties advocated for fundamental and equitable solutions to deal with the roots of the monetary crisis, which required a reconfiguration of the political economy.¹⁰

The political elite's control has remained the essence of the problem; it has not changed even though the momentum of the uprisings disrupted the status quo. Despite a renewed sense of identity that transcended sectarian and geographic lines and a change in people's perceptions of the traditional leader (*Zaim*) that were captured in the previous context analysis,¹¹ the political elite has remained in control, governing by the politics of apportionment (*muhassasa*) and using the same tools of sectarianism and clientelism to rebuild constituency. On the other hand, many opposition political parties and activist groups believe that the system is starting to crumble from within. They justified this assessment in different ways. An opposition political party representative described how his party is calling to take over power with a fully fledged rescue programme and gave examples about attracting new members from the supporter base of traditional political parties to show that the political elite's support is weakening.¹² An activist talked about polls showing a reduction in the size of the political

8 L. Safwan, Is the Lebanese government using COVID-19 to undermine protests?, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 1 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3IIFTor>

9 Lebanon aims to reconcile financial system loss figures next week, Reuters, 4 June 2020, <https://reut.rs/3iVYcV8>

10 هيكلية الدين العام والمصارف... وضريبة لمرة واحدة على الودائع: الأخبار [Structuring public debt and banks ... and a one-time tax on deposits], Alakhbar, 28 January 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/283262>, accessed 15 October 2020

11 M. Al-Masri, Z. Abla and R. Hassan, 2020, Op. cit.

12 Interview, opposition political party member, 24 July 2020

parties' constituency.¹³ Other representatives of opposition groups and parties confirmed this opinion, but noted that, despite inherent failures of the system, it is managing to stay afloat and might not be ripe to fall yet. Here, *'Kellon ya'ni kellon'*¹⁴ (all means all) epitomises how the political elite holds up as one body, despite its internal contradictions. It was described as an "archipelago system" of confessional groups and powers ... that captured people and where the people feel safe".¹⁵

The slogan *'Kellon ya'ni kellon'* continued to reflect a categorical rejection of the prevailing political system by activist groups. The rift between activists and opposition groups on the one side and the political elite and its supporters on the other deepened further as the economic crisis unfolded. It is an issue of broken state–citizen relationships. One activist explained that relations between the people and the elite is now more than ever "completely ruptured". He clarified: "the unfolding of the economic crisis exposed the size of the crime this elite committed; it is now an 'ethical' problem ... how can we give legitimacy to those that destroyed our livelihood!"

However, *'Kellon ya'ni kellon'* was refuted by most political parties with a large representation in parliament, as a generalised criticism. According to them, it did not distinguish between 'reformers' and 'the corrupt' among the political parties represented in parliament. This discourse was used to blame their opponents for mismanagement and corruption, and to criticise others for exploiting the protest movement for political gains. In that sense, the state's inability to deliver reliable electricity or solve the solid waste management crisis has become a microcosm of accusations and infighting among these ruling political parties. For example, one political party insists that building an electricity plant in a certain area is essential for Lebanon's energy security, while opposing political parties argue that other motives lie behind such a plan, including the plant's location in a part of the country that is predominantly inhabited by communities belonging to the same religious sect as that of the political party.¹⁶

Power networks of the political elite are deeply entrenched in various administrations and across sectors. Public institutions often function to serve the political and economic elite while avoiding accountability measures.¹⁷ According to experts interviewed, this is demonstrated, for example, in the role of state institutions when it comes to supporting the highly controversial projects of building water dams or solid waste incinerators or when security institutions "operate with impunity"¹⁸ to serve the political elite, as one interviewee said (see section 2.4, 'Securitisation of social dissent, strong-arm racketeering and increase in violence'), and most recently when the banking system bypassed laws and set its own terms for restricting deposit withdrawal.¹⁹

Despite women's visible role in protests, their participation in high-level political debates and decision-making remains overshadowed by a patriarchal system. The previous context analysis showed that women played key roles in the protest movement, but their role regressed even within the activist groups as events quickly unfolded and systems previously in place were relegated. The role of women in the protest movement during the period under review remains to be examined, considering changes in the internal structure of political and activist groups that might have occurred, but, at the formal decision-making level, Diab's cabinet saw a historic 30% women representation in ministries historically viewed as male-dominated, such as defence, justice and deputy to prime minister. It is important, though, not to automatically conflate women's nominal representation in cabinet roles

13 Interview, opposition political group member, 31 July 2020

14 *'Kellon ya'ni kellon'* is the protests' most common slogan that grouped the established political parties traditionally governing for decades as one group and one system.

15 J. Mouawad, 'بول أشقر يتحدث عن انتفاضة 17 تشرين: انهما مثلت حلما واقعيا... ولكن كيف نستعيده؟' [Paul Ashkar talks about the October 17 uprising: It represented a realistic dream ... but how do we get it back?], Legal Agenda, 2 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/310ZBnf>

16 T. Perry and E. Francis, Special Report: Lebanon's power struggle – why a failing state can't get the lights on, Reuters, 10 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-power-special-report-idUSKCN25626G>

17 C. Adwan, Corruption in post-war reconstruction: Confronting the vicious circle, Lebanese Transparency Association, 2004; and M. Rizk, 'الإمضاء والإعمار: إدارة لا شرعية لم تحقق المعجزة' [Council for Development and Reconstruction: Illegitimate administration that did not achieve a miracle], Elnashra, 16 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/3nl4QIE>

18 Interview, opposition political party member, 21 July 2020

19 T. Azhari, 'Not legal' but necessary: Lebanon's banks tighten restrictions, Aljazeera, 3 February 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/02/03/not-legal-but-necessary-lebanons-banks-tighten-restrictions/>

2.1.3 Old political polarisations re-emerge

The 14 March–8 March divide, along with the escalation of geopolitical tensions, re-emerged, after it was partially overtaken by the socio-economic demands of the October movement, particularly between October 2019 and January 2020 when protesters joined efforts, even though their views on the Hezbollah arms and the international sanctions against the party remained divided.³⁰ The conflict resurfaced, with the US intensifying its actions against Iran and its allies. The entry into force of the Caesar Act on 17 June 2020, which included Lebanese state officials who have ties with Hezbollah in US sanctions, reflected a more stringent approach by the US administration in dealing with Lebanon specifically, and the region generally. While most opposition political groups have managed so far to set these divisions aside, united under the banner for reform, some groups are more vocal about these issues. Given the sensitivity of the issues, the calls for Hezbollah's disarmament are sometimes used to widen divisions between protesters, as with the call for protest of 6 June in Beirut that turned violent.³¹ Another dimension to this conflict is the formal relationships with Syria. Again, here, political divisions are more pronounced among the political elite, but are also visible though to a lesser extent and are approached in a different way within the opposition parties.

2.2 Economic crash: Who bears the brunt?

Lebanon stands at a crossroads. Most actors, the establishment and opposition parties, as well as the public at large, understand that the economic model adopted for decades needs change. The key question that remains is: what alternative should be built? Ruling political factions cannot agree with each other on an economic model for Lebanon and neither can the opposition political parties and groups across the political spectrum from right to left in terms of economic orientation. The problem remains latent since all actors are struggling to find a path out of the monetary crisis. Beyond the cabinet's plan and the counter-proposal of banks, none of the established political parties has presented any concrete steps, while opposition groups have been suggesting a series of monetary measures and actions to manage the repercussions of the crisis since last January.³²

2.2.1 Currency depreciation and implications for livelihoods

The local currency's rapid depreciation led to an accelerated hyperinflation and a significant loss of purchasing power. The country is now operating along three exchange rates at least. The official Central Bank pegged rate (at LBP/USD1,500–1,515) continues to be used to subsidise imported basic goods and somewhat reduce the impact on the economy from the depreciation-triggered inflation and, consequently, to contain people's anger. Another exchange rate serves for dollar-dominated bank deposits' 'liraification',³³ allowing depositors limited withdrawal only in LBP, at a rate 50% to 70% lower than the market rate. A third commonly used market exchange rate is determining all business transactions and thus fuelling an inflation exceeding 50%. Commercial banks and the Central Bank are also benefiting from multiple exchange rates to restructure their balance sheet and shift losses. The multiple rates allow them to revalue their assets and liabilities using different rates, reduce their losses and embed a loss to depositors.³⁴

30 M. Al-Masri, Z. Abl and R. Hassan, 2020, Op. cit., p.17. See section on 'Coordination mechanisms and the lack of a unified vision'.

31 Tense anti-government protests resume in Lebanon after Covid-19 lockdown lifted, France 24, 6 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/34Uvhf8>

32 L. Holtmeier, Expecting the collapse: Meet Lebanon's young political party ready to take power, Al Arabiya English, 5 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2SMVcQZ>; 'هيكلة الدين العام والمصارف... وضريبة لمرة واحدة على الودائع' [Structuring public debt and banks ... and a one-time tax on deposits], Alakhbar, 28 January 2020

33 The term refers to a system-wide forceful conversion of dollars to Lebanese pounds, as an opposite trend to 'dollarisation', which refers to using the USD as the domestic currency for transactions and bank deposits in a country other than the USA.

34 M. Azar, Dissecting the difference between the calculations of government & those of parliament, Finance 4 Lebanon, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3jTVelw>

The inflation and shortage of dollars resulting from these multiple exchange rates are impoverishing households and disrupting business operations, despite efforts from the government to alleviate the pressures by subsidising some food items. The rapidly soaring prices have hit the middle- and lower-income classes hard, causing additional strain to at least 55% of the population who are suffering from poverty,³⁵ particularly those who earn their income in Lebanese pounds. Upper-income classes are less affected. A study by the World Food Programme (WFP) in June 2020³⁶ found that 41% of Lebanese surveyed do not have stockpiled food due to their inability to afford the costs. Findings were even more concerning for refugees, with 44% of Palestinians and 64% of Syrians reporting they could not afford to ensure emergency stocks. They are also affected by competition over jobs, layoffs in worst-affected sectors, such as construction, and the pressure on public services.³⁷ Multiple waves of refugees returning to Syria from Lebanon have also been reported since February 2020.³⁸ Migrant workers are unable to cash their wages in foreign currencies and are facing conflicts with their employers and embassies: the employers for not being able to pay wages in US dollars (USD) and the embassies for not supporting their repatriation.³⁹

The currency depreciation complicated public contracting. Between national politics and local communities, municipalities have been grappling with tensions related to public services,⁴⁰ such as garbage collection. However, according to an interviewee, some municipalities have been able to resolve specific problems, citing examples of a number of municipalities in South Lebanon managing their own electricity generators to offset power across the community. Other examples included a municipality in North Lebanon paying power utility bills and distributing food vouchers for its residents.⁴¹ While municipalities are mandated to deal with such issues and ensure access to and quality of public services, they often struggle because they lack human and financial resources⁴² as well as the technical capacities to address complex environmental issues in addition to the currency depreciation complications. They continue to enjoy relevantly higher trust from their constituents for service delivery,⁴³ but are subject to political pressure and, particularly in bigger cities, are seen to respond more to national political interests than to local community priorities.

2.2.2 The collapse of pillars of the economic model

In essence, the problem lies in the economic model that has been governing for decades. After more than two decades of a currency peg, and monetary and fiscal practices that failed to build a resilient and productive economy, Lebanon's economic model collapsed. The applied monetary, fiscal and sectoral policies focused on rentier sectors and lacked any developmental vision. The economic system was heavily reliant on foreign inflows that started declining and led to a growing balance of payments deficit and foreign currency reserves' depletion. Here it is important to mention that foreign inflows started declining before October 2019 and the balance of payments has

35 ESCWA warns: More than half of Lebanon's population trapped in poverty, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) in Lebanon, 19 August 2020, <https://www.unescwa.org/news/Lebanon-poverty-2020>

36 Assessing the impact of the economic and COVID-19 crises in Lebanon, Beirut: UN World Food Programme (WFP), June 2020, <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116784/download/>

37 Ibid.

38 A. Sewell, Caught in between: Syrians seeking to return from Lebanon stuck in buffer zone, Al Arabiya English, 29 May 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/05/29/Caught-in-between-Syrians-seeking-to-return-from-Lebanon-stuck-in-buffer-zone>

39 A. El-Hage, Migrant workers hit hard by the dollar crisis in Lebanon, L'Orient-Le Jour, 5 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3nGHXZz>

40 F. Gehad Marei, Are municipalities in Lebanon delivering? Survey results on solid waste management, public safety, and citizen outreach at the local level, Beirut: Democracy Reporting International (DRI) Lebanon, July 2019, https://democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/DRI-LEB-DE_BP_Municipal-Survey-Publication_11072019_english_final.pdf, accessed 7 August 2020

41 M. Raad, How a Lebanese municipality is protecting households affected by covid-19, Beirut: DRI Lebanon, 2 April 2020, <https://democracy-reporting.org/how-lebanese-municipality-protecting-households-covid-19/>

42 R. Dandash, 'الأخبار،' بلديات لبنان نحو الأفعال. [Lebanon's municipalities are about to close], Alakhbar, 21 January 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/282848>, accessed 7 August 2020

43 In a survey on social tensions, 59% of the population considered that municipalities improved life a lot or somewhat, compared with 9% who thought the same of the central government and 46% of NGOs and international organisations. Results from UNDP/ARK, Regular perceptions survey on social tensions throughout Lebanon, Wave VIII, July 2020 (unpublished) (shared at a meeting on social stability, 16 September 2020).

been negative since 2011. The accumulation of deficits ultimately became unsustainable. The Central Bank applied financial measures over the last five years to gain time, which allowed commercial banks to make extraordinary profits, ultimately benefiting shareholders and depositors of large accounts, amounting to a 'Ponzi scheme'.⁴⁴ When external inflows faltered and the losses materialised, tensions increased between the banking system, on one side, and depositors and business sectors that are suffering because of dollar shortages and volatility of the exchange rate, on the other. As such, the conflict has a class dimension that crosscuts all political sectarian groups, i.e. between the banks' shareholders, elites and depositors of large accounts on the one hand, and the middle- and lower-income classes on the other. The cabinet – supported by an international financial advisory company and Lebanese experts – provided a clear diagnostic of the roots of the problem as part of its suggested Recovery Plan,⁴⁵ and received support from local and international experts.⁴⁶ The plan's diagnostic revealed that substantial losses are incurred in the financial system (banks and Central Bank). The current debate, ongoing since the formation of Diab's cabinet in January 2020, is how such losses will be distributed and who will bear the biggest brunt between the state, Central Bank, commercial banks and depositors (owners of large and small deposits).

The government was unable to implement the Recovery Plan and entered into a standoff with the banking system.

The government Recovery Plan distributed the burden of covering these losses across economic agents, including the banking sector. Such distribution meant that banks' shareholders would bear a heavy cost. Shareholders had accumulated extraordinary profits from the exceptional measures that the Central Bank applied as part of the 'pyramid scheme'. These measures allowed the Central Bank to uphold the Lebanese economic and political models, despite warnings from national and international experts of the risks.⁴⁷ The banking sector, supported by a parliamentary committee representing most political parties and the Central Bank's governor, opposed the cabinet's plan while negotiations for international financing with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were ongoing. As a result, no agreement could be reached with the IMF. The disagreement led to a halt of discussions and the resignation of an expert and general director of the Ministry of Finance from the delegation representing the cabinet. International donors have been withholding support until an IMF-agreed plan is approved and enacted.

These delays further increased uncertainty and continued currency depreciation fuelled inflation. While USD account depositors feared a 'haircut' (reduction) on their deposits, the banks and politicians used this concern to gain public support and block the government's financial 'rescue' plan.⁴⁸ Politicians stressed that they would oppose any haircut, with the speaker of parliament leading this campaign, backed by the parliamentary committee formed to deal with this issue.⁴⁹ However, in practice, what the banking sector has been implementing has forced all depositors to bear the burden, and naturally owners of LBP smaller deposits and lower income groups felt it most. Depositors with USD accounts withdraw their money in local currency at a rate much lower than the market rate, incurring a loss. In addition, such practices, the Central Bank's policies and the depreciation of the local currency have led to a hyperinflation that has reduced dramatically the purchasing power of households, including non-depositors.

In practice, the Central Bank's applied 'crisis management' measures supported the banking system and pushed the burden on to households.

On the one hand, the Central Bank secured US dollars for imports of necessary goods and consequently shielded some basic consumer goods (such as fuel and medicine) from the inflation resulting from the currency depreciation. On the other hand, it facilitated a de facto capital control and enacted measures to de-dollarise bank accounts, allowing limited withdrawals only in Lebanese pounds

44 A Ponzi scheme is a form of fraud used to refinance an organisation's losses by luring in large funds from new investors with high interest rates to pay off older investors.

45 Lebanese Government Financial Recovery Plan, 30 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2SQdikE>

46 L. Holtmeier, Lebanon's economic rescue plan 'good starting point.' IMF spokesperson, Al Arabiya English, 21 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/37bNh7R>

47 S. Halabi and J. Boswall, Lebanon's financial house of cards, Beirut: Triangle, November 2019, <https://bit.ly/2SO8uMy>

48 '2020' عودة # المصارف وأبواقها إلى شن حملة على # الهيركات', Megaphone, 24 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3dkNMxe>

49 W. Choukair, '2020' الأهداف السياسية للإصلاح المالي في لبنان تُسقط الـ "هيركات"', *انديبننت عربية*, 15 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/34WkD7Y> [Political goals of financial reform in Lebanon duntake the 'haircut'], Independent Arabia, 15 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/34WkD7Y>

(liraification) at an exchange rate at half the market rate at least, and consequently supporting commercial banks and simultaneously fuelling a hyperinflationary trend. These measures effectively served as a 'masked haircut' on USD deposits, instead of adopting a plan with a more equitable distribution of losses. In response, a few depositors joined forces and formed a group to defend depositors' interests by offering support on legal matters, organising for action and ultimately initiating a process for representation.⁵⁰ Yet so far, and despite their hefty stake, depositors remain excluded from the negotiations between the IMF, the state and banks represented.

In parallel, a similar conflict erupted when the cabinet announced its intention to run a forensic audit of the public administration, starting with the Central Bank accounts, to demonstrate transparency and strengthen Lebanon's negotiating position with creditors. The Central Bank, backed by political parties blocked plans to hire Kroll, a forensic accounting firm, because of its alleged links with Israel.⁵¹

The banking system is resisting these measures, which are perceived as threatening its interests, and no party has been held accountable so far. This can be seen in the move by the Association of Banks in Lebanon that called for the privatisation of state assets, which would see the transfer of public funds to pay off losses of the banking system.⁵² In the meantime, the economic situation is worsening and living conditions are quickly deteriorating.⁵³

2.3 Growing poverty and unemployment

2.3.1 Widespread poverty as economy further melts down

Poverty is spreading and deepening because of the economic crises and the secondary effects of the COVID-19 containment measures. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) estimated in June that 55% of the population in Lebanon is suffering from poverty as the economy deteriorates.⁵⁴ Lebanon does not have a comprehensive social protection system. As part of its response to COVID-19, the government disbursed LBP400,000 (equivalent of USD40 at the prevailing market rate in May 2020) in cash assistance to 200,000 families, whereas around 470,000 have requested assistance. This was in addition to 15,000 receiving food vouchers as part of the National Poverty Targeting Programme of the Ministry of Social Affairs pre-COVID-19. A study released in July 2020⁵⁵ covering slums around Beirut stressed the dire implications of the economic deterioration on housing for poorer classes and noted that "housing evictions are a critical risk ... with special attention to Syrian refugees who have lower bargaining power in community dynamics". Indicators of Syrian refugees' risk of household evictions registered a steep increase around June 2020 because of inability to pay rent.⁵⁶ Survey results published by the WFP in June 2020 reported that 64% of Syrians do not have food emergency stocks due to unaffordability.⁵⁷

50 Depositors Union, 'رابطة المودعين / حملة الدفاع عن المودعين سابقا (2)', Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/bdalebanon/about>

51 N. Houssari, Lebanon hires US firm for central bank probe, Arab News, 22 July 2020, <https://arab.news/mjtwx>

52 Banks' losses are partially incurred from their exposure to government debt in US dollars, but also from banks placing a large part of their customers' USD deposits with the Central Bank that used this money to finance the system and continued to offer commercial banks extraordinary profits to place their customers' deposits to sustain this situation (referring to 'financial engineering schemes' in 2016) until it blew up.

53 M. Azar, Stalemate between government & ABL: State asset fund & unfair distribution of losses, Finance 4 Lebanon, 26 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/33RDzoZ>

54 UNESCWA in Lebanon, 19 August 2020, Op. cit.

55 Urban residents under pressure: Social and economic impacts of compounding crises on vulnerable urban communities in Greater Beirut, Urban Needs Assessment in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, Beirut: Acted, July 2020

56 In Focus: Rise in evictions due to increased economic vulnerability, Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, July 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/77872>, accessed 2 August 2020

57 WFP, 2020, Op. cit.

2.3.2 Businesses and individuals struggle – massive shutdowns and soaring unemployment

More businesses have been struggling, shutting down or rethinking their operation models. Value chains have been reconfiguring their models, and different goods and services have become less available, with increasing reliance on local production and cheaper lower-quality imports. Estimates expect two-thirds of retail outlets in Beirut to close by the end of the year.⁵⁸ The dire conditions of businesses were further exacerbated by increased electricity cuts that exceeded 20 hours a day in July.

Unemployment soared. While no official measure of unemployment exists, some estimates consider it could reach 65% if no measures are taken.⁵⁹ Workers are subject to salary cuts and being laid off, and retirees or those close to retirement are seeing the erosion of their LBP savings value. Households cannot afford basic goods and services. The result of the WFP's survey released in June 2020, targeting the Lebanese population, as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees, showed that more than 30% of Lebanese respondents reported losing their jobs since the outbreak of COVID-19, as did almost 40% of Palestinians and more than 50% of Syrian refugees.⁶⁰

2.4 Securitisation of social dissent, strong-arm racketeering and increase in violence

2.4.1 Shrinking spaces for freedom of expression and journalism

Security forces stepped up actions against activists, which was perceived as part of a 'politicisation' of security institutions. Security institutions summoned hundreds of activists, protesters and journalists to police stations for questioning or interrogation. According to the Lawyers' Committee to Defend Protesters in Lebanon, these were perceived as acts of revenge or as a way to intimidate activists, restrict protests and curb freedom of speech through crackdowns.⁶¹ A member of a governing political party explained that these acts are part of the general prosecution, as the law prohibits defamation or insult of the president of the republic for example. Amnesty International examined at least 75 cases of people that military and security institutions summoned between 17 October 2019 and 24 June 2020 on charges of defamation in relation to social media posts criticising the authorities. The military court has also acted on general prosecution cases related to violence happening during protests.⁶² In certain cases, the arrests led to clashes between security institutions and activists protesting against them.⁶³ According to one interviewee, these tactics do not act as a deterrent; instead, they trigger retaliations in the form of public denouncement of the political elite and reinforce perceptions of security institutions' lack of accountability.⁶⁴ A practitioner working in the fields of governance and security reforms considered that "the laws are not made to hold them [security institutions] accountable". He further concluded that the "security sector is a reflection of the broader problems in the country [referring to politics, governance, and accountability issues]". Within this context, in July 2020, 14 Lebanese and international organisations joined together under a 'Coalition to Defend Freedom of Expression in Lebanon' to counter attempts to stifle free speech and opinion.⁶⁵ Two incidents, highlighted by activists, are indicative of this trend: the symbolic presence of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) during

58 I. al Ghossein, 'الأخبار،' تهديد قطاع البيع بالتجزئة: الإقفالات 'مؤقتة' تهدد قطاع البيع بالتجزئة: الأخبار', Alakhbar, 6 July 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/291043>, accessed 6 July 2020

59 'تقرير لـ'الدولية للمعلومات' عن البطالة في لبنان... هل تصل إلى مليون عاطل عن العمل؟' [A report by 'Information International' on unemployment in Lebanon ... Will it reach one million unemployed?], LBCI Lebanon, 16 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/32vRRKQ>, accessed 6 July 2020

60 WFP, 2020, Op. cit.

61 L. Maalouf, Lebanon: Arbitrary arrests and beatings of protesters must immediately end, Amnesty International, 16 January 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/lebanon-arbitrary-arrests-and-beatings-of-protesters-must-immediately-end/>

62 Amnesty International, <https://join.amnesty.org/page/64051/action/1?locale=en-US>, accessed 17 July 2020

63 N. Houssari, Arrests of Lebanese activists continue, Arab News, 19 June 2020, <https://arab.news/4mqke>, accessed 17 July 2020

64 Interview, opposition political party member, 21 July 2020

65 Lebanon: New coalition to defend free speech, Human Rights Watch, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/13/lebanon-new-coalition-defend-free-speech>, accessed 25 August 2020



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Protesters gather into the night in Beirut, October 2019.

the large-scale layoffs of the American University of Beirut's staff and the migrant workers' protests at RAMCO (the contracting company in charge of waste collection), who were demanding their dollar-denominated wages.⁶⁶

2.4.2 Growing role of strong-arm men in different communities

Strong-arm men continue to prevail in neighbourhoods, sometimes on behalf of the security institutions that function to a large extent according to political allegiances. With the continued compromised presence of the rule of law compared to the previous context analysis, strong-arm men appear at different moments in acts of violence and vandalism in what they sometimes justify as protection of their neighbourhood and community. Interviewees considered it likely that such incidents could recur in different localities, under the increasing socio-economic pressures, but worried they could also be caused by external political drivers. Perceptions of poor localities such as Lebanon's second capital Tripoli, North Lebanon or the Khandaq el Ghamiq area of Beirut, which are stigmatised as hubs for violence, further feed into this concern. One example is the vandalism and violence that followed the 6 June 2020 protest. A member of an opposition political party that did not participate in the protest explained that such acts are a combination of planned, politically driven acts and spontaneous public reaction to worsening living conditions. A week after the violent and divisive protests of 6 June, young men in Khandaq el Ghamiq, adjacent to central Beirut's square where protests took place, organised to protect their neighbourhood from what they claimed were 'infiltrators'.⁶⁷ From the outside, the neighbourhood was characterised by activists as inhabited by a largely anti-protest, low-income community that regularly came into violent conflict with protesters in nearby squares. It is important to stress that such community-based strong-arm men are not unique to these areas and are present in other neighbourhoods, taking different forms depending on the political dynamics, clientelist networks and relationships with formal security institutions.⁶⁸

66 Interview, legal expert and activist, 28 July 2020

67 E. Sassine, 'نشرة الأخبار المسائية - نشرة ١٤ حزيران - لماذا انتشر حزب الله وحركة أمل في محيط الخندق الغميق؟', LBCI Lebanon, 14 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/32vgDLA>, accessed 15 June 2020

68 M. Abi Samra, 'محمد أبي سمرا: زعماء السياسة ومافيات قبضياتهم: هنري فرعون وإميل الخوري', Almodon (المدن), 27 June 2020, <https://www.almodon.com/society/2020/6/27/-زعماء-السياسة-ومافيات-قبضياتهم-هنري-فرعون-واميل-الخوري>, accessed 29 June 2020

2.4.3 Rising community-level tensions and disputes

Overall, economic pressures, inter- and intra-community tensions, and consequently crime rates are increasing, along with incidents of violence. Police data for the first four months of 2020 reported a year-on-year increase of 100% in murders, 50% in car thefts and 20% in burglaries.⁶⁹ Intra-Lebanese relations witnessed increased tensions, with Lebanese citing negative relations rising from 3% in 2018 to 21% in 2020, according to the regular national perceptions survey on social tensions.⁷⁰ Job competition and public services use have been the key drivers.

2.5 The politicisation of the judicial system

The judicial system's independence from political influence, a demand of the 17 October protests, is a structural problem that has remained unaddressed. The cabinet failed to complete judiciary appointments as sectarian and political divisions blocked its efforts, despite hopes for a breakthrough after the protests created a momentum and a civil society activist was elected Head of the Beirut Bar Association.⁷¹ The discussion of a draft law on judicial independence also stalled in this period. According to a legal expert, "we are back to ground zero ... But there might be an opportunity ... Wins could be achieved as a result of individual judges' work approach and ethics."⁷² He explained that sensitisation and engagement of the public in debates around the importance of an independent judicial system during the early months of 2020 could exert pressure on judges' performance.

2.6 Infrastructure services and environmental degradation

The strain on public services is exposing mismanagement of natural resources, which are perceived as being exploited by the political elite for political and financial returns, rather than sustainability principles, especially amid weak accountability of public administrations at the national level. At best, they have been managed technically, without much strategic thought to their social functions and environmental sustainability. Most conflicts include environmental activists, backed by popular support, defending a collective good and opposing large-scale projects against the political elite. Three prominent public services problems illustrate this situation: i) deterioration of solid waste collection and management services; ii) increased electricity cuts; and iii) the strong opposition to the Bisri water dam project. Other contentious issues include cement factories and quarries in the north, other dams' construction and exploitation of water resources, wastewater management, public spaces accessibility, and air and water pollution. Lebanon recently ranked among the highest countries in the region in terms of death rates caused by air pollution.⁷³

Temporary measures govern solid waste management, which has been a constant source of tension. In June and July, the prime minister and the Ministry of Environment formed a ministerial committee and consulted with key stakeholders and actors, including civil society representatives, to push forward more sustainable approaches to waste management.⁷⁴ Yet, the absence of a sustainable strategy for solid waste management, differences between responsibilities of administrative institutions, technical experts' opinions, limited financing options and intricate socio-political dynamics obstructed solutions for this sector. Urban and rural landfills

69 As Lebanon sinks into crisis, fear of crime grows, The Daily Star, 22 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2GYisZ0>, accessed 1 August 2020

70 UNDP/ARK, Regular perceptions survey on social tensions throughout Lebanon, Wave VII, January 2020 (unpublished)

71 J. Jalkh and A. Samrani, Dans les coulisses du feuilleton des nominations judiciaires [Behind the scenes of the judicial appointments series], L'Orient-Le Jour, 12 June 2020, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1221621/dans-les-coulisses-du-feuilleton-des-nominations-judiciaires.html>, accessed 18 July 2020

72 Interview, legal expert and activist, 28 July 2020

73 D. Cherry, لبنان بين الأعلى في معدل الوفيات وفي الكلفة الاقتصادية من تلوث الهواء في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا [Greenpeace: Lebanon's death rate and economic cost due to air pollution among the highest in the MENA Region], Greenpeace MENA, 24 June 2020, <https://www.greenpeace.org/mena/ar/appr/>, accessed 18 July 2020

74 H. Maalouf, 2020, Op. cit.

serving Beirut and Chouf, areas with the densest populations, reached maximum capacities,⁷⁵ leading the union of Municipalities of Choueifat and Southern Suburbs to stop receiving solid waste from those areas into the Costabrava landfill by the end of July.⁷⁶ The central and local governments have been struggling to find an alternative solution, especially as politicians and the public exhibited a strong 'not in my backyard syndrome' driven by confessional divisions and mistrust in authorities' and contractors' capacities for monitoring and accountability.⁷⁷ This was compounded by the problems related to public contracting and difficulty in paying the contracted company in charge of collection in Beirut in US dollars because of the monetary crisis.⁷⁸ The company's migrant workers' strike in protest at not receiving wages in US dollars and the spread of COVID-19 cases among them⁷⁹ shed light on the plight of migrant workers in Lebanon, including their increased vulnerability, and highlighted the Lebanese economy's dependence on foreign low-skilled workers, especially amid high unemployment rates among Lebanese.

Similarly, the electricity cuts increased and ignited popular anger and led to localised protests and roadblocks.

Blackouts resulted from the imported 'tainted fuel' scandal,⁸⁰ where fuel was not suitable to be used, adding to longstanding electricity cuts. Political disputes had obstructed the reform of the sector and the upgrading of the power-generation infrastructure. In parallel, households and businesses are reliant on owners of private generators, mainly in Beirut and its suburbs, that have been raising prices of electricity to meet the higher demand and the higher cost of diesel.⁸¹

The Bisri water dam construction to provide water for Beirut and its suburbs is another environmental conflict that has escalated.

Popular opposition to the project prompted the World Bank (the financing party) to suggest the possibility of repurposing the loan for livelihood support in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis.⁸² The government dismissed the suggestion influenced by political parties: the FPM and Hezbollah (and its ally Amal movement) supported the project, claiming that it is necessary for Beirut and its suburbs' access to water, while the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and Lebanese Forces (LF), who initially supported the project, changed sides and joined civil society opposition. Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri sided with the project, aligning with his political opponents. After this report was written, on 5 September 2020, the World Bank informed the Lebanese government of its decision to cancel the undisbursed funds for the Bisri Dam Project due to non-completion of the tasks that were preconditions to the commencement of the Bisri Dam construction.⁸³ The World Bank's decision was seen as a victory for environmental activist groups that have long advocated for its halt.⁸⁴

The complexities of environmental issues mean that it is typically difficult for the wider public to make informed and sustainable environmental choices, even though they continue to suffer from environmental degradation and yearn for effective solutions. These conditions constrain real public participation and lead to sub-optimal

75 [There are no real solutions to the waste crisis in Lebanon ... and the 'garbage' ministry is absent], Elnashra, 15 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoilfGn7Clo&feature=youtu.be>, accessed 23 July 2020

76 [The Costabrava Crisis ... no improvements], LBCI Lebanon, 21 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2lp9lBe>, accessed 22 July 2020

77 Solid waste management in Lebanon: Lessons for decentralisation, Beirut: DRI, Lebanon, October 2019, https://democracy-reporting.org/ru/dri_publications/report-solid-waste-management-in-lebanon-lessons-for-decentralisation/

78 A. Majzoub, RAMCO strike a key moment for labor rights in Lebanon, Human Rights Watch, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/05/ramco-strike-key-moment-labor-rights-lebanon>, accessed 21 October 2020

79 [Waste threatens the Lebanese again ... Corona and the strike of contracting companies!], Almodon (المدن), 14 July 2020, <https://www.almodon.com/society/2020/7/14/النفائيات-تهدد-اللبنانيين-مجددا-كورونا-وإضراب-الشركات-المتعهدة>, accessed 21 October 2020

80 AFP, Lebanon charges 12 people including officials over tainted fuel, Al Arabiya, 14 May 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/05/14/Lebanon-charges-12-people-including-officials-over-tainted-fuel>

81 A. Majzoub, Lebanon in the dark: Electricity blackouts affect rights, Human Rights Watch, 9 July 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/09/lebanon-dark>

82 T.K. Maloy, World Bank suspends disbursement of Bisri Dam loan, An-Nahar, 28 July 2020, <https://cutt.ly/Jgp3zgp>

83 The World Bank, Cancellation of Water Supply Augmentation Project (Bisri Dam Project), 5 September 2020, <https://cutt.ly/Hgp3cdt>

84 D. Mawad, World Bank-funded dam in Lebanon mirrors governance crisis, The Associated Press, 2 September 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/c1c865a911220a66d8a51330ba21ab7b>

solutions such as accepting municipal waste incineration to get rid of the garbage piling in dumpsites, without really understanding that this technology entails substantial risks, and likewise accepting the expansion of solid waste landfills, without questioning its mismanagement. In the absence of national strategy and planning on environmental issues, local authorities will continue to struggle balancing short-term fixes and needs with the difficulty of finding safe long-term solutions, and communities will lack a framework for informed engagement and consultation on decision-making around public projects that have lasting environmental implications.

3. Key dynamics

Lebanon is at a critical juncture, with rising tensions and negative forces playing on various fronts. Actors are trying to turn the situation to their advantage, while struggling to surmount complex internal and external challenges. Some analysts and activists consider the country may be heading towards political transformation in its political model and identity, because of the political and socio-economic pressures that exposed cleavages and divisions in the current political economy. Compared to the previous context analysis⁸⁵ written based on data collected in January, the “positive attitude [that] permeated most of the interviews” at that time seems to have abated. Indeed, the most recent UNDP Perceptions Survey on tensions reveals increased negative perceptions in relation to attitudes towards institutions, inter- and intra-community tensions, propensity to violence and fear of crime overall.⁸⁶ There seems to be a greater realisation of the resilience of the established political system when, at the same time, the spaces for political dialogue have become more restricted because of COVID-19 containment measures, differences between political groups and the ongoing search for a shared vision for the country’s future.

3.1 Divisive rhetoric and use of violent confrontation to deter protests

Amid volatile internal economic and political conditions and the unstable geopolitical situation, some political actors have used divisive and threatening tactics for political gain or to negotiate and protect positions of power. From anti-protests’ accusation of ‘treachery’⁸⁷ to the amplification of a sectarian discourse, utilising divisive rhetoric on media outlets (including spreading misinformation on social media), vandalism and the threat of violence, which are reminiscent of previous waves of armed violence and of civil war, all serve as tactics to discourage another wave of popular uprisings. As one activist explained, the political elite has used such instruments and escalated its discourse to reach “close to an explosion”, yet without moving towards a military confrontation.⁸⁸ It is not in the interest of any of the establishment’s political parties to reach this situation at the moment. He stressed, consequently, that any act of violence during popular protests should be analysed carefully because it could be in response to the use of violent tactics as well as genuine frustration. Nonetheless, given that Lebanon’s history is rich with examples of minor scuffles quickly escalating into widespread political violence, social unrest and higher levels of repression, the situation requires careful monitoring, as movements have the potential to turn towards more acute violence, particularly as the economic situation continues to worsen and the government seems unable to protect and provide for the Lebanese people whose trust in the state continues to erode.⁸⁹

3.2 Heated geopolitics

The Middle East region is witnessing multiple layers of rising tensions with spillovers to the Lebanese scene. This includes primarily the US–Iran conflict, which also shapes the Gulf countries’ relations with Lebanon and even European countries’ position and support. Syria’s multiple wars, a sanctioned regime, collapsing economy and large number of refugees also constitute highly active dynamics. Regional conflicts have reached Lebanon and have been used by Lebanese actors, interacting with and intensifying internal tensions. Recent events, including the interference in the appointments of the Central Bank of Lebanon’s vice governors, the US inclusion

85 M. Al-Masri, Z. Abla and R. Hassan, 2020, Op. cit.

86 UNDP/ARK, Regular perceptions survey on social tensions throughout Lebanon, Wave VII, January 2020 (unpublished) and Wave VIII, July 2020 (unpublished) (shared at a meeting on social stability, 16 September 2020)

87 A. Naamani, 2020, Op. cit.

88 Interview, opposition political party member, 21 July 2020

89 AFP, Lebanese PM Hassan Diab: State can no longer protect citizens, Al Arabiya, 2 March 2020, <https://cutt.ly/Tgp3bT4>

of Lebanese officials in the sanctions under the enactment of Caesar Act in June 2020,⁹⁰ the row with the US ambassador in Lebanon on the back of her criticism of Hezbollah, which was seen by many as interference in Lebanese internal affairs,⁹¹ the skirmishes on the border with Israel⁹² and the verdict in the assassination case of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in August,⁹³ provide examples of the geopolitical-related dynamics that have deepened divisions and put pressure internally on Hezbollah and its constituency. Such deep divides are reflected and replicated in Lebanese politics among the political elite and to some extent across political and activist groups within the October movement.

3.3 Opposition parties and activists are taking time to organise while political elite repositions

The protests' momentum against the political elite waned as COVID-19 spread and socio-economic conditions created additional burdens. One interviewee noted that the lower-income classes are preoccupied with securing a livelihood, and it is the few middle-income class activists that are still engaged.⁹⁴ All interviewees confirmed that protests, while being a means of nonviolent expression of dissatisfaction, cannot in and of themselves be the drivers of change. Protests need to be strategically used to precipitate long-lasting change, and this requires strategic planning. The protests are now smaller and localised, sometimes gathering activists or political groups spurred on by anger at deteriorating living conditions. The dynamic that emerged between October 2019 and February 2020 that triggered a possibility of re-visioning a 'new Lebanon' and re-questioning the role of traditional political leadership is becoming less clear.

Activist groups and political parties are still striving to find direction and form a strong body with a unified vision and roadmap. This new phase is long, more demanding and seems less exciting than the initial energy of October 2019, especially under the weight of the economic crisis; as one of the interviewees said, it requires "tedious long-winding effort and most important is to keep the October 17 uprisings' voices loud ... this stage is about organising for the future". But the landscape of political activists is evolving. According to one opposition political party member, in 2011 it was effort influenced by the events of the Arab uprisings, in 2015 it was sector-specific, and now it is about real political organisation and change. Opposition political groups that are distinct from the traditional ruling political parties and that existed pre-2019 (emerging after the 'Garbage Crisis' movement in 2015, the municipal elections in 2016 and the parliamentary elections in 2018) gained maturity and humility in dealing with differences, and are ready to communicate, coordinate and discuss crossing taboos and managing differences, notwithstanding the multitude of new groups forming in 2020. They are still closely coordinating their ground movements, meeting to explore avenues for joining efforts under common policy stances and programmes that could ultimately lead to the formation of an alternative power. One such initiative is *Drabzeen*,⁹⁵ a platform that aims to attract all those that were hopeful post-17 October and to start the discussion around a common programme. The challenge is to move along the same strategy, and form a new power with a unified vision and roadmap. Most of the opposition groups are targeting the long term, but they see along the way possible limited gains in terms of some reforms. This process is beset with the divisions that are inherent in different layers of identities, relations with neighbouring countries and the position along the international conflicts, relations with Syria as a state, the Syrian government and the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and the issue of arms and resistance.

90 US Department of State, Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act Fact Sheet, 17 June 2020, <https://www.state.gov/caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act/>

91 S. Dadouch, Lebanese judge bans media from interviewing U.S. ambassador after anti-Hezbollah comments, The Washington Post, 28 June 2020, <https://wapo.st/3nloygW>

92 R. Eglash and S. Dadouch, Israeli says it repelled incursion from Lebanon; Hezbollah denies launching attack, The Washington Post, 27 July 2020, <https://wapo.st/33TZjk9>

93 Data collection and analysis was finalised prior to the verdict issued on 18 August 2020.

94 Interview, opposition political party member, 21 July 2020

95 Drabzeen Human Development, <https://www.drabzeen.org>

The new political groups differ in terms of strategic approach in making change happen. For example, Lihazi is a political group that promotes a bottom-up approach to advancing change that focuses on building up and organising grassroots movements as a long-term process, while others such as ‘Citizens in a State’ (Mouwatoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla) present themselves as an alternative political group and are calling on the political elite to relinquish power, while they offer themselves as the substitute. Yet, like others, both groups are trying to expand membership, develop internal processes and structures, and reach for the ‘silent majority’ (51% of eligible voters did not vote in the 2018 parliamentary elections⁹⁶) and beyond central Beirut. At the same time, new opposition political parties are forming, and other activist groups are still coming together to form.

Although activists find difficulties in bridging the normative differences, the attempt to find a common ground is underway. One example is the ‘national salvation charter’ that was signed by some 5,500 individuals agreeing on a set of principles or goals but still looking to develop a programme and work processes.⁹⁷ Another attempt to start a coalition is the ‘Coalition of Change – For a Democratic Lebanon’ (Liqa’ Altaghyir- Min Ajl Lubnan Aldiymuqrati) under the auspices of the Lebanese Communist Party.

However, such initiatives seem insufficient, as one of the organisers said: “we cannot bypass stages, we need to go back to the basics ... our space, as political activists and opposition, is ‘sick’ [he explained it as a result of decades of being ruled under the prevailing political establishment] and we need to rebuild from the ground.” Most interviewees from opposition groups and parties are banking on long-term gains, mainly through parliamentary elections. The political parties also see elections as the test and solution for the opposition. Whatever the solution is, all understand that it will not happen without organising and sustaining alternative anti-establishment opposition blocs in all sectors and fields, such as happened in preparation for the Beirut’s Order of Engineers and Architects elections.

3.4 New political economy dynamics under crisis

The economic crisis is deepening and changing the social fabric. There is a process of impoverishment that one economist described as an “earthquake” with 72% of households reporting a monthly income of LBP 2.4 million and expected to fall into poverty.⁹⁸ This is coupled with the collapse of public services delivery, most notably electricity and solid waste collection services.

As these trends continue to worsen, the question is whether this will reinforce the pre-existing relations with the political elite and clientelist networks or lead to new forms of clientelism. One activist argued against the maintenance of clientelist relationships and proposed three indicators to support this claim: i) the break with the political leader (*Zaim*) image that happened during the protests; ii) the dwindling state resources that feed the clientelism; and iii) the consequent renegotiation of these relations. However, others fear that the opposite could happen with the continuing decimation of state resources necessary to fulfil its responsibilities of providing basic services, making way for further privatisation of such services that may end up being controlled and delivered by private networks. In the absence of national institutions, this could mean reproducing new clientelist structures and further entrenching divisions among people based on class and privilege, and this additional layer might be a new form of clientelism. This remains to be seen, but what is clear is that some players have gained power (such as importers of fuel, or importers of consumer goods and food) and have managed to benefit from the government’s subsidising the consumer basket of basic food products.⁹⁹ At the community level, new patrons and powerbrokers have begun to emerge, such as owners and operators of private generators that supply homes with power amid the ongoing electricity outage.

96 Lebanese Elections 2018 website, Voting rates in all electoral units, <https://bit.ly/2Fne4SV>

97 ‘5,500 sign the ‘charter’: Towards a national conference for salvation], Almodon, 30 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2InVqvu>, accessed 1 August 2020

98 Kamal Hamdan, Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/kamal.hamdan.353/posts/3114668088608999>, accessed 17 October 2020

99 M. Wehbe, ‘السلة “الملغومة” ... الدعم المنهوب سلفاً، الأخبار’, Alakhbar, 9 July 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/291229>, accessed 2 August 2020

3.5 Can localised responses and community solidarity alleviate the pressure?

Crises have been associated with a growing trend of localised responses. Amid the challenges for central government in managing the socio-economic, environmental and infrastructure conditions, municipalities and unions of municipalities are grappling to respond to multiple crises as part of their wide authority. One example relates to solid waste management. When landfills came close to their maximum capacity and collection declined, some municipalities attempted to initiate community-based recycling projects. Others have reassumed their responsibility to collect as contractors fail to do it.¹⁰⁰

At the same time, a wave of individual initiatives, including new and existing charities,¹⁰¹ and local solidarity and social economy projects emerged. Some of these initiatives demonstrated an increased interest in individual and collective farming projects,¹⁰² individuals and households' planting in urban dwellings,¹⁰³ as well as municipalities in rural areas cultivating unused land.¹⁰⁴ In addition to organic and locally led responses, there are examples of political parties advocating for local production, including the prominent political party leaders¹⁰⁵ that encouraged their supporter bases to invest more in agriculture and farming for self-sustenance. This reflects a nationwide concern about survival because of continued crises and political failure to provide a roadmap for a sustainable solution. Localised responses have always been a feature of emergency response; however, they remain generally undervalued and underutilised, in terms of fostering inclusion and ensuring the use of resources meets real priorities, among others. Local responses can risk shifting attention away from national political dynamics and macroeconomics that are the crux of the problem, as well as diverting attention from the accountability of national actors. Indeed, this hype to return to agriculture that *The Economist* called Lebanon's "hobbyist gardening"¹⁰⁶ will not protect against the risk of serious food insecurity ahead, if nothing is done, as experts stress,¹⁰⁷ especially as most agricultural inputs are imported. It also reflects an unregulated use of water and land resources that risks their further depletion and could pose risks of community tensions. However, such initiatives can also be an avenue for increased solidarity and social cohesion for local communities.

100 M. Nassif, 'بيروت أزالت نفاياتها من كيسها والدولار يستبدل الأجانب بلبنانيين للكنس والجمع', LBCI Lebanon, 15 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3n8NixU>, accessed 16 July 2020

101 J. al Dhaybi, 'جنى الذهبي' - الدكانة الاجتماعية " في طرابلس: البيع للفقراء بلا أرباح', Almodon (المدن), 27 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3lHAmOC>, accessed 29 June 2020

102 S. Lazkani, Watch Nadine Labaki & Lebanese public figures sing to promote growing local (video), Daraj Media, 18 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4le024gQXk&feature=youtu.be>

103 S. Lazkani, Watch Nadine Labaki & Lebanese public figures sing to promote growing local (video), The961, July 2020, <https://www.the961.com/nadine-labaki-promote-local-growing/>

104 S. Abdallah, Lebanese municipalities encourage agriculture as famine specter looms, Al-Monitor, 12 December 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/municipalities-launch-agricultural-campaigns-economic-crisis.html>, accessed 4 August 2020

105 P. Sawma, 'Lebanon: Agricultural 'religious obligations' ... Addressing the economic collapse with a pot of mint!', Daraj, 9 July 2020, <https://daraj.com/en/50982/>

106 Hobbyists hope to halt hunger in Lebanon by growing their own crops, *The Economist*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/05/28/hobbyists-hope-to-halt-hunger-in-lebanon-by-growing-their-own-crops>, accessed 4 August 2020

107 M. Rozelier, Riad Saadé: 'Going back to the land could be more than just a lifeline for the Lebanese', Commerce du Levant, 20 July 2020, <https://www.lecommercedulevant.com/article/29938-riad-saadé-going-back-to-the-land-could-be-more-than-just-a-lifeline-for-the-lebanese>, accessed 21 July 2020



A group of young protesters on top of one of Beirut's abandoned buildings, October 2019.

3.6 Labour force dynamics

The economic crisis and COVID-19 pandemic are transforming the labour force. The increasing layoffs, wage reductions and loss of purchasing power are not only driving unemployment rates higher but are also leading skilled workers increasingly to seek emigration, even though the pandemic and external economic conditions limit this possibility. The labour market is shifting to increased informalisation and precarity as a result of limited jobs. This means lower wages and tougher working conditions and limited compliance with labour standards. Competition for jobs is leading to escalating tensions both among Lebanese and between Lebanese and Syrian refugees.¹⁰⁸

The labour market segregation is also undergoing changes. It has become more expensive to rely on migrant workers and thus there is an increasing need for locals to do low-skilled jobs. For example, the municipality of Ghobeiry, a densely populated suburb of Beirut, decided to replace migrant workers employed by private contractors to collect waste with local municipal hires. It requested 40 Lebanese workers to replace male migrant workers and received more than 1,000 female and male applicants of all ages within 18 hours of the call.¹⁰⁹ The economic structural changes are expected to be reflected in the labour market. In the future, as some economic sectors shrink, while others ultimately expand, the labour market will need to adjust and may require a change in skill set. Another segregation will be at the level of skilled jobs and access to technology, whereby those able to work remotely will remain more advantaged than those that are not. The shifts in the labour market will come as a result of the economic changes resulting from the crises, COVID-19 repercussions, the policy response and outward-migration trends.

108 UNDP/ARK, Regular perceptions survey on social tensions throughout Lebanon, Wave VIII, July 2020 (unpublished) (shared at a meeting on social stability, 16 September 2020)

109 M. Nassif, 2020, Op. cit.

3.7 The widening gaps within the education system

The education sector this year is witnessing several changes that are expected to trigger tensions. The economic crisis and deteriorating living conditions are driving a shift of enrolment from private to public schools. At the same time, private schools are facing their own financial problems, leading some to shut down and others to raise tuition fees or lay off staff.¹¹⁰ Tensions between parents and school administrations have increased as a result of requests for higher tuition fees. Consequently, the demand for public school enrolment is expected to increase and, where there are few or no vacancies (especially the primary schools), pressure is intensifying.¹¹¹ A rise in dropouts is also expected as the worsening economic situation forces families to deprioritise education for their children in order to meet livelihood and basic needs, or as more children enter the labour force to support their households. Within this context, public schools will need to resort to measures to accommodate the newcomers, with limited human and physical resources, while also managing the enrolment of the Syrian refugee students.

The pressures are already increasing tensions between school administrations, parents/students and teachers. International aid to targeted communities, which excludes others (such as French direct aid to Francophone educational institutions,¹¹² and Turkish scholarships and building hospitals in mostly 'Sunni' areas¹¹³), reinforces external and sometimes sectarian community loyalties. This is a negative dynamic that is perpetuated by the inherent problems of the services sector in Lebanon, which lacks a strong developmental state behind it.

Another dynamic widening the gap between private and public education is the introduction of technology and remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown. This situation is deepening the difference in education outcomes between private and public schools and between students from more affluent or deprived households, such as those who have better access to generators for electricity amid the frequent electricity cutoffs, in addition to better access to internet connection, laptops and the software required for online remote learning. This affects students' adaptability and abilities to access technological solutions, in addition to the challenges of electricity cuts and costly internet access. The differences are accentuated by locality and geography, as smaller towns or regions might face additional challenges because of their remoteness and lack of connectivity.¹¹⁴ In addition to the impact of online and home schooling during COVID-19 on educational outcomes, the experience is disruptive for social development and learning, has mental health impacts and can expose more vulnerable children to risks (such as online safety issues or abusive home environments).

3.8 Social media amplifies conflict issues

Social media remains a powerful tool that is being used in different ways to influence and mobilise people on all sides. Most notably, it is being used to spread false information, which is often picked up in traditional media as 'facts'. While social media was effective in bringing many activists together to organise protests, it has so far failed to support this organisation beyond the streets, and is instead being used more for awareness raising, such as on sectoral and economic issues (DarajMedia, Megaphone, etc.), especially to replace the public town halls that were taking place in the squares after the spread of the COVID pandemic and ensuing lockdown. It is also empowering its users to voice their positions and opinions as facts and assuming wide acceptance of their views based within the bubbles that it creates for users.

110 الإغلاق يحيق بالمدارس الفرنكوفونية في لبنان بسبب الأزمة الاقتصادية [Closure is surrounding Francophone schools in Lebanon due to the economic crisis], France 24, 12 July 2020, <https://f24.my/6ftv>, accessed 22 July 2020

111 'أزمة التعليم هي الأكبر ومشكلة التعليم الخاص تتفاقم التكلفة في المدارس الرسمية أعلى والمستوى أدنى' [The education crisis is the biggest and the problem of private education is exacerbated in the cost of public schools at higher and lower levels], An-Nahar, 5 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2SPFxyz>

112 France pledges €15 million to Lebanese schools crippled by crisis, France 24, 24 July 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200724-france-pledges-%E2%82%AC15-million-to-lebanese-schools-crippled-by-crisis>

113 M.H. Ali, New sultan on the block, Carnegie Middle East Center, 24 August 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/82554>

114 لبنان .. الأزمة الاقتصادية تعزز التعليم الرسمي, 2019 [Lebanon ... The economic crisis boosts public education], SkyNews Arabia, 2 October 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4csQlr3X6A>

3.9 COVID-19: A magnifying lens exposing structural issues and marginalisation

The COVID pandemic and the economic/financial crises tamed public protests and revealed, once again, how traditional political power functions.

Figure 2: Timeline of events and measures related to COVID-19 between February and July 2020

February

- 21** The Minister of Health announces the first COVID-19 infection in Lebanon.
- 22** Travel ban applied to epidemic countries.
- 23** Ministry of Public Health launches National COVID-19 awareness campaign.
- 29** Education institutes close until 8 March.

March

- 04** Entry restrictions implemented to curb COVID-19 spread.
- 10** The first death from COVID-19 in Lebanon recorded.
- 11** Closure of restaurants, malls, nightclubs, pubs, gyms, tourist sites, etc.
- 16** Lebanon declares two-week medical state of emergency.
- 18** Activation of the national crisis operations unit; entries and exits to the country closed until 29 March.
- 19** Government closes borders.
- 21** Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab allows security forces to police social-distancing and isolation measures.
- 22** Minister of Interior Affairs asks security forces for strict control over violators.
- 26** Medical state of emergency until 12 April.
- 27** Security forces forcibly destroy the last few remaining tents used for protests in the city centre, under the pretext of COVID-19 containment measures.

April

- 06** Over 500 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported.
- 09** Government extends nationwide lockdown until 26 April.
- 19** Nightly travel curfew modified.

May

- 04** Authorities continue easing of lockdown measures nationwide.
- 05** Authorities extend lockdown measures until 24 May.
- 17** Authorities gradually reopen economy.
- 21** Beirut – Rafic Hariri International Airport reportedly set to reopen from 8 June.

June

- 18** Announcement that Beirut International Airport to resume flights as of 1 July.

July

- 01** Authorities announce extension of COVID-19 restrictions until 2 August.
- 28** Lockdown reimposed amid COVID-19 spike.



Health workers in an isolation ward for COVID-19 patients in Beirut, February 2020.

The pandemic revealed how the ruling political parties use their clientelist networks to reinforce confessional/sectarian and regional divisions and benefit from a weak public health system. When the pandemic started, each political party rushed to showcase its 'branded' services provision to its supporter base,¹¹⁵ from offering disinfectants to equipping a fully fledged health response system, including providing quarantine buildings and developing a COVID response plan,¹¹⁶ while the public health system was receiving charitable support from individuals and civil society organisations (CSOs). The public education system also lagged behind and struggled to find solutions for remote learning, further widening the gap in education outcomes between private and public schools.

The pandemic's socio-economic impact cannot be separated from the impact of the economic crisis, and instead it magnified the difficulties that businesses and households are facing, leading to negative coping strategies. The pandemic has exposed the deficiencies of the public health system and public education, the social protection system, labour and employment. These socio-economic trends are expected to persist and have been associated with a rise in tensions and violence, especially between the Lebanese population and other non-national groups.¹¹⁷ The lockdown raised awareness about the importance of seeing open public spaces as a public good and a right that all citizens can access. In a largely privatised Lebanon where public spaces, especially in urban settings, are a scarcity, lockdown measures underscored the social, physical and mental health imperatives for having outdoor open public spaces.¹¹⁸

The pandemic specifically further marginalised those who were vulnerable before the crises. It has been felt more keenly by those working in the informal sector, those who cannot work from home and those who, if not laid off, are also more at risk of infection. The pandemic was associated with a growing burden of care and unpaid domestic labour responsibilities on women, as well as an increase in domestic violence. The state

115 E. Ward, In Lebanon, coronavirus presents a political lifeline for the sectarian-based elite, Al Arabiya English, 6 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/30Ztx3o>

116 E. Knecht, Hezbollah asserts role in Lebanon's coronavirus fight, Reuters, 1 April 2020, <https://reut.rs/2SUz46x>

117 M. Nassif, 2020, Op. cit.

118 Peer-reviewed article by International Alert team on Public space as a tool for peacebuilding in Lebanon, forthcoming in December 2020

response to the pandemic did not cater for the situation of persons with disabilities.¹¹⁹ It exposed the problems of overcrowded prisons, migrant workers' employment conditions, including residency in high-density shelters,¹²⁰ and the vulnerability of refugees, who reported a higher incidence of jobs and income losses, as well as much weaker pandemic-prevention measures applied in workplaces where Syrians work as compared to Lebanese. The pandemic also revealed the critical value of the work that most of the marginalised do, which is often undervalued, from waste collection to domestic work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to growing community tensions, particularly between Lebanese and refugees, as fears of a further outbreak are exacerbating underlying tensions. Such tensions are centred around stigmatisation of refugees (Syrian and Palestinian) in cases of infection in informal settlements and overcrowded areas.¹²¹ The outbreak has also fuelled intra-Lebanese tensions, deepening social, economic, geographic and confessional divides. Municipalities and local communities are reporting increased tensions arising from pressure on basic services and from the municipalities' limited capacities to respond to all community needs. As part of their efforts to combat COVID-19, Lebanese municipalities have introduced discriminatory restrictions on Syrian refugees that do not apply to Lebanese residents,¹²² such as curfews and restricting movements from the informal tented settlements. Misinformation on social media has propagated fear and confusion among communities and fuelled tensions.¹²³ In a positive move, the government has been quick to counter misleading messaging by disseminating factual information, updates and the effective protection measures on websites and social media profiles of the Ministry of Public Health and the Disaster Risk Management Unit at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. As Lebanon's economic and health situation grows more dire, Syrian refugees may feel increasingly unsafe in the face of rising local hostility. They may even be less inclined to self-report if they contract the virus,¹²⁴ thereby further accelerating its spread.

The second wave is more difficult to deal with and has a larger spread, while the living conditions are deteriorating. The government is unable to enforce a full lockdown, and cannot upgrade the health system, while prevention measures remain lax despite awareness and more than half the population have no health coverage. The public is less and less responsive, either because of a general fatigue and a feeling of despair under the burden of the economic crisis, or it is sceptical of the prevention approach, and sometimes even doubtful of the reality of the pandemic.¹²⁵ This is because of an underlying nationwide systemic problem of transparency, trust and accountability between citizens and governments, which has been further exposed by this crisis.

Municipalities, community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are on the frontline, complementing the government response, yet they are all struggling with limited financial resources. In terms of operations, NGOs and CBOs, especially those working beyond emergency response, face more difficulty in project implementation because of the interruption in field-based and face-to-face activities and services. Adapting funding and finding new resources have become increasingly hard. A survey of 21 organisations concluded: "With fewer funding opportunities, higher competition over grants, the inability to host fundraising events and the decline in governmental support, the challenge for the organizations is one of surviving the consecutive crises they are exposed to in Lebanon."¹²⁶ Furthermore, the shifting of resources to address the health emergency and the economic impact of prevention measures risks diverting funds from peacebuilding programming. To maintain

119 Lebanon: People with disabilities overlooked in Covid-19, Human Rights Watch, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/11/lebanon-people-disabilities-overlooked-covid-19>

120 J. Boswall, Coronavirus traps migrant workers in Lebanon as economy fails, Al Arabiya English, 26 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/33SnCs5>

121 LCRP Update – Impact of COVID-19 on social tensions, 22 March 2020

122 Lebanon: Refugees at risk in COVID-19 response, Human Rights Watch, 2 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3iRZJvz>

123 Spreading facts, not fear, in the fight against coronavirus in Lebanon, UNICEF, 6 March 2020, <https://uni.cf/36WZHQy>

124 M. Yacoubian, Coronavirus prevention extremely difficult in refugee, IDP camps in Middle East, Al Arabiya, 18 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/33TRH14>

125 M. Nassif, 'هل يجب أن يُصاب المشككون كي يصدقوا وجود كورونا؟' [Do sceptics need to be infected to believe the existence of Corona?], LBCI Lebanon, 31 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/33Py1Ly>

126 S. Warby, Lebanese civil society and the impact of COVID 19: A survey of perceptions and responses to the pandemic, ARK, 2020, <https://www.ark.international/ark-blog/lebanese-civil-society-and-the-impact-of-covid-19>

spaces for interaction and critical discussion with limited resources, CBOs and NGOs working in communities and with municipalities need to integrate peacebuilding approaches into their interventions.

Using technology to reach beneficiaries, maintaining connections, delivering services and information, could ensure – and even sometimes expand – participation, but also risks limiting in-depth engagement, especially for those newly embracing technology and even when using private spaces. In other words, the use of technology and media to replace face-to-face communication could have implications for power, responsibility and participation. Using remote communication could lead to the exclusion of some because of prohibitive cost or limited access to devices and internet connection. In addition, it has implications on risks of digital surveillance,¹²⁷ the prevailing digital divide¹²⁸ and gendered relations, because of family obligations for instance.

The impact of COVID-19 is deeply gendered. While the rhetoric is that ‘the virus does not discriminate’, it affects people differently based on gender, age, class, ability, location, nationality, etc. In Lebanon, there are increasing concerns that the crisis will exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities.¹²⁹ There are more women on the frontlines working as nurses or social workers (in Lebanon, 80% of registered nurses are women¹³⁰ compared to a 70% global average).

The lockdown is disproportionately affecting women and girls in Lebanon, as many of them find themselves in confinement with perpetrators of abuse, and there has been a reported increase in cases of gender-based violence and domestic violence (DV) for March 2020. Women refugees and domestic workers are likely to be more at risk. The Internal Security Forces (ISF) also reported a 184% increase in sexual harassment and extortion cybercrimes in just two months between February and April, compared to the previous year.¹³¹ DV cases have risen sharply during the pandemic, with DV response actors already overstretched, yet also facing the risk of reduced funding as funds are reallocated to the COVID-19 response. The Attorney General at the Court of Cassation has instructed the judicial police to open immediate records in all cases of DV, even in cases of non-witnessed crimes, via teleconference to facilitate women’s access to justice.¹³² However, according to DV actors, there are cases of ISF officers receiving calls on their DV hotline but not responding to such cases due to limited capacities during the COVID lockdown, or lack of gender-sensitised skills. The situation risks exposing the increased incapacity of the ISF to act as frontline responders to the stark increases in DV, with long-term consequences for women’s protection, mental health and livelihoods.

Community initiatives and growing sense of solidarity. Across Lebanon and particularly during the first two months of the general mobilisation of government measures, community groups mobilised to provide support, such as food and medical supplies, for vulnerable community members. These groups included youth networks, which grew out of the October 2019 protests and mobilised to share accurate public health messaging, combat misleading information and support local humanitarian responses.¹³³ In Beirut and elsewhere in the country, for example, CSOs partnered with the tourism sector to provide low-cost accommodation for frontline health workers to help protect their families.¹³⁴ In the North, South and Bekaa, voluntary committees were formed to mobilise support and coordinate donations and distribute goods. In the Bekaa, interviewees indicated that most municipalities offered food assistance to Lebanese families from their budgets, or with the support of their local committees, CSOs or even the Bekaa Governorate.

127 Joint Civil Society Statement: States use of digital surveillance technologies to fight pandemic must respect human rights, Human Rights Watch, 4 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2GYeZJY>

128 D. Brown, Closing the ‘digital divide’ critical in COVID-19 response, Human Rights Watch, 25 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nKMUqA>

129 S. Ramo, Gendering COVID-19: Implications for women, peace and security, 1 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Ih1Hc8>

130 Women’s needs and gender equality in Lebanon’s COVID-19 response, UN Women, 23 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3jWdwme>

131 ارتفاع هائل بعدد شكاوى جرائم الابتزاز والتحرش الجنسي خلال التعبئة العامة... كم بلغت النسبة؟ [A tremendous increase in the number of complaints of extortion and sexual harassment crimes during the general mobilisation ... What was the percentage?], LBCI Lebanon, 4 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3iPO3Jx>

132 بعد ازدياد ظاهرة العنف الاسري بسبب الحجر المنزلي... تعميم للقاضي عويدات [After the increase in the phenomenon of domestic violence due to home quarantine ... Judge Oweidat’s circular], LBCI Lebanon, 16 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3dmVarZ>

133 R. Simpson, COVID-19: Seven trends that will shape peacebuilding in Lebanon, International Alert, 9 April 2020, <https://www.international-alert.org/blogs/covid-19-7-trends-will-shape-peacebuilding-lebanon>

134 S. Rose, Hundreds of Lebanon’s coronavirus medics find free housing, The National, 14 April 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/hundreds-of-lebanon-s-coronavirus-medics-find-free-housing-1.1005854>

Opportunities for conflict-sensitive COVID-19 assistance.¹³⁵ First responders, healthcare and social workers are working tirelessly in difficult conditions with limited resources. The Ministry of Public Health, NGOs and international partners are working together to coordinate a response across the country, share guidance and key messaging. Despite best efforts, even interventions aimed at saving lives can do harm and exacerbate tensions among communities already under great pressure. This can include perceptions of unequal access to treatment and services, unintended stigmatisation of communities targeted through health campaigns, or trust in service providers being undermined by reports of corruption in the provision of medical supplies and other services. In a context of heightened tensions and spread of misinformation, it is critical that services are, and are seen to be, effective, consistent, transparent, accountable and inclusive. There are examples of healthcare services applying Do No Harm and conflict-sensitivity principles to improve their COVID-19 response by using networks to disseminate correct information related to COVID-19, using analysis to improve access to and understanding of the needs of the most vulnerable groups, and improving coordination through partnerships and information sharing.¹³⁶

135 For a discussion of conflict sensitivity and COVID-19 in Lebanon, see *ibid.*, and L. Assaad and R. Simpson, Health and protection: Vectors for social stability – Adapting and responding to emerging crises, International Alert, July 2020, <https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Conflict-Sensitivity-Social-Stability-Model-Cover-Note-EN-2020.pdf>

136 L. Assaad and R. Simpson, 2020, *Op. cit.*, p.6

Postface

Given the data collection and analysis for this report concluded in July 2020 shortly before the Beirut Port explosion on 4 August, this major development is not explored in the report. Even before that event, conditions and dynamics were evolving rapidly and new risks and issues emerging, making developing concrete peacebuilding programmatic conclusions and recommendations challenging at the time of writing. In order to explore the report's implications in this dynamic context, the International Alert team in Lebanon facilitated discussion and reflection sessions with peacebuilding partners, to advance programmatic directions and entry-points for peacebuilding, despite the challenging situation. This section is also informed by a number of internal reports and targeted analyses conducted by the Alert team in Lebanon during 2020, before and after the Beirut Port blast.

Prospects for peacebuilding in an uncertain and turbulent context

Political conditions and dynamics continue to be extremely unstable, with the political elite maintaining control, even though their position is weakening and the mechanisms of maintaining traditional power structures have been exposed. Although this report does not explore the implication of the 4 August Beirut blast, the cabinet resignation and the ensuing political deadlock, the key dynamics discussed continue to be valid. The lack of accountability of the ruling elite continues to breed distrust in the state, and stall reforms, amid visible economic collapse. The traditional political parties continue to protect their economic interests and patronage networks and rule through politics of apportionment, while international and regional power holders reinforce the old political confrontation between 8 March and 14 March blocs. The lack of shared vision for an economic model, both among the traditional parties and within the protest movement, remains unaddressed as the main focus is on halting the monetary crash. The challenges posed by the resurgence of COVID-19 also continue to magnify social inequalities and divisions.

Political dynamics remain strained between momentum for reform and resistance to change. Members of the political elite are using all their tools to survive this period and maintain their positions. This includes examples of using the judiciary system (the case of inability to make judiciary appointments discussed in section 2.1.2, 'Difficulty of reform amid the prevailing power-sharing system') and security institutions (the case of defamation cases against journalists discussed in section 2.4.1, 'Shrinking spaces for freedom of expression and journalism') politically to shore up support. On the other side, while activists and opposition political groups are continuing to press for reform and accountability, they are simultaneously struggling for direction. In addition, the momentum of the upbeat protests has abated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures, as well as due to general exhaustion with people's mobilisation ailing under the weight of the unrelenting economic crisis. As the economic crisis is deepening and the complexity of issues and actors involved in it is becoming more visible to the wider public, whose awareness of and interest in topics on political and economic models was shown to have been elevated in the previous context analysis and continues to hold, there is a need to support analysis, critical debate and the translation of complex economic policy ideas to an accessible language. Such efforts can help sustain the political and economic awareness awakened with the October protests and nurture the development of alternative ideas. The need is even more pronounced now as the political elites are consolidating their efforts to stay in control and protect their own economic interests and those of their clientelist networks, while the protest movement is struggling to keep its momentum due to the economic pressures and the brain drain.

The structural economic changes (such as a shift to cash economy, restructuring of the banking, insurance and reinsurance sectors, heavier reliance on local agricultural production, etc.) that the economy is witnessing are expected to be reflected in the labour market. Coping strategies for this stark reality include inward migration to



A group of protesters on top of Beirut's famous 'The Egg' building, October 2019.

the rural areas¹³⁷ in light of global restrictions on travel due to the pandemic, outward migration for those with access to such means, both regular and irregular, and shifts to low-skilled labour and employment in search of better livelihood opportunities. Other coping mechanisms are described as negative and would include increased theft, burglary, cutting down on meals for survival, increased reliance on food parcels, deprioritising education for children to ensure health and livelihood needs are met, among others. The number of Lebanese who left the country and did not return in 2019 jumped on the previous year.¹³⁸ Adding to the already significant Lebanese diaspora across the globe, this most recent pursuit of outward migration among youth risks additional 'brain drain' in Lebanon. Despite a vibrant civil society and burgeoning youth networks, young people, especially those from lower socio-economic classes and periphery regions such as the North, Akkar and Bekaa,¹³⁹ continue to be marginalised from decision-making particularly on the political and socio-economic fronts, resulting in a significant constituency of young people with limited positive outlooks for their future or the capacity to effect meaningful change in their lives. As such, any proposed economic recovery programme should capitalise on the human capital of the country's young people, and tap into their roles and potential in this process.

The COVID-19 pandemic interacted with and accentuated all the major conflict issues and dynamics, and the country survived a mild first wave of spread yet did not prepare for a more aggressive second one and did not deal with secondary effects beyond the medical conditions. Overall, the dynamics are not promising and warn of an escalation, leading to rising tensions within and across communities and deepening political divisions. **Amid this turbulent context, it is important to develop and strengthen systems for monitoring causes and triggers of conflicts and tensions, as well as perceptions polling of communities on attitudes towards, and entry points for, peaceful change. Such data should inform strategic planning, programmatic interventions and specific entry points for peacebuilding and reform, and should be used to inform coordinating actions of key local and national stakeholders.**

137 N. Houssari, Lebanon's 'new migration' as economic woes worsen, Arab News, 10 May 2020, <https://arab.news/p4eek>

138 Lebanon's brain drain: 'I'm Never Coming Back', Asharq Al Awsat, 29 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nDzWed>

139 According to a local peacebuilding analysis that International Alert conducted in Tripoli and Bekaa in July 2020.

To counteract stigma associated with the disease, service providers need to continue sharing correct information, countering fake news and intervening where possible to prevent evictions on public health grounds. The prolonged nature of the pandemic requires that both authorities and CSOs communicate clearly with communities on services, prevention measures, and both individual and collective responsibilities in preventing the spread of the virus, as well as mitigating social tensions arising from other issues. This can be done by **providing training on communication strategies and rumour control to political activists, civil society activists and media personnel.**

While the overlapping crises create barriers to observance of rules, the issue of public health also offers an opportunity to raise awareness of the potential benefits of collaborative action and offers opportunities for social solidarity and support to those most affected, including by layoffs and the transition to distant learning. Many businesses and CSOs have adapted to online work, while others continue to need assistance and support. Perhaps most notably, education providers and organisations offering psycho-social support **need assistance to ensure their online or blended programmes do no harm and are conflict sensitive, and as much as possible equip children and youth to deal with conflict and tensions without violence.**

At the same time, regardless of how volatile this period is, livelihood basics remain necessary and present a potential for tensions, including securing work for survival, education and health, where alternative solutions need to be considered to mitigate conflicts, and maintaining some level of social stability. In critical sectors such as health and education, civil society actors need to continue supporting public providers to strengthen their systems and staff capacity at the local level, provide services without discrimination, ensure inclusive spaces, counter misinformation and stigma, and prevent violence. In meeting livelihood and food security needs, calls for self-sufficiency and local production need to be **coupled with a long-term vision to resolve the food security issue and the economic crisis, and implemented in a way that does not aggravate social, economic or environmental conflicts. Against this backdrop, conducting conflict, gender and environmental assessments for livelihood interventions is particularly crucial to mitigate conflict and conflict spillover, especially in new agri-food production and value chains.**

On the political front, there is a need to **advance credible alternatives and prepare for a real change.** While the conditions might not be conducive, this work is slowly starting through the creation and consolidation of new networking platforms and would benefit from creating new avenues for public debate and engagement, which bring diverse participants from across divides, and inclusive dialogue on public issues of concern. Entry points relate to **improving quality and access to public services, accountability of state institutions and CSOs, and environmental issues, and eventually these could develop into subjects related to citizenship and political, economic and social rights to increase citizen engagement and support newly formed groups to develop thinking about new ways of 'doing politics'. This includes engaging hitherto marginalised groups and reinvigorating the participation of women.**

Within CSOs and the protest movement, the previous analysis¹⁴⁰ found that women were instrumental in defusing tensions in certain instances, as well as in decision-making within activist groups, and this regressed as events unfolded and systems once in place were realigned to patriarchal norms, even within activist groups. Crises have the potential to influence gender relations and create opportunities for women to challenge restrictive gender roles and assume leadership positions. This can happen by redefining gender relations and rearranging, adapting or reinforcing patriarchal ideologies. In times of transition, pre-crisis gender norms can be disrupted with the breakdown of existing society practices and state policies, and the reinstating of a new social contract with the state and of the rule of law, in general. Therefore, **gendered transformative political gains in post-conflict settings can happen if there is a disruption in systematically established gender norms, an active women's movement based on civil society rather than feminism sponsored by the state, and international support.**¹⁴¹ However,

140 M. Al-Masri, Z. Abla and R. Hassan, 2020, Op. cit.

141 A.M. Tripp, Women's movements and constitution making after civil unrest and conflict in Africa: The cases of Kenya and Somalia, *Politics & Gender*, 12(1), 2016, pp.78–106, doi:10.1017/S1743923X16000015

conflict and political violence can also give rise to more rigid gender stereotypes that men and women are expected to fulfil.

It is, therefore, important to **increase the role for civil society women networks and activists in oversight of formal structures.** On the community level, there are opportunities to improve meaningful participation of women in decision-making through the creation of space for grassroots initiatives – including those solidarity initiatives that emerged following the economic crisis – and the linking of local- and national-level efforts. Peacebuilding efforts are most effective when led by the women's rights activists and local communities themselves. Thus, the rollout of the National Action Plan of UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS), which was endorsed by the Lebanese government in September 2019, should support locally led women's peacebuilding networks and open dialogue spaces with grassroots groups, in particular those established by the protest movement post-October. This would contribute not only to informing Lebanon's national WPS agenda,¹⁴² but also to increasing meaningful participation of women in conflict mitigation.

At the community level, local solidarity initiatives are often capable of reaching more vulnerable or hard-to-reach people, showing a growing sense of solidarity among Lebanese as they mobilised to collect donations and aid, and in many cases, transcending political, sectarian or familial affiliations. This presents an opportunity for effective coordination bringing together municipalities, CSOs and other community representatives to share information and benefit from the latest safety and prevention guidance. There are **opportunities to support solidarity initiatives, increase collaboration and encourage different forms of coalitions. Such initiatives might have limited scope and reach; however, if ultimately connected across localities, linking across regions and geographical divides, such initiatives could contribute to a comprehensive alternative for the current political economy model, not to mention their potential to increase protective factors and social stability at the local level.** The presence of grassroots social movements that mobilised particularly in response to the dire economic repercussions of the COVID-19 lockdown on vulnerable families and following the Beirut blast on 4 August, and the growing public consciousness and clamour for change, means that these new movements could be part of the renegotiation process and push for a more participatory political process. In the short to medium term, this means **activist groups creating their own spaces for dialogue and networking that can push for a people-centred recovery, which takes into account space, identity and heritage, and that can bridge inter-group divides, and organise citizen action for government accountability. In the longer term, more inclusive and participatory political engagement will help rebuild citizen–state trust and strengthen the democratic process.**¹⁴³

Conflict dynamics in Lebanon remain highly volatile and susceptible to internal and regional shocks. While the situation is unfolding, new issues, dynamics and areas for further exploration and analysis arise. Based on the analysis and conclusions of this report, areas for further exploration include: the role of the diaspora in economic and political transformation; new issues arising from the dynamic between economic deprivation, growing poverty and clientelism; prospects and models of solidarity economy; the correlation between intra- and inter-group conflict; the impact of peacebuilding work facilitated by technology in light of the expected continued restrictions on mobility and gatherings to curb the COVID-19 pandemic; and the impact of local initiatives on prevention of violence in volatile contexts.

142 A. Naamani, Challenges and opportunities to advance the women, peace and security agenda after Lebanon's protest movement, Agency for Peacebuilding, 23 June 2020, <http://www.peaceagency.org/en/2020/06/23/women-peace-security-after-lebanon-protests/>

143 A. Naamani, R. Simpson and I. Slavova, In the absence of the state, people are leading Beirut's recovery, Open Democracy, 11 September 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/in-the-absence-of-the-state-people-are-leading-beiruts-recovery>

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