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Envisioning and contesting a new Lebanon?

Actors, issues and dynamics following
the October protests



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Abbreviations

CEDRE	Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
FM	Future Movement
FPM	Free Patriotic Movement
ISF	Internal Security Forces
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
LCRP	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
LF	Lebanese Forces
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
PSP	Progressive Socialist Party
SoSt	Social stability

Preface

This report provides an analysis that captures a snapshot of the time between October 2019 and February 2020 in Lebanon. It 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 nationwide protests that began in October 2019. The analysis was developed with the aim of supporting organisations in planning and designing peacebuilding and development interventions in the aftermath of these protests.

The data was collected and analysed *before* two major events hit Lebanon: the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures starting on 15 March; and the massive explosion in Beirut Port on 4 August. Both developments have had extensive ramifications on the context in the country and significant implications for the outlooks presented in the analysis and for peacebuilding overall.

Daily life has been transformed since 15 March, when the country was placed under lockdown and continuing measures to curb the virus' spread, including evening curfew and restrictions on movements outside the home. While lockdown measures have been intermittent since March, the pandemic and the response put further pressures on an exhausted health system and interacted with pre-existing political, economic and social dynamics. COVID-19 has deepened and accelerated concurrent crises in the country, and these implications on the context and on peacebuilding trends¹ will be discussed in a forthcoming analysis covering the period February–July 2020.

The Beirut Port explosion hit the country at a time when it had already been grappling with an economic crisis, a political stalemate² and the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving a heavy toll of human loss, injury and trauma, and destruction in its wake. This is in addition to wide-reaching implications in terms of the political and economic fall-out, ailing infrastructure and food security issues, with the port being a major facility through which 70% of Lebanon's trade passes³ and the damage severely impacting the country's main economic hub. The explosion places 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, these two major developments are not explored in this report. Conditions are changing rapidly, dynamics are evolving and new risks are emerging. 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 report are still relevant today.

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

This report will be followed by an updated context analysis that builds on and further develops some of the key findings in this research and examines the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut Port explosion on conflict dynamics, peacebuilding trends and peacebuilding work in Lebanon.

1 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>

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>

Executive summary

This report provides a summary of a context analysis to support organisations in planning and design of peacebuilding and development interventions. It draws on targeted interviews with protestors and community members, as well as political insiders, underpinned by desk-based analysis.

The analysis aimed to deepen understanding of evolving dynamics following the protests that began in October 2019. It captures a snapshot in time, and presents a summary of the main causes of tensions according to the perception and experiences of key social groups and actors, their relations and underlying dynamics that could present entry points for engagement.

Since October 2019, nationwide popular protests have been calling for increased accountability from the country's political elite, which has shared executive power along sectarian lines since the end of Lebanon's civil war in 1990. Unlike previous civic movements since the end of the civil war, the October protests were triggered by a severe economic downturn that continues to unfold amid a stalemate among the major political parties, which are yet to offer recovery plans to the Lebanese.

While political allegiances and loyalties remain to a large extent among the parties' supporter bases, nonetheless, an overarching change in sentiment towards the traditional sectarian political parties is an opportunity for youth groups, even those in support of such parties, to push for internal reforms and find bridges with other activist groups through local dialogue and deliberative democracy processes.

The data was collected and analysed prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, which took hold in March 2020. Daily life has been transformed since 15 March when the country was placed under lockdown and continuing measures, including evening curfew and restriction on movements outside the home, to curb the virus's spread. While initially this curtailed large-scale mobilisation of protests, resulting in a movement of protests online, there has been a recent resurgence of protests in Tripoli, Beirut, Bekaa, Akkar and elsewhere. Lebanon is at a critical juncture, facing continued political instability and close to a socio-economic collapse. The conditions are changing rapidly, and risks are emerging, yet opportunities are also unfolding, and the issues and dynamics presented in this paper are still relevant today. Given the timing, the research was conducted before the impact of COVID-19 and, therefore, these issues are not explored here.

Conflict issues

The political elite maintains control, despite criticism and opposition, and remains unable to offer solutions to critical livelihood issues. It is perceived as detached from public needs, although all political parties claim to support people's demands and consider 'others' guilty of 'mismanagement' and 'corruption'.

The Lebanese people are suffering from a currency crisis (shortage of US dollars and a dual exchange rate system). This is the result of four intractable and connected crises – which are further explored in section 3 of this report – which are not the result of the 17 October movements but their drivers. Despite these crises, the government response has been almost absent, and the Central Bank rather supported the interest of banks and the political elite. The recent developments have only exposed latent economic pressures simmering for years.

Residents of Lebanon are enduring harsh livelihood conditions. Poverty rates estimates have been on the rise (from 27% in 2011 to 33% in 2018).⁴ Inequality also increased to record highs (the richest 1% of Lebanon's adult population have 24% of income and 40% of wealth).⁵ **Non-nationals have become especially vulnerable under such conditions. Their historical marginalisation and discrimination are accentuated because they are perceived by many as secondary to Lebanese. An increased sense of nationalism among Lebanese risks increasing the vulnerability of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as well as migrant workers.**

The impact of political **interference in the management of natural resources and the environment** is being strongly felt. The state failed to deliver basic services yet has embarked on large-scale infrastructure projects, since the start of reconstruction works in 1992 following the end of the civil war in 1990. Such projects are decided upon using the logic of the politics of apportionment, downplaying the impact on the environment and public health, whereas people have increasingly prioritised these issues, which has allowed the politicisation of environmental issues.

The different official **security forces institutions** function, to a large extent, according to political allegiance. At the same time, and in the compromised presence of the rule of law, strong-arm men were active on the ground and operate for the security forces when needed. Some within the political elite use this system to threaten instability and securitise conditions, according to their interests, and as part of their bargaining, negotiations and contentions.

Emerging dynamics

Despite the gloomy economic outlook and the seemingly tense relationships, a positive attitude permeated most of the interviews. Even individuals who did not take part in the demonstrations or were loyal to political parties opposed to the protests expressed an awareness that the system needed reform, and that any change to come will be a step forward. While this positivity might have been a slightly misguided moment of revolutionary euphoria, it needs to be capitalised on as a rare opportunity for change.

- **A renewed sense of common identity** included a transcendence of sectarianism and widespread acceptance of the civil state, a more inclusive economic model, the rooting out of corruption and the independence of the judiciary as a key vehicle to achieve all of that.
- **Changes in people's relationship to the political elite** included breaking the barrier of fear and despair to challenge the political elite and dismantle the status of the '*Zaim*' ('Leader'). Nevertheless, such a change might have distanced a few who could not as easily rid themselves of such loyalties, due to fears that have long been nurtured and capitalised on by politicians.
- **Intergroup barriers persist:** Despite agreement on many core issues, widespread generalisations about the opposing groups and the limited opportunity for information to flow from one group to another persisted.
- **Increased public engagement in political debate:** Growing interest in politics in general, and economics in particular, was evident, with numerous political debates taking place in the public sphere and participation at a record high.
- **Envisioning and negotiating gender roles:** While a few key demands were highlighted and women played a significant role in defusing tension, the revolutionary fervour might have caused a regression in their position within activist groups.

4 United Nations (UN) Lebanon, UN Lebanon Annual Report 2018: Working together for a secure, stable and prosperous Lebanon, Beirut: UN Lebanon, 2018

5 N. Salti, No country for poor men: How Lebanon's debt has exacerbated inequality, Carnegie Middle East Center, 17 September 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/09/17/no-country-for-poor-men-how-lebanon-s-debt-has-exacerbated-inequality-pub-79852>

- **Age, class and region are points of tension:** Despite a display of national unity, the geographic connections were weak, and the ground for instigating inter-regional tensions is fertile. A generation gap is evident as a point of tension both within and between groups. Class differences affected motivation to join protests, nature of participation and type of direct actions preferred and enacted, and changed over time and varied by region, with class differences being particularly stark in Tripoli.

Outlook and potential scenarios

The analysis allowed the researchers to draw up a set of outlooks for peacebuilding in the political, economic, social and security sectors in Lebanon for the period following the October 2019 movement.

New political players

- The October movement created a reinvigorated civic movement, particularly among youth, despite internal conflicts and negative surrounding dynamics. The economic crisis and the current COVID-19 situation have stalled momentum of new political actors, and it remains to be seen whether this civic movement can continue to organise politically with a unified programme that can achieve small wins, gain power in some institutions and mobilise for the 2022 parliamentary elections.
- Upcoming municipal and parliamentary elections in 2022 will be instrumental in shaping and driving the new political actors that emerged following the October movement. Elections will bring either new players from within the activist community or new faces altogether with progressive political agendas, or alternatively strong allegiance to external forces (regional and international).

Economy and financial system⁶

- Whatever direction economic reforms take, there will be a cost to pay; however, it is not yet clear who will bear the highest cost.
- The banking sector emerged to the wider public as a conflict actor and the public's trust in this sector is waning. The financial 'rescue' plan announced by the government in late April aims to restructure the banking sector, and there is a possibility that the sector will take a hit. In such a case, safeguarding measures would be needed to protect depositors, who will otherwise bear the brunt.
- Discussion around a more inclusive and just economic model has moved to the public discourse with more interest from the public on such issues. With increased public awareness, activists have better opportunities and spaces to continue to explore and build alternative economic models and apply these models successfully in specific localities, allowing for expansion and replication.

Living conditions

- With the deteriorating living conditions and the inability of many employers to pay wages in US dollars, outlooks for marginalised non-Lebanese groups – particularly migrant workers and Syrian refugees – seem grim, as they are further exploited at work and face a higher cost of living due to inflation, leading to layoffs and forced evictions or voluntary returns to their countries.

6 In 2015, International Alert conducted research on how Lebanon's political power-sharing system among the sectarian groups has directly enabled their dominance of economic opportunity in the post-war era; see J. Banfield and V. Stamadianou (eds.), *Towards a peace economy in Lebanon*, London: International Alert, 2015

- With the spark in tensions between Lebanese and non-Lebanese communities (mainly Syrian refugees), social polarisation risks further increases, leading to increased violence and petty crime, and a return to clientelist networks.
- The economic crisis and the COVID-19 situation gave way to solidarity initiatives among Lebanese communities, presenting a positive outlook on the emergence of solidarity economies and new ideas for community-based wealth building and management that would increase connections between people.

Environment

- The government's financial 'rescue' plan puts strong emphasis on the investment projects presented at the CEDRE conference⁷ to attract foreign funds. Such projects, if pursued with no environmental safeguarding measures, might have negative effects on the environment, and risk forgoing quality of basic services, such as solid waste management, water provision and preservation, and proper wastewater treatment.
- This could increase tension with lobby groups and affected local communities, depending on the project. Two examples of projects with the potential for tension and conflict spillover are water dams and solid waste incinerators that feature in CEDRE projects.
- Political infighting could also lead to a complete halting of infrastructure projects, such as in electricity and solid waste management, that would result in a deterioration in access to power, pollution and environmental degradation.

Security institutions⁸

- Given that Lebanon's history is rich with examples of scuffles quickly escalating into widespread political violence, social unrest and higher levels of police repression, the protests have the potential to take a turn towards more acute violence and, consequently, security institutions hard-handling protestors during demonstrations and detention. The political elite could use powerbrokers and securitisation of the responses to demonstrations to threaten activists, who could either reorganise in the long term or just disappear.
- Activists, particularly outside Beirut in regions where traditional political parties are strong, spoke of being penalised for their engagement in protests. Potential risks include losing their jobs or financial support because of their activism, or being harassed and detained.
- Political parties are mobilising to regain faltered legitimacy. They might use their networks of powerbrokers, or strong-arm men, to deliberately increase inter-community tensions along sectarian and political parties' interests, and use it for political gain, especially as poverty increases, and such networks could reach vulnerable groups who need a social safety network.

7 On 6 April 2018, France hosted in Paris the international conference in support of Lebanon development and reforms, CEDRE (Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/news/article/lebanon-cedre-conference-06-04-18>. The objective of the CEDRE conference was to mobilise support from the international community for the development and the strengthening of the Lebanese economy as part of a comprehensive plan for reform and for infrastructure investments as prepared by the Lebanese authorities and presented during the conference.

8 International Alert has previously conducted research work on people and security in Lebanon. See C. Geha, *Citizens' perceptions of security institutions in Lebanon*, London: International Alert, 2015; K. El Mufti, *Civil society's role in security sector reform in Lebanon*, London: International Alert, 2015; L. Khattab and H. Myrtilinen, *Gender, security and SSR in Lebanon*, London: International Alert, 2014; and E. Carpi, M. Younes and M. AbiYaghi, *Crisis control & (in)formal hybrid security in Lebanon*, Lebanon: Lebanon Support, 2016.

1. Introduction

On 17 October 2019, people across Lebanon took to the streets. The immediate trigger was a proposed tax on WhatsApp voice calls, yet protestors also expressed long-term frustration at the political elite, failing economic policies, corruption, deteriorating living conditions and rising inequality. Although the tax was immediately dismissed, waves of mass protests continued for five months up to the time of writing this report. Such widespread protest was unprecedented in Lebanon's recent history. The movements spanned major cities and included men and women from different religions, regions, social classes and ages. The protestors demanded the government's resignation, the appointment of an independent cabinet, a programme of structural economic and governance reforms, and early parliamentary elections. Several activist groups (some newly formed and others already established) mobilised and coordinated the protests and activities on the ground. These groups set up encampments in main city squares that became the centre of action, while protests spread beyond urban central areas and were active but less frequent in smaller towns.

These months of mass protests changed the national socio-political and economic context. Lebanon is at a critical juncture, facing a complex political crisis and close to a socio-economic collapse. The conditions are changing very quickly, influencing relations, perceptions and practices among the general population. Risks are emerging, but opportunities are also unfolding. After this report was finalised, Lebanon faced another crisis in the form of COVID-19. The pandemic and the country's response to the crisis will interact with the political, social and economic conflict dynamics laid out within this report and are likely to compound many of the pre-existing grievances and inequalities, but these issues are not explored here given the timeframe of the analysis and the evolving context and response to COVID-19.⁹

This report provides a context analysis to support peacebuilding and development organisations to review their strategies and interventions in the emerging conditions while applying a conflict-sensitive approach. It provides a snapshot of the prevalent conditions in the country at a specific time – i.e. January and February 2020. It also explores the main causes of tensions according to the perceptions and experiences of key social groups and actors, as well as entry points for engagement. In particular, it offers recommendations for possible peacebuilding and development programmes to ensure that they are conflict-sensitive, while supporting civic activism and political dialogue.

The report starts by describing key actors in section 2 and then moves to the underlying causes of tensions in section 3. Section 4 details the emerging dynamics that could drive further tensions or bring people together. Finally, section 5 presents suggestions for interventions by peacebuilding and development organisations.

Methodology

The analysis is based on desk review, field observations and in-depth interviews to assess perceptions and opinions of key informants, as well as the research team's background knowledge and experience in conflict analysis in Lebanon. Data collection took place between 16 January and 1 February 2020, and a validation meeting (online) with partners was conducted in March 2020.

Desk research included secondary data mainly from closely following traditional media and, more importantly, emerging social media platforms to reflect the need for alternative sources of information and to keep up with the dynamic context.

⁹ International Alert is conducting further research work to improve its understanding of the opportunities and spaces for community and political dialogue, as well as of the prospects for establishing local peacebuilding networks, particularly after the October 2019 movement and the COVID-19 situation.



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Overlooking the massive popular protests that swept Beirut, October 2019.

Field visits and key informant interviews consisted of conversations with 51 persons (35 men and 16 women) across the regions of central Beirut and its surroundings, Tripoli, Saida and Nabatieh. The informants' profiles varied in terms of political orientation and role, and included Syrian refugees and actors knowledgeable about living conditions of other non-nationals, namely Palestinian refugees and migrant workers. Further information was obtained and validated during the meeting of the social stability working group at the end of January. The working group included representatives of ministries, UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Limitations and challenges

While this report tries to draw a broad overview of groups, it is important to keep in mind that the situation is very dynamic, and the list of groups mentioned is not exhaustive. A more specific and comprehensive consideration requires further data collection beyond the scope of this report.

This report is a snapshot of a socio-political setting during a very dynamic and changing period. As field work was about to start, the confrontation between protestors and security forces escalated. Incidents of property destruction, arrests by security forces and increased uncertainty made it more difficult to reach research subjects drawn from among the protestors. They did not readily accept meetings and were cautious. It was particularly challenging to get detailed information on the role of security forces given these sensitivities. Researchers relied on networks and connections and followed set criteria to avoid sampling bias, such as having informants that are both for and against protests, ensuring diversity in activist groups met according to each group's structure, nature, size and regional coverage.

2. Actors

This section summarises the perceptions and positions of actors that are for and against the protests. It provides a brief overview of actors, including from the political elite. It also sets out detail on the main activist groups that have played a major role in the protest movement, through ground actions (such as roadblocks and sit-ins at government institutions premises), political debate sessions in public spaces or supporting the protests in various ways. The roles and positions of the various actors depend on regional specificities, affiliations to national politics, social fabric and local political dynamics, among other factors.

Political groups represented in parliament

Prominent actors within parliament can be broadly divided into **three groups, based on their declared position towards the ongoing protests**, noting that their public discourse is not always a reflection of their real position towards the demands of the public.

- **The first group – which now holds the presidency, the leadership of the parliament and the government –** has been vocal in its rejection of the political demonstrations and in spearheading a campaign against them. Prominent groups include the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Amal Movement and Hezbollah.
- **A second group is nominally supporting the demonstrations** – as in the case of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). It also includes those engaging, to various extents, with dissenting groups and those who resigned from the government as a show of solidarity and participated in protests, such as the Lebanese Forces (LF) and the Future Movement (FM).
- **A third, much smaller group of parliamentarians**, such as the Phalanges (Kataeb) Party and independent parliamentarians, play an active role in reforming or opposing parliamentary decisions. Some of these are present informally in the demonstrations and are vocal in their support of the revolution.

The interest of the majority of the political players in parliament is to sustain their positions in power. Some groups see the current moment as an opportunity to grow their popular political capital, or lobby for some of their demands that, on the face of it, overlap with the protestors' demands.

While ostensibly there appear to be similarities between the attitudes of the governing political parties – including both the March 8 and 14 political alliances – towards the protest movement, this does not necessarily reflect the reality of the political landscape.¹⁰ Such alignment may be better understood as an attempt by the so-called March 14 political parties to capitalise on current protests for gains within the current system and not with the aim of toppling it. It could also be perceived as an attempt by the March 8 political parties to discredit the movement by insinuating that it is controlled by the LF and directed against the FPM and Hezbollah's arms. Nevertheless, the traditional elite structure is still standing and operates with the consensus of the majority of its parties.

Based on interviews with their representatives, the political groups opposed to the movement appeared to operate within **a worldview consumed by altercations among the political elite**, rather than by drivers and demands of the movement itself. The main political issues they raised were related to tension over power distribution at a higher level, and the popular political unrest appears marginal to their considerations. In addition, current economic crises and widespread corruption are still blamed on opposing political groups or external/international variables.

10 Two political alliances formed in 2005 following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and based on their position towards the Syrian government.

An interviewee representing one political party against the protests blamed the governor of the Central Bank for the financial crises, discussed corruption of the other political groups and asserted that the demands of the demonstrators (including abolishing sectarianism and fighting corruption) are its party's demands.

In another example, a representative of a political party that nominally supported the protests explained that the demonstrations started because of unprecedented corruption and said:

“If I weren’t in a leadership position in the party, I would have been the first one on the street.”

Despite this recognition of a collective responsibility among the ruling political parties, he still blamed other parties for the current crisis. For example, he attributed the debt accumulated in the energy sector to mismanagement by an opposing party, but at the same time excused the overall debt accumulation to which his own party is accused of contributing and claimed that “the overall debt has at least led to the building of the country’s infrastructure” and “we can see where the money went”. He explained that his political party was “obliged to play by the rule of political apportionment and political project contracting” because that is how “the whole country is run” even though it is not the party’s preference.

While taking stock of the revolutionary moment, we are reminded of the **vast number of supporters of certain mainstream political groups** as evidenced by the number of votes they received in the last parliamentary elections – something that was highlighted in the interviews with such supporters.¹¹ The size of the popular base of some parties explains some of the confidence in their political discourse and is used strategically by political groups to give them legitimacy and discredit those who oppose them.

Nevertheless, the **positions taken by party leadership do not necessarily reflect the inclination of its popular base** in these turbulent times. The first few days of demonstrations included many Hezbollah supporters without sanctioning by their party. The FM supporters demonstrated against the budget while FM parliamentarians allowed it a vote. Many PSP supporters in Chouf and Aley participated in protests, although many preferred to do so by going to protest squares in Beirut where they are less observed by the party.

Security institutions¹²

In interviews, protestors generally spoke of security forces as opponents that confront them when demonstrating. Perceptions about security forces evolved following experiences on the ground and were nuanced based on region-specific contexts. In Tripoli, for example, young activist men talked about episodes when army intelligence had a significant role in influencing protestors’ movement tactics and planning. In Saida, too, one male protestor interviewed talked about the army being clearly present, yet without confrontation with protestors. The student activists protesting in Nabatieh spoke of all security forces (formal, municipal and informal security groups active in their region) as one group and lumped them together with the dominant political parties. Beirut, in contrast, reported more complex and violent scenes where multiple security actors faced protestors. The anti-riot police remained on the front line, yet protestors also clashed with the forces¹³ that are assigned to the protection of the speaker of parliament and other political actors.¹⁴ The army became increasingly present after the first few days of protests in downtown Beirut, and some protestors differentiated it from other actors as being more politically

11 The total number of preference votes cast for Hezbollah candidates, for example, is 290,090 – the highest compared to all other political parties. When combined with their close ally, Amal Movement, whose preference votes are 165,556, the number is indicative of the size of their popular base and explains some of the confidence in their political discourse.

12 This area could benefit from further exploration, because, at the time of data collection, the confrontation between protestors and security forces escalated and the situation became more sensitive, and, therefore, it was not possible to collect enough primary data for in-depth analysis.

13 Defence attorneys for the demonstrators: The attack in Verdun occurred in a systematic way to terrorise the demonstrators, An-Nahar, 11 December 2019, <https://www.annahar.com/article/1084114>

14 After issuing the ‘staving off discord’ statement, Berri guards vowed to the protestors: You will meet God, Al Modon, 31 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/30gz31B>

neutral. The violent confrontations between protestors and security forces in Beirut changed with time and all actors adjusted to the shifting situation. Analysis showed that security institutions are often influenced by political parties to serve political interests along sectarian divisions. Parties are active across communities, intervening through strong-arm men that operate on their behalf, control neighbourhoods and sometimes form clientelist networks.¹⁵

It is difficult to assess the power dynamics between multiple politically charged security forces, yet coordination between them increased with time and after several episodes of confrontations. One interviewee, a young male member of a political party, explained that, after days of protests, the heads of security forces met and coordinated to distribute roles in various regions. In addition, the cybercrime bureau, part of the judicial police of the Internal Security Forces (ISF), has been very active in pursuing defamation complaints against activists to coerce them, undermining freedom of expression.

The banking system

The Central Bank and commercial banking system are key conflict actors blamed by the protestors for the prevailing economic and financial conditions. Their exposure to the government debt (financing its operations and supporting the political elite) became visible a few months before the protests started and as the economic crises intensified. They applied control measures on deposit withdrawal, which provoked public anger amid talks about large depositors getting preferential treatment and being able to transfer their money abroad. The banks are fighting for their shareholders' interests and business survival, at the expense of the wider public, which set them as adversaries to protestors.¹⁶ Their image as the most stable and resilient sector in the country faltered and this was compounded once financial flows into the country diminished. The mainstream political parties, especially Hezbollah and its allies, focused their attacks on the Central Bank governor, because of a perception that the governor is complying with US sanctions on Hezbollah for alleged money laundering.

Municipalities

The role of municipalities in the movement is relatively minor. It varies according to region, the internal dynamics within the municipal council and the municipality's affiliation to national politics. In Tripoli, for example, a young male protestor who is also a member of the municipal council talked about a positive role, providing electricity for protestors' tents and even doing some rehabilitation works to set up a theatre in the squares where the protests were taking place. By contrast, another activist perceived the Tripoli municipality as weak and unable to provide adequate support, because of a politically fragmented council, whereby members remained under the influence of political leaders. In other places, a negative perception prevails among activists, such as in Nabatieh, where one interviewee claimed that municipal police were assaulting protestors, and in Beirut, where protestors directly attacked the municipality as they perceived it as part of the political elite.

Activist groups: a colourful mosaic¹⁷

A few days after the start of the protest movement, groups of protestors started erecting tents in the cities' main squares. A few weeks later, the mosaic of actors sharing the protest spaces could be visually traced thanks to these tents.¹⁸ The map of tents in the squares (the spots chosen, the size of the tent, the clustering) helped understand the groups' positioning. Numerous groups formed beyond these encampments, based on

15 E. Carpi et al, 2016, Op. cit.

16 Mohammad Zbeeb, Facebook post, 6 February 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/mohammad.zbeeb/posts/10157263342217476>

17 We owe the expression 'a colourful mosaic' to an unpublished analysis by activist Kassem El Saddik entitled 'The dynamics of Harak: Strategic and Tactical Challenges'.

18 J. al-Dhaibi, Faces of the Revolution: Qasim Al-Siddiq, from Canada to Al-Nour Square, Al Modon, 7 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/39GRQpQ>

common interests, affiliations and personal networks, joined in the protests. However, the scene was different in each of the cities where protests were happening. This was influenced by the local social fabric and political dynamics (hegemony of certain political powers), how connected the city was to other regions, the history of mobilisations in the region and the impact of the economic crisis on residents. Nevertheless, there were some patterns that could be identified when attempting to roughly categorise the groups, many of which have roots in the movements of 2005, 2011 and 2015.

The classification below is roughly based on the period of formation, scope and interest, level of formality and structure. It is important to note that many active groups either were created during the last few months or developed during this period and are changing quickly.

1. Established/registered political parties, with no representatives in the parliament

They are mainly: the Communist Party, People's Movement of Lebanon, Union of Lebanese Democratic Youth, Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla, The National Bloc and Sabaa Party.

These parties work on a national scale (to different extents) and have groups spread in different cities. Some have developed a fully fledged political discourse and mission and some bring a historical dimension to the current protest movement. Some, particularly the Communist Party, were able to capitalise on the moment and move away from being a marginal actor in the last decade, to becoming a major player and coordinator of activities in the square. Some of the parties listed above have been more connected to the political class. On the one hand, the political class is more likely to perceive them as a threat; on the other, their past alliances and experiences with other major mainstream political parties and the ensuing public discourse has been, in many cases, a reason why other groups of activists are reluctant to coordinate with them. Others were recently established and have access to substantial resources, and a wide support base is quite active. Yet they receive some criticism from activist groups because of what some described as limited transparency, intergroup coordination approach and their liberal economic vision.

In addition to these parties, constituents of the political parties that consider themselves opposition but are represented in parliament are also participating actively in certain squares but without explicitly showing their party identity.

2. Pre-17 October established political groups

These are relatively nascent groups initiated by activists to build an alternative to the prevailing political system. They are generally associated with the individual experience of the activists behind them and adaptable to change, and they have changed names and forms in their short period of existence.

Of these, Lihaqqi, Marsad and Beirut Madinati are political groups that emerged or grew during elections. Beirut Madinati ran in Beirut during the 2016 municipal elections and has a presence mainly in the capital, but its activities slowed after 2016 before picking up again recently. Lihaqqi and the founder of Marsad ran in the 2018 parliamentary elections as part of Tahalof Watani, which is the alliance representing civil society/independents that ran against mainstream political parties. Lihaqqi ran in the Chouf and Aley area but has since expanded widely across Beirut and elsewhere. Marsad was formed in 2018 by activists to run in the parliamentary elections

with Tahalof Watani, a coalition of small activist groups running in the 2018 parliamentary elections. Most of these groups have roots in the 2015 protests about solid waste management, particularly Marsad activists that were at the forefront against the solid waste mismanagement.

These groups are relatively more well known among the public. Their participation in elections means that they consider accessing the parliament/local governance a key strategy to influencing change. Their experience since the elections has allowed them to develop operational structures, outreach and membership mechanisms, which other emerging groups still do not have. These established groups are using the protest space to expand and connect to new people and communities, and they usually organise visits to protest spaces in other cities to hold meetings or debates. In addition, independent actors/activists that branched out of Tahalof Watani remained present on the protest scene. Other groups also emerged from different, more grassroots opposition experience, such as the left-wing al-Haraka al-Shababiya lil Taghyir or the anarchist movement in Lebanon, Kafeh, which gained momentum during the protests.

3. New emerging groups (Beirut based)

Some groups built on previously existing networks. For example, there are those that gathered people based on geographical proximity like the Kantari group, Chevrolet group, Jal el Dib group and Verdun group, among others. They are mainly interested in street action, yet some like the Jal el Dib group are evolving into a more structured organisation and building a common political vision, with founders claiming to be previously affiliated to mainstream political parties. Others such as Aaamiet 17 Teshreen formed an opposition group based on personal networks with some key members politically active since 2005. Ana Khat Ahmar is another group of businesspeople that gathered during the protests through personal networks.

4. Interest-based groups

These groups are based on common concerns and/or ideology, such as feminist and anti-racism groups, environmental groups (like Save The Bisri Valley) and the group fighting the banking system (Group for Nationalising Banks). They are using the space of the protests to push to the forefront often sidelined concerns, including feminism, racism, anti-capitalist and environmental degradation or natural resources mismanagement, such as in solid waste or dams developments. Others are based on professional associations with a political interest. They challenge the role played by existing unions, and in many cases suggest alternative union arrangements or at least a reclamation of a unionised space that has been under a mainstream political hegemony. Examples of such groups include The Association of Professionals, the Alternative Media Syndicate and the Association of Workers in Arts and Culture.

Since December 2019, a few emerging groups have started researching and developing solidarity initiatives; while some of these initiatives adopted a charity approach, others opened a debate about the possibility of taking advantage of the crisis to build an alternative economy. A smaller number of initiatives deal with agriculture (Habaq movement and Izraa initiative) in Akkar and the Chouf area. Other initiatives struggled to operate due to a lack of knowledge and capacity.

5. Specialised collectives and/or individuals

These are mostly collectives or activists and NGOs that existed prior to the start of the protest and adapted their activities to respond to arising needs. Some developed a political, economic or legal discourse and adapted it to emerging demands. They include economists, researchers, urban planners and lawyers. They played a major role in highlighting and/or defending the rights of protestors like the Lawyers Committee for the Defence of Protestors, Legal Agenda and the Social Media Exchange (SMEX). Other groups were crucial in creating online content (including alternative media platforms like Akhbar al Saha, Megaphone, the Public Source and Daleel Althawra).

In addition, many Facebook pages played an important part in online mobilisation and in creating a national identity for the protest movement (Lebanon Revolts). In a few cities, umbrella online groups were created to speak in the name of the protesters of the city (Tripoli Revolts for Lebanon and Saida Revolts). Depending on the political moment, and the parties behind these platforms, in some cases, they have been instrumental in coordinating the different groups. In some cases, such as in Tripoli, these platforms were the result of coordination mechanisms between activist groups, while, in others, they were more a communications approach to create unity based on national identity.

6. Informal and transient groups

Many of the protestors participated on an individual basis. They have no previous experience in politics and are part of loose associations (such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups), created to organise specific protest action or for physical maintenance of the protest spaces (e.g. groups doing daily cleaning in most squares). These groups originated based on personal networks and expanded.

Coordination mechanisms and the lack of a unified vision

While the different actors participating in the protests have in common their opposition to the existing political system, there is no unified alternative political vision. Different frameworks of coordination emerged at different times. When it comes to direct action, the need and level of coordination varied. It was affected both by the circumstances on the ground at individual protest sites and how quickly they changed (e.g. roadblocks, confrontations with the riot police, detentions or stopping the parliament assembly from happening, etc.). Where there was less time and space for coordination, groups would react fast as the on-the-ground situation demanded. At other times when events unfolded more slowly, coordination increased, with groups co-organising marches and actions.

As for coordination on political positions, the need for it was less urgent at the beginning of the protest movement, or in moments of reactions to actions of the political class. One activist explained:

“In concrete moments, we were really shocked how aligned the political positions of different groups in different regions were, even if we were not yet in contact. From the outside, this could appear as an orchestrated unified position.”

However, the differences between groups’ political positions appear during deeper discussions around the political vision. These differences at times lead to tensions, which some groups attempted to avoid by resorting

to strategies of focusing on common concerns. “There are deep political differences between the different groups, but we have to put these differences aside and focus on what we agree on,” an interviewee from Beirut said. “If we focus on the economic or social aspects, we could go beyond our political differences,” an activist from Saida explained. Differences/fears are also the result of individual/personal relations and perceptions between activists from different groups.

Not addressing these differences is thus related to the fear of conflict within the movement distracting from addressing national political issues. One independent activist from Tripoli argued that “the Harak fears engaging in a political discussion, because they are cautious of addressing the weapons of Hezbollah”. This would be a contentious issue that exposes differences in positions. Other groups see that these differences will be key in identifying political alliances in the near future, claiming that “when we get to a point where we’re discussing which electoral law we want, which economic system we aim for, we will have to find out who are our actual allies”. Several initiatives aimed at developing common policy demands have emerged, usually supported by experts and well-known activists who do not necessarily belong to a specific group, but who played a key role in informing actions and debates. However, the process of alignment along common specific political, social and economic demands has just started and the outcome remains to be seen.

Thus, despite attempts to coordinate at three levels (direct action, policy and political), the activist groups have not yet fully succeeded in consolidating their efforts. Competition among them, the differences in organisational values and work approach, and even the level of trust constitute barriers. A key issue of the current debate is whether these groups should come together as one unified front. One activist explained:

“There is a lot of reluctance to coordinate between groups; there are many coordination tables, with the same groups around it, but this reluctance is connected to the fear of creating one front, the risk that this front will then negotiate with the state ... yet it is not clear what would the alternative to this front, and to negotiations, be.”

Moreover, the gaps between the groups – which, in some cases, are related to differences in ideological and political positions (such as the position towards the Syrian government and Hezbollah, or the position with regards to the secularisation of the state) and to class differences (in Tripoli, for instance, interviewees cited the gap between ‘intellectuals’ and the ‘marginalised’) – lead to the exclusion of certain groups from the coordination networks. These might be some of the reasons why groups have been only partly able to delegitimise the practices of the political elite. They have not been able to reach large parts of society that still cannot easily disconnect from the traditional allegiance to political leaders (*Zaim*).

The lack of a unified political vision, and the ambiguity around the leadership and/or the coordination mechanism are key issues in maintaining the division between the groups of protestors and the communities opposing these protests. One focus group participant opposed to the protests complained that protestors “have been in the street for months and we still don’t know what they want, they didn’t show us a programme ... and they don’t have a unified leadership”. Although some groups published their demands and might have a political vision, there is a wide spectrum of activist groups with a variety of contentious issues. The activist groups have not yet succeeded in formulating a sound alternative that can realistically claim to lead societal change and take over political institutions. As a student organiser from Nabatieh stressed, there is a “need to develop a solid political discourse that attracts people, and to avoid showing that everything that is being done is to spite the political parties in power ... and we need to show people we can protect them, with numbers at least”.

3. Issues

The conflict issues emerging post-17 October are rooted in Lebanon's longstanding structural problems. Most notable are societal sectarian divisions and unresolved war grievances, an oligopolistic economy, a clientelist sectarian-based power-sharing system and opposing foreign policy orientations. These structures that gave rise to the issues that fuelled five months of intense nationwide protests and social movements include the prevailing political system, economic crises and ensuing deteriorating living conditions, environmental degradation, the absence of the rule of law and politicisation of security institutions.

Political elite state

The political elite maintains its control, despite criticism and opposition, and remains unable to offer solutions to critical livelihood issues. It is perceived as detached from public needs, although all political parties claim to support people's demands and consider others guilty of 'mismanagement' and 'corruption'. One political party member explained this, as he classified the Lebanese population into three groups: "those part of the protest movements; those governing, and those governing but having the same demands as protestors and came to power to fight corruption". The political elite uses the politics of apportionment to reinforce its position. It bargains to capture economic and political rents from state assets along a balanced distribution among its members, through different arrangements in public procurement and contracting. Some of the political elite relied primarily on direct access and control over service ministries. Other groups with strong links to the private sector created rent opportunities arising out of public sector works contracts awarded to private companies. This process allows the elite to maintain its power, even though it sometimes leads to struggles and deadlocks and ignores the growing deprivation of the people, exacting a costly societal toll. One interviewee who was a member of a political party framed it as a "contagious" process in which all political parties are implicated. Almost all interviewees considered it a key conflict driver and described flagrant levels of rent seeking and nepotism.

The political class is supported by a financial and economic system in place since the 1990s that nurtures the process of rent creation and brought about a new class of financial elite to join the traditional political class. Economic and political interests have intersected and strengthened with time, especially in the last two decades. The "collusion of finance and politics", as one of the interviewed veteran activists described it, became blatant and people started feeling its impacts on their daily living experiences, especially amid intractable economic crises.

Outlooks and potential scenarios:

- The October movement produced a reinvigorated civic movement, particularly among youth, despite internal conflicts and negative surrounding dynamics. The economic crisis and the current COVID-19 situation have stalled momentum of new political actors, and it remains to be seen whether this civic movement can continue to organise politically with a unified programme that can achieve small wins, gain power in some institutions and mobilise for the 2022 parliamentary elections.
- Upcoming municipal and parliamentary elections in 2022 will be instrumental in shaping and driving the new political actors that emerged following the October movement. Elections will bring either new players from within the activist community or new faces altogether with progressive political agendas, or alternatively strong allegiance to external forces (regional and international).



Protestors reclaimed many of Lebanon's public spaces, one of which is 'the Egg' in downtown Beirut, which was severely damaged by the 1975–1990 civil war, October 2019.

Four economic crises

The Lebanese people are suffering from a currency crisis (shortage of US dollars and multiple exchange rates system). This is due to four intractable and connected crises that led to the 17 October movements. The government response has been almost absent during this critical situation, and the Central Bank refrained from issuing formal measures to manage the repercussions on people's financial condition. The recent developments have only exposed latent economic pressures simmering for years. According to an economist interviewed for this report:

"These crises will create a problem of trust in the economy and cannot be solved separately but need a comprehensive plan that could be painful yet effective. In fact, it could be 'less painful' if the higher income classes bear its cost."

The Lebanese economy's **dollarisation and heavy reliance on external financing** became problematic. The balance of payments has registered annual deficits year after year since 2011, a first-time trend in the history of Lebanon. Typically, Lebanon's large structural trade deficit – due to high reliance on imports – is offset with foreign inflows of remittances, financial and foreign direct investment, especially in the real estate sector. These were no longer sufficient and triggered a balance of payments crisis.

External factors, including the crisis in Syria, international sanctions and weaknesses in Lebanon's export sector, amid growing imports, led to a deficit in the balance of payments, which resulted in the Central Bank running down its foreign currency reserves. Consequently, it is now facing the prospect of not being able to meet obligations such as paying foreign currency denominated debt, financing basic necessity imports and intervening in the foreign exchange market to uphold the official currency peg, thus leading to the emergence of a parallel exchange rate with around a 30% differential (at the time of writing of this report) and translating into a hike in prices of

consumer goods that are 80% imported. Over the years, monetary policy kept interest rates high to support banks and attract funds into Lebanon and maintain the currency peg. Yet it stifled economic activity and incentivised banks to place a large share of their resources in government debt instruments or in deposits at the Central Bank.

The high exposure to sovereign debt puts banks under significant pressure. The situation has been further aggravated as a result of the erosion of consumers' confidence, leading to a run on banks, in a highly dollarised economy (70% of bank deposits are in US dollars). As the **banking crisis** unfolded, informal restrictions were imposed on deposit withdrawals. As the situation drags on and more and more private sector loans default, because of a contraction in the economy, banks could easily and quickly reach insolvency. A collapse will have a detrimental effect immediately, but also for years to come, making it much harder to rebuild a post-crisis economy.

Simultaneously, the **public sector** is facing difficulty with financing a chronically large public deficit and extremely high public debt. A fiscal imbalance has prevailed since the 1990s, but, where opportunities to curtail it arose, attempts to do so have not been serious. Public finance has also deteriorated due to mismanagement and corruption. Economic policies give primacy to financial sectors and debt creation at the expense of productive sectors. Upholding the pegged exchange rate for decades was only possible using high interest rates, amid weak confidence and economic fundamentals. Lebanon entered a vicious cycle of rising public debt, high interest rates, depressed investment and growth, and an oversized banking sector.

Considering the above, the **real economy crisis** has been inescapable. Economic growth has slowed since 2010, hovering around 1%. Currently, the economy is contracting and moving into a deep recession. Real sectors, namely agriculture, industry, trade and services, are experiencing difficult operating conditions. Businesses are suffering from shortages of funding, an inability to deal with the rest of the world through the international banking system, the complexity of a dual exchange rate system and lower consumer demand, among others. Small and medium enterprises are most affected and are the front runners in closing their doors. More than 95% of enterprises in Lebanon are classified as small business.

Outlooks and potential scenarios:

- Whatever direction economic reforms take, there will be a cost to pay; however, it is not yet clear who will bear the highest cost.
- The banking sector emerged to the wider public as a conflict actor and the public's trust in this sector is waning. The financial 'rescue' plan announced by the government in late April aims to restructure the banking sector, and there is a possibility that the sector will take a hit. In such a case, safeguarding measures would be needed to protect depositors, who will otherwise bear the brunt.
- Discussion around a more inclusive and just economic model has moved to the public discourse with more interest from the public on such issues. With increased public awareness, activists have better opportunities and spaces to continue to explore and build alternative economic models and apply these models successfully in specific localities, allowing for expansion and replication.

Deteriorating living conditions

Residents of Lebanon are enduring **harsh living conditions**. Poverty rates have been on the rise (from 27% in 2011 to 33% in 2018).¹⁹ Inequality also increased to register record highs (the richest 1% of Lebanon's adult population have 24% of income and 40% of wealth).²⁰ The situation has intensified as the economic crises have unfolded, with salaries being cut and unemployment rising. Precariousness of, and competition for, work has increased. Youth are increasingly looking for immigration opportunities. A number of suicides have also been attributed to deteriorating living conditions.²¹ National political bickering and deadlocks have slowed the provision of public services. Corruption and nepotism have been further exposed, especially as the clientelist networks faltered, amid shortages of funding ordinarily received from regional players (the Gulf and Iran), and the tightening of international sanctions. Interviewees, both activists and protestors, as well as members of political parties said, "people are hungry", "the boat is sinking" and "we are all drowning". Even NGOs are facing restrictions in responding to crises and providing services.

Non-nationals have become especially vulnerable under such conditions. Their historical marginalisation and discrimination are being accentuated because they are perceived as secondary to Lebanese, especially as the protest movement fostered a sense of nationalism. A member of the Anti-Racism Movement said:

"The discourse of priorities among nationalities is much stronger than the usual; it's already hard to talk about migrants' rights in normal times, now it seems even absurd."

Migrant domestic workers' living and working conditions have deteriorated, especially as a result of the currency crisis.

Similar threats are facing Syrian refugees. According to a perception survey from the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) Social Stability Working Group, tensions with Lebanese have heightened, even though they had been increasing pre-crisis. Among the most frequently reported drivers of tension between refugees and the host community was competition for jobs and resources. Syrian refugees are under amplified scrutiny from local authorities. Their living conditions have also deteriorated as a result of price increases and dwindling aid pre-17 October.

Some groups, particularly Syrian refugees, interviewed for this research are frustrated with their treatment by the UNHCR, claiming a lack of transparency on its part, and so they focus their actions on demanding changes within the organisation to improve its responsiveness to the needs of Syrian refugees. Between October and December 2019, and with the increase in hostility in the political discourse of some parties towards refugees, reports coming from the LCRP Social Stability Working Group²² showed that refugees had reported fears that the new dynamic following the October movement will manifest in an increase in restrictive measures targeting them, including curfews, arrests and detentions, as well as deportations and tension against them. They also shared concerns of forced eviction by their landlords due to their inability to pay rent, and some feared that they might have to return to Syria because of the risk of escalation in Lebanon's security situation. This explains why, although they prefer to distance themselves from participating in the protests to avoid risks of increased hostility against them, Syrian refugee groups interviewed for this research said that they also felt connected to the demands of the Lebanese people. One Syrian refugee women said:

19 UN Lebanon, 2018, Op. cit.

20 N. Salti, 2019, Op. cit.

21 M. Chehab, Several suicides were recorded in Lebanon ... and street anger increased against the authority, euronews, 5 December 2019, <https://arabic.euronews.com/2019/12/05/suicide-increasing-lebanon-renew-protests-overthrow-regim-beirut-crisis>

22 In the context of the LCRP, the social stability (SoSt) sector complements the efforts of other sectors to mitigate tensions resulting from the profound impact of the Syrian crisis on local communities, through a comprehensive set of interventions at local and national level, which emphasise institution building to tackle both the expression of conflict and causes of community tensions. The SoSt sector comprises of working groups dispersed across Lebanon's governorates and includes international and national NGOs operating within the SoSt sector.

“The revolution is asking for the thieves, and we are being stolen from as well, if we expose those who are stealing our aids, we would be helping the protestors.”

However, they did not see a role for themselves in the current protest movement out of fear of damaging the movement and/or of being used as a scapegoat. They have been used in the political discourse, especially by the FPM, as a driver of the hardships for the Lebanese but this rhetoric did not gain traction.

Palestinian refugees have also been portrayed by some media outlets as instigators of violence during the protests.²³ Palestinian factions in camps took a deliberate decision to keep their constituency away from the streets, understanding “the importance of giving priority to the Lebanese at this juncture”, as a key informant of a Palestinian NGO said. She further explained that the Palestinian community considers the Lebanese protest movements a natural continuation of the protests in the Palestinian refugee camps earlier in the summer, calling for their social and economic rights. She considered that the rights-based discourse that the Lebanese activists are advocating is expected to support the Palestinians’ plight in Lebanon, something that could not be achieved with the historically governing parties.

Outlooks and potential scenarios:

- With the deteriorating living conditions and the inability of many employers to pay wages in US dollars, outlooks for marginalised non-Lebanese groups – particularly migrant workers and Syrian refugees – seem grim, as they are further exploited at work and face a higher cost of living due to inflation, leading to layoffs and forced evictions or voluntary returns to their countries.
- With the spark in tensions between Lebanese and non-Lebanese communities (mainly Syrian refugees), social polarisation risks further increase, leading to increased violence and petty crime, and a return to clientelist networks.
- The economic crisis and the COVID-19 situation gave way to solidarity initiatives among Lebanese communities, presenting a positive outlook on the emergence of solidarity economies and new ideas for community-based wealth building and management that would increase connections between people.

Environmental degradation

The impact of political interference in the management of natural resources and the environment is strongly felt. The state failed to deliver basic services. It has embarked on large-scale infrastructure projects prioritised on the basis of the politics of apportionment among competing political factions, while downplaying the impact on the environment and public health. This contrasts with the public who have increasingly prioritised these issues, and has led to the politicisation of environmental issues. The large forest fires that spread across Lebanon prior to the protests in October exposed state failures and triggered a wave of rage. Campaigns against dams, solid waste facilities, quarries and the electricity management sector are also ongoing.

23 D. Foi’Elle and J. Ayoub, Syrian melancholy in Lebanon’s revolution, Al-Jumhuriya, 6 December 2019, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/syrian-melancholy-lebanons-revolution>

While some campaigns like the Bisri dam gained visibility and achieved symbolic wins at the time, there is no evidence that the project has halted.²⁴ There have been earlier modest wins, such as the movement against using incineration for solid waste disposal that the Beirut Municipality had planned. This project has also been halted for the time being because of intensive lobbying by the Waste Management Coalition creating strong opposition from within the municipal council against it.

Outlooks and potential scenarios:

- The government's financial 'rescue' plan puts strong emphasis on the investment projects presented at the CEDRE conference to attract foreign funds. Such projects, if pursued with no environmental safeguarding measures, might have negative effects on the environment, and risk forgoing quality of basic services such as solid waste management, water provision and preservation, and proper wastewater treatment.
- This could increase tension with lobby groups and affected local communities, depending on the project. Two examples of projects with the potential for tension and conflict spillover are water dams and solid waste incinerators that feature in CEDRE projects.
- Political infighting could also lead to a complete halting of infrastructure projects, such as in electricity and solid waste management, that would result in a deterioration in access to power, pollution and environmental degradation.

Politicisation of security forces further manifested

The various official **security force institutions** function, to varying degrees, according to political allegiance and sectarian affiliations, as appointment of leadership positions in the security sector, by convention, must consider such factors.²⁵ At the same time, and where there are areas where the rule of law is compromised, strong-arm men are active on the ground and operate in place of the security forces when needed. This happened on several occasions when bodyguards of MPs and politicians and protestors clashed during protests or sit-ins in front of politicians' homes,²⁶ or when supporters of political parties would attack protestors in public spaces at gatherings.²⁷ Such incidents occurred in the presence of official security forces who engaged only when tensions risked escalating to violence, by keeping the opposing groups apart. Members of the political elite have used this system and the threat of instability to restrict the protestors', as well as the journalists', freedom of speech and expression through crackdowns and arrests, according to its interests, and as part of its bargaining, negotiations and contentions.

Security provision by formal and informal actors is complex, and different security forces at different times, depending on local context, enjoy varying degrees of trust from the population (typically, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have a better satisfaction rating; however, such ratings depend on the changing political context and interaction between the population and security forces). Interviewees did not always make clear distinctions

24 The World Bank in the Serrail: 'The Poorest' and the Bisri Dam, Al-Akhbar, 2 March 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/284954>

25 Brigadier General Dr A. Saliba, The security sector in Lebanon: Jurisdiction and organization, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012

26 Lebanon protesters scuffle with lawmaker's bodyguards in Tripoli, Asharq Al-Awsat, 9 December 2019, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2028306/lebanon-protesters-scuffle-lawmakers-bodyguards-tripoli>

27 J. Haboush and T. Azhari, Hezbollah, Amal supporters attack protesters, Daily Star Lebanon, 25 November 2019, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Nov-25/496207-hezbollah-amal-supporters-attack-protesters.ashx>

between security actors (such as the LAF, ISF, Municipal Police, etc.); however, in some cases, they were more specific. For example, in the period between November 2019 and January 2020 (up until data collection for this analysis was concluded), the role of army intelligence was instrumental in influencing some crowds in Tripoli, and activists interviewed in Tripoli for this report claimed that intelligence officers have incriminating material on many of the protestors hailing from poor areas and would be able to use that material to threaten their political activism.

During the protests, the security forces played diverse roles at different times depending on political conditions. As an interviewee from the Lawyers' Committee for the Defence of Protestors stated, the role played by each security agency also varied depending on the region:

"The army for instance is playing a different role in different regions. And this is scary because you don't have one way to deal with each agency. There's security chaos. So, they make more mistakes, and it's very hard to hold them accountable because of the lack of clarity. The sense of security is absent."

Outlooks and potential scenarios:

- Given that Lebanon's history is rich with examples of scuffles quickly escalating into widespread political violence, social unrest and higher levels of police repression, the protests have the potential to take a turn towards more acute violence and, consequently, security institutions hard-handling protestors during demonstrations and detention. The political elite could use powerbrokers and securitisation of the responses to demonstrations to threaten activists, who could either reorganise in the long term or just disappear.
- Activists, particularly outside Beirut in regions where traditional political parties are strong, spoke of being penalised for their engagement in protests. Potential risks include losing their jobs or financial support because of their activism, or being harassed and detained.
- Political parties are mobilising to regain faltered legitimacy. They might use their networks of powerbrokers, or strong-arm men, to deliberately increase inter-community tensions along sectarian and political parties' interests, and use it for political gain, especially as poverty increases, and such networks could reach vulnerable groups who need a social safety network.

4. Dynamics

Despite the increasingly gloomy economic outlook and tense relationships, a positive attitude permeated most of the interviews. Even individuals who were not taking part in the demonstrations or those who were loyal to political parties opposed to the protests expressed an awareness that the system is broken, and that any change now is a step forward. While this positivity might be slightly misguided in a moment of revolutionary euphoria, it needs to be capitalised on as a rare opportunity for change.

Ability to envision a different Lebanon

A key issue was **transcending sectarianism and widespread acceptance of the civil state**. One male activist in Saida described how “People no longer ask you about your name to know your religion, they do it to be able to address you”. A focus group participant described how among her religious friends, some of whom were vehemently against civil marriage for example, she is ‘shocked’ by their attitude change in favour of a civil state and says that in some way “something broke”. Another issue is a realisation that, despite class differences, the key stratification is not between the lower and middle classes, but rather between the majority of the Lebanese and a much smaller upper class that holds power.

Another key element of this vision is the **reconsideration of the service-based economy and a move towards productive economic models**. A focus group participant opposed to the movement in Khandaq El-Ghamiq affirmed that, for him:

“...this Harak can do one positive thing: create a new country with different financial politics. ... The currency should crash completely. We are in a country that is not productive, we don’t have industry, and we depend on tourism. When the currency crashes completely we will have a big shift. Those who have land will plant it, and people will start buying local products.”

The opposition to the policy of pegging the Lebanese pound to the dollar has grown and most of those interviewed strongly reject the economic model established since the 1990s. Experiments in alternative economic models are mushrooming and attempts to invigorate an ailing agriculture sector by new actors abound.

Another agreed-upon issue is the **judicial reform as a key vehicle to rooting out corruption**. This is work in progress, which predates 17 October, but, with the consolidation of the lawyers’ and judges’ efforts and popular support for it, it appears more feasible than ever. Multiple entities from activist groups to NGOs have already been working on this agenda and drafted legislation for consideration several years ago.²⁸

The downside of a growing sense of national pride is the risk that it is not fully inclusive or open to all Lebanese. With national pride, there often comes a risk of discriminatory attitudes towards non-Lebanese.

Relation to political leadership

Being able to challenge corruption and a system that was perceived to have a tight control over its people was a crucial change that came about with the 17 October protests. One focus group participant saw this as a key success of the revolution: “all politicians had their pictures ripped and were kicked out of restaurants” after a time when approaching even the “halo of a politician” was not possible. Participants also spoke of protestors

28 H. Farfour, The draft law on ‘the independence and transparency of the judiciary’: Will deputies undermine the current ‘makeup’?, Al-Akhbar, 11 July 2018, <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/253915>



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Protestors from different social and age groups gathered in Martyrs' Square in downtown Beirut as part of the nationwide protests, October 2019.

supporting a certain *Zaim* for 25 years, but now revolting against him. Focus group participants in this research, who were pro-movement, disagreed on the extent to which information on corruption cases was available to the public, but agreed that a taboo had been broken and that now people can speak out against corruption.

The disclosure of some politicians' deep involvement in corruption might have distanced some of their followers who had taken part in the protests; nevertheless, others could not as easily rid themselves of such loyalties to their political leaders. For instance, this is accompanied by the contradictions of seeing the faults of a leader but not being able to let go of a long-entrenched attachment to that *Zaim* who has become a symbol of their politico-sectarian identity. Tied to the inability of some groups to let go of such loyalties are fears that have long been nurtured and capitalised on by politicians. A prominent one is the fear of an Israeli aggression and the risk that the current revolutions would weaken the resistance to Israel. Attempts by certain political groups opposed to Hezbollah to ride the wave of the revolution in order to attain political gains, which are not necessarily linked to revolutionary demands, further enforce this fear. A fear of marginalisation from political life was also expressed by a few sectarian minority groups in the event that a non-sectarian political system would substitute the current sectarian, power-sharing system.

Intergroup barriers persist

What was striking in the interviews, between those who support the protests and others who do not, were the widespread generalisations about the opposing groups and the limited opportunity for information to flow from one group to another, despite agreement in essence on a lot of core issues. Indeed, it appeared as though parties and groups operated largely in bubbles that acted as echo chambers, giving little opportunity for critique to be heard. Those opposing the revolution knew little about the groups and individuals in the squares, often citing the prominent political parties and other parliamentarians participating in the protests. Their primary source of information is still the

television or social media channels that either confirm their political positions or ignite their opposition. For example, one older male interviewee who supports Hezbollah described how, despite his living minutes away from downtown, and at times even hearing the chants coming from the ring, he only knew about what was happening from TV.

Most political discussions continue to happen among people belonging to the same macro group, whether on the side of activist groups or on the side of the government, though differences within both also abound. When asked about communication with the others, especially others that are not necessarily with the protests, an activist group member talked about a communication strategy in terms of reaching numbers on social media and blog visits only. There seems to be little evidence that these social media accounts reach those that are not necessarily with the protests. This is further confirmed by interviewees opposed to the protests who repeated rumours extensively refuted on social media by revolutionary groups, and when asked if they had seen any of the videos that refute these rumours, none said they did. The mainstream media further reinforce this with their choice of speakers and selective coverage, often with political aims or as a tool of politicians. Focus group participants who oppose the protests saw this lack of communication as marginalisation and a few activist groups are conscious of this, acknowledging that they “still cannot reach the audience that is on the other side ... and have not really taken a serious step to engage in a debate with them, probably because we are afraid of a clash”.

Although people continue to meet in work and social spaces across political divides, the discussion in these spaces often induces more intergroup tension rather than mutual understanding. Past existing platforms that brought people together across dividing lines might be a pathway to create fractures in these bubbles. The demonstration that took place between Chiyah and Ein-Remmeneh in November 2019 is one example of political action that defused tension between communities, and was only possible because of pre-existing connections between a group of mothers who had organised together previously.²⁹

Exceptional time for political debate and engagement

Growing interest in politics and economics was mentioned by most research participants. Almost all interviewed confirmed that they have now become ‘economic experts’. There are many more political debates taking place in the public sphere and participation is at a record high. As one activist shared:

“I was surprised by how interested people are to learn and discuss political issues in this moment. They don’t trust information perpetuated through the media. They want to learn and make informed opinions.”

Another activist spoke of a political awakening, claiming that what has been achieved in “30 days of the revolution equals 30 years of [political] awareness”. Some activists in Beirut noted the broadening of the scope of topics, or the opening up of platforms for them to express political views that they did not know were shared by so many, even on topics once seen as sensitive like civil marriage or LGBT rights.

Those opposed to the movement either felt excluded or attended only if the intention was to cause disruption. In addition, in Beirut for instance, debate spaces were mushrooming all over the squares, which, on the one hand, meant that many people were able to participate in these debates and, on the other, meant that many of these debates included a homogeneous group of people, and did not get into a contest of ideas. Nevertheless, in other cities where the debates were concentrated in one space, such as Saha wa massaha in Tripoli, participation in the debates included protestors from opposing political ideologies (Islamist and secular for instance), and thus allowed for conversations that could create fractures in traditional bubbles.

29 T. Azhari, Mothers lead march between Muslim-Christian suburbs, Daily Star Lebanon, 28 November 2019, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Nov-28/496410-mothers-lead-march-between-muslim-christian-suburbs.ashx>

Still politics by coincidence or the emergence of new political organisation?

The political mobilisation and action could be described as the “politics of coincidence” – “spontaneous organisational forms that fall outside traditional political organisations with flexible structures, emotional discourse, and loose demands”.³⁰ As elaborated in section 2 above, while many of the protesters were not politically organised, there are a few nascent initiatives building to a large extent on the 2015 Harak, among others. The beginning of the revolution was largely led by the ‘street’ as some interviewees indicated with phrases such as “the street is ahead of us” or “the street knows better”, and has resulted in a malleable political discourse to respond to street dynamics and ensure coordination with other political actors. Nevertheless, a sense of lack of strategy and political vision emerged, resembling the politics of coincidence described above. With the limited political vision and structures to take people forward, this dynamic is shifting, causing either chaotic political action or regression of political activists, or translating into a herd effect in the protest movement. For example, some activists spoke of the financial crisis as an opportunity to mobilise popular dissent; in the words of a feminist activist:

“The best context for a revolution to succeed is the context of the financial collapse. Because this imposes the sense of urgency. Usually the revolution would have to impose a crisis or bring risks to get you out of it later, but now there’s crisis with or without the revolution.”

However, the same activist also feared that the “sense of urgency does not allow for proper political organisations”. Another activist described this attitude as problematic, and she criticised the attitude of a few revolutionaries who are capitalising on the anticipated collapse, hoping that “hunger would bring people back to the street”; she also warned that this was a sign that the movement is still unable to formulate a vision and move people beyond reactionary politics.

Envisioning and negotiating gender roles

The traction that the slogan ‘the revolution is female’ has gained and the prominence of women in the protests do not necessarily mean that women and their priority demands have been afforded much space. In the public image, women have been at the forefront, particularly at the beginning.³¹ One example was the iconic image for the start of the revolution of a woman delivering a swift kick to the bodyguard of a member of parliament. The right of women to pass on their nationalities to their husbands and children, custody rights and public condemnation of sexual harassment marked the early days. Feminist groups and a feminist discourse have gained a louder voice within the revolutionary ranks and beyond, and the image of women at the forefront dominated the imagination of many. In addition, the role of women was key in defusing tension after a few days of escalation in November, when they organised a peaceful march across a sectarian line of divide and a flashpoint in Beirut’s suburb from the civil war period, following a night of clashes between youths in the same area, as an affirmation against a return to the violent clashes that made the civil war.³²

Nevertheless, female activists complained of regression in the position of women within the groups, with one female activist from an established political group stating that “with the revolution, the testosterone went up, and the boys could not control their patriarchal tendencies”. The same female activist described how, before the revolution, there were practical steps in place to ensure an equitable space for women within the group – including monitoring the amount of time that men and women spoke in meetings – but this was halted for a while as events quickly unfolded and systems once in place were relegated. While that group is now working on a ‘code of conduct’ to ensure patriarchal norms do not take over, she gave examples of several incidents where colleagues hijack – or attempt to hijack – the voice or role of women.

30 C. Kerbage, Politics of coincidence: The Harak confronts its ‘peoples’, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, 2017

31 C. Wilson, J. Zabaneh and R. Dore-Weeks, Understanding the role of women and feminist actors in Lebanon’s 2019 protests, New York: UN Women, 2019

32 T. Azhari, 28 November 2019, Op. cit.

Discourse of treachery and exclusionary politics

A key counter-revolutionary tactic used by the political elite has been accusing the protestors of being ‘foreign funded’, working for ‘foreign agendas’, threatening the ‘resistance against Israel’, and of claiming that the protests are ‘infiltrated by Syrians and Palestinians’. This discourse has had a significant impact in changing the way the protests were perceived popularly and has diverted attention away from the shared socio-economic demands to the regional geopolitical concerns. The most prominent example is the speech of Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah on 25 October in which he “urged the resistance supporters to leave the streets, noting that a dangerous scheme aimed at targeting Lebanon is being prepared”.³³ This speech was mentioned by all three interviewees opposed to the protests, and by several focus group participants from Al-Khandak as key to a change in their position towards the protests. The apparent alignment of the demands of some of the protestors with the demands of the March 14 alliance, and the – generally feeble – critique of Hezbollah, particularly at a time when Hezbollah is facing increased sanctions, has given this discourse further traction.

This tendency to distrust other actors and accuse them of treachery is not only a counter-revolutionary tactic but also runs across groups and at different levels, and undermines collaboration efforts of activist groups. External intervention is one of the fixtures of Lebanese politics, and local players have varying understandings of the level to which such intervention is acceptable. This explains to some extent why many interviewees spoke of a ‘fifth column’ operating in the obscure revolutionary moment or listed the many political groups that might want to capitalise on the revolution. Others, including several focus group participants from Khandaq El-Ghamiq, blamed the lack of trust on the nature of the protest movement, arguing that “a movement without clear leadership is worrying, because any party could ride on its wave”.

Points of tensions: age, class and region

Across the axes of age, class and region, several tensions and differences in political dynamics have been shared by interviewees. On the regional axes, in early chants, protestors listed and cheered the various areas of Lebanon revolting, in a display of national unity. Protestors also visited different regions where they joined locals in demonstrating. Nevertheless, the differences between the areas is stark, the connections across the regions are weak, and the ground for instigating inter-regional tensions is fertile. Interviewees from Tripoli, for example, explained a sense of marginalisation and being disconnected from the rest of the country, with one activist from Tripoli claiming that “in the head of many people from Tripoli, the Madfoun check point – separating North and Mount Lebanon Governorates – [is] more of a border than a check point”. While this sense of disconnect predates the protests, feeling is heightened now, and the activist from Tripoli expressed not feeling welcome when in protests in the capital.

The differences between regions in terms of the ability to protest and its cost is also stark. In the city of Nabatieh, for example, protestors were facing a challenge because of the close-knit communities and the strong dominance of one political group in the area. As one student activist from Nabatieh explained, some protesters were facing pressure through their families, while others were threatened with losing a scholarship or a job. Some also received direct threats from political groups, though again because of the personal connections. Such threats were not acted upon, though they were often complied with because of social pressure.

The generation gap is evident as a point of tension both within and between groups. Among those in support of the 17 October protests, a young generation seems to be free of the burden of the civil war and is leading on the calls for change. They are showing innovation, perseverance and a strong commitment to rights for all. This age dynamic played differently among those in support of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah for example, where the

33 S. Nasrallah says suspicious sides exploited popular protests, urges supporters to leave streets, Al Manar TV, 25 October 2019, <http://english.almanar.com.lb/857188>

younger generation seemed more attached to the political parties. For example, a 48-year-old father interviewed expressed surprise when he saw that his 19-year-old son changed his Facebook profile picture to that of a political leader in response to political events. While he also supports this leader, he believed his son's position was too extreme and feared that he might one day find him attacking protesters. This is partially explained by some of the older generation hailing from or being exposed to leftist and nationalist political ideology, whereas youth of the same areas grew up with a dominant political group that they credit for the 2000 Liberation of the south that has shaped their political imaginations.

Class differences in terms of motivation to join protests and nature of participation were subject to complex debates between research participants. In the focus group with protest activists in Beirut for example, one participant talked about a division in motivation, claiming that middle-class protesters were driven by ideology, whereas members of the lower class were motivated by the difficulty of the economic situation and suggested that the latter will withdraw if the situation becomes better. Others noted changes over time, with the squares being a 'melting pot' of classes at the beginning, but only lower-class protesters persevering. Yet another noted regional differences, observing that, while Beirut has many middle-class protesters, Tripoli demonstrators were mostly lower class. The class division in Tripoli was mentioned by all activists interviewed in the city, several of whom spoke of a clear division and difficulty in bridging the gap between an 'intellectual middle class' and an 'uneducated poor youth'.

Social media connects and divides

Social media was a key connector for protesters in Lebanon, facilitating information exchange for coordination within and across regions. Using WhatsApp, activist groups quickly reacted to developments on the ground. Social media served as a support system for protesters when violence erupted and in case of arrests to reach legal aid. The rapid creation of social media channels, as an alternative to traditional media, which is perceived as biased in favour of the political elite, provided alternative channels for more reliable information. Despite its positive role, social media has also ignited tensions and driven people to act violently. Social media, in its roles of connecting and dividing, is very difficult to track.

Activists' over-reliance on social media platforms that mainly include people from their own circles could blind them to what is happening beyond these circles. Traditional media, in contrast, played a supporting role, as protesters claim, early on and exposed evidence of corruption committed by the political elite, and mobilised the public to take part in the protests and to call for better government accountability. Stations owned by political parties opposed to the protests also covered the protests, yet maintained their political discourse.

5. Recommendations

With the mounting economic crises and the stalemate among politicians about how to pull Lebanon out of the meltdown, the civic movement faces tremendous challenges as to how to bring about desired changes in the country's political and economic models. Nonetheless, the current crisis and the increased citizen interest in public affairs also bring opportunities to shift the discussion from political infighting within patron–clientelist frameworks to reformist and inclusive processes.

Approaching the dynamic situation in Lebanon requires caution, and foreign funding needs to be aware of the risk of stigmatising the groups with which it is cooperating. Those providing assistance should:

- **Support processes for facilitating collective decision-making or deliberative democracy processes**, such as Citizens' Assemblies at municipal level (including in urban centres such as Tripoli), bringing together an inclusive range of participants across political, regional, socio-economic, gender and other divides to discuss key issues (such as electoral law) and develop joint actions and visions across political divides.
- **Provide facilitation support to improve coordination between different active political groups and foster inter-regional connections and support local actors through networking** (across groups and with decision-makers) and building capacity in advocacy on popular demands.
- **Embed gender sensitivity and women's participation into development and conflict-prevention efforts** (in line with 1325 commitments), and political and economic participation. **Support women's rights and women's participation in civic activism and policy-making**, including the development of a reform agenda and the 2022 elections. Seize the opportunity of engaging broader sections of society in advocacy for women's rights, capitalising on the growing interest in politics and the need for addressing sexual and gender-based violence. Ensure an equal or at least a fair representation of women in all activities and projects.
- **Provide training on communication strategies and rumour control** to political activists and media personnel.
- **Capitalise on growing support for certain rights, including the rights of women, refugees and migrant workers**, among others, through increased coordination, local dialogue, networking and pooling of resources between political groups and activists on these issues to strengthen advocacy.
- **Facilitate opportunities for exchange of information on global models of organising on themes of particular interest to residents of Lebanon** today, including:
 - sharing lessons, technical advice and capacity development and piloting *alternative economic models* in response to the deepening economic crisis; and
 - addressing environmental challenges and supporting effective engagement in *environmental initiatives*, such as waste management, electricity and water (including wastewater management and pollution of Litany river).
- **Convene consultations between international donors and political activists on international aid to Lebanon** and its impact on the macro political scene, and lobby for increased aid transparency. Of particular importance is management of aid to Syrian refugees, including ensuring quality provision of aid and



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Protestors gathered in al-Nour Square in Tripoli, October 2019.

minimising corruption – of both Lebanese authorities and international aid organisations – in managing this issue.

- Increase the emphasis on **human rights, accountability and citizen engagement and oversight of security sector institutions**, in order to build citizens' trust in these institutions. Strengthen the focus on rule of law and accountability in security and justice institutions, including effective judicial oversight of security forces. Encourage community security dialogues involving security institutions and citizen groups.
- **Support research and a community of practice on the evolving dynamics and debates of this period and future trends**, contributing to the academic literature and practitioner learning. These should be shared and made publicly available to inform wider discourse. More in-depth qualitative research is needed to cover the following areas:
 - class, age and gender, which reported differences in positioning and actions of protestors;
 - dynamics within groups, specifically with respect to the role of women in political activism and political decision-making;
 - lessons learned from the 2018 parliamentary elections and the experience of independent groups; and
 - how the global pandemic, healthcare crisis, and local and national COVID-19 responses will interact with identified political, social, economic and environmental dynamics.
- **Mainstream conflict sensitivity in all stages of the programme cycle**, in consultation with partners and stakeholders. This includes supporting collaborative partnerships on conflict sensitivity between local and international NGOs and using a conflict-sensitive analytical framework to guide how to support local actors in order to strengthen positive peacebuilding and avoid doing harm. This can also include *working in partnership and consultation with local networks*, increasing local visibility and ownership.

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