

2,750 Tons of Ammonium Nitrate: What Happened in Lebanon?

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On August 4, 2020, an explosion rocked Beirut, Lebanon. A massive mushroom cloud blossomed in the sky. Shock waves rippled across the city, shattering windows, collapsing buildings, and sending people running for their lives. To many around the world, this explosion and news that it was the result of government mismanagement came as a devastating surprise. However, for the Lebanese people, the explosion instilled anger, not surprise. In fact, for many, government mismanagement was the least surprising part of the incident. Understanding the protests that erupted in the following weeks, then, requires an understanding of the events that set the stage for the August 4 disaster.

For many, August 4th began as an ordinary day: Beirut, Lebanon's capital and largest city, was bustling with people. As the day progressed, at one point, people noticed something quite out of the ordinary: a massive plume of dark smoke near the sea billowing toward the sky. Moments later, a blast and a white cloud engulfed the city, sending people running for their lives. When the dust settled and the earth ceased to shudder, over 190 people were dead, over 6,500 injured, more than 300,000 without homes to return to, and at least \$3 billion in estimated damages (The Unprecedented Mass Protests in Lebanon Explained; Hubbard). The blast was noted as one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history, with experts estimating its yield to be equivalent to that of between 500 tons and 1.1 kilotons of TNT, about one-twentieth the size of the atomic bomb that the US dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 (Amos and Rincon).

President Michel Aoun initially blamed Israel for the explosion, citing it as a foreign attack, but soon, reports emerged that the blast was caused by 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate that had resided in Beirut since 2013 (Vohra; Amos and Rincon). People's grief for lost loved ones and a devastated city soon morphed into anger.

I. Background

To understand Lebanon's predicament leading up to the explosion and perhaps the cause of the explosion, we must look back to Lebanon about forty years ago. Lebanon was, and still is, religiously divided, with the largest three religious groups being Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims (Lalwani). In 1975, a war broke out between these religious sects, beginning the Lebanese Civil War (Lalwani). The war lasted for fifteen years, until 1990, ending with the Taif Agreement—an agreement that established a temporary government of a certain number of seats in Parliament to each religious sect (Lalwani). Many military leaders from the civil war found positions in Parliament, leading to political party formation along religious lines (Lalwani). As money flowed into the government for services such as providing clean water, consistent electricity, and waste management, politicians used the money to enrich themselves and their interests, neglecting the civilian services that the money was intended for (Lalwani). In addition to rampant political corruption, the government was in debt, so the government relied on using high-interest rates to lure in investors to its banks (Lalwani). However, the high-interest rates were an empty promise as there was neither a plan nor the money to pay investors the promised interest (Lalwani). Eventually, the system cracked when foreign investors began pulling their money out of the banks in response to regional strife (Lalwani). Debt skyrocketed, and soon, the banks froze civilian accounts, barring people from withdrawing their money (Lalwani).

As a result of a failing bank system, politicians' misuse of government funds, and political corruption, Lebanon now finds itself in a social and economic crisis, at the extreme frustration and anger of the Lebanese. Powerful politicians bicker behind closed doors while Lebanese civilians face blackouts, lack clean water, and watch the country's poverty and unemployment rates climb higher day by day, crises that the

Lebanese blame on their dysfunctional government (Page). What finally motivated masses of people to the streets, though, was a proposed tax announced last fall. In an attempt to absolve Lebanon's rising debt, which is currently 160% of the country's GDP, the Lebanese government announced a proposed tax of twenty cents a day on the use of messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger (Hubbard; Madani and Tabet). Unsurprisingly, the tax was very unpopular. Many believed the collected tax dollars would face the same fate as all of the other money the government had collected—tucked into the pockets of the political elite. Thus, the poor were the first to take to the streets since the tax was not something they could afford (Aziza). October 17, 2019, marked the beginning of weeks of mass protests that saw hundreds of thousands of angry protesters take to the streets in protests that were later dubbed the “October Revolution” (Aziza).

The October Revolution was not merely a decry of the tax; protesters were indeed expressing their anger toward the broader economic crisis and government corruption, a long time coming. The protests transcended religious, socio-economic, political, and even class divides (Aziza). While in the past, people of these different groups may have stayed quiet and followed the politicians who represented their religious sect or political position, the October Revolution brought everyone together, united by the common demand for government accountability and complete elimination of the current corrupt sectarian governmental system (Aziza).

Admittedly, peaceful protests became violent at times, with protesters setting buildings on fire and holding mock executions of effigies of Lebanese politicians (Aziza). Law enforcement responded with beatings, tear gas, rubber bullets, and at times, even live ammunition (The Unprecedented Mass Protests in Lebanon Explained). In an incident on October 26, 2019, the army opened fire on dozens of protesters staging a sit-in, seriously wounding two protesters (Unprecedented Mass Protests). There was no transparent investigation into the altercation, again demonstrating the government's ineptitude at protecting the people it should serve (Unprecedented Mass Protests). Clashes with law enforcement like the one on October 26 further angered protesters and reinforced their belief that the government did not exist to serve and protect them; rather, it existed to retain power and money among a tight circle of political elites.

Nevertheless, the protesters eventually disbanded; inclement weather and the COVID-19 lockdown drove people back into their homes (Aziza). In some aspects, the protests were not successful. Protests did not cause top politicians to leave office or a new governmental system (Aziza). This failure may have even driven people away as some began to feel the movement was futile, and others were discouraged by the military and law enforcement's violent response, viewing the protests as too dangerous and not worth the risk (Aziza). Journalists, who played a key role in calling out politicians and fighting for accountability, were interrogated and intimidated, which may have further dissuaded journalists from pursuing accountability and suppressed free expression (The Unprecedented Mass Protests in Lebanon Explained). Nonetheless, by and large, the October Revolution succeeded in changing civilians' minds, decreasing people's fears of challenging the government, and revealing to the Lebanese people their resilience and unity (Aziza). This unity is most evident in a 170 kilometer-long human chain that protesters formed across Lebanon in 2019 (Lebanon Protests: People Form a Human Chain). Strangers proudly joined hands, with one participant saying, "for the first time I feel I'm Lebanese" (Lebanon Protests). The October Revolution turns out, had another key impact—laying the groundwork for the civilian reaction that followed the August 4 explosion.

II. Post-Explosion Lebanon

The August 4 blast destroyed half of Beirut, leaving glass, rubble, and blood littering the streets (Hubbard). Immediately following the blast, the Lebanese took to the streets to clean up and help neighbors who were hurt or had lost their homes, for the Lebanese knew they could not rely on the government to help. Indeed, in the days that followed, there was no government clean up crew or government outreach to those whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed (Al Jazeera). However, as news emerged that the blast was the product of government mismanagement—neglect for a massive ammonium nitrate stock that arrived at the port in 2013—rather than a foreign attack, the Lebanese's grief turned into anger (Hubbard and El-Naggar). This blast was the culmination of the Lebanese government's failure: it represented neglect toward the

Lebanese people as well as apathy toward the aftermath of failure. Lebanon's circumstances were even worse leading up to and following the explosion than they were in 2019: the Lebanese currency had lost 80% of its value (massive inflation), COVID-19 lockdowns had further damaged the economy, COVID-19 cases were beginning to rise again just before the explosion, and now the country faced a devastated capital and port city (Lalwani; Hubbard). Thus, massive protests re-emerged on the streets on August 8. While the protesters were once again demanding a new government, this time their anger was even more palpable, for the protesters were marching amongst rubble, a conspicuous reminder of how their city had been scarred by government corruption and neglect.

Again, protesters were met with a violent response from the military and law enforcement, who launched tear gas and rubber bullets at peaceful protesters (Page). The Lebanese Red Cross and Islamic Relief Corps reported 728 injured, and the Internal Security Forces reported one of its personnel had died trying to help injured protesters and seventy other personnel were injured. Despite risks of injury and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the protesters continued to gather in large masses, for many felt that they had nothing to lose: unemployment, homelessness, and lost loved ones motivated many to join protests, even if they had not participated in 2019 (Aziza). The October Revolution is especially relevant here since this year's protests could springboard off experiences, networks, and organizations from the 2019 protests (Aziza).

Indeed, civilian organizations play a crucial role in Lebanon's protests. Because of their dysfunctional government, protesters are purposeful about self-reliance and channeling foreign aid directly to civilians, rather than allow the aid to pass through the government (Aziza). One example of such a civilian organization is Khaddit Beirut, a grassroots initiative predominantly led by activists and scholars, which launched the day after the explosion (The Roadmap to Recovery). Central to Khaddit Beirut's beliefs is the recognition that the Lebanese people must rebuild their communities themselves (The Roadmap to Recovery). Thus, Khaddit Beirut aims to have a community-led recovery through mobilizing international support and offering guidance and transparency in the rebuilding process (The Roadmap to Recovery). Khaddit Beirut is

only one of many civilian-led organizations that have emerged in response to the explosion and the Lebanese government's negligence.

Despite the size and support mechanisms for the 2020 protests, how successful these protests and civilian efforts will be remains in question. While the protesters have succeeded in pressuring multiple politicians to resign, many know that their goals will only be realized when the current sectarian government and power-sharing structure falls. Perhaps the government's aggressive efforts to intimidate protesters and suppress free expression will stymie the movement. Perhaps time will diminish attention and anger toward the explosion. At least in the United States, Beirut's devastating explosion was just another story that was swept up in a tumultuous news cycle. The event emerged as headlines and social media posts, but soon after, election details and COVID-19 charts overtook it. Moreover, little attention was paid to the situation of Lebanon outside of the immediate blast. While overturning a governmental system is indeed a tall order, massive protests and hundreds of emerging civilian organizations demonstrate the Lebanese's resilience. Perhaps, then, there is hope for a brighter future for Lebanon.

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