

Lebanon's Catastrophic Warlord Regime and the Tragedy of a Complicit State

Carmen Geha, PhD

Maria Zambrano Fellow and Senior Researcher
Inter-disciplinary Research Group on Migration (GRITIM)
Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona

I explain to the editor of this Yearbook that I am suffering from writer's block and keep postponing the deadline. In reality it's not writer's block at all, I am an expert on Lebanon and a survivor of Lebanon's violence. The truth is I am suffering from PTSD and, having lived through the traumas of the last three years, I am at a loss for words. The truth is, I am not blocked at all, I am burned out and exhausted from having to relive the events of the last three years, which are the manifestation of 30 years of violence, corruption and incompetence. It's July, and, in a few days, it will be two years since the Beirut explosion or the Beirut blast as it has been referred to as. This mass crime was caused by the explosion of around 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate stored at the Beirut port, immediately killing 210 people, wounding 6,000 and tearing down 300,000 homes and local businesses. In a nutshell for readers not familiar with Lebanon; nobody has been arrested and the investigation has repeatedly stalled. A Lebanese judge indicted two former politicians who have since successfully run for and won parliamentary seats, thereby immediately securing parliamentary immunity, meaning no judge can now drag them to court.

I am experiencing the form of burnout that comes with losing everything dear to you. I am luckier than others, I did not die in the explosion nor at the door to a hospital that would not let me in; and I am a high-skilled migrant who recently landed a new job and a prestigious fellowship in Spain. I am privileged and so I have decided to try to get over my

state of burnout and provide some analysis to an audience that is interested not only in understanding Lebanon but also in joining our call for justice and accountability. In doing so, I frame this analysis in a two-fold explanation of what happened: 30 years of warlord rule and a state that is complicit. These two titles will also help overcome two salient myths and inaccuracies in describing Lebanon; that the people are resilient and the State is weak. In reality, Lebanon's politicians are resilient and the State is a major accomplice to their crimes. This essay is a response to the simple question of what happened to Lebanon and what some of the prospects for its future are. To do this, I provide a short historical review and an empirical framework to help those interested move away from myths and mistaken depictions, to point them in the right direction when it comes to attributing responsibility and demanding accountability.

The Warlords Are Resilient, the People Are Depressed and Exhausted

In development and humanitarian circles – and in some literature circles too – this idea of people in Lebanon having resilience floated around for a long time after the civil war had ended. In fact, numerous international development and donor programmes sought to build capacity for communities' resilience. The logic here was that people could together build collective strength for more cohesive societies and stable localities. This sounds quite idiotic, since, while pointless funding and efforts went into increasing people's resilience, it was in fact the warlords who were gaining resilience. They co-opted international funding, exploited local NGOs and built their privatization empires borrowing money

from depositors in local banks. Expecting people to be resilient in the face of trauma, violence and mass corruption is unethical. Real efforts must be geared towards bringing the warlords to justice.

The 2019 October Revolution was a culminating moment for mass anti-regime protests and a sort of last straw for people's political agency. Activists since the end of the civil war have attempted to construct a national opposition to warlord-rule. This moment came to a head in October 2019. The Lebanese were suffering, burdened with the weight of corruption, and they wanted to see accountability for those who stole their dreams and had oppressed them for so long. Many Lebanese in the diaspora flew back to Beirut just to participate in these protests.

The revolution's political significance lay largely in signalling out all warlords together as being responsible for corruption, inequalities and the lack of basic services. This grouping of different sectarian and party leaders, brought together under the slogan of "all of them" (*kellon ya3neh kellon*), shows us the ways in which the warlords have historically and more recently employed three practices to evade reform and oppress people. This narrative cemented the fact that all warlords and sectarian parties have been responsible for the crimes and corruption of the last three decades. But the framing of all warlords as being responsible also empowered these same warlords to react in three ways, thereby continuing in the same vein as the last 30 years.

First, they acquiesced to the demands of the protestors, acknowledging corruption but shirking any kind of responsibility. They pointed fingers, bickered and accused the protestors of being biased towards their own parties. Second, they used state institutions, including the armed forces, as their own personal arsenal, sending police to shoot live bullets, the army to arrest activists and the courts to summon those people speaking out against the system. Third, they reactivated their networks of clientelism to pay supporters and loyalists not to take to

the streets. These actions, which they have mastered over the years, allowed them to remain resilient not only during the revolution, but to survive the pandemic, and to come out on top following the Beirut explosion. In fact, the warlords won an overwhelming majority in the Parliament at the last May 2022 elections, with regime opposition members taking only 13 seats.

Lebanese politicians are resilient, they have proven this resilience even in the face of the biggest refugee crisis since World War II and despite a war in neighbouring Syria. The Lebanese State allows UNHCR to operate and receives billions in aid without being a signatory to the Geneva convention. Despite some expectations that Syria's conflict would spill over into Lebanon and despite the massive influx of Syrian refugees, the political system remained intact; by which I mean it remained corrupt, sectarian and refused to grant refugees legal status.¹ The Lebanese State does not recognize the 1 million – or so – Syrians as refugees.² Their fate is left to the hands of local associations, some international agencies and UNHCR.

Expecting people to be resilient in the face of trauma, violence and mass corruption is unethical. Real efforts must be geared towards bringing the warlords to justice

The international community plays along with this warlord resilience and hardly recognizes the pain and suffering of refugees stuck in Lebanon. Instead, the United Nations' Secretary General stated that "Lebanon is a key pillar in the international framework for the protection of Syrian refugees, and, without it, that entire system would collapse."³ After the port explosion, the situation of refugees was exacerbated by the mass destruction, financial col-

¹ KNUDSEN, A.. "Acquiescence to assassinations in post-civil war Lebanon?" *Mediterranean Politics*, 15(1), 1-23. 2010.

² "or so" used here since there is a deliberate absence of reliable data, as per politicians' wishes, enabling this issue to be exploited and refugees to be used to incite hatred and fear. This is partly due to UNHCR officially accepting the government's request in 2015 to stop registering newborns. The "or so" is part of the problem.

³ UN news report, 2014

lapse and destruction of health and education services. Instead of calling for responsible state policies, on 22 August, the UN Special Coordinator Mr. Jan Kubis wrote on Twitter: “Many thanks to the High Commissioner 4 @Refugees @FilippoGrandi for visiting #Lebanon, for bringing assistance to its people, when they need it the most, after they have hosted Syrian refugees for so many years. The international community is in debt to Lebanon, needs to repay it now.” His statement clearly shows no regard for discriminate state policies and communicates the belief that the UN should simply pay Lebanon for allowing Syrians to have a home, no matter how abusive that home is.

A Complicit Vulture State, Not a Weak State

Lebanon’s state institutions are tools used by warlords to perpetuate fear and inequalities. The State is in fact a very powerful tool, which can be used to hand out favours to regime loyalists. From narcotics trading, illegal imports at the port, employment opportunities and private bodyguards, the State is a powerful tool for those loyal to the warlords. The State provides protection and immunity to government officials and parliamentarians. In an economy with 80% living under the poverty line, becoming a Member of Parliament can earn you a salary for life and a guarantee that your actions will never be called into question by the courts. The State can refuse a marriage certificate, allow a rapist to marry their victim, stop issuing passports, ensure you have drinking water and arrest you for no more valid a reason than a post on social media. The State is used to ban movies and concerts, limit women’s rights, crack down on dissent and squander money through the Central Bank. The State in Lebanon is not weak; it is a vulture imposing violence and corruption on people who refuse to give in and express blind loyalty.

Lebanon’s disasters and compounded crises were totally preventable. Arabic graffiti written on one Beirut wall in the aftermath of the port blast captures this point: “This need not be how we end.” The recent economic crash, like the explosion, was not inevitable, yet every step of the way politicians persisted in doing the wrong thing and using public resources for their own private gain. The State is not

weak, it is feared, it can take away your children depending on what sect you belong to, it can refuse you entry at the border, it can detain you, since it does not recognize people as legal refugees, and it can hold migrant workers in slave-like conditions because the kafala system is legal. For decades, Lebanon’s politicians have focused squarely on preserving their hold on power, knowing that any serious reform measures would end their rule. So they devised intricate ways to allow them to channel state resources to confer contracts and deals among themselves. If real reform were ever to strengthen the role of the State, they would be out of business.

The State in Lebanon is not weak; it is a vulture imposing violence and corruption on people who refuse to give in and express blind loyalty

The roots of the crisis can be traced back to Lebanon’s post-war formula, which granted military chiefs amnesty for war crimes, ushered in a Syrian occupation for three decades and mainstreamed corruption throughout the State and even society. After the Syrian withdrawal, the political camps that were pro and anti-Syrian actually formed national unity governments blocking not only key political reforms but also attempts to improve women’s rights, urban governance, electricity and waste management, culminating in today’s garbage crisis and leaving Lebanon with the highest rates of cancer in all of western Asia. The Taif agreement led to a swift transition from conflict to relative peace. But post-war Lebanon saw neither peace nor economic development, only large-scale investments whose proceeds went into the pockets of the political elite. The Taif agreement contained plans for administrative decentralization, the eradication of sectarianism, sustainable development and equal rights of citizens. None of these saw the light of day. For the Lebanese people, 2020 unleashed “hell” – a word of President Michel Aoun’s own choosing in September 2020 when he was asked what could happen if no new government could be agreed. “Well, then we would descend into hell,” was his

blunt response. Many months later, no government has emerged because the parties entrusted to form it continue to squabble over ministerial positions. In reality, this squabbling is nothing but a distraction from the more fundamental point, which is that a functional government that would win the support of the people and the international community would need to be properly reformist in nature. The current leaders are incapable of and uninterested in reform because real change would lead to their ousting or jailing. This is the deliberate disaster that the people of Lebanon are experiencing.

Alongside the current pressures from Covid-19, is the collapse of the banking sector, which began in 2019 and locked many people out of their bank accounts, creating great economic hardship, and the port explosion, an incident which, despite the undeniable devastation, has led to no accountability or change.

No Prospects without Accountability

Lebanon cannot and will not move forward without accountability, and if accountability is unachievable within the current political and geo-political climate, then it is safe to say that there are no prospects for Lebanon moving forward. This is the reason that many of us are deliberately choosing not only to move

The current leaders are incapable of and uninterested in reform because real change would lead to their ousting or jailing. This is the deliberate disaster that the people of Lebanon are experiencing

away physically from Beirut but to disentangle ourselves politically. For my generation this is very clear because we grew up during the civil war and came to political consciousness in the ensuing years. We saw the rise and fall of a middle class and a post-war agreement that only brought about smaller wars, assassinations and mass killings that never saw justice. For us, we realize now that, of course, every dollar can save a life and that local institutions like schools and hospitals need all our support and mobilization. But there are no prospects unless a class of warlords who coalesce against our well-being, exploit the State and oppress dissent are held accountable for a series of decisions and actions that have destroyed the country. Lebanon's prospects may be that clear and yet that complicated; to move forward the people are not demanding the downfall of the regime (*iskat*), but rather accountability for a warlord regime and a complicit state (*mohasaba*).