

Strategic Analysis Paper

1 September 2020

Lebanon: A Fractured Nation with a Chequered History and a Troubled Future

Saloni Salil

FDI Visiting Fellow

Key Points

- The explosion in Beirut has brought to the fore – and exacerbated – the ongoing political crisis in Lebanon.
- Lebanon's geographical location and the vortex of geopolitical tensions in which it is located can hardly be under-emphasised.
- The combined forces of domestic politics and international influence have led the country to become a proxy battleground.
- Lebanon, to avoid becoming a failed state, must revitalise its once rich economy.

Summary

A massive explosion in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, shook the city on 4 August, when an estimated 300 tonnes, out of 2,700 tonnes, of ammonium nitrate that had been stored unsafely in a warehouse for six years, blew up. [Ammonium nitrate is a common chemical ingredient](#) in agricultural fertilisers – and also the main component of the explosive composition known as ANFO – ammonium nitrate fuel oil. The explosion was one of the world's largest industrial accidents and its effect has been amplified by the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic. The explosion has raised questions in other countries where ammonium nitrate is unsafely stored, such as [in the Philippines](#), Ukraine, Georgia, Libya and Guinea-Bissau [where] there are dangerous dumps of munitions left over from both past and present conflicts, some of them perilously close to residential areas'. Authorities in Chennai,

India, recently moved a stockpile of ammonium nitrate from a facility in North Chennai to Hyderabad for safe storage.

The blast in Beirut has further brought to the fore – and exacerbated – the ongoing political crisis in the country. It is a symptom of an already-broken political system that has further intensified the country’s problems. Following the blast, the entire Cabinet of Lebanon resigned, compounding the many problems that the country is already going through, including the economic crisis owing to its [neo-liberal policies](#) that has led to Lebanon becoming one of the most unequal societies in the world, a health crisis, human rights issues, [youth unemployment](#) at 37 per cent and [overall unemployment](#) at 25 per cent, corruption, and a [debt to GDP ratio](#) of approximately 152 per cent, the third-worst in the world.

Analysis



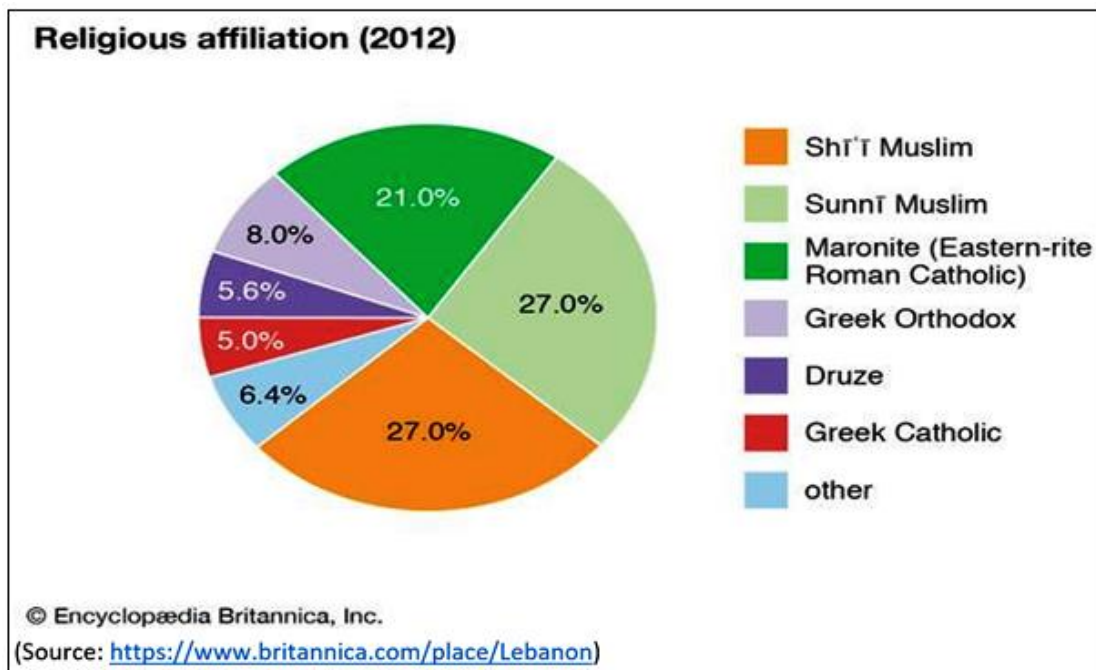
(Source: <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/middle-east/lebanon/>)

Lebanon is a small country in the Middle East, bordered by Syria to its east, Israel to its south and the Mediterranean Sea to its west. Given that geographical location, it is easy to understand the country’s “chequered history” and “troubled future”. Due to its small size,

‘... [outside powers](#) have found it very easy to exert influence, especially given Lebanon’s internal demographic divisions. Foreign powers can often find allies in Lebanon, though they rarely can find enough friendly forces to control the entire country, leading to frequent split governments and regular civil strife. Lebanon’s greatest challenge, therefore, is to keep access to its trade routes while balancing its own divisions, which are manipulated by outside powers.’

The country's demography is diverse, its population consisting of 27 per cent Shi'ite Muslims, 27 per cent Sunni Muslims, 21 per cent Maronite Christians and the remaining 25 per cent comprising approximately [18 recognised religious groups](#). It also has an unusual political system. After Lebanon became independent from France in 1943, the new government sought to give equal representation to every religious community so that none felt left out. The government itself was:

'... [designed to provide](#) political representation of all Lebanese religious groups, with its three largest being Christian Maronites, Sunni Muslims, and Shiite Muslims. The number of seats in parliament is split between Christians and Muslims and proportionally divided among the different denominations within each religion. Government posts and public-sector positions are also divided among the majority sects. The president must always be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni and the speaker of parliament a Shia.'



In theory, then, every religious community has been given a position of power in the political system of the country. In reality, however, each community created a political party to safeguard its interests and also to ensure a secure vote bank. That led to the country being divided along religious lines and, in turn, to civil war.

In 1990, with the end of the civil war, a Second Republic was established, according to which the powers of the Lebanese President were reduced and further equality of representation in Parliament became a major goal. That goal clearly did not eventuate and, as a result, economic and political conditions further worsened, with corruption becoming rampant among the political class and financial elites, leading to an economic crisis in 2019 that grew in the run-up to the October Revolution of that year.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab succeeded Saad Hariri, but his economic policies were no more effective than his predecessor's and the outbreak of Covid-19 continued to erode Lebanon's economy. The explosion in Beirut, therefore, became a trigger; the Lebanese people took to the streets to protest the ineptitude of the government, which resulted in the entire Cabinet resigning *en masse*. The protests have continued, despite that, however, with the protestors demanding an end to sectarian politics and corruption, and the implementation of a fairer tax system.

The Geopolitics of the Middle East and the Lebanon Crisis

Lebanon's geographical location and the vortex of geopolitical tensions in which it is located can hardly be under-emphasised. The country's sectarian politics and democratic divisions have allowed external forces to use those schisms for their own interests. '[Lebanon depends](#) heavily on neighbouring countries for economic and political stability. However, the constant interference of some of these states in Lebanon's internal politics creates volatility.' Countries like Iran, which is Shi'ite-majority, and Saudi Arabia (Sunni-majority), have sought to expand their influence in the country by pumping money into Shi'ite- and Sunni-based political parties in Lebanon.

The presence of Hezbollah has compounded the issue. It is '[a Shi'ite Muslim political party](#) and militant group based in Lebanon, where its extensive security apparatus, political organisation, and social services network fostered its reputation as "a state within a state". This Iran-backed group is driven by its opposition to Israel and its resistance to Western influence in the Middle East.'

For a long time, Lebanon has been a proxy battleground for Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Iran manifests its influence through the Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia has had a close relationship with the former PM of Lebanon, Saad Hariri, a Sunni Muslim. Although it is believed that Saudi influence is on the decline in Lebanon, Riyadh will not let the Iranians, who the Saudis believe have embroiled the country in their reckless misadventures, gain control over Lebanon without a struggle. The danger for Lebanon is not being able to insulate itself from that external power-play.

Beijing, too, has tried for a long time to gain a strategic foothold in Lebanon. Its efforts have been supported by Hezbollah, which, seeing Iran's growing Chinese ties, believes that '[going to China](#) to save Lebanon financially and economically' is a viable option in aiding its own efforts to control Lebanon. China has been militarily-engaged in Lebanon through the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), has constructed highways, signed co-operation agreements and has provided aid to Lebanon in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The involvement of the United States for several decades further complicates regional stability. '[America's foreign policy](#) towards Lebanon still suffers from a number of problems and cannot be divorced from the history of US interference in Lebanon's internal affairs and US support of Israeli policies detrimental to the Lebanese people and interests' and can have larger repercussions for the stability of the country.

The Future at Stake

Lebanon has stumbled from one political crisis into another in recent times and is in danger of becoming a victim of power-hungry foreign actors who seek economic, strategic and political gains by controlling the country. [‘The economic crisis in Lebanon](#) is also intrinsically linked with the war in Syria and other regional turmoil engendered by imperialist interventions. The impact of a decade-long global recession and, now, the COVID-19-led lockdown must also factor in any meaningful assessment of the situation in Lebanon. A myopic view looking at only the inefficiency of the current political system and ignoring the larger geopolitical and global economic scenario will thus do a great disservice to the expectations of common Lebanese’.

The future of Lebanon and of the entire region is at stake. [French President Emmanuel Macron](#) remarked, ‘If reforms are not carried out, Lebanon will continue to sink’. Lebanon is a fractured nation with its future in jeopardy and is often viewed as something of a lost Paradise. The explosion in Beirut may, however, usher Lebanon into a new political age. Several experts opine that the protestors must negotiate with the political parties to hold fresh elections in the country without sectarian preferences. The transition of power must be overseen by neutral third parties, such as the United Nations. Outside powers, instead of playing political games in the embattled country, should engage in the reconstruction of Lebanon.

Lebanon, to avoid becoming a failed state, must revitalise its once-rich economy. Experts believe that before the world steps in, Lebanon and its citizens must help themselves, which may well require an orchestrated series of immediate measures. As has been noted elsewhere: [‘In the absence of such reforms](#), Lebanon’s famed resilience, its social fabric, its proud history and future are at risk.’

About the Author: Ms Saloni Salil is currently positioned as Defence Analyst and Officer on Special Duty at *Defence and Security Alert Magazine*, New Delhi. She has held honorary positions in various organisations and has a number of published works among her credentials. She has been a regular contributor to a number of prominent strategic affairs platforms. She has also been associated with Future Directions International as a Visiting Fellow in the Indo-Pacific Research Programme since 2012. She authored a monograph titled ‘China’s Strategy in the South China Sea: Role of United States and India’, along with several other publications on maritime security and power struggles. Her major research work has been on the Indian Ocean Region, South China Sea and Indo-Pacific Studies (US, Japan, Australia), Sino-India relations, US foreign Policy, India and its neighbourhood, but is not limited to the above. Ms Salil contributes to the growing discourse on the concept of the Indo-Pacific and major power intentions in that region. She is currently pursuing an LLB, as she believes that “Lawfare is the new Warfare” and further plans to complete a LLM in International Law (Maritime Law).

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
Suite 5, 202 Hampden Road, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 6389 0211
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au