Timebomb at the Port: How Institutional Failure, Political Squabbling and Greed Set the Stage for Blowing up Beirut

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On a Saturday afternoon in December last year, dozens of protestors gathered in front of the Port of Beirut. They picked the port as for them it epitomized the country’s engrained habit of corruption, loudly denouncing it just as tens of thousands had done before them since the 2019 ‘October Revolution’ erupted. Sick of political inertia and greed, the protestors demanded radical change and the departure of the country’s notoriously dysfunctional political class. ‘All of them means all of them’ (killun ya’ni killun), they added as if they anticipated the possibility that exponents of that political class would once again pose as ‘reformers’ and end up reproducing the same corrupt political system in the process. That is exactly what happened. The Lebanese economy crashed, and a new supposedly reformist government, led by Hassan Diab, was formed with the promise of reforms but accomplished nothing, only to see the economy slide further into bankruptcy. As poverty rose dramatically and protestors kept demanding the departure of the political class, the unthinkable happened on 4 August: a massive explosion in the Port of Beirut caused by the ignition of a yet unknown part of a cache of 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate stored and left unguarded at its warehouse no. 12 for at least six years, killing more than 200 people, injuring 6,500 and wreaking destruction throughout the city at a cost of US$ 3.8-4.6 billion. The explosion pushed Diab’s government to resign, and a new prime minister was nominated to try to form yet another government amidst new promises of reform.

Snippets of information have since revealed some details on how the explosives ended up in the port, who may have owned them, and how key politicians, officials and judges failed to safeguard public safety in response. How and even whether all these threads will eventually add up to a conclusive story about what and who exactly caused the blast remains to be seen. Yet whatever details will surface, establishing the real course of events will need to take into account the port’s dismal institutional record and its underlying structural causes featuring 30 years of a failing political system and a greedy, incompetent political class. Indeed, recent revelations about incompetence, bickering, and politicians and officials brushing off responsibility for the port’s ticking timebomb have some strong echoes in that past. Yet after the blast, the stakes are higher than ever. For years corruption trampled on people’s dignity and helped push the country into bankruptcy; now it appears to have reached the stage of killing people and...
obliterating entire neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, ‘reform’ has become a byword for ignoring exactly the chronic institutional and political failures underlying Lebanon’s rotting state institutions. In this respect, the story of the Port of Beirut is emblematic of the country’s wider conundrum, and a strong pointer for the urgent need for sweeping and fundamental change.

What we (don’t) know thus far

Now more than a month has passed since the blast, an inconclusive and highly confused account has emerged of what caused it. In November 2013 a vessel, the Rhosus, sailing under Moldavian flag and supposedly carrying a huge cargo of ammonium nitrate from Georgia to a buyer in Mozambique, arrived at the port of Beirut to pick up additional cargo in order to pay for passage fees through the Suez Canal. Despite being found to be unseaworthy by several port authorities both in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the ship was allowed to dock and never departed. Abandoned by its owner, it failed to pay port fees and was impounded by judicial order following claims of outstanding debts filed by two companies. The Ukrainian and Russian crew on board were left to fend for themselves for 10 months. The 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate were dumped in the port’s warehouse no. 12, apparently already used for storing hazardous and combustible materials. What followed were six years of political and institutional lethargy and negligence involving port authorities, the customs authority, security agencies, judges and key political leaders.

Port officials reportedly asked a judge at six occasions for authorization to remove the explosive materials, even when such authorization formally would not have been necessary when it pertained to dangerous materials. All the same, they failed to take action. A law firm representing two companies suing the owner of the Rhosus for arrear payments repeatedly warned the Ministry of Transport about the vessel’s lethal load. Several judges looked into the matter when the cache was found to be decaying as bags of it were torn and began to spill their contents. In 2016-17, the Customs Authority reportedly tried to re-export or sell the explosives. It asked the Lebanese army and a local manufacturer to take the ammonium nitrate, but neither showed an interest. The army suggested sending the material back to Georgia but this never happened. Probably no one was willing to pick up
the cost of re-exporting the material or its destruction. Yet Badri Daher, the head of
the Customs Authority, kept asking for judges’ authorization to remove the cache,
who responded that he did not need their approval as he had the authority to do
so himself. The Justice Ministry was alerted, but no action was taken.

In January 2020, the General Directorate of State Security, one of the many
security agencies present in the port, issued a report stating that storing the cache
together with inflammable materials in warehouse no. 12 risked a fire “the
consequences of which would be a major explosion that could destroy virtually the
entire port.” Months went by until 20 July when the General Directorate of State
Security sent a letter to President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Hassan Diab
warning them again about the dangers of the explosives being stocked at the
port. Aoun claimed after the blast that he instructed the Supreme Defence
Council (a coordinating body for the country’s security and defence agencies
chaired by the president) to “do what is necessary”. He later said in his defence
that he did not know how dangerous the material was and that he had “no
authority to deal with the port directly.” Seemingly changing his story again,
Aoun claimed he got to know about the cache of explosives and the dangers it
posed, but by then it was too late for him to do something about it. Subsequently, it emerged that a few days before the blast Judge Ghassan Oweidat
ordered the warehouse sealed in response to a request by the General Directorate
of State Security, citing concerns that some of the ammonium nitrate may be
stolen or had already disappeared. A hole had been detected in the warehouse’s
walls. Oweidat ignored State Security’s warnings about the cache’s wider risks to
the port, which should have prompted its removal, and focused instead on the risk
of the material being stolen and used as explosives. Workers were sent to the
warehouse to mend the wall and may have accidently set off a fire. This appears to
have ignited combustible material, possibly fireworks, which then caused the
ammonium nitrate to explode.

An official investigation is under way to reconstruct what exactly led to the
explosion, headed by Lebanese Judge Fadi Sawan and in collaboration with the
FBI and French forensic experts. More scrutiny is likely to follow as local and
foreign lawsuits are prepared for the massive damage and loss of life caused by the
explosion. The list of questions that need to be answered is lengthy. Yet most of
them go back to or will revolve around one core issue: Why did no one in the course of six years act to prevent a disaster that apparently was waiting to happen? It is far from certain what the investigation will uncover, or indeed whether it will ever report its full findings. Doubts prevail about the investigation’s impartiality and ability to examine the responsibility of political actors and address lingering doubts among parts of the population that the original blast may have been triggered by a hostile act. Yet whatever will materialize, it seems likely that a spectacular degree of incompetence, deeply diffuse authority, political meddling and perhaps high-level corruption were a necessary if possibly insufficient condition under which the chain of events leading to the blast unfolded. This puts the port’s dilapidated, corrupt institutional environment and three decades of political squabbling underlying it at centre stage of both attempts to unearth the truth and to ensure disasters like this will not happen ever again.

“The illegitimate son of the state” at 30

The port’s current institutional framework dates back 30 years when the country experienced the final rounds of its vicious civil war. From 1960 until 1990 the port had been managed by a private concession granted to the joint-stock ‘Compagnie d’Exploitation et de Gestion du Port de Beyrouth’ (CEGPB). Its shareholders included some of the country’s wealthiest businessmen and bankers including Henri Pharaoun, Sami Maroun, the Badawi brothers and the Baltaji family, all from the Christian-Maronite community, closely connected to its political leaders, and supported by French capital. During the war, de facto control over much of the port had been exercised by the Lebanese Forces (LF) led by Samir Gaegea, as it operated its 5th basin. This granted the militia an important asset in a thriving war economy of smuggling, arms trafficking and drug pushing, which helped to bankroll the war effort and enriched a select group of warlords. As the conflict dragged on, warlords from other sectarian communities, equally immersed in the country’s war economy, forced their men onto the board of the CEGPB, and they built 25 illegal ports across Lebanon’s 225 kilometres’ shoreline, each used for their own arms supplies and illicit trade.

Following the Ta’if Accord in late 1989 and with the help of outside forces,
including Syria, these same warlords sat together with exponents of Lebanon’s traditional political families (the zu’ama) and a rising new elite of Lebanese entrepreneurs (dubbed the “contractor bourgeoisie”) to work out the implementation of a political arrangement that could lift the country out of war. While their prime attention went to the high politics of amending the country’s constitution, one of the first practical tasks at hand was to find a successor to the CEGPB whose 30 years’ concession had expired on 31 December 1990. The original major shareholders of the company argued for the concession to be renewed by way of compensation for the damages they claimed to have suffered during the war. Geagea initially joined the company’s bid for renewal, but he ran into his rival Elie Hobeika, also a former LF leader now turned government minister, who with Syrian support had begun to undermine Geagea’s post-Ta’if quest for power. Hobeika pressed his agenda by appointing a delegate on a hastily created ‘provisional board’ representing the formally dissolved CEGPB. Yet when other warlords suspected Hobeika of trying to gain control over the port, they demanded that ‘their’ ports should be fully legalized on grounds of “promoting regional development” and “economic decentralization”; lofty goals serving as a thin disguise of their own greed mingled with sectarian competition.

This was anathema to then Prime Minister ‘Umar Karameh who – with the Lebanese army and the Syrians – proclaimed the dismantlement of the militias as a priority for his government and shut down illegal militia-controlled ports scattered along the coast. Hobeika’s attempt to control the Port of Beirut faltered but now the entire post-Ta’if mercantile-political class lined up to demand their piece of the Beirut port. As a result, the Port of Beirut was to become a major bone of contention in a decades’ long scramble for the country’s resources, public revenues and investment opportunities, by divvying these up among the country’s mercantile-political class. Lebanese political jargon coined the practice muhasassa (apportionment).

As the Port of Beirut had de facto returned to the state, political bickering moved to the question of how its administration had to be integrated into the public sector and, by extension, what ministry had to be granted authority or ‘tutelage’ (ishraf) over the port. As several ministers, allied to key political leaders and former warlords, competed to claim ultimate authority, no agreement could be reached.
When late Rafiq Hariri arrived as prime minister in 1993, another key actor was added to the mix, leading to further delays in settling the status of the port. It was no secret that Hariri had his own ambitions for the port, which he saw as a key asset in his vision of Lebanon as a haven for private enterprise and commerce. Given his significant wealth, he also had the resources to take up the challenge of privatizing the port. Other, less wealthy members of the political class, however, could be expected to resist privatization on Hariri’s terms as it risked pushing them out. For now, Hariri’s government therefore simply agreed to disagree when it came to the port’s status and administration. In March 1993 a makeshift agency, the ‘Transitional Commission’ (TC), was established to provisionally administer the port before its ultimate status, whether as public service entity or as a private sector operation, was to be determined. As if to underline that all options were still left open, all contenders and their political patrons were granted seats on the TC. This stopgap solution was maintained until today and had profound consequences for how the port was to be run for decades.

The Port of Beirut was the first institution that the post-Ta’if ‘Troika’ (the Christian-Maronite president, the Sunni prime minister, and Shiite speaker of Parliament) subjected to muhasassa; a prelude to them slicing up virtually the entire state apparatus from the mid-1990s onwards. By implication, the port’s management became dependent on the incessant power struggles within the Troika, paralyzing routine decision-making and sound governance. As the port’s administration was left undetermined, it had de facto become part of the state but no institutional framework emerged to formalize its status. This effectively left matters of authority, auditing and inspection, transparency and accountability in limbo at a time when the port became a key part of the state’s infrastructure and an essential component of the country’s economy. By 2019, it was receiving annually more than 70% of the country’s imports, US$ 1.2 - 1.4 billion in customs (or some 10% of total state revenues), and between US$ 200 - 230 million in handling fees. In addition, the port employed 450 people working for the TC and hosted more than 600 private companies, together employing thousands more. This state of affairs led the Lebanese newspaper Ad-Diyar to aptly describe the Port of Beirut as the “illegitimate son of the state” as the political class consistently failed to settle its status.
Paradoxically, the port’s economic and financial muscle allowed successive ministers of Public Works and Transport and chairmen of the port’s TC to brush off concerns about the port’s messy status and even frame it as the cause of its success. “It’s a mix between public and private that functions very well,” said Minister of Public Works and Transport Ghazi Aridi, member of Walid Jumblatt’s Progressive Socialist Party, in 2013. Nearly a decade earlier, TC chairman Hassan Qraytem, a Hariri confidant, commented: “From where I stand, I optimize the opportunities of a partnership between the public and private sector: I try to think of the port as a private company belonging to the state.” The urgency to clear up the port’s institutional mess was further downplayed as its revenues and economic relevance kept growing, especially when war in neighbouring Syria since 2012 meant ever more business for the Port of Beirut and, by extension, Lebanon’s mercantile-political class. Complacency reinforced the inclination to leaving things at the port as they were. After all, why fix it when it isn’t broken?

**Administrative bedlam and corruption**

Yet the port’s administration, in being neither a state entity nor a private company, was broken. Its jumbled governance structures created an environment in which political meddling, diffuse authority, incompetence and corruption thrived, for thirty long years. For much of the 1990s, the port’s TC kept its own private bank account despite being an integral part of the state, inaccessible to anyone else but TC members. Its sizeable revenues continued to flow only partially to the cash-strapped state treasury, and years went by during which none of its income was paid into it. Compounding its lack of transparency, the state’s watchdogs – the Court of Accounts, the Central Inspection Board and the Civil Service Board – overlooked the port simply because it failed to be listed on their inventory of state agencies to scrutinize.

The port’s employees continued to be governed by private law even when paid from public resources. Occasional audits of the TC’s books were conducted by a private company but its findings were only shared with the TC members. In the TC’s internal deliberations, numerous complaints of embezzlement and administrative wrongdoing were systematically ignored. Some TC members and port employees openly continued their private sector activities related to maritime
affairs, in contravention of Lebanese public service law. Their political bosses shut their eyes to such practices, and indeed were keen to get ‘their’ men on the TC not in the least because of their own stakes in the world of shipping. One 2019 study found that 17 out of Lebanon’s 21 large shipping line companies were “politically connected”. 32 In this dance of deep-seated conflicts of interest and patronage, TC members and port personnel were hired and fired at will, depending on constant juggling and horse-trading at the highest political level.

Exactly because of the high stakes involved, political authority, or formal ministerial ‘tutelage’, over the port and its operations remained contested. The Ministry of Public Works and Transport came to ‘supervise’ the port, but it fell short of having the authority to effectively control it. The port’s dealings with the private sector suffered from legal problems as it lacked clear legal powers only a full-fledged state agency could exercise. As the port never appeared on any organizational chart stipulating political and administrative authority, its dealings with other state entities – such as the customs authority, security agencies and ministries – were left to the discretion and inclinations of politicians and officials involved. The port’s ambiguous legal status confused judges tasked to intervene in legal disputes involving it, more often than not prompting them to declare that they lacked jurisdiction or to endlessly pass on complex issues to other branches of the judiciary or state agencies. In a few cases where judges (mostly judges of ‘Urgent Matters’ responsible for immediate execution of court orders) did take a stand, politically backed port officials simply ignored or overruled them. 33

Given its diffuse, contested and ambiguous institutional environment, the port was hit by corruption scandals as it provided ample opportunity for abuse and plenty of ambiguity to cover it up. A British private company, Sar-Mowlem, contracted to remove shipwrecks in the 1990s was defrauded as a rival Lebanese company, linked to port officials, was paid instead for works the foreign company had already carried out and after using expensive, heavy equipment the latter had brought in. 34 Port workers allegedly received bribes from companies not only for speeding up the handling of their cargo but also for deliberately holding up the unloading of competitors’ merchandise. 35 In 1993 Minister of Transport ‘Umar Misqawi alleged that US$3 million of the port’s finances “had evaporated” and been squandered. 36 In 1996 Misqawi accused the TC of deliberately leaving the
port’s own equipment and personnel idle as it continued to lease cranes and manpower from private companies while paying them millions of dollars.\textsuperscript{37} In 2003 another foreign company, the Port Authority of Dubai, was contracted to operate a newly built container terminal. It swiftly withdrew as it was allegedly met with extortion attempts by Lebanese companies linked to politicians and backed by members of the TC.\textsuperscript{38} According to the UNDP’s Arkan Seblani, politically connected companies that are contracted for maintenance work, are compensated excessively, or are paid for entirely fictitious projects.\textsuperscript{39} In 2013 Minister of Public Works and Transport Ghazi Aridi, somewhat contradicting his own rosy appraisal of the port’s effectiveness, claimed that corruption in the port amounted to “one billion dollars” each year.\textsuperscript{40} His revelation was questioned by Hassan Jaroudi, the president of the Syndicate of Maritime Agents. In his assessment that amount could not be more than US$ 300 million.\textsuperscript{41} Other state agencies present in the port and interacting with the TC are separately believed to be riddled with corruption, including the Customs Authority, security forces, and the judiciary.

The Port feud over privatization

Leaving the port in an institutional and legal limbo may not have been initially intended by anyone. Yet for 30 years Lebanon’s notoriously fractured political class failed to agree on clarifying the port’s status, causing it to muddle through with the port’s ‘temporary’ and dysfunctional administration. Sharp political disagreement was primarily centred on numerous proposals and attempts to privatize the port. Rafiq Hariri held his hopes high that it was only a matter of time until his version of liberal economics prevailed, just as he transferred ownership of down-town Beirut to Solidere, the private stock company that he founded. Yet in the port he faced stiff resistance from rival politicians who did not have the financial clout to meet the capital requirements to take part in the privatization, or who were determined to deny Hariri another windfall project. Others had strong links with a handful of companies that benefitted from the port’s outsourcing of handling and logistical tasks, and therefore did not welcome any changes that could upset their steady stream of revenue. Time and time again, proposals for privatization were vetoed in the unruly coalition governments led by Hariri.

In response, Hariri took a gradual approach and embarked on partial privatization
schemes, such as the temporary outsourcing of the port’s main container terminal in 2002. After a tender was held in 2004, a foreign joint venture company was contracted, only to face numerous challenges filed by rivaling Lebanese companies who contested the fairness of the tender and demanded compensation for the loss of business they claimed was rightfully theirs. After seemingly tough negotiations with the TC, the foreign joint venture agreed to register a new consortium for the contract it already received, the Beirut Container Terminal Consortium (BCTC). This time the consortium was sure to involve “Lebanese investors.” The consortium’s chief lawyer is reportedly Raymond (Rony) Araiji, a former minister and member of the Marada Party of Suleiman Franjieh and his childhood friend. After BCTC was established, Lebanese companies’ compensation claims were dropped and the port’s union, equally infiltrated by the political class, abruptly stopped rallying around the issue. Meanwhile, however, the TC remained in place, and so did the port’s dilapidated institutional set-up.

The deal involving BCTC appears to have restored some calm at the port. Yet rivalries flared up again when in 2015 the TC, again chaired by Hassan Qraytem, launched a plan to expand the port’s container terminal. The plan allowed for greater capacity for unloading and storing container shipped cargo to substitute for general cargo now manually handled and transported by conventional trucks to its destinations. The plan ran into fierce opposition from mostly Christian-Maronite traders, off-loaders and truckers who stood to lose their business to container companies. Workers went on strike, supported by Maronite political parties including Aoun’s and Bassil’s Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Even the Maronite Patriarchate in Bkirke intervened to stop the plan from materializing. One of its arguments against the plan was that the TC failed to be a legal entity, and that as such it was not authorized to expand the port’s facilities. The plan came to nothing. The container terminal contract itself formally expired in April 2020, certain to prompt a new round in the endless struggle over the port and its assets. A call for bids was delayed until the end of the year.

**Hizbullah and the port**

As Lebanon’s political factions plodded along with the TC, they increasingly got company from Hizbullah. Details on how, why and to what extent Hizbullah got
involved in the port are murky. Arguably, Hizbullah gradually forced its way into
the port exactly because, with the TC’s political fragmentation and diffuse
authority, no one was able or willing to stop it. Interestingly, Hizbullah had no past
in maritime affairs. During the civil war, a declassified CIA report described it as
“the only major indigenous group without direct access to the sea.”\(^48\) Since the
1990s, however, Hizbullah’s role in the port of Beirut grew through its connections
with political bosses and parties represented in the TC, such as Nabih Berri’s Amal
and, from 2005 onwards, the FPM. It also had strong links to key ministers with
sway over the port. Between 2016 and January 2020 Lebanon’s Transport Minister
was Yusuf Finyanus, who on 8 September 2020 was sanctioned by the U.S.
government on the accusation of being a “Hizbullah enabler” and for allegedly
having benefitted from corruption involving the party.\(^49\) Hizbullah has been very
active in the port’s unions, which more than once mobilized to counter
privatization schemes that threatened business interests of the party’s allies.
According to Riad Kobaissi, an investigative journalist with Al-Jadid
television, Hizbullah also managed to penetrate the port’s customs authority and security
forces, especially from the start of the 2010s.\(^50\) This prompted rumours that
Hizbullah used the port for smuggling arms and for illicit trade to help finance
itself, although port inspectors of UNIFIL’s Maritime Task Force (MTF) can be
assumed to have worked against such a possibility.\(^51\) Large amounts of cannabis,
grown in areas controlled by Hizbullah, were seized in the port, most recently in
April 2020.\(^52\) This seizure seemingly confirmed Hizbullah’s alleged use of the port
for illicit trade. Yet the fact that the drugs caches were seized could equally suggest
that Hizbullah’s control over the port was limited, assuming it was behind the
drugs in the first place. Whatever the extent of its role in the port and the nature of
its meddling, Hizbullah’s presence may be viewed as both a consequence of the
port’s elusive authority while having exacerbated the political meddling
underlying it.

The international ‘reform’ caravan
passed over the port

Foreign donors, international organizations and aid agencies have been largely
unconcerned about the port’s institutional mess and its root causes in political
bickering and greed. While especially since the early 2000s the European Union, the World Bank, UN agencies and donors from the West have passed through Beirut with a laundry list of required ‘reforms’ for their financial assistance to be released, few bothered to consider let alone help address the dismal institutional set-up of the port. A plethora of international aid conferences to assist Lebanon – ‘Paris I’ (2001), ‘Paris II (2002), Paris III (2007), ‘CEDRE’ (2018) and meetings of the UN-led International Support Group for Lebanon – singled out virtually all of Lebanon’s state institutions for urgently needed reforms. Yet the port was seldomly even mentioned. On one such rare occasion, in 2018 the World Bank called for the “reform of the government structure of the major ports,” describing the port of Beirut’s administration as “a bit unique.” A year later, the World Bank recommended the port to be included in reforms to ensure “transparent accounting and reporting or revenues, costs and investment needs”. It did not provide further details and no action was taken. In its damage assessment of the blast, the World Bank reiterated the same vaguely worded reforms, adding that the port’s operations should be opened up further to the private sector. French President Emmanuel Macron does not seem to have included an overhaul of the port authority in his recent “roadmap for reform,” even when he announced the roadmap while standing on the rubble of the harbour during his second visit to the country since the blast, on 1 September. There appears to have been no demand for an international audit of the TC’s books, as the Central Bank is now subjected to.

It is not that foreign donors and aid organizations did not know about the disarray into which the port’s administration had fallen. Portia Peel Ports Limited and Logistics and Port Management Americas LLC, respectively the British and US companies leading the Beirut Container Terminal Consortium, will have had intimate knowledge of that, could have told them, and may have done so. Likewise, British company Sar-Mowlem could have shared some of its experiences with the port’s corruption until the early 2000s. Going back further, in 1993 the European Investment Bank approved a loan to the Lebanese state to carry out rehabilitation works at the port. Indicative of the lack of trust it had in the port of Beirut’s own administration, it demanded that France’s Port autonome de Marseilles manage and supervise the works. International consultancy firms were also familiar with the Port of Beirut’s governance troubles. In 2000, one such
company, Highpoint-Rendel, scrutinized the port’s administration and highlighted in its final report serious shortcomings, concerns over abuse of power, and major irregularities. Following the textbook approach of the international ‘reform’ drive generally, it recommended a range of technical and managerial changes, ignoring their political underpinnings.

Donors’ and the World Bank’s lack of real interest in the port is odd, to say the least. One would expect that at least their mantra of reform would also have reached the port administration, if only because of the vast financial resources kept in its bank account whereas all other state institutions were systematically starved of revenues. It is possible that exactly because the port has self-financed its operations and projects, the caravan of aid organizations and creditors passed it over without much interest, or leverage. Foreign investors, including French-Lebanese container transport and shipping group CMA CGM, are reportedly eyeing the contract to take over BCTC’s container operations, and may not want to see their chances jeopardized by alienating the TC. Whatever may have been the reason, by skipping the port in their reform drive, international donors and aid organizations unwittingly allowed Lebanon’s mercantile-political class to keep treating the port as their playground at the expense of solid and responsible governance.

From the port’s institutional and political wasteland to the blast

Of course, one cannot draw one straight line from the port’s institutional failure and political squabbling to the blast of 4 August. Yet whatever or whoever set off the explosion is likely to have crossed the port’s institutional wasteland brought there by 30 years of political wrangling, jealousies, and greed. In this environment, the factors or actors behind the blast will have gone ignored, unopposed and uncorrected, or they may even have seized on the port’s delipidated and politicized administration as an opportunity. Accordingly, an analysis of the chronic failure to build a strong, responsible and accountable port authority is compatible with, complementary to and perhaps even a necessary addendum to, all hypotheses and theories that thus far have been suggested to explain what
exactly caused the blast. If it was just incompetence, negligence and bureaucratic inertia that caused the explosion, the port’s dismal institutional record, failing political oversight and greed will have set the stage. If it was the mainly unruly, greed-driven nature of the global maritime sector and its disregard for basic safety that is to blame, it still needs to be explained why such behaviour was not addressed or corrected by the port administration, its appointees and their political bosses. After all, the world’s harbours and port cities do not get blown up that often, whatever one thinks of the “global network of maritime capital and legal chicanery.”

A similar analysis would have to complement even more sinister hypotheses, including Hizbullah supposedly having had a hand in obtaining or keeping the ammonium nitrate in the port’s warehouse, and/or Israel embarking on one of its secret operations to cause it to detonate. None of these theories is supported by any hard evidence thus far. Yet should this emerge, they would make sense in the context of the port’s lawlessness and failing authority structures providing ample opportunity for such reckless schemes and offering an ideal environment for them to go unchecked or uncovered. Remaining questions abound, as the Lebanese grapple to understand what or who exactly was responsible for the catastrophe. But chances are that, in the final analysis, the port’s institutional failure and Lebanon’s mercantile-political class’ squabbling and greed set the stage for blowing up Beirut. It is bound to amplify calls for that class to leave – ‘All of them means all of them.’

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Endnotes


3. The extra cargo involved is reported to have been heavy, seismic survey equipment destined for Jordan. It belonged to UK company Spectrum, contracted by the Lebanese Ministry of Energy led by Gebran Bassil. Asia Times, 28 August 2020, https://asiatimes.com/2020/08/lebanon-probes-procurement-of-death-ship-rhosus/


7. Ibid.


12. Ibid.


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15. Who owned the Rhosus and its cargo of ammonium-nitrate?; was its cargo really destined for Mozambique or did it have other customers?; what links, if any, did the ship and its cargo have with companies, state institutions, officials and possibly even political players?; how protective were the port authorities in ensuring the safe storage of the hazardous materials?; did the stores of the company holding the Rhosus contract mislead the politicians about the fire in warehouse 9 and the first explosion in warehouse 12?; what did the customs authorities know about the shipping of the ammonium-nitrate?; how did reports on the fire and explosion in warehouse 12 contrast with later reports claiming the fire started by irresponsibly storing the ammonium-nitrate with other combustible materials in warehouse 12?; did the fire authorities know about the ammonium-nitrate stored at the port?; did UN troops, inspecting an international arms embargo, have any knowledge of the ammonium-nitrate stored at the port?; and what role did Hizbullah play given its presence in the port area? For further discussion: Mayssoun

16. The Lebanese government refused an impartial, international investigation (although that in itself would not have been a guarantee for impartiality). Sharp political disagreement arose over who was to head the Lebanese investigation, causing Fadi Siwan to be appointed as the fourth candidate of choice. The investigation thus far did not call in senior politicians for questioning. Siwan ordered the arrest of Badri Daher but allowed the head of the Customs Authority to be ‘detained’ at his own headquarters that lack detention facilities. President Lahoud failed to sign a decree initiated by caretaker Prime minister Hassan Diab dismissing Daher from his duties. On 10 September a huge fire at the port ostensibly destroyed the Custom Authority’s archives, possibly destroying evidence.


23. Ibid., p. 189.


26. For a more detailed discussion, see: Ibid., pp. 90-95.


31. Ibid.

32. “Politically connected” is defined as such companies having a clear link (via their board members, managers or shareholders) with those in political power. Ishac Diwan and Jamal Ibrahim Haidar, “Clientelism, Cronyism and Job Creation in Lebanon,” in: Adee Malik, Adee Malik and Izak Atiyas (eds), Crony Capitalism in the Middle East – Business and Politics from Liberalization to the Arab Spring, (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 134.
34. Ibid., pp. 37-40.
35. Ibid., p. 40.
36. Ibid., p. 41.
37. Ibid., p. 41.
38. Ibid., pp. 41-42.
40. However, Aridi’s claim apparently also included tax fraud at customs, in which the TC played no direct role. Le Commerce du Levant, 27 June 2013, https://www.lecommercedulevant.com/article/22217-corruption-une-pratique-qui-perdure
41. Ibid.
51. UNIFIL-MTF is mandated “to prevent the unauthorized entry of arms or related materiel by sea into Lebanon.” It says on its website that since its inception in October 2006 it referred 14,381 vessels to the Lebanese authorities “for further inspections”, at sea or on land. UNIFIL website, 22 October 2019, https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-maritime-task-force
53. Wissam Harake and Christos Kostopoulos, Strategic Assessment: A Capital Investment Plan for Lebanon, Investment
55. World Bank, Beirut Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment, p. 49.
59. On CMA CGM, its Lebanese origins and current operations in the port of Beirut see: https://www.cma-cgm.com/local/lebanon
60. International responsibility may even go beyond discounting the port’s bad governance as described here. The U.S. government may have known about the large cache of ammonium-nitrate being casually stored at the port’s warehouse as an American contractor working with the U.S. Army stumbled on it during a safety inspection at the port and reported it to port officials. The New York Times, 10 August 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/10/world/middleeast/beirut-explosion-us-contractor.html
About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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