

# LEBANON-in-CONFLICT

Alerts, Background, and Reviews from and about Lebanon

[A joint UMAM D&R and HAYYA BINA Project]

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## Defaulting in the Shadow of Coronavirus Lebanon: No Longer on the Brink!



### ■ Qom versus Rome

On February 21, ten days after the Lebanese parliament granted its confidence to the Hassan Diab cabinet

under ridiculously tightened security measures, the first case of Covid-19 was officially made public in Lebanon.

To be fair, information about the intensifying global pandemic,

the danger that comes with its rapid transmission, and the relevant measures likely to counter it entered the radar of Lebanese authorities nearly a month earlier. On January 23, a senior officer at the Ministry of Health stated that Lebanese authorities were taking the necessary actions to prevent the virus from spreading into Lebanon,<sup>(1)</sup> and on February 1, Prime Minister-designee Hassan Diab announced the formation of a "Corona Crisis Follow-up Committee."<sup>(2)</sup>

Once the announcement was made, the Diab government, which had been primarily tasked with addressing the pounding and



Photo by Nabil Ismail/Facebook

Two iconic "vacuum-cleaned" pictures that will probably stick to any recollection of Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his cabinet.

Diab, the lone representative of the cabinet during the parliamentary vote of confidence on February 11. According to Human Rights Watch: "While Prime Minister Diab was talking to a half empty parliament hall about the importance of the right to protest, security forces were throwing tear gas and beating people up outside."

An overview of downtown Beirut's Martyrs' Square after security forces "cleansed" it at the end of March from the traces of the October 17 "Revolution!"

<sup>(1)</sup> "The Ministry of Health Started Taking Measures to Prevent Coronavirus from Reaching Lebanon," *an-Nahar*, January 23, 2020.

<sup>(2)</sup> <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/news-bulletin-reports/499116/committee-formed-to-follow-up-on-coronavirus-preve/en>

accelerating economic and financial crisis, found its agenda updated with a new item: the Covid-19 fight.

<sup>(3)</sup> The woman was in Qom improving her skills as a ritualistic reciter, as confirmed by Sayyed Hashem Safiyyeddin during the March 25 interview he gave to al-Manar TV in which he announced Hezbollah's plan for fighting the coronavirus.

<sup>(4)</sup> The pro-Hezbollah minister of health said on February 21: "The decision to cancel flights from Iran is a decision to be taken by the government and [such decision] is pending on political considerations."

<sup>(5)</sup> On February 23, Hezbollah members present at the Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport prevented *an-Nahar* journalist Asrar Shbaro from interviewing passengers coming back from Iran and interrupted the live streaming of these interviews, which were broadcast on the website of *an-Nahar*. *An-Nahar*, February 24, 2020.

<sup>(6)</sup> It's only on March 16 that Lebanon announced the closing of the official border crossings with Syria. This announcement doesn't necessarily mean that the "illegal" points of crossing, used by Hezbollah and smugglers, are closed though. The targeting by an Israeli drone of a Hezbollah vehicle near that border on April 15, 2020, proves that even the official border crossing point of Masna' is not hermetically closed.

<sup>(7)</sup> This campaign culminated in the prologue of the evening news bulletin of pro-Lebanese Forces TV station MTV, which considered that the government decision not to stop the flights coming from Iran is politically driven and defies all scientific considerations.

<sup>(8)</sup> On March 18, pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar* published an article titled: "Did the first coronavirus case not come from Iran?" In spite of the question mark closing the title, the whole article was meant to demonstrate that the first case of coronavirus did not come from Iran. <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/285836>

Although the first official case of Covid-19 came from a female Hezbollah activist returning from Qom on a flight with about 150 passengers,<sup>(3)</sup> the Ministry of Health stalled in recommending the prudent measure of halting flights with coronavirus-stricken Iran under the questionable pretext that this was a decision for a higher authority to make.<sup>(4)</sup> Hence, as airplanes continued arriving from Iran — with some of the passengers being publicly received at the airport by Hezbollah operatives<sup>(5)</sup> — and as stretches of the Lebanese/Syrian border remained out of any official control,<sup>(6)</sup> some of Hezbollah's domestic opponents pointed to these developments and launched a media and public opinion campaign centered around the theme that in addition to all the other calamities Iran exports to Lebanon, it has now exported the coronavirus as well.<sup>(7)</sup>

However, in proportion to the spread of the virus within various sects and areas of the country, tempers partially subsided and the debate was more or less recalibrated to focus on blunting the spread of Covid-19. The circumstances under which the situation shifted are interesting to take note of. On March 8, a Jesuit priest residing in a Beirut convent published on his Facebook page that two of his peers tested positive and that all the priests of his convent are in self-confinement. On March 10, the first death due to Covid-19 was registered. It happened in a Byblos hospital and the name of the concerned individual left no doubt that he's "Christian!"<sup>(8)</sup>

## ■ To Pay or Not to Pay – A Conundrum

In the meantime, the fateful March 9 debt payment deadline drew near. For months, the Lebanese were attentively tuning into political commentary shows and consuming media coverage as they debated whether or not the country should pay when a \$1.2 billion Eurobond reaches maturity. Bringing the discussions and rampant political arguments to a close, Prime Minister Diab addressed the Lebanese from the Grand Serail for the first time since his official appointment as premier and announced on March 7 that “Our international reserves have reached critically low levels, forcing the Lebanese Republic to withhold all the payments on the Eurobonds that are due on March 9.”<sup>(9)</sup>

When Lebanon entered this dire stage in its continued financial and economic unraveling, the time for soothing statements seeking to make the collapse more palpable had passed. Experts put forward reports to provide context to the extent of just how sharp the financial and economic crisis was and how much more (or rather very little) loss the state could handle. Although, the Lebanese did not need this dramatic announcement to understand just how bad the situation was as they have been experiencing it on a daily basis, be it through the unofficial capital controls that banks have been enforcing, the outrageous conversion rate between the US dollar and the Lebanese pound, or simply the uptick in the cost of goods at the store.

While the Lebanese government ultimately decided not to pay, bringing the issue to

<sup>(9)</sup> <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-news/505968/full-speech-of-pm-hassan-diab-addressing-eurobond/en>

a close, it would be negligent to overlook the acerbity of the debate that preceded the monumental decision.<sup>(10)</sup> The debate pitted the “pay party,” championed by the governor of the central bank and representatives of the banking sector, against the “don’t pay party,” spearheaded by Hezbollah, and took on all kinds of shapes varying from media jousts to judicial wrestling.<sup>(11)</sup>

Indeed, it did not escape the “pay party” that even if Lebanon pays the March portion it will not be able to honor its upcoming commitment and pay the future installments; however, the issue for this party — a party that is perhaps the most multi-confessional, cross-sectarian, and politically diverse<sup>(12)</sup> — was less about Lebanon respecting its further commitments, which everyone knew to be impossible, but more about continuing to have the upper hand over the economic levers of the country.

The firm position of Hezbollah – which often acted like a boy scout when it came to domestic issues under the pretext that it was busy resisting, liberating, and fighting *takfiris* — to impose the default decision was much more of a political statement bringing about a shift in the balance of power in the country than it was a bare economic decision.

## ■ Hezbollah: A Badly Needed Reputational Plastic Surgery

Though publicized by Hezbollah as a victory of the “people” against the bank “sharks” and other greedy profiteers, defaulting was not, as such, good news. Not only was

<sup>(10)</sup> It's on March 23 that Lebanon officially announced it will stop paying all maturing Eurobonds in foreign currencies.  
<https://en.annahar.com/article/1150465-lebanon-to-stop-paying-back-all-debt-in-foreign-currencies>

<sup>(11)</sup> On March 7, (Shia AMAL Movement affiliated) Financial Prosecutor Ali Ibrahim took it upon himself to freeze the assets of 21 Lebanese banks as well as the assets of their board members. In response to this bold move, (Sunni pro-Hariri) State Prosecutor Ghassan Ouwiedat suspended Ibrahim's decision only a few hours later, adding more drama to a sector that has already become a bit of a farce.  
<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/269832-lebanon-suspends-asset-freeze-on-20-banks>

<sup>(12)</sup> This assertion is eloquently proven through the vacillating position of speaker Nabih Berry, who also happens to be the head of the AMAL Movement—Hezbollah's alter ego! Through Ali Hassan Khalil, his political councilor and former minister of finance, Berri kept advocating the “pay” option until the very last moment. It required pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar* to publicly scold Khalil in its main editorial on March 2 and accuse him of trying to sell the “pay” option even to Hezbollah, before Berri himself mounted to the frontline and washed his hands of this option the following day.

this default a poorly timed alignment of difficulties due to the coronavirus, but it also came at a time of particular turbulence for Hezbollah and its patron, Iran, giving the group more to handle as it sought to contain the tarnishing of its image.

A cursory overview of developments during the last few months helps illustrate this. Bearing in mind the complications that have arisen for Hezbollah since the beginning of the October 2019 uprising, 2020 kicked off with additional tribulation.

During the early hours of Friday, January 3, an American drone strike killed Qassem Soleimani, commander of the al-Quds Force, and Abou Mahdy al-Muhandis, deputy chief of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

With international tension rising amidst tit-for-tat escalation that saw a barrage of Iranian missiles target U.S. forces in Iraq, the Iranians demonstrated their incompetence on the global stage during a tragic error of epic proportions on January 8. Bracing themselves for a potential American response, Tehran shot down a Ukrainian plane shortly after takeoff from Imam Khomeini International Airport in Tehran, killing all 176 people onboard. After initially denying culpability, mounting international pressure and irrefutable evidence for the transgression forced the regime to acknowledge its deadly error, kicking off a fresh wave of protests in Tehran. Hundreds of people took to the streets to hold vigils and criticize the regime, prompting security forces to use live ammunition and tear gas to contain the crowds and prevent the kind of demonstrations that erupted in November 2019.<sup>(13)</sup>

<sup>(13)</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/13/iran-protests-witnesses-live-ammunition-fired-disperse-crowds-tehran>

Meanwhile in Syria, the catalogue of losses grew. In southern Syria on February 6, Israeli air strikes killed 23 Iranian-backed militants<sup>(14)</sup> and then on February 27 an Israeli drone picked off a senior Hezbollah commander operating with Iranian forces near the Golan Heights.<sup>(15)</sup> At the same time, Hezbollah incurred mounting losses in the northwestern part of the country. During two incidents at the end of January, a commander and three fighters were killed.<sup>(16)</sup> In the midst of a particularly devastating round of fighting in Idlib between pro-Assad forces and the Turkish army, a building with a group of Hezbollah fighters inside was bombed on February 28. Although Hezbollah officially put the death toll at eight, more independent estimates place the number at 14 or more fatalities.<sup>(17)</sup> Furthermore, on March 31, Israeli jets cut through Lebanese airspace while carrying out a bombing run near Homs, targeting a base believed to be playing host to a meeting between Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.<sup>(18)</sup> While bodies continued piling up for Hezbollah in Syria, other complications developed in Lebanon that also required immediate public image restoration.

As damaging as the recent collection of deaths in Syria has been for Hezbollah, perhaps the most public black eye for the group during this period has been the release and subsequent extraction from Lebanon of Amer Fakhoury, a former member of the South Lebanon Army (SLA) and holder of a U.S. passport who was accused of torturing and killing detainees at the prison he helped administer for the SLA.

Having been held since September 2019, a military court ordered his release on

<sup>(14)</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51397357>

<sup>(15)</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-syrian-state-media-reports-one-dead-in-israeli-strike-near-border-1.8594676>

<sup>(16)</sup> <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/02/hezbollah-and-i.php>

<sup>(17)</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/thousands-bury-hezbollah-fighters-killed-syrias-idlib-69320321>

<sup>(18)</sup> <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2212451/israel-targets-iranian-commanders-syrian-base-near-homs>

March 16, which prompted Fakhoury's repatriation aboard a U.S. military aircraft despite technically being barred from leaving Lebanon. In the wake of this closure of the "Fakhoury file" and the ensuing outrage from within the communities that comprise Hezbollah's core support base,

Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah attempted to set the record straight by saying he and his officials had no prior knowledge of the decision to release Fakhoury, and that no deal was behind the choreographed arrangement which allowed the issue to settle.<sup>(19)</sup>

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Obviously, no one took what Nasrallah said seriously, especially since the release of Fakhoury happened in parallel with the release of U.S. citizen Michael White by Iranian authorities, and the freeing of three French citizens and an Iraqi who disappeared in Baghdad on January 20 while doing work for a French NGO.<sup>(20)</sup> Ironically enough, the same day that Nasrallah said there was no deal, Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker said the exact same thing!<sup>(21)</sup>

In the middle of this reputational massacre, to which we should add the financial hardships of Hezbollah mainly caused by the sanctions on Iran and the unrelenting American chase of Hezbollah assets and financiers around the globe, Hezbollah had to retort with the means at hand.

During a publicized announcement of great pomp, Sayyed Hashem Safiyyedin, head of Hezbollah's Executive Council, presented

<sup>(19)</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/nasrallah-hezbollah-involved-amer-fakhoury-release-200321020333936.html>

<sup>(20)</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-france/three-french-nationals-and-an-iraqi-freed-in-iraq-france-says-idUSKBN21D3KJ>

<sup>(21)</sup> <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2191501/schenker-no-deals-no-promises-fakhoury%E2%80%99s-release-lebanon>

his organization's coronavirus response on March 25. The plan calls for the deployment of 1,500 doctors, 3,000 nurses and paramedics, and 20,000 additional activists,

including "frontline Islamic Resistance medics," alongside the preparation of 32 medical centers and designation of about five hospitals for coronavirus patients. While the war-like rhetoric of Safiyyedin's announcement did not fail to grab attention, it did fall short in convincing the public of its true purpose; after all, Lebanon already had 333 Covid-19 cases by this time.<sup>(22)</sup>

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**Healthcare is not the only sector where coronavirus is bringing justification for further cooperation between the state and the non-state but what is most concerning is not the present level of coordination but the precedent it sets. The increased intimacy between the state's institutions and Hezbollah might become impossible to undo in the post-coronavirus era.**

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When juxtaposing the coronavirus response with the series of broadcast appearances in which Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah addressed the Lebanese like he did in July 2006, conjuring images of a state leader taking his people to the final victory, the Hezbollah plan seems uniquely outsized. Although Nasrallah repeatedly said their Covid-19 response is in line with the government provision, Hezbollah's contribution in the fight against the pandemic is by no means comparable to that of other Lebanese parties and organizations but comparable — if any comparison is to be made — to the one of a state, and not necessarily of a state the size of Lebanon!

Some observers connected this massive plan to an exaggerated number of coronavirus cases within Hezbollah's support base or even ranks.<sup>(23)</sup> The full truth about the real figures of Hezbollah's coronavirus infections still needs to be revealed, however, the exaggeration about these figures does not seem well

<sup>(22)</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-hezbollah/hezbollah-deploys-medics-hospitals-against-coronavirus-in-lebanon-idUSKBN21C3R7>

<sup>(23)</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/31/fears-over-hidden-covid-19-outbreak-in-lebanon-iraq-and-syria>





grounded. In a small country like Lebanon where word travels fast, it is exceedingly difficult to conceal things, especially if they are of larger magnitudes.

Besides attempting to use coronavirus as a chance to restore its all-mighty corporate image by putting forth a feigned “Lebanonization” of its concerns and demonstrating that it cares for everyone in Lebanon — without actually giving up its supranational agenda — Hezbollah is using the pandemic to set new precedents for state and non-state cooperation.

The fact that the Ministry of Health, run by a pro-Hezbollah minister, and the *Hay'a Sihhiyya*

On Tuesday, March 31, a few days after the March 25 interview during which Sayyed Hashem Safiyyeddin, Hassan Nasrallah's maternal first cousin and head of Hezbollah's Executive Council, announced his organization's plan to fight the coronavirus, which included the deployment of 1,500 doctors, 3,000 nurses and paramedics and 20,000 more activists, including “frontline Islamic Resistance medics,” Hezbollah organized a tour in Dahyeh for the local and international media to show off its preparation. As it was put by al-Akhbar, (April 1, 2020), the tour was a kind of “live fire exercise.”

While all Lebanese parties tried to take advantage of the coronavirus to bridge the gap dug between them and their respective constituency by the October 17 Movement, their efforts are by no means comparable to the ones of Hezbollah.

For the latter, countering the pandemic was an opportunity to prove its capability of fighting on different fronts at the same time. The anti-coronavirus mobilization of Hezbollah does not only prove its superiority over the state but it also speaks to its medical capabilities developed during its involvement in the Syrian conflict.

*Islamiyya* (the Islamic Health Association, i.e. Hezbollah's ministry of health) are nowadays rolled into one, even more so because of the coronavirus, is an open secret. Therefore, the community of donors, ranging from countries that allow open communication with Hezbollah to those that do not, are aware of this merging and understand that in spite of their macro-level control over health expenditure, it is Hezbollah taking the credit and running things on the ground. Obviously, healthcare is not the only sector where coronavirus is bringing justification for further cooperation between the state and Hezbollah, but what is most concerning is not the present level of coordination but the precedent it sets. The increased intimacy between the state's institutions and Hezbollah might become impossible to undo in the post-coronavirus era.

## ■ A Lebanese “New Normal”?

As things go, one would probably not miss the mark in predicting that the country's efforts to contain the coronavirus pandemic will move ahead without any agreement being reached on how to handle the acute economic and financial crisis that the country is going through.

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**As one nasty observer put it, the coronavirus is no less than “the gift of Diab’s government and those supporting it.”**

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Whether we like it or not, since Lebanon announced on March 23 amid a quasi-indifference that it would cease payment on all maturing Eurobonds in foreign

currencies,<sup>(24)</sup> a new status quo took shape. Though this status quo is hardly *normal*, it has been subjugated to an attempted *banalization* through a cascade of factors that have attempted to standardize the constellation of restrictions imposed on the Lebanese and advocate for an extension of such restrictions longer than what most people may be able to stomach.

Chief among these factors is the unforeseeable end of the coronavirus pandemic and what this eventual end will bring in its wake in terms of a reordering of political priorities. As one nasty observer put it, the coronavirus is no less than “the gift of Diab's government and those supporting it.”

Another factor of importance, though often obscured by the intense and multifaceted debates over the economic situation and how to handle it, is that not all the players on the domestic front are equally rushed to find a solution. At the other end of the spectrum are those seeking a quick resolution and a decrease in the suffering in their daily lives and businesses, although their statistical

<sup>(24)</sup> <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-news/505968/full-speech-of-pm-hassan-diab-addressing-eurobond/en>

majority in the county is not enough to participate in the ongoing conflict between the opposing agendas held by the various poles of power within the establishment.

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**It's a matter of fact that the Lebanese banking sector and Hezbollah slept in the same bed for a long time. If today they appear to be on opposite extremes of a horseshoe, this should be understood from an agenda perspective.**

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With reference to the actual defaulting of Lebanon on its debts, the general issue of this conflict is whether or not to accept the IMF bailout. The bottom line of the debate in the final analysis is a political one, which prolongs and deepens the

fracture governing over Lebanon since the July war of 2006 and its appendix — the weeklong military subjugation campaign that Hezbollah waged against its domestic opponents in May 2008, which led to the Doha Agreement. The fact is that those who advocate a blank acceptance of an IMF package consider that—despite the inevitable social costs of such a choice—this will contribute to a relaxing of Hezbollah's grip over the state and allow a recalibration in the balance of power. It's not uncommon within the pro-IMF circles to hear statements such as: "An IMF intervention is paramount, on the economical level, to the UNSC resolution 1701 regarding the Lebanese/Israeli border."<sup>(25)</sup>

<sup>(25)</sup> The 1701 United Nations Security Council resolution was intended to end the July 2006 war by means of a "cessation of all hostilities" between Israel and Hezbollah in addition to the reinforcement of the UNIFIL and the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces.

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8808.doc.htm>

<sup>(26)</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-hezbollah/imf-deal-would-spark-popular-revolution-in-lebanon-hezbollah-believes-idUSKBN20Q2II>

Although Hezbollah's position regarding the IMF varied between full-fledged populist rejection as a breach of national sovereignty and more nuanced approaches, the fact is that, as it was plainly stated in a Reuters report, "Hezbollah believes that terms required by any IMF bailout package for Lebanon would spark 'a popular revolution.'<sup>(26)</sup>

The opportunity for a show of strength that fighting Covid-19 has provided Hezbollah with should not cause one to lose sight of the hasty and botched approach that Hezbollah adopted vis-à-vis the October 17 Movement.

While the pandemic is allowing Hezbollah as well as all other Lebanese political forces an “overtime” during which each of them is trying to restore its patriarchal and protective image in the eyes of its constituency, all of them are aware that

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**At the end of the day, Hezbollah wants to be the one whose door needs to be knocked upon when it comes to finding a sustainable solution for the economic and financial crisis—even if the one knocking at its door is an IMF delegation!**

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this grace period is not endless and that sooner or later the pre-Covid-19 challenges, added to the Covid-19 economic legacy, will be back on the table. A “popular uprising” would of course affect every actor on the political scene, but as they

are not on equal footing, the larger power brokers stand to incur more loss than the others...

It's a matter of fact that the Lebanese banking sector and Hezbollah (as well as other questionable entities) slept in the same bed for a long time. If today they appear to be on opposite extremes of a horseshoe, this should be understood from an *agenda perspective*.

The banking sector that happily agreed to play the sponsor of the Lebanese establishment via the central bank doesn't have any other political agenda outside going back to “business as usual”— as much as this “as usual” is possible and even at the price of sacrificing some of its icons. Hezbollah's agenda is entirely different,

looking at “gains” and “losses” through a very different lens than the one of a banker or Lebanese notable. Hezbollah also has a different framework through which to conduct its affairs and a timetable that is set apart from the banking sector. Their main priority until further notice (i.e. until

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**The coronavirus crisis made clear the full collapse of the Sunni leadership—including the official religious leadership represented by Dar al-Fatwa.**

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U.S./Iran relations are sorted out in one way or another) is to buy time and stability and continue portraying itself as the key guarantor of this stability. Consequently,

Hezbollah wants to be the one whose door needs to be knocked upon when it comes to finding a sustainable solution for the economic and financial crisis—even if the one knocking at its door is an IMF delegation!

## ■ Coronavirus as a Ripening Agent for Lebanon’s Problems

While the two most visible issues affixed to the two months of Covid-19 in Lebanon are the economic situation and the imposing role of Hezbollah, it is prudent not to lose sight of the fact that coronavirus is acting as a ripening agent in various social and political areas facing the country.

The first and perhaps most important issue is the status of the Hassan Diab government and its nature. While there have been periodic statements of support for this government by Hezbollah officials and their unofficial mouthpieces, giving credence to the notion that this is Hezbollah’s government, several governmental episodes have provided unadulterated evidence that there’s not a lot to expect from this

government in terms of “reforms.” This evidence has ranged from petty incidents, such as “smuggling appointments within the administration,” to use the Lebanese jargon, to the more significant ones, such as the insistence of the minister of justice, known for her acquaintances with the

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## Tripoli, the “Bride of the Revolution,” may turn into the “Nightmare of the Republic!”

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president’s circle, to politically influence the judicial reshuffle suggested by the High Judicial Council — not to mention the cabinet’s failure in even

proposing a mock rescue plan. Suffice to say, few believe that this government is doing little more than trying to keep up the appearances of a functioning state while fulfilling basic managerial tasks.

The second feature that was made clear thanks to the coronavirus crisis is the full collapse of the Sunni leadership. It’s not exclusively about Saad Hariri and his Future Movement but rather the constellation of Sunni figures that have occupied center stage during the last fifteen years—including the religious leadership represented by Dar al-Fatwa, the highest official Sunni religious institution in the country. This leadership disintegration is perfectly exemplified by the recent donations that Druze leader Walid Jumblatt made to this religious institution as part of his coronavirus-driven spat of generosity while none of the country’s numerous Sunni multi-millionaires have done anything similar.

Mentioning all of this leads us to talk about Tripoli, Lebanon’s Sunni stronghold, which sent and continues to send alarming messages. Before becoming the “Bride of the Revolution,” a title earned due to the city’s consistently vigorous nighttime

demonstrations after the start of the October 17 Uprising, Tripoli was known for violence and extremism. Islamists and competing groupings dealt in a currency of blood and lead, a trade that became particularly virulent when regional geopolitics borne of the neighboring civil war in Syria brought

repeated suicide and car bombs to the city during the first half of the 2010s. In addition to the violence and perpetual poverty, tens of

thousands of refugees flooded into the city and added a new dimension to the suffering. Since then, little has improved; in fact, it's gotten worse. By all measures, poverty has risen, with some experts placing estimates at close to 80% of the population before the arrival of coronavirus.<sup>(27)</sup> However, one need not consult economic figures or data aggregations to see what kind of impact Covid-19 is having. On April 7, riots erupted at the city's al-Qubbeh prison amid heightened tension and anxiety over the possibility that coronavirus might tear through the prison. Already the third carceral riot in Lebanon since the virus's arrival, the men of Tripoli hoped their arson and reciprocal security clampdown might expedite the government's coronavirus amnesty process, which hardly has the luxury of time.<sup>(28)</sup>

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## A default may well signal other tragedies... Bad news never comes alone!

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<sup>(27)</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/poverty-set-deepen-lebanons-economic-crisis-200101093225897.html>

<sup>(28)</sup> <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2225156/fears-over-riots-spreading-lebanon%E2%80%99s-prisons>

## Once Upon a Time Lebanon was on the Brink...

For April 13, 2020, the “this day in history” listings include the break out of a civil war in Lebanon in 1975. The official end of that war came in 1989/1990 with the drafting

of a new constitution based on the Taef Agreement and the entrusting of the country to the good caretakers of the Syrian regime led by Hafez Assad, whose son Bashar would later come to learn about civil war during an ironic reversal of fates.

Looking back, these two monumental periods in the halls of Lebanese history seem to belong to a bygone era; April 13, 1975 to the memorable moments of the Cold War and the Taif Agreement's parliamentary ratification on November 5, 1989 to the end of that East versus West epoch.

In spite of the civil war and complicated state reconstruction, during the last 45 years there have been rare moments that seemed to inspire optimistic thinking and suggest that perhaps meaningful change was within reach. But just as quickly, the Lebanese leitmotiv bore through, suggesting once again that the country is *on the brink* of something bad.

In 2020, the year where Lebanon celebrates 100 years of statehood, it's not Magi checking out the country's welfare and gifting it with gold, frankincense, and myrrh that Lebanon has to expect but visits from some of the prophets of doom. Lebanon is no longer on the brink but in the midst of an abyssal free fall—and a default may well signal other tragedies... Bad news never comes alone!

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Zachary P. Hanley contributed to this report