

Behind Lebanon's Catastrophe - An interview

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In the aftermath of the explosion, the people of Beirut poured out into the streets to demonstrate their anger at the government corruption and incompetence. An estimated 300,000 are now homeless.

Suzi Weissman interviewed Gilbert Achcar for her program on Jacobin Radio, August 8, 2020 on the massive August 4 chemical explosion and subsequent political upheaval in Lebanon. The discussion took place shortly before the Lebanese government resigned.

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Gilbert Achcar, a native of Lebanon, is professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, University of London. His most recent book is *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising of 2016*, a sequel to *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (2013). This is an abridged version of his recorded remarks, transcribed by Meleiza Figueroa.

EXPERTS HAVE ESTIMATED that the power of the blast was something like 1500 kilotons of TNT, which would amount to one-tenth of the power of the Hiroshima blast. It devastated houses over a very big radius.

They saw it in the island of Cyprus, which is more than 150 miles away from Lebanon. It was gigantic — very simply put, one of the biggest explosions of all time, short of nuclear ones. And you can get a sense of what it meant since it has been estimated at one-tenth of Hiroshima.

Close to 300,000 people instantly turned homeless. I'm lucky that no one of my close relatives was injured. Even though their homes were severely damaged — with all the glass shattered, doors and window frames exploded — the flats weren't completely devastated.

The amount of destruction is unbelievable. It's like if there were a car bomb every 100 meters or 200 meters over a very large radius. The Lebanese have been used to car bombs: Beirut is a city that has been so much the theater of all sorts of violence but nothing compares to this.

Criminal Negligence and Sectarianism

It's more than neglect, it's criminal negligence if you know that you have something like this in the heart of a city and leave it in place for years. Fortunately, it was on the edge of the sea; had it been located in the middle of the city, the devastation would have been of course much, much bigger. But part of the blast went in the sea.

That anyone could leave such a quantity of highly explosive material for so long in such a place without any of the necessary precautions is just mind-boggling. You can't understand how any people, any responsible people, including I would say even the people working there... I mean imagine Suzi, that you were working in a place like this and you know that there is this thing and you know how dangerous it is.

You would go on strike — you'd say we can't work here and we won't work here until this is cleared. But the problem is they didn't do anything. Every few months a report sent to the authorities about that storage, about the necessity to do something, but nothing was done.

It's a very corrupt government, probably one of the most corrupt on earth. And there are plenty of them, as you know. But this one is very, very much corrupt, based on the partition of power based on religions and sects.

The political system of Lebanon is sectarian, basically a division of the spoils and the positions of power among warlords and political leaders. And you have this combination of an economic sector where the banking sector plays a major and central role, that is connected to the political class which dominates the system in Lebanon.

This is what produced what you have, a country whose rulers hide their money outside. They have been making billions and billions of dollars through every kind of trick you may think of, including all sorts of traffic in connection with the surrounding countries, with Syria, and so forth.

It has been a money-laundering country, money originating from the cultivation of drugs and from every traffic you can think of. Whatever illicit or criminal activities you can think of, you will find them exerted in Lebanon, with the difference that they are exerted by the ruling class, the country's ruling groups.

Hence there was a huge anger that started long before this blast, and burst out on the 17th of October last year in a popular uprising whose key slogan was, "All of them means all of them!"

Resentment and Despair

It was to my surprise that [on the occasion of French president Macron's visit] tens of thousands of people signed a petition demanding that Lebanon be put again under French Colonial mandate for 10 years.

Of course, it is likely that even those who launched it are aware that it can't fly but it's a gesture of despair, of resentment, of anger, saying that the guys ruling us are not up to the task and we need international rule or something like it. Some people would put it in a less colonial way and ask for the United Nations to rule the country.

There have been demands like that but of course that's going nowhere. It's people venting their anger and as you said, the fact is that those who rule Lebanon are not interested in getting the

support of the whole population. They are catering each for their own constituency.

That's a sectarian system and within the sectarian system you have a sub-sectarian political system, with every leader essentially interested in preserving the allegiance of his — and I mean his because there's no her, or almost no her — constituency, and that's how it works.

So you have a number of such allegiances, but no allegiance to the whole, to the public interest. I'm not speaking here of the true kind of social allegiance that a socialist would attend to, I'm just speaking in terms of what a bourgeois state is supposed to do under normal conditions and in order to ensure a minimum of hegemony, of consent, as you said, among the population.

Nothing of this is done and with the economic collapse and the huge depreciation of the local currency, the country has become divided, cut in two. It's no longer what you have in the bank that makes a difference, or your income. It's whether it is in Lebanese liras, the Lebanese currency, or in dollars.

If you are constantly getting dollars from abroad — they call them “fresh dollars” — you can withdraw them from the bank. If your dollars are not “fresh,” that is, if you had, say, \$100,000 in the bank a year ago, you can't withdraw it — except in Lebanese currency at the exchange rate fixed by the government, which is way below the market rate. So you can imagine what it means for those whose income is in the Lebanese currency.

This has turned a huge number of people into poverty. Close to half the population is now below the poverty line according to estimates — double the proportion prior to last fall — in a country that wasn't regarded as poor, compared to other countries of the Global South.

Lebanon was a relatively better off country, but it's gone through a major collapse, as we have seen in other countries such as Argentina where the local currency collapsed. The Lebanese economy is dollarized — and many of the rulers store their money in dollars abroad.

Since they're getting “fresh money” from their foreign accounts or from their sponsors — because many of them are linked to foreign states, whether the Saudi Kingdom or Iran or others — they don't care about the rest of the population.

Neoliberal Before Neoliberalism

Lebanon has been neoliberal before neoliberalism. This is a country of wild capitalism, savage capitalism. It's been like that for a very long time. It has long been regarded as a fiscal paradise, one of the world's prominent fiscal paradises, referring to tax-heaven countries where there is bank secrecy enabling money-laundering and where a lot of things happen below the surface.

No one is going to be worried as long as they have connections among the rulers and are giving these rulers a share of the pie. It has been like this for very long time. The country went into civil war as you know, in 1975, for 15 years there were ups and downs during those years, for sure, but they are regarded as one long period of war, which ended officially in 1990.

It ended through an agreement between the Syrian regime and the Saudi monarchy, that was sponsored by the United States. The key figure for years was Rafik al-Hariri [assassinated in 2005 — ed.], who was prime minister and presided over the country's postwar reconstruction, which was done on a crudely neoliberal basis.

All the terrible features of the Lebanese capitalist system that existed before 1975 were reproduced and even worse because of the conditions created by the war. So that's what you have: a mafia-like, a gangster-like kind of state, with the difference is that it's not one ruled by one single mafia. And it's perhaps better not to have one single mafia ruling your country, but competing mafias. The Lebanese equivalent of countervailing powers is different mafias balancing each other, though they eventually cooperate in exploiting the country.

Energized Protests

Today — we're speaking on Saturday, the eighth of August — has seen major demonstrations in the central parts of the city with, for the first time, occupation of ministries. Three ministries have been occupied. There were also attempts at occupying other ministries and the headquarters of the Bankers Association of Lebanon was attacked.

People know what they are targeting. They are targeting the whole political system and the economic system; and they see, very rightly so, that the two systems are completely intertwined, combined as a machinery of exploitation and of criminal negligence.

The new explosion has been absolutely spectacular, as you said, but the criminal negligence didn't start and end there. Lebanon's level of pollution is appalling. This is a country where you have garbage stacking up in the streets, a country where you don't have a regular and reliable supply of electricity, a country, that is, where very basic requirements of modern life are not ensured.

Criminal negligence didn't start on the fourth of August 2020; it's been there for many, many years, and the country's condition is unhealthy by many standards. The probability of diseases of certain kinds, including cancer, are quite high in Lebanon because of all that.

Today's protests have really gone qualitatively one step further in the form of struggle beyond what we have seen before, with to the occupation of ministries. Add to this that, symbolically, the protesters have hanged in the city center six cardboard figures representing the six key political leaders of the country.

In the good tradition of the sectarian distribution of power, they've chosen two Christians, two Muslim Sunnis and two Muslim Shia. So you had the President of the Republic and a rival political Christian figure; you had Saad al-Hariri, the Prime Minister right before the uprising last October, the son of the famous Rafik Hariri who was Prime Minister during the 1990s; and you had Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader and his close ally who leads another sectarian Shiite organization that is called Amal.

These six cardboard figures were hanged in Martyrs' Square. All this is symbolic, of course. It's like the petition about French tutelage in that it reveals the level of anger. All this is very worrying, I should also say: the level of anger in the country is such that anything can happen any time. This is, after all, a country that has been through wars and wars.

The previous uprising that started on 17 October last year and went on for several weeks, was a huge mass movement that covered the whole country. It was truly the first broad popular movement encompassing all parts of the country and people of all religious denominations, Christians and Muslims alike.

But it had subsided due to various factors, one of them being the pandemic. As in other countries, the pandemic has played a counter-revolutionary role in some way; it's managed to stop movements

in some countries in a very demobilizing way.

Take Algeria, for instance, where they had every week a huge demonstration: this stopped with COVID, because of the pandemic, which the government used as an opportunity to repress the movement. So that was part of the story, in addition to the fact that the movement in Lebanon didn't have a recognized representation and still doesn't have one.

It doesn't have any organized leadership — I'm not speaking of a centralized leadership, but of any kind of coordination that can speak in the name of the movement and put forward demands in a systematic way. In the absence of that, the movement went down, until you had this huge explosion.

It's a new beginning now. It wasn't a huge outpouring of people today in Beirut. It was estimated that fewer than 10,000 people were there, but these were people braving not only the pandemic but also other risks as it has become dangerous today to walk in central Beirut because of the shattered glass and all that can fall from devastated buildings. So we'll have to see how the movement goes on.

Uncertain Regional Outlook

The bigger picture is difficult to tell, precisely because of the problem that I mentioned. The issue is that in what was called the Second Arab Spring, four countries were involved, which are Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, with a major difference between three of them — Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon — and Sudan, the only country where you have a multitiered leadership of the mass movements, very democratic and very horizontal, including neighborhood committees.

In organization there is strength. Strength is not only in unity as the motto says, but also in organization. And that's what is lacking in Lebanon and that's why it's quite difficult to guess what will happen out of that, especially now that you have a new international intervention illustrated by Macron's visit. It will be followed by an attempt by Western governments to do something out of the crisis.

I'm afraid that they will use Lebanon again to settle regional and international accounts. This country, Suzi, has been for several decades a theater of regional and international wars. Foreign powers settled their accounts there at the expense of the country and of its population: the Saudi Kingdom, Iran, the United States, Israel, Syria, Iraq and others.

Because of the lack of organization, I don't see yet a possibility of a real democratic renewal, a radical democratic and social renewal of the country. But we should hope at least that this new tragedy will give a powerful impetus to the buildup of such a movement.

Suzi Weissman interviews Gilbert Achcar

P.S.

• Against the Current No. 208, September/October 2020:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc208/lebanons-catastrophe/>