

Lebanon: “They are all implicated”: An Interview with Joey Ayoub on the Beirut Explosion

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On August 4th, an explosion of nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate at the port of Beirut, Lebanon, left more than 170 dead, thousands wounded, and hundreds of thousands homeless. “This was criminal incompetence, and they are all implicated,” says Lebanese writer and researcher Joey Ayoub who has participated in Beirut’s social movements in recent years. Ayoub is completing a PhD at the University of Zurich and is the founder of the blog *Hummus for Thought* and the podcast *The Fire These Times*. He was interviewed by *New Politics* editorial board member Daniel Fischer.

If you’re willing to share, how has the August 4th explosion impacted your friends and family? What has been your personal reaction?

Some of them got away with light bruises, while others had to be hospitalized. In terms of material damage, it ranged from a few broken glasses to the entire apartment blown away. My mother’s stained-glass workshop was badly affected and her multiple projects — mainly churches and museums — have been destroyed by the blast. We also have relatives whose survival was not certain, but thankfully as of now they seem stable.

As for my personal reaction, it was primarily shock. Shock would then be replaced by anger and then shock again. A part of me still does not believe it, and I’ve been trying to emotionally deal with the consequences of what we saw, which is difficult to do.

How has the explosion affected Beirut’s most marginalized residents including refugees and the migrant domestic workers in the *kafala* (sponsorship) system?

Those affected that were already in vulnerable positions suddenly found themselves with a serious additional problem to deal with. Many migrant domestic workers have been trying to leave Lebanon for months now, but a combination of Covid-19 restrictions, Lebanese racist policies, and the corruption of the various implicated African and Asian countries has meant that they’re still stuck in the country.

The *kafala* system that governs the lives of migrant workers in Lebanon traps them in abusive relationships of dependence with their Lebanese sponsors/employers. Their legal status is dependent on that of these employers. This means for example that if an Ethiopian woman leaves an abusive Lebanese household, she is automatically an illegal resident in Lebanon and becomes at the mercy of the country’s carceral and racist system.

Are there any specific responses to current events by Lebanese artists, musicians, or protesters that you think should be more widely known?

There are hundreds of initiatives designed to get immediate funds and aid to those who most need it. A friend posted a thread on Twitter [link [here](#)] listing the groups supporting the most vulnerable communities which people can donate to.

What would you identify as the main social causes of August 4th's explosions? To what extent is your analysis shared by Beirut's protesters? How do the explosions connect to their overall grievances and their chant "all of them means all of them"?

This was criminal incompetence, and they are all implicated. We know for a fact that all high-ranking politicians and intelligence services were aware of the presence of the ammonium nitrate, from the army to Hezbollah to the president to the prime minister.

In terms of to what extent this is shared, I'd say fairly widely. Protesters have been repeating the "all of them means all of them" chant and demanding that the entire sectarian political elite resign. What the explosions symbolized most clearly is how there is no point in trying to debate which sectarian political party is less unacceptable as the very corruption of the system they depend on was what led to the explosion. One ends up debating which one of them has less blood on their hands, not whether they do or not. This is why they must all go.

How would you characterize the class and ethnic composition, organizational structure, political orientation, and tactics of the uprising? Do they differ from when protests first broke out last October? How has the uprising been affected by major developments including Lebanon's changes in government, COVID-19, and the recent explosion?

The protest movement has been very diverse in terms of Lebanese sectarian communities. There have been major protests from Nabatieh in the south to Tripoli in the north, with traditional support bases that would otherwise go to the sectarian parties showing defiance to them. This threatened Hezbollah in particular in the first few weeks, which led Nasrallah to make the very unusual move of giving multiple speeches in that period, which he used to demonize protesters and call us foreign agents. Other sectarian parties followed suit with similar narratives.

There's no coherent political orientation other than anti-sectarianism. Protesters include everyone from liberals to leftists and a fair number of conservatives as well. Every single political party in power right now has a right-wing and sectarian platform, so we're not really dealing with a political spectrum in the first place.

Covid-19 slowed down the uprising and worsened the economic crisis. People were forced to deal with urgent matters, which just worsened even more dramatically with the explosion. In many ways, we are in emergency mode right now. This will inevitably affect the uprising as well. I don't expect people on the streets every day, but I expect that on the days when protests do happen, they will get increasingly angrier.

How did the people of Lebanon react when Prime Minister Hassan Diab's cabinet resigned on Monday (August 10)? What do they hope will happen next, and what do you hope?

I can only speak on my behalf here and say that I hope that both the president and the speaker of parliament are also forced to leave. The prime minister has been the weak link for a few years now, including during the Saad Hariri years. It is the other two that are more difficult to remove. Diab resigning alone doesn't make much of a difference in my opinion.

How are Hezbollah and other sectarian forces responding to the current crisis?

By doubling down and ignoring its root causes, as they are all implicated in it. Hezbollah has in

particular earned the title of most reactionary party as its obsession with maintaining the status quo at all costs, regardless of the suffering on the ground, has even shocked some of its traditional supporters. Hezbollah's allies, the Free Patriotic Movement and Amal, have also reacted in a reactionary way.

As for the sectarian parties currently viewing themselves as 'the opposition,' namely Said Hariri's Future Movement, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces, and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, they have been trying to ride the wave of the revolution rather unsuccessfully.

A few in the Western Left are spreading theories that "Israel caused the massive explosion at the Beirut port" and that "the US is trying to carry out a 'color revolution' in Lebanon to remove Hezbollah from the government." What do you think of these claims, and why are they being advanced?

It's the usual claims designed to dehumanize revolutionaries that come from countries that these leftists don't want to think about. They've done the same from Hong Kong to Belarus, so there's no real surprise there in my opinion. I view these groups as racists who are incapable or unwilling to view us as humans. I make no real difference between these so-called leftists and right-wingers, as their conclusions are the same.

What are the main challenges that the uprising will need to overcome going forward?

This sectarian political class, first and foremost. They have been ruling for decades now and are deeply entrenched in our society. Many Lebanese depend on them for their salaries, while others draw their identity from these parties' founding myths.

Besides that, fundamental problems in Lebanese society are still with us and present within the protest movement. Here I'm thinking especially of misogyny, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and so on. Sectarianism is of course still present even among anti-sectarian forces due to how institutionalized it has become. All of these are issues that we have to deal with to move forward.

While much attention is focused on Beirut, how would you connect these events to trends in the rest of Lebanon and in the broader region?

I've been looking at similarities and differences [link [here](#)] between Hong Kong and Lebanon which is leading to some interesting results. Besides that, I'd describe the protests in Lebanon as part of a global revolt against authoritarianism.

What actions can people around the world take to support the people of Beirut?

For the foreseeable future, our main concerns are both immediate aid, including medical equipment, and accountability. So on that note, I'd ask your readers to check the groups I [listed](#) that are receiving donations.

Finally, we've been calling for an international investigation into the explosion, because we know that no domestic one will amount to anything. This is something that the so-called international community can actually do something about because the Lebanese government is heavily dependent on promised funds coming from multiple Western and Gulf countries.

Joey Ayoub is a Lebanese writer and researcher currently completing a PhD at the University of Zurich. He was editor for the MENA region at *IFEX* and *Global Voices*, and he runs the *Hummus for Thought* blog. He tweets @joeyayoub.

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