



03-08-2021

## One year on from Beirut's explosion, Lebanon is more broken than ever

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Bissan Fakhri



Writing in the dark without electricity, Bissan Fakhri recounts the blast that devastated Lebanon's capital one year ago, and charts the country's dizzying collapse into utter dysfunction and despair ever since.

Like many others in the city, I felt the explosion in two waves.

During the first, I leapt from my couch to look out the windows, searching for smoke or rubble from the airstrike I was sure had just taken place. My apartment overlooks the neighborhood of Sin al-Fil, littered with glass skyscrapers. The sun fell on these in such a way at 6:08 p.m. that, in my panic, the orange glints looked like rockets or fire tumbling to the ground. The second wave was so strong I was convinced the building was collapsing. Trained by years of my mother's fretting, I sent a voice note to the family WhatsApp group only seconds after it ended: "There are airstrikes, but I'm fine! There are airstrikes, I'm okay!" Grabbing my wallet, my keys, and a phone charger, I ran to the door, sending another one: "Tell me what's happening, please someone tell me what's happening!" And then a text message, in case they hadn't heard my voice notes: "tell my mom I'm okay." In the days that followed, when the sound of broken glass was crunching under our feet, and when my knees wouldn't stop their shaking, I learned just how many parents were never able to reach their kids that day.

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That whole summer, it had felt like we were close to an implosion. The national currency had lost 80 percent of its value. The banks had stolen everyone's money and lifetime savings, except for the very rich and well-connected, who had managed to smuggle their millions out. The depths into which the economic crisis was soon going to plunge us were becoming more apparent, and people were already struggling to eat, find medicine, and educate their children. The Covid-19 pandemic had hastened our decline, and forced us off the streets, where many had stayed since the [anti-regime uprising](#) erupted across the country in October

2019. We had gone from the elation of revolution; reclaiming our public squares and dancing with each other in the streets; to the surreality of curfews, masks, and disturbing images of mass burials in Italy and New York. In the choking heat and humidity of July and August, the reality of our demise, and how long and painful it would be, had set in. The signs of decay were already there.

And then the world blew up around us.

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Soon after the explosion, calls for O negative blood sounded across the city and beyond for our thousands of injured. I put on two masks and drove to the Hôtel-Dieu hospital to donate. My tires crunched on broken glass the entire journey, even though I was kilometers away from the blast's epicenter. I realized my mistake quickly as I neared the hospital: I was yet another car in a surge of traffic transporting the wounded to get help, and family members coming to look for their missing loved ones. A Red Cross volunteer jumped out of an ambulance, arms flailing, shouting and pleading for cars to move to let the ambulance pass. I got off the road as quickly as I could, but in the dark, in the crunch, I was stricken by the apocalyptic sight of the cars and the people driving them. Metal shells; every window blown off; and their drivers, some yelling into phones, some quiet and haunted, their eyes wide, their headlights illuminating shattered shards of glass.

My anxious mind, for years controlling and tempering fear with lists, made one for the city: Find the missing, help the wounded, bury the dead, take revenge.

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The realization of the enormity of our loss, the scale of this human aberration, came in waves too. On television, I watched the family members of missing firefighters and port workers share photos from their phones to the cameras, watched their faces crumble over the many hours of live broadcasting, when it became obvious their loved ones weren't coming home. I saw the faces of four young women, nurses at the St George Hospital, all killed. I heard the story of how their colleague Pamela Zeinoun, who survived, rushed three premature babies to safety. Rawan Mesto, a Syrian waitress in her 20s, had worked at the Cyrano restaurant to support her family; they struggled to raise the money needed to bury her. The little faces of Alexandra Naggear and Isaac Oehlers, the youngest victims of the blast, were imprinted into my mind, and I'll never forget them as long as I live.

Then there was the realization of the many close calls; of being home when I wasn't supposed to be; and then listening to my friends' stories and how close I was to losing them. Death plucked its victims at random on 4 August, and had the 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored at the port by our criminal regime chosen to explode just seconds later or earlier, the list of casualties would have been different. It's not without bitterness that I firmly believe the pandemic probably saved hundreds if not thousands of lives. The hundreds who work at the national electricity company's head office overlooking the port were at home because of the lockdown. The building is still a skeleton now, one year later. At a popular yoga studio nearby, where dozens would ordinarily practice during the 6 p.m. class, the entire roof collapsed onto the floor. The pubs and bars in the nearby Mar Mikhael neighborhood, which would usually have been full for happy hour, were emptier for fear

of the virus.

So young were so many of the victims that their funerals were conducted like weddings, as tradition dictates. White coffins were spun to the sound of ululations, as parents wailed nearby. I awoke one morning, heart racing, to the sound of gunfire so strong that I ran to take shelter in a windowless bathroom, terrified of falling stray bullets. The young firefighter Ralph Mallahi, from my neighborhood, was being laid to rest. I saw a video of him strutting through our streets as people clapped for health workers during the pandemic, pretending the audience was cheering for him and taking a bow. He was hilarious, so I giggled for a few seconds, forgetting myself, until remembering he was gone forever and sobbed. Later I learned that a football player for the Ansar team, Mohamad Atwi, was killed by a stray bullet to the head, presumably from one of the funerals of the explosion victims.

On 8 August, four days after the blast, a [video](#) circulated on Facebook of a young woman with a megaphone calling to the residents of the eerily empty streets through an open car window:

To the people of traumatized Beirut, to the people of traumatized Beirut: they blew up the city and our children and our friends. They blew up our homes and our streets and our livelihoods. The only thing we have left is each other. Today at 4 p.m. we will lay the victims of the Beirut explosion to rest, and move from the Electricity Company to Martyrs Square. Justice

for the victims, revenge upon the regime.

I showed up to Martyrs Square at 5 p.m., and riot police and parliamentary guards were already firing tear gas on protesters. I met a group of friends gathered at the edges of the square; pale survivors. I didn't hug any of them—Covid, and our medical system was overwhelmed.

Sitting at the edges of the square, I was boiling with rage and hatred. For the past few days the only thing lulling me to sleep had been images of vengeance. I'd lived and breathed the idea of human rights and its pursuit my entire adult life, but now could only find peace and sleep imagining the top brass in our ruling class dragged through streets, bloodied and trampled. The feeling was evidently popular, because across the country, people repeated the slogan "Get the nooses ready," and in Martyrs Square that day effigies of numerous political leaders were hanged.

The adrenaline failed to propel me toward the front of the clashes. My legs were jelly. At the sound of gunfire, I retreated. Four days after causing one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history, the Lebanese regime shot at us. The Lebanese regime shot at us. It unleashed violence into a crowd of people that included the wounded; families and friends of people who had been murdered in the explosion; people who'd lost their homes and businesses and couldn't afford to fix them, some because their money had been stolen in the banks. The Lebanese regime shot at its citizenry after it had blown up our capital, when the missing were still unaccounted for, when the dead were still being buried—all this just meters away from the explosion site. These were the new lists I composed in my head, pitiful lists of our suffering and humiliations.

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One year on from the Beirut explosion, our killers are still among us. In July, security forces beat up and tear gassed demonstrators who included the families of the explosion's victims. They were simply demanding justice, protesting the decision by caretaker Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi to shield senior officials from questioning by the judge formally appointed to investigate the blast. The country is not only deprived of justice, but these same killers are responsible for further structural violence; a slow death that is less bloody than the explosion, but causes a collective pain still palpable. I write this in the dark, in sweltering heat, as fuel shortages cause severe electricity shortages across the country. Gas station queues blockade our already-choked roads, and people hustle desperately for scarce baby milk and life-saving medication for everything from heart disease to depression. The explosion was a real reminder of the frailty of the human body, and this new decay subjects our bodies to a different kind of violence. In one weekend, I counted six friends stricken with food poisoning, stomachs rejecting the food that has spoiled in the summer heat with no power to run fridges or freezers. My own stomach is uneasy most days, and I genuinely don't know if it's the nerves or the lack of electricity for food storage.

8 August 2020 was the last day I protested in Beirut. I haven't been back to the streets since. One year into the explosion, surrounded by decay and despair, I have lost my belief that we know how to change the Lebanese regime. I reject questions of why people in Lebanon haven't revolted, and what it's going to take to get us into the streets, both tinged with accusations of succumbing to apathy. So much

weight is given to protests and demonstrations, and they are invested in a promise to deliver change that isn't fair. The October 2019 uprising was the greatest weapon in our arsenal of nonviolent tactics. True to a real revolution, there was a reckoning with many of our own selves, in particular those who had had allegiances to political parties that went back not just years, but decades, and were handed down the family line like an heirloom. There was a sacrifice of sectarian fealty, and a coming together so over-the-top in its expression that I remember cringing at the sentimentality. It still didn't work. Protests won't force remorseless, power-hungry leaders to loosen their grip on the nation.

The catastrophe of 4 August, however, birthed a solidarity so strong it left me breathless. In the days that followed, when even the unscathed were open wounds, we turned to community. We swept glass, we fed each other, we tended to wounds and listened. The explosion made the invisible visible. So much of the suffering that had gone ignored in the underbelly of our unfettered capitalist, racist, and patriarchal country was exposed. When the money and support poured in, those who needed it most had been suffering long before the explosion. Volunteering with a friend, we drove a migrant domestic worker to the emergency room for a nosebleed that hadn't stopped in three days. In the apartment where she had taken shelter, she was ostracized for fear it was Covid-related. On the way, she explained to us she hadn't actually been injured in the explosion, but rather her Lebanese employer had hit her across the face. Many who needed medical care after the blast had already needed it before it. For families who needed food, and elderly people living alone who needed attention, it was the same.



These days, when I'm alone, I flit from screen to screen and app to app, refusing to be with myself. But I search for and find solace in my community. With the people around me, I am more real and honest than I was before the explosion, revealing past traumas and insecurities I'd found taboo before. I ask my friends if I can hug them. I kiss their foreheads and cheeks. I beg them to get blood tests and memorize the dates of their parents' vaccination appointments. We share memes, argue, and laugh at the absurd. In this broken country, I take care of them and they take care of me. Tomorrow, when we mark the anniversary of the explosion, I'll be back in the streets again. Even if our presence in Martyrs Square doesn't shake this regime or grant us justice, I want to be there. Standing steadfast in the face of this rotten regime, being together in solidarity and shared recognition, is all we have left.

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