

Beirut Catastrophe

By Bassam Haddad and Ziad Abu Rish

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Like so many, I am beyond mad at the criminal incompetence and corruption of the Lebanese Government, Bureaucracy, and their attendant business cronies/supporters who privilege profit over everything with almost no checks on their horror, save the self-congratulatory "open" discourse in public spaces, which serves more to vent than to exact concrete accountability. Hence the necessary courageous protests and mobilization we have observed for some time being the beaming light amid rot.

A much more careful and detailed account is [Ziad Abu-Rish's](#) take below on what happened yesterday, and implications. I asked him to synthesize his social media comments for potential publication (perhaps on Jadaliyya). Thanks Ziad.

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By [Ziad Abu-Rish](#)

The nature of Tuesday's explosion in the port of Beirut and the extent of the damage across the city and beyond is not yet clear. There are plenty of unconfirmed reports and it is hard to take official statements as transparent.

That being said, the effects of the explosion were felt across the city and beyond. For those familiar with the geography, nearby areas such Karantina and Gemmayzeh as well as further away areas such as Manara, Hamra, Burj Hammoud, Sin al-Fil, and Brummana felt the explosion.

The port area itself is largely decimated, with adjacent neighborhoods destroyed and those one neighborhood removed reportedly looking like a warzone. Much of the most-damaged areas are only now being accessed by those searching for victims, rescue teams having been forced to wait out the flames or make sure remaining structures would not collapse on them.

The anecdotes and reports of windows shattering, balcony doors collapsing, and ceilings caving in across Beirut (to say nothing of the "exterior damage" on the streets that are today lined with broken glass) and beyond are true and a testament to how powerful the explosion was.

As of 3pm EST on Wednesday 5 August, official estimates claim 135 dead, 5000 wounded, dozens missing, and approximately 300,000 made homeless or unable to properly make use of their homes. At least three hospitals in Beirut have either closed down or evacuated significant parts of their facilities. One estimate puts the material damage in the 3-to-5 billion US dollar range.

Most everyone was terrified, immediately assuming what is the worst-case scenario in their minds, having flashbacks to their own previous experience with bombings/shelling, or reliving some type of trauma. Many folks sitting in their homes were injured, others leisuring, meeting, or working at cafes or hotels had window panes fall on them. Office and other buildings experienced similar damages or injuries. In all cases, most people were frightened and panicked.

Many ERs were overwhelmed the night of the bombing and even the morning after. Anecdotal evidence indicates some people had to visit several hospitals before being able to get treated, some going to Tripoli, Saida, or parts of Shuf. In other cases, folks waited hours to contact the Civil Defense or the Red Cross. Ambulance sirens, typically a weekly (if at all) occurrence in some neighborhoods, were that night a regular feature despite being relatively far from explosion.

People were/are panicked in Beirut and the country. This explosion comes in the wake of a massive surge in COVID-19, economic collapse, and escalating internal and regional tensions. It is worth stressing that the major part of a food- and otherwise-dependent political economy is now completely non-operational. Beyond the immediate deaths, injuries, material damage, and individual/collective trauma, there is no way to know which of the many explanations are in fact the case.

What we do know is that a port hanger containing 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate was the cause of the large explosion (note: Timothy McVeigh used 2.3 tons of this substance—mixed with another—in his 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City). That highly explosive material, used for bombs and fertilizer, had been at the Beirut port for at least six years. It was initially confiscated, was known to top-level officials in the relevant Lebanese

bureaucracy, and was the subject of several formal warnings about the hazardous nature of the material and its current storing. What triggered the explosion of this ammonium nitrate is not yet clear, though various video footage show a pre-existing nearby fire which had already caught the attention of both the public and on-the-scene officials.

Beyond this, we do not know much. There is no way to confirm or deny the two most circulating explanations (not to mention other possibilities). First, an accidental spark of some sort caused nearby materials (some say fireworks) to catch fire and explode, eventually spreading to the nearby ammonium nitrate. If true, this along with the criminality of leaving the explosive material unaddressed for years, is another example of how policies and negligence of governments, ministries, and various bureaucracies in Lebanon cost people their lives, livelihoods, and sense of security. Second, the site was targeted by fire, bomb, or rocket to either destabilize the country in general or target a port-located arms depot/shipment belonging to Hizballah. If true, this is another example of how regional rivalries and the ability external powers such as the United State and Israel to wage elective wars, assaults, and bombings with impunity cost people their lives, livelihood, and sense of security.

Neither scenario is beyond the realm of real possibility. There is no way at this point to confirm or discount either of these or other explanations regarding what caused the ammonium nitrate to explode. Therefore, it remains best to wait for the unanimous "official" explanation in Lebanon. But until then, and long after, it will be those people living in Lebanon (whether citizens, refugees, migrant workers, or others) who pay the price.

There will be time for more analysis (in coverage and quality) of causes and culpability, and for understanding the extent of the material damage to the port, the city, and the country—all of which are lived spaces. But for now, all eyes must be on immediate medical attention for those in need, including search and rescue.