

Solidarity as Act of Resistance

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On August 4th 2020, an explosion of apocalyptic proportion which tremor was felt as far as Cyprus shook Lebanon. For technical reasons, which remain unknown, circa 2700 tons of ammonium nitrates, stored at the Beirut port for over five years caused two consecutive explosions believed to be the third most powerful worldwide. The devastation that this criminal act has caused is unfathomable. More than 200 innocent lives were lost either on the spot or after being buried under the rubble for several days. At the time of writing this article, many people are still missing with no indication as to whether they may be still alive or not. Some 5000 are wounded with various prognosis for recovery. Some 300,000 have found themselves totally homeless with the inability to secure immediate decent and safe shelters. A number of areas have been totally wiped out of which, many host the city's poorest and most vulnerable including migrant workers already hit very badly by the economic crisis and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hospitals have been partially or even totally destroyed creating instantly a major deficit in health care services, also amidst a full-blown Covid-19 pandemic. Public amenities and infrastructure have also been damaged many beyond possibilities of repair at a time when the country's coffers are depleted following years of corruption, wheels and deals and Ponzi schemes which have intensified during the past two years

Citizens and residents take action

Citizens and residents of the city have always taken various forms of initiatives to sweep, clean, protect, and safeguard their streets and neighborhoods as well as lend a helping hand to residents who are vulnerable and frail. Many of us bear witness to the long years of the civil war when residents cleaned their own streets and removed rubble left by daily shelling courtesy of the warring militias.

A similar phenomenon materialized almost immediately after the August 4th criminal explosions in the form of diverse acts of solidarity. Indeed, and within hours of the explosions, spontaneous groups of young women and men armed with brooms, spades, buckets and other basic material roamed the streets of Gemmayzeh, Mar Mikhael, Mdawwar, Geitaoui, Borj Hammoud, Karantina, Ashrafieh and other affected areas. Whereas young women and men gathered spontaneously, various local scouts' outfits, community based organisations as well as non-government organisations also mobilized and organized to provide a wide array of support to the distressed population. As per the testimony of Ayman A., an eye-witness, *"the ability of young people to deploy well organized and equipped assistance was exemplary; their capacity to deal with catastrophe in less than 24 hours from a major shock is bewildering especially that these are mostly very young volunteers"*. The witness continues and says *"this is reminiscent of*



what happened back in July 2006. However, I felt that this was people's way to deal with the trauma, by being there to help others".

Less than a day after the explosions, the streets were filled with volunteers. A Syrian resident whose house in Mdawwar was severely damaged and whose two children sustained injury and had to be hospitalized told me *"as soon as I returned home, I realized the gravity of the damages. But, young women and men were filling the streets and were calling on each one of us and were offering their help. I have never seen something like this. We could not have done any cleaning or immediate repairs without them"*.

But, who are these young people and how and why did they mobilise so quickly. I spoke with Karl K. (15 year old) who has been on the streets as of the second day after the catastrophe. Karl said: *"on Tuesday, we immediately fixed our own house which was damaged and then, the house of a school friend who was alone, injured and needed stitching. The next day, along with my family and my friend who was feeling better, we got basic equipment and we all went to Mar Mikhail. It was packed with people and volunteers. We decided to head to Karantina which was closer to the blasts and less people were working there. We met with the residents who were distraught. We started cleaning their houses. We realized that many had lost everything including kitchen equipment. The day after, we decided to cook at home and take meals with us as well. How can people eat if they lost their gas stoves? Every day, we do the same thing. The armed forces stand there and watch. They do not help. How can the government leave all these people like this? Ayb!"* Karl has been taking part in the uprising since October 17th. For him, the explosion is a final straw that broke the camel's back. He adds *"Things must change and we need to push for that. The government is bad and does not do what it is supposed to do. Ayb!"* As of today, Karl who is also a young chef will start cooking with one of the active popular kitchens. He tells me *"I want to help not just with money. I want to work as well"*.

Organised solidarity has also swamped the devastated streets in the form of emergency tents, health support, provision of temporary shelters and placements, medical aid as well as mental health support. In fact, the recognition of short term and long term impact of this disaster on the mental health of individuals especially children and the mobilization to address this is very much a testimony to the level of maturity of various actors and activists. Popular kitchens and food tents are available in many locations and distribution to homes and to residents with mobility challenges is also taking place. With 300,000 rendered homeless, tens of individual and CSO initiatives are taking place to provide at least immediate shelters to as many people as possible. Civil society organisations are also carrying out various forms of surveys of damages, an activity which should normally be done by official organisms. The voluntary mobilization of migrant workers who are helping in cleaning the streets is simply amazing especially given their experience with racism, exploitation and oppression by their Lebanese employers and by Lebanese society in general. Moreover, and in addition to the amazing work carried out by the Lebanese Red Cross, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society mobilized and deployed all over the affected city to offer help to the affected population and despite being

kicked out from one of the areas where they were offering help simply because they are Palestinians. Perhaps one of the most touching form of solidarity and support is the deployment of animal welfare society such as Animals Lebanon who has set up a tent in Tabaris and has thus far reunited some 75 pets with their families.

What do these acts of solidarity and resistance tell us?

I sincerely hope and expect that one outcome of this major criminal act will be in unmasking the multiple layers of corruption and criminality which although ever so present in Lebanon, amplified even further in the post-Taef Lebanese state which strengthened the sectarian power sharing system. Thirty years after the end of the Lebanese civil war and the succession of scandals as well as the gradual (and rapid) dismantling of the vestige of a state by the war lords who have been rehabilitated and recycled into politicians

In dealing with an oppressive and murderous police state, all options are possible and there is probably no right and wrong. Residents and citizens are losing their lives, livelihoods, hopes and dreams every day and in various forms. Choices of how to act are several yet not all may be judicious or even useful on the long run. Yet, and after each mega disaster, we keep observing a similar pattern... young women and men take to the streets with their shovels and brooms and start clearing rubble. It seems as if the lack of faith or trust in a responsible and performing government is now generational. Have we replaced the responsibility to demand accountability from the state by immediate citizens (and residents) action? Have we reformulated, reshaped and recreated the definition of active citizenship to mean “taking matters into our own hands” and not waiting for any support from the government?

Most of those actively working on the ground have no expectation whatsoever from their government, a government that has yet to show any empathy with its people and residents. While this is a totally understandable position, one wonders if this means that citizens and residents have given up on the mere concept of state accountability, as many seem to think. This question remains to be answered but, thus far, what the immediate observations of the initiatives that citizens and residents have taken, the empathy and compassion that has been generated is a case in point in how acts of solidarity and resistance take shape and save lives and livelihoods in the process.

Box one: Asfari Institute appeal for testimonials

In an effort to contribute to the creation of a repository of information and data, the Asfari Institute is calling on all activists and volunteers to share with use their testimonials (written or recorded). This will help us compile qualitative data and narratives on activism within the context of state absence and failure.

Box 2: Initiatives by the American University of Beirut

Thus far, the American University of Beirut has deployed two initiatives to assist the distressed population as well as assist in amplifying the impact of the relief efforts.

Shake Up Beirut (www.khadditbeirut.com) has created an information and technical support hub linking activists with volunteers, affected individual, and expert support in health, environment, education and shelter.

Another initiative by AUB and specifically Centre for Civic Engagement & Community Services (CCECS) which has started a “Beirut Recovery Project” which is recruiting volunteer experts to map the houses damaged by the Beirut port explosion (www.aub.edu.lb/ccecs)

Box 3: Epilogue

On August 8th, I participated in the first call for demonstration after the horrific and criminal explosion. Two hours into the demonstration, I was tired and decided to head back home but needed to rest a bit. I went into Paul’s café in Gemmayze where many protestors were gathering or taking a short respite. Young people accosted me kindly and asked me whether I needed to take a seat or have a cold drink of water or whether I needed to use the restroom. They insisted that I should rest and offered their services to help me in any way. Despite a history of internal strife and violence, despite various divisions and age-old intestine fights and discords, various forms of kindness and solidarity have emerged, and which will undoubtedly perdure. The scenes that many of us have observed on the streets, the inter-connectedness that were created amongst individuals, and the different acts of solidarity and everyday resistance are in a way reminiscent of the genesis of Black Lives Matter in 2013 as a powerful movement against institutionalized and systemic racism. Many pop songs came to embody BLM’s philosophy and spirit. The one that comes to mind is *Now that we’ve found love* by The O’Jays (1973). The song goes on to say... “*Now that we’ve found love, what are we gonna do with it...*”. Somewhere in this bleak and gory moment, outstanding acts of resistance were born out of care and love in the face of oppression and gratuitous crime. This is where hope comes from.