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The Tripoli Protests Are Lebanon's Canary in the Coal Mine

by [Hassan Mneimneh](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh](#)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.

**Brief Analysis**

Dire circumstances are pushing Lebanese people to the edge, which could bring violent results.

Recent violent events in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli seem to have gone mostly unnoticed outside of the region. It may be unsurprising that violence in Tripoli or elsewhere in Lebanon fails to rise to the level of global news. Fifteen months of protests—which the pandemic have rendered sporadic and less pertinent—have a low tally of seven victims. While this is a relatively fortunate outcome for both the protestors and the longer term relationship between the citizenry and the uniformed forces, it paradoxically lowers the protests' appeal as a front-page story for the international press. Yet the Tripoli protests are important for understanding the likely future of Lebanon, especially given an international willingness to work with Hezbollah towards 'reform.'

The emergence of violent protests against state institutions, as witnessed in Tripoli, has serious implications for the view coalescing in some Washington circles that Lebanon may as well be managed by Iran through its local proxy, Hezbollah. Tripoli is a signal—well worth noticing—that this idea is misguided, and that allowing Lebanon to continue down its current path may well ignite a new destabilizing competition that has both regional and international ramifications.

Hezbollah Control at Any Price

Lebanon's perceived geo-strategic value in its deeply troubled region has in recent years devolved to the security threat that it constitutes against Israel. The Iranian proxy Hezbollah, the source of this threat, has carefully calibrated its high-pitch rhetoric of terminal enmity towards Israel—a central part of the group's branding, designed

for local consumption—while maintaining an actual posture of insuring that all occasional confrontations with this foe remain within the implicit yet mutually agreed upon rules of engagement designed to diffuse tensions.

The relative stability that Hezbollah has thus secured has enabled it to devote its resources to the dual pursuit of serving Iranian interests across the region, most notably in Syria, and of consolidating its grip on Lebanon through the asymmetrical symbiosis that it has achieved and imposed on Lebanon's political class. Mired in clientelism, communitarianism, and kleptocracy, Lebanon's ruling elite have in large part accepted Hezbollah's patronage, even if some of its main figures have bemoaned its undue influence.

This stability has had its repercussions on the state and society in Lebanon, which has thus succumbed to control by a foreign-directed force—Hezbollah—that proclaims a primary concern of protecting its own base of support from much of the economic and social burden from which the Lebanese public currently suffers. In a corrosive symbiosis, the voraciously corrupt ruling class has provided civil cover for this de facto takeover, and have demonstrated little interest in acting in the collective national interest and preventing the collapse of Lebanon as a whole.

The roots of the recent violence in Tripoli lie in the realization of this untenable arrangement, and in Lebanon's much larger, now atrophied popular movement. The "October 2019 Revolution," which attracted broad cross-sections of the Lebanese public, was a direct result of the country's untenable state of affairs. But since then, the situation has further degraded. Lebanese depositors no longer have access to their funds in banks while political and economic elites have syphoned their wealth away through transfers abroad. The public have sunk into unprecedented levels of poverty, shortages, and despair—made even more severe by the pandemic and by the explosive example of corruption and mismanagement in the Beirut Port blast on August 4, 2020.

While subsequent events have made the reality of protestors' accusations even more visible, the prospects of success for the "revolution" were hampered from the beginning by limitations in capacity, organization, and leadership. Yet it was Hezbollah and the ruling elite's adept maneuvering that ultimately succeeded in leveraging the pandemic and ensuing international apathy to the hegemony of an Iranian proxy clearly running Lebanon into the ground.

This "victory" against the backdrop of an actual collapse of the fiscal, financial, and economic systems of the country has led to even more brazen displays of corruption and neglect. The country's political class dismissed the international community's warning that Lebanon must regain its confidence to secure the support needed for recovery. Field hospitals provided by friendly governments as assistance against the pandemic and the August blast were left un-deployed. Flour supplied by Iraq to mitigate rampant poverty was not distributed, lest it reduces the profit of the "bread cartel." Food supplies—subsidized by earmarked funds to benefit the Lebanese consumer, whose income, when still available, was cut to less than a third as a result of currency devaluation—found their way to markets as distant as Kuwait and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Whether these actions were calculated to push the Lebanese public to despair or merely reflected of the insatiable quest for ill-gained wealth, the result was the further attrition of Lebanon's middle class, the putative incubator of the drive for meaningful reform.

Further ransacking the already depleted Lebanon may destroy the middle class, with implications that may span decades. It will not, however, provide the Iranian proxies and kleptocrats with a docile country to rule. The violent protests that Tripoli has witnessed may indeed be a harbinger of the more dangerous phase into which Lebanon may sink.

The Warning of Tripoli

Tripoli, Lebanon's second most populous city, has long suffered from government neglect. Its pre-civil war [international exposition grounds](#)—designed in the 1960s to draw millions of visitors per year but never finished—are left to collapse in the elements. Likewise, the city's industrial zone is abandoned to rust, and its once emblematic

orchid gardens have all but disappeared. Tripoli's regression has been further compounded by the ongoing misery in the surrounding province of Northern Lebanon—both under the Syrian occupation until 2005 and as a result of the absence of government development programs since.

While the majority of Tripoli's inhabitants are Sunni Lebanese, its reputation as the “Qandahar of Lebanon”—implying that it is home to jihadist elements—is far more an artifact of deliberate disinformation spread to stoke fears of “the Sunnis” to benefit Hezbollah than a reflection of the currently extremely marginal ability of radical groups to recruit in this city. In fact, the ‘resistance axis’ of Iran, Hezbollah, and the Syrian regime have engaged in a systematic campaign to push the population of Tripoli towards radicalization in order to serve as a “controlled opposition.” These efforts range from direct support to Islamist factions in the city to assassinations, the bombing of mosques, and daily acts of intimidation.

Yet at the start of the October 2019 protests, Tripoli responded to the calls of national unity and civil action with unequalled, festive, massive participation. It took the resistance axis's full toolkit of subversion and repression to even partially undo Tripoli's renewed integration into the common national consciousness.

Tripoli's middle class, actual and putative, shares the fate of its counterparts across Lebanon. Pushed to near despair, its ranks are shrinking even as the expectation of a re-ignition of the October revolution recedes. Tripoli is already home to large poor and destitute strata, both from the city itself and of migrants from its hinterland. The capacity of these Lebanese to further endure the loss of their meager privileges alongside the continuing graft and plunder of their national resources is at near exhaustion.

Tripoli is also home to billionaires. They and others from the ruling class, together with other aspirants, have successfully capitalized on the needs of some of Tripoli's poor in order to mobilize paid support and orchestrate calculated protest actions for their own ends.

In the past few weeks, Tripoli has witnessed an unprecedented escalation of violent protests, culminating in the burning of government buildings and security facilities. It is politically expedient for local and national leaders to attribute the events to the machinations of their rivals within the political class. The scale of the violent protests and rhetoric of the protestors point, however, in a different direction.

Gone are the elegant slogans demanding reform, the smart rebuke of the rulers, the orderly removal of the corrupt political class, and the forging of a new and equitable Lebanon that characterized earlier protests. Gone are the civic acts of national consciousness, of streets cleaned by the protestors at the conclusion of the protests, and the emphasis on a sense of commonwealth. Gone are the festive “concerts” of the revolution, with synchronized crowd-sourced displays of semiotic and social solidarity reflecting a national unity in formation. What the latest protests showed was instead the raw anger and frustration of a population that is destitute, hungry, and desperate; driven by a youth conscious of the potential toll of the pandemic but refusing to submit instead to the actual and figurative obscurity of a lockdown.

Tripoli's protestors are issuing through violence a direct response to a political class failing to engaging in reform—for lack of will, lack of capacity, for its parallel exploitation of the fall, and for its subservience to the diktat of the Iranian proxy.

What the Tripoli protestors know, while well-meaning friends of Lebanon in Paris and Washington seem to miss, is that no reform can possibly be anticipated or extracted from Lebanon's political class. No enticement, no shaming, and no threat can rise to the levels of breaking the lust of the rulers of Lebanon for more plunder and more petty victories in their petty rivalries.

The protests also serve as a rebuke to the argument that seems to be forming in circles close to decision-making in capitals on both shores of the Atlantic. Some seem to believe that Hezbollah, while not immune from corruption, is

less exposed to it than other Lebanese political actors, and that Hezbollah—if excluded from a significant role in Lebanese politics—has the power to interdict its constructive evolution. Accordingly, they argue for engaging, recruiting, or assigning to Hezbollah a substantive role in the Lebanon’s next phase.

Born out of a desire to find a reasonable fix for Lebanon at an affordable cost, this argument ignores the longer term gamble in which Iran can engage if Hezbollah continue to preside over Lebanon’s ongoing disintegration.

Having developed social and economic support systems to provide remedial services for Hezbollah’s base, Iran is in no rush to oversee a rescue plan for Lebanon. The net outcome of the severe downturn suffered by the economy and society in Lebanon can be viewed to be in its favor, with the political class which its local proxy has tamed more beholden to its authority.

The national cross-communitarian middle class—the incubator of the genuine opposition to Iranian supremacy—is weakened and discredited. And as for Iran, the emergence of a radically-tainted Sunni opposition is a welcome development, as it could be subject to manipulation and serve as a point of entry for both truly radical formations and Turkish influence. These actors have value from Iran’s perspective as they can deny Saudi Arabia and other Gulf foes the possibility of regaining the influence that they have forsaken in the past years.

The sobering truth is that Lebanon cannot reform. Even if the country were a closed system, the dynamics of vertical segmentation through clientelism and communitarianism are forbidding obstacles that the weakened middle class cannot overcome. But Lebanon is no closed system; Iran has a clear interest in strengthening its control over the country to improve its geo-strategic posture, irrespective of the long term damage Lebanon will suffer.

The limited international coverage of the Tripoli protests highlights just how little Iran must compete with other agencies of influence. With the new generation of Gulf leaders having effectively forsaken the Lebanon cherished by their elders, and with the attention of Western capitals elsewhere, Lebanon’s hope to extract itself from its current conundrum are dim. In consequence, Lebanese and the rest of the world must ready themselves for the new invitees of the Iranian gamble: certainly Turkey at the very least, but also the possibility of an actual return of reconstituted radicalism, reifying Iran and its proxies’ caricature of Lebanon’s northern region.

As such, the violence of the Tripoli protests is Lebanon’s ‘canary in the coal mine.’ The city of Tripoli has no monopoly on poverty, hunger, and despair in Lebanon, and the country as a whole can expect dark days ahead. Far from being the preferable option, abandoning Lebanon to a de facto rule by Iran will only exacerbate the likely violence ahead and its destabilizing impact on its region. ❖



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