



# In Vain Search for Accountability: The Crises of the Lebanese State

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## Contents

Introduction.....	4
The importance of accountability .....	4
The continuing cascading crises .....	5
The financial meltdown .....	6
The explosion .....	9
The pandemic .....	10
Risks ahead.....	11
Policy recommendations .....	13
Bibliography .....	14



## Introduction

Lebanon is in the midst of a dire crisis that is deteriorating by the day. As of December 2021, the Lebanese pound had lost more than 90 percent of its value since 2019,<sup>1</sup> and the World Bank was warning of a financial meltdown likely to rank as the world's third worst since the 1850s.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this financial meltdown, the country is still recovering from a disastrous explosion in Beirut in August 2020 that killed more than 200 people and destroyed the homes of 300,000 more.<sup>3</sup> The country is suffering from two national traumas, paired with a badly handled pandemic – this on top of an already vulnerable position as approximately 30 per cent of population are refugees.<sup>4</sup>

Several decades of political mismanagement and corruption mean that there is little hope of a successful process of accountability for any aspects of the crises.<sup>5</sup> There is an ongoing national investigation into the explosion, and several international investigations, as well as a national probe, of alleged mismanagement by the Governor of the Central Bank, Riad Salameh. However, there are major obstacles to overcome before justice can be seen to be done.

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters, "French court orders Lebanese bank to pay \$2.8 mln to locked-out depositor", 13 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/french-court-orders-lebanese-bank-pay-28-mln-locked-out-depositor-2021-12-13/> retrieved 2021-12-14.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, "Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction", 1 June 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes> 2021-11-02.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2021, "They killed us from inside", p. 1,

This brief explores the current crises through the lens of accountability. The financial meltdown, the Beirut port explosion and COVID-19 are examined as issues that have exposed the flawed political system to an international audience. It examines where tensions exist in Lebanon today, and the risks associated with a lack of accountability in the ongoing crises. The brief concludes that the international community needs to do more to act in support of the Lebanese people, for instance by sanctioning corrupt officials, and making specific demands that enables the national investigation of the Beirut Port explosion.

## The importance of accountability

The ability to hold a government and its institutions accountable for a societal crisis or trauma is of great importance if citizens are to retain trust in society and its institutions. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) lists accountability as one of its four key objectives in support of governance for peace. The other three are promoting inclusive political processes, fostering resilient state-society relations and promoting partnerships.<sup>6</sup>

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/03/they-killed-us-inside/investigation-august-4-beirut-blast> retrieved 2021-11-18.

<sup>4</sup> Inter-Ministerial and Municipal Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking, <https://impact.cib.gov.lb/home?dashboardName=vaccine> 2021-11-21.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2021, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 2012, "Governance for Peace, Securing the Social Contract", United Nations Publications, p. 12.





There is no universal definition of accountability in the context of state-society relations, but one “conceptual consensus” to which most scholars adhere is that accountability is about providing answers to people with legitimate claims. This brief sees accountability as an “institutional relation or arrangement in which an agent can be held to account by another agent or institution”.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, this brief focuses on three ways of ensuring accountability in order to achieve good governance in a state.

First, elections ensure accountability in a vertical sense, meaning that elected officials are answerable “downwards” to their voters. However, since only elected officials can be held accountable in elections, and as they only respond to their own constituents, this is insufficient for achieving accountability in a state. Second, horizontal accountability forces public officials and agencies to report “sideways” to control mechanisms such as ombudsmen and corruption control agencies. Here, the major difficulties are how to scrutinise the vast number of government actions and how to finance such a monitoring scheme. Third, as a complement, there are also societal actors that can hold a government accountable directly, such as social and

political movements, associations and the media.<sup>8</sup>

To understand the preconditions for accountability in Lebanon, it is important to understand that, in many respects, Lebanon has been a weak state with a low degree of legitimacy since it achieved independence in 1943. The state has never had a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; nor has it developed a functioning centralised taxation system; the bureaucracy is built along sectarian fault lines<sup>9</sup> and fails to deliver fundamental services to the people, such as electricity and running water.<sup>10</sup>

## The continuing cascading crises

Economic inequality is not a new phenomenon in Lebanon; it does, however, continue to reach new depths. Inflation stood at 84.9 percent in 2020 and gross domestic product (GDP) had fallen from US \$55 billion in 2018 to an estimated US \$20.5 billion in 2021, while real GDP per capita fell by 37.1 per cent in the same period.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the financial meltdown, food prices have skyrocketed. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), the price of a food portion according to the Survival Minimum

<sup>7</sup> Bovens, Mark, Schillemans, Thomas, Goodin, Robert E., 2014, “Public Accountability”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>8</sup> Ackerman, John, 2003, “Co-Governance for Accountability: Beyond ‘Exit’ and ‘Voice’”, *World Development* Vol. 32, No 3, pp. 448-451.

<sup>9</sup> There are 18 recognised religious minorities in Lebanon, the largest groups are Shiah Muslims, Sunni Muslims and Maronites. The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, “Libanon – Aktuell politik”, [https://www-ui-se.ezp.sub.su.se/landguiden/lander-](https://www-ui-se.ezp.sub.su.se/landguiden/lander-och-omraden/asien/libanon/religion/)

[och-omraden/asien/libanon/religion/](https://www-ui-se.ezp.sub.su.se/landguiden/lander-och-omraden/asien/libanon/religion/) retrieved 2021-01-22.

<sup>10</sup> Atzili, Boaz, 2010, “State Weakness and ‘vacuum of power’ in Lebanon”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, pp. 761-769.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, “Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction”, 1 June 2021, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/90f36d3399fac59746ac2f3a44fa612a-0280012021/original/Lebanon-Economic-Update-October-2021.pdf> retrieved 2021-11-02.



Expenditure Basket has increased by 628 per cent since October 2019.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the government has failed to maintain the necessary oil imports, which has led to an almost complete breakdown in the country's power production.<sup>13</sup> In the autumn of 2021, many households only had electricity for about one hour a day.<sup>14</sup> The lack of electricity means that some 2.8 million people in Lebanon are also suffering from water shortages.<sup>15</sup> To ease the crisis in the country, Hezbollah brought in a month's supply of fuel from Iran in September 2021, even though this put Lebanon at risk of US sanctions and further increased tensions around Hezbollah.<sup>16</sup>

The country has also been severely affected by the explosion in Beirut Port on 4 August 2020 – one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history. Tonnes of ammonium nitrate blew up, killing 218 and injuring over 7000 people. Over 77,000 apartments were destroyed or damaged, more than 300,000

people were displaced and large parts of the city were flattened.<sup>17</sup>

As if these two national traumas were not enough, Lebanon has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further added to the socioeconomic deterioration. The first case of the virus in Lebanon was recorded on 21 February 2020.<sup>18</sup> By November 2021, more than 8600 people had died from COVID-19,<sup>19</sup> in a population of 6.8 million people.<sup>20</sup> Of 16 countries in the Middle East, only Iran had a higher number of cumulative confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people in December 2021.<sup>21</sup>

## The financial meltdown

The financial crisis in Lebanon has highlighted systematic mismanagement and corruption in the Lebanese state. While the situation continues to deteriorate, no one is taking responsibility for transforming

<sup>12</sup> [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000132702/download/?\\_ga=2.106930883.130636766.1635843027-1493928393.1635843027](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000132702/download/?_ga=2.106930883.130636766.1635843027-1493928393.1635843027) retrieved 2021-11-02.

<sup>13</sup> World Food Programme, "WFP Lebanon Country brief", September 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/10/world/middleeast/lebanon-electricity-outage.html> retrieved 2021-11-24.

<sup>14</sup> Middle East Eye, "Lebanon crisis: How one village keeps the lights on thanks to solar power", 30 October 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-crisis-electricity-bchaaleh-village-solar-power> retrieved 2021-11-02.

<sup>15</sup> UNICEF, 2021, "Surviving without the basics", p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Al Jazeera, "Hezbollah-brokered Iranian fuel arrives in crisis-hit Lebanon", 16 September 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/16/first-shipment-hezbollah-iranian-fuel-arrives-lebanon> retrieved 2021-11-24.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2021, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Gulf News, "Lebanon announces first coronavirus case", 21 February 2020,

<https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/lebanon-announces-first-coronavirus-case-1.1582292569236> retrieved 2021-11-19.

<sup>19</sup> Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, Lebanon, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/lebanon> retrieved 2021-11-19.

<sup>20</sup> World Bank Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=LB> retrieved 2021-11-19.

<sup>21</sup> As of 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021, the most affected countries, in order, are Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Palestine, Israel, Bahrain, Oman, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Syria, Yemen.

The quality of testing differs in the accounted countries and are therefore in no way absolute. The counting began 19<sup>th</sup> February 2020. Our world in data, University of Oxford, <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/lebanon> retrieved 2021-12-20 and Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, mortality analyses, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality> retrieved 2021-12-20.



the system, and nor is anyone being held to account.

Even though the consequences of the financial meltdown only became visible in 2019, the root causes are much older. In contrast to a floating currency where the value is decided by supply and demand, the Lebanese pound was pegged to the US dollar in 1997 – a fixed value, where one dollar constantly equalled about 1500 Lebanese pounds, that kept the economy afloat for over 20 years. For a long time, the system, and the man behind it since 1993 – the head of the Central Bank, Riad Salameh – were lauded for keeping the economy running even in times of war and political turmoil.<sup>22</sup>

However, the system demanded a certain influx of US dollars – a condition that was fulfilled until 2011, but then impeded by the civil war in neighbouring Syria, which

constrained Lebanese exports.<sup>23</sup>

Simultaneously, relations to the Persian Gulf states became strained as Saudi Arabia tried to contain Iranian influence by pressuring Sunni political leaders to shun Hezbollah.<sup>24</sup> The influx of dollars reduced and investors were offered an inflated interest rate to attract much-needed foreign capital, sometimes as high as 20 percent, that was funded with borrowed money.<sup>25</sup> This created what analysts have called a Ponzi scheme – a system where money does not circulate but only enriches the upper class.<sup>26</sup>

At the time of writing there are at least four ongoing investigations of Salameh for embezzlement and money laundering: in Lebanon, France, Switzerland and Luxembourg.<sup>27</sup> Salameh has denied any misconduct and claims that an audit he himself ordered has investigated his affairs and cleared him of any wrongdoing.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> New York Times, "As Lebanon Collapses, the Man With an Iron Grip on Its Finances Faces Questions", 17 July 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/17/business/lebanon-riad-salameh.html> retrieved 2021-11-03.

<sup>23</sup> Wall Street Journal, "How Lebanon's Economy Imploded", 11 August 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal/how-lebanon-economy-imploded/33523860-e250-42ea-8aca-2d207bf2e9e5> retrieved 2021-11-03.

<sup>24</sup> Reuters, "Explainer-Lebanon's financial meltdown and how it happened", 17 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-financial-explainer-idCAKCN2DT0OY> retrieved 2021-11-03.

<sup>25</sup> Wall Street Journal, "How Lebanon's Economy Imploded", 11 August 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal/how-lebanon-economy-imploded/33523860-e250-42ea-8aca-2d207bf2e9e5> retrieved 2021-11-03.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example: Reuters, "Explainer-Lebanon's financial meltdown and how it happened", 17 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-financial-explainer-idCAKCN2DT0OY> retrieved 2021-11-03 and New York Times, "The Great

Lebanese Ponzi Scheme", 2 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/02/opinion/lebanon-protests.html> retrieved 2021-10-28.

<sup>27</sup> Reuters, "Lebanese judge imposes travel ban on central bank governor amid probe", 11 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanese-judge-imposes-travel-ban-central-bank-governor-2022-01-11/> retrieved 2022-02-02. New York Times, "As Lebanon Collapses, the Man With an Iron Grip on Its Finances Faces Questions", 17 July 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/17/business/lebanon-riad-salameh.html> retrieved 2021-11-03. Reuters, "Luxembourg opens criminal inquiry into Lebanon cenbank governor", 15 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/luxembourg-judicial-authorities-open-criminal-case-related-lebanon-central-bank-2021-11-15/> retrieved 2021-11-15.

<sup>28</sup> Reuters, "Lebanon c.bank governor says ordered audit, rebuts allegations", 17 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-cbank-governor-says-ordered-audit-rebuts-allegations-2021-11-17/> retrieved 2021-12-14.



The crisis has led to a significant widening of the economic gap, as people who make a living in dollars can live comfortably, while people who are paid in Lebanese pounds have seen their savings more or less obliterated.<sup>29</sup> According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the multidimensional poverty rate has nearly doubled since 2019, from 42 percent to 82 percent of the population. Instead of looking solely at the conventional measure for poverty, income levels, multidimensional poverty includes indices on education, health, public utilities, housing, assets and property, as well as employment.<sup>30</sup>

In 2019, at the outset of the economic crisis, popular protests were held against a proposed tax on WhatsApp. Even though the suggested tax was cancelled within hours, the popular outburst gathered around a million people within a few weeks,<sup>31</sup> united across sectarian, political

and class lines, to protest against widespread corruption among the political elite.<sup>32</sup> People got together to demand accountability under the slogan “all of them means all of them” – demanding that the whole political ruling elite resign to create space for the formation of a new, non-sectarian government.

The unity of the people was seen for example in the 171-kilometre human chain organised from Tripoli in the north to Tyre in the south.<sup>33</sup> Hezbollah opposes the protests as they constitute a threat to the party’s powerful position in the country, and Hezbollah supporters therefore made several attempts to sabotage them.<sup>34</sup> This large protest movement has been inactive since the winter of 2020, but protests with road blocks<sup>35</sup> and attacks on banks have taken place.<sup>36</sup>

The lack of accountability is preventing Lebanon from getting the external help it needs. The International Monetary Fund

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<sup>29</sup> International Crisis Group, “Lebanon: A Journey to the End of the State”, 24 November 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/lebanon-journey-end-state> retrieved 2021-11-29.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, a household that is deprived of electricity or that is unable to buy medicine, irrespective of their financial capacity, is considered multidimensionally poor. See United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2021, “Multidimensional poverty in Lebanon (2019-2021)”.

<sup>31</sup> BBC, “Lebanon protests: How WhatsApp tax anger revealed a much deeper crisis”, 7 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50293636> retrieved 2021-11-29.

<sup>32</sup> International Crisis Group, “Lebanon: A Journey to the End of the State”, 24 November 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/lebanon-journey-end-state> retrieved 2021-11-25.

<sup>33</sup> Al Arabiya, “Lebanese protesters successfully form human chain across country”, 27 October 2019,

<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2019/10/27/Lebanese-protesters-form-human-chain-across-country> retrieved 2021-11-05.

<sup>34</sup> International Crisis Group, “Lebanon: A Journey to the End of the State”, 24 November 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/lebanon-journey-end-state> retrieved 2021-11-25.

<sup>35</sup> Reuters, “Lebanese protesters block roads over economic meltdown”, 29 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/lebanes-e-protesters-block-roads-over-economic-meltdown-2021-11-29/> retrieved 2021-11-30.

<sup>36</sup> As seen in, for example: Al Jazeera, “Banks targeted in Lebanon’s ‘night of the Molotov’”, 29 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/4/29/bank-s-targeted-in-lebanons-night-of-the-molotov> retrieved 2021-11-05, and in BBC, “Lebanon banks close in solidarity after assault on staff”, 29 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57651265> retrieved 2021-11-04.





(IMF) has offered support to Lebanon that is conditional on a number of reforms being undertaken, notably audits of the Central Bank and debt restructuring.<sup>37</sup> However, these demands have not been met, partly due to the political stalemate that has prevailed since Hassan Diab resigned as prime minister following the explosion in August 2020.<sup>38</sup> The newly appointed prime minister, Najib Mikati, took office in September 2021, but he has barely had a chance to undertake the requested restructuring as debates over the suitability of the investigator appointed to investigate the port explosion, Tarek Bitar, have stalled the cabinet's work. Due to an argument about Bitar, the cabinet did not convene between October 2021 and January 2022.<sup>39</sup>

## The explosion

The tragically mis-handled Beirut Port explosion also illustrates the great challenges and dire need for accountability in Lebanon. The fact that it ever happened, the huge obstacles facing the domestic investigation and the lack of government support for the reconstruction are all clear testimony of the mismanagement of the political elite.

The explosive cargo had been stored in the port since 2013. Within days of the explosion, documents revealed multiple warnings about the explosives by various authorities over the past six years, implicating senior politicians, such as President Michel Aoun and then-Prime Minister Hassan Diab, who knew but failed to take the necessary action to protect their citizens.<sup>40</sup> After thousands of people attended protests demanding accountability, prime minister Hassan Diab and four ministers resigned within days of the explosion, but without accepting any responsibility for what had happened.<sup>41</sup>

One week after the explosion, the Lebanese government set up a national investigation led by Judge Fadi Sawan. This investigation has been politicised, however, and faces major challenges as ministers, parliamentarians, lawyers and others are protected by various kinds of immunity and are doing all they can to obstruct it.<sup>42</sup> This resistance by parliamentarians and ministers led to Sawan being removed as investigator in February 2021 to be replaced by Tarek Bitar, who has faced similar challenges. Ministers aligned with the politicians being investigated are now questioning Bitar's impartiality and

<sup>37</sup> International Monetary Fund, "Lebanon and the IMF", <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/LBN/faq> retrieved 2021-12-03.

<sup>38</sup> France 24, "Lebanese leaders form government after 13-month stalemate", 10 September 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210910-lebanon-slated-for-new-government-after-13-months-wait> retrieved 2021-12-03.

<sup>39</sup> Reuters, "Lebanese cabinet meets after hiatus, amid friction over budget", 24 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/lebanon-finance-minister-says-no-deal-yet-fx-rate-budget-draft-2022-01-24/> retrieved 2022-02-02.

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2021, pp. 1-8, and AP, "Officials long warned of explosive chemicals at Beirut port", 8 August 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-beirut-ap-top-news-international-news-middle-east-6bec1c8ecb5061bf2dd98107aeb151d9> retrieved 2021-12-07.

<sup>41</sup> Al Arabiya, "Lebanon PM Hassan Diab resigns less than a week after deadly Beirut explosion", 10 August 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2020/08/10/Lebanese-PM-Hassan-Diab-s-cabinet-resigns-after-Beirut-explosion-Reports> retrieved 2021-12-07.

<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2021, pp. 1-8.



demanding that he also be removed from his post, leading to several months of deadlock in the Lebanese cabinet.<sup>43</sup>

In the absence of reliable processes for accountability, the explosion has been surrounded by rumours of who is to blame, exacerbating intercommunal tensions. Early on, there was speculations that Israel was behind the explosion.<sup>44</sup> Accusations have also been levelled at Hezbollah, although no direct proof has been presented in either case.<sup>45</sup>

Hezbollah accuses Bitar of bias,<sup>46</sup> and has made several attempts to stall the investigation. Tensions around the investigation turned violent on 14 October 2021, when supporters of the two Shiah parties, Hezbollah and Amal, gathered to demonstrate their disapproval of Bitar. The protest was attacked and seven people were killed – all of them Shiah Muslims.<sup>47</sup> When the fighting erupted, cafés several kilometres away closed as people feared

that violence would spread across the city.<sup>48</sup> Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, blamed the attack on the Christian party, Lebanese Forces, claiming that "the real agenda of the Lebanese Forces is civil war".<sup>49</sup>

Some of the destroyed parts of the city have been rebuilt, including thousands of homes, but the state has left a power vacuum for other entities to fill, as almost all the reconstruction work has been done through non-governmental organisations.<sup>50</sup>

## The pandemic

The global pandemic hit Lebanon hard and further emphasised the dysfunction of the state. Lockdowns have exacerbated the financial distress, and many people have been unable to afford healthcare, which in turn has left the health sector under-resourced, as well as being overwhelmed by and understaffed due to the pandemic.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Reuters, "Lebanon goes to polls in March amid economic meltdown", 19 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanese-parliament-confirms-election-date-march-27-sources-2021-10-19/> retrieved 2021-11-04.

<sup>44</sup> Reuters, "Hezbollah will respond if Israel behind Beirut blast, says Nasrallah", 14 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-security-blast-idUSKCN25A18R> retrieved 2021-12-08.

<sup>45</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon: A Journey to the End of the State", 24 November 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/lebanon-journey-end-state> retrieved 2021-11-26.

<sup>46</sup> Reuters, "Lebanon's Hezbollah chief, Nasrallah, says blast judge biased, should be replaced", 12 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-hezbollah-chief-nasrallah-says-beirut-blast-judge-is-politicised-2021-10-11/> retrieved 2021-01-22.

<sup>47</sup> Reuters, "Hezbollah's Nasrallah says Beirut violence was a dangerous development", 18 October 2021,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-amal-movement-says-violence-aimed-reignite-internal-strife-2021-10-18/> retrieved 2021-10-25.

<sup>48</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon: A Journey to the End of the State", 24 November 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/lebanon-journey-end-state> retrieved 2021-11-26.

<sup>49</sup> Reuters, "Hezbollah's Nasrallah says Beirut violence was a dangerous development", 18 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-amal-movement-says-violence-aimed-reignite-internal-strife-2021-10-18/> retrieved 2021-10-25.

<sup>50</sup> Bloomberg, "After Devastating 2020 Explosion, Beirut Volunteers Rebuild the City", 1 September 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-09-01/how-beirut-and-its-citizens-rebuilt-the-year-after-2020-explosion> retrieved 2021-12-03.

<sup>51</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies, "Navigating Collapse in Lebanon's Covid-19



Refugees and migrants in Lebanon have been particularly badly affected by the pandemic. The death rate in the Palestinian and Syrian communities has been three and four times higher, respectively, than the national rate.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, 21 municipalities imposed restrictions on Syrians in the spring of 2020 that did not apply to Lebanese citizens, even though there had been no confirmed cases among Syrian refugees at that point.<sup>53</sup> People without documents have also been denied – or forced to pay as much as US\$ 500 for – COVID-19 tests.<sup>54</sup>

Even though the Syrian and Palestinian communities constitute at least 30 per cent of the total population, only 6.63 per cent were fully vaccinated as of November 2021. These numbers need to be understood in relation to the whole population, where only around 24 per cent had received two doses at that time.<sup>55</sup> Only 20 per cent of the around 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon have legal papers. Thus, Syrian refugees have not registered for the

vaccination due to fear of arrest, detention or deportation. Palestinian refugees lack trust in the Lebanese government and fear that they might have to pay for the vaccine. There has been a lack of information in both communities, and also for migrant workers.<sup>56</sup>

At one point, the World Bank threatened to withdraw funding for vaccines due to allegations of favouritism. They investigated claims that 16 parliamentarians and five parliamentary staff violated the national vaccination plan by jumping the queue ahead of healthcare workers and the elderly.<sup>57</sup> Some politicians have also offered vaccines to their constituents.<sup>58</sup>

## Risks ahead

In none of the three crises described above has there yet been any successful national process in which the responsible actors have been held accountable. Human Rights Watch has presented a list of names in connection with the explosion, and there

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Response", 13 April 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/navigating-collapse-lebanons-covid-19-response> retrieved 2021-11-19.

<sup>52</sup> <https://news.trust.org/item/20210223150529-d9fjo/> retrieved 2021-11-21. Reuters, "Palestinian refugees in Lebanon three times more likely to die with COVID-19", 16 February 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-refugees-health-trfn-idUSKBN2AG22M> retrieved 2021-11-21.

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Refugees at Risk in Covid-19 Response", 2 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response> retrieved 2021-11-22.

<sup>54</sup> Al Jazeera, "Undocumented in Lebanon: No papers, no coronavirus test", 28 March 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/28/undocumented-in-lebanon-no-papers-no-coronavirus-test> retrieved 2021-11-19.

<sup>55</sup> Inter-Ministerial and Municipal Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking,

<https://impact.cib.gov.lb/home?dashboardName=vaccine> retrieved 2021-11-21.

<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Refugees, Migrants left behind in Vaccine Rollout", 6 April 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/06/lebanon-refugees-migrants-left-behind-vaccine-rollout> retrieved 2021-11-21.

<sup>57</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies, "Navigating Collapse in Lebanon's Covid-19 Response", 13 April 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/navigating-collapse-lebanons-covid-19-response> retrieved 2021-11-19.

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Refugees, Migrants left behind in Vaccine Rollout", 6 April 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/06/lebanon-refugees-migrants-left-behind-vaccine-rollout> retrieved 2021-11-21. Arab News, "Jabs for votes: Lebanon's oligarchs turn to Covid bribery", 10 June 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1874206/middle-east> retrieved 2021-11-19.



are at least four investigations of the Governor of the Central Bank, Riad Salameh. People know who is to blame but have not yet seen anyone put on trial in the national courts.

Without credible judicial processes, rumours and accusations circulate that highlight the lack of accountability. Without a judicial process, existing divisions risk being further cemented which, in turn, increases the risk of violent conflict. Tensions are already high along two fault lines: between Hezbollah's supporters and opponents, and between the elite and the great mass of people suffering from the shortcomings of the government.

Tarek Bitar's continuing inquiry into the explosion is a threat to the status quo that has allowed the political elite to escape responsibility, which explains the resistance to his investigation. The protest movement in 2019 also constituted a major threat to the political elite, so political parties are now trying to restrain their supporters by asking them to stay off the streets. The fact that people are complying tells us that loyalty today is with the group, rather than the greater mass as it was in the protest movement in 2019.

Hezbollah runs a state within the state and has long been criticised for retaining its weapons after the civil war ended. Its allies – Iran and Syria – continue to shore-up its position in Lebanon in various ways. Nonetheless, pressure is growing on Hezbollah as more and more people target

them for criticism.<sup>59</sup> The Islamist party is able to set off an outburst at any time but careful not to do so for the wrong reasons, which is why it did not respond to the violence on 14 October 2021.

Societal actors, such as social movements, have made demands for greater accountability, but this has evidently not been enough and there is still a substantial lack of vertical and horizontal accountability. Horizontal accountability through control mechanisms and institutions struggles with corruption and an alliance within the political elite to help each other escape responsibility. Vertical accountability through elections requires transparency. The elections scheduled for May 2022 are not likely to generate any much-needed accountability.

The economic crisis and the explosion have exposed important failures in the political system. While Lebanon is no stranger to tensions and crises, there have now been two major national traumas in addition to a pandemic, and there is no end in sight to this deteriorating situation. To avoid the precipice, the Lebanese people need the support of the international community to change the political system.

The international community is already assisting through external processes of accountability, but these cannot replace national inquiries. If there are only international investigations, this will again prove to the Lebanese people that their government is not functioning, which risks

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<sup>59</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon: A Journey to the End of the State", 24 November 2021, [https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/lebanon-journey-end-state)

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further cementing divisions. The role of international inquiries should be to complement national ones and act as a control mechanism. A truly independent national investigation, complemented by an international one, has a better chance of laying to rest some of the undercurrents of

frustration and anger, and of initiating a sustainable process of national unification. For this reason, the international community must put pressure on the Lebanese government and ensure that those responsible are held to account in national processes.

## Policy recommendations

- To achieve processes of accountability in Lebanon, the European Council should implement sanctions, through the framework adopted for targeted restrictive measures,<sup>60</sup> directed at the officials involved in corruption and the obstruction of the Beirut Port explosion investigation – an action urged in a resolution by the European Parliament.<sup>61</sup>
- The EU should make demands on the Lebanese government to enable the independent national investigation into the explosion led by Tarek Bitar to proceed; to follow up on national investigations into the state's bankruptcy; and to initiate an investigation into the handling of the pandemic.
- The EU should invest in partnerships with local actors in Lebanon that are working for accountability, such as the NGOs, institutions and leaders fighting for justice.

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<sup>60</sup> European Council, "Lebanon: EU adopts a framework for targeted sanctions", 30 July 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/07/30/lebanon-eu-adopts-a-framework-for-targeted-sanctions/> retrieved 2021-12-21.

<sup>61</sup> Al Jazeera, "EU Parliament resolution urges sanctions on Lebanese officials", 16 September 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/16/eu-resolution-calls-for-sanctioning-lebanese-officials> retrieved 2021-12-21.





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