

The Beirut Explosion:

How a Tragedy for the Lebanese People Could Turn into a Mediterranean Crisis

Following the tragic explosion in Beirut more than 170 people were confirmed dead and over 6,000 have been injured. Other thousands were left without a home or had their homes severely destroyed by the blast.

***The reaction of the international community has been prompt.** Numerous European and Middle Eastern countries have offered their support. The European Union has mobilised €33 million for the country's urgent needs and pledged €30 million more at the International Conference on Assistance and Support of August 9. Besides a \$50 million financial support, Qatar offered to build a field hospital in Beirut to treat the injured. Kuwait pledged \$40 million and United States \$17 million. Iran, Turkey and Israel have offered medical support as well (though Israel's gesture has been quickly rejected by Lebanon).*

It took French President Macron only a couple of hours to touchdown in Beirut, walk its blasted streets and offer his sympathy and promises of support to its people. The head of Turkish diplomacy, Çavuşoğlu, also visited the Lebanese capital. Both countries are strong regional actors in the Mediterranean. Despite international aid being always welcomed in such times of extreme duress, such gesture also signals interests of a wider range.

***The country, already severely hit by a disastrous financial crisis and Covid-19 pandemic, seems to be experiencing a void of political legitimacy.** This comes only months after the Government declared default last March. The resignation of the government following ample riots in Beirut opens the path for utmost uncertainty in an already divided political landscape of a region which has recently turned into a battlefield of regional and local powers: from the Libyan conflict to the Syrian civil war.*

***On a national level, the port explosion represents the loss of Lebanon's perhaps largest asset.** The Country of Cedars has been a historical transportation hub in the Mediterranean. Lebanon was also heavily dependent on foreign imports, with over 80% of its wheat and most basic necessities coming from abroad. The Beirut Port represented the entry point of most imports and the only large grain silo of the country was completely destroyed by the blast.*

***Regionally, a weaker Lebanon in addition to the already existing situation in neighbouring Syria adds to the security risks of the Mediterranean.** A succumbing Lebanon would create a political void which other actors might be willing to fill. The geopolitical battle would then be on Lebanon, not for Lebanon.*

Given certain inter-confessional tensions in Lebanon, **any internal conflict is prone to degenerate into a protracted civil war, which would undoubtedly lead to a massive migration crisis at the level of the Mediterranean region and, implicitly, European Union.**

The continuing protests along with the political status-quo seem to create the premises for such a crisis. Although the Lebanese cabinet has resigned, in accordance with the constitutional provisions it continues to convene, yet with lesser prerogatives. As there are no elections in sight (at least none were mentioned by the Executive), the Lebanese President will most likely consult the Legislative and form a new Executive.

This, in turn, generates further tensions with the rioters who keep protesting for a thoroughly revamped political class. A distrusted, not to mention delegitimized, political elite is a major vulnerability for every country. Hopefully, Lebanon will not end up there and the protesters and political elite's priorities will meet up midway.

Lebanon's biggest challenge at the time may not lie in neither the reconstruction efforts nor the on-going riots. **Of uncertain origin, multiple conspiracy theories have spread on-line.** A twitter claiming the explosion was of atomic origin gathered thousands of likes and shares after being shut down. Multiple reports in social media indicating an Israeli missile attack have been intensely shared on Twitter, Facebook, 4chan, and even messaging apps. President Trump's remarks regarding a "terrible attack" have been altered to become a "terrible terrorist attack", further fueling the speculations.

As always, news of such magnitude generate conspiracy theories and speculations. Whether these phenomena represent multiple isolated cases of "fake news" or belong to orchestrated disinformation campaigns might be too early to say. What is certain is that, **corroborated with Lebanese people's distrust in the government, such fake news may generate a larger impact than expected.**

The Beirut explosion is a very tragic incident for Lebanon. But disinformation and a distrusted government are an explosive mix that may open the way for a crisis of Mediterranean proportions.

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* The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the official policy, position or view of the Romanian Institute for Europe-Asia Studies - IRSEA or any of its partners.