

CONCLUSION

Little has changed since those angry, heady days of 2015. When I was last in Beirut, in September 2017, the Lebanese army and Hizballah had recently fought, and won, a series of battles against Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and IS in the barren hills of the Lebanese borderlands. While some expressed disquiet at Hizballah's ever-growing autonomy and juggernaut-like strength, others celebrated this as a decisive victory over the dark forces of *takfiri* Islam. In truth, though, the ragtag band of straggly-bearded, dishevelled fighters that emerged from their hiding spots in the high ground to board their coaches to Idlib did not look much like formidable foes. The Lebanese press, if it was not anatomising this success, was dissecting the latest political row—an unseemly spat between Saad Hariri and his Future Movement colleagues, who were eager to introduce new biometric identity cards ahead of the 2018 parliamentary elections, and Amal, whose leader, Nabih Berri, adamantly opposed this innovation. As so often is the case in Lebanon, high politics appeared driven by low pecuniary considerations: how much was this scheme going to cost? Would it leave the supporters of this or that party out of pocket and discourage them from heading to the polls? And who, exactly, would it favour? Whose pockets would it line? For this was to be, of course, a public-private initiative, undertaken with a corporate partner.

But if the last heat of September brought with it reminders of the pettiness and venality of Lebanese politics and the troubling militarisation of Lebanese society—of the unquestioning veneration of some for the army, that apparent bastion of national unity and sovereignty, and

of the increasingly bitter rows over Hizballah's arsenal and foreign adventures—with the onset of winter came yet another crisis. On 4 November 2017, Saad Hariri, announced his resignation as prime minister over the airwaves from Riyadh. His life was under threat, he explained, and he could no longer continue as Lebanon's prime minister in the present circumstances, when Hizballah and Iran continued to interfere with impunity in the sovereign affairs of Arab states. Lebanon's politicians reacted with shock and panic to this unexpected news. President Michel Aoun said that he had only been informed of the resignation by phone from Saudi Arabia, and that he could not and would not accept it until Hariri returned to Beirut and explained in person his reasons for so suddenly quitting office. Hariri's relations with Hizballah had seemed cordial enough in recent months and, despite their profound difference of opinions over Syria, they appeared to be putting inner stability ahead of foreign questions. What's more, only the day before leaving for Riyadh, Hariri had met with the Iranian official Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister who now served as a senior adviser on foreign affairs to Ali Khamenei. Bereft of information, many soon turned towards conspiracy: Hariri, a Saudi citizen with close friends among the kingdom's tentacular royal family, had been privy to a palace coup against King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (known by his initials MBS), and had been arrested for failing to disclose its details; Hariri was being punished over the failure of Saudi Oger, the family construction firm, which had recently gone belly-up; Hariri had been caught up in the anti-corruption campaign that Muhammad had recently launched, and which had caught such eminent figures as Walid bin Talal in its snares, as Muhammad ruthlessly consolidated his own political and financial position and confiscated his rivals' assets.

Rapidly, though, another narrative, just as strange and disturbing, began to emerge. Determined to prevail over Iran and its proxies—the Houthis in Yemen, who had launched a missile on Riyadh only a few days earlier and, of course, Hizballah in Lebanon and Syria—and to buttress Saudi Arabia's position as the dominant Sunni power in the region, recently threatened by Qatar and Turkey, MBS had decided that Hariri was at once too weak, too willing to compromise with Hizballah, and too intent upon going his own way and ignoring the

diktats from Riyadh. He was, in effect, too Lebanese and not Saudi enough, privileging the former's domestic stability over the latter's foreign ambitions. He had to be replaced by a more pliant figure, willing to do Riyadh's bidding and confront Hizballah head-on.¹

But if this was the plan, it soon backfired. While Aoun and others deplored Saudi Arabia's actions as an unprecedented intervention in Lebanon's internal affairs, Hariri's supporters rallied behind him. The same message was everywhere—on stickers and posters hastily put up on Beirut's streets, but also on social media and television broadcasts: *kilna Sa'd*, 'we are all Saad'. Saudi Arabia's Western allies, too, felt that this was a step too far, and Emmanuel Macron, in particular, soon began to exert pressure on Riyadh to release Hariri and allow him to return to Beirut. On 18 November, Hariri left Riyadh for Paris, where he was reunited with his wife and children, and invited for a friendly family lunch at the Elysée Palace with the Macrons.² Hariri was back in Beirut by 22 November, Lebanon's Independence Day. Before the jubilant crowds that had gathered in central Beirut to greet him, with their banners and sky-blue Future Movement flags, Hariri announced—his voice hoarse, his eyes tired—that he would be staying in Lebanon, and that he remained resolute in his defence of all the principles he held dear: stability, independence, moderation, the nation above all else.³ On 5 December, Hariri officially rescinded his resignation before the cabinet. Lebanon, he insisted, had been 'sheltered from the fires raging in other parts of the region, thanks to the unity of its people and its attachment to civil order'. But for this to remain true, the country had 'to keep its distance from exterior conflicts', while continuing to 'consolidate its relations with friendly and brotherly states'.⁴ Bland words, perhaps, but ones by which a harried prime minister attempted to steer a path between the Scylla of Hizballah and the Charybdis of Saudi Arabia.

Still, though, the ugly political rows continue. In January 2018, Berri and Aoun fell out over the question of military promotions—at once a matter of clientelism and one of confessional rights and consideration, with Berri incensed that Aoun had bypassed the minister of defence, a representative of Amal. As both men dug their heels in, accusing each other of exceeding their constitutional prerogatives, the dispute dragged on. It soon became more acrimonious still, when

someone leaked a video of Gebran Bassil, the foreign minister, Aoun's son-in-law and president of the FPM, calling Berri a *baltaji*, a thug. Within hours, Berri's supporters had taken to the streets to demand an immediate apology for this slight. In the Hermel, they surrounded FPM offices, chanting slogans and throwing projectiles at their windows. In the mixed suburb of Hadath, they were met with FPM supporters, determined to defend what they saw as their own territory. The army had to be called in to keep both sides apart. As the sour smell of sectarian rancour spread through the streets, both sides reeled back from the void, staging a very public reconciliation in early February.

It is clear, however, that all is not well in Lebanon. The prestidigitator tricks of the Central Bank have now been forgotten, and yet Lebanon's currency still appears volatile and its foreign debt levels unsustainable, its economy balanced on the thin threads of trust like a high-wire walker above the abyss. Efforts to resolve the longstanding row over public sector pay, which had mired Lebanon in bitter disputes and strikes since 2011, finally came to fruition in September 2017, when the cabinet approved a new pay-scale. Even this victory, though, was marred by clumsiness, when the courts ruled that the tax hikes the government had initially hoped would finance the rise in salaries were unconstitutional. What's more, it has done little to dissipate disagreement between Lebanon's private schools, many of which claim they cannot afford to pay their teachers according to the new scale, and their employees, who insist that they cannot afford to live on their old salaries. Teachers across the private sector walked out for a three-day strike in November 2017, but still the issue is unresolved, these industrial disputes an indication of the economic strains and pinches that many in Lebanon have to live with.⁵ The electricity still stutters and cuts out, and the energy minister's attempts to make up for shortfalls in supply by leasing three Turkish floating power stations have been referred to the courts because of concerns over the financial propriety of the tender process. The rubbish crisis still has not been resolved. As the temporary dumping grounds created on the Costa Brava beach and in Burj Hammoud reach saturation point, civil society activists continue to warn of impending infrastructural collapse and environmental disaster. In September 2017, the minister of the environment was forced to apologise after he was caught on camera telling local resi-

dents in Costa Brava that the rubbish should not have been piled up on their beach; the idea, he explained, was always to throw it into the sea. In October, the cabinet approved a new long-term plan, based on the idea of 'waste to energy': an attractively simple idea for the politicians—who would be able to kill two birds with one stone by building a series of incinerators that would burn Lebanon's rubbish and provide its national grid with supplementary power—but one decried by civil society activists and academics, who warn of spiralling costs, malpractice, and potential environmental risks.⁶ In the meantime, the rubbish continues to pile up. On 15 January 2018, a Hamas cadre was injured in a car bomb in Saida, an indication for some of the internecine splits that threaten to splinter Palestinian society in Lebanon, and for others of Israel's determination to chase down its enemies, bringing violence to Lebanon yet again.⁷ On 8 March, a Syrian toddler died when her family's tent, in one of the camps of the Beqaa, caught fire.⁸ We do not know yet whether this was another in the series of arson attacks on informal encampments that began in the summer of 2017, or whether her parents were simply attempting to keep warm or cook some food, but the fire is a further reminder of the precarity that Syrian refugees in Lebanon live with, and of the xenophobia that leads the government to refuse them adequate shelter—sending some of their flimsy homes up in flames.

And yet, the country's politicians seem to be turning their attention away from the present and its problems, and towards the promises of the future. The newspapers have begun to fixate on the upcoming elections, still scheduled for May 2018, examining the chances of this or that candidate to hold on to a majority or to cause an upset, and anatomising the unexpected alliances and strategic understandings drawn up by various parties. Talk is now focusing, for instance, on the end of the alliance between Hizballah and the FPM, and the birth of a new 'blue-orange' coalition uniting Aoun's movement and Hariri's Future Movement.⁹ A brutal campaign is being waged by the Syrian regime and Russian forces on the eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus, and yet many in Lebanon continue to talk, with blithe inhumanity and seemingly endless resources of Panglossian optimism, of the windfalls of Syrian reconstruction—of how the ports of Beirut and Tripoli could be turned into conduit points for all the building material, of how

Lebanon could serve as an attractive rear-base for all the international agencies and corporations that would flood into Syria to help remake the country, and of the potential profits for Lebanese contractors, engineers, and banks. More and more, commentators in Beirut, Washington, and Tel Aviv talk of a new Israeli war on Lebanon, spurred on by the IDF's desire to cut Hizballah down to size, but also by the growing rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, a new marriage of convenience born of the two countries' shared fear of Iran and its growing influence through the Middle East. Despite the spectre of war, many in Lebanon seem entranced by the windfalls of offshore gas. The bid put forward by a consortium led by Total has been accepted, and the Lebanese government is readying itself to sign the exploitation contracts. Buoyed by this news, many foresee a bright new future as a carbon economy now that the work of boring down into the seafloor in Lebanon's exclusive economic zone is finally set to begin, after so many delays and false dawns.¹⁰ But what are we to make of these radiant projections, when so much still appears broken in the present, when the lives of the Lebanese still seem so wearily, disconcertingly hard, when such simple things as getting to work through the morning traffic or Skyping a friend abroad require bottomless reserves of patience, and when so many worry aloud at the state's growing intolerance of dissent? These dreams and delusions of the future seem both too much for the Lebanese, and not quite enough.

AFTERWORD

When I finished writing this book in late winter 2018, weary and jaded, I could not have foreseen what would come to pass. Even a few short weeks ago, the events that have held Lebanon in their sway since 17 October 2019 seemed inconceivable. I was last in Lebanon in May and June 2019. The country seemed then in the grip of a malaise as deep as I could remember. When we went to buy a friend's daughter a present, the malls were ghostly in their emptiness, the shop attendants idling with phones in hand, their eyes glazed over with tedium. More striking still was how young they all were, just kids in their late teens or early twenties, as though an entire generation had gone missing—as it has, in a sense, with so many taking flight as soon as they can finish their studies or can afford to go abroad, uncertain whether they will return. When we went to have dinner in an old haunt on our last night in Beirut, our meal broken by the loud yaps of a drunk young American expounding on his aggressive dating strategies and bold plans for restructuring the Jordanian economy, the waiter walked through the half-empty space, wishing each table in turn a safe flight. No-one here, it suddenly occurred to me, as I looked around, half-drunk, lives in Lebanon.

Deep economic morass was only compounded by the staleness and stasis of the country's politics. After the evanescent anger and hope of 2015 and 2016, the parliamentary elections of May 2018 seemed an anti-climax. Some had hoped the new electoral law, various iterations of which had been debated by Lebanon's politicians for more than a decade, might create a space for lists of independent candidates, not aligned to one or another of the dominant political blocs, and for a

political life less beholden to the logic of confessionalism. In the event, the law's labyrinthine complexities created only befuddlement, adding to the general sense of listless disinterest. Tellingly, though these were the first national polls since 2009, many voters simply stayed away, and the turn-out fell below 50 per cent. Significant losses for the Future Movement coupled with the Free Patriotic Movement's strong performance were widely seen, both at home and abroad, as confirmation of Hizballah's growing dominance over Lebanon. There was some truth to this reading. Michel Aoun, the party's longstanding ally, was ensconced in the presidential palace, and the FPM, headed by his son-in-law Gebran Bassil, was now the single largest parliamentary grouping, with twenty-nine seats. For his part, Hariri seemed not to have recovered from his debasing trip to Saudi Arabia, while trust in his party's capacity to provide for its supporters and speak for Lebanon's Sunnis had been steadily eroded both by years of growing precarity and perceived neglect—particularly evident in places like Tripoli and Saida—and the painful open sore of the Syrian war.

Beneath the headline figures, however, the depressing truth was that little had changed with the elections, which brought only disappointment to those who had hoped for a breakthrough for civil society candidates. In the end, only one such candidate—the journalist Paula Yacoubian—won a seat. And what was new did not bode well. The election of former army or intelligence officers like Chamel Roukoz, Ashraf Rifi and Jamil Sayyid spoke of the growing militarisation of Lebanese politics—with another former military man, of course, in the presidential palace. And the reappearance on the scene of men like Sayyed or Elie Ferzli, loyal allies of Damascus banished from the political scene, seemingly for good, in 2005, suggested that many in Lebanon regarded the Syrian war's outcome as a foregone conclusion. More than this, the return of these despised Lazaruses seemed the clearest indication that the country's politicians were a closed case. As in an outlandish soap opera, some disappeared for a while, and others returned miraculously from the dead. But all were ultimately interchangeable. Unrepentant and unaccountable, their old offences held, in the eyes of their peers, about as much significance as their old promises.

Just as wearisome as the election results were the negotiations to form a new government, headed up by Saad Hariri. These dragged on

for nine months, as the FPM insisted on seeing its self-proclaimed status as the representative of Lebanon's Christians confirmed by a respectable share of cabinet seats, and as Hizballah sought to keep Hariri in check by imposing on him its Sunni allies. Finally, another national unity cabinet—in truth, a fudge dominated by the overbearing Aoun and Bassil, who together claimed eleven ministers—was formed in January 2019. Its mission was to implement the structural reforms international donors had called for at the CEDRE conference, held in Paris in April 2018. There, France, the United States, the IMF and others had pledged over \$10 billion in loans and aid, whose release was conditional on what the French government blandly described as 'challenging fiscal consolidation'—in other words, on raising taxes and cutting state expenditure, hardly the most popular tandem of measures at the best of times.¹

Indeed, one did not have to look far to find manifestations of growing discontent. The spring and early summer of 2019 were marked by a series of strikes, as public sector workers, teachers, university lecturers and retired soldiers protested against proposed cuts to their salaries and pensions. While teachers had grown accustomed to industrial action, having only recently secured wage increases after drawn-out negotiations with the Ministry of Education, the veterans' protests were a sign of just how dire things had become for many: holding a sit-in beneath the prime minister's offices in central Beirut, they spoke of their fury and desperation, of their desire for dignity and respect from the state they had served, but also of their very real struggles to make ends meet. In the face of this anger, politicians fell back on nativist rhetoric—with the minister of labour imposing harsh new registration measures on foreign residents, provoking widespread protests among Lebanon's Palestinians. But if they hoped that such populist tactics would be enough to diffuse the situation, they were wrong.

For the onset of autumn brought no let-up from the sense of crisis. In September 2019, rumours began to circulate of ATMs running dry and of money-changers hiking up the price of dollars, feeding anxiety about a possible currency crisis and devaluation of the Lebanese lira, pegged to the dollar since 1997. In an economy so heavily reliant on imports of everything from wheat and other staples to energy supplies, and in which so many who kept current and savings accounts in the local

currency counted on its easy convertibility into dollars, devaluation would have spelled disaster. Despite reassurances from the longstanding central bank governor, Riad Salame, that all was well, fear of economic catastrophe was rapidly morphing into anger at the government.

This only increased when over a hundred wildfires broke out across the country on 14 October, devastating swathes of what is left of Lebanon's forests and endangering homes and powerlines. As Laure Stephan, *Le Monde's* Beirut correspondent, noted, sadness rapidly yielded to anger, particularly when it was discovered that the country lacked forest-guards because the cabinet still could not agree, after years of unedifying squabbles, on the confessional distribution of public appointments, and that three Canadair fire-fighting helicopters, purchased at considerable expense in 2009, had been grounded. The helicopters had not been properly maintained, and had simply fallen into disrepair. In the absence of state intervention, the Lebanese were forced to fall back on the volunteers of the Civil Guard and the help of Cyprus, Jordan and Greece.² There could perhaps be no sadder, and truer, encapsulation of the governing class's profligacy, neglect and casual reliance on foreign assistance. To many, they simply looked like spoilt brats who could always count on others to get them out of dire straits.

Then, on 17 October 2019, came the announcement, as part of the raft of fiscal measures intended to appease foreign lenders, of a charge on WhatsApp calls. Given Lebanon's patchy, sluggish network, these are perhaps not much better than crackly mobile calls. But they do have the advantage, at least, of being cheap, serving as a convenient work-around for those who cannot, or will not, pay the high charges imposed by operators. It is one of austerity's ironies that, for all its proponents' insistence that we are all in it together, pinching our pennies and tightening our belts in a common show of discipline and prudence, it often serves only to underline the stark economic—and cultural—inequalities running through society. For so often it is the small charges and impositions, those that seem most innocuous or insignificant to those in power, that prove the most provocative and intolerable to others. So it has proved in Lebanon, just as it has in Brazil in 2013 and 2015, or in autumn 2019 in Chile, where transport fare hikes caused public anger to boil over.

Rapidly, though, the demonstrations morphed into something more than simple tax protests, with protesters' demands expanding to call for the cabinet's resignation and the appointment of a new government of experts; early parliamentary elections; a concerted effort to end corruption and to bring to heel those who had asset-stripped the Lebanese state since the end of the civil war, appropriating public funds or funnelling them to their allies and clients; and the abolition of political sectarianism. In short, this is nothing less, in many participants' eyes, than a revolution. This is reflected in the slogans they use, both in the streets and on social media, where images and clips circulate under the hashtags *#lubnan_yathur*—'Lebanon revolts'—and *#lubnan_yantafid*, or 'Lebanon rises up'. The emblematic cry of the Arab spring, *al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*, 'the people want the downfall of the regime', had been heard during the trash protests in 2015. Then, many had still been wary of uttering such transformative, subversive words. Now, however, few in downtown Beirut, Tripoli, Sur, Zouk and other epicentres of the uprising seem to have any qualms about calling for the entire system to be overturned, the political class a rotten tree that must be pulled out of the ground. For all that some protesters have singled out particular politicians whom they regard as especially corrupt—none more so, perhaps, than Aoun's son-in-law and heir apparent, Gebran Bassil, whose naked pursuit of power, ostentatiousness and use of crude nativist and confessional rhetoric to strengthen his shaky hold over the FPM have alienated many, even within his movement—many have been at pains to stress that all politicians were at fault here. None could be excused or redeemed. It was time to remake the system, rather than tinker with its parts. As another of the chants that have echoed through the streets and public squares of Lebanon in recent weeks has it: *killun ya 'ni killun*, 'all of them means all of them'.

Clearly, the 'uprising of 17 October', as many Lebanese have taken to calling their revolution, has not emerged from the ether, with growing numbers expressing disgust in recent years at the disjuncture between the opulent comfort of their politicians' world, and the pollution, environmental degradation, infrastructural failure, anxiety and straitened circumstances of their own lives. What's more, the protests do share certain features with earlier moments of mobilisation in 2005 and 2015, not least a marked penchant for mutinous political humour

and carnivalesque merriment. The Lebanese continue to show a remarkable capacity for harnessing their disaffection, transforming it into memorable slogans and mocking memes, and refusing to regard politics as an austere, cerebral pursuit. To protest, they understand, is an inherently physical act, a statement of one's presence in the world, of one's capacity to move, to cry, to sing and shout and make common voice with others. In Beirut, where bands, balloon sellers and snack vendors mingle with the crowds, or in the northern city of Tripoli, where the local DJ Mehdi Karimeh turned the central square of Sahat al-Nour into a massive dance party, the crowds have insisted on having fun. This is a world away from the heedless, nihilistic hedonism of Beirut's chichi clubs, with their stiff social conventions and conspicuous flaunting of wealth. Instead, it is joy as a kind of resistance, as emancipation from the ordinary. What better way for the Lebanese to turn their noses up at their politicians than by refusing to be defeated by despair, channelling their anger and frustration into joyous communion?

In other ways, too, the protests of recent weeks have built on those of 2015. One can see this in their commitment to horizontal organisation and open debate, in their insistence on civility—on peaceful protest, on cleaning up after themselves, on avoiding misogynistic or homophobic slurs, and on treating soldiers and policemen as simple citizens rather than agents of a repressive state—and in their commitment to reclaiming the country's urban spaces, from roads and squares to controversial private developments, like Zaitunay Bay or Eden Rock in Beirut. These are more than theoretical stances: women have played a prominent part in organising, as have young, working-class men, whom some had once dismissed warily as agents of unruliness.

But the sheer scale of these protests is unprecedented. For the first time, demands that had long been the preserve of a small core of hardened activists—not least the abolition of the confessional system—have been taken up by a wide swathe of the Lebanese. Indeed, calls for systemic change have resonated across the country. This, in itself, is new too. Where previous protests could be overly focused on Beirut and rely on a relatively small set of middle-class activists drawn from student politics and civil society, Nabatiyyeh and Sur, Tripoli and Zouk, and down-at-heel Beirut suburbs like Ayn al-Rummaneh have all emerged in recent weeks as significant centres of mobilisation. In

short, the movement that began in mid-October has rapidly become a nation-wide one, cutting across regional, confessional and class lines. Opposition to austerity, then, has succeeded in crystallising the dispersed, diffuse discontent that seeped through Lebanese society in recent years, turning hopelessness into hope. Out of disillusion has been born a bold new vision of the future.

In response, Lebanon's politicians have offered little. Saad Hariri, it is true, resigned on 29 October, after the measures he proposed failed to satisfy the demonstrators. Others, though, have remained obdurate in resisting the protesters' calls for reform. While the president, Michel Aoun, has appeared uncertain—a weary, ailing figure—his son-in-law, the target of so much concentrated ire, has shown no inclination to give away his power, suggesting in a speech that politicians should retain a stake in the selection of a new cabinet of neutral technocrats. For his part, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah has dismissed the protests as the work of foreign plotters intent on undermining Lebanon's sovereignty—a familiar refrain that has provided grist to the mill of sundry online conspiracy theorists.³ Like sitting tenants refusing to be evicted, Lebanon's politicians appear intent on simply waiting it out, in the hope that the protesters will soon tire themselves out and return home, leaving the status quo untouched. No-one knows where we go from here. But we have already gone much further than anyone might have hoped, or dreamed, a mere month ago. To turn back now must surely be impossible.

7 November 2019