



Monumental disaster The explosion on August 4 didn't just lead to deaths and widespread injuries. It also shook Lebanon's government BLOOMBERG/HASAN SHABAN

STATES OF MATTER

Blast from the past

A calamitous explosion has, once again, turned Lebanon into a pawn in the hands of erstwhile colonisers



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

A lethal chemical blast tore through Beirut on August 4, jolting Lebanon awake to realities put away in deep freeze since the coronavirus pandemic. Within two days, French President Emmanuel Macron was in the city, with words of admonition for the nation's deeply disoriented political leadership. To the people of Lebanon, he sought to bring reassurance.

Macron spent little time in the rituals of protocol. He was out on the streets for a substantial part of his visit, less a visiting dignitary and more a politician seeking electoral validation. "France will never let Lebanon go," he said. "The heart of the French people still beats to the pulse of Beirut."

Macron's political messaging was unobtrusive in its invocation of France's colonial overlordship. He left Beirut with urgent appeals for political reform and promises to return before long, completely unaware of the deep ironies of history that resonated through his actions. "Macron Bonaparte" was one among many titles conferred on him, for his revival of French imperial hubris.

The seemingly respectful hearing Macron gained within Lebanon is a measure of the state of despair the country has been reduced to. Most of the country's political leadership chose invisibility, rather than risk public exhortation by appearing at any of the sites hit by the August 4 blast. Macron's public appearances were a reassertion of imperial intent that assumed a camouflage of democratic accountability.

On the eve of Macron's second visit in just over three weeks, the Lebanese political factions fast-tracked long-deferred decisions. Mustapha Adib, an academic who briefly served as a Cabinet aide before gaining appointment as ambassador to Germany in 2013, was plucked out of obscurity and designated prime minister. Since Saad Hariri's resigna-

tion last September after days of street protests against corruption and a collapse in living standards, the PM's post had been filled by a caretaker devoid of approval within Lebanon's complicated system of confessional politics. The new incumbent, though, won little goodwill. Hariri's position as a power broker who will continue calling the shots was intimidation that the impact of the change would be little more than cosmetic.

The State of Lebanon is France's bequest from the quarter century between the world wars, when it held a dubiously earned mandate to govern. It was a State bequeathed to the reign of the Maronite Christian faith, assured under the confessional system of politics France assembled, of the key positions of president and commander of the armed forces.

Sunni Muslims, as a relatively influential confessional group at the time, were granted the prime ministership, though that office was to be held at the pleasure of the president. The numerically significant though less influential Shia community was given the remnants from this sharing of the political pie.

It was a system that bred corruption and severe sectarian animosity, plunging Lebanon into the chaos of a brutal civil war in the mid-'70s. The Taif accord of 1989 sought to bring about a peace that remained tenuous until 1991, when all Arab States made common cause in shared opposition to Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The Taif accord ended the assured legislative majority of the Maronite bloc in favour of parity in representation with all other sectarian groups put together. And the prime minister was made accountable to parliament. Syria was granted guardianship rights

over Lebanon, but only grudgingly.

Israel and the US pressed their own agenda, which was partly convergent with Saudi Arabia's and its constellation of Gulf kingdoms. All this while, the traditionally disempowered Shia bloc was slowly but surely entrenching itself. Today, the Shia Hezbollah deploys a greater fighting force than the Lebanese national army. And it exercises a veto over every significant office of power though it is yet to stake a claim to any among them.

Partly in the expectation of ripple effects in Lebanon and the wider region, the West and its Arab allies sought to quickly finesse the Syrian regime, beleaguered but still standing despite a civil war that began in 2011. With Turkey, Iran and Russia now the decisive players in Syria, the West has to worry about adverse spillover effects in Lebanon. That may be occasion for a pivot, leaving to France the thankless job of restoring Lebanon to a more equitable state, while the US and Israel shift their attention to the Gulf kingdoms.

As Macron set about the second phase of his mission, US President Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, was flying into Abu Dhabi in an Israeli jetliner for the formal inauguration of diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Oil wealth has been the lubricant of diplomatic relations in the region, though it has brought little benefit to Arab States that have resisted the Western diktat. In a situation of growing regional disorder, the Western power blocs may now be choosing to retreat behind the ramparts of the oil kingdoms, to safeguard that key interest against the enveloping turbulence.

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