

Taking Some Stock of the Lebanese Garbage Protests It Stinks!

Who knew that garbage was so attractive? Well, there's no longer any doubt about it in Beirut. Want proof? Lebanon's garbage crisis began "officially" on July 17 when the Naameh dump, located in the fiefdom presided over by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, was shut down. That action, which did not come as a surprise since its closure had been ordained several months before, attracted none of the government's attention.

It seems that all bets hinged on a last-minute *arrangement à la libanaise* in which Jumblatt would change his mind and spare the country and its leaders the migraine that would certainly accompany the grand opening of the "garbage file." After all, that "file" (to use the Lebanese lingo) stinks of the financial and political corruption that has been de rigueur in the country for the last two decades. As things turned out, however, that action



A poster produced by Hayya Bina in early 2015 that focuses on the now-famous "garbage" situation. The caption is composed of two words taken from Lebanon's national anthem: "Sahlouna wal-Jabal" ("Our valley(s) and mountain(s) [are hotbeds of manhood]!"). The poster was created by Dona Timani.

became the catalyst for a popular wave of anger fueled by uncreative and inefficient governmental policies. And so, the demonstrations began on Saturday, August 22.

As has often been said, the garbage crisis heralded an undeniable end to the March 8-March 14 polarization, which has dominated the Lebanese landscape since shortly after the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister



After the demonstration began on August 22, the Lebanese learned (thanks to a leaked video clip) that their minister of interior had been on holiday in Mykonos. Despite the innumerable sarcastic comments that followed, the minister's leisurely absence triggered the improvisation of a derisive song titled "All of Them Means All of Them." In short, the song makes the point that the uprising should not be *à la carte* but should instead stand against all of the system's pillars without exception. This helps illustrate the wealthy "cultural production" (i.e., graffiti, slogans, drawings, etc.) through which the garbage uprising will be remembered—and which has already become part of Lebanon's memory!

Rafic Hariri and the subsequent withdrawal of Assad's Syrian troops from Lebanon. The fact that the end of that polarization had been announced quite some time ago, however, seems merely tangential. From a practical perspective, the primary actors in each coalition have always sought ways to manage the country jointly (and *profit* by its management). Yet the objective imbalance between the two has grown by an order of magnitude. As the leader of March 8, Hezbollah has

grown remarkably as a regional actor due to its involvement in Syria and other regional arenas. In contrast, the Future Movement (FM) which leads March 14 has continued to lose influence, and at this point,

it is questionable whether FM can even be considered representative of mainstream Lebanese Sunni anymore. But despite attempts made by both coalitions before August 22 to maintain some semblance of a "vertical split" (which is how that relationship is referred to in the Lebanese parlance), it is clear that the Lebanese political parties which constitute the two alliances must refresh their "corporate profiles" to ensure their respective constituents remain allegiant. Dutifully, both are hurrying to do exactly that.

Where the street movement is concerned, interpretations of its true nature run the gamut. They range, for instance, from an ad hoc coalition of civil society groups created spontaneously by the garbage situation but which was hijacked almost immediately by big business, to one that is "embassy piloted" and seeks to foment a "critical situation." Such conditions would provide an alibi for an unpredictable intervention that will somehow deliver Lebanon from its enduring political deadlock (an even more complex situation

represented by the longstanding presidential vacuum, legislative lethargy and governmental paralysis). Whatever its true nature might be, however, that movement has certainly introduced something new into the Lebanese mix. For example, a number of groups involved in the street movement have taken to recycling dusty “Arab Spring” literature and combining it with nostalgic left-wing jargon and actions in an attempt to convince the public that the “new” landscape is characterized by a split between “the people” and the suppressive “authority.” Absent any clear definition of Lebanon's “unique” political scene, however, that landscape will only fragment further and become increasingly complex.

Without doubt, some innocuous “solution” (good or bad) will ultimately end the garbage crisis. But when that solution is found, the popular movement will really face its litmus test. Will it continue to address issues that are no less critical than the smelly garbage crisis (such as regular power outages) and possibly far more abstract (such as endemic corruption)? In true Lebanese fashion, though, it will always be *too early* to assess the legacy of the garbage “uprising.” Despite that truism, it is certainly realistic to take some stock from that ongoing movement.

A Baptism by Fire for Lebanon's Civil Society Organizations

Lebanon's civil society organizations

(CSOs) have enjoyed many years of financial and moral support, most of which has come from the U.S. and the EU. In view of that pedigree, then, Beirut's garbage protests might well be considered a baptism by fire for those CSOs. While their actions have never before been overtly “political” in nature, the garbage protests mark the first time CSOs have not been used as a sobriquet by a given party or organization. Rather, they are emerging today as bona fide political actors, parties, organizations or simply agendas. That shift should be recognized as a pivotal change in Lebanon's political landscape, the logical consequence of which ought to be a revision of the laws that govern political parties and nongovernmental organizations, especially since current laws date back to 1909—when Lebanon was still part of the Ottoman Empire!

The Other Side of the Looking Glass: LAF vs. ISF

A much less publicized yet critically important issue that has accompanied the garbage uprising is the diffuse tension that has surfaced between the various Lebanese security and military organizations charged with maintaining order. Of note, those responsibilities include assessing current events and determining how the matter can best be contained.

On the evening of August 23, a new concept, “infiltrator,” was added to the Lebanese vocabulary being used

to describe the garbage protests.¹ In contrast with the good-natured atmosphere that pervaded among the demonstrators that day, a group of “suburban youngsters” systematically instigated clashes with the security forces positioned near the square where the demonstration was taking place. Ultimately, the situation became so unruly that the so-called “civil society” groups that had urged the demonstration demanded that the demonstrators leave the area—and asked the security forces to impose control. Interestingly, the few dozen *infiltrators* performed so confidently for the television cameras broadcasting the scene live that it appeared they had a very specific agenda in mind. Further, since the identity of those infiltrators is still being investigated, theories about their involvement—ranging from asserting their social conscience to fulfilling some conspiratorial plan—continue to swirl.²

While the truth about the evening's events will likely end up in the “big book of Lebanese riddles,” it is amply evident that “confusion” reigns supreme among Lebanon's security and military bodies regarding who did what, when, how and to whom. In other words, it should be apparent that every time the discussion focuses

on Lebanon's security/military organizations, we must recall that none of them are under the command of a cohesive political authority. As a result, each organization has its own agenda and each is run by ambitious officials who, based on their respective agendas, are *full political partners* in some faction of the country's political authority.

In order to remain realistic about the events occurring today in Lebanon, and to help forecast what *might* happen, we must consider seriously the statements and actions of key government representatives, such as Minister of Interior Nohad al-Machnouk. For instance, on the eve of the August 29 demonstration, Machnouk threatened to prevent the Internal Security Forces (ISF) from “escorting” the demonstrators if the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) was not allowed to participate in that mission. Clearly, Machnouk was suggesting that the Sunni-commanded ISF was simply not ready to bear all of the responsibility for suppressing the demonstration (possibly forcibly), while the LAF and its commander-in-chief—who may become a powerful candidate for the presidency of the republic—remained on the sidelines.³

Another theory which has continued to gain traction holds that some senior

¹ Coincidentally, the same concept surfaced almost simultaneously in Iraq. On August 26, the Lebanese daily *as-Safir* reported that during a meeting with his ministers of interior and defense, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abady warned that “infiltrators” were trying “to poison the relationship between demonstrators and security forces.” <http://assafir.com/Article/439928>

² The minister of interior recognized personally that the violent response to the situation by the security forces was “excessive,” and a subsequent investigation of those events resulted in disciplinary measures being taken against some of the organization's officers and patrolmen.

³ *An-Nahar*, August 29, 2015.

politicians are behind the introduction of the “infiltrators” into the protestors' ranks. General Jamil as-Sayyid, a one-time General Security head who served a lengthy prison term for his alleged role in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri, stated unambiguously during a televised interview that the “infiltrators” were being mentored by such politicians. Of course, this “other” theory is equally uncomfortable since it implies that the security agencies associated with those politicians were also complicit in enabling the infiltrators to threaten Lebanon's security by co-opting and “redirecting” the demonstrations.⁴

Investing in “demonstration management” (and mismanagement) is nothing new in Lebanon's recent history. In fact, the credentials (and other endorsements) of General Michel Suleiman (the LAF commander-in-chief from 1998 – 2008) were bolstered because of his apparently astute handling of the huge demonstrations that followed the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri and the *neutrality* he is purported to have demonstrated during the events of May 2008, which led to the Doha Agreement. Indeed, those credentials contributed to his election to the presidency. Thus, that precedent, combined with the possible candidacy of the current LAF commander-in-chief (General Jean Kahwaji), leads to an inescapable conclusion. Stated

simplistically, the best way for the army and its commander (and even the politicians supportive of his candidacy) to be viewed as Lebanon's saviors is by creating and then resolving critical security situations. It is an especially effective strategy, since despite everything, talking about the army and the role it plays in Lebanese politics remains somewhat taboo. Moreover, the LAF's primacy in all things Lebanese is reasserted periodically by the international community, particularly the U.S. After all, which other organization is responsible for preserving Lebanon's alleged “stability?”

Notably, while the LAF and the ISF are not the only organizations involved in this wrestling match, they are the most visible. Still another, however, is the General Security Directorate. The closest of all such Lebanese security apparatuses to Hezbollah, it is maintaining a very low profile where the garbage demonstrations are concerned. Interestingly, the mandate for the General Security organization includes following up on NGOs and other associations.

The End of a Career...no Insults for Saad Hariri...

A great deal has been said in recent years about the decay that continues to affect the moderate Lebanese Sunni leadership personified by the Hariri establishment. The decline of Hariri-

⁴ The televised interview with Jamil as-Sayyid is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qj8A1BiQuCM>



This graffiti, posted during the August 23 demonstration, reads, "SOLIDERE costs us blood." It is interesting to note that the statement draws a link between the late former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's postwar "reconstruction" enterprise (which shaped Lebanon's manners and mannerisms related to political, social and even "corruption" affairs) to the "war." Of course, without that war, no reconstruction would have been necessary!

based leadership is certainly due in part to internal mismanagement. At the same time, however, that trend can be traced to Saudi Arabia's reconsideration of its exclusive and decades-old reliance on the Hariri dynasty/establishment. With respect to the influence being exerted by Hariri & Company over the Lebanese Sunni community, it is at once interesting and entertaining to note that Saad al-Hariri has escaped insult since the garbage uprising began. However, the same cannot be said for his father, who was killed more than 10 years ago. The huge posters that surround the grave of the late former prime minister were "profaned" with graffiti. Further, SOLIDERE, the private company the late Hariri founded to rebuild downtown Beirut, was barraged with insults and criticism. After a 10-year

political career during which he served as prime minister from November 9, 2009 to June 13, 2011, Saad al-Hariri definitely should have felt indignant about having escaped insult—especially since it appears he has been overlooked completely in the venting of public anger.

A Half-broken Taboo: Are Nasrallah and Hezbollah Part of the "System?"

Another icon on the Lebanese landscape is Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah. Despite the efforts of his organization "to defend" its image and that of its leader, the observation can be made that the Nasrallah "taboo" (which has already suffered tremendously because of the propaganda being generated by the Syrian opposition) has been broken—if not completely, then at least substantially during the Beirut protests. The proof can be found in the quasi-military action taken by several Hezbollah operatives on August 28.⁵ That evening, they forced a television station that was hosting a panel discussion in downtown Beirut to remove a picture of Nasrallah (which had been included among the posters of other Lebanese political leaders that were serving as a studio backdrop). Of course, Hezbollah's efforts have not been confined to field operations. For instance, the burgeoning presence it has created on social media sites enabled the organization to remove from Facebook

⁵ A video of the incident is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqmU_cG4vtI



The caption reads:

"Nothing happening in Dahiyeh."

(Stated otherwise, "Move along, nothing to see here" (hence the quotation marks).

No Water...no electricity...

More important than anything else is that [Dahiyeh] remain the [human] container [from which you draw people] to fight your wars, no?"

(The expression "Container of the Resistance" is often used to describe areas that have given numerous "martyrs.")

This composition, which bears the signature of one of the groups central to the protest, was circulated on social media and stoked the anger of Hezbollah and its supporters. Ultimately, several "denunciation" campaigns were organized, which prompted a cat-and-mouse Facebook "hunt."

a picture of Nasrallah—almost as soon as it was posted—considered malefic by Hezbollah’s many fans. Several "trash" demonstrators told *ShiaWatch* that every time they tried to insult Hezbollah and decry its intervention in Syria, they were physically threatened by other “demonstrators” whose affiliation with that organization was more than evident. Interestingly, although neither Nasrallah nor Hezbollah have (yet) received the same scorn the demonstrators have heaped on their Lebanese counterparts, *a number of leading figures in the uprising are Shia. Thus, despite the paucity of insults being slung at Nasrallah/Hezbollah, the organization's political monopoly over*

representation of the Shia community is indeed being revisited. That eventuality becomes even more evident based on a conversation *ShiaWatch* had with a senior security official, who made it clear (on condition of anonymity) that most of the demonstrators were Shia and Christian.

The Garbage Uprising and Lebanon’s Complex Frontline Grid

Perhaps the most difficult task associated with analyzing the garbage uprising is overcoming the difficulty involved in separating the spontaneous aspect of this movement from its deliberate counterpart—represented by the political *instrumentalization* of



One of the characteristics of the demonstrations in Beirut that has sparked debate in several Arab countries (primarily Egypt and the Gulf states) is the cheeky clothing being worn by some of the female demonstrators. In truth, these liberal styles should not have attracted such attention. Rather, the way such styles of dress coexist with those that are both more conservative and conform to the “Islamic” code (clearly not the approved ISIL (Daesh) style) is what should have attracted the most attention. The mixed wardrobe on display during the Beirut demonstrations says a great deal about the *confusion* that permeates the extant political forces relative to the *political identity* of the demonstrators. One possible response to that confusion is that these demonstrators simply do not share a political identity similar to others in the various capitals of the Arab world.

its enthusiasm. As a reminder, when the demonstrations began, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) backed the effort. The day after, however, the PSP withdrew its support. The party justified its decision by explaining that the demonstrations had been derailed from their original course of “legitimate advocacy...[in] an attempt to [induce

the] collapse [of] what remains of the State's institutions.”⁶

While the colorful and seemingly citizen-based demonstrations have garnered the lion's share of media attention, it is impossible to ignore that they have incited sectarian responses. We are reminded, therefore, that sectarian fault lines in Lebanon are both present and dangerous—the most important of which is the Sunni-Shia rift. Regardless of the solidarity being shown by those responsible for (what remains of) the Lebanese political system, and despite their competing and contradictory interests and agendas, the fact remains that most of the demonstrations have been directed against Sunni “addresses.” These include the Grand Serail, the office of the (Sunni) prime minister, the ministry of interior and the ministry of environment (both of which are led by Sunni ministers). Because of that focus, large swaths of the Sunni community feel they have also been targeted.

Critically, the attacks against SOLIDERE and the perversion of Hariri's grave did nothing to ease the anxiety being felt by the members of Lebanon's Sunni community. In fact, that sentiment has been apparent since the demonstrations began. Perhaps one of the most telling acknowledgments of that angst came from a Sunni MP from Akkar who observed on August 23 that if things failed to change, then

⁶ <http://anbaaonline.com/?p=356647>

Akkar (specifically the area's *Sunni*) were ready to defend the Grand Serail.

Of course, the sectarian dimension associated with the demonstrations can be assessed from a less raucous, more quantitative perspective. On August 30, the day after the largest (to that point) garbage-inspired demonstration, the Amal Movement organized a large-scale rally in the southern town of Nabatieh to commemorate the 37th anniversary of the “disappearance” of Sayyed Moussa as-Sadr. But while the Amal Movement conducts such rallies annually, and although the speech given by Amal head Nabih Berri was moderate and sympathetic to the *substance* of the popular protest, such spectacles can no longer be considered distinct from the event that occurred less than 24 hours before. At this point, it is challenging to resist the urge to conduct a “comparative demonstration” because of its predetermined conclusion. Nevertheless, while garbage has indeed become the catalyst for thousands of people to seize control of some streets and accuse politicians—including Berri—of being corrupt and wantonly sucking away Lebanon’s resources to suit their own purposes, that denunciation will have little effect on hundreds of thousands of other Lebanese who belong to the clientelist networks of various corrupt, sectarian leaders, and who are ready to heed the calls of those leaders to defer to

established sectarian obligations by filling the streets and listening transfixed to their discourses....⁷



To be sure, some of the dissent being expressed by the CSOs leading this ongoing “street dance” focuses on the agenda of that popular movement. For example, should it be restricted to day-to-day demands or should it go further and include topics of a purely political nature? Despite this infighting among the various and sundry NGO “churches,” it is worth noting that none have suggested broadening the movement’s agenda to include critical items. Such items include the refugee issue and its many implications (which may prove far more decisive than garbage where the sustainment of Lebanon’s stability is concerned) and/or the impact of Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria (the most effective demonstration yet of Lebanon’s national schizophrenia and the most convincing explanation for why “the State” cannot lead the country’s development).

In language that is less metaphoric and a bit more diplomatic, following a September 3 meeting with Prime Minister Salam, U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon David Hale stated, “The challenges facing Lebanon are serious: there are security, political, economic, and humanitarian problems, so many of them spilling over from

⁷ This applies as well to General Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement, the members of which began large-scale demonstrations in Beirut on September 4.

the conflict in Syria.⁸ Mr. Hale also echoed some well-intended yet nebulous advice given by Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin (the current president of the UN Security Council), who urged (on behalf of that body) Lebanon's parliament on September 2 "to meet and elect a president as soon as possible in order to put an end to the constitutional instability."⁹ Despite Mr. Hale's diagnosis and the entreaty delivered by Mr. Churkin, it does not appear that simply clearing Beirut's streets of garbage will remove the stench that today characterizes Lebanon. Of course, the (miraculous) election of a president would give the Lebanese a dose of relief, since ostensibly it

would contain further deterioration of the cabinet (which would be on par with the overall effect inspired by the formation of the Salam government). As all Lebanese have witnessed, however, the election of a new president is no easy task—nor is its eventual outcome guaranteed to be positive.

In view of the foregoing and until further notice, no one should expect good news to emanate anytime soon from the small country sandwiched between the rotting remains of Syria, the eagle eyes of Israel and a sea increasingly crowded by boats chock-full with "refugees" seeking to escape Lebanon's stinking shores in favor of some fanciful El Dorado....¹⁰

⁸ Ambassador Hale's Statement Following Meeting with PM Salam. September 3, 2015. U.S. Embassy, Beirut. Press Releases 2015. <http://lebanon.usembassy.gov/pr-09032015.html>

⁹ "U.N. urges Lebanon to elect new president." Al Arabiya. September 3, 2015. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/09/03/U-N-urges-Lebanon-to-elect-new-president-as-protests-grow.html>

¹⁰ About the same time the garbage protests began in Beirut, a boat that presumably left the Lebanese port of Tripoli filled with refugees sank off the Turkish coast. Those aboard included Palestinians who fled the Yarmouk refugee camp near Damascus and had sought refuge in Lebanon's Beddawi camp (North Lebanon). Open sources coupled with information obtained by ShiaWatch confirm that Lebanon's market in "boat people" is flourishing. Interestingly, the LAF announced September 6 that it arrested two Palestinians in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp (again in the North) for their involvement in smuggling refugees into Turkey. The LAF also raided an apartment near the Beddawi refugee camp in which 21 Palestinians were preparing to depart Lebanon illegally.

For more information, see "The death of nine refugees 'who sailed from Tripoli'... A bad omen?" <http://www.almodon.com/society/ac922777-ba8d-4ad0-bb0a-2499b7790489>