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ENVISIONING AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO LEBANON: THE ARAB- CANADIAN RESPONSE TO THE LEBANON CRISIS

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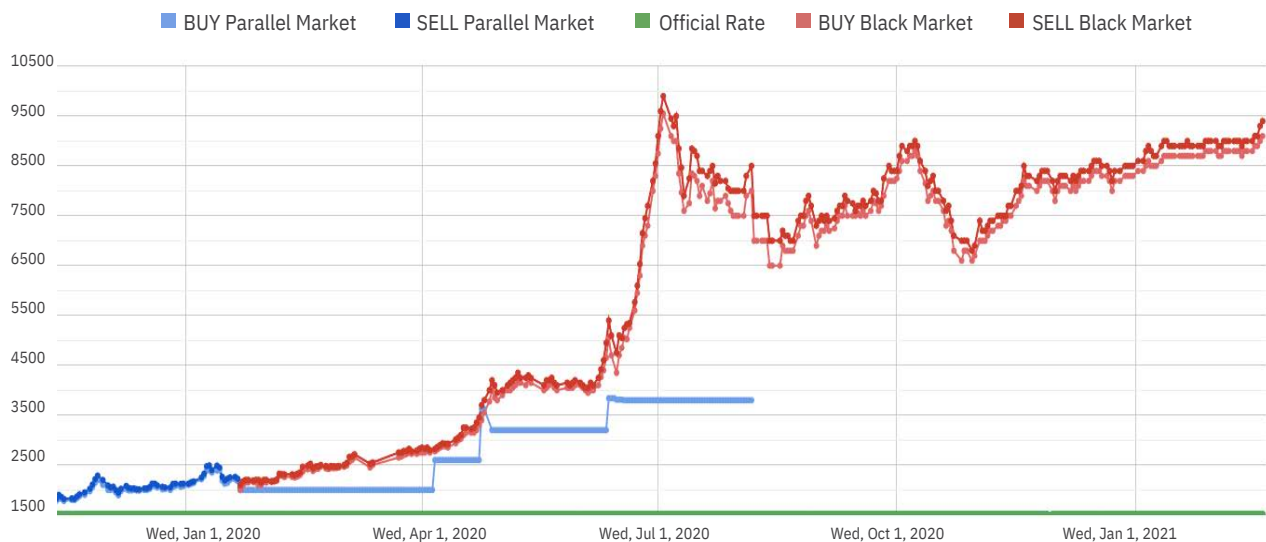
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Context and Scope of Problem

The Beirut port explosion on August 4, which killed more than 200 people, wounded several thousand, left 300,000 homeless and psychologically traumatized millions, is just the tip of the iceberg about what is wrong with Lebanon's 30-year political system. Since September 2019, the Lebanese people have been grappling with a financial liquidity crisis caused by three decades of negligent governance, sectarian based party structure, corrupt rule, and a risky nationally regulated financial program, where new depositors were lured into Lebanon's dollarized economy by low interest rates in order for the Lebanese Central Bank to pay existing creditors.¹

Socioeconomic Deterioration

In 2017, Lebanon's calculated Gini coefficient placed it at a rank of 129 from 141 countries in terms of income equality, with the top 2% capturing a share of income almost as high as that of the bottom 60%. In February 2020, 1 US Dollar (USD) was equivalent to around 2,500 Lebanese Pounds (LBP) in the black market. One year later, that same dollar is equivalent to 9,000 LBP in the black market, caused by an acute USD shortage in Lebanon.² With three different exchange rates to deal with (Figure 1), the inequalities are increasing between people in Lebanon who have access to US dollars in cash and those who do not.



LebaneseLira.org: Historical Exchange Rates Chart

While more than half the population is unemployed, the other half earn in the local currency at the official exchange rate of 1USD = 1515 LBP. Since the LBP prices of imported consumer goods have increased by 58% in the past year, the cost of living has de facto increased. The United Nations estimates that more than 55% of the country's population is now trapped in poverty and struggling for bare necessities, which is a twofold increase since 2015.³

Due to the deteriorating economic crisis, a popular socio-political uprising began in October 2019, demanding for the resignation of the ruling elite, objecting regional interference in domestic political affairs, and calling for early parliamentary elections (currently slated for May 2022). In the Fall of 2020, student body elections held at four major universities, including public and private universities, resulted in historic landslide victories for non-sectarian candidates, signalling a shift in political opinions of the youth.⁴



A popular uprising against the ruling class emerged in October 2019, which saw more than half the country in the streets at its height. Source: Unknown.

However, there is a possibility that the economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and aforementioned economic crisis will effectively reinvigorate the power of sectarian warlords over the Lebanese people. Indeed, Lebanese people are reaching new levels of desperation, reverting to partisan rhetoric to receive aid and COVID vaccinations from sectarian-based political parties,⁵ committing crimes for diapers and menstrual hygiene products,⁶ and fleeing the country in rickety boats to Cyprus that are capsizing along the way.⁷

Lebanese-Canadian Relations

In recognition of the decades of connection between the Lebanese and Canadian people, the Lebanese look to their friends in the Arab-Canadian community and, on behalf of all Canadians, the Canadian government in this most difficult period of their history. For decades, the resilient Lebanese people have hosted and welcomed refugees from across ethnicities and religions from Palestinians to Syrians to Jews to Armenians into their homes. The Lebanese people and civil society have continued to safeguard and promote refugee rights, even with the calamities that the country is facing.⁸

Domestically, the Lebanese-Canadian community has a long history of contributing to Canada. Since the late 1800's, Lebanese people have made Canada home and been involved in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of Canada. From Joe Ghiz to Wajdi Mouawad to Rola Dagher to Mohamed Fakhri to Nazem Kadri to Dany Assaf to Amber Fares, to name a few, Lebanese-Canadians have contributed to Canada. Indeed, the strength of the Lebanese diaspora across not only Canada, but also the world is also worth noting. With 18 million Lebanese people worldwide and only 5 million of them in Lebanon, Lebanese people are known to take a piece of Lebanon when they settle in their new homes.

With the help of the larger Arab-Canadian community, the Lebanese people, especially the youth and women, look to Canada for critical support as they fight for their basic right to live in a corrupt-free nation that respects their social, political, economic, and human rights.

Canada's Recent Support of Lebanon

Since the August 4th explosion, the Lebanese-Canadian community, the larger Arab-Canadian community, and all levels of government throughout Canada warmly responded to immediate relief in Lebanon. Along with a strong advocacy campaign by the Lebanese-Canadian Coalition, the Canadian government graciously announced a multi-tiered aid strategy that combined immediate funding for trusted partners on the ground in Lebanon, a donation matching program that matched private donations that Canadians made, and aid to the Lebanese Red Cross, amounting to a total of \$30 million.⁹ Additionally, provincial governments stepped up to the plate:

- The Ontario government provided \$2 million to the Canadian Red Cross through the International Disaster Relief Program. This was one of the largest contributions an Ontario government has made towards an international humanitarian relief effort.¹⁰
- The Quebec government donated \$1 million to international organizations that had the capacity to intervene quickly and efficiently.¹¹
- The Nova Scotia government provided \$1 million to the Lebanese Red Cross.¹²
- The Alberta government created a fund that matched every private donation from Albertans to the Canadian Red Cross' relief fund, up to a total of \$500,000.¹³

The generosity and tireless response of Canadians, provincial governments, the federal government, and the Prime Minister are noted.

Policy Recommendations

Although the Canadian government has stepped up to help the Lebanese people in the immediate term, there are additional worthwhile measures the Canadian government and its partners can take to continue supporting the Lebanese people in the short- to medium-term, which can be integrated into the government's overall Middle East Engagement Strategy.

1. Committing to gender-responsive, needs-based humanitarian assistance to marginalized communities, specifically women and LGBTQ people

Undoubtedly, the most affected groups in Lebanon need Canada's humanitarian assistance the most. A recent study conducted by CARE International, ESCWA, UNFPA, UN Women, and ABAAD found that women in female-headed households, who make up 51% of the population, are suffering increased vulnerability in the short-term aftermath of the Beirut Port explosion. The combination "of economic turmoil, greater risks of gender-based violence and the constant struggle to access assistance are highlighted."¹⁴ The five organizations call for longer-term assistance through shelter rehabilitation, the scaling up of tailored assistance to marginalized groups through technical support and cash assistance, long-term psycho-social support, and resources to help protect against gender-based violence.

In order to break the cycle of domestic abuse at the household level and promote inclusive policies at the macro-level, the Canadian government, through its partners like CARE, should commit to supporting local, non-sectarian and apolitical nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Lebanon that specifically empower women and LGBTQ people. Both women and LGBTQ folks have served as the backbone of the Lebanese protests since October 2019, as they are the ones most negatively impacted by the economic crisis and have no support by the state. Instead, Lebanese organizations such as the Kafa, the Lebanese Democratic Women's Gathering (RDFL), Helem and Meem, to name a few, have provided this crucial support for the most marginalized women and LGBTQ people this past year.

In addition to a youth and women mandate, the Middle East Engagement Strategy should include explicit support for LGBTQ folks in countries like Lebanon, where registered organizations supporting the community already exist. The Canadian Arab Institute is ready to work with the government to build an exhaustive list of local feminist NGOs that require humanitarian assistance for their gender-responsive work.

2. Promoting security and stability in Lebanon: Capacity Building in the Lebanese Armed Forces

Canada's strategy to combat Daesh through providing support and resources to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) has been effective in this global battle. Through Canada's Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building Program, the Lebanese Armed Forces have been able to prevent terrorist activity and enhance security and defensive capabilities along the Lebanese-Syrian border, most recently in September 2020.¹⁵ Professionalizing the LAF is also meant to stabilize the country and curb the negative influence of Hezbollah as a sub-national militia that operates in the shadows and against a wider national interest, including crippling the economy.

However, the Army's security efforts should not exonerate it from accountability. Ever since the October 2019 uprising erupted throughout the country, the LAF has been accused of using excessive and even lethal force several times against mostly peaceful protesters. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression

and peaceful assembly as provided under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Lebanon and Canada are a party.



Karl Freiha, a health worker, was with multiple metal pellets while tending to an injured protester, despite wearing a recognizable uniform. Source: Rights Watch

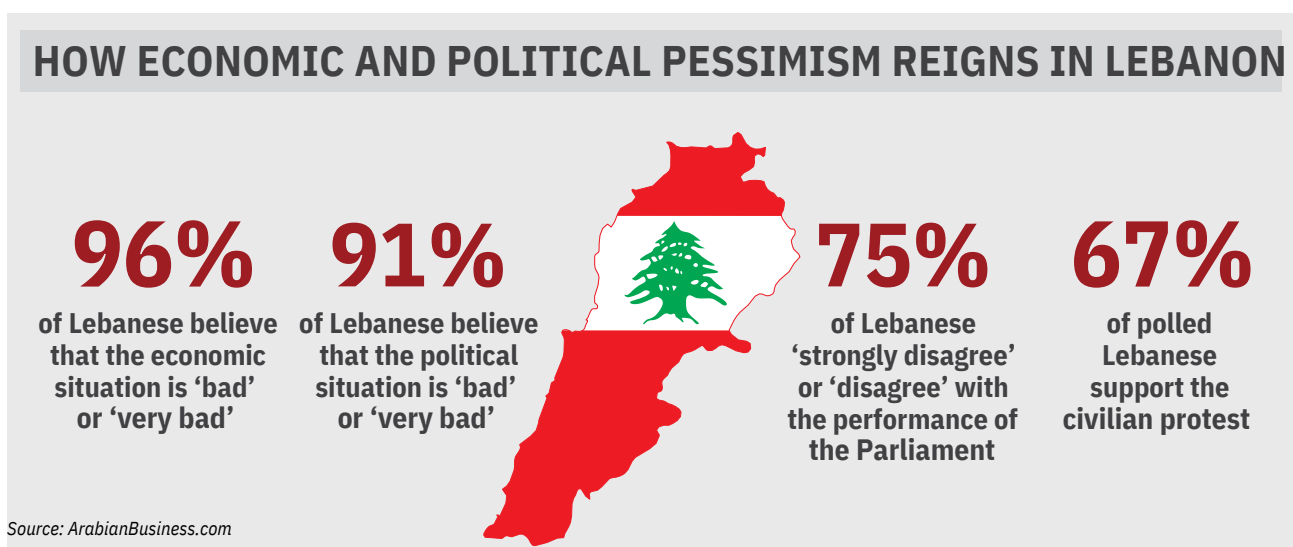
On August 8, a few days after the explosion, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese people peacefully took to the streets to express their disdain towards the ruling elite. The Human Rights Watch found that several human rights laws and international norms were broken that day by the LAF and the Parliamentary Security Force, including firing live ammunition, metal pellets, rubber balls, and teargas cartridges directly at protesters, striking some in the head and neck, including injuring health workers wearing their uniforms at the scene.¹⁶ Most recently on January 27, 2021, protester Omar Tayba was shot and killed in the back

by security forces in Tripoli, most likely while running away from live

ammunition rounds in a public square.¹⁷

The solution is not to discontinue the support and resources to the LAF, as this would also create a dangerous security vacuum in the country, but rather to increase Canadian capacity building support by providing additional technical human rights and gender-responsive training programs for the LAF. The Canadian Training Assistance Team Lebanon has successfully developed and delivered an intermediate Civil-Military Cooperation course for the LAF to strengthen relations between the military and civilian actors such as the Red Cross, religious institutions, the private sector, and development agencies.¹⁸

However, as tense protests will likely continue for the foreseeable future due to growing economic and political pessimism (as indicated in the infographic below), further training programs are needed to ensure the safety of protestors. Towards further human rights training, there should be a focus on community policing training for the LAF to better engage with women, youth that are NEET, and other marginalized groups, especially during tense situations such as protests, which is missing from current training programs.¹⁹



3. Join and co-lead France's diplomatic effort in helping set up a transparent and capable government in Lebanon

The strong people to people ties between Canada and Lebanon is supported by a good diplomatic relationship between the countries. At this stage, Canada has the unique ability to use its soft power to get more involved in supporting the French initiative, which includes auditing the Central Bank and the state's finances, swiftly forming a government technically capable of developing necessary reforms, concluding an impartial investigation of the Beirut explosion, and holding free and fair early parliamentary elections. There is a concern that Lebanon is on the path to becoming a failed state. The French initiative aims to help Lebanon avoid this path; however, it needs bolder and more impartial international support, with Canada at its forefront. France has deep historical and socio-cultural ties with Lebanon. Yet, in contemporary times, Canada has similarly strong socio-cultural ties with Lebanon with the growth of the Lebanese-Canadian community. Accordingly, it is powerful to imagine Canada and France leading multilateral efforts and rally global support for the cause of Lebanon. This bolder approach is something Canada could uniquely provide, as it has already shown such strong support for the Lebanese people through its bilateral funding and historical people to people ties.²⁰

We know that Canada is calling for a government to be formed that will be transparent, accountable and responsible.²¹ However, a bolder approach is needed now more than ever, as the judicial investigation of the Beirut Port explosion has stalled seven months after the disaster due to political intervention. On February 18, 2021, the chief investigator was sacked by the political class because he called for the interrogation of two former ministers.²² There is reason to believe that the ruling elite will do everything in their power to make sure they have full control over an investigation that looks into their actions. This is why Canada must take bolder approaches with France, as it is in the interests of the Lebanese people, especially women and youth.

Ultimately, should the Lebanese ruling elite not respond to the French initiative soon, Canada should explore imposing sanctions on the corrupt ruling elite through Senator Ratna Omidvar's Bill S-259, Frozen Assets Repurposing Act.²³

Essentially, the existing political oligarchy is largely responsible for the deterioration of the Lebanese state, as they have all turned a blind eye to state corruption, while the Lebanese people, especially women, the youth and LGBTQ people, continue to suffer unwarranted pain and hardship without public services, dignity, rights, and hope for the future.

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