



July 28, 2021

Congressman Ted Deutch  
Chair, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism

Congressman Joe Wilson  
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism  
House Foreign Affairs Committee

**RE: Amnesty International Statement for the Record for July 29th Hearing on  
“Lebanon: Assessing Political Paralysis, Economic Crisis and Challenges for U.S.  
Policy”**

On behalf of Amnesty International USA and our members and supporters in the United States, we hereby submit this statement for the record to address the spiraling humanitarian crisis in Lebanon and the need for meaningful action and aid by the U.S. government. Government corruption and economic collapse, violent repression, a depleted public health system, and heavy devastation of parts of Beirut from a historic explosion have left the majority of the population in poverty and food insecure. Almost two years ago in October 2019, mass protests erupted due to tax hikes and failures of the government following years of simmering public anger over soaring inflation, unemployment, utility shortages, and severe mismanagement of and inaction towards the country’s economic crisis by the ruling class.

Dire shortages and soaring prices of basic necessities like food, fuel, water, and critical medications have worsened the public health crisis, which along with COVID-19 and the Beirut blast have overwhelmed resourceless hospitals. Access to public services has become hard to come by, the lira’s value has sunk 90%, and Lebanon defaulted on its debt for the first time in its history. Of particular critical concern - and necessitating urgent U.S. policy response - is this collapse of the Lebanese public health system and need for medical aid and assistance.

**COVID-19, Public Health Crises and Systems in Collapse, and Discrimination**

Societal inequality and government abuses in Lebanon have worsened with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in 2020, as has the compounding economic crisis. Refugees, people in prison, and oppressed *kafala* migrant workers were faced with heightened exposure to COVID-19 and limited recourse. The country’s two million Syrian and Palestinian refugees have been and remain at constant risk due to systemic discrimination, being crowded in run-down refugee camps, and the highest poverty rates in Lebanon. Kafala workers similarly face disproportionate poverty rates, losing jobs that have left them stranded in the country.

On March 15, 2020, with COVID-19 spreading, an emergency lockdown was declared, at first containing the virus; but in August cases and deaths began to skyrocket nationwide following the Beirut blast. COVID-19 cases soared with an already-ailing hospital system overwhelmed, with thousands injured in the blast requiring urgent treatment, and scarcity of shelter for the hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Worsening matters, three major hospitals were destroyed in the blast, with over half of Beirut’s 55 medical centers left unusable from the damage, per the WHO. The country is facing dire shortages of hundreds of essential drugs, medications, and medical supplies, and private Lebanese hospitals have

warned that they are running out of fuel and electricity amid severe shortages to keep operating life-saving equipment for patients.

UNICEF has reported that over three-fourths of all households in Lebanon lack enough food or money to buy food, leaving 30% of children to skip meals and go to bed hungry. Lebanon's water supply system is also on the verge of complete collapse according to another UNICEF report last week, imperiling critical access to safe water for over 70% of the country's population - over 4 million people, including 1 million refugees. Water pumping is expected to gradually cease across the country in the next month without intervention or change in trajectory.

Lebanon passed 550,000 COVID-19 cases on July 16th, 2021 - in a country of roughly 6.8 million people - and 7,883 deaths, with just 11% of the population fully vaccinated. And though new deaths have fallen significantly, cases in July have begun to steadily rise again. Slow vaccination has been a struggle for lower income nations broadly, largely due to patent laws hindering wider vaccine distribution, in favor of wealthy countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has only further compounded the political and economic distress gripping the country.

### **Recommendations**

With the severe public health crisis and catastrophic collapse of public infrastructure in Lebanon, Amnesty International urgently calls on Congress and the Biden administration to:

- Increase the multilateral allocation and delivering of emergency humanitarian assistance in the form of food, water, medicine, and electricity supply directly to the Lebanese people and civil society as they cope with economic collapse, COVID-19, and the fallout from the Beirut port blast.
- Provide significantly increased medical aid including COVID vaccines, medications, equipment and resources, and funding for medical NGOs and UN-run clinics due to the collapse of Lebanon's public health system.
- Further improve accessibility of COVID-19 vaccines by implementing accountability and transparency structures into the distribution of COVAX-initiative vaccines to countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and fast-tracking a TRIPS waiver to enable equitable distribution.
- Designate Lebanon a TPS country due to the humanitarian crises gripping the country. And further increase U.S. resettlement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and exert diplomatic pressure on Lebanese authorities to end the continuing deportation of thousands of refugees to Syria.

### **The Beirut Blast and Lack of Accountability**

On August 4th, a massive accidental explosion – one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded – in Beirut's port decimated the port and damaged over half the city of Beirut. Over 200 people were killed in the blast, over 6,500 wounded, thousands more with untold psychological harm, and over 300,000 Lebanese displaced. Prime Minister Hassan Diab's cabinet resigned days later, causing further chaos. The blast only worsened what the World Bank has described as one of the worst economic crises in 150 years.

Officials traded blame while leaked documents showed successive governments were made aware of the danger several times since 2013, yet did nothing. The bankrupt government's negligence extended to cleanup and recovery efforts it was largely absent from, with the public relying on local volunteers and international aid and assistance. Government authorities rejected calls for an independent investigation in the aftermath, and their domestic investigation has since systematically failed to meet international

standards due to flagrant political interference, granting of immunity to high-level officials, and other fair trial and due process violations.

No new government has formed in the over 11 months since due to political disagreements between PM-designate Saad Hariri and President Michel Aoun, which has also held up foreign aid. This past week, former prime minister Najib Mikati became the third PM-designate, nominated following Hariri's resignation after months of failed negotiations. Authorities in recent months have also undertaken moves to obstruct and undermine the impartiality of the investigation of the blast. Amnesty has called for the lifting of immunity for summoned officials.

### **Recommendations**

Amnesty International therefore calls on Congress and the Biden administration to:

- Push for the UN Human Rights Council in its Fall 2021 session to launch an investigation into the catastrophic August 4th explosion in Beirut, as supported by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair and many victims' families, to find whether state conduct contributed to the deaths and how to ensure remedy to the victims.
- Call on Lebanese authorities to end obstruction and political interference in ongoing domestic investigations into the blast, and to uphold accountability for anyone found responsible.

### **Mass Protests and Brutal Repression by Authorities**

In Fall 2019, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese engaged in peaceful protests across the country for several weeks, demanding government accountability and economic reform. Lebanese security forces responded with only brutality in return. In January 2020, protests continued due to a lack of meaningful changes from the newly appointed cabinet. Again, Lebanese security forces responded with violence against journalists, activists, and protesters in the form of arbitrary detention, intimidation, and unnecessary or excessive force – using live ammunition, water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Thousands were injured, with 409 protesters injured over a two night period in January 2020 alone.

By March 2020, authorities had detained 967 protesters, using torture to extract “confessions”. The use of torture has not been isolated in response to protests. Since 2014, Amnesty has documented a years-long campaign of abuses against hundreds of Syrian refugees arbitrarily arrested and detained on baseless terrorism charges, subjected to fair trial violations and torture by authorities. Authorities have also increasingly and disproportionately wielded falsified terrorism charges against protestors and tried civilians in military courts to instill fear and further silence dissent, in flagrant violation of international law. Authorities also dismantled protester tents in Beirut.

In the weeks after the Beirut blast, the waves of protesters again took to the streets, demanding justice for the blast's victims and government accountability. Authorities again responded with excessive force, injuring over 230 people. The protests and brutal suppression of dissent by security forces continued through the first half of 2021, with authorities using live bullets, injuring over 300 protestors and killing one in Tripoli in January 26-29 alone. And as documented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty, security forces in Tripoli have forcibly disappeared and tortured dozens of activists.

This summer, demonstrations have persisted country-wide in response to continued failures of government formation, economic distress, and the nearing anniversary of the blast - with security forces continuing to use arbitrary arrests and excessive force. Riots following Hariri's Resignation in Tripoli in

mid-July left nineteen protesters and ten soldiers injured, with security forces reportedly firing rubber-coated steel bullets at protesters.

The pattern of violent repression of dissent by Lebanese security forces remains alarming. The Lebanese Armed Forces – heavily reliant on \$2 billion in U.S. military aid since 2010 – is a regular perpetrator of these human rights abuses. The Leahy Laws bar the U.S. government from providing military aid to foreign security forces proven to violate human rights.

### **Recommendations**

Amnesty International therefore calls on Congress and the Biden administration to:

- Center all ongoing and future U.S. military or security training provided to the Lebanese Armed Forces on respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, conditioning future increases in the \$200 million in annual military aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces on successful reforms to end violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.
- Leverage the United States' outsized diplomatic influence in Lebanon to push authorities to end the rampant arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and fair trial violations of protestors, journalists, activists, and human rights defenders; and institute deeply needed judicial and security institution reforms.
- Formally review via the State Department the potential use of U.S. security assistance – such as military training and FMF – by Lebanese security forces in carrying out human rights violations.
- Pass legislation calling for an end to the Lebanese government crackdown on protesters, free speech, and the press and judiciary; along with independent Lebanese investigation into the myriad violations by security forces.

Chairman Gregory Meeks of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Ted Deutch, chair of the Middle East and North Africa subcommittee, also voiced many of these same concerns and calls for action by the Biden administration in a letter to the State Department on May 18th.

Amnesty International USA strongly recommends that the United States government take these actions to support Lebanon during this time of political upheaval, economic collapse, and humanitarian crises.

As always, for any questions, concerns, or clarifications please feel free to reach out to us at [adadon@aiusa.org](mailto:adadon@aiusa.org) and [pnassif@aiusa.org](mailto:pnassif@aiusa.org) at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Philippe Nassif  
*Advocacy Director,*  
*Middle East and North Africa*  
[PNassif@aiusa.org](mailto:PNassif@aiusa.org)

Amit Dadon  
*Mustafa Kassem Fellow,*  
*Middle East and North Africa*  
[ADadon@aiusa.org](mailto:ADadon@aiusa.org)