

Lebanon's oligarchs and imperialist backers seek to exploit outrage over Beirut port blast

By Jean Shaoul
15 August 2020

Lebanon's Christian, fascist, and Sunni parties grouped around former Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri have begun to call openly for the return to power of this corrupt billionaire.

The demand was first made public within hours of Prime Minister Hassan Diab announcing the resignation of his "technocratic" government on Monday evening, following antigovernment protests in the wake of the massive explosion at the port on August 4.

The disaster, whatever its precise cause, was the result of the criminal neglect and callous indifference displayed by successive governments and the ruling elite, which for years ignored repeated warnings about the dangers of storing ammonium nitrate without proper safety controls so near residential areas.

Much has been made of Diab having received a letter about the storage of the powerful chemical at the port on July 20, after which he called on the Supreme Defence Council for action. In his own defence, Diab responded, "The current cabinet received the file 14 days prior to the explosion and acted on it in a matter of days. Previous administrations had over six years and did nothing."

Nevertheless, when it became clear that Diab's government was going to be branded as the chief culprit, some of his cabinet colleagues resigned, precipitating Diab's own resignation, although he remains in a caretaker role. As Ghada Shreim, minister for displaced people in Diab's now-caretaker government, told *Al Jazeera*, "In the end, we felt that they wanted to make us the criminals, that they wanted to put this all on us, and it was a major reason for the [government's] resignation."

On resigning, Diab laid the blame for the "earthquake" that had hit Lebanon on his government's corrupt predecessors, although he kept silent on whom he meant or what exactly they had done.

At no point during the six months that he held the reins of power did Diab warn publicly about the machinations of the political elite, even as they made it impossible for him to carry out any measures to deal with the economic crisis much less alleviate the plight of working class families.

On Thursday, in its first action since the explosion, Parliament approved a state of emergency granting the military sweeping powers to curb freedom of speech, assembly and the press, as well as to enter homes and arrest anyone deemed a security threat and try people in military courts. The move is clearly aimed at suppressing opposition to economic hardship, corruption and distrust of the political elite.

Hariri's Forward Movement, in alliance with the fascist Lebanese Forces led by former militia leader Samir Geagea, and the Druze-based Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Jumblatt are working energetically to engineer a Hariri-led government.

This could prove difficult to sell to an enraged public that is fully

aware that Hariri was in power for four of the six years that the ammonium nitrate was stored in the port and that is disgusted with the entire ruling elite.

The fallback position of these layers is a "national salvation" government, potentially headed by the military and made up of bankers and other business figures, to supposedly resolve the crisis and prepare the way for elections on the basis of a new electoral law. The discussions are that this unelected body would be in power for two to three years.

Washington's preferred option is apparently a government of "independents" headed by Nawaf Salam, a diplomat-jurist and scion of one of Lebanon's ruling dynasties, whose cousin Tammam Salam was prime minister between 2014 and 2016, and like Hariri was responsible for ignoring the dangers of storing the powerful chemical.

Hariri and company would be the driving force behind either a "salvation" or an "independent" government. Their aim is to reverse the setback they suffered last October, when mass social protests swept the country forcing the Hariri-led government to resign. They are determined to restore the direct rule of the plutocracy, in the service of imperialism, and limit or eradicate the influence of the "mobsters" in Lebanon and Syria, a term employed always as a euphemism for Hezbollah.

These layers are vehemently opposed to Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, and with its allies forms the largest political bloc in parliament. Hezbollah is a bourgeois Islamist movement, politically and socially conservative and deeply hostile to any independent movement of the working class. It has for years been a member of the country's coalition governments and played a key role in defending the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad against the far-right Islamists backed by the CIA, the Gulf monarchs, and Turkey.

The campaign against Hezbollah is bound up with the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" sanctions regime targeting Iran, which is tantamount to a state of war and aimed at overturning its government and installing a client regime.

Hariri's campaign has been aided and abetted by the imperialist and regional powers and the international media, who have suggested that Hezbollah is to blame for the explosion and routinely singled it out as the "obstacle" to democratic reform and a break with sectarianism.

Diab, an engineering professor, was chosen by Aoun to head a "technocratic" and "independent" government in January as a sop to the popular demand for a break with the entire corrupt political setup.

Bassel Sallouk, an associate professor of political science at the Lebanese American University, told *Al-Jazeera* that the aim of Lebanon's elite was "to defuse the momentum of the October 17 protests—and they did that very brilliantly. ... We saw the momentum

of the protest movement die down after Diab came to power.”

Diab’s cabinet, largely unaligned professional people, had the support of Hezbollah, President Aoun’s Christian Free Patriotic Movement, and the Shi’ite Amal Movement led by Nabih Berri, the parliament’s speaker.

While the Christian and Sunni oligarchs allied with Hariri’s Future Movement were bitterly opposed to the government, it suited them to blame Diab and Hezbollah for the growing economic crisis engulfing Lebanon, which had racked up debts of 170 percent of GDP as the Gulf countries withdrew their financial support.

Within weeks, as the currency’s value plummeted and inflation soared, Diab announced that Lebanon would default on its \$30 billion foreign debts and turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a loan. But access to international loans and economic support pledged at the 2018 Cedre conference, policed by Washington and Paris, was always going to be dependent on the imperialists’ foreign and economic policy agenda.

The Trump administration has been applying pressure in support of its local stooges, intensifying its sanctions on Hezbollah and those organisations, including the banks, dealing with it, and imposing new sanctions on Syria, whose economy is closely linked to Lebanon’s.

The Diab government submitted a plan to the IMF that would have involved Lebanon’s banks, the country’s chief creditors, taking a substantial “haircut,” as well as a raft of austerity measures and privatisations. But the banks, owned by the Christian and Sunni plutocrats around Hariri’s Future Movement, rejected it.

The Future Movement refused to cooperate with the government, leading to the eruption of small but violent clashes between the two rival blocs. In June, Aoun warned that this could spark another civil war in a country that saw a bitter armed conflict from 1975 to 1990.

Even if the port blast had not occurred, the Diab government’s inability to provide a modicum of social support for Lebanese workers and their families hit by the coronavirus lockdowns imposed in March would have sealed its fate.

According to Social Affairs Minister Ramzi Musharrafieh, up to 75 percent of the people need aid, as people scrounge in garbage dumps for food and beg passers-by for something to eat. Hariri’s bloc, already preparing to move against Diab, seized the opportunity created by the devastation to blame Hezbollah, centred on claims that the warehouse was a Hezbollah explosives dump and that Hezbollah managed the port and was thus responsible for the failure to remove the ammonium nitrate.

Hariri and his allies refused to accept the investigation undertaken by the Diab government, which has placed around 20 officials under house arrest, frozen their bank accounts, and banned them from traveling. They demanded an international investigation, aimed at placing the blame on Hezbollah.

These were the forces that organised the welcome extended to French President Emmanuel Macron when he visited Beirut just two days after the blast. Speaking as the representative of Lebanon’s former colonial master, he called for an international investigation into the cause of the blast and insisted that financial aid would be conditional on “political reform.” Reuters cited a Lebanese government source as saying that Macron wanted Hariri to head a government of technocrats, but Aoun and the Christian parties were opposed to this.

Germany’s Foreign Minister Heiko Maas echoed this call during his visit to Beirut Wednesday, when he brought a cheque for a token €1 million for the Lebanese Red Cross, while insisting that aid would be

conditioned on “economic reforms and good governance.”

On Thursday US Undersecretary of State David Hale called for an end to “dysfunctional governments and empty promises.” He added that the FBI along with French investigators would join Lebanon’s probe into the blast at the port, in an apparent reversal by Aoun of his earlier refusal to accept an international investigation.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the Trump administration is preparing to impose anticorruption sanctions against prominent Lebanese politicians and businessmen in a bid to drive a wedge between Hezbollah and its allies.

A recent report by the Congressional Republican Study Committee (RSC), focused on containing Iranian power and influence in the Middle East, gives some indication of the thinking in Washington. It recommended legislation banning any IMF money from bailing out Lebanon, as it would “only reward Hezbollah,” and the extension of US sanctions to Hezbollah’s allies in Lebanon.

It cites a Lebanese-American analyst who wrote in 2017, “Lebanon’s stability, insofar as it means the stability of the Iranian order and forward missile base there, is not, in fact, a US interest,” indicating that as far as the US is concerned, a civil war in Lebanon might be welcomed as a useful way of undermining and targeting Iran.

Either of the Hariri bloc’s scenarios for a return to power—the outright reinstatement of Hariri or a military-dominated government of “national salvation”—presages escalating class struggle and threatens a turn to civil war.

The working class must understand that its demands for economic security and social equality are diametrically opposed to the interests of all factions of the kleptocracy that has ruled Lebanon for decades. Workers must be guided by a political and economic strategy based upon their own class interests that recognises that it is impossible to resolve the crisis confronting the working class without a direct challenge to capitalism and its state apparatus.

While the ruling elite which is mortally afraid of the working class turns to its international patrons in a position of weakness, the strength of the working class lies in its international nature. It needs an international perspective that focuses on building a political leadership to unify the working class across sectarian, ethnic, and national divisions—not just within Lebanon’s borders but throughout the region—in a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

This means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, with its perspective for a United Socialist States of the Middle East, as the leadership of such a struggle.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>