

# Chapter 10

## Activists Escaping Lebanon: Disruption, Burnout, and Disengagement



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### 10.1 Introduction

This chapter captures an era in which the world is experiencing a mass wave of forced migration; (Europe’s biggest since World War II) following the largest flow of refugees from the Middle East also since World War II. Refugees from Syria have been escaping mass atrocities for over a decade now as millions of Ukrainians begin to flee from the Russian invasion. In this moment of time, data is missing on the longitudinal impact of forced displacement from both the Middle East and Europe. One day we will, and for that purpose it is important to capture moments in the experiences of migrants forced to flee violence and begin to rebuild their lives. This chapter is written from the perspective of Lebanese activists who purposefully decided to settle around the Mediterranean. Many of whom recognize that they are not refugees legally but report feeling “forcefully displaced” from one of the worst economic crises in the century; caused by deliberative inaction by the ruling regime.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter explains the evolution of collective action and protests in and around Beirut, linking perceived opportunities for actions with a generation of activists who tried to challenge the political system in different ways. The study analyzes the decisions and trajectories by activists who are resettling from Lebanon after 2018 by conceptualizing the Mediterranean as a politically symbolic space where migrants feel “at home.” The cut-off date of 2018 corresponds to a series of deadly events including economic collapse, COVID pandemic, political repression, and the port explosion as experienced by activists in Lebanon. To be able to capture this moment in time and conceptualize the Mediterranean as a politically symbolic space or

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>

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object, this chapter shares findings from in-depth interviews with 24 activists. The interviewees were part of a purposeful sample of a group that had left to Mediterranean cities in countries including Turkey, Greece, Portugal, Italy, and Spain. This is an exploratory study that seeks to build a broader research agenda relaying the voice of activists – not just Lebanese – who are resettling purposefully on cities across the Mediterranean.

The chapter has three inter-linked objectives. The first objective is to contribute to the debate on migration and the disruption of social movements by trying to locate how individual activists make choices about how and when to engage in politics of their home countries. The second objective is to conceptualize moments in the lives of migrants when activists experience burnout that pushes them to disengage in the hopes to rebuilding their own personal safety and careers after they migrate. Finally, the chapter provides evidence of how Mediterranean cities are seen as havens by activists, not only as geographical locations receiving Lebanese activists but as symbolically familiar objects of home and belonging.

## 10.2 Uprising and Hope on the Mediterranean

More than a decade has passed since the Arab uprisings sparked a wave of discontent and created political, social and security ripple effects across the region. The trajectories of these protests, their composition and responses from Arab regimes were distinctly different but the narratives of protestors had elements of great similarity including demands for freedom, gender equality economic opportunity, and social justice. Widespread corruption, discontent and marginalization drove millions of Egyptians, Syrians, Yemenis, and Libyans to the streets. People were either met with oppression and mass violence as in Syria and Egypt; or faced uncertainty after regime change with procrastinated conflict and collapse in Libya and Yemen.

Until 2019, both Iraq and Lebanon had escaped this mass wave of popular mobilisation. Authors cited that the forces of deeply entrenched sectarianism and widespread clientelism could justify why a revolution in the Lebanese context was not possible. Fakhoury (2014), for instance argued that power-sharing along sectarian lines hampered the sort of collective action and protesting that we see in other Arab states.<sup>2</sup> The discontent that sparked a wave of great hope and exuberance in October 2019 created a rupture from the bleak history of war and post-war sectarian politics in Lebanon. The country ruled by a century-old power-sharing agreement had endured a civil war for 18 years that ended with amnesty for war crimes in 1990. No truth and reconciliation took place and the same militia leaders partnered with

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<sup>2</sup>Fakhoury, Tamirace. “Do power-sharing systems behave differently amid regional uprisings? Lebanon in the Arab protest wave.” *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (2014): 505–520.

financiers and became Ministers and Members of Parliament.<sup>3</sup> The Syrian regime then effectively occupied and ruled Lebanon until 2005. The post-war order was that of corruption, clientelism, repression, and neo-liberalism that marginalized people and purposefully impoverished a population that needed to show loyalty to warlords in exchange of basic rights and services.

In 2019, and rather unexpectedly a great deal of hope through collective mobilizing suddenly sparked new questions for activists and researchers. Could the Lebanese people finally put enough pressure to transform the politics of clientelism and sectarianism that plagued the country for three decades?<sup>4</sup> We will never know. What followed, from mass repression, financial collapse to the covid-19 pandemic leading up to the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020, crushed the spirit and momentum of revolt. The magnitude, timing, and nature of the explosion also transformed the narrative and strategies from street protest to widespread solidarity as 300,000 people lost their homes. Activists that were shouting for reform and accountability now had barely escaped death, attended mass funerals for friends and neighbours, carried brooms to clean glass off the streets, and gave away what they had from food, shelter and medical equipment. Hospitals, schools, shops, and entire buildings fell to the floor just moments after the explosion taking away 210 lives and destroying Beirut's infrastructure. This, at the backdrop of one of the worst economic collapses worldwide, transformed collective action from revolt to anger and disdain. By 2021, Gallup news reported nearly 70% of people wanting to leave Lebanon and nine out of ten people were struggling to get by.<sup>5</sup> The following section historicizes how activists framed their strategies and narratives prior to the collapse that would ultimately push many of them to leave the country. I argue that this moment unlike other times when movements would enter periods of abeyance,<sup>6</sup> this is rather a movement of true disruption and deliberative disengagement.

Lebanon, unlike other countries in the region, has held elections since 1947 but maintained through an electoral system that normalizes violence, vote-buying, fraud, and a sectarian gerrymandering of districts designed to keep the same ruling elite in power.<sup>7</sup> Sectarian power-sharing enabled a group of warlords to turn into politicians and to create a system that is the anti-thesis of any democratic rule. They govern through impunity and have managed to evade necessary economic, social, and

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<sup>3</sup>See Hudson, M. C. (1999). Lebanon after Ta'if: another reform opportunity lost?. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 27–40.

<sup>4</sup>See for example AlJazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/17/one-month-on-hope-defiance-as-lebanon-protests-persist>

<sup>5</sup>Leaving Lebanon: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/357743/leaving-lebanon-crisis-people-looking-exit.aspx>

<sup>6</sup>Abeyance defined here as a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in nonreceptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another; from Taylor, Verta. "Social movement continuity: The women's movement in abeyance." *American sociological review* (1989): 761–775.

<sup>7</sup>El Machnouk, S. (2018). Electoral system reform in Lebanon: dilemmas of a consociational state. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(1), 1–20.

security reforms for three decades. Due to this system, ample challenges have pushed activists to take to the streets, to no avail eventually leading to many activists choosing to immigrate and withdraw from political life following repression, impoverishment and a series of missed opportunities.

I define activists and activism here in the broad sense as strategic actions and initiatives by individuals and collectives that seek to bring about social justice and political change. Because Lebanon suffers from the politicization of its labour unions, collectives are difficult to build and sustain in the face of sectarian political parties led by corrupt individuals and former warlords. Organizing is a form of activism for collective interests including a range of absent basic rights from education to healthcare to political participation. Political activism therefore is inertia directed against the repercussions of sectarian power-sharing by demanding equal rights and accountable democratic institutions. This is symbolized by movement leaders that engrained the values of equity, participation, and secularism as a countering power to the state that runs deep in society spreading intolerance, violent conflict, and inequality. In a sense, Lebanese activists who recently fled to cities across the Mediterranean did so because they sought places that provided refuge but also meaning for themselves and a sense of safety. It remains to be seen in what ways this new Lebanese diaspora will be able to engage and redefine activism from across the Mediterranean. This section presents the activists' past use of protests, coalition building, and advocacy to try to influence political reform in Lebanon.<sup>8</sup>

Here I highlight the generation of activists who had gained a sense of a shared and collective consciousness around the time of the Cedar Revolution in 2005; which mobilized enough support back then to end Syrian occupation of Lebanon.<sup>9</sup> "I thought in 2005 that real change could happen but even as the Syrians left, the Lebanese warlords came back to power using the same old ways of governing through impunity."<sup>10</sup> Many of the protestors that organized sit-ins and marches in 2005 wanted more than the Syrians to leave, they aspired for reforms. "We knew that the civil war could not come to an end, as long as the war *zu'ama* (leaders) were still in power and so after the Syrians left, we started organizing civil society associations to work on political reforms like elections, access to information, and women's rights."<sup>11</sup> This period of organizing by activists between 2005 and 2011 following the Syrian regime military withdrawal, was a period of neglect and lack of response by Lebanese state institutions. A series of assassinations of some of the main leaders of the Cedar revolution set-back collective action and pushed many activists to fear for their lives. "Essentially all we did was jolt and develop anxiety whenever we

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<sup>8</sup>For a history on these groups see Geha, C. (2016). *Civil society and political reform in Lebanon and Libya: Transition and constraint*. Routledge.

<sup>9</sup>Kurtulus, Ersun N. "'The Cedar Revolution': Lebanese Independence and the Question of Collective Self-Determination." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 195–214.

<sup>10</sup>University professor, interview with author, February 2022.

<sup>11</sup>Lebanese reporter, interview with author, August 2022.

heard any sound; it felt like an explosion could happen anywhere and at any time,”<sup>12</sup> The string of assassinations further enshrined impunity with nobody being held accountable for these murders and no justice delivered to the families of the victims.<sup>13</sup> There were also frequent detaining of activists, shutting down civil society associations, and a series of assassinations on journalists, Members of Parliament, and academics who sought to challenge the system.<sup>14</sup>

As a reaction, many activists saw that organizing through civil society associations and advocating for change was not the appropriate way to address the issue. Instead, activists described a need to take to the street and be more confrontational with the system and politicians. This led to a series of mass mobilizing. The first wave of protests was framed by activists the movement of *Isqat al-Nizam al-Ta'ifi* (bringing down the sectarian regime) inspired by the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in January–February 2011. The movement was much smaller than in Egypt and Tunisia but organisers were able to articulate a Lebanese version of bringing down the system that mobilised people to the streets.<sup>15</sup> The movement organisers chanted slogans calling for the end of the regime “and its symbols” (*wa-rumuzih*), referring to those who protected and supported the sectarian system. For example, the head of Hezbollah leader Nasrallah is not a governmental official but controls the state as if it were his party’s backyard. In interviews, protest leaders explained the conundrum of organizing a mass movement against multiple warlords and armed militias, which made it difficult to create a narrative. “We tried to frame our collective again against a regime, but the sectarian parties jumped to agree with us, suddenly they all agreed there was a problem but none took responsibility. This shattered the movement and split the ranks, eventually we were too exhausted and the protests subsided.”<sup>16</sup>

In summer of 2015, a combination of garbage crisis, hot weather, electricity problems and governmental deadlock following the second postponement of parliamentary elections triggered a next wave of mass protests in Beirut. A trash crisis began because people living near the Na‘ama landfill protested and refused to let garbage dumpsters into their area due to overflow of garbage. The landfill which opened in 1997 was intended to be a two-year temporary solution for trash in Beirut and Mount Lebanon.

The landfill was still being used two decades later despite numerous smaller protests by affected residents of Na‘ama.<sup>17</sup> Trash eventually started piling up and anger on the part of residents of the peripheral town Na‘ama reached Beirut, leading

<sup>12</sup>Lebanese reporter, interview with author, August 2022.

<sup>13</sup>See Knudsen, Are. “Acquiescence to assassinations in post-civil war Lebanon?” *Mediterranean Politics* 15, no. 1 (2010): 1–23.

<sup>14</sup>On constraints see Hårdig, Anders C. “Beyond the Arab revolts: conceptualizing civil society in the Middle East and North Africa.” *Democratization* 22, no. 6 (2015): 1131–1153.

<sup>15</sup>Sami Hermez, “On Dignity and Clientelism: Lebanon in the Context of the 2011 Arab Revolutions”, in *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2011), p. 527–537.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with author, protest organizer, Beirut April 2022.

<sup>17</sup>See Human Rights Watch, “As If You’re Inhaling Your Death”, [www.hrw.org/report/2017/12/01/if-youre-inhaling-your-death/health-risks-burning-waste-lebanon](http://www.hrw.org/report/2017/12/01/if-youre-inhaling-your-death/health-risks-burning-waste-lebanon)

a group of activists to mobilise with the slogan *tol'it rihitkum* literally meaning “your stench has emerged” – rendered in English as “You Stink”.<sup>18</sup>

The protest organisers of You Stink identified the garbage crisis as a political crisis, a failure and a result of corruption and negligence. This was a first mass articulation of trash, electricity, unemployment and inflation as resulting from political failure and corruption.

More 200,000 people joined the protests, making it one of the largest street protests in Lebanon’s recent history. Following the protests, the Beirut *Madinaty* (Beirut My City) electoral campaign was founded by a group of activists, professionals, artists and university professors. This group articulated the need for a political opposition group to take the momentum from the streets to the competition in elections for the seats of the Beirut municipality. Beirut *Madinaty* won 30 per cent of the votes but no seats due to the majoritarian municipal electoral system, but it gave birth to subsequent movements in other areas and set a historical precedent encouraging other opposition groups to run for parliament in 2018. Never before was there a single opposition list made up of leaders who had emerged from a collective protest and seeking to compete with mainstream corrupt parties.<sup>19</sup> Organizing between 2011 and 2016 reveals that movement mobilizing and movement abeyance was still taking place; social networks among activists met regularly to plan and strategize. “When we were not protesting, we took the time to reflect, learn, fight a lot among ourselves, and then work on new campaigns. It was a very different time; we had the headspace and means; now (in 2022) there’s nobody left.”<sup>20</sup>

The 2019 October revolution was the most historical juncture for anti-regime protests and activists. Some debate on whether it was an uprising or a revolution often takes place in media and academic spheres; but I use the word revolution because people referred to it in such a way. These protests gave the largest number of people the opportunity to be seen and heard by local and international media. The Lebanese were suffering, they were burdened with the weight of corruption and wanted to see accountability for those who stole their dreams and oppressed them for so long. Many Lebanese in the diaspora flew back into Beirut just to participate in these protests. “I could not believe that we were seeing on the streets what I had dreamt of my entire life, I booked the first ticket back and never regretted it.”<sup>21</sup> One analyst explained the sentiment by describing the images as “bringing back life to a place that was dead for so long reeling under the impact of criminals.”<sup>22</sup>

The revolution was framed by protestors as a revolt against criminals who mismanaged every aspect of public life. The streets filled with women, children, young and old around the clock organizing debates, chants, marches, and expressing

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<sup>18</sup> Geha, C. (2019). Politics of a garbage crisis: Social networks, narratives, and frames of Lebanon’s 2015 protests and their aftermath. *Social Movement Studies*, 18(1), 78–92.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Activist, founder of collective for disappeared persons, interview with author, August 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Feminist organizer and protestor, interview with author, March 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Lebanese in French diaspora, interview with author, February 2022.

their anger. This opened up the space of political participation that had thus far been monopolised by sectarian parties. New competent reformist men and women emerged at the centre of not only every protest, public dialogue, media appearance and police station where activists were illegally detained or arrested. They succeeded in putting forward, to a large extent, an intersectional narrative that was inclusive of migrant workers, refugees and members of the LGBTQ community.<sup>23</sup> “We protested for our dignity, life under a criminal regime stripped us of dignity and we took to the street altogether for dignity. Every march restored a piece of our long-lost dignity and gave me a sense that we were citizens united for the first time.”<sup>24</sup>

The revolution was a critical juncture for collective action in three ways. Firstly, it cemented a narrative all warlords and sectarian parties were responsible for the crimes and corruption of the latest three decades. The phrase “*kellon yaaneh kellon*” (all means all of them) became a mainstream slogan and approach to holding all politicians accountable is a sign of social transformation unlike any other in the country’s history. “Everyone agrees that there is corruption but sees their leader (za’im) as innocent so for millions of people to condemn all of the leaders (*zu’ama*) this meant that the time for fear had ended and this was a time of unity and hope.”<sup>25</sup> The protestors cursed all politicians and held showed their faces and names across the city.

Secondly, it decentralized protests not just in Beirut, but spread from North to South of the country expressed a national outcry, demands for accountability, and desire for new competent political leadership.<sup>26</sup> The movement was also purposeful in that it confronted government, parliament, banks and politicians’ homes – linking the power of corruption, money, and violence to the impeding economic collapse that destroyed the middle class and impoverished the country.<sup>27</sup> Politicians responded by sending party loyalists to beat and kill protestors, burn tents, and shut down TV stations reporting the protests. Thirdly, in a country of all forms of gender-based discrimination, the revolution was gendered not only in terms of women’s leading participation and main roles as mobilisers, spokespersons and advocates, but also in putting the issues of gender equality on the table.<sup>28</sup> Throughout these waves of protests, it is possible to trace movement mobilizing and periods of movement abeyance. Even in times of abeyance, political discontent existed and activists managed to get organized and re-organized to address different shared grievances. This ability and interest in taking an active stance and the inertia created around that mobilizing is lost after 2018 and utterly disrupted after the explosion and economic collapse.

<sup>23</sup>Lebanese law still criminalises homosexuality.

<sup>24</sup>Student organizer, interview with author, February 2022.

<sup>25</sup>Mid-career professional, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>26</sup>For analysis on the protests see Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, “Why Did the October 17 Revolution Witness a Regression in Numbers?”, 31 October 2020, <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/agendaArticle.php?id=199>

<sup>27</sup>See UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-s-economic-crisis-spirals-out-control-pushing-children-further-hunger-2022>

<sup>28</sup>See Carmen Geha, “Our Personal Is Political and Revolutionary”, in *Al-Raida Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2020), p. 23–28.

### 10.3 An Abusive Home to the Largest Population of Refugees

The Mediterranean remains the deadliest place in the world and protracted conflict and state repression accounts for the most forcefully displaced persons escaping from the Southern Mediterranean. Lebanon is home to the largest refugees per capita in the world. Palestinians and Syrians however that sought refuge in Lebanon found a new home that was abusive and politically exploitative. The Lebanese state allows UNHCR to operate and receives hundreds of millions in aid without being signatory to the Geneva convention. Lebanon's political system remained non-reformist and showed resilience to the detriment of people, even with the outbreak of civil war in Syria starting in 2011. The Lebanese state does not recognize the one million – or so – Syrians as refugees.<sup>29</sup> Their fate is left to the hands of local associations, some international agencies, and UNHCR.

At the backdrop of local organizing and protesting, activists across Lebanon also showed solidarity and support for the multiple waves of Syrian refugees who had to settle in Lebanon. This included symbolic initiatives to welcome Syrian refugees, denouncing acts of discrimination, and working with authorities to try to change policies that incite violence against Syrian refugees. The sectarian warlords and parties exploited Syrian refugees to their own gains. For example, Christian right-winged former militia leaders complained that the refugees were changing the demography in Lebanon and blamed refugees for stealing jobs. Hezbollah, actively fighting in Syria alongside the Assad regime since 2013, blamed Syrian refugees for importing violent extremism to justify its alliance with the Syrian government. Unlike refugees in Turkey and Jordan, Syrians in Lebanon are housed in volatile environments subject to exploitation and played out as a political card by local authorities. This often resulted in burning refugee tents, every winter storm led to refugees dying, and each election the refugees were used to entrench the rule of warlords. This normalization of discrimination was the result of an evolution of policy responses to the Syrian refugee crisis. Instead of insisting on social justice policies, the United Nations' Secretary General stated that "Lebanon is a key pillar in the international framework for the protection of Syrian refugees, and without it, that entire system would collapse."<sup>30</sup> After the port explosion, the situation of refugees was exacerbated by the mass destruction resulting in increased financial collapse, the collapse of the health system, and further unemployment.

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<sup>29</sup>“Or so” deliberately here to say that there is absence of reliable data on purpose by politicians to exploit this issue and use refugees to incite hatred and fear, UNHCR officially accepted the government's request in 2015 to stop registering newborns. The “or so” is part of the problem.

<sup>30</sup>UN news report, 2014.



## 10.4 Explosives, Narcotics, and Terror on the Mediterranean

The date of August 4th will go down in history as the largest non-nuclear explosion the world had seen in a century. Amidst Lebanon's year of hell, came a mass wave of community organizing to try to fix what was broken, pull bodies from under the rubble, and fundraise for local associations. The narrative of Lebanese people, inside and outside Lebanon, focused immediately on condemning a corrupt government that had stored explosives near people's homes. A protest sign, five days after the explosion amidst public funerals that would go on for days, read "we do not need an investigation to know who did this" and showed the faces of politicians. The protestors hung poles with puppet enactment of politicians in a sign to say that they wish to see them hung dead. International condemnation from governments, UN agencies, embassies, businesses, artists, and the Vatican went on for weeks, and months to no avail.

The evidence was that the Lebanese government had knowingly stored explosives on the port.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, due to decades of corruption and mismanagement, state institutions had been purposefully emptied of competence, data, capacity and leadership to help with the disaster. The state was subservient to the political will of warlords who had for years acquiesced to keep each other in power obstructing any attempts at reform. For 15 days, people picked up rubble, dead bodies, and glass with their barehands. Young people flocked to sweep the streets, experts warned that breathing glass dust is dangerous and can damage the eyes. But people kept coming in to see Beirut and countless of community assistance programs and initiatives were launched. These can be grouped into a four-fold typology of work that focused on relief and humanitarian assistance, advocacy and human rights, fundraising platforms, and political organizing.<sup>32</sup>

At the time of writing, more than two years after the explosion, not a single arrest has been made and the politicians have successfully stifled any attempt for a judiciary investigation. At the time of the explosion, a UN special tribunal for Lebanon issued a verdict accusing a Hezbollah operative of the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri back in 2005. No single arrest was made and no local investigation launched into the assassination that rocked the city and took away 25 innocent lives alongside the Prime Minister. No other assassination from the tens that claimed the lives of intelligence officers, journalists, activists and reporters has ever been investigated. The latest of these has been the killing of Lockman Slim, intellectual, civil society activist, and Hezbollah critic shot dead in February 2021.

Three current Members of Parliament accused by a Lebanese judge of the explosion are ran successfully for parliament, they enjoy the same immunity now

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<sup>31</sup> See "Exclusive: Lebanese Leaders were Warned in July," 10 August 2020, Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-security-blast-documents-excl-idUSKCN2562L7>

<sup>32</sup> Geha, C. (2021). *From Revolt to Community-driven Resistance: Beirut's Year of Hell*. Istituto Affari Interanzionali (IAI).

and have refused to show up to the assigned court investigating the explosion. Lebanon is a rising narcotic state with shaky diplomatic ties to its Arab and Gulf neighbors. Several tons of keftagon are being exported to neighboring countries to fund ongoing conflict and account for the losses due to corruption to keep sectarian parties in power.<sup>33</sup> The banking crisis has impoverished what used to be a middle class pushing more than two-thirds of the population into poverty.<sup>34</sup>

## 10.5 Activists Escaping for a New Home on the Mediterranean

To be able to capture this moment in time and conceptualize the Mediterranean as a politically symbolic space of mobility, this section presents findings from an ongoing research project using interviews with 24 Lebanese migrants who self-identified as activists, most of them referring to themselves in fact as *former* activists – insisting that they have given up. In many ways, this section highlights the agentic role of activists in moments of disruption that do not lead to abeyance but rather deliberative disengagement. “We are scattered across the world really; we can’t meet even if we wanted to; us and our parents have now lost all savings in the banks. This is time to survive to put food on the table and pay rent, it is not time to protest especially not against authorities who could care less if we all died.”<sup>35</sup>

The temporal aspect here is important to stress. The interviews are with Lebanese who fled very recently who are still trying to re-locate their ideas of themselves as they watch ongoing multiple crises back home. Østergaard-Nielsen has written about existing migrants and diaspora communities who engage in political activities back home. Other scholars trace political choices of migrants in the diaspora to connections with their home countries.<sup>36</sup> We know for instance that Turkish and Kurdish migrants purposefully engage in trans-national political practices seeking to contribute to political change in both the sending and receiving countries.<sup>37</sup> Another example are Israeli migrants in Mexico who express conviviality with the local Jewish community as a means of connecting to their roots and a show of community outreach.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See: The Arab News <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2006906/middle-east>

<sup>34</sup> See United Nations estimates in September 2021: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099102>

<sup>35</sup> Business owner, interview with author, August 2022.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Müller-Funk, Lea. “Diaspora mobilizations in the Egyptian (post) revolutionary process: Comparing transnational political participation in Paris and Vienna.” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 14, no. 3 (2016): 353–370.

<sup>37</sup> Østergaard-Nielsen, E. (2003). The politics of migrants’ transnational political practices. *International migration review*, 37(3), 760–786.

<sup>38</sup> Aizencang Kane, P. (2021). Jewish Diaspora, Israeli Diaspora, and Levels of Conviviality. *Contemporary Jewry*, 41(2), 387–409.

The findings below identified three patterns that emerge after I conducted a content and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts.<sup>39</sup> The 24 individuals interviewed are all high-skilled migrants who used to be considered part of Lebanon's middle and upper-middle class. They are educated – university and graduate studies – and used to afford to live in the Beirut area. Some had foreign European passports but most only had Lebanese passports. They also constitute a community of “epistemic privilege;”<sup>40</sup> they were journalists, professors, business owners, artists, and saw themselves as people who could afford time and resources to dedicate for civil society and collective mobilizing. They were also among the generation that grew into political consciousness around 2005, so they were within an age group of 25- to 48-year-old men and women. They had all actively participated in the waves of protests discussed here, organized election campaigns, launched civil society networks, and expressed publicly their outcries and opposition to the Lebanese political system. Three sets of findings capture this moment in the lives of activists who are choosing to migrate from Lebanon to other Mediterranean cities. The evidence here from narratives and lived experiences reveals three inter-linked realities that are important for conceptualizing the Mediterranean as a symbolic place for mobility: (1) Lebanese activists deliberately wanted to settle across the Mediterranean, (2) Lebanese activists are purposefully cutting ties with transnational political networks back home, and (3) Lebanese activists report the toll that political organizing takes on mental health and well-being.

### ***10.5.1 The Mediterranean Is Like Home: Familiarity as a Determining Factor***

After experiencing trauma and disappointments, the participants in the interviews all expressed a sign of relief that they had the opportunity to re-settle a place that was close enough to Beirut and yet felt safe and welcoming. One salient answer about choosing certain cities in the Mediterranean had to do with how these cities were perceived as having welcomed other forcefully displaced people including Syrians. Referring mainly to their experience in Istanbul, some activists interviewed explained how seeing the precedent of the Syrian evolve over the past decade made them feel less lonely in Turkey and that they can learn from the experience of Syrians about integration, what to do or not to do. The participants in the interviews all had a geographically symbolic reference to the Mediterranean as “being closer” and contrasted it with Canada and the United States. For instance, Rima (36 years old, Istanbul, development expert), explained:

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<sup>39</sup> Adapted from: Gioia, Denny. “A systematic methodology for doing qualitative research.” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 57, no. 1 (2021): 20–29.

<sup>40</sup> See Janack, Marianne. “Standpoint epistemology without the “standpoint”?: An examination of epistemic privilege and epistemic authority.” *Hypatia* 12, no. 2 (1997): 125–139.

“We had been planning our paperwork to leave to Canada anyway since 2018 but when the explosion happened, we packed and now we plan to stay longer. It’s like Istanbul adopted us. People were warm and here we can swim on the Mediterranean and have everything we could have wishes for. It is also very affordable.”<sup>41</sup> Another participant (Makram, 42) explained that the presence of Syrian refugees was somehow reassuring, “it is amazing to walk the streets in Istanbul and hear Arabic being spoken in most restaurants and cafes; I felt like if the Syrians could come here and begin to rebuild their lives then I could do it as well. For now, I can’t imagine being somewhere else.”<sup>42</sup>

All of the participants interviewed explained that it was not the explosion only but its aftermath as being the main trigger for them wanting to pack and leave to the nearest place. The fact that Lebanese do not need a visa to Istanbul was also a major reason for some, including couples who found it easy to marry there in a civil court as opposed to Lebanon’s segregated court system. For Fadia (31 years, consultant), “Istanbul is an easy transition and makes us feel safe. I might consider Canada or the US in the future but for now this is home because it is a feasible escape and a metropolis that reminds us of Beirut. Even before I had visited it, I felt that I knew it from people’s stories and experiences.”<sup>43</sup>

The regulatory framework of visas and ease of doing business was another attraction in Portugal. One migrant (Joanne, 31, architect) explained to me how she felt that the Portuguese people were more desirable to her culturally than any Arab of Gulf country. “Portugal offers free-lance visas allowing me to live there and work remotely. I had the chance to visit Saudi Arabia, Germany and Amsterdam but felt that I would be an outsider there. In Portugal I felt people looked like me and felt like me.”<sup>44</sup> Connectively to people and a shared appreciation for culture kept coming up as a repeated pattern here. Joanne explained that in Portugal she felt “simplicity of life. Lebanon’s economic model was a disaster and Portugal gave me the opportunity to spend money to enjoy beach and leisure in a way that Lebanon never did.” Also speaking on Portugal, Hadi (42, trader) explained that he had to make little effort to fit in the culture and that ease of doing business was a welcome relief after decades of suffering in Beirut. “I cannot count the number of times we had to open and close the business, and when I came here, I found I can achieve so much in so little time, without feeling like a stranger.” Besides the explosion, many interview participants explained that the economic model was suffocating and Lebanon’s lack of any infrastructure from fuel to electricity had pushed them out. All of them explained that they felt they were forcefully pushed out of the country and how before the collapse and destruction they had all wanted to stay. All of the people interviewed are above 30 and consider themselves mid-career professionals who had tried to build homes and contribute to changing Lebanon, all to no avail. “Life became intolerable and I felt stuck so I obliged myself to leave, I would have endured a war but not this purposeful destruction and imposed crisis on me. why should I stay and

<sup>41</sup> Rima, NGO worker, Istanbul, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Makram, academic, Athens, interview with author, July 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Fadia, consultant, Istanbul, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Joanne, architect, Lisbon, interview with author, April 2022.

live in the dark?” (Joanne, 31, architect). According to Zeina, “In Cyprus, just a 40-minute flight from that place of death (Beirut), I don’t have to worry about electricity, internet, or that someone might randomly attack us. I can send my kids to school and safely work from my house. I am close enough geographically to still eat the same food and enjoy the same weather, but without the daily threat and heartache of life in Lebanon.”<sup>45</sup>

The familiarity of a place that reminded them of home was a major factor in choosing cities, especially cities that migrants could invite their elder parents to. Another was personal freedom, Viviane (40, business manager, Athens), “as a queer person it was clear to me in 2018 that I did not belong anymore and felt that I needed to leave. I had worked in London, Amsterdam, Germany, Austria and Paris for as long and after returning to Beirut I decided that I always wanted to live somewhere sunny. Greece has no grey skies and it is ideal as it is just two hours away from Beirut. Its beauty reminds me of Lebanon and people are close enough for me to relate to. I made a new home here.”<sup>46</sup> Freedom was a recurring theme, “at the end and especially after 2018, I felt trapped, like my choices were limited, even my choice of conversation someone was forcing me to speak about sects and religion and limited mobility. Here in Spain, I can talk about whatever I want and engage on various issues, feminism here is a productive conversation but in Lebanon it is toxic.”<sup>47</sup>

### ***10.5.2 Enough Deception: Rationalizing Political Opportunity***

In a most sobering recount of events, the participants interviewed here present the portrait of what can only be described as a heartbroken *emerging* diaspora that is strategically seeking to cut ties from political life in Lebanon. If activists display agency in trying to frame movements and engage with political opportunities, then in this research it is evident they also practice agentic choice in disengagement and pursuit of personal safety. Here participants repeatedly used the word dignity and loss of dignity in Lebanon. “I was throwing my life away, volunteering here and there, spending days on the streets. At the end of the day, I need to provide for my family and recover decades of money lost to the banks. Now is not the time to work on elections in Lebanon, now is time to win back my lost dignity and mental sanity. Athens is offering me that choice by making me feel like a human being again.”<sup>48</sup> They all relayed a sense that they had self-deceived themselves into expecting change while in parallel also having been deceived by their own government and

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<sup>45</sup>Zeina, reporter, Nicosia, interview with author, July 2022.

<sup>46</sup>Viviane, company manager, Athens interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>47</sup>Amanda, entrepreneur, Barcelona, interview with author, July 2022.

<sup>48</sup>Fouad, entrepreneur, Athens, interview with author, July 2022.

international community. The participants, all but one, saw themselves as activists and movement organizers.<sup>49</sup> In this section, they insist on a crossroads in their lives symbolized by the explosion and explained what came after it as the political system re-enshrined impunity and continued with systematically collapsing the state. Here there was conscious desire to disconnect from politics at home, “I don’t want to be tied to this deadly geography anymore. I deceived myself for decades, it is time to move on,” explained to me a long-time activist and organizer.<sup>50</sup>

The overwhelming repeated statement in this set of findings was giving up. It was an accumulation and not a one-time decision. “I organized protests day in and day out, we shut down roads, I joined a political platform, and worked non-stop even under COVID. But then I had to attend to my job and MA studies, still I did not lose home. But after August 4th, I was done. My husband and I were at a shooting in a gas station during the fuel crisis, and immediately after it we started applying to leave. After that, I really lost hope and felt people were polarized among the old sectarian parties again. There was nothing left for me to do.”<sup>51</sup> In many interviews, participants relayed a feeling of guilt, “I know many who have decided to stay and keep helping, but I have decided to turn my back for now. It feels like we were raped over and over again, and I see no chances for me to survive back there. Seeing the news makes me sick to my stomach, I stopped following the news.”<sup>52</sup>

For others, this deception had caused them to put their private lives on hold. “I have missed every family event for the last ten years, I constantly refused jobs abroad including a very well-paid position in Dubai. I was always involved in any campaign; we protested an entire summer just for garbage. Then to watch the city explode and no change happen, that was it for me, I may be emotional but I am not stupid, there is no way I am spending another hour trying to fix this mess,” explained one activist to me.<sup>53</sup> Another spoke about geo-politics and the feeling that change was bigger than one group of people can handle, “with no money in my bank account and my father losing his pension, it would be silly for me to stay and try to fight. There are larger forces at play preventing real change from happening. Without a major transformation I have no more hope that our innocent grassroots work can lead to anything.”<sup>54</sup>

There was a fleeting hope that some of them could be mobilized again in the future but that this was not a priority right now. In fact, disengaging and recovering from loss of financial power to loss of dignity was the priority. “You can be an activist everywhere, I don’t need to be in Beirut as a location, I feel close enough from where I am. But right now, I am allowing myself to lose hope, we did

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<sup>49</sup>In most interviews, the participants cried when asked about this, and as author of the chapter I also cried twice listening to this side of the story.

<sup>50</sup>Malek, entrepreneur, Istanbul, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>51</sup>Fadia, consultant, Istanbul, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>52</sup>Loyal, hospitality industry, Barcelona, interview with author March 2022.

<sup>53</sup>Mirna, artist, Italy, interview with author, February 2022.

<sup>54</sup>Rabih, journalist, Italy, interview with author, March 2022.

everything we can. I need to take care of my family right now.”<sup>55</sup> For others this was also a move for self-preservation. “When the Tayyouneh attacks and shootings happened, I could not go to work and spent the day glued to my social media, counting the deaths and feeling shocked. To save my sanity, I don’t read the news anymore. I can’t afford to lose a day of work and I live in a city with too few Lebanese so nobody really understands it. What use am I without income to my parents? That’s why I prefer to keep myself distant from events there and this distant does not allow me to be active in any of the political groups I was part of before I left in 2020.”<sup>56</sup>

### 10.5.3 *Fatigue and Burnout in Isolation*

In migration studies, networks and interpersonal ties play an important role in the ability of new migrants to integrate. Career choices often affect the types of locations that migrants choose to move to, particularly in the cases of high skilled migrants who may move for better opportunities or to join professional networks abroad. The severe context of Beirut in the migration episode after 2018 caused many to lose their networks of support therefore adding to the feeling of isolation and needing to start over. This was, for activists, a time of a lost collective. “We used to be altogether involved in each other’s lives and work, we became friends during sit-ins and survived bullets and tear gas. I am glad we are still alive even though we are all over the place and will never live near each other again.”<sup>57</sup> These impressions of being alone appear to be somehow mediated by the feelings of belonging and familiarity that Mediterranean cities could offer Lebanese activists. The isolation undoubtedly made worse by the COVID 19 pandemic was briefly interrupted by the idea that at least in Mediterranean cities they were close to home. “I could not have imagined passing the pandemic while being in a different time zone than my parents. Also, seeing thousands of people leave Lebanon, I did not feel too alone here, I felt that I was part of a wave of migrants that now at least had landed close to Beirut and somewhere where the climate was bearable. I imagine it was harder for people in places like Sweden and Denmark.”<sup>58</sup>

Another activist explained to me that even though she was new to Barcelona, her own network back home no longer was available to her, “all my friends left and so this isolation had nothing to do with being in Spain, on the contrary people were nice here. The isolation came from the feeling that I had nobody to come back to in Beirut anyway.”<sup>59</sup> Others spoke about an intentional disconnect, “because I am hurt I

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<sup>55</sup>Fadia, 31, consultant, Istanbul, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>56</sup>Rabih, 43, journalist, Italy, interview with author, March 2022.

<sup>57</sup>Makram, academic, Athens, interview with author, July 2022.

<sup>58</sup>Omar, 38, business owner, Istanbul, interview with author February 2022.

<sup>59</sup>Layal, 45, hospitality industry, Barcelona, interview with author March 2022.

decided to emotionally disconnect from what is happening in Beirut and now I find it very difficult to talk to people there. It is as if by moving I was abandoning the privilege I had to make my voice heard about Lebanon. I feel here I must work alone now and I feel very isolated.”<sup>60</sup>

Activists also spoke to the toll that burnout does to them. “From elections to protests to raising money after the explosion, it affected my psyche, I went to very dark places. After the war, I grew up with a sense of responsibility that I had to do something but with time I realize I was just deceiving myself. The older I get the worse the situation got.”<sup>61</sup> They described a series of realizations that they needed to start over in the pursuit of citizenship, bank accounts, safety and income for their family members still stuck in Lebanon. They described feeling grateful to cities and new regulations, having to learn a new language and a new tax system. “Adjusting and learning to slowly integrate is much more important to my wellbeing than what is happening back home, in fact I read the news with disgust these days.”<sup>62</sup>

## 10.6 Conclusion

The older Lebanese diaspora is featured in many studies on migration and forced displacement. Dating back to the Ottoman era, Lebanese migrants have been documented to contribute economic remittances back home and contribute positively to their receiving countries. This chapter however has sought to document and begin to theorize a specific episode in migration by a selected sample that was very active in public life and politics in Lebanon. It captures a moment in time when ‘new’ migrants choose to stay geographically close but political distance from their home countries due to conditions of violence, economic collapse, and continued lack of accountability of the political regime. Activists in this chapter explained a rational choice of withdrawal that merits further analysis. In their temporalities, these narratives emphasize that some migrants may stop wanting to be activists and that the pursuit of personal safety and wellbeing can be main drivers for migrants resettling in cities across the Mediterranean.

The narratives of activists point to a political choice of self-exile as the only path for recovering personal well-being, dignity, mobility, employment, and safety. Exile appears to be a retreat for activists, and in time we will demonstrate whether such a choice of disengagement from politics back home is permanent. But what we know from these narratives is that there is a distinct choice of forsaking attempts at political activism rationalized by lack of opportunity, continued impunity, and loss of personal wellbeing. One of the major conclusions therefore is that political movements can de-mobilize in moments of migration by activists and that this can have

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<sup>60</sup>Fadia, 31, consultant, Istanbul, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>61</sup>Malek, 46 years old, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>62</sup>Mirna, 39, artist, Italy, interview with author, February 2022.



destructive effects of politics back home. From portraits of hope put together by collective networks to descriptions of hell, activists engage and disengage in shaping political movements. Activists also see the Mediterranean as a potential safe alternative to life in Beirut.

The chapter captures the Mediterranean as a space of mobility towards cities that appear to provide safety as well as familiarity. It remains to be seen whether this “new” Lebanese diaspora emerging after 2018 will resort to collective organizing and new forms of influencing politics back home. For now, activists perceive the truth to be bleak and this bleakness of a severe context of crisis may be helpful to explain the behavior and political choices of other activists seeking to escape what appears to be impossibly rigid structures. It appears that these narratives tell the story of the evolution of multiple crises in Lebanon and the way that activists try to adjust, to the point of no adjustment. It highlights rational choices people make to preserve their survival and also shows that activists, who are also high skilled, can choose the Mediterranean as a second home.

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