

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

CRISIS AND SECTARIAN NEOLIBERALISM IN LEBANON:
THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS IN 2020

by
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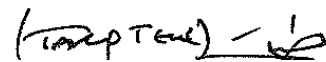
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Writing this thesis was not easy because it made me think of everything I aspire to change in Lebanon, all while realizing the little hope I have to do so. Nevertheless, my thesis is a way for me to show my love for this country. I therefore dedicate this thesis to a free, secular and feminist Lebanon, my family who pushed me to get this done, Safaa for her constant support and last but certainly not least, Professor Rima for being constructive in her feedback and patient in the whole process.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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The aim of the thesis is to analyse how the year 2020 has affected the political practices in Lebanon through a focus on the Ministry of Social Affairs. More precisely the scope of analysis focuses on the political practices vis-a-vis the social repercussions that were the outcome of two exogenous events that happened in the context of a deep financial crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion. For that end, this thesis focuses on the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs and its response to the pandemic and the August 4th Beirut port explosion. It investigates the way some members of the Lebanese political regime have taken advantage of the social repercussions of the dramatic events that occurred during the year 2020. This thesis relies on qualitative methods of inquiry including content analysis of secondary data collected between January 2020 until December 2020, and in-depth expert interviews. The work showcases how the Ministry of Social Affairs reproduced old patterns when dealing with a crisis, which is to rely on foreign funds to respond to the social repercussions of the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion, whereas some members of the political regime capitalized on the pandemic and explosion to restore its legitimacy. While the Lebanese state is often referred to in public culture as absent, this thesis shows that it is very present in terms of security-led role rather than civil welfare. The political system in Lebanon found new ways to reinvent itself and became more explicit in its violent tactics and strategies, sectarian narratives and delegation of power to the security-led agencies.

PREFACE

On the 6th of December 2019, Wassef Harake, a lawyer activist, protested along many civilians, against the Ministry of Social Affairs' inactiveness in providing and protecting vulnerable individuals in Lebanon. Despite the security apparatus' attempt to remove them out of the Ministry's building, Harake spoke loudly about Naji Fleati, a father who had committed suicide a few days before the protest due to the deterioration of his financial situation (Al Nahda, 4th of December 2019): "*Naji Fleati did not commit suicide because he was ill, he did not commit suicide because he was poor. Rather, he committed suicide because this system is corrupt and based on social injustice. This Ministry (of Social Affairs) should appropriate its role and achieve social justice [...]. People commit suicide because they live among leaders who have stolen public money [...].*" (Facebook, 2019).

Seven months later, on the 3rd of July 2020, Wassef Harake was beaten by five men affiliated to the Minister of Social Affairs, Ramzi Musharafieh. The five suspects later confessed to the Information Bureau, that they had beaten the lawyer, due to their dissatisfaction with him carrying out sit-ins inside ministries, specifically within the Ministry of Social Affairs (Al Akhbar, 10th of June 2020). Although the minister had denied the implication of the Ministry with what had happened to Wassef Harake (Al Akhbar, 10th of June 2020), it seemed quite clear that shedding light on the Ministry's role and activities can unfold systemic gaps in ensuring decent social services vis-a-vis its society, which can seem to disrupt and threaten those in power.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, CONTENT REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

A. Introduction

In Lebanon, the beginning of the year 2020 was contextualized with an uprising that erupted in October 2019. The uprising spread across Lebanon denouncing and calling for the end of the political and financial elites' rule.

The mass mobilizations that emerged during the month of October in 2019 were chiefly due to the financial and economic crises that began to be explicitly felt and lived by the Lebanese society and non-Lebanese residents alike¹. The country's economic depression has had a big social impact on the livelihood of those living in Lebanon. The World Bank (2021) has labelled the crisis as "*catastrophic*" with "*more than half the population likely to be below the national poverty line*".

The dollar shortage, the devaluation of the Lebanese pound (LBP), the unofficial capital control on most depositors (except bankers and politicians), the inflation rate and Lebanon's GDP decline resulted in an increase in unemployment rates from 11.4% in 2018-19 to 29.6% in 2022 (International Labor Organization, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Due to the closure of banks and the imposed restrictions to access their US dollar accounts, businesses stopped operating and left many people unemployed and without any social safety net. The fragile and collapsing socio-economic situation was

¹ Due to the dollar shortage in Lebanon, many Ethiopians domestic workers, who work under the Kafala system, were unpaid and kicked out of their employers' households (France 24, 25th of June 2020). They were sleeping on the streets, in front of their consulate, demanding their return to their homeland (France 24, 25th of June 2020).

accentuated during 2020, through two major events: the COVID-19 pandemic and the 4th of August Beirut port explosion.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020), COVID-19 high risk sectors² in Lebanon employ almost half of the Lebanese workforce (610,000 workers) and 60% of non-Lebanese workers (208,000 workers). The governmental decision to announce a full lockdown on the 15th of March 2020 had important social repercussions. According to a report published by the World Bank in April 2020, poverty had increased from 37 to 45% and extreme poverty from 16 to 22%. Many individuals took to the streets, in defiance of the lockdown, to denounce the rapid deterioration of their socio-economic situation (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

On the 4th of August, a massive explosion hit the Beirut port, killing more than 200 people, injuring about 10,000 people and displaced approximately 300,000 (Sukarieh, 2020). The explosion was due to the storage of around 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate and other types of explosive material in Beirut's port (hangar number 12), which are located next to residential areas and Beirut's central business district. With an already collapsing economy, the social repercussions of the explosion were apparent with a noticeable rise in the unemployment rate and food insecurity (Sukarieh, 2020; ESCWA, 2020; Actions Against Hunger, 2021).

Throughout 2020, the financial and economic crises, the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion had affected people's livelihood. Responses to the social repercussions caused by the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion were diverse. Many actors were involved in responding to the deteriorating socio-economic situation throughout the year

² High-risk sectors include accommodation and food services, manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, real estate and business activities, and arts and entertainment (ILO, 2020).

2020. The state institution, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), that is responsible for ensuring a social safety net to its citizens (Ministry of Social Affairs' constitutive law 212/993) had a sporadic action plan. In parallel, some members of the Lebanese political regime capitalized on these disasters for their own personal advantage.

This thesis looks at how the year 2020 has affected the sectarian and neoliberal political practices in Lebanon when dealing with the social repercussions caused by the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion. More specifically, this thesis looks at the practices employed by the Ministry of Social Affairs both during the pandemic and after the Beirut Port explosion. In addition, the research looks at the practices initiated by some members of the Lebanese political regime that capitalized on the social repercussions of the year 2020 for their own advantage, using Klein's (2007) concept of "disaster capitalism."

The year 2020 was used by the political system to counter the uprising that started in October 2019. The year 2020 manifested in many events that were used by the political system as new ways to reinvent itself. The political system became more explicit in its violent tactics and strategies, sectarian narratives and delegation of power to security-led agencies.

This part of the analysis can be framed within Klein's theory of disaster capitalism³. Some members of the political regime instrumentalized the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion to reclaim and restore their legitimacy as a response to the political opposition that was beginning to form with the start of the 2019 uprising.

In parallel, and while the year 2020 has allowed the political system to reinvent itself to counter the uprising in October of 2019, it also showed the inability of the state to counter the crises. The intervention of the Ministry of Social Affairs during the pandemic and

³ The disaster capitalism framed by Klein looks at how disasters and crises are capitalized on for private gains (Klein, 2007).

after the Beirut port explosion illustrate its inactiveness and the inability as a public institution to respond to the social repercussions caused by both events. Instead, the Lebanese army was given the role to respond to the social repercussions.

B. Content Review

As mentioned previously, the scope of this research is to look at how the year 2020 has affected political practices in Lebanon. Therefore, this thesis looks at the response initiated by MoSA and some members of the Lebanese political regime, when dealing with the social repercussions caused by the pandemic and the Beirut Port explosion in the year 2020. In a nutshell, MoSA's response to the social repercussions of the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion was rooted in a fund-based policy, while some members of the political regime restored and reclaimed their legitimacy by capitalizing on the social repercussions of the events that took place in 2020. This section will closely look at the MoSA, its mandate, and how it has dealt with social policy by specifically looking at its fund-based programs. The next section will review Lebanon's history with fund-based policy.

1. The Ministry of Social Affairs

The Ministry of Social Affairs was constituted in 1993, and its aim was to respond to social needs in the aftermath of the civil war (Jawad, 2007). According to the second article of MoSA's constitutive law 212/1993, the Ministry is responsible for developing the social policy for the country. Article two also mentions the Ministry's role in taking care of emergency situations that require social aid and relief (MoSA's constitutive law 212/1993).

In practice, however, the Ministry's strategy and activities have been centered around partnerships with the associational sector and the international community. The Ministry relies heavily on the associational sector. According to the Ministry's website, "*the Ministry [aims at] adopting partnership with the [associational] sector in the provision of welfare services, and in joint ventures with service-or character development. [...] this view is compatible with contemporary trends in human development.*" On the Ministry's website, the list of contracted NGOs, which dates to 2009, had 236 NGOs financed by the Ministry to provide social services to vulnerable communities (MoSA's website, 2022). Assigning NGOs to do the bulk of the Ministry's work pushes citizens who are in direct contact with the NGOs to legitimize their *raison d'être* and trust their intervention (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005).

Aside from the Ministry's partnership with NGOs, it has partnered with the international community on specific projects such as distributing aid to the most vulnerable households in Lebanon. Three programs funded by the international community were put in place to respond to the socio-economic situation in Lebanon (The National Poverty Targeting Program- NPTP, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan - LCRP which started before 2020 and the Lebanon Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net - ESSN

which started in 2020), whereas one is funded by the Lebanese government (NSSP).

Below is a table that lists these four programs in detail.

Social Programs in Lebanon	Project						Data Collection			Aid Distribution		Managerial Arrangements				References
	Year	Party financing the program	Type of fund	Component of the program	Party in charge of the program	Targeted Audience	Methodology	Tool used for data collection	Party in charge of data collection and management	Party in charge of aid distribution	Period of distribution	Financing Tracking	Public Communication	Monitoring and Evaluation	Complaints and Grievances	
The National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP)	2011-present	The World Bank, the UNHCR, The World Food Programme, the German cooperation, Norway, Canada, France and Italy	Grant	Component 1: Administration of the NPTP Component 2: Social Assistance Component 3: NPTP Graduation Pilot	The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers	Lebanese Households	Proxy Means Testing (PMT)	From the launch of the program, data collection was done manually ⁴	Social Development Centers, social workers and inspectors, NPTP Central Management Unit (CMU) at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM)	Social workers, Social Development Centers	N/A	x	x	x	x	The World Bank (2020), The Presidency of Council of Ministers' website (2022)
Lebanon Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net (ESSN)	2020-present	The World Bank, The EU, Germany	Loan	Component 1: Cash Transfers to extremely poor Lebanese households Component 2: Top-up cash transfers for students in extreme poor Lebanese households at risk of dropping out of school. Component 3: Social services to vulnerable households Component 4: Enhanced delivery of Social Safety Net systems Component 5: Contingent Emergency Response (CERC)	The Ministry of Social Affairs, Inter-ministerial Committee for Social Affairs (IMC)	Lebanese Households, Social Development Centers, Syrians and other non-Lebanese vulnerable groups	Proxy-Means Testing (PMT)	DAEM, Social Safety Net platform, empowered by the Inter-ministerial Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking (IMPACT)	Presidency of the Council of Ministers, social workers and inspectors, NPTP Central Management Unit (CMU) at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM)	MoSA	N/A	x	x	x	x	The World Bank (2021)

⁴ Households in need of aid would go to a Social Development Center that is near them. Then, they would mention their desire to register for the NPTP and they would provide the Center with their ID and other relevant documents. Social Workers are then dispatched to the households to administer the survey. Once done, the data collected would enter a database managed by the NPTP Central Management Unit at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (CMU-PCM). The CMU-PCM verifies data and once this is done, CMU-PCM computes Welfare Scores by applying the PMT formula to household data, and ranks households based on their score from the poorest to the least poor. (The World Bank; 2020).

National Social Security Program (NSSP)	2020-present	The Lebanese Government	Public Budget	<p>Phase 1 Component 1: Assist families with children in grade 4 or below, and enrolled in public school with LBP400,000 Component 2: Assist drivers with a public license (red license plate), except for trucks and large buses with LBP400,000 Component 3: Assist victims of land mines (or their surviving family members) with LBP400,000</p> <p>Phase 2 Component 4: Assist people with Disability, from the MoSA database and additional outreach conducted by LAF through municipalities and hotlines, with LBP400,000 Component 5: Those who are registered under IMPACT, 1) Female headed households (aged 18 to 64) with at least 1 child (aged 0 to 18) and no civil servants. 2) Households with at least one household member with disability and no civil servants. 3) All household members above 64 and no civil servants. 4) Households with a child under 5, and high dependency ratio (above 0.66) and no civil servants. 5) Households with more than 4 children under 18 and no civil servants.</p> <p>Phase 3: Households meeting the above eligibility criteria in which the spouse of non-Lebanese male household head is a Lebanese woman; previously, where the</p>	A Steering Committee made up of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Minister of Defense (Deputy Prime Minister), Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE)	Lebanese Households, drivers with a public license, victims of land mines, people with Disability.	Proxy-Means Testing (PMT)	Interministerial Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking (IMPACT) and database from the NPTP Program, MoSA, MEHE, Ministry of Labor, and LAF's National Office for Mine-related Issues. Municipality's dataset on people with disabilities.	Lebanese army	Lebanese army	5 phases. April 2020-present	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	ILO (2021)
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				head of the household was a non-Lebanese male, the household was not eligible.												
The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP)	2015-present	The UN and the international community	Donor mechanisms and trust funds	Component 1: Basic Assistance Component 2: Education Component 3: Energy Component 4: Food Security & Agriculture Component 5: Health Component 6: Livelihoods Component 7: Protection Component 8: Shelter Component 9: Social Stability Component 10: Water	Co-led by the Lebanese Government and the UN	Syrian displaced, Palestinian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese households.	The LCRP gets its data from the Lebanese government.	N/A	N/A	The Government of Lebanon (GoL) and national/international partners	2022-2023	x	x	x	x	UNDP (2022), LCRP (2022)

Table 1: A table that summarizes the four programs aimed at distributing financial aid to vulnerable households

These programs are all based on distributing financial support and social services. In 2020, two programs were aimed to assist vulnerable households amid the COVID-19 pandemic: the Lebanon Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net (ESSN) and the National Social Security Program (NSSP) as elaborated in Table 1.

Under the patronage of the Minister of Social Affairs, Ramzi Musharafieh, the Lebanon Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net (ESSN) was initiated to respond to the socio-economic crisis that was accentuated by the COVID-19 lockdown. The difference between the ESSN and the NPTP is that the former introduces new added features and improvements from the latter (The World Bank, 2020). The added features include moving from e-card food vouchers to cash transfers, investing in the development of the Social Development Centers, collecting data from an e-governmental digital platform, IMPACT and adding more criteria of inclusion when looking at the targeted audience (The World Bank, 2020). Unlike the NPTP which is a grant offered by the World Bank, the UNHCR, the World Food Programme, the German cooperation and other nation states, the ESSN is a loan issued by the World Bank.

The second program that was initiated within the COVID-19 context, was the National Social Security Program (NSSP). Unlike the other programs that are in collaboration with the international community, the NSSP was initiated by the Lebanese Government, using government's budget. A difference can be explicitly made between the programs that are internationally and governmentally funded. Programs that are internationally funded (NPTP, ESSN, LCRP) are accompanied by a defined mechanism that allows checks and balance (Monitoring & Evaluation and Financial Tracking), and protection of rights (Grievance Mechanism). The NSSP, however, was delegated to the army which did not develop mechanisms to report on complaints, transparency breaches or human rights

violations (ILO, 2021). In addition, whereas public institutions had a role in working on collecting and analyzing data and distributing services within internationally funded programs, the NSSP was delegated to the leadership and management of the Lebanese army.

The NSSP and the ESSN both target Lebanese households by using the Proxy Means Testing methodology (PMT). The methodology of Proxy Means Test (PMT) is criticized in the literature, more specifically regarding its inclusion and exclusion errors. For example, PMT was used in a social program in Mexico, and its use has reached 20% of the population with an estimated exclusion of 70% and an inclusion of 36% (Kidd and Wylde, 2011). The inclusion errors are defined as those who should not have been included in the program whereas the exclusion errors are defined as those who should have been included in the program but did not (Kidd and Wylde, 2011).

Overall, the Ministry of Social Affairs' social policy is rooted in partnerships with NGOs and collaborations with international community. Resorting to funds as a policy-response to socio-economic hardships is a pattern that is identified within the Ministry of Social Affairs' social policy vis-a-vis financially vulnerable communities. This pattern is identified within Lebanon's political system when dealing with any critical juncture⁵. The next section will first look at the associational sector and how it has always been present in Lebanon. It will then look at the Lebanese government's fund-based policies when dealing with specific context such as the financial and humanitarian crises.

⁵ A critical juncture is defined as “*major events that disrupt the existing political and economic balance in one or many societies*” (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, p.96).

2. Lebanon's associational sector

The development of the associational sector coincided with the development of the state (Deets, 2015; Gaspard, 2003). During Lebanon's pre-state creation, Christian missionaries came to settle from abroad to establish social assistance, healthcare, schools and other religious communities established welfare institutions to offer services to their constituents (Barakat, 1991). Families migrating to Beirut started establishing sectarian associations for their communities. Associations were established by families who wanted, at the time, to maintain the confessional identities of communities and this kept happening until 1958 (Haddad, 2020). With President Fouad Chehab's governance, the state-initiated partnerships with the associational sector (Karame, 2020).

During the civil war which erupted in 1975, many residents were not provided for and this pushed NGOs and militias to take over and provide social services throughout the years of conflict (Haddad, 2020; Gaspard, 2003; Jawad, 2007; Cammett, 2014). The civil war weakened the state's performance and accentuated the dominance of the militia/associational sector (Karame, 2020).

After the civil war, a lot of NGOs have emerged to replace the state's role in providing services and according to Salloukh et al., (2015), a lot of them fall under the sectarian elites' surveillance and reproduce sectarian governance. For example, the Lebanese Council for Women (LCW) does not aim at changing laws nor at initiating gender sensitive reforms, instead it conforms to Lebanon's sectarian system: its internal division are organized along sectarian lines and their activities align with the sectarian and patriarchal agenda.

The Ministry's engagement with the "private sector"⁶ shapes and limits its direct intervention with the communities in question because it partners with NGOs based on providing the financial means so the latter can assist those in need. Therefore, its strategy to partner with NGOs so they can assist the vulnerable communities of society by receiving money from the Ministry (Jawad, 2007, MoSA's website), weakens its ability to build an identity and approach for itself.

NGOs that have a contract with MoSA have surpassed the role of the Ministry. Local NGOs monopolize and establish the criteria of recognition when distributing aid and services (Jawad, 2007, Kingston, 2013). In reference to the hierarchy and administrative procedure, it is normal to expect that the Ministry is legally superior to the NGOs it comes in contact with. However, the NGOs interviewed by Jawad (2007, p.228) perceive the state as a "*political machine*" which should not be meddling in welfare action. This assumption is linked to how they perceive welfare, as a "*charitable altruistic activity*" (Jawad, 2007, p.228) and to their belief in the state's inability to deliver services due to "*its weak governmental programs*" and "*unprofessionalism*" (Haddad, 2020).

Many civil servants have communicated to Jawad (2007), the influence and power NGOs have over the Ministry. According to one civil servant, contracts with NGOs are hardly ever broken (Jawad, 2007). As NGOs become stronger, they place themselves as the only alternative to welfare services for their communities (Haddad, 2020). This has led many authors to consider that what has undermined the role of the state in working towards establishing citizenship is the state's consociational, sectarian and neoliberal set-up (Salloukh et al., 2015; Deeb; 2015; Mikdashi, 2014).

⁶ This is taken straight from MoSA's English/Arabic website. It does not distinguish private sector (which is often profit oriented) from associational sector (which is often non-profit oriented).

Citizens' trustworthiness derives from how they perceive public-service bureaucrats on one hand and the degree of fairness when asking for services (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005). According to Jawad (2009), service users prefer not to approach government services as they did not expect much from the services provided by MoSA. This entails that the Ministry is not perceived as a strong actor for providing welfare services by Lebanese citizens as there are other non-state actors who are getting the job done, such as religious/non-religious associations and political parties.

This normalized Public-Private Partnership (PPP) promoted by the state over the years accentuates the neoliberal approach that the Lebanese state has always adopted. In fact, by allocating the initiatives to provide for certain social groups to different NGOs, and by funding their agendas, the Ministry of Social Affairs has stripped away and neutralized the agency it might potentially have, in recognizing social groups equally and distributing its services to them in a fair way.

3. *Lebanon's history with funds policy*

Having never experienced a “*state-led development*” (Baumann, 2012, p.21) due to its *laissez faire* economy that was established since its creation (Gaspard, 2003; Traboulsi, 2012), Lebanon's neoliberalism during its post-war era, accentuated the elites' grip on the state's resources and decision-making; thus, weakening state institutions to maintain their power (Hayakawa, 2018; Salloukh et al., 2015).

In this kind of environment, crises are dealt with through specific funds policies (Karamé, 2020). The trajectory of Lebanon's economic, institutional and political scheme, when dealing with a crisis, is rooted in a pattern defined by capital injection through foreign funds and aid. After every “critical juncture”⁷ (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, p.96), Lebanon's political system calls on the international community to assist it with funds.

In the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war, the economy experienced growth with former Prime Minister Hariri's reconstruction plan⁸ in 1992 until it entered a “cyclical crisis” in 1998 which later turned into a structural crisis (Dibeh, 2005). The crisis was of a monetary and fiscal nature which caused high interest rates, unsustainable deficit and public debt growth and economic recession (Dibeh, 2005, p.7).

To deal with the crisis that began to unfold, the Lebanese state took part in many conferences alongside other nations such as France, to gather funds, more specifically loans, to respond to the crisis that took place amid the fiscal and monetary policies initiated by Hariri's government. “Paris I” was the first conference that was held within that specific context. Taking place in Paris, France, in February 2001, Lebanon had to

⁷ According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, p.96), “critical junctures “are major events that disrupt the existing political and economic balance in one or many societies.”

⁸ The reconstruction plan, called “Horizon 2000” included spending around US\$18 billion on social and public infrastructure. Therefore, there was a stable economic environment which contributed to the boost that occurred from 1992 until 1998 (Dibeh, 2005).

present how it will optimize the funds in question: by adopting a new economic vision by accessing new global markets, attracting investments, privatization, and addressing the financial imbalances (Annahar, 12th of April 2018). While “Paris I” raised 500 million Euros in international aid, the parties who attended the conference agreed that another expanded conference would be organized with the participation of the European Commission and international financial institutions and with the participation of several donor countries, which is the conference known as the Paris II Conference held in November 2002.

In 2002, France held another conference “Paris II”, with Lebanon’s economic partners and 23 countries such as Qatar, Spain, Denmark. As the IMF acknowledged Lebanon’s economic reform and reduction of the public debt (Govt France, 2007), the participant countries announced aid of 4.2 billion Euros (3.1 billion for financial aid, and 1.3 billion for project aid). The private sector was prioritized and aligned with Hariri’s policy to invest and attract foreign capital (Baumann, 2012; Hockel, 2011). At the top, there were rentier and financial capitalists who protected their interests by instrumentalizing state policies and institutions to their own benefit (Baumann, 2012). The weakness of welfare state-institutions had reinforced a pre-existing clientelist system where the elite cartel design redistribution and monetary policies to their advantage (Mouawad, 2017).

Another critical juncture had occurred in 2006. The Israeli war on Lebanon in July 2006 destroyed a sizable portion of Lebanon’s infrastructure and economy, with \$2.4 billion US Dollars’ worth of damages, (World Bank 2007). The Lebanese authorities have cooperated with the Swedish government, in 2006, which organized the “Stockholm Conference”, with the support of the United Nations, to deliberate Lebanon’s reconstruction after the July 2006 War. While fifty donors attended (countries,

international, regional and non-governmental organizations), Lebanon was granted a loan of 980 million USD (Govt France, 2007), in addition to the aid received from Qatar for reconstruction (Al Jazeera, 22nd of August 2006).

This systemic pattern of seeking external funds in the form of aid or loans was also detected with the way the state responded to the massive influx of Syrian refugees starting 2012 into Lebanon. The Syrian uprising-turned-war forced many Syrians to leave their homes in search of safety. As some started to settle in Lebanon, Lebanese political leaders such as Saad Hariri and Gebran Bassil (L'Orient le Jour, 5th of April 2017), started reporting an increase in unemployment and poverty, losses in billions of dollars for the Lebanese state and a security instability due to the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon (L'Orient le Jour, 31st of March 2017). The Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been used by the political system as a scapegoat to justify the deterioration of the socio-economic situation. Instead of putting in place well-grounded economic policies that would generate productivity or a social plan to ease tensions between the Syrians and Lebanese, the government reproduced its capital injection response policy and called for the launch of a massive capital injection program, which would help generate jobs for Lebanese and Syrian nationals (L'Orient le Jour, 31st of March 2017). For example, in 2017 alone, Lebanon received \$25,000,000 as an incoming funding from the Kuwaiti Government to assist the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon (OCHA, 2017).

In 2018, Lebanon has called for another international donors' conference to attempt at showing its commitment, yet again, to stabilizing the economy, fostering investment and growth, creating job opportunities and reducing poverty. The reason is mainly due to Lebanon's long-term economic policies which resulted in high fiscal deficit, public debt, and high unemployment rates. On the 6th of April 2018, France hosted CEDRE

(Economic Conference for Development, through reforms and with companies) which is an international conference that aims at supporting Lebanon's development and reforms. The Lebanese government's vision for growth and reforms included an increase of public and private investments, economic and financial stability through fiscal adjustment, fighting corruption, modernization of the public sector, amongst other reforms (CEDRE Statement, 2018).

The difference between CEDRE and previous international conferences for Lebanon, was that the former had a monitoring committee which oversees any irregularities in the projects funded by the CEDRE program (L'Orient le Jour, 19th of April 2019). Therefore, it could not be implemented without budgetary and sectoral reform. In case of any irregularities, "*the funding will be suspended and the institution in question will be blacklisted*", according to Jacques Lajugie, a consultant for France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (L'Orient le Jour, 9th of April 2019). While Lebanon pledged to commit itself to these reforms, the international community had doubts about the government's credibility and commitment. The government's commitment was met with delays in forming a government, after the resignation of Hariri in 2017 from Saudi Arabia⁹. Pierre Duquesne, charged by French President Emmanuel Macron to lead the process of the Economic Conference for Development through Reforms and with Businesses, warned that there will be no investments if sectors such as the telecommunication, energy and civil aviation are not regulated (L'Orient le Jour, 9th of April 2019). While France did pledge to grant Lebanon the estimated funds of \$11 billion, Lebanon did not receive such money due to

⁹ On the 3rd of November 2017, Lebanon's Prime Minister at the time, Saad Hariri, landed in Saudi Arabia and saw his cellphone confiscated, with no one from the royal family greeting him upon his arrival. The next day, Saad Hariri was forced to resign from his position as Lebanon's prime minister. According to Reuters (11th of November 2017), close sources said that this is because Hariri as a prime minister, was unable to contain Hezbollah.

its lack of cooperation in putting in place the reforms that it was required to undertake (Bahout, 2018).

Throughout the different circumstances mentioned above, Lebanon capitalized on chaos and instability to rely on foreign aid and loans. With multiple capital injections that took place throughout the years, the deterioration of Lebanon's economic and financial sector started to become more apparent in 2019, as the currency devaluation and inflation started to gradually appear. The revolution that took place in October 2019 was a direct result of this deterioration. While the revolution was still ongoing in the first few months of 2020, the pandemic that started in March of 2020 followed by the Beirut Port explosion in August of 2020, have accentuated the socio-economic deterioration. More funds were initiated from the World Bank and other donors (DCP, 2022), to support the crumbling economy.

C. The aim of the thesis

How did the year 2020 affect the neoliberal and sectarian practices in Lebanon? The thesis looks at how the social repercussions of the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion were dealt with by the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon as well as some members of the political regime who took advantage of it. On one hand, its aim is to center the response of the Ministry of Social Affairs within a pattern of neoliberalism. On the other hand, it aims to contextualize the practices of some members of Lebanon's sectarian political regime considering Klein's (2007) concept of "disaster capitalism."

D. Methodology

This thesis relies on data collected from January 2020 until December 2020. The data specifically looks at the response of the Ministry of Social Affairs as well as some

members of the Lebanese political regime to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion. The thesis relies on qualitative research methods including content analysis and semi-structured interviews.

1. Data Collection

During the period of July 2020, semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic experts. Four virtual interviews were conducted with experts who have followed developments at the Ministry of Social Affairs during the pandemic and the Beirut blast. Experts were selected following a review of the literature tackling the evolving nature of Lebanese political system in relation to the pandemic and the Beirut Port explosion. They inprovided a lengthy and constructive analysis on the nature of the political system when it responded to the two crises.

	Official Government Documents	Interviews with Experts	Academic Articles	Academic Books	Social Media			Journalistic Articles	Media	Grey literature	Total
					Youtube	Instagram	Facebook				
Ch.1	6	0	10	5	0	0	0	9	0	13	43
Ch. 2	0	0	34	15	0	0	0	1	0	0	50
Ch. 3	1	4	1	0	3	9	1	16	4	5	44
Ch.4	11	4	0	0	5	6	4	29	5	5	69
Total	18	4	45	20	8	15	5	55	9	23	202

Table 2: A table that summarizes the data collected for each chapter of this thesis.

The research was conducted in Arabic and English. This method of content analysis of secondary data was opted for taking into consideration the effect of COVID-19 related restrictions on the ability to conduct face-to-face interviews, in addition to the accessibility limitations to interview high ranking official during the crisis, and the time restrictions for this research project.

2. Content Analysis

The research design is mainly based on two qualitative methods: content analysis through the different types of data collected: official government documents, articles, Youtube videos, Tweets from Twitter, grey literature documents, and in-depth interviews with experts.

Chapter 2 introduces a theoretical framework that will allow further understanding of the research question. It introduces the theory behind Lebanon's political system, consociationalism and the outcome of that political system in practice. In addition, Chapter 2 looks at another aspect of Lebanon's system, which is its economic governance, primarily based on neoliberalism and disaster capitalism.

Chapter 3 looks at the pandemic during the year 2020 and introduces how some members of the Lebanese political regime took advantage of the health crisis to reclaim and restore their legitimacy. It also introduces the Ministry of Social Affairs' plan to respond to the social repercussions which resulted from the lockdown policies in March 2020. More specifically, Chapter 3 looks at the Ministry of Social Affairs' approach to social aid, data collection and distribution plan regarding the NSSP Program, the only program funded by the Lebanese government, and which supports the social repercussions of the pandemic.

Chapter 4 looks at the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion during the year 2022. It first looks at the different stakeholders and the different ways they have capitalized on the explosion to benefit from it. The second section looks at the response plan that was initiated and the weakening of state-institutions (notably the Disaster Risk Management Unit, the High Relief Committee and the Ministry of Social Affairs) when the state emergency was declared by the Higher Defense Council.

After having looked at Chapter 3 on the pandemic and Chapter 4 on the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, Chapter 5 concludes this thesis by giving an overview analysis and responding to the question asked: how has the year 2020 affected the sectarian and neoliberal political practices in Lebanon when dealing with the social repercussions caused by the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis intends to analyse how the year 2020 has affected the political practices in Lebanon. More precisely the scope of analysis focuses on the political practices vis-a-vis the social repercussions that were the outcome of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion.

To be able to respond to the question, it is important to give context. Lebanon's multilevel crises are operating within a political system known as "consociationalism", which is a system theorized by Lijphart (1974) as the ideal system to transform a divided political culture into a democracy, by letting political elites govern through consensus. In Lebanon, the consociational model has interacted with social and economic settings in a way that allowed the political sectarian elites to instrumentalize the state and its resources to maximize the benefits of their business and banking entourage (Salloukh et al., 2015). Therefore, in practice, the ruling elites have used state institutions as a political tool to practice their domination and maintain their power (Mouawad, 2017; Hayakawa, 2018; Nagle, 2018).

In addition to its weak political governance, Lebanon also suffers from weak economic structures. The country suffers from the Dutch Disease, which is caused by its overreliance on capital flows from abroad that serve as the engine to the economy (Ayoub & Saab, 2010). In Lebanon, the Dutch Disease manifested through an economic growth that was caused by revenues from unproductive but major sectors such as tourism, insurance and banking (Kubursi, 1999; Ayoub & Saab, 2010; Abosedra and Fakhri, 2017; Safieddine, 2019; Mazzucotelli, 2020).

The response to the social repercussions of the pandemic and the aftermath of the Beirut blast in Lebanon's consociational system, intersects with a weak political governance and a weak economic structure. This section will dive into the theoretical framework of three components that constitute Lebanon's political system (Consociationalism, Sectarianism and Neoliberalism) to further understand the findings of the thesis.

A. Consociationalism

Consociational democracy, is a form of governance run by a cartel of elites that aims at cooperating to transform a divided political culture into a democracy (Lijphart, 1974). Unlike centripetal democracy which in its nature pushes the elites to compete against each other, consociational democracy is based on elites' cooperation to prevent social divisions from destabilizing democracy (Lijphart, 1974). It is based on four main criteria: (1) a grand coalition in government; (2) a proportional representation of all polities; (3) a mutual veto for all governing parties; and 4) segmental autonomy within the polity (Lijphart, 1974).

Scholars who adhere to the theory of consociationalism democracy argue from a standpoint of social divisions and divided societies (Lijphart 1974; Lustick, 1979; Andeweg, 2000). According to that school of thought, divided societies have a destabilising effect due to their differences and social segmentation (Lijphart, 1969, p.207). Viewing society as "deeply divided" (Nordlinger,1972; Lustick, 1979) stems from the assumption that the division is salient and deep (Majed, 2020). Therefore, the destabilisation is seen as inevitable which is transformed into a conflict (Dixon, 2012). One way to manage the destabilisation that could emanate from a said divided society, is by incorporating consociationalism as a power-sharing system of governance (Lijphart 1974; Lustick, 1979; Andeweg, 2000).

Consociationalism is therefore presented as a “one size fits all” approach to manage different kinds of conflict (Bogaards et al. 2019; Dixon 1997). The adoption of such interpretation to solve a conflict is argued to be rooted in primordialism and essentialism (Dixon, 2012; Taylor, 2009). In fact, Dixon (2012, p.126) argues that consociationalists use a “*Wonderland definition*” to conceptualize and define consociationalism. For example, they use it to justify its success in nearly 50 countries but choose to stay silent in countries where it failed (Bogaards et al. 2019).

An opposing school of thought, instrumentalism, considers consociationalism as flawed because of its views on society (Majed, 2019). The initial paradigm views society as a mosaic of homogenous sects or ethnic groups which are inherently violent (Wimmer 2013; Majed, 2019). Ethnicity is used to satisfy groupist rhetoric instead of real groupness¹⁰ (Brubaker, 2006). For example, violence in Yugoslavia which was labelled as an “ethnic conflict” was more linked to warlordship, thuggery and doing business in the black market, than ethnicity (Brubaker, 2006). According to Brubaker (2006), the use of ethnicity as a unit of analysis is therefore limiting and does not capture the true picture of what is causing a certain conflict, issue, or behavior. The reason behind this lies in the argument that “*ethnicity, race and nationhood are fundamentally ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world. They are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world*” (Brubaker, 2006, p. 17).

The instrumentalist approach argues that political elites exploit identities such as sectarianism to further their own interests, by creating traditions or starting violent conflict. Therefore, allocating the cause of violent conflicts to the biological and cultural nature of the identity in question (Lijphart, 1974), generalizes groups which undermines

¹⁰ According to Brubaker (2004, p.64-65), groupism is “*to treat ethnic groups as substantial entities to which interests, and agency can be attributed*” while groupness refers to the being in a group.

cross-cultural differences (Hashemi and Postel, 2017) and other factors that might have caused the conflict such as for example, state structure and agency. In addition, the critique that emerged to the “deeply divided societies” appellation argues that conflicts *“can only be understood as an intersection of various divisions and polarizations, and, as such, the very labeling of conflict as “sectarian” or “ethnic” is too reductionist in most cases”* (Majed, 2020 p.5). Therefore, by only instrumentalizing ethnicity as a unit of analysis, consociationalism has proven its failure. A case study to illustrate consociationalism’s failure is Lebanon.

B. Lebanon’s failed consociationalism: sectarianism

When the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, it was clear that the consociational model had failed in Lebanon. The reasons behind the outbreak of the civil war are rooted in many factors such as inequality, poverty, exploitation of natural resource wealth, uneven distribution of services (Collier, P. and Sambanis, N., 2005; Berdal, M. and Malone D. M., 2000; Arnson C. J. and Zartman I.W., 2005). In addition to the socio-economic factors, there was also the unequal sectarian political representation within public institutions. The political consociational system at the time favoured the representation of Maronites who wanted to maintain their political supremacy after the end of the French mandate in 1943 (Makdisi and MarkTanner, 2009). This has created an unbalance of representation between the religious communities in Lebanon with Muslim political figures demanding more economic benefits and an equal power sharing system with the Christians (Makdisi and MarkTanner, 2009). However, the resistance of Maronites and the meddling of external powers in Lebanon’s domestic affairs gradually resulted in the outbreak of the civil war (Makdisi and Sadaka, 2005).

Consociationalism adopts and institutionalizes an ethnic-centric rhetoric that aims at regulating state-society relations. In the case of Lebanon, state-society relations have been characterized by a patronage system which has affected the way state-institutions manage and deal with different crises (Mouawad, 2017). The elite cartel in Lebanon, a central component of consociational democracy, have been using sectarian¹¹ practices as a tool to accentuate the divide established by consociational democracy. This has been done through a process of Sectarianization where sect-based communities become the vehicles of political mobilization (Saouli, 2019).

In parallel, the elites have used state-institutions to increase their wealth by implementing neoliberal clientelist policies, which accentuated societal inequalities (Makdisi and Marktanner, 2009; Baumann, 2012; Pearlman, 2013). The executive branch's approach to social policy is dependent on a neoliberal assumption that economic growth will ensure the innovation of other domains such as the social (Jawad, 2007). The intersection of the political and economic structures facilitates the capitalization and Sectarianization of welfare (Cammett, 2014).

According to Cammett (2014), the sectarian and clientelist networks interfere in the administrative workflow of public institutions. For example, sectarian political parties own and finance clinics that receive a budget from the Ministry of Public Health and the

¹¹ While sectarianism shares different definitions, there are nevertheless three schools that frame its analytical framework. The primordialist/ethnonationalist approaches respectively give a biological and culturalist explanation for violent conflict by allocating the cause behind violent conflict to the biological and cultural nature of the identity in question. This tends to generalize groups which undermines cross-cultural differences (Hashemi, Postel, 2017). The instrumentalist approach, however, allocates the cause of a violent conflict to individuals instead of the nature of the group in question (Hashemi, Postel, 2017). Political elites exploit identities such as sectarianism to further their own interests, by creating traditions or starting violent conflict. In terms of conflict management, the instrumentalist approach seeks to replace the individuals in power with democratic and moderate representatives who are seen as supportive of human rights (Dixon, 2017). The constructivist realism approach focuses on contrasting the political realities that might shape violent struggle instead of using biological/cultural assumption as a way of explaining the conflict.

Ministry of Social Affairs (Cammett, 2014). Sectarian political parties have also taken part in monopolizing social services. Each political party adopts a specific strategy for its distribution of welfare services. According to Cammett (2014), there are two strategies adopted by the sectarian elites when providing for welfare services: the in-group/out-group strategies. Social psychologists have distinguished between in-groups and out-groups to depict how people naturally favour those with the same ethnic, religious, linguistic background (in-groups) and tend to show antipathy to the members of the out-groups (Huddy, 2001).

Cammett (2014) analyses how sectarian political parties target in-groups and out-groups strategically. For example, Cammett's (2014) research shows that Hezbollah has refused to aid some Shiites who do not have a history of supporting the party, have worked for Amal Movement or are not religious enough. They control clinics and hospitals and serve their community, the family of martyrs and whoever is loyal to the party. In opposition, the distributional strategy of the Future Movement is not centred around history of loyalty or degree of religiosity, but on electoral calculations and strategies. The Hariri Foundation has invested in a medical centre in Karm al-Zeitoun, a Christian area, because it is in the First District of Beirut where two Sunni seats are allocated. The Foundation has neglected to invest in Ouzai, which is home to a significant Sunni resident population, because it is in a district where the party does not seriously contest elections; the neighbourhood falls in the Baabda voting district, an area dominated by Hezbollah (Cammett, 2014). The different sectarian strategies have made access to welfare exclusive, as it is not attainable unless one possesses the right social capital (Deets, 2015). Obtaining the right social capital and integrating the right social circles demands a Sectarianization of the self where

one needs to show allegiance, likability and similarity to the sectarian ideologies promoted by the parties in power.

Consociationalism in Lebanon has prevented the reduction of inequalities and instead has monopolized welfare amongst sectarian leaders. Scholars attribute the role of the state as weak when analysing social welfare in Lebanon (Jawad, 2007; Höckel 2011; Cammett, 2014). Most scholars have emphasized on the lack of state capacity (Cammett, 2014; Deets, 2015). The next section will analyse another the economic aspect of Lebanon's political system, which has contributed to Lebanon's weak state capacity.

C. Neoliberalism

In the context of Africa, Médard (1982), focuses on the political economy and the abuse of power afflicted by political leaders through the privatization of public affairs, the monopolization of public services and the use of clientelism and corruption to maintain their power. In Lebanon, as shown in the previous section, the way consociationalism was established has privatized public affairs, especially social welfare (Cammett, 2014). Many scholars (Baumann, 2019; Daher, 2020; Dib, 2020; Majed & Salman, 2019) have attributed the protests that started in October 2019 as a result of the neoliberal sectarianism adopted by the political system in Lebanon. The neoliberal sectarianism is translated by a population that is dispossessed in the face of a minority rent seeking capitalists and sectarian leaders, who benefits from the political and social divisions to implement their neoliberal agendas (Traboulsi, 2014; Salloukh et al., 2015; Baumann, 2019). According to Chaaban (2016, p.3), individuals linked to the political elites control 43% of Lebanon's commercial banking sector whereas 18 out of 20 banks have major shareholders linked to political elites. Chaaban's study shows how the political elites in Lebanon can access the economic sector by appointing people from their close friends.

This therefore accentuates the exclusivity of the sector and the political elites' consolidation of power in sectors such as the economy.

According to Harvey, 'neoliberalism is a class power project' (Harvey, 2006, p. 145) which means that the poor and working class are not included in the distribution of power and wealth (Harvey, 2006, p. 149). In the Lebanese context, neoliberalism has an added layer to it, and it is sectarianism. Neoliberal sectarianism would translate through a network of clientelism where the sectarian leader would determine job allocation, promotion, wages, and social class mobility (Traboulsi, 2014) all while conditioning these services to sectarian belonging (Salloukh, 2019). In fact, the political and economic elites have gained control over public resources to maintain patronage through clientelist networks that accentuate sectarian dependency (Chaaban and Salti, 2010; Cammett and Issar, 2010; Karam, 2017).

Managing crises in Lebanon is done by relying on foreign funds instead of activating the state's ability to manage crises through its internal resources (Karame, 2020; Atallah et al., 2020). In addition to the fund-based policy that was implemented, some members of the political regime have taken advantage of the year 2020. In her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Klein (2007) theorizes the link between disasters and markets. According to Klein (2007), capitalism feeds from disasters to move forward. Her hypothesis relies on different regional examples such as the Iraqi War, the Katrina Hurricane, and Jakarta's water flood. The one common factor between the different events mentioned is the disrupted stability that is caused by either war or climate disaster.

Instability causes a shock to social, infrastructural and economic conditions, which gives an opportunity to advance a vision of division (Klein, 2007). Radical social and economic

re-engineering is repurposed for the advantage of small global elites that are in power (Klein, 2007). The consequences are: “*unapologetic partition between the included and the excluded, the protected and the damned*” (Klein, 2007, p. 49). The contextualized disaster, which caused the socio-economic re-engineering, opened a new market for many contractors to increase their profit. Whether in New Orleans or Baghdad, those benefiting from disasters are the same global class (Klein, 2007, p.50).

Overall, disaster capitalism maximizes the profit of certain individuals amid a disaster or a crisis. In Lebanon’s political and economic systems, disaster capitalism manifested amid situations of social disasters such as the pandemic (chapter 3) and the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion (chapter 4).

CHAPTER III

THE 2020 PANDEMIC AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE OF THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS

The pandemic created a recession all around the world, with the job market pausing to abide by the lockdown measures that were imposed in all countries. While this caused the unemployment rate to increase all over the world (BBC, 2020), it accentuated Lebanon's ongoing crises (Kharroubi et al., 2021).

The announcement of the first lockdown on the 15th of March 2020, was automatically followed by the declaration of a health emergency. Even though the health emergency (التعينة العامة) is based on paragraph "b"¹² of Article Two of Legislative Decree No. 102 of September 16, 1983 (National Defence), it differs from a state of emergency (حالة الطوارئ). The latter was announced by a decision issued by the Council of Ministers rather than an official decree (the formal way of announcing a state of emergency).

With the announcement of the lockdown, the economic and financial situation in Lebanon has worsened exponentially. There were severe shortages of power and clean water supplies, a devaluation of the Lebanese currency which affected the job market and an already stretched health sector (Amnesty International, 2020). According to Mona Alami¹³ (2020), the pandemic has pushed Lebanon into new phases of instability with unemployment reaching 30% among the general population, and 40% among the youth in the year 2020. Moreover, Mona Alami (2020) mentions how 75% of the population

¹² The paragraph b talks about the implementation of a set of measures announced by decrees taken in the Council of Ministers, such as organizing transportation and imposing Control over raw materials and supplies and regulate the distribution of energy sources.

¹³ Mona Alami is a French Lebanese journalist and research. She covers political and economic issues in the Arab World and is a fellow at the Atlantic Council, a senior associate at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and TRENDS Research and Advisory.

need aid due to the high inflation which made it difficult for many people to access necessities (Collard, 2020).

This chapter will closely look at the assistance provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs to mitigate the social repercussions of the pandemic, and by members of the political regime to reclaim and restore their legitimacy after the 17th of October revolution. The assistance was supposedly the distribution of LBP400,000 which remained a promise that dragged on for too long while the rate of the Lebanese currency was losing its value. The theoretical framework of the first part of this chapter relies on Klein's conception of disaster capitalism. Overall, the tactics to restore the legitimacy of sectarian elites included 1) militarization of the lockdown to crackdown on dissent and 2) clientelism and patronage.

A. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic: an opportunity

1. The 2020 pandemic: reclaiming legitimacy

The start of the first lockdown in Lebanon coincided with a national uprising. In October 2019, an uprising erupted across Lebanon calling for the end of the elites' political rule. During that period of revolutionary uprising, Lebanese politicians were subjected to public criticism as many protesters were shaming them in public places. The social movements that erupted after the 17th of October 2019 have pushed for a collective political awakening, as many started denouncing the leaders they used to adhere to. This has created a new momentum which put at risk the popularity and legitimacy of those in power. As a response, some political elites resorted to violence and started to attack protesters (Reuters, 25th of November 2019). On the first day of the uprising, for example,

Akram Chehayeb¹⁴ got caught up in a protest and one of his bodyguards got out of the car and fired his rifle in front of demonstrators (DW, 24th of October 2019). Another example can be portrayed with Wassef Harake, a lawyer activist, who protested along many civilians, against the Ministry of Social Affairs' inactiveness in providing for vulnerable individuals in Lebanon. Seven months later, Wassef Harake was beaten by five men known to accompany the ex-minister of Social Affairs, Ramzi Musharrafia. The five suspects later confessed to the Information Bureau that they had beaten the lawyer, due to their dissatisfaction with him carrying out sit-ins inside the ministries, specifically within the Ministry of Social Affairs (Al Akhbar, 10th of June 2020). MP Aswad's¹⁵ supporters also confronted and violently attacked a protester from Tripoli in Kesrouane area (al Quds, 6th of February 2020). During a parliamentary session, MP Jamil el Sayyed, previously the Director General of the General Security under Emile Lahoud's Presidency, expressed his willingness to shoot protesters who were gathering outside the houses of politicians (Al Jazeera, 4th of June 2020).

These reactions showcased resistance and opposition to the social movement that was forming against them. Members of the political regime were not the only actors that used violence to oppose the uprising. State institutions, such as the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese army for example, continuously oppressing protesters in Beirut, Tripoli and other Lebanese cities. According to Marie Noëlle AbiYaghi (virtual interview, 23rd of July, 2021),

¹⁴ Akram Chehayeb is a member of the Progressive Socialist Party headed by Walid Jumblatt, and a former Minister of Environment (1996-1998), Minister of Displaced (2009-2011), Minister of Agriculture (2013-2016)

¹⁵ Ziad Aswad is a member of the Free Patriotic Movement headed by Gebran Bassil, and a current deputy in parliament, representing the Jezzine region.

“the state’s response is not different from how any state responds to contention in so called democracies. Apart from the violence, there’s the usual justification of the lack of autonomy of actors, that they are affiliated to external powers but also a discursive pillar which was based on more local narrative such as the fear of the *fitna*, the return of civil war. There’s a clear dissonance with how things work between elites and how in contrast they use fear of the other and otherness to discipline people in Lebanon but also how they can move their own constituencies to underground to translate this discursive repressive tool into a more violent repression.”

Marie Noëlle AbiYaghi, a Lebanese scholar who writes about social movements, explains how the political narrative used against the uprising, included false accusations (i.e., being affiliated to foreign embassies or organizations with a foreign agenda) (LCPS, 2020). Another political narrative accused the uprising of potentially starting to a civil war, especially after partisans of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement raided protests in downtown Beirut (France 24, 25th of October 2019). The multiple raids have incited *fitna* and fear amongst the population. Despite the political narrative that was circulating against the uprising, the political elites failed to keep people off the streets. The start of 2020 was also met with protests, road blockages and demands for political resignations. Therefore, with the start of the pandemic, an opportunity was seen by most political leaders to reclaim their legitimacy following the October 2019 uprising. The political regime took advantage of the pandemic to stop the protest movement that created a threat on their ability to move and be seen in public. On the 26th of March 2020, the Lebanese

Cabinet extended the lockdown decision for two weeks and imposed a curfew from 5PM until 7AM. Protests were slowly beginning to lose momentum as COVID-19 cases started increasing and the economic situation started degrading. The political system took advantage of this situation and ordered the riot police to take down the tents in Martyr's Square in March of 2020 (The National News, 1st of April 2020). The tents that were put in Martyr's Square after the first day of the October uprising, occupied a big portion of Beirut's Central District's public space. By removing them, the space that was materialized against the political regime (through political discussions and socio-political gatherings) returned to its normal settings (a road with cars passing on it). Therefore, amid the start of the pandemic and with COVID-19 cases increasing, the political regime took the lockdown as an opportunity to initiate a crackdown on the uprising and everyone involved in it. The crackdown policy included the detention of many protesters and activists, a way to silence them with laws that do not meet international human rights standards (Amnesty International, 2020). Many individuals took the streets, in defiance of the lockdown, to denounce the rapid deterioration of their socio-economic situation. The repercussions of the lockdown pushed Tripoli, Lebanon's most impoverished city, to protest on the night of the 27th of April 2020. As soon as the protesters reached MP Karameh's house, his bodyguards began to fire live ammunition and the army started beating people (Human Rights Watch, 2020). As they were met with violence, protesters set banks on fire, to oppose their policy which restricted access to people's money (Human Rights Watch, 2020). They also threw stones at the Lebanese Army (Human Rights Watch, 2020). As a result, the Lebanese army shot a live bullet at 26-year-old Fawwaz Fouad al-Seman, which led to his death the next morning (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In parallel, the Higher Defence Council extended the lockdown on the 5th of May,

by two weeks, reminding security forces “*to not go easy on suppressing violations of the lockdown, in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19*” (Megaphone, 5th of May 2020). Another extension of the lockdown was announced on the 19th of May until the 7th of June. By taking advantage of the pandemic, the political regime had to extend the lockdown measures which were accompanied by a militaristic assistance and approach to the control of demonstrations.

On the 15th of June, a meeting was held by the Higher Defence Council, to address the economic collapse (Megaphone, 15th of June 2020). The political regime sought a solution by gathering officials from security agencies and the banking sector. According to what was agreed, a department will be established within the General Directorate of the General Security¹⁶ to investigate measures that should reduce the price of dollars (Megaphone, 15th of June 2020). Another solution that was agreed upon during the meeting, was the pre-emptive arrest of protesters whose acts accentuate and further deepen the economic crisis¹⁷ (Megaphone, 15th of June 2020). To counter the economic crisis, which seemed to become more apparent with each passing day, some members of the political regime adopted a militaristic approach. Instead of initiating economic, financial and monetary reforms with relevant state institutions, the political regime saw it more convenient to arrest, punish, and put in prison anyone who according to the political regime, was aggravating the economic crisis (Megaphone, 23rd of March 2020). Using the prerogatives of security agencies to deal with an economic crisis is a way to not hold some members of the political regime

¹⁶ According to its website, the Lebanese General Security’s role allows it to monitor the media, provide services for foreigners and undertake technical functions such as issuing the Lebanese passport; therefore, it has nothing to do with economics and financial decisions.

¹⁷ According to the political regime’s rhetoric, the economic crisis is due to the protests and civil unrest that have started in 2019 (Megaphone, 15th of June 2020).

accountable. As per the meeting's decision to address the economic crisis, the situation worsened: the Lebanese currency was deteriorating and the Lebanese army was oppressing the media and protesters (Megaphone, 14th of April 20; Schoorel et al., 2020). While the uprising broke the fear and the silence which de-legitimized the political elites, the pandemic came as an opportunity for the regime to claim back their authority by managing and ordering the state's security apparatus to take care of any lockdown breach, thus limiting and blocking any physical political movement from happening. Based on the decisions made during that time, the priority of those in power was to maintain their positions by ordering the use of force against those who publicly oppose them. In fact, the political elites saw the 2020 pandemic, not only as an opportunity to reclaim their legitimacy, but also as a chance to restore it, by positioning themselves as the only alternative for socio-economic assistance.

2. The 2020 pandemic: restoring legitimacy.

As the state struggles to ensure safety and reassurance due to its weak economy, budget deficit and political deadlock, many sectarian political parties saw the pandemic as an opportunity to reach out to their constituencies, reflecting Klein's conception on disaster capitalism.

With the politicization of the lockdown measures to reclaim their rule, the political regime had also taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to restore their legitimacy, by

“Reproducing the clientelistic relations with the people and this was obvious during the first period of the pandemic, where there was a call for the state – wayn el dawle. The sulta¹⁶ always accuses the deficiency of the state to justify why they are present. After they steal from it, they present themselves as the only alternative” (Lama Karame, virtual interview, 14th of July 2021).

By positioning themselves as the only alternative (Chehayeb, 2020) the political regime capitalized on people's livelihood to gain political interests. The political elites have taken the pandemic as an opportunity to redress their reputation among their communities. For example, sectarian political parties such as the Druze-led Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), the Lebanese Democratic Party, the Lebanese Forces, have started sanitisation across their villages and towns (Chehayeb, 2020). The North of Lebanon branch of the Lebanese Forces sent out volunteers who were donating medical coveralls, sanitizing streets, homes and churches (Facebook, 2020). Similarly, the Free Patriotic Movement also provided free testing and delivered essential goods to families in quarantine (Chehayeb, 2020). The executive council head of Hezbollah, Hashem Safieddine, reported an allocation of 3.5 billion Lebanese lira to assist their constituencies affected by the pandemic (Naharnet, 26th of March 2020).

The sectarian political parties also secured quarantined centres in areas where they have an influence. For example, according to a report done by LBCI (27th of March 2020), Amal Movement secured over 25 quarantine centres, with 360 rooms, in Beirut, Bekaa and the South. MP Faysal Karame secured 105 rooms in a hospital in Akkar, where he was elected during the last parliamentary elections. The Progressive Socialist Party secured 100 rooms in areas of Chouf, Bhamdoun, Aley, Rashaya, Hasbaya. The Future Movement also secured a hospital in Akkar. Hezbollah secured 19 quarantine centres, with 920 rooms in Beirut, Mount Lebanon, Bekaa, the South and Jbeil/Kesrouane area. In addition to securing quarantine centres and in align with their strategy to present themselves as the only alternative, politicians and business leaders have donated more than LBP3.2 billion. At the start of the pandemic in March of 2020 for example, Walid Jumblatt, head of the Progressive Socialist Party, donated \$50,000 to the Hariri

Governmental Hospital through Marcel Ghanem's, a Lebanese TV political host, telethon (LBCI, 27th of March 2020).

Other ways that were appropriated by the political regime to restore their legitimacy was through the discourses they had initiated. Many politicians were promoting a political imaginary that denied any collapse from happening. The Central Bank Governor, Riad Salemeh argued that the “*talks about Lebanon going bankrupt are not backed by evidence or numbers*” (Al Arabiya, 4th of April 2020). And throughout the year 2020, some politicians promoted the collapse by normalizing it and pointing out the positive aspects of it. The President's economic advisor, Charbel Kordahi, stated that we would no longer get water imported from France or Italy when sitting at a restaurant and that is a positive effect of the devaluation of the currency because we would most probably get Lebanese water (Megaphone, 5th of October 2020). An MP, Michel Daher also made a statement on how cheap Lebanon has become, after he ordered the bill at a restaurant and it turned out to be 360,000 liras, 20\$ per person (Megaphone, 5th of October 2020).

While the political elites worked towards restoring their legitimacy by serving as the only alternative to an incapable state, the state's assistance on the other hand, is embedded in neoliberal practices. It relies on no strategy and foreign aid to cope and deal with the overlapping socio-economic crises. The next section will explore the Ministry of Social Affairs' approach to the socio-economic assistance to the pandemic.

B. The Ministry of Social Affairs socio-economic assistance during the pandemic

1. Defining the context: the socio-economic aggravation of the pandemic

On the 15th of March 2020, the first lockdown was announced, and it came with restrictive measures: the Minister of Interior warned that anyone who violates the lockdown

measures, will be held accountable or prosecuted (Megaphone, 23rd of March 2020). The government put in place measures to counter the pandemic, but it did not, address the severe socio-economic repercussions that resulted from it.

On the 24th of March, a taxi driver tried to burn himself because of a ticket that was issued for violation of a law that limits the number of passengers to only one (Megaphone, 24th of March 2020). Protests erupted across Lebanon denouncing the lockdown, as it needed to be sustained with a socio-economic plan (Megaphone, 28th of March 2020). The reason behind these demands was that there is no social protection strategy in the country that could protect the vulnerable communities. According to Lea Bou Khater (virtual interview, 6th of July, 2021),

“The sectarian leaders would prefer to support their communities directly, in order to maintain the patron-client relationship. Its neoliberal nature calls on the state to be as small as possible and supportive of investment and businesses instead of protecting people”.

Lebanon’s neoliberalism is characterized by a constant exploitation of the state’s resources to serve the interests of the sectarian leaders (Mouawad, 2007, Salloukh et al., 2015). This neoliberalism intersects with a political motive that lures constituencies into a dependency cycle that is based on welfare services. Nevertheless, the state has put up a façade that ensures its involvement in distributing aid to the most vulnerable. In 2020, two programs were aimed to assist vulnerable households amid the COVID-19 pandemic: the Lebanon Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net (ESSN) and the National Social Security Program (NSSP), as mentioned in Table 1 from the second chapter. While the former is financed by the international community, the latter relies on the Lebanese public budget. Therefore, the next section will closely look at NSSP’s framework, database collection and aid distribution.

2. The Ministry of Social Affairs' approach to social aid during the pandemic: the NSSP Program

The National Social Solidarity Program (NSSP) was launched in a TV Press Conference (Al Jadeed, 14th of April 2020) where the Ministry of Social Affairs announced its intervention in assisting the most vulnerable households that have been affected by the lockdown policies. This program aims at assisting families with children in grade 4 or below, and enrolled in public school, drivers with a public license (red license plate), except for trucks and large buses, victims of land mines (or their surviving family members), and people with disability, from the MoSA database and additional outreach conducted by LAF through municipalities and hotlines.

The Minister of Social Affairs, Ramzi Musharafieh, framed the response of the socio-economic situation under the lockdown as a “*national duty*” to all Lebanese citizens (Al Jadeed, 14th of April 2020). His use of “*citizen*” excludes the socio-economic sufferings of many other non-Lebanese residents who were also affected by the economic crisis and the lockdown measures. Many Ethiopians were kicked out of their kafeel’s household due to shortage of dollars (France 24, 25th of June 2020). They were sleeping on the streets, in front of their consulate, demanding their return to their homeland (France 24, 2020). The state's conceptualization of the program only includes specific targeted Lebanese households, considering that Lebanon has the highest rate of refugees per capital. This emphasizes the institution’s exclusive perception of who is socio-economically affected by the pandemic, and who is eligible for assistance.

The body that governs the framework of the NSSP is a Steering Committee made up of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Minister of Defense (Deputy Prime Minister),

Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). The aim of the NSSP is to distribute financial aid that amounts to LBP400,000 which was equivalent to \$144.14 at the time when the exchange rate was at LBP2775.

The initial plan, however, was to distribute food baskets: one includes food commodities and the other one includes cleaning and sterilization materials. The plan, however, did not fall through since in a TV interview conducted in April of 2020, the Minister of Social Affairs had stated that distributing “*food baskets require taking out a lot of food quantity from the market*¹⁸” which is why they will distribute what equals a food basket: LBP 400,000 (OTV, 10th of April 2020).

The Minister stated his wishes to distribute LBP600,000 but then referred to the Lebanese state’s inability to provide for its society, the way the United States and Britain have secured and provided for those working in the private sector (Al Jadeed, 14th of April 2020). According to him, there needs to be a balance between the households which should have access to their livelihoods, the economy which should experience continuous growth, and the businesses which should be sustained to avoid bankruptcy and to that, the state is seeking to fulfil the need (OTV, 10th of April 2020). But he does not explain how the state, or the Ministry of Social Affairs can contribute to ensure that balance.

The Minister announced that the aid will be distributed if the pandemic and economic crisis continue to affect the livelihood of people (Al Jadeed, 14th of April 2020), but then

¹⁸ According to an interview conducted in November 2020 on TV, the Minister of Social Affairs stated that the reason why they switched from food basket to distributing money is because the former would be provided by the Lebanese army which would not be sustainable as they run out of food to feed the army if they proceed with this option (OTV, 10th of April 2020), which shows that the state was meant to gather food, not from the market, but from the resources of the Lebanese army.

contradicted himself by saying “*we cannot guarantee what will happen*” (OTV, 10th of April 2020), referring to the state’s economic and financial situation and its ability to send out LBP400,000 to every household every month. In fact, according to the former Minister of Social Affairs, Richard Kouyoumjian, the state is bankrupt, and the main concern is that people do not go hungry, so “*how can the state secure monthly aid according to the mechanism it has adopted, and where is the sustainable plan in it?*” (El Nashra, 16th of April 2020).

According to Lama Karame (virtual interview, 16th of July 2021),

“MoSA’s policy wasn’t different than the one that was adopted before the collapse. Poverty continued to be perceived as this small problem that can be fixed with aid and food distribution. It’s like treating a crisis with solutions that target a small problem. Therefore, it wasn’t proportional. We give them the fish instead of teaching them how to fish. There’s no initiative related to what happens after the funds are over”.

The action of distributing money is temporary in its nature and does not sustain those affected for more than a short period of time due to the high inflation and currency devaluation¹⁹. However, the Ministry of Social Affairs has acted based on injecting capital, to those affected by the economic crisis and the pandemic, “*as a way to help out, as if the role of the sulta and the state is to just help*” (Lama Karame, virtual interview, 14th of July 2021). In contrast, in one of his TV interviews (OTV, 10th of April 2020), the Minister of Social Affairs claimed that “*previous governments have always relied on borrowing*”, and how “*they*”²⁰ were expecting this current government to get loans. However, according to the Minister, this is not what the government he takes part in, does. The Minister’s statement meant that the government in which he takes part does not

¹⁹ The unofficial Lebanese currency rate in April 2020, was 2775 pounds.

²⁰ He did not specifically mention who “*they*” are.

rely on borrowing and distributing aid but that is not the case with the launch of the NSSP program.

Therefore, instead of looking at poverty from a multidisciplinary approach, poverty is seen as financial issue that can be solved by distributing aid, disregarding other factors that could contribute to its existence such as employment, education, urban development, etc. Lea Bou Khater (virtual interview, 6th of July 2021) explains how.

“The MoSA hasn’t developed anything beyond the NPTP, which means that it is implementing the programs that are designed by the World Bank. The World Bank is championed of poverty targeting. It started with the Washington Consensus when countries had to cut down expenses on healthcare, education, and social insurance to pay back loans which made people fall into poverty. Therefore, the World Bank had created a social strategy based on giving poor people money”.

By relying on capital injection to sustain and assist vulnerable communities, poverty has become a permanent situation for a lot of people (Karame, 2020). The response lies within a *“piece-meal approach that looks at poverty as a flaw that needs medicine”* (Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, virtual interview, 23rd of July 2021). The Ministry of Social Affairs’ lack of strategic management to contain the socio-economic situation and its reliance on distributing aid, is a depiction of how it deals with social issues such as poverty.

The way a problem is framed is more important than policy solutions (Lea Bou Khater, virtual interview, 6th of July 2021). The approach adopted by the Ministry of Social Affairs when it comes to socio-economic assistantship does not produce policies to treat inequality, rather it adheres to immediate aid, leaving space for clientelism and favoritism (Karame, 2020). Having looked at the Ministry of Social Affairs’ approach to social aid during difficult times such as the pandemic, the next section will look at the Ministry’s data collection and action plan to map out the targeted people of the NSSP program.

3. The Ministry of Social Affairs' data collection and distribution plan for the NSSP Program

According to different TV appearances done by the Minister of Social Affairs, Ramzi Musharafieh, the socio-economic assistantship amid the COVID-19 pandemic includes three databases. The audience for the NSSP Program is targeted Lebanese households that are already in previous state-owned data basis, drivers with a public license, victims of land mines, and people with disabilities (ILO, 2021)

The first one will include families registered with the NPTP²¹ program: those who benefit from food vouchers, and those who benefit from medical and educational coverage (OTV, 10th of April 2020). The second database is taken from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Transportation, the Lebanese army and the Council of Ministers as it respectively includes lists of students in public schools, public drivers, landmine injured and the poor (Al Jadeed, 14th of April 2020). The database that was collected from the different ministries and state institutions, however, was reported by the Lebanese army to contain errors (Siren Associates, 2020). The lists that were used as reference provided by the ministries, and other sources, are said to be outdated, as the names of deceased individuals were included in the distribution processes (Siren Associates, 2020). This has delayed the aid distribution phase (Megaphone, 14th of April 2020).

The third dataset is based on an electronic survey that is accessible to all citizens to fill out on IMPACT²² (Al Jadeed, 14th of April 2020). The responses are automatically

²¹ As per Lebanon's commitment to the Paris III international donors' conference, the Lebanese government received donations to fund the Emergency National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP) (Karame, 2020). The NPTP program was officially launched in 2011 and became the ESSN as it was relaunched in 2014 with additional funding (Karame, 2020). The aim of the program is to provide social assistance such as health coverage, and food aid to the poorest Lebanese households (NPTP website, 2021).

²² IMPACT (Inter-Ministerial/Municipal Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking) is owned by the Central Inspection, an oversight governmental entity. It is used to collect data from different kinds of ministries such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, Agriculture etc (<https://impact.cib.gov.lb/home/about>).

evaluated based on Proxy Means Test (PMT), a method used for targeting social programs and identifying the income poor. The collaboration between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Central Inspection to collect data for the NSSP Program on IMPACT, will eliminate all chances of clientelism and preferential treatment from NGOs, charities, or municipalities, emphasizing that the digitalization of the process will not allow for any kind of manipulation, guaranteeing the elimination of clientelist tendencies.

After having covered 1,858,309 household members (Open Impact, 2020), the Ministry of Social Affairs launched an online website for its National Poverty Target Program (NPTP) that targets the poorest families in Lebanon. The rules of registration are different from IMPACT's data collection. The family in need would go to www.nptp.gov.lb, fill in their first name, family name, phone number, and address. Once they press send, they receive a call from the program to continue the procedure and have a social worker evaluate the family. Overall, there seems to be a clear shift between the minister's decision back in March 2020, which was to adopt a digital data collection on IMPACT and the Ministry's current launch of its own data collection platform. The former one would cancel any clientelist and sectarian manipulation of the data while the latter is in fact based on human intervention which could lead into recognizing certain social groups over the others.

With the data collected, the Ministry of Social Affairs did not clarify, in any statement or TV interview, which database will be prioritized, what regions are going to be covered first, and how the distribution of aid will take place. It did, however, confirm in a statement that it will not interfere in the distribution process and targeting mechanism, and it will not audit or supervise the process nor accompany the distribution process (El-Nashra, 18th of November 2020). Although the minister did not elaborate on the reason

behind such a decision, the distribution process is delegated to the Lebanese army. According to the legislative decree no.102 dated 9/16/1983 and its amendments, the Lebanese army takes on three types of missions: defensive, security, and developmental. Its third mission involves distributing various aids to poor or affected areas, within the framework of the Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC²³) (Lebanese army's website, 2020).

Lama Karame (virtual interview, 14th of July 2021) explains how.

“The aid distribution was delegated to the Lebanese Army due to the excuse there's no trust but in the Lebanese army. The political regime weakens the public administrations and uses it for sectarian and clientelist reasons and whenever it is time to activate its role, the rhetoric uses labels as weak or distrustful to find alternatives in other institutional bodies such as the army.”

By delegating the aid distribution to the Lebanese army and not involving itself (i.e., decentralized centers) in the process, the Ministry of Social Affairs is disregarding its role in policy implementation. Therefore, the motive to assign the distribution plan to the Lebanese army further undermines the role of public administrations and gives expansion of power to the state's military apparatus. The “*militarization of social aid*” is conceived as dangerous by Lama Karame (virtual interview, 14th of July 2021). The Lebanese army has data on vulnerable people and the lack of data protection could be used for means that could violate human rights.

After having delegated the mission of distributing aid to the Lebanese army, neither the army nor the Minister of Social Affairs mentioned a clear timeline on the logistics of the distribution plan (when, where, to whom). According to the Lebanese army's Facebook page (2020), the distribution of aid began to those injured by landmines because they are

²³ According to the Lebanese army's website, the CIMIC is the Civil Military Cooperation, which was established in 2015 has three regional directorates, in the North, South and in the Beqaa. The regional directorates' role combines coordination and planning with local and national authorities, civil organizations on development programs (Lebanese army's website, 2020).

the fewest, and because the process of verifying their injury is easy. The Lebanese army did not report the number of households who were targeted in this first distribution phase, nor did they mediatize the start nor the end of their mission. In parallel, many mobilizations occurred to protest the state's inability to protect the vulnerable during the recent lockdown (Megaphone, 28th of March 2020). This shows that the plan to distribute the LBP400,000 did not reach the intended population. Human Rights Watch (2020), labelled it as "*inadequate Government response creating a risk of hunger for many.*"

From how things unfolded, the government response was initiated sporadically. Since the pandemic coincided with social unrest, the government's intervention to distribute aid could be looked to polish their image and to portray itself as well-intentioned. However, the inadequacy lies within the technicalities that were not ensured nor planned by the Ministry. The technicalities include financial and human resources, as well as a clear deployment plan based on scientific measurements.

In fact, a survey that targets Lebanese citizens who have registered on IMPACT, showcased criticism vis-a-vis the program by highlighting its lack of transparency, unfairness, and failure to address the crisis (Siren Associates, 2020). Many reported to have received nothing despite having registered on the e-platform, others have mentioned that people who are well-off have received aid whereas people in need have not (Siren Associates, 2020).

Overall, the NSSP, which is funded by the Lebanese government and managed by the Lebanese army, does not have an elaborative framework regarding the financial tracking of the program, a complaints and grievances mechanism, obligations to communicate publicly the progress of the program, and an evaluation and monitoring framework of the program. The lack of obligations to report diminishes the degree of transparency which

makes it difficult to track progress and the delivery of aid. Unlike other social aid programs funded by the international community, the ESSN and the NPTP for example have a defined framework regarding the reporting progress or issues. The NSSP's lack of transparency showcases how the Ministry of Social Affairs deals with programs that are not financed by external international parties. The NSSP is the only program, out of four others funded by the international community, that is managed by the Lebanese army and that does not have reporting mechanism, creating ambiguity over the distribution process. The LBP400,000 that was supposed to be distributed to the targeted people by the Ministry of Social Affairs, remained a promise and was therefore not distributed. The next chapter will look at the Beirut explosion's social repercussions and the role the Ministry of Social Affairs in responding to these repercussions.

CHAPTER IV

THE BEIRUT EXPLOSION AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE OF THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS

On the 4th of August 2020, a massive explosion hit the Beirut Port, killing 218 people, injuring more than 10,000 people and making 300,000 people homeless (Sukarieh, 2020). The explosion was due to the storage of 2,750 of ammonium nitrate and other types of explosives in Beirut's port (hangar number 12), which is located next to residential areas and Beirut's central district. With an already collapsing economy and high public deficit, the aftermath of the Beirut explosion exacerbated social repercussions as many people found themselves without shelter and no livelihoods, and many businesses were destroyed in the areas affected by the explosion in central Beirut.

This chapter will first look, through Klein's (2007) notion of 'disaster capitalism', at how the Beirut explosion was capitalized upon by the Lebanese political elites and the international community to maximize their interest and profit. It will then look at the Ministry of Social Affairs' role in responding to the social repercussions which resulted from the explosion of the 4th of August.

A. The Beirut explosion: an opportunity

1. The Beirut blast: reviving economic opportunities.

In the aftermath of the Beirut blast, many politicians labelled the blast as an opportunity for economic prosperity and growth (Megaphone, 21st of August 2020). Michel Aoun, Lebanon's President, in a chat with journalists, labelled the Beirut explosion as an opportunity that has lifted the economic siege Lebanon was under (Al Jadeed, 7th of August 2020). Secretary General of Hezbollah mentioned in his speech after the Beirut

explosion “*opportunities, on a national, regional and international level, arise from the womb of tragedies*” (Youtube, 7th of August 2020). Gebran Bassil, the head of the Free Patriotic Movement referred to the Beirut blast as “*a big drama that can be turned into an opportunity*” (CNN, 2020). Former Minister Fadi Abboud, affiliated to the Free Patriotic Movement, proposed to transform the scene of the explosion into a “*tourist’s paradise*” (Twitter, 2020). According to Abboud, the site of the explosion can easily become “*the new Baalbek temple*”, labelling it as a heavenly touristic attraction in Lebanon (AP News, 10th of December 2020). Other politicians took advantage of the disaster to reaffirm the importance of their presence in keeping the political system intact: Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces, called for early parliamentary elections (Middle East Monitor, 3rd of August 2021). After some talk about MPs resigning from parliament due to the explosion, Walid Jumblatt, head of the Socialist Party, feared that his party’s absence in parliament will give opportunity for opposing parties to take over (Megaphone, 21st of August 2020).

Many countries and international organizations have assisted Lebanon and Beirut with financial aid following the Beirut port blast (e.g., France, the UAE, Cyprus, Qatar, etc.) (Donor Coordination Platform, 2020). With aid coming from abroad, there have been popular demands not to channel it through the state, but through Lebanon’s civil society, as a reaction to the state’s criminal act of neglecting the whole situation (Fawaz and Harb, 2020). Official correspondence was leaked and showed how the political system and the civil servants who work at the Beirut port were aware of the ammonium nitrate stockpile stored in hangar number 12 (Al Jadeed, 19th of February 2021). Many civil servants and judges have reported and requested over the years and up until August 2020, the urgency to move the ammonium nitrate stockpile and destroy it safely. Instead of issuing decisions

to evacuate the dangerous explosives from the port, many state officials were not responsive and decided to ignore it (Al Jadeed, 19th of February 2021).

The idea of the state channeling aid to the affected areas of the Beirut blast, after Lebanon's uprising against the ruling elites, was therefore not welcomed. *“The international community did not want to channel the funds through ministries or the CDR because they know that these institutions are controlled by political oligarchs.”* (Lea Bou Khater, virtual interview, 6th of July 2021). International funds initiated by states, international institutions and federations were therefore channeled instead through different sanctions of civil society (Fawaz and Harb, 2020), as many local and international NGOs were providing services and were deployed on the ground to assist the affected communities (Annahar, 27th of September 2020).

While this was perceived as a good way of managing the humanitarian crisis that was caused by the explosion, the distribution of funds was not based on a constructive assessment (Fawaz and Harb, 2020). Funds were distributed sporadically to a network of associations that is not homogenous in terms of organization, *raison d'être*, agency, personnel, which made it difficult to attain an equal treatment of services based on the regions that were affected.

According to Lea Bou Khater (virtual interview, 6th of July 2021), *“bypassing state institutions has made the state even weaker and has made the people even more tied to sectarian organizations. Bypassing them is never a solution as strong institutions are needed to secure equal access to all citizens. CSOs might benefit a certain group and disregard another one. CSOs are not democratically elected, what is their legitimacy?”*.

Mona Harb (virtual interview, 6th of July 2021) stresses the importance of including state

institutions as she mentions that “*post disaster recovery, will not happen with the army or CSOs. It needs state institutions to protect the common good.*”

While non-politically affiliated organizations and ad-hoc initiatives were helping during the aftermath of the explosion, politically connected organizations funded by politicians also made an appearance (LCPS, 2020). For example, Fouad Makhzoumi Foundation, owned by Beirut MP Fouad Makhzoumi, has offered meals, material for the reconstruction of houses and money to families who have been damaged by the explosion (Makhzoumi Foundation, 2020). The René Moawad Foundation, a politically affiliated NGO was also involved in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion (RMF Together, 2020). Moreover, many residents living in affected areas (Gemayzeh, Mar Mikhael and Ashrafieh) have reported receiving calls from construction brokers, associated with influential politicians, to urge the owners of the destroyed heritage buildings to sell them for a cash sum in foreign currencies (The Legal Agenda, 14th of August 2020). As a reaction, a social media campaign was launched with many hashtags such as *ما تبيع بيتك* (#Don't_sell_your_house) (Twitter, 2020).

The Beirut explosion was looked at as an economic opportunity to satisfy the interests of different stakeholders such as some politicians and NGOs led by politicians. The Beirut Explosion also revived sectarian narratives.

2. The Beirut blast: reviving the sectarian narratives.

The Beirut explosion was used as an opportunity to emphasize and increase the sectarian sense of belonging. At a time where the legitimacy of politicians is being challenged by the multilevel crises and social mobilizations, some politicians affiliated to Christian political parties have politicized the Beirut explosion, by promoting conspiracy theories

about the explosion targeting Christian areas of Beirut. Nicolas Sehnaoui, an MP and a member of the Free Patriotic Movement, cited that the explosion that happened in Beirut is a plan to push Christians out of their area and out of the country, stating that “*Christians are always targeted*” (OTV, 25th of August 2020). To make his conspiracy more credible, the Lebanese MP then proceeded to assert his rhetoric by referencing how Hiroshima and Nagasaki, bombed during the Cold War, were the only two cities in Japan with a big Christian community (OTV, 25th of August 2020). Nadim Gemayel, an MP affiliated to the Kataeb Party, labelled the Beirut explosion as a “*Christian pain first, then Beirut, then finally Lebanese*” (Twitter, 2020). Another sectarian reference was made by Samir Geagea, the head of the Lebanese Forces where he labelled the Beirut blast as the “*Achrafieh blast*” (The National News, 10th of August 2020), referencing the underlying sectarian and political symbol of what Achrafieh was during the civil war, a dominated middle-class Christian area. By labelling the blast as such, the Lebanese Forces have ignored the many non-Christian, refugees, migrant workers and lower-class neighborhood who were affected by the blast. The Lebanese Forces even hung their flag on Mar Mikhael’s crumbled building, to commemorate the assassination of their leader Bashir Gemayel (Megaphone, 14th of September 2020).

The Lebanese political elites have found ways to reproduce their narrative amid the humanitarian disaster that took place on the 4th of August. The uprising that started on the 17th of October 2019 had de-legitimized the system’s sectarian rhetoric and economic practices. Having no alternative to strengthen their position vis-a-vis their communities and society, some politicians have used their opportunism to take advantage of the Beirut blast, ignoring their duties as civil servants to protect civilians, assist the victims and manage the aftermath of the blast.

The sectarian populism that arose after the Beirut explosion, the desire to take advantage of the destruction to invest and build Beirut again, can be explained through Klein's (2007) disaster capitalist analysis. According to Klein (2007) the elites use and exploit the destruction of what exists to build, invest, and make profit out of it. The political system in Lebanon saw the Beirut explosion as an opportunity to reaffirm their sectarian narrative, especially after the 17th of October uprising, where their legitimacy was questioned. By capitalizing on the explosion to satisfy their sectarian narrative, the political elites had shielded themselves from all responsibility by delegating power and governance to the military.

3. The Beirut blast: a militarized governance

A state of emergency, limited to the governorate of Beirut, was declared on the 5th of August in the Council of Ministers' executive statement (2020) for two weeks (until the 18th of August). According to the statement issued by the Council of Ministers after having met with The High Relief Committee and the President of the Republic (2020) that was made public on the 5th of August, the legal texts used framed the decision as essential to fighting "*aggression on the homeland and any aggression directed against it and to ensure the sovereignty of the state and the safety of citizens*"²⁴.

The state of emergency's declaration comes with a breach of international law. Since Lebanon is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights²⁵, it is supposed to abide by the treaty's clauses. However, there are some obligations that

²⁴ Article 1 of the decree no. 102/1983 and decree number no. 52/1967.

²⁵ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is a treaty adopted and signed by the General Assembly of the UN in 1966 and entered into force in 1976. According to its preamble, the Covenant recognizes, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, civil and political freedom and freedom from fear, civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights.

were not respected. Lebanon did not notify, as per article 4.3 of the ICCPR, the UN of its decision to declare the state of emergency. According to experts from the Legal Agenda (Siren Associates, 2020), this could risk isolating citizens from protection offered by external oversight. Moreover, the founding text, for declaring a state of emergency in Lebanon (the decree no. 52/1967), is not in full alignment with the ICCPR. The decree no. 52/1967 does not mention, as per ICCPR's standards, the principles of proportionality, necessity, and non-discrimination, which could risk giving extraordinary powers to the military without having any legal safeguards (Siren Associates, 2020).

Declaring a state of emergency meant that the supreme military authority maintains security and can put at its disposal all the armed forces²⁶. These forces must carry out their basic duties when needed, according to their own laws and under the authority of the High Military Command (Lahham, 2020). The internal structure of the Lebanese army is a depiction of the Lebanese sectarian system, where sects are represented amongst ranks of officers (Salloukh et al., 2015). The political regime has infiltrated the institution with the military commander being appointed by the President of the Lebanese Republic. According to article four of the decree no. 102/1983, the High Military Command can prosecute violators and refer them to the military judiciary within five days of the arrest. After a year of ongoing uprising protesting the politicians' legitimacy and incapability of governance, the state of emergency had given authority to security agencies to oppress protesters during the 8th of August protest, by using live bullets to shoot, arrest and prosecute them in front of the military court (Megaphone, 8th of August 2020).

²⁶ According to article 3 of the decree no. 52/1967, the armed forces include: the internal security forces, public security, customs, and armed forces personnel in ports, airports, woodland outposts and in the armed guard units and their detachments, and firefighters.

The state of emergency restricts freedom of movement. This has resulted in many violations of international legal standards that ensure the protection of basic human rights. The governor of Beirut issued a statement on the 14th of August, while the state of emergency was still intact, requesting NGOs to submit their documents to the Lebanese army Emergency Operations Room to receive a special permit to access affected streets and neighborhoods. Non-permit holders were not able to access the affected areas and would be arrested and tried before the Military Court, as per the instructions in the legislative decree no. 52/1967. In addition, while the declaration of the state of emergency is supposed to ensure security, many Beirut residents have reported an increase in cases of theft, which shows that the state of emergency was not aimed at protecting citizens, it was rather aimed at protecting those in power (The New Arab, 12th of August 2020).

The declaration of a state of emergency one day after the Beirut explosion, when the factors of what had caused it seemed ambiguous and unknown²⁷, can be interpreted as a tool to cover up the Beirut port explosion and surrender all affairs to the military. MP Osama Saad²⁸ was the only one from the parliamentary session to comment that there was no need for a state of emergency to be declared (Megaphone, 13th of August 2020).

The state of emergency was illegally extended. While the state of emergency was supposed to last for two weeks, the resigned Council of Ministers had illegally extended

²⁷ From the time when the Minister of Interior stated that those behind the explosion will be caught in a matter of 5 days (Al Arabiya, 6th of August 2020), up until the time of writing, an investigation is being led by judge Bitar who has been trying to summon politicians to the investigation process. However, there has been political refusal and dispute around both the judge and his act of summoning politicians, which has slowed the process of finding who has been behind the explosion and what has caused it. The political opposition to the judicial process has led to clash that has turned sectarian on the 14th of October 2021 between partisans of Hezbollah and Lebanese Forces (L'Orient le jour, 16th of December 2021).

²⁸ Ossama Saad is a member of parliament and a leader of the Popular Nasserist Organization movement.

it in Beirut until the 18th of September (LBCI, 21st of August 2020). The decision was made based on an exceptional approval with only 3 caretaker ministers present²⁹ (Lahham, 2020), whereas according to the article 65 of the Lebanese constitution, it must be renewed with a cabinet meeting with the presence of all ministers, followed by an approval of the Parliament, to ensure full transparency in restoring order and ending the emergency. Moreover, article 2 of the decree no. 52/1967 requires the Council of Ministers to issue a decree when extending the state of emergency. However, the Council of Ministers published an administrative memo since the government's caretaker PM could not obtain the approval of two thirds of the members of the Council (Lahham, 2020). Publishing an administrative memo does not legally bind Diab's decision for extension.

The political regime's disrespect of the legal procedure is a warning sign of a potential abuse of such powers (ALEF, 2020). Administrative documents at the port, which could be used as evidence in the port investigation, were burnt 8 days before the end of the illegal extended state of emergency (Megaphone, 10th of September 2020), with no official entity intervening to put the fire out.

On the 14th of September, the caretaker government issued another administrative memo, extending the state of emergency until the end of the year 2020 (Siren Associates, 2020). Prime Minister Hassan Diab did not explain the reason behind the extension. Instead of following the correct legal process, the resigned government issued another administrative memo which referenced both the original state of emergency declaration

²⁹ The three ministers who were present during the parliamentary session that approved of the extension are: caretaker Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Zeina Akar, caretaker Interior Minister Mohammad Fahmi and caretaker Agriculture and Culture Minister Abbas Mortada (Lahham, 2020). The reason behind such a dull presence of ministers is due to the government's resignation 7 days prior to the extension.

and its earlier extension (Lahham, 2020). The administrative memo enumerates several responsibilities delegated to the Lebanese army such as coordinating with stakeholders for the distribution of aid, mapping damages, and providing security to the city of Beirut. A second extension of militarized governance had furthered restrictions of movement and freedom of speech. For example, retired military officer, Maurice el Shamei, amongst many others, was arrested on the 9th of August, 5 days after the blast, for tearing down a picture of President Michel Aoun after protesters had stormed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Megaphone, 9th of August 2021).

The political system capitalized on the Beirut explosion by taking a step back and allowing the state's security agencies to take over and govern the city of Beirut until the end of 2020 when it was lifted. The political elites have breached international and national law with the way the state of emergency was declared, framed and extended. By doing so, the political regime had stripped yet again public administrations from assuming their responsibility in crisis management, instead delegating all activities related to the port to the state-led security agencies. While it had delegated the management of Beirut explosion's aftermath to the army, the Lebanese political regime did not hesitate to call for international funds, as it has been doing over the years, whenever a crisis arises.

4. The Beirut blast: a call for funds

Klein (2007) argues that the willingness to seize opportunities to build and invest usually comes out of violent events, when the affected population is vulnerable and has no other choice but to comply with what is offered as a way out of the disaster. According to Harithy (2020), there were no reconstruction policies in Lebanon in the aftermath of the civil war due to the lack of the state's equipment and commitment in setting this process,

instead the political regime capitalized on these events to bring in funds or even hire their own private companies (i.e., Solidere, Waad) as a solution to solve the different problems. The Beirut explosion is no different.

After the explosion, ex-prime minister Hassan Diab and other public officials such as the President of the Republic, Michel Aoun, appealed for international assistance as the only way to save Beirut and Lebanon from the humanitarian crisis (Al-Arabiya, 5th of August 2020). While international technical and financial assistance³⁰ were granted as soon as the damages of the Beirut explosion made headlines, some of the aid that was provided was taken advantage of and hidden from public assistance. For example, Sri Lanka donated 1,675kg of tea as a gesture of solidarity with Lebanon to the President of Lebanon's state (Al Arabiya, 10th of September 2020). While it is international protocol to give donations to the head of state, it was reported that President Aoun did not give out these donations to the victims of the blast, but to his Presidential guard, inciting criticism from the public eye with [#حرامي_الشاي](#) (#Tea_Thief) trending on Twitter (2020). Similarly, the Head of the Ghobeiry Municipality, Maan Khalil, reported to have uncovered “*a disaster*” in the warehouses of Beirut's Sports City Stadium (The 961, 5th of November 2020). The 7,000 tons of flour that was donated by the Iraqi government after the Beirut blast, was unhygienically stored as it was exposed to water, moisture and air (L'Orient le Jour, 4th of November 2020).

In addition to reviving sectarian narratives and economic opportunities, the political regime in Lebanon also found a way to capitalize on the aid that was supposed to reach

³⁰ According to the Donor Coordination Platform, the amount of international aid that was received since the 4th of August is estimated around \$307,538,992. Many countries such as Germany, France and Turkey deployed their humanitarian teams to help in Beirut's affected areas.

the victims of the Beirut blast. However, the Lebanese political system was not the only political entity to have taken advantage of the Beirut blast.

5. The Beirut blast: a geopolitical and business opportunity

The international community saw the Beirut explosion as an opportunity to advance their geopolitical and financial objectives and influence in the region. Upon President Macron's visit to the site of the explosion on the 6th of August, CMA CGM, a transport company, headed by a French Lebanese family, accompanied him to pursue a plan to rebuild Beirut's port within three years (Al Arabiya, 10th of April 2021). According to Joe Dakkak, CMA CGM's general manager, the estimated cost for the rehabilitation, expansion and digitization of the port is around \$400 to \$600 million dollars (Maritime Executive, 2021). While France was offering its services and help to build the port and with President Macron's visit to the affected areas in the Beirut blast, Turkey was also moving its cards as a regional power. According to Mohamad Hage Ali³¹ from the Carnegie Middle East Center (2020), Turkey criticized Macron's appearance to the site explosion and labelled it as colonial. But it proceeded to send its Vice President Fuat Oktay and its Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to the affected site to show Turkey's solidarity with the Lebanese people by offering to rebuild its port, provide medical assistance by building temporary hospitals near the damaged areas (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 2020). They also proposed the use of Turkish ports (Mersina and Iskenderun) until the Beirut port would function again and made sure to visit the Turkish and the Lebanese Sunni community in Lebanon to thank them for their love for Turkey and its president (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 2020).

³¹ Mohamad Hage Ali is a is the director of communications and a fellow at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center.

The visit of both countries at the same time to show extensive assistance to Lebanon during the aftermath of the Beirut blast, can be read through the lens of geopolitical influence in the Mediterranean region. Turkey has been wanting to establish its influence in the Eastern side of the Mediterranean for fear of having this area blocked by other rivalries such as Cyprus, Greece and Israel (Cagaptay, 2019). Turkey has signed an agreement with Libya regarding the demarcating the maritime borders with Libya. According to the maritime agreement (2019), both parties make the mandatory passage for any pipeline from the eastern Mediterranean to Europe, therefore putting France's pipeline project in the Mediterranean at risk (Megaphone, 6th of September 2020). The event of Beirut's explosion is seen as a geopolitical opportunity to seize more influence in the region, especially after discovering the presence of gas in Lebanon's maritime borders.

Other countries, such as China also positioned itself with a plan to build Beirut's port (The Diplomat, 19th of August 2020). Already taking part in the expansion of Tripoli's port and Qlayaat Airport in the North of Lebanon (Xinhua, 17th of March 2019), China's interest in wanting to rebuild the Beirut port is linked to the Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative³² (BRI), providing China a space for its presence in the region (BRI website 2020). Germany has also introduced a strategy for the rebuilding of the port (LBCI, 4th of September 2021). According to the German private companies, the port would be built outside of the city, and the damaged area would be for hotels, public and private spaces etc. (LBCI, 4th of September 2021).

³² The Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a strategy that aims at connecting China to the Mediterranean via Eurasia. The initiative revolves around infrastructure connectivity, connecting markets and strengthening trade (BRI Website, 2020).

Between local political elites that take any opportunity to reproduce themselves and affirm their grip over the country, and an international community which interferes to preserve its own interest and influence, the events that occurred in 2020 have extremely affected and continue to affect Lebanon's multilevel crises. The state intervention and management of the multilevel crises, however, were channeled through the state's security agencies.

B. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Lebanon's socio-economic assistance after the Beirut port explosion

Much of the socio-economic relief during the aftermath of Beirut's blast was provided by NGOs and groups of young volunteers. According to the Lebanese army's official registry, at least 385 organizations have recorded participation in the Beirut reconstruction (Al Akhbar, 9th of September 2020). Beit Baraka, Offre de Joie, Rebuild Lebanon, Food Blessed, Live Love Beirut, were among many NGOs providing, rebuilding and assisting the affected areas with donations coming from Lebanese nationals, fundraisers and international donors (Annahar, 27th of September 2020).

"The state willingly gave the space to the CSOs to deal and cope with the situation and help victims." (Lea Bou Khater, virtual interview, 6th of July 2021). Fawaz and Harb (2020) have claimed Lebanon to be a *"republic of NGOs"*, due to the role they have played in aiding affected areas after the blast. Lebanon's associational sector which is known to provide services to specific sectarian communities (Kingston, 2013; Cammett, 2014; Haddad 2020), is an outcome of the country's laissez-faire policy which has limited the state's intervention and enforced a clientelist system where the elite cartel use the state – amongst their NGOs and personal networks – for their own advantage (Mouawad,

2017), to provide basic services to those in need (Baumann, 2012; Salloukh et al., 2015; Haddad 2020; Gaspard, 2003).

Apart from the monopolization of the relief management by NGOs, after the explosion of the Beirut port, the Lebanese army played an important role which diminished the role and the responsibility of state institutions such as the Disaster Risk Management Unit (DRM), the High Relief Committee (HRC) and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA). This section will look at who in theory was in charge of dealing with the social repercussions of the Beirut explosion and it will then map the role and the activities of the Ministry of Social Affairs and other state institutions who in theory are responsible for handling humanitarian disasters of the scale of the Beirut explosion.

1. The declaration of the state of emergency and delegating the responsibility to the Lebanese army.

Amid the aftermath of the Beirut explosion, the Higher Council for Defence³³ (HDC) securitized the management and response plan of the blast by declaring a state of emergency and delegating responsibility to the Lebanese army. By delegating the crisis management to the Lebanese army, the public institutions in question were left with no role to play.

According to the National Defence Law No. 102 of 16/9/1983, the Council decides how the defence policy that is designated by the Council of Ministers should be implemented and frames any defence mobilization. Regarding the last point, the defence mobilization, the law does not state in which circumstances or the reason behind such mobilizing defence. In addition to its role in the defence sector, the HDC is present in state-led

³³ The Higher Defence Council is an entity affiliated to the executive branch and it includes the President of the Republic as Chairman, the Prime Minister as Vice Chairman, the Minister of Defence as a member, the Minister of Foreign Affairs as a member, the Minister of Finance as a member, the Minister of the Interior as a member, the Minister of Economy as a member.

humanitarian agencies, and it presides two non-official committees³⁴ which fall under the Disaster Risk Management Unit, also a non-official state entity.

In HDC's first meeting, the President of the Lebanese Republic, stated that the HDC's meeting is aimed to *“take the necessary judicial and security measures, in order to help citizens, treat the wounded, and preserve property”* (Lebanese Presidency, 2020). The declaration of a state of emergency after the Beirut explosion shows the President's approach in wanting, as a priority, to maintain security and stability.

“The deployment of the Lebanese army in the humanitarian assistance and oppression of protests was a weird dichotomy” (Lama Karame, virtual interview, 6th of July 2021). In fact, Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi (virtual interview, 23rd of July 2021), argues that

“The army always appears as the crutch of the system. We see the army when we have demonstrations, or in reinforcement of the police. It therefore appears as this crutch of the regime. And I think that the decision to have the army distribute this aid at a moment where we had all these voices extremely critical vis-a-vis the state could have been a way cosmetically rehabilitate the image of the state because typically the army enjoys more trust levels than the ISF in Lebanon.”

The security governmental agencies oversaw the operational and managerial response to the aftermath of the Beirut blast, while NGOs and volunteers were on the ground assisting those affected by the blast. The Lebanese army mapped damages in all affected areas, covering more than 69,000 households and businesses in affected areas, and more than

³⁴ The Committee for Coordination to Confront Disasters and the Committee Establishing Emergency Plans are agencies formed but have not been constituted by legal texts.

16,000 households and businesses in less affected areas (Siren Associates, 2020). The monopolisation of the management response of the Beirut blast by the security apparatus shows how the government approaches disasters and crises from a perspective which restricts relevant state institutions from doing their job. It also reproduces the state's inability to count on its public administrations and institutions.

While the security agencies took charge of managing the crisis, it did not ensure efficient results. Fawaz and Harb (2020) reported that assigning NGOs to different zones by the Lebanese army have been inefficient since the army did not do a background check on the capacity that every NGO holds, which means that they assigned large scale NGOs to a less damaged zone and small-scale NGOs to extremely damaged zones, for example. According to Mona Harb (virtual interview, 6th of July 2021),

“Those in the army who oversee the recovery have felt a sense of helplessness, they were put in the position of coordinating and managing the aftermath of the blast without knowing how to operate. Their role was constrained by their inexperience in post-disaster management and the fact that they're not trained to do this.”

Therefore, the security governmental agencies oversaw responding to the aftermath of the Beirut blast (relief and security), with a marginal presence of the central government [ministries] (Siren Associates, 2020). The HDC's mandate does not necessarily tackle the management of socio-economic issues. Its role in the aftermath of the Beirut blast shows how socio-economic assistance and building a socio-economic safety net for those affected was not a top priority for the government. The next section will look at the role of the state institutions that should have intervened and the obstacles as to why they could not.

2. The diminishing role of the Ministry of Social Affairs and other humanitarian led state institutions.

Three state institutions are identified when looking at the entities responsible for handling humanitarian disasters and the social repercussions caused by the former. The first one is the Disaster Risk Management Unit (DRM), the second one is the High Relief Committee (HRC) and the third one is the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA). The following table resumes the expected role of these three state institutions and the action plan that they had to adopt during the aftermath of the Beirut blast.

State institutions' response to the Beirut explosion	Year of establishment	Official document that defines its work	Institutional Affiliation	Scope of work	Structure	Response Plan during the aftermath of the Beirut explosion	Reference
DRM	2010	According to its website, the DRM was founded based on a public-private partnership between the Lebanese government and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in 2010.	Affiliated to the Council of Ministers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The unit is the only national entity concerned with all phases of disaster risk reduction, from prevention, preparedness, response and recovery from disasters. - They elaborate national strategies for disaster risk reduction. - They report on the disaster or crisis, circulate it to all concerned departments and bodies to take immediate measures to confront it, and take the necessary measures to be able to confront disasters and crises. - Since it is under the executive branch, the Unit also suggests appropriate decisions to manage the crisis or disaster and address them in coordination with the concerned departments and bodies. 	<p>1/ The committee for coordination to confront disasters, which takes notification of the disaster and coordinates with relevant entities and evaluates the results of the operation and proposes recommendations.</p> <p>2/ The committee establishing an emergency plan develops emergency plans for disasters, sets out a national strategy for relief and standards that measure development in disaster management in accordance with the Sendai Framework³⁵</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordinate with relevant stakeholders, mapping the damages (public institutions, buildings, affected areas). - Identify what was needed in terms of resources (food, health equipment, shelters), managing the aid and its distribution. - Make sure there's no theft and help with searching for missing people. - The DRM reached out to European countries and asked them to provide support teams. 	DRM website (2022), decision no. 41/2013 ³⁶ , decision no. 103/2010, LBCI (2020).
HRC	1976	Decision no.1/35— regarding the formation of the High Relief Committee and defining its tasks and powers	Affiliated to the Council of Ministers	<p>Committee's functionalities are framed administratively and are limited to receiving³⁷ and delivering aid and donations. Another part of the Committee's functionalities is to manage disasters of all kinds. Overall, the constitutive decision frames the Committee's role in an administrative and managerial way.</p>	<p>The Committee is made up of the Prime Minister who acts as a chairman³⁸, the Deputy Prime Minister who acts as a Vice President, and the Ministry of National Defence, the Minister of Public Health, the Minister of Social Affairs, the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Public Works, who act as members. The Committee can also consult the Director Generals of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Displaced, Council of the South, two Commanding Officers from the Lebanese army and Internal Security Forces.</p> <p>A committee exists within the HRC, and it includes representatives of international, and local organizations, picked by the HRC President, General Mohamad Kheir. Its role is to initiate and provide aid</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Map the damages of the blast and coordinate the distribution of donations with the Lebanese army. 	Article 3, article 4 of the decision no.35/11, Youtube 2020,

³⁵ The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction aims at reducing disaster risks and losses in lives, livelihoods, health etc. (UNDRR, 2015).

³⁶ The committee was relaunched by the decision no. 68/2018 as it included more members, amended by decision no. 11/2019 to include a representative from the National Institute for Statistics.

³⁷ According to article 52 of the Public Accounting Law, any funds presented to the state must be accepted by a decree issued from the Council of Ministers and are recorded in the revenues section of the budget. However, the Committee has been receiving funds without recording them in the revenues section of the budget (Al Akhbar, 23rd of October 2010).

³⁸ The Commission never held meetings with its board members, instead it began to dedicate wide powers in the hands of the Prime Minister, away from any role of the Council of Ministers and the relevant ministries, within the framework of a clear policy aimed at emptying ministries and public administrations of the element (Al Akhbar, 23rd of October 2010).

					to Lebanon in coordination with the HRC			
MoSA	1993	Law 212/1993-- regarding the formation of the Ministry of Social Affairs and defining its tasks and powers	Affiliated to the Council of Ministers	Attention to emergency cases that require social aid and relief, amongst other roles and responsibilities.	<p>The Ministry is made up of the Minister of Social Affairs, a General Director.</p> <p>The General Directorate of Social Affairs, consists of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Administrative Department - Planning and Research Department - Accounting department - The Directorate of Social <p>The Directorate Social Services includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Department of Disabled Affairs - Social Welfare Department - The interests of associations and civil organizations - Family Affairs Department - The Directorate of Social <p>The Directorate of Social Development includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social Development Department - Department of crafts and handicrafts - Development Services Department 	Based on a rapid assessment carried out by the MoSA team, to determine the conditions of the affected groups in the residential neighbourhoods of eight main areas surrounding the port, the Ministry of Social Affairs partnered with the Italian Embassy to distribute financial aid to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poor families with NPTP holders. - Poor housewives - The wounded and injured - Persons with disabilities 	وزارة الشؤون, Law 212/1993, أطلقت المرحلة الـ 2 من توزيع المساعدات بالتعاون مع السفارة الإيطالية في حرج بيروت (Ministry of Social Affairs website, 2020).

Table 3: State institutions' response to the Beirut explosion

a. The Disaster Risk Management Unit

The Disaster Risk Management Unit saw its prerogatives limited amid the declaration of the state of emergency and thus could not operate according to its response plan. As they were about to implement their response plan, the HCD declared a state of emergency which delegated everything to the Lebanese army (LBCI, 17th of August 2020). Although the response plan did not how they were going to coordinate, map, assess, and distribute aid and manage the aftermath of the blast, the political decision to declare a state of emergency limited the ability of the DRM, a unit specialized in managing disasters and risk, to ensure it is doing its job. The DRM was therefore unable to carry on with its plan. Instead, the Lebanese army was the entity that managed and provided what was needed to the affected areas of Beirut. The DRM's role was therefore more focused on providing awareness for the spread of the Coronavirus, as it has been doing ever since the pandemic started.

b. The Higher Relief Committee

The Higher Relief Committee³⁹ relayed its responsibility to the Lebanese army and called on NGOs and citizens⁴⁰ to help with the aftermath of the Beirut explosion. The High Relief Committee (HRC) is a state-led institution, which falls under the executive authority of the Council of Ministries. According to its constitutive decision no.1/35 (1976), the aim behind the creation of HRC was to secure urgent aid to citizens affected by the conflict. The institution was therefore created in a precise historical context and

³⁹ The Council was created in 1976, during the second year of the Lebanese civil war. It was subordinated to the Department of Social Welfare but was later moved to the Prime Minister's Office in 1993 (Karamé, 2020).

⁴⁰ By relaying the responsibility to NGOs and citizens, the High Relief Committee is producing a neoliberal rhetoric which minimizes and limits the role of the state and its institutions to effectively use its agency for the management of the crisis.

later saw its functions expand, after the civil war. According to article 8 of its no. 35/1 decision, it is the only official committee to work on relief in Lebanon.

In the news, the HRC is portrayed as a state entity that shows up when issues requiring relief occur like environmental disasters. The issues it follows up on, can be classified within a broader range of expertise. During the year 2020 and up until March 2021, the Committee was dealing with issues such as insects threatening agricultural crops (El Nashra, 24th of March 2021), beach cleaning operations after the environmental disaster that affected the Lebanese coast from Naqoura to Beirut (El Nashra, 22nd of March 2021), compensation for the 4th of August blast (El Nashra, 22nd of March 2021), mapping of the 4th of August blast (Manar, 26th of August 2020), dealing with collapse of buildings, as well as infrastructure maintenance due to storms and floods (Manar, 9th of December 2019).

In one of his interviews, General Kheir, the President of the HRC⁴¹ mentioned how *“the Committee does not have an oversight role, instead, its role is to sign deals with NGOs who want to donate, and send it directly to security agencies (i.e., Military Intelligence Bureau, Customs Office, General Security, State Security Forces) so that the donations can be audited”* (Youtube, 8th of January 2021). The role of the Committee has been reduced to an intermediary one where it is used as a liaison between NGOs and other security agencies. This role contributes to further accentuating the neoliberal pattern of delegating and managing services to organizations that are not under the authority of the state.

The asymmetric relationship between the High Relief Committee and the Lebanese army is particularly shown after the 4th of August Beirut blast, where the HRC was assigned to

⁴¹ General Mohammad Kheir is the president of the HRC with a rank of Major General. He is also the Secretary General of the Higher Defense Council (HDC)

map the damages of the blast and coordinate the distribution of donations with the Lebanese army. Although article 3 explicitly mentions the Committee's role in managing crises, the management of the Beirut blast's aftermath was directed to the Lebanese army. Even if the Committee was given its initial role to manage crises, it is practically not feasible as it is incapable of covering the number of people affected by the blast, hence the need of the Lebanese army's assistance (Youtube, 8th of January 2021). To accentuate this need, General Mohamad Kheir mentioned that the Committee should foster 3,000 employees whereas currently, it only has 30 employees (Youtube, 8th of January 2021). The Committee does not exist as an entity, it is represented by General Kheir (Al Akhbar, 23rd of October 2010).

With little human capacity to support the relief after the blast, the rhetoric promoted in the Secretary General's interviews was based on calling out NGOs, international organizations and countries "*that love Lebanon*" to help after the blast (Youtube, 26th of August 2020). General Kheir also called on the ones who are earning a salary to not accept aid, but rather help their neighbours (Youtube, 26th of August 2020). Both statements mentioned are rooted in a neoliberal and individualistic perception, where responsibility is put on the individual to get out of the crisis while undermining the intervention of the state and the Committee in question. Instead of highlighting its role in managing the crisis as per article 3 of its decision no. 35/1 (1976), the Commission pacified and reduced its role to mapping and accepting aid and coordinating its distribution with the Lebanese army.

c. The Ministry of Social Affairs

The Ministry of Social Affairs' intervention was minimal after the Beirut explosion. On its website, the Ministry of Social Affairs has communicated that, in collaboration with the Italian Embassy, it distributed financial aid to NPTP holders affected by the blast. Even during a humanitarian crisis, the Ministry found itself collaborating or partnering with foreign entities such as the Italian Embassy. The Ministry of Social Affairs has reproduced its dependency on external agents to put in place any action plan that assists vulnerable people.

In addition, the response plan to the Beirut blast targeted poor families that are holders of the NPTP card. This means that the families who are not enrolled in the NPTP program but who have lost all their livelihood amid the port explosion do not benefit from the aid initiated by the Ministry of Social Affairs. This shows that the Ministry of Social Affairs is not inclusive enough to fit its intervention according to the context of the intervention. In conclusion, the Disaster Risk Management Unit, the Higher Relief Committee, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Lebanese army have had overlapping missions of mapping the damages and assessing needs which shows weak to no central coordination as the DRM and HRC institutions went to do its own assessment and mapping (Siren Associates, 2020) and the Ministry of Social Affairs continued with its strategy of distributing aid on a scale that only includes those who are already NPTP card holders.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The year 2020 debuted after the start of a national uprising which triggered a crisis of legitimacy vis-a-vis the political regime in Lebanon. As many started mobilizing and demanding their basic needs and rights, the political regime started using tactics and strategies to counter and oppress them, by calling on the army and security forces to disproportionately use force against protesters, instrumentalizing and politicizing the social movements, and relying on deep rooted sectarian affiliations to solidify their position⁴².

Some members of the political regime sought to politicize the start of the pandemic in March 2020 to reclaim the legitimacy they were beginning to lose in 2019, with the start of the uprising. In addition, they also restored their legitimacy by positioning themselves as the only ones with an answer to socio-economic hardships. They played different strategies: they declared a state of emergency, they dismantled the social movement's space in Downtown Beirut (and other region's squares) and restricted protests to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and they instrumentalized their networks to provide food baskets and assistance to the people in their community who were impoverished because of the lockdown measures imposed by the government. The pandemic therefore allowed some key members of the political regime to reposition themselves as saviors and supporters of the people.

The Beirut blast was also taken advantage of by some members of the political regime. They sought the post-blast situation as an economic opportunity for reinvestment and

⁴² Mona Harb, virtual interview, 6th of July 2021; Lea Bou Khater, virtual interview, 6th of July 2021.

capital injection. They called for funds – as they do whenever a crisis hits Lebanon – and deployed their private charities to assist people on the ground. Moreover, the regime militarized the response to the blast by declaring a state of emergency which restricted movement and allowed the Lebanese army to take over the city of Beirut by imposing a curfew and giving permission and space for specific NGOs to assist those in need. By politically deciding to give the post-blast response to the Lebanese army, the political regime sought a way out of accountability and holding responsibilities to the humanitarian crisis. Not only did some of the Lebanese political regime take advantage of the blast, international and regional powers sought to instrumentalize the Beirut port for their own geopolitical strategies such as Turkey and France for example.

As these two events unfolded throughout the year 2020, the state's response to them was similar in many ways. In both events, the state's response was cosmetic and sporadic. During the pandemic, the state sought to “help out” by distributing food baskets and money through the Lebanese army. This was debated by many scholars as “putting band-aid to the problem” (Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, virtual interview, 23rd of July 2021). The state's approach to poverty is embedded in a rigid neoliberalism where the poor is seen as an anomaly that needs fixing, rather than looking at the policies that breed economic inequalities and poverty.

While the Lebanese state is often referred to in public culture as absent, this thesis shows that it is very present in terms of security-led role rather than civil welfare. The state was present during the pandemic and the post-blast response, but the main institutions that were mobilized were mainly security-led ones, which meant that it did not act as a welfare state. During the pandemic, the Ministry of Social Affairs sporadically put in place a

distributing aid plan and then delegated the distribution to the Lebanese army. And during the post-blast response, it was mainly the security agencies which mobilized.

Over the years, the political regime has used the state's resources and personnel to advance their political and personal interest, "parasiting"⁴³ (Mona Harb, virtual interview, 6th of July 2021) them from their role and function which left them unable to respond to any crisis due to the absence of administrative autonomy. Therefore, with the state institutions' weak and ineffective response, the Lebanese army is the only public entity that is still capable to manage and deal with policy implementation (distribution of aid) and a humanitarian crisis (Beirut port explosion).

Has the year 2020 transformed the sectarian neoliberal system in Lebanon? The year 2020 has shown the resilience of the political system. The political system in Lebanon found new ways to reinvent itself and became more explicit in its violent tactics and strategies, sectarian narratives and delegation of power to the security-led agencies. According to Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi (virtual interview, 23rd of July 2021), crises leave room for fluidity and transformation. However, by analyzing the system's reproduction and reliance on a security agency to fill up its role vis-a-vis society, one would think that the transformation is towards a more authoritarian rule.

Lebanon's neoliberal and sectarian nature is based on state intervention specifically tailored to the interests of those in power, weakening its autonomy and agency to initiate well rounded effective policies to sustain society's welfare. Due to the absence of any

⁴³According to Mona Harb (virtual interview, 6th of July, 2021), parasiting is not an English verb, but it is derived from the word *parasite*, which is an organism that lives on or within a host organism and gets its food from or at the expense of the host (CDC, 2021), which means that the political regime has stripped away the potential and ability of the public institution to serve their role vis-a-vis society, weaking therefore the ability to respond to crises and fulfill their mission

Lebanon's neoliberal and sectarian nature is based on state intervention specifically tailored to the interests of those in power, weakening its autonomy and agency to initiate well rounded effective policies to sustain society's welfare. Due to the absence of any strong political alternative and political organizing, the current political system sees crises as a way and an opportunity to strengthen and reproduce itself.

strong political alternative and political organizing, the current political system sees crises as a way and an opportunity to strengthen and reproduce itself.

APPENDIX

Chapter 1

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 بينما لا تزال جثث ضحايا انفجار مرفأ بيروت تحت الأنقاض، ارتأت مخابرات الجيش أنّ أولوياتها هي ملاحقة الناشطين. فالقت القبض، اليوم الأحد، على العسكري المتقاعد موريس الشمعي الذي أقدم ليل السبت على تحطيم صورة رئيس الجمهورية ميشال عون في مقرّ وزارة الخارجية بعد اقتحامها من قبل المتظاهرين. وأقدمت عناصر المخابرات على اختطاف الشمعي من منزل أخيه في منطقة الدورة وتغطية رأسه، على طريقة الميليشيات والمنظمات الإرهابية، واقتياده إلى التحقيق. الأخطر أنّ المخابرات سرّبت صورة الموقوف وهو مقتاد إلى الاعتقال وسط احتفاء من قبل مناصري التيار الوطني الحر الذين عمدوا إلى مشاركتها على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي. يُذكر أنّ ساحة الشهداء صدحت أمس بأصوات الآلاف الذين أطلقوا شتائمهم وغضبهم باتجاه

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Chapter 5

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