

In October 2019, Lebanon witnessed a huge popular uprising. The demands for a better quality of life and access to basic needs were ignored by the political class and the situation continues to deteriorate. Today, resistance in Lebanon is a long-term game that should start with dialogue, civic education, and citizen engagement.

By Tracy Nehme

Resistance
as a long-term
project

On resistance in Lebanon

A landmark in Beirut, Lebanon, the monument in Martyrs Square still bears the scars of Lebanon's Civil War (1975-90). The monument honors people executed here in 1916 at the orders of the Ottoman military ruler Jamal Pasha.



In October 2019, Lebanon witnessed an unprecedented popular uprising. People took to the streets to denounce a corrupt political class that no longer represents them. Some say that October 2019 was the true end of the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975. It was, indeed, the first time after the civil war that a huge number of people from all religions, classes, and political backgrounds got together and fought for a common goal. The political and economic system reached a deadlock, and it was clear that the political class did not have the people's interest in mind. Citizens were united in misery. Ever since that moment, people have been eager to learn more about politics and the youth has been looking for new ways to engage in the public sphere. Some are joining alternative political parties, some are working with NGOs, while others are developing social media independent news platforms and podcasts.

The demands of the revolution were completely ignored by the political class, and the situation in Lebanon has been deteriorating beyond imagination since October 2019. Over the span of two years, Lebanon went through one of the three most severe economic and financial crises the world has seen since the mid-19th century.¹ People's money and savings are now stuck in banks, basic medicine is often unavailable, fuel and other daily commodities' prices have become exorbitant, and most homes do not have constant access to electricity.

A year after the beginning of the economic and political meltdown, 2,750 tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded in the port of Beirut, leaving 215 dead, wounding 2,750 others, and displacing 300,000.² The Beirut port explosion in August 2020 was one of the biggest non-nuclear blasts on record.³ It revealed what could happen to a country run by an extremely incompetent and corrupt government that has never been held accountable for its actions. Over a year later, the political class is still in power with little-to-no hope of a radical political change. No one was held accountable, and justice is yet to be served. For the few who have not lost hope, resistance is the only option.

Resistance as a long-term and uncertain project

When we think of acts of resistance, we tend to think of strong, specific actions that are being talked about decades after the fact. We think of wars won, or at least of fierce battles with a clear winner and a clear loser. But most of the time, resistance is a long and difficult process, an act of courage that needs to be cultivated daily. Under the collaborationist Vichy régime of World War II, resistance was definitely not a given for everyone: ninety percent of France's population either supported the

Some say that October 2019 was the true end of the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975

1 | Lebanon Economic Monitor (Spring 2021). *Lebanon Sinking (To the Top 3)*. The World Bank in the Middle East and North Africa.

2 | <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53668493>

3 | <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/beirut-blast-judge-issues-arrest-warrant-ex-finance-minister-khalil-2021-10-12/>

4 | Wilkinson, S. (2011), via: <https://www.historynet.com/french-resistance-resistant.htm>

When we think of acts of resistance, we tend to think of strong, specific actions. But most of the time, resistance is a long and difficult process, an act of courage that needs to be cultivated daily



Vichy regime or was not willing to be involved in any risky endeavors.⁴ Most people just wanted the war to end and did not want to fight anymore. Those who resisted decided to take risks that could get them arrested, tortured, or killed. Whoever resisted did so in any way they could: some by writing clandestine newspapers, others by helping Jews escape across borders with fake passports, and some by organizing guerrilla warfare activities. When we look back at the French resistance, it seems so simple now that we know who won, but it is important to remember that the resistance was fought with no prior knowledge of its potential success in liberating the country.

That said, now is a pivotal time in Lebanon's history. In the post-war era of the last thirty years, the ruling elite was able to provide the illusion that 'all was well', and most people took advantage of a system they knew was not sustainable. After the civil war, people were tired and did not want to fight anymore. They endured one crisis after another and refused to fight back, or to become involved politically. Now, the Lebanese people need to stop being resilient and start resisting. In this context, there is nothing more comfortable than radical ideas, especially in times of crisis. Economic crisis coupled with political instability leaves people feeling disillusioned and looking for immediate change, making extremist propaganda attractive to a larger part of the population.

The parliamentary elections due in March 2022 will be an important political battleground in this respect. To this day, elections remain the most democratic way for change to happen incrementally over the long-term and for parliament to be gradually renewed. Elections also encourage political parties to work harder both internally, by organizing, educating and developing, and externally, by building coalitions and recruiting new members. Indeed, doing politics means compromising and building alliances. It will be impossible for the opposition to win unless the opposition parties form a large alliance for the 2022 parliamentary elections. This will require putting some ideals to the side. Through forming a united opposition front, the Lebanese opposition can aspire to get a few more seats in parliament.

Resistance is not a settling of accounts, but it is a project: an endless and uncertain battle for justice and freedom. It is firstly personal, then societal, and, finally, political.

Breaking the barrier of fear through civic education

Another way of resisting is by breaking the barrier of fear. The political regime has understood that fear can be used as a tool. The Christians are told that there is an international conspiracy to erase them from the Middle East, the Sunni are told that the Shia are taking over – instilling fear that the country will be completely isolated from the Arab world – while the Shia are told that the state is not capable of protecting them from external threats. This will not only keep the various Lebanese communities fearful of each other but will also have them fear for the survival of their own culture and religion.

While fear separates us, resistance brings us together. Breaking barriers happens by re-appropriating our historical narrative. We have been raised with an unclear history and false narratives about the civil war, our Arabic roots, our religion and our national identity. That is why supporting education and pushing for new ways of learning should be at the center of our resistance. Education can happen through art, books, history classes, complementary school programs, discussions, talks and debates. Over the last two years, the multiple crises leading to an increase in poverty rates – with 74 percent of the population living below the poverty line⁵ – have greatly impacted demand for education and student retention. Since the beginning of the uprisings in October 2019, many schools have been forced to close their doors for long periods of time, affecting over 1.3 million children and keeping over 700,000 children out of school.⁶ Investing in children's education will not only transform their future but will also be a vital step in ensuring the country's recovery, both economically and socially. It is time to reclaim Lebanon's history and culture so that the nation is built on more solid grounds.

Lastly, resistance requires courage. It is by being courageous and taking a leap of faith that one can fight for freedom and sovereignty. Without courage, the people remain without a country. To despair is to abandon. No matter the difficulty of the present moment, and regardless of the lethargy currently felt by the Lebanese, one should not deny the importance of the times we are living. Only people can save other people. This is the splendor and misery of politics. ●

We have been raised with an unclear history and false narratives. That is why supporting education and pushing for new ways of learning should be at the center of our resistance

5 | <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099102>

6 | Lebanon Education Sector (2021). *Data on Children in Education in Lebanon for the year 2020–2021*.



Tracy Nehme is founder of Coffee & Politics in Lebanon.