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Beirut August 4: Great Collapse or Big Bang?

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The morning after the devastating explosion of a 2750 t ammonium nitrate storage facility in the port of Beirut the Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbār ran the headline "The Great Collapse". In a few moments, Beirut was destroyed as if by a small atomic bomb, wrote the newspaper's editor-in-chief, Ibrāhīm al-Amīn and Beirut turned into a city of catastrophe.

A grim history

The ammonium nitrate had been stored in the port of Beirut for almost six years, transferred from the Moldovan-flagged cargo ship Rhosus to hangar 12 in the port area of al-Marfa' at the end of 2013 after the rotten ship had had to moor in the port of Beirut due to a damaged engine. The then owner, Russian businessman Igor Grechushkin, declared bankruptcy and wrote the ship off; the ten mostly Ukrainian seamen under Russian captain Boris Prokoshev were later repatriated. The cargo was confiscated by the Lebanese port authorities as security for the demurrage charges that Grechushkin was expected to pay but did not. Years later, the ship sank and the ammonium nitrate remained in hangar 12.

The local port officials wrote at least six times to the owner of the port, the state port authority, pointing out the risk of storing such a highly sensitive material. They demanded a quick disposal of the artificial fertilizer for example on the fields of Lebanese farmers. However, nothing happened. Igor Grechushkin, who probably lives in Limassol in Cyprus at the time of writing, refused to cooperate. State authorities remained inactive.

The Detonation

What finally triggered the detonation of the ammonium nitrate on 4 August 2020 at 18:08 local time is still under investigation. The force of the explosion was enormous. Damage to buildings occurred within a radius of more than 10 km. In an inner radius of two to three kilometres, over 135 people were killed and well over 5,000 injured, almost 300,000 people made homeless. The harbour area and the adjoining areas of the city centre, the main power station and the biggest grain silo in the city were largely destroyed by the enormous shock wave. As a result, the country's grain reserves will now only last barely for another four weeks.

However, the detonation was not only the drop-let that made the barrel overflow, but the barrel itself virtually exploded. A devastation of such a magnitude had many commentators compare it to a few minutes of war, a war of the state against its own people. Without any safety measures, the ammonium nitrate had become highly explosive due to the long and dense storage. The port authority (Gestion et exploitation du port de Beyrouth) ignored all complaints and warnings from the local officials. It was only after the disaster that Lebanese President Michel

Aoun declared that the ammonium nitrate had been "illegally" stored, which was "totally unacceptable". Since the fact of the stored dangerous substance was well known, the Lebanese public sees this as just another cynicism of a government, which refuses to take responsibility for the mismanagement of officials it was supposed to supervise.

The collapse

The state, a state that no longer guarantees the material security of the population, not even aiming to do so, is held responsible for the collapse of society. Already in the course of the prevailing profound economic crisis, the population saw itself betrayed by the state elites, whose internal power struggles and insistence on sectarian power sharing had made it impossible to cope with the economic crisis. The decline in the value of the Lebanese national currency could not be stopped, and while the old elites were able to maintain their standard of living with private foreign exchange reserves, the population had to make do with a now almost worthless currency.

Neither had the quarrelling state elites been able to take measures against the supply crisis, which had been coming to a head for months, now gradually turning into a societal crisis. The 1.5 million Syrian refugees, whose living conditions were becoming increasingly precarious, were not the least of the victims. In the secondary urban centres, such as the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, the voices in favour of a political separation from the centre of power in Beirut increased. Shiite Hezbollah has been suspected of infiltrating the military and preparing a coup d'état.

The Corona epidemic aggravated this already precarious situation, which now became a State crisis. The mismanagement of the state authorities became ubiquitously evident. During July, the number of people infected with the Covid 19 virus tripled. Even before the detonation, which destroyed two of the city's larger hospitals, medical care was no longer guaranteed.

Loss of confidence

"Beirut itself is a disaster" headlined editor Nūr Ni'ma of the newspaper ad-Diyār. One might just as well say: For the majority of the Lebanese this state is the disaster. The almost 5 billion dollars, which according to first estimates the reconstruction of the basic structure of Beirut's port area will cost, are not available. If money would come into the country, this, it is feared, would only end up, as usual, in the pockets of the Lebanese oligarchs.

Lebanese newspapers declare the state systematically covering up the "madness" represented by the storage of ammonium nitrate in Hangar 12 and in addition trying to profit from the situation. However, all strategies of the elites to conceal their fatal failure of the state will eventually be doomed. For example, on 7 August the trial of the perpetrators of the 2005 bomb attack, in which the former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 21 people had been killed, was to begin in a court supported by the United Nations; in absentia four suspects of Hezbollah are accused. This should have been the first time that the attack, which in the eyes of many Lebanese had started the polarization of political and military power in the country, would be legally dealt with. Due to the current economic crisis, the polarization has been realigned: now it is the coalition of the old state elites vs. "the people" with opposite sides seemingly irreconcilable. The loss of trust is so widespread that any political action is in principle considered implausible from the start. The increasingly mutinous people withdraw their support of this state. The Lebanese Foreign Minister, in office since January 2020 Nāsif Yūsuf Hittī resigned one day before the detonation stating that he saw Lebanon on the road to becoming a "failed state". Now protesters in the streets of Beirut are demanding the resignation of the government of Hassān Diyāb. It is to be expected that the political elites will "dismiss" Diyāb, in fact drop him as a pawn, in order to keep the uproar at bay and safeguard their image as the country's masters. But this is exactly what the protesters fundamentally doubt and start to deny. Thus, reports are not surprising, some mem-

bers of the political elites are supposed to be already packing their bags, in order to turn their backs on the collapsing country in good time, should the worst happen.

The horror of the end

In the eyes of many Lebanese commentators, the detonation of the ammonium nitrate marks the final collapse of the order of state and rule. For them, the state in its existing guise has become meaningless. But the state elites will try to

sit out this crisis too. For this they will once again attempt to use their traditional patronage system, hoping that the people's ties to their clans and families will continue to work and that those who are not in a clientele relationship will become politically and socially isolated. However, it is doubtful whether this attitude will guarantee their survival in the current crisis. It is more likely that the explosion has heralded the beginning of an end.