

“The Revolution in Lebanon Changed Everything”

Q/A with Lebanese Activist and Opposition Figure Laury Haytayan

BIC STORIES FROM THE FIELD, SERIES – COMMENTARY

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On May 15, 2022, Lebanon held its first legislative elections since the October 2019 revolution, which coincided with the start of an unprecedented economic and financial crisis, soon followed by the deadly explosion of the Beirut port, which destroyed parts of the capital and killed close to 200 people. The elections brought modest but potentially meaningful shifts in Lebanon’s political establishment.¹

The militant Hezbollah group and its allies lost the parliamentary majority they had held since 2018, having won 61 seats in the 128-member legislature, a drop of 10 members since the last vote. The biggest winner turned out to be the nationalist Christian Lebanese Forces party led by Samir Geagea, one of the harshest critics of

¹ “What Lebanon’s Election Results Mean for Ending Its Crisis”, May 2020. Kali Robinson, Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-lebanons-election-results-mean-ending-its-crisis>

Hezbollah and its Iranian backers. Another big winner was Druze leader Walid Joumblatt, whose group won all eight seats they were running for.²

Notably, independent candidates won 13 seats, making unprecedented gains. Two of those seats went to the party Taqaddom, which was established in 2019 following the revolution. The Brussels International Center met with Taqaddom's general coordinator Laury Haytayan in Beirut on June 7 to discuss what these results could mean for the future of the country. The conversation was slightly edited for length and clarity.

- ***BIC: On 17 October 2019, the Lebanese cabinet announced new tax measures to address an economic crisis. In response, tens of thousands of peaceful protesters took to the streets across the country calling for their social and economic rights, for accountability, an end to corruption, and the resignation of all political representatives.³ On a personal level, how did the "tawra" revolution of 2019 influence your decision to bring about change by establishing your own political party?***

My political life did not start with the revolution, but the revolution played an important part in shaping my will to play a role on an institutional level. That is when, with fellow activists like me, we formed "Taqaddom", an emerging political party which, today, has two MPs elected to parliament. So, this is how the revolution impacted me. But I do have a long history of activism in the country which started in 1990. When the war ended in Lebanon, we were not able to have the country we wished for. The same militias that had been fighting went on to become our political leaders after the war. Since then, there always has been movements aiming to change that reality. It did not start with the 2019 revolution; it has been an on-going process all along. Right from the start, you had people fighting the Syrian occupation and, personally, that is when my political awareness became more and more acute. In 2011, we had demonstrations in favour of a secular state because we were fed up with the confessional system. In 2013,

² "In Lebanon's parliamentary election, Hezbollah and allies lose majority", May 2022. Le Monde with AP. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/05/17/in-lebanon-s-parliamentary-elections-hezbollah-and-allies-lose-majority_5983786_4.html

³ "Lebanon protests explained", September 2020. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/lebanon-protests-explained/>

again, we went to the streets to protest the postponement of the elections. In 2015, we had the trash crisis, and it then became obvious that the system was really breaking down because they were unable to simply collect the trash. It became very clear that the system was collapsing. In 2018, I ran for elections in Beirut as part of a movement wanting to stop the collapse we were witnessing and to change the way we govern this country. In 2018, people were not yet fully aware of where we were heading. Then, in 2019, the revolution coincided with the full collapse of the country.

- ***BIC: As you mentioned, the 2019 revolution coincided with an unprecedented crisis. Still, it seems it gave you enough hope to launch your own political party.***

2019 was very important. It was a moment in time that changed everything. People descended into the streets, they were fed up with the political system and the political class. It started with economic demands but rapidly people went to the streets with all kinds of demands. Strikingly, there was a change in the public discourse: all the political leaders became the target of critics, even the leader of Hezbollah [Hassan Nasrallah], who until then was an untouchable figure for its own base. The same with Nabih Berri, the Speaker of parliament. That is why the people in the streets chanted “killun yaani killun” (Arabic for “all of them means all of them”, a popular slogan asserting that no politician should be exempted from resignation). Everybody wanted change, but there were different understandings of what change should look like and where to start. Different communities had different priorities. Women-led groups on the streets had specific demands such as the right for a Lebanese woman to pass on her nationality to her child. For some, the main issue was how Hezbollah had become a state within the state. For others, it was the economic downfall. So, everybody had different priorities because nothing was functioning in the country, but everyone was in the streets with at least a collective objective: to get rid of the whole political class.

- ***BIC: Domestic voter turnout on May 15 was 49%. Do you believe low turnout is a sign of political apathy or is it rather an indicator of the widespread mistrust in the democratic process? Or perhaps both?***

49% is not as bad as it seems. A lot of people have left the country and among the diaspora, especially among those who left after 2019, a lot of people were eager to vote for change. The diaspora vote had a big impact on the results of the elections.

Inside the country, the low turnout – if you want to call it that – is actually not from the people that are upset with the system. It was more about those who were upset with their own political parties but would not go as far as voting against them, yet they did not want to vote for them, so they did not vote at all. This is why, despite a low voter turnout, the results for the change movement were big. That is how we ended up with 13 MPs that are part of the change movement and there are other independent MPs that, eventually, might join us too.

- ***BIC: As you just said, 13 independent lawmakers were elected to parliament. Is that more than you were hoping for?***

The number 13 has definitely been a lucky number for us because we were expecting a lot less than that. Because we had the diaspora vote one week before the rest of the population, that gave the people a boost to really be confident and enthusiastic and go vote. Before the diaspora vote, many Lebanese had the feeling that nothing would change, but that feeling of hope from the diaspora injected hope in the country.

- ***BIC: According to the World Bank, Lebanon's economic collapse is likely to rank among the world's worst financial crises since the mid-19th century. It said in a report that continuous policy inaction and the absence of a fully functioning executive authority threaten already dire socio-economic conditions and a fragile social peace with no clear turning point in the horizon.⁴ The challenges are titanic. In your view, what concrete steps need to be swiftly taken to tackle this severe crisis?***

The experts who have been advising “Taqaddom” are very clear: the only way forward is to sign a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This deal is not about the amount of money we would be getting but it is, rather, about finally imposing the reforms that need to be done in this country. This is where our focus is, on the set of reforms that are a prerequisite for the IMF before we can receive any money. And reforms are what we demand, because that is the only way to provoke change in this country. For years, the political class has been resisting

⁴ “Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction”, June 2021. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>

reforms even though they knew there was no alternative. So, these reforms, with a budget that could actually lead to growth, with a vision, with the restructuring of the banks, a capital control law, and so on, these are highly necessary. Then, we also need an economic vision to facilitate growth. This is the only way forward and hopefully our MPs will work in parliament to ratify these laws. If we can get the IMF deal, then more investments can come into the country and the private sector will have a role to play.

- *BIC: As you mentioned, Lebanon's government signed last April a staff-level agreement with the IMF for a four-year extended fund facility of 3 billion dollars that would however only get full approval if Beirut enacts a series of reforms, including restructuring the financial sector to restore banks' viability, reforming state-owned enterprises, and establishing a credible and transparent monetary and exchange rate system.⁵ One could argue that the political will does exist for some small-scale, easy-to-implement reforms. But it seems the May 15 election failed to produce a solid parliamentary mandate to achieve the larger scale reforms recommended by the IMF.⁶*

We cannot say that overwhelming change has happened in the parliament - not that drastic change is what we were expecting. But having new parliamentarians of the change movement will change the dynamics and the way the parliament functions. Imagine if we only had MPs of the old political class: they would not do anything. But, for instance, we recently had an issue with the maritime border with Israel and the 13 MPs of the change movement immediately held a press conference, pressing the government to take action. The moment they did that, the whole atmosphere in the parliament changed and other MPs from other blocs started talking about it, started proposing new laws, etc. And this is just on one issue, so imagine about the rest. So, there is an important role for the change movement, for the 13, to play that proactive role. Because then, the others will not

⁵ "IMF staff reaches agreement on \$3 billion deal for Lebanon", April 2022. AFP.

<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220407-imf-staff-reaches-agreement-on-3-billion-deal-for-lebanon>

⁶ "Lebanon's Voters Signal a Desire for Change, but Reform Will Come Slowly", May 2022. Worldview by Stratfor. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/lebanons-voters-signal-desire-change-reform-will-come-slowly>

really be able to stay still and do nothing. Can the others block change or reforms? Yes, that is possible. But then it will be very clear to the people – clearer than before – who is blocking change.

- ***BIC: Do you believe that the 13 new independent lawmakers can be a new source of pressure on their parliamentary counterparts to engage in economic reforms and have that proactive role you just talked about because their own financial fortunes are not tied to the country's corrupt economy, unlike established political leaders?***

True. Our 13 MPs – well, I say “our” although it is not a unified block but at least they are trying to work together – they are not part of the state capture system. So, their interests differ from those who have personal stakes in this system and have been in bed with the bankers, if you will. That is why the 13 will have different views and, definitely, the laws that they will propose will be in the interest of the people and not in the interest of some.

- ***BIC: What role can the international community still play to support Lebanon? Right after the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron promised to help push through much-needed political and economic reforms. Nearly two years later, it would be fair to assess his initiative did not really bear any fruit. Today, do you think there is still a need for a similar foreign involvement or can change only be brought from the inside?***

The international community has always been a big player in the country. For sure, some of us have been very disappointed with France's initiative. I am sure Mr Macron did not know that his gesture would end up being what it ended up to be, i.e. abused by the political class. I guess he got a first-hand experience of what we have been dealing with. This political class, they can fool you once and they will try to fool you twice. So, I think Macron learned his lesson. We do appreciate the French support and the support of the international community, but they need to learn how to tackle issues in this country. We have a group of political entities that have abused everything and have worked against their own people, leading us to

⁷ “Lebanon's Voters Signal a Desire for Change, but Reform Will Come Slowly”, May 2022. Worldview by Stratfor. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/lebanons-voters-signal-desire-change-reform-will-come-slowly>

where we are today. Yes, they were elections and people elected them. But now, we need to pressure them into agreeing to reforms.

Most Lebanese have lost their savings. We worked hard, put our money in the bank, and then the banks cannot tell us where our money is. Banks say the money is with the central bank, the central bank says it is with the government, the government says the State has taken the money so that we should sell the State assets. In this corrupted and bankrupted country, the same people who have stolen our money now want to sell the State apart. And obviously, they would buy the State. After stealing everything, they want to steal the State as well. So, Mr Macron and the international community need to be very careful because this is where we are heading. They need to be aware of these issues and they need to talk to the opposition and the change movement to get a better view of what could be done without causing harm.

- ***BIC: According to some polls, stopping corruption is seen by the Lebanese population as the most pressing economic issue.⁸ In your view, how can that be achieved?***

Look, there are levels of corruption. First of all, the overarching question is: why do we have corruption? The answer is: because we do not have accountability. So, everybody can do anything and get away with it. The independence of the Judiciary is thus very important. Today, if the investigation into the Beirut port explosion is blocked, it is because of the non-independence of the Judiciary, which is full of political appointees. The blockage is happening because every political party has their own people placed at top positions within the Judiciary. So, we need new laws to enshrine the independence of the Judiciary and take away political influence. That would be a big change, and this is what we want to fight for.

Secondly, we also have problems on the side of the public administrations, such a bribery. Petty corruption, if you will. So, we need new ways of appointing people in

⁸ "Study of Perceptions and Attitudes of Lebanese Citizens Towards the Economic, Social and Political Situation in Lebanon", December 2021. Statistics Lebanon.

<https://www.kas.de/documents/284382/284431/2021-12+KAS+Public+Opinion+Survey+Lebanon+Report.pdf/bfb92390-cb9b-97f3-423a-d4ec1fc464a0?version=1.1&t=1643958272879>

public administrations based on qualities and skills and not based on political affiliations.

Thirdly, if you want to get rid of corruption in the country then you need to get rid of the political leaders who are at the core of the corruption. And that requires to change the election law. The electoral law in Lebanon is so complex that it makes it very hard to have fair competition. So, we need a new law, and we need to have what we call the “independent electoral management body”. So as not to have the ministry of interior managing the elections while it has stakes in these elections. Sometimes, the minister of interior runs for elections while managing the elections. Sure, it is the same process in France, but we are in a country where we do not have strong institutions. Because our institutions are weak and corrupted (in parts because of the political appointees I mentioned), that is why it is important to have an independent management body. These are practical ways to tackle corruption.

- ***BIC: During the October 2019 revolution, the mantra 'killon yaane killon' or 'all of them means all of them' was chanted by tens of thousands of protesters like yourself who descended into the streets across the country. The meaning of that slogan was very clear, it was a rejection of the entire political class. Yet, under the “Lebanese Opposition Front” banner, your party “Taqaddom” chose to ally with a contentious actor such as Kataeb, a right-wing Christian party and former militia which has tried since the 2019 revolution to rebrand itself as part of the democratic opposition to the ruling establishment. Other independent parties have refused to join lists with a party they see as still part of the traditional establishment.⁹ You have not. Could you explain what motivated that alliance and how do you reconcile that choice with the spirit of the revolution you were part of?***

“Taqaddom” was and still is in the Lebanese opposition front, which includes Kataeb and some independent figures who were politically active and at some point in time decided to change course and decided that enough is enough. When it comes to Kataeb, they have been changing direction in politics since 2017 or 2018. True, they were part of the previous governments...

⁹ “Why hopes remain dim for free and fair elections in Lebanon”, May 2022. Justin Salhani, The New Arab. <https://www.skeyesmedia.org/en/News/News/10-05-2022/10020>

- ***BIC: And they were a militia during the civil war***

Yes, they were one of the warring parties. But they have constantly tried to improve. They took responsibility for what they have done during the war, a time during which they believed they were protecting some communities in the country. After the war, they were in exile for years and they came back in 2005. They were part of the government but on a smaller scale than others, so it would not be fair to blame them for everything that has happened. They are changing, they are evolving, and taking necessary steps. When they resigned from the government in 2020, we thought that it was possible to work with them and form an opposition together. I know that not everybody accepted that decision. It was one cause of division among the emerging political parties and the revolutionary movement. But we thought that a bit of maturity was required because we do need allies and we do need to broaden the opposition to be able to be effective.

- ***BIC: So, it was a pragmatic choice?***

In Parliament today, we have our 13 MPs, but we will also need to work with others who align with our objectives. When we are proactive, when we know what our agenda is and what we want to achieve, and that other parties want to work with us on that, we will work with them. We have been very transparent on that, making sure people understand why we did what we did. It was difficult. Even within our party, it was challenging to convince everyone that [aligning with Kataeb] could be the right path for us. In the end, we had a vote and we decided that it was the right decision. And I guess that strategy was very successful since we ended up with two MPs in Parliament from "Taqaddom", in addition to a third one who is very close to us.

- ***BIC: To conclude, a question on the Hezbollah issue. Your party has taken a bold stance by calling for the disarmament of the Shia party and militia. Realistically, is that achievable and if so, how?***

We laid out practical steps on how to do that. First of all, it starts with redefining the role of the army and reequipping the army. The army should be the guarantor of the frontiers, not a police force in the streets standing in-between demonstrators and the political class, like they did. To be able to take on its role as protector of the borders, we need to empower the army and discuss what could be the role of Hezbollah with the army. As a militia, Hezbollah has gained a lot of...

experience. In some respects, they have the discipline of an army. And they have weapons, “smart” weapons as they are claiming. So, how can we transfer the know-how they have gained into the hands of the army? And what do to with their weapons? Rather than giving them away like in 1990 when militias at the end of the war disarmed and sold their weapons abroad, let’s put those arms into the hands of the army.

Secondly, we need to finalise the delimitations of our borders, maritime and inland. Why is that important? Because today, in a way, the *raison d’être* of Hezbollah is linked to the issue of the Shebaa land.¹⁰

In 2000, when the Israelis left the country, we thought that Hezbollah would not have a role anymore because they had accomplished their mission in fighting the Israeli occupation and sending the Israelis back home. But then there was still the issue of the Shebaa farms. So, it is important to finalise our inland and maritime borders, discuss with Syria and if we conclude that Shebaa is Syrian, then Hezbollah will need to think about what *raison d’être* is still. Then, it will become clear that there is no need for their weapons anymore.

- ***BIC: So, you want to take away their purpose?***

Yes. Another point that we are raising is the need to redesign, revamp, the Israeli-Lebanese General Armistice Agreement of 1949. Why? Because that agreement stipulates that the army is the guarantor of the border with Israel. By re-establishing that, you take away a card out of Hezbollah’s hands [which effectively controls that border]. In 1996, following the war between Hezbollah and Israel, we

¹⁰ Sunniva Rose from The National writes that “for two decades, the Shebaa farms remained part of the reason Hezbollah says it cannot disarm, using Israel’s occupation of a tiny strip of land to justify its arsenal. The Shebaa farms are located in the South of Lebanon, close to the Hermon mountain range, in a highly volatile region where Israeli, Syrian and Lebanese borders meet. The village of Shebaa itself is undisputedly Lebanese, but it remains unclear whether the 14 farms that span an area roughly 14 kilometres in length and 2 kilometres in width, are Lebanese or Syrian. Israel has occupied the Shebaa farms since 1967, along with the Syrian Golan Heights. Israel annexed the latter in 1981 although it was unrecognised by the international community until March 2019 when US President Donald Trump changed decades of American policy and recognised Israel’s sovereignty over the territory. By arguing that the Shebaa farms are Lebanese territory occupied by Israel, Hezbollah justifies its right to have an armed militia so that it can “liberate” Lebanese land.

had in Lebanon what we call the “April Agreement”¹¹, that is when the government gave legitimacy to Hezbollah to defend the border. It was the first legal document stating that Hezbollah could play such a role. From 1996 till 2022, we have seen the evolution of Hezbollah and it was not always in favour of the country. In 2011, they started fighting in Syria alongside the Bashar Al-Assad regime. In Yemen, they fought alongside the Houthi. They took on a bigger role than simply defending the Lebanese borders. That is why we need to reinstate the amnesty agreement with Israel in order to make clear whose role it is to defend our borders.

These are simple steps – well, not simple but practical – that we believe in. And this is our role as a political party, to lay out practical steps. When we say, “let’s disarm Hezbollah”, it is not poetry. It is a clear objective with clear steps, without antagonising the people who support Hezbollah. Because we do not believe in an “Iranian occupation”. Hezbollah is a Lebanese entity. People who fight for Hezbollah are Lebanese people. They believe that Hezbollah is defending them because the government and the State institutions are weak. This is why it is important to strengthen those institutions, such as the army. By making the army capable of defending its people, then people in the South might not turn to Hezbollah for protection, fearing the next Israeli attack. We are not antagonising the Shia community when we call for the disarmament of Hezbollah. On the contrary, we are just saying that the State institutions are the protector of the Lebanese people, and that Hezbollah can exist as a political party. No one wants to completely destroy Hezbollah. But today, Hezbollah’s agenda is a regional one and it goes against the interests of the Lebanese people.

- ***BIC: Is disarming Hezbollah a step needed to curb Iranian influence in the country?***

Yes, definitely. But we do not call it an “Iranian occupation” like we called it the Syrian occupation. The Syrian occupation was economical, military and political. With Hezbollah, it is different. It has an Iranian agenda, but it is not Iranian, they are Lebanese people. In our view, they have a dangerous agenda, but we need to deal with them as Lebanese people. It is a very delicate issue – which does not mean we should not talk about it. Hezbollah’s regional agenda is one of the

¹¹ The Israeli–Lebanese Ceasefire Understanding (also known as the April Understanding) was an informal written agreement between Israel and Hezbollah, reached through the diplomatic efforts of the US, which ended the 1996 military conflict between the two sides.

reasons why we are here today and why the country is collapsing. Hezbollah has played a role in allowing corruption to happen, opening fronts, and attacking other countries, etc, because they have an agenda that clashes with the interests of the Lebanese people. So, we cannot ignore it, and at the same time we cannot alienate them and say that they are strangers in the land.

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