

# Lebanon: Vigil InSight Situation Report

13 May 2021

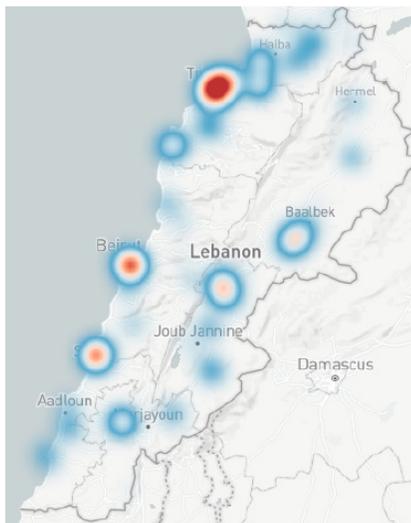
Lebanon's political crisis looks set to continue; foreign diplomacy is failing as aid cuts trigger more shortages and violent protests increase.

This document compiled with contributions from aid agencies operating in Lebanon provides an analysis of the current situation in the country and discusses the implications for aid agencies working in the area.

## SUMMARY

- Lebanon has been in a state of political crisis for decades but last year's catastrophic blast at the Port of Beirut triggered unprecedented protests demanding the removal of political dynasties.
- French-led diplomacy has failed to break the deadlock or to force the formation of a new government; financial aid has been halted.
- Israel continues to regard Hezbollah as an existential threat. Drone, air and maritime attacks continue.
- Political factions, in particular Hezbollah, are stockpiling food, fuel and other basic goods to provide for their communities in anticipation of the state's inability to do so, increasing the prospect of further protest.
- Recent months have seen an increase in violent crime, with subsidy cuts resulting in people fighting over goods at supermarkets and food distribution points.
- The main threat to aid access in 2021 remains protests. 706 peaceful and 360 violent protests took place in the first three months of 2021. In 2020, one aid worker was beaten and his personal belongings taken during a protest in Bar Elias town, Beqaa governorate.
- While most protests are political and unlikely to target aid agencies, some protests focus on food, security or health concerns. Such protests may potentially affect aid agencies if they run such programmes in areas with increasing unrest. In 2020, aid agencies reported unfounded allegations being spread about their programmes.

Heat map showing the location of adverse events in Lebanon, from 01 January to 31 March 2021.



Note: This map is based on data from ACLED<sup>1</sup> and Insecurity Insight.<sup>2</sup> Incidents include protests (peaceful and violent), civil unrest, disputes (including involving small arms fire), criminal activity (e.g., attacks on property, looting, robbery, car jacking, and murder), severe weather conditions, fires, violations at the southern border, incidents of displacement, and incidents involving explosives.

## MITIGATION FOR AID AGENCIES

Although there is little recent evidence of aid organisations being directly targeted in Lebanon, the threat from Islamist militants remains, and social tensions mean that the risk from wider indirect threats is rising affecting staff safety and access.

Although aid agencies will need to continue their own assessments of how to adjust their security strategies, there are options available, for all staff members:

- Ensure planners and other staff maintain a high degree of situational awareness and draw on all available information in order to assess route planning and other activities.
- National staff should be aware of "no go areas" for local political reasons.
- Avoid planned or likely protests where possible.
- Consider wearing PPE in high-risk areas, in particular for passengers of high significance or those exposed to particular risks, such as drivers.
- Carry suitable medical and breakdown kits at all times and ensure staff are trained to use them, regularly.
- Routes should be varied if possible, despite the security presence on main roads. This is especially relevant in Beirut (see map 4).

- Restrict circle of knowledge of travel for security communications.
- Use vehicle trackers / check in with office during movement.
- Do not announce likely travel routes for high-risk projects and individuals on social media – especially when travelling along the Zahlé – Baalbek Highway and in the Bekaa / Baalbek Valley area.
- Take into account that increasing volatility will affect national staff, women and men in different ways.
- Train staff in de-escalation and negotiation tactics to deal with threatening crowd events.
- Ensure a caring and supportive environment within aid agencies. Train staff to identify and mention mental health concerns.
- Due to current ongoing power cuts alongside infrequent fuel supplies, ensure fuel reserves are maintained.

## CONTEXT: LEBANON'S CURRENT POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

Lebanon has been in a state of perpetual political crisis since before the 1975-1990 civil war. The situation deteriorated further after the catastrophic blast at the Port of Beirut in August 2020 which killed over 200 people and injured thousands more. The blast triggered unprecedented cross-sectarian and nationwide protests demanding the complete removal of the political dynasties that have ruled the country for decades.

Former colonial power France has led efforts to resolve Lebanon's most recent political crises, and Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian again visited Beirut on 06-07 May after Paris announced entry restrictions on Lebanese political figures who blocked efforts to find a solution to the political and economic crisis. Le Drian threatened more sanctions in a meeting with President Michel Aoun, parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri in the hope of preventing what he described as a "collective suicide" by the ruling political class. However, there is no sign that the vested interests on all sides of the religious divides are willing to compromise on their own demands for continued control, or to reduce their patronage and corruption, which would break the political deadlock and allow the formation of a new government. This, in turn, is a requirement to pass reforms that donors have demanded as conditions to release new financial aid.

Israel continues to regard Hezbollah as an existential threat to its own security. It maintains a covert (and occasionally overt) campaign of drone, air and maritime attacks on Hezbollah – and particularly suspected arms shipments from Hezbollah's main sponsor, Iran. The most recent example was the 24 April drone strike targeting an Iranian-owned tanker off Syria's Baniyas refinery, which was launched from inside Lebanese waters. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial also continues, and he has a history of launching attacks against external enemies (including Hezbollah) in order to distract the media and public during periods of domestic political pressure (see Predictions, below).

The political crisis is now at a stage where sectarian political factions, including Hezbollah, have little or no faith in the government. The crisis has impacted the economy, with factions such as Hezbollah, stockpiling food, fuel and other basic goods to provide for their communities in anticipation of the state's inability to do so and in the hope of shoring up their own support. The caretaker government has been forced to reduce the number of subsidised products from 300 goods to 100 and is reportedly considering introducing rationing.

Recent months have seen an increase in violent crime, particularly robberies and murders (see heat map on next page). Cuts have already resulted in fighting over goods at supermarkets and food distribution points. In one such incident in Tripoli, a member of the public was killed, and two others injured. Drug trafficking has also increased, with the result that Saudi Arabia banned the import of Lebanese agricultural produce last month after a massive seizure of the amphetamine Captagon hidden in a shipment of pomegranates - Saudi sources have plausibly accused Hezbollah of orchestrating this.

Power cuts have grown more frequent and longer in recent months and with parliament not yet approving a loan for fuel imports, countrywide electricity provision is likely to be severely limited in the coming weeks. Indeed, this week an electricity supplier threatened to stop its supplies unless the government addresses its debts, although it did not give a deadline. Shortages and high prices of fuel will also probably make the maintenance of private generators difficult in the event of prolonged blackouts.

Lebanon is in phase four of the COVID-19 pandemic, with community transmission widespread. A vaccination programme is proceeding slowly and the occupancy rate of the country's limited intensive care beds is extremely high, though not yet approaching 100%.

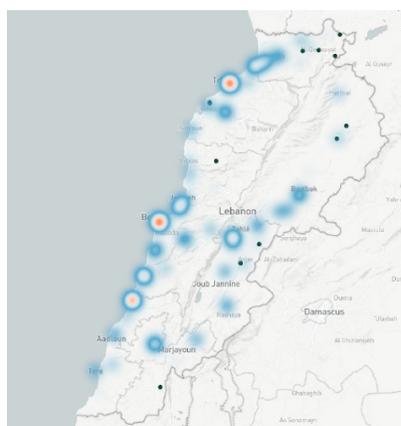
Heat maps showing the locations of violent incidents (left), incidents that have the potential to effect NGO operations (middle) and a focus on Beirut (right) from 01 January to 31 March 2021.<sup>3, 4</sup>

Map 1



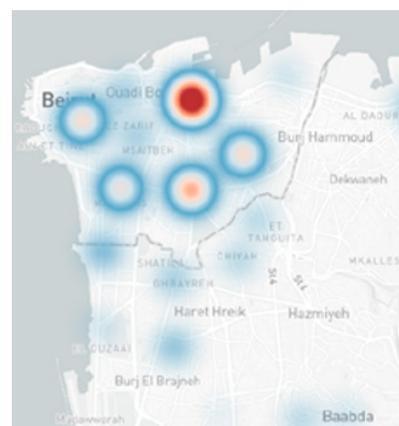
Map 1: incidents include burglaries, theft, robberies, car jacking, murder, disputes and fights, incidents involving small arms fire, raids by security forces, and violent protests.

Map 2



Map 2: incidents include protests which typically involve roadblocks, and incidents involving explosives (hand grenades, landmines, IED's, and unidentified explosives; shown by the green dots)

Map 3



Map 3: Beirut incidents include peaceful and violent protests, protests where security forces intervened, strikes, civil unrest, accidental explosions, disputes and fights, incidents involving small arms fire, and murders.

## TREND ANALYSIS

This trend analysis should be read alongside Insecurity Insight's report [Aid Security in Lebanon](#). Available data for 2021 (illustrated in the maps above) builds on concerns raised in the report over an increase in incidents between January to March – particularly protests. The report notes carjackings, robberies and theft as the main incidents experienced by aid organisations in 2020.

The maps above show the main threat to access and safety in the first three months of 2021. They highlight that crime remains a concern particularly in rural areas, including the Baalbek valley region.

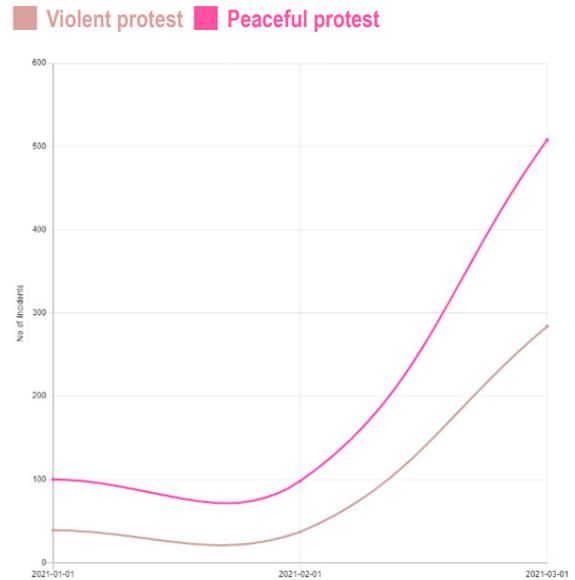
However, the most common incidents are protests: 1,066 were recorded in the first three months of 2021. Protests can hinder access and may put individuals at risk. In 2020, one aid worker was beaten by protesters. His ID papers and car key were taken but returned following negotiations, highlighting some of the specific risks to staff directly touched by protests.

Most protests are political and unlikely to target aid agencies. However, where protests focus on areas where aid agencies are active, such as food security, or health, there are potential risks that programmes could become targets, including through false allegations.

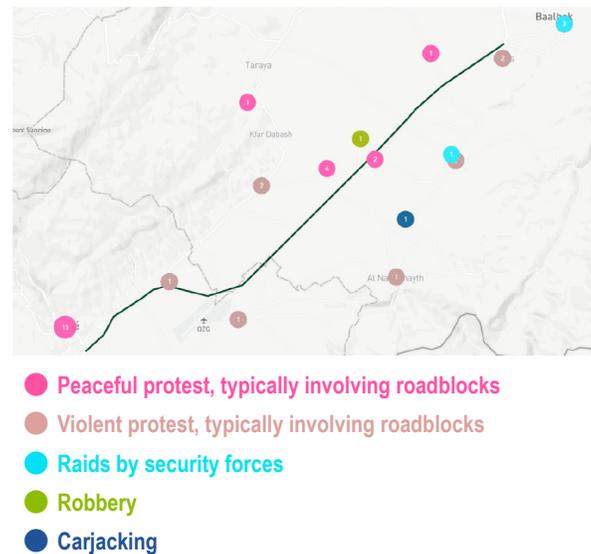
There are a number of broad threat trends that can be drawn from the maps and graph:

- The main overall riding threat to aid organisations in 2021 remains protests – both peaceful and violent, with 706 peaceful protests and 360 violent protests in the first three months of 2021 (chart 1). The heat maps show the majority of protests are in the three most populous cities – Tripoli, Beirut, and Sidon (Saida).
- Map 1 – violent incidents - shows the coast and the three main cities – Tripoli, Beirut and Sidon - as the focus. There are fewer reports from the Baalbek area, except for the town of Marjaayoun, in the south. Violent incidents reflect food insecurity with such events more common in urban areas.
- From Map 2 we can also see that the main suburban / rural area for protests remains the Zahlé and Baalbek valley with protests spread between the two, with the former holding the higher concentration of violent incidents including violent protests and small arms fire (see map 1).
- Map 2 also highlights that incidents likely to affect aid operations, particularly roadblocks (as part of protests), have occurred along the coast, and in the Zahlé and Baalbek Valley area. Map 2 further indicates that incidents involving explosives, such as landmine explosions, remain a concern in Northern Lebanon and along the Eastern border.
- Map 3 looks at Beirut. Most incidents are in “downtown Beirut”, Beirut Central District and Mar Elias Refugee Camp, all areas again of higher population density, and where some of the larger protests/ incidents have occurred.
- The cluster map updates the findings in Insecurity Insight’s analysis report Aid Security in Lebanon which said that NGOs remained most vulnerable to armed carjackings and robberies, with protests a third main concern. The cluster map focused on the Zahlé-Baalbek International Road - one of the main arterial roads to the Baalbek Valley, shows only one reported carjacking in this area in the first three months of 2021, and one robbery. However, it includes a protest at the beginning of February 2021, when a number of mayors, unions and other factions in Bekaa protested in Baalbek town over the number of crimes along the “International Road”.
- Insecurity Insight’s analysis also highlights the need for a person centred-approach to security risk management. In 2020, aid agencies experienced two incidents of self-harm by staff and volunteers reported sexual harassment from beneficiaries.

**Chart 1 showing the increase in protests in Lebanon, from 01 January to 31 March 2021**



**Cluster map showing the number of incidents affecting operational logistics along the Zahlé – Baalbek Highway in Lebanon, from 01 January to 31 March 2021.**



● Peaceful protest, typically involving roadblocks  
 ● Violent protest, typically involving roadblocks  
 ● Raids by security forces  
 ● Robbery  
 ● Carjacking

## PREDICTIONS

- The prospects of an all-out armed conflict on the scale of the 1975-1990 civil war are still low. Nonetheless, the collapse in the public's trust and faith in the ruling parties means that protests will continue, with the risk of violence by protesters, security forces and politically backed militias rising along with wider tensions.
- The easy availability of weapons and explosives because of Lebanon's own previous conflicts, as well as the Syrian civil war, further increases the risk of armed violence.
- Eight months of French-led international political pressure has so far failed to persuade the political elite to adopt a reform roadmap or form a new government (a condition for unlocking international aid). More sanctions from Paris and the wider European Union are all but certain, with US and Gulf States likely to follow, but this could still be months away.
- Israel will continue to target Iranian shipments of arms and other goods intended for Hezbollah. This will mainly take the form of airstrikes in Syria or offshore but the possibility of airstrikes (most likely against the main routes from the Syrian border – one of which includes the Zahlé – Baalbek Highway, see map above); even covert ground operations inside Lebanon cannot be ruled out.
- Media reporting suggests that the shift from the prosecution case against Netanyahu to that of the defence has reduced the pressure on him, reducing the risk of further military adventurism abroad intended to distract from his domestic woes.
- With no clear path out of the economic crisis, living standards and the safety and security environment are highly likely to worsen countrywide in the coming months. This will be exacerbated by any further lifting of state subsidies in the coming months.
- This is likely to result in low-level conflict over food and other essential goods, a rise in petty and violent crime and also an occasional escalation of personal disputes to involve firearms and even explosives. Anecdotal evidence from NGO workers already suggests that personal disputes are becoming more violent, because people are not going to the police and more civilians are carrying handguns. This has been cited as a particular issue in Tripoli in the far north (see heat maps above).
- Such incidents are most likely in more deprived areas such as Tripoli, Akkar Governorate, the Bekaa Valley, parts of southern Beirut and the more remote areas in the south of the country for example Marjaayoun town (see general heat map and map 1). It is also likely to see a rise in opportunistic crime incidents - such as car-jackings (see map 4)
- The increasing unrest and volatility in Lebanon will impact the well-being of national staff beyond their professional duties.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

- Thursday, May 15: Eid al-Fitr – the end of Ramadan.
- Tuesday, May 25: Resistance and Liberation Day which commemorates the end of Israel's 22-year military occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000.
- Tuesday, July 20: Eid al-Adha, the 'Fest of Sacrifice' which honours the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God.
- Tuesday, August 10: Hijri New Year – Islamic New Year.

This incident analysis is part of Vigil InSight, a joint initiative by HawkSight, DHC, Gunn and Insecurity Insight. It is published by Insecurity Insight. Insecurity Insight. 2021. 'Lebanon: Vigil InSight Situation Report, 13 May 2021.' Switzerland: Insecurity Insight.

<sup>1</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database [attribution policy](#). Accessed 28 April 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Insecurity Insight collated data from multiple public sources and confidential contributions from aid agencies. The data may differ from other sources. The data is part of the Aid in Danger project. For more information on Insecurity Insight visit our [website](#) or [subscribe](#) for updates.

<sup>3</sup> These maps are based on the ACLED (Armed Conflict and Location & Event Project) data set and data from Insecurity Insight. Insecurity. ACLED data set was accessed on 28 April 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Locations for some of the incidents are approximate.