

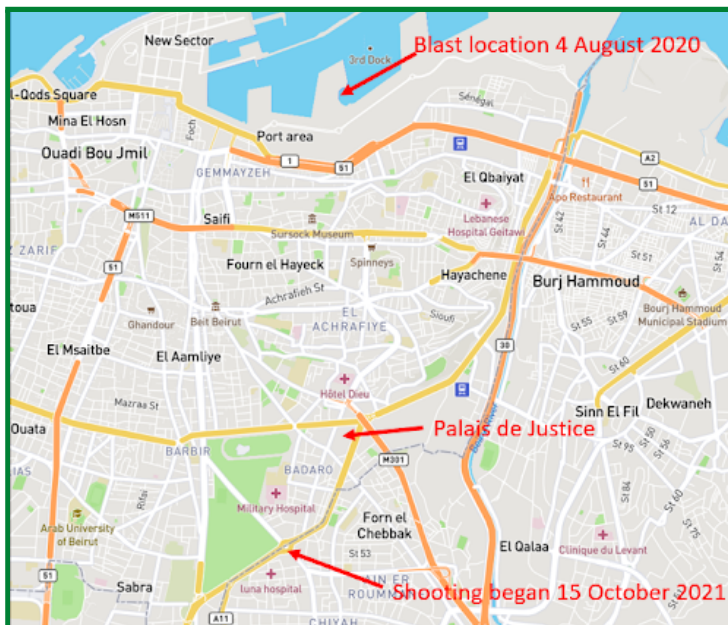
Lebanon

Flash Analysis and Prediction
15 October 2021



Gunfire in central Beirut as Hezbollah and its allies try to stall port blast investigation

At least six people were killed yesterday afternoon in Beirut in the worst civil violence to hit the Lebanese capital since 2008. Gunfire targeted a demonstration called by Shia militia Hezbollah and their allies, Amal, to demand the removal of the judge investigating the explosion that destroyed the city's port last August, killing 219 people.



The protest began outside the Palace of Justice – Lebanon's main court building – with the demonstrators claiming that the investigation had become politicised and demanding the removal of Judge Tarek Bitar.

The protesters were targeted as they reached a roundabout in the city's central Tayouneh-Badaro area – one of the frontlines during the 1975-90 Civil War.

Militia members armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers exchanged sporadic fire for several hours before the Army moved in to restore calm.



Analysis

Earlier in the day, a court had dismissed a legal complaint brought by two former Government Ministers and Amal MPs - Ali Hassan Khalil and Ghazi Zaiter - who Judge Bitar had sought to question on suspicion of negligence in connection with the port explosion. The pair, who deny any wrongdoing, accused the judge of bias and this ruling was undoubtedly the trigger for the protest. Hezbollah and Amal accused the Christian Lebanese Forces party of being behind the attack on the protesters. Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea condemned the violence and appealed for calm. Nonetheless, the claim that his men were involved is credible given the widespread anger among the families of the port blast victims at Hezbollah's obstruction of moves to hold anyone accountable for the disaster and support for Judge Bitar's attempts to do so.



Prediction

- The port blast enquiry and shootings are part of a wider political crisis with Hezbollah and its allies on one side and March 14 Alliance on the other. The mismanagement and corruption has led to crippling inflation, shortages of food, fuel and medical supplies and power outages. The two sides inability to agree on a new government – or investigate the port blast – has led to international bodies halting all but the most vital financial aid in the hope of forcing a compromise. This has not happened despite over fourteen months of pressure and there is still no sign that Hezbollah will back down and agree to a new representative government or independent judicial investigation.

- Both the Army and Hezbollah's Iranian backers have provided fuel for power plants in recent days- However, shortages and power outages will undoubtedly continue, further fuelling public anger and more mass demonstrations. The risk that Hezbollah/Amal supporters may target such demonstrations has increased **SIGNIFICANTLY** as a result of yesterday's violence.
- The complaint brought by Ali Hassan Khalil and Ghazi Zaiter has led the port blast probe to be suspended for the second time in three weeks. Further delays in the investigation, or the removal of key figures (as Hezbollah demands) are therefore also **LIKELY** to be the trigger for more communal violence.



Mitigation

- Those operating in Beirut need to understand local complexities and ensure their team is composed in a manner that signals neutrality and are able to negotiate intense situations.
- Continue to discuss with local staff concerns over the current political and humanitarian situation.
- Neutral communication with all forms of Armed Groups – including state actors, and non-state actors as well as local political and community leaders.
- Have alternative routes planned for known areas of protests.

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