

On the Brink in Ras Beirut: An Ethnography of Livelihood Struggles Amid Economic and Political Discord

Lives and Livelihoods in
Turbulent Times
Working Paper Series (Vol. 2)

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Edited with an introduction by
Nikolay Mintchev,
Mayssa Jallad,
and Mariam Daher

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Suggested citation:
Alawieh, Z. 2022. *On the Brink in Ras Beirut:
An Ethnography of Livelihood Struggles Amid
Economic and Political Discord*. London: Institute for
Global Prosperity.

Layout and design: David Heymann

ISBN: 978-1-913041-35-9



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Lives and Livelihoods in Turbulent Times

By Nikolay Mintchev, Mayssa Jallad and Mariam Daher

INTRODUCTION

Lives and Livelihoods in Turbulent Times is a working paper series aiming to understand the changing nature of livelihoods in Lebanon today. The initial catalyst for the series was a set of ethnographic observations carried out by three researchers – Rahaf Zaher, Zainab Alawieh and Grace Abi Faraj – exploring the ways in which the livelihoods of Ras Beirut residents were changing at a time of crisis. People in Lebanon have long experienced protracted challenges in multiple domains, from electricity and water provision, to large scale displacement and political volatility. Since 2020, however, Lebanon has seen rapid economic deterioration, as well as a number of other crises and tragedies: the devastating explosion at the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020; the Covid-19 pandemic and its recurrent lockdowns and curfews; over a year of political paralysis in which the country was run by a caretaker government; a massive inflation that wiped out over 90% of the Lebanese Lira's value and led to an exorbitant increase in the pricing of goods; a fuel crisis leading to long queues, sometimes requiring people to wait for a full day at gas stations or purchase black-market gasoline at extortionate prices; and an ongoing electricity crisis where grid electricity is available for as little as an hour per day.

The papers in this series aim to formulate an account of how this multi-faceted crisis is experienced by people in Lebanon. The aim of the case studies and analyses is to develop a close understanding of what happens to people's livelihoods, as well as their lives more broadly, in such dire economic circumstances. For example, in the ethnographic work by Zaher, Alawieh and Abi Faraj, the conversations and observations that the authors write about began as conversations about livelihoods, but often ended up revealing personal struggles and aspirations, as well as deeply felt anxieties, grief and anger.

The expressions of the intimate emotions and experiences that some of the case studies depict so vividly should serve as a reminder that a livelihood does not just sustain oneself economically, but

also emotionally and socially, and in some ways also politically; the security and adequacy of a person's livelihood affects every aspect of their existence, from the things they think about on a daily basis, to the relationships they establish with others, the trust they build in their government, and the plans they make for their futures and the futures of their children. This has two important implications for how we understand the impact of the current crisis on people's lives: first, there is the well-known fact that the costs of poverty and livelihood insecurity are tremendous, extending well beyond matters of money; second, there is the crucial point that recovering from the damage done by the deterioration or loss of livelihoods requires the mobilisation of multiple and diverse strategies thanks to which people can make ends meet. In fact, the case studies presented in this volume and others give readers a picture of both the costs of livelihood loss/insecurity and the strategies that people use to deal with poverty.

The research carried out in the three volumes by Zaher, Alawieh and Abi Faraj was part of a bigger study on livelihoods in Lebanon. The three researchers were part of a team of citizen social scientists who conducted 'discreet choice experiment' (DCE) and livelihoods surveys with business owners and workers in Ras Beirut in order to understand the factors that guide the decision-making processes of providing and seeking employment (for more details on the meaning and practice of citizen social science, see Jallad et al. 2021). Quantitative surveys such as DCEs, however, are limited in the kind of data they produce, leaving out potentially valuable information about both the context of the survey – namely, the here-and-now of the encounter between researcher and respondent – and the broader context of people's lives that determines the ways in which they answer the survey questions.

In response to this challenge, Zaher, Alawieh and Abi Faraj embarked on a further research initiative to supplement the quantitative findings



of the DCE surveys with qualitative data about the strategies that people develop in order to obtain and distribute essential resources in times of exceptional economic hardship. This qualitative study consisted of two parts. The first part was a programme of ethnographic observations of the DCE/livelihoods surveys themselves. This was modelled on previous methodological work at the RELIEF Centre in which we argued for the value of ethnographically observing the social and cultural dynamics that play out in the process of quantitative data collection (Jallad and Mintchev 2019, Shourbaji 2020). Building on this recent work, the case studies began with observations and descriptions of the contexts in which the DCE/livelihoods surveys took place, and the ways in which the interactions during the surveys unfolded. These were descriptions of what happens in the field when researchers approach potential respondents and ask them if they would like to participate in a study about livelihoods, and what the process of interviewing someone looks like once the survey is underway. The responses were diverse, as one would imagine. They ranged from hostility and dismissal to kindness and willingness to engage, but in all cases the ethnography of the process showed a human side of research that is usually lost in the numbers and figures of quantitative research.

During the second phase of the study, two of us (Jallad and Mintchev) worked together with the researchers and supported them in designing a set of bespoke questions and plans for continuing the engagement with each of the respondents in the original ethnographic observations. This helped the team to prepare for the second phase of qualitative data collection, which consisted of follow-up interviews in which Zaher, Alawieh and Abi Faraj returned to their interlocutors and continued the conversation by asking a number of questions about social and economic life in the context of the current crisis.

The responses to these follow-up interviews were very rich and informative, and they also became more emotionally intense as time passed and the crisis unfolded. They showed just how much time, energy, and social and emotional work goes into supporting oneself and others in the community when people's livelihoods are under such strenuous pressure. Ras Beirut residents told stories about reliance on remittances from friends and family members abroad, strengthening connections with neighbours and sharing food and other necessities with them, working multiple jobs over long hours,

relying on charity, and cutting expenditures down to a bare minimum, among other things. Interviews with employers also revealed various strategies of coping. One owner explained how he tried his best to keep his business open for the sake of the staff who work for him. Another business owner talked about his landlord's willingness to look the other way when it was impossible to pay the rent of the shop. These collective and individual strategies, however, could only go so far in mitigating the damaging impact of the crisis. In fact, the case studies also depict anxiety, anger, frustration and exhaustion, which inevitably results from the widespread lack of access to basic necessities. Shortages of essential medications mean that people have to spend hours on end searching for them in pharmacies across the city and even across the country, while electricity blackouts and fuel shortages create anxiety about buying certain foods, lest they were not cooked or refrigerated properly and could potentially cause food poisoning. And while it is true that some people are better off than others, especially if they have access to jobs that pay in foreign currency, the sense of insecurity, decline, and anxiety about the future appears to be ubiquitous across the board, even among educated professionals in traditionally well-paid and prestigious jobs.

In any case, the details of how different people in Ras Beirut experience this crisis is something that readers can learn about in the working papers and so we will not expand on this topic in this introductory note. A final point that we would like to raise, however, is that this work has important value not just because it documents people's experiences in this uniquely challenging historical moment, but also because it highlights the enormous potential of communities to drive recovery as a 'bottom up' process. What the case studies show very vividly is that people's economic lives are intricately linked with their social, emotional, and political lives. Exchanges of money, goods and services are constantly taking place within informal social networks both at home and abroad. The resources that people have are either used to obtain basic essentials such as food, medication, care, and electricity, or shared with others in the community who are in need of support. This economy of belonging and sharing, whereby people support one another in acquiring basic necessities shows that 'horizontal' distributions between relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues and fellow residents of the same neighbourhood, play a crucial role in helping people to get by at a time when economic and political elites are widely seen as the instigators of the crisis and viewed with



deep suspicion. Our view is that these ‘horizontal’ networks between relatives, neighbours and so forth are crucial not only for the present moment but also for future recovery efforts of all sizes and scales. Recovery must emphasise investment in livelihoods, infrastructures and services that directly benefit the people and communities who are struggling to make ends meet, and who are self-organising to support one another through the exchange of various kinds of resources. Overlooking this fact risks alienating and excluding the majority of the public, thereby returning to business as usual at best, and a deepening of the current crisis at worst. Neither of these options is compatible with a better future, and neither is likely to alleviate the disillusionment and discontent that much of the material in this working paper series represent so vividly.

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By Zainab Alawieh

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a study of how people in Ras Beirut are coping at a time of severe economic crisis. During my research, which took place between April and September 2021, I roamed around different neighbourhoods within the Ras Beirut area – Hamra, Ain Tineh, Raouche and Qouraitem – and conducted more than 40 surveys with residents and business owners, discussing how their livelihoods were affected by the economic collapse and high unemployment that Lebanon is going through.

The economic crisis was not the only crisis to take place in the country. In fact, people in Lebanon had to deal with the consequences of a hatrnick of disasters that struck the country during the past couple of years: the economic crisis, the Covid pandemic, the Beirut Port Blast and a political deadlock. Everyone was furious, upset or anxious and that's a fact that anyone residing in Lebanon during this period can attest to. Prior to beginning my research, I could already anticipate the kind of situations I would encounter, and the kinds of stories I would hear; as a Lebanese who had witnessed what the country had gone through, I braced myself to hear stories about devastating personal situations and circumstances. I expected that the livelihoods of Ras Beirut's residents and employers would be heavily affected by the economic shock, yet I didn't imagine that prominent businesses in Hamra, Beirut's cultural epicentre, would be on the brink of collapse. Throughout my research, I interviewed people of various age groups, occupations, and social backgrounds and I heard stories about a range of different experiences.

Yet, despite all the differences between people, many of the stories that were recounted to me seemed to have one common feature, which was an expression of disillusionment with a ruling political class that was widely blamed for the

disastrous situation. In the case studies below, I aim to bring attention to some of the struggles of Ras Beirut through the stories of its residents and businessowners.



CHAPTER 1

Riad: A Business Owner May and September 2021

If you really want to know how bad the crisis in Lebanon is, then I suggest you visit Hamra street. “Beirut’s Champs Elysées,” as it was called back in the “golden years”, between the 1960s and 1970s, is a famous commercial district located in Beirut, known for its boutiques, thronging cafes and restaurants. Before the economic crisis, you wouldn’t be able to walk in that bustling street at your own pace as you would have bumped into other people, especially on weekends. However, all of this has changed now; the streets are no longer crowded as they used to be, half the stores are shuttered, and you could feel the agony of a collapsed district creeping up on you. No, this isn’t an exaggeration or a dramatized description. As I was walking around Hamra, I could literally see it in merchants’ disappointed faces and I could sense it in residents’ depressed eyes. You can feel that Beirut is aching and it isn’t okay. You just wouldn’t believe that this street was once Beirut’s commercial artery.

Riad¹ is a business owner in Ras Beirut who sells fake luxury bags. He is a single man in his early thirties who is striving to keep his family’s business going – a business that his grandfather had started back in the 80’s – after many of the neighbouring stores on the same street had shuttered.

جدي بلش هيدا المحل من الصفر. هيدا
المحل هوي نجاح وتعب وعرق جبين سنين.
مرق على هالمحل حروب وأزمات وما سكر.
/ My grandfather started this
business from zero. This store is
my grandfather’s success, effort
and years of hard work. It has
witnessed wars and turbulence
before, but it was never shut.”

To be honest, I was thinking to myself: the economic crisis has struck so hard, forcing essential businesses to shut down, so why would a fake luxury bags retailer risk investing money and resources to keep his business open in time of such crisis? I realized that this shop was more than just a business to Riad, it had a valuable emotional significance to his family, and for that reason he would not give up on it that easily.

The store was spacious and well-designed, with an elegant window display that would normally attract shoppers. However, looking at the stacked shelves, one could tell that it had been quite a few days since any customer had stepped into the store. When I asked Riad about the demand for bags in general, he said that the business used to make \$2000 per day before the crisis and that he used to ship bags to be sold abroad twice per month. However, the shelves were stacked now as people weren’t shopping like they used to.

Riad explained that people’s priorities had now shifted, and the goods he sold had now become luxurious to them:

“اللي قادرة تدفع \$50 حق جزدان صارت بتفضل
تحطن ع أشياء أساسية مثل الأكل أو الدواء، أو تساعد
جاريتها أو قرابتها..
/ if a lady has access
to fresh dollars, she’d rather pay
\$50 for essentials like food and
medicine, or even help a neighbour
or a family member, instead of
buying a bag”

This meant that there were very few customers who still visited his store from time to time. It is important to note that the minimum wage in Lebanon before the crisis was 675,000L.L., which was equal to \$450. Due to the currency collapse, at the time of this ethnographic account (September 2021), the minimum wage per month was worth around \$35, and perhaps even less, depending on the black-market rate which changes hourly. Yes, *the exchange rate of the Lebanese Lira against the US Dollar varies each hour in the black market.*

Riad explained that back in 2019 he had two employees who helped him serve the customers as he wasn’t able to manage his crowded store alone. He mentioned that during the holiday season, his father would also join him for additional support in the store. Now, the situation was much different, and Riad had barely enough work for himself, let alone for other employees:

¹All names of people in this paper have changed.

هلاً ما عندي موظفين لأن أنا شخصياً عم كيش / I don't have any employees now because I barely do anything myself in the store, I'm 'chasing flies'"

He also said that the obstacles he faced while running his business were not just about selling his stock. He had thought of adding other products to the store to keep the business running but the issue was that he could no longer buy stock from China due to the capital control measures implemented by the ruling class. Riad just could not risk wasting the fresh dollars he still had to invest in a city that was about to completely collapse. Riad had considered switching up his retail business to something in higher demand, such as food retail (the sector least affected by the economic collapse). He explained, however, that he wanted to be patient in making such a decision, just to make sure that a switch would be beneficial to him in the current situation.

I wanted to learn more about how people made ends meet in the difficult circumstances of this economic crisis, so I asked Riad about the ways in which people were helping each other in Ras Beirut to make life easier. "Basically, everyone is struggling," he said, "but some are doing better than others. Those who are financially stable are helping the less privileged by donating money." One remarkable thing about Riad was that he answered my questions before I even asked them, before I had finished expressing them. It seemed to me that this was an expression of built-up frustration, disillusionment, and even anger that was growing day after day. As he was speaking, I could sense that he was releasing all the pent-up feelings he had regarding the situation. He jumped from topic to topic with different tones, and his anger grew bigger when he reached the topic of medications: "I don't think that money can help in all cases. Some people have money but they can't find what they need in the market to purchase it." Riad said that his father took fifteen different kinds of medication, and the shortage of medicines was really worrying him. As he explained to me about the possibility of his father being deprived of his essential medications, his face twisted with an expression of frustration and anger.

The hardship that people were facing also had political implications. Riad mentioned that people in his family previously supported one of the political parties in Lebanon, but that political parties meant

nothing to them now: "we thought that they were real leaders defending my sect and protecting us, whereas my people are struggling to find bread now." Riad mentioned how disappointed he was that some acquaintances are accepting food boxes, aids and gasoline vouchers from a certain political party after all we've been through.

I continued the conversation by asking what keeps people going in his opinion. Riad said that people are in survival mode. Those who were financially stable were helping others by donating money. Some expats were also sending money and medications when possible. He then elaborated on the difficulty of life in Lebanon and the mass exodus that the country was going through: "People used to have a clear plan for the next 6 months, now they just live day by day without thinking about the big picture of life, because they have no choice but to do so. Many of my friends have left the country, and those who couldn't are stuck here. I think we have no choice but to keep going, hoping things would get better after the formation of the government." As for him, he explained that the bond with his family holds him back from leaving the country. He said that he has changed his lifestyle as he spends money more mindfully now and he is managing to be fine, for now.

CHAPTER 2

Haleeme: A Domestic Cleaner June and August 2021

The account that follows presents the most emotionally charged interview that I conducted throughout my fieldwork. The interview was with Haleeme, a Lebanese woman in her early fifties, who worked as a janitor and lived in Ras Beirut with her son, who was in his twenties.

I approached Haleeme's house and knocked on the door. I remember very vividly that I only made a couple of knocks, and also that they were calm knocks. Despite this, Haleeme opened the door violently, with an angry face. After introducing myself and trying to calm her down, she apologized for the way she welcomed me, explaining that she had just been through a really bad day. She had spent five hours of her day searching for her medications in different pharmacies. Like many Lebanese people of her age, Haleeme suffered from high blood pressure and diabetes. That day was her hunting-for-medicine day, but she couldn't find any of the medications she needed in the pharmacies. Haleeme said that it wasn't just the medicine hunting that had angered her:

“الواحد مش ناقصو. عم نبرم ع أدوية بهالشوب
سكتنا ورضينا، بس إقعد ساعات بالعجقة
/ what بسبب ولاد عم يلعبوا بالطريق؟؟
we're already going through is
enough. Going from pharmacy
to pharmacy, searching for my
medicine in such hot weather, I
try to swallow it and not complain,
but getting stuck in traffic because
of kids messing up in the road??
That's not acceptable!”

What had particularly infuriated her was that some youth had blocked the road with tires. And in addition to this, there were many other stress factors: being unable to find medicines, worries about gasoline shortage, and the insecurity on the roads. All of this, she said, had led to her aggravated attitude and the poor mood for which she apologised.

Haleeme and her son struggled financially. Their monthly income was around 1,000,000 L.L., which,

at the time of the interview, was equivalent to only 100\$. Haleeme explained that she had no medical insurance, so a substantial part of their income was spent on medication. She said that she felt particularly sorry for her son because his days were passing and all he was doing was buying medicine and food. Like all mothers, she wanted to offer him a good education and watch him grow as a man who can flourish and contribute to society. In the current crisis, however, the odds were stacked against them. Haleeme's husband had passed away a few years ago, so she had no choice but to work as a cleaner who maintains the tidiness of a building in Ras Beirut, because they couldn't afford house rental otherwise. She's responsible for cleaning the stairs and the yard, in addition to cleaning a couple of houses in the building itself on weekly basis, upon request, whereas her son handles other chores in the building. In a normal “life”, she said, people work hard when they are younger and then enjoy their retirement; in Lebanon, however, one's worries grew bigger with age. This was true, I thought, as Lebanon's government does not offer Old Age Security.

About a month after this interview, I visited Haleeme's house once again. My second encounter with her was much better, as we had already broken the ice the first time around. Haleeme welcomed me with a warm voice and asked me to come in. What got my attention on that day, was that there were three boxes on the floor of the living room. Before I even asked about them, Haleeme proclaimed

“الحمد لله، الله ما يقطع حدا.”
/ Thank God! He forgets no one.”

She explained that a couple of weeks after my first visit, a Lebanese youth who works for an NGO, had visited her and had asked her to take a survey. The week after, she was sent a box containing basic food items such as rice, sugar, lentils, pasta, milk, food cans and even some fruits and vegetables. She received a box once every two or three weeks. This time around, Haleeme seemed less worried than during our first meeting, and it was very likely that the food support she was now receiving was one of the reasons for the change.



I don't quite know how to explain this, but our conversation felt like two friends sitting together after not seeing each other in a while, where one had good news and wanted to share it excitedly with the other. In her excitement, Haleeme didn't even give me a chance to ask her about anything; she told me everything all at once! She shared that she and her son were trying to save some money from their food budget now. They were eating more beans and rice, and less meat and chicken compared to before the crisis, but she was really content nevertheless.

Haleeme also mentioned that her employer had raised her salary to 2,000,000 L.L and the residents of the building also offered her and her son financial support from time to time – sometimes 50,000 L.L, sometimes 100,000 L.L. As for her medication, one of the residents in the building was taking care of that for her. She said that he worked in the medical field. The reason that she seemed so relieved, I thought, was that she didn't have to worry about her basic needs anymore. I couldn't help but think to myself how covering basic needs has now become an achievement in my home country...

CHAPTER 3

Nabeel: A Hotel Owner in Ain El Tineh April and September 2021

In a busy street close to Raouche, there stands a small three-stars hotel. Nabeel, one of the owners of the hotel, is a Lebanese man in his early forties. Nabeel co-owns the hotel with two other individuals, and this is his only source of income. Lebanon's economic crisis has taken a huge toll on the hospitality sector, severely affecting small business owners. "The rooms are clean and ready to welcome tourists, yet our hotel occupancy is plummeting," said Nabeel. Due to the insecurity in the country, the number of tourists had decreased significantly during the winter and spring seasons. Nabeel explained that at the moment of the interview, he had only one room rented, and the occupants were Iraqis who had come to Lebanon due to a medical emergency. The price for a one night stay at his hotel was 120,000 L.L., which, given the high inflation rate amounted to just \$12. At the end of the month, after splitting the profits, Nabeel said that he could barely cover his essential needs. There were five employees serving the guests in the hotel, but due to the nearly null hotel occupancy, he had to downsize his team of employees to just two. Looking around the hotel, it was obvious that it needed some maintenance, something that was later confirmed by Nabeel himself. The problem, however, was that the maintenance service had to be paid in dollars, and Nabeel was unable to afford that. The government, he explained, was not offering any compensation for the business owners in the hospitality sector. They just wanted businesses to pay their taxes.

Nabeel later said that during the summer months, many expats chose to spend their vacation in Lebanon, taking advantage of the currency devaluation. He was delighted that the expats were checking in at his hotel, but he was also worried that the electricity and fuel crisis were making it difficult for him to provide a good service and keep his customers satisfied.

قلنا وقتها خي انفرجت! بس يا فرحة ما تمّت! أي
مغترب رح يقبل ينام بأوتيل ويفيق بنص الليل عم
يختنق من الشوب بآب؟ / I said to myself,
'Phew! It's getting better!' But it
didn't last for so long! Why would

**an expat want to sleep in a hotel
where he'd wake up soaked in
sweat in August?"**

Nabeel was referring to the fact that owners of private generators, which used to provide electricity backups during daily power outages, weren't able to secure fuel to keep up with the 23 hour outage building up since the crisis, and therefore cut off their service for longer periods of time. This meant that it was impossible to keep the air conditioning on when it was most needed in the hottest months of the year. Worse yet, there was no electricity for lighting and Beirut was dark most nights. Generator fuel was difficult to obtain, and when available, it was sold at extortionate prices: "I can't afford to buy fuel from the black market for my generator, that's ten times the cost of one room."

Nabeel also explained that the economic crisis had taken a toll on the tourist sector and that he and his business partners were thinking about selling the hotel eventually if they got a good offer. His salary barely covered the school tuition for his children. In a country where he couldn't envisage a decent future, Nabeel told me that he had gone for a visit to Dubai to try to start a new business with the hopes that his family would join him there. He added that he felt stuck because he couldn't do anything in his own country. The ruling class, he explained, had forced him to start from zero, although he was now in his forties. This was a widely shared predicament, not only his personal experience; all hotels in Beirut were suffering, not just his. The only possible exception, he said, were "the chalets and hotels situated away from the city, where the weather is relatively cold and surrounded by nature. [They] might be doing much better than us."

A few weeks later, I visited Nabeel again. This time he said that he wasn't going to sell his share of this business for now, but he was going to move to Dubai along with his family. He was able to secure a job in real estate there and he had been going back and forth setting up everything before his family joined him there. The way he explained his decision made it clear that the situation in Lebanon was not sustainable for him and his family: "The situation is catastrophic. I just can't stay here with



two kids. It's impossible for us." Nabeel explained that the people in charge of the country must come up with a rescue plan immediately. He might have landed an opportunity abroad, but what about the others? he exclaimed:

“ في عيل وموظفين بدا تعيش! / There are employees who have families to feed!”

At this point in our conversation, Nabeel started to seem concerned. He said that leaving the country wasn't an easy decision, but it was the only way out of the financial difficulties he is facing, and the only way to build a promising future for his children. As for the hotel, there was no clear plan yet about what to do with the property. For the time being, all three of the co-owners were able to find another source of income abroad so a decision about the future of the hotel was temporarily on hold.



CHAPTER 4

Nariman: Stay-At-Home Housekeeper/ Engineer in Raouche April and August 2021

After approaching a number of different residential buildings in the Raouche area, I began to realise that the reaction of residents towards me could be quite distant and cold: some of them opened the door and nicely refused to participate, but others shut the door closed and asked me to immediately leave the building, even though I presented my ID card and offered the project's brochure. One time, after a rejection from a resident, I decided to investigate the reasons for this response and so I asked a janitor I encountered in the building. The janitor explained that the residents had recently become alarmed and scared, and this was particularly the case after an attempted armed robbery had occurred the previous week. This meant that I would often go for long stretches of time without finding anyone to agree to be interviewed.

Soon after my encounter with the janitor, however, I was able to secure an interview with a woman in one of the nearby buildings. After introducing myself via the building intercom, Mrs. Nariman asked about the duration of the survey, as she was busy cleaning up her apartment and did not have much time. I thought to myself: "This a sentence that you don't often hear in such a prestigious neighbourhood in the heart of Beirut." People living in such apartments usually hired cleaners or had live-in domestic workers to do their cleaning. After Mrs. Nariman agreed to participate, I went up the building stairs until I reached her apartment. Mrs. Nariman opened the door with a smiley face and a very welcoming attitude. She apologized for the mess and asked me to come in. As part of the Covid precautions that we had adopted for our research, I asked her to conduct the interview by the door. Mrs. Nariman mentioned that this is the first year that she does the house chores by herself after her domestic worker left the country due to the financial crisis and currency collapse. She stressed that none of her neighbours had renewed their contracts with their foreign domestic workers, not even her neighbour who formerly held a senior government position. Mrs. Nariman implied that the economic situation didn't spare anyone in her circle; it had affected all residents, even former government personnel, forcing them to change their life styles.

Mrs. Nariman was a Lebanese woman in her forties who had gone from a successful engineer to a stay-at-home mom. She shared her story with me in an interview that lasted around forty minutes. She lived with her children and husband in a spacious apartment that was nicely located on a quiet street, just a few meters away from the Mediterranean seafront promenade. The flow of her words as she told her story was a lot more than just participation in a local research project; for her, it was a chance to pour her heart out. Mrs. Nariman explained that she was one of the Lebanese depositors who lost years of work after the Central Bank imposed an unofficial capital control in November 2019. She now lived off her husband's modest income, in addition to the monthly cash she was allowed to retrieve from the bank, which barely covered her basic needs.

Mrs. Nariman used to work as an engineer, but she hadn't signed any contract for quite some time now. She had been continuously applying for different jobs, but hadn't heard from anyone yet, despite her years of experience in the field. Mrs. Nariman had a viewpoint on unemployment that many Raouche and Ras Beirut residents shared,

**إذا ما عندك واسطة لا الخبرة ولا الشهادة بظعميك
خبز / Your years of experience and
certificates have no value if you
don't have wasta (connections)."**

She mentioned that she had passed by the Order of Engineers recently to check up on some of her colleagues that worked there. What she saw there was not acceptable to her: fresh graduates were assigned to positions that required years of experience simply because they were favoured for their political affiliation. Her facial expressions while narrating this incident suggested that she was struggling not only financially but also mentally – her eyes teared up as she began to describe how diminished her sense of achievement and accomplishment in life had become. The process of job seeking was very challenging for her and she thought that her years of experience had now gone to waste. Mrs. Nariman confirmed that she was experiencing depression and anxiety amidst



the unstable situation that we were living in. One thing that she was happy about, however, was the medical insurance she was offered at an affordable price by the syndicate, and she was thankful that this was something that she didn't have to worry about like other people.

Mrs. Nariman expressed her worry about her children's future in Lebanon. She had considered emigrating, but she felt stuck and conflicted. On the one hand, she did not want to leave behind her family and friends, nor did she want to change her whole life by moving to another country and starting anew. She also felt that Lebanon could offer good prospects and opportunities for her children. On the other hand, Mrs. Nariman brought up the incident of robbery that had recently occurred in the area, expressing her fears and concerns over the instability in Lebanon in terms of politics, security, education, and the economy, among other things. And she wasn't the only resident in Raouche who was concerned about the situation – her worries and fears were widely spread among residents and frequently talked about as if everyone had memorized the same exact words. Hearing people recount the same narrative, I even thought to myself “all people are struggling, all people are drinking from the same bitter cup.”

When I asked Mrs. Nariman about the things that kept her going in these difficult times, she replied that her family was her pressure point; she was a dedicated mother who sought the best for her children. This also came up when I asked her what kinds of initiatives and projects, she thought might help people in Lebanon right now. She stood quiet for a bit while thinking about the questions, and then she said:

الأكل والشرب بيتدبر ما حدا بيموت من الجوع،
 ... / As a parent,
 what worries me the most is the
 educational system in Lebanon.
 Food and drink aren't an issue.
 We won't die starving. I'm
 concerned about the education of
 our kids.”

It must be noted that the educational system in Lebanon was, and still is, on the brink of collapse. Mrs. Nariman specified how the pandemic and the wave of migration out of Lebanon added to the pressure:

“The previous academic year was affected by coronavirus and its complications, so students weren't able to receive high quality education with the unstable internet connection in Lebanon. Many of my children's professional teachers have left the country seeking better opportunities, I suppose. We lost teachers with years of experience! And we don't know when we might receive emails from schools saying they're going to shut their doors all of a sudden because of electricity blackouts or due to the fuel shortage!”

Then Mrs. Nariman returned to my original question:

“You asked me about a plan or project that might help. Honestly, there's no answer to this question. It's as if you're asking me for a band aid for a heavily wounded body. The only solution is either emigration or complete change of government. FROM THE ROOTS. We are just sick of band aids.”

She insisted that there must be a rescue plan for the educational system – she didn't know who could implement it or how it could be done, but she knew that it was a necessity.



CHAPTER 5

Nahla: A University Instructor and Freelancer May and August 2021

Nahla was a Lebanese university instructor in her late thirties who lived with her husband, children and maid in a spacious apartment, located in a prestigious neighbourhood in Ras Beirut. Nahla delivered lectures at two different universities and also worked as a freelancer sometimes. She held two degrees, which added value to her educational background, and would, in normal cases, offer her family a decent livelihood. With such qualifications and experience, this was not a person who should normally be worried about livelihood security. However, Nahla explained that her family was suffering like everyone else:

بعلم بجامعتين ... ما بحب بين نقاعة. الشغل /
والتعب منيح ومطلوب بس مش لما يكون بالهوا.
I work in two universities and as a freelancer. I don't want to sound like a cry baby. I mean, hard work is really good but not when it doesn't pay off.

Nahla was a calm person; she showed no signs of rage or anger. Instead, she was concerned and worried. Her tone of voice and body language said it all. She told me that she and her husband had been trying so hard not to discuss the current situation in her house. They thought that their children were already stressed enough by the pandemic, so they would rather spare them from talk about the country's economic and political situation. She said that on some days, when she feels that she's about to burst into tears, she goes to her friend's house to let it all out and then comes back home wearing a smile. All the things that were happening were just too much for her.

Nahla drew a sharp contrast between her past lifestyle and the way she and her family were living in the present: "We used to travel to a new country yearly with the kids, but now that's impossible. I think that the kids aren't comfortable with the change in our lifestyle." As a university instructor, she said that she wouldn't trade her children's education for anything. Although the family was struggling to pay for their tuition, Nahla was committed to her

children's schooling. This, she explained, was part of a bigger commitment that went beyond her and her family: she wanted to offer something to her country, namely, well-educated children who might contribute to the rise of a new Lebanon.

The topic of nation-building led us to a discussion of the political revolution that started off in 2019, and the aspirations that the protesters on the squares held for a new kind of politics and a new Lebanon. Nahla said that she participated in the protests at the beginning but after a few months, after the protests started to become more violent, she really couldn't tell right from wrong. She said that her heart ached for her students who were trying to prove themselves in a failed state. Corruption, she explained, was widely spread in Lebanon and embedded at the roots of all enterprises, both public and private. Nahla used her own experience to back this up, telling me stories about one of the universities where she worked. Some of her colleagues, she said, had been hired just because they knew someone in the university, and despite their poor qualifications. The political parties, she continued, have proxies and connections everywhere – in ministries, in schools and even in universities.

I asked if she thought that *wasta* was still important after everything we were going through. *Wasta*, Nahla replied, was still widely used, but in the economic crisis it was now used for other things, such as obtaining fuel and medicine:

"Personally, I think that the people who are actually struggling in this country are just us, those who aren't affiliated to any political party. We're the ones who never needed *wasta* to get to a job. I know from my colleagues, specifically those who used their *wasta* to get the job, that the parties are helping them find medicine, fuel, financial assistance... So basically, the answer would be 'yes'. [...] The



instructor that was assigned by wasta, the pharmacist that works in that pharmaceutical company with wasta, the owner of that gas station affiliated to them, and so on...I think they have connections with bigger networks, I'm just giving an example. I mean, they support each other, this is how things are now."

During my second visit to Nahla, almost two months later, I noticed that her maid was not there anymore. Nahla said that she and her family were shifting their priorities more and more, trying to hang in there with all the challenges they were witnessing and going through. Part of Nahla's salary for the new academic year was going to be paid in 'fresh' dollars, which was a good thing, because it would help her cope with the high inflation. The problem, however, was that life was becoming unbearably expensive: the tuition fees of her children had increased, not to mention, the bills for the generator, the fuel from the black market and every single item in the market that had doubled or tripled in price. And while at the time of the first interview, Nahla was able to hide the hardship from her children, by the time I returned to interview her a second time, this was no longer possible.

"How can you hide a three-hours trip to a village that's just a few kilometres away due to queue in front of gas stations? It's just all so frustrating – the queue, the electricity blackouts, the empty shelves at the supermarket. You can't hide all of that stress. I just feel sorry for [the children]. Our lifestyle has changed a lot in two years. I just try to do things differently now. Instead of travelling, we're trying to have 'touristic trips' from time to time in Lebanon, visiting new places to discover."

The problems that Nahla described were common occurrences throughout the country and many residents in Ras Beirut, as well as in Beirut and in Lebanon more generally, saw emigration as the only solution to this predicament. For Nahla, however, emigration was not something that she considered, at least for the time being: "With kids, and at this age, it's not easy at all. For now, it's not an option." She specified that although these were difficult times for them, she and her family were nevertheless able to earn a living. It was a basic living, not the one that they thought that they deserved given their hard work, experience and qualifications, but it was a living nevertheless.

CHAPTER 6

Wisam: A Hair Dresser and Journalist in Ras Beirut June and September 2021

The last story I would like to present comes from a small barber shop in Ras Beirut. Wisam, a Lebanese man in his late twenties, was the co-owner of the shop, together with another business partner. What really surprised me about this employer was that he worked as a journalist in the mornings and as a hair dresser in the evenings. What are the odds of meeting a person who combines these two jobs in such a way? Come to think of it, this is happening in Lebanon, so it is not that strange, actually. Lately, the Lebanese people, especially the youth, have been taking advantage of any and every opportunity that comes their way, if this means securing extra money to support their livelihoods in these precarious times. When I asked Wisam about his different choices of profession he said that

“اللبناني بيشتغل كل شي / the Lebanese are capable of performing any job”

It later transpired that he only took care of the administrative tasks at the shop. Wisam worked as a journalist at a reputable news agency. What was even more surprising was that he was also a political activist. He had joined the protests that were taking place since 2019 and he was fighting corruption with his pen – as he described it.

The barber shop was really small in terms of space. Wisam had two employees, and altogether, the shop could hardly fit more than five people at a time. Wisam mentioned that the volume of his business customers wasn't directly affected by the economic crisis, as men always need to shave their beards and style their hair; yet, the Lira devaluation had affected his business in the same way in which it had affected all businesses and all people in Lebanon. One reason for the economic sting he experienced was that his rent was in fresh dollars, whereas his clients paid him, of course, in Lebanese Lira. This had made the business very difficult to sustain, but the only reason that he hadn't closed it down yet was that he had two employees who desperately needed their jobs. The barber shop wasn't his only source of income, so the decline in revenue was not a catastrophic problem for him. His employees,

however, were facing different circumstances and needed their jobs. Wisam's second job was paid in Lebanese Lira also, but he was managing to make ends meet because he was single and did not have any dependents.

When I asked Wisam if he could elaborate his experience of the revolution, he said that he never missed a protest. What had really aggrieved him, he said, was the President's statement that if people don't like the situation in Lebanon they can leave. He said that he and his friends would not rest until every member of the current political class was out of power. It was his duty, he said, to make a change in Lebanon for his generation and for upcoming generations as well.

Wisam then narrated an incident where he was threatened by a neighbour who was affiliated to one of the political parties over a post he had shared on Twitter. He even said that he was one of those who got beaten up during the protests and that he had already inhaled his share of tear gas. Then he smiled saying,

“ما بيأثر، فدا لبنان. / but it's okay, for the sake of Lebanon.”

I visited Wisam's barber shop a few weeks later. Many things had changed during this time and the situation in Lebanon had become much worse. There was now a massive shortage of grid electricity, fuel and generator electricity, and inflation had increased even more. This time, Wisam's energy was different. He said that one of his employees had left, and as he was speaking, he held himself responsible for that. He felt that he should have done more to help him.

The volume of customers had now decreased also: “say we had ten customers per day before, now we have only two and this is due to the electricity shortage”. The business had to be managed differently now, with new opening hours during which they turn on the private generator. Due to the fuel shortage, it was no longer possible to keep the

generator on for the full day. Wisam and his business partner were now forced to buy fuel from the black market at a high price and this made running the shop significantly more expensive.

I asked Wisam if he knew of any people and businesses that were managing to do well in this crisis. He said,

**“عندك المطاعم وأصحاب السوق السوداء”
/ restaurant owners and black marketers”**

And what enabled them to be successful? “For black marketers, people need them at the moment and the government gets a share from them, so it helps them thrive. As for restaurants, there’s always high demand for food.” For all other businesses, he said, the situation was really difficult, and there was little outside of government support that could alleviate the pressure. “The government has to offer financial assistance to people, just for them to get their business on their feet again.”

I recalled then that during our first visit, when the topic of immigration came up, Wisam explained that he wasn’t really considering leaving Lebanon. This time he told me that he had been on a job hunt, seeking opportunities abroad. Personally, his stance felt a bit surprising to me as I didn’t expect him to change his view on this issue. At the same time, however, a lot of things had changed as Lebanon’s crises became worse. During this second interview, I noticed a major shift in Wisam’s thinking, a shift that only those who live in Lebanon can understand, while dealing with an exponentially worsening livelihood.

To conclude, I would like to highlight that the compounded political, economic and infrastructural crises have made a meaningful recovery difficult to imagine in the foreseeable future. When I asked each and every person what kind of a plan or initiative might save the businesses or the residents of Ras Beirut, or at least provide them with a bit of light at the end of the tunnel, almost everyone had the same look in their eyes – the look that says “are you kidding me? Do you live in this country?” Those who could no longer stand the situation decided to leave the country or were at least trying to leave. Those who couldn’t emigrate were counting their days one after the other, hoping for a miracle to put an end to the nightmare. When I investigated how people in Ras

Beirut were able to sustain their livelihoods, the answer was always that they have shifted their priorities to cover the most basic essentials, and that they were aided by neighbours, friends and family who could support them. I held conversations and interviews with different people from different social and economic backgrounds and they were all aware of the fact that there was very little they could do to mitigate the current situation; the only way out, they said, was through elections that just might replace the current political class. Ras Beirut’s residents were trying their best to help each other out. Expats too were sending money and making donations of medicines or whatever else they could do to help their families, neighbours and friends. Few people were optimistic about the future to come but everyone was trying their best to support those who were close to them in whatever way they could.





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