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## Lebanon. A Country constantly facing a difficult juncture

Pope Francis' Easter message depicts certain countries as experiencing not the joy of the Resurrection, but the Friday crucifixion or the Holy Saturday tomb. *Lebanon definitely qualifies as one of the nations experiencing a seemingly endless juncture between death and resurrection.* The people of the Land of the Cedars are facing a virtually unparalleled predicament: they are living in a state of pervasive desperation, causing the country to plunge into a state of "induced coma." With the outbreak of the *thawra* protests against widespread government corruption and misrule, given the country's secular, inter-religious and intercultural nature, free from external interference, it was hoped that something would finally change. *On 17 October 2019, hundreds of thousands of people, regardless of religious or political affiliation, had defied the wrath of the government led by Saad Hariri, the embodiment of a political establishment eager for power, money and domination.* The Sunni Prime Minister resigned, hoping to become the spearhead of the people's uprising (a prospect that was immediately disproved by the facts), and was replaced by a new cabinet led by scarcely-known Hassan Diab, who had good will but no political clout within a so-called "confessional democracy", strictly divided among religiously inspired parties, lacking efficiency and transparency. Nothing or almost nothing changed, to the point that even Diab was forced to step down in August 2020, although he is still formally in office to run current affairs, since his successor (and guess what, Hariri again) is unable to form a governing coalition. The reason for all this is the alliance established five years ago by Christian Maronite President Michel Aoun and by his heir apparent (and son-in-law: the notion of tribe, family or clan still prevails in Lebanon) with the Shia political bloc formed by the Amal Movement led by Parliament Speaker Nabiah Berri, and pro-Iran Hezbollah, led by Nasrallah. In reality, this alliance is increasingly unstable due to the rampant economic crisis and the new White House administration. *Given the present deadlock, the pressure of EU countries was to no avail, in particular from French President Macron, aimed at resolving the political crisis especially after the devastating explosion at government-owned Port of Beirut on August 4 2020, which left 207 dead, 6,000 injured and 1,600 homes destroyed or seriously damaged, with 300,000 homeless.* The dynamics leading up to the explosion were never fully disclosed - and never will be, predictably - with suspicions resting on southern and eastern neighbouring countries, just as on the authorities' mismanagement that permitted a high risk warehouse to be located so close to the centre of the city. *Meanwhile, the economy is in shambles.* The dollar rose from 1,500 to 11,000 Lebanese Liras, with more than a third of the population living in poverty, unemployment close to 40%, a collapsing banking system, medicine shortages, bread and oil subvention that the government can no longer afford. The country was already bankrupt after failing to pay its foreign debts in February 2020 and has been hit particularly hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. *Moreover, the country is still grappling with the unresolved question of more than one million Syrian refugees on its territory.* Out of an autochthonous population of 4 million Lebanese - plus half a million Palestinians, who were never granted full citizenship and whose presence dates back to 1948, when Israel was founded - there are still roughly one million war refugees who arrived in 2012-2013. There were about one and a half million at the time, but today about 500,000 seem to have returned to their homeland or expatriated elsewhere, with an increase in the number of people leaving during the most recent economic crisis. Indeed, the presence of such a large number of Syrians (as though 16 million people had arrived in Italy in the same period!) is creating huge problems. There are no refugee camps, because the Lebanese government has consistently refused to grant special status to refugees, as it did with the Palestinians, claiming that it did not receive enough financial aid from the UN and the EU. This is something that Turkey has succeeded in doing, with artfully inflated pressures regarding migratory influxes, or Jordan, which has agreed to a large UNHCR presence. *Syrians live in Lebanon's remote corners and, thanks to legal expedients, manage to find illegal work, under constant threat of deportation.* Despite having suffered twenty years of occupation by the Syrians, the Lebanese people have had to take in refugees fleeing the war in the East - almost all of them Sunnis -, with rare

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spirit of welcome and solidarity, something that Europeans have certainly not been able to do, except occasionally and with countless exceptions. The Lebanese people were forced to make room for the new arrivals. This was also made possible by the absence of any proper legal framework, which allowed entrepreneurs to hire Syrians off the books, paying them much less than they would have paid the Lebanese, thus profiting enormously, increasing unemployment for Lebanese people and creating unacceptable situations of labour exploitation. Lebanon's disastrous condition extends to all sectors, ranging from the energy crisis (one hour of electricity per day) to the local welfare crisis (bread is sometimes lacking), medicine shortages and the exorbitant cost of medical care, the crisis in the digital sector, and so on. Exploiting large offshore gas deposits discovered in Lebanese waters (but with gas fields in common with their Israeli enemies and with their problematic Turkish neighbours) is also being thwarted by the ruling parties' thirst for money. *Given this doomsday scenario, the Pope's Urbi et Orbi message at Easter touched and heartened all Lebanese people, without distinction:* "I thank the nations that generously receive people who are suffering and seeking refuge", [Francis said](#). "Lebanon and Jordan in particular are taking in many refugees who have fled from the conflict in Syria. He added: "May the people of Lebanon, who are undergoing times of difficulty and uncertainty, experience the consolation of the Risen Lord and find support from the international community in their vocation to be a land of encounter, coexistence and pluralism." *The Pontiff outlined a realistic profile: "A land of encounter, coexistence and pluralism"*, with 18 ethnic and religious communities that are recognised under the Constitution (about 30 in fact). But this community cannot overcome the current gridlock alone: a genuine concern on the part of the international community is needed to form a government and get back on track towards economic recovery. For the time being, however, this concern is motivated only by partisan interests: each side is pulling its strings - Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States on the one hand, Russia, Syria, China and Iran on the other, with Turkey turning the tables - while the Lebanese people are suffering. When will we see a change of course?

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