

Horror in Beirut. A Critical Examination. The Catastrophe in A Broader Context

Was it an accident or a warning?

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The Establishment explanation for what occurred in Beirut's port on August 5th is that the horrific series of explosions that killed hundreds, injured thousands and left hundreds of thousands homeless was a terrible accident that came about due to a multi-faceted failure by Lebanon's corrupt and incompetent government. Or at least that is the prevalent narrative in the international media, but a more critical examination of what took place is a bit like peeling an onion only to discover that there are layers and layers of alternative possibilities that just might place the catastrophe in a broader context.

The story, which is [generally being accepted](#), is that a Russian-leased but Moldovan flagged ship the *Rhosus* carrying nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate from Batumi in Georgia to Mozambique wound up unexpectedly in Beirut's port in November 2013 due to a leak in the hull and mechanical problems. It was then impounded and blocked from exiting due to alleged general unseaworthiness as well as its inability to pay disputed debts and docking fees. The dangerous cargo was offloaded and stored in a Hanger number 12 in the port a year later. Ammonium nitrate can be used to make fertilizer but it also can also be used in explosives. The two ton "fertilizer bomb" used to destroy the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 killing 168 people was, for example, primarily ammonium nitrate.

The ship and cargo, which was supposedly destined for a Mozambican company that produced commercial explosives, was then *de facto* abandoned by its lessee and sat in the port with its Russian captain and three Ukrainian crewmen while the issue was being largely ignored by the Lebanese government. The crew were basically being held as hostages by the port authorities, unable to leave the ship and, it was claimed, frequently on the verge of starvation. They were eventually released and allowed to fly home in 2014 while the *Rhosus* itself, emptied of its cargo, reportedly sank [in an unused corner of the port in 2018](#).

Both the crew and the port authorities were aware of how dangerous the offloaded cargo was, but the Lebanese government, which was having its own problems, did nothing to address the issue. Shafik Merhi, director of the Lebanese Customs Authority, [wrote to government officials](#) no less than six times between 2014 and 2017 requesting "urgent" steps be taken to secure the explosives, but he received no response.

The first explosion may have been started by a welder or even a smoker who somehow ignited fireworks or possibly even a storage site for munitions which then somehow caused the ammonium nitrate to explode. The second explosion has already been described as the largest ever that did not involve a nuclear weapon, though [some have been suggesting](#) that it did indeed involve an Israeli tactical nuke. If there is any residual radiation at the site

surely that possibility will again be raised.

The blast devastated the port and the surrounding residential area and was felt as far as 120 miles away in Cyprus. Grain silos near the explosion were heavily damaged, destroying an estimated [80% of the country's grain supply](#) at a time when there is already widespread hunger due to a deepening economic crisis that has produced many bankruptcies, a failure of health services and sharply declining standards of living. The problems have all been exacerbated by U.S. unilaterally imposed sanctions and Israeli meddling.

The narrative that the explosion had been a horrible accident was almost immediately widely accepted, but President Donald Trump was quick to describe it as an attack, saying "I've met with some of our great generals and they just seem to feel that . . . this was not some kind of a manufacturing explosion type of event. They seem to think it was an attack. It was a bomb of some kind." However, the Defense Department subsequently refused to confirm Trump's speculation and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper observed that "Most believe that it was an accident."

Others also had some problems with the narrative. A *cui bono?* "who benefits" analysis inevitably suggests that Israel, which has been increasing its pressure both on Lebanon and particularly on Hezbollah recently, might well consider a totally wrecked Lebanese economy to be a gift insofar as that would increase political turmoil and could produce a reaction against Hezbollah. Israel is heavily involved in destabilizing neighboring Syria as well as Iran and has been specifically targeting Hezbollah as the connecting link in the frequently touted Shi'a "land bridge" extending from Iran to the Lebanese Mediterranean coast.

To be sure Israel has officially expressed shock and has denied any connection with the blast. It's top government officials and Foreign Ministry have offered their condolences. It has even sought to send humanitarian aid to assist in the recovery, but, of course what governments say and do does not necessarily mean anything if there is a hidden agenda or policy. When governments say one thing and do another thing secretly, they frequently hide their actions, a practice which is described using the intelligence expression "plausible denial."

Israel has not hesitated to attack Lebanon in the past, [inflicting enormous damage](#) on the country's infrastructure and killing thousands of civilians during two major incursions and an actual occupation in 1982 and 2006. Over the past year, Israeli warplanes have flown repeatedly into Lebanese airspace to attack Syrian and alleged Iranian positions and has also [staged ground attacks along the border](#). There has been considerable speculation that war between the two states is coming, particularly as it is widely believed that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu needs a war as a distraction from the many scandals that he has been associated with.

Lebanese party of government Hezbollah, which is by invitation using its military wing to help Damascus, has become increasingly an Israeli target of choice as it is seen as an Iranian proxy. If indeed it was storing weapons at the port they might plausibly have been identified for destruction by Israel, but reliable sources in Lebanon insist that Hezbollah had no access to the area. Beyond that, at the end of July the Israeli defense minister [specifically threatened to destroy Lebanese infrastructure](#). As the port of Beirut is the country key's economic lifeline, it constitutes the primary infrastructure target.

Israel is known to have numerous intelligence agents operating in Lebanon, so it has the means to get into the port and set off an explosive intended either to ignite the ammonium nitrate or destroy Hezbollah weapons, if they actually exist. That would avoid having to send a bomber or a missile to do the job, though some have claimed that one video of the bombing shows an incoming missile.

Israel has long espoused the so-called [Dahiya Doctrine](#), named after a suburb of Beirut that was devastated by the Israel Defense Forces in 1982-3. It endorses the employment of maximum lethal force against civilians and infrastructure to teach the “enemy” a lesson. It has been used in both Lebanon and more recently in Gaza with Operation Cast Lead and Operation Protective Edge.

Several observers of developments in the Middle East believe that Israel did in fact arrange for the explosion. Shortly after the blast a general in the Lebanese Army stated that the explosion had been caused by a tactical nuclear device intended to bring down the Lebanese government and ignite a civil war with Hezbollah. Indeed, aerial photography shows an enormous crater, at least several hundred yards across. American anti-Zionist Richard Silverstein [also blamed Israel](#), writing on his *Tikun Olam* blog that “A confidential highly-informed Israeli source has told me that Israel caused the massive explosion at the Beirut port earlier today [when] Israel targeted a Hezbollah weapons depot at the port and planned to destroy it with an explosive device. Tragically, Israeli intelligence did not perform due diligence on their target... It is, of course, unconscionable that Israeli agents did not determine everything about their target including what was in its immediate vicinity. The tragedy Israel has wreaked is a war crime of immense magnitude.”

Silverstein clearly has a good high-level source in Israel but the information he obtains has sometimes been challenged. Some believe that he is [being fed information](#) that the Israeli government wishes to make public without having to admit to anything. If that is true in this case, the Israelis might want to be sending a message to the Lebanese and to Hezbollah, suggesting that the second explosion had not been intended and warning them against retaliation that would escalate the fighting. It would also warn Hezbollah that Israel is willing and able to strike anywhere in Lebanon and it might also turn ordinary Lebanese against Hezbollah because the suggestion would be that its actions had invited a devastating attack from Israel.

There have also been suggestions that something had to be done to the ammonium nitrate to make it explode like it did. Ammonium nitrate is not an explosive by itself, but serves as an oxidiser, drawing oxygen to a fire and making it rage faster and further. British security specialist Robert Emerson is speculating that the “...ammonium nitrate got something added to it accidentally, possibly oil or some other flammable compound. Ammonium nitrate smoke is more yellow, this is rather red. An investigation would ascertain if that is the case and where contamination took place.”

Other speculation is perhaps more sinister with a local journalist in Beirut [claiming that](#) security-agency sources revealed a routine check three months ago that discovered military-grade explosives together with tons of the chemical in Hanger 12 while a former U.S. Central Intelligence Agency officer, Robert Baer, told CNN that certain aspects of the explosion “suggest the combustion of military-grade material along with the ammonium nitrate.”

One of the better-quality videos of the explosions would appear to show a first explosion

that might consist of fireworks or munitions going off followed by the huge explosion of the ammonium nitrate, which would more-or-less support the emerging standard narrative. Beirut residents, who have been demonstrating against the government since the incident, seem mostly to believe that it was no more than an accident due to bureaucratic incompetence. But that does not rule out that it was an inside job carried out covertly by the Israelis to weaken Lebanon and its arch-foe Hezbollah. If recent history has anything to teach us it is that whatever actually happened, the cover-up will begin right away. Likely no one will be punished in Lebanon and no one will seriously look into a possible Israeli role. The real losers will be the people of Lebanon who have lost their lives and homes in a horrific incident that never should have occurred.

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