

Lebanon Protesters: Ensure a Unified ‘B-Team’ Runs Any New, Responsive Government

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As Lebanon’s massive, countrywide, anti-government demonstrations continue, the vacuum provides time for those ardent, long suffering protesters to create the most responsive anti-austerity government in the Middle East. If any populace in that region could do it, it’s Lebanon’s well-educated, smart younger generations who predominate in the uprising.

However, most of those of us who have newspapered in Beirut tend to agree with long-time ([43 years](#)) Middle East correspondent [Robert Fisk](#) who observed that it had a classic, fatal flaw:

Bring down the regime, the government, the masters of deceit, the cancerous centres of power: that is their only cry. The Lebanese protestors, in their hundreds of thousands, are demanding a new constitution, an end to the confessional system of government—and to abject poverty. They are absolutely right; but then they stop. It’s as if the revolutionaries of Beirut, Baghdad and Algiers are too pure to dip their fingers in the glue of political power, their goodness too heavenly to be contaminated by the dirt of politics, their demands too spiritual to be touched by the everyday hard work of future governance that they believe their courage alone will ensure victory. This is nonsense. Without leadership, they will be overwhelmed. The elites and kings who govern the Arab world have sharp claws.

As a former Beirut *Daily Star* editorial-page editor/writer, I read an archival interview of [Krim Belkacem](#), one of the Algerian revolution’s leaders. Asked about post-war plans for education, healthcare, agriculture, infrastructure, etc., he said: “A revolution never reveals such plans *before* winning lest it divide and lose the people—and the fight.”

The truth is, as Fisk writes, that most revolutionaries have *no* such plans beyond overthrowing a regime lest it divide *their* numbers. True, most revolutions “eat their young” by internal squabbling over leadership once the last shot is fired, as Algeria’s independence leader [Ahmed Ben-Bella](#) learned in exile—and Belkacem’s assassination in Frankfurt—despite [seven years](#) of unified warfare against the French.

Now, most repressive rulers today get out the weaponry—rubber bullets, water cannons, concussion bombs, and live ammunition to clear the streets. In Beirut, luckily, restraint seems to rule. Aside from police shortages to handle such massive numbers, a standoff response does save costs on personnel, weapons, jailings, and lawsuits over deaths and injuries. And police absenteeism because family members are among the demonstrators.

In Lebanon, it was long-standing, [dire public needs](#) that eventually exploded October 17 into a massive countrywide demonstration triggered by a \$6 monthly charge for the internet’s

free Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. It affected almost everyone and became the last straw of austerity policies. The basics demanded by *all* party loyalists, thousands of refugees, those in [18 religious sects](#) were legion: 24-hour electricity, clean tap water, garbage collections, unclogging sewers, ending blatant corruption, and failure to collect taxes from corporations and the rich.

So far, it's unlikely that the [civil-society group](#) doing a "Paul Revere" warning with a WhatsApp protest message were long-term planners. But the result was thousands hopefully and obediently waiting on promising words from the Prime Minister. His previous non-actions showed immediate redress was unlikely for these basic and common grievances.

Unfortunately, it never takes the Old Guard long to regroup and creep back into power in the guise of a caretaker government which then puts in power *their* candidates who will *re-*impose the same policies that led to an uprising in the first place.

How different it could be, as prime minister candidates emerge, if a demonstration group would confront them with a manifesto containing the people's demands. If demonstrators could set off the uprising by mobile phones almost instantly, they ought to be able to quickly check out the picket signs expressing people's chief demands. Then, help their preference for a prime minister hunt up prospective cabinet ministers willing to quickly fulfill those demands—and provide him or her with a nonsectarian "B-Team, a "brain trust" of expert advisers for *all* sectors of government. Such specialists would enable the new government to "hit the floor running" to answer those demands the moment their prime minister is chosen.

The new government should include eagle-eyed policy monitors—especially the enforcers—particularly for the country's banking system at the start.

Success lies in rapid and effective action on behalf of ordinary citizens to retain public confidence. The Lebanese "window" is currently wide open for a long-needed, non-partisan government drawn from those demonstrators to execute fast-moving transitions from the past.

Perhaps one of the best examples in modern history of a B-Team quickly implementing programs pulling a nation out of economic destitution and despair is still U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt's "[brain-trust](#) " during the 1930s Great Depression. "FDR's B-Team was drawn from economics, law, politics, government, universities, labor, healthcare, science, and social programs.

In FDR's "First Hundred Days," they unrolled bold "New Deal" [programs](#) despite howling opposition from both parties in Congress and the colossal power of corporations and the "banksters." Most of those major programs were generated by dozens of FDR's [proclamations and executive orders](#) because Congress was too paralyzed by the Depression to disobey party leadership.

Three days after FDR's inauguration in March 1933, the B-Team's first major plan—tackling the financial industry's depredations—his eight-day [bank "holiday"](#) proclamation closed all banks. The night before reopenings, Roosevelt gave his first radio Fireside Chat to Americans, reassuring them that their [deposits were safe](#).

In those "First Hundred Days," the B-Team launched a staggering number of [programs](#).

[agencies, and pushed tough regulatory laws](#) , either benefitting or protecting the 99%: deposit insurance, banning bank ties to the stock market, policing Wall Street, regulating workplace practices, subsidizing staple crops, and providing low-cost loans to buy homes.

What followed was a public works program for millions of unemployed. More than [3.5 million](#) were building dozens of dams and the Tennessee Valley Authority to furnish cheap and reliable power and flood control. Improved highways and new bridges served motorists and truckers. Repairs were made to schools and hospitals and new ones were built and staffed. Millions of jobless young men were doing conservation improvements for waterways, fisheries, and agricultural wastelands. By FDR's second term, his B-Team had inaugurated the Social Security program and given unions protections for wages, hours, and collective bargaining.

The cost for FDR's New Deal was [\\$500 billion](#) (in today's dollars), primed both with *temporary* public debt and [hiking income taxes](#) on the wealthy—and enforcing collections—so that by 1940 those earning \$60,000 had a 47% rate and those above \$5 million, 75%. Their outrage was just as great as the well-off would be in today's Lebanon if fresh leadership put such teeth into new tax laws.

Treasury revenues spiked because paychecks were spent on food, housing, goods and services. In turn, retail and wholesale profits were banked—and taxed—providing increased lending funds for business and mortgages—and subsequent federal and state revenues from those taxes.

It could be argued that what worked in a near-bankrupt U.S. in the 1930s won't work in today's Lebanon. But if a [quarter](#) of Lebanon's population brought about the government's fall, it's possible that the slate could be wiped clean of policies from the country's usual hidebound, negligent, corrupt, and incompetent administrations.

For example, just to pass Lebanon's [2019 budget](#) took 37 cabinet and parliamentary meetings. And confronted with a national debt of [\\$85 billion](#) and a credit rating of junk-bond status—and threatening rumbles from the 99%—government officials sped to Paris last year vowing “serious reforms” if [CEDRE](#) (Conference for Economic Development and Reform) could cobble [\\$11 billion](#) together in loans and grants from its donors.

The purpose, the delegation claimed, was to cover [127 infrastructure projects](#) in three payment phases. Wise to Lebanon's ways, however, CEDRE's loan [conditions](#) included a clamp-down on corruption, submitting the 2020 budget, filling vacancies in key regulatory offices, and a donor-monitoring committee. The loan would be cancelled if the committee found irregularities even in *one* project. CEDRE's growing [doubts](#) about credibility and a charge of “sloppy” documentation means [funds](#) have yet to be released.

This needs to change. And only those demonstrators can make it possible.

Foreign Policy's [Sune Haugbolle](#) pointed out the country was at Ground Zero for total collapse:

With Lebanon's credit ratings hitting junk status, unemployment rampant, and environmental degradation reaching cataclysmic levels, the floor under the sectarian system has caved in. The sheer corruption, incompetence, and social injustice of the political class have destroyed the social contract. What remains now is to rebuild it based on a new legal and political order.

To do that would require an FDR-type leader and a B-Team to immediately underpin that new order. Experts would have to be hired to fix electrical utilities, garbage collections and disposal, water systems and the like. Enforcers would have to get tough about collecting taxes from the rich and powerful—perhaps a bank holiday to prevent their sending money abroad. That alone could help finance repairs and rebuilding the country’s crumbling infrastructure. Corruption finally would have to be addressed and stringently punished.

As for a bank holiday, Lebanon’s private institutions are suspected of being “overstocked with cash” and of [earning billions](#) stored abroad from 30 years of high interests charged on government bonds. If the previous regime demanded [\\$3.3 billion](#) from those private banks for the 2020 budget, it would seem a new government could force a few billion more to cover the nation’s resurrection.

Recruiting government talent for a B-Team and labor for such public-works projects should be easy. Most Lebanon’s universities have department chairs able to single out past and present talent for a B-Team capable to handle such monumental undertakings—banking to agriculture—to resurrect the country. High school faculties also know promising and dedicated students willing and able to intern with these experts. Working together, they would learn that shared professional skills rise far above and beyond sect, race, gender, and class.

Obviously, such a cabinet staff would have to be cooperative, tough, and altruistic millennials and those under 25. They would have to be willing to work at minimum wages at the outset, a cost well worth replacing those “elders” responsible for nearly destroying the country. And it’s possible. Those millions demonstrating throughout Lebanon *were* able to *temporarily* set aside centuries of enmity caused by tribal, cultural, sect, and social divisions. They were united in mutual demands of near-deaf governments.

A heavy proportion of the Beirut protesters were chiefly the millennials— [students and workers](#) —who packed Martyrs Square and side streets perhaps reaching to my former neighborhood in the Ras Beirut district. And unlike the usual ferocious Middle Eastern demonstrations, Beirutis proved to be nonsectarian in chants ([“Revolution, “Thieves! Thieves!”](#)), and [singing and dancing](#) in joyous displays of warm, communal response. In one instance, men stopped shouting and raising clenched fists to calm a terrified toddler in a car with [“Baby Shark.”](#) a globally popular children’s song.

That sea of thousands, waving [Lebanese flags](#) reflects unity and promise for permanently changing the country after years of quiet desperation from rigid, uncaring, caste-ridden, and corrupt governments.

It’s not too late for new, forward-looking political leaders to round up a prime minister candidate and a B-Team helping to meet Lebanon’s critical challenges. The time indeed has come for a drastic change for the people in that benighted country. It can only come from those demonstrators. Now.

As the tough old adage should remind them: “It’s time to either put up or shut up.”

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