

Lebanese diaspora in France

# The Port and Paris

---

Report | By Jonathan Dagher | 03.05.2021



Another protest in front of the Lebanese Embassy in Paris, following the murder of Lokman Slim in February  
Photograph: Jonathan Dagher

**The 2019 protest movement and the Beirut port explosion galvanised political activism in the Lebanese diaspora. But the deepening crisis in Lebanon also puts them in a bind.**

The three women enter the Lebanese consulate in Paris swiftly, with apparent determination. They are followed by a fourth protester who films them, but their face masks shield their identities. One of them gets

held back by a consulate employee who seemingly recognised the group's intention. The other heads straight for the entrance hall where a portrait of Lebanese President Michel Aoun hangs in a frame. In just seconds, she picks it off the wall and slams it to the floor. The frame shatters. The employees try to kick them out, "please, we will get penalized," they can be heard saying on camera. But it's too late, the shattered portrait is captured on film.

After the affront at the consulate on September 11, 2020, the video made the rounds on social media in Lebanon. Six months after the event, people in Lebanon still recall that move as a brave and much needed message of solidarity from abroad. For many, it gave voice to the public anger bubbling in Beirut over a lack of accountability for the port's explosion. Messages of admiration flooded the comment threads, but other users were outraged, decrying the move as vandalism, or even a crime.

In reality, the women were neither heroes nor criminals. They lead quite ordinary lives in France, working in healthcare, education, and academia, but that didn't prevent them from becoming some of the faces of an increasingly engaged Lebanese diaspora. Article 384 of Lebanon's penal code allows imprisonment for those who insult the president, and so, to protect themselves from trouble when they visit Lebanon, the protesters asked zenith to keep their identities anonymous.

zenith interviewed one of the women on one of her rare days off from working at a clinic. She chose the pseudonym 'Iman'. During the interview, Iman paused to remind her daughter not to miss her dance practice on Zoom, and then rushed to pick her son up from soccer practice. Listening to her speak from her well-decorated living room in a

spacious house on the outskirts of Paris, it was almost hard to believe she was the same woman who had stormed a consulate building.

“I had never done anything like this before,” she says. “We had planned the protest, we were angry, but we didn’t plan on actually going in. It was an on-the-spot decision that felt important to do, but also scary and thrilling.”

It was the aftermath of the explosion that had prompted the four protesters. Almost a month had passed since August 4, but another big fire had broken out at the port in Lebanon, further terrorizing Beirut’s residents who feared that more chemicals would blow up. Iman, who was on a train in Paris, received a video call from her sister in Beirut.

“She showed me the black cloud towering over the city and I started crying on the train,” she said. “It broke me to see Beirut destroyed. All I could think of was how unfair everything was in Lebanon. It was state injustice, negligence, and impunity, all at once.”

She texted her group of friends. The next morning, they made their way to the consulate. Iman brought her daughter’s dirty diapers along. The others bought eggs from a nearby supermarket, and photos of Lebanon’s political elite with the word “criminal” printed across their faces. Soon enough, the eggs were hurled, the diapers were laid out, the incriminating printouts plastered on the entrance, and the portrait taken down.

“The consulate and the embassy represent a political regime that should end,” Iman tells zenith, “and the ambassador is a supporter of the president, so we protest against him.”

## **A history of political activism in France**

The Lebanese diaspora has always led a visible role in political activism. It's difficult not to, at its scale. In the absence of an official population census, the numbers of Lebanese people residing abroad remains unknown, but a private Lebanese research, studies and statistics firm called Informational International estimated that 1.3 million Lebanese citizens – meaning passport holders – lived outside Lebanon, from a total of 5.5 million Lebanese citizens overall. Millions more live abroad without officially holding the Lebanese citizenship, but their numbers have never been counted.

France's charged history with Lebanon, even before and after the French mandate, has made it a unique destination on the Lebanese emigration map. Unlike other popular destinations such as Canada, the US, Australia, Nigeria, the Gulf, or Brazil, France is geographically close to Lebanon. France's mandate over Lebanon from 1918 to 1943 also meant that the language, and a lot of its culture, laws, and even schools were imported to the country – particularly to Beirut and Mount Lebanon where the political and economic elites resided at the time, rendering Paris a familiar “second home” to a large portion of Lebanese.

The earliest modern wave of emigration to the country occurred as far back as 1975 when the Syrian army infiltrated Lebanon following the start of the civil war. In 1990, another wave followed as war raged on in Lebanon between Christian right-wing militias, the Lebanese Forces and the military forces under Michel Aoun, who – back then – commanded the army and soon after became president for the first time.

Those who emigrated were mostly Christians belonging to different social classes. Some became doctors, others started their small business

or restaurants and have been living in France ever since. It wasn't long before Aoun himself fled to the French Embassy in 1990, after Syrian forces launched an operation to drive him out. It was in Paris where he lived in exile for 15 years and where he founded the Free Patriotic Movement - the party with a leading number of seats in today's parliament.

In 2006, as a two-month war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah, yet another wave of emigration followed, and many of Lebanon's educated middle classes headed to France where they had already established connections and communities. Those who picked France were often those who could afford it. After the port of Beirut exploded on August 4, 2020, following months of economic crisis and a COVID-19 pandemic that had closed off borders worldwide, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Lebanon with a political initiative and a message of solidarity. He announced an exceptional decision: France would reopen its borders to Lebanese visa applicants, despite COVID-19 concerns. Soon, another wave of emigration ensued.

"We took a decision to leave everything behind in a hasty - and blurry - way," says Rana Khoury, a political activist who arrived in France on September 1st with her husband and three-year old son who narrowly escaped danger in the blast. "We were scared that the door will close again on the possibility that our son would live normally or dream of a future, just like the door had been shut in our faces for years, so we left. We don't know for how long or what we're going to do in Paris. But we knew we had to do it."

Like many others, Khoury continues her political engagement from Paris, she tells zenith. Besides the proximity and the language, France's

political culture and its various communities facilitate and encourage political engagement.

“To many Lebanese, France offers an atmosphere of belonging and comfort. There is a cultural and political climate that has led Lebanese expatriates to feel like their action can have a political impact,” says Professor Ziad Majed, a Lebanese political researcher who teaches Middle East Studies and International Relations at the American University of Paris. He has worked on politically organising with the Syrian opposition intellectuals who were driven into exile before and following the 2011 revolution.

Majed is also a political activist who came to France in late 2005 for security reasons, after his friend and companion, famed political writer, professor, activist, and journalist Samir Kassir with whom he had co-founded the Democratic Left Party, was assassinated in June 2005. Kassir came to France during the Lebanese civil war following the Syrian and then the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the early eighties. He returned to Beirut in 1993, and soon became one of the main writers and thinkers that would set the stage for Lebanon’s 2005 uprising that liberated it from the Syrian regime’s occupation. Three months later, he was assassinated by a bomb planted on his car.

Majed then received alerts from security sources about threats on his own life too, and it was in France that he sought safety. He mentions Kassir as a famed example of an expatriate who had found in France the foundations of the political ideology that he would develop back home in Beirut: “After Samir came to France, he transformed culturally. It was in Paris that he met with the Syrian and Palestinian intellectuals. Here he dived into the leftist ideals of democratic equality, social justice, and freedom that would define his political work. By the time he went back

to Beirut, he had learned how to speak a language that was Palestinian, Syrian, French, and Lebanese all at once.”

But there’s another side of the coin, Majed says. “Leaders and representatives of powerful political mainstream and sectarian parties in Beirut have also established political lobbies and connections in the Elysée Palace and the French institutions, and within the parties’ elites in Paris, including far-right parties such as the Front National.”

Lebanon’s parties have a stronghold in Paris, from the Free Patriotic Movement to the Lebanese Forces, to others. Newer movements and groups that have aligned themselves with the recent anti-establishment uprising in Lebanon, such as “Citizens in a State”, “Des Libanais à Paris”, “The National Bloc”, “Beirut Madinati”, “Li7aqqi” and “Justice et Egalité pour le Liban” are also politically active within France.

The Lebanese also have demographic weight. The 15th district of Paris is known to host many Lebanese, and the municipality of the 15th has repeatedly catered to the Lebanese community for votes. Since 2018, expatriates have also been granted the right to vote in Lebanon’s parliamentary elections, bringing them centre stage into the Lebanese political playground and the focus of mainstream political parties back home.

## **Diaspora United and the challenges of resisting from abroad**

On October 17, 2019, people in Lebanon took to the street nationwide to protest the dire economic conditions, and it wasn’t long before many

Lebanese expatriates joined in. Catherine Otayek had arrived in Paris in 2016 for an internship, and she had never really considered herself politically active, but when she saw footage of the protests on Facebook, she did the first thing that came to her mind:

“I went on the Facebook group for Lebanese expats and asked if anyone wanted to organize a demonstration in Paris. I knew what was happening was big, and I felt I had to be a part of it.”

Many shared her sentiment. One message led her to another and soon enough, she was in contact with dozens of Lebanese expatriates from Berlin to London to New York all the way to Sidney and even the Gulf, where protests are illegal. They called their network “Meghterbin Mejtemin” [Diaspora United], and for months they would work tirelessly to organize protests across almost every major city. They described themselves as the mirror of the revolution in Lebanon.

Otayek recalls this as she sits in the park of Buttes Chaumont. Despite the serenity of the landscape, a deep melancholy seems to wash over her.

“It’s the injustice that kills me,” she says. “We had so much hope of coming back to a country we belong to. I wanted to come back, but this changed after the explosion of August 4. It’s not that I want to spend my whole life away, but now I realize that I might have to.”

Otayek’s political engagement has dwindled since the blast. She was visiting Beirut when it happened, and she spent weeks volunteering and picking up the debris. But she, like many other expats, is burnt out. She blames exhaustion, COVID-19, and a general feeling of disillusionment. Many have also mentioned guilt as a demotivating factor. The downward



spiral of the currency in Lebanon, the lack of accountability following the blast, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the dire living conditions in Lebanon have left many Lebanese expatriates emotionally drained, worried more about sending necessary food, money, and medicine to loved ones back home, rather than mobilising politically in the French Republic.

## **The struggle continues**

On a cold Paris morning on February 7, five protesters returned to the Lebanese consulate, also in masks. This time, they had red paint with them. Three days before, Lokman Slim, a prominent activist who had received dozens of documented death threats from Hezbollah supporters, was found dead, shot in the back in his own car. The story sparked anger in Lebanon, where faith in criminal investigations had dwindled. With focused anger and harrowing silence, the five protesters hung up photos of Slim in front of the consulate. They printed the word “criminals” on pieces of paper. They splashed red paint on the walls and used it to write, in big red letters “Assassins” on the sidewalk in front of the entrance. They walked away quietly.

In theory, it should be easy for many Lebanese expats to move forward in a country such as France where a better life is possible and tempting, but some members of the diaspora disagree. “I can’t cut ties with my home,” Iman says. “It’s who I am. It’s what I speak, it’s what I cook, it’s what I love. It’s my home. It runs in my veins, and I will keep fighting for it.”

---

**Jonathan Dagher** is a journalist and producer at the Lebanese independent online media platform Megaphone News. In summer 2019 he participated in RSF Germany's Berlin Scholarship Programme.

*The content published on the Lebanon Chronicles channel is supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). The views expressed in these articles are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the KAS.*