



CONVERSATIONS FROM BEIRUT

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Gas prices are up in Beirut. Gas prices are up everywhere, but in this city that clings to life, temples run hot.

In the morning, a shouting match between delivery drivers on rusted motorcycles turns to blows on the street outside of Riwaq, a leftist cafe-bar. As foreigners gawk, Beirutis don't pause to wonder why they are fighting—gas prices are up in Beirut.

Like everywhere else in this city, in this café, everyone knows each other. We recognize one another from the Tuesday night drag shows put on in their basement, the art gallery opening last weekend in Hamra, or any one of the cafe-bars that keep the lights on and the liquor flowing until the early hours of the morning.

Beirut is a big city, but it is a very small place.

On my second day in Beirut, still learning how to dodge cars in the intersections where

the traffic lights had gone dark—yes, the power crisis extends to even traffic lights—an elderly woman carrying her groceries stopped me and pointed to the collapsed gas station across the street.

“Look at that. Do you like that?” she said. I didn't know how to respond.

A few midnights later, as the same street filled with partygoers drinking Almazas and sipping gin-basils from little plastic cups, a friend gestured towards the destroyed canopy, a jutting, rusted monument to the open wounds of this city.

“Do you know what happened? They haven't repaired it because it collapsed on the owner and his family. They lived above the gas station. It was probably during the blast, I don't know.”

“Do you think they are still in there?” someone joked morbidly.

“Wouldn't surprise me,” she said with a shrug.

This August, it will have

been two years since nearly 3000 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded at the port of Beirut. The blast killed hundreds, injured thousands more, and blew out nearly every window in a 20-mile radius. Walking through the streets of Beirut, it is impossible to ignore the way in which it tore through this city. From the faces of those martyred by the blast painted around the city to the gutted grain silos that remain standing at the port, the bleeding wounds of Beirut are plain to see.

We sit in a palatial penthouse in Achrafieh, careful not to ash cigarettes onto the pristine white couches. Between sips of wine, I catch snippets of conversation. One guy's sister is a famous singer, one manages the “family office,” and one used to be a professional boxer. They are all moving to France or Canada or Dubai. Anywhere but Beirut.



One of the girls, a dermatologist (or maybe a dermatology student, I can't be sure) offers me a hit of her JUUL. "Do you know how difficult it is to get pods in Lebanon?" she says with a smile. I savor the nicotine. It's difficult to get a lot of things in Lebanon.

Her boyfriend cuts in, "You know about the revolution, right?"

"He means the failed revolution!" his friend chirps as he pours another glass of wine.

"Okay yeah, of course it was going to be a failure," he says. "It was rich kids like us in the streets. The reason why the government didn't shoot us like they did in Syria or Libya is because they knew that nothing was going to happen!"

Most nights, the conversation turns to the *thawra*—revolution. In October of 2019, thousands of young people took to the streets of Lebanon to protest a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls. Quickly, the demonstrations turned towards Lebanon's corrupt political system and kleptocratic government. Everybody has

a story from this time and an opinion on the outcomes.

Tonight, as we stand watching a three-man band play rock covers of popular Arabic songs, some new friends loudly debate the *thawra*.

"You can't say that it wasn't a failure!" one proclaims, waving his lit cigarette wildly.

"How can we know if it was a failure? This May is going to be the first opportunity we have to vote against these tyrants. The opposition only needs to get thirty seats, then we can start making real change," argues another.

"If the election even happens..."

"It has to happen! The people won't stand for this bullshit."

They agree and leave it at that.

One of the debaters is a veteran activist. He became involved in protests during the garbage crisis of 2015, during which young people who joined the "You Stink!" movement faced off against politicians who couldn't negotiate a contract with the





PC: Textgrounds from Pexels



garbage collectors while trash piled up on the streets.

The other says that he has resigned from politics and protesting, all of it... he just wants to leave.

"I tell my parents that I blame them for this whole situation. Obviously, it's not their fault exactly, but it's their generation that didn't stand up. We have had almost three decades since the civil war ended and nothing has changed. Why should things change now? This place is dying, man."

I ask him what he means.

"Look, people are either going to leave or die. I don't think there will even be a Lebanon in 50 years," he says as he lights another cigarette.

While Beirut crumbles around us, in places like Riwaq, everyone is friendly. Chatting over a couple of beers, I mention that it feels like the first few weeks of college, with everyone scrambling to make fast friends. Omar, a web designer, laughs, "Yeah bro, all of our friends have left. The only ones of us

left behind just have this shitty Lebanese passport"

I offer to marry him for the visa. He politely declines. He says he wants to earn his way out of Lebanon.

"The thing that you have to realize is that there are two economies in Beirut. There is the lira economy, which is fucked, and there is the dollar economy, which is where we are now," he says, gesturing to the crowded bar. "Most Lebanese can barely afford to spend 80,000 on a meal, let alone a single drink."

Three years ago, 80,000 Lebanese lira were worth about 50 dollars. Today, that amount is worth less than four.

For most Lebanese, lirarate.org, the website that tracks the black-market price of the currency, is a part of the daily rotation. "We check the lira, then we check Instagram, Facebook, Twitter," Maha, a friend's date, says. In the last couple of weeks, they have started to track the price of fuel.

In this volatile economy,

changes in oil prices mean drama. With a spike in gas prices, taxis begin to jump medians to skip a couple minutes of traffic, delivery drivers fight on the street, but mostly, everyone is anxious about electricity. In Lebanon, the state provides four hours—maybe five if you are lucky—of power per day. For the remainder of the time, households are powered by private generators that run on diesel, which has more than doubled in price in the last two weeks.

"Living here, you start to become numb to the situation. We get used to all of these injustices," Maha adds with a laugh. "I wake up every morning like 'What fresh hell is going to come today?'"

As we step out of the bar onto the street, it begins to rain. "Aw fuck. Sorry about that. It usually doesn't rain in March," Omar says.

These days, the Lebanese often apologize for things they can't control—even the weather.

