

Lebanon meltdown

by GWYNNE DYER

Beirut has been living with car bombs and air raids on a sporadic but continuing basis for so long that it would probably make sense to rebuild this time with shatterproof glass. The torrent of broken glass falling from a thousand shattered buildings probably accounted for half the 158 dead found so far in Beirut, and certainly for most of the 6,000 wounded.

The Beirutis were not expecting a giant exploding warehouse, of course, but Lebanon has been cursed in so many other ways that in retrospect it seems almost inevitable. Fifteen years of brutal civil war, followed by thirty years of corrupt rule by the very warlords who ruined the country, ended Beirut's claim to be the 'Paris of the Middle East' a long time ago.

The sense that the country's time was running out has taken different forms over the years, but it was always there. I even thought the end might be coming with Islamic State a few years ago, and took my wife there to see the old Lebanon (some of which still survived and was easy to love) before IS came over the mountains from Syria to destroy it all.

Another blow to my reputation as a prophet, and one I was happy to take. IS over-reached itself, and is gone. What finally did it for Lebanon was more banal: the deliberate looting of the country's entire fragile economy, and the concealment of the proceeds in obscure foreign banks, by the few thousand people whom ordinary Lebanese contemptuously call the 'political class'.

'Warlords' is the right name for them, although many are sectarian leaders whose pedigrees go back to Ottoman times. It is a country where old men and obsolete communal loyalties oppress the impoverished young. That is true of almost every country in the Arab world, of course, but in Lebanon's case the only remaining route to a better future may lie through even greater violence.

Popular anger was great even before the 2.75-kiloton explosion last week. Garbage collection failed years ago, the only safe water comes in bottles, and there is still not reliable 24-hour electricity 30 years after the war. The currency has collapsed, most people's savings have been wiped out, the country has defaulted on its debt, and there are no jobs for the young.

There were huge non-violent street demonstrations last October, and the multi-party coalition government was forced to resign. 'All of them means all of them,' the demonstrators chanted 'but all that really changed was the faces of the cabinet ministers. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

There is a lot of sympathy for the Lebanese, and foreign governments are willing to bail the country out of its troubles 'but only on condition that the loans don't just get pocketed by the same thieves in silk ties, and that there is complete transparency in banking and in government financial transactions.

Those conditions were too tough for the 'political class', since many of their past crimes would be exposed and future ones would become more difficult. So, incredibly, the Lebanese government refused the loans even as families went without food. Then came the explosion, which was clearly the result of official incompetence at the very least.

The demonstrators came out on the streets in force on Saturday, and by Sunday the army was there as well, firing live rounds into the air. The militias are out too, but so far they have left their weapons at home. The likelihood that this confrontation will be resolved peacefully? Worse than evens, certainly.

The crisis might have been delayed another year without the explosion, but not more. Even Hezbollah, once violent but relatively honest, now also has its hand in the till, and popular outrage is huge. This time, the protesters are building mock gallows in the street.

The oligarchs have their backs to the wall, but they know that popular rage can often be drowned in blood in the Arab world. In the

past decade it has been done successfully in Syria, in Egypt, and in Bahrain, so why not in Lebanon too?

Here's why not. Even if they win in the streets, the oligarchs still lose, because there is no economy left to plunder. And if they lose in the streets, they could easily end up on real gallows.