

Lebanon Advisory: 28 January 2020

Summary

Demonstrations [erupted](#) throughout Lebanon in October 2019 against the corruption and economic mismanagement of Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri and his government. Though the initial protests were generally peaceful, the recent '[week of anger](#)' witnessed the most violent clashes to date, after approximately 500 protesters and police were [injured](#).

Sporadic protests have continued unabated since, despite a new and downsized cabinet being [formed](#) with the support of Hezbollah last week. With continuing economic uncertainty affecting the country, including the Lebanese Pound [losing](#) over 60% of its value and the imminent [repayment](#) of high value bonds in March, demonstrations look likely to continue in the short term.

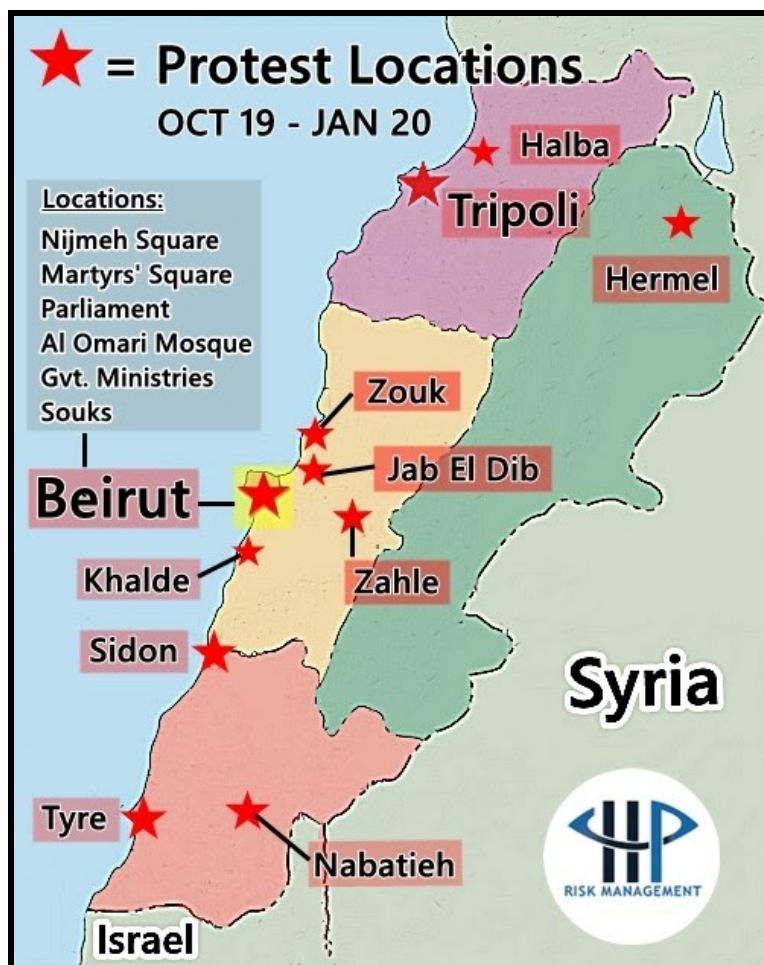
HP Risk Management personnel have been supporting journalists working in Lebanon for more than a decade. This advisory provides a situational assessment and safety considerations for media workers heading to the country to report on the protests and political developments.

Situation Assessment

Beirut has been the epicentre of unrest and witnessed the largest protests to date, with Nijmeh Square and Martyrs' Square notable flashpoints. Other affected locations include Tripoli, Nabatieh, Sidon, Tyre, Jal el Dib, Zahle and Nabatieh (amongst others).

Major highways connecting Beirut to other urban centres have occasionally been blocked, including the main ring road around Beirut, the Batroun highway, the Byblos-Tripoli highway, and the Furn el-Chebbak highway.

Security forces have used [water cannon](#), [batons](#), [rubber bullets](#), [pepper spray](#) and tear gas, at times fired at the [heads](#) of demonstrators. Live ammunition has been used on occasions, resulting in the [death](#) of Alaa' Abu Fakhr in Khalde last November. Some protesters have allegedly been [tortured](#) during detention, whilst Amnesty International



has highlighted [examples](#) of the blindfolding and forced confessions of individuals. The makeshift tents and camps of protesters have previously been attacked by factions opposed to the demonstrations, including [examples](#) of arson and one tent having a bomb thrown at it in the village of Fakeha (Hermel district).

In turn, protesters have thrown [projectiles](#) such as molotov cocktails, rocks and fireworks; directed [lasers](#) at security forces personnel; used [aerosol cans](#) as flame throwers; [burnt tyres](#) and [tree branches](#), as well as using [metal bars and sticks](#) to smash windows of commercial banks and foreign exchange bureaus.

In an attempt to control and limit the protesters movements, the authorities have started [erecting](#) blast walls of large concrete blocks around key locations in Beirut, and used Twitter [to warn](#) people to stay away from protest locations for their own safety.

The protesters anger continues to be fuelled by grievances such as:

- [Electricity shortages](#) and rationing continue to affect much of the country.
- [Currency controls](#) imposed as a result of a long running banking crisis and high government debt.
- [A shortage of medical supplies](#) with professionals out on strike warning of a looming crisis.

Media Landscape

Numerous media workers have been harassed and attacked whilst covering the protests, despite clearly identifying themselves as members of the press. Between 16 and 19 January alone, Lebanese security forces [assaulted](#) more than 20 media workers including Reuters video journalist [Issam Abdallah](#), who needed stitches in his head after being beaten by riot police.

Local reporting [highlights](#) that journalist's equipment has been broken, including the [shooting down](#) of a drone by the authorities. In addition, the security forces recently [tweeted](#) that field journalists should wear vests marked with 'PRESS' for their own safety.

The risk of detention and arrest is ever present, as seen in the case of freelance journalist [Nicolas Frakes](#), and highlighted in a recent [CPJ report](#).

Supporters of both [AMAL](#) and [Hezbollah](#) have been present at protests and responsible for attacking demonstrators. Though Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has previously stated that journalists would [not be targeted](#) in Lebanon for the killing of Iranian General Soleimani, media workers should be alert to the potential of anti-western activity across the country, as highlighted by the recent [arrest](#) of a Syrian ISIS militant who was planning attacks against western embassies.

Outlook

The heavily indebted government faces large bond repayments in March, which they are unlikely to be able to meet. At the same time, the newly formed Hezbollah-dominated government is unlikely to receive

significant endorsement from the international community, making any major financial assistance unlikely for now.

With ongoing economic and political uncertainty in the country, demonstrations are [likely to continue](#) for at least the short term, with electricity shortages, currency controls and lack of medical supplies continuing to fuel anti-government sentiment.

Safety Advice

Given the levels of violence witnessed in previous weeks, journalists planning to cover any future protests in Lebanon should be aware of the following safety information:

- Be aware that the Lebanese security forces have recently [advised](#) all media workers to wear vests marked with PRESS “for their own safety”.
- [Currency restrictions](#) are currently in place throughout Lebanon. Bring USD cash with you and do not rely upon ATM’s. Be aware that many shops are [refusing](#) to take card payments.
- Charge your electrical devices at every opportunity due to [reported](#) electricity shortages and rationing over the past few months (resulting in protests in [Tripoli](#) earlier this month).
- Take a well stocked first aid kit with you. Medical supplies and medicines are [reportedly](#) in short supply.
- Ensure you have [personal protective equipment](#) (PPE) on hand at all times, including a full face respirator in case the authorities use tear gas. A helmet and bullet proof vest are also advisable. Generally bringing body armour into the country is not challenged by customs officials.
- Satellite technology may be confiscated at Beirut–Rafic Hariri International Airport, including BGAN and sat phones.
- If reporting from a protest tented camp, be alert to the threat and dangers of arson attack.
- Assess the protest location in advance, noting that temporary concrete walls can restrict entrances and exits to/from key locations.
- Movement around Lebanon can be affected at very short notice due to protesters blocking the main highways. Plan all journeys around the country in advance, and always have a contingency plan in place. Take a decent road map with you and do not rely on sat nav.
- Police barricades and checkpoints are commonplace during protests. Ensure you carry all appropriate paperwork with you.
- When covering demonstrations, maintain situational awareness at all times and stay in close proximity to hard cover. Always have an emergency exit route planned, and keep to the periphery of the crowd.
- Always use discretion when filming, especially around state sensitive sites and infrastructure.
- Engage a local fixer and ensure that accreditation and all necessary permits are in place.
- Always try to work with a colleague and have a check-in procedure with your base - particularly if reporting from protest locations.
- Ensure all sensitive data and messages are regularly backed up and wiped from your devices, and ensure your digital devices are secure in advance of travel. CPJ’s [digital safety kit](#) has steps and resources to protect you and your team.
- Like many Middle Eastern countries, Lebanese officials and militias can react with hostility if they believe you are affiliated to the state of Israel. It is sensible to ensure devices and social media accounts are sanitised of any evidence of association or visits to Israel.



In addition to the above, a general safety guide to reporting from protest locations can be found via the [CPJ's website](#).

HP Risk Management works with a number of newsrooms and journalist associations, providing on-call risk assessment support, safety advice and training. We continuously support journalists working in high risk and/or challenging environments worldwide.

For more information please contact info@hpriskmanagement.com

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