

February 2025

Spotlight

Lebanon Office



The Beirut Port Explosion: A Prolonged Struggle for Justice Amidst Political Turmoil

By Albert Jawhar

Abstract

The publication of this paper comes at a pivotal moment in Lebanon's political landscape, as the country experiences a shift in governance following the election of President Joseph Aoun on January 9, 2025 and the nomination of Prime Minister-designate Judge Nawaf Salam. In his inaugural speech, President Aoun emphasized the need for justice for the victims of the Beirut Port explosion, signaling a potential shift in the Lebanese state's approach to the investigation. Simultaneously, Prime Minister-designate Nawaf Salam reaffirmed his commitment to ensuring accountability, a sentiment that has been echoed by families of the victims and civil society groups. Against this backdrop, Judge Tarek Bitar has resumed his investigation, summoning key officials for interrogation, including security and port officials. However, legal and political obstacles persist, with defendants filing lawsuits aimed at blocking the proceedings. This paper seeks to contextualize these recent developments within the broader political shifts in Lebanon, particularly in light of the relative stability following the ceasefire in southern Lebanon and renewed efforts to form a functional government.

This paper is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the investigation into the Beirut Port explosion, outlining its historical trajectory, key legal and political developments, and the current challenges hindering accountability. It begins by detailing the background of the explosion and the initial domestic and international reactions, followed by an examination of the key obstacles that have stalled the investigation, including political interference, judicial obstruction, and international pressures. Finally, the paper analyzes the most recent developments, particularly in light of the formation of a new government and the renewed push for justice, while also assessing the potential paths forward. With increasing international scrutiny from the UN Human Rights Council, European Parliament, and US Congress, this paper serves as a concise summary of the main trends in the investigation thus far, anticipating potential progress or further roadblocks in the coming months.

Introduction

On the evening of August 4, 2020, a massive explosion rocked the Lebanese capital, Beirut, resulting in the deaths of more than 220 people, injuring over 6,500, and displacing tens of thousands. This explosion, one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in history, left a deep imprint on the memory of the Lebanese people and sparked widespread anger against a political system accused of negligence and corruption. From that moment, the path of the investigation into this disaster began, but it quickly turned into a complex political and judicial battle, amid internal and external interventions and pressures. This article traces the details of this investigation year by year, leading up to the current situation.

The Political Context in Lebanon Before the Explosion

Before the explosion, Lebanon was already mired in severe economic and political crises. The country was experiencing an unprecedented economic decline, which peaked with the collapse of the local currency and widespread poverty and unemployment. Politically, Lebanon's sectarian system was paralyzed due to deep divisions among different parties and sects. This turbulent context set the stage for the explosion, adding a new dimension of chaos and instability¹.

2020: The Beginning of Investigations and Political Obstruction

In the days following the explosion, there were widespread calls for an independent international investigation. However, the Lebanese authorities rejected this request and insisted on conducting a domestic investigation. On August 11, 2020, the Lebanese government referred the explosion case to the Judicial Council, an extraordinary court that handles major cases. Judge Fadi Sawan was appointed as the judicial investigator, and he began investigating several officials, including heads of security agencies and port employees² and issued 25 arrest warrants against officials³. As the investigation progressed, obstacles quickly emerged. In December 2020, Judge Sawan summoned former Prime Minister Hassan Diab and three former ministers for questioning. This move provoked widespread anger within the Lebanese political class, leading these politicians to file lawsuits against Sawan, accusing him of bias.

2021: The Appointment of Judge Bitar and the Escalation of Political Tensions

In February 2021, the Court of Cassation decided to transfer the case from Judge Sawan to another judge, Tarek Bitar. Bitar, known for his independence and courage in the face of pressure, took over the case, reviewing the evidence and reissuing charges. However, he encountered the same obstacles that had plagued his predecessor. In September 2021, several politicians filed new lawsuits demanding Bitar's removal (18 lawsuits), leading to the suspension of the investigation multiple times⁴.

In July 2021, the former parliament also refused to lift the immunity of MPs wanted for questioning, and the Ministry of Interior refused to grant Bitar permission to question security leaders or execute arrest warrants⁵.

Meanwhile, the streets of Lebanon were boiling with protests. Families of the victims and civil society forces organized numerous demonstrations demanding accountability for those responsible for the disaster. On October 14, 2021, armed clashes erupted in Beirut between supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement on one side, and Lebanese security forces on the other, following calls to replace Judge Bitar. These events highlighted the political and sectarian complexity surrounding the investigation.

2022: Continued Obstruction and External Interference

In 2022, attempts to obstruct the investigation continued, with political interventions leading to the suspension of the investigation for months. In August 2022, on the second anniversary of the explosion, the voices of the victims' families grew louder, expressing frustration over the delay in

¹ www.hrw.org - "They Killed Us from the Inside" An Investigation into the August 4 Beirut Blast, 2021

² arabic.euronews.com - What do we know about the Beirut Port explosion investigation so far?, 2020

³ **Ibid**- A total of 25 people were arrested in the Beirut Port explosion case, 2020

⁴ arabic.euronews.com - Two weeks after its resumption... the investigation into the Beirut Port explosion was suspended for the fourth time, 2021

⁵ arabic.cnn.com - Two years after the "Beirut Port Explosion"... A chronology of the most prominent events, 2022

achieving justice. Judge Bitar tried to resume his work, but found himself hindered by numerous lawsuits and procedures that impeded his progress⁶.

Internationally, some external actors, including France⁷, began to exert pressure on the Lebanese government to ensure the independence of the investigation. French President Emmanuel Macron, who visited Beirut several times after the explosion, emphasized the need to hold those responsible for the disaster accountable. However, these pressures were not sufficient to advance the investigation significantly.

2023: Bitar's Return and Continued Challenges

In January 2023, after a 13-month hiatus, Judge Bitar unexpectedly resumed the investigation, sparking fresh outrage among the political class. Bitar decided to file charges against prominent political and security figures, including Public Prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat, who retaliated by filing charges against Bitar, accusing him of impersonating a judicial investigator, issuing an arrest warrant against him, banning him from travel, and releasing 17 detainees in the case⁸.

This escalation led to a sharp divide within the Lebanese judiciary, with judges split between supporters and opponents of Bitar. On the other hand, the families of the victims continued to organize protests and exert pressure to ensure the continuation of the investigation, but their efforts have yet to yield results⁹.

2024: A Year of Challenges and Change

By 2024, the investigation into the Beirut Port explosion remains stuck in the labyrinth of Lebanese politics. Judge Bitar continues to face immense pressure from various political factions, while no high-ranking officials have yet been held accountable for the disaster.

With Oueidat's retirement in February 2024 and the appointment of Judge Jamal Al-Hajjar as his successor, meetings were held between Al-Hajjar and Bitar to resume the investigation. However, reports indicate that Al-Hajjar insisted on removing politicians and judges from the case, which Bitar rejected.

The first phase of negotiations between the Public Prosecutor, Judge Jamal Al-Hajjar, and the lead investigator, Judge Tarek Bitar, ended without any positive outcomes. Bitar rejected all proposed solutions, including dividing the case between multiple judicial authorities, insisting that all accused should be tried before the Judicial Council.

After the failure of the negotiations, Bitar planned to resume his investigations and issue the indictment by the end of December, but he held it up till the beginning of the new president mandate. It was expected to resume the interrogation sessions that were previously halted due to disputes with former Public Prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat.

There was speculation that Judge Al-Hajjar will step down from the case and possibly hand it over to Judge Nada Dakroub. But this did not happen and Bitar continued holding firm to his position despite ongoing political pressures.

⁶ www.aljazeera.net - The most prominent milestones in the faltering investigation and its causes. Two years after the Beirut port explosion, and justice is stuck, 2022

⁷ www.erehnews.com - Macron affirms France's "firm commitment" to Lebanon, 2024

⁸ **Ibid** - The return of the investigator in the Beirut Port explosion case.. What scenarios await the course of the investigation?, 2023

⁹ www.france24.com/ar - Investigation into the Beirut Port explosion: The families of the victims consider that "the rule of law has ended", 2023

The Movements of the Victims' Families: A Persistent Struggle for Justice

From the moment of the explosion, the families of the victims began to organize themselves to demand justice. Their protests were not just ordinary demonstrations; they were expressions of deep pain and anger towards a political class they hold responsible for the tragedy. The families regularly gathered in front of the Justice Palace and other locations to raise their voices, demanding accountability for those responsible for the disaster.

In the two years following the explosion, the families' actions evolved to include organizing protest rallies and sit-ins, as well as coordinating with local and international human rights organizations to push for a transparent and independent investigation. On the first anniversary of the explosion, the families organized a massive march in Beirut, carrying the photos of their lost loved ones, and they vowed not to rest until justice is achieved.

The journey has not been easy for the families of the victims, as they have faced numerous obstacles and challenges, including attempts by some political parties to obstruct the investigation and remove Judge Bitar from his position. Despite all these difficulties, the families have continued their struggle, affirming that their cause is not political, but one of justice and truth.

Judge Tarek Bitar's Actions: Between Challenges and the Pursuit of Truth

Judge Tarek Bitar, who was appointed as the judicial investigator in the Beirut Port explosion case after the removal of Judge Fadi Sawan, found himself at the center of a fierce judicial and political battle. From the outset, Bitar demonstrated a strong resolve to uncover the truth and hold those responsible accountable, regardless of their positions or political affiliations.

Upon taking over the investigation, Bitar began summoning high-ranking political and security figures for questioning, including ministers, MPs, and heads of security agencies. This move angered many political forces, who saw Bitar's actions as a threat to their interests and began efforts to remove him from his position.

One of the most prominent attempts to remove Bitar came in October 2021, when several politicians filed lawsuits demanding his recusal from the investigation. Although the Court of Appeals rejected these lawsuits, Bitar found himself once again in the crosshairs of political attacks.

Details of the Accusations: Who Has Bitar Charged?¹⁰

Since taking over the investigation, Judge Bitar has taken bold steps in confronting political forces, issuing charges against several prominent political and security figures. Key individuals charged by Bitar include:

- > **Hassan Diab (former Prime Minister):** Bitar charged Diab with criminal negligence that led to the deaths of at least 214 people. Bitar summoned Diab for questioning multiple times, but Diab refused to appear, prompting Bitar to issue an arrest warrant. Diab subsequently left Lebanon for the United States after his government resigned, further complicating the investigation.
- > **Nohad Machnouk (former Minister of Interior):** Bitar accused Machnouk of criminal negligence and failing to take necessary measures to prevent the disaster.

¹⁰ www.nna-leb.gov.lb - Al-Sharq Al-Awsat: The investigation into the Beirut port explosion is pursuing Diab, former ministers and security leaders, 2022

Machnouk responded by filing a lawsuit demanding Bitar's removal, leading to a suspension of the investigation.

- **Ali Hassan Khalil and Ghazi Zeaiter (former Ministers and current MPs):** Bitar charged both Khalil and Zeaiter with criminal negligence in connection with the Beirut Port explosion. Bitar based his accusations on their roles in the government during the period when the ammonium nitrate was stored at the port. Both ministers refused to appear before Bitar and filed lawsuits seeking his removal.
- **Youssef Fenianos (former Minister of Public Works):** Bitar issued an arrest warrant in absentia for Fenianos after he refused to cooperate with the investigation. Fenianos also filed a lawsuit demanding Bitar's removal.
- **Abbas Ibrahim (Director of General Security):** Bitar attempted to question Major General Abbas Ibrahim, but the Minister of Interior refused to grant the necessary authorization, impeding this aspect of the investigation.

Where Does the Investigation Stand?

Despite Judge Bitar's significant efforts, the investigation into the Beirut Port explosion continues to face major obstacles, including:

- **Repeated suspensions:** Due to the lawsuits filed by the individuals charged by Bitar, the investigation has been suspended multiple times. These suspensions were the result of attempts to remove Bitar from his role, significantly delaying the progress of the investigation.
- **Political pressures:** Judge Bitar has faced intense political pressures from influential forces in Lebanon, notably Hezbollah and the Amal Movement. These groups have accused Bitar of politicizing the case and have actively sought to have him removed from the investigation. Reports indicate that Bitar has even received direct threats from Hezbollah officials, further complicating his efforts to proceed with the investigation.
- **Refusal to lift immunities:** Another major challenge has been the refusal of the Lebanese Parliament to lift the immunity of certain MPs and former ministers whom Bitar wished to question. This refusal has added another layer of complexity to the investigation, preventing Bitar from holding key figures accountable.
- **Lack of judicial support:** In some instances, Bitar has not received the necessary support from within the Lebanese judiciary. There have been divisions among judges regarding Bitar's methods and independence, which has left him increasingly isolated and has made his task of pursuing justice even more difficult.

Public Escalation and Solidarity with Bitar

In the face of these pressures, the families of the victims did not remain silent. On the contrary, they intensified their efforts to support Bitar and ensure that he remained in his position¹¹. The families viewed Bitar as their last hope for achieving justice for their loved ones, and they launched popular campaigns to protect him from attempts to have him removed.

In October 2021, during the Court of Appeals sessions to consider the lawsuits demanding Bitar's removal, hundreds of victims' families and their supporters gathered outside the Justice Palace in

¹¹ www.aa.com.tr - Beirut explosion investigator: The Public Prosecutor has no right to summon me for investigation, 2023

Beirut. These demonstrations sent a clear message to the political establishment that the families would not accept any attempts to obscure the truth or derail the path of justice.

The Current Situation: Ongoing Struggles and Confrontations

To this day, Judge Bitar remains in his position, despite numerous attempts to have him removed. The investigation continues, but it faces new challenges daily. Some political forces remain determined to remove Bitar from the case, while the families of the victims continue to stand firmly behind him.

On the international front, there have been increasing calls for an independent or international investigation into the Beirut Port explosion, given the ongoing obstacles facing the local investigation. However, the Lebanese authorities have so far rejected these calls, insisting that the local investigation is sufficient.

Despite the difficulties that the investigation has faced, both the families of the victims and Judge Bitar remain committed to moving forward, asserting that justice can only be achieved through a full uncovering of the truth and the accountability of all those responsible.

Election of the President of the Republic and Formation of the Government

On January 9, 2025, the fourteenth President of the Lebanese Republic, His Excellency President Joseph Aoun, was elected. In his inaugural speech, he emphasized justice for the victims of the Beirut Port explosion¹². Prime Minister-designate Nawaf Salam also stressed the importance of achieving justice and continuing the investigations¹³.

In this context, particularly after the announcement of a ceasefire and relative calm in the south, Judge Tarek Bitar resumed his work. Local newspapers reported on January 16 that Judge Bitar took decisive action on this date to continue his investigations: He has initiated proceedings against 12 security officials and port officials.¹⁴ Among them are, former Major Generals Abbas Ibrahim and Tony Saliba, and former and current officials from the Beirut Port Authority, General Security, and Customs. However, in a strategic move, the questioning of politicians previously charged in the case former ministers as former ministers Nohad Machnouk and Youssef Fenianos has been deferred to a later stage.

But Bitar's pursuit of justice does not come without resistance. Defendants facing interrogation are preparing a legal counteroffensive, seeking to block the investigation once again. Before February 7, 2025, Lebanon's Court of Cassation is expected to receive multiple lawsuits and appeals challenging Bitar's authority. Some of the accused outright reject his legitimacy, arguing that he has exceeded his jurisdiction. This legal maneuvering is not new; for years, Lebanon's political elite has fought to obstruct the investigation at every turn.

Yet, despite the mounting legal and political pressure, sources close to the case assert that Bitar remains undeterred. His legal justification rests on the principle that the Judicial Council operates as an independent body, and any attempt to remove him would be akin to dismantling a legally established institution. Undaunted, Bitar is resolute in his mission: he intends to issue an indictment before the end of February.

His return to the case has also placed Lebanon's newly appointed Public Prosecutor, Jamal Hajjar, under immense pressure. The Public Prosecution's refusal to cooperate could significantly delay the enforcement of arrest warrants, though such measures would remain legally binding.

¹² www.csis.org - Lebanon Finally Elects a President, 2025

¹³ www.bbc.com - ICJ president Nawaf Salam named Lebanon's new prime minister, 2025

¹⁴ today.lorientlejour.com - Tarek Bitar returns with force: 12 security officials and civil servants prosecuted, summoned, 2025

This lack of institutional backing adds yet another layer of complexity to an already fragile investigation.

Meanwhile, Bitar is expanding the scope of his probe. He has summoned 14 individuals for questioning, including 10 new figures—some of whom have never been interrogated before. However, one name stands out among them: Vladymyr Verbonol, the elusive owner of Savaro Limited, the company responsible for importing the ammonium nitrate that triggered the catastrophic explosion. This development follows an important international precedent—the UK High Court’s 2023 ruling, which held Savaro Limited liable for the devastation, following legal action by the Beirut Bar Association.

With the stage set, Bitar now faces two possible paths. One option is to proceed with caution, conducting multiple interrogation sessions before making any major legal moves. The other—and perhaps the more likely scenario—would be to issue arrest warrants for individuals who fail to appear, particularly if their absence suggests potential involvement in the explosion.

In response, the Association of Families of Victims, Injured, and Affected Individuals of the Beirut Port Explosion issued a statement on 14th of January 2025 that they received with hope the inclusion of justice for the families of the port explosion victims in the program of Prime Minister-designate Judge Nawaf Salam. They stated they are ready to provide him with all the documents in our possession for thorough review, given his judicial background, as they had already submitted them to various concerned agencies without success so far.

Political Analysis of the Current Situation

The investigation into the Beirut Port explosion has become a central issue that reflects many of the political and social challenges facing Lebanon. The complex sectarian political system, which is built on delicate balances between different sects and parties, makes it difficult to hold officials accountable without triggering broader crises. Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, both of which wield significant influence within the past Mikati government, are among the most prominent forces opposing the continuation of the investigation, fearing that the charges might extend to some of their allies.

The obstruction of the investigation and the lack of accountability are clear evidence of the deterioration of the system and Lebanon’s descent towards becoming a failed state, amid numerous political obstacles.

But now after the election of President Aoun, the ceasefire in southern Lebanon, and the nomination of Judge Nawaf Salam as Prime minister that is working on the creation of a new government revive the hope of a transparent trial.

Internationally, countries such as France have taken a stance in support of the independence of the investigation, on the other hand the International Commission of Jurists Human Rights Council called to Establish an International Investigative Mission into the Beirut Blast¹⁵ The European Parliament has issued resolutions condemning the Lebanese authorities’ failure to conduct an effective investigation into the explosion. MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) have repeatedly called for sanctions against Lebanese officials obstructing justice. In September 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution urging an independent investigation and warning of targeted sanctions¹⁶.

Members of the US Congress have also urged a credible and independent investigation into the explosion. Some have called for US sanctions on Lebanese officials who have interfered with the

¹⁵ www.icj.org - Human Rights Council: Establish an International Investigative Mission into the Beirut Blast, 2021

¹⁶ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/>

judicial process. In 2021, US lawmakers discussed including Lebanon's corruption issues and the port explosion investigation in broader foreign policy deliberations¹⁷.

The UNHCR stated in 2024 that an international investigation should be held while after nearly four years after the blast, nobody has been held to account, and the Lebanese authorities have continuously obstructed the investigation¹⁸.

In 2023, The International Democrat Union stated that they support the statement issued by 40 members of the Lebanese Parliament of January 27, 2023, calling for the investigation to continue unimpeded and call on the Lebanese authorities to stop obstructing the investigation into the explosion of the port and to provide the necessary support to the lead investigator, Judge Tarek Bitar¹⁹.

The World Bank published a detailed report titled "Beirut Residents' Perspectives on August 4 Blast: Findings from a Needs and Perception Survey" that reflects international concern and the need for accountability, echoing sentiments similar to those expressed by human rights bodies²⁰. All these positions have yet to have a decisive impact on the ground. The international community has so far avoided imposing severe sanctions, fearing that such measures could further destabilize Lebanon, which is already in a precarious situation.

Conclusion

The Beirut Port explosion is not just a tragic incident in Lebanon's history; it is a true test of the country's political and judicial systems. Despite more than four years having passed since the catastrophe, justice remains elusive, hindered by internal political pressures and external interventions that have obstructed the course of the investigation. As Lebanon continues to grapple with its ongoing political and economic crises, the future of the investigation remains uncertain. However, the hope for justice persists, kept alive by the steadfastness of Judge Bitar and the relentless efforts of the victims' families.

¹⁷ <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>

¹⁸ www.hrw.org - UN Human Rights Council: Beirut Blast Inquiry Needed, 2024

¹⁹ www.idu.org - Joint Statement by the International Democrat Union and the Centrist Democrat International on Lebanon – The political culture of impunity must end, 2023

²⁰ [World Bank Document](#)

SOURCES

1. Documents and articles provided in the investigation file.
2. Publications:
 - ScienceDirect: Investigative consequence analysis: A case study research of beirut explosion accident – 2021
 - Arab Center Washington DC- Beirut Port Explosion: The Investigation That Will Shape Lebanon's Future 2021
 - Research Gate: Beirut explosion aftermath: lessons and guidelines 2021
 - World Bank: Beirut residents' perspectives on august 4 blast. Findings from a needs and perception survey
3. Media coverage from local news agencies regarding the investigations.
4. Reports from Human rights watch.

Albert Jawhar is a project manager at Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation Lebanon office. He is a specialist and researcher in legal and political affairs.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Michael Bauer

Head of KAS Office Lebanon

michael.bauer@kas.de

www.kas.de/libanon/



The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: "Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 4.0 international" (CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>