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LEBANON, THE HEIST OF THE CENTURY

A film by Miyuki Droz Aramaki & Sylvain Lepetit

BRAIN
WORKS

SYNOPSIS

Both the large fire and the blast wave that destroyed the Port of Beirut caused more damage to the Lebanese capital than a 15-year civil war. This explosion, which was caused by 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate which were unsafely stored in the port, is the perfect illustration of the greed, negligence and corruption of a ruling class that has been in power for over thirty years.

These leaders are actually former warlords who then became corrupt politicians and split the country's wealth among themselves. As good military strategists, they know how to constantly take advantage of the geopolitical position of this tiny country, wedged between Israel and Syria, which is a constant battleground for French, American, Saudi and Iranian diplomatic influences.

These few predatory families, who have been in power since the 80s, have led Lebanon to its current state of bankruptcy. Never before in Lebanese memory has the country experienced such misery, even during the worst days of the fighting: the Lebanese pound has seen its value divided by six in just a few months, the prices of basic foodstuffs keep on skyrocketing, while the banks go bankrupt. The Lebanese no longer have access to their bank accounts and seek to flee abroad to avoid sinking into extreme poverty.

Most recently, the World Bank decided to suspend its donations of COVID- 19 vaccines. Its teams had just found out that 16 Lebanese MPs along with their families were receiving COVID- 19 vaccines that were intended to be given to medical teams. As the healthcare system is on the brink of bankruptcy, kept afloat by doctors and nurses who are no longer paid, other MPs suggested that future vaccines, which were donated free of charge by Russia be sold on the private market.



This unstoppable hydra has six heads: two of them are Christians, two others are Shiites, one of them is Sunni and the other one is Druze. Their names and those of their parties have been appearing tirelessly on the Lebanese political theater since the 1980s: former general-turned-President Michel Aoun, billionaire Sunni Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Amal militia leader and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, Hassan Nasrallah's Hezbollah, leader of the Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea and enigmatic Druze leader Walid Joumblatt.

After killing each other during the civil war, yesterday's enemies are now sticking together to keep their heads above water. As in the days of the civil war, they cynically continue to play on geopolitical rivalries to keep themselves in power: Saudi Arabia against Iran, Syria against Israel, the French and Europeans against the Americans... A subtle game that allows them to remain unaccountable: Neither to the citizens they are supposed to represent, nor to the international community that has been financing Lebanon at a loss for thirty years.



What are the hundreds of billions of euros of aid that have been distributed since the end of the civil war being used for? Certainly not for the country's infrastructures, that had to be rebuilt after a 15-year civil war. Since 2021, Lebanon has been experiencing power cuts that last up to 12 hours a day, there's no running water, waste is being dumped in the sea, phone calls are among the most expensive ones on the planet, while the Internet connection is one of the weakest in the world. Not to mention roads, wastewater treatment, school and hospital construction... in short, that's everything a functional state needs to have. And yet, on a per capita basis, millions of euros have been paid out to get Lebanon back on its feet. Between bilateral aid, multilateral loans, humanitarian aid and cooperation agreements, it is impossible to know the incredible amount of money that has been given to such a tiny country.

In Lebanon, everyone knows: money has been massively embezzled. Donor countries are also aware of this, but for a long time they turned a blind eye in the name of regional stability.

After the explosion of August 4, 2020, for the first time, the international community decided to stop financing a system that is despised by its own people. The Lebanese people even took to the streets to demonstrate in front of Western embassies, asking the donors not to help their government, as the money would be embezzled. Under Emmanuel Macron's leadership, stepping outside the usual polished framework of diplomacy, the IMF, the World Bank and the European Union cut Lebanon off. There would be no more blank checks from then on, said the French president, who took the liberty of using words to describe what was wrong: that this was a criminal system, a Ponzi scheme, leaders who should be ashamed. Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean Yves Le Drian went even further and said: For me, Lebanon is the Titanic without the orchestra.

How did Switzerland of the Middle East get stripped of all its wealth? And why can't anyone bring down these castes of criminal families who have turned their territories into hunting grounds? The film will capture the spirit of the last thirty years that led to catastrophe, between the hopes for peace and the development of an educated Lebanese middle class and the power of warlords that met with real estate and financial madness at the turn of the 2000s. A place that seems to us to symbolize this great game, which we may use as a symbol

during the film: Casino du Liban. Built in the late 50s during the country's golden age, this palace reopened after the civil war. In 2017, management had the installation of the world's largest roulette wheel certified by the Guinness Book of Records... while a few months later, the Lebanese economy collapsed. This place will allow us to set up in images a world of fake luxury: that of the winning fever, easy money and the rhythm of slot machines. Without going into detailed portraits of each of these families, we will go back over their main feats of war, the poker game that enabled them to make billions of dollars, the unnatural alliance that took everyone by surprise or the financial mechanism that wiped out the Lebanese people's savings.

Finally, the film will be set in a historic Franco- Lebanese context: having visited the country twice already and planning a third visit, Emmanuel Macron has made the Lebanese issue one of the top priorities of the end of his five-year term. No other international leader has put so much effort into what can only be described as a diplomatic mess.

When Jacques Chirac left the Elysée Palace, he lived out the rest of his life in the Hariri family's luxurious Paris apartment on boulevard St-Germain.

From the Karachi scandal to François Fillon's luxury gifts scandal, the shadow of obscure Lebanese intermediaries constantly looms over French politics. This story, which is almost a thousand years old, also enables us to understand the expectations of a segment of Lebanese society, who see Paris as a protective referee rather than the former colonial power.

The majority of Lebanon's elite first learned how to read and write in Beirut's French-speaking schools, and many Lebanese intellectuals at some point in their lives attended French universities. Today, the French-speaking community in Lebanon goes far beyond religious or community barriers.





POSSIBLE SPEAKERS

Of all the warlords still active, Walid Joumblatt is the most forthcoming and the least hyppocrite. As perfectly fluent in French, his family has been living in a feudal stronghold in Chouf since the 17th century, handing down power over the Druze community from one generation to the next. As a true political weathervane, he has made and broken alliances his entire life.

Benjamin Barthe, as a *Le Monde* foreign editor based in the Middle East and the 2008 Albert Londres Prize winner for his reporting on Gaza, he has been living in Beirut for the past 6 years. He is one of Lebanon' s leading political and financial experts.

Danny Azzi, a former banker and head of Standard Chartered in Lebanon, regularly appears in the Lebanese media. Always elegantly dressed, he greets guests with a cigar in his hand in the most luxurious cafés of Beirut' s financial hub, but always speaks his mind.

Sybille Rizk, as the Director of Public Policies of Kulluna Irada, she is one of the best observers of this mafia system.

Marie-Claude Najm had agreed after the 2019 revolution to become Lebanon's Minister of Justice. A concession to the demonstrators, considering she was one of the few "technocrats" who were to reform the country. Not attached to any party, she had a front-row seat to observe what she described as an "administration rotten to the core" and a system of political allegiance over which she had no control. She resigned after the explosion in August 2020 after nearly being lynched by the angry crowd.



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