



# The Beirut Explosion – Is there a Hezbollah Connection?

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The major questions regarding the causes, and responsibilities, of the catastrophic explosion relate to the origin and destination of the ammonium nitrate cargo and the reasons that led to its storage in the Beirut port for six years.

This short paper analyses the available information at this moment and the discrepancies in the various reports in order to try to clarify if Hezbollah had any connection to this affair, as some in the Lebanese public believe.

### **Official versions**

Lebanon's President, Michel Aoun, blamed the detonation on 2,750 tones of ammonium nitrate that he said had been stored unsafely at a warehouse in the port.

A similar amount of the chemical arrived on a Moldovan-flagged cargo ship, the MV Rhosus, which docked in Beirut in 2013 after suffering technical problems while sailing from Georgia to Mozambique. The Rhosus was inspected, banned from leaving and was shortly afterwards abandoned by its owners, according to Shiparrested.com. Its cargo was reportedly transferred to Warehouse 12 following a court order and should have been disposed of or resold.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab described the circumstances that led to the explosion as "unacceptable". Mr Koraytem and the director general of Lebanese Customs, Badri Daher, said their warnings about the danger posed by the stored ammonium nitrate and calls for it to be removed were repeatedly ignored.

Authorities in Lebanon have detained 16 people as part of an urgent "transparent" investigation decided by the Lebanese government. The public opinion in the country does not believe in a fair investigation and is asking for an independent international one.

Eighteen people have been questioned, including port and customs officials, and "those who carried out these works" where the ammonium nitrate was being stored, the government's Deputy Commissioner to the Military Court, Judge Fady Akiki, said. Maintenance was conducted on the warehouse just hours before the blast. Akiki added that investigations are ongoing "to include all other suspects, in order to clarify all facts related to this disaster."

### **The mysterious ship and its ammonium nitrate cargo saga**

According to a detailed report in the New York Times, the Rhosus ship, which flew the flag of Moldova, arrived in Beirut in November 2013, two months after it left the Black Sea port of Batumi, in Georgia. The ship was leased by Igor Grechushkin, a Russian businessman living in Cyprus.

Grechushkin had been paid \$1 million to transport the high-density ammonium nitrate to the port of Beira in Mozambique, the captain said.

The ammonium nitrate was purchased by the International Bank of Mozambique for Fábrica de Explosivos de Moçambique, a firm that makes commercial explosives, according to Baroudi and Partners, a Lebanese law firm representing the ship's crew, in a statement issued on August 5, 2020. Grechushkin, who was in Cyprus at the time and communicating by telephone, told the captain he didn't have enough money to pay for passage through the Suez Canal. So, he sent the ship to Beirut to earn some cash by taking on an additional cargo of heavy machinery. But in Beirut, the machinery would not fit into the ship, which was about 30 or 40 years old, the captain said. Prokoshev, the captain, joined the ship in Turkey after a mutiny over unpaid wages by a previous crew.

"I have no idea how Grechushkin got permission for us to dock in Beirut," Prokoshev said in the interview with the Russian publication MediaZona, adding that in "Beirut the crew was told to load up the ship with heavy machinery".

Then Lebanese officials found the ship unseaworthy and impounded the vessel for failing to pay the port docking fees and other charges. When the ship's suppliers tried to contact Grechushkin for payment for fuel, food and other essentials, he could not be reached, having apparently abandoned the ship he had leased.

Six crew members returned home, but Lebanese officials forced the captain and three Ukrainian crew members to remain on board until the debt issue was solved. Their plight attracted attention back in Ukraine, where news accounts described the stranded crew as "hostages," trapped aboard an abandoned ship.

Increasingly desperate, Prokoshev sold some of the ship's fuel and used the proceeds to hire a legal team, and these lawyers also warned the Lebanese authorities that the ship was in danger "of sinking or blowing up at any moment," according to the law firm's statement.

A Lebanese judge ordered the release of the crew on compassionate grounds in August 2014, and the owner, Grechushkin, having resurfaced, paid for their passage back to Ukraine. Grechushkin could not be reached for comment.

Prokshev, who said he is still owed \$60,000 in wages, placed the fault with Grechushkin, and with Lebanese officials, who insisted on first impounding the boat, and then on keeping the ammonium nitrate in the port "instead of spreading it on their fields." "They could have had very good crops instead of a huge explosion," he said. As for the Rhosus, it had sunk in the harbor in 2015 or 2016, after taking water on board.

The crew's departure left the Lebanese authorities in charge of the ship's deadly cargo, which was moved to a storage facility known as Hangar 12, where it remained until the explosion.

Senior customs officials wrote to the Lebanese courts at least six times from 2014 to 2017, seeking guidance on how to dispose of the ammonium nitrate, according to public records posted to social media by a Lebanese lawmaker, Salim Aoun.

"In view of the serious danger posed by keeping this shipment in the warehouses in an inappropriate climate," Shafik Marei, the director of Lebanese customs, wrote in May 2016, "we repeat our request to demand the maritime agency to re-export the materials immediately." The customs officials proposed several solutions, including donating the ammonium nitrate to the Lebanese Army, or selling it to the privately owned Lebanese Explosives Company. Marei sent a second, similar letter a year later. The judiciary failed to respond to any of his pleas, the records suggested.

### **The Mozambique version**

The ammonium nitrate was sold by a fertilizer producer, Georgian Rustavi Azot LLC, to an explosives manufacturer in Mozambique, Fábrica de Explosivos. Reuters tried to contact a well-placed source at the Mozambican company via LinkedIn, but so far has been unable to get any reactions or clarifications. Levan Burdiladze, director of infrastructure at Rustavi Azot, says that only in the last three years has the company operated the chemical plant where it currently operates, so it cannot confirm the origin of the ammonium nitrate in question.

Cornelder, the company which manages the Port of Beira was never notified of the operation of a ship bound for Mozambique with 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, which caused explosions in Lebanon. "Normally, before receiving a ship, we are notified. In this case, we never received any notification from a ship that came to the port of Beira with these characteristics and cargo," said António Libombo, Cornelder's deputy executive director, the company that has managed the Port of Beira since 1998. The Ministry of Transport and Communications of Mozambique also said that it had not been informed about a ship with these characteristics that year.

### **Hezbollah's hints and silences**

Al-Mayadin, a TV station close to the movement announced quickly that "the incident was not caused by a terrorist act." After the explosion, a Hezbollah spokesman, on its official TV station Al-Manar, quickly untied any link with the act by the terrorist group and said that "it all started with a short circuit." Apparently addressing rumors that the cause of the blast in Beirut was an Israeli strike on Hezbollah weaponry, sources close to Hezbollah tell Lebanon's OTV "there is no truth" to such claims.

According to Ehud Yaari, a known Israeli journalist and expert on Middle East, Major-General Abbas Ibrahim, General Director of the General Directorate of General Security (GSS), was the one who hurried to say the massive blast that shook Beirut's port area was caused by confiscated "high

explosive materials." It would be "naive to describe such an explosion as due to fireworks," Ibrahim told Lebanese TV. The GSDG is today the most powerful of Lebanon's internal state security organs. Ibrahim is considered by many Lebanese analysts to function on behalf of Hizballah within the state security system, often playing a mediating role.

The person who actually manages the port of Beirut, is Wafiq Safa, Hezbollah security chief and Nasrallah's brother-in-law, married to Nasrallah's sister. On July 9, 2019, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Safa as the head of Hezbollah's security apparatus, directly linked to Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, for exploiting Lebanon's ports and border crossings to smuggle contraband and facilitate travel on behalf of Hezbollah, undermining the security and safety of the Lebanese people, while also draining valuable import duties and revenue away from the Lebanese government.

It is important to note that Hezbollah has not reacted officially to the disastrous event until Friday evening August 7, some 72 hours after the explosion, a clear sign of deep embarrassment. Hezbollah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah was scheduled to speak on Wednesday night August 5 in relation with the present tension on the border with Israel, but Al-Manar announced that his speech was delayed and "his eminence will tackle latest developments."

In his relative short appearance Nasrallah was rather on the defensive and repelled those voices in Lebanon which, "from the first hour of the explosion - when people hadn't even figured out what happened or who caused it, etc. some local, Arab media and political factions had their story pre-determined that what exploded in warehouse was a Hezbollah arms cache, explosive materials, missiles. Didn't matter, it just had to be Hezbollah. This is unfair. This is exceptional unfairness," he said. [citations from the speech were taken from the simultaneous translation on Twitter by David Daoud, research analyst on Hezbollah and Lebanon – 7.8.2020]

"I want to be very clear and totally deny that we have nothing in this warehouse -- no missile, ammonium nitrate, no bullet, not now, not in the past," he said emphatically. "We know how the ammonium nitrates arrived at the warehouse, and I don't want to spend more time dealing with this. Investigation will decide if what was destroyed was military in nature."

Moreover, he denied any link between the organization and the Beirut port. "We don't know anything that goes on in Beirut Port. Some questioned whether Hezbollah knows more about Haifa port in Israel than Beirut Port. Yes, correct, because as Resistance it is our duty to know what's going on in Haifa port, but not Beirut Port." This, in contradiction with what is known about the intense activity in the port of Wafiq Safa, Hezbollah security chief and his brother-in-law,

Nasrallah even hinted at the possibility that the explosion “may have been caused by external actors, jets, missiles, etc.” He thus took advantage of a previous declaration by his ally, Lebanese President Michel Aoun, that “one possibility about the cause of Beirut Port explosion is that “foreign/external intervention caused this incident.”

As to the investigation, Nasrallah clearly prefers one done by the Lebanese establishment and his allies, not an international one. “Now there's a matter of trust. If all Lebanese people and factions trust the Lebanese Armed Forces, let LAF conduct investigation. If some Lebanese trust one security agency, and others trust another -- let both agencies conduct a joint investigation. But if there's consensus on LAF's trustworthiness, let them investigate and reveal findings.”

And he finished on an optimistic and defying note: “I want to say to those who have started a battle with Hezbollah over this disaster -- you won't achieve any results. I tell Hezbollah's base, do not worry. These people are chasing mirages. Just as they were disappointed in the past, they will be disappointed again.”

In sum, Nasrallah has tried to convince the Lebanese people and the international community that Hezbollah is clean of any past or present involvement in the Beirut port explosion. In fact, he didn't deal at all with the numerous queries in this grave affair.

#### **Hezbollah's previous experiences with ammonium nitrate for terrorist attacks**

In September 2015, thanks to a tip-off from a foreign government, reportedly Israel, police and intelligence agents in London raided four properties and uncovered three metric tones of the explosive agent ammonium nitrate contained in thousands of ice packs. This raid was done under wraps, didn't involve any prosecutions, and was kept secret for years. The Hezbollah cell that stockpiled these ice packs in London was part of a much broader Hezbollah operation to hideaway ammonium nitrate ice packs and other explosive materials in strategic locations all over the world and is closely connected with previously reported plots from Thailand to Cyprus.

A further storehouse filled with approximately four tones of explosive agents, including ammonium nitrate, presumably in ice packs, was raided by Thai police after their arrest of the Hezbollah agent Hussein Atris in January 2012. Atris claimed the explosives were not for use in Thailand, and the National Police chief said they were found in shipping crates for export to other countries and that the cache had been hidden there for at least a year.

In October 2014, Hezbollah operative Muhammad Amadar was arrested in Peru with explosives, having been caught scoping out local Jewish and Israeli, targets. The explosives found in Amadar's house probably were transferred from the Thailand storage. A similar plot was disrupted in Bolivia

around 2015, and a Saudi paper reported in 2017 that Bolivian police foiled a would-be Hezbollah plot to conduct large attacks against tourists in Bolivia, Peru, and Chile.

A discovery of 8.2 tons of ammonium nitrate ice packs in Cyprus in 2015 and the arrest and subsequent conviction of Hussein Bassam Abdallah as a Hezbollah agent planning attacks on Israeli or Jewish targets in the country showed that Cyprus was also the “point of export” for other planned attacks throughout Europe, including possibly for the bombing of an Israeli tourist bus in Burgas, Bulgaria, in 2012. The Cyprus stockpile had been stashed there since at least 2011, which was likely true of the 2015 London find as well.

Cypriot and Greek media are speculating if there is any “eerie connections” between the ammonium nitrate discovered in Cyprus in 2015, but found there since 2011, and the owner of Rhosus, Igor Grechushkin, the Russian businessman without Cypriot citizenship, manager of Teto Shipping, a bankrupt company with a Marshall Islands registration.

#### **Significant questions the investigation will have to clarify**

If nobody waited for the ammonium nitrate in Mozambique, was the Beirut stop of the ship “for technical failure” only a trick to have it stockpiled there?

Nobody contacted the company Fábrica de Explosivos de Mozambique, which probably appeared on the manifest of the ship to ask if they want it, after paying 1 million dollars to the owner of the ship?

Who decided to store the sensitive explosive in the port despite a client waiting for it in Mozambique?

Who decided during the six years’ time, again and again, to keep it in the port in poor conditions?

During all these years did someone have access to the Hangar 12 to take away some of the stoked material, and if positive, who was it?

Was there any storage of Hezbollah weapons in the proximity of the ammonium nitrate which could put in jeopardy the sensitive explosive material?

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