

# **ELIAS MOUKHEIBER INSTITUTE FOR LEBANON**

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## **BEIRUT HERITAGE INITIATIVE**

**PROPOSAL FOR THE PRESERVATION**

**OF**

**HERITAGE HOUSES DAMAGED**

**BY THE AUGUST 4 BEIRUT BLAST**

## THE ELIAS MOUKHEIBER INSTITUTE FOR LEBANON (EMIL)

### Our Vision

The go-to place in Lebanon to design, develop and dialogue about solutions to the country's true challenges. A policy-oriented think-tank committed to tackling hard questions in a rigorous and inclusive manner, and to provide solutions to endemic political and social problems within Lebanese government and society.

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### Mission

Harnessing Lebanon's potential and creating pathways to a uniquely successful nation and society through creative policy development and leadership, training and mentorship of the next generation.

Linking with the Lebanese diaspora to develop solutions for their country's true challenges, while creating a network of generations committed to working together for Lebanon's future.

### Our Values

Rationality, empathy, credibility, creativity, adaptability, resourcefulness, patience, learning, gender inclusiveness (gender, socio-economic status, religious, political inclination) teamwork, analytical rigor and rationality, courage, non-partisanship, loyalty, trustworthiness & commitment to a better future for Lebanon, irrespective of personal political preferences.

### SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

The two August 4 blasts that lasted seconds created more structural damage in a few minutes than 15 years of civil war (1975-1990). In the blink of an eye, half of the capital was gone, in an apocalyptic scene of death and destruction.

This devastating explosion resulting from nearly 2,750 tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate igniting at the port of Beirut rocked the Lebanese capital and wreaked havoc throughout the city killing at least 200 persons, wounding nearly 6,500. Around a quarter million are now homeless. The explosion created a pressure wave that ripped through the capital, impacting some 8,000 structures,

including 640 historic buildings - approximately 60 of which are at risk of collapsing. The areas directly impacted by the explosion, including predominantly Christian and Armenian neighborhoods such as Gemayze, Mar Mikhael and Achrafieh also had the highest concentration of historic structures (such as the Sursock museum, Lady Cochrane's palace, The Three Doctors School, the Old Clinics building of Saint George Hospital, the Geitawi Hospital, historic churches and mosques and many private homes.) These splendid buildings were the only remaining core of 'old Beirut, mostly built in the 1800-1920 timeframe, during the Ottoman and French Mandate eras.

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These neighborhoods have since continuously been tight-knit communities housing generations of families, artists and artisans, schools, small businesses, mom-and-pop shops, and in the last 15 years, a concentration of trendy boutiques, restaurants, bars and art galleries significantly contributing to the city's livelihood and social and cultural life.

Beyond the physical destruction, the human impact of the twin explosions is massive: there are now an estimated 300,000 homeless as a direct result of the explosions; all local businesses, without exception, are destroyed; the rainy season starts in Beirut in late September / October and continues throughout April / May. Because of the nature of the community (largely stable in makeup since the 1800's, small businesses, a mix of older people living there since their birth and trendy, younger newcomers working mostly in fashion, the arts or the restaurant / bar scene), most do not have the luxury of other housing or extra income.

The dire economic crisis in Lebanon, which came to a head in October 2019 and has since resulted in massive devaluation of the currency against the dollar (going from 1500 LL/1US\$ to 8000 LL/1US\$), huge inflation (about 250% in that time frame) and massive restrictions on withdrawing funds from banks (ranging from \$200-\$3000 per month) and only in local currency equivalent at a rate half that of the black market rate, means that people affected by the explosions now face intense pressure to sell-up to real estate developers because they can neither afford to restore their homes or live in them. Because they are pressed to find alternative housing for their families, their only recourse is to sell cheaply in order to have cash in hand. There is clear evidence that many such deals are taking

place under the table, threatening the existence of an entire chunk of the community and the historical makeup of the city.

The fact that the explosions destroyed the harbor also creates an additional significant hurdle: Lebanon imports 90% of all its goods (industrial, food, medicines, commercial merchandise...) through the Beirut harbor. The destruction means that this route is no longer available, with the consequence being a lack of materials arriving in Lebanon to facilitate reconstruction. Land transit through Jordan, Syria and Turkey has now partially replaced this route but it means that availability of construction materials (glass, wood, plastic, tools, tiles...) is reduced and prices have increased significantly.

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Therefore, the extent of the destruction on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, combined with the ongoing and unprecedented major economic crisis as well as the restrictions both on cash and available materials, means that there is now a major humanitarian crisis affecting 300,000 people in their most basic needs: housing and food. Many NGOs have risen to the immediate challenge. Mostly young people are volunteering to alleviate daily needs. Many donations continue to arrive with those needs in mind. The government is totally absent.

This proposal is to help conservationists preserve temporarily the further destruction of historic homes through rain and wind while awaiting materials and funds that will allow their restoration to their previous architectural splendor, while preserving their original ownership. This is an essential first step to preserving both personal property and the possibility of rebirth of the local community. The lessons learned from the fate of Beirut's center post the 1975 civil war are to be heeded, lest another core of the city disappears forever again.

During the civil war, the capital's downtown became an artillery zone for rival militias. All of its historic buildings, markets and boulevards became a wasteland denuded of people and commercial activity and were severely damaged. There exists a very large trove of pictures and videos of both intact Beirut and war-scarred Beirut. With the war's end, Beirut Downtown became prime real estate again. The government wanted to regenerate the city center and to do that created Solidere, a public-private Company that bought the land and buildings in return for shares in the Company, with the aim of encouraging investment in the

ravaged city center. But few developers were interested in refurbishing what remained standing. Hundreds of historic buildings initially designated for restoration were in fact razed, with no laws to stop the destruction.

Instead, high-rise towers came up, with luxury apartments and high-end stores meant more for wealthy Gulf tourists and overseas Lebanese than for locals. Instead of a downtown reborn, the district became, to many, a symbol of Beirut's post-war ills: corruption and incompetent handling of the economy.

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Today the problem is there continues to be no law to prevent such massive, thoughtless destruction; every single developer can demolish. We know that not all buildings are dangerous for public safety, but this pretext will be used as it was in the past to benefit developers at the expense of residents and community life. Many Lebanese fear a second version of the Solidere scenario and its impact not only on structures but also on residents and their livelihood.

With many homeowners in dire financial straits, unable to either live in or repair their homes, Lebanon's conservationists also fear an onslaught of opportunistic developers ready to snap up historic buildings, tear them down and turn them into apartment blocks. This proposal addresses this fear by helping conservationists protect damaged homes by covering them with tarps strong enough to withstand rain and wind, thereby limiting additional damage to weakened structures, while more extensive repair work is being planned and executed.

### **The Institute's Commitment to Responding to the August 4, 2020 Beirut Blast**

EMIL, through the commitment of its founding members, asserts that preserving Beirut's heritage houses is a matter of identity. It is not just about the building but about preserving cultural heritage. It is part of the collective memory and identity of Lebanon.

This initiative is one of a handful of examples in a growing push in Lebanon toward rehabilitating threatened landmarks, many of them damaged in the war, and re-envisioning them as collective spaces.

In a country with 18 recognized religious sects and a complicated patchwork of political groups, we need to have those spaces of collective memory, spaces of gathering, spaces of a rich multicultural community.

## **Lessons Learned from The Cost of Doing Nothing**

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Amid the largely privatized post-war reconstruction process, developers and politicians imagined Beirut transforming into a glittering modern metropolis like Dubai. Despite the commitment to owners to rebuild the city's historic French Mandate and Ottoman-era buildings, many were leveled and replaced by high rises, faster, cheaper and more lucrative to build.

Some once-vacant heritage sites have been renovated in recent years and reemerged with a range of uses: as galleries, cultural centers, restaurants, and private residences. But many remain abandoned or under threat.

Fast response for the relief of those destituted homes ravaged by the August 4 explosion is urgent to preserve the soul of communal living and to safeguard Lebanese unity.

## **LOCAL & INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE**

On the day following the explosion, a thorough assessment of the situation in all the neighborhoods was carried out by the Directorate General of Antiquities in collaboration with the Beirut Heritage Initiative, an independent group of volunteer architects and engineers. Architectural damages and deterioration of historic artifacts were noted. Immediate safeguarding measures were taken, but the race to seal the roof-tops before the imminent rain season has become a priority to prevent the remaining structures from collapsing.

Various groups have mobilized to combat unrestricted redevelopment, with teams of volunteers assessing the buildings' structural integrity.

The renovation work is being carried out by the Beirut Heritage Initiative, a coalition that includes among others the U.N. culture agency UNESCO, the French Embassy and the Order of Architects. The state is largely absent, apart from producing licenses for work.

Many of the buildings destroyed in the blast were proud holdouts. Since the end of the 15-year civil war in 1990, many old buildings have been demolished and replaced by modern high rises, as speculators stepped in to make fortunes. Since the blast occurred there have been reports of middlemen scouting destroyed neighborhoods and making offers to buy old buildings. That appears to have provoked a determination by owners to save their buildings.

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A giant banner placed on a damaged historic building reads in Arabic and English: “We are staying.” Another banner hanged on a street in Gemayze reads: “Our history is not for sale.”

“National heritage should be protected. It is an important heritage for the identity of the country,” UNESCO’s chief Audrey Azoulay told journalists during her visit in Beirut. She added that UNESCO launched a campaign titled “Li Beirut,” or for Beirut, and called on states, the private sector and individuals to donate money. She also called for preserving the historic districts of Beirut through laws that prevent selling buildings by taking advantage of weak owners.

With museums, galleries and cultural institutions expected to experience substantial losses in revenues, preliminary estimates show that \$500,000,000 are needed over the coming year to support heritage and the creative economy (UNESCO).

UNESCO will prioritize interventions to stabilize, secure and safeguard several historic buildings located in the most affected neighborhoods.

## BUDGET

The estimated Budget to purchase and install tarps on the roofs of damaged buildings that the Beirut Heritage Initiative will execute in partnership with EMIL:

Targeted Buildings: N=160 (out of a total of 640)

Average square meters needed per building : 400 to 500 m<sup>2</sup>

160 buildings x 500 m<sup>2</sup> = 80,000 m<sup>2</sup>

80,000 square meters of tarps needed to cover 160 buildings

Lina S. Moukheiber, MPH  
President & Co-Founder

Tarps on the local market come in 10 m x 20 m size @150 \$

Average needed is 20 m x 40 m per building @ \$300

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Total Estimated Budget

\$300 per building x 160 buildings = \$48,000

## Key Partners & Players

EMIL will seek local and international support to ensure that funds are marshaled to provide short-term relief to homeowners while also coming up with a long-term framework to prevent a repeat of Solidere's impact on what is left of the last historical and architectural treasures in Beirut.

EMIL will ensure oversight of the execution of this project and will coordinate technical, financial, administrative and legal aspects. A financial audit will be conducted and shared with the donors.

EMIL will oversee and guarantee compliance with best practices and insure its transparent financial management and resources allocation: budget controls, spending, regular financial reports sent to donors and partners showing the spend and beneficiary.

EMIL commits that 100% of the funds raised will be used for the purchase of tarps as above. Distribution and installation will be offered by the partners: the DGA and the Beirut Heritage Initiative.

## Key Contextual Facts

The only law protecting so-called “archaeological structures” was enacted before 1700.

Caretaker Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni issued a decree preventing the sale of any historic building without permission, a move that aims to prevent “exploitation.”

Lina S. Moukheiber, MPH  
President & Co-Founder

Abbas Mortada, the caretaker Minister of Culture also issued an edict stopping any sale of real estate in neighborhoods affected by the blast until after completion of restoration work.

## **ANNEX 1**

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Pictures from the Gemayze neighborhood where many homes potentially benefiting from this initiative are.

## **ANNEX 2**

Bank details attached for transfer of donations to a fresh USD account for ease of withdrawal.

## **References**

Beirut Heritage Initiative <https://www.facebook.com/BeirutHeritageInitiative>

Directorate General of Antiquities

UNESCO <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1071212>

Dr. Amine Iskandar, Architect



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Photo Credit: Amine Iskandar



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Photo Credit: Rami Rizk

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President & Co-Founder

## **DOMICILIATION**

BANK AUDI SAL

**Titulaire du compte**

AGENCE BAB IDRIS

ASSOCIATION ELIAS MOUKHEIBER EMIL

BANK AUDI PLAZA

## RUE OMAR DAOUK, BAB IDRIS

BEYROUTH

LIBAN

Banque	Guichet	No.Compte	Rubrique Comptable
00056 - BANK AUDI SAL	00004 - AGENCE BAB IDRIS	009246570004	EXTERNAL CURRENT ACCOUNT

## **IBAN (International Bank Account Number)**

LB91005600000000009246570004

## **BIC (Bank Identifier Code)**

AUDBLBBXXXX

**Ce relevé est destiné à être remis, sur leur demande, à vos créanciers ou débiteurs appelés à faire inscrire des opérations à votre compte (virements, prélevements, etc....).**

**Son utilisation vous garantit le bon enregistrement des opérations en cause et vous évite ainsi des réclamations pour erreurs ou retards d'imputation.**