



# Not just another story: The power of applied human rights

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**Abstract:** A photojournalistic project tells the collapse of a state through the personal stories of its citizens. How applied human rights set the ability to understand complex human rights matters in a low-threshold manner? The example of Lebanon.

*Mum, I am sorry but I need to hang up. It's late and I still want to shower before the lights go out with the next electricity cut. – Wait, what is happening?*

It is indeed a fair question: What is happening in Lebanon? During our second semester of the EMA programme in Beirut, Lebanon, in an exchange with the ARMA programme, we were confronted with what experts describe as a [failing state](#) – a country hit by multiple crises and mismanagement causing a humanitarian disaster. We soon realised that our approach to understanding – and conveying to others – an answer to the seemingly basic question of 'what is happening in Lebanon' required many perspectives – and brought up more and more questions, like:

What are the challenges of being the most religiously diverse country in the region? Is there a functioning healthcare system? What is it like to be elderly in Lebanon without receiving any support from the state? How has the [state been reacting](#) to being host to

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the largest number of Syrian refugees per capita worldwide? Why are more and more young people seeking a future outside of the country?

Our human rights-related [project](#) '**Lebanon In a State of Unrest**' was born. With the goal of creating a touring exhibition, we started interviewing persons of different socioeconomic, professional, political, and religious backgrounds who live in the small country on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Over several months, we formed a small transnational team with members from Austria, Lebanon, and Syria – working together on 30 photojournalistic portraits: from a political activist, a survivor of the Beirut port explosion, and a school teacher to a refugee family on the Syrian border, former combatants during the Lebanese Civil War and a DJ representing the wild party scene. In the accompanying texts, the protagonists tell their own experiences in their own words.

Our photojournalistic approach to personal stories combined with background information on the underlying topics allows for a broad audience to experience different realities and perspectives that exist side by side within a multi-faceted and crisis-ridden country.

*Everything is breaking down. It is an every-person-for-themselves kind of situation. From medication shortages to crazy high transportation costs, from malnutrition to mental health issues. We all need a mental break.*

(Excerpt of the story of Lea, medical doctor)

Each story is profoundly individual and simultaneously embedded into a larger topic, which allows the spectator to zoom in and out – comparable to a mosaic. A meaningful feature when it comes to explaining 'what is happening in Lebanon'.



*The lady that once was the iconic picture of the Lebanese Civil War on NY Times is today begging in the streets of Beirut.*



*A young stateless student is holding his "laissez-passez". He was born in Lebanon and is deprived of Lebanese nationality due to gender discrimination legislation. Lebanese women cannot pass on their nationality to their children.*

Since 2019, Lebanon has been in a state of constant turmoil and uncertainty or, in other words, 'unrest'. What used to be [labelled](#) the 'Switzerland of the Middle East', a prosperous, diverse, and lively country, now barely resembles this image. 2019 marked a turning point in Lebanon's most recent history. A severe economic crisis hit the country. With the proceeding devaluation of the Lebanese Lira, the country's collapse keeps unfolding. At the same time, the government is unable to pay and cover basic needs, for the country finds itself in a state of irregularity. State power barely exists, and electricity is mostly provided by the hour from private generators in the neighbourhood. Fuel and bread prices have been on the rise since Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, while salaries are constantly declining. Bank accounts are frozen and life savings have lost most of their value. People are struggling to meet their daily needs. Four out of five people are estimated to live in [poverty](#). Adding up to this ongoing economic crisis, Lebanon, just like almost every country worldwide, was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Yet, this was not the end of Lebanon's devastating experiences. On August 4, 2020, the biggest non-nuclear [explosion](#) destroyed large parts of the Beirut port. With fatal consequences. Not only did the explosion cause the death of over 230 people and an estimated 7.000 injured, Amnesty International [reports](#), the Beirut Blast also brought about massive destruction. When 2.750 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded in seconds, buildings were damaged in a radius of 20 kilometres, displacing an estimated 300,000 people. Yet, to this day no one has been held [responsible](#). There is no justice for the dead nor for the living.

*I will never forget the scene surrounding me (...) When I finally arrived on the street, I could not believe what I saw. There were whole pieces of houses, furniture, a hand, an arm. The sound of sirens all around. You could not drive, because the streets were full of glass. You*

*could not breathe because of the smell, the dust and the smoke. It was apocalyptic, just like in a horror movie. Was that even my city? I felt as if war had broken out.*

(Excerpt of the story of Yasmina, Beirut port explosion survivor)

Notably, the [World Bank](#) warns of follow-up crises as a result of the *status quo*, concerning electricity, water supply, sanitation, and education listing the current situation as one of the most severe global crisis episodes since the mid-nineteenth century. [Olivier De Schutter](#), UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, has drawn a grim picture. The currency has lost 95 percent of its value and prices have increased by over 200 percent. Over 80 percent of the population lives in poverty. Nine out of ten people find it difficult to live on their income. De Schutter has concluded that 'the economic crisis was entirely avoidable', indeed, that 'it was manufactured by failed government policies'. According to him, 'the Lebanese State, including the Central Bank, is responsible for human rights violations, including the unnecessary immiseration of the population, that have resulted from this man-made crisis.'

**FOTO 14** Belongings of a Syrian refugee family living in Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, struggling to provide basic necessities.

**FOTO 05** A Syrian refugee family is watching the busy streets of Shatila refugee camp inside Beirut from their small apartment.

### **When numbers become people**

*Before the crisis, if you went to my house and opened the fridge, you would see chicken, lamb, and beef ... nowadays, you might only find some Labneh (Lebanese yoghurt). I am trying to explain to my kids that the life we used to live is not available anymore.*

(Excerpt of the story of Rabih, who used to run a successful business)

Quantifiable data and reports are crucial tools for spotlighting the often-neglected MENA region. In addition to this, we are convinced that storytelling can serve as a meaningful contribution. First, sharing personal experiences – if treated in a sensitive and destigmatising way – can empower victims and survivors of human rights violations. Second, journalistic approaches can encourage identification and a deeper understanding of how complex issues impact life realities beyond our own. Stories are powerful. Without them, we tend to forget that percentages of populations consist of humans who live and breathe – or that the number three consists of a person and a person and a person. Stories have the capacity to activate what is direly needed in the field of human rights: empathy, conversation, and activism.

*My generation was raised by people who have lived through the Civil War. By people who have been traumatised by the 'other' – the other political party, the other religion, the other community. (...) We need to get exposed to people with other backgrounds and perspectives and to be open-minded and respectful. I want more conversations to happen.*

(Excerpt of the story of Samira, tour guide and content creator in Beirut)

**FOTO 08 A young woman survived the Beirut port explosion in a stuck elevator.**

**FOTO 09 One of the few still remaining Egyptian fishermen in Beirut.**

**FOTO 11 An activist shows remains of bullets she got shot with while she protested against the Beirut port explosion.**

### **Looking ahead**

Our project's inaugural exhibition was held in June 2023 in Vienna at SOHO STUDIOS, and was then hosted in September 2023 in Venice at the Headquarters of the Global Campus of Human Rights. We are planning to bring the exhibition to Beirut in autumn 2024.

**FOTO 03 Two women founded a community project to self-support families in need.**