The 17 October 2019 protests in Lebanon: Perceptions of Lebanese and non-Lebanese residents of Tripoli and surroundings

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Abstract: *Starting from 17 October 2019, Lebanon had witnessed an unprecedented wave of mass protests and mobilisation across its territory. This so-called Thawra came to question the state's social contract, which is built on a peculiar political system: sectarian con-sociationalism. Characterised by institutionalised clientelism and systemic corruption, coupled with an unprecedented economic crisis, the system recently showed its limits. Tripoli is Lebanon's second-largest and most deprived city. Yet, it hosted the largest protests across the country, aptly referred to as the 'bride of the revolution'. To better understand the city's dynamics in this respect, field research was conducted there in January 2020. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, the study reflects on Tripoli's residents' perceptions about the protests. Beyond focusing exclusively on the city's Lebanese residents, it gives some important insights into its vulnerable Syrian and Palestinian refugee*

inhabitants. The study also demonstrates that, surprisingly, Tripoli's citizens have nuanced perceptions about these protests. It reveals through charts how divergence in some of these perceptions depends on conditions such as employment, sex, age and nationality. Finally, it gives some tangible insights into Tripoli's level of mobilisation, engagement, and inclusion of women in the wave of protests.

1   Introduction

Since 17 October 2019 Lebanon has been witnessing a turning point in its modern political and social history. Starting from this date, an unprecedented wave of mass protests and mobilisation has spread throughout the country's cities and regions. Many described these events as a 'revolution'. Nevertheless, it is the first time that the country's social contract is being seriously questioned. This social contract for decades has been based on a consociational political system, which was put in place in order to guarantee the sectarian *status quo*. However, this system derived progressively towards an institutionalised clientelism that resulted in systemic corruption driven by its elites. Recently, this political setup showed its limits due to the deterioration of the country's economy. The accumulation of these factors pushed the Lebanese to the streets.

Yet, the highest rates of mobilisation and participation in the wave of protests were recorded in Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest and most deprived city in terms of income and development. For a better understanding of the causality of the city's dynamics in this respect, field research was conducted in Tripoli in January 2020. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, the study reflects on the perceptions about the ongoing protests of Tripoli's Lebanese and non-Lebanese residents. In this regard, it is important to note that, apart from its Lebanese inhabitants, the city hosts a number of Syrian and Palestinian refugees whose opinions also had to be taken into consideration.

After a short review of the relevant literature, this article presents in detail the used research methodology. It subsequently analyses the results that were filtered out from the survey conducted in Tripoli's diverse neighbourhoods. These results are illustrated by the relevant featured charts and diagrams. An additional part goes beyond these quantitative findings, and focuses on the qualitative observations gathered on the field through the organisation of focus groups and interviews. Beyond focusing only on Tripoli's Lebanese residents, the work also targets its Syrian and Palestinian populations. The analysis gives some tangible insights into

Tripoli's level of mobilisation, engagement, and the inclusion of women and refugees in the ongoing wave of protest.

2   Literature review

With 18 recognised religious sects, Lebanon is a unique example of interaction between politics, demography and religion (Faour 2007). This interaction has been institutionalised in a power-sharing model that attempted to balance the role of the different sects while guaranteeing political representation and group autonomy regarding personal status, education and cultural affairs (Fakhoury 2014). However, this model led to a fragmented society characterised by deep internal divisions, weak institutions and a lack of loyalty to the country (Haddad 2009; Barakat 1973). In practice, it translated into a political system composed by former warlords and businessmen from different sects where a small political elite appropriates the core of the economic surplus and redistributes it through sectarian clientelist affiliations (Baumann 2019; Cammett 2015). The result is a failed system run by corrupt elites responsible for the Lebanese economic shortcomings (Baumann 2019; Traboulsi 2007). The pervasive corruption caused a crumbling infrastructure, almost non-existent public services, and an economy in permanent deficit where public debt is equivalent to more than 150 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank 2019). All of these built up on increased social inequalities and high unemployment rates, especially among the youth.

In this context, the government's proposal on introducing a tax on WhatsApp calls was only the straw that broke the camel's back. It triggered mass protests that started on 17 October 2019. This so-called *thawra*, or 'revolution' in Arabic, came in the midst of an aggravated recession. It soon turned into a generalised uprising against the endemic corruption of the entire sectarian political establishment that had been profiting from the system (Assouad 2019).

This certainly was not the first time that social protests challenged the sectarian political class in the country. Several movements, such as the 'You Stink' movement during the summer of 2015, had already 'helped to negotiate and reshape "political identities" in the context of the political hegemony of sectarianism' (AbiYaghi et al 2017). However, October 2019 was the first time that a popular movement spread outside the capital Beirut to different cities across the country (Yacoubian 2019), where sectarian lines usually are more typically defined.

This is the case of the northern city of Tripoli, which soon became the most dynamic epicentre of the wave of protests. Tripoli is a city that for decades has been one of the poorest and most neglected by the state (Abdo 2019). The city is characterised by high levels of poverty and

inequality, as well as high rates of unemployment (Kukrety & Al-Jamal 2016; UN-Habitat Lebanon 2016). It also has a long history of social and political mobilisation. However, these were mainly focused on pre-existing networks and shaped by Islamist elements (Gade 2018). The situation of instability that Tripoli witnessed from the Civil War in 1975 until the current day allowed Islamic violence to flourish in the city (Mahoudeau 2016).

There are 264 895 registered Lebanese living in Tripoli (AbiYaghi et al 2016). The overwhelming majority of the population are Sunnis living alongside with an Alawite minority (Lefèvre 2014; AbiYaghi et al 2016). The proximity of the city with Syria reflected in political proxy dynamics between its political actors. This led to spill-over effects that concretised in violent rounds of armed clashes around sectarian lines, especially between the Sunni majority *Bab el Tebbaneh* and the Alawite *Jabal Mohsen* adjacent neighbourhoods (Lefèvre 2014; Ismail et al 2017).

In addition, the city hosts around 70 000 UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) registered Syrian refugees (AbiYaghi et al 2016) who arrived after the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011 (Abdo 2019). Their influx has impacted on Tripoli's socio-economic and demographic context, which led to tensions (Thorleifsson 2016). The population of the city has consequently grown by 17 per cent (Ismail et al 2017). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP) reports, 74 per cent of the Syrian refugees are living below the poverty line (cf Ismail et al 2017). This reality aggravated an already difficult situation due to the presence since 1948 of thousands of Palestinian refugees. The majority of the Palestinian population lives in the Beddawi refugee camp (AbiYaghi et al 2016), which is the second-largest Palestinian refugee camp in the country. Their status as permanently displaced persons 'has relegated them to a secondary status by their Lebanese Sunnis co-religionists' (Haddad et al 2003: 17) that suffer from 'deliberate neglect' (Suleiman 2006).

Both Syrians and Palestinians have directly or indirectly been involved in the various episodes of violence in Lebanon, particularly in the post-civil war era in Tripoli (Lefèvre 2014; Haddad et al 2003). In the 2000s, for instance, the city witnessed the emergence of Jihadi Salafist groups such as *Fatah al-Islam*, which was active in some surrounding Palestinian camps (Lefèvre 2014). In parallel, high unemployment rates led to competition over jobs in the city that has been a key source of socio-economic tensions (Ismail et al 2017). As a result, locals might often have a conflictual relationship with the refugee population, while their integration remains a pending issue.

3 Methodology

Against this background, a research project was conducted to establish the perceptions of Lebanese and non-Lebanese Syrian and Palestinian resident populations of Tripoli, in terms of support/non-support, engagement, their feeling of safety, as well as their expectations about the probable outcomes of the protests ongoing at the time in Lebanon. The choice of Tripoli was motivated, on the one hand, by the high level of the city's mobilisation during the wave of protests since October 2019, and by the high concentration of displaced Syrian and Palestinian populations in a relatively small area, on the other.

The research was conducted during the month of January 2020 by a team of 23 international students, with the coordination and supervision of three tutors. It was realised in the framework of the Arab Master's in Democracy and Human Rights (ArMA) programme's activities, based at the Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ), and part of the Global Campus regional programmes.

The project was executed in three phases. A first phase was dedicated to the elaboration of the research plan as well as the tasks' repartition. The second phase included the fieldwork through data collection. This was conducted between 19 and 22 January 2020 in the city of Tripoli and its direct surroundings. The third and last phase consisted of data analysis as well as report drafting and editing.

Since nationality is the main variable, the research question focuses on how nationality affects the perceptions towards protests and mobilisation. Several hypotheses were formulated to verify the likelihood of the expected outcomes. The main tested hypothesis was if nationality, as well as the socio-economic conditions, can affect the level of engagement in the protests. In this study, the definition of the level of engagement is understood as the direct physical participation in any protest-related activity during the period October 2019 to January 2020. In addition to this hypothesis, another expected outcome was assuming that both Syrians and Palestinians would feel more afraid to engage in the protests (fear to be arrested or to be forcibly deported). Their motivation to engage would be hindered by some legal, social, political and historical reasons that are linked to the precariousness of their status as residents. This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis for the testing of the above listed hypotheses.

3.1 Quantitative research methodology

The quantitative research was realised by using the KOBO Toolbox application. The team edited an online-based questionnaire on the application's collect tool that the surveyors could access through

their phones. Survey teams were deployed across Tripoli's various neighbourhoods at different times of the day, throughout the days allocated to the fieldwork. This was held between 19 and 23 January 2020. The data collection process consisted of randomly approaching people on the streets and asking them to orally answer the survey's questions. The surveyors were operating in teams of two to three individuals. Each team had at least one Arabic-speaking member to facilitate the communication with locals. All teams received a brief kick-off training about surveying techniques in order to avoid any form of bias while formulating the questions on the field.

The aimed target was to complete around 300 surveys in order to have a minimal academic relevance. The survey was completed by randomly approaching people on the streets and squares of Tripoli, according to the following sampling categorisation:

- 100 Lebanese who are engaged in the protests: In order to reach this target, surveyors approached Tripoli's protest movements' hotspots where engaged Lebanese were most likely to be found and surveyed. This was mainly done at the Abdel Hamid Karameh or Al-Nour square and its direct surroundings, as well as the Palma intersection. These places were hosting the most vibrant gatherings of protestors since October 2019.

- 100 Lebanese who are not engaged in the protests: In order to deliver the best possible representation of the city's socio-economic and religious repartition, the surveys were collected from areas that present different backgrounds. For low-income populations, surveys were filled in the city's old souks (Remmaneh, Zahriyyeh and Nourieh neighbourhoods), Bab El Tebbaneh, and Al Tell square. For middle and higher-income populations, the surveys were collected around Azmi Street and El Mina. The latter would augment the probability of reaching Tripoli's Christian minority. Finally, surveys were also filled in Jabal Mohsen in order to include a representation of the Alawite religious minority.

- 50 Palestinian refugees: For this purpose, the surveying teams visited the Beddawi Palestinian refugee camp and spread across its streets and markets. The chances of approaching Palestinian respondents on a random base were high enough there to comply with the target.

- 50 displaced Syrians: These were encountered randomly all across Tripoli's different districts that were covered by the surveyors, but also in the Beddawi camp where one finds a significant concentration of Syrian refugees.

3.2 Qualitative research methodology

The qualitative research was realised through the organisation of four focus groups and one interview. The focus groups were composed of

young people aged between 18 and 35 years, residing in Tripoli or in its
vicinity. The chosen criteria of sampling were limited to a total number
of six participants for each one of the four focus groups. All four groups
were gender-balanced with three to four men and three to four women.
Also, the criteria of participants' repartition were defined around two
main axes: nationality, and position towards the ongoing protests. The
variables were chosen explicitly in order to limit this study around the
analysis of simple criteria due to the lack of time and resources while in
the field. Accordingly, two groups were allocated to Lebanese, and two
others to non-Lebanese. One of the Lebanese groups was composed
of supporters of the protests, while the other was dedicated to non-
supporters. Of the two groups made up of non-Lebanese, one was made
up of Syrians, and the other of Palestinians. The participants of each focus
group were pre-selected by various local non-governmental organisations
(NGOs): *Madrassat Al-Mouchaghibin* for Lebanese supporters; *Leb Relief* for
Lebanese non-supporters and Syrians; and *Nab'a* for Palestinians. All the
focus groups have been moderated and noted down by Arabic-speaking
students. Non-Arabic-speaking students were appointed as observers of
the groups' dynamics and as note takers. The focus groups were recorded
with the voluntary consent of the respondents on an anonymous basis,[1]
according to the Saint Joseph University's ethical standards.[2]

   Below, the results of the quantitative and qualitative research are
presented in two separate parts, titled 'results of quantitative research' and
'other observations from qualitative research'.

4   Results of quantitative research

4.1 General information about the respondents

A total of 322 persons responded to the survey, of whom 236 were
Lebanese, 43 Syrians, and 42 Palestinians. The initial sampling target
was reached regarding Lebanese nationals, while it was more difficult to
achieve in the case of the two other nationalities. Furthermore, 58 per cent

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1   All surveyors who participated in the field had to undergo training in the ethics of
     conducting interviews and focus groups. The training was delivered by the ArMA
     Master's programme prior to the field. Surveyors recorded focus groups' conversations
     on their phones. The records were deleted soon after making transcripts of the
     conversations. Both records and transcripts kept the participants' identities unknown,
     without any reference to their names or any other critical personal information.
2   Any research or study in social sciences involving data collection from human subjects,
     or which results have an incidence on research, should be approved by the Saint-Joseph
     University's ethical committee. The committee's role is to ensure that the research
     respects human dignity, personal consent, confidentiality and privacy, to measure the
     risks, benefits and transparency. For more information about the University's ethical
     standards and procedures, see the website at https://www.usj.edu.lb/universite/
     ethique-proc.php.

of the surveyed population was composed of men, while 42 per cent were women.

In order to generate representative results, the sample was diversified according to age, education level, employment, level of income, and engagement in the protests. The following paragraphs present and analyse the collected results by first showing the general outcomes, before combining some elements by crossing the data.

Moreover, different districts of Tripoli were covered, according to the earlier detailed methodology. The following map (Figure 1) shows the repartition of respondents according to their location while approached by the surveyors. The highest concentration of answers was collected in and around the old souks, the Al-Nour square, the Beddawi Palestinian camp and the adjacent neighbourhoods of Bab el Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen. Other surveys were filled all along Azmi Street and El Mina districts. Regardless of their nationalities, most respondents were residents of Tripoli's various districts or suburbs. Very few were residents of one of the neighbouring *Cazas* of the North Lebanon Governorate.
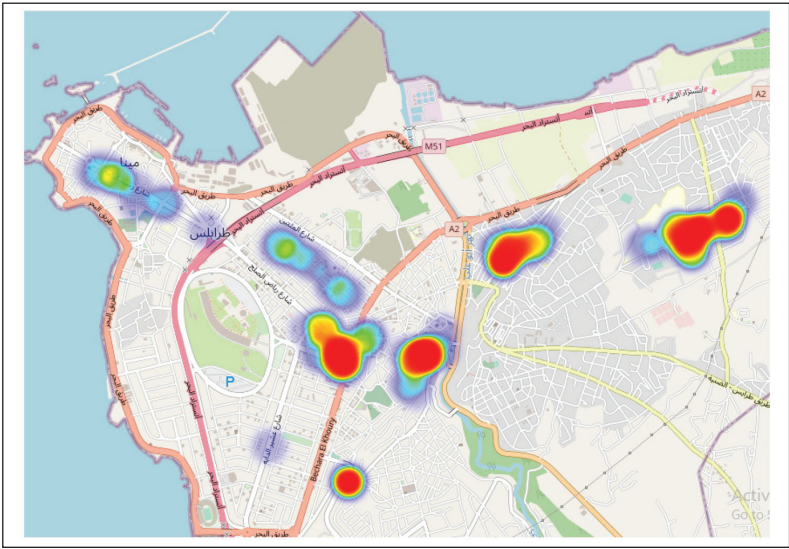

Figure 1: Map of surveys' repartition and concentration in Tripoli

Most of the respondents were Lebanese (73,29 per cent), followed by Syrians (13,35 per cent) and Palestinians (13 per cent). These results reflect the demographic reality of Tripoli. More than half of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 35 years, while almost 40 per cent were middle-aged and almost 10 per cent were 61 years old or older. Fewer

than 1 per cent of the respondents received no kind of formal education, almost 6 per cent were illiterate and nearly 35 per cent attended primary school. More than a third of the participants had a low level of education. Over 27 per cent attended secondary school, while almost 32 per cent declared that they had reached higher education. To assess the respective group affiliation of those surveyed, respondents were asked whether they were active in a religious, political, professional or civil group. The results revealed that such activities were not widespread among the survey respondents. Most respondents (82 per cent) did not have an affiliation with any group. However, most of the people who did engage in a group activity were part of civil society organisations (9 per cent), followed by those affiliated to political parties (5 per cent).

4.2 Employment and perceptions

Nearly 35 per cent of respondents declared to be self-employed, around 13 per cent worked in a household, and around 21 per cent were employees. Also, 13 per cent of the respondents declared not currently to be working. Among those, almost 10 per cent were unemployed, while around 3 per cent were retired. However, we suspect that some respondents might have been reticent to confess that they were unemployed, knowing that many surveys were filled during conventional working hours and that the city has high unemployment rates. A small proportion of respondents declared to be students (around 7 per cent), state employees (nearly 5 per cent), or daily labourers (around 7 per cent).

The overwhelming majority of respondents perceived the demands claimed during protests to be very favourable, apart for daily workers: Indeed, only half of these respondents approved. In terms of unfavourable perceptions, state employees turn out to constitute the most sceptical group: 20 per cent were moderately or very unfavourable towards the demands. This may be explained by the fact that the demands target the state, which causes their income to be at stake. The least negative feelings were expressed by those identified as employees and unemployed. Such a result could be explained by the fact that these two groups have less to lose from potential change (see Figure 2).
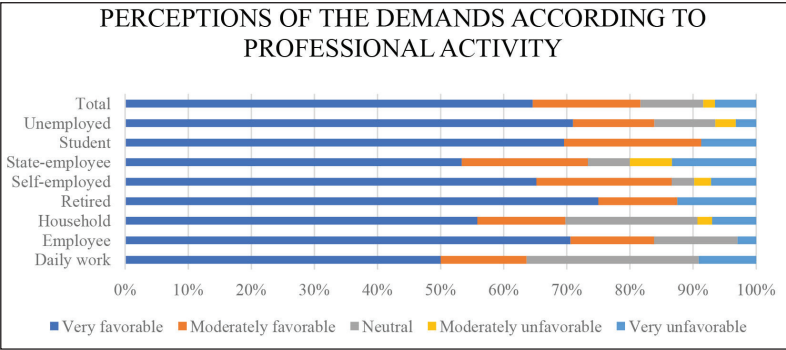
Figure 2: Perception of the demands according to professional activity

The feelings towards the actions of protestors were more diverse. When combining the moderately favourable and very favourable answers, the aggregated data showed that a small majority was favourable towards these actions. However, when splitting it up, only the unemployed, students, retired and daily workers were slightly in favour of the protestors' actions. This might be an interesting indicator knowing that these groups are those who are the most marginalised by the Lebanese system. On the other hand, it is important to note that students and retirees were the most divided groups on the issue as no respondent felt neutral towards the modes of action (see Figure 3).
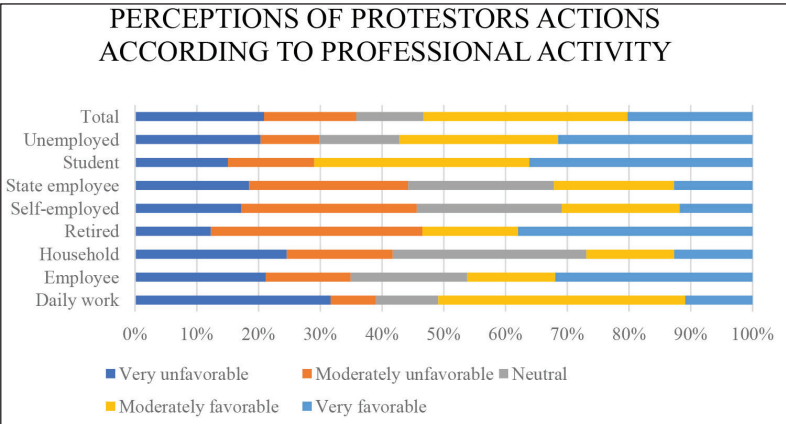

Figure 3: Perception of protestors' actions according to professional activity

4.3 Declared household income and perceptions

Regarding household income, participants were almost equally split into two categories: low (around 50 per cent) and average (around 45 per cent). Only up to 4 per cent of the interviewed persons declared to have a high income. This result reflects the reality since Tripoli is considered to be the country's poorest city.[3] Concerning the feelings towards the demands according to their income, most of the respondents, regardless of their income levels, were either favourable or moderately favourable towards the protestors' demands. Notably, the only income group where no one perceived the demands as very unfavourable is the high-income group. However, it is important to keep in mind that only 13 out of 322 respondents described their income as high. The difference between the low and average-income groups is inconspicuous (see Figure 4).
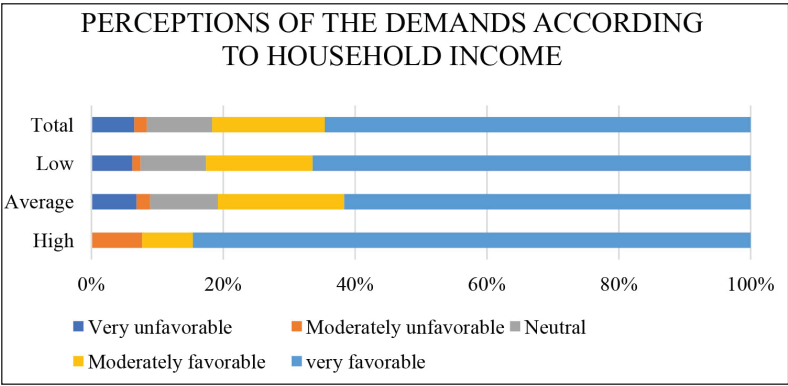

Figure 4: Perception of the demands according to household income

Respondents seemed more wary when asked about their perception of the actions undertaken by the protestors in order to achieve their demands. Most of the interviewed persons – mainly participants from the low and average-income groups – were moderately in favour of the protestors' actions (see Figure 5).

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3   For more information, see the study conducted by the UN-Habitat Lebanon (2016) *Tripoli City Profile 2016* (updated September 2017) 45, available at the website https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/60482 (accessed 14 March 2020).
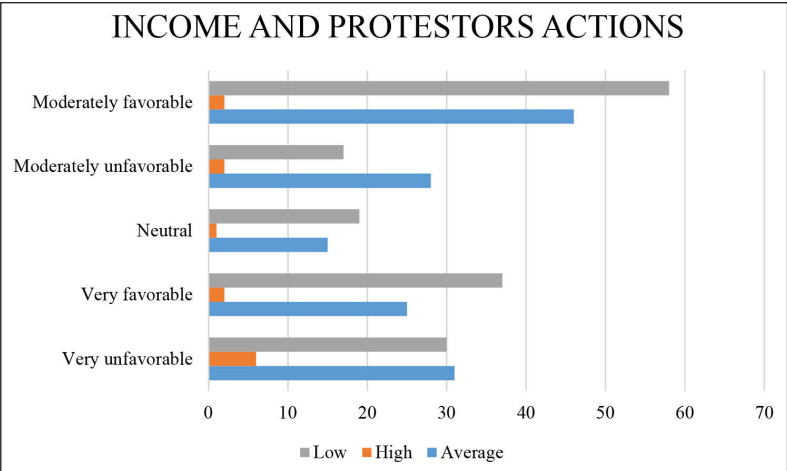
Figure 5: Income and protestors actions

In addition, there is a stark contrast in the perceptions about the potential outcomes of the protests between high, average and low-income respondents. An overwhelming majority of 90 per cent of the high-income respondents were pessimistic. This confirms that high-income and low-income groups have different interests at stake. Indeed, one can suppose that the *status quo* characterising the country's configuration allowed citizens from the upper classes to generate high incomes. Therefore, in their opinion, change might be considered a threat and represent a rather risky bet. On a contrary, low-income participants have nothing to lose and everything to win from a potential change (see Figure 6).
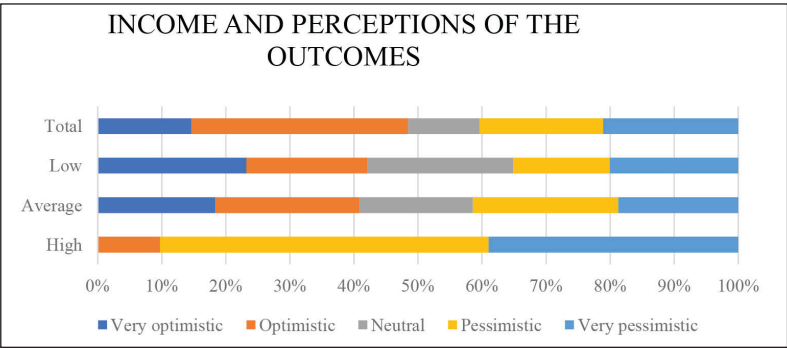

Figure 6: Income and perceptions towards protests outcomes

4.4 Perceptions towards outcomes according to engagement in the protests

More than half of the respondents (54,3 per cent) did not engage in the protests. The majority of those engaged were not doing it frequently, with up to 30 per cent engaged either 'barely' (8,7 per cent) or 'sometimes' (23,3 per cent), while only close to 5 per cent said that they were 'engaged regularly' and only 9 per cent were 'completely engaged'. Among those people who have been active since the protests have started, approximately half participated in 'sit-ins, marches, roadblocks and demonstrations'. Around one third were active on 'social media' and 19 per cent took part in 'discussions and meetings'. Finally, 2 per cent stated that they were taking part in other activities, which were not further specified. The survey respondents had the option to choose multiple activities, therefore it is not possible to disaggregate the data and to analyse whether people had the tendency to be part of one or multiple activities. Nonetheless, one clear result is that most of the engaged respondents took part in the protests at least once since October 2017. Their engagement was translated into many forms. Some were physical, by attending sit-ins, marches, roadblocks and demonstrations, while others engaged through social media. Although social media plays a major role in the circulation of immediate information and is used by a large number of people during protests, it only came second when it comes to active engagement of the respondents. There is a slight difference between men and women's answers when it comes to levels of engagement. However, more women seem to be 'completely engaged' in protests (close to 11 per cent) compared to the surveyed men (about 8 per cent). For the rest of the answers, we can conclude that the respondents' gender had no significant impact on their level of engagement in the protests.

The relation between the respondents' perceptions towards the projected optimistic or pessimistic outcomes of the protests with their level of engagement produced a very disparate set of results. However, a significant number of those 'completely engaged' in the protests fall under the 'very optimistic' category (about 45 per cent) while it was completely absent for the 'pessimistic'. Yet, the highest levels of participation corresponded to people who are 'optimistic' towards the outcomes and tend mostly to engage either 'regularly', 'barely' (47 per cent) or 'completely' (44 per cent) in the protests. Finally, people who described themselves as 'pessimistic', 'very pessimistic' or 'neutral' do engage although with different frequencies, while people who 'do not engage' in the protests ranged from 27 per cent for the 'optimistic' to 10 per cent for the 'very optimistic' (see Figure 7).
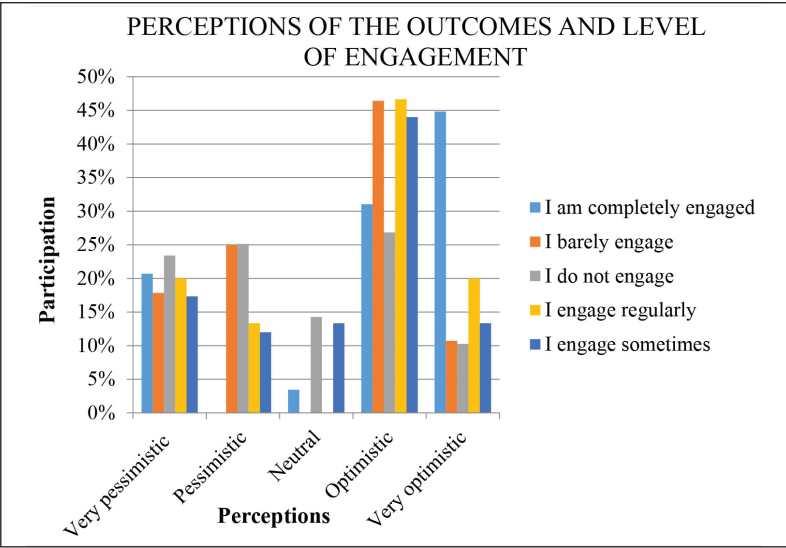
Figure 7: Perceptions of the outcomes by levels of engagement in the protest

4.5 Perceptions towards the outcomes according to gender

The different perceptions, ranging from 'very pessimistic' to 'very optimistic' towards the outcome of the protests, did not show significant dissimilarities in respect of the respondents' gender. The majority of respondents, both men and women, perceived the outcome of the protests as 'optimistic' respectively at 37 per cent and 29 per cent. The smallest group of respondents were those with a neutral perspective, which accounts for 14 per cent among women and 9 per cent among men (see Figure 8).
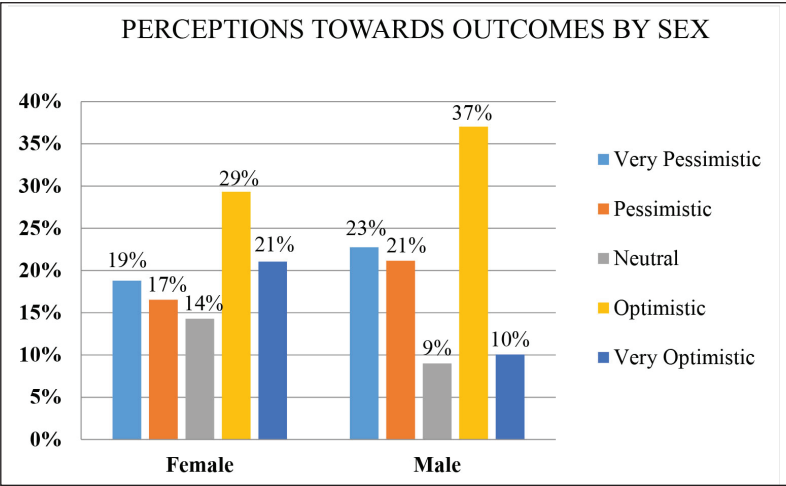
Figure 8: Perceptions of the outcomes according to sex

Even though there is a high number of people that have an 'optimistic' or even 'very optimistic' perception, the second largest group of male respondents (23 per cent) assess the outcomes as 'very pessimistic'. In general, the distribution on the scope of perception among men and women is rather similar. However, the women seem to have a slightly more optimistic perception, as the two most selected assessments were 'optimistic' (29 per cent) and 'very optimistic' (21 per cent).

4.6 Perceptions towards the outcomes according to age

The largest group of participants (48,45 per cent) had a positive attitude towards the outcomes of the protests. In terms of age, the numbers are relatively equal among the youngest and middle-aged respondents. Of the former, 32 per cent were 'optimistic' and 14 per cent were 'very optimistic'. Of the latter, 35 per cent were 'optimistic' and 15 per cent were 'very optimistic'. In relative terms, respondents aged 61 and above had the most positive attitude towards the outcomes of the protests with 38 per cent of this group being 'optimistic' and 16 per cent 'very optimistic'. However, this category also had some very conflicting results when it comes to pessimism. In this sense, this age category were 9 per cent 'pessimistic' and 28 per cent 'very pessimistic', which are respectively the lowest and the highest rates in the general population of respondents. In contrast, 19 per cent of the interviewees between the ages of 18 and 35 were 'very pessimistic' and 21 per cent were 'pessimistic'. Moreover, 22 per cent of the middle-aged respondents were 'very pessimistic' and 19 per cent were 'pessimistic'. Lastly, about 13 per cent of the youngest group of respondents

and almost 9 per cent of both middle-aged and oldest interviewees had a 'neutral' stance towards the outcomes of the protests (see Figure 9).
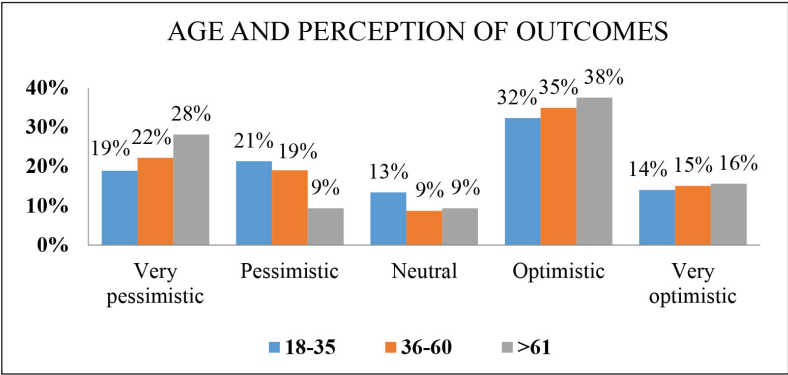

Figure 9: Perceptions of the outcomes by age categories

4.7 Perceptions towards protestors' actions

Besides the outcome of the protests, the survey participants were also asked to express their feelings towards the actions of the protesters. Again, the figures show a rather similar distribution of opinions among both men and women. Most of both men (38 per cent) and women (27 per cent) indicate a 'moderately favourable' attitude towards the actions of the protestors. Among men, a big gap shows between the most selected response, namely, being 'moderately favourable' (38 per cent) and the second being 'very unfavourable' towards the actions (19 per cent). On the other hand, the women who responded were less divergent. Most of the women (27 per cent) were 'moderately favourable', followed by 23 per cent of them being 'very unfavourable' (see Figure 10).
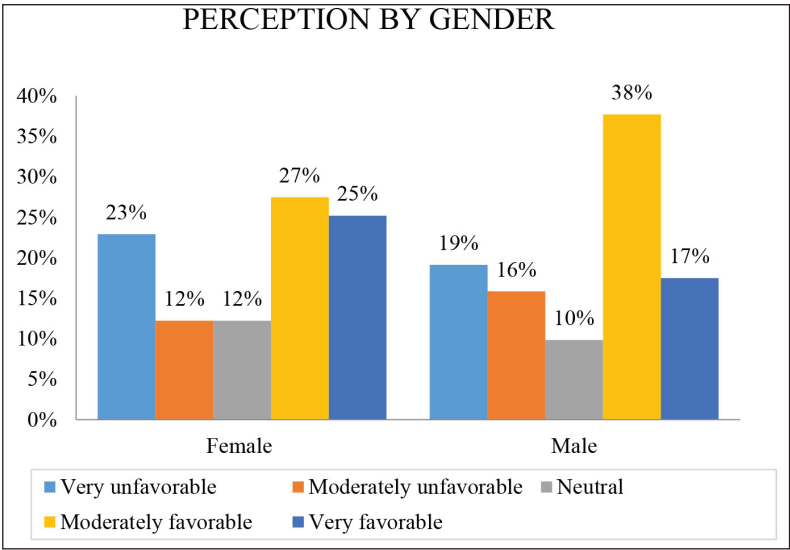
Figure 10: Perceptions of protestors' actions by gender

All in all, it can be stated that there is a slight tendency towards more positive perceptions of the respondents concerning the actions of the protesters.

4.8 Expected scenarios for the country

To gather information regarding the implications of the protests, those surveyed were asked to select one or multiple scenarios that they thought are most likely to happen. These scenarios referred to either a positive or a negative development or consequence on the economic, social, or political situation in the country. As this is a multiple-choice question, the survey participants did not have to choose either positive or negative scenarios. Therefore, it cannot be stated whether the respondents were generally optimistic or pessimistic towards the future because they expressed different tendencies based on the different social levels, which might be contradictory or additive at times (see Figure 11).
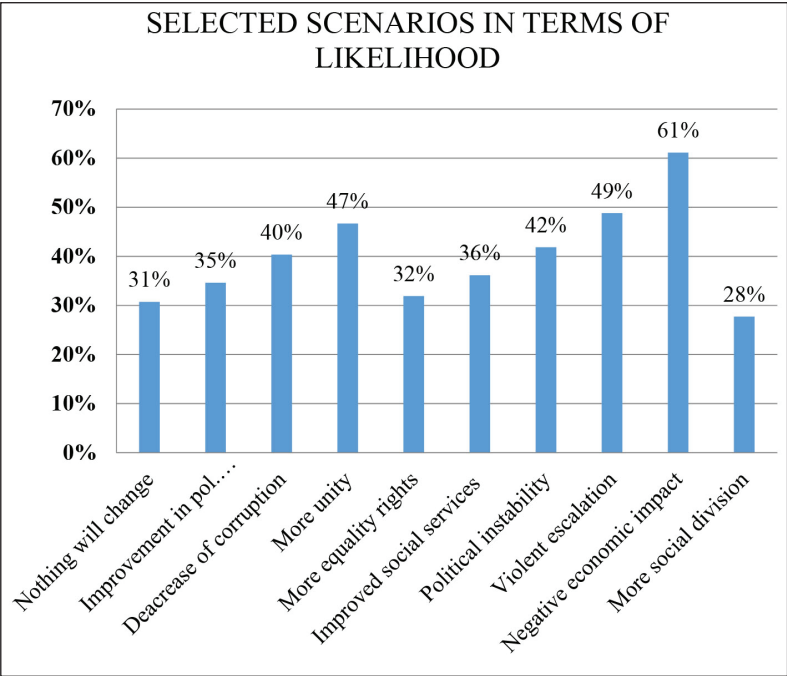
Figure 11: Perceptions of the protests' outcomes

It can be summarised that the most selected scenario is the one referring to possible 'negative economic impact' with a total of 61 per cent of the respondents assessing that it is most likely to happen. Almost 50 per cent predicted 'violent escalation', but a similar number of people (47 per cent) also predicted 'more unity' and social cohesion. Regarding the other possible scenarios, 42 per cent of the respondents predicted 'political instability', while 28 per cent predicted 'more social division'. Finally, around one-third of respondents equally assessed that 'nothing will change', that political representation will rise, that there will be more equality in rights, and that social services will improve.

The interpretation of the results concerning the expected outcomes of the protests shows unequivocally that there are both optimistic and pessimistic thoughts, with mixed feelings of fear and hope regarding the impact of the protests on the country and its population. However, there are also other important factors that need to be considered here. This is the case of the deteriorating political and economic situations that can also have reciprocal impacts on the protests. The economic crisis and the political deadlock of Lebanon thus are important intervening variables that cannot be occulted in this analysis and need at least to be mentioned.

4.9 Perceptions about safety during the protests

Another question raised in the survey was whether the respondents ever felt unsafe during the protests. If yes, they were asked to identify one or more actors that made them feel unsafe, as this was also a multiple-choice question (see Figure 12).
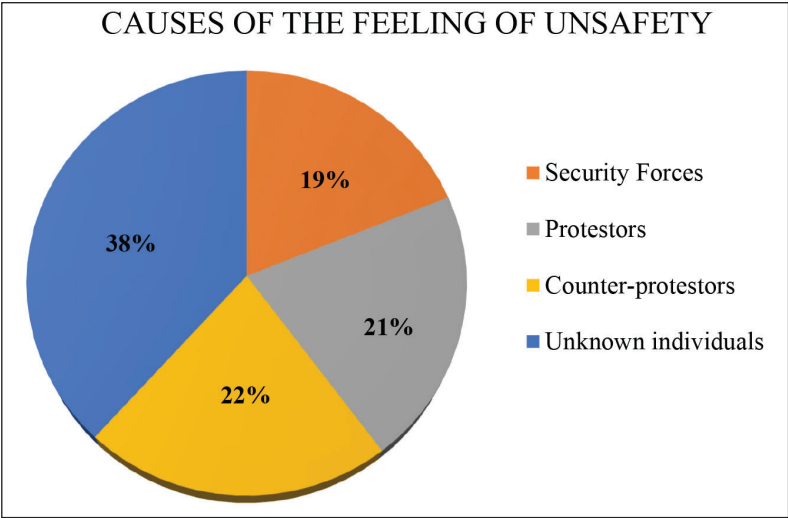

Figure 12: Causes of the feeling of being unsafe during protests

Interestingly, less than half of those surveyed (about 44 per cent) stated that they felt unsafe during the protests, whereas most of those who did feel unsafe (38 per cent) declared 'unknown individuals' to be the main cause of their fear in this respect. Also, in a tight range varying from 19 to 22 per cent, respondents expressed that 'security forces', 'protestors' or 'counter-protestors' are the causes of them feeling unsafe. People seemed to be less afraid of security forces during protests than of 'protestors' or 'counter-protestors'. This may be explained by the relative popularity of the Lebanese army in Lebanese society. Also, security forces are well-known and identified, even if they might be a potential threat mainly when protesting in the streets. In opposition, unknown individuals are psychologically the most frightening, especially that beliefs related to the infiltration of the protests by a 'fifth column' is very popular in the country.

4.10 Perceptions about safety and nationality

Palestinians had the highest rate of feeling 'unsafe' during protests with 52 per cent compared to 43 per cent and 42 per cent respectively for Lebanese and Syrians. This could be related to their fragile situation in the country and to their long-lasting struggle to stay away from trouble and

keep a low profile in their host country. It is also very interesting to see that the majority of Syrian respondents did not feel unsafe during the protests, even though a few years before they had faced violent repression in their own country (see Figure 13).
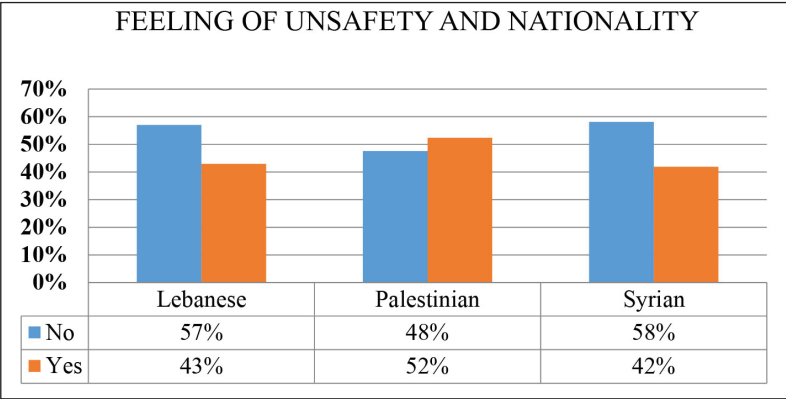
FEELING OF UNSAFETY AND NATIONALITY

	Lebanese	Palestinian	Syrian
No	57%	48%	58%
Yes	43%	52%	42%

Figure 13: Feeling of unsafety during protests by nationality

4.11 Nationality and participation in protests

Most of the respondents (about 55 per cent) shared the opinion that people with nationalities other than Lebanese should not participate in the protests. Interestingly, this was not a very predominant view among Lebanese (53 per cent), but rather among Palestinians (62 per cent) and Syrians (57 per cent). Thus, in relative terms, it is mostly the Palestinians who rejected the view that other nationalities should be part of the protests. This might be linked to their previous experiences such as their participation in the Lebanese civil war. It is also interesting to note how even in a Sunni majority city, most of the Lebanese citizens are reluctant to integrate other nationalities in the protests.

In contrast, 129 respondents (40 per cent) shared the opinion that non-Lebanese should participate in the protests. This view was predominantly shared by Lebanese (42 per cent), followed by Syrians (40 per cent) and Palestinians (33 per cent). A few of the respondents (around 5 per cent) had no opinion on this issue (see Figure 14).
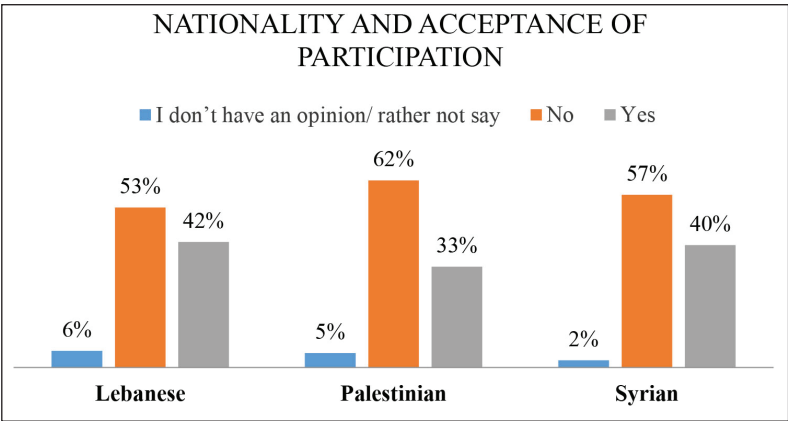
Figure 14: Acceptance of participation by nationality

4.12 Nationality and engagement in protests

The statistics on the extent of engagement in the protests may be seen in connection with the aforementioned numbers shown in Figure 14. In this respect, the number of engaged Palestinians and Syrians nationals in the protests seems to be very low (see Figure 15). Almost 93 per cent of the Palestinians and 79 per cent of the Syrians did not engage at all. For those who did, Syrians either engaged 'sometimes' (16 per cent), 'regularly' (2 per cent) or 'barely' (2 per cent), while none of them was 'completely engaged' in the protests. In contrast, around 2 per cent of Palestinian respondents said that they were completely engaged, while about 5 per cent declared to engage sometimes.

Even though Tripoli is considered to be the 'Bride of the Revolution' (Anderson, 2019) with the highest mobilisation rates across the country, the number of non-engaged Lebanese in the protests was surprisingly high (43 per cent). For those Lebanese who said that they were engaged, most of these were 'sometimes engaged' (28 per cent), while only 12 per cent were 'completely engaged' and merely 6 per cent were 'regularly engaged' (see Figure 15).
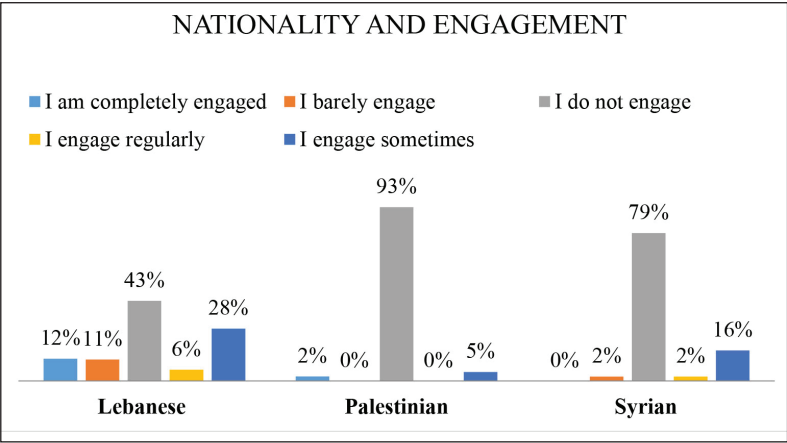
Figure 15: Engagement in protests by nationality

These results based on the survey and the quantitative interpretations were coupled with the organisation of focus groups. The qualitative results are the subject of the next part of this study.

5   Other observations from qualitative research

As previously mentioned in the methodology, four focus groups were also organised during the team's field work in Tripoli. These four focus groups were divided as follows: Lebanese supporters; Lebanese non-supporters; Syrian refugees; and Palestinian refugees. Each focus group consisted of six to eight people, both men and women, aged between 18 and 35 years. The meeting with the first three groups occurred around the El Nour square, while the Palestinian group was interviewed in the office of the Palestinian *Nab'a* NGO in the vicinity of the Beddawi camp. The moderators asked twelve questions in Arabic, in order to meet the following five main objectives:

(1)   to capture how Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian youths comprehend and define the concepts of revolution and different forms of mobilisation, and the role of women;

(2)   to understand the perceptions of Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian youths regarding the expected outcomes of the protests;

(3)   to apprehend the feelings generated by the protests and how it influenced the way youngsters perceive them in terms of identity and belonging;

(4)   to understand how participants from various nationalities feel about the participation of non-Lebanese in the protests; and

(5)   to filter out the motivations behind people's support of or opposition to the revolution.

5.1 Different understandings for the concept of 'revolution'

Regarding the first key objective, almost all participants referred to the same concepts: For instance, they all agreed that the revolution is related to social justice and aimed at reforming the current political system. If non-supporters agreed as well, they, however, added that the Lebanese protests were 'first about revolution, but are not anymore'; it soon turned into an unwelcome *intifada* or 'uprising' in Arabic, which constitutes a 'conspiracy against Lebanon'. Also, some of the Syrian and Palestinian participants described the revolution as a positive event, whereas actions held by protestors in Lebanon were seen by some as negative because they changed from being peaceful to violent aiming for 'sabotage'.

Lebanese supporters' described the mobilisation as somehow being a peaceful protest to drive the country in the right direction, create a platform in which people can connect to each other (through discussions, debates, volunteering, social media, writing, art), but also to try to orient the protests towards continuous pressure, coordination, inter-regional dialogues, as well as encouragement regarding some innovative initiatives. Non-supporters expressed their understanding of a mobilisation as follows: 'A revolution has to be bloody, with destruction of property where roads closures have to target the houses of politicians as well as the parliament'. For Palestinian participants, the revolution should remain peaceful and not resort to violence. Participants expressed their relief when they realised that the events remained peaceful. Some participants supported the idea of 'a civilised form of protests' and reproached protestors to be 'violent'. All participants agreed on corruption being the main trigger of the mobilisation, along with the injustice that affected Lebanese people in past years. The economic situation was also mentioned as an important factor.

5.2 The role of women in the protests

According to all focus groups, women played a significant role in the revolution. Lebanese supporters expressed their surprise regarding the active and leading role played by women over the past few weeks, describing it as both positive and effective. However, non-supporters adopted two different approaches: For some participants, women should adopt 'appropriate behaviour' and avoid breaking or vandalising any kind of urban property. Indeed, if women should be part of the protests as their opinion is essential to a successful movement, violent behaviour is not feminine. As explained by a participant, 'breaking furniture doesn't turn a woman into a revolutionary'. For others, on the contrary, the stereotype stating that they represent the 'inferior sex' and that 'they only go to the

square to take "selfies"' should be opposed. Syrian participants agreed on the great role played by women, which they explained by the different Lebanese traditions and customs. One of the Syrian participants, a 15 year-old girl, expressed the impossibility for her to participate in any kind of protests by the fact that Syrian traditions would not allow her to become involved, although the girl did not completely exclude the idea of one day participating. Palestinians explained that 'the participation of women is not something new since Lebanese treat women equally: 'Lebanese women's rights are guaranteed according to the social context.'

Both groups of Lebanese agreed that women are breaking the barrier of fear and changing perceptions about themselves among Lebanese society. According to Syrian participants, 'the Lebanese street respects and give women the space to express herself'; 'women's voices are more powerful'. Two Palestinian women concluded that 'women's participation in the revolution did not change Palestinians' perception since Palestinian women are already revolutionary and inspiring many Lebanese women'.

5.3 Optimistic and pessimistic prospects on the outcomes

Supporters were optimistic about potential outcomes, explaining that positive changes take time. Non-supporters had different views mostly about negative outcomes.

Syrian participants constantly referred to their experience in Syria. Therefore, they mostly shared pessimistic thoughts regarding the potential consequences for people's lives. However, they highlighted quite a few positive aspects, such as the army's support towards the people and the positive role of the media. Some of them expressed that 'they hope for the best' for their 'Lebanese brothers'. In general, they showed much fear and scepticism about the outcomes due to their own experience in Syria.

Palestinian participants opened up about the damages that the revolution caused after switching to episodes of violence: If the revolution was something beautiful to witness in the first days, it now harms the citizens of Lebanon. Some participants illustrated their reasoning by highlighting the dangers linked to road blockages. They stressed how the aftermath would impact their economic living standards, since rentals are charged in US dollars. Palestinians raised their concerns regarding the well-being of their families who can barely cope with the current rising cost of living in the country. The protests generated fear and uncertainty: 'We became like prisoners in the camp' said some Palestinians. Some expressed happiness only at the beginning of the events, when the protests were peaceful. They all agreed that they no longer were comfortable with the ongoing events, due to the violent behaviour of some protesters. Some others noted that they were proud to see Lebanese people referring to

Palestinian songs and signs as inspiring symbols. However, they feared being negatively associated with some of the ongoing events.

5.4 The refugees and their concerns

Regarding the effects of the protests on the refugees' situation, supporters and non-supporters spoke of the economic impact that will affect both Palestinian and Syrian refugees. They also underlined that there now is a stronger tendency to accept refugees' integration. Non-supporters pointed out that the mobilisation increased the awareness among Lebanese citizens that the presence of Syrian refugees is not 'the reason' behind the current crisis as stated by some politicians. They revealed an existing 'racism' against the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Most Syrians did not see potential improvement in their conditions, as the demands were mainly targeting the basic living rights of the Lebanese people. They also considered that tackling the refugee crisis was not one of the demands' priorities. However, for some of them, if the revolution were to succeed, a time might come where the focus would finally be on refugees' demands and needs.

From a slightly different perspective, Palestinians mainly spoke of themselves as being accused of participating in the protests for the sake of sabotage. They were also predominantly pessimistic regarding their future situation and believed that no rights would be granted to refugees. Some participants denounced that 'Palestinians have always been accused to be terrorists. No matter what the revolution will lead to, their situation will remain the same.'

5.5 Hope, anxiety and mixed feelings

When moderators asked about the feelings generated by the protests, supporters described instability, stress, anxiety, positive energy, optimism and pride. People who underwent the Lebanese civil war, however, were more pessimistic. The non-supporters expressed feelings of discomfort, fears of degradation, and rising tensions. However, they mentioned that they also felt pride in the beginning of the protests, noticed some harmony between different social classes, and to some extent felt enthusiastic.

Changes in self-perception were not noticeable in most of the supporters' answers, but one Lebanese supporter pointed out that her presence in the revolution was motivated by the fact that she originally was from Tripoli. She now felt a stronger attachment to her hometown and identity and therefore saw her presence there as essential. Others agreed that the protests reaffirmed, now more than ever, the power of the youth to induce change. Most of the non-supporters explained that they identified as Lebanese nationals first and foremost, no matter what their

religious or political affiliation was. Many of them also agreed that fighting sectarianism was a positive outcome. Palestinian participants linked the revolution to their revolutionary identity referring to their continuous fight against the occupation.

5.6 Ambiguous opinions about non-Lebanese participation's rights in the protests

As far as the participation of non-Lebanese in the protests was concerned, diverse and conflictual remarks were given as some supporters considered that Palestinian refugees should be allowed to participate according to their residency status. On the contrary, some participants refused to differentiate, stating that everyone can participate in the name of equality, while others strictly refused the potential participation of any non-Lebanese person. Non-supporters agreed that non-Lebanese (Syrians and Palestinians) have the right to take part in the protests and that they are welcomed.

Some Syrians stated that non-Lebanese do not have to participate whatsoever since the security forces in Lebanon use the same oppressive methods as in Syria. If safety and security measures were guaranteed, Syrians and Palestinians would be hugely present in the protests. For most Palestinian participants, the fact that some Lebanese do not accept the participation of non-Lebanese is understandable since 'it is their country'.

5.7 Multiple motivations

When the moderators asked about the perceptions motivating the participants to become involved in the protests, supporters insisted on the importance of these events as a means to acquire democracy, to get rid of sectarianism, as well as to bring back human rights and dignity. For non-supporters, one of the objectives was to fight against sectarianism through the unity that people have shown in the streets. For the inhabitants of Tripoli, the goal also was to break some of the city's long-lasting stereotypes, which often depicted it as a bastion for Islamists and extremists. Syrians believed that the need for social justice and the sense of shared responsibility towards the situation were both important triggers.

However, the reasons for the non-participation of some were the fear of the state or the dependency on the clientelist political parties. Non-supporters gave the example of road blockades that are unpleasant and harmful. Syrians also denounced the recourse to certain forms of mobilisation, such as road blocks, disturbing security, and vandalism. Palestinians again referred to their own precarious situation. Some of them referred to the civil war by linking it to the danger of the current situation, especially that the protesters 'lack clarity regarding their exact needs and demands'.

6   Limitations

This study reflects only on the perceptions gathered in Tripoli and its direct surroundings at the given time of the field work in January 2020. Therefore, any generalisation on the entire process of the wave of protests, as well as on the entire country is highly improbable because of the socio-economic, political and religious diversity of Lebanon, as well as on the rapid evolution of the dramatic events there. The quantitative results are based on the respondents' declarations and own views. This reality reflects on the limits of the analysis. Therefore, highlighting this point is more than essential. One also has to be aware of the fact that the gathered answers to the questionnaire were those of 322 persons, which is a relatively small sample, despite being slightly above the minimal number for a valid scientific data set. The probability of sampling bias or margin of error has to be taken into consideration during the interpretation of the results. Finally, the perceptions about the protests, collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods, must be relativised by the effects of other independent, causal and intervening variables such as the collapsing financial and economic situations of Lebanon.

7   Conclusion

Our research shows that Tripoli's inhabitants have nuanced perceptions about the ongoing wave of protests occurring in Lebanon since October 2019. The divergence in some of these perceptions relates to many variables or conditions such as employment, sex, age or nationality of the respondents.

Most of the interviewed persons were in favour of the protestors' demands. However, when asked about the protestors' actions, even the poorer were only moderately in favour of the protestors' actions. This was the case for both men and women, who were both only moderately supporting these actions. Surprisingly for the city, more than half of the respondents indicated that they never engaged in the protests. Most who were engaged were not frequently participating in the protests. In other words, the active and regular form of mobilisation concerned only a low proportion among the respondents. It can also be deduced that gender had no significant impact on the level of engagement.

Regarding the expected outcomes, there are both optimistic and pessimistic thoughts, with mixed feelings of fear and hope for the future. The most selected scenario was related to the negative economic impact, followed by violence, and then by unity and cohesion. Also, this study gave a good picture about the protestors' perceptions of fear. People declared being less afraid of security forces during protests than of other protestors, counter-protestors or unknown individuals.

In addition, one of the most interesting aspects of this research was to reveal the relationship between nationality and the dynamics if the protests. More than half of the respondents shared the view that non-Lebanese citizens should not participate in the protests. Interestingly, this view was more often defended by Palestinians (62 per cent) and Syrians (57 per cent) than the Lebanese themselves (53 per cent). Thus, the very low levels of participation by Palestinians and Syrians in the protests may be related to these declarations.

Finally, it is worth noting that the interviewed Lebanese supporters were all aware of the sacrifices and the possible outcomes in the long run. If all groups identified the same demands, they clearly had different positions towards the ongoing events: Some participants fully embraced the movement while others seemed to have remained sceptical about the methods or the potential negative scenarios. All agreed in the end that this is still an uprising *intifada* and not yet a revolution, while expressing the fear that an escalation might lead to another civil war.

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