

INTERVIEW / MELVINE KHOURY

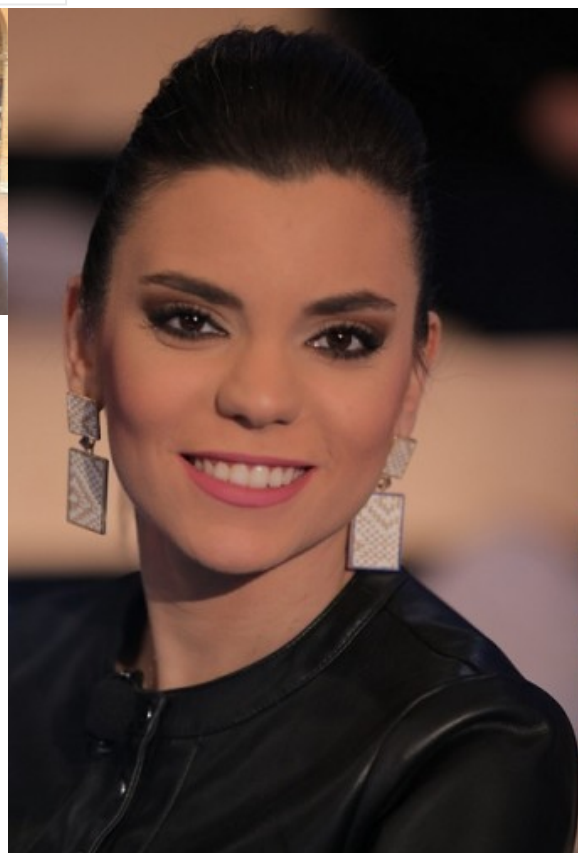
“I survived Beirut; my faith helps me to forgive”

WORLD

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**Nico
Spuntoni**



An explosion outside – close, but not very close – as I was going about my housework. Then another explosion. I lost consciousness, until I woke up in pain in a hospital bed with a face I no longer recognised.

A little more than a year has passed since the day that changed the lives of Melvine M. Khoury - press officer of the local Maronite Archdiocese - and thousands of Beirutis. The

explosion at the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 left 218 people dead, more than 7,000 injured and 300,000 displaced. The third most serious non-nuclear deflagration in history. Last Wednesday, the Lebanese people commemorated the first anniversary of the tragedy with a very well-attended demonstration in front of Parliament, calling for truth and justice. There is still no explanation for the presence of the 2,700 tonnes of ammonium nitrate that exploded and gutted the heart of the capital, perhaps forever, leaving deep wounds in survivors like Melvine, who in this interview with the *Daily Compass* agreed to look back on those moments, shortly before returning to the operating theatre for the umpteenth time.

Melvine, what do you remember before and after the two explosions at the port?

I don't remember much of what happened after the second explosion. I woke up in hospital with my face covered in blood, the whole of my body in pain, and terror in my eyes. My brother told me that I was thrown against his bedroom wall, with the furniture falling on top of me. The bones in my face, my teeth, and my left shoulder were broken. I am still undergoing surgeries for the consequences of the impact. The other day, for instance, I went under the knife again to have a steel plate removed from my shoulder.

How has your life changed since 4 August 2020?

Disfigurement and pain change everyone. I try to appreciate more the gift of life I have received and have cherished since the explosion. I try to live on the edge every day, not to worry much about tomorrow but to trust in Providence. I try to use my talents and all my abilities to help my brothers and sisters in difficulty. I don't care too much about the "things" of this world, but rather, I work harder for justice, security and peace.

How much has your faith helped you to get back on your feet?

I am still struggling between my faith, my religious convictions to love and forgive, and the reality I live every day. With Christ I will overcome any doubts I may have. With Christ I will rise again.

After what happened to you, do you still see your future in Lebanon or would you prefer to live abroad?

I am a Lebanese woman who has endured much, like everyone else. I have made many sacrifices for my country and I don't see any other future but here. Lebanon needs me now more than ever. I will not leave the land of my ancestors, the land of Saint Charbel. We Christians in Lebanon have a mission, to bear witness to Christ. I will never give up. I will not leave my country and nobody can make me leave Lebanon.

One year later, how many people are still homeless?

Many are still unable to return home, not only because of the damage but also because of the sense of insecurity. Nothing and nobody guarantees that something similar will never happen again. On the other hand, many buildings have suffered structural damage and require considerable funds to be repaired. Yet, the government has not helped in any way so far.

How is the investigation into responsibility for what happened proceeding?

Judge Tareq Bitar, who is in charge of the investigation into the explosion, seems to be very serious, honest and fearless. We hope that he will see it through. What is certain is that none of those responsible are cooperating with him.

Why were all those tons of ammonium nitrate there, and why weren't they removed? What's your opinion?

We are still waiting for Judge Bitar to conclude his investigation and provide us with the answers to these questions. What is certain is that such a quantity of highly explosive nitrate could not have gone unnoticed except for the corruption and negligence of many responsible persons in the government.