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From Crisis to Reform: Understanding the Structural Barriers to Governance and Democracy in Lebanon

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Abstract: This paper analyses Lebanon's worsening economic and political crises in the light of its long-standing sectarian regime of power-sharing. Focusing on historical analysis, it contends that the confessional setup—solidified under the National Pact of 1943 and the Taif Agreement of 1989—has institutionalized division, handicapped reform, and eroded democratic governance. Tracing the trajectory of such dynamics, the study emphasizes the way economic inequities, foreign political pressure, and large-scale corruption have exacerbated systemic breakdown. Furthermore, it analyses the implications of the latter stagnation on the legitimacy of the state, trust among citizens, and societal cohesion. The paper ends with an identification of structural and processual reforms that are needed if Lebanon is to revamp credible institutions and step towards wider political accountability and citizen participation.

Keywords: Lebanon, sectarianism, confessionalism, political crisis, power-sharing, electoral system, National Pact, Taif Agreement

1 Introduction

The long-standing Lebanese economic and political crisis is the result of confessional power-sharing that, having initially been conceived as the way of dealing with confessional diversity, has become solidified regime that prevents attempts at good governance and democratic revitalization. First introduced under French Mandate and officially institutionalized with the National Pact of 1943. [1] The confessional regime of powers divides the powers of politics along sectarian lines and implants the sectarian allegiance in the very core of the apparatus of the state. Since its inauguration, the setup has brought elite capture and clientelisms and rendered the state vulnerable to inefficiencies, corruption, and immobility. [2] Rather than cultivating national cohesion or inclusive politics, the sectarian model has accentuated political polarization and eroded public trust. This is the origin of the problem with the existing setup: in practical terms, the state institutions have, instead of their obligation to the public and become the sites of bargaining between sectarian elites. State legitimacy, both at the level of day-to-day governance and the nation's moments of crisis, is always under threat among the public.

These challenges have been complicated by the nation's unexpected economic downfall and successive public accountability breakdowns, most egregiously the 2019 economic crash and 2020 Beirut port explosion. [3] These catastrophes revealed the inheritance of years of neglect, capture of the state, and erosion of governance. They brought with them, too, huge protests and demands for structural reform. Thus far, little concrete change has followed, as of 2025. This is complicating the process of developing any reform agenda, with reform demands being countered with interests and foreign geopolitical intervention.

[1] Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
[2] Imad Salamey, "The Crisis of Democracy in Lebanon: Power-Sharing and Sectarianism," *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (2014): 467–482.
[3] World Bank, *Lebanon's Economic Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities for Reform*, 2022, https://www.worldbank.org.

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The paper is grounded in field observation and first-hand experience of the post-2020 Lebanese civil discourse, and it evidences the vibrancy of bottom-up politics and the long-standing inability of the political elite to respond to exhortations about radical transformation. The thesis is refined to three intersecting dynamics that have maintained the country volatile: sectarianism, socio-economic inequality, and foreign political intervention. They intersect to constantly maintain an accustomed pattern of division, elite polarization, and citizen grievance. Methodologically, the paper draws on historical analysis, scholarly literature, case studies, and the views of political analysts and civil society organizations. Analysis, initially, considers the evolution and genesis of the Lebanese sectarian order, and then goes on to its present-day manifestations in political and election systems. It is cautious about foreign meddling and economic collapse that followed in enshrining institutional inflexibility as permanent. Lastly, the paper considers probable future trends, assessing reform momentum based on civil society activity and continuing foreign meddling. Through examining structural, rather than surface-level, symptoms, the paper attempts to offer grounded, historical insights into how Lebanon might begin to traverse its broken and disjointed political landscape. Reflected within recent attempts at reform—most of which have been waylaid or hijacked—whatever future momentum will most certainly be dependent upon rewiring relations of power both within and beyond the Lebanese frontier.

2. Historical Origins of Lebanon's electoral System Pact

Lebanon's current political disintegration is the result of a century-long process of cultivating instruments of power-sharing that prioritized sectarian stability at the expense of national cohesion. Since the French Mandate, through the years of independence and extending to the protracted Civil War, confessional politics has transformed from an interim agreement to an entrenched mode of political configuration. This exegesis explores the foundational league and eras that canonized sectarian politics in Lebanon, that is, the French Mandate, the National Pact of 1943, and the Civil War (1975-1990).

2.1 Colonial Beginnings and the Codification of Confessionalism

The French placed Lebanon under their authority after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire during World War I under the leadership of the League of Nations mandate. Instead of implementing a civic conception of politics, the French strengthened prevailing sectarian tendencies by apportioning political authority among the essential faith groups—Maronite Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Druze—proportionately according to communal population. [4] The Maronite community, which was coincidentally France's natural ally in the Levant, was given excessive political favor, and this resulted in long-standing disputes and the deprivation of the remainder of the sects of balanced authority-sharing. [5] Though designed as a process to provide representation and communal equilibrium, the confessional scheme entrenched sectarian division as the core of political identification. Political loyalty was determined in religious identification, with the apparatus and influence of the government regulated via sectarian networks of patronage.[6] The initial configurations that maintained the National Pact of 1943 still determine the country's fractured political order.

2.2 The National Pact of 1943

The National Pact was an informal agreement that guaranteed Lebanese independence in 1943 and enshrined confessional power-sharing as the modus operandi of the Lebanese regime. It gave the presidency to the Maronite Christian, the premiership the Sunni Muslim, and the speakership of the legislature the Shia Muslim. [7] It also allocated seats to Parliament in 6:5 proportion in favor of the Christians against the Muslims, the compromise being the demography of Lebanon of the day. [8] The agreement between the communities was the result of the compromise: the Christians agreed that they will not seek the protection of the West, and the Muslims relinquished the dream of unity with Syria. But instead of building unity, the agreement strengthened sectarian politics, connecting political competitions with communal allegiances. It bred zero-sum politics, with the two sects competing to maintain their portion of governance, inhibiting the development of a national identity and competent governance. [9] Although the National Pact prevented broad-scale sectarian conflict in the short term, the regime could not endure the long term. Changes in demographics, economic inequality, and lingering

[4] Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
[5] Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).
[6] Karim Makdisi and Marcus Marktanner, "Trapped by Consociationalism: The Case of Lebanon," *Political Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2009): 204–218.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Tina Fakhoury, "Power-Sharing After Civil War: Fifty Percent of Success," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 9, no. 2 (2014): 50–63.
Ibid.[9]

grievances added their costs and prevented the regime from reforming in response to stimuli. Patronage, rather than reform, held the political elite, which primarily belonged to the dominant sectarian factions, in line and preserved the status quo. The fragile balance collapsed into civil war in the mid-1970s.

2.3 The Civil War (1975–1990) and the State's Decline

Lebanon's civil conflict between 1975 and 1990 was the catalyst that altered the trajectory of the nation's political history. Although it had its proximal causes in long-standing domestic grievances and political exclusion, the conflict, however, was an extension of the wider regional politics, like the Arab Israeli conflict and the Cold War rivalries between the superpowers. External powers like Syria, Israel, Iran, and the United States invested in the warring factions, making the nation effectively the battleground of foreign interests. [10]

The gravest consequence of the conflict was the breakdown of the Lebanese state. As the ruling machinery broke down, sectarian-based militia organizations stepped in to fill the void, taking responsibility for the security, wellbeing, and justice of their constituents. Paramilitaries like Hezbollah and the Amal Movement accumulated vast influence based on the delivery of services and security in exchange for political loyalty, acting, in effect, as alternative arrangements of governance. [11] The long-term consequences of the conflict were negative: more than 120,000 died, hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced, and the economy and infrastructure of the country were shaken. [12]

Sectarian conflicts deepened as the factions fragmented and depended increasingly on their sectarian leaderships. Most importantly, the conflict justified the disintegration of the state and the entrenchment of the influence of foreign players in the guidance of the country's politics. [13]

2.4 The Taif Agreement (1989): Institutionalizing Sect

The Taif Agreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia in 1989 formally ended the fifteen-year civil conflict of Lebanon. Though universally hailed as having restored peace, the agreement institutionalized instead of eliminating the sectarian bases of Lebanese politics. It altered the existing regime of sectarian power-sharing by de-emphasizing the constitutional authority of the Maronite presidency and amplifying the authority of the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament from the Shia Muslim community.[14] It also insisted upon an equal number of seats between Muslims and Christians in Parliament, instead of the erstwhile 6:5 ratio that gave preference to the Christian community.[15] While the agreement formally enshrined an ostensibly balanced division along sectarian lines, it did little to eliminate the confessional constitution itself. Religious seats of politics continued to be apportioned along sectarian lines, thereby entrenching the very confessional cleavage that had created the civil conflict in the first instance.[16] The redeployed regime placed an emphasis on the significance of coexistence among the sectarian blocs but lacked the provision of creating cross-sectarian consensus or national unity.[17] One of the most contentious provisions of the Taif Agreement was the disarming of all the militias, except Hezbollah. Fearing an imminent invasion of southern Lebanon by Israel, however, Hezbollah kept its arms and slowly transformed into an overwhelming political and military force. [18] While the militia was dismantled in the others, the ongoing arming of Hezbollah subverted the balance of force and contributed to the volatility of postwar politics. The agreement also sanctioned the dispatch of the Syrian forces as peacekeepers. But, in practice, however, Syria was able to dominate the political configuration of Lebanon, with mastery over salient decisions and an omnipresent military and intel apparatus until 2005. This practically subverted Lebanese sovereignty, with domestic decisions often being arrived at based on the interests of Syria. [19] Long-term implications of Taif have been seismic. The agreement ended public fighting but enshrined political deadlock and confessional polarizations. Lebanon's leadership configuration, fixed

[10] Elizabeth Picard, "Lebanon's Political Reconstruction: From Taif to the Present," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2002): 12–25.
[11] Melani Cammett, "Partisan Activism and Access to Welfare in Lebanon," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 46 (2011): 70–97.
Nadya Makdisi, "The Lebanese Economy and Post-War Reconstruction," *Middle East Report*, 1996[12]
[13] Jens Hanssen, "The Failure of the Taif Agreement: Confessionalism and Its Discontents," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 3 (2004): 398–414.
[14] Imad Salamey, "The Crisis of Democracy in Lebanon: Power-Sharing and Sectarianism," *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (2014): 467–482.
Ibid.[15]
[16] Michael Hudson, "Trying Again: Power Sharing in Post-Civil War Lebanon," *International Negotiation* 4, no. 1 (1999): 103–122.
Ibid.[17]
[18] Augustus Richard Norton, "Hezbollah and the Politics of Legitimacy in Lebanon," *Mediterranean Politics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 1–18.
Ibid.[19]

under the Taif formula, has cultivated the culture of clientelism and entrenched deficit modes of patronage that prioritize confessional loyalty over the leadership of the nation. The 1-3-4 formula (a single president (Maronite), three major sectarian fractions, and four significant leadership positions that are allocated to the sects) has foreclosed substantive reform and guaranteed institutional petrification.[20]

2.5 The Role of External Actors

These interventions have restricted the freedom of Lebanon to undertake autonomous reform. Political elites frequently put their positions with the agendas of the foreign patrons, with regional allegiances coming ahead of the nation's agenda. This has rendered governance cumbersome, derailed institutional reform, and strengthened the perception of Lebanon as an externally dependent, polarized society.[21] As witnessed with post-2020 trends, although the Beirut explosion brought wide demands for systematic reform, the political class, insulated behind the foreign patrons and domestic modes of patronage, remained immensely immobile. While civil society mobilized along the anti-sect and accountability-based agendas, efforts such as the 2022 parliamentary elections and foreign exhortations for reform, were stifled due to elite division and electoral gerrymandering. It opens out an underlying deadlock: with the confessional paradigm itself intact, reform work is likely to become engulfed in the very establishment it is trying to challenge. From my own field experience, including interaction with regional policy groups and civil society movements since 2020, the surprising thing is not that sectarianism has persisted, but that it has managed to get continuously reengineered to maintain itself despite crisis. This process renders it impossible to work on reform on the ground, with otherwise salient campaigns being foiled by institutional roadblocks, institutional co-optation, or pushbacks. It is not so much to generate reform recommendations—so much is needed, however—than to disrupt the incentive systems which benefit from breakdown. Thoughts on Paralysis post-2022 Since the 2022 Lebanese parliamentary elections, hopes for strong political reform in Lebanon have effectively flatlined. Though the elections included an incremental rise in reform-minded and independent candidates, the latter remain institutionally excluded and powerless to articulate legislative agendas. [22] Old sectarian parties—most having reshuffled under the very same underlying behavior—still dominate seats of authority in Lebanon still. The political standoff over the succession of President Michel Aoun at the end of his term, coupled with repeated deadlocks over the construction of cabinets, is symbolic of elite faction still handicapping governance. [23] The systematic judicial independence was no less problematic, notably with respect to the investigation of the Beirut port explosion. The inquiry of Investigative Judge Tarek Bitar has systematically been blocked via judicial objections, political intimidation, and withdrawal of cooperation from the state. [24] High-ranking officials suspected of negligence or complicity remain protected from accountability via parliamentary immunity or sectarian networks, reflecting the extent to which accountability processes have their mooring in political considerations. The undermining of belief in judicial process is an extension of the broad legitimacy problem among Lebanese post-war institutions. [25] Virtually unheard-of grassroots mobilization and foreign pressure, including repeated reform demands conditional on International Monetary Fund (IMF) assistance, have led to little hard momentum beyond rhetoric. Anti-sectarian civil campaigns still have far to go among an opposition-disintegrating and silencing intended political process. Up to 2025, the reform process seems steadily symbolic, it was found more on donor expectations than institutional will. The political elite still has strong interests in the very institutions civil society actors have most consistently targeted as the essence of Lebanon's ills. [26]

3 The Lebanese Electoral System

The Lebanese electoral process continues to reflect the characteristics of the colonial compromise that has evolved over the years to maintain static confessional interests. Instead of supporting national unity or reform of existing institutions, the process entrenches religious identity as the core of political representation. Begun with the 1943 National Pact and modified with the 1989 Taif Agreement, the process took the form of a civic paradigm. Parliament seats and executive positions are determined based on confessional division, with the consequence favoring sectarian membership over policy-based agendas and developing demographic manipulation rather than an ideology of pluralism.[27] [28] It is fractured and frozen electoral politics. The 2022 parliamentary election proved clearly, with settled sectarian players winning in the face of massive-scale public opposition and the emergence of nationally rising, non-confessional candidates. Structural

Ibid.[20]
[21] Ibid.
[22] International Crisis Group, "Avoiding Further Deterioration in Lebanon," 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org.
[23] International IDEA, "The Global State of Democracy 2023," https://www.idea.int.
[24] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Justice for Beirut Blast Obstructed," 2022, https://www.hrw.org.
[25] Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2021," 2021, https://www.transparency.org.
[26] Maha Yahya, "The Lebanon We Deserve," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2023.
Ibid.[27]
Ibid.[28]

engineering—confessional quotas and man-made districting—still repress reformists.[29] [30] The National Pact originally sought to promote communal cooperation by distributing executive powers among the Maronite Christians, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, with an initial 6:5 ratio of parliamentary representation in favor of the Christians. This structure, however, over the years helped to entrench zero-sum sectarian politics. The civil conflict reinforced the logic, developing militias into political entities that captured the institutions of the state—most prominently, the Hezbollah, which combined armed might with vast social services. [3132] Though the Taif Agreement balanced parliamentary representation and officially transferred executive authority, it too enshrined sectarianism and perpetuated elite domination under the watch of Syria until 2005.[33] The 2017 reform converted Lebanon from being majoritarian to proportional representation. Though enthusiastically received upon its implementation, the reform strengthened existing dynamics of power. The confessional quotas persisted, electoral districts persisted being mapped with the objective to maintain elite interests, and preferential voting fostered intra-sect contests. National-level politics persisted in being discredited, and the legislative deadlock expanded.[34] These weaknesses are reflected in the operation of public institutions. The government is still dependent on clientelist networks, the public jobs and public services being channeled via sectarian networks. This machinery created an oversized and bloated bureaucracy and widespread corruption. The 2019 Lebanese economic collapse—initiated with currency devaluation, banking sector failure, and rapid-track deterioration—revealed the frailty of the political economy that is based on patronage and not on public service.[35] . The uprising of 2019 revealed underlying public grievances. Activists within both sectarian blocs called for the reform of the system and the end of confessional rule. Even if the movement created new civilian players and transformed the agenda, it did not engender transformative politics.

The 2022 election represented a contained breakthrough, with an array of independent candidates winning seats within parliament. However, institutional barriers—such as gerrymandering, economic imbalances, and limited access to the media—forestalled their expansion.[36] More worrying is the hijacking of reform discourse among current elites. Current elites used reform discourse to consolidate their dominance, confusing distinctions between reformers and careerists. The rhetorical ambiguity has blurred the public and split civil society opposition. There were multiple signs of growing public skepticism that deters cohesion and dismantles reforming blocks. Nonetheless, civil society is still advocating an integrated civil electoral law that would eliminate sectarian quotas in favor of a national constituency system. If this reform was passed it could allow competition based on ideology and public policy. The formation of an independent electoral commission—supported by reformists and foreign monitors—is still an essential recommendation. However, they were met with considerable resistance by political elites, which see the proposals as an existential threat. Nonetheless, vote-buying, intimidation, and patronage prevail, and most often in rural and disadvantaged areas.[37]

4 Emerging Pressures and Pathways for Reform

New trends have brought added complexities to the Lebanese reform process. Previously excluded from electoral proceedings, the diaspora is assuming increased significance. Though voting rights, albeit limited, were extended in 2018 and 2022, procedural limitations and lists of electoral districts dampened efficacy. Prospective reform efforts entail the creation of an extranational constituency in the hopes of enhancing diaspora representation and challenging home-country patronage politics. [38] While digital campaigning and civil society protests have transformed political discussion, online campaigns, citizen journalism, and spoofs broke the official monopoly on interpretation and enlivened political discourse. However, differential online exposure—most intensely in the rural areas—selects influence and entrenches inequality in civil activity.

Educational fault lines also sustained sectarian alignments, beginning with the confessional nature of Lebanese educational curricula. At the same time, new policy issues—climate change, gender justice, and urbanization are spanning sectarian fissures. Movements like Beirut Madinati and Li Haqqi have gathered support along those agendas, primarily among the young and the urbanized population. Youth-based movements with

Ibid.[29]
[30] Arab Barometer, “The Challenges of Independent Candidates in Lebanon’s 2022 Elections,” 2022, https://www.arabbarometer.org.
Ibid.[31]
Ibid.[32]
Ibid.[33]
[34] Jad Khalil, “Electoral Politics in Lebanon: A Sectarian Framework,” *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020): 62–80.
Ibid.[35]
Ibid.[36]
Ibid.[37]
[38] Sami Dagher, “The Diaspora’s Role in Lebanon’s Political Future,” *Lebanese Policy Review*, 2021.

an environmental-justice and city planning agenda are shifting the political agenda, offering practical alternatives to sectorial identification. Established religion has an ambivalent role to play as well. As most clergy members adhere to the status quo, however, there has developed wider clerical support for accountability and reform, to counter simplified interpretations of the conservatism of religion. Comparative examples put Lebanon's challenges into higher relief. As with Iraq and Bosnia, the post-conflict concessional formula in Lebanon has transformed into an elite cartel regime. Regimes entrench sectarian quotas within parties, which disincentivize political crossing cutting politics of coalitions and emphasize identity politics over accountability in policy. [39] International intervention has been distressing in the three cases—calling out reform yet tolerating elite entrenchment behind the veil of foreign aid and foreign policy. Civil society is an abiding force, but still, it is coupled with actual limitations. Activists are unmoved with elite competition, stuck judicial reform, particularly with the Beirut port explosion investigation, and mounting public anger. The reform talk, used by the elite, has the effect of disempowering opposition before it is institutionalized. Nevertheless, Lebanese civic space is increasingly pluralistic. Women's rights organizations, green movements, youth forums, and diaspora organizations form a multipolar accountability system. If their coalition politics, use of pressure, and provision of workable political alternatives reap their rewards, it might yet turn sectarian deadlock into democratic resurgence.

5 Navigating Lebanon's Reform Process

Lebanon is struggling with the difficult and increasingly fragile dynamics of domestic limitations and foreign entanglements. Domestically, its political establishment, shaped under the tutelage of an entrenched sectarian split between powers, is still highly averse to change, despite the latter decade, which has been shaped by economic disintegration, mega-protest movements, and burgeoning civic opposition. in the meanwhile, the regional situation is being shaped in dramatic terms. Syria's comeback into the mainstream of the Arab diplomatic space, the foreign policy shifts of Iran, the foreign policy course correction of Riyadh, and growing conflicts entwining the Israel have reshaped the external terms of the politics that Lebanon is trying to conduct, reform, or simply survive. Overall, the multilayered crises shed light on the limitations and the possibilities of Lebanese political transformation.

Lebanon’s post-Taif political framework continues to operate on the principle of confessional consociation. While intended to manage pluralism, it has devolved into a mechanism for elite preservation and institutional gridlock. The 2022 parliamentary elections—hailed by some as a breakthrough—brought in several independent candidates. Yet their marginal presence failed to disrupt the entrenched networks of patronage, largely because the system itself is engineered to absorb and neutralize dissent.[40] Government formation remains hostage to sectarian negotiations, and the ongoing presidential vacuum epitomizes the inertia at the heart of Lebanese governance.[41] This is more than a partisan deadlock: it is the natural result of an electoral process that incentivizes clientelism and sectarian loyalty rather than institutional accountability. Structural reform will thus need to engage the underlying rules of representation. Moving to a single national constituency and eliminating sectarian quotas would not merely redistribute the electoral map, it would begin the process of shifting the logic of political contestation from identity-based to issue-based.[42] [43]

The civic resilience played a major role in the Lebanese political sphere, since 2019, there was a noticeable mobilization. Although the political system has avoided serious reform, the wider Lebanese public sphere has been the location of incremental evolution. The 2019 protests marked the breaking point in Lebanese political culture. The mass movement shook off the limits of sectarian identity and raised many questions around accountability, social justice, and institution building. These movements were the new motivator of civil society entities—Li Haqqi, Minteshreen, the Mada Network—who have gone on to try to institutionalize protest in the form of electoral politics, online campaigning, and community governance. [44] [45] Nonetheless, this civic energy faces significant challenges. Fragmentation, funding disparities, and elite co-optation continue to undermine collective efficacy. Cross-sector coalitions, bridging gender justice, environmental advocacy, anti-corruption campaigns, and youth leadership—remain more aspirational than operational. Initiatives like Beirut Madinati and

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ziad El-Husseini, “Lebanon’s Electoral Dilemma: Reform or Retreat,” *Lebanon Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 89–107.
[44] M. AbiYaghi, L. Yammine, and J. Chabarek, “From the October Uprising to the Economic Collapse: What Prospects for Lebanon?” *Arab Reform Initiative*, 2020.
[45] UNDP, “Supporting Civic Education in Lebanon,” 2022.

citizen-led municipal forums offer potential blueprints for coalition politics but require sustained support and strategic coordination to scale their impact.[46]

The Lebanese diaspora played another substantial role in promoting reform, the diaspora has significant economic contributions, and it has become an increasingly coherent political constituency in recent years. Diaspora-led advocacy groups sprang into action after the Beirut port explosion, calling for accountability, advocating forensic investigations, and crowdfunding independent media. [47] This political awakening has resulted in more organized attempts at extending voting rights, building transnational policy agendas, and incorporating diaspora expertise into domestic developmental projects. Nonetheless, productive diaspora engagement is yet compromised by archaic laws and institutional resistance. Overseas voting is restricted, consultative arrangements are sporadic, and sparse instruments are available that enable the diaspora to influence policy or legislative agendas. Institutionalizing diaspora representation, reserved seats in the legislature, advisory boards, or online participatory platforms that would not only democratize reform but also globalize its legitimacy too.

Education Reform and Youth-Led Governance It is the young Lebanese that choose to skip the mainstream politics and instead choose innovation-led engagement. The policy laboratories of the universities, civil education websites, and NGOs that work with the youth are filling the void that has been left behind by the party-based political culture. The MEHE-UNESCO Five-Year Plan is the ideal reform at the systems level, and the curriculum redesign is rooted in civic literacy, inclusive history, and critical thinking. [48] These reform processes aim to disassociate identity from sect and redefine citizenship as engagement and not allegiance. But that takes generational times, stable finances, and insulated politics. Without institutional support, youth movements burn out or get depoliticized. Youth involvement in subnational processes like quadratic representation, internships, and citizen budgeting may sustain their involvement and deepen the democratic depth of the state.

6 Regional Realignments and Their Domestic Implications

Apart from its domestic fissures, Lebanese reform math is defined by fluid geopolitical tides. Membership in the Arab League of Syria, brokered in sections by the Gulf and Moscow, is testament to regional avidity to prize stability at the expense of accountability. [49] [50] Normalization, for Lebanon, carries the threat of recalibrating the legitimacy of the Syrian political establishment's influence, principally via allied movements and policy surrogates. Not being under foreign military occupation, yet, Lebanon therefore continues to remain vulnerable to the politics of soft power of Damascus, particular as the pool of Syrian refugees and economic links become regional political bargaining counters.[51] The 2023 thaw between Saudi Arabia and Iran, despite being termed regional thaw, has resulted in very few dividends to Lebanon. The axis of Hezbollah-Tehran continues to blunt discussions on disarmament and seals security exceptionalism. Since Iran has defined its role as resistance-oriented, its strategic thinking has frequently negated the political sovereignty of Lebanon. Riyadh has, however, taken the policy of hands-off and investment in technocratic blocks instead of direct political intervention.[52] The void that has been created due to the disengagement of Riyadh has further tilted the pendulum in the direction of Iranian-aligned factions. The long-standing Lebanese conflict has a nice analogue in the interim, that is, the long-standing Yemeni conflict. Like Lebanon, foreign-funded sectarian fault lines, paralyzed state institutions, and politicization of the armed forces.[53] Both nations demonstrate how foreign-funded non-state actors, under the cover of legitimacy, sustain instability and prolong reform and substitute its own institutions. The most imminent regional threat, however, continues to be the Palestinian Israeli conflict. The Gaza conflict of 2023-2024 has shaken the southern Lebanese border, with Hezbollah proclaiming unity and resuming periodic attacks of gunfire.[54] This securitized politics eliminates room for civil politics, entrenches securitized narratives, and inhibits reform. It also diverts investment away from governance and inhibits foreign investment otherwise needed to reconstruct the country.

[46] UN Women, “From Protest to Politics: Women in Lebanon’s Thawra,” 2021.

Ibid.[47]

[48] UNESCO, “Reforming Lebanese Curriculum: Civic Literacy and National Unity,” 2021.
[49] David Meier, “Syria’s Comeback: What It Means for Lebanon,” *Arab Strategic Affairs Review*, 2023.
[50] Haidi Haid, “The Regional Repositioning of Syria,” *Middle East Policy Watch*, 2024.
[51] UNHCR, “Syria and Lebanon: Displacement and Policy,” 2023.
[52] Julien Barnes-Dacey, “Saudis Step Back from Lebanon,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2022.
[53] Farea Al-Muslimi, “Lessons from Yemen for Lebanon,” *Middle East Reform Monitor*, 2023.
[54] Amos Heller, “Lebanon on Edge: The Gaza Conflict and Hezbollah’s Response,” *Security Watch*, 2024.

7 Strategic Recalibration and Reform

Whereas regional politics offer such pressure, they offer room for strategic maneuvering too. Ascending non-Western powers—primarily, China and Russia—as regional interlocutors offer more of a multipolar world in which Lebanon has leeway to offer diplomatic leadership. Though neither is bound to democratization, their overtures to stability, investment in infrastructure, and energy transport might offer driving force behind regional domestic institutional building—if as part of broader regional agendas.[55] Lebanon's reform agents must therefore articulate an activist, and non-passive, new logic of strategy—linking governance reform with domestic recovery and regional economic interdependence and security. This involves redesigning neutrality as an activist, and not passive, agenda of engagement; breaking conditional aid packages that enhance civic institutions; and setting domestic reform within transnational networks of civic engagement. Such changes require reappraisal of foreign engagement as well. Western donors must shift away from their privileging of technical assistance to political empowerment—support to movements, and not service delivery, but rights-based campaigning and strategic litigation. The European Union's electoral reform leadership, the UNDP's citizen educational assistance, and the International Monetary Fund's conditionalities must all be brought into line to avoid elite manipulation and fractionalization. Lebanon's future is lean, yet achievable, reform must be envisioned as the country's necessity and the neighborhood's necessity. Only if the internal decay is repaired and the foreign adjustment is utilized is it possible that Lebanon might deconstruct its confessional bunker and construct an accountable, dignified, and pluralistic sovereignty-based state.

8 Navigating the Lebanese Reform Process

Lebanon is facing multifaceted and increasingly fragile complex of domestic constraints and foreign entanglements. Domestically, its political elite, forged under the tutelage of an enshrined sectarian division between powers, still is immensely opposed to reform, in spite of the intervening decade, which has been forged out of economic setbacks, large-scale protests, and burgeoning civil resistance. Meanwhile, the regional setting is being defined dramatically. Syria's re-entry into the mainstream of the Arab diplomatic firmament, the foreign policy moves of Iran, the foreign policy course-shift by Riyadh, and growing conflicts and instability in the region which redrawn the external terms of the politics that Lebanon seeks to conduct any reform. By extension, the intertwined crises shed light on the limits and the possibilities of Lebanese political transformation.

The Post-Taif Lebanese politics continues to abide by the confessional principle. However, despite being designed with the purpose of containing pluralism, it has, instead, transformed into an elite-preserving mechanism and an institutional stasis tool. The 2022 parliamentary elections, which others have referred to as a blessing, arrived with quite an array of independent candidates. All the same, their peripheral entry did little in derailing the existing trends of patronage, primarily the reason being that the very system has the capacity of swallowing and rendering ineffective opposition.[56] Formation of governments still comes under confessional bargains, with the existing presidential void being an exemplification of the stasis being faced at the very essence of Lebanese politics.[57] The challenge is bigger than partisan politics: it is the unavoidable result of an electoral process that incentivizes clientelism and sectarian representation rather than institutional accountability. Structural reform will thus need to address the underlying rules of representation. From one constituency in the entire nation and the removal of sectarian seats to the whole electoral map, it would not merely redraw the electoral map, it would start the process of shifting the logic of political competition from the politics of identity to issue politics.[58] [59]

9 Conclusions

Lebanon’s current crisis is magnified by a failed economy, large-scale emigration, and regional entanglement, has also mobilized vast civic consciousness. 2019 mobilizations, electoral windows, and youth-led civic movements are more than signs of resistance: they represent the initial cornerstones of a long overdue transformation. Regional trends, from Syria's redeployment to the Iranian Saudi power struggle and the escalation in Palestine compound with the overall regional instability makes the Lebanese track challenging, and it creates diplomatic pressure points that must be targeted and navigated wisely. As exemplified in this paper, reform in Lebanon cannot merely represent an institutional engineering exercise but the reconceptualization of the political community, the democratization of representation, and the restoration of the country's national sovereignty from domestic elites and foreign actors alike.

[55] Maggie Kuo, “China’s Middle East Strategy: Infrastructure, Influence, and Lebanon,” *Asia and Middle East Monitor*, 2024.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

The obstructions are considerable, yet the active civil society, diaspora engagement, and transnational solidarity represents a counterpoint to the status quo. The question is less whether Lebanon will reform, but whether it will reform before the disintegration of its civic infrastructure under the deadweight of institutional unresponsiveness. And the latter depends as much upon the reformers as it does on the coherence of the regional and the global community in extracting accountability, an equitable division of the burdens, and inclusivity.

At this critical juncture, the path forward cannot rest on principles alone, it must translate into coherent, context-specific actions that reflect both the structural urgency, and the lived demands articulated across Lebanon's civic landscape.

Recommendations

Rebalance regional interaction via multilateral diplomacy, Lebanon is compelled to redefine its location in the shifting regional dynamics via balanced, practical diplomacy. This involves the nurturing of intensified interaction with the Gulf States, China, and non-West powers with core alliances with the EU, U.S., and the UN organizations. Reform agents must advance foreign policy on non-alignment, economic cooperation, and neutrality. This recalibration must prioritize the country's sovereignty over proxy alignment and gain from new regional fora—trilateral energy fora and climate blocs—where Lebanese interaction is productively integrated. Public diplomacy efforts could shape reform as regional stability's imperative, with an invitation to productive investment with an absence of political conditionalities.

Improve civic infrastructure as Lebanon's best hope for democracy is its civil society. Investments need to be concentrated on organizational survivability, and ecosystem-level building of strengths. Decentralize support to rural and disadvantaged regions, construct digital security infrastructure among activists, and boost civic education on an all-around scale. Civil society organizations need to converge behind an agreed national charter of reform principles, underpinned with participatory planning, in order to avoid duplication and elite capture. International donors need to push modalities of pooled spending being managed by Lebanese organization consortia, to minimize dependency on multiple foreign agendas.

Institutionalize diasporan representation in governance institutional reform, this implies the setting up of a transnational electoral district with seats of parliament, an official advisory council on the board, online, and in safe, venues of policy feedback. Diaspora host governments might work with Lebanese institutions in the sponsorship of civic education, diasporan media, and campaigning for transparency and elections. This sort of reform must be protected with monitoring from autonomous institutions and anticorruption watchdogs to ensure representation, and not the entrenchment of elite interests.

Construct a national consensus on sovereignty and demilitarization. An agenda of substantive reform must meet Lebanon's incomplete security challenge. Parliamentary discussion must be initiated on the inclusion of the militia element of the role of Hezbollah under an expanded view of national defense. Confidence-building might be the setting up of cross-party defense committees in parliament, security consultations under the sponsorship of the UN, and transitional justice processes demilitarizing politics and defending populations. Religious leadership, municipality officials, and civil educators might also play the role of middlemen in depolarizing the security discourse. There simply is no reform of sovereignty that is viable which does not entail redesigning the interaction between the state and armed non-state actors.

Anchor economic reform with institutional accountability, including systematic enforcement of the capital control laws, forensic audit of the central banking systems, and reform of the procurement systems. National recovery plans must prioritize the social protections, that is, public health and universal primary education, and energy subsidies, with macroeconomic stabilization, as well. Budget preparation must engage civil society, watchdogs against corruption must be autonomous, and public financial data must be accessible and transparent. Institutional accountability alone is the route to enable Lebanon to regain investor confidence and public trust.

Lebanon's future will rest on whether reform efforts can move beyond fragmented promises toward a sustained, shared commitment, locally and internationally, to rebuild institutions, restore trust, and create a political system that serves its people rather than divides them.

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