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# Bridging Divides

Strengthening Social Cohesion and  
Accountability in Lebanon's Reform Process

*Policy Brief, March 2024 – August 2024*

**we'am**  
Working for  
Engagement,  
Acceptance  
and Mediation





# Disclaimer

This report was produced by ALEF – act for human rights in partnership with Oxfam, SHiFT, and Right to Play under the WE'AM project (Working for Engagement, Acceptance and Mediation) funded by the European Union. Its content is the sole responsibility of ALEF – act for human rights, Oxfam, SHiFT, and Right to Play, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



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# 1. Executive Summary

ALEF – act for human rights is implementing the WE'AM project (Working for Engagement, Acceptance and Mediation), funded by the EU and led by OXFAM, and which aims to contribute to a people-centered recovery in Lebanon, in line with 3RF and particularly Pillar 3 that supports a socially cohesive environment.

As part of the project, ALEF is producing a series of policy briefs to address the drivers of social tensions in Lebanon and the impact of the different reform processes in the country on social cohesion. It aims to highlight the urgent need for longer-term policy interventions to protect the different communities in Lebanon and marginalized groups. ALEF is analyzing secondary sources, news reports, and articles to identify the root causes of social tensions while drawing on findings from the Perceptions Reports, produced under the WE'AM project, which capture community perceptions on social tensions and reform processes.

This policy brief is the first in the series and covers the period between 01 March and 31 August 2024.

Lebanon's ongoing crises have severely eroded trust between the population and government institutions, as citizens feel abandoned by a state unable to provide basic security or enforce laws. In fact, the escalating armed conflict between Hezbollah and Israel has deepened societal fragmentation within Lebanese communities. The collapse of governance in the country, amplified by the country's ongoing economic constraints, is pushing people into widespread poverty, thus intensifying social tensions, especially due to resource competition. The presence of refugees, particularly Syrians, further heightens tensions, as they are perceived as competitors for employment and aid, resulting in widespread discrimination, hate speech, and violence. As such, social cohesion continues to deteriorate, as violence, crimes, and discrimination against marginalized groups become more pronounced, deepening divisions within the country. This situation is further exacerbated by Lebanon's governmental paralysis, driven by recurrent political vacuums, and corruption, which obstruct the legislative reforms necessary to address these challenges.

ALEF suggests the below recommendations to mitigate these issues and promote social cohesion and human rights in Lebanon:

## Recommendations

### To the Lebanese Parliament

- Pass key legislation for the implementation of comprehensive economic, political, and judicial reforms to address the root causes of social tensions and instability, enhance public safety, and restore trust in governmental institutions. These should include measures to strengthen judicial independence, combat corruption, and ensure economic policies that promote social equity and stability.
- Strengthen judicial independence by passing laws that safeguard judges from political pressure and influence, ensuring that reforms in the judicial system are not only structural but also effective in ensuring justice for all.
- Promote transparency and accountability in the legislative process and governance. Ensure that all reforms are closely monitored and subject to public scrutiny to prevent corruption and mismanagement, which may undermine public trust.
- Ensure that all legislation is inclusive and considers the needs of vulnerable populations.
- Commit to the obligations outlined in international human rights treaties ratified by the GoL and intensify efforts towards the ratification of additional treaties.

### To the Lebanese Government

- Prioritize and expedite the implementation of comprehensive economic, political, and judicial reforms to address the root causes of social tensions.
- Prioritize sustainable development through long-term social and economic policies that focus on growth, job creation, and economic diversification. These could help mitigate some of the root causes of instability, particularly the economic hardship many citizens face.
- Work towards inclusive policies that consider the needs of vulnerable populations, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, and economic support.
- Support anti-discrimination initiatives and enforce policies that protect marginalized groups, including refugees, women, and minorities, from discrimination in employment, education, and healthcare.
- Enhance the complaint mechanism of the ISF's cybersecurity-unit to ensure they are user-friendly for reporting and provide victims with clear guidance and the necessary steps to take following a report. This system should be widely disseminated to raise public awareness, ensuring that individuals are informed of its availability and can access it when needed.
- Promote media literacy to enhance critical thinking and reduce the impact of divisive narratives on social cohesion.

- Adopt measures that enhance community safety, particularly during nighttime, to promote a safer environment. Emphasize the disproportionate impact night-time insecurity has.
- Strengthen the capacity of local law enforcement to handle conflict resolution within the community. Community proximity to law enforcement can help reduce tensions between communities and the state, especially in areas with large refugee populations.

#### **To Local Authorities**

- Emphasize the importance of fostering a sense of community responsibility without encouraging further securitization.
- Foster partnerships with local NGOs and community-based organizations to implement targeted social programs that address specific challenges faced by different segments of the population.
- Establish mechanisms for early detection of social tensions and conflicts within the community and implement preventive measures to address underlying issues before they escalate.
- Make already available public spaces, such as a library or public garden, a safe and neutral hub to foster inter and intracommunal communication, where awareness sessions and other activities could take place.
- Promote youth engagement by creating platforms within local authorities that empower young people to participate in decision-making processes, shaping policies that directly affect them. This could help reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies among youth.

#### **To International Donors Including 3RF Principals**

- Push the GoL towards political, economic, and judicial reforms, emphasizing the importance of addressing the current crisis and fostering stability.
- Strengthen coordination mechanisms between local government, international actors, and civil society organizations to ensure that reform efforts are inclusive, transparent, and holistic. This could ensure that initiatives are more effective and avoid duplication of efforts.
- Include marginalized voices in decision-making on reform processes to ensure comprehensive community representation.

#### **To International Programs in Lebanon, including EU-led**

- Support the creation of a cooperation hub that consolidates the findings of the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of implemented programs on social stability to ensure effectiveness and adjust strategies accordingly.

- Prioritize programs that support collaboration among government agencies, civil society, international organizations, and private sector entities to implement holistic and coordinated solutions.
- Encourage and fund projects that aim to strengthen the overall public safety and security.
- Support programs that promote media literacy to enhance critical thinking and reduce the impact of divisive narratives on social cohesion,
- Ensure that any aid or assistance in Lebanon responds to the local context and is needs-based, inclusive of vulnerable communities and equitable.
- Decentralize aid and resources to ensure more local autonomy in decision-making processes and resource allocation, enabling communities to better address their unique challenges.
- Increase resettlement programs in Lebanon to share the responsibility of hosting refugees.
- Invest in community resilience by supporting mental health and psychosocial support programs for communities affected by the ongoing crises, especially for vulnerable populations.

#### To CSOs

- Facilitate safe spaces for dialogue between Lebanese citizens and refugee communities to promote understanding, tolerance, and collaboration, to reduce tensions, especially among the youth, including through collaborating with local community leaders to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding.
- Ensure that program design processes adopt a participatory approach with local communities to create interventions that better align with local needs.
- Establish community dialogue forums to facilitate open discussions on safety concerns, economic hardships, and social issues, ensuring diver perspectives are heard and considered in project design.
- Create robust feedback mechanisms within CSO programs to ensure that beneficiaries, especially those from marginalized communities, can voice concerns and suggestions, leading to more responsive interventions.
- Encourage responsible journalism that emphasizes positive reporting and contributes to a positive public discourse.
- Advocate for the inclusion of marginalized voices in decision-making processes to ensure comprehensive community representation.
- Advocate for the decentralization of aid and resources in favor of local autonomy.

## 2. General Background on the Evolving Context

Between March and August 2024, elements comprising the context around social tensions in Lebanon have continued to evolve.

The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, which initially erupted on October 8, 2023,<sup>1</sup> intensified significantly. Although the **hostilities were initially confined to the southern border** between Lebanon and Israel,<sup>2</sup> **they gradually expanded to include attacks in the Beqaa**,<sup>3</sup> particularly in Baalbek, **as well as targeted assassinations in the southern suburb of Beirut**.<sup>4</sup> By the end of August, Israel escalated its attacks on the southern suburb, **indiscriminately targeting buildings and civilian infrastructure in the area**.<sup>5</sup> As a result of these escalations, the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) had reached 113,054,<sup>6</sup> with 1,566 casualties including 589 fatalities of which 137 were civilians.<sup>7</sup> The attacks completely destroyed 4,000 residential buildings and damaged 20,000 others.<sup>8</sup> As IDPs settle in different regions due to the war, local communities have been facing additional pressure, with resources becoming even scarcer. As a result, sectarian discourse has been amplified, especially in areas hosting IDPs, with local populations, who are already under economic duress, perceiving the new arrivals as a burden or a threat to their limited resources or safety. These dynamics fuel resentment and deepen sectarian divides.

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1 The Independent (2024, October 3). Israel-Hezbollah-Hamas conflict timeline: Everything that's happened since 7 October. Retrieved from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-hamas-hezbollah-gaza-attack-lebanon-iran-b2623075.html>

2 OCHA (2023, November 18). Lebanon: Flash Update #1 – Escalation of hostilities in south Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/lebanon/lebanon-flash-update-1-escalation-hostilities-south-lebanon-18-november-2023>

3 The National News (2024, February 26). Israeli strikes hit Lebanon's Baalbek for first time since start of Gaza war. Retrieved from: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2024/02/26/israeli-jets-strike-lebanons-baalbek-for-the-first-time-since-gaza-war-began/>

4 OCHA (2024, January 3). Lebanon: Flash Update #8 – Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/lebanon/lebanon-flash-update-8-escalation-hostilities-south-lebanon-3-january-2024>

5 Reliefweb, (2024, September 10). Lebanon: Flash Update #26 - Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon, as of 06 September 2024. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-flash-update-26-escalation-hostilities-south-lebanon-06-september-2024>

6 IOM (2024, September 5). Mobility Snapshot – Round 45. Retrieved from: <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/lebanon-mobility-snapshot-round-45-05-09-2024>

7 Reliefweb, (2024, September 10). Lebanon: Flash Update #26 - Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon, as of 06 September 2024. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-flash-update-26-escalation-hostilities-south-lebanon-06-september-2024>

8 Ibid

This ongoing conflict, compounded by persistent political polarization and divisions—evidenced particularly by the failure to elect a new president—continues to exacerbate the situation in Lebanon, deepening feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty about the future. Indeed, the conflict has further diminished the state’s ability to address political, economic and security challenges particularly as **the prolonged presidential vacuum, and inability to hold cabinet meetings, obstructs any prospects of implementing reforms.**<sup>9</sup>

In April, the Parliament decided to **postpone municipal elections for the 3rd time** under the pretext that violence is still eminent in South Lebanon and elections cannot take place without the Southern districts.<sup>10</sup> The repeated extension of existing municipal councils’ mandates has significantly constrained their capacities, leading to inefficiencies and, in some regions, rendering them completely inactive. In previous years, Lebanon’s economic collapse had driven away employees from the public sector and compelled municipalities to implement budget cuts in many essential operations and intervention areas. Even after the second postponement of the municipal elections, many municipalities were unhappy with their term’s extension, feeling forced to continue their duties with insufficient support. Despite the ongoing challenges they face, the government did not grant them additional powers or privileges, nor were they granted the required financial allocations to overcome these obstacles.<sup>11</sup> Given this data from previous years, the current situation is likely even more critical.

Many councils struggle to perform their duties, affecting local governance and undermining their reliability and rendering them increasingly dispensable and peripheral in managing local administration. Lebanon’s ongoing economic crisis further exacerbates this situation due to limited resources to support municipalities.<sup>12</sup> Various factors contribute to the challenges, including limited administrative capacity, inadequate human resources and IT equipment, weak legal enforcement, etc. <sup>13</sup> This shows the extent of the resource gap municipalities suffer from.

**Poverty in Lebanon has more than tripled over the past decade, affecting 44% of the population,** with one in every three Lebanese living in poverty.<sup>14</sup> The prolonged economic and financial crisis has forced households to implement various coping mechanisms, such as reducing food consumption, cutting back on non-essential expenses, and limiting healthcare spending.<sup>15</sup> This has deepened existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable groups, including women, LGBT individuals, refugees, migrants, and others, who often bear the brunt of

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9 Now Lebanon (2024, June 14). Lebanese Presidency Stalemate. Retrieved from: <https://nowlebanon.com/lebanese-presidency-stalemate/>

10 NaharNet (2024, April 25). Parliament postpones local elections again as violence rocks south. Retrieved from: <https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/304817-parliament-postpones-local-elections-again-as-violence-rocks-south>

11 ALEF. (2023, January). Peacebuilding and Social Stability Challenges Faced by Municipalities within a Context of Ongoing Crises in Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://alefliban.org/publications/peacebuilding-and-social-stability-challenges-faced-by-municipalities-within-a-context-of-ongoing-crises-in-lebanon/>

12 LCPS (2024, September 12). Reforming Municipal Elections in Lebanon: Pathways to Democratic Local Governance. Retrieved from: <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/en/articles/details/4888/reforming-municipal-elections-in-lebanon-pathways-to-democratic-local-governance>

13 The Tahrir Institute. (2023, May 18). Local Governance in Lebanon: The Great Mirage. Retrieved from: <https://timep.org/2023/05/18/local-governance-in-lebanon-the-great-mirage/>

14 World Bank (2024, May 23). Lebanon: Poverty more than triples over the last decade reaching 44% under a protracted crisis. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/23/lebanon-poverty-more-than-triples-over-the-last-decade-reaching-44-under-a-protracted-crisis>

15 Ibid

these systemic challenges and are further marginalized as a result. Amid the ongoing war and the multiple other crises affecting Lebanon, **food insecurity is expected to worsen, as individuals and families are increasingly struggling to meet their basic needs.**<sup>16</sup>

Lebanon remains the country with the highest number of refugees per capita, with the government estimating the presence of 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and around 11,238 refugees of other nationalities. As the country grapples with its most severe socio-economic crisis in decades, **the situation of refugees has worsened, resulting in a significant rise in poverty and restricted access to basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education.**<sup>17</sup> In fact, nine out of every ten Syrian households in Lebanon are under the poverty line.<sup>18</sup> The country's worsening economic crisis and deteriorating security situation have heightened scrutiny of Syrian refugees, particularly when crimes involve Syrian nationals. **The Syrian community has increasingly become a target of hate speech and physical attacks from segments of the Lebanese population.** They are also facing discrimination from the Lebanese government, as many struggle to renew their legal documents, finding the process nearly impossible. Since a Syrian was suspected in the kidnapping and killing of Pascal Sleiman in April<sup>19</sup> and another was found guilty in the shooting of the US embassy in June,<sup>20</sup> **Syrians have been facing deportations,<sup>21</sup> raids on their camps,<sup>22</sup> and further marginalization within Lebanon.**<sup>23</sup>

In other security-related concerns, in August, a man murdered his niece, a TikTok influencer, under the pretext of restoring the family's honor after she was cyberblackmailed with an explicit video.<sup>24</sup> **Honor killings continue to be a serious concern in Lebanon,** especially since no criminal charges are imposed on the murderer.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, **discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community persists.** For instance, two men were arrested for the killing of a transgender person in Dora, after the body was found with multiple stab wounds to the face.<sup>26</sup>

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16 Relief Web (2024, August 20). WFP Lebanon: 2024 Mid-Year Highlights. Retrieved from:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/wfp-lebanon-2024-mid-year-highlights>

17 UNHCR (2024). Lebanon at a Glance 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/at-a-glance#:~:text=Lebanon%20remains%20a%20country%20hosting,11%2C238%20refugees%20of%20other%20nationalities.>

18 World Bank (2024, May 23). Lebanon: Poverty more than triples over the last decade reaching 44% under a protracted crisis. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/23/lebanon-poverty-more-than-triples-over-the-last-decade-reaching-44-under-a-protracted-crisis>

19 NaharNet (2024, April 8). Army says LF official killed during an attempt to steal his car. Body taken to Syria. Retrieved from: <https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/304462-army-says-lf-official-killed-during-attempt-to-steal-his-car-body-taken-to-syria>

20 L'orient le Jour. (2024, June 8). More than 40 arrested in connection with attack on US embassy in Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1416613/plus-de-40-arrestations-en-rapport-avec-lattentat-contre-lambassade-des-etats-unis-au-liban.html>

21 Access Center For Human Rights (2024, May 20). Refugees' Weekly News. Retrieved from:

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C7MIY5XKKoh/?hl=en&img\\_index=6](https://www.instagram.com/p/C7MIY5XKKoh/?hl=en&img_index=6)

22 Elnashra News Website (2024, May 23). Al-Masih on the decision to evacuate Al-Waha camp for displaced people in Deddah: The State decisions are stronger than UNHCR's directives. Retrieved from: Elnashranews

23 961 website (2024, May 14). 500+ Syrian Businesses Illegally Operating In Lebanon Were Just Shut Down. Retrieved from: <https://www.the961.com/500-syrian-businesses-illegally-operating/>

24 LebanonON (2024, August 17) The Baalbakia family kills their famous daughter Tiktoker to wash the shame... movie led to her murder Retrieved from: <https://www.lebanonon.com/news/269741>

25 Ibid.

26 L'orient-Today (2024, May 21). Murder of a transgender person in Dora: two suspects apprehended. Retrieved from: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1414572/le-meurtre-dune-personne-transgenre-a-dora-elucide.html>

# 3. Drivers of Tensions in Lebanon

## Root Causes

Lebanon's social tensions are deeply rooted in a combination of political, economic, and social drivers that have worsened over time.

Lebanon's weak rule of law and institutional fragility have created an environment where justice, accountability, and basic services are inconsistently upheld. With institutions failing throughout the years to protect the rights of individuals and ensure fair treatment, communities have often had to rely on religious or political groups for security and support, reinforcing divisions. Selective enforcement of laws has eroded trust in the government, and other public institutions, fueling public frustration and resentment. This institutional collapse has not only been fostering distrust between citizens and the state but also amplifying competition among communities, as each seeks to secure resources and protection through alternative, often religious, channels. This is evident in incidents like the clash in the Tayouneh area of Beirut in 2021, where sectarian tensions erupted into violence resulting in seven deaths and over 30 injuries. The clash erupted during a protest organized by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement near the Palace of Justice in Beirut against the lead investigator of the Beirut Port Explosion, Judge Tarek Bitar, accusing him of bias in his investigation.<sup>27</sup> The incident highlighted the growing tensions over the investigation into the Beirut Port Explosion and raised questions about the state's ability to maintain order amid political and sectarian divides. This is also the case for the ongoing protests of families of the Beirut Port Explosion victims, who have resorted to demonstrations as a means to demand accountability and justice.<sup>28</sup>

This distrust is also aggravated by the lack of gun control and the rise of crime in different areas across the country, leading to an overall sense of insecurity. The perception that there is no reliable authority to turn to in times of crisis weakens social cohesion and pushes communities to seek other, often non-state, means of protection.

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27 L'Orient Today. (2022, October 15). Tayyouneh clashes: One year later, questions remain unanswered. Retrieved from: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1314720/tayyouneh-clashes-one-year-later-questions-remain-unanswered.html>

28 Al-Monitor. (2024, August 4). Four years and no justice: Lebanon marks port blast anniversary. Retrieved from: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/08/four-years-and-no-justice-lebanon-marks-port-blast-anniversary>

Lebanon's political and social landscape remains deeply fractured along religious lines due to unresolved grievances from the 1975-1990 Civil War. The war's devastation and the lack of a comprehensive transitional justice process left scars, with different religious communities still harboring mistrust and grievances against each other. These divisions are reinforced by selective justice in the aftermath of the Civil War, Lebanon's governance system, widespread corruption, and the lack of rule of law. To add insult to injury, political and religious groups, born as a result of the system, are backed by regional powers that align these communities with regional agendas, often conflicting with national interests. Regional influence has thus fostered this internal division in Lebanon, as communities become entangled in broader Middle East conflicts. In a society that supports or opposes one another based on religious and political affiliations, this heightened distrust, ultimately destabilizing Lebanon's social fabric and threatening its national unity.

Economic and financial constraints also significantly fuel social tensions in light of Lebanon's economic collapse, which has left a large portion of the population struggling to make ends meet. This has created competition for scarce resources, including water, food, and energy. For instance, access to water is constrained by aging infrastructure and inefficient management, while Lebanon's economic collapse has restricted the import of basic goods. Electricity is also largely unavailable or in limited supply due to mismanagement and lack of maintenance. The scarcity also extends to food, medicine, and fuel, which have all witnessed a spike in prices as a result of inflation and the collapse of the Lebanese Pound.<sup>29</sup>

However, at the root of the economic crisis in Lebanon is the country's decades of mismanagement and corruption. As basic services and opportunities diminished throughout the years due to mismanagement and embezzlement by those in power, many Lebanese citizens struggled with unemployment, inflation, and a declining quality of life. This hardship has been fostering resentment and frustration, especially as communities notice vast inequalities in wealth and privilege among politicians. The breakdown of essential services (such as healthcare, education, and public safety) has further alienated marginalized populations, making it more difficult for them to integrate and reducing opportunities for social mobility and cohesion. As people compete for limited resources, jobs, and economic support, distrust and social tensions intensify across the country. Indeed, corruption and mismanagement have left citizens feeling abandoned by a state no longer capable of protecting their rights or ensuring their safety.

The government's mismanagement of the Syrian refugee crisis, with the presence of a big number of refugees in Lebanon, adds another layer of complexity. This situation has been putting immense pressure on government services and infrastructure, as Lebanon finds itself unable to meet these demands without support provided by the international community. The perception that aid is disproportionately directed towards Syrian refugees, rather than the Lebanese population, has been intensifying tensions between the two communities. This perceived bias not only fuels discrimination but has also rendered Syrian refugees victims of hate speech and violence, as Lebanese view them as competitors for aid, services, and an already limited job market. This perception is exacerbated by the reluctance and lack of transparency from the Lebanese government, which, despite co-leading the response plans, has refrained from being perceived as a genuine co-leader and has maintained a strong anti-refugee rhetoric. This stance has created significant polarization against refugees and humanitarian actors,

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29 Human Rights Watch. (2022, December 12). Lebanon: Rising Poverty, Hunger Amid Economic Crisis. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/12/lebanon-rising-poverty-hunger-amid-economic-crisis>

further deepening mistrust. At the same time, donors and humanitarian actors have struggled to clearly articulate their programs and targeting mechanisms due to the heightened anti-refugee sentiment, limiting their capacity to provide accurate information and counter the prevailing narrative. This challenge is particularly pressing in the context of an increasingly hostile anti-aid and anti-refugee environment. These dynamics are compounded by Lebanon's complex and tense history with Syria, which maintained a military presence and significant political influence in Lebanon until 2005, leaving a legacy of resentment and mistrust that continues to shape Lebanese attitudes toward Syrian refugees today.

## Barriers to Legislative Reform

**If legislative reform is a measure that could contribute to resolving the issue of social tensions in Lebanon, reform has unfortunately been stalled, even blocked at times, by different factors.**

Lebanon's persistent political crises, including recurrent presidential vacuum, the presence of a caretaker cabinet, and the recurrent delays in government formation, pose significant barriers to legislative reforms. These political deadlocks recurrently paralyze decision-making and may stall progress on critical reforms, undermining effective governance. Indeed, according to the Lebanese constitution, when the presidential election is overdue, the Lebanese Parliament is considered an electoral body exclusively until a president is elected. As such, the absence of a fully functioning cabinet coupled with the continued vacuum in the Presidency of the Republic are preventing parliament from effectively passing and enforcing laws. For instance, the IMF Staff Level Agreement on a comprehensive economic reform package has been on hold since its formulation by the GoL in April 2022. Additionally, the paralyzed parliament also put on hold discussions or approvals of grants and programs that aim to support the most vulnerable.

This situation is compounded by Lebanon's culture of political corruption. Corrupt practices, such as embezzlement, bribery, and nepotism, have been diverting attention away from reform initiatives, prioritizing instead personal interests. This has created resistance to reforms that could threaten the status-quo, as many policymakers and legislators fear losing their influence or access to resources.

The country's profound socioeconomic challenges have also led citizens to struggle with their survival, diminishing their drive to advocate for structural reform efforts. As citizens focus on day-to-day survival, activism for change is no longer a priority. This economic crisis has also reduced the GoL's already-limited resources, making it difficult to prioritize legislative changes when the focus is on immediate needs. Furthermore, there is a significant barrier for civil society and interest groups to effectively engage in policy debates around the necessary reforms, leaving many social actors excluded from participating in shaping the policies that most affect them. This exclusion became particularly problematic following the financial collapse, during dialogues with the international community and financial institutions aimed at addressing the crisis, further marginalizing key voices in the reform process.

Compounding these issues are the external influences and regional tensions that play a significant role in shaping Lebanon's domestic policies. As explained, domestic political factions aligned with foreign interests have long been prioritizing regional agendas over Lebanon's

development. Key reforms that could benefit all Lebanese, such as anti-corruption measures or legislation for judicial independence, are frequently blocked or stalled by political groups backed by foreign powers who fear these changes could weaken their influence. This external pressure on Lebanon's religious or political leaders has been encouraging recurrent gridlock for years, preventing the consensus needed for meaningful legislative progress and reform.

Additionally, the ongoing war complicates security, paralyzes government, and shifts the focus from reform to emergency response. The immediate focus on survival, security, and humanitarian needs undermines efforts to engage in meaningful conversations on priorities related to governance and sustainable priorities. The war has also been exacerbating sectarian divisions, making it even harder for political factions to potentially agree on reforms, as each group prioritizes its own survival and interests over national unity. With the constant state of conflict, the government is often paralyzed, and the trust in institutions needed to push through reforms is severely eroded.

Legislative reforms in Lebanon also face political resistance, lack of political will, and entrenched interests that resist change. Indeed, the influence of powerful stakeholders who benefit from the status quo in the country has been obstructing progress, while insufficient public awareness and engagement has decreased the demand for reform. Institutional inertia, such as is the case in the 3RF's existing structures and processes, continues to resist new approaches, thus delaying and preventing meaningful reform. Additionally, the complexity and slow pace of legislative processes required by the GoL, along with competing emerging priorities, hinder the enactment of reforms.<sup>30</sup>

## Impact of Tensions

**Social tensions in Lebanon have long had a profound and destabilizing impact on the country.**

They exacerbate social divides along religious and political lines, eroding national unity and preventing collective action toward social cohesion and development. The rising insecurity and crime rates, exacerbated by the lack of effective law enforcement, have further strained communities, particularly in vulnerable areas where resources and services are already scarce. This has led to the proliferation of alternative security providers,<sup>31</sup> often aligned with political or religious affiliations, perpetuating further fragmentation and instability.<sup>32</sup> Growing polarization has been leading to increased violence, hate crimes, and discrimination. Thus, this power vacuum in the country leaves room for non-state actors to fill.

Marginalized groups, such as Syrian refugees, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and religious minorities, are at heightened risk of human rights violations due to the intensifying discrimination, hate speech, and violence in Lebanon. Indeed, vulnerable groups have been experiencing heightened targeting by both state and non-state actors in the country, with the failure of

30 Ghali, G. (2024, May 31). Unpacking the Limitations of the 3RF in Lebanon: A Political Settlements Perspective. University of Bath.

31 Reuters. (2022, November 28). Beirut 'neighbourhood watch' echoes troubled past. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/beirut-neighbourhood-watch-echoes-troubled-past-2022-11-27/>

32 ICSR. (2024, July 2). The rise of Soldiers of God: is Beirut back to the time of the militias? Retrieved from: <https://icsr.info/2024/07/02/the-rise-of-soldiers-of-god-is-beirut-back-to-the-time-of-the-militias/>

the government to protect these groups exacerbating their already precarious situation. Ongoing impunity for crimes, such as the recent murder of the female TikTok influencer<sup>33</sup>, and the lack of accountability for crimes against marginalized groups, such as Syrian refugees and LGBTQIA+ individuals – as is the case of the murder of the transgender person<sup>34</sup> - demonstrate how entrenched social divisions allow human rights violations to go unpunished. This is indeed further reflected in the threats, attacks, and restrictive measures Syrians in Lebanon faced after the kidnapping and killing of Pascal Sleiman.<sup>35</sup>

These social tensions leave young people with little hope for a stable future, resulting in an increasing number of youth seeking to emigrate in search of better opportunities. This may lead to a “lost generation” of youth disconnected from the state and increasingly disengaged from the social fabric.

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# 4. Impact of the Progress of Reform Processes on Social Cohesion

The reform processes in Lebanon, crucial for addressing the country's political, economic, and social crises, have faced several barriers, not just legislative, leaving the population in a state of frustration and disillusionment. Despite the urgent need for comprehensive reforms, progress has been slow, and the lack of effective action has further exacerbated the divisions within Lebanese society.

In fact, the lack of a functioning government and the failure to address Lebanon's economic and social crises have exacerbated sectarian and political tensions. The absence of meaningful reforms has eroded trust in public institutions and governance, contributing to a culture of apathy and disengagement. Many Lebanese citizens, particularly youth, no longer see the state as a viable means for addressing their concerns and have turned to alternative forms of support, often based on religious or political alignments.

This growing sense of frustration and alienation is leading to a fragmentation of society, where people are increasingly divided along religious, political, and social lines. Such fragmentation undermines efforts to build a unified national identity and impedes social cohesion, making it more difficult for the Lebanese people to collectively address the challenges facing their country.

## **Political Stalemate and Institutional Paralysis**

As discussed, the persistent political stalemate has prevented the implementation of necessary reforms, such as those related to the electricity sector, public administration, and judicial independence. This has hindered the ability to address Lebanon's systemic issues, including corruption and the failure to hold individuals accountable for economic mismanagement. Lack of accountability continues to erode public trust in institutions, making it difficult for the Lebanese to feel represented by the state. This situation is further fueled by the perception that the political class is more concerned with preserving its own power than addressing the needs of the population.

## **Economic Reforms: The Road to Recovery Remains Unclear**

Lebanon's economic collapse has revealed the urgent need for structural economic reforms. However, the pace of reform has been painfully slow. Efforts to restructure the banking sector, address public debt, and introduce fiscal reforms have been met with resistance from vested political and economic interests.

The lack of concrete economic reform has led to widespread poverty, unemployment, and inflation, undermining the financial security of many Lebanese citizens and weakening social cohesion.

As such, the failure to implement meaningful reforms has depleted public services, such as healthcare and education, further contributing to social inequality and frustration. These failures have pushed many citizens to seek alternatives outside the state, reinforcing religious or political divisions.

## **Judicial and Anti-Corruption Reforms: A Stagnant Path**

Lebanon's judiciary remains heavily influenced by political factions, which undermines its ability to act independently and impartially. Despite calls for judicial reform, the lack of political will to strengthen the rule of law has allowed corruption to flourish. The absence of a functioning legal system that can hold accountable those responsible for wars and the multiple crises in Lebanon has deepened public disillusionment.

Anti-corruption reforms, which were central to the demands of the 2019 protests, have largely failed to materialize. The absence of accountability for widespread corruption has fueled anger and distrust, particularly among younger generations who are increasingly alienated by the lack of progress.

## **Social Reforms: Limited Progress in Addressing Inequality**

Reforms aimed at addressing Lebanon's social inequalities, such as gender equality, refugee integration, and youth empowerment, have seen limited progress. While some civil society organizations continue to push for reforms in these areas, political paralysis has prevented meaningful changes from being enacted.

The most vulnerable communities continue to face discrimination and exclusion, both legally and socially. The lack of comprehensive social policies that promote inclusion and equity has exacerbated divisions within Lebanese society, making it more difficult to foster a shared sense of belonging and solidarity.

These crises have also disproportionately affected Lebanon's youth, who face record levels of unemployment and limited opportunities for education or career advancement. This has led to a growing sense of frustration and disenchantment, particularly among young people, many of whom are leaving Lebanon in search of better prospects abroad.





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# Bridging Divides

Strengthening Social Cohesion and  
Accountability in Lebanon's Reform Process



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