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Lebanon's Civil Society as an Anchor of Stability

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On November 4, 2017, Lebanon's Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, unexpectedly resigned. On a televised broadcast from Saudi Arabia, Hariri blamed Iran and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, for his decision and alluded to an assassination plot against him.¹ Lebanon's political elite, including President Michel Aoun and others, claimed that Hariri was being held hostage by Saudi Arabia, and hence forced to resign from a government that included Hezbollah.² For a moment, it seemed that the October 2016 Aoun–Hariri entente that had ended more than two years of political deadlock had collapsed. About two weeks later, however, and with the intercession of France's President, Emmanuel Macron, Hariri returned to Lebanon and rescinded his resignation.³ This development signaled that the Aoun–Hariri entente of 2016 has, for now, maintained Lebanon's national unity government and weathered the storm of regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The broader and more significant implication of the manner in which the most recent political crisis was resolved suggests that the Lebanese political system—the power-sharing model between sectarian communities enshrined in the Ta'if Accords of 1989—is more stable and resilient than is commonly assumed.⁴ Elite-based cross-sectarian compromises, such as that between Aoun and Hariri, are one contributing factor to this stability, but they are not the only one. Shortly after Hariri's abrupt resignation, Lebanese citizens across political and sectarian lines almost unanimously denounced the Saudi gambit

to disrupt the national unity government and called for the return of their prime minister to Lebanon.⁵ The bottom-up and spontaneous reaction of the Lebanese public to the Hariri saga is an underemphasized example of how non-elite social forces also contribute to the stability of the Lebanese political system.

This Brief argues that the Lebanese public helps maintain that stability in several ways. First, civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) support, pressure, and challenge the Lebanese government, in its normal functioning and with respect to the enactment of new laws, such as recent electoral reform. Second, NGOs help in moments of crisis by supplementing or substituting *for* the state, such as in responding to the ongoing trash disaster and the Syrian refugee crisis.

The Resilience and Stability of the Lebanese Political System

Despite both internal and external disturbances—the undulating effects of the Syrian civil war and the presence of millions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon; extensive disgruntlement over Hezbollah’s active involvement in the war in Syria; sporadic terrorist attacks across the country; a struggling economy; and constant tension between Hezbollah and Israel—the power-sharing model that emerged from the Ta’if Accords of 1989 still holds the country together.⁶ In fact, the Lebanese political system is still based on these American- and Saudi-supported Accords, which constituted a cross-sectarian compromise involving almost all Christian and Muslim leaders. With the exception of internal clashes between Hezbollah and the Future Movement in 2008, the current Lebanese political system has remained intact.⁷

One main factor that explains the resilience of the Lebanese political system indeed relates to elite-based compromises.⁸ The country’s political elites have successfully learned to accommodate one another through the formation and re-formation of cross-sectarian alliances. In October 2016, the rapprochement between Aoun and Hariri ended another political crisis, the latest in a long line since independence in 1943. That compromise in turn led to a series of agreements that reflected elite-based interests and provided stability to the Lebanese political system.⁹ For example, on June 16, 2017, the Lebanese parliament finally approved a new electoral law that incorporates elements of a proportional representation system and reduces the number of electoral districts. The new law was hailed by Aoun, Hariri, and other key politicians as a great achievement.¹⁰

While the country’s political elite bragged about the new “made-in-Lebanon” law, the next round of elections will most likely produce a refurbished Parliament that nonetheless reflects the status quo. This is primarily owing to the fact that the new electoral law is still based on a sectarian system, wherein voters elect candidates according to their religious sects, thereby allowing the political elite to form cross-sectarian alliances so as to undercut contenders from challenging their leadership.¹¹

In addition to the new electoral law, the Aoun-Hariri entente paved the way for parliamentarians across political and sectarian lines to pass the first national budget since 2005, issue oil and gas decrees enabling future exploration, and approve a new tax law.¹² And the willingness of the elites to form cross-sectarian alliances has so far pulled Lebanon back from another devastating civil war—which largely explains why the international community continues to praise the resilience of the Lebanese political system and to emphasize how elite-based compromises contribute to the country’s relative stability.¹³

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But despite the useful role played by elite-based compromises, the downside of the Aoun-Hariri entente has included severe limitations on political action and freedom of expression.¹⁴ Moreover, the stability and resilience of the Lebanese political system relies on maintaining an internal balance of power through consensus-based decision-making; when Lebanon's elites *fail* to reach consensus, the country is crippled by deadlock. Given that the Lebanese public has learned to stay afloat during times of war and has become accustomed to “business as usual” in spite of recurrent political deadlocks, it is clear that elite-based compromises are one, but not the only, contributing factor to the stability and resilience of the Lebanese political system. What other forces and factors help maintain this durability?

How Civil Society Contributes to Stability

Although the Government of Lebanon still fails to provide adequate solutions to several of the country's basic woes, a strong civil society has emerged in recent years to both support a weak government and often, in effect, cover for it, as well as to challenge the sectarian-based political system. By assisting and sometimes substituting for the state, Lebanon's civil society has become another important factor sustaining the stability and resilience of the Lebanese political system.

Most of these civil society organizations are bottom-up rather than elitist and are focused on social services as well as on electoral and political reform. Though the political participation of Lebanon's civil society remains limited owing to the sectarian makeup of Lebanese politics, there are at least two major ways whereby these groups and organizations are contributing to the stability of the Lebanese political system. First, civil society supports normal governance while attempting to reform it, such as through Lebanon's electoral laws. Second, civil society organizations respond to crises when the Lebanese government is unable or unwilling to, as with respect to handling environmental disasters and assisting the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon.

Supporting and Reforming the State: Electoral Laws and Politics

Civil society in Lebanon has long advocated reform of Lebanon's electoral laws, which are primarily based on a sectarian system. The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), for example, has consistently argued that effective participation in the political process requires the abolition of political

sectarianism, along with the adoption of a new electoral law that provides more opportunities for non-elitist groups to participate in the political process.¹⁵ In fact, the Lebanese Transparency Association, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS), LADE, and eighty-five other civil society organizations (CSOs) formed a coalition called the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER) to draft proposals for new electoral laws and lobby parliamentarians and ministers to reform the current sectarian-based law.¹⁶ Alongside these CSOs, several Lebanese universities collaborated to form the University Initiative for Electoral Reform in Lebanon (UIFER), which similarly calls for reforming existing laws. UIFER, composed of university students and civil society activists, examines draft proposals of electoral laws and lobbies parliamentarians and ministers to consider their analyses of various laws.¹⁷

Lebanon's new electoral law has finally adopted a proportional representation system (but within the sectarian makeup of the Lebanese political system), and there is little doubt that this is largely the product of lobbying efforts and proposals submitted by CSOs to parliamentarians and ministers. Although the new law was largely drafted according to the elites' sectarian and political calculi in different districts, most prominent CSOs, including LADE and LCPS, contend that there are significant positives in this law.¹⁸ For instance, the electoral campaign supervisory authority and the presence of civil society activists on its board are significant in a country that has not held parliamentary elections since 2009.

While the same CSOs argue that the political elites want to maintain the status quo, many civil society activists are gearing up for the parliamentary elections on May 6, 2018.¹⁹ For example, the civil society group *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut Is My City), which emerged before the municipal elections of 2016 and later participated in elections challenging the ruling elite in Beirut, is mobilizing its base and supporting recently established groups, such as *LiBaladi* (For My Country).²⁰ As a matter of fact, *LiBaladi* has joined forces with other volunteer-based campaigns and independent candidates in an alliance known as *Koullouna Watani* (roughly translated to: We Are All For My Nation) to participate more effectively in the upcoming parliamentary elections.²¹ In some instances, civil society organizations and independent candidates have even formed alliances with established political parties as a way of partaking in and hopefully reforming the Government of Lebanon.²²

The bottom line is that the new electoral law still creates only limited opportunities for CSOs to effectively

overhaul the sectarian-based political system; but the participation of volunteer-based campaigns in the political process could likely encourage many Lebanese to seek an alternative to the status quo.²³ In fact, the formation of alliances between some civil society groups and across sects will probably lead to the election of a small number of deputies from outside elite circles. Despite the many negatives in the new electoral law, the experience and efforts of civil society activists in lobbying the Lebanese parliament to adopt a proportional representation system, along with their participation in the upcoming elections, are underemphasized developments that suggest how bottom-up organizations seek to both support and reform the Lebanese political system.

Filling in for the State: Environmental Disasters

In carrying out its responsibilities with respect to the environment, the Government of Lebanon relies extensively on the expertise of dozens of local environmental NGOs as well as on the offices of international movements, such as Greenpeace. Most of these groups submit proposals to the Ministry of Environment and later form joint committees to tackle different environmental concerns, including environmental cleanup of different sites and beaches, conservation of forests and animal sanctuaries, and tree planting and reforestation. For example, the Ministry of Environment, the Al-Shouf Cedar Society (an environmental NGO), and the mayors of different villages together manage the Al-Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve.²⁴ Similarly, the *Jabal Moussa* (Mountain of Moses) Biosphere Reserve is managed jointly by the Lebanese government, the Association for the Protection of *Jabal Moussa* (an environmental NGO), and a handful of Lebanese donors.²⁵ These governmental and non-governmental bodies are likewise collectively responsible for trailblazing and clearing walking paths to the site, and preserving the rare plants, birds, and threatened mammals.

Apart from protecting natural reserves, several environmental NGOs have lobbied different parliamentarians and ministers to deal more effectively with environmental crises—and in some cases, NGOs filled in for the state in finding solutions to environmental disasters. For instance, during the July war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, Israeli jets struck the Jiyeh power plant, south of Beirut, causing a massive oil spill along Lebanon's Mediterranean coast. Local NGOs (including *Bahr Loubnan-Liban Mer* [Lebanon Sea] and the Green Line Association) and civil society activists, with support from international NGOs, the United Nations, and a few Arab and Asian states drafted

proposals for and later directed the cleanup of thousands of tons of oil along Lebanon's sea floor and beaches.²⁶ The Government of Lebanon approved and supported the initiatives of NGOs to clean up the tons of oil, but civil society activists were chiefly responsible for handling the disaster.

In the summer of 2015, piles of uncollected garbage filled the streets of Lebanon. Thousands of Lebanese took to the streets to pressure their representatives in Parliament to find new landfills. The driving force behind anti-government protests was *Tul'it Rihitkum* (You Stink), a grassroots movement.²⁷ The Lebanon Eco Movement, a network of around sixty environmental NGOs, supported You Stink and participated in the demonstrations. Both movements pressured the Government of Lebanon to find a sustainable solution to the garbage crisis, including long-term waste treatment centers. While the Government of Lebanon did not fully comply with the demands of You Stink and other movements, some ministers coordinated with local NGOs to find solutions.

The government's solution was opening two landfills in 2016.²⁸ Shortly afterwards, the You Stink and Lebanon Eco movements once again took to the streets and criticized the government for providing only short-term solutions to waste treatment. One of the major criticisms related to the location of one landfill, which was next to the airport and thus posed a threat to aviation safety.²⁹ Between April and June 2017, residents in different municipalities, supported by You Stink, staged new rounds of anti-government protests and organized rallies to raise awareness about the landfills' impact on the environment. Around mid-June 2017, the Lebanese Minister of Environment audaciously confirmed that dumping waste in the Mediterranean Sea was part of the government's trash plan.³⁰ In response, several civil society activists are currently drafting new proposals that take into account the dangers of dumping untreated waste and sewage in the sea, and they are lobbying parliamentarians and ministers to provide a sustainable and environmentally friendly plan to deal with this continuous disaster.³¹

The bottom line is that Lebanon's civil society consistently pressures the government to find practical solutions to the ongoing waste disaster. In contrast to the previous agreement between the Government of Lebanon and Sukleen, the only company that was licensed to collect garbage, the pressure by civil society activists is somewhat restraining the country's political elite from making new corrupt arrangements. Even as the country's political elite deliberated for weeks over

the location of the landfills and the estimated profits from waste treatment centers, the mobilization of environmental NGOs is important and will most likely keep pressure on the government to find a solution to the waste problem.

Filling in for the State: Assisting Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are close to one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon as of January 31, 2018.³² The Government of Lebanon is not only ill equipped and underfinanced to properly assist incoming Syrian refugees, but it is deliberately making it difficult for Syrians to settle.³³ The difficulty in dealing with the influx of Syrian refugees is further exacerbated by the fact that Lebanon has signed neither the 1951 Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocol.³⁴ UN agencies in Lebanon, such as UNHCR Lebanon, spearheaded the initial response to the rapid influx of refugees and assisted with their settlement in Lebanon. Shortly afterwards, local CSOs that had prior experience in providing welfare services began assisting UN bodies.

According to UNHCR data, Lebanese NGOs are at the forefront in aiding refugees in a number of sectors: livelihoods, basic assistance, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), shelter, health, food security, education, SGBV (sexual and gender-based violence) and child protection, and social stability. Most CSOs are funded by UNHCR, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union (EU), and other international bodies to provide humanitarian assistance, especially food and shelter, to the refugee community in Lebanon.³⁵

In 2012, the Government of Lebanon, particularly the Ministry of Social Affairs, established a committee to work with local and international bodies in aiding refugees. But in 2014, the Government of Lebanon introduced new policies intended to reduce the number of Syrian refugees, especially by making it extremely difficult for Syrians to renew or even obtain residence permits. As a result, local organizations such as *Arc En Ciel* (Rainbow) Lebanon, Association Justice and Mercy, Caritas, Makassed Philanthropic Association of Beirut, Makhzoumi Foundation, and many others became, and remain, chiefly responsible for aiding refugees in various sectors. In fact, Daleel Madani (Civil Directory), which is part of Lebanon Support, a research and information center about civil society in Lebanon, lists several CSOs, such as LebRelief, that emerged after 2011 to aid refugees.³⁶ Some of the groups on Daleel Madani are not included in UNHCR data and statistics.

On a related note, some universities, including the Lebanese American University (LAU), the American University of Beirut (AUB), and the University of Balamand, are assisting refugees in several ways. Thus, Imad Salamey, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Institute for Social Justice and Conflict Resolution at LAU, spearheads several projects that raise awareness about and propose solutions to protect vulnerable populations, especially the forced displaced people from Syria, Iraq, and other Arab states.³⁷ Scholars and practitioners in the Faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine at AUB and the University of Balamand are also supporting health initiatives to help refugees in different parts of Lebanon.³⁸

Another way in which universities are assisting refugees is by enlisting evidence to counter rampant misconceptions about Syrian refugees. Scholars at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB run a program, “Refugee Research and Policy in the Arab World,” to produce policy briefs and host events to inform public policy discussions and raise social awareness about refugees in Lebanon and the Arab world.³⁹ In addition, Dr. Nasser Yassin, professor

in the Faculty of Health Sciences and Director of Research at the Issam Fares Institute, launched a series on Twitter called “Fact of the Day.”⁴⁰ (See Image 1.) The “Fact of the Day” series, which is part of the popular Twitter hashtag #AUB4refugees, is based on academic research. The facts are also based on data from UN sources and other bodies and are aimed at dispelling skewed rhetoric about the burden of Syrian refugees on Lebanon and on other Arab countries. For example, some facts focus on the contributions of Syrian refugees to Lebanon’s economy, such as the total amount refugees pay for housing, groceries, other necessities.⁴¹

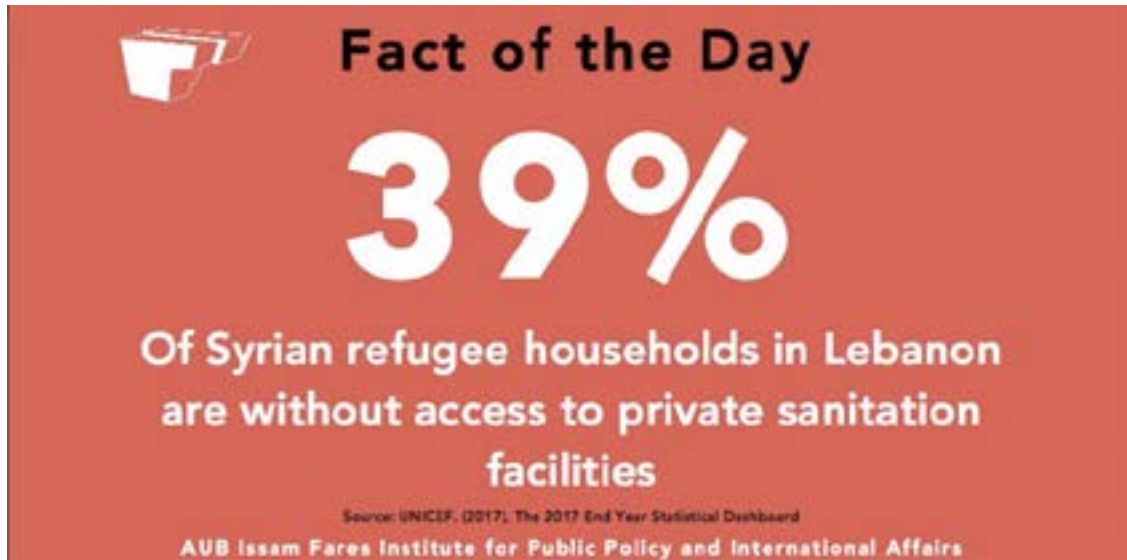


Image 1: Posted and shared by Nasser Yassin of AUB on Twitter on March 6, 2018

Bloggers and social media activists are also taking to their channels to voice their concern regarding racist rhetoric and expressions of hatred toward Syrian refugees. For example, some popular blogs, such as Gino’s Blog and Blog Baladi, are raising social awareness about the dangers of hate speech and are consistently calling for drives to gather much-needed supplies for Syrian refugees.⁴² The appeal is to both religious and secular communities, urging them to collaborate with local NGOs and UNHCR in order to educate themselves about the gravity of the refugee crisis and about possible ways to assist refugees.

Many social media activists took to their channels to recirculate the following message (see Image 2): “Welcome to Syrian refugees and workers in Lebanon. We are sorry for what the racists among us commit.” Likewise, some bloggers and social media activists volunteer in different UNHCR drives for clothing, food, and other essential supplies and often coordinate fundraising campaigns in some of Lebanon’s most impoverished communities, for underprivileged Lebanese as well as Syrian refugees.



Image 2: Posted and shared by several social media activists on Facebook and Twitter

Despite the Government of Lebanon's unwillingness to deal with refugees and its limited resources, as well as its failed system of public service provision, civil society activists have been strikingly successful in assisting the impoverished Syrian refugee community in Lebanon. By providing assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, civil society organizations are in effect filling in for the Lebanese state and thereby contributing to the stability of the Lebanese political system.

Concluding Remarks

This Brief emphasizes that cross-sectarian compromises are not the only factor contributing to the stability of the Lebanese political system. Rather, it analyzes how some civil society groups, including bottom-up organizations focused on politics, environmental causes, and refugee assistance, are assisting the Lebanese government and often substituting for it.

The Brief argues that civil society provides stability and reform in three areas: 1) the new electoral law, which serves the interests of elites but also reflects civil society pressure for proportional representation and other reforms; 2) environmental planning and protection, whereby environmental NGOs are relied upon by the Lebanese government to protect natural sites and assist with finding solutions to disasters like the garbage crisis; and 3) refugee assistance and relief, where civil society organizations as well as scholars have coordinated the provision of services to the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon and countered racist rhetoric against them.

Lebanon's civil society has become more determined to challenge the status quo by participating in the political process rather than seeking to completely overhaul the sectarian-based political system. The fact that civil society organizations are able to both pressure and assist the Lebanese government in important issue areas clearly suggests that such bottom-up organizations are contributing to the stability and resilience of the political system.

An inadvertent consequence of Lebanon's civil society's substituting for the state, however, is that it allows the Government of Lebanon to remain deliberately weak. The expertise and success of civil society in the areas of electoral reform, environmental planning and protection, and refugee assistance means that the Government of Lebanon has little incentive to build strong public institutions that can (and should) tackle such important issues. Rather, Lebanon's political elite can continue to exploit the expertise and commitment of civil society activists within a political system that primarily serves their own interests. Although many CSOs advocate for non-sectarian political platforms and are striving to reform the sectarian-based political system, the unintended consequence of Lebanon's civil society's substituting for the state is that it reinforces the elite-based compromises at the heart of Lebanon's political system.

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