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How to build a resilient society in a weak state: the case of Lebanon

Introduction

Considered by the World Bank as one of the worst three global crises since the mid-nineteenth century, the current financial crisis that Lebanon is facing is showing the limits of an obsolete political system whose leaders failed to guarantee their institutional and social roles. With more than 78% of the Lebanese population living below the poverty line,¹ the question of whether Lebanese society can recover from decades of corruption and mismanagement of public policies is beginning to arise. According to Princeton University economist Markus Brunnermeier, a resilient society can bounce back from shocks, such as political, social, and economic crises.²

Building a resilient society requires teamwork and common goals across the development, humanitarian, and peace sectors. Thus, efficient collaboration and coordination between the United Nations (UN) agencies, governments, civil society, private sector, and other actors is indispensable to ensure this objective.³

¹ World Bank Group, *Lebanon Economic Monitor*, Spring 2021, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/394741622469174252/pdf/Lebanon-Economic-Monitor-Lebanon-Sinking-to-the-Top-3.pdf> [accessed: 13 March 2022].

² M. Brunnermeier, *The Resilient Society*, Colorado: Endeavor Literary Press, 2021.

³ "Building Resilient Societies Critical Step towards Achieving 2030 Agenda", 1 October 2021, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/dsgsm1642.doc.htm> [accessed: 13 March 2022].

Nevertheless, in the Lebanese case, structural and conjunctural political and economic dysfunctions, as well as regional and international interferences, impede achieving this resilience by the local society. This statement leads us to the following question: In a weak state with a divided society, what are the conditions for overcoming the different challenges and build lasting, inclusive, and efficient societal resilience?

The main hypotheses for addressing this issue are based on the importance of including all actors – local, regional, and international, and mainly local populations – in the cooperation mechanism, through a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Besides the institutional empowerment, an efficient fight against corruption and a review of the educational system are crucial in ensuring a lasting and inclusive new social contract based on meritocracy and solidarity.

In this article, we will analyse the main obstacles restraining Lebanese society from becoming resilient before suggesting processes towards achieving this goal. In order to do so, we will base our study on institutional analysis, legal acts investigation, and desk research to provide a succinct, yet concise examination of a deficient political, social and societal system, whose reforms are indispensable to ensure the survival of the Lebanese state in its various components.

The Lebanese political culture: communitarianism as the basis of the social contract

The first major obstacle impeding Lebanese society's resilience is structural, as it is linked to the state's weakness and the heterogeneity of its population. Since its creation, Lebanon has been suffering from structural deficiencies resulting in a divided society that turns more to its community than to the Lebanese entity. These deficiencies are the result of a particular national habitus, and create divisions within the population, and thus, in many cases, a lack of cooperation between different communities.

Habitus, according to Norbert Elias, means embodied social learning that evolves over time given the evolution and accumulation of a nation's fortunes. The German sociologist refutes the idea that "the fortunes of a nation over the centuries become sedimented into the habitus of its individual members."⁴ The national habitus of a people is not biologically fixed and predetermined. It is rather closely linked to the process of state formation that corresponds to it on the one hand, and to the internalisation by men of certain behavioural norms on the other.⁵ It is in this logic that a "Lebanese national habitus" emerges with the formation of the Lebanese state in

⁴ E. Dunning, S. Mennell, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

1920. Sectarianism, violence, neo-patriarchy, and clientelism have become inherent components to Lebanese society.

Although sectarian consciousness is observable in all countries of the Middle East, it remains particular to Lebanon in view of the constitutional distribution of power between the different religious communities, known as political sectarianism.

Until today, this distribution reinforces the feeling of belonging to a particular community, which therefore becomes more important for the Lebanese citizen than the state itself due to the weight of each community in the development of Lebanese politics and the symbolic image that each community has regarding the individuals it represents. If the religious community constitutes the identity reference for the Lebanese, it is favoured by the geographical distribution of the different sects, thus creating not only identity, but also territorial divisions among the population and favouring the control of each community on a portion of the Lebanese territory and, thus, the population living in it.

Moreover, this feeling of belonging to a community pushes part of the population to think of the federation as a solution to political problems in view of “fear of the other”, impeding the development of a strong national and united sentiment, and favouring neo-patriarchy and the culture of violence.⁶

In Lebanese society, neo-patriarchy and clientelism are closely linked and inseparable from each other. If certain societies perceive chiefs of tribes or the head of state as father figures it is the leaders of political parties who fulfil this task in Lebanon, which accounts the emergence of patrimonialism as a concrete and accepted reality. It is, in fact, a “traditional mode of domination characterised by weak institutionalisation and the direct appropriation of power by a family, an oligarchy, or a clan.”⁷

By favouring patrimonialism, this neo-patriarchal structure of Lebanese society leads to the consolidation of clientelism which is characterised by “social relations that are both unequal and personalised, dominated by an exchange of services deemed mutually advantageous.”⁸ In fact, although they “are characterised by the indivisibility of supply and an absence of discrimination of beneficiaries,”⁹ collective goods are controlled by these “political families” who redistribute them by favouring first the militants, and then the supporters. However, if collective goods are subject to appropriation, the same is true of the various functions, public or private, where priority is given to those who have a political support or “wasta”.¹⁰

This observable phenomenon, which over time has become an omnipresent aspect in daily social relations, further explains the political commitment of the

⁶ A. Issa, *The UNDP in Lebanon: The Impossible Governance*, Paris: FNSP, 2015.

⁷ P. Bonte, M. Izard, *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2007.

⁸ P. Braud, *Sociologie politique*, Paris : LGDJ, 2014.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ A. Issa, *The UNDP in Lebanon...., op. cit.*

population that appeals to the political party representing it for mainly socio-economic purposes. As nothing is free, these political parties impose on the beneficiaries first loyalty and then political or even, in certain circumstances, armed commitment. Neo-patriarchy and clientelism, in their relationship with sectarianism, are therefore a big source of violence.

Whether domestic or political, violence is a daily reality in many societies. Defined by Philippe Braud as a “political resource mobilising the threat or the effective use of physical coercion,”¹¹ political violence, in the case of Lebanon, is distinguished by its close relationship with sectarianism on the one hand, and instrumentalization by neo-feudal political leaders on the other. It manifests itself, above all, in most political parties’ creation of an armed militia whose main mission is to control a Lebanese area or region.

Based on sectarianism, neo-patriarchy, clientelism, and violence, the Lebanese political culture is thus a major challenge to the construction of a resilient society because it incites the population to be divided and seek help from those who are inhibiting their decent and meritocratic political system. That is one of the reasons why many of the country’s youth, who cannot find jobs based on merit, decide to flee Lebanon and look for better opportunities elsewhere, depriving the country of its potential technocrats and future economic and social leaders.

The legacy of the Lebanese Wars (1975–1990): internal divisions and foreign interferences

Building a resilient society requires a political will from the country’s leaders. Nevertheless, in the Lebanese case, those leaders do not have any interest in offering resilience to their population because it might lead to a considerable decrease in their power and prerogatives.

Contrary to what most of the existing literature on the topic asserts, the Lebanese wars were not a conflict between Lebanese Christians and Muslims. They were rather a complex interaction between local unrest and a broader regional geopolitical configuration, with Palestinians, Israelis, and Syrians as the main protagonists.¹²

More than thirty years after the wars ended, local warlords are the ones in power and still pledge allegiance to the same regional actors, joined by Saudi Arabia, where the Taif Agreement ending the wars was signed. The Agreement imposed amnesia without resolving accountability for war crimes nor rebuilding the country on strong political, social, societal, and economic grounds. Oblivion was foisted on the population, with the fate of many disappeared victims still neither solved nor revealed.¹³

¹¹ P. Braud, *op. cit.*

¹² F. Mermier, C. Varin, *Mémoires de guerres au Liban (1975–1990)*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2010.

¹³ G. Corm, *Le Liban contemporain : Histoire et société*, Paris : La Découverte, 2012.

Maintaining control over their respective communities, the current political leaders – warlords – are still able to manipulate their populations through a securitisation discourse inviting them to remain hostile towards the “others.”

This “fear-of-the-others” logic is also transposed to the regional level, as these internal divisions are sustained by foreign interferences. Lebanon became one of the battlefields of the Iranian-Saudi duo and their allies, which was favoured by the weak state structure and the preponderance of non-state actors, such as the Hezbollah, who are part of the political scene nonetheless¹⁴.

As a small and internally fragile state, Lebanon pays the price for any neighbouring unrest. Having interfered during the Lebanese wars, the Syrian army remained in Lebanon until 2005, which led to the development of an anti-Syrian feeling among a large part of the Lebanese population. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, many Syrians have fled to Lebanon, and half of the country’s population have become composed of refugees. Many business owners decided to hire Syrians, a cheaper workforce, leaving the Lebanese jobless in an already difficult economic situation.¹⁵

In the absence of any state economic programme, poverty, and thus, violence increased considerably until 17 October 2019, when the Lebanese population decided to take to the streets to protest against the ruling elite in an unprecedented national demonstration.

However, what was initially perceived as national hope was rapidly dismantled by the political oligarchs who played on the revisited sectarian war discourse, confirming that the Lebanese society was still, after all, mostly sectarian, and would turn again to its community rather than seek resilience.¹⁶

An unprecedented multi-level crisis: local inertia and international indifference

The national hope of the October Revolution was nothing but the confirmation of a national and state deficiency that led to an unprecedented multi-level crisis.

Since the October Revolution, the Lebanese economy has plunged in hyperinflation that made the Lebanese lose not only almost their entire purchasing power, but also access to imported products and, most importantly, medication.¹⁷

¹⁴ A. Issa, “The Fragmented Middle East: Persistent Insecurity, Rising Instability”, *Security: Theory and Practice*, no. 3, 2021.

¹⁵ R. Rabil, *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: The Double Tragedy of Refugees and Impacted Host Communities*, Minneapolis: Lexington Books, 2016.

¹⁶ A. Issa, “Liban : l’impossible sortie de la crise”, April 2021, Fondation Jean Jaurès, <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/liban-limpossible-sortie-de-la-crise> [accessed: 13 March 2022].

¹⁷ Amnesty International, “Lebanon: Government recklessness in medication subsidy reform violates right to health and life”, 16 December 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/>

One of the reasons for this situation is the failure of the banking system that has long been considered the most important and profitable aspect of the Lebanese economy. A shortage of US dollars affects all commercial banks, and people cannot withdraw their money from their bank accounts or transfer money to their relatives abroad. The question of whether people will get their money back also arises, and there are rumours about the political class's embezzlement of money and its transfer abroad.¹⁸

The global pandemic and the lockdown restrictions accentuated the problems as many businesses had to close down, leading to an increase in unemployment and therefore, in poverty. According to the World Bank, more than 78% of the Lebanese population lives below the poverty line, meaning that getting out of the crisis needs not only a rapid and urgent response, but also close cooperation between various international, regional, and local actors. Nonetheless, neither the rapid answer nor the multi-level cooperation was implemented. As a matter of fact, local negligence and indifference were brought to international attention only after the Beirut explosion of 4 August 2020, which revealed the inability by the Lebanese political class to fulfil its responsibilities and ensure both physical and human security to its population.

The international intervention to help those who were affected was limited, and despite the pressure on the local ruling class, no effort has been made to address the basic needs of the populations. On the contrary, international agencies promoting transparency and human security became part of the corrupted system and, consequently, limited in their efficiency, as they were pressurised from local leaders who would not accept any limitation of their prerogatives.

Some local and international non-governmental organisations tried to provide the Lebanese populations with the necessary services. However, their reliance on financial support from external donors who themselves depend on the local leaders' approval limits their action despite their commitment.¹⁹

Thanks to solidarity within the population and to the Lebanese diaspora, some of the basic needs, such as medications, are being provided. However, such quick impact initiatives cannot replace long-term policies, as other structural needs are yet to be met, for example hospitals, electricity, security, and other necessities that are supposed to be the responsibility of the Lebanese authorities. Therefore, with different actors who are meant to help building a resilient society but are either paralysed or unwilling to cooperate, the Lebanese population is yet to find its way towards strength and peace.

news/2021/12/lebanon-government-recklessness-in-medication-subsidy-reform-violates-right-to-health-and-life [accessed: 13 March 2022].

¹⁸ A. Issa, "Liban: l'impossible sortie de la crise"..., *op. cit.*

¹⁹ A. Sewell, "What happened to the international aid promised to Lebanon after the Beirut port blast?", December 2021, *L'Orient le Jour*, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1285046/what-happened-to-the-international-aid-promised-to-lebanon-after-the-beirut-port-blast.html> [accessed: 13 March 2022].

Towards national (re)construction: the imperatives for a resilient and solid society

After the Beirut Blast, Lebanese designer Zuhair Murad, who launched an initiative to help affected populations, created the slogan “Rise from the Ashes” to express the resilience of Lebanese society which was able to rise again after every incident.²⁰ However, the accumulation of structural and conjunctural deficiencies became more challenging.

Lebanon is suffering from double disintegration. The deficiencies of the state lead to disintegration from above. Defined by Max Weber as the monopoly of legitimate physical violence, the state’s primary mission is to ensure the security of the populations on its territory.²¹ To be able to do this, it must have the appropriate means, such as military and police institutions. It must also be able to carry out social and economic missions for the benefit of the populations’ security. The state should intervene and redistribute wealth and to provide collective facilities and public services. From this perspective, the weak Lebanese state is far from ensuring its main missions that are its *raison d’être*.

The dysfunctions and shortcomings of the state are not, however, the only sources of conflict. Social and political disintegration from below can also lead to belligerent situations. For a state to endure, the individuals who compose it must feel attached to other members of that society. The lack of social cohesion and the feeling of exclusion of part of the population can lead to conflicts in various forms, ranging from organised crime to armed dissent.²² As we have seen in this article, the Lebanese population itself is divided, and sectarian tensions characterise the political and social landscapes.

The first solution for building a resilient society must then be local and articulated around a new social contract based on coexistence, acceptance, and meritocracy. The current social contract has already shown on many occasions its limits. Both the political elite and the population need to get out of the vicious circle of corruption and sectarianism. The role of international organisations like the UN agencies can be crucial in coordinating such actions through efficient surveillance and development policies aiming at empowering the local population.

Reviewing the civil and civic education school programme and implementing mandatory public interest activities for students can develop common responsibility and an increased awareness of the impact the public sphere has on the personal level.

²⁰ F. Andrews, “Rise from the ashes: Zuhair Murad sells T-shirt to raise money for Beirut disaster relief”, August 2020, The National News, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/lifestyle/fashion/rise-from-the-ashes-zuhair-murad-sells-t-shirt-to-raise-money-for-beirut-disaster-relief-1.1065595> [accessed: 13 April 2022].

²¹ M. Weber, *Le savant et le politique*, Paris: Editions 10/18, 1998.

²² F. Ramel, “(Dés)intégration institutionnelle, (dés)intégration sociale”, [in :] *Nouvelles guerres. Comprendre les conflits du XXI^e siècle*, Paris : La Découverte, 2015.

Regional and international powers also have their share of responsibility as they must support local efforts in building a resilient society instead of interfering to create more chaos and divisions.

Consequently, a resilient society in Lebanon can only be built if strong coordination and collaboration between the local population and authorities, international and regional powers, as well as international organisations and other non-governmental actors is implemented to address both the short- and long-term needs of the population through efficient and lasting public policies.

Conclusion

To conclude, Lebanese society is facing many challenges impeding its resilience given the numerous and increasing obstacles it is facing. These challenges are both structural and conjunctural and are the consequences of decades of deficient public management and policies, a divided society, and continuous foreign interferences. These different elements have created an environment conducive to corruption, tensions, and internal fragilities.

That is why broader cooperation is indispensable to ensure that the Lebanese population can indeed rise from the ashes. This cooperation needs to include all the actors involved in building a resilient society, starting with local populations whose role is indispensable in ensuring lasting, efficient, and authentic resilience. The empowerment of national institutions, the implementation of a new school curriculum encouraging civic and civil education and fighting corruption cannot be done without the implication of the local society who is not only the victim of, but also responsible for the current situation because of its solidarity not with its members, but with a corrupted system encouraging nepotism.

However, if global and inclusive cooperation is necessary, the current local, regional, and international conjunctures do not seem to be heading towards any improvement regarding the Lebanese case. None of the influential actors, namely the ruling political class, foreign regional and international powers, or international organisations, are willing to interfere to limit the disastrous consequences of decades of mismanagement.

In the absence of any reaction, extreme poverty and violence can become the new lasting reality for Lebanese society, which might result in the proliferation of organised crimes or even terrorist groups.

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Abstract

The Beirut Port explosion brought to the world's attention the long-term struggle of a population suffering from structural deficiencies due to the lack of efficient public policies and strong state institutions capable of fulfilling their primary roles. The weak Lebanese state is the victim of its rulers' inability to ensure their population has access to its basic needs and rights. On the other hand, the population itself is stuck in a vicious circle due to the specificity of the Lebanese political culture that gives more power

and allegiance to the community than the state itself, creating an atmosphere revolving around corruption, clientelism and violence, and leading to massive flow of educated young people who desperately want to but cannot help their country. In such circumstances, both the state and the population become a target for bigger regional powers that use the Lebanese territory as a battlefield for their own rivalries and interests. Consequently, and with an unprecedented economic crisis, building a resilient society in Lebanon is challenged by various obstacles that need to be addressed as a whole, by including the different actors involved in such processes and mostly the local population itself, whose role is indispensable in building lasting resilience and peace.

Key words: sectarianism, corruption, violence, foreign interference, development policies, education, social cohesion, international cooperation