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LEBANON:

**Finding a Path
from Deadlock to
Democracy**

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**Democracy and
Rule of Law Project**



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INTRODUCTION

LEBANON IS ARGUABLY THE MOST democratic Arab state. Under parliamentary rule since becoming independent in 1943, it has regular elections, numerous political parties, and relatively free and lively news media. Lebanon also has one of the most complex political systems in the Middle East, based on the premise that a careful balance in all aspects of political life must be maintained among the seventeen recognized religious communities. While this confessional system has spared Lebanon the authoritarianism experienced by many Arab regimes in the twentieth century, paradoxically it has also prevented the transition to a truly democratic state. Nor has the confessional system eliminated the factional strife it was designed to avoid.

Unlike most Arab regimes, which are characterized by powerful national governments, Lebanon lacks a central authority. The manner in which power is distributed among various sects results in a collection of de facto ministates responsible for all the needs of their respective constituents. Citizens have no opportunity for representation outside the confines of their sect; thus, there is no institutionalized citizen-state relationship. When the leaders of the major communities agree on specific issues, they can get things accomplished even in the absence of effective government institutions. But when they disagree, the whole system is paralyzed. The lack of a central authority with institutionalized decision-making capabilities poses significant challenges to progress toward a more complete democracy. The problem of persistent weak authority was exacerbated in 2005 by the withdrawal of troops from neighboring Syria.

Lebanon's highly segmented political landscape also creates serious problems for maintaining peace. Systemic instability has haunted the country since independence, surfacing in episodes of violence, the most significant of which was the 1975–1990 civil war. Lebanon's confessional system perhaps can best be characterized as a chronic disease that periodically erupts into a crisis. Even low levels of internal dissatisfaction or external pressure can upset the delicate balance and cause the government to disintegrate.

The assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005, and the subsequent Syrian withdrawal have brought the intrinsic weaknesses of the Lebanese system to the surface. With the end of Syrian tutelage over its political life, Lebanon has to find a new political balance among the factions, handle a precarious security situation, redefine its relations with Syria and with the international community, and launch immediate economic reforms. More than ever, these challenges demand a unified and coherent vision for political and economic development, yet the demise of Hariri has deepened the vacuum of authority. Hariri's unique position in Lebanese and regional politics made him most able to bridge the divides between Lebanese opponents. He enjoyed extensive support from Sunnis and other sects in Lebanon and had strong regional and international connections.

As Lebanon confronts its various political, economic, and security challenges, its fate is intricately tied to external dynamics. Lebanon has a dramatically different position in international affairs than it did only a short time ago. First, it finds itself caught in the middle of a showdown between Syria and the international community. Until recently, an international consensus that stability was the first priority in Lebanon overshadowed concerns about Lebanese sovereignty and political reform. The Syrian presence in Lebanon was seen as a stabilizing factor and was tolerated internationally. As Syrian relations with the United States soured over insurgents crossing into Iraq through the Syrian border and over Syria's stance in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Syrian regime was increasingly isolated both regionally and internationally. In this context, Syria's control of Lebanon became intolerable to the international community.

Second, Lebanon has acquired symbolic significance in the attempts by both the United States and Europe to promote democracy in the Middle East. For the administration of President George W. Bush, the Lebanese revolt against Syrian interference is evidence that the war in Iraq has served to spread the freedom agenda to other parts of the Middle East. Furthermore, Lebanon offers a model of confessional coexistence between Christians and Muslims, Sunnis and Shiites, a model that has problems but cannot easily be replaced. For the European Union (EU), a successful relationship with Lebanon can help Europe in its interactions with other Arab countries, particularly in the context of the revamped Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which places greater emphasis on political reform in the region than when it was first launched in 1995.

Yet despite the importance the United States and Europe attach to success in Lebanon, both lack a conceptual framework and thus any real strategy for encouraging political reform. Instead, they are still struggling to reconcile their desire for stability in Lebanon with their vision of real democracy, which would require the abrogation of the confessional system. This absence of a coherent reform strategy is a significant problem because the potential of political reform in Lebanon is dependent to a significant extent on what the international community does. The domestic and international pressures on Lebanon following Hariri's assassination provide an opportunity for change. But what sort of reform must take place in Lebanon to maintain the momentum and resolve the economic and political crises? Given that the deep divides in Lebanon's political system predate—and will outlast—Syrian intervention, where does Lebanon go from here? And what can the United States and Europe actually do to help?

THE LEBANESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Foundation of the Lebanese System

The Lebanese political system is defined primarily by confessionalism, which mandates that a careful balance be maintained between confessional communities in government, parliament, and civil administration. Different forms of confessional rule have existed since 1843, but the system became fully developed after Lebanon gained independence from France in 1943. The National Covenant (Al Mithaq al Watani)—a 1943 verbal agreement between Lebanon's first president and its first prime minister—was a pragmatic attempt to alleviate tensions among Lebanon's religious sects. In the hope that it would build a sense of overarching Lebanese national identity that would pacify both

Muslims and Christians, the covenant stipulated that Christians would forego European protection, while Muslims agreed to set aside pan-Arab aspirations and accept Lebanon's existing geographical boundaries. The National Covenant was accompanied by an informal agreement that the president must always be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shi'ite Muslim, and that Christians and Muslims must be represented in parliament and the civil service according to a 6:5 ratio (based on the 1932 census).

The system worked tolerably well for three decades, but changing demographic trends compounded by the involvement of external actors in Lebanon resulted in the outbreak of civil war in 1975. The Arab-Israeli conflict brought the inherent conflicts of the Lebanese system to a head as groups inside Lebanon split over the domestic presence of armed Palestinian forces. The 1989 Ta'if Accord, an agreement brokered by several Arab states (particularly Saudi Arabia), ended the Lebanese civil war and codified many of the provisions of the National Covenant, thus perpetuating the principle of confessional distribution of power. In order to establish a more balanced distribution of power, however, the Ta'if Accord endorsed the transfer of some of the Maronite president's powers to the Sunni prime minister and the Shi'ite speaker of parliament. It also gave equal parliamentary representation to Muslims and Christians, subdivided proportionally among the two groups' various denominations. The legislature today has 128 seats, with 64 Christian representatives and 64 Muslim representatives. The Ta'if Accord also reaffirmed that all positions in the state bureaucracy must be allocated along confessional lines.

While in theory a confessional representation system seems appealing in a country as religiously diverse as Lebanon, in fact it has proven to be problematic. The Lebanese confessional system contains intrinsic dilemmas that are almost inevitable in all confessional systems. Rigid allocations among religious factions for the purpose of power sharing crystallize divisions and set battle lines. They are particularly dangerous in a society such as Lebanon, where the power-sharing groups have significantly different birthrates and emigration rates. The distribution of power is still based on the 1932 census, which no longer reflects the religious makeup of the population. Thus, over time the system has become inherently unfair.

The Lebanese system also impedes the creation of a modern state with a central authority that has decision-making and decision-implementing capabilities. The Ta'if Accord created a system whereby the president, the prime minister, and the speaker of parliament all rule with almost equal power, though in different capacities. The relationship among the members of this "troika" overshadows the role of any institution. Since there is no central authority to arbitrate, political actors view any compromise as a threat to their very existence. Every reshuffling of top administrators since 1990 has been marred by conflict among the troika members over their respective sectarian shares. The success or failure of each leader's maneuvers to legislate or to implement policies is measured in terms of "losses" or "gains" for his respective community. The fact that every single bureaucratic post is allotted on a confessional basis further complicates an already extremely complex political landscape in which different sects are continuously vying for power without an arbiter to enforce laws. Disagreements among the members of the troika are not settled in the Council of Ministers or in parliament but outside these institutions, often with a foreign power playing the role of arbiter. The existing system also exacerbates the crisis of authority by making it very difficult for any political party or group to gain a majority of seats in parliament. Electoral tickets are often formed on a constituency-by-constituency basis by

negotiation among local sect leaders. These loose coalitions generally exist only for the sake of the latest election, and rarely form cohesive blocs in parliament.

Thus, while the semblance of a modern state exists, there are no modern institutions. In short, Lebanon has a confessional oligarchy. The result is perpetual political and administrative paralysis; the existing institutions cannot introduce needed reforms for fear that these changes would alter the status quo and the balance of interests among the communities. This makes it almost impossible to devise a national agenda for political and economic reform.

Syrian Intervention

The fragmentation of the Lebanese system invites the disproportionate influence of outside actors. Because it is virtually impossible to generate sufficient power to govern from within this highly fractured system, foreign powers become crucial to providing governments with a degree of authority. Syria's role in Lebanon must be understood not only against the background of Syria's ambitions, but also in light of the weakness of the Lebanese system that provided the opening to intervention. Similarly, Syria's withdrawal has not only restored the sovereignty of Lebanon but has also left a power vacuum that threatens the stability of the country.

Syrian military forces first entered Lebanon as a peacekeeping force in 1976, invited mainly by Christian Lebanese and endorsed by the Arab League. During and after the civil war, Syria—like many foreign powers before it—used the Lebanese confessional divides to its advantage, shifting alliances with various communities as they successively called on it for help. Thus, Syria became the main power broker, controlling the presidency, the judiciary, and the intelligence and security apparatus, as well as many Lebanese politicians who owed their power and survival to the Syrian authorities. Syrian control over Lebanese political life silenced sectarian tensions and swept the weaknesses of the Lebanese system under the rug. It also curtailed the political and civil rights Lebanese had long enjoyed.

Lebanese society was sharply divided about Syria's presence. In the 1990s, opposition to Syria and to the Syrian-aligned Lebanese government was concentrated among Christians. In particular, it coalesced around the Qornet Shahwan Gathering, a mainly Maronite group supported by the powerful head of the Maronite Church, Patriarch Cardinal Nasrallah Butros Sfeir. The group reflected a widespread sentiment of postwar disenfranchisement among the Christian community. With the two most prominent Christian leaders excluded from political competition—General Michel Aoun was in exile and Samir Geagea was in prison—most Christians (particularly Maronites) felt that they were no longer adequately represented.

Opposition to Syria escalated after September 2004, when the Syrian government pushed Lebanon's parliament to amend the constitution and extend the presidential term of General Emile Lahoud, who was widely seen as a Syrian puppet and whose term was due to expire in November 2004. Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, who had played by Syria's rules since 1992, resigned. Political activists and parties from across the political spectrum met at Beirut's Bristol Hotel in December 2004 and February 2005 to demand a "total withdrawal" of Syrian troops from Lebanon. In addition to representatives of the Qornet Shahwan Gathering, those attending included members of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, the Democratic Forum, the Democratic Leftist Parties (a conglomeration of leftist parties led by former members

of the Lebanese Communist Party), the banned Lebanese Forces (a right-wing phalangist Christian party), and the exiled General Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. Some members of Hariri's parliamentary bloc also attended. Notably absent were representatives of the major Shiite parties: the Amal Movement, led by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and the Shiite Islamist party Hezbollah.

The Syrian show of force also exacerbated rising U.S. and French concerns about Syrian intervention in Lebanon, which culminated in September 2004 with United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for the withdrawal of "all foreign forces" from Lebanon, without mentioning Syria by name.

The assassination of Rafiq Hariri in a bomb blast in Beirut on February 14, 2005, created a clear political demarcation between anti-Syrian forces and Syrian allies. The opposition movement, which at this point included prominent Christian, Druze, and Sunni figures, immediately blamed Syria and formed an unprecedented unified front. The Lebanese public was mobilized, with hundreds of thousands of Lebanese calling for "Syria Out" and "Freedom, Sovereignty, Independence," as well as demanding the "truth" behind the assassination. In the midst of this popular upheaval and the increasing regional and international pressure, the Lebanese government resigned and, on April 26, 2005, Syria withdrew all its troops. In June, Lebanon held its first elections free of direct Syrian intervention in three decades, and formed a new government.

POLITICAL CHANGES AFTER THE SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL

The Syrian withdrawal and the Lebanese parliamentary elections were presented abroad, particularly in the United States, as a turning point for Lebanese democratization. In reality, the change was more limited, and the old problems of Lebanese politics remain. There is no doubt that the events of 2005 were significant. Politicians and citizens mobilized in an unprecedented show of unity to demand Lebanese sovereignty and the restoration of political freedoms curtailed by Syria. A demonstration in Beirut on March 14, 2005, brought more than one million people into the streets, almost a third of the country's population. The wall of fear that had prevented the Lebanese from criticizing the Syrian presence was destroyed. People are now more willing to challenge politicians. The news media are much more critical of Syria's role and of Syrian allies in Lebanon. Issues whose discussion had been suppressed since the close of the civil war, from sectarian relations and the distribution of power to the question of Hezbollah's arms and the status of armed Palestinian refugees, are being debated openly again. There has also been a national rejection of impunity for political assassinations, a significant development in a country whose history is scarred by unpunished assassinations. In brief, many postwar taboos are gone.

Furthermore, the parliamentary elections in June 2005 were characterized by a level of genuine competition that had not been seen in thirty years. Although Lebanese citizens have always enjoyed seemingly democratic practices such as participating in presidential and parliamentary elections, they had a limited capacity to choose their own government. Syria and its allies have influenced parliamentary and municipal elections through district gerrymandering to ensure the election of pro-Syrian politicians and through interference during the elections themselves, with Lebanese military and civil security forces often present inside the polling stations.

Despite these positive changes, however, there has not been any structural change in Lebanese politics so far. The divided nation has united in an unprecedented outpouring in favor of sovereignty, not democratization. The Lebanese branded their upheaval the “Intifada for Independence,” not the “Intifada for Democracy.” As the euphoria of the protests subsided, the momentum for change created by the Syrian withdrawal rapidly dissipated, and the old divides in Lebanese politics and society resurfaced. The end of Syrian control improved political and civil liberties in Lebanon, but did not create a paradigm shift in Lebanese politics. Such a fundamental shift would require politicians to abandon assumptions about the organization of the political system and the relationship between the government and the citizens. In Lebanon, this implies challenging the basis of the confessional system. None of the events since Hariri’s assassination suggests that political actors are beginning to do so.

The parliamentary elections and the ensuing debate over formation of the cabinet confirmed that the political game continues to be played by the same sectarian rules. The cross-communal alliances apparent in the demonstrations of March 2005 proved fragile and fickle. The opposition was united on certain key demands: the request for an international investigation into Hariri’s assassination, the resignation of Lebanon’s security chiefs, and the withdrawal of Syrian troops. Beyond that, however, they had deep strategic disagreements on almost every important issue confronting Lebanon.

The elections were, if anything, a triumph of confessionalism. Running on the legacy of his father, Saad Hariri became the effective leader of the Sunni community, and gained control over 72 of 128 parliamentary seats. Two parties, Hezbollah and Amal, continued to share the allegiance of the Shiite community. All the Druze seats belonged to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. Most of the Christian seats were divided among Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Forces, and members of the Qornet Shahwan Gathering. Although he ran on a reformist, nonsectarian platform, Aoun emerged as the leader of the Maronite community upon his return from exile and now controls the most powerful Christian bloc. His role as a confessional leader with presidential ambitions has undermined his party’s potential as a strong opposition movement in favor of discussing reform issues.

As a result of the 2005 elections, the Lebanese crisis of authority is more pronounced than ever. The government faces major domestic and international challenges, but there seems to be no political figure strong enough to lead the country.

REALISTIC PRIORITIES FOR REFORM

Any strategy for political reform in Lebanon must take into account two inescapable but conflicting realities. First, political reforms that ignore the key flaws in the confessional system are bound to fail because those flaws themselves are the crux of the matter. Second, there are no short-term prospects for a secular, nonconfessional Lebanon. The country is thus caught in a vicious circle. At this point, any step toward breaking the vicious circle would be significant.

The Lebanese confessional system is deeply entrenched in politics and society and is not going to change overnight. Politicians are not questioning the rules of the sectarian game. They believe that the Ta’if Accord continues to be the best frame of reference for discussion. The accord

suggests vague measures to begin to deconfessionalize the system, but it lacks a coherent plan. It calls on parliament to form a national council—headed by the president and composed of the prime minister, the speaker of parliament, and prominent political figures and intellectuals—to propose ways to abolish confessional representation. It also suggests that merit and capability replace confessional quotas as the basis for filling public positions (excluding top-level posts), but no action has been taken in that vein.

In an ideal scenario, Lebanon would tackle the confessional problem by creating institutions and processes that would allow multiple interests to begin to cut across sectarian interests. These would include measures such as developing a national civic program to start replacing confessional affinities with a new national consciousness, establishing integrated educational institutions, and changing the educational curriculum to include a comprehensive history of the civil war. However, there is no political willingness to embark on this process, and these proposals are not part of a serious national political debate. Even the most secular and liberal Lebanese activists acknowledge that advocating a secular Lebanon at this time is unrealistic.

In the short run, reform efforts thus need to focus not on eliminating sectarian power sharing but on making sectarian representation fairer and less of a zero-sum game. Government authority must be strengthened both at the center and at the municipal level, and the patronage that underpins the confessional system should be shifted to merit-based hiring. In a search for domains in which progress on these fronts is possible, three stand out: security reform, electoral reform, and economic reform. More broadly, reform in these areas would address the two major problems in Lebanese politics—the lack of central authority and the confessional system. All three domains are already a major part of the political debate and must be given priority.

Security reform, electoral reform, and economic reform are not impossible, but they will be difficult. First, they must take place in a precarious security situation, as shown by the continuing political assassinations. Second, they will occur at a slow pace, if they occur at all, given the coalition nature of Lebanon's government: The various groups in government will be engaged in a balancing act. Third, any changes will be greatly affected by regional and international dynamics.

Security Reform

The unstable situation in Lebanon in the aftermath of Hariri's assassination has brought to the fore the need for an overhaul of the entire security system. The 2005 wave of assassinations and car bombings targeting politicians and journalists and the suspected involvement of the heads of the security services have highlighted the disarray of the Lebanese security apparatus. Syria's withdrawal and international pressure have reopened the question of Hezbollah's arms and the lack of the Lebanese state's monopoly on security. As a result, security reform is at the center of debate in Lebanon.

The Lebanese security system is characterized by the absence of central oversight: The various security services are politicized, and are divided into disparate elements that do not respond to a common higher civilian authority. Thus, a systematic overhaul of the sector is needed, including reform of the main security services, as well as a new approach to the Hezbollah militia and its relationship to the Lebanese army.

The heads of the main security agencies are appointed on a sectarian basis: The head of the intelligence services is Maronite, the director of general security is Shiite, the director of internal security is Sunni, and the director of state security is Catholic. The head of the intelligence services is appointed by the minister of defense; the three security directors are named by the minister of the interior. The defense and interior ministries, however, do not exercise any institutionalized authority over their appointees. Instead, the interaction between ministers and directors of security depends on their personal relationship at any given point in time. By law, the different agencies are supposed to coordinate with each other under the umbrella of the Central Security Council, which is headed by the minister of the interior. In practice, however, the council exists merely as a formality, taking up only trivial issues. Heads of security agencies report any substantive information to those who appointed them; there are no institutionalized relations among the different services, or clearly delineated responsibilities. As a result, when there are security incidents such as Hariri's assassination, there is nobody to address citizens' concerns or take the lead in responding and investigating. Until 2005, the Syrian military intelligence services exercised direct control over the Lebanese security services, making sure that no coordination existed among them. While there are still suspicions that clandestine Syrian intelligence elements remain in Lebanon, they no longer have the degree of control over the Lebanese security services they once exercised.

Consolidating the security services would put the government as a whole, rather than the various confessional groups, in charge of security. This would strengthen the authority of the government and deprive the factions of an instrument they now use to enhance their power. Consolidation would not eliminate confessionalism, of course, but it would start undermining it. Consolidation of the security services would also enhance the functioning of the democratic system in Lebanon. A single security apparatus could more easily be made accountable to all three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. Budgets, appointments, and dismissals would have to be approved, if not by parliament as a whole, then at least by a committee with assigned responsibility for these matters. The judiciary would be able to investigate crimes committed by the security services and try those involved. But such oversight is impossible as long as security remains in the hands of different services tied to confessional groups.

Reform of the security services will obviously not be easy, but the Syrian withdrawal and the arrests of the heads of the security services allegedly involved in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri have provided a window of opportunity. In an effort to begin consolidating the security services, the cabinet announced in October 2005 that the State Security Department—an institution introduced for political reasons in 1989—eventually will be disbanded, and that a central operations center will be established to coordinate activities and share intelligence among the security services. The cabinet also announced that a committee of judges and military officers will oversee security reform.

The second area of concern in security reform is Hezbollah's militia. Solving this problem will be a longer-term undertaking than reorganizing the security services. The existence of an armed militia independent of the government would be cause for worry in any country, and certainly it is an obstacle to democratic reform in Lebanon. UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon, is clearly aimed at Hezbollah. But the Ta'if Accord exempted Hezbollah from having to disband because of its status as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, and many Lebanese support this exemption. Further complicating a solution to the problem, Hezbollah's militia also has a political role. Analysts from different perspectives in Lebanon argue that Hezbollah's arms are the great equalizer in an otherwise lopsided

political system: Shiites do not have political representation even remotely commensurate with their numbers, but they have a militia. The political ramifications of disbanding Hezbollah's militia are thus huge: Either Shiites must be offered something in return, namely, the prospect of electoral reform that would guarantee them an opportunity for greater representation, or they might resort to violence to redress what they would regard as their further disenfranchisement. This would entail launching a discussion of the deconfessionalization clauses in the Ta'if Accord, something Lebanese politicians are not ready for.

In addition to the internal Lebanese dimension, the debate over Hezbollah's future also has a considerable regional component. Hezbollah has multiple identities and roles. It is a Shiite political movement providing representation for Shiites in the domestic political arena. It is also a regional movement allied with Syria and Iran to deter Israel's ambitions in the region. Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has declared repeatedly that the party will remain armed "as long as Israel remains a threat to the country," even if this situation lasts "one million years." The debate on Hezbollah's status thus is not purely about Lebanese politics, but takes place against the background of the Arab-Israeli conflict and in the context of great tension in U.S.-Syrian and U.S.-Iranian relations. Out of a combination of ideological conviction and pragmatism, Hezbollah has long resisted the option of disarming and becoming solely a Lebanese political movement. By normalizing its status on the Lebanese scene, the movement believes it could undermine its international standing, losing its Syrian and Iranian allies, and becoming vulnerable to U.S. and Israeli pressure.

Despite the intricacy of the situation, there are some signs that a solution may be possible. Hezbollah recognizes that ultimately the principal determinant of its future will be Lebanese public opinion. Since the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, and particularly since the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, the organization has found it increasingly difficult to cater to all of its constituencies, including Shiites and other groups in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. When it organized a mass demonstration on March 8, 2005, it chose slogans and symbols to project a national image. By exclusively waving Lebanese flags, not Hezbollah banners, it was presenting itself as a national movement that was bidding Syria farewell as opposed to urging the troops to stay. Before the elections, it formed alliances with Lebanon's most powerful political blocs—Nabih Berri's Amal Movement, Saad Hariri's Future Movement, and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party—as a way of fending off external threats of disarmament. After the elections, a member of Hezbollah joined the government for the first time. There is, in other words, growing realization by Hezbollah that its future is as a Lebanese Shiite party. But this does not mean that it is ready simply to disband its militia without expecting something in return. The disarming of Hezbollah is a goal to be reached in the long run by negotiations, not suddenly by a government order.

Electoral Reform

Like security reform, electoral reform would not necessarily eliminate the confessional character of the Lebanese political system, but it could make it fairer. There are major flaws in electoral legislations as well as other serious concerns about procedures that cannot be addressed through legislation.

There are two main flaws in the legislation itself: The electoral list system and the method of creating legislative districts. The list system does not reflect the current Lebanese demographic reality and thus aggravates the confessional problem. The constitution requires that the 128 seats in parliament be equally divided between Christian and Muslim candidates. The seats granted to

each community are further subdivided among various sects based on their supposed shares of the population. The distribution by individual sect is provided in Table 1. But each district has its own allocation of seats, and the party lists must follow the specific sectarian distribution for that district. For example, in Beirut's first district, each party list must have two Sunni candidates, one Maronite, one Greek Orthodox, one Greek Catholic, and one Protestant. Each voter can thus vote for two Sunnis, one Maronite, one Greek Orthodox, and so forth. The distribution is different in each of Beirut's other two districts (see Table 2). Not only is the system extraordinarily complicated, but the confessional allocations in each district are based on the 1932 census—the last ever conducted in Lebanon.

Table 1. Division of Lebanese Parliament by Confession

Confession	Seats
Christians	
Maronite	34
Greek Orthodox	14
Greek Catholic	8
Armenian Orthodox	5
Armenian Catholic	1
Protestant	1
Other Christian minorities	1
Subtotal	64
Muslims	
Sunni	27
Shiite	27
Druze	8
Alawite	2
Subtotal	64
TOTAL	128

Table 2. Electoral Districts of Beirut

Beirut Electoral District	Seats	Distribution
Beirut 1	6	2 Sunni 1 Maronite 1 Greek Catholic 1 Greek Orthodox 1 Protestant
Beirut 2	6	2 Sunni 1 Shiite 1 Greek Orthodox 1 Armenian Orthodox 1 minority
Beirut 3	7	2 Sunni 1 Shiite 1 Druze 1 Armenian Catholic 2 Armenian Orthodox

The inherent problems of the confessional system have already been discussed in the present paper (under the heading “The Foundation of the Lebanese System”). To sum up, the confessional system is unfair because it is based on faulty data, but it is impossible to correct the faulty data—carrying out a census is politically unthinkable. It is possible, however, to reform the election law, which at present compounds the problems of confessionalism because of how the law is modified and manipulated before every election.

Lebanon has never had a fixed, stable electoral law; a new law is drafted before most elections, changing the number and size of electoral districts. This was the case before the outbreak of civil war in 1975 and remains the case now. With the 1989 Ta’if Accord, an effort was made to solve the problem by declaring that Lebanon’s six governorates (*muhafazat*) would be the exclusive basis for electoral districts. The purpose of the resulting large electoral districts was simple: Candidates in each district would have to appeal to a broader, multisectarian constituency in order to win. However, Syrian officials grew concerned that some of their most important allies might lose the elections if they were forced to compete outside their narrow tribal and sectarian communities. Christian politicians also favor small electoral districts (*qadas*) because they are a minority in many regions but the majority in a number of small districts. A districting system based on the larger *muhafaza* would thus force them to broker alliances with candidates from other communities. In a majority Sunni district, for example, Christians would have to join a Sunni-dominated list. Thus, in every election since the Ta’if Accord, parliament has passed a law changing the number of districts and gerrymandering their borders. The result is a districting system that follows neither the *muhafaza* nor the *qada*; rather, the divisions are ad hoc, aimed at undermining potential opponents to Syria and weakening coalitions of independent candidates. The continuous manipulation of electoral districts has further distorted representation. The number of votes needed to win a parliamentary seat according to the 2000 electoral law varies from approximately 12,000 to 47,000. In some districts, constituencies of fewer than 4,000 voters are entitled to a representative from their own sect, while in others, groups of more than 10,000 voters go without sectarian representation. Other important issues in any reform of the electoral law are voting age and expatriate voting. These issues are politically charged because different proposed solutions favor different communities. Lowering the voting age from the present twenty-one years to eighteen would favor Muslims, who have a higher birthrate, and thus a younger population. Permitting expatriates to vote, on the other hand, could shift the balance of power in favor of Christians. The expatriate community is very large and made up predominantly of Christians, many of whom left the country before 1975.

The electoral law has other deficiencies. First, there is no structured, comprehensive system for legal redress. Various institutions have ill-defined and sometimes overlapping competencies for adjudicating complaints, and procedures are not defined in detail by legislation. Second, there is no regulation of campaign spending. Candidates are not required to present any details about the sources and the amount of their campaign financing. Powerful candidates, who often own TV channels, monopolize airtime. Third, the system does not prevent extensive abuse of state resources and power by candidates during elections. Candidates who are already in office often use government facilities and staff in their campaigns and pressure civil servants to vote in their favor.

Elections in Lebanon are also marred by technical problems that cannot be addressed by legislation alone. First, in practice Lebanon does not have mandatory secret balloting. Security forces and representatives of the candidates themselves—who are legally permitted inside polling stations—watch voters cast their ballots. The absence of preprinted uniform ballots

creates opportunities for manipulation and can further compromise the secrecy of the vote. This facilitates rampant vote buying, which is done by everyone. Second, voter lists are not updated, which also leads to fraud. And while soldiers are not allowed to vote, their names are kept on voting lists, and some are invited to vote illicitly by powerful candidates. Third, while the law also stipulates that election day be the same in all districts, parliamentary elections are usually staggered. Thus, as the results in the first districts are known, vote buying and electoral manipulation get more intense in the remaining districts.

The problems of Lebanon's election law are widely acknowledged, and there is a growing consensus that the electoral law needs immediate revision. But there is great discord over what would constitute a fair electoral law that would not break the country apart. The parliament that was elected in 2005 promised to give the issue priority, and on August 8, the cabinet approved the formation of an independent national commission to draw up a new electoral law.

The issue is also debated openly by the Lebanese public and civil society organizations, above all the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections. The problem is to devise a law that would be accepted by most people as fair and that would reduce sectarian tension. One proposal is to move to a system of proportional representation. This would be in line with the Ta'if Accord, which calls on parliament to enact a new election law that will allow candidates for the Chamber of Deputies to be elected "on a national rather than on a confessional basis," with the upper chamber (Majlis al Shuykh) structured along confessional lines. The upper chamber's powers would be confined to "crucial issues."

A proportional representation system could make Lebanese elections fairer, to the extent that it would allow equal representation among voters. It would begin to undermine the sectarian character of Lebanese elections by forcing candidates to forge new alliances across the political spectrum. Proportional representation systems promote competition among political groups rather than among individual candidates. Proportional representation would also encourage candidates to run on policy-specific platforms; if a candidate's confessional identity were no longer enough to win votes, he or she would have to speak to voters' interests beyond identity. Proportional representation would also give independent candidates a better chance for at least some presence in parliament and minimize the ability of broad coalitions to dominate, as they do in the current first-past-the-post system. This would pave the way for the gradual renewal of Lebanon's political elite by allowing new blood to enter politics and create new dynamics.

Economic Reform

It is impossible to envision a strategy of even limited political reform in Lebanon without economic reform. The country's economic woes are to a large extent the consequence of the authority crisis as well as of the sectarian-based patronage system. Overlapping policy-making powers and responsibilities and widespread corruption have obstructed the emergence of coherent economic policies and efficient institutional structures in the public and private sectors. More than any other issue, economic problems provide citizens with a tangible sense of the arbitrary, corrupt, and inefficient manner in which public policy is devised in Lebanon. Political reform and economic reform are thus complementary. Political reform would lead to economic reform, but some economic reforms could be enacted first to facilitate political change.

Experience around the world has demonstrated that there is no automatic link between economic reform and political reform. Unlike security reform and new electoral legislation, economic reform brings with it no guarantee that it will help advance Lebanon along the path to democratization. However, inasmuch as economic reform is an inherently political act because it changes the distribution of benefits in society, significant economic reform in Lebanon will encourage shifts in the political system.

Lebanon's economy has a mixed record. On the positive side, the domestic economy is very resilient, as it demonstrated during the civil war. Despite the battering it received, the economy survived thanks in large measure to remittances from expatriates, a highly entrepreneurial private sector, and a vibrant civil society. Following the civil war, authorities devoted considerable effort and resources to the urgent task of economic and financial recovery. A massive reconstruction project was launched to rebuild the damaged infrastructure. Macroeconomic policy has been able to minimize the impact of negative political developments on the national economy and restore price and exchange rate stability. The private sector has remained vital in the fields of education and banking, with improvements in the regulatory environment of the latter. The Lebanese Central Bank also enjoys high credibility. But there is a downside to the Lebanese economy as well. Since 1995, the rate of economic growth has been declining, and public debt has been mounting since the civil war ended in 1990. The Economist Intelligence Unit projected that gross domestic product (GDP) would grow only 2 percent in 2005. The public debt, estimated at US\$36 billion, is the highest in the world proportionate to GDP: 165 percent. The level of debt threatens domestic financial stability and has forced the government to seek external aid repeatedly, as reflected by the 2001 Paris I and 2002 Paris II aid conferences in which the government met with international donors to seek bilateral assistance in restructuring its debt at lower interest rates.

Economic reform has been at the center of debate since the end of the civil war. Critics of the postwar economic path blame former prime minister Hariri and his finance minister, Fouad Siniora (currently prime minister), for the mounting debt, and denounce the excessive emphasis on macroeconomic and financial issues at the expense of the socioeconomic, institutional, and organizational dimensions of development. They cite increased inequities in income and asset distribution, environmental degradation, uneven development among the regions, and increasingly difficult living conditions for the majority of Lebanese. Hariri's defenders assert that he was never allowed to implement his economic vision because of sharp disputes with President Emile Lahoud and his supporters.

Regardless of where specific blame lies for Lebanon's current economic troubles, the reality is that Lebanon's governance structure has proved unable to promote sustained economic and social development. One of the major problems is the absence of a coherent long-term national policy that focuses on the public good. The absence of a coherent policy is obvious in all aspects of Lebanese life, from inadequate implementation of rules and regulations, to the illegal exploitation of natural resources, to chaotic urban and rural planning.¹ There is no clear distinction between political players' private interests and the public interest. At the same time, the nature of the Lebanese system renders it difficult to hold government officials accountable for ultimate executive responsibility.

The major economic reform with the clearest political implications is privatization, which has been one of the most contentious issues in Lebanon since the end of the war. In his last four years as prime minister, Hariri pushed privatization by setting up the Higher Privatization Council, which

was charged with guiding the process, and by making a pledge at the Paris II donor conference in 2002 to privatize telecommunications, electrical utilities, and other state assets. The issue was discussed and subsequently shelved by the cabinet repeatedly, and no agreement was ever reached. Following Hariri's resignation in 2004, the Higher Privatization Council was, in effect, dissolved. As the energy sector has become a larger burden on the state due to inefficiencies and exorbitant costs, the issue of privatization has moved once again to the forefront of debate. After the 2005 elections, Prime Minister Siniora announced ambitious plans for privatization of state-owned companies. If the process is ever launched, its prospects will be enhanced by Lebanon's tradition of economic liberalism and resultant private-sector dynamism.

The political implications of privatization are apparent in the experience of *Électricité du Liban* (EDL), the state-owned company that provides power to most of the country. Because of mismanagement and rampant corruption, EDL keeps losing money while charging some of the highest rates in the world. In 2004, 9 percent of Lebanon's nondebt public expenditures went to cover EDL's operational losses.² Economically, it makes no sense not to privatize the company. However, EDL is a powerful source of political patronage; it has long been used by political elites to distribute free electricity and jobs to their constituents. Opposition to privatization also has a sectarian character. Both Shiite parties, Amal and Hezbollah, resist privatization because they seek to preserve a substantial stake in the public sector for a relatively poor Shiite community that, unlike the Sunni and Christian communities, is not well represented in the private sector. However, the inefficiencies of EDL, including frequent blackouts, affect everyone in Lebanon equally, and all communities increasingly recognize that the current situation is untenable.

Progress on privatization would signal a political shift. First, if properly designed and managed, privatization would undermine key sources of political patronage. Second, privatization would require the development of an administrative and legal framework, which could lead to progress at a more general level in both public administration and the rule of law in Lebanon. Third, and most important, an agreement on privatization would mark the end of the current decision-making paralysis and open the way for other changes.

But a poorly designed and implemented privatization program could have negative consequences, as countries in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and elsewhere in the Middle East have shown. Poorly run privatization programs can increase rather than decrease patronage and corruption. Lebanon currently lacks the tools to regulate private industries and prevent privatization from becoming nothing more than an exchange of state corruption for private corruption. While Prime Minister Siniora has promised to create a regulatory body to oversee the privatization of state-owned industries, there is no discussion of creating a permanent regulatory body to act as a watchdog over the private sector. Furthermore, a successful privatization program calls for a system of social safety nets designed to absorb the costs for some sectors of the population.

Reform in the economic sector will not be easy, because it inevitably will affect vested interests. Thus, change will only take place if there is a lot of public pressure for change. Furthermore, putting a lot of issues on the table at once might facilitate reform by decreasing the ability of the factions to undermine every step along the way.

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

It is impossible to discuss reform in Lebanon without discussing international influence. Lebanon is caught up in an international storm caused by escalating tension between Syria and the international community. The possibilities of reform in Lebanon today are the result of the Syrian withdrawal, which would not have taken place without the pressure exerted by the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia. In the aftermath of the Syrian withdrawal, Lebanon needs continued international support to carry out reforms. However, the wrong policies by international actors could undermine the process.

International actors can aid reform by continuing to protect Lebanon against undue Syrian interference, but they must also understand that Lebanon has been deeply influenced by Syria for obvious geographical and historical reasons, and that this is not going to change despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops. Syria continues to exercise vast power in Lebanon, through many allies such as Hezbollah, Amal, and President Lahoud, and through economic pressure, which it does not hesitate to use. It has also sponsored Palestinian groups with an armed presence in Lebanon and there are reports of a continued Syrian intelligence presence. As it pursues its interests in Syria, the United States should consider how its policies toward that country will affect Lebanon.

International actors must also accept the fact that the reform process in Lebanon cannot start with a direct approach to the big issues—in particular the confessional system and the disarmament of Hezbollah—but must be pursued in a more incremental and indirect manner. Thus, there are certain issues the international community, specifically the United States and Europe, should not touch right now. Specifically, the United States and Europe can help achieve the long-term goal of a more democratic Lebanon through diplomatic and technical support of reform in the areas of security, electoral law, and the economy. However, it is vital that, in providing this support, the United States and Europe do not overstep their bounds. There is widespread distrust of external interests in Lebanon, given its tumultuous history of international interference. Poorly conceived involvement by the United States and European countries in Lebanese internal affairs will fuel domestic tensions and undermine political and economic reform initiatives.

Regarding security reform, because of the complexity of the issue of Hezbollah's disarmament, the U.S. government should adopt a low-profile approach, re-emphasizing that the issue of Hezbollah's final status is to be resolved by the Lebanese. The United States must accept that the disarmament of Hezbollah can only be done in a cooperative and gradual manner, in full consultation with Hezbollah itself. Indeed, if the United States pushes the Lebanese government too strongly on this issue, the fabric of the Lebanese state itself might disintegrate, so contentious is this issue. Most Lebanese consider Hezbollah a legitimate organization, as they credit it with pushing Israel out of Lebanon. Also, most political groups have publicly rejected the implementation of the stipulation of UN Resolution 1559 regarding the disarmament of Hezbollah and other militias. While respecting Lebanese sensitivity on this issue, the United States must also make clear that Hezbollah is not purely a Lebanese question and that its disarmament can only occur in the context of progress toward Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian peace agreements. The fate of Hezbollah is also tied to that of armed Palestinian groups in refugee camps and bases in Lebanon. Like Hezbollah, Palestinian groups were spared from the Ta'if disarmament requirement. With the Lebanese government lacking the power to disarm these groups, the issue has to be part of a comprehensive regional peace agreement. Also, the

Hezbollah issue is particularly sensitive because it could break the international consensus on Lebanon. The United States should avoid a disagreement with France over whether Hezbollah's disarmament should be a priority. So far, the U.S. government has demonstrated sensitivity to the complexity of the issue.

For its part, the EU, which enjoys greater credibility than the United States in Lebanon, should continue to engage in dialogue with Hezbollah over recent proposals to merge its military wing into an auxiliary unit within the Lebanese army. The UN and the EU have submitted proposals to this effect, and even some Hezbollah officials have referred to this issue. In order to maintain this trust, the EU should also resist U.S. and Israeli pressure to include the group on its list of terrorist organizations.

In other areas of security reform the international community can be very beneficial, as demonstrated by the UN's investigation of the Hariri assassination. The investigation marked a turning point in Lebanese history: For the first time, the security sector was sent a powerful political message that it would be held accountable. The arrest, on August 30, 2005, of the former chief of the Department of General Security, Jamil Sayyid, the former chief of the Internal Security Forces, Ali Hajj, the former head of military intelligence, Raymond Azar, and the commander of the Presidential Guards, Mustafa Hamdan, was a dramatic move on this front. It is vital, however, that security assistance not be perceived as politicized. European organizations such as the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces are best suited for this role because, unlike the U.S. government, they can provide technical assistance on security reform issues outside the jurisdiction of foreign or defense ministries.

In the area of electoral law reform, both the United States and the EU should encourage the opening of the debate on the electoral law to civil society activists and election law experts. While reform must be primarily a Lebanese process, the United States and the EU should assert their support for a reform of the electoral framework, provide technical assistance when requested, and facilitate dialogue. The EU has already been directly involved through its electoral monitoring mission. It has also issued several calls for reform of the whole electoral framework, and has provided specific recommendations. It has also offered technical and financial assistance to Lebanon to reform the electoral law before the next general election, as part of its effort to revamp the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and make a stronger commitment to supporting political reform in the region. On the U.S. side, organizations such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have already involved themselves in the process by training local observers and working with members of parliament. NDI and IFES should continue to work with domestic groups such as the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections to provide technical expertise on electoral reform and facilitate dialogue between different political forces. The benefits of such support, however, are relatively modest. It is unclear how far technical solutions such as redistricting can go toward resolving such a highly politicized issue as electoral reform. Donors can do two things: provide a comparative framework of electoral reform and facilitate debate. The rest depends on the political willingness of the Lebanese themselves to invest in this process.

In the process of economic reform, the United States and Europe can solicit support for the new government and help Lebanon handle the problem of its public debt. International donors, however, should refuse to do an economic bailout of Lebanon, which would merely prolong the problem. The

Paris II conference, which raised US\$4.4 billion in financial support for Lebanon, presented a broad reform package as a condition for debt rescheduling, including fiscal adjustment, restructuring and privatizing public enterprises, promoting investment, and enhancing transparency. However, it also eased the immediate pressures on the budget, thus sapping the reform program of its urgency and allowing the wide divisions within the elite over economic policy to reopen.³ Donors should avoid an international financial package that simply postpones the hard decisions that need to be made; rather, they must help devise a clear economic strategy on which to condition further aid. The World Bank has sent a team to Lebanon but has emphasized that it will not award an aid package unless there is proof of reforms in the direction of privatization and a reduction in the size of the public sector. The United States and France should also send clear warnings to Lebanon that the country will not get any aid unless serious institutional economic reforms materialize.

Through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and Association Agreements, the EU is deeply involved in the process of economic reform in Lebanon. The Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement signed in June 2002 (and awaiting ratification) could have a positive effect, since it advocates a greater role for the private sector and encourages the launch of legislative reforms to make possible the larger-scale economic and trade-related policy reforms required by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Throughout this process, however, the EU must recognize that economic liberalization is not a substitute for policies designed to encourage democratic development. Since the 1980s, the EU has followed a policy of “economics first” that assumes that economic reform and market-related and administration-related capacity building are likely to spill over into broader political reform in the Mediterranean region. Ten years after the launching of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the EU is reevaluating that assumption, given that it has been discredited by the experiences of several countries in the region. For the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to remain relevant, it must approach economic reform as a component of a holistic approach to change that includes an emphasis on political reform.

The United States and Europe can play a crucial role in political reform in Lebanon, but their task is not easy. They should focus on stabilizing the volatile situation in Lebanon and consider how their policies toward Syria will affect this goal. While acknowledging that there are no short-term prospects for a secular nonconfessional Lebanon, they must push reforms that address the key flaws in the confessional system. They must also realize that sensitive issues such as Hezbollah’s disarmament cannot be dealt with conclusively in the near future.

NOTES

- 1 Samir Makdisi, *The Lessons of Lebanon: The Economics of War and Development* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004).
- 2 World Bank Lebanon Country Office, *Lebanon: Second Quarter 2005* (June 6, 2005), p. 5. (<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLEBANON/News%20and%20Events/20666801/Q2-2005.pdf>)
- 3 “Lebanon Country Outlook,” The Economist Intelligence Unit Views Wire, April 23, 2004.

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