

# CONFESSIONALISM, CONSOCIATIONALISM, AND SOCIAL COHESION IN LEBANON

CASE STUDY OVERVIEW



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This report presents case study findings from a two-year research and policy-dialogue initiative that explores how international peacemakers and development aid providers affect social cohesion in conflict-affected countries. Field research conducted by leading international scholars and global South researchers yields in-depth analyses of social cohesion and related peacebuilding efforts in Guatemala, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka. Principal case study specialists for Lebanon include Marie-Joëlle Zahar and Joy Aoun. The project was coordinated by the Sié Chéou Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy at the University of Denver from 2012 - 2014, and supported by a generous grant from Henry Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion and International Affairs.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Analyzing social cohesion in Lebanon, this case study disentangles the web of interpretations to which the concept lends itself. How should one understand social cohesion in the Lebanon case? Is it the same as communal “coexistence” or the notion of ‘vivre ensemble’ as suggested by several Lebanese intellectuals and activists during field research? Does cohesion come from a common lived experience (through schooling or military service, for example) or does it rest on a shared vision for the country and its future? What role does the Lebanese state play (or not) in fostering social cohesion; what roles do religious communities, communal political forces, and parties play? In a country often described as enmeshed in a web of regional and international politics, what role (if any) has the international community played in fostering social cohesion?

Based on extensive interviews conducted in Lebanon in summer and fall 2013, the study identifies three interrelated sets of factors that have stood in the way of social cohesion in Lebanon:

- First, intra-communal cohesion (also referred to as bonding) has historically been strengthened at the expense of inter-communal cohesion (also referred to as bridging).
- Second, sectarian politics and the concomitant absence of the state are important elements in fostering intra-communal cohesion and limiting the potential for inter-communal cohesion.
- Third, international donor assistance has reinforced communal cleavages, even though some assistance was directed toward fostering social cohesion.

# 2. POLITICAL ECONOMY OF A DIVIDED SOCIETY

Lebanon’s economy contributes to centrifugal dynamics, or social fragmentation. The country’s economic structure favors wealthy elites that, in turn, use their wealth and access to the State to strengthen their hold over communal clients. The provision of public services and the development of infrastructure in the hinterland regions depend upon personal connections with the State, effectively preventing Lebanon’s poor from uniting as a class across identity-based, sectarian divisions. Politics in Lebanon remains, therefore, a communal game. Localized groups vote regional elites into power in return for which they expect conditions to improve in their region or locality, rather than across the State at large.

The case study also highlights the presence of an implicit economic contract between Sunni families and Maronite bureaucrats that accompanied the National Pact. This contract had important consequences for post-independence economic development and for the dynamics of social fragmentation:

- First, the contract suggested that the government would do little, if anything, to develop sectors or regions that could undermine the free flow of imports. Therefore, infrastructure and services tended to be limited to the coastal cities, resulting in unequal development patterns.
- Second, the economic contract between Sunnis and Maronites allowed elites to use privileged access to the State as a means of strengthening their clientelist hold over supporters. In a country where State welfare policies were almost nonexistent, elites were particularly well placed to build up their political connections and economic investments, effectively creating a situation with economic inequality and unequal access to state resources, based on identity.

### 3. DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION, ASSISTANCE, AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

International engagement in post-civil war Lebanon has ebbed and flowed at the rhythm of political developments in the country and in the region. Initially constrained by Syria's tutelage, Western contributions to Lebanon's reconstruction were limited to "standard" development aid. With the forced departure of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005, Western engagement became more "political" and thus began to address democracy promotion and social cohesion. However, little has been done to bridge the gap between theory and practice:

- In Lebanon, no matter its source, international engagement contributes to communal bonding (the strengthening of intra-community bonds) rather than inter-communal bridging (the strengthening of bonds between communities and the requirement for social cohesion).

Following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, the Israel-Hizballah war of summer 2006, the political crisis that paralyzed state institutions between 2006 and 2008 and, since April 2011, spillovers from civil war raging in Syria, have all heightened instability. In response, the United Nations, Western donors, and international financial institutions provided support for the rehabilitation of infrastructure leveled by Israel's 2006 airstrikes. The international community addressed Lebanon's political crisis through efforts to strengthen central and local government institutions, and by developing programs in support of citizenship initiatives.

Following the 2006 conflict, humanitarian assistance provided through the European Commission's Humanitarian Office (ECHO) totaled more than €46 million with a similar amount managed by the UN through the Lebanon Recovery Fund. Moreover, in the post-2005 period, the United States became a key player in Lebanon. In the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, the US government saw an opportunity to shift the regional balance of power in the Levant and reengaged meaningfully in Lebanon. Congressionally mandated American funding programs are a key aspect of the bilateral relationship. Since 2006, the U.S. government has obligated more than US\$1 billion to support the implementation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions 1559 and 1701, fund programs to combat sectarianism and unify national institutions, support the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces through training and equipment, and bolster economic opportunity through initiatives tied to the US State Department's Economic Support Fund (ESF).

### 4. SOCIAL COHESION PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS (DIRECT AND INDIRECT)

As a result of renewed international interest in "social cohesion" or addressing social dynamics as a key factor for stable post-conflict recovery, international NGOs such as Search for Common Ground (SFCG), International Alert or the International Center for Transitional Justice – which usually appear in post-conflict countries almost immediately after the signing of peace agreements, set up permanent offices in Beirut. Programs and projects mushroomed and Lebanese NGOs working in these areas began to receive more foreign funding. The majority of activities do not focus on religion as an explicit dimension. Search for Common Ground, for example, works with youth and the Internal Security Forces to build inter-group trust. International Alert also conducts a similar program. Other areas of activity include work with the youth of political parties to 'do politics differently' (International Alert) or women's socio-economic empowerment (SFCG).

Some NGOs that have elected to address the religious dimension head-on. Such is the case of Adyan, the Lebanese foundation for interreligious studies and spiritual solidarity, the founders of which argue that it would be chimera to separate national unity from social cohesion and that both rest on intercultural understanding and religious pluralism. Some donor representatives acknowledge the importance of addressing religion and

argue that international organizations should do more in terms of improving dialogue between religious leaders who currently (with a few exceptions) play a negative role in terms of social cohesion. NGO efforts, however, struggle to yield long-term results. Further complicating the work of international and national NGOs concerned with social cohesion are two broader factors:

- Lebanon's oft-changing security environment, and;
- The lack of governmental buy-in (with the limited exception of occasional local buy-in at the level of municipalities).

Overall, not only does the state not buy into social cohesion programs and activities, but political elites have used loopholes in the law on associations to combat NGOs that do not further their own narrow local or sectarian interests, including withholding licensing, influencing internal elections, and setting up parallel structures. In a country where sectarian leaders permeate the state and where foreign donors privilege their relationship with state structures, NGOs have often found themselves forced to court sectarian leaders, modify their programs to be granted access to areas under a given leader's control and water down the anti-sectarian bent of their social cohesion work.

## THE UN AND SOCIAL COHESION IN LEBANON

The United Nations is one of Lebanon's long-standing partners in the field of development assistance. The organization has multiple links to the state and to its society. Indeed, not only is Lebanon a founding member of the organization, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been deployed in South Lebanon since 1978. In 1997 the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) returned to Beirut – its permanent headquarters, from which it had moved during the war – and, in 2008, the UN established the post of Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL).

How the UN engages in Lebanon varies – at least in part – on the region where the missions, agencies, funds, programmes, or offices are located. The South has typically been the recipient of most security support and humanitarian assistance whereas remote areas across the country have benefited from development assistance. The UN has been involved in recovery assistance following major security breaches, for instance following the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war during which the Israeli aviation destroyed most of Lebanon's road infrastructure, or after the 2008 clashes between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Islamists holed up in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared in North Lebanon. In general, respondents indicate that UN development assistance has not necessarily deepened divisions but has not healed them either.

Little direct attention was paid to using recovery assistance in order to bridge differences between communities. For example, UN engagement in the south has traditionally not had to contend with high levels of interreligious violence. Instead, Christians, Sunnis and Shi'a had shared interests related to collective security vis-à-vis Israel and common concerns surrounding the presence of Palestinian refugees. In other words:

- The shared experience of severe insecurity or rising demographic change can unify diverse groups across social divisions that may function as conflict cleavages in other settings.

In seeking to foster social cohesion, the United Nations' reputation for neutrality provides the organization with comparative advantage vis-à-vis other donors who are perceived to be siding with either March 8th or March 14th. The organization's lengthy engagement with Lebanon also provides comparative advantage in terms of implementation expertise. However, the UN also suffers from a number of limitations. First is its privileged partnership with the State. The UNDP identifies "ministries such as social affairs and education as the main

partners in its efforts to promote pro-poor, local development, local governance and empowerment projects.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the State has leverage in identifying the UN’s local CSO partners and often, state officials tend to privilege their own communal organizations as UN partners. In looking for partners, the UN also privileges efficiency, ability to deliver and report, and sustainability, criteria that tend to privilege older more established communal CSOs at the expense of new inter-communal organizations. Last but not least, the organization employs a significant number of local staff including former ministry officials who are likely to reflect rather than overcome existing social divisions within society.

## PERCEPTIONS OF DONOR ENGAGEMENT

Many Lebanese question the commitment of (particularly Western) donors to their stated objectives of fostering social cohesion. Following the 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah, Western donors gave to an Emergency Flash Appeal, but several “exerted pressures on UN agencies and NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] not to meet or provide assistance to Hizballah.”<sup>2</sup> This type of conditionality has made some NGOs weary. Local civil society activists critique the approach taken by Western donors on several fronts. On the one hand, they underline that social cohesion programs have little tangible impact, as discussed above. CSO activists also criticize the manner in which donors have contributed to the professionalization of Lebanese NGOs and squandered the volunteering spirit of members.<sup>3</sup> Others stress that the recipients of aid (NGO, ministries, municipalities, etc.) do not really develop in terms of integrating additional capacity or capabilities. Programs hire staff and create jobs, generate a project, and produce knowledge, but most of these efforts are not sustainable in the long term, as it does not translate into development.

Amidst these criticisms, there are however those who are satisfied with donor engagement in Lebanon. Among those, several point to the fact that the international community seems more supportive of social cohesion efforts as well as more attuned to local realities. Those who hold such views stress that six or seven years ago, international donors or organizations excluded or bypassed the religious or communal components of Lebanese society, funding only more “benign” and secular projects. Today, these aspects are fully taken on board in designing and funding social cohesion programming.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Whereas research on peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction suggests that cohesion and stability go hand in hand, Lebanon puts the complexity of the relationship under a magnifying lens.

- Overall, the notion of “negative resilience” may be Lebanon’s foremost contribution to the study of social cohesion.

Since the outburst of armed conflict in neighboring Syria, Lebanon’s apparent stability has been incorrectly described as a sign of social cohesion. While some wonder about the country’s seeming ability to weather the storm, others describe it as constantly on the brink of collapse and disaster. From tensions between the Sunni and the Shi’a communities to intra-communal strife – particularly but not only within Lebanon’s Sunni community, there is ample proof that social cohesion is being put to the test. So, what accounts for the country’s stability? The standard explanation contributes stability of Lebanon, a very deeply divided society, to shared interests. To

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1 See, Clark and Zahar, “From Critical Junctures to Missed Opportunities,” p. 11.

2 David Sharer and Francine Pickup, “Dilemmas for Aid Policy in Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories,” *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine* 37 (March 2007): 4–6, [www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2871](http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2871), cited in Zahar, “Norm Transmission in Peace- and State-Building,” p. 79.

3 See, Comments by Samer Abdallah, general coordinator, Nahwa al-Muwatiniyya, at a workshop on donor-NGO relations in postconflict settings, Lebanese American University, Beirut, 22 July 2011. Cited in Zahar, “Norm Transmission in Peace- and State-Building,” p. 80.

illustrate, a key political informant described the country as a business with communal leaders as stakeholders. According to him, the shared interests of diverse communal stakeholders explain the ability of Lebanon to remain stable in spite of growing tensions locally, nationally, and regionally.

What then of efforts to promote social cohesion in Lebanon? This study has highlighted two hopeful avenues:

- Widespread societal mobilization against some of the most egregious aspects of the sectarian system, particularly women's rights and civil marriage, and;
- Mobilization in favor of better service provision.

In both instances, the issues cut across sectarian lines. These issues affect citizens in ways that challenge the current compact between sectarian elites and the communities that they represent. Indeed, in both instances, citizens have looked to the State for answers to their problems. Whether it is by demanding that the State challenge the hold of religious leaders on civil status or by demanding more State accountability particularly in the form of decentralization at the local level to address the needs of citizens, these kinds of mobilization break with the traditional mold whereby communities would address their grievances to their own communal leaders. It might just be that this is the kind of social cooperation that will, in due time and given a favorable setting, create the conditions for social cohesion in Lebanon.

In a country enmeshed in a web of regional and international politics, one cannot but reflect upon the role of outside factors on the dynamics of social cohesion. In this regard, and for the short- to medium-term, no other factor is as important as the Syrian crisis and its reverberations in Lebanese politics and society. There is no easy solution to the pressure that displaced Syrians currently residing in Lebanon exert on social cohesion in host communities and beyond. Whereas all leading Lebanese factions agree that the problem must be addressed, there is no agreement on how to go about it. The issue is multifaceted:

- First, the Syrian civil war exacerbated political disputes between the various Lebanese factions, further slowing down an already cumbersome and contentious process of policymaking.
- Second, most Lebanese political and religious leaders are more concerned with internal stability and security than providing services and support to Syrian refugees but, paradoxically, the longer the refugees' needs remain unmet, the more pressure their presence will exert on ill-equipped host municipalities and the communities therein.

One thing is already clear: service provision to displaced Syrians cannot be perceived by the local population to be "at their expense". Indeed, disagreement over the presence of displaced Syrians in Lebanon has already exacerbated societal polarization particularly as refugees are often settled in otherwise already disadvantaged Lebanese communities.

Another vector influencing social cohesion in Lebanon is the manner in which international donors engage with the various communities. Currently, donor engagement is complicated by the convergence between internal political polarization and regional/international dynamics. For instance, important donors like the United States – and to a lesser degree the E.U. – will struggle to engage the government of Lebanon directly so long as Hizballah remains in government, something that – given popular support for the Party of God – is unlikely to dissipate any time soon.

Another consequence of the Syrian conflict, the territorial consolidation and advances of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is likely to affect the dynamics of social cohesion. ISIL may have a constituency among Salafi Sunnis in Lebanon, whose number is on the rise since the beginning of the war in Syria. However, it has also triggered an intra-communal divide with some groups like Lebanon's Jamaa Islamiyya, the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, agreeing with liberals and Sunni moderates to call ISIL and its leadership heretics. Further, if one accepts the description of Lebanese elites as stakeholders in a shared business venture referred to earlier on in this concluding section, then ISIL may be perceived as a threat by all stakeholders equally, triggering a movement toward social cohesion. Similar reactions have in the past happened with Israeli attacks in 1996 and 2006 triggering 'rally around the flag' effects. What remains to be seen is whether this punctual social unity created by a common threat can outlast the disappearance of the threat or whether, once the danger has passed, the Lebanese will once again fall back on the divisions and the inter-communal bickering that have been the norm in the country since independence.