



THE DAY AFTER BEYOND TEMPORARY STABILIZATION, LEBANON NEEDS TO BUILD A STATE

Lebanon is victim to a brutal Israeli aggression that is killing thousands, injuring tens of thousands, obliterating complete villages, and causing a mass exodus from the South, the Southern Suburbs of Beirut and Baalbek in barefaced violation to international humanitarian law.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese state, responsible for upholding national interest and protecting the Lebanese, is hijacked by Hezbollah and subjected to its local and regional considerations. The group has unilaterally taken the strategic decision to open the Lebanese front against Israel without recourse to state institutions. It has enforced this decision on the Lebanese with total disregard of its consequences and continues to dictate its choices today in misalignment with Lebanese interests. In addition, The Islamic Republic of Iran, now directly appropriating Hezbollah's decision making, has been blatantly imposing its agenda upon the Lebanese authorities.

Lebanese society was already worn-out by the different forms of violence it endured over the past five years, a devastating economic crisis, a blast in the heart of the capital, and now, continuous Israeli attacks. With no one defending Lebanon's interests at this crucial moment, the country risks further disintegration.

A ceasefire agreement that ends this cycle of violence is yet to be concluded. **But even after the war is over, any stability risks to be short lived if the country does not address the structural problems that have compromised state sovereignty and social cohesion for decades now.**

EXISTENTIAL RISKS

Recent developments and the unsettling reality on the ground indicate that Lebanon will be faced with a series of existential risks in the post-war phase:

01. Protracted Displacement and Destruction

Lebanon is witnessing its largest internal displacement ever. One fourth of the Lebanese have been forced out of their homes and systemic urbicide is underway. The cost of destruction has already surpassed the country's GDP. This risks to become a reality for much longer than anyone is willing to admit today. First, because of the ambiguity regarding Israeli plans with regards to the creation of a de facto buffer zone in Southern Lebanon and the absence, until present, of any mention of sustainable return in the draft ceasefire agreement propositions that were leaked. Second, because, contrary to 2006, it will be a very difficult feat to rally donors around a reconstruction effort, and channel support to a political class that has lost its credibility, from international and regional actors who have lost interest in Lebanon.



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02. Social Fragmentation and Internal Strife

Increased political polarization risks to overshadow current social solidarity. This is compounded by widespread displacement and Israeli attacks in host communities, as well as divisive discourses, including accusations and counter accusations of treason and death threats. While a civil war remains a weak possibility, communitarian tension and strife risk to explode. Isolated incidents have already been reported; while they remain rather contained, a protraction of the current crisis could contribute to a conflagration. Communitarian fears are also high due to the possible emergence of a new internal balance of power. Some are concerned that this might happen at the expense of ostracizing their communities. Others fear that a regionally weaker Hezbollah would attempt to impose a local political reality through the use of its arms internally.

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03. Full Economic Paralysis and Total State Disintegration

This war has put the final nail in the coffin of an ailing economy. Total output risks to be slashed by more than 15%, after a 40% reduction post 2019. The “Somalization” of Lebanon could soon become a reality. The country is critically dependent on aid and remittances, and is losing its key competitive advantage: human capital. Recovery and the reconstitution of human and physical capital will be a long and difficult road, and is not guaranteed. The economic crisis also meant that the state apparatus was further emptied of most of its competent civil servants and left to ruins. The state had been disintegrating long before this war, systematically and purposefully by the various sectarian political factions. In its current status, it is certainly in no shape to respond to the ongoing crisis, let alone shoulder the colossal task of dealing with its aftermath.

A CEASEFIRE & A NEW POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Addressing these critical risks requires, in a first phase, a ceasefire agreement that paves the way for sustainable return and stability, and a political class capable of upholding Lebanon's national interests.

01. A Ceasefire Agreement that Guarantees the Interests of the Lebanese

Lebanese officials involved in the indirect negotiations should commit to the implementation of UNSCR 1701 without ambiguity. This will require a wide LAF deployment, and its exclusive control over arms, backed by firm political support, and a more assertive UNIFIL that has the adequate political cover to fulfill its mandate. It will also necessitate tight control over the now porous Lebanese borders.

In addition, the agreement should explicitly include the sustainable return of the displaced to their towns and guarantee Lebanon's sovereignty against Israeli attempts at controlling Lebanese land, air, and sea long after the cessation of hostilities.

The Lebanese and Israeli sides should also commit to returning to the 1949 Armistice Agreement, following the ceasefire.

02. State Authorities that Commit to Stability, Sovereignty, and Recovery

Parliament needs to convene and elect a President of the Republic at the earliest.

The president should be able to commit to a clear roadmap to restore stability and sovereignty, while warding off any foreign interference, and equally important, laying the ground for a political reform process, anchored in the constitution and Taif agreement, in the post war period.

A government should then be formed. It should have sufficient credibility and capacity to shoulder a transparent and efficient reconstruction effort, but also implement a rigorous reform agenda.

The Lebanese armed forces, politically supported and enabled by the government, should be ready to step up, in terms of protecting the borders and restoring trust in one of the key national institutions. The role of the LAF leadership in keeping the institution united and avoiding divisions along sectarian lines will be critical. The security forces will also need to play a more assertive role in terms of tighter control and enforcement to diffuse internal tensions and uphold the rule of law.

RECONSTRUCTION, DEFENSE, & POLITICAL REFORM

A reconstruction and reform program and a national political roadmap that all the Lebanese can adhere to are necessary to move from achieving temporary stability and short-lived relief, to sustainable recovery and state-building. Tackling long standing issues of national defense policy and the political system, with courage and honesty, will be key in this process.

01. A National Reconstruction and Reform Program

A serious reconstruction effort can be a pathway to recreate unity and social cohesion around and under the state's leadership. The manner by which the relief and reconstruction effort will be led, will determine whether it will pave the way for swift return, sustainable recovery and renewed trust in the state, or whether it will be another episode of corrupt practices and limited developmental impact. In order to avoid yet another missed opportunity, the effort will have to be led by a new and credible government, based on a national reconstruction program, and anchored in commitment to institutional and financial reform. The current war should be an additional reason for reform and a driver for an IMF program and not a pretext for dismissing it, not the least because reforms are needed to rebuild trust with key donors. An independent committee should be established to oversee the program's progress and monitor impact. In addition to governmental representation, it should also include representatives from the donor community, international organizations, and civil society actors.

02. A Defense Policy Exclusively Controlled by the State

The state needs to reclaim exclusive control over its defense policy, and uphold its prerogative and responsibility as the sole protector of the Lebanese.

The triad: Army, People, Resistance should be categorically abandoned. Lebanon has paid a catastrophically costly price for it. Hezbollah's premise for military deterrence and its exclusive alignment with the 'axis of resistance' have not only failed to protect Lebanon, but also exposed the country and dragged it into regional wars.



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A new defense policy should be set by the state. It should start with it regaining exclusive control over weapons from all non-state actors, and its commitment to reaching a definitive border demarcation agreement. Its approach should be comprehensive and should rest upon three pillars: (1) a foreign policy that seeks to shield Lebanon from wars and proxy wars through capable diplomacy, and credible reengagement with the Arab world and international community, as well as the rebuilding of Lebanon's soft power (2) a bolstered Lebanese Army, adequately armed and supported, including through UNIFIL presence (3) a fiscal and financial policy that achieves economic sovereignty and social resilience.



The full implementation of the Taif agreement and the Lebanese Constitution are long overdue



03. Political Reform that Paves the Way for Modernization

Political reform is key to bring all Lebanese under a state that treats them as citizens on an equal footing, rather than communities that fear each other. Ever since the Taif agreement was signed in 1989, the Lebanese political class has refused to implement it in full. This has, in many ways, led to the protraction of the Lebanese civil war, albeit in other forms. Sectarian political leaders maintained control over the state and ensured the instrumentalization of communities' respective fears to prevent reform. The full implementation of the Taif agreement and the Lebanese Constitution are long overdue.

Article 95 of the Lebanese constitution is the entry point: the deconfessionalization of parliament, following an electoral law that guarantees balanced representation, and the creation of a Senate with a strict mandate. Decentralization, both fiscal and administrative will be instrumental in providing key services and achieving equitable development with increased public control and scrutiny over financial resources. Other political reforms that build on the Taif agreement and seek to improve it should also be considered. An inclusive political process to align on those should be launched in due time.

Lebanon is at a crossroads. Its post-war reality will very much depend on the posture of the different political actors, including Hezbollah's future configuration. Its political leaders will have to decide whether they want to build a state or otherwise dismiss difficult questions and needed reforms, and extend the war into an internal power struggle that risks to further degrade the country.

The state's ability to reclaim its sovereignty, and its capacity to protect the Lebanese and provide them with the services they need, and engage them on an inclusive and forward-looking political process will be a key determinant of long-term stability and social cohesion. To do so, the country will need capable statesmen, courageous political actors, as well as citizens, both in Lebanon and the diaspora, capable of reclaiming agency over their future. The upcoming phase should be one where political ambiguity is not tolerated, divisive discourses are rejected, and where a common sense of national duty is to prevail. After all it has been through, Lebanon deserves a real chance – not more of the same.

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