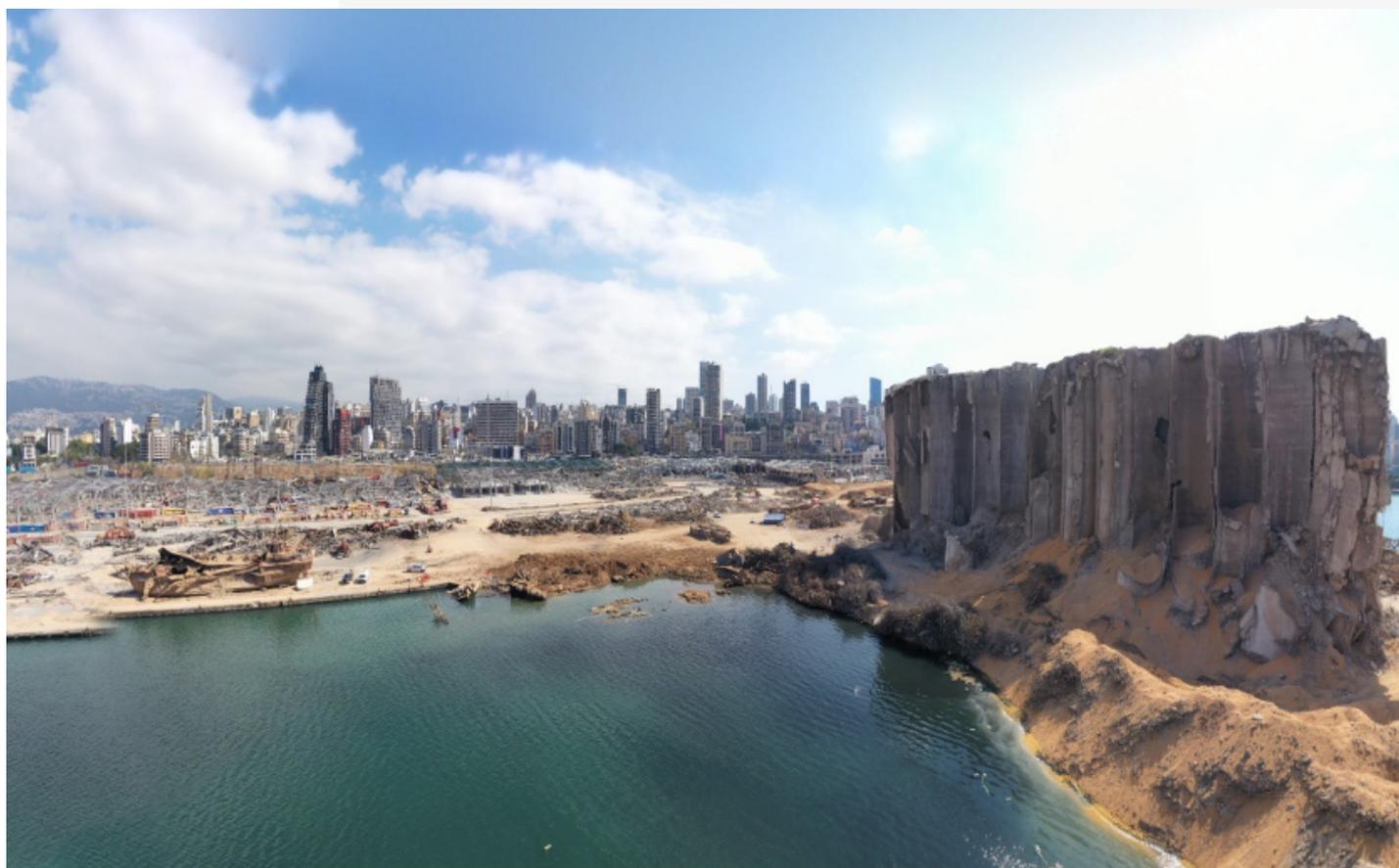


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LEBANON'S CRIPPLING CRISIS: PROSPECTS FOR A FURTHER EU INVOLVEMENT IN THE COUNTRY'S STABILITY



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INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean region and the European continent are inextricably linked from a geographical, historical, and strategic point of view. For this simple reason, it is impossible for the countries that lie on the two shores of this almost-closed sea to ignore each other for a long time. Consequently, international cooperation between them has always been intense, being reinforced by strong cultural and economic ties. Nevertheless, due to the high degree of instability that traditionally affects this area, the EU's foreign policy towards many of its southern neighbours has usually been dominated by the theme of the security-development nexus. Lebanon is no exception. Having its modern history characterized by recurring social unrest, economic crises and civil wars, this small country has often drawn the attention of European policymakers. In 2019 the nation that was once called "the Switzerland of Middle East" has fallen again into a severe political paralysis and started to experience a deep economic downturn, which undermines inter alia the normal implementation of cooperation programmes with the EU (World Bank, 2021). The general election held in May 2022 was intended to put an end to this situation, but it didn't. For as long as the crisis perseveres, risk Lebanon risks falling into another devastating civil war is becoming feasible. Therefore, stronger European engagement to maintain the country's stability seems to be a matter of necessity, and it could be one of the last opportunities to save Lebanon from sinking.

THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AND ITS CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

According to the World Bank, Lebanon is facing one of the world's worst economic crises of the last 150 years. The country's real GDP has declined by 10.5% in 2021, following a 21.4% drop in 2020. This means that, overall, Lebanon's economy has contracted by nearly 60% since 2019, so that today it is less than half of the size it used to be only three years ago. At the same time, the value of Lebanese lira has declined by nearly 90% over the last two years. Poverty is soaring and, obviously, the situation heavily impacts the political life of the country (Adam Gallagher, 2022).

Traditionally, the management of politics in Beirut is based on a sectarian power-sharing agreement, contracted right after the nation's independence from France in 1943. In fact, all the 18 religious sects which are present in Lebanon are granted representation in the government, the military, and the civil service by the country's constitution. According to this system, the three key government positions of President, Prime Minister, and Parliament Speaker must be split between a Maronite Christian, a Sunni Muslim, and a Shia Muslim. Consequently, all the major Lebanese parties have been organized alongside the ethno-sectarian lines that divide the country's society and almost every electoral campaign in the nation's post-civil war history has been dominated by identity issues, rather than being focused on practical policy proposals and government plans (Matthijs Bogaards, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, this situation has led to high levels of corruption and inefficiency, which in turn have made the country's economy extremely fragile, ultimately and inevitably culminating in economic collapse under the weight of powerful external shocks that occurred in recent years (Mattia Serra, 2022). Amongst such shocks are the inflow of a massive number of refugees generated by the Syrian Civil War, the global economic slowdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the skyrocketing inflation wave that followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Being unable to undertake any serious program of reform, increasingly heated infighting erupted between the most prominent Lebanese political leaders, spreading hate speech and sectarian violence amongst the population. The degradation of the country's security conditions raises substantial concerns in Europe as the situation is increasingly considered a grave source of instability for the whole Mediterranean region.

THE SECURITY COOPERATION BETWEEN EU AND LEBANON: WHAT HAS GONE WRONG SO FAR?

On 1st April 2006, the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement entered into force, replacing a far less ambitious Cooperation Agreement established in 1977. The new arrangement included many more political and security issues, a true economic and financial partnership, and numerous social and humanitarian affairs (Lebanese Ministry of Economy and Trade, 2006). With such a deal in place, Lebanon was set to become one of the EU's closest and most promising partners. However, on 12th July 2006 a violent conflict broke out between Israel and the Lebanon-based Hezbollah militia. Despite a ceasefire being reached on 14th August 2006, the image of the country was irreversibly damaged. Since then Beirut has experienced a period of permanent instability, being forced to cope with one emergency after another. At the same time, the EU has found itself trapped in the role of an indispensable external donor, obliged to continue offering generous help to Beirut to avoid losing all the progress previously achieved in the bilateral relationship.

Notably, between 2014 and 2020 Brussels has offered as much as €402.3 million in aid, acting under the now-dismissed European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). As for period 2021-2027, the EU has adopted a new financial cooperation framework, called Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). Since the NDICI will lay the foundation for any aspect of the EU-Lebanese cooperation in the coming years, it is important to notice that it still maintains approximately the same main features of the previous ENI (European Commission, 2022).

Focusing specifically on the security field, in 2018 the EU announced its latest military aid package in favour of Lebanon. Overall, it amounted to roughly €50 million, to be delivered over a period of two years following the announcement. The plan included a fund of €46.6 million aimed at promoting the respect for rule of law, enhancing national security and countering terrorist organizations. It also provided an additional payment of €3.5 million to support the amelioration of security conditions at the Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut, with a special focus on tackling illicit trafficking and terrorism (European Union External Action, 2018). As scheduled, this program expired in 2020, when a new one was supposed to replace it, operating within the framework of the new NDICI. However, as of October 2022, a novel security cooperation deal still has to be found.

The main reason for such a significant delay must be understood as stemming from the lack of legitimacy that characterises the Lebanese Government, resulting in the EU feeling uncomfortable to make commitments to its fragile counterpart. Indeed, on 4th August 2020 a powerful explosion shook the port of Beirut. The blast destroyed all the surrounding areas, killing over 200 people. The number of injured was in the order of thousands. The cause of such a catastrophic event was later determined to be a huge stock of ammonium nitrate that had been unsafely stored for years, and then accidentally set on fire (Ben Hubbard, Maria Abi-Habib, Mona El-Naggar, Allison McCann, Anjali Singhvi, James Glanz and Jeremy White, 2020).

Obviously, an incident of this scale triggered massive popular protests, that gave a final blow to an already fragile system and led to the resignation of the Prime Minister Hassan Diab on 10 August 2020. Nonetheless, since the parliament was unable to elect a new government, the outgoing government continued to stay in office in a caretaker capacity for almost two years. To break the impasse, a general election was held in May 2022. The main novelty consisted in the fact that Hezbollah's close ally, the Free Patriotic Movement, lost many of its seats to the Lebanese Forces, which thus became the largest Christian party in Lebanon. However, abstention was high, and the election failed in producing a clear parliamentary majority.

PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS IN AND ABOVE SECURITY COOPERATION

A fundamental problem with the aforementioned initiatives is that they appear to be unable to break the vicious cycle that often links together insecurity, political instability, and economic stagnation. The perennial political unrest characterizing the country makes it an uncomfortable destination for private investments, resulting in the only money effectively reaching the Lebanese economy being from international aid or from actors that want to speculate on them. This situation in turn feeds popular disillusionment and resentment towards national politics, raising abstentionism and leaving the country's heavily corrupted political élite almost totally free to operate. Therefore, since the structural instability of Lebanese politics appears to be a direct consequence of the latent risk for sectarian violence to break out, a strong commitment to reforming the country's security sector ought to be considered an absolute priority for the EU as well as a real prerequisite for achieving success in any other field of bilateral cooperation. As a matter of fact, Lebanese political parties will remain organized alongside confessional lines so long as the different communities reflecting the country's society continue to mistrust each other and the State. It is precisely the fear of being attacked by surprise that pushes many people to support sectarian leaders, even if everybody in the country knows that they have become corrupt and inefficient (Bénédicte Aboul-Nasr, 2020). Consequently, if the national army proves to be able to protect ordinary citizens from this kind of threats, the role of confessional militias will be put into question and could result in the entire political system of the country finally changing for the better (Hijab Shah, Melissa Dalton, 2020).

One could argue that, given the complexity of the political phase that Lebanon is going through, it is impossible for an external actor like the EU to participate in the formation of strong and reliable security forces. Nevertheless, there are some examples of success in that sense. First, other EU missions could be used as a model. EUAM-Iraq, for instance, is helping Baghdad in realizing some important security sector reforms, even though the country's politics are affected by a very difficult crisis, which makes the Iraqi political situation almost as chaotic as the one seen in Lebanon. This experience demonstrates that bypassing the central government and cooperating directly with the competent institutional stakeholder – in this case, the national security apparatus – can be a valid way to make a cooperation program progress when faced with obstructionism from the local political class (Domenico Farinelli, 2022).

Furthermore, it should be noticed that many EU member States are already carrying out some important security cooperation programs in partnership with Beirut, operating outside the framework of EU external action. Among them, France and Italy stand out for having a decades-long experience in the country, while Spain is doing considerable progress in recent years. On 19th March 1978 the UN Security Council established the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNFIL). The initial mandate of this mission, specified by UN resolutions 425 and 426, was to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon and to assist the Lebanese Government in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area. Thereafter, due to the war fought in 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah, the scope and the reach of UNFIL have been further expanded by a series of fresh UN resolutions, to the point that the mission's name was changed in UNFIL II. Today the mission's tasks are no more limited to just monitoring the cessation of hostilities, but they also include an active participation in the process of reformation of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Rome, Paris, and Madrid take part in UNFIL, and they have played a leading role during the enhancement of the mission (UNFIL, 2022).

Specifically, Italy is present in Lebanon with the Italian Bilateral Military Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL) that aims to implement training and education programmes for the LAF, operating within the framework of UNFIL II (Italian Ministry of Defence, 2022). France has also contributed to the development of the Lebanese security sector since the expiration of its mandate over the country in 1945. Bilateral cooperation between France and Lebanon in this field has remained strong over time. Notably, in 2018 Paris provided up to €14 million in aid to the Lebanese army (Reuters, 2018). Spain can't boast an equally long history of engagement with the country, but Madrid seems have taken the initiative in recent years. For example, on 28th February 2022, Spanish Major General Aroldo Lázaro Sáenz took over the role of Head of Mission and Force Commander of UNFIL, succeeding the Italian Major General Stefano Del Col (UNFIL, 2022). Such an important occasion to share knowledge and responsibilities should not be underestimated. If EU member States decide to combine all the strategic assets at their disposal in Lebanon, they have the potential to give a decisive boost to the country's security and stability situation.

Finally, it should be noted that other international actors have been able to conclude important agreements with Beirut, even during these troubled times. Many observers have been taken by surprise when, on 11th October 2022, Lebanon and Israel reached a historic deal regarding the exploitation of gas fields in disputed waters (Aljazeera, 2022). This agreement was signed in spite of the fierce hostility between Israel and Hezbollah, the latter being one of Lebanon's most influential political forces. Consequently, it can be considered a concrete demonstration of the fact that, when it comes to its vital national interests, Lebanon is capable of overcoming its internal troubles and even the worst diplomatic deadlocks.

Therefore, an announcement of a new package of EU military aid comprised of measures to assist in building the capacity of the Lebanese security sector is strongly recommended. In shaping its external action, the EU should continue to consider Lebanon as one of its major partners in the Eastern Mediterranean region, interacting with particular patience and respect towards Lebanon's security forces. If this were done, Brussels and Beirut would be able to effectively pursue their mutual interests in the coming years.

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