

LEBANON: Past Challenges, Present Calamities, Future Prospects

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PHILOS
PROJECT



Executive Summary

THE AUGUST 4 BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSION SUMS UP LEBANON'S ACCUMULATING WOES:

criminal negligence by the authorities topping off a collapsed economy and currency in freefall, the results of years of theft on a colossal scale by the country's corrupt political oligarchy protected by Hezbollah. All these calamities are coming on the eve of the centenary of Greater Lebanon proclaimed by the French after the First World War. That was a historic event fraught with ambitions as well as perils, particularly for Lebanon's Christians. Eventually, in the subsequent century, Lebanon witnessed decades of relative prosperity and tranquility under Christian ascendancy culminating in the 1975-90 Lebanon War and then followed by years of faltering under Sunni prominence only to end in overall state disintegration under Shiite dominance steered by Hezbollah. A slippery slope of compromises forged between Christians and Muslims after the 1943 independence from French rule adjusted Lebanon's twin Western and Arab orientations, but these today are threatened with a forced radical swerve eastwards towards Iran and China facilitated by Hezbollah's maneuvers.

Lebanon has always exhibited unique strengths and enduring contributions that justify its survival and flourishing. These include individual and communal freedoms in the heart of a region suffering from a chronic freedom deficit, a vibrant sectarian pluralism, unparalleled human capital in any Arab context, an open free-market economy and banking system, a rooted Western-style liberal educational footprint along with modern medical care, and a national institution of the armed forces that for its small size and limited capabilities has performed outstandingly on a number of occasions. Lebanon's points of vulnerability feature the constant need to maintain demographic balances among its various sectarian components, the specter of spiking emigration when economic and security matters deteriorate sharply, and an ingrained tribal-clannish feudal-like power structure within its sect-based communities.

Four challenges beset Lebanon today: economic and financial ruin due to a corrupt ruling oligarchy, the hijacking of the country by Iran through Hezbollah, the coronavirus pandemic, and the aftermath of the August 4 Beirut port explosion.



The defrauding of the state and the people through a borrow-and-steal scheme has been underway for 3 decades and reached unprecedented proportions in the last few years when banks began lending the corrupt governments money from people's savings only to have them looted. Lebanon today exhibits a dearth of hard currency, a heavily devalued national currency, shoddy infrastructure across the board, and some 1.5 million displaced Syrians placing mounting burdens on the already shattered economy. A popular uprising against all this deliberately engineered deterioration exploded in the streets in fall 2019 fueled by mounting poverty and revealing the end of any trust people had in their leaders.

Standing behind most of this disintegration and protecting the culprits have been Hezbollah, who have steadily transformed Lebanon into an advanced military platform serving a country, Iran, with an ideology utterly alien to most Lebanese. In knee-jerk fashion, Hezbollah regularly hurl at their vocal critics hollow-ringing accusations of treason and "Zionist collaboration". At their hands Lebanon has been transformed into a failing pariah state dominated by their armed state-within-the-state militia. Hezbollah have persistently prevented their puppet governments from instituting any meaningful reforms required by the international community to begin to help Lebanon stand on its feet economically and financially. Their strategy is to plunge Lebanon into utter destitution so that China can then throw the exhausted Lebanese people a lifeline thereby steadily wrenching the collapsed country away from its natural Western-Arab identity markers towards Syria, Iran, and China.

Under the cover of the coronavirus pandemic Iran has pursued with vigor its nuclear program, while Hezbollah have acquired precision-guided munitions capabilities heightening the dangers on Lebanon and its people of devastating Israeli retaliation.

In any reconstruction efforts to rebuild the principally Christian neighborhoods of Beirut extensively damaged by the port blast, the city's old charm should not be sacrificed to the greed of developers who will rush in to try and erect gaudy skyscrapers to replace the quaint old homes and businesses affected by the explosion.

Lebanon's essentials must come first in any future rehabilitation. This means Lebanon as a free, religiously pluralist, peaceful, pulsating, prosperous, Western-oriented, diverse country, in place of some crumbling, monochromatic, and hollowed-out shell of its former unique self. Hezbollah and the leaders of their community exhibit a Shiite triumphalism coupled with open thuggery that are rejected by the vast majority of Lebanese. This intimidation is countered in Lebanon by home-spun values of freedoms and rights that are identical to those prevailing in the West.

Needed are the preservation of Lebanon's free native Christian community as the leaven of freedom within a sectarian pluralist context under a new consensus arrangement. Since the parachuting of secularism onto a Middle Eastern environment is neither easy nor practical (just consider the direction once-secular Turkey has taken), some version of creative federalism accepting sectarian diversity as a given is the favored path forward for a composite society like that of Lebanon.

Successful bottom-up and constitutionally grounded federalism will end the cycle of disastrous sectarian triumphalist escapades, tame the tyranny of demography, allow for an extra civil-secular category of affiliation for the willing, and offer layers of local protections for still vulnerable communities within the Lebanese mosaic. This type of federalism, grounded in an independent judiciary with proper accountability, will help offset the prominence of sub-state loyalties while accepting sub-state communal affiliations and distinctiveness. Federalism of this variety is best served by a neutral or disassociated posture on the Lebanese national level when it comes to contentious regional issues. Lebanon's real source of hope lies in its new generation of youth largely liberated from the hang-ups of the past and motivated by a fresh and life-affirming future outlook.

A series of detailed recommendations regarding Lebanon are offered at the end for the near-, medium-, and long-terms.

WHY LEBANON? BECAUSE OF THE DIRE NEED IN THE REGION FOR A THRIVING OASIS OF FREEDOM, WHICH IS WHAT LEBANON HAS ALWAYS BEEN. BALANCING OF EXTREMISMS IS THEREFORE THE SOUND STRATEGY FOR THE COUNTRY AS IT LOOKS AHEAD, AND THIS CAN ONLY HAPPEN WITH ACTIVE WESTERN SUPPORT: THE WEST SHOULD NOT EXIT FROM LEBANON MAINLY FOR ITS OWN VITAL REGIONAL INTERESTS.

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Introductory

THE MASSIVE EXPLOSION ON AUGUST 4, 2020, OF SEVERAL HUNDRED TONS OF AMMONIUM

nitrate at the seaport of Beirut, killed over 200 people with scores still missing, and injured more than 6000 persons at the latest count. The blast embodied in summary all of the good, the bad, and the ugly about Lebanon.

For thirty years at least Lebanon and the Lebanese have been the targets of organized corruption and grand larceny at the very top of the political totem pole, including by those who have actively protected the looters. These same culprits, many of whom must have known of the ruinous cargo, stood silent for the past six years as the deadly ammonium nitrate languished in a hangar in Beirut's port waiting to go off and precipitate utter tragedy for the innocents of the city. Not even one whistleblower from this venal ruling elite found it in his/her conscience to pass on anonymously to the media information about this ticking bomb—either out of cowardly fear, or outright negligence, or criminal complicity. Accusations were quickly traded, underling officials at the port were detained, presumed stashes of fireworks at the place of the explosion or a contrived story of a mishap while welding of a door were blamed, and all suggestions of launching an independent international investigation into the incident were rejected by the authorities.

Then there are those who first brought in the alleged 2750 tons of lethal chemicals with the clear intent to have them weaponized in stages over time for their own purposes oblivious of the danger in which this was placing Lebanon's capital and its people. Looming over all this has been the perpetual threat of a renewed Israeli-Hezbollah military showdown occurring also, and as always, at Lebanon's expense. Thus the port blast comes as the metaphorical icing on the cake of misery that the Lebanese have been enduring since the tsunami of economic downfall with its accompanying currency collapse, all resulting from years of corruption and theft, finally hit the hapless country in fall 2019. Add to all this the coronavirus pandemic and you get the perfect storm that was just waiting to happen.

A bright spot amidst the distress came when large numbers of Lebanese youth hailing from all over the country across the many sectarian divides poured spontaneously into Beirut's afflicted areas, quickly organized themselves, and began working on the enormous clean-up operation plus distribution of aid to the needy. These young men and women, civil-society specimens of the large anti-government street protests of fall 2019 and their resumption in spring 2020 and again since the blast itself, have no specific political affiliations or even a clear sense of sectarian belonging; they are refreshingly liberated from being beholden to this or that clan leader or party boss—they just felt instinctively Lebanese in total solidarity with their stricken country folk. They personify the freedoms that uniquely continue to characterize Lebanese society.

It has been called "Beirut-shima", Lebanon's Chernobyl, Lebanon's 9/11—one shattering explosion embodied all at once Lebanon's many dark as well as luminous sides, these last centering on civil society's swift heroic responses. Will this unprecedented catastrophe mark the start of the countdown towards the final demise of the corrupt ruling conglomerate and those standing guard over it? Time alone will tell.

I. Centenary of 'Greater Lebanon'

September 1, 2020, marks the hundredth anniversary of the creation by the French after World War I of what came to be called *Grand Liban*, or Greater Lebanon. The "greater" in the name signifies the addition of Beirut along with territories to the north, east, and south of the traditional mountainous stronghold, namely Mount Lebanon, which the Maronite Catholic community has called home for centuries. Greater Lebanon came as a fulfillment of an old Maronite dream to live in independence and freedom. But from a practical perspective it was designed to address the immediate challenge brought on by the devastating famine that befell the mountain during the years of the First World War under the twilight of Ottoman rule, thereby adding to Mount Lebanon arable territory like the Akkar plain in the north and the Bekaa Valley to the east to prevent future recurrence of drastic food shortages.

A deeper probing, however, will reveal more permanent factors driving the Maronites to create for themselves and others with French help and Vatican endorsement a viable autonomous state under French Mandate that

moved towards eventual independence in 1943. As a rooted and ancient Levantine Christian community that entered in the year 1180 into full communion with the universal Roman Catholic Church, the Maronites enjoyed genuine organic cultural and creedal affinities with the West that have infused their most intimate repositories of personal and communal identity. Moreover, and uniquely among the other indigenous Christian communities of the Middle East, the Maronites over the centuries have managed, and at great cost to them in terms of lives and resources, to avoid the common fate of being reduced to a subordinate and second-class *dhimmi* status under Islamic rule. As the only surviving free native Christian community at the time of the passing of the Ottoman Empire they felt justifiably entitled to a state where they would predominate under Western (French) auspices, and where they could enjoy and share with others their hard-won liberties.

In the long span of history, any transient occasions seized by original communities like the Maronites for reaffirming perennial ties with the wider world—ties that pertain to the most basic existential space of self-understanding—such occasions in themselves become of secondary importance (in this case French colonial and strategic objectives in the Levant after World War I). It is the actual perennial ties themselves, independent of any specific occasions for their reaffirmation, that are primary and permanent and therefore paramount. Mount Lebanon's age-old civilizational, cultural, educational, and religious affinities with the West in terms of shared beliefs and values override the often messy and transitory circumstances for such a necessary reaffirmation of indissoluble connections. And the continuous reinforcement of these bonds will happen despite any reliance on external protection from the West being at best a hazardous and precarious proposition with often detrimental consequences. Centuries of dhimmitude and abuse have led Levantine Christians to seek foreign protection notwithstanding the perils entailed in such an option.

This said, it was by no means a smooth sail towards the emergence of the Greater Lebanon in question, nor was the resulting territorially expanded entity without its own latent demographic, political, and sectarian time bombs. Following the end of the First World War, Maronite Patriarch Elias Boutros Howayik, along with his supporters within the church and the community, managed with tenacity and skill to navigate the many local, regional, and international obstacles impeding the creation of the desired enlarged Lebanon: vehement internal Sunni opposition supported by Damascus-based Arab nationalist rejection; shifting opinions within the French political hierarchy; the tectonics of French-British rivalries playing out in the Levant; and the reluctance by some within the Maronite community itself, and more outspokenly among the Greek Orthodox, plus hesitations mushrooming into open resistance among Druze and Shiites. Also, within the ranks of the French and the Maronites who were jointly spearheading the rearrangement of Lebanon under French Mandate there were two schools of thought. Those favoring what became Greater Lebanon included French High Commissioner, General Henri Gouraud, along with Maronite Patriarch Howayik; while those with reservations about Lebanon's territorial enlargement were represented by the secretary general between 1919 and 1923 to High Commissioner Gouraud, Robert de Caix, and the future Prime Minister and President from a prominent Maronite family, Emile Edde.

With the defeat in summer 1920 by Gouraud's French forces of the Arab nationalist army of Faisal headquartered in Damascus the last concrete hindrance to the Greater Lebanon project was removed. However, fears harbored by both de Caix and Edde persisted regarding the latent dangers of adding territories with large non-Christian populations to the core and predominantly Maronite central mountains. "De Caix," one historian wrote, "was one of the first to realize the dangers of extended boundaries to the integrity of the future Lebanese state; throughout his involvement in affairs of the Levant he advocated a smaller Lebanon...[and he] warned that the incorporation of areas with a large Muslim population might endanger the stability and future of a Christian Lebanese state."¹

As the allure of full independence from the French beckoned to both Christians and Muslims alike, in particular to the two contending poles of support for and opposition to Greater Lebanon, the Maronites and the Sunnis respectively, they began to gravitate towards a compromise for a future post-Mandate independent state. This compromise became enshrined in the unwritten National Pact that marked the 1943 inauguration of the Republic of Lebanon, an agreement that carried the names of Maronite President Bechara al-Khoury and Sunni Prime Minister Riad al-Solh. In addition to pegging the top government posts of President, Prime Minister, and Parliament Speaker to a Maronite, a Sunni, and a Shiite in that order—an arrangement embraced with enthusiasm by the urban business class—there was also the understanding that Lebanon would conceive of itself as having "an Arab face" while simultaneously being open to the rest of the world, in particular the West. From here, and bolstered by the years of calm and prosperity that followed, came such clichés describing Lebanon as a "bridge between east and west", and as the "Switzerland of the Middle East", or Beirut as the "Paris of the Middle East".

The journey down the slippery slope of turmoil coupled with further compromises on the sensitive issues of identity had begun. In 1958 the Sunnis of Lebanon, responding to Arab nationalist sentiments stoked by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, precipitated an armed mini-revolt in Lebanon that ended with a reaffirma-

reaffirmation of the National Pact, yet stood as a warning of what was to come. Following the Arab defeat by Israel in June 1967 the armed Palestinian resistance to Israel began to grow in both Lebanon's refugee camps and in Jordan. The Arab-endorsed Cairo Agreement of 1969 legitimized Palestinian cross-border raids and rocket attacks into Israel from South Lebanon, an imposition the weak Lebanese government of then President Charles Helou was compelled to swallow thereby eroding Lebanese sovereignty over the south of the country and the Palestinian refugee camps. With the relocation after September 1970 from Jordan to Lebanon of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headed by Yasser Arafat, in the wake of King Hussein's bloody crackdown on them, the stage was set for the inevitable military clash with the Lebanese that occurred in April 1975 and precipitated the 15-year Lebanon War until 1990. Lebanon's Sunnis in 1975 once again used the armed Palestinian presence in the camps to denounce what they termed "Political Maronitism", referring to the supposed Christian privileges that had been presumably entrenched at the expense of Muslim rights. This devastating factional and sectarian war in Lebanon involving several external players as well resulted in a Syrian military occupation and the emasculating of Christian political power in favor of the Sunnis as spelled out in the "Ta'if Accords" of 1989 that brought the war to an end. An era of Sunni ascendancy under the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was ushered in only to be succeeded upon his 2005 assassination and the departure that same year of Syrian forces from Lebanon by a still-ongoing era of Shiite dominance under the twin stranglehold of Hezbollah and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's Amal Movement.

Since its independence in 1943 Lebanon has moved from a Maronite-Sunni condominium "with an Arab face" that preserved its open cosmopolitan orientation, to a weak Arab state, to a fractured sectarian edifice and battleground, to a reconstituted Sunni-steered state, and now to a failing state in which armed Shiites call the shots. The period between 1943 and 1975 when the Christians were ascendant was marked by an enhancement of freedoms for all across the board, a sustained cultural flowering, and unprecedented economic prosperity demonstrating that Lebanon's peculiar brand of sectarian pluralism can work.² The hiatus of war from 1975 to 1990 saw a stifling Syrian occupation and fragmentation of the state, to be followed by years of uneasy cohabitation between this Syrian armed presence and Sunni Harirism during which time the Lebanese state faltered as government corruption and cronyism underwent a skyrocketing quantitative increase. When both Hariri père and the Syrians were gone the stage was set for the gradual incorporation of Lebanon into the regional Iranian orbit of influence where it now sits hostage as tightening Shiite control effectively presides over Lebanon's wholesale collapse. By appealing to both the historical record and to common sense one can rest the case here as to which of the three eras was best for all of Lebanon: the Christian (principally Maronite), the Sunni, or the Shiite era if one can indulge in such sectarian appellations. But there is no going back to a nostalgic past; there is instead a sober absorption of history's lessons with a view to looking ahead to devise the best system that upholds a peaceful and vibrant sectarian pluralism without the repetitive vicious circle of any single self-assertive sectarian dominance at the expense of the rest.

When thinking of the Lebanon of the future an amalgam of two essential identity indicators inherent to its very makeup and *raison d'être* must be preserved and reinforced. The first indicator is Lebanon's deep historical and organic links with Western civilization and the pervasive Judeo-Christian heritage on the level of basic universal values and freedoms, links that have also rendered it open to the global cultural and technical infusions of modernity transcending, among other things, the often crass manifestations of mere popular culture. The second indicator is Lebanon's inherent Arab affiliation in terms of geography, language, temperament, certain features of regional culture, expressions of Islamic heritage, and a variety of intersecting interests and shared objectives. What is surely not an identity marker for Lebanon as a whole, nor for the overwhelming majority of its citizens, is an artificially imposed maneuvering of the country and its people into the sphere of an alien culture like that of today's Mullah-dominated Iran, or Persia broadly for that matter, and the parallel forced severing of its existential ties with both the West and the neighboring Arab environment. Such a strange attempt at the refashioning of Lebanon's identity currently underway—a hallmark of Hezbollah's long-term strategic goals—will undoubtedly fail, but the price of its failure will be big for fragile Lebanon.

The stakes are high and the pitfalls are many for Lebanon with its heterogeneous mix of religious sects alongside their often disparate sub-state agendas, but so are the promises if a secure pathway to a healthy up-building pluralism can be charted. These promises render the successful navigation of the perilous pitfalls worth the attempt. The combined Western-Arab countenance of Lebanon can and will be protected and preserved, a one-of-a-kind hybrid civilizational feature that will continue to define Lebanon's special place at the meeting point of the Mediterranean, European, Arab, and Islamic worlds.

From here one can engage in informed speculation about what Lebanon ought to look like on its second centenary in 2120. No one possesses a crystal ball to peer into the future; however, all the ingredients that individually and collectively make Lebanon unique in a positive and constructive sense both in itself and for its surrounding neighborhood are precisely where the efforts towards any protection and preservation must be concentrated.

What then are Lebanon's enduring strengths and singular contributions that justify its continuation and thriving?

II. Lebanon's Abiding Positive Features

No matter the storms that afflict Lebanon nor their severity and duration—this being a particularly acute instance of tribulation for the small country and its people after the August 4 Beirut port explosion—certain inherent, lasting, and highly prized essentials that will continue to set Lebanon apart in the Arab Middle East and beyond are worth safeguarding and fortifying for its future and that of the region. Chief among these distinguishing features of Lebanon are its individual and communal freedoms. Lebanon deserves particular attention precisely because of these freedoms. Lebanon is in fact at the epicenter of the single most pivotal cause in the entire Arab and indeed Islamic worlds: the chronic dearth of freedoms. Seen from this perspective the most pressing issue in the wider Middle East is not the Palestinian question, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or oil and energy, or big-power geostrategic competition, or matters of development and economic advancement, or even the region-wide Sunni-Shiite showdown—important and significant and interrelated as all these issues surely are. The paramount and urgent challenge in the Arab, Turkish, and Persian domains is the persistent, glaring, and deepening *freedom deficit*. All these societies suffer from a pitiful freedom drought on the personal and communal levels, and they are becoming even less free year after year.

The only place featuring a native, free, open, and pluralist society in the Arab Middle East is Lebanon. Despite the long litany of problems—many quite serious—that the little country of Lebanon now faces, it remains remarkably if not miraculously by far the freest society in the Arab world, and it passes the freedom test with flying colors when compared to Mullah-dominated Iran or to Erdogan's Turkey. The reason why Lebanon is special, nay unique, when it comes to freedoms is that it is home to the only remaining ancient, free, rooted, indigenous, and non-*dhimmi* Christian community in the entire Middle East, whereas all other native Christians have at some point or other in their turbulent histories succumbed to second-class *dhimmi* subjugation under Islamic rule thereby losing their freedoms and never regaining them. Moreover, Lebanon's free Christians, through a kind of gradual and steady osmotic diffusion of their lived freedoms, have helped spawn a special breed of Muslims among both Sunnis and Shiites: liberal, educated, sophisticated, open, and considerably free while being largely immune to jihadist ideology of whatever stripe. Whenever Muslims live side by side and interact closely over long periods of time with *free* Christians, they tend to change and for the better. However, when Muslims live side by side and interact for long periods of time with *dhimmi* Christians, they don't change: Lebanon is the case in point for the first proposition; Egypt is an example of the second. Freedom then makes all the difference, so free native Christianity like the one that obtains in Lebanon serves as the leaven for cultivating and spreading this freedom elsewhere.

Lebanon's sectarian pluralism is another rare instance of religious communal diversity in the region that can only be sustained in a vibrant free milieu. This quaint pluralism possesses an impressive track record of periods of successful peaceful coexistence among its various communal components often occurring in spurts with displays of prosperity and innovation as their signature hallmarks. However, the freedom-starved nature of the surrounding region along with the frequent spillovers of tensions into Lebanon's composite and delicately calibrated polity have on recurring occasions undermined this precarious pluralism plunging it into bloody mayhem. When the going got tough each sect has tended to look to outside patrons for succor, with the Christians—be they Maronites, Melkites (Greek Catholics), or Greek Orthodox—having the least reliable external sources of support. On the other hand, the Muslims, whether Sunnis, Shiites, or Druze, usually found ready material and ideological backing coming their way from political or religious movements as well as countries with plenty of resources to spare. This phenomenon has underscored the old adage voiced by General Gilbert Clayton of the British Cairo Office after the First World War that “with the vast majority of Muslims, Arab nationalism and Islamism are synonymous terms”.³ In fact the Arab nationalist option, when it has been embraced by Christians, in most cases Greek Orthodox clerics and urban intellectuals, as a tactic to ward off potential sectarian targeting, has resulted in a *dhimmi* disposition of humiliating subservience.

For the concept of pluralist sectarian coexistence to function it must find life within a climate hospitable to freedoms, and in Lebanon one way this has been ensured is through the safeguarding by law of the sacrosanct space of personal circumstances entailing crucial milestones like birth, public worship, marriage, divorce, inheritance, death, and so on for each one of the eighteen distinct religious sects recognized by the Constitution. This means a twin legal system operates here where these sensitive sect-specific laws are guaranteed full expression and protection alongside the state's other laws and practices that apply to everyone regardless of sectarian affiliation. In Lebanon, unlike in most other Arab countries, Islamic *Shari'a* law is not the law of the land for all

citizens across the board including non-Muslims. As one of those precious specimens of home-grown freedoms, Lebanon has been ideally suited to provide the soil in which genuine pluralism among differing religious communities can thrive. For this the free Christians of Lebanon deserve the bulk of the credit as do those members of the non-Christian communities that have accepted the pluralist bargain.

A number of other crucial assets define the ancient Biblical land of Lebanon, mentioned seventy times in the Bible and visited in the Tyr and Sidon areas by Jesus himself according to the Gospels.⁴ Perhaps Lebanon's greatest treasure remains its human capital, something not so much in evidence in other more tranquil and economically prosperous countries in the region such as the Gulf States where the external trappings of modernity are on display thanks to strong purchasing power and surface imitation. The age-old mercantile acumen of the Lebanese since Phoenician days embodies a special dynamism of its own that has reverberated down the ages evolving into entrepreneurial novelty and commercial success. Because of its human capital Lebanon is the only country in the Arab Middle East which, if run by a Singapore-like efficient government, is assured to produce returns on all investments made in its various sectors: technology, health, finance, innovation, education, and more. This is because Lebanon already has all the needed components, which are extremely hard to come by in one place, to create a silicon valley for the region. These are: the large pool of Lebanese expertise and talent in all fields already present in the country and its diaspora; presence of two American-certified universities with deep roots in scholarship and discovery; presence of a city young people love to live in; presence of superb elementary and high school education; and presence of a highly sought after East Mediterranean location, mild climate, touristic sites, entertainment sector, all coupled to natural beauty found nowhere else in the Middle East.⁵ In the domains of education and medicine alone Lebanon over the many decades has left a lasting pedagogical and therapeutic footprint on the Middle East region and farther afield. This was not achieved solely through the needed technical tools but primarily through human excellence and ingenuity that have rendered Lebanon a regional hub in these two vital fields.

One institution continuing to enjoy popular confidence and considered the backbone of stability for the country as a whole is the Lebanese Armed Forces. Known for short as the Lebanese Army, this multi-confessional institution currently headed by one of the finest commanding generals to come in decades, General Joseph Aoun (no relation to the President of the Republic), is what most Lebanese look up to in times of turmoil for some reassurance of order and security. Back in 1975, at the outbreak of the 15-year Lebanon War, the army disintegrated along sectarian lines, but since the ending of that war in 1990 it has been painstakingly reconstituted from all existing sects and denominations, equipped and trained mainly by the Americans and the French, imbued with a patriotic *esprit de corps* that has guarded it against easy fragmentation, and made to stand as the principal guarantor of internal tranquility and protector against external threats such as the Islamic State terrorists. It has had to coexist uneasily with armed militia remnants after the war, the occupying Syrian army until 2005, and now Hezbollah. It coordinates closely with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) stationed in South Lebanon on the border with Israel. Like freedoms, pluralism, human capital, education, and medicine, the Lebanese Army can be viewed as an indispensable strategic asset and unifier for Lebanon that under any circumstances must always be supported and preserved. It is an institution that has been in harmony with Lebanon's twin authentic identity orientations: Western and Arab. On the battlefield and by the acclamation of many international observers the Lebanese Army has proven its worth and performed exceptionally well often under difficult conditions in terms of logistics, weaponry, and terrain. Therefore, any policy whatever be its short-sighted motivations in either Washington or Paris to discontinue funding or support for the Lebanese Army becomes tantamount to a needless politicizing of that institution and to punishing of the innocent, or the "good guys", as it were, instead of the actual culprits on the Lebanese scene. Not to mention that such a stab at the Lebanese Army invariably runs counter to American and/or French strategic interests in the long-run.

Sewn into Lebanon's state and social fabric alongside the special and unique features these exhibit are points of vulnerability that require particular caution. In any mixed sectarian society like that of Lebanon communal demographic balances become crucial for maintaining stability, especially in a Middle Eastern context where sheer numbers are often taken to be the primary or even sole criterion for determining who rules whom, and how. This ingrained regional prejudice in favor of the reduction of politics to mere majority rule—often erroneously advanced as being in line with, and a reflection of, democratic principles—could spell disaster for many native communities if the other bedrock democratic notion of minority rights is downplayed or neglected altogether. It is a sure recipe for what de Tocqueville famously called the "tyranny of the majority".

When Mount Lebanon in 1920 transited from a Christian-majority autonomous Ottoman province to become the heart of Greater Lebanon under French Mandate with added territories along with their populations, and some years later to emerge with this expanded size as the independent Republic of Lebanon, the Christians went down in numbers from around 80 percent to a bare majority of 55 percent. Given the many operating factors that have tended to reduce Christian numbers over the decades such as chronically low birth rates and emigration facilitated by a strong push factor due to recurring local hardships and calamities side by side with an equally compel-

ling pull factor coming from the attractions of life in the West to which Christians found they could adjust with relative ease, Lebanon's Christians eventually dipped below the half-point population mark in favor of a growing Muslim majority. With constant pressures coming at the Christians from a restless Muslim population in favor of integrating Lebanon, or even dissolving it, into some wider regional Arab configuration, a series of consociational arrangements and compromises were devised between Christians and Muslims to avoid the demographic specter of an imposed majoritarian form of rule. By the early twenty-first century, however, and following an accelerated period of Christian demographic attrition due to the vicious sectarian strife of the war years, the Christians decreased further to around 35 percent, or roughly a third of the overall Lebanese population. With the relentless influx into Lebanon after 2011 of nearly 1.5 million displaced Syrians fleeing the ravages of war next door—the vast majority of these being Sunni Muslims—fears of a radical and irreversible tip in the delicate demographic balance among Lebanon's sectarian communities to the detriment of the Christians became very palpable.

There is a clear justification for viewing the demographic menace primarily from the vantage point of Lebanon's Christians. In line with the assertion made earlier that the central cause deserving precedence over all else in the Arab and Islamic worlds is the cause of freedoms and their alarming scarcity, anything that threatens the existence of free native Christianity in Lebanon will have adverse ramifications across the region. The survival of the region's only oasis of ancient free Christianity is therefore nonnegotiable and constitutes a historic imperative for both the people of Lebanon and of the Arab world. It needs to be recalled at all times that this free Christianity in Lebanon is not an artificial transplant but predates Islam itself and is indisputably ensconced in its natural habitat, Lebanon. A political formula therefore that achieves a liberation from the snare of numbers and shields exposed communities from the hazards of demographic determinism, while concurrently preserving a healthy interactive pluralism where the rights and duties of all individuals and groups within the state are guaranteed—such a formula becomes the holy grail of political systems for heterogeneous societies. An arrangement of this sort is not at all beyond the realm of the possible and would go a long way in sheltering the free Christians from the ever-present specter of emigration. An outline of such a system to accommodate communal diversity will be presented below in due course.

Alongside the fluctuations of demography there exists another Achilles Heel for Lebanon: the lingering tribal and clannish nature of its sect-based communities. In nearly each of these communities a chief figure belonging to one or another of the prominent families within that sect presides over a feudal-like structure often based on near-cultish atavistic loyalties to the leader by the clan rank-and-file in return for favors doled out to these followers in a mutually beneficial relationship of clientelism. These leaders double as warlords in times of inter-communal conflict, and patrons in peacetime; their eldest surviving sons take over from the aging fathers in a time-honored nepotistic practice of inherited feudal succession based on group adulation of the particular family. They often forge links with external players from the region or beyond that reinforce their grip on their communities and their power play within the convoluted kaleidoscope that is Lebanon. Whatever “political” parties or groupings they end up creating become convenient façades masking the underlying reality of family, clan, or sectarian configuration. In advance of parliamentary elections—national popular voting exercises every four years in which pervasive fraud occurs regularly—these same leaders advance grandiose claims for themselves and their parties of being the sole reliable guarantors of their sect's interests and rightful share of power. Once back in the saddle the season of backroom deals and divisions of spoils commences anew within as well as across these presumed rival political parties. If corruption has been the principal hallmark of this type of interaction among the various contending leaders in Lebanon, this corruption has seen an exponential leap of truly astronomical proportions since 1990 when the Lebanon War ended.

III. The Multiple Challenges Facing Lebanon Today —

Four main challenges and several other lesser though related ones afflict Lebanon and can be summarized as follows: the country's economic and financial collapse at the hands of the corrupt oligarchy of politicians; the hijacking of Lebanon by Iran via Hezbollah; the spiking coronavirus pandemic; and the consequences of the August 4 port explosion that devastated parts of Beirut.

1. Economic and Financial Collapse

With the ending in 1990 of the war in Lebanon the country and its exhausted people began to fall victims to a coordinated scheme of steady and methodical plundering on a soaring scale that finally came to its predictable catastrophic climax in fall 2019. For thirty years successive post-war governments

starting with that of the late Rafiq Hariri have borrowed billions of US dollars from states, international organizations, and donor conferences organized by friends of Lebanon with the declared objective of rebuilding the shattered country and modernizing its decrepit infrastructure. Very little of these funds went into the actual pledged projects that usually yielded shoddy sub-standard outcomes—except for parts of downtown Beirut where the restoration under the late Hariri has been impressive. The bulk of this money, however, ended up lining the pockets of the few officials at the top in connivance with other local politicians who were associates in the illicit deals, all of which quickly spawned a self-perpetuating mafia of escalating heists at the expense of both Lebanon and its people. This is what is referred to today by protestors on Lebanon's streets as the criminal and corrupt political class.

When the brazen pillaging of external donor money reached a plateau the politician criminals running the several Lebanese governments over the last fifteen years began the practice of borrowing huge amounts from the local banks, with the blessing of the Central Bank, supposedly to service the burgeoning national debt that they and their predecessors had amassed on the shoulders of the state—around 100 billion US dollars and counting. The banks, whether complicit or merely responding to dubious monetary restructuring policies devised and implemented by Lebanon's Central Bank, began to hand over to the corrupt governments cash money from people's hard-earned life savings. This money too was largely stolen over time thereby accelerating the downward spiral of “borrow and steal” that finally sent Lebanon off the cliff in fall 2019. By March 2020 the government was bankrupt to the point that it defaulted for the first time on payments to service the monster national debt. As the banks began to realize what was actually happening to the money they were lending to the unconscionable governments they started removing huge amounts of whatever was left and transferring these to their accounts abroad, first perhaps as a means to save the remainder, but soon some sleazy bank owners decided to jump on the plunder bandwagon and collaborate with the crooks. Even after “capital control” went into effect in fall 2019 placing tight restrictions on what dollars people could move out of the country these same bank owners secretly helped many of the corrupt politicians and leaders transfer billions from accounts in Lebanon to accounts overseas. The country swiftly became dollar-starved and dollar banknotes began to vanish from banks, markets, and people's hands. As confidence plummeted in both the banks and the national currency, the Lebanese pound or lira, which had been pegged to the US dollar, the lira now began to go into freefall losing eventually up to 80 percent of its value as of this writing.

All the while compounding the economic and demographic distress of the Lebanese, it needs to be recalled, has been the massive influx into the country since 2011 from neighboring war-torn Syria of hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians, the vast majority of them Sunnis, reaching at their peak around 1.5 million. Although many of these dislodged Syrians have moved with ease back and forth across the porous border thereby forfeiting their claimed status strictly as refugees, international relief agencies have insisted on classifying them as such and extending some aid to them while expecting strained Lebanon as the host country with meager resources to shoulder the bulk of support in terms of accommodations, basic necessities, education, employment, and even to accept their eventual naturalization. This last point, naturalization, has been rejected out of hand by Lebanese of all sectarian stripes including the Sunnis, who dread any elevated power of their Syrian coreligionists inside Lebanon. Instead, a concerted cry for their repatriation to safe parts of Syria has been the general consensus since any legitimizing of their presence would adversely upset the delicate demographic balances among the various sectarian communities and magnify Lebanon's crushing economic burdens. For a small and struggling country like Lebanon to be encumbered open-endedly with such a huge number of incoming foreigners has amounted to an exacerbation of its many woes beyond the point of endurance.

Something finally snapped in Lebanon on the popular level on 17 October 2019, and an unprecedented, massive, and fairly sustained popular uprising (with ebbs and flows) exploded onto the streets, squares, and thoroughfares of Lebanon's towns and cities only to have its momentum slowed and eventually arrested temporarily by the coronavirus pandemic beginning at the end of February 2020. The popular protests comprised young and old, urban and rural, educated and barely literate alike, but the driving energy behind them has been the youth, and at times the women—and they have largely hailed from all the country's religious sects without exception, meaning the uprising has been nonsectarian and inclusive. Even though much of it started spontaneously, the uprising relied for its sustained energy on social media. But what has really kept it going has been the underlying genuineness of the grievances and unanimity of the legitimate demands, with abysmal daily-life conditions serving as a unifier in misery. These demands have included: an end to corruption by the political class; the repatriation of stolen billions; basic life necessities (electricity, infrastructure, currency stability, food security, affordable medical care, affordable education, and jobs); a halt to the hemorrhaging emigration of the country's youth; cabinet government ministers with clean records and real expertise in their respective fields of special-

ization who can offer workable solutions for Lebanon's economic and financial meltdown; new early parliamentary elections under heavy international supervision and scrutiny (in any self-respecting country, when such large and persistent popular protests occur, all legitimacy for any recent parliamentary elections is considered lost and people go back to the polls for new early elections); and a call for the swift departure of the entire existing political class perceived as hopelessly corrupt and responsible for bringing Lebanon to this deplorable state. This last demand has been enshrined in the recurring mantra chanted by protestors in the streets: "All of them means all of them", insisting that all politicians and leaders without exception are implicated in corruption and need to depart. The uprising of Lebanon's people, largely peaceful at the start, has been the resounding collective angry response to their deliberate impoverishment at the hands of the kleptocratic ruling political class.

The year 2019-2020, and likely beyond, will go down in Lebanon's history as the worst by far economically and financially. Hit hard in particular have been the trust and confidence that Lebanon's once-robust and prosperous banking sector enjoyed with the Lebanese themselves as well as internationally. It will take years, if at all, to begin to restore the vanished faith people previously placed in Lebanese banks. This is potentially catastrophic for the sector when trust erodes among the wealthy Lebanese in the diaspora who on a regular basis used to deposit hefty amounts of hard currency in the country's banks. In retrospect, many ordinary account holders inside Lebanon particularly from the strained middle class feel that they have been the unsuspecting victims of a grand Ponzi scheme perpetrated for years by the thieving politicians in cahoots with their corrupt allies in the banks. How else is one to explain the sustained and unnaturally high interest rates offered on savings accounts with which Lebanese banks had been luring customers all this time, whether in Lebanese pounds or in US dollars—9 to 12 percent on the dollar, and up to 22 percent on the pound? Then, practically overnight, the floor is removed from underneath the entire edifice only for people to discover they have lost all their hard-earned savings, or had them severely devalued, or are no longer able to access them if they are in dollars.

Poverty in Lebanon has been climbing steeply since the economic and financial unraveling that surfaced in fall 2019, so that by early summer 2020 it had reached 25 percent classified as destitute with up to 50 percent being considered below the poverty line. The once-thriving middle class has been all but decimated as the Lebanese currency plummeted in value in the space of a few months. Among the facets severely impacted has been Lebanon's showcase educational sector, once the pride of the country and the region. Lebanon's two leading American universities along with the French-oriented Jesuit University went into austere survival mode as they experienced severe cash shortages, declines in tuitions, soaring prices, and excessive increases in overhead, equipment, and maintenance costs—all of which have led to mounting painful layoffs of personnel and faculty. At least 80 percent of the nearly 400 private Catholic schools in Lebanon, the country's backbone of primary and high school education, find themselves in such dire straits financially that many have announced they might not be able to resume teaching in fall 2020.

Near-irreparable damage on all levels has been inflicted on Lebanon's unique assets and strengths, as in the educational domain, the banking sector, and across civil society, thanks to the callous criminal politicians who stripped the country bare of its hard currency reserves. By the calculations of these blood-sucking parasites who thrive on people's misery, greater mass poverty would enhance their throttlehold on their hapless followers who, as a result, become even more desperate for the measly handouts coming to them from the entrenched networks of cronyism and favoritism controlled by the cold-hearted leaders. But this gang of thieves and former warlords masquerading as leaders has acquired a collaborator and godfather in Hezbollah, Iran's Lebanese henchmen.

2. Lebanon Hijacked by Iran via Hezbollah

Back in 2014, Ali Reza Zakani, a member of the Iranian parliament representing Tehran and a close ally of the late Qassem Soleimani, gloated openly that the Yemeni capital Sana'a would soon become the fourth Arab capital to be brought into the Iranian sphere after Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. Following consolidation of the 1979 revolution that toppled the Shah, the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini actively sought to spread its influence as far as possible into Arab Shiite communities. The result was the Shiite Crescent extending from Qom in Iran through Iraq and Syria to southern Lebanon as its western edge, and sandwiched between Sunni Turkey to the north and the Sunni Arab countries of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and Egypt to the south. Perhaps the most significant development bolstering this ideologically defined Crescent was the emergence in 1982 in Lebanon of Hezbollah, the paramilitary organization of Shiite Lebanese openly beholden to Iran with a visceral hostility to both Israel and the West in general, principally the United States.⁶

A nagging question has persistently hovered over the extent to which Hezbollah takes into account in its calculations, strategies, and activities Lebanon's welfare and best interests as a state and as a people. Time and again it has been demonstrated empirically for a large majority of the Lebanese that Hezbollah in fact doesn't. Most Lebanese feel that Lebanon for Hezbollah and their Iranian handlers is merely a strategic location on Israel's northern border and on the Eastern Mediterranean shore where the Shiite community of Jabal 'Aamel in the south of the country resides. This community's old and intimate connections with the Shiite hinterland in both Iraq and Iran took a decided turn in favor of the latter when Hezbollah became after 1982 the dominant force in Lebanese Shiite affairs. Trading the primacy of the traditional Shiite religious authorities in Iraq's Najaf and Karbala for Qom's *Wilayat al-Faqih* (the Rule of the Jurist-Consult under Khomeini then Khamenei), and what this entails in terms of a virulent apocalyptic Mahdism, is precisely what Hezbollah has imposed on Lebanon's Shiites—all done under the banner of presumably fulfilling the eschatological destiny of this community to be the spearhead of "resistance against the Zionist enemy".

As the orphaned Palestinians and their aspirations gradually became a diminishing priority among former Sunni Arab supporters, Iran cleverly jumped on the opportunity to ride this abandoned horse as its quickest entryway into the Arab arena and regional politics. Tehran extended its influence in a number of Arab countries by supporting with money, arms, and training loyal groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Bashar Assad's teetering Alawite regime in Syria, and Shiite proxies in Iraq and Yemen, thereby becoming the maestro of the new regional "Rejectionist and Resistance Front" to Israel and its international backers like the US. The way Hezbollah have behaved as the backbone of this expansionist Iranian agenda in both Lebanon and Syria has confirmed to the Lebanese that they are little more than agents of naked Iranian imperialism, and that championing of the Palestinian cause is merely designed to serve this prime Iranian strategic objective. The Lebanese have also seen and tasted that wherever Iran has imposed its dominance—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—the results have been a relentless plunge towards failed-state status for each of these countries.

For their part, Hezbollah have put forth as their principal achievements the key role they played in bringing about Israel's May 2000 departure from South Lebanon, how they fought and repelled Israel in summer of 2006, and how alongside the Lebanese army they ended the presence in 2017 of *Daesh* (ISIS) terrorist bases in northeast Lebanon. It is correct that at the time the Lebanese did cheer the army and Hezbollah for their effective logistical, intelligence, and battlefield cooperation to exterminate ISIS from Lebanon. Regarding Israel, however, most Lebanese would prefer pursuing via peaceful means a narrower focus on the few remaining slivers of territory in South Lebanon still occupied by Israel plus a lasting demarcation of the land and maritime borders between the two countries through third-party arbitration so as to close the file on disputed border territories and the undersea hydrocarbon (oil and gas) reserves. All other maximalist confrontational slogans regarding "wars against the Zionist enemy" and "liberating Jerusalem", with Lebanon as the leading edge of any such ideologically-infused adventures, are, for most Lebanese, dangerous, unnecessary, and well beyond the abilities of a tiny and vulnerable country like Lebanon. But Hezbollah consistently turn a deaf ear to the sentiments of most Lebanese and foist upon them, in the name of *al-muqawama* (armed resistance), precisely such perils of imminent destruction.

A word about numbers is appropriate here. Simply stated, Hezbollah do not have and never have had the majority of Lebanese on their side, with the exception of their fight against ISIS, which they undertook mainly for their own safety. It is true that the current Christian leadership in power in Lebanon gave Hezbollah a "Christian" cover of sorts back on 6 February 2006 when Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah signed a Memorandum of Understanding. But Christian backing for Aoun, especially after he assumed the presidency, has fallen precipitously as people began to resent his open support for Hezbollah's armed state-within-the-state that is busy prosecuting an unfamiliar and highly risky foreign program on Lebanese soil. So when it comes to numbers in Lebanon today it is accurate to say that a swelling majority of the Christians, nearly all the Sunnis, and many courageous Shiites who refuse to be subservient to Hezbollah's will constitute together well over 50 percent of Lebanon's population. Moreover, Hezbollah know this and it makes them nervous since it exposes the myth of their oft-repeated formula of unity in which they refer to Lebanon's "golden triad" of the people, the army, and the resistance: the people as such are by no means giving Hezbollah their blanket endorsement; the army as an institution is hardly on Hezbollah's wavelength or blindly singing from their hymnbook; and left on its own with a narrow mainly Shiite base of support is their so-called resistance. This said, no one in Lebanon—certainly among the youth of the new generation—is in any way entertaining scenarios of civil or sectarian strife. It is not for the Lebanese to engage in bloody internecine warfare in order to resolve the challenge posed by Hezbollah or their arms; this is an issue larger than Lebanon requiring concerted regional and international attention.

Hezbollah constantly fall back on a curious defense mechanism when faced with criticism of any sort: hurling at Lebanese who disagree with them the ready accusation of treason and of collaboration with Israel. This is particularly odd when Hezbollah themselves proudly declare from the rooftops that their primary allegiance is to the Islamic Republic of Iran's *Wilayat al-Faqih*, namely to an ideological and military agenda of a foreign power whose priorities are largely alien to the vast majority of Lebanese. There is a double standard of inconsistency here that is deeply resented by most Lebanese. As a defensive knee-jerk reaction such recurring accusations of treason or collaboration with Israel also indicate a clear sign of weakness on the part of those casting them. For sure any form of unprovoked Israeli aggression against Lebanon is rejected by all Lebanese, but anything beyond this would be tantamount to overreach risking that Lebanon and its people become embroiled in untold hardships. The Lebanese do not appreciate unwelcome regional infusions and imports of instability as happens when Hezbollah, directed by their manipulators in Tehran, view Lebanon solely as an advanced military platform serving Iranian objectives of regional expansion, something utterly contrary to Lebanon's interests. And when push comes to shove as it invariably does, that platform which is Lebanon becomes cynically expendable for both Iran and Hezbollah. Simply put, working to further a strange external set of ideologically and imperialistically motivated goals inimical to Lebanon's interests as defined by the greater number of Lebanese disqualifies Hezbollah, themselves self-declared foreign agents, from flinging on others charges of treason or subservience to a hostile power.

Lebanon is today increasingly in the clutches of Iran through its proxy Hezbollah, and against the will of most of the Lebanese people. This hostage status of Lebanon has transformed its once reputed openness into the exact opposite: a pariah state in the eyes of most former friends, dictated to by an armed state-within-the-state. Over the past few years Hezbollah have worked methodically, using a combination of carefully crafted local alliances, intimidation, occasional thuggery, and election fraud, to secure the presidency of the republic, a parliamentary majority at the last elections, and now a puppet government. To complete this hijacking operation Hezbollah have emerged as the arch-protectors of the corrupt and criminal cartel of politicians who have systematically stripped Lebanon dry of its finances, some of whom are open Hezbollah allies. Thus the socio-economic and financial breakdown of Lebanon has been very convenient for Hezbollah. They have regularly sent out their ruffians to attack and smash banks, storefronts, and traffic lights in downtown Beirut so as to tarnish the image of the peaceful protests that have continued off and on since October 2019 against the corruption that has brought about mass poverty.

As nearly 50 percent of the Lebanese slip below the poverty line, Hezbollah shield the real culprits they protect who are responsible for this national disaster—the felons of the country's political elite—by circulating a contrived narrative that it is all America's fault since Washington is the one supposedly imposing a blockade on Lebanon that prevents any dollars from entering the country. But this is merely the beginning. Hezbollah have actively blocked any and all meaningful reforms whatsoever from being implemented by their stooge governments, including what the International Monetary Fund has requested as a necessary condition for helping Lebanon out of its deep financial mess—reforms of the rickety electric power system, the over-staffed government bureaucracy, transparency of government spending, and much more. Despite Lebanon having defaulted for the first time ever in March 2020 on its loan-interest payments, the IMF did open negotiations with the Lebanese government in the hope that the implementation of substantive reforms across ailing sectors like electricity and bloated civil-service appointments, where the plundering has been at its height, could jump-start a move on the path towards slow recovery.

Hezbollah, however, would have none of it. For them any real reforms would risk exposing the pervasive corruption and mismanagement apparatus of their allies over which they themselves preside.⁷ Moreover, the IMF to them means Western influence, principally that of the United States, something they are determined to obstruct. The same goes for proposals to expand the role of UNIFIL to make it more robust by extending its enhanced monitoring capabilities to cover the highly permeable Syrian border across which so many of the smuggling operations of Hezbollah take place—fuel, flour, fighters, and cash dollars to aid the regime of Bashar Assad, in return for Iranian military technology and weapons flowing in the opposite direction to Lebanon. In addition, they have exploited opportunistically the hardships resulting from both the coronavirus pandemic and the economic and financial collapse in Lebanon to wean the country steadily away from its natural and deeply-rooted historic Western and Arab connections towards “the East”, meaning for them Assad's Syria, Iran, and China. Nothing less than a calculated undermining of Lebanon's very identity and traditional Western-Arab orientation is here being undertaken through stealth beneath a smokescreen of distractions coupled with deliberately misleading diversions of blame for the ongoing misery. Hezbollah reason coldly that if the Lebanese are brought to their knees through destitution, famine, and loss of basic services like fuel, electricity, inter-

net, and so on, the desperate people who remain, after able-bodied youth with some means and a liberal bent of mind seek to emigrate, would then embrace any help, no matter how meager, coming from Iran or China. In this sense, Nasrallah is correct when he gloats before the Americans during his defiant televised appearances that Lebanon's economic ruin and financial collapse would actually strengthen Hezbollah instead of weakening them. At the very least it would alter the face of Lebanon permanently in the direction of authoritarian darkness as prevails in neighboring Syria.

Deep as they are, Lebanon's economic griefs minus the intrusion of Hezbollah's ideologically motivated political vetoes can find their way to solutions, even if painful ones. But Lebanon is not permitted to extract itself from the quicksand in which it has been plunged. Loss of government credibility in the eyes of the people and the outside world has resulted in a stifling international isolation for the once open and vibrant East Mediterranean country. Meanwhile, guarding closely their growing arsenal of weapons, Hezbollah hoard hard currency, smuggle what they like in and out of wretched Lebanon, take care exclusively of their own under the banner of "supporters of the resistance", and bask in their fortress seclusion while holding a gun to the heads of everyone else among the Lebanese. As vocal critics of any notion of federalism, Hezbollah practice their own version of faux federalism that is more akin to an armed parasitical apartness. Parasites thrive on the misery of their host, but the mass of supporters of "the resistance" are themselves not parasites. Many of them, however, are intoxicated by the studied doses of bombast they are given, which cultivate illusion at the expense of reality. The ideal subjects of totalitarianism, as Hannah Arendt would say, are people for whom the distinctions between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, no longer exist.⁸

3. The Pandemic and Precision-Guided Munitions

A century ago, at the time of the birth of Greater Lebanon, the Levant, like most everywhere else around the world, was hit by a global influenza pandemic that later came to be known as the Spanish Influenza. Already, people in Mount Lebanon and the adjoining areas were suffering from famine as a consequence of Ottoman brutality with almost a third of the population decimated as a result. But there are no accurate figures as to how many actually perished from starvation, and how many were claimed by the flu. What is clear, however, is that people in great numbers fell victim to this devastating flu virus all across the Middle East, Lebanon included. Sir Mark Sykes, the second of the celebrated Sykes-Picot duo that shaped the contours of the Mandate System defining the post-war Near East, himself contracted the flu and died from it on 16 February 1919 at the height of the pandemic's deadly second wave.⁹

Fast-forward a hundred years and Lebanon, along with the rest of the world, is hit by the coronavirus pandemic over and above all the other grave problems it faces. Until July 2020 the number of cases in Lebanon had been rather low after several months from the arrival on 21 February of the virus on its shores, first through returning visitors to Iran and shortly thereafter via returning visitors to Italy. One reason for this relatively mild level of infections is the closure early on of schools and universities along with malls and other venues of public crowding. The overall economic toll during the first half of 2020, in particular the strains on Lebanon's delicate healthcare system, have been acute. Given the financial and economic strains the virus has been inflicting globally, it stands to reason that fewer external funds would be available for ailing Lebanon down the road. Any second corona wave should it come about promises to be devastating for the vulnerable country already afflicted with severe currency devaluation, near-hyperinflation, dwindling medical supplies, and the aftermath of the August 4 blast. Such a wave appears to have congealed with an ongoing spike in cases since around mid-July 2020 after lockdowns were eased nationally.

Under the cover of the coronavirus pandemic Iran has likely been busy clandestinely advancing its nuclear program towards the breakout point, while Hezbollah, according to numerous official and media reports mainly out of Israel, have been upgrading their missile arsenal to become precision-guided munitions (PGMs). The presumed smuggling of components from Iran through Syria for these missiles, and even setting up camouflaged factories on Lebanese soil to manufacture these enhanced capabilities, have heightened the dangers on the entire country of a military confrontation with Israel. The same reports speak of adopting the tactic of human shields such that many of these missiles and factories have been deliberately located in densely populated residential civilian areas like Beirut's mainly Shiite southern suburbs along with villages in parts of South Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. Whoever it was that stored weapons-grade ammonium nitrate in huge amounts at Beirut's civilian port only to precipitate the consequent widespread destruction in the city also behaved with unconscionable abandon. If these surfacing reports are accurate, Hezbollah, in a display of reckless sociopathic brinksmanship, are exposing Lebanon, specifically their own Shiite community, to "back to the stone-age" pulverization, by

Israel's own threatening language, and dragging the Lebanese people with them to hellish destruction against the stated will of the majority. If this is their idea of deterrence—this presumed deterrence serves only Hezbollah and their masters in Tehran, not Lebanon—or military parity with Israel, Hezbollah have never consulted the Lebanese people about it. Instead, and in the name of “the resistance”, they have been stonewalling all objections while engaging in studied distractions such as blaming the US for increased tensions, and getting the Lebanese government they control to wax alarmist about fake scenarios of foiled coup d'états against it or about a looming though nonexistent specter of civil strife and other fabricated conspiracies. In parallel, they have persisted in preventing any meaningful reforms required to launch Lebanon's arduous healing process. If the PGM issue is perceived by Israel as a strategic game-changer, which is what they say it is potentially, then Lebanon is in for much additional roughness in its already grueling ride forward.

4. The August 4, 2020, Beirut Port Explosion

It is estimated as a preliminary figure that the price tag of the devastation caused by the Beirut Port explosion will exceed 10 billion US dollars—this on top of the already enormous national debt, the deepening economic woes, and the currency downfall. Most affected by the force of the blast were the neighborhoods adjacent to or overlooking the port area, and these are overwhelmingly Christian. Some 300,000 people were rendered homeless by the explosion with severe to total wreckage of their dwellings. A majority of these residents live in older houses and buildings many of which have crumbled or experienced extensive damage as a result of the detonation. It is traditional structures like these that have given Beirut its special caché and prevented the city from devolving into acreage upon acreage of faceless glass and steel high-rises. When reconstruction eventually comes to this destroyed part of the city every effort will need to be made to restore the old houses and maintain the quaint look and feel of this charming section of old Beirut. Greedy developers stepping in like vultures to tempt homeowners to sell their stricken properties for high prices in order then to put up the gaudy skyscrapers must be prevented from doing this. Already, calls are rising for precisely such an interdiction. However one assesses the implications of the August 4 explosion, it will be many difficult years before Beirut begins to recover some of its previous glory and special appeal.

IV. Salvaging Lebanon's Essentials

Lebanon comes first for the Lebanese: not fattening the pockets of the robber-politicians; not Palestine, and certainly not some unscrupulous use of Palestine to further questionable external geostrategic goals at Lebanon's expense; not Syria because the Lebanese have suffered enough from that regime, and they certainly don't wish to be seen somehow as accomplices in its continued atrocities against its own people; and not Iran, an alien, imperialist, and potentially hostile power with a lethal embrace as most Lebanese have tasted. And when Lebanon is placed first this means a free, religiously-pluralist, peaceful, vibrant, prosperous, Western-oriented, and diverse Lebanon, not a crumbling, monochromatic, hollowed-out shell of its former self at the mercy of the twin oppressive controls by a criminal political oligarchy and by the paramilitary organization protecting this clique with its primary allegiances elsewhere.

As Lebanon disintegrates, the tormented Lebanese are treated to vocal displays of what can only be termed Shiite triumphalism. In addition to recurring TV appearances by Nasrallah in which he extolls the “axis of resistance” while smirking about how well taken care of his own followers are during the exceedingly hard times for the rest of the Lebanese, his ally, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, openly attacks all notions of federalism insisting that any future electoral law ought to consider the whole of Lebanon as a single electoral district, which would be a prelude for “deconfessionalizing” the political system in order to usher in the “civil state”. Listening to this discourse the naïve will see in it an enlightened, forward-looking reformist recipe. The reality, however, is that it is little more than a smoke-and-mirrors ruse concealing the consolidation of Hezbollah's and Iran's tightening grip on the country in favor of refashioning the state to reflect their enforced dominance. Perhaps the most telling indicator of this triumphalism was when Hezbollah protégé and leading Shiite Mufti Kabalan, in his May 2020 Ramadan sermon, declared openly that the Lebanese formula of 1943, premised on a Sunni-Maronite compromise as the basis for peaceful coexistence, is now “dead”—a blunt assertion of a Shiite takeover under the armed umbrella of Hezbollah. Many voices were quickly raised against such a declaration by Kabalan, but there has been no retraction whatsoever from the Mufti. Telling also was the dismissal by Nasrallah of the resumption of the peaceful anti-government street protests on 6 June 2020, after a prolonged cessation due mainly to the onset

of the pandemic: the numbers were “too few”, he said contemptuously, then proceeded along with Berri in the following days to dispatch their hooligans to destroy public property in downtown Beirut in a familiar tactic to smear the protests. In the wake of the port explosion, and when desperate residents of the affected portions of Beirut tried to gather in protest before the country’s sealed-off parliament building in the center of town, Berri’s armed thugs masquerading as parliament security fired live bullets at them injuring many.

Lebanon today is disputed territory between the free and the unfree, on this hundredth anniversary of “Greater Lebanon”. The liberal values that permeate the people of Lebanon’s popular uprising, against corruption and those who shelter it, are values empirically entrenched in the lives of the very people who advocate for them; they are identical to the deepest values that inform America and the West. Moreover, they are genuinely homespun in the soil and culture and traditions of little Lebanon, and they are not, as some tendentiously claim, mere colonial imports, transplants, or impositions from the West. Lebanon has always been oriented towards the West and the Arab world simultaneously—hardly ever towards the Persian sphere, or never to the artificially coerced extent one witnesses at present. The deepest universal values that the West upholds found pre-existing richly fertile ground in Lebanon, as attested to among other things by the numerous educational institutions that altruistic Westerners established there since the early nineteenth century, and that have grown and flourished and endured for well over 150 years spreading knowledge and values and free inquiry throughout the country and the region.

Exploiting Lebanon’s current ordeal to steer it elsewhere from its natural course is an objective that will fail. Mullah-run Iran’s regional ascendancy is transitory; in fact, its entire ideologically-driven imperial adventure in the Near East, including in Lebanon through Hezbollah, will also end in resounding disappointment. But this assured failure will be costly for Lebanon and the neighborhood. Salvaging Lebanon’s essentials therefore has to be the paramount task moving forward. These essentials include Lebanon’s precious personal and communal freedoms, its native Christian community that is the real source of these freedoms, its pluralist sectarian complexion under a consensus formula of mutual respect for diversity, its free-enterprise economy featuring an open liberal financial banking system, the strong institution of its armed forces, its vibrant liberal educational sector, a reconstitution of its independent judiciary to instill a culture of accountability before the law, and its insulation as much as possible from the vicissitudes of regional rivalries and power shifts—one may say a dreamy wish list. A future Lebanon minus the two M’s, the militia (Hezbollah) and the mafia (corrupt political class), would be poised to achieve all of these items and more.

If, a hundred years into the future, on Greater Lebanon’s bicentenary in 2120, the Middle East were to feature exclusively secular states, or civil states as they are often designated, in each of which religion and politics are totally separated and religion is largely relegated to the private realm, while all in the state regardless of their religious affiliations were equal in citizenship and rights before a single civil legal system, not the Islamic *Shari’a*, then this would be nothing short of a miracle. Counting on such pervasive secularism to be the Middle East’s reality after a century from now, or really anytime in the foreseeable future, would be foolhardy at best. One look at present-day Turkey under Erdogan, where a successful systematic dismantling of the secular Kemalist legacy has been underway for some time now in favor of a fanatical and imperialistically guided neo-Ottoman expansionism, crowned by the recent re-designation of Hagia Sophia as a mosque, is enough to convince any sensible person that a secular prospect for the twenty-first century Middle East amounts to little more than a mirage. Whether or not it is inconvenient to the Western secular mind, the ultimate identity of individuals and groups in the Middle East, where the majority religion—Islam—does not separate religion from politics, will remain essentially defined by religious/sectarian parameters.

To hope to preserve a healthy pluralism in a sectarian Lebanon of the future an arrangement would need to be devised offering optimal chances to accommodate diversity within a unified state entity, while simultaneously safeguarding the distinctiveness and autonomy of the various communal components constituting the existing pluralism. The only viable way forward for heterogeneous, mixed, and divided societies as we have in Lebanon would be creative federalism that accepts the given of sectarian identities and operates in tandem with this given. The path towards such an arrangement could be paved initially through gradual administrative decentralization.

Many voices from among Lebanon’s leading politicians have come out now and then rejecting wholesale the federal option, or making light of it, or otherwise dismissing it as unworkable. Is it surprising when the big-time warlords of Lebanon with much blood on their hands, and who went on to become mega-crooks after the war in Lebanon ended in 1990, openly attack federalism? They perpetrate their denigrations either out of sheer ignorance and a muddled view of the concept, or out of a latent cowardly dhimmitude rooted regrettably in some Christians, or, more likely, out of fear of losing their grip since they know federalism is the only meaningful pathway for composite societies like Lebanon’s to follow so as to anchor rights and freedoms for all and to prosper. These corrupt and anachronistic feudal lords recognize in their heart of hearts that a federal state under the rule of law will put an end to their cronyism, or at the very least will confine any residual harm from it within specific

communities where it can be quashed before it metastasizes nationally. Those with weapons like Hezbollah reject the federal concept because they wish to maintain their repressive hold on power—pure and simple. Whatever their self-serving motives, such a federal option, if properly implemented, would undercut the leechlike clamp over the people by this feudal blood-sucking gang of robber-politicians and their armed protectors. The knee-jerk or calculated rejection of federalism by this entrenched mafia is their only survival mechanism since they realize that in the end it is they and no one else who are the real causes of Lebanon's ruin. No one should pay any heed to their denunciations of federalism, or frankly to almost anything they declare on the subject.

One huge benefit accruing for Lebanon from successful federalism is that it would put an end to this toxic pattern of recurring sectarian triumphalist escapades, the Shiite version now being the latest to afflict the country. Nothing short of a paradigm shift—in similar fashion to what Thomas S. Kuhn propounded for the development of science in his celebrated 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*—is required for the socio-political restructuring of Lebanon, and this is precisely where creative federalism comes in. This said, much plain misunderstanding pervades most references to federalism in Lebanon rendering the concept analogous to a dirty word in popular parlance with potential dangerous implications for those uttering it. Two examples will suffice here: federalism is not synonymous with fragmentation or partition or disintegration of the state into enclaves—far from it; and a false territorial fixation stamps the idea of federalism in the popular mind, meaning that federalism must somehow entail population transfers and the elimination of mixed areas—this too is not true. Constitutionally-grounded federalism taking as its basic unit the autonomous religious/sectarian community is the type of federalism most suited to the case of Lebanon. The beauty of the federal concept is that it is sufficiently malleable to be tailored to nearly any set of peculiar local givens such as obtains in Lebanon. Persistent attempts must therefore be made through dialogue, writings, and education, to coax the rejecters out of their fears, misconceptions, or misplaced power ambitions, by reassuring them that federalism is not some bogeyman out to undermine them and their communities, but at the same time that it is indeed an effective way, if applied properly, of curbing unjustified desires for continued domination over others. When carefully assessed, all anti-federalist arguments reveal their bankruptcy, and in some instances confirm the suspicion that they often conceal an agenda of monolithic repressive control on the part of the refusers.

What then would a federal Lebanon look like? For starters, the fact that Lebanon is small geographically is no reason to render the federal concept inapplicable—size is immaterial. As mentioned earlier, this is constitutional not territorial federalism, which considers as its bedrock unit entity each of the eighteen officially recognized religious communities in Lebanon's constitution regardless of their geographic spread. Under this concept nobody would need to relocate physically if they don't wish to from where they reside to other more homogeneous areas. Although the 1975-1990 war in Lebanon did segregate to some extent the religious/sectarian communities, this is not a basis for our federal prescription, and the existing mixed areas, either among sects of the same religion or featuring interpenetration of the various religious communities, are important to be preserved for their interactive diversity. A pivotal objective of this federal arrangement for Lebanon would be to spell out in its amended constitution the protections of equal basic individual and group rights and freedoms for all citizens regardless of the demographic fluctuations, whether in terms of numerical inflation or shrinkage, any one of these communities happens to experience over time. Thus the federal formula, by safeguarding equal rights and freedoms for all, would finally liberate the different religious communities from the specter of demographic alterations bringing about adverse implications. In the end, the fact that Lebanon actually consists of a collection of many different sectarian minority communities with no clear numerical majority for any single one would be enshrined as an equalizing principle.

Whether the choice will be of a single representative assembly, or a two-tier parliamentary legislature, each community would elect its own representatives to this legislative body proportional to its demographic size. The three top posts in the country—President, Prime Minister, and Parliament Speaker—could then be filled by rotation among the Christians, Sunnis, and Shiites, with the prerogatives and powers assigned to each of these three government branches being adjusted to create greater balance among them. On the level of what are termed personal circumstances, namely matters pertaining to issues of birth, marriage, divorce, inheritance, death, and the like for each of the eighteen religious communities, Lebanon is already a *de facto* federal state. In order to open the door for an additional secular option, a Category Nineteen of personal circumstances following a strictly civil legal code could be created alongside the already existing eighteen sectarian slots, and to which anyone over the legal age of maturity could transfer his/her affiliation. This is the only realistic chance available to introduce an opening into the sectarian-bound Lebanese federal system for a secular choice. It goes without saying that the details of creating such a federal system and the challenges arising from the endeavor would be handled by competent constitutional and legal experts—this is not daunting given that some of the most successful states around the world are actually federal in composition and structure, and given also the inherent flexibility of the federal concept itself.

Perhaps the most important advantage of federalism for Lebanon's composite sectarian profile lies in the layers

of protection this system would provide. Here, lessons can be applied from the rich experiences of both the Swedish Ombudsman system and the Oblast concept tried successfully in Russia to offer additional legal protections to minority communities embedded within other larger minority communities (example, the Shiite community in Lebanon's Christian-majority Byblos district), or communities at a distance from any demographic concentration of their coreligionists (example, the isolated Christian villages in the north, east, and south of the country near the Syrian and Israeli borders). Over and above the standard constitutional protections for all there would also be available an added legal layer of localized protection for such vulnerable communities through appeals to a designated Ombudsman, or to the recognition of a well-defined and specific Oblast status. The demon of runaway demographic increase, or alternately of communal demographic hemorrhaging, would then be considerably tamed.

Federalism of the live-and-let-live variety is neither a panacea, nor is it a problem-free political prescription; it represents a viable road-map towards a transition from unstable heterogeneity towards workable pluralism. Those who reject it out of hand need to offer a feasible alternative, which so far no one has. Instant secularism is unrealistic; canceling the confessional system could result in forced homogenization as a prelude to suppression of variety along with minority rights and distinctiveness; and to maintain the status quo is no solution given where it has landed Lebanon recurrently and of late. It should also be recalled that true federalism offsets the prominence of sub-state loyalties while accepting sub-state identity affiliations and distinctiveness. To work, federalism has to be arrived at bottom-up and not imposed top-down. This means the various components—in this case the sectarian communities—destined to comprise the federal arrangement should all be agreed that adoption of the federal route towards peaceful and prosperous coexistence is indeed what they want. A modicum of regional and international shepherding would thus be needed here over and above the concurrence around the federal concept by the various local aggregates.

The encouraging news is that for the first time leading members of the intelligentsia in Lebanon's Sunni community have expressed openness to this option given how frustrating Shiite militant ascendancy has been for their community. Historically, the Sunnis in Lebanon as well as in the wider Arab context, as the majority community of the Islamic world par excellence, never entertained such federal notions of local autonomy and the preservation of the rights of other non-Muslim communities; for them over the centuries the *dhimmi* category of "conditional protection" coming at a huge cost to the subordinates was the only alternative available to such non-Muslim communities.¹⁰ Any softening of this Sunni stance now for whatever reasons ought to be exploited to push for the federal solution in Lebanon. Not that the Sunni community in Lebanon or elsewhere is immune to deadly extremism of their own, but Lebanon's Sunnis have demonstrated lately that they are not pro-ISIS, nor are they willing to use the massive presence of displaced Sunni Syrians inside Lebanon as a weapon against other communities, as happened in 1975 with the armed Palestinians in Lebanon's refugee camps.

The absence of a rooted democratic culture in the Middle East is a drawback that will hamper federalism; however, following the federal trajectory for societies with disparate components will itself offer the fastest way to begin to instill the rudiments of such a democratic culture in the assorted and freedom-thirsty Middle Eastern environment. Like democracy, federalism is a constant work-in-progress featuring successive course corrections from within. For Lebanon this will be easier since already there exists a tried system of consensual democracy, despite its many blemishes chief among them the evil twin of apportionment of illicit spoils. In particular, an appreciation for safeguarding minority rights in place of the regionally prevalent crude view of democracy as amounting to sheer numerical majority rule (the one-man, one-vote, one-time syndrome) needs to be further instilled in the local culture through painstaking education combined with empirical peaceful coexistence premised on mutual trust and respect. And there will be no dilution of the umbrella bonds that link the Lebanese. These overarching unifying features of a federal Lebanese state—one economy, one currency, one army, one foreign policy—will, as part of the normal course of development, be both stimulated and moderated. Healthy competition within and across federated communities will fuel nation-wide economic growth and enhance prosperity for all, whereas the pull towards federal consensus will lead to a balanced and centrist foreign policy that will guard Lebanon against serving as a tool for externally manipulated agendas.

Federalism will orient Lebanon to navigate clear of ideological excesses, or unnatural integration into contending regional axes. Even though in reality only the strong can afford to be neutral and remain able to protect their neutrality, and even if such "armed neutrality" is the sure way a self-declared neutral state can avoid degenerating into a power vacuum that sucks in trouble, Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Bechara Ra'i's recurring open plea starting in July 2020 for Lebanon's neutrality¹¹, and his parallel bold rejection of Hezbollah's forced steering of the exhausted country into the Iranian orbit, received much traction on the popular level precisely because this tactical invocation of neutrality for Lebanon, in line with the 1943 Maronite-Sunni compromise bargain of neither East nor West, called the bluff of Hezbollah's weapons as "defensive". Echoing the rise to the critical demands of the historical moment that his predecessor a century ago under different circumstances, Maronite Patriarch Howayik, achieved when he pushed for the Greater Lebanon project—despite the latent demographic hazards

for Christians of that territorial expansion—Patriarch Ra’i ignited a national debate that has placed Hezbollah on the defensive by forcing them to unleash their slanderous mouthpieces in the local media against the Patriarch. Many Sunnis have lined up on the Patriarch’s side revealing once again that a majority of Lebanese reject out of hand the forcing of their country into the Iranian sphere. Ra’i’s neutrality gambit does not allow for compromises on Lebanon’s basic Western-Arab identity markers; it is not intended to incite the Lebanese to any violent clash with Hezbollah; it does not imply giving up on just Arab causes over which there is a national consensus, but at the same time it does not entail placing Lebanon alone in suicidal fashion in the frontlines of any regional confrontation including one with Israel; and it is best understood as disassociating Lebanon from polarizing and contentious regional disputes. In the end, this neutrality puts Lebanon *first* before all other issues and considerations.

Patriarch Ra’i also knows that when a free people like Lebanon’s Christians are cursed with recurrent rotten leadership, the obvious solution would be to improve or alter the leadership rather than jettison the freedoms. The same is true as well for Lebanon’s other communities. There is something deeply unsettling about the ingrained clan feudalism in Lebanese society that sends voters from all sects in droves every four years to reelect the same assortment of vampire crooks who then persist in preying on their mindless followers with impunity. The hope is that the new generation in Lebanon seems more liberated of this obsession with traditional parasitical leader families, hence willing to break with the detrimental recurring pattern of re-empowering them. This is the sure way to finally rid the country of these criminal mafia bloodsuckers. Only then can a new mentality emerge characterizing a new ruling class consisting of individuals with real expertise who respect the rule of law by upholding an independent judiciary, work for the common good, restore prosperity to Lebanon, instill a culture of recycling trash, clean up beachfront properties seized and spoilt by the robbers, reduce pollution of air and soil and rivers, upgrade shoddy infrastructure, and end government waste and theft of state resources. The goal for the future then is a federal democratic Lebanon governed by a new ruling class open to both East and West with its foundational Western-Arab identity preserved and its personal and group freedoms intact. Federalism, an unfairly maligned concept, may entail slow and daunting work, but on balance its attractions definitely outweigh its limitations as the most suitable future political solution for the Lebanese sectarian mosaic and for many similarly atomized sub-regions of the Middle East.

V. Maximizing the Endurance of the Positives; Minimizing the Persistence of the Negatives —

A Table of Recommendations follows that offers short-, medium-, and long-term suggestions to American policy-makers for what a reconstituted and healthier Lebanon would need in order to revive. Except in obvious places, its recommendations within each of the three timespan categories are not listed in any particular order of priority.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT TERM

- 1. Urgent humanitarian relief** following the devastating August 4 Beirut Port explosion. Ways should be devised to deliver any and all such relief *directly* to the needy people of Beirut (mostly Christians) via credible NGOs and international relief agencies and the churches, bypassing both the Hezbollah-captive Lebanese government and the corrupt political parties, because any aid coming through these channels will either be stolen, or it will end up enhancing people’s dependence on the parasitical feudal politicians.
- 2.** Support and push for an **independent international investigation** into the August 4 Beirut Port explosion, perhaps Bosnia-style through the mechanism of the International Criminal Court at The Hague.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT TERM

3. Call for the city of **Beirut** to be declared **an open and weapons-free city** where only the Lebanese army and security forces carry weapons.
4. A **fund** named the Lebanon Relief and Development Fund should be **established abroad** starting now and be **overseen by an honest, confidence-inspiring group of trusted figures** (possibly headed by an elder statesman like former Senator George Mitchell who is partly of Lebanese descent) to gather funds from the Lebanese diaspora and from any other genuine friends of Lebanon around the world willing to chip in. This fund would be **for the future generations of Lebanese** and for the rebuilding of the country and its vital institutions including the educational sector. Advertising this fund would inject confidence and offer much needed hope for the ailing Lebanese who may be thinking of emigrating.
5. The **Lebanese Armed Forces** should continue to receive infusions of **aid, training, weaponry, and support** as needed to keep them strong and ready.
6. **Beefing up the duties and powers of UNIFIL**, or introducing a new and more assertive international force altogether, are ideas worthy of continued serious exploration.
7. The **Global Magnitsky Act to combat corruption** (or any similar US government instrument) should be invoked for Lebanon and a Special Envoy designated and dispatched to Lebanon to meet with, and put on strict notice, the 5 or 6 known top corrupt politicians of the ruling mafia cartel who have robbed the state coffers, the account holders in banks, state assets, etc., that they need to return immediately 50-70% of what they stole and retire permanently from politics; otherwise, the full weight of the Magnitsky Act will fall on them and their families, all their assets in country and abroad (they are known to the US authorities) will be confiscated, they and their families will never have visas to the US or Europe, they will be pursued legally across the globe, and much more. This would be **American soft power in action: both cost-free and with no boots on the ground**. The Lebanese people will applaud the US profusely for this.
8. Push for a **new government that represents the people**, not the corrupt politicians protected by Hezbollah.
9. Press for **early parliamentary elections** that will be heavily **monitored internationally** including the **new electoral law** under which they will be held. The smaller the electoral district in such a law, the better served are minority rights, and Lebanon is in the end a collection of minorities.
10. The imminent collapse of **Lebanon** into a **failed state** must be **prevented at all costs** because this **will strengthen Hezbollah** and Iran not weaken them, and it **will usher in China with billions** of relief dollars as the “rescuer” providing Beijing with a naval port on the Mediterranean for the first time ever (maybe two—Beirut and Tripoli) plus other economic openings and military means to entrench itself in the region. Incorporating Lebanon by force into the Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative like this is too costly for the West.
11. Support Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Bechara Ra’i’s declared proposal of “**constructive neutrality**”, or “**disassociation**” regarding Lebanon’s involvement in the problems and tensions of the surrounding region.
12. Strive to make sure Lebanon’s strong tradition of **free-enterprise economic activity** is **not altered** into some decrepit socialist alternative. Restore its banking sector as free of crooks, liberal, and open to transparent local, regional, and global transactions and investments. Assist in the creation of **new employment opportunities for the youth**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT TERM

13. Give **more direct help to private schools and universities** in Lebanon, particularly to primary Catholic schools that have constituted the backbone of pluralist education in the country. AUB, LAU, and many of the best American high schools in Lebanon have embodied America's showcase contribution to rigorous learning and free inquiry throughout the region based in a free, open, and pluralist Lebanon. They have represented America's unique educational and cultural footprint in the Arab region for nearly 2 centuries.

MEDIUM TERM

1. Creative ways must be found to **team up and coordinate with the Russians on shared goals in the Eastern Mediterranean** that would include **the preservation of Lebanon** as a unique though fragile experiment (despite its many flaws) in native religious and sectarian peaceful pluralist coexistence. Specifically, to work closely with the Russians **to repatriate back to safe parts of their native Syria the hundreds of thousands of Syrian displaced currently in Lebanon** thereby relieving the small host country of this enormous and unsustainable burden on its meager resources as well as its finely balanced demography. Additionally, to partner with the Russians **to reduce Iran's footprint in both Syria and Lebanon**, while also making sure Turkish leader **Erdogan's fanatical neo-Ottomanist imperial thrust** in the Near East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean is **thwarted**.

2. **Tackle the Iranian menace** (either through comprehensive negotiations, or by other means) **first at the source**, not in derivative and delicate theaters like Lebanon.

3. **Work with both France and the Vatican** when they extend a helping hand **to support Lebanon's vital educational sector**, bolster its freedoms, and offer a cultural umbilical cord that **reinforces Lebanon's deep Western ties**. Lebanon's many universities and schools including the Anglo-Saxon ones play a uniquely crucial role in the education and spread of liberal values not only within the country but regionally and beyond.

4. **Allow Lebanon to have a modest share in Syria's impending reconstruction** when the right time comes because this small yet vital oasis of freedom will need urgent economic relief.

5. Give Lebanon tangible incentives to create a **truly independent judicial system** that enforces **accountability under the law** from top to bottom.

6. Help to **instill** in the new and reformed Lebanese ruling class the habit of resorting to **the "Build-Operate-Transfer" (BOT) approach to economic and infrastructure development, or transparent and regulated Public-Private Partnership (PPP)** whereby major assets of the state and large development projects are leased out to competent external developers for a set period of time in return for cash up front only to be restored to the state after the developers have recovered their investment and some profits. BOT has been persistently resisted by the corrupt and thieving ruling class in Lebanon over the decades because they saw they could not engage in their usual quick short-term robberies through any truly transparent version of it.

7. **Help Lebanon strengthen its agricultural and industrial sectors** by investing in them so that the country can become more self-sufficient in these two vital areas. Allow for **Gulf Arab resources** to be invested in these two vital sectors.

8. Have the **US government** serve **as the only credible third-party arbiter** between a future Lebanese government and Israel **on the final demarcation of the joint land and maritime borders**, in particular regarding the disputed area of Lebanon's undersea oil and gas reserves along the Israeli-Lebanese maritime demarcation line. Once completed, this should be

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

MEDIUM TERM

followed by internationally monitored **unitization of extraction** as well as exploration of cost-effective ways to **unify refining and delivery** to European markets or elsewhere of these hydrocarbons.

9. Push for the ability of **Christians in Lebanon** to be unimpeded in **making future pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the Holy Land** for religious purposes. It is discriminatory that native Christians of the Near East cannot visit the holy places of their faith like all other Christians from around the world.

10. For the wealthy and Lebanon-loving **Lebanese diaspora to invest again in Lebanon** their trust and confidence need to be restored. The same is true for **the return of Gulf Arab investments**. This can only happen if the corrupt ruling apparatus is systematically dismantled, and **transparency and trust** are reinforced through an independent judiciary bolstered by international oversight.

11. Help to **slow down, put a halt to, or even reverse Christian emigration out of Lebanon**, and along with it the departure of much precious human capital and talent.

12. Preserve **a spot in the Arab world (Lebanon)** where **those native to the region suffering from repression in their own societies can come for a breather and feel liberated and refreshed** before returning home and without having to exit the region altogether.

LONG TERM

1. Coordinate closely with the Holy See and with the churches both in Lebanon and around the world for the **preservation of free indigenous Christianity in Lebanon and the Near East**. This includes maintaining **security and stability along with opportunities** to prevent emigration in droves of Christian youth and the consequent disastrous demographic depletion. It also means **incentivizing the return of Lebanese youth** from abroad to find lucrative employment opportunities back home. Freedom nurtured indigenously as in Lebanon over long centuries and in the face of endless hardships is the Middle East's only future hope. **Protecting the freest society in the still freest country in the Arab Middle East is sufficient to make an airtight case for Lebanon.**

2. Work to **anchor the federal option for a future Lebanon**: Lebanon as a constitutionally declared democratic federal state with considerable local autonomy for its various sectarian communities, with a clear constitutional option for a civil category, with layers of protection of individual and group rights and freedoms, and with robust shared umbrella areas that unify the bonds of the federal state's diverse components.

Conclusion

IT WAS ARRESTING AFTER THE AUGUST 4 BLAST TO SEE THRONGS OF RESIDENTS FROM

the mainly Christian areas of devastated Beirut near the port gather around French President Emmanuel Macron, who had made it a point to visit the destroyed neighborhood, and clamor openly for a return of the French Mandate nearly 100 years to the day since its inception in 1920. Such displays of nostalgia for a vanished past, while understandable under the current poignant circumstances, are in the end counterproductive. The same is true about any longing for an exclusively Christian Lebanon, even if smaller in size and confined enclave-style to the central mountain regions. The general secretary to the French High Commissioner in 1920, Robert de Caix, expressed apprehensions for the Christians who were about to become part of an oversized and multi-religious Lebanon. He was reacting to what seemed at the time to him like "Maronite overreach", something that

later became the foundation for Lebanon's "confessional democracy" with its string of compromises fed by Christian demographic diminution and paralleled by their political emasculation.¹² De Caix was ahead of his time and was thinking in "federal" terms, although with a decided territorial orientation: Mount Lebanon for the Maronites, Beirut for the Sunnis and Greek Orthodox, and Sidon for the Shiites.¹³ A properly crafted future unified Lebanon along *constitutional* (not territorial) federal lines, however, would be the modified answer to de Caix's justified fears. As mentioned earlier, such federalism practiced under the rule of law would offset sub-state loyalties while reinforcing and even celebrating sub-state identity affiliations.

Always, there is the "Why?" question concerning Lebanon's very existence. And always, the answer has to focus on freedom, a dwindling commodity in the wider Arab and Middle Eastern region. Despite Lebanon's many woes alongside the worsening climate of freedom in the Near and Middle Eastern vicinities, Christians remain far freer in Lebanon than anywhere else in the Arab or Israeli (not to mention Turkish or Persian) domains. But if emigration of Lebanon's youth as happened back in 1920, in particular that of the Christians, accelerates today following the precipitous decline over the past year on all economic, financial, and security fronts in Lebanon, very little will be left to buoy up hope. Constantly shifting threats from mutating versions of both Sunni and Shiite extremist Islamist ideologies necessitate an equally adaptive defensive strategy of balance practiced on the part of those communities in the direct line of fire, the Christians being in the forefront of these. Such balance will also shelter Lebanon's moderate Muslims, a large majority in their own right. Today, the paramount menace is from Shiite Iran; tomorrow, it might come from Turkey's Erdogan or some other militant Sunni direction. Balance, along with the continuous cultivation of solid friendships around the region and the world, will provide the much needed shielding protection for Lebanon's vulnerable communities.

Every country where Iran has dominated—Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and now Lebanon—lies in ruins. Stated in the obverse, any country or territory from which the West departs ends up worse off—beyond the Middle East, one could point to Cuba, Venezuela, and Hong Kong as obvious examples. The West has not exited Lebanon completely, nor should it principally because Western interests are at stake. Helping the Lebanese to restore lost confidence and trust in their political system, their institutions, their judiciary, their banks, and new leaders will go a long way in arresting at Lebanon's borders the regional collapse of freedom. A strengthened Lebanese civil society will work to methodically dismantle the militia-mafia cartel of enablers and looters that currently hold the people of Lebanon captive.

FOOTNOTES

1 Meir Zamir, *The Formation of Modern Lebanon, 1918-1926* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 75-76.

2 William Harris refers to Lebanon as "an increasingly elaborate and eccentric sectarian pluralism". See his *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 147.

3 Quoted in Zamir, *Formation of Modern Lebanon*, p. 81.

4 Nearly all Biblical references to Lebanon without exception are positive ones unlike most of those for Egypt. See Rev. Ghassan Elia Khalaf, *Lebanon in the Bible: A Theological and Historical Study* (Beirut: Dar al-Manhal al-Hayat, 1985), p. 9. On Jesus's visit to the environs of Tyr and Sidon see Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30.

5 Conversation in February 2020 with Kamal Badr, MD, Dean of Medical Education at the American University of Beirut Medical Center.

6 Much has been written about Hezbollah in English. Perhaps one of the finest analyses comes in Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011), 544 pages.

7 The Finance Minister in the Hezbollah-steered (now caretaker) government of Prime Minister Hassan Diab, Ghazi Wazni, himself a protégé of Parliament Speaker Berri, a staunch Hezbollah ally, declared bluntly on 2 July 2020 that the political group he represents refuses any forensic audit conducted by the acclaimed firm of Kroll, a division of Duff and Phelps, into the finances of Lebanon's Central Bank as had been proposed by the government three months earlier. The predictable and convenient excuse used was that Kroll had "close ties" with Israel. See <https://www.the961.com/finance-minister-refuses-forensic-audit-bdl/>.

8 Hannah Arendt, author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

9 See Alasdair Soussi, "The Spanish Flu Pandemic and Its Impact on the Middle East", in *The National, Lifestyle*, February 10, 2018. <https://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/the-spanish-flu-pandemic-and-its-impact-on-the-middle-east-1.703289>.

10 It must be acknowledged that the Ottomans in their day devised the *millet* system representing their willingness to work with the given of sectarian diversity and to offer administrative decentralization and local autonomy in Mount Lebanon to these various *millets*. But this only happened after European pressure was applied in 1860, while concurrently the *dhimmi* category was never eliminated from Ottoman thinking. The line from there to Erdogan's intolerance, despite the 80-year Kemalist interlude, has been a natural one.

11 For the full text of Patriarch Cardinal Ra'i's official statement on Lebanon's neutrality see "Al-Rahi Announces Memorandum on 'Lebanon and Active Neutrality'", published in Naharnet, 17 August 2020. See <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/274237-al-rahi-announces-memorandum-on-lebanon-and-active-neutrality>.

12 Harris, *Lebanon: A History*, pp. 178-185, p. 150 & p. 180.

13 Zamir, *Formation of Modern Lebanon*, p. 93.



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