

# How Lebanon's Terrifying Past is Threatening a Lost Future

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

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**Even as Lebanon struggles with basic necessities, the country will need to explore radical reforms in education and other sectors if it is ever to break out of the cycle of repeated collapse.**

It is no longer a surprise that Lebanon is now globally perceived as a failed state—a nation where impunity, incompetence, nepotism, and corruption prevails. What the international community seems to overlook in its commentary on Lebanon's current collapse is the fact that politics in Lebanon has been doomed ever since the Taif Accord—signed in Saudi Arabia on October 22, 1989. Although the agreement promoted coexistence and allowed for a certain extent of restored peace and political normalcy after Lebanon's devastating civil war, it furthered Syria's tutelage over Lebanon by legitimizing the presence of Syrian troops in Lebanese territory, strengthened political sectarianism across the country by abolishing meritocracy and embracing kakistocracy, and empowered warlords' control of their former polities by dividing the spoils of war amongst militia leaders. With a failed political class, Lebanon needs significant structural societal reforms if it is to create a new generation of Lebanese political leadership. While the country is currently struggling with the basic necessities of life, large-scale reform will eventually be needed if Lebanon is to come back from this period, especially on the failures of the country's educational system.

Under the Taif agreement, successive Lebanese governments deliberately undermined the country's public institutions as they were representatives of those same parties that, during the war, were involved in war crimes against their own people. Each of Lebanon's ruling parties has contributed to the failure of the state by infiltrating the structure of both public and private spheres in an all-encompassing manner, spanning from education to defense, healthcare, finance, media, agriculture, justice, foreign policy, and commerce. As a result of this malady, the Lebanese state has embarked upon a self-destructive plan that not only inflicts pain on its own people but also further empowers its corrupt leaders, who thrive on Lebanon's sectarian divisions.

As a means to justify their corruption and maintain power, the rhetoric of the country's senior leadership often

focuses on Lebanon being in a constant state of threat from its historic enemy—Israel. Yet this same leadership is leading the country towards its own demise. With Lebanon apparently managing its own collapse quite well, it is likely that Israel is content with this status-quo and an increasingly weak neighbor. Moreover, Lebanese should realize that a full-scale attack from Israel is unlikely to happen as it knows the price of any future war with Lebanon will be costly, regardless of the clear power imbalance between both countries.

As such, While Hezbollah and its allies often claim that their presence is necessary to protect Lebanese from Israel, it is these parties that have imploded the country from the inside out ever since the assassination of Rafik Hariri and consequently, the withdrawal of the Syrian army in 2005. This pseudo-transformational leadership—supported by Hezbollah—is technically the biggest parliamentary bloc and comprises in its totality Iran’s long arm in the region. Yet Hezbollah wouldn’t have triumphed without partnering with the main political groups in previous parliamentary, municipal, and presidential elections. As such, Lebanese politicians have not only furthered the expansion of proxy wars in the Middle East but also left Lebanon adrift, isolated, and disconnected from the international community.

In fact, all political parties that had been involved in the country’s Civil War demonstrated their keenness to thwart reforms in Lebanon when they pushed against civil society activists in the 2018 elections. These frustrations helped drive the 2019 revolution slogan “All Means All”—when Lebanese came to the streets to protest government corruption, they emphasized with this cry that all Lebanese politicians, regardless of their sects and loyalties, are jointly responsible for Lebanon’s political instability, social unrest, and economic collapse.

However, these existential issues will not effectively be addressed—and will return even if Lebanon’s current crisis is ameliorated—without reforms on a deeper societal level. Even were the Lebanese political system not controlled by the current political parties, the Lebanese people would not likely be able to solve its political deadlock.

Unfortunately, the sectarian policies coupled with a failed education system have left the vast majority of Lebanese without a sense of national identity, a sense of belonging, or social cohesion. Neither the Lebanese political parties nor their supporters are willing to sacrifice any unearned sectarian privileges to save the country. These views have been cemented by a flawed educational structure—partially established by warlords and corrupt politicians to shape educational narratives that serve their interests—that has done little service to Lebanon’s post-Civil War generations and fueled the country’s brain drain.

For example, because Lebanon’s sectarian constitution divides public institutions and government jobs between Muslims and Christians, students often find themselves obliged to join a university run by people with similar religious beliefs and a similar political affiliation in order to guarantee success. This, of course, negates the basic principles of secular education to which all public universities were established, strengthens and prolongs the deleterious effects of sectarianism, and negatively affects higher education attainment rates because the majors offered in a campus dominated by a specific religion may differ from the majors offered in another campus dominated by another religion or sect. Similarly, cronyism is rife in many private schools and universities, whereby politicians hire faculty and staff of the same political background to advance their authority in the political arena, within their party, faction, or legislature.

These biased education systems and dysfunctional schools have in many cases successfully radicalized their communities and helped to craft a deep state that can successfully nip reform initiatives in the bud. Therefore, many Lebanese have become their own worst enemy—products of a sectarian system incapable of waiving tribal loyalties that have transformed what was once called the Paris of the Middle East into a place of lawless anarchy. In order to save Lebanon from being the mere firewood in the hands of the unscrupulous, overcome past civic injuries, and eliminate religious intolerance, Lebanese will have to shed their sectarian skin, stop electing their tormentors, respect others’ beliefs, and acknowledge racially, ethnically, and culturally distinct others—who all together make up

Lebanon.

Certainly, Lebanon cannot avert its total collapse without extensive reforms that address some of the failures of the post-1989 state. While there are many competing issues at present, it is important not to neglect educational reforms—these are what will provide the public with a strong basis to fight for a sovereign nation. While far from easy, it is vital for Lebanon to work towards its public education system and reconfigure its schooling to include pluralism, secularism, and diversity in all aspects of teaching and learning.

As a first step, local leaders of education who hope to effect change should partner with local and international NGOs to ensure the implementation of the Education for All initiatives and UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 to which Lebanon subscribes. Further, to adequately support teacher development and school improvement, international observers should ensure that donor funds go directly to low-income schools rather than the government. Equally important, accreditation bodies should consistently examine diversity on college campuses and monitor student enrollment rates at public and private universities if they are to create inclusive learning environments conducive to creative inquiry, self-reflection, and civic engagement.

Today, given the international community's pledge to help Lebanon, countries are invited to step up support and foster synergies between all Lebanese entities in order to create a functional education system that can raise a new generation of educators who share a sense of national identity, social cohesion, and national unity. Once Lebanese educators have met the educational requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities and colleges in Lebanon will then be able to prepare well-rounded citizens who can actively participate in transforming their country into a developed one. Nevertheless, for this to occur, Lebanese citizens must realize that they can be part of a solution to a situation that most believe unattainable. ❖

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