RULE OF LAW

Support to Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace in Lebanon

by Adam Day,
March 2021

1. Introduction

The scene of a long and brutal civil war (1975-1990) and multiple wars with Israel, Lebanon has more recently been hailed for its resilience, having endured the region's upheaval and seemingly absorbed the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war. This celebrated resilience – based on the country's perceived economic and financial strength and relatively stable confessional power-sharing system – has been rocked over the last decade, exposing Lebanon's structural fault lines and vulnerabilities. Indeed, the Syria crisis may be best understood as an acceleration of underlying weaknesses in the Lebanese system, many of which revolve around polarized politics and poor rule of law governance capacities.

Since the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011, Lebanon has undergone a series of overlapping crises that have devastated its economy, strained relations amongst communities, and driven hundreds of thousands of people into vulnerability. As of late 2020, the country was host to roughly 1.5 million refugees who fled the war in Syria, causing massive strains on Lebanon's public institutions and driving up tensions with many host communities.[1] The Syria conflict also significantly impacted Lebanon's social and economic growth, exacerbating an already fragile economy and contributing to a USD 18 billion downturn in growth rate.[2] A stagnant economy and a paralysed Lebanese Government triggered social unrest across the country,

including widespread protests in 2019 and 2020 that turned violent, including during confrontations between politically-affiliated groups as well as with security services.[3] While a new Government took power in early 2020 (only to resign months later and lapse into caretaker mode), the combination of severe outbreaks of COVID-19 and a massive explosion in Beirut on 4 August 2020 has caused further economic collapse, pushing even more of the population into vulnerability, contributing to huge inequalities in terms of access to services, and threatening to worsen the risks of further unrest. Continued calls for reform of the governance system, recurrent complaints about lack of freedom of expression and the heavy-handed response by the security services, have kept Lebanon extremely tense into 2021.[4]

This multifaceted crisis is happening within a context of deep and structural gender inequalities. Lebanon has one of the highest overall gender gaps in the world (ranking 145 out of 153 countries in the 2020 World Economic Forum *Gender Gap* report), and amongst the lowest global rates of women's labour market participation, hovering at 29 per cent for women[5] and 76 per cent for men.[6] Women's participation in politics is cited as some of the worst in middle-income countries (women represent only 4.6 per cent of the 128 elected officials in Parliament). Youth have also expressed strong dissatisfaction with the Government,

often leading protests and pushing for ambitious reforms. Public confidence in the State, in particular by marginalized groups but also more broadly, has been badly damaged by the 2020 Beirut explosion and the stalled efforts to take forward an investigation into those accountable for it.

Lebanon's precarious position today is also the result of a decades-long struggle to emerge from a long period of *de facto* tutelage under Syria and recurrent occupations of Lebanese territory by Israel. The 2006 Lebanon/Israel war remains fresh in the minds of many Lebanese and indeed has been a constant reference point that has allowed Hizbullah to grow into a significant political player in the country. The February 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 22 others in a massive bombing in downtown Beirut was but the most visible and deadly of a series of terrorist attacks that have kept political tensions high and undermined the population's trust in institutions of accountability and security across Lebanon.

This case study examines the UN's response to these crises between 2017 and 2020, focusing on several rule of law programmes the UN put in place to improve access to justice, build the capacity of municipal policing, and address critical governance shortfalls. It is guided by the central question: *How has the UN's rule of law work contributed to the conflict prevention goals of the UN, to a reduction in risk of violent conflict in Lebanon?* As such, it aims to provide an assessment of the impact of the UN, identifying good practices, inhibiting and enabling factors, and lessons for the broader UN system.

The study has five sections: (1) a background description of the risk landscape and the endemic shortfalls in State rule of law capacities; (2) an overview of the main rule of law actors in Lebanon; (3) an assessment of areas where there is evidence of the UN's impact in terms of conflict prevention; (4) an examination of the enabling and inhibiting factors for the UN's impact; and (5) lessons and recommendations for the broader UN system.

A note on scope and methodology

For the UN system, the rule of law is a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards. It covers areas of work such as police, justice, and corrections.[7] However, we recognize that other areas of the UN's work may also contribute to the core goals of the UN's rule of law work, including efforts to combat impunity, build accountability, advance transitional justice, limit corruption, and address conflict-related sexual violence, amongst others. This project does not adopt a strict definition of rule of law but is instead largely guided by interviews with experts in a range of field settings, asking them what they consider to be the key rule of law programmes by the UN and its partners.

Regarding the scope of these studies, it is important to highlight that this is not a comprehensive assessment of the UN's work in a given setting. It does not try to capture every rule of law programme, but instead reflects the views of experts about the most impactful, relevant, and effective rule of law interventions in the given timeframe. This expert-driven approach to cases studies is to ensure that they feed meaningful cross-cutting policy recommendations, which is the core purpose of this project.

In terms of methodology, we note that the UN's rule of law work takes place alongside the interventions of a range of actors, including national leaders, bilateral donors, INGOs, and local organizations. While it is our goal to identify evidence of the UN's impact, often the UN is a small player amongst these, supporting and coordinating rather than leading on programming. Indeed, many of the most

influential roles of the UN are normative, centred around its advocacy and public statements rather than concrete programmatic deliverables. Given these roles and the large number of other intervening factors, it can be difficult to isolate the UN's impact via its rule of law interventions. Rather than speak in direct causal terms about impact, we contextualize the UN's *contribution*, alongside the interventions of others, to the broader goals of risk reduction.[8] Where the precise impact is impossible to ascertain, or where the UN has not generated evidence that directly supports causal findings about impact, we rely on a broad set of expert consultations to help us identify good practice and lessons that could be applied beyond a single country context.[9]

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2. Conflict prevention landscape

Lebanon was described by one UN expert as "surviving in a form of stable instability," meaning that many of the factors that have prevented large-scale conflict in the country are also those that present significant risks. For example, Lebanon's confessional power-sharing system is the outcome of the peace agreement that ended its civil war and is widely seen as a strong hedge against intercommunal conflict. At the same time, the confessional set-asides and quotas in Lebanon's governance system have also led to deeply engrained corruption, a lack of accountability across the political arena, and growing public dissatisfaction in the leadership of the country. Similarly, its strong interdependence with Syria, based on reciprocal arrangements for workers and trade, worked for decades to stabilize Lebanon, but were also part of the reason Lebanon became so deeply affected by the Syrian crisis. The war in Syria has accelerated many of the social, economic, and political drivers of instability, though Syria is by no means the sole cause of the risks facing the country.

Over the first six years of the Syrian conflict, more than 1.5 million Syrians fled to Lebanon (roughly one-quarter of the overall population of Lebanon) and settled in communities across the country. Lebanon had already played host to roughly 450,000 Palestinian refugees since 1948, making the country one of the highest per capita refugee recipients in the world. This influx of newly vulnerable refugees created enormous pressures on Lebanon's already weak public service institutions, overwhelming schools, straining infrastructure, and driving an overburdened health sector further into debt.[10] Roughly three-quarters of the Syrian refugees were women and children with specific and gendered needs. Unemployment, already high before the Syrian crisis, soared, deepening longstanding inequalities and heightening tensions within many host communities.[11] While ostensibly maintaining an open border policy, the Lebanese Government created significant *de facto* obstacles for the Syrian refugee population in the country, including refusals to offer work permits, deportations, and periodic closures of border crossing points.[12] Refugees have been chronically unable to access basic services and have faced acute challenges in gaining access to justice institutions, also facing serious discrimination in a highly polarized climate.

Fighting from Syria spilled directly into Lebanon as well. In 2014, forces of the Syrian-based Al-Nusra Front and Islamic State temporarily held the town of Arsal. While they were driven out by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Hizbullah in 2017, the border area between Syria and Lebanon has remained extremely tense, with frequent reports of skirmishes and territorial incursions.[13] While the number of deaths was relatively low from these incidents, the fighting drove tensions between Lebanese communities and extremist armed groups higher, contributing to the creation of self-defence groups in

some municipalities starting in 2014 and greater pressures on local police forces. More generally, there are credible reports of the rise of extremist elements within some communities of Lebanon during this period. These dynamics contributed to the deployment of the LAF in greater numbers along the Syria/Lebanon border and a more concerted international effort to support the State security services as part of the extension of State authority in the country.

In the face of unprecedented challenges to the country's stability, Lebanon's political institutions ground to a halt. Sectarian tensions – principally between Hizbullah and a range of Sunni groups – flared up amidst mutual accusations of participating in the Syrian war, leading to a deadlock in Government. Between 2014 and 2016, the country was without a president, while a caretaker Government was unable to take even the most basic of decisions in response to the crisis.[14] While the 2016 election of President Aoun (and the 2018 legislative elections that formed part of the 2016 deal) helped to unlock the governmental paralysis, the Government still proved largely ineffective at addressing the inter-related challenges emanating from the Syria crisis and Lebanon's own downward economic slide. In 2019 and early 2020, large-scale demonstrations took place in protest against increases in taxes, high unemployment, corruption within government, and the lack of basic governance institutions across the country.[15]

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly worsened the already dire economic situation in Lebanon. By the end of 2020, the Lebanese pound had lost more than two-thirds of its value on international markets, while more than half of the population was considered below the poverty line.[16] With the already overburdened healthcare system stretched well beyond its limits, the most vulnerable in Lebanon faced still greater risks to their health and socioeconomic well-being.[17] In March 2020, for the first time in its history, Lebanon defaulted on its sovereign debt.[18]

In August 2020, the Port of Beirut suffered a massive explosion that killed more than 200 people, wounded more than 6,500, and displaced roughly 300,000 residents in surrounding areas.[19] Estimated costs for rebuilding from the damage were in the billions of dollars, contributing to an overall economic contraction of roughly 24 per cent.[20] Women were especially affected by the explosion, triggering a UN Women-led response plan in addition to the umbrella Reform, Recovery & Reconstruction Framework (3RF), no quotations.[21] The explosion further exacerbated socioeconomic hardships for many communities, and dramatically increased levels of distrust in the Government.[22] Concerns about corruption amongst the political elite, a lack of accountability, and the poor governance capacities of Lebanese institutions remained extremely high, underscoring the need for effective, large-scale support to a country that has felt on the brink of more large-scale escalation into violence.

3. Mapping of rule of law actors/processes

As in most countries, the principal rule of law actors in Lebanon are the national institutions, general security, police, judiciary, corrections, and the ministries that oversee them. The LAF also play an outsized role in rule of law provision as well, given the relatively small presence of police throughout the country. However, the Lebanese Government has been largely paralysed for the past ten years, at times completely blocked and at others simply unable to take national decisions on key issues. Moreover, experts have pointed to chronic shortcomings across many other Lebanese institutions, including poor public perceptions of the judiciary, the use of military courts to oversee civilian affairs, poor access to justice for much of the population, non-functioning anti-corruption efforts by the State, lack of parliamentary oversight of key governance functions, and an increasingly heavy-handed response to popular protests by the Lebanese security services. As a result of these shortfalls and the strong international presence in Lebanon since the post-Taef reconfiguration, bilateral donors, INGOs, the UN and other groups in advocating for governance and rule of law improvements may be more relevant and impactful than in some other contexts.

Lebanon has been the recipient of enormous amounts of bilateral aid and support during the last four years, including significant support to governance institutions. Much of this support is channelled through the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) that has several programmes designed to improve access to services, support host communities, and address the governance shortfalls in Lebanon.[23] Additional significant support to the Lebanese security services has also been provided through the Rome Conference and major bilateral initiatives to support the LAF.[24] The top donors in this context are the US, Germany, France, the EU, the UK, Norway and Canada.[25] In some cases, such as the US and UK support to the LAF, this funding is provided directly to the Government.[26] International NGOs – in particular the American Bar Association and the Norwegian Refugee Council– have played an important role in providing advisory and capacity support to rule of law institutions as well.[27]

International support to Lebanon ramped up significantly in the wake of the August 2020 explosion, after which donors pledged an additional USD 11 billion for reconstruction (some of which will be used for improving the governance capacities of the State and combating corruption).[28] The principal channel for this support has been Lebanon's 3RF, which articulates as a key priority the reform of governance institutions and better accountability.[29] Here, the World Bank, the EU and the UN collaborated in producing the 3RF, working with Lebanese civil society and the Government. Donor support also ramped up and reframed in

response to the COVID-19 Lebanon Emergency Appeal, launched in March 2020 that had received USD 91 million by 31 December for activities to be implemented outside the LCRP.

Of course, not all international support to Lebanon is for crisis response. For example, there was a USD 11 billion international pledging conference in April 2018, held to help Lebanon stave off the current economic collapse. International pledges were conditioned on adopting and implementing fairly minimal reforms, including many in the rule of law arena. However, experts have suggested that these initiatives, along with ongoing discussions with the International Monetary Fund, have not prompted the kind of serious reforms to the Lebanese governance system required to unlock a new relationship with the international donor community and other international financial institutions.

Within the UN system, the main actors working on rule of law issues since 2017 have been UNDP, UNHCR, UNODC, OHCHR, UN Women,[30] and the Resident Coordinator's Office (which is integrated into the UN's special political mission in Lebanon, UNSCOL). As a special political mission, UNSCOL plays a lead role across the UN in advocating for improved rule of law and governance reforms, including in the context of Resolution 1701, which expressly concerns Lebanon's security and stability. The peacekeeping mission, UNIFIL, also plays a role in supporting some rule of law work in southern Lebanon. Much of the UN's work during this period has been orchestrated under the 2017-2022 Integrated Strategic Framework, the LCRP and more recently the 3RF, all of which provide broad umbrellas for cooperation by the UN. It is also worth noting that some agencies (e.g. UNHCR and UNDP) and OHCHR also maintain regional offices that cover Lebanon and the other countries in the Middle East. The Integrated Strategic Framework provides a full outline of UN actors and partners.[31] The 1325 National Action Plan also contains some independent rule of law programming.

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon, formed by UN Security Council Resolution 1757, was created to establish accountability for the February 2005 bombing that killed Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 22 others. While not a UN entity per se, its work is considered integral to the international community's efforts to combat terrorism, build systems of accountability, and help to address deep public scepticism in the institutions of the State.

It is worth a specific mention of the role of women and youth in pushing popular protests during the 2019-2020 period. Though historically marginalized in politics and the broader socioeconomic landscape of Lebanon, there are signs that some women-led organizations may now be playing a more influential role in the domestic trajectory of the country.[32]

4. Rule of law impact

This section assesses the extent to which the UN's rule of law interventions may have reduced the risk of escalation into widespread violence, focusing on the 2017-2020 period. It does not attempt to capture the full range of UN programming in-county, but rather relies on the available data and a range of expert interviews to identify the most impactful and relevant work in the rule of law arena.

Access to justice

Lebanon faced significant access to justice constraints before the Syria crisis, including chronic issues related to victims of past political killings, families of the disappeared, and communities that had limited institutional capacities as a result of the power-sharing arrangements across the Government. In this context, the influx of more than one million Syrian refugees into Lebanon contributed to a significant overburdening of Lebanese institutions and highlighted the severe constraints on the ability of Syrians and other marginalized communities to access key services. More than 70 per cent of Syrians in Lebanon lack legal documentation, while the Lebanese Government has strongly resisted issuing formal residency permits or other documentation that would allow them access to justice.[33] Women refugees (which constitute more than half of the Syrian population in Lebanon) have faced particular forms of discrimination and higher hurdles in terms of accessing legal institutions across Lebanon.[34]

It is important to note that the situation facing Syrians is indicative of a broader shortcoming in the Lebanese system. Lebanese citizens – particularly those in poorer communities – have struggled to access State justice institutions, often relying more on informal, local mechanisms to resolve disputes.[35] Surveys indicate that poor access to justice has been one of the key reasons behind the growing tensions between the Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees, which at times escalated into violence.[36] Syrian refugees were especially affected by security measures targeting their settlements, such as curfews and raids, with little recourse to the Lebanese justice system.[37] But Lebanese citizens too have faced decades of poor access to justice, a problem which has only worsened in recent years.

Women across Lebanon face serious obstacles to accessing justice processes, though the barriers differ in part based on confession. Lebanon recognizes fifteen different personal legal statuses, depending on confession (Sunni, Shia, Druze, and a variety of Christian sects).[38] Each of these has a separate set of courts to address issues around personal status.[39] Regardless of their confession, women face similar barriers in accessing justice processes, including due to lack of knowledge of their rights, limited financial means, and cultural impositions on their role in public.[40] Women also face the legal hurdle of not being able to pass nationality on

to their children, creating significant problems with accessing institutions for their families (while this issue is a longstanding one that arose from the large Palestinian population in Lebanon, it has come to affect Syrian refugees as well).

Several UN initiatives were put in place between 2017 and 2020 to help address the shortcomings in access to justice. Amongst these initiatives is the establishment of the Access to Justice Working Group, composed of UNDP, UNHCR, the Bar associations of Beirut and Tripoli, under the lead of the Ministry of Justice. According to a range of experts, the coordinated work of the UN and other actors in the access to justice space has helped to bring the key actors together in Lebanon, avoid duplication, and develop a national joint strategy on legal aid. This group's establishment was part of a USD 3.5 million UNDP-led project entitled "Enhancing Community Security and Access to Justice in Lebanon Host Communities" taken forward jointly with UNHCR and with funding from the Netherlands and Canada.[41] The project has helped to build the capacities for the Lebanese State to monitor tensions and be more responsive to risks when they arise, including by increasing the access of Syrians and Lebanese to justice institutions.

While it is difficult to quantify access to justice progress, there are several indications that the UN's work has increased the ability of vulnerable groups to take advantage of legal services in many parts of Lebanon. Some of the key accomplishments in this field include:

- UNDP, UNHCR, the Ministry of Justice and the Bar associations of Tripoli and Beirut through the Access to Justice Working Group supported the development of a national strategy on legal aid and laid the foundations for a **hybrid civil legal assistance system** to be piloted through helpdesks in dozens of municipalities (offering free legal services to disadvantaged people);

- The same grouping supported the Tripoli Bar Association to set up a hotline for free legal assistance in the COVID-19 crisis, including for SGBV survivors and migrant workers; UN Women has now joined these efforts and, with UNDP, is funding and supporting the Tripoli Bar Association to deliver legal aid services to survivors of SGBV, and to build a SGBV investigator roster in the north of the country;

- UNDP supported the Beirut Bar Association's work to help safeguard the legal rights of over 1,000 victims of the Beirut blast;

- UN Women has been working with Anti-Racism Movement and Legal Aid Worldwide (LAW) to provide legal aid services to migrant domestic workers. On 8 October 2020, with support from UN Women, LAW filed a ground-breaking case on behalf of a migrant domestic worker in Lebanon, arguing that her treatment "constituted crimes of slavery, slave trading, trafficking in persons, forced labour, deprivation of liberty and withholding personal documents, racial discrimination, gender discrimination, and torture." The case is moving through national courts;

- UN Women, with LAW, is undertaking a study on gender-based violence and crimes during Lebanon's civil war. The objective is to contribute to issues of accountability and reconciliation.

Taken together, these efforts have improved access to justice for thousands of Syrian refugees, women, and other marginalized populations of Lebanon. While they have not yet addressed the structural issues facing marginalized populations – indeed, the legal framework remains a complex and challenging one for refugees to manage – improving access to justice in the short term has the benefit of addressing issues that might escalate into greater tensions if left unaddressed.

Municipal police

Lebanon has a unique distribution of security tasks across its army, internal security, and police, with many traditional police duties conducted by the LAF (e.g. crowd control, criminal investigations, anti-trafficking). This presents a set of challenges for the UN to support improved policing, though given the growing internal tensions in Lebanon, the need for municipal policing capacities has increasingly been seen as crucial to preventing violence. In particular, as tensions between host communities and Syrian refugee settlements rose during the Syria crisis, the use of these security agencies was seen as potentially risky, given their role in imposing curfews and arrests and the risks of excessive force. In this context, UNDP and UNHCR collaborated with the Ministry of Interior and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) training academy to build up community police with training, integration of women into the police force, and increasing the police force's capacities to de-escalate. Complementing this, UNDP's tension monitoring system has helped to identify areas where additional municipal policing might be required and to build a common core of skills in community policing. UN Women is working with the ISF on issues of social norms, to include awareness-raising on gender equality and women's rights into the standard trainings of uniformed personnel.

In 2017, UNDP supported the development of standard operating procedures and a code of conduct for the municipal police. UNDP also assisted the ISF Academy with the development of a new curriculum for the municipal police, with modules on social skills that focus on conflict management, negotiation, and effective communications. Roughly 500 municipal police officers were trained by the ISF Academy, with UNDP support. UNDP also promoted stronger inclusion of women in municipal police services, with this issue enshrined as one of the five strategic components of the municipal police reform programme developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior.

With technical support by UNDP, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities collected data and analysis on tensions between Syrian refugees and host communities across more than 900 municipalities in Lebanon through the Security Cells. This comprehensive set of data has informed national senior officials on risks of conflicts at the local level across the country. In 2020, the Ministry of Interior shared its security cells report with 63 entities, including ministries, Governors, Parliament and the President's office, helping to build a more common approach to community security.

OHCHR supported the development of a Code of Conduct for the LAF, which was launched in January 2019. Following the launch, the LAF Commander announced new positions of Legal Advisors in all the institution departments in charge of monitoring the dissemination of the Code of Conduct and its proper implementation. (OHCHR also supported the development and updates of Codes of Conduct for the ISF in 2012 and 2017). OHCHR also engaged with the General Security Office (GSO) on developing their Code of Conduct in 2016. In 2019 and 2020, OHCHR supported GSO with a capacity-building programme on migration and borders management targeting more than two hundred GSO personnel on the borders including the airport.

According to several experts, this work has helped the municipal police become a far more important player in reducing tensions, especially in areas hosting large Syrian populations. And these impacts have been widespread: over 200 municipalities are already implementing at least one aspect of the broader reform, and it has been disseminated to more than 550 municipalities. "Getting the municipal police and the ISF to work together on community security is the best chance to keep tensions low around Lebanon," one expert noted.

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Governance after the Beirut explosion

The August 2020 explosion in Beirut caused catastrophic damage to the city and cost hundreds of lives. The explosion, and the stalled efforts by the Lebanese State to investigate and establish accountability, have shaken public confidence and contributed to a significant risk of more widespread unrest.

In the wake of the explosion, the UN, EU and the World Bank developed the 3RF, which principally concerns reconstruction and recovery. However, in developing the plan, and in the context of widespread protests against the Government, the 3RF also includes work to strengthen the independence of the judiciary, implementation of an anti-corruption strategy (including by staffing up and funding the National Anti-Corruption Commission) and strengthening the oversight roles of some government inspection units. As laid out in the plan, Lebanon should adopt new governance models that breaks the capture by political elites of State institutions and helps to build popular trust in the Government. The plan articulates a collaborative approach, based on the inclusion of government, civil society, private sector and development partners. "Building a transparent, viable rule of law capacity in the Lebanese State is a crucial element of the 3RF," one UN expert noted, while others stressed that addressing corruption and improving public confidence in the State were important to preventing more popular unrest.[42]

Though the initial assessment was criticized for being "gender blind," UN Women subsequently coordinated the efforts of 46 feminist activists and women's rights organizations to issue a unified "Charter of Demands". The Charter represents signatories' concerns and demands for an immediate humanitarian assistance process that recognizes and addresses existing gender inequalities and seeks to ensure that all women and girls' needs and priorities are met and that the process is transparent and subjected to due diligence as well as clear accountability mechanisms. The Charter also advocates for the inclusion of voices and needs of all women (especially the most vulnerable groups) in the reconstruction and reform plans of Lebanon.[43] Since then, the representatives of this feminist civil society platform met with the donors' community in Lebanon (October 2020) and with the leadership of the UN, World Bank, and EU (November 2020) to share their concerns and demands. In addition, the members of the platform were actively engaged in the development of the 3RF recovery plan that is more inclusive of women, girls, and marginalized groups' needs in Lebanon. UN Women continues to support the formalization of this platform and to expand its mandate and focus beyond the response to the Beirut explosion.

The 3RF is still being operationalized and it is too soon to understand its impact in terms of tension reduction. However, several UN experts noted that there were good practices that could be identified in terms of leveraging major donors and international financial institutions to push through governance reforms at the national level.

Prisons

Several shortcomings in the Lebanese prison system were identified by experts as potentially affecting the risks of violence in Lebanon. Lengthy delays in trials, allegations of torture, overcrowding, and a dominant role by military (rather than civilian) justice mechanisms were pointed to as key areas needing reform. Several initiatives and programmes have been implemented to address these issues since 2017.

For example, processing prisoners in Lebanon has fallen largely to the Ministry of Interior over the past ten years, despite the clear need to build the capacity of the Ministry of Justice to take on greater responsibility in caseload management. UNODC and UNDP have jointly worked with the two ministries in this regard, and in 2016 agreement was reached with the Government to shift the principal responsibility, a key step in

improving civilian oversight of justice. In addition, a USD 7 million Dutch-funded project on Egypt and Lebanon has helped to strengthen internal management of prisons, build more rehabilitation programmes, and put in place measures to protect children and other vulnerable groups being processed by the justice system.[44]

Some of UNDP's work has helped reduce overcrowding in Roumieh prison, addressing infrastructural issues that had prevented the use of common areas for more than 3,000 prisoners. UNDP's support to women inmates has also improved rehabilitation programming for over 100 people in recent years. UN Women is currently working in Roumieh prison, providing skills training and cash for work to non-violent female offenders that are due for release in the next year to help them prepare for social integration.

Preventing violent extremism

Violent extremism in Lebanon has become a far more central issue during the Syrian conflict amidst the widespread reports that extremist elements had gained a stronger foothold in the country, though it should be stressed that Lebanon's experience with violent extremism predates the Syrian crisis.[45] Within the UN, there is a strong recognition that the prevention of violent extremism must account for underlying structural factors (deep social inequalities, alienation of some social groups, governance failures) alongside the more immediate risks emanating from the conflict.

Here, the UN has supported the Government's development of a national preventing violent extremism (PVE) strategy and National Action Plan, which was formally launched in 2018. While implementation of the plan is ongoing, there has been progress in establishing a PVE network, a monitoring and evaluation framework, an early warning system, and PVE training materials for State actors. During 2019, a series of national consultations were held throughout Lebanon on the nine pillars of the National Strategy for PVE, including governmental entities, municipalities, civil society, private sector, universities and international organizations, with the goal of feeding insights into a National Action Plan. Within the action plan, the justice pillar received funding from the UK and had begun implementation in 2019 but was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, several experts noted that the establishment of the plan itself sent a helpful message from the Government that extremism was an issue that required a national response, which helped reassure some communities that might otherwise feel a greater need to take issues into their own hands (e.g. via the creation of community defence groups).

According to UN experts in Lebanon, it is too early in this process to identify the impact of these efforts, though they are included here to indicate the priority placed on this issue, and also the risks that violent extremism poses to the country.

Accountability and justice

While much of the focus in Lebanon has been on the recent set of crises, the country is also dealing with the legacy of its long civil war, from which thousands of disappearances and killings have not been addressed via any justice process to date.[46] Addressing the past history of large-scale crimes during the civil war, however, is an important facet of building a stronger sense of accountability, and in reducing longstanding tensions amongst communities. After years of advocacy, in 2018, OHCHR supported the development and passage of Lebanon's Law 105, which formally establishes a National Commission for the Mission and Forcibly Disappeared in Lebanon.[47] In 2020, this Commission was provided with Commissioners and has begun its work, with roughly USD 3 million of support from the UN's Peacebuilding Fund, and partnership with UNDP, OHCHR, and UN Women. While the Commission has not yet begun its formal work and faces strong criticism amongst some quarters in Lebanon, the signal

appears to be a somewhat positive one that Lebanon is taking its human rights obligations seriously, including those related to transitional justice. [48]

One of the most important mechanisms to establish accountability for past crimes has been the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), an independent court based in The Hague that was established by the Security Council in the wake of the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 22 others. In recent years, the STL has concluded the trials for several of the alleged perpetrators of the assassination and has conducted a wide, victim-focused campaign to establish the facts behind the bombing and related acts of terrorism. While the Court has focused on the Rafiq assassination, it should be noted that the trials take place in the context of more than 80 terrorist attacks within Lebanon since the country's independence, including a spate of killings that took place during the Syria civil war.

It is very difficult to assess the impact of the STL, especially as many of the trials are pending, though it is worth highlighting some of its activities. It was the first court to fully establish the role of victims in terrorism-related crimes (Lebanon uses the civil law system based on witnesses rather than victims), which has meant that hundreds of people affected by the bombing have participated in the judicial process. The STL also has a robust outreach programme, which has conducted reconciliation and truth-telling work with eleven universities and sensitization campaigns with the ISF and LAF. As one senior STL member noted, one of the main accomplishments of the Court has been to generate a national conversation about accountability, "it has given some sense that the recurring terrorist attacks in the country might be addressed through something other than more violence … though that end is far from in view."

Overall impact

Lebanon remains in an extremely fragile moment as the combination of the Syrian crisis, strong downward economic trends, COVID-19 restrictions, and the August explosion have placed enormous strains on its society. Continuing social unrest as recently as March 2021 at the time of writing indicate that the risks of broader escalation remain very real, while many of the key structural challenges (e.g. corruption, lack of access to justice, deep sociopolitical divides, and lack of political will to implement meaningful reforms) are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon.

However, as the above overview of the UN's work in-county demonstrates, some of the rule of law over the past four years does appear to have helped to mitigate the risks of instability, if indirectly. In particular, the work to improve access to justice, especially for women, and bolster the role of the municipal police appears to have alleviated some of the more acute strains at the local level, providing communities with the key rule of law capacities needed to improve access to justice and reduce the reliance on the

armed forces to provide security. While direct causal evidence is impossible to establish, several experts interviewed suggested that these improvements may have reduced the risk of greater tensions and possible violence.

In a volatile context involving recurrent large-scale social unrest, the work to gradually improve governance, combat corruption, and address longstanding issues of accountability also appears to have contributed to a reduction of risks, though most trends in Lebanon are quite negative at this time. Much of the impact described above has been in part due to sizeable international funding, which has flowed through both the LCRP and the 3RF, both of which have prioritized governance capacities as areas for intensive programming. As several experts pointed out, there is little evidence to support a finding that the UN has directly reduced risks of violence or escalation, though some of the more indirect influences described above do indicate that small improvements to the governance capacities, particularly at the local level, have helped.

5. Enabling and inhibiting factors

Governmental paralysis

One of the greatest challenges facing Lebanon has been the deeply divided political class governing the country, which has resulted in long periods of paralysis, an inability to effectively and inclusively respond to crises and implement meaningful reforms, and a widespread perception of corruption and lack of political will amongst the elite. In particular in the rule of law area, the Government has invested very little in institutional development (particularly in the rural parts of the country), largely leaving issues like policing and justice to local/municipal authorities. This has meant enormous differences across Lebanon in terms of rule of law capacities, and frequently a need for the UN and its partners to take responsibility for the delivery of projects without a stable partner in government. "We never know when the Government might fall, or go into caretaker mode, or just become overwhelmed with a new crisis, which makes joint planning an extremely difficult task," one UN official noted.[49]

Sectarianism

Lebanon's consociational system has resulted in a proliferation of personal status laws across its 15 recognized religious communities, including separate laws for Sunnis and Shia, as well as for Melkite Greek Catholic, Maronite, and Greek Orthodox.[50] With no formal relationship to the State, courts overseeing these different communities have developed widely disparate levels of access, especially for women. And while a range of Bar associations have provided significant support, the fees associated with these courts have created serious barriers to poorer or otherwise marginalized community members, meaning that access to justice depends in part on religious affiliation and wealth.

Lack of legal status

The influx of Syrians prompted an enormous outpouring of hospitality amongst many Lebanese communities that have hosted more than one million refugees for nearly ten years now. Though there have been serious tensions and moments of violence, the willingness of the Lebanese to continue to host Syrians has been remarkable. The same cannot be said of the Lebanese Government, which has refused to grant basic legal rights to Syrians, imposed erratic and onerous visa requirements on incoming people, and has restricted their right to work in-county.[51] Indeed, Lebanon's failure to ratify the almost universally

accepted Refugee Convention was cited as a major inhibiting factor on the rights of Syrians in Lebanon. This combination of obstacles has meant that Syrians have faced enormous challenges in accessing justice institutions and other protections from the Lebanese State. Indeed, in many respects their status has paralleled that of Palestinian refugees that have lived for decades in Lebanon with similar restrictions on the right to work or move freely in the country. "The single biggest problem for access to justice in Lebanon is the uncertainty over legal status of Syrians," a UN official noted. This view should be balanced against the many other voices who have pointed to domestic governance shortfalls as the main driver of access to justice problems in Lebanon.

Underdeveloped police and judiciary

Lebanon's security is dominated by the LAF, while the police force has received far less attention or resources.[52] At the municipal level, this has meant that rule of law activities (e.g. community policing) have been dominated by the army, which has at times been extremely heavy-handed, and which is not well linked to civilian justice systems. The UN's emphasis on building up the municipal police is a reflection of the need to shift to more civilian forms of rule of law. Similarly, experts have pointed to an underdeveloped and widely distrusted judiciary as a serious challenge in helping to establish accountability and public confidence in the State, particularly in the context of popular unrest.

Socioeconomic downturn

The prolonged and acute economic crisis has not only raised tensions, but has also resulted in a decrease in the number of municipal workers in a number of areas.[53] With even fewer services being delivered and municipal police increasingly placed on the front lines of conflict prevention at a community level, these reductions have kept the State stretched and often unable to deliver. This, in turn, has contributed to the large-scale social unrest (e.g. in October 2019) and the calls for greater accountability and less corruption amongst the political elite. As the economy has descended further, the risks of further unrest have grown.

6. Lessons and recommendations

Drawing from the above analysis, this section provides some broader lessons and recommendations that can be applied across the UN system.

- **Legal status matters.** The influx of Syrians in Lebanon highlighted a pervasive pre-existing problem that has plagued the country for decades: large populations of Palestinians and Syrians have a lesser legal status in-county despite their long-term presence, while poorer Lebanese have faced major access problems as well. Addressing access to justice is more than just a socioeconomic – though poverty is a strong inhibitor of access – it requires dedicated capacities to help marginalized communities overcome the legal hurdles related to their residency, right to work, and right to access State institutions.

- **National plans need local implementation.** Lebanon's governing institutions have been largely paralysed for much of the Syria crisis, leading to huge gaps between the adoption of plans and their implementation. Where the UN has appeared to achieve the most impact – such as in municipal policing – it has been through intensive engagement at the local level, helping to transform broad national commitments into tangible changes on the ground. Dedicated budgets for implementation at the local level are crucial in this regard. Where such local implementation has not been possible or has been significantly constrained – such as the national PVE strategy – plans tend to gather dust on shelves.

- **Gain leverage through conditionality.** The joint EU, World Bank, and UN 3RF plan demonstrates the value of bringing key donors together around support to Lebanon. In fact, several experts noted that the traction achieved with the national authorities (e.g. their commitments on anti-corruption and governance) were largely the result of pressures from Lebanon's major donors. "The message from the major donors has been clear," one expert noted. "The kind of international support that Lebanon has received is conditional on the authorities being much more serious about governance, anti-corruption, and improving access to State institutions."

- **Conduct gender-sensitive assessments and programmes.** Both the refugee influx and the Beirut explosion served to highlight the distinct and significant obstacles that women face in accessing justice, gaining representation in government, and benefiting from foreign assistance. A good practice from the Beirut explosion was the gender-sensitive assessment, which was then used for targeted programming.

- **Gather evidence of impact.** One of the major challenges of this study was encountering any evidence of the impact of the UN's rule of work in Lebanon. Overwhelmingly, the UN gathered information about its activities, but very few programmes were based upon a visible theory of change to demonstrate how those activities might have an effect. This is in part because much of the UN's work is advisory and indirect, but that does not mean programmes should proceed without a sense of the impact they might have. In some areas, such as improving the capacities of the municipal police, the theory of change is fairly accessible, and the evidence of impact is more readily available. In other areas, there did not appear to be any tracking of impact at all. For example, how will the UN's PVE work contribute to a reduction in the risks posed by violent extremism, and how will the UN know it is having an impact? If the UN is to demonstrate the value of its rule of law work, it should place greater emphasis and resources on linking activities to outcomes.

- **Aim for intergenerational impact.** One of the insights from the STL experience has been the focus on young people and the hope to gradually address deeply rooted political divisions for future generations.

As one Lebanese pundit noted, "most of the leadership of Lebanon has been around since the civil war, they aren't going to change their minds, you need to change the minds of their sons and grandsons [and granddaughters]."

- **Treat crises as opportunities.** On the one hand, the UN's rule of law work in Lebanon has suffered from the compounding crises over the past years: the influx of Syrians, the rapid decline of the economy, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the August 2020 Beirut blast, all interspersed with regular social upheaval and mass protests. "There are so many crises every day that it is extremely difficult to advance any one project in partnership with the Government," a UN official remarked. But as the above description of the 3RF highlights, with crisis comes opportunity: the UN, EU and World Bank were able to leverage the significant outpouring of international support following the Beirut explosion to build an ambitious and holistic response plan, one based on improving the governance capacities of the State and rebuilding public confidence in the justice sector in particular. The extent to which this is a sustainable source of funding, given competing priorities in the region, remains to be seen.

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