

More than Aid: Lebanon Needs a Welfare State that Upholds the Rule of Law

The Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action

Abstract

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- *You do not apologize? The World asks us.*

- *You will not grant us forgiveness. Only our death takes the form of forgiveness. And we apologize... We apologize for being late in the womb, but childbirth is difficult these days, and the invading soldiers besiege the entrance to the womb. And you, O World, are the neutral witness.*

Mahmoud Darwish, *Farewell War! Farewell Peace!*

The new war between Lebanon and Israel – hard to date precisely, as the bombardments have been intensifying over the past 12 months – took a destructive turn in September 2024. It is now unfolding as a massacre of unprecedented magnitude. Although the war is still in its early stages, the civilian death toll already exceeds twice that of the 2006 war. Tens of thousands have been injured, and millions have

been displaced.

In this context, it was expected that donors and the international community, particularly Lebanon's so-called "friends," would mobilize to aid a country already burdened by one of the world's most severe economic crises since 2019. Both Lebanese and non-Lebanese residents are struggling to cope or survive amidst countless overlapping crises. Today, displaced persons constitute over 20% of the population (more than 1 million people, with numbers rising daily). Will international aid meet these immense needs? And what is the Lebanese government doing to contain this crisis?

The promises of aid from the international community now seem to dominate the Lebanese government's agenda. It is a confounding situation where the government of a country at war limits its role to nothing more than a fundraising campaign.

On the donors' side, initiatives are quickly unfolding. The Canadian government has already mobilized 15 million dollars^[1], while the United Nations is increasing its fundraising efforts with a target of over 1 billion dollars by the end of 2024^[2]. The European Union, Lebanon's second-largest donor, has decided to offer an additional EUR 10 million, followed by another EUR 30 million, bringing its total aid package for 2024 to over EUR 100 million^[3]. France, alongside Qatar, has delivered an initial shipment of 27 tons of medical supplies and equipment^[4]. It is difficult to estimate all the aid received thus far here, as the Saudis, Emiratis and Qataris are regularly regularly providing aid. Moreover, an international interministerial conference for Lebanon, initiated by the French President, is set to take place in Paris^[5] on October 24, 2024.^[6] While it is still too early to predict the outcome of this conference, we must question its modes of operations and the risks it may pose to local governance and crisis management mechanisms.

A large-scale deployment of international aid is now imminent, exceeding even what was mobilized for Palestinian victims and survivors. This raises the question: How do Lebanese lives compare to Palestinian ones? And what is the value of these lives on the "Levantine blood market," to borrow once more from Mahmoud Darwish's words? As this war already involves multiple countries in the region (such as Yemen, Iraq, Iran, and Syria) and threatens to escalate into a regional conflict, how will this international aid be deployed, and according to what priorities and objectives?

In the past, international aid to Lebanon has played a dual role: it is offered during acute crises to support a bankrupt economy, and it directly or indirectly legitimizes the political elite responsible for the system's collapse. Therefore, this aid serves, both, as a lifeline for the prevailing economic-political system and the primary funding source for civil society. No matter how dynamic civil society networks of solidarity may be, they cannot (and must not) replace the state in crises management or prevention, *a fortiori* in times of wars.

Today, civil society is left to fend for itself, and, whether we like it or not, the various diaspora-led fundraising efforts hide the lack of investment by the local elites in emergency relief or humanitarian aid to alleviate the suffering of war victims. It is disheartening to observe these recurring patterns, with Lebanon's leaders, all of whom are billionaires, lamenting the state's lack of resources, which they themselves have plundered, all the while appealing to the international community's generosity and imploring private initiatives to mobilize.^[7]

Once again, Lebanese and non-Lebanese disaster-stricken populations have only two means of survival to resort to. First, the generosity of international donors, whose motivations are now viewed with suspicion by the majority of people, as these same states either directly supply weapons to the Israeli aggression, enabling it to wound, mutilate, burn, and exterminate an entire people, or, at the very least, through their silence, tacitly endorse the massacres that Israel is committing in every single country in our region.

The second consists of informal solidarity networks, which often reinforce “deadly” sectarian identities,^[8] stifling any hope for a secular and civil state for all and undermining access to rights.

What we lament, above all, is the absence of any protection grounded in the rule of law.

It is telling that the current wartime government’s first economic policy was to raise the price of bread for the umpteenth time (there were 15 such hikes in 2021 alone) that followed yet another (debt-)financed plan through the World Bank.

With three-quarters of the population living in poverty before the war^[9], and in the context of a bankrupt state and collapsing public administrations, Lebanon managed to make one notable achievement in the past 12 months: a renewed (albeit symbolic) emphasis on the importance of universal social protection. On the one hand, Parliament passed a law in December 2023 establishing retirement schemes for private-sector workers. On the other hand, the government adopted a National Social Protection Strategy. This offers valuable *momentum* that must continue. For these reforms to be more than empty promises, civil society, public actors, and the international community must now work together to reinforce this vision of a welfare state that offers protections based on systems of foresight and on social rights founded on the principles of universality.

It is in this spirit that we reiterate the need for humanitarian aid and solidarity initiatives by the international community, rather than offering aid that would erode what remains of universality in an already collapsing social protection system and of a crumbling state that the Lebanese alone must rebuild.

The ecocide in southern Lebanon, the urbicide of Beirut’s southern suburb, the devastation of large parts of the Beqaa Valley, and the systemic destruction of agriculture, education, infrastructure, and basic living conditions for thousands of Lebanese are not merely the morbid byproducts of the Israeli war on Lebanon: They represent an exorbitant bill that the Lebanese state will ultimately have to pay.

Unfortunately, the current war carries another grim forecast. Lebanon’s healthcare sector, which is predominantly private, has demonstrated relative resilience in adapting to wartime conditions, both in the past and today. However, this resilience is the responsibility of the state, which must not resort to the logic of NGO-ization. The Ministry of Public Health, for its part, must no longer operate as a glorified NGO. Reinvesting in public healthcare and social welfare institutions was already a pressing need during times of crisis; it is now a matter of survival during wartime, at a time when health workers (many of whom are volunteers or unpaid) are targeted by Israeli attacks, with hospitals and ambulances directly targeted or threatened, and the number of disabled individuals on the rise.

This prognosis is not meant to be a pessimistic one.

At a time when the ceasefire and aid to victims are certainly priorities, the construction of a welfare state that upholds the rule of law seems to become a vital necessity to eschew the risks of crises and conflicts, current and future, and to hope to break the vicious cycle of perpetual crises and wars in Lebanon. Aren't the mutilated bodies of yesterday and tomorrow, in the likeness of a devastated society, already paying the price for the delay in the construction of a social state in Lebanon?

^[1] <https://www.canada.ca/fr/affaires-mondiales/nouvelles/2024/10/le-canada-...>

^[2] <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/lebanon/flash-appeal-lebanon-...>

^[3] <https://luxembourg.representation.ec.europa.eu/actualites-et-evenements/...>

^[4] According to the French Government

<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/news/article/leb...>

^[5] <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/afrique-du-nord-moyen-or...>

^[6] Historically, meetings of the International Support Group for Lebanon have been convened by the Élysée Palace, such the various international conferences (Paris 1, 2, 3). The most recent, the CEDRE Conference of April 2018, known as Paris 4, promised USD 11 billion in aid that was never disbursed,

as it was conditioned by reforms that were not implemented.

^[7] On August 7, 2020, just three days after the Beirut Port explosion, the then-President of the Republic (and the last to day, given the failure to elect a successor), Michel Aoun, sought to console the nation by welcoming the return of international aid in the aftermath of the explosion. In his view, this marked the end of the financial embargo on the Lebanese state.

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1228706/aoun-sempresse-de-detricot...>

^[8] Term coined by Amine Maalouf. Amine Maalouf, *Les Identités Meurtrières* (Deadly Identities), Paris, Grasset, 1998.

^[9] According to UN ESCWA estimates in 2021:

https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634-_multidimensional_poverty_in_lebanon_-_policy_brief_-_en.pdf