



Breaking Free from Statelessness

The Shiite Question and Possible Paths Forward

By

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This paper examines the complex reality that has unfolded in Lebanon over the past decades, characterized by the accumulation of internal and external factors that have effectively sidelined the state as a regulatory entity within society. In place of the state and its legitimate institutions—now largely symbolic and superficial—a mafia-like structure has seized actual power, fostering the growth of armed organizations that have undermined national sovereignty and usurped the state’s exclusive functions, particularly in defense and security (most notably, Hezbollah, the most organized and dangerous among them). As a result, crises have multiplied domestically, rendering Lebanon, for the most part, a society without a state¹, a reality that has brought about profound hardship and systemic instability. On the international front, Lebanon has become increasingly isolated from its regional and global environment. While the entrenched mafia-militia nexus has deepened its descent into state failure². This trajectory has not only invited sanctions but has also driven large-scale emigration, depriving the country of some of its most talented and skilled citizens.

This paper examines the developments of a pivotal era taking shape in the wake of seismic shifts in the geopolitical landscape following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. These changes have resulted in the curtailment of the military arms of Iran’s Islamic regime, the retreat of its influence, and the weakening of its broader regional project. The expansionist doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which once extended to the Mediterranean, has now recoiled to the Syrian coast following the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The military defeat of Hezbollah in Lebanon, after engaging in confrontations under the banners of “distracting Israel” and later “supporting Gaza”—as part of Iran’s “Unity of the Arenas” strategy—served as a prelude to the unraveling of the mafia-militia alliance. This collapse came in the aftermath of the breakdown of Hezbollah’s parallel state, which had operated at the expense of the Lebanese state, and the gradual disintegration of its affiliated military, financial, economic, and social structures³. For Lebanese society as a whole, Hezbollah’s setbacks have paradoxically translated into gains for the Lebanese state, allowing it to reclaim what has been lost. This shift culminated in the resolution of the presidential vacuum, facilitated by strong international momentum, leading to the election of Army Commander Joseph Aoun as President of the Republic and the appointment of Judge Nawaf Salam as Prime Minister. A ministerial statement was subsequently drafted under the framework of the National Reconciliation Accord (Taif Accord), the United Nations Charter, and the principle of the state as the primary regulatory authority in society. These represent initial steps in a broader trajectory that may ultimately lead to a fundamental resolution for Lebanon, closing the chapter of mafia-militia dominance once and for all. To this end, this paper proposes a series of policy ideas aimed at revitalizing the state and restoring its full sovereign roles in defense, security, the economy, and society. Furthermore, it outlines the foundational requirements for this endeavor, namely the establishment of full citizenship, anchored in democracy and human rights, within a society enriched by its diversity and the dynamic interaction of its communities—a society that

¹ Khalife, A. (2011) Une Société sans citoyens: enjeux de l’éducation à la citoyenneté démocratique dans la société multicommunautaire libanaise. Sarrebrouck: EUE. [Khalife, A. (2011). *A Society Without Citizens: Challenges of Education for Democratic Citizenship in Lebanon’s Multi-Community Society*. Sarrebrouck: EUE.]

² Acemoglu, D. & Robinson, J.-A. (2013) “Small differences and Critical junctures: the weight of History” in *Why Nations Fail*, Profile Books LTD, p.112.

³ Khalifa, A. (2023). *The Shia of Lebanon in Education: The Emergence and Outcomes of a Parallel Educational System*. Published by Umam: Documentation & Research.

Khalifa, A. (2023). *The Shia of Lebanon in the Economy: A Parallel Entity Attracting Sanctions*. Published by Umam: Documentation & Research.

embraces a civilizational and cultural framework rooted in the values of freedom, openness, and human fraternity.

I. The Reality of the Mafia-Militia Alliance

1.1 One of the Roots of the Deep State in Lebanon?

Consociational democracy is, by definition, a form of democratic governance designed for pluralistic societies, as theorized by political scientist Arend Lijphart⁴. It is based on the principle of power-sharing, which serves as both a fundamental principle and a key concept in the practice of governance.

The mafia-militia alliance has paralyzed Lebanon's consociational democracy, stripping it of its core principles and replacing power-sharing with the most blatant forms of sectarianism, distorting its intent and undermining its objectives. Under the dominance of this alliance, sectarianism has entrenched clientelism and quota-based governance, supplanting meritocracy and institutional efficiency. As a result, the state's structural integrity weakened due to internal power struggles and the division of authority among competing stakeholders and vested interests. The mafia and militia factions have encroached upon the state's exclusive functions, assuming roles that sovereign governments typically perform for their societies—defense, security, economic governance, and social services. Consequently, Lebanon now operates under a parallel military apparatus, a shadow economy, an alternative education system, and parallel judicial and healthcare structures.

The entrenched network of interests and patronage that constitutes the foundational structure of the deep state has given rise to a rentier economy dominated by political elites. These elites exploit public resources and assets for their private gain through monopolistic agencies and rent-seeking mechanisms. Within the nexus of mafia-militia alliances, sustainable development has been systematically sidelined, while economic and social disparities continue to widen. As ruling elites benefit from the status quo, ordinary citizens endure the deterioration of essential public services⁵.

The mafia-militia alliance operates on a system of mutual benefit, ultimately dismantling the very foundations of the state while thriving on its demise. This dynamic gives rise to numerous destabilizing consequences. In the realm of security, the existence of armed groups operating outside the state's exclusive authority over defense and security has fueled internal divisions and perpetual cycles of conflict. This opens the door to endless warfare and devastation, while simultaneously weakening the state's ability to assert its sovereignty and enforce the rule of law. Economically, the absence of stability, transparency, and accountability has rendered any possibility of economic recovery unfeasible. Years have passed since the onset of Lebanon's economic collapse, yet no serious or structured plan for recovery has been pursued.

⁴ Lijphart, A. (2018) *Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in thirty-six countries*. Second Edition. Seawolf Press.

⁵ Shehadi, N. & Harney, B. (Eds) (1989) *Politics and Economy in Lebanon*. The center for Lebanese studies, Oxford.

1.2 The "Shiite Question": The Unholy Pact of Mafia and Militia

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in the wake of mass uprisings that toppled the Shah's regime, the project of Shiite Islamic influence expanded, accompanied by a deliberate strategy of intervention in the internal affairs of other states, including Lebanon. This was justified under the banner of exporting the Islamic Revolution and championing the oppressed. However, Iran's constitution in this regard stands in direct contradiction to international law, international relations and the sovereignty of states. Iranian interventions have primarily sought to mobilize and co-opt Shiite communities, detaching them from their national identities and local societal concerns, and instead aligning them—both politically and religiously—with the overarching doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) in Iran. In Lebanon, this dynamic has rendered the Shiite sectarian identity particularly problematic, transcending the historical, social, and cultural fabric of the country's multi-sectarian society. The "Shiite Question"⁶ in Lebanon has been characterized by the militarization of the sect, the monopolization of its political representation, and the perpetuation of armed resistance as an open-ended, indefinite struggle devoid of a national framework. This resistance became functionally and strategically integrated into the expansionist framework and growing sphere of influence of *Wilayat al-Faqih*.

After the "Shiite Question" emerged and took shape under the aegis of the mafia-militia alliance, this very alliance, driven by networks of mutual benefit, has in turn obstructed any possibility of overcoming or challenging it. The "Shiite Question" has contributed to a cycle of accumulating defeats, persistently framed as resounding divine victories or manifestations of an overwhelming supreme will. Meanwhile, the mafia-militia alliance has continued to hollow out the state from within, depleting its resources, stripping it of its essential functions, and subordinating it to regional power struggles and proxy wars—all at the expense of the supreme national interest of all Lebanese.

Hezbollah's military defeat became a necessary condition for breaching the entrenched structure of the "Shiite Question" and initiating the dismantling of the mafia-militia alliance by eliminating one of its two pillars. The war, which proved to be a catastrophic setback primarily for the Shiite community and Hezbollah's military and financial apparatus, has created an impetus for transitioning toward an inevitable and irreplaceable state-building project after the Shiite community has endured the bitterness of alternative choices and the inherent suffering they brought, culminating in senseless death, humiliation, and degradation.

II. Revisiting the State-Building Project

The state, as the institutional framework that organizes society, represents an essential human and civilizational achievement in governance and the management of public affairs. While society in Lebanon existed before the formation of the state, the state-building project remains the only viable path to breaking free from the dominance of the mafia-militia alliance. More than that, it is an existential necessity for the survival and development of society itself. The ongoing process of state-building is intertwined with several critical issues, including citizenship, sovereignty, international

⁶ Khalifa, A. (2024). "Can a Political Opposition Movement Still Emerge from Lebanon's Shiite Community Against the Ruling Duo?" *Van Journal*, No. 4, published by *Umam: Documentation & Research*, Issue 10, June 3, 2024, p. 5.

relations, national security, the structure of the political system, and the prospects for its implementation and evolution. These are all essential debates that must be actively pursued, especially as Lebanon stands at the threshold of a new and seemingly promising phase, within a favorable regional context.

2.1 The Lebanese Constitution: Is It Still a Viable Framework?

Comparative constitutional law studies⁷ often place the Lebanese experience in an advanced position within this context. The Lebanese Constitution, as a legal text, is arguably one of the most sophisticated frameworks devised by multi-sectarian societies to manage their pluralism. Throughout various political junctures and critical milestones, the issue has not been with the Constitution itself but rather with those entrusted with its implementation and the political practices subordinated to the interests of the mafia-militia alliance. This has led to the paralysis of the political system—if not an outright coup against it⁸. For instance, the failure to elect a president or the refusal to designate a prime minister are not constitutional rights; rather, they represent an abuse of constitutional prerogatives and a dereliction of duty in the exercise of power. This raises a fundamental question: should the constitution account for the bad faith of those in power, or should it remain focused on establishing and maintaining the system? Therefore, dismantling the mafia-militia alliance does not require overturning the constitution or dismantling the entire political system. Rather, the solution lies in ensuring that power is entrusted to responsible leaders—true statesmen—rather than to mafia operatives and militia figures masquerading in suits and ties.

Accordingly, there remains a viable path for reform within Lebanon's existing political system and constitutional framework. The Lebanese Constitution allows for the implementation of gradual reforms that can strengthen the foundations of a civil state by advancing state institutions, enhancing judicial independence, and reforming the electoral system. This can be achieved through the adoption of laws that uphold the principle of citizenship, curb the dominance of sectarian leaders, and empower oversight institutions such as the Court of Audit and the National Anti-Corruption Commission.

Moreover, the Taif Accord outlined several constitutional reforms that have yet to be implemented. Among the most significant of these is the adoption of expanded decentralization, which would improve political, administrative, economic, and financial governance by ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources and fostering comprehensive and sustainable development. Additionally, the accord proposed the establishment of a Senate to preserve the role of religious communities as part of Lebanon's social, historical, and cultural fabric, while simultaneously working toward the gradual abolition of sectarianism—recognized as a temporary condition that must eventually be overcome.

However, implementing these reforms requires active participation in decision-making positions within both the legislative and executive branches. We propose the formation of lobbying groups to ensure that these reform measures are incorporated into the electoral platforms of parliamentary candidates, with the aim of advancing their implementation once elected. These reforms

⁷ Messarra, A. (2005). *The General Theory of the Lebanese Constitutional System: Comparative Studies on Power-Sharing Systems*. Beirut: Librairie Orientale.

⁸ Mansour, A. (2009) *The Coup Against the Taif Accord*. Dar Al-Jadid.

are essential for establishing a functional political system and, at the same time, enjoy both Arab and international support, as they constitute a fundamental component of the Taif Accord.

2.2 The Emerging State in Lebanon: When Will It Be Fully Achieved?

The state that has emerged in Lebanon, built upon a coalition of religious sects, differs from the national state-building processes observed in more homogeneous societies. In other words, it is not the culmination of a project of a people and a nation; rather, it—the state—precedes the formation of the elements of the unity of the people. As a result, the state-building project in a multi-sectarian society like Lebanon remains in a continuous state of formation and evolution. The fundamental question, then, is: when will this project reach completion?

The external factors driving the reconfiguration of the regional geopolitical landscape present a pivotal moment for the completion of the state-building project in Lebanon. The defeat of the “resistance” project in the region and the collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria serve as catalysts for a return to constitutional legitimacy, which forms the foundational basis for the establishment of the state in Lebanon.

III. Essential Components and Conditions for the State-Building Project in Lebanon

The state-building project is a comprehensive process and an ongoing commitment that necessitates the fulfillment of certain preconditions and complementary factors, including: consolidating and reinforcing national identity, establishing the primacy of the rule of law and legal principles, ensuring full citizenship tied to a culture of democracy and human rights, formulating a national security strategy, and adopting a policy of positive neutrality.

3.1 Identity and the Elements that Unite the People

Identity is a complex construct—cultural, social, political, and individual—characterized by its dynamic and evolving nature. Reducing identity to a singular dimension risk making it exclusionary, as it lacks the necessary points of convergence to foster cohesion. Amin Maalouf described such rigid identities as “killer identities”, referring to exclusive frameworks based solely on religious, national, or ethnic affiliations.

In a society as religiously and culturally diverse as Lebanon, the identity that unites the people must necessarily be a composite one—an evolving and dynamic construct where no single culture is absolute or dominant, but rather a continuous process of cultural exchange. This identity does not conform to the framework of chauvinistic nationalism, as articulated by Ernest Gellner, who argued that the foundations of national unity are merely inherited myths passed down from ancestors, designed to foster hostility toward all others. Instead, national identity is rooted in the will to live together. The mere existence of this will signifies the possibility of forging such an identity. However, coexistence does not entail imposing one group's way of life upon others, nor does it imply a form of social conditioning designed to erase individual distinctions. On the collective level, cultural identity means

that each community presents itself through its own historical narrative and collective imagination—seeing itself through its own lens rather than through the lens of others. This is not a matter of tolerance or superiority, but rather a recognition of diversity and difference without turning difference into division. On the individual level, as expressed by Marcel Gauchet in his book “Religion in Democracy”, identity is ultimately about “being oneself”.

3.2 The Rule of Law, Legal Framework, and Ending Impunity

The rule of law and the legal framework establish a culture of accountability and oversight, standing in direct opposition to the mafia-style governance model built on impunity. Strengthening transparency can serve as an effective and direct pathway toward the rule of law by empowering the judiciary as an independent authority and enabling it to initiate investigations *proprio motu*—on its own accord—based on available information obtained through transparency mechanisms and the right to access and disseminate information. This would allow the judiciary to act on such matters in its rightful capacity as a competent authority.

The judiciary’s authority to initiate proceedings *proprio motu*—on its own initiative—can be introduced within the Lebanese judicial system, following the precedent set by the International Criminal Court (ICC) under Article 15 of the Rome Statute. This would enable the prosecution of crimes classified as “crimes that concern the community as a whole”, or those that shock the conscience of humanity, violate ethical awareness, and undermine the foundational values of society. This necessitates the judiciary to take action on its own initiative, with courts exercising their indispensable jurisdiction to fulfill their assigned functions and objectives, ensuring that impunity is effectively prevented.

3.3 Citizenship, Democracy, and Human Rights

The connection between citizenship and democratic governance or human rights is neither a realistic nor a necessary connection. Evidence of this can be found in highly repressive societies—whether under theocratic rule or authoritarian regimes—where individuals are legally recognized as citizens yet remain burdened by obligations and deprived of fundamental rights. However, linking citizenship to democracy and human rights is an aspirational goal, one that ensures both individual and collective freedoms while fostering equality among citizens. Consider citizenship without democracy: in such a case, individuals acquire citizenship merely by birth—whether by *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) or *jus soli* (right of the land)—without any merit and without a moral or ethical framework attached to it. Citizenship can then be exploited by authoritarian regimes, whether political or religious. Conversely, let us consider citizenship alongside democracy. In this case, we are not merely born as citizens; rather, we become citizens through our effectiveness in public life, our impact on society, and our ability to acquire and exercise the skills necessary for accountability and oversight (In this context, we refer to active citizenship). This approach to active citizenship (as opposed to passive citizenship) raises the expectations placed on the state’s role in society, particularly in comparison to political and social systems based on exclusivity or governance in the name of religion—systems in which justice is diminished for those who are different, and equality in rights is eroded. This vision of “complete citizenship” is explicitly articulated in the *Document on Human Fraternity* issued by the Vatican and Al-

Azhar, a framework that is particularly relevant not only to Lebanon but also to all pluralistic societies. It also results in regulating the contribution of religion to the public sphere, which is among the functions of the state in Lebanon, ensuring freedom of belief and the conditions necessary for coexistence.

3.4 National Security Strategy

National security diplomacy⁹ advocates for strengthening state sovereignty by fortifying legitimate security institutions, including the army, internal security forces, and police. A militia or parallel security apparatus cannot be equated with the state, which holds the exclusive right to monopolize arms. However, a national security strategy extends beyond military capabilities; it also encompasses the necessity of developing the national economy as an integral component of security—ensuring internal stability, civil peace, and social cohesion. Additionally, it involves establishing a functional political system that reinforces the concept of citizenship, rather than paralyzing institutions or subverting governance due to sectarian dominance. Finally, national security diplomacy emphasizes the need to restore and strengthen Lebanon’s international relations, repairing ruptured ties with its regional and global partners through a foreign policy that prioritizes Lebanon’s supreme national interest.

3.5 The Option of Positive Neutrality

Positive neutrality, as recognized under public international law, is a strategic choice based on balance and openness, steering clear of sharp polarizations that divide—or even break—the fabric of society. Unlike isolationism, positive neutrality promotes active engagement in regional and international affairs without aligning with any particular axis, while maintaining good relations with all parties.

This approach enables the development of an independent economic policy that prevents dependency on external actors and strengthens preventive diplomacy to shield Lebanon from being drawn into external crises. Moreover, it supports a commitment to peace and human rights, allowing Lebanon to reclaim its historical role and identity while ensuring a clear distinction between its sectarian components and regional or international power alignments.

Conclusion

To break free from the stranglehold of the mafia-militia alliance, the fundamental solution lies in the establishment of a modern state in Lebanon, with all its essential components and prerequisites—not in altering the political system itself. The foundational constitutional framework is in place, yet it remains obstructed by the web of clientelist exchanges established by the mafia-militia alliance.

In this context, the opportunity is ripe to initiate gradual reform within the existing system, utilizing its mechanisms and institutional frameworks. As part of the comprehensive solution and its

⁹ It was highlighted in the activities of the Civic Influence Hub – Morning Dialogues as an entry point for achieving a citizenship-based state, in accordance with the Hub’s literature and publications, along with the adoption of the positive neutrality option.

implementation measures, key priorities include strengthening the role of the state, fostering international cooperation, and bolstering the Lebanese Armed Forces by providing financial and military support—ensuring that the army becomes the sole entity responsible for national defense. Additionally, combating corruption requires public sector reform, judicial independence, and proactive judicial action to safeguard the rights of all citizens and restore public confidence in the state. Negotiations with the international community should aim at lifting sanctions related to Hezbollah in exchange for handing over its weapons to the Lebanese army, implementing political and security reforms, and improving the investment climate by guaranteeing political and economic stability. These measures would ultimately position Lebanon within the framework of positive neutrality.

This gradual reform process may be slow and encounter political obstacles, whether domestically, due to the persistent resistance of remnants of the mafia-militia alliance, or externally, as a result of shifting momentum or changing interests among international powers involved in reshaping the regional geopolitical landscape—of which Lebanon is an integral part.

Popular pressure may intensify, and it should be strategically leveraged to safeguard the gradual reform process, ensuring meaningful change without descending into chaos. Achieving this requires a multifaceted approach that combines grassroots mobilization, institutional reforms, and a shift in political culture. The question remains open: Will the Lebanese people succeed in enforcing a gradual reform process, or will radical change become the only viable option—particularly in light of regional and international dynamics and the emergence of new influencing factors reshaping the future of the region?

Authors' Short Bio

Dr. Ali Khalife is the founder and director of ALEPH-YA Publishing and Distribution Foundation, which is concerned with writing and publishing in a way that stimulates self-reflection and critical sense.

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