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Elites, power and security

How the organization of security
in Lebanon serves elite interests

Erwin van Veen

CRU report



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About CRU

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a think tank and diplomatic academy on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organizations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

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Executive summary

Despite the turmoil and the insecurity that is spilling over from the Syrian conflict, Lebanon is not a passive player or victim in the regional security situation. Although it is understandable that the focus of much current analysis is on the implications of the Syrian conflict for Lebanon – largely out of fear that the country might be sucked into the regional vortex of violence – it overlooks the fact that it is largely the interests of Lebanon’s political elites that determine how the country’s state security organizations perform. It is for this reason that the report analyses how the interests of Lebanon’s political elites influence the organization of security as a crucial perspective to understanding the focus and performance of the country’s security organizations. The key assumption that the report develops and substantiates is that Lebanon’s state security organizations largely exist to protect elite interests and that this is achieved through the provisions of the country’s elite pact, i.e. the arrangement between its elites on how to govern.

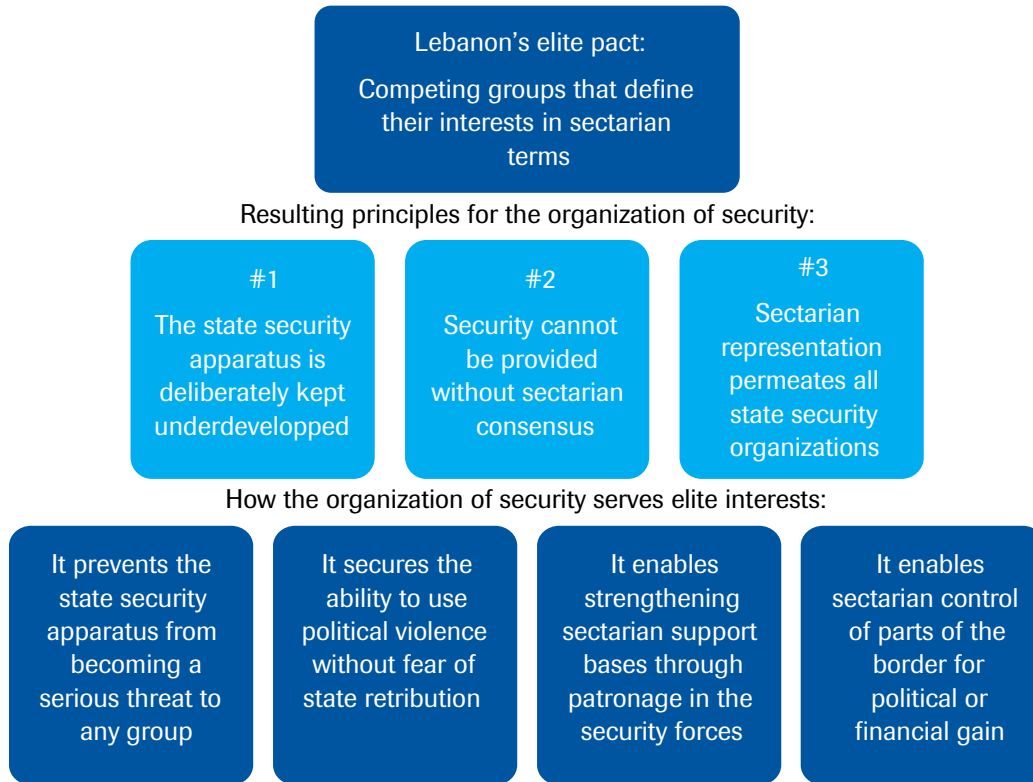
Because Lebanon’s elites are organized on a sectarian basis, their elite pact reflects a dynamic balance between the interests of different socio-religious groups that are simultaneously identity-markers, service providers, power-seekers and parts of regional alliances. On behalf of these groups and themselves, Lebanon’s elites seek to maintain or increase their relative power and secure advantages for their constituencies. Because sectarian loyalties tend to trump national ones in political processes and sectarian capabilities trump national ones, this often results in a competitive zero-sum game, and sometimes in a conservative status quo arrangement. In this context of intense political competition for power and identity, it is only logical that Lebanon’s state security organizations first and foremost serve elite interests. Figure 1 below summarizes the main ways in which this works.

Elite competition on the basis of sectarian groups ensures that a shared national vision on security is largely absent. The consequences are that state security institutions are deliberately kept underdeveloped, that security cannot be provided without consensus between the main sectarian elites and that sectarian influences permeate state security organizations. This makes it difficult for these organizations to provide either national or citizen security that is reliable and transparent. They intervene instead on a case-by-case basis as political consensus permits. Only when sectarian interests coincide does a proto-national interest emerge that enables security interventions that are to Lebanon’s collective benefit – but even then some factions are more likely to benefit than others.

This situation is entirely by design, ensuring as it does that the interests of Lebanon’s elite are served by the country’s security organizations in four main ways. First, the requirement that sectarian political consensus is a sine qua non for domestic security operations, combined with the sectarian composition of Lebanese security organizations, means that state force cannot be deployed effectively against major sectarian interests. Second, having an underdeveloped state security apparatus with strong sectarian representation also makes it comparatively easy to use violence in pursuit of political objectives without fear of state retribution. Third, strong sectarian representation within the state security forces increases the ability of elite groups to dispense patronage in order to maintain their social support base. Fourth, an underdeveloped state security apparatus with strong sectarian representation obviously does not have the capacity to guard Lebanon’s borders, and nor does it aim to do so. This results in

fragmented border control that enables certain elite players to benefit politically, militarily or financially from controlling sections of the border.

Figure 1: How state security organizations serve elite interests in Lebanon



This state of affairs results in the uneven, unreliable and unequal provision of security on the basis of sectarian elite control and affiliation; in the informalization of security provision by state security organizations; in the inability of state security organizations to provide national security as a collective good (since interests are not defined in national terms); and in the perpetuation of the status quo regarding how and for whom security is provided.

It is in this context that the security threats that are spilling over from Syria's conflict have galvanized some of Lebanon's elite groups. On the one hand, Hezbollah's leaders (Shia) have realized that they cannot succeed in their Syrian intervention supporting President Assad and at the same time maintain domestic stability against radical extremist groups. On the other hand, the leaders of the Future Movement (Sunni) see their control over Lebanon's Sunni community threatened by the same radical groups, in part because they offer a more aggressive response to Hezbollah's dominance. This combination results in sufficient convergence between elite interests to enable the Lebanese security forces to address radical extremism in Lebanon. While this seemingly serves both sectarian and national interests, it is perceived as benefiting Hezbollah the most. In turn, this risks communities and/or sectarian groups increasingly taking care of their own security, with an ensuing rise in radicalization and violent responses.

The main message of the report is that it would be a severe analytical mistake to regard the inability of Lebanon's main state security organizations to ensure either national or citizen-oriented security as a case of organizational dysfunction. Quite the contrary: their organizational dysfunction is precisely the type of functionality desired by significant parts of Lebanon's elite and serves their purposes well. In consequence, efforts at reform that fail to take account of the interests of Lebanon's political-security elites and their sectarian/consociational elite pact are bound to have only limited operational impact.

However, if Lebanon's state security organizations can use the present crisis to assert a more balanced control over the domestic security landscape by serving short-term sectarian elite interests while remaining legitimate in the eyes of the population, they may over time shift popular expectations from security provision on a sectarian basis to security provision on a more national basis. Such a complex and risky endeavor would deserve international support.

Acknowledgements

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The report is also indebted to Imad Salamey (associate professor at the Lebanese American University) for his thoughtful reflections and peer review, as well as to Ann Fitz-Gerald (professor at Cranfield University) for offering a helpful working definition of the term 'elites' during the above-mentioned expert event. At Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit particular thanks go to Iba Abdo for good background research and to both Ivan Briscoe and Mariska van Beijnum for excellent feedback. Jane Carroll did an excellent copy-edit of the report while the team at Textcetera took care of its typesetting. The report's contents remain the author's responsibility.

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1. Introduction

Recent analyses of security in Lebanon have focused on how the country's political elites and security forces have sought to deal with the spillover effects of the next-door Syrian conflict, which, from a security perspective, have largely taken the form of radical extremism.¹ This focus includes, for example, reflections on episodes such as the fighting by Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces against the followers of Sheikh al-Assir in Sidon (2013),² the 'restoration' of law and order in Tripoli by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in response to street unrest and terrorist actions (2014), operations against radical groups in the Bekaa valley (2014) or the storming of Roumieh prison (2015). Such a focus easily leads to projections in which Lebanon is seen as becoming the next state in the region to succumb to violence, turning into the next hotbed of terrorism or remaining a divided society facing a protracted security dilemma that is strengthened by a volatile regional environment, primarily the regional great power game between Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Yet, this is far from the complete picture.

It is undeniable that violence in Lebanon is rising in consequence of the Syrian conflict. This was most recently demonstrated by the suicide attack by Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN) in January in Tripoli's Alawite quarter Jabal Al-Mohsen, killing about nine citizens. The attack took place in revenge for the presumed Shia/Alawite attack on the Sunni Salaam and Taqwa mosques 17 months earlier.³ It illustrates one of the ways in which the Syrian conflict is playing out on a reduced scale in its western neighbour. It is also undeniable that the organization of security in Lebanon has a number of characteristics that make it sensitive to foreign influence. This includes, for example, Hezbollah's continued presence as a state within a state with a capacity for violence that outmatches that of other sectarian groups as well as the LAF. It should also be recalled that Syria dominated security affairs in Lebanon until 2005 and that the effects of this period remain profound.

However, this report shifts the focus back to understanding security in Lebanon largely as a product of its domestic politics. It shows that the Lebanese polity is far from a passive player or victim in the regional security situation. Instead, it argues that analysing how the interests of Lebanon's political elites influence the organization of security is vital to understanding

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- 1 By and large, most refugees seem to have stayed away from involvement in militant activity so far. This might change in the medium term if the desperate situation of many continues and worsens (Wimmen 2015; several interviews between 12 and 22 January 2015).
 - 2 The armed followers of Sheikh al-Assir occupied the city of Sidon for a few days in an effort to emulate the example of Hezbollah by establishing a new non-state armed group in control of a specific territory. The attempt was short-lived because Sidon sits on the main coastal route connecting Beirut with the South, which made the event a direct threat to Hezbollah. Al-Assir's perceived association with radical Salafism made the effort intolerable to the sectarian groups governing the Lebanese state. This explains the Hezbollah-LAF collaboration. Interview, 13/01/15; see also: *Al-Akhar English*, 24/06/13 ([online](#); consulted 25/02/15).
 - 3 It is interesting to note that the suspects in the 2015 attack were rapidly identified while those in the 2013 attack were not (interview, 20/01/15; also: *Al-Jazeera*, 11/01/15 ([online](#)); *Washington Post*, 23/08/13 ([online](#)). Both consulted 25/02/15). In a further twist, leading Lebanese Sunni figures, such as the Minister of the Interior, Nihad Mashnouk, initially downplayed JAN's role in the 2015 attack because some in the Future Movement (the main Sunni party in Lebanon) consider it possible to work with JAN and wish to keep channels of communication open (several interviews between 12 and 22 January 2015).

the focus and performance of its security organizations. The key assumption that the report develops and substantiates is that Lebanon's state security organizations largely exist to protect elite interests and that this is achieved through the provisions of the country's elite pact, i.e. the arrangement between its elites on how to govern. Greater insight into this assumption can help improve the effectiveness of international support for Lebanon's tottering security organizations, either by increasing the political savvy of such efforts or, at a minimum, avoid reinforcing existing power structures without being aware of doing so. In this effort, the report is part of a broader research project that examines how domestic elite interests shape the organization of security and the performance of security organizations in fragile environments. It will ultimately consist of two case studies (Lebanon and Ethiopia), as well as a synthesis paper. Together, they seek to develop a set of insights beyond those of single case studies.⁴

As a working definition of 'elites', the project understands these as individuals or representatives of groups with influence on a nation's tangible and intangible security resources. Such elites are the unit of analysis for both case studies. In the case of Lebanon this takes the form of sectarian elites that largely represent religious groups organized on a socio-political basis, such as Hezbollah (Shia) and the Future Movement (Sunni) (see Table 1 below). Elites are examined at the national level as relatively homogeneous actors that are representative of relatively well-defined constituencies.⁵

As to the report's structure, Section 1 examines the nature and stability of Lebanon's elite pact, how it relates to the interests of Lebanon's main sectarian elites and what general implications this has for the organization of security. Section 2 analyses in more detail what this means in practice for the organization and performance of the country's most important state security institutions at the national level. Section 3 then explores how the Syrian civil war is used by some of Lebanon's political elites to strengthen their domestic power base and what effects this is likely to have on the prospects for security in Lebanon. A few concluding observations outline possible opportunities in this complex interplay for influence that could stimulate the provision of security as more of a public good.

4 Annexe 1 provides more detail on the report's methodology.

5 This approach is somewhat similar to how realist theorists in International Relations study states: while it is imperfect, given obvious intra-elite dynamics, it adequately allows for initial analysis of the project's main research questions (see Annexe 1). The synthesis report will provide further analysis on issues such as elite permeability, composition and intra-elite dynamics, using work including Bottomore (1993); Perthes (2004) and Leftwich (2009).

2. The exercise of power and the organization of state security in Lebanon

The pact between Lebanon's elites on the basis of which they rule the country has historically been grounded in consociational principles of governance.⁶ Practically, this means that leading political representatives of the parties that represent the country's larger sectarian groups have tended to govern on the basis of a power-sharing formula. This consists of a mix of predefined formal rights that protect sectarian interests and give sectarian groups a fixed stake in government, and informal flexibility in terms of the actual interpretation and utilization of these rights to exert influence.⁷ Roughly speaking, the main parties of the moment are, on the one hand, the Future Movement (representing Lebanon's Sunni), the Lebanese Forces and the Kaeteab party (both representing a part of Lebanon's Christians) – who are united in the anti-Syrian March 14 alliance – and, on the other hand, Hezbollah, Amal (both representing a part of Lebanon's Shia), the Free Patriotic Movement (representing a part of Lebanon's Christians) and the Progressive Socialist Party (representing Lebanon's Druze) – who are united in the pro-Syrian March 8 alliance (see Table 1 below).⁸

An example of formal rights is how the sectarian division of the country's top three leadership posts – those of president (a Maronite), prime minister (a Sunni) and speaker of parliament (a Shia) – was officially agreed in the 1943 National Pact.⁹ An example of flexibility is that the quality of leadership, level of coherence and extent of popular adherence endow some groups with more influence and power than others at particular points in time. This can be witnessed today in the primacy of the Future Movement (Sunni) and Hezbollah (Shia) in the country's political dialogue. Previously, it took the form of Maronite dominance of Lebanon's political life.

In more theoretical terms, Lebanon's governance can be characterized as a weak corporate consociation with occasional episodes of quasi voluntary self-exclusion by important sectarian groups (such as the Shia before, and the Maronite Christians after, the 1989 Ta'if

6 The founding father of consociationalism, Arend Lijphart, defined these as: the presence of a grand coalition, proportional representation, extensive veto power, relative group autonomy and an elite cartel (Lijphart 1980). The term 'elite pact' is often used synonymously with the term 'political settlement'. It generally refers to either the continuous *process* of the struggle for power between domestic elites, or to the *distribution* of power between such elites as imperfect representatives of contending social groups and classes at a particular point in time (OECD 2011), (Khan 1995, 2000). In fragile environments, such pacts tend to feature an appreciable level of exclusion and are often unstable. Used as an analytical lens, they focus attention on processes of intra-elite contention and bargaining whereby elites can be defined along various cleavages, such as rural versus urban, religious versus secular, political versus economic (Putzel and Di John 2012).

7 El-Husseini, 'Lebanon: Building Political Dynasties', in Perthes (2004); Salamey (2014).

8 Greater detail on the different parties and alliances that make up Lebanese domestic politics can be found in Salamey (2014).

9 The national pact can be seen as the foundational agreement between Lebanon's elites that started out as an unwritten arrangement, subsequently acquired customary force and was codified in, for instance, the Ta'if (1989) and Doha (2008) agreements.

agreement that concluded the civil war).¹⁰ It is a weak consociation because intra-sectarian differences have led to a situation in which some sectarian groups feature several parties that vie for dominance, with the result that they may command a plurality rather than a majority of the vote in their sectarian group (see Table 1 below).

For example, the Christians are divided between the Lebanese Forces, the Kataeb party and the Free Patriotic Movement; the Sunni Future Movement faces competition, albeit not electoral, from radical Sunni groups; while the Shia vote is divided between Hezbollah and Amal.¹¹ In short, Lebanon's political elites do not correspond precisely to the country's main sectarian groups and, consequently, some compete within the same sectarian constituency. In practice, such competition is limited as the political and spatial boundaries between elite representatives of different subgroups within the same sectarian group are relatively clear, with personal ties playing a major role in influencing political allegiance.¹²

Lebanon's consociational governance arrangement is corporate, i.e. formalized on a group-basis, in that blocks of parliamentary seats are pre-allocated to each sectarian group. Many analysts agree that such aspects of Lebanon's power-sharing formula have perpetuated sectarian affiliation and organization.¹³ In addition, Lebanon is characterized by a high level of post-conflict elite continuity and a low level of elite permeability.¹⁴ The fact that many of the major 'warlords' of the Lebanese civil war (which ended in 1989) continue to hold significant positions of political and military power today testifies to this observation. Consider, for example, Walid Jumblatt

Box 1. Key political/security events in the modern history of Lebanon

- 1975–89:** Lebanese civil war
- 1989:** Ta'if peace agreement
- 2005:** Assassination of Rafik Hariri (Prime Minister, Sunni Future Movement)
- 2005:** Withdrawal of Syrian forces
- 2005–06:** Assassination of a number of politicians and dissidents of the March 14 alliance
- 2006:** Hezbollah–Israeli conflict
- 2008:** Hezbollah armed takeover of West Beirut
- 2008:** Doha agreement to resolve the ensuing domestic political crisis
- 2011:** Start of the Syrian conflict
- 2013:** Armed occupation of Sidon by Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir
- 2014:** Lebanese Armed Forces take over security in Tripoli
- 2015:** Internal Security Forces storm Roumieh prison

10 O'Leary, 'Debating Consociational Politics: Normative and Explanatory Arguments', in Noel (2005); El-Husseini (2004).

11 Salamey (2014). It should be added that the creation of the March 8 and March 14 political alliances after the murder of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri has had the net effect of turning Hezbollah's plurality among the Shia into a majority, owing to its alliance with Amal.

12 Salamey (2014); Hamdan, 'The Limits of Corporate Consociation: Taif and the Crisis of Power-Sharing in Lebanon since 2005', in Knudsen and Kerr (2012).

13 El-Husseini (2004); Hamdan (2012); Salamey (2014).

14 The post-conflict continuity of elites and elite pacts observed here is not unique to Lebanon and is explored in more detail in: Valters, van Veen and Denney (2015).

(Druze), Nabil Berri (Shia), Michel Aoun (Christian), Hassan Nasrallah (Shia) and Amin Gemayel (Christian).¹⁵

Table 1: An overview of the parties representing Lebanon's main sectarian groups

Name	Political alliance	Leader	# of cabinet seats	# members in parliament	Armed capabilities ¹⁶
Hezbollah (Shia)	March 8	Hassan Nasrallah	2	12	Very significant
Amal (Shia)	March 8	Nabil Berri	2	13	Significant
Future Movement (Sunni)	March 14	Saad Hariri	3	26	Very limited
Lebanese Forces (Christians)	March 14	Samir Geagea	0	8	Limited
Phalanges / Kataeb Party (Christians)	March 14	Amine Gemayel	3	5	Limited
Free Patriotic Movement (Christians)	March 8	Michel Aoun	2	18	Limited
Progressive Socialist Party (Druze)	March 8	Walid Jumblatt	2	7	Limited

It should be acknowledged here that different perspectives exist on the benefits of Lebanon's consociational governance arrangement. Some consider it a beacon of relative stability, premised on the pragmatic recognition of the fact that Lebanon is a collection of minorities which need to find a way to live together. Others, though, depict it as a hard-nosed realization of the inability of any of its sectarian elites to secure political dominance by force, which makes maintaining the status quo their next best option.

However, Lebanon's recent history raises doubts as to whether its elite pact(s) has/have actually been all that functional. One might posit that Lebanon was essentially subsumed under Syrian hegemony for 15 years (1991–2005), amounting to de facto foreign control over Lebanese politics, and over security in particular.¹⁷ In other words, Lebanon's different sectarian elites and interests were suppressed and sidelined insofar as they did not align with those of Syria.¹⁸ The revisions that the Taif agreement introduced to Lebanon's consociational formulae were therefore only really put to the dual test of political acceptance and feasibility

15 See also: Kassir (2003). Samir Geagea, the leader of the militia of the Lebanese Forces (LF), was the only warlord to end up behind bars, in part because of his effort to re-arm the LF well after the civil war had ended and social support for militias had evaporated (Kassir 2003; Gaub 2015a). For an interesting portrait of Jumblatt's role in the civil war, see: Strong (1984).

16 Armed capability is here defined as possessing a functioning military command structure, medium to heavy weaponry, a supporting communication network and medium-sized units. Many Lebanese across sects possess light arms. Smaller groups that are heavily armed also exist, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command.

17 El-Husseini (2004); Hamdan (2012).

18 Interestingly, it was largely Syria's foreign policy choices that influenced its ability to dominate Lebanon (its tutelage over Lebanon was enabled by siding with the US coalition in the first Gulf War while its withdrawal was expedited by siding with Iraq in the second Gulf War).

in the highly charged environment of 2005/06 when a number of Lebanese elite players lost Syria as their key foreign patron, owing to its withdrawal when the assassination of Rafik Hariri created a major Sunni grievance and when Hezbollah's legitimacy took a dent because of its brief war with Israel.¹⁹ Since then, Lebanese politics can be characterized as either featuring intense competition for power, or being largely in a situation of stalemate.

Taking another step back, it can be argued that Lebanon's elite pact has in fact created more political instability than stability. In the country's recent history its elite pact did not break down just in 2005, but also in 1958, 1975, 1982 and 2008. It has tended to do so at points in time when the political elite of one of Lebanon's larger sectarian groups perceived it could bid for political dominance through force of arms. Because of dissatisfaction with their subsumed position in a Maronite-dominated country, Lebanon's Sunni and Shia elites made the first serious attempt at gaining overall dominance around 1975. Much of the muscle was provided by the Palestinian Liberation Organization's militias, which had moved to Lebanon after their expulsion from Jordan in 1970. Lebanon's Christians were the next to try with Israeli assistance in the form of the latter's offensive into Lebanon in 1982.²⁰ Finally, Hezbollah gave a show of force in 2008 – despite assurances it would never deploy its resistance capabilities domestically – rendering both the Future Movement's militia-in-formation and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) inoperative.²¹ While falling short of achieving full domination, Hezbollah demonstrated clearly what might come to pass if its interests were not adequately respected.²² In short, while Lebanon's elite pact created periods of stability, it is also fundamentally unbalanced and unsatisfactory, as these intermittent episodes of violence show. The consequences of this situation for the provision of security, examined below, are profound.

'You know how it starts, but you don't know how it ends...'

Lebanese Sunni official on the learning effect of the 1975–1989 civil war

It will come as no surprise that the ruptures discussed above have done little to bring about a greater sense of national unity. Instead, several interviewees described Lebanon as an uneasy collection of group interests that lack a shared sense of national identity, and in which elite interaction and governance dominate a sectarian governance scene that occasionally descends into violence. More positively, they also noted that past violent ruptures have introduced a greater sense of caution in the use of violence. In other words, they pointed to a learning effect among elites in respect of the limited utility of violence as an effective conflict resolution strategy.²³ As one interviewee put it, 'You know how it starts [civil war], but you don't know how it ends...'.²⁴ A practical consequence is that the elites of sectarian groups other than Hezbollah have not made serious efforts to re-arm or re-form their civil war militias. They hesitate to do so despite the competitive disadvantage they suffer in elite competition and political negotiations because of their lack of meaningful capacities

19 Yadav (2013).

20 Rabinovich (1985).

21 See for instance: Lefèvre (2014).

22 Knudsen and Kerr (2012); several interviews between 12 and 22 January 2015.

23 On this point see also: O'Leary (2005).

24 Interview, 12 January 2015.

for violence.²⁵ It should be added that several interviewees observed that the 'DNA' and networks of the different sectarian groups have also influenced the attitude and ability of their leaders to use armed force after the civil war.²⁶ For example, the Sunni Future Movement was described as now being a largely urban group with major business interests and a focus on political (instead of violent) competition, while the Christian Lebanese Forces are being discouraged from arming by their international sponsors (such as the USA and France). In turn, Hezbollah's origins in the paradigm of resistance against Israel with Iranian support has ensured, in the eyes of some, that it is primarily driven by security considerations and a securitization logic, while also operating as a political actor. It represents the proverbial army with a state, enabling correspondingly different possibilities and attitudes regarding the use of force.²⁷

The preceding discussion indicates that Lebanon's elite pact is simultaneously stable and unstable as well as adjustable and heavily contested. It also shows that the interests of Lebanon's sectarian elites largely consist of self- and group considerations. The literature reviewed and interviews conducted for this report suggest that these characteristics generate three principles for the organization and provision of security in the country:

Principle #1: The state security apparatus is deliberately kept underdeveloped. It is no coincidence that Lebanon's state security organizations have been unable to intervene decisively in any of the country's major episodes of violence. This is because it suits parts of Lebanon's sectarian elites to have security organizations at their disposal that are strong enough to serve as relatively crude tools against selected security threats but that also remain sufficiently weak not to interfere with sectarian politics and organization. In short, these organizations are politically barred from developing to higher levels of professionalism and performance. This state of affairs is entirely by design and has both a strategic and an operational component:

- The sectarian nature of elite competition in Lebanon largely prevents the development and articulation of a national view or strategy on security.²⁸ This makes organizational and performance improvements unattractive – if not impossible – because a coherent, long-term framework for orientation, development and action is absent;²⁹
- The clashing sectarian interests in Lebanon's governance arrangements result in its security institutions being structurally under-budgeted, inadequately supervised and understaffed. In turn, this creates a situation in which the organizational backbone that is linked to their ability to perform is underdeveloped (taking into consideration the professionalism

25 This was reinforced by the armed Hezbollah take-over of West-Beirut and the ruthless suppression of the 2013 Sidon insurrection. While communities throughout Lebanon are arming themselves, this is largely a response to the cross-border spill-over effects of the Syrian civil war and less of a strategy by sectarian elites anticipating the next domestic confrontation. For example: *Al-Monitor*, 10/09/14 ([online](#): consulted 27/02/15); several interviews between 12 and 22 January 2015.

26 Several interviews on 13/1/15.

27 Several interviews across the political spectrum between 12 and 22 January 2015.

28 For more detail on efforts to establish a national defense strategy: Knudsen (2014).

29 This observation echoes in a recent survey conducted by International Alert of different aspects of Lebanon's security situation. While the trust of Lebanon's population in state security institutions proved to be medium to high (depending on the institution), another key finding was that many respondents saw ample scope for improvement, including greater independence of sectarian interests and a more impartial provision of security. International Alert, 30/06/14 ([online](#): consulted 17/03/15).

of leadership, the quality of military doctrine and training, as well as the quantity and quality of equipment).

The legacy of 15 years of Syrian rule perpetuates this state of affairs because Syria basically used the Lebanese security forces as a gendarmerie-type extension of its own capabilities: good enough but not too good. In addition, officers originally appointed during Syrian rule still represent a significant section of the highest ranks of the LAF, which inhibits reform.³⁰

Principle #2: Security cannot be established or enforced by state forces without sectarian consensus. Interviewees agreed unanimously that Lebanon's security organizations can only operate effectively in the domestic context if there is political consensus between the elites of the major sectarian groups on the nature of the threat, the need for enforcement and the use of force for that purpose. This means that consensus must be built on a case-by-case basis, which is time-consuming and prone to both vetoes and horse-trading. It also means that rules are enforced selectively, preferentially, or not at all, when this is in the interest of particular elite players with sufficient political clout at a decisive juncture.³¹ This influences, among other things, how strictly or permissively border control is managed (enabling, for example, the passage of militants and smugglers), whether certain criminals or terrorists are arrested and prosecuted, or, more mundanely, whether and how building regulations are enforced.³²

Principle #3: There is significant sectarian representation in all state security organizations. Inter-sectarian distrust, the absence of a shared national security outlook and a lack of effective mechanisms for internal and external oversight of state security forces combine to ensure that Lebanon's elites use sectarian representation in the country's various security institutions to keep a finger on the pulse of these organizations. While this is functional in reducing distrust and defusing tensions, it also has two important detrimental effects on the quantity and quality of security these institutions can provide. To start with, it makes them sources of patronage that obey a political rather than a security logic – especially in view of the fact that sectarian quotas are fixed for some of them (this also creates operational limitations resulting from not being able to hire on the basis of merit). Moreover, it creates parallel lines of information and, potentially, command.³³ Although these do not seem to be developed to the point that armies exist within the army, they do create significant potential for fissure and bias.

30 Israeli concerns over supplying the LAF with advanced weaponry because of the risk that it might fall into the hands of Hezbollah represents a more external factor, which influences the LAF's level of equipment in particular. Israeli concerns are said to have reduced the quality of foreign supplies and donations to the LAF. Several interviews between 12 and 22 January 2015. See also, for example: El-Hokayem and McGovern (2008).

31 On the basis of a survey it conducted, International Alert observes: '74.6% of respondents stated that their first recourse would be state security institutions, although that percentage is far lower in response to suffering *physical, political, sexual or domestic violence*' [author's italics]: Geha (2015).

32 One interviewee provided the anecdotal example of how a prime minister of Lebanon intervened on behalf of an imprisoned extremist, got him out of jail, sent his own car to drive him to Tripoli and provided him with US\$25,000 in cash (interview, 12/1/15).

33 For example, a delegation of the Lebanese Muslim Scholars Committee attempted to mediate in the fighting around Arsal between the LAF and JAN/the Islamic State in the summer of 2014 with the consent of the parties – but was fired on just beyond the last LAF checkpoint. A member of this committee (who was interviewed for this report) blamed the incident on an LAF faction or individuals, operating outside of the regular chain of command, who wanted to see the military's offensive against radical extremist continued (interview, 19/1/15). On this episode see also: Lundquist (2014).

From the perspective of a politician with an inclusive, national agenda or a citizen who is not affiliated to a particular sectarian group – both of which types of individual are in short supply in Lebanon – these three principles result in the relatively fragmented, biased and ineffectual organization and delivery of security.³⁴ Staying within the paradigmatic logic of sectarian elite competition and power-sharing does not improve matters, however, as these principles perpetuate a vicious cycle. As long as Lebanon’s sectarian elites do not demand the provision of better and more equitable security, Lebanon’s national security institutions will continue to produce the inadequate supply that invites the same sectarian elites to maintain the basic self-protection mechanisms (which can be latent) that increase the risk of violence. In addition, whenever sectarian elites are agreed on the need to counteract specific security threats through Lebanon’s national security institutions, they only have a crude and unreliable tool for intervention at their disposal which may not be up to the task. This suggests that the organization of security is both a consequence of elite interests and competition, and, once it is established on the basis of the sectarian elites’ logic, a further source of instability.

Box 2. How interviewees across the political spectrum described the association, tasks and recent operations of Lebanon’s five key security organizations at the national level

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF): In terms of sectarian association, the LAF is considered to be relatively neutral and enjoys high levels of popular trust (80+%), with the important exception of its intelligence branch, which most interviewees regarded as collaborating with, if not dominated by, Hezbollah. In terms of tasks, the LAF is seen mainly as responsible for the maintenance of domestic security and much less as capable of defending Lebanon’s borders against conventional or non-conventional security threats. It is seen as struggling with containing the spillover from the Syrian civil war. In terms of recent operations, the LAF is perceived by many to be working increasingly in the interests of Hezbollah as it seeks to reduce the threat of radical Sunni groups in Lebanon.

The Internal Security Forces (ISF): In terms of association, the ISF is seen as being Sunni-influenced and enjoys limited levels of popular trust (c. 50%), although this varies by region. In terms of tasks, it is mostly considered to be a police force that deals with traffic management, ordinary crime and regulatory enforcement without significant capability to mobilize force in situations of organized violent conflict. In terms of recent operations it is seen as insignificant from the perspective of elite competition with the exception of the ISF’s intelligence unit (created in 2005), which has rapidly acquired status and capability, with a focus on anti-terrorist operations.

General Security (GS): In terms of association, the GS is considered by many to be strongly Hezbollah-oriented and dominated by former Syrian appointees. In terms of tasks, it is seen as responsible for securing Lebanon’s borders. In terms of recent operations, it has no significant capacities for power projection but it influences the political and security situation through the use of the intelligence it gathers and disseminates.

34 As also demonstrated by, for instance, Nashabe (2009) and Adib (2012).

Hezbollah: In terms of association, Hezbollah represents many of Lebanon's Shia. Many considered the movement to be an Iranian agent, but the historic marginalization of the Shia and the country's long-time abuse by Israel were also often mentioned as reasons for its ability to retain capacities for violence. In terms of tasks, it is seen as competing for domestic influence with other sectarian elites, with the advantage of being able to deploy force. In terms of recent operations, many perceived it as having drawn Lebanon into the Syrian civil war and as now trying to use the negative effects of this, such as the rise of radical groups in Lebanon, to strengthen its domestic political position.

The resistance brigades: In terms of association, these brigades are created and commanded by Hezbollah despite their cross-sectarian composition. Many saw them as an effort by Hezbollah to expand its influence throughout the country under the guise of providing security against radical extremism. Some interviewees suggested that members of other sectarian groups join these brigades because of the pay, the power that membership confers, the need to protect their communities and the lingering appeal of Hezbollah's resistance narrative. In terms of recent operations, their role was seen to vary between undercutting the LAF, serving as a tool for exerting political pressure, and operating as a criminal racket.

NB: Neither Hezbollah nor the resistance brigades are state security organizations, while the State Security Directorate, Civil Defence and the Lebanese Customs Administration are. However, the former two are vastly more relevant than the latter three, which explains their inclusion here.

Sources: Interviews across the political spectrum between 11 and 22 January 2015; ICG (2012); *Daily Star*, 15/09/14 (online; consulted 16/03/15); Knudsen (2014); International Alert (2015).

3. The realization of elite objectives through state security organisations

The organizational effects of the three principles for the organization and provision of security that were discussed at the end of the previous section include many of the usual shortcomings of security organizations in fragile environments, such as partisan affiliation and operations, corruption, incompetence, inadequate training, insufficient installations and equipment, and rivalry between and fragmentation within security organizations.³⁵ Such seemingly operational issues in themselves already pose formidable obstacles to reform, even for those Lebanese security professionals who are motivated to improve the organizational performance of the places where they work.

However, these shortcomings do not represent interests or motivations that might drive or incentivize the development of a more citizen-/public good-oriented model of security delivery. Instead, the preceding section has made it quite clear that these shortcomings in fact serve particular elite objectives. Therefore, an understanding of these objectives is of paramount importance as the basis for any reform or development efforts, whether domestic or international in nature. The interviews conducted suggest that Lebanon's sectarian elites achieve at least four objectives through the way in which security is currently organized in Lebanon, namely: 1) a guarantee of last resort that state force will not be used against their interests; 2) the ability to have recourse to extralegal violence without fear of repercussion or prosecution by the state; 3) the ability to dispense patronage to maintain their support base; 4) the maintenance of partial border control in strategic locations on a sectarian basis that generates political or financial advantages. Each of these objectives is explored in more detail below.

Preventing the state security apparatus from becoming a serious threat to any group

First, the combination of the requirement that sectarian political consensus is a sine qua non for domestic security operations (principle #2) with the sectarian composition of Lebanese security organizations (principle #3) means that state force cannot be deployed effectively against major sectarian interests. This pertains mostly to the LAF as it is the only state organization that can project sufficient power to credibly threaten and exert force at scale. Recent episodes where such consensus could be found include LAF operations against Fatah al-Islam in the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr al-Bared (2007), Sheikh Al-Assir in Tripoli (2013), radical groups around Aarsal in the Bekaa valley (2014), popular unrest and radical groups in Tripoli (2014) and the ISF's operation in Lebanon's Roumieh prison against groups of radical Sunni inmates following the January bombing in Tripoli's Jabal Mohsen quarter (2015). However, equally noteworthy are periods of inaction where such operations proved

35 For a general overview of such issues, see: Sedra (2010); for a Lebanon-specific overview: Nashabe (2009), Adib (2012).

impossible, such as effective control of the border by the LAF (from 2005 up to now), LAF intervention against Hezbollah's armed takeover of West Beirut (2008) or earlier LAF operations in Tripoli despite similar popular unrest and street violence (2013).

When asked what would happen if the LAF were to move into action without such consensus between sectarian elites, many interviewees outlined a range of escalating responses that could include popular demonstrations against military operations, street violence against the armed forces,³⁶ political protestations that would bring the national government grinding to a standstill, resignations of high-level officers and civil servants, disobedience of military orders, defections, and, ultimately the break-up of the army. They illustrated this with an example such as that of Saad Hariri allegedly having to prevent a number of resignations of high-level Sunni officers in the LAF in 2008 when it was powerless to face Hezbollah on the streets of Beirut.³⁷ A retired general pointed to the fact that the LAF fragmented at various points during Lebanon's civil war from 1975 to 1989 (in 1976, 1982, 1984 and 1988), only to be reconstituted in its current form by former president Émile Lahoud on the basis of the 'doctrine of consensus' that was formulated in the early 1990s.³⁸

'We always have our passports in our hands, ready to leave...'

Lebanese Druze academic on the daily threat of violence and crisis caused by fragmented security

A social consequence of the fragmentation and unreliable nature of security provision in Lebanon is, as one interviewee suggested, that the private provision of security has become as much of a necessity as an element of fashion and prestige.³⁹ Those who consider themselves important – members of elite groups in particular tend to surround themselves with armed retinues, which reduces their accessibility to voices outside of their immediate sectarian group, enhances the risk of triggering security incidents and reinforces the image of arms and violence being a normal facet of daily street life; this, however, has unequal repercussions for different social groups.⁴⁰ In particular, those not affiliated to a sectarian faction are supplied with significantly reduced levels of security. This ranges from mundane issues such as politicians being able to ignore traffic lights at their pleasure while the less advantaged do so at their peril, to the variable application of the law in matters of graver importance – usually along sectarian lines.

Securing the ability to use political violence without fear of state retribution

Second, having an underdeveloped state security apparatus (principle #1) with strong sectarian representation (principle #3) also makes it comparatively easy to use violence in pursuit of political objectives without fear of state retribution. For example, assassinations of members of the different sectarian elites are a relatively common feature of Lebanese political life and serve clear sectarian purposes. Being a politician was an especially risky business in the tumultuous period of 2005–07, when Lebanon's elite pact was shaken to the core because of Syria's withdrawal and the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

36 On this specific point see, for example: *NOW Media*, 06/06/13 ([online](#): consulted 02/03/15).

37 For instance in an interview on 16/1/15.

38 Interview, 13/1/15.

39 Interview, 15/1/15.

40 This point is also explored in more depth in: Fawaz, Harb and Gharbieh (2012). For a more journalistic perspective on security in Beirut throughout the recent decades: Kassir (2003).

High-profile assassinations included those of Rafik Hariri (2005: Prime Minister and leader of the Sunni Future Movement), Jibril Twaini (2005: a Christian parliamentarian), Pierre Gemayal (2006: leader of the Christian Kataeb/Phalange party and parliamentarian), Antoine Ghanem (2007: a member of the Christian Kataeb/Phalanges party and parliamentarian) and Walid Eido (2007: a Sunni leader in the Future Movement and member of parliament) – among others. What these assassinations have in common is that the individuals assassinated were all largely anti-Syria and against the March 8 coalition, and that none of the incidents has been resolved to date.

However, assassinations are not reserved for top-level politicians, but have also been used to target popular ‘dissidents’ such as George Hawi (2005: a leading Christian in the Communist Party) and Samir Kassir (2005: a Christian anti-Syria, socialist writer and journalist) as well as security officials such as Wissam Hassan (2012: the chief of ISF intelligence).⁴¹ According to a number of interviewees, Hassan’s assassination was a direct consequence of his successful efforts to make the ISF intelligence branch more effective and more independent of Hezbollah. It was under his leadership, for instance, that ISF intelligence uncovered Hezbollah’s parallel national communication network and controls at Beirut international airport (both in 2008), as well as exposed a Syrian plot to smuggle explosives into Lebanon to increase Christian–Muslim tensions with implications at ministerial level.⁴² In short, according to some, he was posing a competitive threat to Hezbollah’s dominance of LAF and General Security (GS) intelligence.⁴³ Naturally, the lack of proper material and training, as well as the complexity of the cases, has contributed to the lack of rigorous investigation or prosecution. However, both the literature and interviews suggest that the influence of sectarian elites on the organization of state security is a more decisive explanatory factor.

This creates, as one interviewee eloquently put it, a culture of impunity in which many forms of violence are informally tolerated or even enabled, as long as one has the right sectarian connections.⁴⁴ The resulting combination of occasional violence and impunity perpetuates a security prism through which events and actions of other sectarian elites and groups are perceived, which stimulates a gradual process of securitization.

Strengthening sectarian support bases through patronage

Third, strong sectarian representation within the state security forces (principle #3) provides elites with the ability to dispense patronage in order to maintain their social support base. This takes three main forms, according to a number of interviewees.⁴⁵ To start with, and crudely put, the need for sectarian representation within the state security forces provides different groups with, in essence, a job quota that they can allocate as they see fit. At

41 In addition, there are more ‘localized’ episodes of assassinations, such as for example in Tripoli in 2012–2013 (Lefèvre 2013).

42 Given his position and associated intelligence-gathering and response capabilities, Wissam Hassan also provided an appreciable level of security and protection against assassination for leading Sunni Future Movement elite members: ICG (2012). His death increased the sense of vulnerability among Sunni Future Movement leaders, which is not surprising in view of the string of assassinations that Lebanon witnessed between 2005 and 2007. The effect that this assassination had, in generating a more antagonistic Sunni–Shia domestic political discourse, should not be underestimated.

43 Several interviews on 15/01/15; see also: ICG (2012).

44 Interview, 15/01/15.

45 Several interviews on 16/01/15.

entry level, some elementary recruitment guidelines and rules need to be seen to apply, but this largely serves to preserve a veneer of merit-based recruitment. At more senior levels, advancement is more a function of sectarian balance and sectarian elite sponsorship than it is of performance and merit.⁴⁶

In addition to patronage within the security forces, their sectarian set-up also provides them with channels of patronage that enable corruption. For example, high-level security officers can have significant stakes in construction businesses where their position and sectarian affiliation allow them to reap profitable kick-backs, circumvent burdensome regulations and conclude favourable deals.⁴⁷ Managing prisons can also be a profitable affair. For instance, the recent 'storming' of the Roumieh prison by the ISF – triggered by the bombing in Tripoli's Alawite quarter Jabal Al-Mohsen – to disable radical groups operating from within the compound, made it clear that a number of individuals had been enjoying illicit access to the outside world (e.g. being in the possession of mobile phones) and privileges beyond what regulations allowed.⁴⁸ It is clear that prison wardens played a role in making this possible.⁴⁹

In general, the sectarian make-up of the security forces enables law-breakers to get away with their actions as long as they have the right connections. In short, sectarian loyalties provide a measure of state tolerance of certain crimes, in particular corruption.⁵⁰ One interviewee provided a particularly striking example by asserting that Rafik Hariri's project to construct a new highway along the coast from Beirut to the south faced a cost inflation of over 260% (from US\$150 million to US\$400 million) as a result of compensation and kick-backs demanded by a sectarian group opposed to the Future Movement.⁵¹ The project was ultimately cancelled, but there was no investigation or prosecution of anyone by the ISF.

Enabling sectarian control of parts of the border for political or financial gain

Fourth, an underdeveloped state security apparatus (principle #1) with strong sectarian representation (principle #3) logically has neither the capacity nor the aim to guard Lebanon's borders. This is wholly intentional and results in fragmented border control in which only certain parts of the border are under the control of state security forces. The Syrian civil war has appreciably worsened this situation (see next section). It enables certain elite players to benefit politically, militarily or financially, from controlling sections of the border. This can happen either directly, by asserting physical control, or indirectly, working through

46 El-Hokayem and McGovern (2008) go so far as to suggest that high-ranking appointees in the military take orders from the sectarian leaders who ensured their appointment.

47 Several interviews between 12 and 22 January 2015; see also, for example: El-Mufti (2012).

48 Several interviews between 12 and 22 January 2015. The BBC and *Al-Akhbar* even speak of a 'detainees' operations room' in the prison from which they would run their clandestine activities (BBC, 12/1/15, [online](#); *Al-Akhbar*, 13/1/15; [online](#); consulted 11/4/15).

49 While no punishments seem to have been meted out to prison staff currently serving, Nihad Mashnouq (the Minister of the Interior) warned that discovery of any further illicit access or privileges would have severe consequences for staff involved (*Asharq al-Awsat*, 15/1/15; [online](#); consulted 11/04/15).

50 The observation on corruption is part of a broader point raised by Menocal and Taxell, namely that institutions reflect the power dynamics of the prevailing elite pact and thus the relations between elites. In short, institutions are functional on the basis of the distribution of power in the political system (Menocal and Taxell (2015). In the case of Lebanon, its elite pact reflects elite interests correlated with sectarian groupings and this logic echoes through its (security) institutions, thus providing a basis that stimulates corrupt practices.

51 Interview, 16/01/15.

friendly elements within state security forces. Figure 2 below provides a very rough estimate of the current state of border control. A few examples will illustrate what such benefits can amount to.

Figure 2: Indicative overview of groups in charge of the Lebanese–Syrian border in early 2015



Note: Groups indicated in red exercise significant control over border stretches in their vicinity.

Source: Author's deductions from a single interview, some aspects of which were confirmed in later interviews.

The map was produced by the Nations Online Project and reproduced with permission.

To begin with, ISF intelligence uncovered a nationwide parallel Hezbollah communications network in 2008 and, specifically, a parallel/overlapping Hezbollah control structure at the Rafik Hariri international airport of Beirut, which is the only official international gateway into the country by air. This basically gives Hezbollah the ability to monitor who enters and exits the country, knowledge that can subsequently be put to political purposes or be used to take action by detaining, interrogating or intimidating departing or arriving passengers

deemed a risk or threat to the organization.⁵² Hezbollah's ability to take action on the basis of such knowledge is, however, not unlimited. If the group would like to detain or interrogate someone coming in from abroad, the possibility to do so depends on the elite connections and sectarian affiliation of that person and any actions taken in his/her support upon arrival/ departure. For instance, one interviewee (a journalist) shared her personal experience of being collected directly at her aeroplane's door by representatives of the Ministry of Justice after having made critical remarks about Hezbollah at an international conference. The group subsequently bypassed normal airport security to avoid any exposure to Hezbollah personnel and she was delivered directly to her doorstep by car.⁵³

Another example is how control over parts of the Lebanese–Syrian land border serves political and financial elite interests. Before the Syrian war erupted, smuggling was a huge money-making business. As the Lebanese–Syrian border does not follow a clear geographical divide, it is porous and invites extensive smuggling operations. One interviewee suggested that a confidential study of Lebanon's borders in 2000 inventoried over 80 smuggling routes.⁵⁴ Several interviewees commented on how known smugglers operated with near-complete impunity as long as they had the right kind of connections to sectarian elites. This implies the existence of widespread bribery, kick-back schemes and perhaps criminal joint ventures that extend through several layers of Lebanon's criminal, security and political organizations.⁵⁵ Such smuggling activities continued unabated between 1991 and 2005 when Syrian forces dominated the Lebanese security scene. This suggests that key Syrian officials were also profiting from the situation.⁵⁶

After the Syrian civil war erupted, smuggling for financial gain was transmuted in part into illicit cross-border traffic of weapons, funds and fighters that feeds into the Syrian civil war. In part in reaction to the brutality of the Syrian regime's response to the uprising and its scorched-earth tactics, significant grass-roots support emerged among the Sunni population of northern and eastern Lebanon in the course of 2012. This enabled such cross-border flows to grow rapidly, not least because Lebanese Sunni localities came to serve as conduits for Gulf funding to Syrian opposition groups and staging areas for attacks on Syrian regime positions across the border.⁵⁷ Although Lebanon's sectarian elites must have been aware of this development, it is unclear whether they – the Future Movement in particular –

'The organizational dysfunction of Lebanon's state security forces is precisely the type of functionality desired by parts of Lebanon's elite...'

52 Several interviews on 15/01/15 and 16/01/15. Hezbollah's parallel control structure of the Rafik Harir airport is also a valuable asset in its global network of business and criminal operations, which serve fundraising purposes and also facilitate terrorist attacks by the movement (*NOW News*, 18/7/14, [online](#); *Australian Financial Review*, 13/12/13, [online](#)) (both consulted 11/4/15). An excellent in-depth analysis of Hezbollah's global network is provided by Levitt (2013).

53 Interview on 16/01/15.

54 Interview, 15/01/15.

55 Interviews on 15/1/15 and 16/1/15.

56 Cockburn (2014); Kassir (2003) describes Syria's presence in Lebanon as a mafia-style protectorate.

57 ICG (2012).

were involved at national level or at scale.⁵⁸ This changed radically in early 2013 when Hezbollah came out from behind the smokescreen it had tried to lay to cover its involvement in the Syrian civil war and acknowledged that its advisory mission had turned into full-scale combat support for President Assad's regime.⁵⁹ This was followed by two years of intense fighting on the Syrian side of the Syrian–Lebanese border, during which Hezbollah managed to establish control over significant parts of it (see Figure 2). One consequence has been that cross-border flows of fighters, arms and funds for the benefit of the Syrian opposition have become progressively more difficult to organize; another is that similar flows for the benefit of the various armed groups supporting President Assad have become progressively easier to organize. Neither the LAF nor Lebanon's General Security (GS) seems to have significantly hindered this process. It is for this reason that recent initiatives aimed at improved border control through, for example, the construction of surveillance towers, must be considered largely symbolic, despite substantial support from the international community.

It is clear that Lebanon's Sunni elites are either unable or hesitant to provoke Hezbollah by insisting on tighter border control by the LAF (this would be a historic first in any case). A useful supporting indicator is the dialogue between the Future Movement and Hezbollah that is currently ongoing. This dialogue is mainly aimed at retaining a measure of stability in Lebanon's domestic politics and security situation despite – or rather because of – Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war.⁶⁰ Remarkably, the movement is simultaneously running parts of the border, fighting a civil war in Syria and being part of Lebanon's government, which, in theory, could undertake all manner of actions to address the very same border situation. In short, the present state of border control and border insecurity persists partly because it serves the interests of Lebanon's ruling elites, although it benefits some more than others.

The implication of the preceding analysis is that it would be a severe analytical mistake to regard the inability of the ISF, LAF and GS to ensure either national or citizen-oriented security as a case of organizational dysfunction. Quite the contrary: their organizational dysfunction is precisely the type of functionality desired by significant parts of Lebanon's elite and serves their purposes well.⁶¹ In consequence, efforts at reform that fail to take account of the interests of Lebanon's political–security elites and their sectarian/consociational elite pact are bound to have only limited operational impact.

58 Wimmen (2015) suggests the Future Movement played a role in recruiting and equipping opposition groups, but offers no evidence. In general, the use of 'private' charities, religious foundations and intermediaries at the various stages of the political decision making, financial transactions and resource transfer chains that serve to support non-state armed groups, make it difficult to establish who is involved, in what capacity and to what extent. In analogy, consider for example the financing of the Syrian conflict (Dickinson 2013).

59 Sullivan (2014).

60 Several interviews between 12 and 22 January 2015.

61 To some extent, this echoes earlier findings such as those of Chabal and Daloz (1999). This situation does not necessarily serve the security interests of the Lebanese population. Although 92% of the Lebanese population indicated in a recent survey that state institutions *should* be responsible for providing security, they simultaneously noted the present fragmentation of the security landscape, the threat level posed by various political parties, the negotiable and sectarian nature of security provision and the level of political interference (International Alert 2014).

4. Elite interests, (in)security and the Syrian conflict

The subject of the Syrian conflict is inevitably broached during any conversation about security in Lebanon. Its cross-border spillover effects have been enormous in terms of refugees, fighting along the border and a series of major security incidents within Lebanon that are closely linked with the fortunes of different parties on the Syrian battlefield. Such effects pose major – arguably the largest – security threats to Lebanon at present (see Box 2 below). What is less examined is how the Syrian conflict is used by Lebanon’s elites to gain political advantage on Lebanon’s domestic scene. In a number of ways, the Syrian conflict provides a case study of how a major external event influences domestic elite interests that shape the domestic organization and provision of security.

Hezbollah as free-rider: entering the war while being part of the Lebanese government

From the outset, Lebanon’s government formally sought to maintain strict neutrality in the Syrian conflict. This did not prevent a significant level of grass-roots Sunni support from Lebanon for Syrian opposition parties, but the support appears to have been fragmented, informal and localized in nature.⁶² However, the leadership of Hezbollah – which is also part of the Lebanese government and thus representative of the Lebanese state – ultimately dragged the country into the conflict nevertheless. Two developments in particular influenced Hezbollah’s decision to intervene militarily. First and foremost there was the threat posed to the survival of President Assad’s regime by the opposition battlefield successes in the immediate vicinity of Damascus in 2012. The capture of the Syrian capital would very likely have resulted in the fall of the regime, removing a key Hezbollah ally from the regional scene. Second, Syrian opposition groups, including radical Islamist elements, gradually took control of parts of the Lebanese–Syrian border in the course of 2013. This indirectly threatened Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon and directly threatened Shia-dominated areas across the border in Syria.⁶³

From the perspective of the central research question of this report – namely, how elite interests influence the organization and performance of security organizations – Hezbollah’s decision to intervene has had two important consequences. The first is that the movement’s leadership has had to engage in creative reframing to develop a narrative that could justify its intervention and that resonates with the distributive, status quo logic of Lebanon’s elite pact. Since this has proved to be problematic, Hezbollah now faces a loss of credibility among both the general population and part of the country’s elites. Although the movement offsets some of this effect by taking on the role of protector of minority groups against radical extremism, this is nevertheless likely to have a negative effect on its relations with some of Lebanon’s

62 ICG (2012); Lefèvre (2014).

63 ICG (2014).

other sectarian elites, its future place in the country's elite pact and quite possibly Lebanon's long-term stability.⁶⁴

The second consequence of Hezbollah's intervention is that the movement has increasingly harnessed Lebanon's state security organizations to combat radical extremists within Lebanon in response to the realization that it overestimated its ability to simultaneously fight a conflict in Syria and deal with associated spillover effects in Lebanon itself. It is doing so in partnership with the Future Movement that sees its leadership of Lebanon's Sunni community being threatened by radical groups. This development is creating a perception of partiality on the part of state security forces that stimulates radicalization and may lead to popular violence.

The political dialogue that is currently taking place between Hezbollah and the Future Movement (since December 2014) could generate the confidence necessary to mitigate the negative effects of these consequences – in particular the radical or violent mobilization of Lebanon's Sunni community.⁶⁵ However, the set-up of the dialogue is too limited in scope to achieve this. For example, it leaves the matter of Hezbollah's exceptional status as resistance movement, its armed capacity and its Syrian involvement explicitly out of account (Hezbollah demanded the same when the current government was formed in early 2014).⁶⁶ It is therefore more likely to help maintain domestic stability in the short term than it is to provide a more ambitious agenda for governance or security sector reform. Both consequences are discussed in greater detail below.

Box 3. Security threats as perceived by Lebanon's population

A recent survey of citizen's perceptions of security threats at the national level suggests that risks associated with the Syrian civil war dominate how people think about and experience security. Threats identified include political instability (95% of respondents named this as a source of insecurity), physical insecurity (96%), the war in Syria itself (95%) and Syrian refugees (91%). In addition, Israel (88%) came out at the top of the list of perceived national security threats. While it is unclear to what extent the perceived high rates of threat posed by political instability and physical insecurity are permanent features of Lebanon's sectarian-based governance model – as opposed to spillover effects of the Syrian civil war – existing analysis suggests that the conflict has appreciably increased both perceived threats.

In relative terms, about three-quarters of respondents felt that Lebanon was less safe today than three years ago. This finding, however, fluctuated in accordance with socio-economic status (the perception of growing insecurity was greater for those earning less than US\$2,500 a month) and location (increasing insecurity was more strongly felt in areas closer to Syria).

64 For example, Gaub suggests that Hezbollah's Syrian intervention is undermining the movement's 2006 Memorandum of Understanding with Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement since he is strongly opposed to Hezbollah's intervention (Gaub 2014).

65 This is particularly a risk in the marginalized Sunni areas of northern Lebanon, as evidenced by the escalating tensions and increasing power of radical Sunni groups in Tripoli throughout 2013 and 2014 (Lefèvre 2014).

66 The limitations and objective of the current political dialogue between Hezbollah and the Future Movement were recognized and articulated by nearly all interviewees across the political spectrum. See also: Zeid (2014).

The same survey also suggests the possible existence of two perception gaps. First, a gap between security threat perception at the national (high) and local (comparatively modest) level. For example, in contrast with the figures above, 51% of respondents considered their area to be safer than other areas, while 40% indicated they felt safer in the locality they lived in compared with three years ago. Second, a gap between security threat perceptions and actual experiences of insecurity. For instance, only 13% of respondents indicated they had been a victim of crime, of which most was property-related (68%), followed by political (18%) and violent crimes (15%).

Sources: Hovig (2014); International Alert (2014).

Hezbollah's justification falls short: political and popular cost

In respect of the narrative that Hezbollah employs to justify its Syrian intervention, it is important to realize that its claim to its unique status (i.e. a high level of popular legitimacy combined with being justified in the popular view in having significant armed capability outside of the state's purview that is formally recognized) is grounded in its self-assumed role as defender of Lebanon and champion of the Palestinians against Israel.⁶⁷ The trouble here is that Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon in 2000.⁶⁸ Using the 2006 war with Israel as evidence of continued Israeli aggression distorts the chain of events somewhat, since Hezbollah largely triggered this conflict itself by kidnapping two Israeli soldiers.⁶⁹ Moreover, Hezbollah's show of force in 2008 clearly served domestic political purposes and violated its own solemn pledges to use its armed capacity only externally.⁷⁰ In short, although the history of Israeli intervention and brutality in Lebanon and against the Palestinians remains a powerful narrative and frame of injustice for the group, it has used its arms and military organization for other purposes. This has become discernible to the Lebanese public and a matter of concern to Lebanon's sectarian elites as it threatens their own relative power.

Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict has forced the movement's leadership to engage in further re-framing of its basic narrative to justify its engagement, maintain its support base in Lebanon and remain a legitimate partner in the Lebanese political arena. By and large it has sought to portray its intervention as having the dual aims of protecting Lebanon against Sunni radical extremism and ensuring the survival of its capability to resist Israel (given Syria's vital role as supplier of arms to Hezbollah and as transit point).⁷¹ This justification, however compelling it seems at face value, is problematic on several counts:

67 Yadav (2013). It probably benefited from the precedent represented by the 1969 Cairo agreement in which the then Lebanese government accepted the presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its militias on its territory as a law and force unto themselves.

68 Israel, however, held on to a minor area of contested territory – the Sheeba farms. Inevitably, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah seized on this occupation by giving a speech the day after the Israeli withdrawal to emphasize its incomplete nature while highlighting this as a cause for continued and unremitting resistance (Yadav 2013).

69 See for instance: Levitt (2013). Hezbollah might have sought to detract attention from Lebanon's growing political crisis and its own exclusion from the government, resulting from the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005, but severely underestimated the Israeli response to the kidnapping of two of its soldiers.

70 For a brief analysis of the development of Hezbollah's military capabilities: Gaub (2015b).

71 Consider, for example, Nasrallah's speeches during the Ashura festival of 2013, February 2014 ([online](#)) and March 2014 ([online](#)) (both consulted 16/03/15). See also: ICG (2014).

- Credibly depicting the threat of radical extremists as a reason for self-protection through a pre-emptive strike relies on painting the entire Syrian opposition with this brush from early on. However, its radicalization was in fact a much more gradual process.⁷² This framing also takes a radicalized state of affairs as a given and in this way downplays any role Hezbollah's own intervention might have had in influencing and expediting the very process of radicalization.⁷³ Lastly, it should not be forgotten that Hezbollah is no stranger to extremist acts itself, which its narrative conveniently leaves out.⁷⁴
- Portraying Syria as a crucial ally in the resistance against Israel while its regime is slaughtering large numbers of Sunni and Palestinians is in stark contrast with the moral appeal and probity of the movement. It only serves to make clear to the Lebanese public that the movement's actions are as much driven by its own interests of organizational survival as they are by its moral righteousness of seeing resistance as a force for the common good.
- Intervening in Syria hardly serves Lebanese interests, especially in the face of growing numbers of refugees, radicalism and social tensions. While these are certainly not all the result of Hezbollah actions, its intervention has nevertheless created a fundamental tension between the movement as a force in itself and its role as a credible elite partner in government. Remarkably, the movement appears to have made very little effort to develop a defensive line of argument on this issue, and other sectarian groups have hardly raised it. This is in spite of the view held by many of those interviewed for this report that Hezbollah's leadership should be increasingly analysed as an Iranian agent or proxy, instead of as a Lebanese movement with strong domestic roots.⁷⁵

Unsurprisingly, Hezbollah's struggle to get its justifying narrative right has reduced its credibility among its Sunni adherents in the region, eroded some support within its domestic base and reduced the confidence of Lebanon's (other) sectarian elites in the movement.⁷⁶ However, several interlocutors also suggested that the explanation given by Hezbollah's leadership for its Syrian intervention remains generally accepted among its core Shia constituency and many Christians that are pro-Syrian regime, despite growing discontent, rising financial costs and increasing casualties.⁷⁷

72 The ICG (2014) observes that Hezbollah had in fact little knowledge of the nature or complexity of the Syrian opposition. For a brief analysis of the process of radicalization of the Syrian opposition: Van Veen and Abdo (2013).

73 Research into the timeline of events in the period 2012–14 that was conducted for this report suggests that, at a minimum, there was a dynamic interplay between Hezbollah's intervention, radicalization and spillover, but it leans towards the view that Hezbollah's intervention largely preceded the process of radicalization in Syria. Several interviewees vehemently denied any such interaction effects, which in the view of the author underlines the sensitivity of Hezbollah to this charge (Interviews on 13/1/15 and on 16/01/15).

74 Consider, for example, Hezbollah's attack on a bus in Bulgaria in 2012, killing six (BBC, 05/12/13; [online](#): consulted 16/03/15).

75 Several interviews between 15 and 22 January 2015; see also: Levitt (2013) and George (2015).

76 See, for example: *Al-Monitor*, 18/2/15 ([online](#): consulted 13/4/15), in addition to several interviews between 15 and 22 January 2015.

77 For example, one interviewee said that Hezbollah is withdrawing some of the membership cards that give its supporters the right to purchase foodstuffs and the like at reduced prices, because of the rising cost of its Syrian intervention. Another interviewee estimated Hezbollah casualties to be around 1,500–2,000, on the basis of a recent speech by Nasrallah in which he mentioned that Hezbollah needed to take care of 4,500 new orphans. Both interviews took place on 16/01/15.

Machiavelli in Beirut: turning the blowback of the Syrian conflict into domestic power gains

In respect of Hezbollah's efforts to crack down on radical extremists within Lebanon, this arises from the movement's realization that it could not sufficiently control the domestic consequences of its Syrian intervention and the more general spillover from the Syrian conflict.⁷⁸ As the drain on its men and funds became apparent, underlined by incidents that demonstrated Hezbollah's limited ability to protect its own (such as the bombing of the Iranian embassy in Janah [Beirut] in 2013), the movement has worked to make Lebanon's Sunni leadership complicit in the suppression of radical Sunni groups. This strategy features several components including making use of Lebanon's security organizations.

To start with, Hezbollah's leadership has made sure that key ministries for maintaining domestic order, such as justice and the interior, are led by the Future Movement.⁷⁹ This makes Sunni leaders such as Ashraf Rifi responsible – and publicly visible as such – for dealing with the threat posed by radical Sunni groups in Lebanon. It also makes them susceptible to the blame that might result for failures in safeguarding domestic security. Given recent incidents, it is quite likely that more of the same will happen and this may shift the focus of public debate, from the link between Hezbollah's intervention in Syria and violent incidents in Lebanon, to radical extremism in Lebanon as a separate phenomenon on its own.⁸⁰

In addition, Hezbollah's leadership has expanded its security operations by creating 'resistance brigades' (see Box 1) as vehicles of mixed sectarian composition to provide security and exert influence in areas where a Hezbollah-only presence would generate resistance. The existence and operations of these brigades have already caused significant sectarian and religious tensions, which have on occasion led to minor conflicts.⁸¹ There is a risk of such incidents gradually building up to a larger violent backlash.

Finally, Hezbollah's leadership has also been instrumental in ensuring that the LAF has cracked down hard on several radical Islamist groups. The Future Movement has supported this development because such groups also represent a competitive threat to its leadership of Lebanon's Sunni community.⁸² This collaboration of convenience has produced the sort of sectarian consensus that is required for effective state-led security operations in Lebanon. While this has encouraged a sense of confidence and security in the short term, it is also feeding perceptions that the LAF is getting too close to Hezbollah for the comfort of many (consider, for example, the quasi-joint LAF–Hezbollah operations in Aarsal, the wider Beeka valley and Sidon). In the longer run, it risks eroding the high level of popular support that the

'If it comes to combating radical groups, the LAF is "swallowing the knife": it is damned if it does and it is damned if it doesn't...'

Lebanese general

78 See, for example: Noe (2014).

79 Naturally, the Future Movement considers this an opportunity to expand its influence and to force Hezbollah to make compromises from a position of ministerial strength (Interview, 12/01/15).

80 Several interviewees expressed their concern about this matter (both March 14 sympathizers as well as individuals not strongly aligned with either the March 8 or March 14 alliance).

81 For an example: *Nahermet Newsdesk*, 23/03/14 ([online](#): 01/04/15).

82 Interview, 13/1/15.

LAF currently enjoys – especially given that many of its rank and file hail from Sunni communities in the north of the country.⁸³ From the perspective of the LAF there is, however, little choice. As one general put it, ‘The LAF is swallowing the knife.’ In other words, it is damned if it doesn’t combat such radical groups, and damned if it does.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the benefits largely seem to accrue to Hezbollah.

It takes two to tango: the high-stakes game of the Future Movement and Hezbollah

In brief, a paradoxical situation is being created in which the elites of Hezbollah and the Future Movement – as leaders of the respective 8 and 14 March alliances – have established a form of tactical cooperation in the interest of maintaining domestic security in the short term. This cooperation has three main elements:

- Hezbollah acts as a state within a state in combating radical extremism, but in the knowledge that it is to a significant extent dependent on the very state it seeks to dominate. This leads it to look for ways in which its leaders can pull the strings from behind the scenes of Lebanon’s competitive politics and shift the parameters of its elite pact in its favour.
- The Future Movement willingly partners Hezbollah in this endeavour because it sees a chance to reassert itself domestically and to use the LAF to eliminate competition from radical groups for its claim to leadership over the Sunni community. The same goes for Lebanon’s Christian Maronites under Michel Aoun, who are allied to Hezbollah at least in part out of fear of the rise of ‘Sunni power’ such as the Islamic State and its repression of minorities.
- The security forces (the LAF in particular) are simultaneously used to serve as instruments in the defence of Lebanon against external threats and to protect different sets of sectarian elite interests in response to a shifting threat perception.

These elements are tacitly joined in the political dialogue between Hezbollah and the Future Movement. While dialogue and cooperation between the Future Movement and Hezbollah are clearly welcome from the perspective of maintaining much-needed stability – it has so far effectively helped to contain the threat posed by radical Islamist groups⁸⁵ – it also creates two significant potential risks. The first is that it accelerates a process by which Lebanon’s Sunni leadership in the Future Movement becomes discredited and disassociated from its constituency. After all, in the dialogue it is clear that it is not able to deal with Hezbollah on an equal footing and this plays into the narrative of radical groups of corrupted and co-opted rulers that must be overthrown. The second is that Hezbollah may well have unintentionally laid the basis for growing Sunni–Shia tensions in Lebanon through its prior aggressive stance towards the Future Movement as representative of Lebanon’s Sunni and through its Syrian intervention. In turn, this introduces a longer-term risk of eroding Hezbollah’s position in Lebanon’s elite pact. Once other sectarian elites start seeing the movement as less of a status quo

83 Popular confidence in the LAF stands at slightly over 80% according to a recent survey (International Alert 2015); see also: Lefèvre (2014).

84 Interview, 13/1/15.

85 See for example: Wimmen (2015).

partner with whom one can do business, and more as an existential threat, in that seeks to tilt the prevailing elite pact in its own favour, negotiations will become much more complicated.

However, the current situation also offers limited opportunities for working towards more equitable security provision. In particular, if the LAF is to maintain its high confidence ratings among the Lebanese public, it must ensure its operations against radical groups adhere to high standards of transparency and accountability. Maintaining popular trust in the LAF is currently in the interest of both the Future Movement and Hezbollah. This suggests modest openings might exist for improving internal oversight, professional ethics and civil/military relations. Although not much should be expected of such initiatives in the short term, they may create building blocks and relations that can be used when the Syrian conflict ends. Also, in the short term the Future Movement could negotiate greater LAF presence and control in traditional Hezbollah areas along the Lebanese border to counter perceptions of LAF partisanship.⁸⁶ As Hezbollah is comparatively weak domestically, while international support for the LAF is high, it is conceivable that appropriate resources and pressure points could be found.⁸⁷ Such a development could gradually increase the extent to which state security institutions actually provide security for the Lebanese state and its citizens.

86 The grant of three billion dollars by Saudi Arabia to the LAF for the purchase of weapons from France could be used, for example, to enable a more effective deployment of the LAF along the Syrian–Lebanese border with the aim of neutralizing Hezbollah’s influence. However, its delivery appears to be slow with weapons’ supply not meeting demand (AI-Monitor, 21/4/15; [online](#): consulted 24/4/15).

87 The careful calibration of Hezbollah counter-actions (or even their absence) against Israeli strikes on Hezbollah assets on the Syrian side of the Golan heights clearly aims to avoid escalation and can be interpreted as a sign of relative weakness. See for example: *BBC*, 19/01/15 ([online](#)) and *AI-Monitor*, 30/01/15 ([online](#)) (both consulted 17/03/15). This report has argued that the same applies to Lebanon’s domestic situation.

5. Conclusions

The preceding sections examined how elite interests in Lebanon shape the organization and performance of its state and non-state security organizations at the national level. Its starting point was an analysis of the characteristics of Lebanon's elite pact, which refers to the mix of formal and informal rules on the basis of which Lebanon's main sectarian elites govern the country. It has become clear that its elite pact is one between divided minorities that largely define their interests at the group level, with scope for the leaders of these groups to define complementary interests at the individual level. The implication is that security in Lebanon is organized first and foremost to serve the interests of its main sectarian groups and in particular of their elites. This is interspersed with structural opportunities for private profit-making via the provision of 'security', as long as such opportunities are framed within the broader sectarian context and benefit one or more of its key stakeholders.

This situation results in the uneven, unreliable and unequal provision of security on the basis of sectarian control and affiliation; in the informalization⁸⁸ of security provision (including by formal state security organizations); in the inability of state security organizations to provide national security as a collective good (since interests are not defined in national terms); and in the perpetuation of the status quo in how and for whom security is provided. The oddity that Lebanon's elite pact explicitly and formally continues to recognize the right of a prominent non-state organization, Hezbollah, to maintain significant armed capacity outside of the state, has the consequence that the state's monopoly on the use of armed force is neither an aspiration nor a reality for Lebanon's elites.

In this context the Syrian conflict is creating external security threats, mainly in the form of radical extremism, that neither Lebanon's state nor its non-state security organizations are able to control by themselves. Although Hezbollah's intervention on behalf of President Assad was justified as a defence against the threat of radicalism, it appears that the movement has realized that it chewed off more than it can swallow. As a result, efforts to counter the threat of radicalization and preserve Lebanon's elite pact have led to new political and security marriages of convenience between Hezbollah and the Future Movement, as well as between Hezbollah and the LAF. While their terms appear to be in Hezbollah's favour, they are not controlled by it. The situation offers an opportunity for longer-term change if state security organizations can use it to assert their control over Lebanon's domestic security landscape by serving short-term sectarian elite interests while remaining legitimate in the eyes of the population. If such control can be sustained and increased, and can acquire characteristics of public security, Lebanon's security organizations may over time shift popular expectations from security provision on a sectarian basis to security provision on a more national basis. While this will be a step-by-step, long-term process that is susceptible to setbacks, it nevertheless represents a feasible approach to maintain relative stability between deeply divided elites. An elite pact that slowly recognizes national interests next to sectarian ones might yet be the result.

⁸⁸ Informalization refers to the process by which security is provided on the basis of both unofficial and official criteria, which reduces transparency, increases the sectarian character of security provision and reduces the value of the notion of citizenship.

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Annexe 1: Methodology and definitions

The report is the first output of the research project: *'All for the few and the few for themselves?: How elite interests influence the organization of security and justice in fragile environments'*, which is part of the Security and Justice Research Programme of Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. The project represents an exploratory research effort based on a multiple case study design with the aim of developing three research questions into a firmer set of hypotheses that can be further examined. These questions are:

- What are typical interests that elites seek to protect through security and justice organizations?
- How do such interests influence where the organization and provision of security and justice are situated on the range from private to public solutions for matching supply with demand in fragile environments? What are mechanisms through which this happens?
- Under what conditions do elites decide / can elites be nudged to provide security and justice in a manner that gravitates more towards public solutions for matching supply with demand?

As the project initially focuses on its security dimension, its working definition of elites is: 'those individuals or representatives of groups with influence on a nation's tangible and intangible security resources'. Such elites are the unit of analysis for each case study. Elites are examined at the national level as relatively homogenous actors that are representative of relatively well-defined constituencies. Influence is defined as having at least one of the following characteristics: a) shaping popular perceptions of security, b) participating in (in) formal decision-making on security matters and c) possessing organizational capabilities that can be mobilized to create (in)security. Elite interests are understood as a mix of self, group and national objectives that inform elite behaviour.

To increase research validity, the project differentiates between four analytical sub-categories within elite groups. These are used to identify interviewees and triangulate data, namely a) politicians who decide on security policy and strategy, b) opinion-makers who shape the political-security discourse (such as journalists and analysts), c) high-ranking representatives of state security organizations and d) influential representatives of non-state security organizations who both decide on the organization of security and command actual security activities.

This report is based on a literature survey and 24 semi-structured, qualitative interviews that took place in Lebanon (Beirut and Tripoli) between 12 and 22 January 2015:

- six national politicians: 1 minister, 1 party leader and 4 (former) members of parliament;
- ten Lebanese opinion-makers : 6 journalists, 1 academic and 3 civil society activists;
- six high-ranking officials and officers in the Lebanese security forces (active or retired): 3 generals in the Lebanese Armed Forces, 1 colonel in the Internal Security Forces, 1 general with the Directorate for General Security and 1 civil servant in the Ministry of the Interior;

- two influential informal security providers: 1 sheikh and 1 leader of a street gang.

The interviews represent the full breadth of the Lebanese political / sectarian spectrum. Despite the refusal of direct representatives of Hezbollah to meet with the researchers, sufficient interviews were conducted with known sympathizers of the movement to ensure its views have been adequately taken into account.