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Lebanon and Syria

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*Lebanon's Education System
– Why reforms are necessary*

The Lebanon Papers

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Firstly,

Lebanon is currently experiencing one of the most difficult times in history as the country is wrestling with a dire economic situation, a global pandemic and political instability.

The Lebanon Papers series therefore aims to offer an overview on the current situation in Lebanon and provide possible solutions for a better future.

Its purpose is to prevent disinformation by ensuring sound reporting while explaining the challenges as simple as possible for the information to be accessible to as many people as possible. The paper series consist of well-founded reports on different topics using political, economic and judicial perspectives in order to achieve a comprehensive coverage. The third issue of the series addresses the education system. In Lebanon, education is highly privatised leading to the fact that most parents have to pay large sums to ensure quality education for their children. In the light of economic collapse, a privatised education system will be difficult to sustain and is therefore of dire need for reform. This paper will discuss some of the possible ways forward.

We hope that you will enjoy reading our paper series and are looking forward to any feedback that you might have.



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Meet the Author

I am a graduate lawyer specialised in International, European law and Human Rights. After completing my legal studies at the Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität in Munich I moved to Beirut in order to gain work experience in the region. Currently I am doing my LL.M. in public international law remotely at Utrecht University. During my studies in Munich I gained work experiences, both in law firms such as Freshfields or Beiten Burkhardt, as well as through an internship in a foundation in Bogotá. Cultural exchange, languages and the interaction of traditions and history of each country in the respective legal system, have always fascinated me. I am particularly interested in the question of how best to consolidate the principles of the rule of law. However, it is not only legal aspects that need to be considered, but also the interplay between politics, religion and society,

“Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages [...] Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”¹



The right to education, as well as the right to free and equal access to education is enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration follows the goal to ensure the universal and effective recognition and observance of the rights anchored in it. Unfortunately, this target is far from being achieved worldwide due to lack of implementation. Therefore, the scope for improvement remains significant.

Education is considered a fundamental right and it is crucial in an economic and political environment. The global economy, the digital shift and the overload of accessible information cry out for the “knowledge-worker”. Education is key for prosperity. The number of young Lebanese leaving the country has risen dramatically between 2018 and 2020. Currently, 35% of Lebanese between the ages of 22 and 50 are planning

on leaving the country². Among them students who are forced to look for universities abroad as they are more affordable. High tuition fees extend from school to university education. Even before the economic crisis, only a certain part of the Lebanese population was able to pay these fees and thus provide their children with a good education. With the depreciation of the national currency and the shortage of US-Dollars, this share has halved. More and more parents are forced to take their children out of private schools and students have to interrupt their studies. The lack of resources available for public institutions and the lower paygrade for teachers result in a lower education level.

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights Art. 26 Para 1

How can the implementation of the right to education be fully granted?

National constraints play an important role and are most of the time difficult but not impossible to overcome. Reforms of the education system have been under discussion for some time. Covid-19 and the economic crisis have currently added further challenges. Due to the pandemic a whole new way of teaching has to be pursued quickly. Meanwhile the public education system has to cope with an increasing number of students with the same limited resources due to the economic crisis. For the future of the country it is time to invest in the education of young Lebanese, who in turn could rebuild the country.

² Lebanon Chronicles, <https://lebanon.zenith.me/en/society/amidst-corona-and-economic-crisis-young-lebanese-leave-home> (viewed 13.11.2020 10:40)

I. History of the Lebanese education system

The Lebanese education system has been highly influenced by different religious denominations that characterise the country. Additionally, the French mandate, that ended in 1943, left its mark on it. Before the civil war, Lebanese education was rather dominated by each religion than by a national education system. The war left an economic crisis and an imminent desperation for change behind. While Lebanon was

slowly coming back on its feet unifying the Lebanese was one of the main priorities. To do so reforming the education system played a huge role. The formal starting point for the education reform process in Lebanon was the adoption of the Taef Agreement, which not only put an end to the civil war in 1989 but enshrined the following goals regarding the educational sector³:



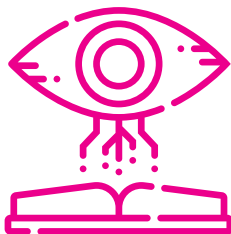
1.

Education shall be provided to all and shall be made obligatory for the elementary stage.



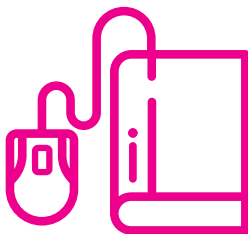
2.

The freedom of education shall be emphasized in accordance with general laws and regulations.



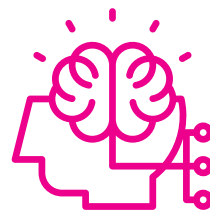
3.

Private education shall be protected and state control over private schools and textbooks shall be strengthened.



4.

Official, vocational, and technological education shall be reformed, strengthened, and developed in a manner that meets the country's development and reconstruction needs. The conditions of the Lebanese University shall be reformed and aid shall be provided to the university, especially to its technical colleges.



5.

The curricula shall be reviewed and developed in a manner that strengthens national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness, and that unifies textbooks on the subjects of history and national education.⁴

The Agreement was followed by the reorganisation of the educational sector in 1995. That included setting the educational ladder in order, as well as changing the names of the educational stages (elementary, intermediate, secondary education – see graphic below) and of the secondary school certificate (Brévet). Furthermore, new curricula were developed and completed in 1997, aiming to reinforce national identity, which had become weak after the war. Their implementation began the same year and was completed in 2001. It must be stated that the old curricula and teaching materials from before the war, were issued between 1968 and 1971 and were lacking congruency as well as substance. Therefore, the reform of the curricula in 1997 was a breakthrough. Introducing new subjects such as computer studies, technology, social studies, economics, and a second foreign language and translation, brought a modernisation to the content of the academic subjects. Most importantly the curriculum stressed that starting immediately teaching should be focused on making the student the center of the educational process and emphasised cooperative living and the Lebanese–Arab identity.

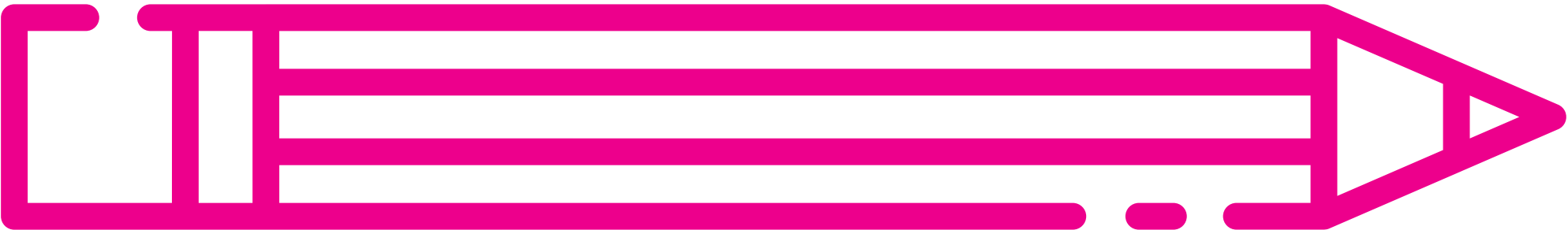
Although these reforms were a necessary step forward, their implementation was not entirely successful. While the number of subjects where increased, teacher training schemes were not offered and therefore it was impossible to ensure that the content of the new curricula would not be taught using traditional (teacher-centered) methods. Additionally, there still is no unified curriculum covering the civil war as part of the Lebanese history in schools, which would be important for students to study, in order to learn how to deal and respond to conflict.⁵

³ Alayan S., Rohde A., Sarhan D., *The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula*, Berghahn Books 2012, Chapter 1 p. 18

⁴ Taif Accord, Part III Other Reforms, Section F. Education https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_tauf_agreement_english_version_.pdf (viewed 13.11.2020, 17:08)

The Lebanese education system today is characterised by a high rate of private schools. Depending on their fee structure and patronage, Lebanese schools can be divided in three categories: public schools, tuition-free private schools supported by government funds (for preschool and elementary levels only), and fee based private schools. Private schools can belong to individuals, associations, or religious groups.⁶ Despite these three categories, the Lebanese Ministry of Education for Youth and Sport exercises control over schools, whether they are public or private. Due to the licensing requirement for private schools by the Ministry and the requirement for unified examinations at the end of the secondary cycle, private schools have been forced not to deviate too far from the government curricula in pre-university education.⁷

The Lebanese education system is structured in three main parts: Elementary, Secondary and Higher education. Language of instruction is mainly Arabic, although English and French are taught with the beginning of elementary school.



⁵ Alayan S., Rohde A., Sarhan D., *The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula*, Berghahn Books 2012, Chapter 1 p. 19,20

⁶ Gonzalez G., *Facing Human Capital Challenges of the 21st Century: Education and Labor Market Initiatives in Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates*, 2008, chapter 6 p. 214

While primary school as part of the elementary education marks the start of the public education at the age of six, private schools start with the preschool phase at the age of three. Students in private schools spend one year at the nursery school, another year at kindergarten one, followed by a third year of kindergarten two. Therefore, a difference in academic performance is rooted from the beginning of the educational journey. Primary school is followed by an intermediate cycle which finds its end with the Brevet, which enables students to pass on to the General or Technical Secondary school, that in turn leads to the official Lebanese Baccalaureate certificate.

Education is compulsory until the age of eleven⁸ and is followed by nearly 95 percent of school-age children. Despite the fact that education is mandatory by law, the Lebanese authorities have not yet achieved its full implementation, especially in urban slums and rural areas.

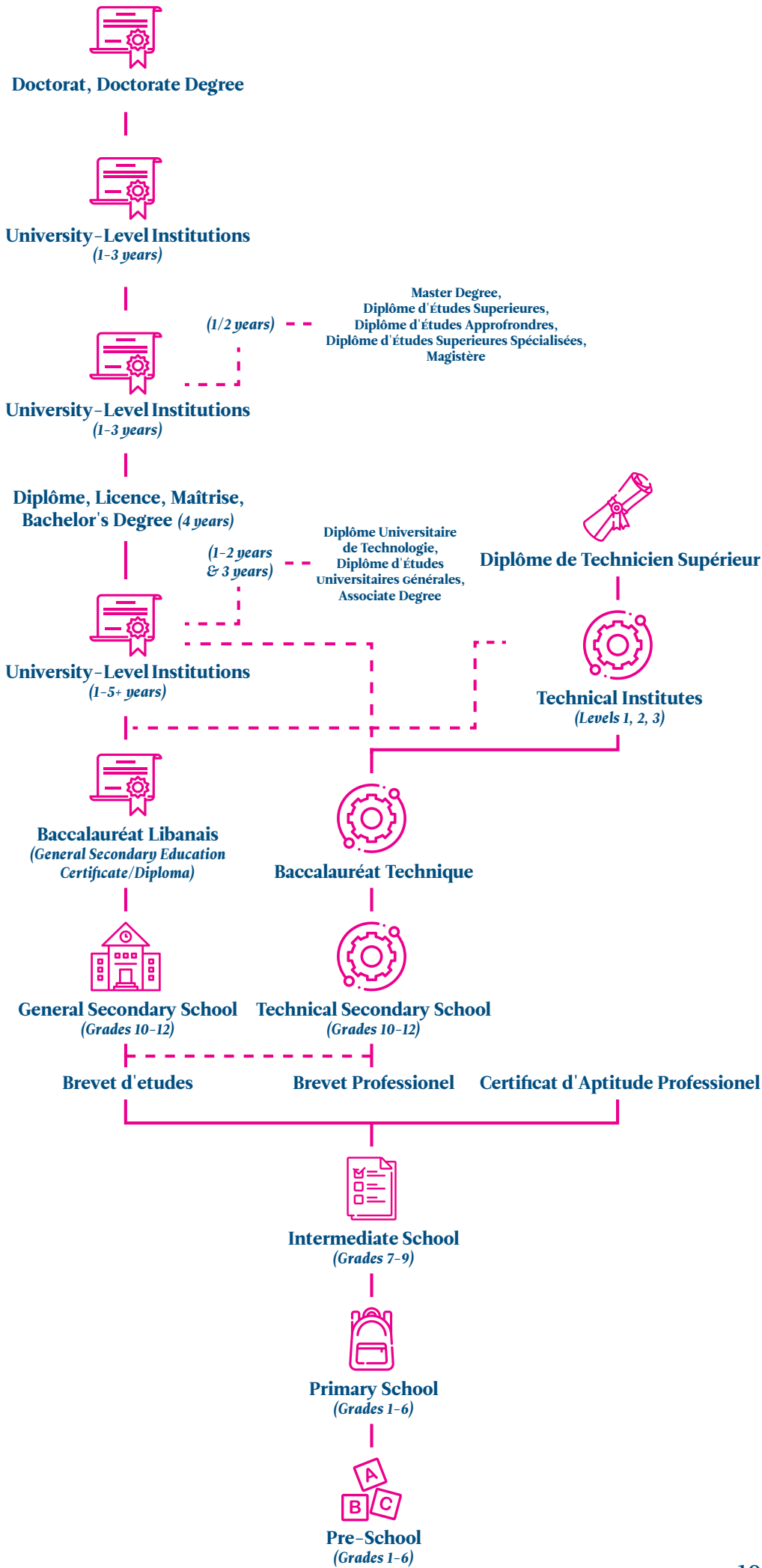
⁷ Lebanon – Educational system overview <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/827/Lebanon-EDUCATIONAL-SYSTEM-OVERVIEW.html> (viewed: 14.11.2020, 17:53)

⁸ Higher Education Government Lebanon http://www.higher-edu.gov.lb/arabic/Guides/Other-Guides/Educ_Sys.pdf (viewed: 14.11.2020, 18:50)

Educational System*

Source: AEI NOOSR

***Note:**
Not all awards or study patterns are included



Similar to the school system, higher education can be divided in public and private universities. Yet there is only one public university – the Lebanese University – in the country compared to countless, expensive, private universities. Higher education in Lebanon is coined by the two countries who helped to shape it: France and the United States. The universities within the country offer therefore different styles of education. The languages of instruction remain Arabic, English or French. However, the main language of instruction depends on the pattern of the university.

A French-patterned university for example, uses primarily French as the language of instruction, for its documents and teaching materials are offered in French or English. Depending on the style of the university the entry requirements can vary. American-patterned institutions request the SAT diploma – a standardized test widely used for college admissions in the US. While French-patterned universities require the French Baccalaureate. This in turn poses an additional financial challenge for the parents, as not every school offers the various degrees at the same time. In order to attend the desired university, the student may have to obtain a specific degree additionally.

To rationalize the diverse system of higher education the Ministry of Education and Higher Education established an Equivalence Committee in 1962.



II. Issues and possible reform attempts

One of the key elements of ensuring the right to education is to make education more accessible. Accessible education then again contains two components in order to be fulfilled: it needs to be available and free.

Dr. Bassel Akar, Associate Professor of Education and Director of the Center for Applied Research in Education at Notre Dame University – Louaize, explained that in order to see whether education is accessible it needs

public schools should be free. However, before the Syrian crisis this was not the case. It was obligatory to pay a registration fee (equivalent to 73 Euros per child per year) for every student, which in turn was not affordable for everyone, especially for numerous families in rural areas, Dr. Akar pointed out. Due to the Syrian crisis and the increase in international support, free public education was offered to Syrian refugees. Therefore, as he explained, the Ministry of Education and Higher



to be available. Additionally, it needs to be analysed what kind of education is available. The availability of institutions can vary depending on the nationality of the students (e.g. Syrian, Palestinian, Lebanese), the income levels of families and on the region they are living in. Not all schools are open for Syrians and Palestinians. At the same time students may face the challenge of not being physically able to reach their school or university due to the lack of public transportation, especially in rural areas, and the lack of available institutions in the countryside, Dr. Akar continued. When talking about accessible education one should keep in mind that starting from the basic education in Lebanon, by law

Education (MEHE) negotiated with donor agencies that public education needed to be free for Lebanese children as well. As a result, the MEHE secured the registration fees for public schools through donor support, following the assumption that financial support would continue to come from abroad.

However, this is not a sustainable model for an education system. Dr. Akar raised concern over the sustainability of this financial support for Lebanese children’s public education once Syrian refugees start returning to Syria after the crisis. Certainly, European states have a great interest in stabilizing countries that border crisis areas,

which is why money flows into the region. Although this financial support is needed, the functioning of the education system becomes dependent on these international donations. Simultaneously, this money is not entirely invested in the education system, due to other more urgent needs. Countries that have been affected by conflict and these are mostly lower to middle income countries, prioritise security over education. That is why, in a political economy of a country emerging out of conflict, the money is primarily invested in security measures, the military, or infrastructure, while education can be found at the bottom of the list, Dr. Akar explained.

At the same time the Covid-19 crisis and the economic collapse are adding challenges to the educational system. One can observe a shift of students that have to transfer from expensive private schools to public ones, and university students that are being forced to interrupt their studies due to the hyperinflation of the national currency – the Lebanese Lira (LBP). Some private schools and universities have been accepting the tuition fees in LBP and are still applying the official exchange rate of 1 USD to 1507 LBP. This is helping families and students to be able to afford the fees. Although the question remains for how long these institutions will continue to offer payments on the official rate while the black-market rate lies at 1 USD to 7500-8500 LBP. Simultaneously, public schools have to cope with an increase of students, while teachers have to endure a paygrade, that has not been adjusted to the hyperinflation. Furthermore, the pandemic has caused a change in teaching and learning methods, to which teachers as well as students still need to adjust to. Instead of taking the new challenges imposed by the Covid-Crisis as something negative, Dr. Akar pointed out, that “the first question we should ask is, what can we learn from this experience? What can we learn from the pandemic?”. He continued, that many teachers had to learn how to teach through a computer and children had to learn how to study online. In fact, Covid-19 has led to the exposure of already existing weaknesses in the education system, which need to be addressed. I.e. the learning traditions that happen inside the classroom are mostly focused on memorisation. Teachers are struggling because they are not getting the attention they would like to get from

children, Dr. Akar explained. If teaching traditions would concentrate more on problem solving and finding answers in an investigative manner the online platform could be used as a space where children could present their work while discussing it in class, he elaborated further. Whereas online education could reach more students, i.e. those who cannot attend school due to geographical barriers, it remains limited to families who have access to a computer, Internet and electricity.

So how could the education system be reformed?

Dr. Akar explained that one can look at reform from the top and from the bottom. Unfortunately, most reform attempts of the education system from the top, have been impeded by disputes or political agendas. The education curriculum for history has not been reformed since 1971, because the establishment in power could not agree on one narrative, he continued. Due to governance issues in the country and the lack of transparency not all the international funds that are meant for the education sector arrive where they should. That is why, work by academics like Dr. Akar and non-governmental organisations (i.e. the Lebanese Association for History) have recently focused on looking at reforms through school-based practitioners. This approach focuses on how international and local agencies could invest in teachers and principals directly by empowering them to develop new approaches that suit the current situation. For example, if Syrian refugees are in the classroom, or controversial history as the civil war, topical issues like the Beirut explosion or other sensitive issues need to be discussed, teachers should be encouraged to pioneer new ways of addressing these inside the classroom, Dr. Akar elaborated further. Teachers and principals could exercise their agency in order to achieve sustainable reforms within the pedagogical culture and the curriculum, by sharing their experiences publicly. “Curricular reform in Lebanon should call for teachers to come to the center and to take part in it.” Dr. Akar pointed out.



Lastly,

Reforms of the education system are indispensable to sustainably overcome the economic crisis. However, these in turn depend on other factors. The public sector of the education system does not have sufficient financial resources to effectively fulfil its actual task. The material is too little, the teachers are poorly paid and some of them are not even properly trained. This is why society falls back on private institutions whenever possible. As a first step, it would already help if public schools and the public university could be subsidised. However, this does not seem to be within the realm of possibility at the moment. Due to the economic crisis, an increased burden on public educational institutions is now imminent. This challenge could be used to implement initial reforms. While reforms from above can only be expected once a fresh wind blows within the ranks of government, support from other institutions or NGOs could be sought. Furthermore, online teaching could also be seen as an opportunity to make education more accessible. Of course, power failures and the necessary equipment are obstacles, but not impossible to overcome. Municipalities could get together and broadcast online lectures in a small, Corona-friendly setting.

Therefore, students who do not have a computer could attend classes and potential power outages could be avoided. The Lebanese society is the best example that it is not necessary to wait until the government finally takes action to achieve something. The will of society is strong enough to enforce reforms from the bottom.

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