

The Lebanon crisis from international political economy perspective

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Article History

Received: 16 December 2021 Revised: 5 March 2022 Accepted: 10 March 2022 Available Online: 20 March 2022

Keywords: crisis, Lebanon, politics, economy & GCC

JEL classification: F5, F2

Citation: Siddique, H.A. (2022). The Lebanon crisis from international political economy perspective, *Review of Socio-Economic Perspectives*, Vol 7(1), 15-22.

Abstract

For the past four decades now, Lebanon has experienced several upheavals in its political and economic dispensation which has had significant adverse effects on the lives of people. Currently, the World Bank mentions that it is facing a much worst situation since the end of its Civil war. The issue of the Lebanon crisis has caught the eyes of international political actors because of its dire consequences and momentum. This crisis is a consequence of the years of mismanagement of the state's economy, political differences, sectarian challenges etc. The life of the people living in Lebanon is a testament to the impact of this crisis. Due to its historic precedence, Lebanon has been entangled with diverse state actors as well as non-state actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah. The paper, through an international political economy—IPE being the interaction between politics and economy in the international space—looks at how the crisis is affecting and being affected. This kind of inquiry is significant because the crisis is mostly looked at from domestic and internal causes. The paper makes plain the bidirectional relationship between IPE and the crisis, that is, the effect of the crisis on IPE and the effect of IPE on the crisis.

1. Introduction

According to the World Bank's 2020 fall report on Lebanon, the economic crisis bedeviling the state was phrased as 'deliberate'. This is because the economic crisis of Lebanon has been a result of long mismanagement, corruption, cronyism, and political gridlocks springing from sectarian leadership that stymied the progress of the state. Consequently, when mention is made of crisis, as far as Lebanon is concerned it encapsulates diverse issues ranging from political schisms, economic mismanagement, whooping level of corruption, sectarianism amongst others. And so, the breakdown of the state, which is depicted in the standard of living of the Lebanese people is consequent to this aforementioned cluster of challenges. This crisis is likely to be ranked top 10 and possibly 3 among the most severe episodes globally since the mid-19th century (World Bank, 2021) and the worst of Lebanon's since the civil war (Sanders, 2020).

Lebanon finds itself in the middle of the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a cold war type of situation—Iran showing support to the Shiite groups such as Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia also influencing the Sunni sect, which is one of the significant groups of people in the state. Aside from that, it also finds itself in the issues of the struggle of the Palestinian people, as such, Israel and the United States have taken a peculiar interest in its (Lebanon) political dispensation, not to also mention Syria, Kuwait, Qatar, amongst others, who are also actors influencing the Lebanon state.

From an international political economy perspective (IPE), which is the aim of this paper, the crisis could be assessed extensively, depending on how IPE has affected the crisis in Lebanon and how the crisis in Lebanon has affected IPE. The paper is divided mainly into two parts, the first part deals with the causes of the crisis. That is, it traces back to the historical background of the state, which in a Cause-and-Effect analysis, it will be considered as the Cause phase—the series of events that have given rise to the breakdown of the state thus 'the

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Lebanon crisis'. The second focuses on understanding the crisis from an international political economy (IPE) perspective.

2. Historical Background of 'the Crisis'

Lebanon as a republic shares borders with Israel in the south, in the north with Syria and the anti-Lebanon mountains share a long stretch of borders at the east with Syria and it also shares maritime borders with Cyprus. It is considered the smallest nation on the mainland of Asia. Lebanon has a long history tracing back to the ancient Phoenician civilization and then the Persians under Cyrus the Great. However, suffice to mention here, that, it was a part of the lands of the Ottoman Empire (that stretched through most of the Gulf regions). After the first world war which precipitated the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, under the auspices of the League of Nations, the mandate of Lebanon, amongst other states, was under the control of France via the Sykes-Picot Agreement, leading to the San Remo Conference of 1920 that finally determined the mandate and boundaries, and purposes of the control ratified by the League of Nations in 1921 and enforced in 1922 (Traboulsi, 2012).

The Independence of Lebanon came after infightings with the French government which later precipitated imprisonment of Lebanon elected officials after an election held in 1943 that empowered the elected officials to abolish the French mandate. In the face of severe pressure from the international community, the French released the officials and recognized the independence of Lebanon. Most significantly, it is important to note that Lebanon was/is a cluster of different ethnicities, religious affiliations—the Maronite Christians, the Sunni Muslims, the Shiite Muslims, amongst others. The Lebanon crisis is a compounded consequence of a myriad undesirable situations thus a mishmash of political, social, economic, and ideological differences between the people and certainly the elites within the territory. To better understand the crisis, it is imperative to first outline these series of unfortunate gridlocks that have stymied the progress of the republic (Traboulsi, 2012).

2.1. The Civil War (1975—1990)

After the gain of independence, Lebanon was a territory housing diverse ethnicities and the continuous change and increase in the difference of the demography, thus the Maronite Christians, Sunni, Shiite Muslims as well as Eastern Orthodox Christian, etc. stifled the political and economic coexistence of the citizenry. Some significant contributory factors too were the Arab Nationalism—spearheaded by the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat—the Iranian revolution, the fierce Arab Israeli conflict, Black September in Jordan—the events of the Jordanian civil war which was the presence of the PLO militants in the Jordanian territories fighting against the Israeli forces, not on the behest of the Hashemite monarch of Jordan—the presence of the Palestinian fighters known as Fedayeen acting as a state within a state (Jordan) and finally, the Iraqi-Irani war. All these culminated in the Civil war of the Lebanon Republic. Given that there was a significant presence of Palestinian fighters in Lebanon after they vacated their presence in Jordan, the reluctance amongst the Christian sect to engage in full-scale aggressions with the Israelis, among others, accelerated the civil war. After the engagement of United Nation Security Council (UNSC) (resolution 425, calling for Israel withdrawal from Lebanon), and the Taif Accord of 1989 (Hezbollah militia which was a fierce group that some believed to have stood beside the Palestinian struggle was not to be disarmed, that is, the only militia which was not disarmed) ended the civil war and ushered in a new phase of Lebanon's struggle for political and economic progress. About a hundred thousand individuals lost their lives in addition to a hundred thousand more injured due to the civil war (Stoakes, 1976).

2.2. Post War (Syrian Occupation) and Cedar Revolution (1990–2006)

During the civil war, the Syrian forces occupied most parts of Lebanon as well as Israeli forces. However, the Israeli forces left in the year 2000 pursuant to the UNSC resolution of 425, leaving behind the Syrian Forces. The disagreement between the Lebanon officials was centered on whether or not Syrian forces were to be sacked out of the country and allowed to stay since some saw the forces as strength against Israeli forces due to the weakness of Lebanon's military forces whilst others saw it as a transgression on the sovereignty of Lebanon (Korn, 1986). After long several back-and-forth within Lebanon about the occupation of the Syrian Forces, some fierce prominent critics of the occupation were killed and prominent figures like Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister was also killed. The Cedar Revolution was a peaceful resistance to push for a full withdrawal of Syrian forces (which had lasted for about 30 years since 1976), replacement of the Syrian influenced government of the Lebanese Republic, the release of Lebanon forces leader Samir Geagea and the return of former prime Minister Michael Aoun who was then in exile. This resulted in the killings of several others, the implosion of Lebanese elites both political and economic. Later, in April 2005, the last forces of the Syrian military left Lebanon after the UNSC 1559 was finally enforced (Kurtulus, 2009).

2.3. The Currency Crisis Resulted in 2019 Protests

Within the periods of wars and the fierce political schisms, it obscured tremendously the development of the republic. Especially, the Lebanese currency that is Lebanese Pound (LBP), in 1997 was fixed or pegged with the dollar at 1507.5 per dollar in other words 0.0066USD (Investopedia, 2021). Due to the instability and the malfeasance within the political officials, the currency could not stay with its fixed rate, it continued to devalue as compared to the dollar massively. Currently, it has devalued almost ninety per cent causing food items to increase and incomes to look ridiculously low. In 2019, on top of the currency crisis, there were also numerous wildfires in Khroub, Chouf, amongst other Lebanese towns and villages. The government was unable to stop this disaster, it took the help of countries like Turkey, Jordan, Greece, Cyprus to curb the daunting situation in Lebanon. This and the upshot of prices of items, fuel shortage, food hoarding due to the mind-blowing devaluation of the currency, discussions of planned new taxes which would be on gasoline, tobacco, as well as Voice over Internet Calls (VoIP) on applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook caused thousands and thousands of the citizenry to come out in full-fledged protest demanding government and political institutions curb the situation (Dahrouge et al, 2020). There were clashes of civilians and the security forces, to the extent that it created a turbulent political environment resulting in the then Prime Minister, Saad Hariri tending his resignation.

2.4. Covid 19 and the Beirut Port Explosion

In the wake of 2020 or even the late of 2019, the covid 19 pandemic which took a toll on the world devastated the economy and the health sector of the country. The government institutions had become incapacitated. It is civil societies and other international NGOs that came to the aid of Lebanon. A heavier blow was the Beirut Port Explosion which took place on August 4, 2020. This was a result of excessive negligence on the part of leaders since some large numbers of chemical substances were left in the port. This explosion took the lives of almost two hundred people and injured more than six thousand as well as leaving about three hundred thousand homeless (Barakat, 2020). Both Covid-19 and the Beirut Port explosion, to this day, continues to shape the country's economic landscape. Patients are dying because, on the one hand, they cannot afford the hefty prices of medicine and even if they can afford, the medicines are scarce. The crisis of Lebanon, considering the multi-layers of challenges points to a breakdown of the state. Some would even go as far as to call it a failed state because of the cataclysmic nature of the crisis in general.

3. The Politics and Economy of the Republic

Consequent to the series of crises which has been mentioned earlier, the politics and economy of the Republic of Lebanon have been significantly impacted and thus continues to struggle. The Taif Accord made the republic a consociational democracy (Traboulsi, 2014). This is the kind of democracy where the government institutions are filled through elections on ethnic, tribe, religious etc. lines. In Lebanon that is based on religious lines it is known as Confessionalism. Such structuring of state manifests because there are several different ethnicities, tribes, religions etc. without a dominant and clear majority within the state. Therefore, in Lebanon, the President comes from the Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister comes from the Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of Parliament comes from the Shiite Muslims according to the National Pact (Britannica, 2019). Unfortunately, consociational democracy has further widened and deepened sectarianism in the country. Because of that inequality is widespread since almost every institution is driven by sectarianism, like marriage, political representation, employment, judicial appointment etc. This kind of structuring has made sectarian leaders exploit the citizenry. That is, sectarian leaders, rely on the support of their population to work and so, provide services in the interest of a handful of members of their sect. The relation between leaders and their represented populace appears to be like that of the client and the producer. Here, the sectarian leaders provide services and in turn, they rely on the votes of members from their ethnic or religion. There is little concern for the common good of all the citizens. A noteworthy feature of Lebanon's consociational democracy is the 'party cartel' that manifests (Assouad, 2021). This is where political leaders who are at loggerheads with each other, protect each other in running the finances of the country down. They most often collude in the misappropriation of the state's finances.

The economy is significantly impacted by the structuring of the state. In that, since there is a lack of cohesiveness and concern for the common good in the state, there is an egregious level of inequality. One of the first countrywide research about Lebanese income distribution was conducted in 1960 and it came to light that, the richest, that is, 4% of the population earned 32% of the national income whilst 50% of the population living in poverty earned 18% of the national income.¹ More recently, the research of 2018, by the World Inequality Lab in finding out the income distribution of the Lebanese population 2005 and 2016, used micro-fiscal data to do the

¹ The study was commissioned by Lebanon's ministry of planning and implemented by the French International Institute for Research and Training for Standardized Development (IRFED).

estimation. The outcome of the research was breathtaking. The richest that is, the 10% of the population earned 49% and 54%, the middle class that is the 40% earned 40% and 34% and the poorest that is 50% earned 12% and 14% of the national income (Assouad, 2018).

This depicts explicitly how deep the crisis in Lebanon is or how multifaceted the crisis is. Lebanon is home to aside from the struggling natives, 1.2 million Syrian refugees, thousands of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees. UNICEF's survey suggests that over 30% of the children skip meals and go to bed hungry, 40% of children again are from families where none of the members has job to feed themselves, 30% receives no primary health care, 77% of the Lebanese population or households do not have food to feed themselves and other disturbing findings (UNICEF, 2021). The core of the crisis of Lebanon is on the one hand, political ineptitude, corruption, lack of political will etc. and on the other hand, gross 'deliberate' economic mismanagement. From a domestic point of view or perspective, the state seems not to have any other alternative than a bailout from the IMF, however, IMF's conditions must be met before an IMF aid recovery could begin. The utmost condition is the capability to fight against corruption which the politicians seem to lack the courage, wherewithal or even the willingness to follow through. It has caused the state to face diverse disturbing consequences, and from an international perspective, it is a diverse and deep cutting consequence.

4. The Crisis from an International Political Economy Perspective

The international political economy is the interaction of politics and economy in the international space. That is, the bidirectional relationship between politics and economy, where politics affects the economy as well as the economy also affecting the politics in the international community. When considering the Lebanon crisis from an international political economy (IPE) perspective, two things need quite attention, those are; how IPE has affected the Lebanon crisis and the other, how the Lebanon crisis has affected IPE. In this way, there will be chances to appreciably grasp how far-reaching the crisis, as well as the impact of IPE is. Imperatively, the term crisis used in discussing Lebanon's gradual breakdown of the state is a cluster of political crises, economic crisis, health crisis, immigration crisis, labor crisis, energy and food crisis, security crisis, a social crisis. Consequently, in the perspective of the international political economy, when assessing the Lebanon crisis five dominant issues occupy the discourse and are assessed vividly. These five issues are— the interaction between Hezbollah, Iran and Syria, the interaction between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Lebanon, expatriate and remittance, the sharp decline in Lebanese technocrats or better said, rise in emigration, and finally, the response and regional interests of the United States vis-a-vis the active role of Israel.

4.1. The Interaction between Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria

During the wake of the civil war, in 1982 precisely, a militant group named Hezbollah emerged purposely because it wanted to fight against Israeli aggression. However, with the Taif Accord which finally made peace prevail in Lebanon, part of the agreement was to disarm all other militias except Hezbollah, partly perhaps Lebanon considered its military might to be relatively ineffective and given that Hezbollah has chalked several successes against the Israeli forces, notably, by driving the Israeli forces out of south Lebanon. Hezbollah is a Shiite militia like the Amal Movement of Lebanon, which means it has close ties with the Iranian government as well as being a pro-Assad regime, in turn maintaining close ties also with the Syrian regime. Iran transfers military equipment as well as funds to help support the Hezbollah group in Lebanon. From an IPE perspective, the Lebanon crisis has played two significant roles in the Hezbollah, Iran and Syria relations.

First, it has adversely affected Iran's economic growth. Due to the international concern for Lebanon crisis, the IMF, European donors, and the United States, having assessed the situation in Lebanon, pressured and continue pressuring the Lebanon government to get rid of the militia since it is endemic and at the core of Lebanon's crisis (Magnier, 2021). These countries have also sanctioned the Iranian government to aid in stifling the chances of supporting the militia group in Lebanon since US and some European countries designate Hezbollah as a terrorist group. The Iranian economy has had a heavy blow vis-a-vis these hefty sanctions. It has not been able to fund the militia group as to how it did in the past. Due to the designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist group, it was not given a higher position after the 2018 elections where it made considerable gains in parliament. Although was awarded some position in the Ministry of Health, a concession which was made even with gains Hezbollah made in the 2018 elections. Even with such a position the United States feared and was skeptical Hezbollah could use such a position to siphon funds in and out of Lebanon for its purposes (Magnier, 2021). Moreover, the United States and EU have sanctioned persons associated with the Hezbollah group (Aljazeera, 2021).

Second, the worsening of Lebanon's economy. Almost all donors including the IMF make it a point to disarm Hezbollah or even present a reformed policy that will tackle the crisis (it goes without saying that this policy must include the disarmament of Hezbollah) before it proceeds with recovery processes. This has continued to strain the economy of Lebanon and has left people to continue their wallowing in abject poverty. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some persons have joined the militia group because of the opportunities of livelihood since the group has chances of smuggling food items and energy (Slim, 2021).

In the new government of Mikati, the Ministry of Public works is in the bosom of Hezbollah, in addition, although the financial minister Youssef Khalil, not a member of either Hezbollah or Amal, is a Shiite. The future policies of both the United States and the EU are perhaps going to be a mixture of skepticism and foreign aids in forms of medical, food and not funds or weapons, given that such top positions are likely puppet positions of Hezbollah.

4.2. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (countries) and Lebanon crisis & Expatriates and Remittance

The GCC countries are Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arabs Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. It has been an immense help to Lebanon for the past decades. Qatar in 2019 pledged 500 million in financial support to Lebanon's economy, Saudi Arabia has been a significant pillar and has single-handedly spent more than most of the GCC countries in the reconstruction of Lebanese after its disquieting Civil war consequences (Gulf International Forum, 2019). Because of the active role played by Hezbollah, a Shiite group, in Lebanon, GCC countries have also designated it as a terrorist organization. Consequently, the tug of war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has generally centered on Lebanon. However, after the 2018 elections when Hezbollah made significant gains, the Saudi government influence in Lebanon began to recede which means financial support as well. The monetary support from GCC countries has not been forthcoming which is a terrible disaster given that the aid of \$860million deposits the gulf states make to Banque du Liban is paramount to the well-being of Lebanon's economy. The current friction between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon due to the statement of the information minister on the Yemeni War (which the government has distanced itself from) which did not go well with the Saudi government foreshadows tremendous negative effects for the Lebanese economy. Saudi Arabia and its allies UAE, Bahrain have recalled their ambassadors and reportedly banned all imports of Lebanon. Saudi Arabia has made demands that the minister of information resigns. This is a dicey demand because of two things. The issues of the resignation of George Kordahi, first, threaten the coalition government which was strenuously formed due to the sectarian nature of Lebanon's politics and second, if the Minister does not resign the ban and diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia, its allies and Lebanon will continue to sink, forcefully, the already sinking economy of Lebanon. In all of this, the crisis of Lebanon continues to aggravate tremendously (BBC, 2021).

Expatriates in GCC countries count as a significant pillar in sustaining the economy of Lebanon. According to the IMF, four hundred thousand Lebanese were working in GCC countries (IMF, 2019). More so, the remittance from these countries accounts for 40% of the total remittance received by Lebanon, that amounts to 6.2 billion and about 5% of Lebanon's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2014 (Young, 2016). Lebanon is one of the world's most received remittances. Some gulf countries in 2016 revoked visas and deported some Lebanese, for instance Kuwait deported about 1000 people (Young, 2016). They called on their citizens to cancel visits to Lebanon. This all sprung from the fact that Iran has a stronghold on Hezbollah where Hezbollah is also a significant player in Lebanon's politics and economics. The perturbing relations between Gulf countries and Lebanon has affected the economy of Lebanon tremendously. It has worsened the crisis. Below is figure 1 (Remittance) & 2 Investment)

Total Remittances

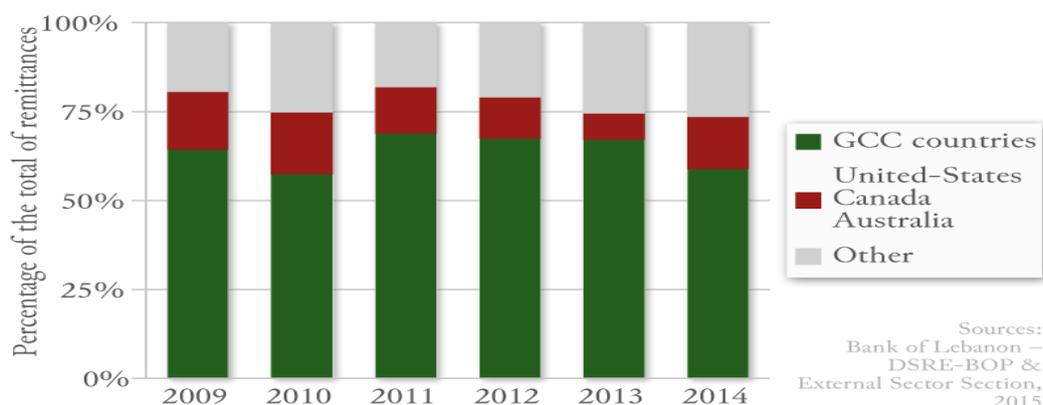


Figure 1. Total Remittance into Lebanon

Source: Bank of Lebanon- DSRE-BOP & External Sector section 2015

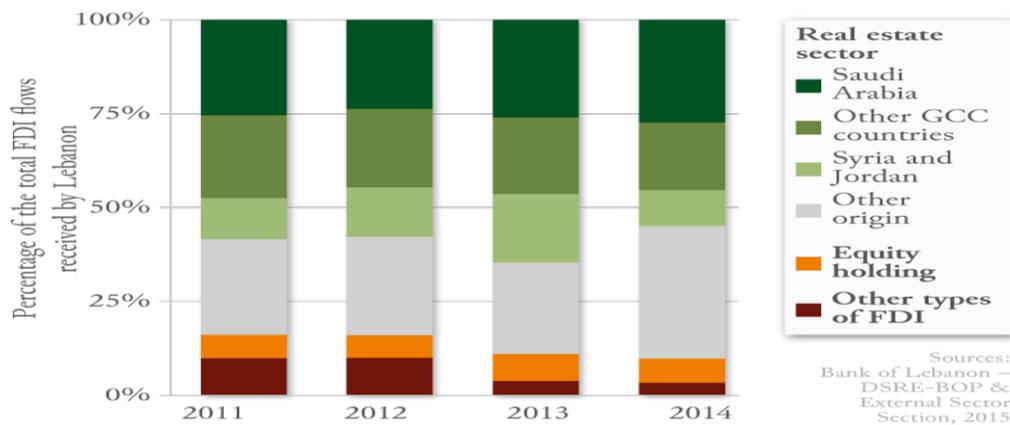


Figure 2. Investment in Lebanon

Source: Bank of Lebanon- DSRE-BOP & External Sector section 2015

Note: Both figures show the significant impact GCC has on the economy of Lebanon. Figure 1 shows the remittances contributed towards the economy and figure 2 shows the total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) received by Lebanon.

4.3. US and Israel Policy Interest & Emigration of Literates

Israel has been aided by the United States government for decades now both militarily and financially. This is because Israel seems to serve the political interests of the United States in the region. The policy interests in the Middle East are significantly pursued through strengthening the Israeli forces. As far as Lebanon is concerned, because of the presence and the active participation of Hezbollah in its political dispensation, amongst others, the United States has spent over the past decade more than 3 billion in military and financial aid on Israel (Siddiqui et al, 2021). Military support for the Lebanese Forces from the United States has also not been forthcoming. This is because of the skepticism the US has about the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon, in turn, this has also further tremendously impacted the economy of Lebanon and at its core is the fragility of the Lebanese Forces due to lack of the capability in finance and military equipment.

The crisis in Lebanon has taken a toll on the state to the extent that a significant number of Lebanese has emigrated elsewhere mostly Europe, the U.S., and the Gulf countries. This has had two effects, first, it has worsened the economy of Lebanon, in that, educated persons who could avail themselves and help manage the economy in their simple contributions have left the countries in the hands of a bunch of elites who are hell-bent on running the state down. Second, it has offered the countries where these educated Lebanese have immigrated to an additional skilled labor force.

5. Conclusion

Per IPE perspective, that is, the interaction between politics and economics between two or more countries, the Lebanese crisis is quite intriguing considering that it has multiple actors involved. The term crisis might be misleading if the historical precedent is not considered when investigating the upheavals challenging the republic of Lebanon. The crisis is a mixture of social challenges, political differences, religious fanaticism (as in the case of the numerous militias), economic mismanagement and a staggering level of corruption. The political actors aside from Lebanon involve Iran, Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the GCC countries, the United States, and the EU, as well as non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Amal among others. Due to the state structure of Lebanon which involves Hezbollah and other non-state actors, purely political, it influences the decision of other state actors who had it not been for these present nonstate actors would be benefactors of Lebanon, thus in the terms of economic benefits. In turn, Lebanon is affected negatively, causing a surge in health, energy, food challenges and other basic provisions. In this way, the relation between the crisis and the actors is considered bidirectional. The crisis influenced the decisions of the actors, as well as the decisions and policy implementation of these actors, greatly influencing the crisis of Lebanon.

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