

Chapter 5: Lebanese Elites' Views on Lebanon and Its Relations with the EU

In recent years, the Mediterranean region has experienced and continues to experience drastic changes. The sea itself has become a border and its porousness, despite extreme danger, has been utilized by hundreds of thousands in recent years. As a dangerous border, the Mediterranean has also become a final resting place for thousands, a reflection of larger conflicts that many are fleeing in countries along or near the sea. The ever-changing dynamics in the Mediterranean region thus require new questions, answers, policies, and approaches. The MEDRESET project seeks to understand how the European Union can better engage with the Mediterranean region, an area that is dynamic, diverse, in conflict, and at odds even with itself.

This chapter is a summary of an elite survey conducted in Lebanon, and presents the findings of the qualitative research based on 30 interviews (with 15 female and 15 male interviewees). The questions posed to the interviewees focused on perceptions of the EU, its member states, and their policies; perceptions of the Mediterranean and key issues in this region; and issues specifically related to Lebanon.

With respect to the methodology, two researchers conducted the interviews. The initial list of interviewees was compiled by the researchers with oversight and approval. The list was later amended with additional names, as some individuals who were contacted either did not respond or stated that they did not wish to participate in the interview. The list of the interviewees therefore included individuals with different backgrounds, who wished to be interviewed. The profile of those interviewed included policy-makers, activists, artists, journalists, designers, business and banking professionals, start-up

sector professionals, humanitarians, and academics. Individuals were contacted by email primarily, with full information on the purpose of the interview and the consent form. Individuals were met in public spaces in Beirut, such as cafes, where they first received information on the purpose of the interview and read and signed the consent form. The interviews lasted one hour and followed the interview structure and questions that were provided.

To briefly summarize the findings, the interviews reflect that the image of the EU held by elites in Lebanon has changed since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis, as many saw the EU as failing to provide safe passage for refugees and migrants. Similarly, many interlocutors were critical of the EU–Turkey agreement on refugees, as well as the amount of aid the EU has or has not provided to Lebanon in dealing with its critical refugee crisis. Furthermore, the elites in Lebanon did not speak of the Mediterranean region in great detail, seeing their country as being in a region that encompasses parts of the Mediterranean but also the Gulf area and Iran. Finally, although the interlocutors shared a variety of policy concerns and issues, the number one issue mentioned by most of the interviewees was the vast corruption in Lebanon, which they see as a barrier to any progress in the country.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first section, background data is provided on the demographics, history, politics, and economy of the country. In the second section we provide an overview of the history of EU–Lebanon relations in a timeline. In the third section the authors discuss the research data pertaining to: the perceptions of the EU; challenges confronting Lebanon; expectations for the EU’s future role in Lebanon; co-operation areas with the EU; and policy recommendations. A list of anonymized interviewees with interview dates is finally provided as an Annex. In the conclusion, the authors summarize the findings of the interviews.

1. Country profile of Lebanon

1.1 Demographics

Lebanon, a country of 10,452 square kilometres, is situated on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, and has a population estimated in 2016 (in the absence of census data) at just over six million. This figure excludes several million expatriates, including perhaps two million who left during the 1975–1990 civil war, as well as over 1.5 million refugees residing in Lebanon, primarily Syrians and Palestinians, and finally approximately 150,000 migrant workers from Asian and African countries.

1.2 Relevant stakeholders at the domestic, regional, and global levels

The Lebanese political system is organized on a confessional basis, with key offices in the state and its institutions, as well as parliamentary seats, allotted to members of specific sects/religions. Although Shia Muslims are believed to constitute the majority of Lebanon's population, the leading posts have traditionally been occupied by Maronite Christians (President) and Sunni Muslims (Prime Minister). Druze and Orthodox Christians constitute additional significant constituencies in Lebanese political life.

This system has generally—but with important exceptions—translated into one where political activity is organized on the basis of religious/sectarian identification.^{1 2} In the increasingly polarized reality that is Lebanese politics, key national stakeholders are the rival March 8 and March 14 coalitions, which differ primarily in their attitudes to Lebanon's regional and international orientation.³ The Shia Hezbollah is considered the most powerful force within the country,

1 Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, London, Pluto Press, 2012.

2 Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions. The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1988.

3 The March 8 Alliance is led by Hezbollah and its allies, while the March 14 Alliance is led by the Future Movement of Sa'ad Hariri and its allies.

maintaining an independent militia believed to be more powerful than the Lebanese military. Its main coalition partner is the Free Patriotic Movement led by current Lebanese President Michel Aoun. The Future Movement led by the Sunni Hariri family is its main rival and is closely aligned with the Progressive Socialist Party which is led by Druze Chieftain Walid Jumblatt and the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea. Geagea and Aoun, both Maronite Christians, represent the increasingly polarized nature of their community. In 2008, the rival coalitions fought street battles, which were decisively won by Hezbollah within a matter of days.

At the regional level, Lebanon has been an arena of fierce Saudi–Iranian rivalry, and these powers also constitute the main regional stakeholders in the country today. Traditionally, Syria has been the dominant power within Lebanon, having stationed forces within the country and dominated its politics between 1976 and 2005, but its influence has waned in recent years; first on account of its withdrawal and more recently due to the Syrian conflict. Internationally, Lebanon’s closest relations are with the former mandatory power France, and with the United States.

1.3 A chronology of key events since the start of the Arab uprisings

Lebanon did not experience mass protest or prolonged civil strife during the upheaval that engulfed the region for much of the past decade. It has however been deeply affected by these events, most prominently the Syrian conflict. On the one hand, Hezbollah has been a key player within Syria, particularly in the military sphere where it has made an important contribution to the survival of the al-Assad regime. At the same time, its Lebanese rivals, primarily various Sunni groups, initially served as an important conduit for supplies, including armaments, to the Syrian opposition. The Syria conflict extended to the Lebanese border region, and as a result, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front and the Islamic State movement were able to establish bases within Lebanon, and conduct a number of attacks in the country, including the capital Beirut. With

the support of Hezbollah, it took the Lebanese military several years to eliminate these groups from Lebanese territory.

Lebanon did have brief protests in the summer of 2015 in response to the country's ongoing trash crisis. The movement, known as YouStink, did not have the same impact nor duration as other movements during the Arab Spring. However, in the most recent municipal elections in 2016, a new social movement, *Beirut Madinati* [Beirut My City], did emerge. Its birth has been linked to the 2015 uprising. In the 2018 Parliamentary elections, the social movement *Kuluna Watani* [We Are All 'My Nation'], has entered the race and received attention.

1.4 Main geopolitical challenges

The main geopolitical challenges confronting Lebanon derive from two sources: Israel and the Saudi–Iranian rivalry extending throughout the region. Israel and Hezbollah fought a devastating conflict in 2006, and most analysts believe it is only a matter of time before a new and more catastrophic conflict erupts. Although the peace has been kept for over a decade by mutual deterrence, there is a widespread belief that Israel is awaiting the opportunity to at least significantly degrade the increasingly powerful militia entrenched on its northern border. This is closely related to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Iran, which is increasingly centred on Syria. An eventual collapse of the nuclear deal, the JCPOA, may set the stage for such a conflict. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has been pursuing an increasingly aggressive policy within Lebanon in order to reduce Iranian influence and re-establish its primacy. This resulted in 2017 in Riyadh's effective kidnapping and forced resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri, an initiative that ultimately failed and backfired spectacularly. For the time being, the contagion of the Syrian conflict upon Lebanon appears to have been contained, though it may well be where a new conflict involving Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran—and thus Lebanon—erupts.

2. Overview of Lebanon–EU relations

2.1 Timeline

2002: Signature of EU–Lebanon Interim Agreement and Association Agreement.

2003: Entry into force of Interim Agreement.

2005: Government of Lebanon approves participation in EU Neighbourhood Policy.

2006: Entry into force of Association Agreement.

2007: Entry into force of EU–Lebanon Action Plan governing co-operation within the framework of the EU Neighbourhood Policy.

2008: Lebanon joins Union for the Mediterranean.

2016: Lebanon and EU adopt partnership priorities and compact.

The EU is Lebanon's largest trading partner and a key source of aid and assistance to Lebanon. The total 2017 trade with the EU amounted to 7.72 billion euro. Industrial products at 351 million euro are the main item of trade.⁴ The nature of trade of industrial products has however changed during the past decade. In the aftermath of the 2006 conflict, the EU began to prioritize reconstruction assistance in addition to previous programmes to promote economic development and improved governance. Since 2011, a growing proportion of assistance disbursed in Lebanon—much of which has been channelled through international organizations—has sought to assist Lebanon with the challenges of hosting a large and growing community of Syrian refugees. From 2014 to 2016, EU aid to Lebanon totalled 147 million euro. The Lebanese government has continued to state that it requires more aid due to the Syrian refugee crisis and the pressures this has placed on the small host country. There are also wide reports of corruption which claim that aid money does not always reach those in need.

In addition to the above, the EU considers the strengthening of the Lebanese state and its capacity to govern and provide public services as a key objective.

4 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Lebanon*, 16 April 2018, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/113412.htm>.

2.2 *The changing structure and nature of interactions with the EU*

EU collaboration with Lebanon is implemented through the European Neighbourhood Policy. The ENP is based around the main themes of political, economic, and human-rights-related reforms, and aims to promote further collaboration with countries neighbouring the EU. The EU thereby offers financial as well as technical assistance to local municipalities and public or private actors in exchange for agreed upon commitments and reforms. The ENP was originally launched in 2003 but was reviewed in 2011, following the ‘Arab Spring’. The new ENI is the main financial instrument for implementing the ENP, and has a worth of 15.4 billion euro for the period between 2014 and 2020.

The reworked ENP is mainly implemented through bilateral co-operation between the EU and each neighbourhood partner, to better adapt to individual challenges and requirements. The mutually agreed upon Action Plans, formulating the agenda for any further co-operation efforts, are however contingent upon the same goals and priorities as in the original policy. These are divided among the sectors of (1) political and economic reform, (2) security, (3) migration and mobility, and (4) education and development of job opportunities. According to the ENI Regulation, external action partners, including civil society organizations and local authorities, are involved in preparing, implementing, and monitoring EU support, given the importance of their roles. Furthermore, civil society organizations are called upon to participate in the development of the three financial programmes—for bilateral, multi-country, and cross-border co-operation—and will be, together with local and regional authorities, their main beneficiaries.

In the case of Lebanon, research projects that are in collaboration with the EU and ENP centre on promoting Lebanese citizenship and furthering the participation in democratic processes. Research is especially focused on gaining further knowledge of the relation between political figures, politicians, and processes of voting. Furthermore, the aim is to display dynamics of political clientelism as a significant factor in elections. EU collaboration seeks to fund projects that seem to empower the Lebanese citizens to contribute to and engage in the

process of policy-making. Many of these research projects focus on single municipalities; others draw on a broader context, including all the country's political parties or the Lebanese state as situated in a broader 'Arab world'.

One of the focuses of ENP economic reformation projects is related to the environmental issue and so-called 'green economy' projects. These projects are intended to help individual municipalities to upgrade their infrastructure for services like water supply, sanitation, and waste disposal. Most recently, these projects have had the aim of increasing the resilience of Syrian refugee communities as well as their Lebanese hosts. Other projects around the country support communities via financial and technical assistance to small-scale agriculture. On a different tack, ENP projects also focus on start-ups and private businesses. These projects are meant to promote entrepreneurship and self-employment as part of a grander strategy to help soften the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis.

The security policy of the ENP focuses on strengthening the military–civil co-operation of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the population especially in the south. These projects materialize in the development and support of civil services and infrastructure like water supply, education, and cultural events. Additionally, ENP support of the LAF focuses on border security management via Lebanon's Integrated Border Management programme (IBM). The aim of the IBM is to improve co-operation between various law enforcement and ministerial actors involved in matters of border security.

ENP projects on migration and mobility aim to intensify co-operation between Europe and Lebanon pertaining to regular and irregular patterns of migration. This is accomplished by an increased financial and technical support for Lebanon during the era of an increased influx of refugees as well as co-operatively addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement. The objectives of programmes such as the EUROMED Migration IV is to implement a comprehensive and shared approach to strengthen effective dialogue and co-operation on migration, mobility, and international protection issues between the ENI South Partner Countries and EU member states, as well as among the South Partner Countries themselves. It also works

on promoting better identification of skills gaps in the EU to facilitate mutually beneficial legal migration and launch dialogues on academic mobility.

The ENP education policy sets out to influence the very early steps of childhood education by stabilizing the public education system with financial aid. Such efforts are meant to support all children in public schools but especially vulnerable communities. Recent education projects funded by the EU have focused on issues of food security and agricultural and rural development by promoting the ongoing improvement of graduate and post-graduate programmes in that area. Furthermore, the ENP offers support for young entrepreneurs to form a sustainable cross-border landscape for start-ups and youth businesses.

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Lebanon

3.1 Perception of the EU and its policies in the Mediterranean

Some of the people we interviewed worked with the EU in regard to applying for or receiving grants. Among those surveyed, government officials, and—to the extent that they have a relationship with EU programmes—civil society and private sector representatives displayed greater knowledge of the EU and of its policies and programmes in Lebanon. Respondents who have or had a direct relationship with the EU or European states were less critical, in the sense that they typically had a positive assessment of such dealings. But they also shared many of the more general observations of their compatriots concerning EU policy in Lebanon and the region. Primarily, most individuals, other than journalists and government workers, were not aware of what the ENP was and spoke more generally of their EU perceptions. They saw the role of the EU as largely unclear and vague.

Generally speaking, respondents have a positive impression of the EU, which reflects either their appreciation of the role it has played within Europe, the values it proclaims, positive views about prominent EU member states, or a combination of the above.

'I think it is a group of countries which is part of what we call the first world that have sets of values. They are trying to encourage them in our country through different projects, whether it's directly or indirectly. I think they are a good set of values, they aren't a bad set of values. I also think that sometimes they are distant from reality. Some of the projects don't really work because they are up from top down and not from bottom up in the community. I don't think it has a bad perception, I think it has a good perception. [*sic*]'⁵

There is widespread consensus that the collective role of the EU is overshadowed by the policies of its individual member states. There is, on the whole, a greater awareness of and knowledge about individual European states and their policies than about the EU. This is particularly the case with European states that have a prominent historical or current relationship with Lebanon (France), or are otherwise recognized as leading European states (Germany and the United Kingdom are the most referenced in this respect).

'France will always have a pretty positive image even historically and given the fact that people have a lot of ties and this cuts across many social and political factions. Then again, [there is] the complicating factor of Bashar in Syria. Currently, regarding Macron [French President] and the previous administration [the view] is that if you are anti-Bashar you are in the position vis-à-vis France. If you are pro-Bashar maybe you are more with Russia. As for the UK, Brexit was a mistake and it looks like the UK is going in the direction of Trump. People with investments maybe are looking at other places in Europe. Germany is stable, many Lebanese visit [there]. A lot of people might send their children there to study.'⁶

'But these three countries [France, Italy, and Germany] are seen as points of asylum for a lot of people. Healthcare, privileges, services. A place to go and have a sort of opportunity for life. At the same time, with the racism that exists in those countries and the conservative politics they have pushed forward, there is a sort of negative response. [...] Sweden gets off a bit easier, it is not as vocal

5 Interviewee 3: Political activist, female, 25 July 2017.

6 Interviewee 16: Political expert and academic, male, 26 July 2017.

about its foreign policy here. It is seen as a place to go to escape. Germany has that as well, but it's become harder and harder. [...] The underlying point I am trying to make is that a lot of the reactions come from how these countries work and what they do in this area. And more often than not what they do is quite negative in most of these areas, which is unfortunate because they could do the, quote unquote, right thing.'⁷

The survey additionally revealed that the EU is, particularly in contrast to the US, not perceived as an active political player in Lebanon. Rather—and to the extent that awareness of its role and policies is identified—it is seen as a practitioner of soft power, a trading partner and development/funding agency: 'You feel that they are more playing the role of a facilitator or a mediator. Not really doers of a policy or forcing a policy.'⁸

'I think broadly the EU is perceived as an aid-provider; somebody that doesn't have a lot of strictly political interests, when you compare it to the US for example. The US has more political interests tied to their aid. The EU is perceived as an actor that has more humanitarian interests that they are implementing in Lebanon.'⁹

'Judging by my personal experience and what I saw the past years, if I talk about EU policy, they did contribute to a lot of aid that came to the region.'¹⁰

'I think it depends on who you are asking or where you are asking that question but in general, it is not perceived in a bad way if you compare perception with other foreign entities, the US for example. You have a fairly good perception so far as I can see, but then again it will depend on who you are asking and when and where. If you go into refugee communities, you might hear a different answer. However, in general the EU is fairly well-perceived.'¹¹

In summary, the EU was seen as an aid-provider primarily, and a medical INGO professional and activist characterized the EU's role as 'symbolic', consisting of 'funding, without any other impact'.¹²

7 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

8 Interviewee 1: HR professional in banking sector, female, 15 July 2017.

9 Interviewee 2: Journalist at foreign news agency, female, 23 July 2017.

10 Interviewee 4: Media spokesperson for INGO, male, 20 July 2017.

11 Ibid.

12 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

The EU's role and record in the Middle East is by contrast notably absent as an explanation for positive views of the institution. Rather, some are highly critical of the EU in this respect.

'But also, they contributed negatively to a lot of the conflicts that are taking place in the region at the same time. I can't really see a clear policy from the EU and if they did have one, judging from the values of the EU, they failed at that policy. I think they were more interested in absolutely guaranteeing their own interests no matter what the costs. We saw the refugee deal they did with Turkey. We saw the way they dealt with—I don't want my answer to sound political—but to see the way they dealt with Aleppo [in Syria], with Mosul [in Iraq], with the way they dealt with the ridiculous death toll and the ridiculous violations in the region. I can't see what their policy is in the region and if there was one or if there is clear one. Or just keeping what is here by pulling the right strings be it the UN Security Council.'¹³

Interviewees also mentioned the bilateral interventions in Syria by some EU member states, noting that some states had a particular stance on military intervention, and this had impact on the way people view the EU.

'Yes, it is trying to play an active role and I am aware of it at least in relief efforts, welcoming refugees, resettlement of refugees, medical efforts, the documentation of violations. In Lebanon, the problem is that the major countries in the EU called for military intervention in Syria. This was seen positively only by a relative minority. The pro-revolution camp was not, as a majority, for it. Of course, the pro-Assad camp was against this. The majority of people here were against it. Other than political activists, the population couldn't handle it, anymore interventions.'¹⁴

The issue of historical baggage was raised in this respect as well:

'I don't think it has a specific politics towards the region. It has policies, multiple, but sure you can describe them as sort of umbrella policy. I will be harsh. It is anti- the population self-determination in this region. This goes way back in history. And it's not like colonialism has really ended. Certain aspects of colonialism have ended. The key impetus of it all is to go against this idea of self-determination of these communities that reside in the region. And I am talking about true self-determination, true representation, and true power for the populations here. And

13 Ibid.

14 Interviewee 18: Researcher, male, 28 July 2017.

this is not something that the EU will be friendly with because it threatens their economic and political interests.’¹⁵

‘Of course, it has specific policies, as a form of soft power. I think of the EU as having had a big history of colonialism in the whole region, I think it is definitely a way for these countries to exercise their cultural predominance. It has always been two-fold, one way it is a good way to get information. In another way, it is a way to keep things in check. I found quite often, that working in Europe as well, there is a mindset that somehow these agencies in Europe are more the decision makers of what culture and arts should look like in the region and more so what people’s worries should be. If the EU decides that arts and culture should be on the refugee crisis, then everyone should do this, and if it is women and empowerment, then this is what everyone should do. A lot of these policies don’t come from the Middle East but from the EU onto the Middle East.’¹⁶

Regarding the Syrian refugees, some interviewees admitted that the EU, often mentioning Germany in particular, has been welcoming of refugees. They also stated that Gulf countries, on the other hand, have not welcomed any refugees. However, the expanding perception is of ‘Fortress Europe’, whose priority is to ensure that the Mediterranean serves as an effective physical barrier between its northern and southern shores.

‘I mean, if you are going to evaluate their policies in the Mediterranean, first thing that comes to mind is the “Fortress Europe” policies that are forcing men, women, and children to go through horrifying experiences. People drowning, people suffering on the borders. Their policy of securitization and outsourcing securitization. They are often outsourcing securitization to the governments here to do their dirty work: to Lebanon, Turkey, etc.’¹⁷

‘From another part I think the EU is looked at as a caged continent where people have dreams to visit and to live there but it is not accessible due to the selection criteria that they have and the conditions that don’t allow people to live there. Also, there is a general feeling that the EU has—due to the Syrian refugee crisis—started to move towards supporting governments in the region to contain the refugees and not have the influx going to Europe, especially through the Mediterranean. Looking at the neighbourhood relationship, now you have the Fund which is to support governments

15 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

16 Interviewee 10: Professional in design sector, female, 31 July 2017.

17 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

and NGOs that are working in response to the crisis. So, I think the EU is trying to limit the amount of people that are migrating to Europe through working with local governments and enhancing their security procedures and to work with NGOs which are responding to the crisis. For me personally, I do believe that Europe is a “Fortress Europe”, it is a gated continent which promotes its diversity and the different identities towards this region, but I don’t think that they do celebrate the cultures from the southern neighbourhood countries. It is not a reciprocal relationship.’¹⁸

The gap between proclaimed values and actual policies was also noted in this respect.

‘Championing itself as a progressive, liberal and democratic entity, I believe that EU policy in the Mediterranean is lacking real efficiency. The effects of its intentions are often watered down, diluted by bureaucracy [so] that by the time they hit the ground they are often limited, and incapable of producing the intended results.’¹⁹

That said, a number of respondents professed ignorance about EU policy towards the Mediterranean, either because they are unaware of it, or because they believe the EU does not have a coherent policy that can be identified. Notably, throughout this spectrum, those consulted believe the EU has effectively been relegated to secondary status by the more assertive roles played in the region by the United States and Russia.

The perceptions of the EU role within Lebanon are also rather critical. The EU is often perceived as being involved in Lebanon either to serve European as opposed to Lebanese or joint interests, or otherwise viewed as present in Lebanon because of conflicts elsewhere in the region, particularly Syria, and in order to insulate Europe from the refugee crisis.

‘I think they want to maintain whatever sort of political strife we are going through in order to minimize whatever expenditure they are putting towards us. I think they are doing this. They are trying to maintain us, how to maintain people from this region, more so than including them.’²⁰

‘They are not helping. We don’t need EU help except in refugees [*sic*], they should welcome more. This is the one area where they are helping.’²¹

18 Interviewee 17: Palestinian refugee working at INGO, male, 4 August 2017.

19 Interviewee 8: Professional in creative sector, female, 3 August 2017.

20 Interviewee 7: Artist, female, 10 August 2017.

21 Interviewee 6: Academic, professor, and economist, male, 25 July 2017.

3.2 *Challenges confronting Lebanon and expectations*

There is much broader consensus on the key challenges confronting Lebanon. Unsurprisingly, the Syria conflict next door, and the broader ramifications of regional upheaval—not least the refugee crisis—are consistently mentioned. So too, albeit to a lesser extent, the Arab–Israeli conflict and the possibility of a new war involving Lebanon.

In terms of domestic issues, corruption and the lack of accountability by political and other elites figures prominently. The persistence of the confessional political system and growing socioeconomic inequalities are also mentioned. The Lebanese are often critical of the state of democracy in their country, and believe their government is working to undermine rather than promote it.

‘Refugees, refugee rights. Infrastructural problems, corruption, gender issues in terms of treatment of women. In a nutshell, it is a bundle of social and economic problems that takes a book to respond. The government here does not really deal with it or enables the problems to continue. The government here is war lords and corrupt officials. They aren’t being harmed and have power and are rich. Everyone else is being harmed and they are inciting communities to fight each other and harm each other.’²²

At the same time, the interviewees are cognizant that they live in a much more democratic political system than most of their neighbours. Notably absent from most responses is the increasing polarization within Lebanese politics and society in recent years. One possible explanation is that many respondents view this as a given. Many Lebanese across the spectrum also expressed a pessimistic attitude when it comes to identifying opportunities for their country in the coming years.

Opinion is divided on the role the EU can or should play in addressing these challenges. Responses ranged from the view that the EU can play a vital role in helping Lebanon to address its problems through support within the country and providing greater access to its markets, to the conclusion that the EU is an insufficient external actor lacking significant impact on the domestic and regional crises confronting Lebanon.

22 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

When asked in which policy areas the EU could be specifically beneficial, interviewee 3 answered:

‘Freedoms, individual freedoms, freedom of speech, killing censorship. Maybe the EU can support everyone working on killing censorship, on supporting individual freedoms. The second that I think is important [is the] environment, even if we don’t feel it is a necessity, I feel we are completely forgetting this field [that] affects our health issues and affects how we live. Whether it is traffic, whether the whole health system is not working well. I also think anti-racism is important, whether anti-sectarianism, anti-sexism, anti-fanaticism. This whole “hate of the other”—whether it’s women, domestic workers, a Syrian refugee, etc.—needs to be tackled somehow. I’m not saying democracy and secularism, because I think these are very big titles that you can’t address at a distance. I think when you work on building values, they will come eventually. When everyone is free and tolerant, I think it will come as a consequence.’²³

3.3 Co-operation Areas with the EU

There was a general observation that the states of the Middle East could benefit from more co-operation with the EU in terms of the economy and governance, in particular. This, however, would require the EU to pursue an agenda that was more aligned with the interests of the peoples of the region as opposed to the narrow priorities of the EU, and to partner less with governments that stand in opposition to the values Europe espouses. On the whole, Lebanese would like to see greater economic co-operation with the EU, and a more energetic European promotion of good governance in Lebanon. As expressed by one respondent, ‘they [should] avoid being hypocritical about their own values’.²⁴

Most did not call for specific policies. They stated that the people know what needs to be done; what they need is funding, knowledge sharing and expertise.

‘We need different tactics and become more innovative in how we can address these issues. Technology innovation needs to be a core part of this. These issues cannot be addressed without this.’²⁵

23 Interviewee 3: Political activist, female, 25 July 2017.

24 Interviewee 9: Professional in start-up sector, male, 10 August 2017.

25 Ibid. The interviewee is referring to what he considered to be core issues within the country, such as the refugee crisis, waste crisis, corruption, etc.

In Lebanon there is an opportunity with the knowledge economy, if I were the EU, I would try to at least be part of it because there are so many opportunities that could be offered to the entrepreneurs. You have a lot of talent, a lot of start-ups. Open the European market to them. They would be better off and the EU would benefit from innovation disruptions and the start-ups would benefit and [in turn] benefit Lebanon. [...] Maybe an entrepreneur visa for start-ups. Facilitating travel, meeting with policy-makers, providing funds, soft landing zones, establishing residency, legal aspect, these kinds of things.²⁶

Visa policies were also seen as crucial for the Lebanese economy. In the words of an HR professional in the banking sector:

‘They might work more on the visa system, because they want tourists, but they are not helping us in doing this. They are a union, but they are inconsistent in the way that they give visas. You have some flexible countries but some that aren’t. If we get a visa for 5 years, we can get our tickets and then go there. So, we opt for Turkey or for the US because they give us a 5-year visa. [...] So, it is becoming obnoxious to go to Europe. They want to appear as being close, but they don’t walk the talk. [...] They look at us from above, we aren’t at the same status. This is repulsing. We’re not on the same level and it’s not fair.’²⁷

The EU is lauded for its generous funding of refugee programmes in Lebanon but criticized for its own restrictive refugee admissions policies, though these are recognized as being more open than those of, for example, the United States. In general, the EU is seen as supporting refugee absorption in Lebanon in order to reduce migration flows to Europe. In some cases, such observations were accompanied by complaints that it has become increasingly difficult for Lebanese citizens to acquire visas to European states. Others noted that the EU also supports Lebanese security forces that engage in human rights violations against refugees.

In the local context, interviewees did call for the EU to exert more efforts, regionally and in Lebanon, towards solving the refugee crisis. Noting the power and wealth of the EU, they stated that the EU was capable of this, but insisted that the EU works more with local, rather than external, actors in this respect.

26 Interviewee 15: Leading figure in the start-up sector, male, 4 August 2017.

27 Interviewee 1: HR professional in banking sector, female, 15 July 2017

'A drastic approach towards solving the refugee crisis. All that has been done is just spending some money and hoping this will be beneficial. But this is all going to NGOs, maybe only 10 percent of them are helping. It should be more in-depth and hands-on with local people. You don't need to bring people from abroad. Making people accountable for whatever they have been allocated to do. There is a lack of accountability. Even if it is well-intended. This creates corruption. Autonomy to the wrong people makes them corrupt.'²⁸

Regarding civil society support, many people are aware that the EU and its member states are a primary external funder of non-governmental organizations and various civic initiatives. Here again, those who assess EU policies on the basis of direct experience generally provide high marks, whether in terms of donor programmes, funding, or technical expertise. Impact assessments were more varied, but responsibility for failures in this respect were as often laid at the door of the Lebanese authorities as attributed to the Europeans, leading some to opine that the EU should exercise more political pressure on the Lebanese government to adopt policies that reflect the objectives of EU assistance programmes. Assistance to Lebanese NGOs, whether by the EU or individual member states, appears to be particularly appreciated, not only for the reasons noted above, but also because its contributions are seen as vital to the sector and because such funding is in contrast to its American counterpart not viewed as politically tainted.

'Yes of course there are a lot of ties between civil society and the EU, whether in funding projects or funding research, initiating projects, and in offering protection in a non-direct way. I know that many civil society groups, especially related to gender and sexuality, especially sexuality; they don't have leverage over the government and the population. Whenever there is a crackdown, the first body they think to support them is the EU. So, they are a supportive body for society that has leverage over the Lebanese government. [...] It is not perceived as a hostile influence but rather compromises what the government has to do in order to keep the EU on its side.'²⁹

Furthermore, acquiring European support is also seen by its civil society recipients as extending a measure of political protection vis-à-vis hostility to their programmes by the Lebanese authorities.

28 Interviewee 15: Leading figure in the start-up sector, male, 4 August 2017.

29 Interviewee 18: Researcher, male, 28 July 2017.

The EU is also seen as a prominent actor in terms of its gender policies. In this respect its own values and assistance to organizations that promote gender equality are widely noted and seen as important contributions. At the same time, it is also observed that the EU partners with governments in the region whose gender policies sharply contradict those of the EU and the organizations it supports. In terms of gender perspective and how the EU could be involved in this regard, interviewees felt that the EU could have more leverage over the Lebanese government in passing faster gender reform.

‘There are a few gains which are happening, but I’m not sure how much the EU is really using their influence on Lebanese politicians on such things. Again, as I said, the only support is financial, and the change is being done by civil sector society, but I do believe the EU could put more conditions or provide more conditional support and funding for the government based on government’s performance in gender equality.’³⁰

Furthermore, one interviewee stated the following.

‘I personally hate the positive discrimination that they try to enforce. I talk about research because that is the field that I know most. When you want to apply for a project you need to have the same number of men and women researchers. This [is the] type of quota that they try to impose. They are blind to the local context. In Lebanon all of the projects have more females than males. In my university we have more female professors.’³¹

Assessment of EU policies in Lebanon within specific sectors such as agriculture, water, energy, or industry was largely declined by those with no direct experience, on the grounds of lack of knowledge. A recurrent observation with respect to these programmes, however, has been that the EU is insufficiently accessible, for example, supporting Lebanese agriculture while restricting access for Lebanese products to the European market—something that would significantly contribute to its further development. One expert stated that the need is infrastructural:

‘I think this is the major need. [...] We need to drink non-polluted water. We can expect a lot from the EU in this regard. We could expect a lot from the EU, especially

30 Interviewee 17: Palestinian refugee working at INGO, male, 4 August 2017.

31 Interviewee 6: Academic, professor, and economist, male, 25 July 2017.

local solutions to technical problems like waste management, solar energy. These kinds of very small-scale projects that specifically target municipalities.³²

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interviewees provided key information, from an elite status perspective, on awareness and perception of EU policies, potential for EU policies in the region, expectations for Lebanon, and with some reflections on gender. Regarding awareness and perception of EU policies, the interviewees realize that the EU is a powerful leader in the region, but they are less aware of EU policies and projects, and much more aware of projects and policies of individual EU member states. Generally, most people had a positive view of the EU. Individuals working in the NGO or creative sectors saw the EU as a critical donor and funder. Primarily, the interviewees were most critical of (1) the EU refugee policy in regard to lack of provision of safe passage to Europe and (2) EU and Schengen visa policies for Lebanese citizens, stating that they prefer the US system which either gives a visa for 5 years, or does not give a visa at all.

Regarding the potential for EU policies in the region, many interviewees called for the EU to work with grassroots organizations and employ a less top-down approach. Many interviewees felt that policies and working areas were decided in the EU, and there was not a dialogue between the EU and its Lebanon partners. Again, individuals from the NGO and creative sectors voiced criticism of the EU's bureaucratic system in applying for grants, which they found discouraging. Finally, individuals felt that the EU could be more effective in using its leverage to influence and place pressure on the Lebanese government. The key policy recommendations which emerged from the interviews were that the interlocutors expect the EU to:

32 Ibid.

- (1) assist more strongly with the refugee crisis and prevent the Mediterranean Sea from acting as a border;
- (2) localize their intervention, as the central government in Lebanon is seen as corrupt, and work with municipalities and grassroots organizations; and
- (3) not make pre-decisions within EU offices to then apply in Lebanon, but instead, make decisions with Lebanese partners or allow for full self-determination.

On awareness in Lebanon, interviewees spoke very critically of their government, primarily stating that corruption is the number one issue in the country. Many expressed feelings of being disheartened and could not envision a different Lebanon. Problems were primarily seen from the point of view of corruption and sectarianism, which also aligns with international influence as all political parties are aligned with other countries regionally. International actors, especially in the Arab and Gulf regions, were seen as key and powerful stakeholders.

With a final note on gender, interviewees discussed a lack of general human rights, including gender rights, mentioning laws regarding a woman's ability to pass on nationality, domestic abuse, and sexual harassment. Many simultaneously discussed a concern regarding LGBT rights when discussing gender. People were intersectional in their approach, underlining that refugees and migrant workers face even harsher situations.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: HR professional in banking sector, female, 15 July 2017 (follow up on 18 September 2017)
- Interviewee 2: Journalist at foreign news agency, female, 23 July 2017 (follow up on 7 September 2017)
- Interviewee 3: Political activist, female, 25 July 2017 (follow up on 8 September 2017)
- Interviewee 4: Media spokesperson for INGO, male, 20 July 2017
- Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017 (follow up on 7 September 2017)
- Interviewee 6: Academic, professor, and economist, male, 25 July 2017 (follow up on 22 September 2017)
- Interviewee 7: Artist, female, 10 August 2017 (follow up on 12 September 2017)
- Interviewee 8: Professional in creative sector, female, 3 August 2017 (follow up on 12 September 2017)

- Interviewee 9: Professional in start-up sector, male, 10 August 2017 (follow up on 21 September 2017)
- Interviewee 10: Professional in design sector, female, 31 July 2017 (follow up on 31 August 2017)
- Interviewee 11. Financial consultant in NGO sector, female, 9 August 2017 (follow up on 5 September 2017)
- Interviewee 12: Government official, female, 7 August 2017
- Interviewee 13: Human rights activist and case worker, female, 8 August 2017 (follow up on 18 September 2017)
- Interviewee 14: Humanitarian official, female, 7 August 2017 (follow up on 13 September 2017)
- Interviewee 15: Leading figure in the start-up sector, male, 4 August 2017 (follow up on 31 August 2017)
- Interviewee 16: Political expert and academic, male, 26 July 2017 (follow up on 9 September 2017)
- Interviewee 17: Palestinian refugee working at INGO, male, 4 August 2017 (follow up on 8 September 2017)
- Interviewee 18: Researcher, male, 28 July 2017
- Interviewee 19. Sexuality and gender activist, female, 2 August 2017
- Interviewee 20: VC funder, male, 9 August 2017 (follow up on 16 September 2017)
- Interviewee 21: Founder of an NGO, female. 2 August 2017
- Interviewee 22: Academic/research on political issues, male, 3 August 2017
- Interviewee 23: Film director, male, 6 August 2017
- Interviewee 24. Artist and film director, female, 9 August 2017
- Interviewee 25. Ceramicist, female, 12 August 2017
- Interviewee 26: Owner of furniture gallery, male, 10 August 2017
- Interviewee 27: Private sector, male, 11 August 2017
- Interviewee 28. IT sector, male, 11 August 2017
- Interviewee 29. Journalist, male, 11 August 2017
- Interviewee 30. NGO sector, female, 14 August 2017

