

The Lebanese National Dialogue

Past and present experience of consensus-building

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Abstract

This paper looks at the National Dialogue experience of Lebanon. National Dialogues have been part of the country's political and social fabric. They have served as an important consensus-building mechanism for core political actors to address issues of common national concern. The paper provides a snapshot of the history of National Dialogues in Lebanon during the civil war and onwards, followed by an assessment of aspects of the National Dialogue from 2008-2014, addressing its composition, themes, outcomes, support mechanisms, and consensus-building principles. It concludes with a more general reflection about challenges and dilemmas of the Lebanese National Dialogue.

About this Publication

This publication was produced in the framework of a two-year project (March 2015 – April 2017) to develop a Handbook on National Dialogues funded by the German Federal Foreign Office in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The purpose of the Handbook is to offer a practice-oriented guide for comprehensively designing and implementing National Dialogues. It rests on participatory methods including 1) strategic dialogue and exchange between local stakeholders, international development and peacebuilding practitioners, and policymakers, 2) a

comprehensive mapping exercise of National Dialogues across the world, and 3) in-depth case studies on National Dialogues produced by local researchers. The project is implemented by the Berghof Foundation, in cooperation with swisspeace. This publication is one of seven case studies; others include Guatemala, Libya, Mali, Nepal, Sudan, and Tunisia. The case studies provide recommendations for on-going processes in the specific country and inform the Handbook's findings. The overall aim of the project is to improve National Dialogues and enhance the capacities and contributions of conflict parties, local stakeholders and external actors towards their successful implementation.

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1 Introduction

National Dialogues are part of Lebanon's political and social fabric. They have served as important discussion fora outside Parliament and the Council of Ministers to address issues of common national concern across the political and confessional spectrum. They have aimed at breaking political deadlocks but also kept contentious issues at bay when consensus could not be reached.

Recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have led to a series of National Dialogues in the region to provide wider participatory avenues for change processes. At the same time, the example of Lebanon shows that National Dialogues can be exclusive processes. In the case of Lebanon, the aim has been to find consensus among the ruling elites in order to jointly tackle issues in a way that allows political buy-in from all key political actors. Potentially, the purpose is to avoid moments where certain political stakeholders become spoilers because they were not included in the decision-making process. In this sense, the Lebanese National Dialogue ensures agreement among those who can maintain peace with the condition of a mutual understanding of the core parameters for the stability of the country.

This paper looks at the Lebanese experience concerning National Dialogues, including its historical and contemporary dimensions. The paper pays closer attention to the National Dialogue chaired by the President after the adoption of the Doha Agreement in 2008 that had the main objective of finding consensus for a National Defense Strategy and breaking deadlocks in the case of political impasse.¹ The paper offers a brief summary of past National Dialogues rounds in Lebanon without aiming at providing an exhaustive account. The paper specifically concentrates on process design elements, including questions about the setting, its participants and the agenda of the dialogue.

The paper first provides a snapshot of the history of National Dialogues in Lebanon during the civil war and onwards, followed by an assessment of aspects of the National Dialogue from 2008-2014, addressing its composition, themes, outcomes, support mechanisms, and consensus-building principles. The paper concludes with a more general reflection about the challenges and dilemmas of the National Dialogue in Lebanon.

¹ Interviews for this paper were conducted with participants of the dialogue, advisers and independent experts in Lebanon in March 2016. The author thanks interviewees for their contribution.

2 National Dialogues in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1989)

Lebanon has seen a number of National Dialogues throughout its history. At the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, a National Dialogue Committee comprising twenty political and religious representatives, equally divided between Christians and Muslims (four Sunni and Shia seats, two for the Druze), was established by Prime Minister Rashid Karami in September 1975 in order to solve the political crisis (Deeb 1980). The Committee held nine sessions over two months and had political, economic and social reforms on its agenda that were discussed in sub-committees (El Khazen 2000). Issues of debate were the abolition of political confessionalism, secularism and the presence of Palestinian arms. Syria played the role of quasi-mediator bringing the warring factions together to the negotiation table (Osoegawa 2013). The National Dialogue Committee called for ceasefires that were subsequently arranged but often lasted for only a few days (O'Ballance 1998). In the long run, the dialogue could neither stop the war nor end the play of sectarian politics.

In an attempt to break the deadlock during the civil war after the Israeli pullback, two National Dialogue conferences, also known as the 'National Reconciliation Conferences', were held in 1983 and 1984 in Geneva and Lausanne

Beirut Factions Open Talks in Geneva

The Washington Post, 1 November 1983

« The conference opened at 5 p.m. in a small 18th-floor room of the heavily guarded Intercontinental Hotel after aides of the nine Lebanese participants wrangled much of the day over the shape of the negotiating table.

They finally decided on a rectangular arrangement of separate tables covered with green baize with Gemayel at the head and the opposition--Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Shiite Moslem Amal chief Nabih Berri, Christian former president Suleiman Franjeh and Sunni Moslem former Prime Minister Rashid Karami – sitting apart to his left.

On his right were the two leaders of the Christian Phalangist-led Lebanese Front – former president Camille Chamoun and Phalangist Party founder Pierre Gemayel, who is also father of the Lebanese president. Next to them at a separate table sat the Sunni leader, Saeb Salam, and the Shiite former speaker of parliament, Adel Osseirane.

The two official observers to the conference – Syrian Foreign Minister Abdel Halim Khaddam and Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammed Ibrahim Massoud – were at another table opposite Gemayel. Each delegate had a leather folder with the words “Lebanese National Dialogue Conference” inscribed on the front.

The assembly of Lebanon's political patriarchs, some of whom have longstanding blood feuds--and most a deep loathing--for each other, was a strange sight, with the Moslem opposition trying to ignore the presence of their Christian adversaries and refusing to make any comment on Gemayel's speech.

There were few smiles and the atmosphere was cool although not particularly tense. The only incident occurred when Jumblatt, who had refused to pass through a metal detector barrier in the lobby of the hotel, was asked outside the conference room by Johnny Abdo, Lebanon's ambassador to Switzerland and the country's former security chief, to surrender his pistol. »

(MacQueen 2009). The talks were attended by most of the interested political factions and seats were again split in the fifty-fifty format, with five Christian and five Muslim representatives each (Dean 2004). Initially the debate revolved around the question of where the conference should take place, such as Beirut airport, Paris, Switzerland or the Presidential palace, who should be invited and what items should be on the agenda (Salem 1994). Because of an objection by Syria, both the Prime Minister and also the Speaker of Parliament were excluded. The first conference in Geneva was eventually held following the invitation of Switzerland's President and chaired by Lebanon's then-President Amine Gemayel (Salem 1994). Behind the scenes, Saudi Arabia and Syria as well as the U.S., the UK, France, Italy, the USSR and Egypt made sure that the conferences would take place. The three main, interlinked themes of the conferences were the controversial U.S.-brokered May 1983 peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel, the issue of political reform of Lebanon, and how to end the civil war. The participants each submitted a written proposal on all of those thematic areas, but due to personal mistrust a systematic compromise guided by a common national interest could not be reached (Preston 2004). The Geneva conference de facto ended with President Gemayel leaving for consultations with U.S. President Reagan in Washington (Salem 2009).

In March 1984 after the Lebanese Cabinet had cancelled the Lebanese-Israeli peace agreement, the way was open for reconvening the National Dialogue conference, this time in Lausanne. There was agreement on the formation of a National Unity Cabinet and other policy issues, including a ceasefire, but the implementation of the consensus of the talks remained flawed. As others have highlighted, although the conference could not achieve a breakthrough and failed to bring about fundamental

Thomas L. Friedman, From Beirut to Jerusalem (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1989) on the Lausanne conference in 1984:

« Having been left by the world to sort out their own feuds, Lebanon's Muslim and Christian warlords convened a peace conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, under Syrian sponsorship, in March 1984. Because there was no neutral space left at home where they could all agree to meet, they had to go to an entirely different country. The various factions, along with President Gemayel, gathered together at the elegant Beau Rivage Hotel, on the banks of Lake Geneva. Lebanese militia leaders, trailing bodyguards in ill-fitting suits with huge bulges in their jackets, waited in line to pass through the metal detector in the hotel lobby behind wealthy European dowagers trailing diamond-collared poodles. The Swiss had surrounded the hotel with barbed wire and sandbags crowned by machine-gun nests and had covered the windows of the conference hall with 20-foot-high steel plates. I could never figure out if all this armour was intended to keep intruders out or the Lebanese in. (...)

It was easily the highpoint of the conference, which got off to a bad start when Druse warlord Walid Jumblatt insisted on placing a Druse flag, as opposed to a Lebanese flag, in front of his seat. Things went downhill from there. Walid spent most of his time in his suite giving an interview to Playboy. Every time a negotiating session began he would announce to his bodyguards, "Okay, it's showtime, let's go." After nine days of fruitless negotiations, interrupted only by banquets of smoked salmon and lobster bisque, the peace conference collapsed as the pigheaded Lebanese politicians refused to make any compromises with one another.

Back in Beirut, the newspapers openly mocked the militia chieftains by showing pictures of them stuffing their faces with Chateaubriand next to pictures of Lebanese children mutilated in the latest street fighting. Following the fiasco at Lausanne, everyone rushed back to Beirut for what would turn out to be yet another phase of the Lebanese civil war. »

change it at least ‘made possible a peaceful exchange of views on neutral soil’ at the height of the Lebanese civil war (Probst 1988).

The series of civil war National Dialogues eventually culminated in the Taif peace negotiations held in the Saudi Arabian mountain resort in 1989. The Taif talks brought together the last 62 deputies of the final pre-war parliament and were convened by the Arab High Tripartite Committee of the Arab League composed of Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Morocco (MacQueen 2009). The number of attending representatives resulted from the original 73 members of the legislative, while eleven members were absent, eight of them for non-political reasons and another three boycotted the discussions (Maaloufova 2001). With the blessing of Syria and the U.S., the final Charter of National Reconciliation ended the 15-year-long Lebanese civil war and emphasised a range of points for peace such as general principles and reforms, issues of internal sovereignty, the issue of Israeli occupation and Syrian-Lebanese relations.

3 Post-Civil War National Dialogue under Speaker Berri (2006)

Over fifteen years later, the Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri launched a new round of National Dialogues in March 2006 to overcome the political impasse when the Shia ministers left the cabinet. Over fourteen sessions were held until the dialogue was interrupted by the Israel-Hizbullah July war in 2006. Regional bilateral conciliatory talks with Saudi Arabia preceded and prepared the ground for the parliamentary dialogue. The Shia minister announced that they would return to the cabinet and join in the talks if the government official agreed to abstain from calling Hizbullah a ‘militia’ and instead acknowledged it as the ‘Resistance’ (Fakhoury-Mühlbacher 2009). Prime Minister Fouad Siniora gave that promise which smoothed the way for the discussions on other politically-contentious pending issues.

The 2006 National Dialogue was held in Parliament with the fourteen senior leaders of the political parties represented in the legislature. Participants were chosen and invited by Speaker Berri, who chaired the meetings. The Speaker, who has been one of the leaders of the March 8 alliance, was supported by a preparatory committee of his



Photo: Lebanese Parliament, Beirut / Source: Lebanese Parliament

political advisers (Nir, Berri 2011). The setting of the dialogue was symbolic: a round table representing equality for all participants, with opponents such as Druze leader Jumblatt and Hizbullah's Secretary General Nasrallah separated by representatives of more moderate forces (Feltman 2006). The agenda of the dialogue was set by the Speaker and comprised controversial issues such as the establishment of the Special International Tribunal regarding the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the issue of Palestinian arms outside the refugee camps, Lebanon's defence strategy including the issue of Hizbullah's arms, the settlement of the Shebaa Farms and the delimitation of the Syrian-Lebanese borders under UN Security Council Resolution 1559, the establishment of diplomatic relations between Lebanon and Syria, and the question of the Presidency.

After the first dialogue sessions in March, Speaker Berri announced that consensus had been reached on the disarmament of Palestinian militias located outside the refugee camps within six months, for normalised diplomatic relations with Syria, comprehensive support for the UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) and the establishment of an international tribunal, and an appeal to the United Nations to validate Lebanon's claim to the Shebaa Farms region along the Blue Line (Murray 2006). A study committee was also created for the issue of Palestinian arms, chaired by Future Movement leader Saad Hariri and Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, which was supposed to bring results to the National Dialogue table (Feltman 2006).

Disputes about the potential removal of President Lahoud and the names of new candidates could not be resolved with March 8 and March 14 adversaries pulling in different directions. Some hoped that the Maronite Patriarch, as spiritual leader of the Maronites, would simply select one name, or at least a list of names for the Presidency, so that the parliament could discuss them (Feltman 2006). Hizbullah's arms also remained a contentious issue. The feeling was that the region and the wider world

WikiLeaks Cables: "National dialogue conference begins on positive note"

3 March 2006, US Embassy in Beirut

« For the first time since the 1989 Ta'if Accord, the full range of Lebanon's political leadership is now engaged in face-to-face negotiations -- this time, in Beirut rather than a foreign venue (and without any international "referees"). (...) Although starting with an hour's delay, the political leaders of Lebanon (...) gradually drifted in into the heavily-guarded parliament building late yesterday morning, proving wrong several commentators who had said Nabih Berri's initiative was insubstantial and would never occur. Sitting around a circular table (with arch rivals Jumblatt and Nasrallah separated by three relative innocents), the attendees listened to Lebanon's national anthem and Berri's opening remarks, which included an appeal for calm discourse, and a note from the UN SYG Kofi Annan. (...) Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said that the dialogue was proceeding "much better than even I hoped." He said that, no matter what happens to the UNSCR 1559 discussion ("very hard"), the participants agreed that they would declare the dialogue a success, as declarations that the dialogue had failed would "be dangerous". Certainly there was a palpable sense of relief in Lebanon -- even reflected in the currency and stock markets -- that an unprecedented meeting among harsh rivals could indeed take place in Beirut without the presence of foreign mediators. At least during the dialogue's first day, Lebanon's political leaders seemed to be acting responsibly. »

control Lebanon's prerogatives on the presidency and on foreign relations making national decision-making dependent on external interests (Feltman 2006).

As admitted by his advisers, Berri was 'simply playing out the clock', hoping for the best and with nothing to lose.² None of the agreements were ultimately implemented; however, the dialogue set a mechanism and space between the two political blocs to discuss issues of common concern outside constitutional settings (Nir, Berri 2011). For the first time since the 1989 Taif Accords, Lebanon's political leadership engaged in national 'face-to-face negotiations' inside Lebanon without resorting to a foreign venue (Feltman 2006). The result was that the dialogue was seen to have created a 'spirit of communal cooperation' that did not previously exist (Feltman 2006).

After the July 2006 war, Berri resumed consultations in Parliament in an effort to forge a compromise between the March 8 and March 14 alliances. Although progress on substantial issues could not be reached, an outcome of the dialogue was a 'media truce' and a code of conduct stipulating that political leaders would refrain from attacking each other in order to stem the rising political and sectarian tension (Lebanon's National Dialogue 2006). Berri had initially called for the formation of a unity government and the adoption of a new electoral law to end the political stalemate. All thirteen high level politicians of the previous dialogue talks participated, except for Hizbullah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah who stayed away for security reasons but sent a representative.

In July 2007, the newly elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy invited members of the March 8 and March 14 factions for a weekend of dialogue talks at the Parc de la Jonchère Hotel of La Celle-Saint-Cloud in the western suburbs of Paris. Twenty-eight representatives from the political parties were invited and an additional two quasi civil society representatives attended the talks. The initiative was criticised as a unilateral effort of France, which had not consulted with regional and international partners (NOW Lebanon 13 July 2007). Another concern was that the dialogue abroad could recognise the legitimacy of the opposition's boycott of the government and set the bar too high for an immediate compromise. However, different from Berri's National Dialogue, the meeting in La Celle-Saint-Cloud focused on the second-level leadership with the hope that the more informal atmosphere could pave the way for future high-level talks (Jaulmes 2007). The talks concluded without any official statement but allowed the Lebanese factions to claim that they are working towards a solution (NOW Lebanon 16 July 2007).

In August 2007, Speaker Berri revived his call for a National Dialogue to end the political impasse in Lebanon but could not succeed in bringing all parties to the table (Mas 2007). Although there was publicly announced support for his initiative from both rival camps and assistance offered by France to support any compromise in moving forward with presidential elections, the dialogue session did not materialise (Bathish 2007).

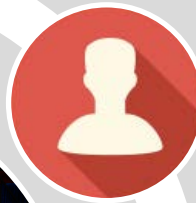
² Berri's adviser Hamdan answered the question of why the dialogue continues, with a joke: 'A man agrees, under threat of death, to teach a King's donkey to sing. When asked why he would accept such an impossible task, the man says much can happen over time, the king may die, he may die, or the donkey may sing.' (Feltman 2006)

PARLIAMENT NATIONAL DIALOGUE 2008



DOHA NATIONAL DIALOGUE CONFERENCE

16-21 August 2008



Participants: 14 political leaders, sponsorship of Emir of Qatar; participation of Arab Ministerial Committee, incl. Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Foreign Ministers of Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, Algeria, Djibouti, Oman, Morocco, and Yemen



Agenda: Presidential elections / Unity Government / Electoral law reform / Prohibition of the use of weapons or violence / Political rhetoric



Outcome: Doha Agreement (21 May 2008) / End of political crisis / Election of General Sleiman as President / Continuation of National Dialogue under new President

4 The Doha Agreement and Post-Doha National Dialogue (2008-2014)

In 2008, Lebanon witnessed a growing political polarisation and armed confrontation between political factions. After 18 months of political deadlock since 2006, the Qatari- and Arab League brokered Lebanese National Dialogue Conference was held in Doha from 16-21 May 2008 to agree on the next steps to overcome the stalemate. The Qatar-sponsored National Dialogue Conference in Doha kept the same composition with 14 representatives of the government and the Hizbullah-led opposition. As a result of the conference, the parties agreed on having the Speaker of Parliament invite the Parliament to convene and elect the consensus candidate General Michel Sleiman as President. Another agreed item was to finalise and enact a new electoral law for the parliamentary elections in 2009. It was also decided in Doha to resume the National Dialogue under the aegis of the president as soon as he is elected and a national unity government is formed.

Participants

The inaugural session of the post-Doha National Dialogue was held in the presence of the Secretary General of the Arab League at the Presidential Palace in September 2008 and sessions continued amidst gun battles in the Northern city of Tripoli, occasional confrontations in the streets of Beirut, and other security incidents in the country.

Similar to the 2006 dialogue equation, the 14 representatives of Lebanon's major political groups participated in the first sessions of the dialogue reflecting the full political spectrum in Lebanon. The names of the representatives were the same as in the 2008 Doha talks to maintain continuity. The three Armenian parties agreed on rotating their participation at the dialogue table (Grant 2008). Unlike previous sessions, advisors did not attend and President Sleiman as chair of the meeting was sitting at the head of a rectangular table, emphasising

WikiLeaks Cables: "First National Dialogue session meets low expectations"
17 September 2008, US Embassy in Beirut

« Christian MP and March 14 member Boutros Harb commented on September 16 that the atmosphere inside the conference room was good and positive. He said Michel Aoun defended the resistance (Hizballah) and asked to expand the number of participants in the dialogue. Hizballah MP

Mohammad Raad asked to add more topics to the dialogue's agenda, Harb reported. However, both proposals were opposed by March 14. In the end, the issue of expanding the number of participants was deferred to President Sleiman to make a final decision, Harb said. (...) Armenian MP Hagop Pakradunian described the September 16 meeting as "more than a photo op, but less than a dialogue." »

his independent role from the participants, in contrast to the 2006 National Dialogue where Speaker Berri was part of the round table reflecting his role as both chairman and participant.

Although officially welcoming the dialogue, March 8 opposition leaders asked to expand the list of participants in an attempt to shift the proportions at the dialogue table. They suggested adding former presidents, prime ministers, and persons with significant public support, such as former MPs and ministers, or other more pro-Syria sympathisers. It was also suggested that the National Dialogue should have an equal number of opposition March 8 and majority March 14 representatives.

In 2010, the Lebanese President announced the list of participants for a new round of National Dialogue that took into consideration the results of the 2009 parliamentary elections. At this time, the dialogue included 19 politicians representing the major blocs in Parliament. The new criteria for participation in the dialogue were based on the 2009 Parliamentary Elections results, each bloc with 4 or more members of Parliament was invited, while considering regional and confessional aspects. Out of the 19 members, seven were from the March 14 majority alliance and seven from March 8 opposition alliance, while five participants were considered centrists and independent. The list was immediately challenged by both rival camps, March 14 and March 8. March 14 wanted the Arab League to participate in the talks and complained that the list did not reflect their victory in the elections. The March 8-leaning Baath Party and the Arab Democratic Party of the Alawite minority protested against the list because they were not represented. Representing the Roman Catholics, President Sleiman named Dean of the Law Faculty at Saint Joseph University from city of Zahle as an independent member to take part in the National Dialogue Committee, which caused dispute among Member of Parliaments from that region, as the city is home to the largest Greek Catholic community. A criticism was that the list continued to comprise key political actors such as the Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Prime Minister Saad Hariri, former President Amin Gemayel, former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, Change and Reform bloc leader MP Michel Aoun, head of Hizbullah's parliamentary bloc Mohammad Raad, and Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt, and 12 other major representatives from different sects. Despite objections over the participant list, the President clarified that he would not make any amendments regarding the nominated representatives as the list was put together after careful consideration of political, confessional, regional, historical and practical balance (The Daily Star 4 March 2010).

In January 2011, the National Dialogue talks were interrupted by the collapse of the Government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri after Hizbullah and its political allies resigned from the cabinet over arguments over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). Confronted with the early repercussions of the Syrian crisis, President Sleiman launched a new round of talks at the Presidential Baabda Palace in June 2012 with the same configuration of participants but without ex-Prime Minister Hariri, who left the country in 2011, and instead with the new Prime Minister Najib Mikati. Some participants were absent because of health or travel issues, or political protest, but their general seat at the table remained (The National Dialogue Committee 2012). Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea boycotted the new dialogue rounds, saying that there was no serious readiness on Hizbullah's side to engage on substantive issues such as its arms (Arab Today 1 July 2012). 'If the participants and the president cannot provide the basic of elements required to hold serious dialogue, then there is no use in wasting time or effort sitting around a table for dialogue just for the sake of doing so', he argued (YaLibnan 4

June 2012). Later in 2012, the March 14 Alliance collectively refused to participate in the National Dialogue, describing it as a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ and arguing that it lacked the openness to discuss the issue of Lebanon’s National Defense Strategy and Hizbullah’s arms (Asharq Al-Awsat 1 December 2012).

In March 2014, following several attempts to restart the dialogue, President Sleiman reconvened the National Dialogue, following the successful endorsement of the new unity Government under Prime Minister Tammam Salam by the Parliament. President Sleiman stressed in his invitations the need to discuss ‘critical developments in the region and their impact on Lebanon’, emphasising ‘the belief that there can be no substitute for dialogue, which will address the manner in which to confront the dangers facing the country’ (National Dialogue session 2014). With his mandate ending two months later, in May, one of his advisers stressed that the president had ‘started his tenure with dialogue and is keen on ending it with dialogue too’ (National Dialogue session 2014). Some March 8 parties, including Hizbullah, rejected the call of the President, as he had repeatedly criticised Hizbullah’s military intervention in Syria (World Bulletin 31 March 2014). ‘Sleiman is no longer an impartial arbitrator... He has become a party to the conflict; one with an external and internal agenda that makes National Dialogue neither productive nor positive’, commented one Hizbullah representatives publicly (World Bulletin 31 March 2014). The dialogue's timing was also seen as ‘inappropriate’ and some argued that the dialogue should resume under a new president (World Bulletin 31 March 2014). The Lebanese Forces continued to stay away in protest at Hizbullah’s role in Syria and the unsolved issue of its arms. This National Dialogue round eventually ended with President Sleiman leaving office on 24 May 2014.

Agenda

The agenda of the National Dialogue in Lebanon has primarily focused on issues of wide national concern that relate to the stability of Lebanon. As in the dialogues during the civil war, priorities have been matters of peace and security that could not have been dealt with in the usual constitutional institutions such as the Parliament. Among other themes, the question of arms outside the control of the State, follow-up to the implementation of past agreements in the context of the Taif Peace Agreement and the Doha Agreement, the issue of reforms of the electoral law, and other issues regarding the functioning of state institutions have been on the front burner. A recurrent issue of debate in the National Dialogue has also been the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which has been dividing political factions in the country.

Doha Agreement ‘On the Results of the Lebanese National Dialogue Conference’ 21 May, 2008 – Mandate for post-Doha National Dialogue

« Initiate a dialogue on promoting the Lebanese state’s authority over all Lebanese territory and their relationship with the various groups on the Lebanese stage in order to ensure the state’s and the citizens’ security...

This dialogue is to be resumed under the aegis of the president as soon as he is elected and a national unity government is formed, and with the participation of the Arab League in such a way as to boost confidence among the Lebanese. »

As stipulated in the Doha Agreement in 2008, the main aim of the post-Doha National Dialogue has been to tackle remaining controversial themes, in particular the issue of the National Defense Strategy of the country, including the dispute about Hezbollah's and Palestinian arms. In response, Hezbollah tried to enlarge the agenda and proposed to include discussions about state-building, education, improving the economy and wider military issues, which political opponents saw as an attempt to 'dilute' the focus of the dialogue on core contentious issues (World Bulletin 31 March 2014). From early on, Hezbollah was adamant that any solution in the dialogue cannot mean disarmament. Mohammed Raad, senior Hezbollah MP and participant of the National Dialogue Committee, declared when the dialogue resumed after Doha in September 2008: 'Defending ourselves is a right that does not require a decision' (Tran 2008). He added that '[the] issue can be debated in theory but the answer is clear and has already been decided'. In response, President Sleiman reaffirmed that the priority of the talks were to define a national defence strategy for Lebanon, which would not mean disarming Hezbollah. At the opening of the dialogue session in September 2008 he was keen to underline that '[a]greeing to dialogue in and of itself means that all subjects are open to discussion', and that the 'only thing banned here is failure or reaching a dead-end' (BBC News 16 September 2008). Instead, he asked the participants to draw a general framework for the dialogue in terms of form and content (Sison 2008). In 2010, President Sleiman opened the dialogue session by emphasizing



the importance of dialogue and its positive impact over the course of time from the Taif Accord up to the Doha Agreement and beyond. Following prior consultations, he clarified that the agreed focus of the National Dialogue remains the National Defense Strategy and he called upon all parties as well as the Ministry of Defense and the Chief of the Lebanese Army to submit proposals. Several proposals were presented and discussed without being made public. Eventually an Experts Committee was appointed to find common ground and present the dialogue table with their conclusions.

In 2012, the focus of the agenda changed slightly after the beginning of conflict in Syria and political debates about the involvement of Lebanon's political actors there, with one side supporting the opposition and the other side of the political spectrum in Lebanon backing the Assad government. Among others, President Sleiman stressed the importance of the stability Lebanon is experiencing in light of the tense political and security situation in the region. Questions about Lebanon's dissociation from regional conflict became central in this context.

Following the collapse of Prime Minister Najib Mikati's government in March 2013, the President put the formation of a new Cabinet on the dialogue agenda, including the long-standing issue of a new electoral law (The Daily Star 25 March 2013). Although all political parties welcomed dialogue in general, no dialogue session took place in 2013, given the rejection of key political actors. The last dialogue sessions under President Sleiman in 2014, revolved around issues like aggravating problems caused by the increased presence of refugees from Syria, as well as growing violence and terrorism caused by the spill-over of the armed conflict in Syria (Suleiman 2014).

Outcome

The outcome of the Doha dialogue in 2008 was effectively the end of an 18-month-long political crisis in the country and this potentially prevented another civil war. Consensus was reached on the nomination of President Sleiman, the formation of government of unity, the end of violence, and the promise to continue the dialogue sealed a breakthrough on the initial political stalemate.

Following the first dialogue session after the Doha Agreement in September 2008, the Dialogue Committee issued a six-point statement, including prioritising talks to reach agreement on the National Defense Strategy; the need to deal with security tensions quickly and agree on a mechanism to end all clashes and promote reconciliation; the need for an agreement among the media to ease political and media discourse; the need to implement the decisions reached in previous dialogue sessions; the need for follow-up sessions chaired by President Sleiman to forge reconciliation; and agreement on the next session (Final Statement of the Table of Dialogue 2008).

Final Statement of the National Dialogue Committee session held at the Presidential Palace in Baabda, 5 May 2014

After deliberations, attendees decided the following:

- The need to continue the national dialogue in order to avoid conflict and create a conducive climate to the implementation of the decisions of the Committee of dialogue, in order to restore security and stability of Lebanon and to keep it away from the impact of regional crises.
- The need to continue discussions in order to agree on a national defense strategy for Lebanon, based on the proposal made by the president and which the Dialogue committee considered a starting point for discussion and the need to fully implement the Taif Agreement and maintain parity and coexistence.
- The need to continue efforts to implement decisions taken by the International Support Group for Lebanon that aim at boosting stability by supporting state institutions, the Lebanese Army and the economy, along with addressing the burden of hosting over one million Syrian refugees.
- The need to exert all efforts in order to respect constitutional deadlines, to avoid vacuum in the top Lebanese institution by securing a quorum in order to elect a new President of the Republic within the constitutional timeframe and the holding of the parliamentary election on time.
- The participants praised the President's role in chairing the Dialogue sessions and his efforts in generating proposals and initiatives.

Subsequent statements of the National Dialogue entailed similar commitments to keep the dialogue going.

Regarding the National Defense Strategy, different modalities and options have been considered, but discussions have remained inconclusive. Many March 14 members have been promoting the idea of disarmament of all militias and armed groups alike, including Hizbullah. In 2010, Lebanese Forces chief Samir Geagea gave a presentation at the Dialogue on a 'transitional proposal', which upheld that only the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are 'morally' empowered to confront the Israeli Defense Forces and underlined that the LAF presence in South Lebanon should be strengthened through the deployment of additional combat units in order to transform the arms into a credible force of deterrence (NOW Lebanon 20 August 2010). According to his proposal, Hizbullah could put itself under the army's command and 'at the army's disposal' without revealing all of its capabilities or military locations (NOW Lebanon 20 August 2010). Meanwhile, the Hizbullah March 8-ally and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun proposed the idea of 'popular resistance' groups as a way to defend Lebanon against any possible attack from the outside (The Daily Star 22 December 2008). In November 2012, President Sleiman tabled his proposal for the National Defense Strategy, presenting it as a summary of ideas from scholars along with proposals presented by other party leaders during previous dialogue sessions (Arab today 29 September 2012). Sleiman's draft called for committing to the 1949 Armistice Agreement with Israel, taking all necessary measures to liberate all the occupied Lebanese lands and compel Israel to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701. It also envisioned a reinforcement of Lebanon's international role, strengthening its ties with countries in the region and beyond, and an increase of the army's capabilities (YaLibnan 21 September 2012). However, the initiative was suspended amid deep political differences over Hizbullah's military involvement in Syria.

A major milestone of the National Dialogue in June 2012 has been the adoption of the Baabda Declaration, which called for disassociating Lebanon from the turmoil in Syria. In the Baabda Declaration, National Dialogue members agreed on keeping Lebanon away from the policy of regional and international conflicts and sparing it the negative repercussions of regional tensions and crises. The Declaration stressed that 'Lebanon should eschew block politics and regional and international conflicts' and should 'seek to avoid the negative repercussions of regional tensions and crises in order to preserve its own paramount interest, national unity and civil peace' (National Dialogue Committee 2012). The Committee agreed that, to 'safeguard their country as a symbol of freedom, coexistence and dialogue', a 'path of dialogue should be adopted, and security, political and media issues should be approached in a spirit of serenity', while the 'focus should be on commonalities and consensus' (National Dialogue Committee 2012). Subsequently, Hizbullah officials renounced the declaration saying it was 'born dead' with other political parties in Lebanon arming the opposition in Syria (Naharnet 14 August 2013). Hizbullah MP Mohammed Raad announced that 'all that is left from the Baabda Declaration is ink on paper.' (Naharnet 14 August 2013). The final National Dialogue session under President Sleiman in May 2014 concluded with a call for continuing deliberations on the National Defense Strategy and 'boosting stability by supporting state institutions, the Lebanese Army and the economy' (Final Statement of the National Dialogue Committee 2014). In light of President Sleiman's ending mandate, members of the Dialogue Committee underlined the 'need to exert all

efforts in order to respect constitutional deadlines, to avoid vacuum in the top Lebanese institution by securing a quorum in order to elect a new President of the Republic within the constitutional timeframe and the holding of the parliamentary election on time' (Final Statement of the National Dialogue Committee 2014).

Consensus-building principles

In the Lebanese National Dialogue context, decision-making is heavily based on the consensus principle. It follows the condition that decisions at the National Dialogue table need the buy-in of all participants. The rule is different from the procedure in the Lebanese Cabinet, where decisions should be made by consensus, but can be adopted by the approval of the two-third majority of the attending members of the government if consensus is not possible (Article 65 para. 5 Lebanese Constitution). The consensus principle in the National Dialogue approach encompasses the President's careful evaluation as to whether all major parties would be willing and available to attend the dialogue session.

The baseline is that the key political parties of the full political and confessional spectrum must work together to develop an agreement that is satisfactory to all of them. On the political side, the balance between the stance of the Saudi Arabia-leaning March 14 alliance and the Iran-leaning March 8 alliance has been critical. In this context, domestic and regional aspects have been equally relevant. On the confessional side, an equilibrium between Christian, Sunni, Shia, Druze and other nuanced confessional interests has been sought. President Michel Sleiman, chairing the National Dialogue, framed the principle once in the following way saying that Lebanon 'is ruled by the logic of consensus on a rooted consensual foundation', based on the experience 'that it is impossible for a confessional or sectarian group to prevail over another, and that its lost stability will entail a loss to all, in addition to the risks it will represent for regional security and peace' (Sleiman 2013).

The principle of consensus has been Lebanon's blessing and curse: on one side, it has ensured that decisions of national concern are supported by the political leadership across party lines. On the other side, decisions could often not be taken and dialogue has remained deadlocked because of the consensus principle, which gave the advantage to those who benefit from maintaining the status quo.

Support Mechanisms

Support structures of the Lebanese National Dialogue have been rather weak. President Sleiman set up a National Dialogue Steering Committee that was composed of selected advisers from the Office of the President and external advisers close to the President, including academic scholars in conflict resolution and other technical experts. The Political Adviser to the President coordinated the Steering Committee and the meetings were hosted by the President. The Committee usually met before the dialogue sessions to discuss the agenda, provide background research on issues and advise the President as the chair of the dialogue on procedural matters. In support, the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) – implemented through the Berghof Foundation and funded by Germany – provided institutional capacity building and technical assistance to the Presidency for the National Dialogue in the start-up phase (Sison 2008). Subsequently, the initiative transformed into the Common Space Initiative in 2010 as a safety-net for the National Dialogue. The aim was to provide support to the needs of the formal National Dialogue, but also to facilitate structured informal dialogues among policy makers, intellectuals, experts, civil society actors, stakeholders, and individuals in order to create an environment conducive to progress. Members of the National Dialogue Steering Committee and key political advisers from across all party lines became drivers of the Common Space Initiative, which aimed at breaking deadlocks in moments when the National Dialogue faced stalemates. The overall purpose of the Common Space Initiative remains to enhance public policy debates, build expertise and common knowledge resources on key issues, and promote collaboration among the national parties.³

5 Conclusion

The Lebanese National Dialogue is probably the longest-standing National Dialogue in the region. Although the themes discussed have been recurrent and the main issues remain largely unsolved, the National Dialogue has provided a consistent framework to address core political divides that polarise the country. The Lebanese National Dialogue might have been less effective than other processes elsewhere in resolving all matters on the table, but it has been a persistent forum for key political leaders to exchange views in a joint meeting with a defined agenda and the goal to seek political agreement.

Continuing dialogue in protracted situations has been critical in the Lebanese context. In 2015, about one and a half years after the last dialogue session under President Sleiman, whose mandate ended in May 2014, the Speaker of Parliament reinitiated dialogue talks in light of the Presidential vacuum and civil protests over the garbage crisis. Speaker Berri stressed that dialogue is the only way to overcome the crises facing Lebanon, along with the commitment to unity and the national coexistence (YaLibnan 2015). Similar to the 2006 dialogue chaired by the Speaker, most heads of parliamentary blocs attended the dialogue sessions in the Parliament alongside the Prime Minister with the objective to bring the political stalemate closer to an end.

The Lebanese experience reveals a range of challenges and dilemmas of National Dialogues. First, an issue of concern has been that the National Dialogue could undermine the role of the Parliament, which is envisioned to ‘represent the whole nation’ and serve as the principal place for open political debate (Article 27 Lebanese Constitution). The argument has been that political dissent should be tackled in the constitutional institutions whose purpose is to transparently solidify policy initiatives and generate agreement. Instead, the National Dialogue allows an inner circle of political party leaders to deliberate outside constitutional structures. In a positive spirit, the National Dialogue has

³ See <http://www.commonspaceinitiative.org>.

been a complementary mechanism in addition to traditional constitutional policy-making infrastructures and eventually enabling them to implement change once major policy directions are defined.

Second, a characteristic of the Lebanese National Dialogue is that it has been an elite-driven process. This has raised criticisms from independent civil society organisations and others outside the core political circles saying that the dialogue preserves the system's status quo instead of enabling real fundamental change. Whereas other National Dialogues in the region have a quota for the participation of women and civil society representatives to reflect the diversity of a 'nation', participation in the National Dialogue is mainly based on political and confessional inclusivity.

Third, the selectiveness of addressed issues in the National Dialogue has raised questions. Some have seen the focus on the National Defense Strategy and electoral reforms, among the handful of themes on the agenda, as an attempt to keep the dialogue technical instead of addressing structural deep rooted political frictions more directly and aspects of dealing with the past more comprehensively. In this context, sceptics have noted that the National Dialogue keeps precarious issues deadlocked instead of unlocking them. However, it is often the nature of National Dialogues to be limited to a range of fundamental subjects, which exemplifies the difference to general debate of broader scope in Parliament.

Fourth, the ability of the National Dialogue to produce consensus and concrete outputs has been contested, with some seeing it rather as talks for the sake of talk (Suleiman 2011). Despite years of dialogue rounds, only partial progress has been achieved on the substantive side. While commitments to continue considerations of options, study proposals and the willingness to dialogue in general have been strong, the political elite has been hesitant to bring about change. Ultimately, the challenge of generating tangible results and sustainable impact has been symptomatic for National Dialogues, as they touch on the heart of sensitive socio-political matters.

Fifth, the Lebanese National Dialogue has a regional dimension given the ties between political actors and the regional power houses. Items on the dialogue agenda and power balances in the region are closely linked, as the country echoes regional developments (The Arab Weekly 2016). Although there have been attempts in the National Dialogue to disassociate Lebanon from the turmoil in neighbouring countries, the region's dynamics continue to vibrate in the carefully calibrated Lebanese political system and respective dialogue rounds.

As explained throughout this paper, the Lebanese National Dialogue is multifaceted, multi-layered and multidimensional with regard to its history, current process design and challenges. The dialogue is imperfect, but it is a fit for and expression of the country's circumstances. Finally, there is no alternative to dialogue. The Lebanese dialogue experience shows that consensus-building takes time. The country's complex political and confessional tectonics have made the search for compromises and consensus a delicate matter that requires patience and continuous effort.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE 2010

March 14	March 8	President	Centrists
PM Saad Hariri	Speaker Nabih Berri	President Michel Sleiman	MP Walid Jumblatt
MP Fouad Siniora	General Michel Aoun	Minister Elias El Murr (new)	MP Najib Mikati (new)
Amin Gemayel	MP Mohammad Raad	Professor Fayez El Hajj Chahine (new)	
Samir Geagea	MP Hagop Pakradonian		
Minister Mohammad Safadi	MP Talal Erslan (new)		
Farid Mekari (new)	MP Sleiman Franjieh (new)		
Minister Michel Pharaon (new)	MP Assad Hardan (new)		
Minister Jean Ogasapian (new)			

Political affiliation of the members of the National Dialogue 2010

Shia	Sunnite	Druze	Maronite	Greek Orthodox	Greek Catholic	Armenian
Raad	Hariri	Jumblatt	Sleiman	Murr	Pharaon	Pakradonian
Berri	Siniora	Erslan	Aoun	Mekari	Hajj Chahine	Ogasapian
	Safadi		Geagea	Hardan		
	Mikati		Gemayel			
			Franjieh			

Confessional distribution of the members of the National Dialogue 2010

NATIONAL DIALOGUE 2012-2014

Saad Hariri,
**Former PM,
Future MP
(March 14)**
– absent from
National Dialogue

Najib Mikati,
**Prime Minister
(2012-2014)**

Tammam Salam,
**Prime Minister
(2014-2016)**

Michel Aoun,
**Former PM,
FPM MP (March 8)**

Fouad Seniora,
**Former PM, Future MP
(March 14)**

Elias Murr,
**Defense Minister
(Independent)**

Mohammad Raad,
**Hizbullah MP
(March 8)**

Sleiman Franjeh,
**Marada MP
(March 8)**

Talal Arslan,
**National Democratic
Party MP (March 8)**

Assad Hardan,
**Syrian Socialist
National Party MP**

Hagop Pakradonian,
**Tashnag Party MP
(March 8)**

Fayez Hajj Chahine,
**Academic,
(Independent)**



Michel Sleiman,
**President
Lebanon**

> Convener of the
National Dialogue
(Decision by
parties in Doha
Agreement)



- **Chair:** President of the Republic
- **Agenda:** National Defense Strategy, other issues identified by the parties
- **Decision making:** Consensus
- **Timeframe:** Open ended
- **Political Composition:** Seven participants of March 8 Bloc, Seven participants of March 14, and five Independent members
- **Confessional Composition:** 4 Sunni, 4 Maronite, 2 Shia, 3 Greek Orthodox, 2 Catholic, 2 Druze, and 2 Armenian Orthodox



Nabih Berri,
**Speaker of
Parliament,
AMAL
(March 8)**



Amin Gemayel,
**Former President
(March 14)**



Najib Mikati,
**Former PM,
(Independent)**



Farid Makari,
**Deputy
Speaker
(March 14)**



Walid Jumblatt,
**PSP MP
(Independent)**



Mohammad
Safadi, MP
(Independent)



Michel Pharaoun,
MP (March 14)



Samir Geagea,
**Lebanese Forces,
(March 14)**
– absent from
National Dialogue
table since 2011



Jean Ogassapian,
MP (March 14)

STEERING COMMITTEE

- Experts appointed by President
- Provide advice on process, structure, content, and agenda

TECHNICAL TASK FORCES

- Work on specific thematic issues (e.g. National Defense Strategy, implementation of past agreements, etc.)

NATIONAL DIALOGUE 2010



Photo: National Dialogue, Baabda Palace, 15 April 2010 / Source: Lebanese Parliament



Photo: National Dialogue, Beiteddine Palace, 15 April 2010 / Source: Lebanese Parliament

PARLIAMENT DIALOGUE 2015



Photo: Dialogue meeting, Lebanese Parliament, 9 September 2015 / Source: Lebanese Parliament



Photo: Dialogue table, Lebanese Parliament / Source: Lebanese Parliament

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