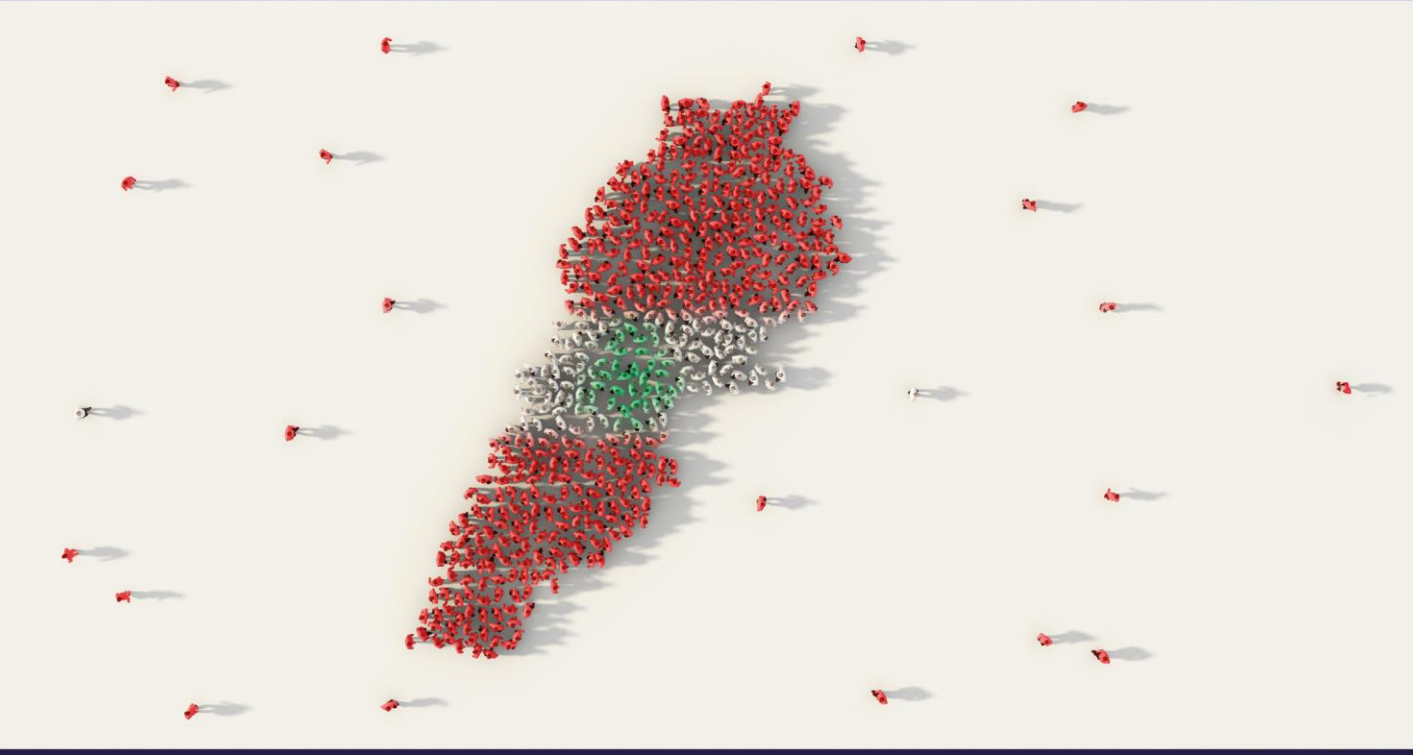
Perspectives for a renewed social contract in Lebanon



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Any remaining errors or omissions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

Disclaimer

The findings presented in this report are based on research conducted from March to December 2025 and reflect perceptions and perspectives expressed by participants at the time of data collection. They should not be interpreted as representing official positions of WFD, the Berghof Foundation, or any governmental entity.

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A functioning social contract is not an abstract ideal. It is the basic arrangement that sets the parameters and expectations for legitimate state-citizen relations and well-being of people. In Lebanon, this arrangement has been stretched to breaking point by a series of political, economic and social disasters collectively referred to as the “polycrisis”. This context raises urgent questions about whose needs the state serves and on what terms. In response, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) commissioned the Perspectives for a Renewed Social Contract in Lebanon study to understand how power, provision, and accountability really work today, and what Lebanese across communities expect from their state in the future. Drawing on a nationally representative survey, alongside interviews and focus groups, the report offers a granular diagnosis of how people experience the social contract, what their aspirations are, and what they see as the conditions for a fairer, more legitimate and effective Lebanese state.

The findings point to a deeply strained social contract. Dissatisfaction cuts across age groups, sects, gender and socio-economic backgrounds. Rather than being grounded in a direct and equitable relationship between citizens and the state, Lebanon’s social contract is mediated through sectarian and political leaders who control access to services, protection and participation. In this context, the government is widely seen as underperforming, weakening core democratic outcomes such as equal citizenship, impartial service delivery, and trust in public institutions. Although political participation is valued, it ranks far behind provision and protection in citizens’ immediate priorities. This creates a paradox in which democratic mechanisms - precisely those that could enable the legitimate, sustainable, nonviolent and incremental change that Lebanese citizens seek - are deprioritised due to entrenched distrust in political actors and institutions. As a result, opportunities for civic engagement, accountability, and representation are constrained, limiting prospects for transparency, responsive governance and reform. Decades of overlapping internal crises, including the Beirut port explosion which many had hoped would disrupt the status quo, have not altered entrenched cross-confessional elite pacts that continue to undermine democratic renewal and institutional credibility. It remains to be seen whether, and how, evolving regional dynamics might reshape the framework of the current Lebanese social contract.

A central message emerging from the research is the profound erosion of credibility and trust in current power holders. To rebuild broken trust, Lebanese citizens expect visible fairness, consistent implementation of the law, and stronger institutions that serve all citizens equally. Beneath political fragmentation and public frustration, there is a shared and coherent sense of what governance should deliver: fairness and dignity. While citizens may disagree on pathways, pace, or policy priorities due to their diverse identities, they are united in rejecting arbitrariness, selective enforcement, and the politicisation of public institutions that erode both social cohesion and legitimacy.

WFD is proud to support research that centres citizens' voices at a time when inclusive and democratic processes for debating and gradually reshaping the social contract are heavily restricted or ineffective. Democratic principles such as inclusion, accountability, transparency, participation and responsive political systems that deliver tangible outcomes for all, are essential conditions for a strong social contract that contributes to state and societal resilience, equitable development and justice. We extend our sincere gratitude to all those who participated in this study – survey respondents, focus group participants, key informants, and the project's advisory board – who shared their reflections with openness and candour.

WFD has worked in partnership with political, community and civic leaders in Lebanon for more than a decade and will continue to support efforts to renew Lebanon's social contract and the institutions that deliver it. We hope this report will inform national dialogue, guide institutional reform efforts, and support international partners seeking to accompany Lebanon on a path toward strengthened legitimacy, restored trust, enhanced accountability, fairness and greater social cohesion. Ultimately, a healthy and sustainable social contract depends on the extent to which governance reflects the aspirations of its people. This study contributes to advancing that understanding.

Executive summary

Lebanon has experienced a profound and overlapping series of crises in recent years, including the 2019 financial collapse, the Beirut port explosion, institutional paralysis, recurring Israeli aggressions and ongoing political and regional insecurity. These events have deeply reshaped citizens' relationship with the state and intensified long-standing governance challenges.

At the centre of these dynamics lies a growing debate about Lebanon's social contract – the implicit set of expectations and obligations that structure relations between citizens, the state, and political actors.

This research - ''Perspectives for a Renewed Social Contract in Lebanon'' - undertaken by WFD in collaboration with the Berghof Foundation between March and December 2025, examined how Lebanese citizens perceive the current social contract and what they expect from a renewed one. It explored the core values, principles, and rights that different generations consider foundational—or reject—in shaping a just, inclusive, stable, and resilient Lebanon, as well as how they understand the relationship between citizens and the state and among citizens themselves. The research further analysed the hopes, fears, and reform priorities articulated by various generational cohorts regarding Lebanon's political, economic, and social future, and identified the structural barriers and opportunities different age groups perceive in implementing a renewed and inclusive social contract.

The study combined a nationwide perception survey of 1,100 citizens with 39 key informant interviews and 10 focus group discussions, providing a comprehensive picture of citizen expectations across generations, regions, sects, and socio-economic backgrounds. Emerging findings were verified on an ongoing basis throughout the research process by an Advisory Board comprising local experts.

Key findings

1. Nature of the Lebanese social contract: mediated rather than direct

Lebanon's social contract does not operate through a straightforward citizen–state relationship, but rather through intermediaries. Sectarian and political leaders mediate access to services provision and protection. This vertical mediation weakens the state and shifts legitimacy away from formal state institutions toward communal leaders, while reinforcing clientelism. This system is further sustained by tacit horizontal agreements amongst sectarian and political elites that regulate power-sharing, conflict management, and crisis containment. In addition, domestic actors strategically leverage external ties in internal power struggles, making the social contract effectively co-produced through external arrangements. These dynamics shape governance and public perceptions of sovereignty, accountability, and state legitimacy. Citizens

want to see state institutions incrementally strengthened and power shifted steadily from sectarian intermediaries to national institutions and rules.

2. Values: strong consensus, but broken delivery — a credibility crisis, not a crisis of values

Across sectarian, geographic, and generational groups, citizens share broad agreement on the core foundations of legitimate and reliable state institutions: the values of “peace and security” and “justice”, in addition to “dignity” at the community level - particularly in interactions between communities. Yet this shared value base often clashes with daily realities. Limited civic space persists alongside structural inequalities, and foundational values such as justice and rule-based governance are widely perceived as applied selectively and rarely upheld universally. This gap between normative ideals and lived experience has produced a deep credibility crisis in governance institutions. Citizens reject clientelism, impunity, political interference in the judiciary, and the presence of armed actors operating outside state authority, all of which are widely seen as incompatible with stability and legitimacy.

3. A survival hierarchy of needs: provision, protection, participation

State–citizen relations are shaped by unmet basic needs and systemic governance failures. People prioritise public healthcare, followed by protection from external threats, internal security, education, and social protection. Political representation and freedom of expression rank lower - not because they are considered unimportant, but because immediate concerns about survival and stability dominate everyday decision-making. Corruption, institutional breakdown, and economic decline are widely perceived as the main barriers to the state meeting people’s needs. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the state remains the primary reference point for rights and service provision.

Citizens aspire to a fair partnership, not permanent dependence. They want a rights-based deal where civic duties are matched by reliable services and democratic guarantees. The central gap is between a structurally-weakened state that citizens adapt around, and a widely shared aspiration for a rights-based, reciprocal partnership grounded in enforceable mutual obligations.

Provision of basic services emerges as the most urgent concern. Access to public healthcare, social protection, employment, and other essential services dominates citizens’ expectations from the state. These areas represent the most visible indicators of a broken exchange between citizens and public institutions. Citizens expect a shift from loyalty-based favours to universal, rights-based provision. There is limited appetite for privatisation, rather, the aspiration focuses on strengthening state capacity and institutional safeguards. Predictable and equitable access to services is seen as a concrete pathway to restoring institutional credibility and rebuilding the social contract.

Protection, which ranks second in citizen priorities, is experienced as fragmented, selective and politicised. Institutions project symbolic authority, while real security depends on geography, sectarian ties, and exposure to conflict. External threats are among the top nationwide concerns, even surpassing healthcare in conflict-affected areas such as South Lebanon and

Bekaa. Citizens seek both physical safety from external threats and equal treatment under the law, where everyone is protected and treated fairly. Citizens identify clear reform priorities: strengthening internal security institutions, developing a coherent national defence strategy (pertaining to the state's monopoly over arms), enhancing institutional accountability, while rejecting coercive or repressive approaches.

Participation is the least prioritised pillar of the citizen-state relationship. While valued in principle, it is widely experienced as ineffective in practice: elections, protests and public debate rarely influence access to services, protection or livelihoods, reinforcing the perception that participation has little real impact. The post-2019 experience has generated exhaustion rather than apathy, prompting many citizens to withdraw, migrate, or engage in civil society rather than participate in formal politics. Citizens seek genuine influence, not merely symbolic inclusion. They prioritise anticorruption and judicial reform over technical electoral adjustments, signalling that accountability and institutional integrity must come first. For many – particularly minority groups – participation is meaningful only if it safeguards communal presence and rights. Institutional repair is therefore regarded as the essential foundation for participation.

When asked to identify a single top reform, citizens follow a clear logic: provision comes first (employment, fair wages, social security, healthcare), protection follows (national security and defence strategy), and participation ranks comparatively low. This prioritisation reflects material urgency and the need for credible, immediate improvements in daily life. Participation is not seen as a substitute for service delivery or security; rather, respondents imply that institutional reliability – particularly in provision and protection - must come first, before political engagement can be meaningful.

4. Citizen–citizen relations: functional coexistence, fragile trust

Everyday interactions among citizens suggest a form of managed coexistence, coupled with a cautious but evident aspiration for greater trust across confessional boundaries. There is high willingness to maintain engagement and remain cordial on the professional level. Mobility across regions, whether for residence, education, or employment, is often seen as a practical necessity, reinforcing routine contact between groups. Despite this, underlying concerns persist. In the private sphere, reservations about inter-sect marriage remain common across age groups. Historical experiences of crisis, localized violence, and uneven state presence shape risk perceptions. For older generations, caution is framed as a protective response grounded in lived experience, while younger individuals are more inclined to question these attitudes, especially when exposed to diverse social and professional environments.

Citizens' aspirations focus on reducing fear while preserving diverse identities. There is broad support for civil laws and de-confessionalised state institutions as a means for improving intergroup trust. These aspirations do not call for the erasure of sectarian identities but rather, they aim to reduce the role of sectarian affiliation in shaping access to state protection and public services.

5. Generations agree on ends but differ on means

Across all age groups, Lebanese citizens converge around core principles of justice, dignity, equal protection, and credible governance, as well as shared end-state outcomes, such as rights-based provision, impartial protection, and meaningful participation. Differences emerge primarily in how generations interpret risk, sequencing, and the pace of reform.

Younger citizens tend to view the social contract through future-oriented concerns, particularly employment opportunities, fairness, and the ability to plan their lives. Protection is framed less in terms of territorial security and more as freedom from arbitrariness and unequal treatment. In the domain of provision, priorities centre on employment, fair wages, and education. Participation is valued normatively but widely experienced as ineffective, generating frustration and selective disengagement rather than apathy. Younger respondents also demonstrate greater openness to cross-communal interaction and place stronger emphasis on modernisation, economic renewal, and digital governance as pathways for reform.

Older generations tend to interpret the social contract through the lens of memory, continuity, and risk avoidance. Protection is framed primarily around preventing renewed conflicts and preserving a fragile sense of order. In terms of provision, priorities shift toward healthcare, pensions, and life-course welfare. Participation is approached cautiously, particularly when rapid change is perceived as potentially destabilising. Their sense of agency is expressed through support for reform alongside preservation of cultural continuity and historical transmission.

Age primarily shapes how citizens interpret uncertainty and reform risks: younger people are generally more willing to accept short-term instability in pursuit of long-term opportunity, while older cohorts prioritise continuity and stability. However, age is less decisive in determining priority areas. When it comes to survival - such as healthcare, basic services, and social protection - preferences align more strongly with geography and socio-economic vulnerability than with generational groupings. Peripheral regions and lower-income groups across all ages converge around immediate service needs, while higher-income respondents place greater emphasis on institutional reform and governance integrity. The same applies to exposure to external threats, where residents of border regions consistently prioritise protection across all ages compared with residents of central regions. Intergenerational analysis is therefore more analytically decisive than other demographic factors in understanding reform tolerance and perceptions of uncertainty. By contrast, it is less predictive in explaining priority hierarchies where structural conditions such as sectarian identity, geographic location, and socio-economic class dominate and influence daily lived realities.

6. Barriers to achieving a renewed social contract: the credibility trap

Lebanon's reform roadblocks are structural, interlocking and historically-reproduced. The central challenge is the absence of credible pathways through which reform can accumulate without being diluted, captured, or destabilised. Citizens consistently identify three interlinked constraints: economic collapse crippling state capacity, entrenched elites blocking accountability and

redistribution of powers, and sectarian fragmentation undermining collective pressure for reform. Power-sharing arrangements embed multiple veto points, concentrated economic-political control stifles renewal, and the legacy of past conflicts fosters caution among both elite and the public. In addition, repeated waves of war, mass displacement, and external dictations (such as on the implementation and pace of a disarmament strategy) undermine state functions and its legitimacy in (re-)building state institutions that meet citizens' needs.

As a result, reforms frequently pass on paper but rarely materialise in practice. This pattern turns each new reform promise into an anticipated failure, deepening public scepticism and reform fatigue. Change therefore appears structurally blocked, rather than merely technically delayed, reinforcing a persistent credibility trap for governance institutions.

7. Preferences for realistic reform: incremental change over radical transformation

Despite frustration and low institutional trust, citizens identify realistic and bounded entry points for progress. They express cautious realism regarding pathways for reform. Large-scale systemic overhauls, such as abrupt deconfessionalisation, are widely perceived as politically destabilising. Instead, citizens favour incremental and enforceable reforms that strengthen state institutions and gradually rebalance the relationship between citizens and intermediaries through visible fairness, predictability, and equal application of rules. There is broad support for reforms that produce tangible improvements in living conditions and public services. Across generations, citizens believe they can still shape the future. Youth tend to emphasise modernisation through technology integration and reform-oriented engagement, while older generations combine support for reform with strong concern for local economic resilience and cultural continuity.

Recommendations to support the renewal and strengthening of Lebanon's social contract

Building on the study's findings, the recommendations presented in this section aim to translate citizen priorities and perceptions into realistic and actionable reform pathways.

Key openings for reform:

- Digital governance, automation, and artificial intelligence, which are seen as tools to limit opportunities for clientelism and enhance transparency.
- Implementation of existing legislation. In particular, judicial independence legislation is widely viewed as a critical credibility test, where even partial enforcement could signal meaningful change.
- Non-polarised sectors, such as environmental protection or local development, which are perceived as potential spaces for cross-societal cooperation, especially when initiatives strengthen institutional capacity rather than substitute for it.

Priority reform domains and measures:

Reform Domain	Reform Priorities
Sectarian system reform	• Incremental, risk-aware reform under existing frameworks • Restore predictability, impartiality, and accountability across state institutions
Provision-oriented reforms	• Rebuild public education as a long-term civic lever • Strengthen universal, non-discriminatory service delivery • Reinforce rights-based, equitable-access social protection systems • Safeguard externally-supported reforms from elite capture
Protection-oriented reforms	• Strengthen sovereign border control and territorial authority • Reinforce formal security institutions as primary providers of protection • Professionalise and de-confessionalise the security sector • Expand equal access to legal protection • Formalise community-based mediation
Participation-oriented reforms	• Implement pending constitutional commitments (including provisions of the Taif Agreement) • Pursue incremental reforms of electoral and political party laws • Ensure participation yields tangible influence and accountability
Oversight and judicial reforms	• Advance judicial independence as a credibility test • Reinforce oversight and anti-corruption bodies • Support coordinated institutional accountability • Clarify and reinforce the separation of authorities
Sectoral reform	• Expand digitalisation and simplification of administrative processes

	• Leverage non-polarised sectors (such as environment, small and medium sized enterprises, local development) for incremental trust-building both between state institutions and citizens and between citizen groups

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of the social contract has re-emerged as a central analytical lens for understanding state–society relations, particularly in contexts marked by political fragility, economic crisis, and declining institutional legitimacy. While much of the scholarly literature has focused on the evolution of social contracts in stable democratic or consolidated authoritarian systems, comparatively less attention has been paid to societies experiencing prolonged instability and overlapping crises.[1] In the Middle East, where political systems have often demonstrated limited adaptability, major shifts in state–society relations have typically been precipitated by disruptive events rather than incremental reform processes.

Lebanon represents a particularly salient case in this regard. Since 2019, the country has undergone a succession of profound political, economic, and security shocks, including a mass popular uprising, a severe financial collapse, the erosion of public service provision, and recurring episodes of insecurity.[2] Together, these developments led to an aggravated loss of confidence in the governing system, declining faith in the ruling elite, and ultimately a further delegitimisation of the state authority and credibility. Existing analyses of Lebanon's governance challenges have largely emphasised institutional dysfunction, sectarian power-sharing arrangements, and elite-driven political dynamics. While these perspectives offer important insights, they tend to privilege structural explanations over citizens' lived experiences, expectations, and future-oriented aspirations. Moreover, they rarely examine how these expectations vary across social groups, including across generations shaped by distinct historical moments, or how shared experiences of crisis, mobilisation, and institutional failure influence understandings of rights, obligations, and collective responsibility.

The election of a new president in January 2025 and the advent of a new 'reformist' government enhanced expectations of a new era of reforms and political and socio-economic stability. Nevertheless, one year later, significant hurdles persist; security threats from Israel continue, with ceasefire breaches and bombings on southern and eastern Lebanon, and repeated threats of imminent invasion and renewed aggression against all of Lebanon.[3] The economic costs of the conflict have been substantial. The World Bank estimates that physical damages and economic losses have reached approximately USD 8.5 billion, further constraining state capacity and deepening public perceptions of neglect and institutional failure. As trust in political institutions continues to erode, these dynamics risk fuelling renewed social unrest and further destabilising Lebanon's fragile political equilibrium, while the promise of reconstruction and economic support

[1] M. Loewe, A. El-Haddad, M. Furness, A. Houdret, & T. Zintl, 'Drivers of Change in Social Contracts: Building a Conceptual Framework,' *Mediterranean Politics* (2024): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2024.2379733
[2] World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor: The Great Denial* (World Bank, 2021); UN ESCWA, *Multidimensional Poverty in Lebanon (2019–2021)* (UN ESCWA, 2021); Human Rights Watch, 'Lebanon: Events of 2022,' in *World Report 2023* (Human Rights Watch, 2023).
[3] Federica Marsi, 'Israel Intensifying Attacks on Lebanon: Is It Planning Another War?,' *Al Jazeera*, 12 November 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/11/12/israel-intensifying-attacks-on-lebanon-is-it-planning-another-war.

from international partners remains contingent upon reforms that threaten civil peace and social cohesion.

Against this backdrop of compounded crises and deferred reform, the question of how citizens understand, negotiate, or withdraw from the social contract becomes analytically urgent. If structural dysfunction and elite bargaining explain institutional paralysis, they do not sufficiently capture how legitimacy is reconstructed – or eroded – at the societal level. Periods of acute rupture often open spaces for normative re-evaluation, where expectations are reassessed and recalibrated. In Lebanon's current context, marked simultaneously by reformist rhetoric, persistent insecurity, and deep socio-economic strain, it remains unclear whether citizens perceive an opportunity for renewal, a continuation of systemic failure, or a transition toward alternative forms of political and social organisation. Understanding these perceptions is critical, not only to diagnosing the depth of Lebanon's legitimacy crisis, but also to identifying the societal conditions under which a renewed and inclusive social contract could realistically emerge.

This research study adopts a citizen-centred and empirically grounded approach to examine how diverse social groups in Lebanon perceive, assess, and imagine the social contract in the aftermath of successive crises. This study draws on a framework structured around the interrelated dimensions of protection, provision, and participation. It uses the social contract notion both as an analytical tool to diagnose legitimacy deficits and misalignments between citizens and the state. In addition, it works as a normative reference point to explore what people consider just, acceptable, and desirable in future state–society relations. The analysis extends beyond vertical relations between citizens and the state to include horizontal relations among citizens, recognising social cohesion and intergroup trust as integral components of any sustainable social contract.

At the core of the study are the following research enquiries: (1) To start by exploring citizens' perceptions of the relationship between the state and society, (2) and then among Lebanese people, (3) followed by the values, principles, and rights that Lebanese citizens consider foundational – or reject as unacceptable. Based on the values, the study investigates people's aspirations for their relationship with the state and with fellow citizens, as well as how the state can best manage diversity and promote social cohesion. Relatedly, the research presents citizens' common and divergent reform priorities with respect to Lebanon's political, economic, and social future and the structural barriers in the way. This offers an analysis of what it takes for citizens to regain trust in state institutions and of the enabling opportunities and reforms citizens identify for advancing a renewed and inclusive social contract, while also probing their hopes and fears.

While the study is attentive to intergenerational experiences – recognising that age cohorts in Lebanon have been shaped by different political ruptures, economic trajectories, and moments of mobilisation – it does not assume generational identity to be the only determinative factor. Instead, age is treated as one analytical variable among others, examined empirically primarily alongside gender, geographic location, and sectarian affiliation. Through this mixed-methods research design, the study explores not only how citizens interpret governance and justice but also how they articulate aspirations, reform priorities, and pathways toward rebuilding trust and legitimacy.

Accordingly, in order to better understand perceptions and aspirations, data is disaggregated to reflect the following primary variables: age groups (to capture intergenerational views), sectarian

affiliation and geographic location (underpinning identity and belonging), and gender; and the following secondary variables: social class/income level and educational level.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

The social contract as an analytical and normative framework

The concept of the social contract is widely used to describe the relationship between the state and society, particularly in analyses of governance, legitimacy, and development. At its core, the social contract refers to an agreement – whether explicit or implicit – that defines the rights and obligations of both the governed and those who govern.[4] The social contract, as a universal concept, originates from philosophical ideas about an implicit agreement that undergirds political authority and citizens' duties.[5] Classical social contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau established the foundational idea that political authority derives its legitimacy from some form of consent by the governed.[6]

While multiple definitions of the social contract coexist, this study adopts the definition proposed by Marcus Loewe and his colleagues, which guides the conceptual framework underlying the research. According to Loewe et al., the social contract refers to the "entirety of explicit or implicit agreements between all relevant societal groups and the sovereign (i.e., the government or any other actor in power), defining their rights and obligations towards each other".[7] This definition emphasises the negotiated and multidimensional nature of state–society relations and provides a context-sensitive lens for analysing legitimacy in fragile, crisis-affected, or transitional settings.

The social contract is used in this study in two complementary ways: as an analytical tool and as a normative reference point. Analytically, it helps explain how state–society relations are sustained or destabilised by examining whether citizens perceive core obligations to be met, and how these perceptions shape acceptance, compliance, and trust in public authority.[8] Normatively, it provides a framework for articulating the principles and expectations citizens consider legitimate and just – highlighting not only what exists but what is deemed desirable in terms of fairness, inclusion, accountability, and dignity.[9] This dual framing is particularly relevant in crisis contexts such as

[4] Fred D'Agostino, 'Contemporary Approaches to the Social Contract,' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/contractarianism-contemporary/.
[5] Ibid.
[6] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Social Contract,' *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified 13 March 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-contract.
[7] Markus Loewe, Tina Zintl, and Annabelle Houdret**,** *The Social Contract: An Analytical Tool for Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Beyond*, IDOS Policy Brief 17/2019 (German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2019), https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/BP_17.2019.pdf.
[8] Markus Loewe and Tina Zintl, 'State Fragility, Social Contracts and the Role of Social Protection: Perspectives from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region,' *Social Sciences* 10, no. 12 (2021): 447, https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/10/12/447.
[9] Cristina Lafont, *Democracy Without Shortcuts: A Participatory Conception of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Lebanon, where citizens' experiences of state performance are tightly interwoven with future-oriented aspirations and demands for institutional renewal.

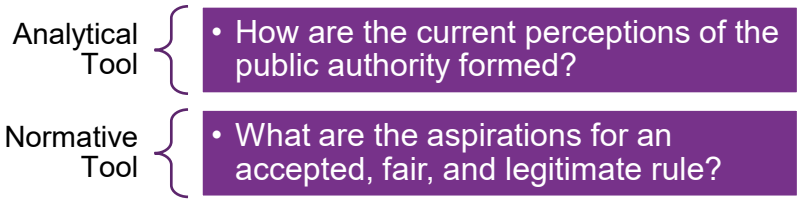

Figure 1 Utilisation of the social contract theory in the research

The 3Ps framework for the citizen–state relationship

To operationalise the social contract in analysing state–society relations in Lebanon, this study applies the Protection–Provision–Participation (3Ps) framework. The 3Ps model is designed to deepen analysis of the social contract, particularly in fragile and transitional contexts, by identifying core dimensions through which citizens evaluate state performance and legitimacy.[10] Loewe et al. (2019) identify protection, provision, and participation as the core content of the social contract, enabling assessments of whether a government delivers on its side of the agreement.[11] The framework translates abstract obligations into concrete domains: security and rule of law (protection), socio-economic well-being and services (provision), and voice in governance (participation).[12] A well-functioning social contract requires balance across these dimensions, creating reinforcing dynamics of trust and accountability.[13] The framework therefore serves as an analytical tool to identify where the contract is perceived as strong or weak and to capture differences in expectations across groups, including across generations.[14]

Protection refers to the state's responsibility to ensure the safety and security of citizens through national defence, law and order, and the rule of law. In social contract logic, citizens accept state authority in part to receive protection for life, liberties, and property; Hobbes's formulation highlights the exchange of some freedoms for security and order.[15] When the state fails to protect citizens or enforce the rule of law, a core pillar of legitimacy is undermined. The protection pillar in the Lebanese context rests on border security, primarily the southern border with Israel and the occupied territories and the eastern border with Syria which is a site of regular clashes between tribes close to Hezbollah and the new Syrian forces. Safety and security from internal clashes (sectarian, competition over resources, electoral tensions, etc.) is also considered an influential dynamic in people's perception and aspiration of protection.

[10] Loewe and Zintl, 'State Fragility, Social Contracts and the Role of Social Protection'.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Loewe, Zintl, and Houdret, *The Social Contract.*
[14] Ibid.
[15] 'Social Contract,' *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Provision refers to the state's duty to provide essential socio-economic goods and services, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, social security, and an enabling environment for livelihoods. In exchange for citizens' contributions – such as taxes, civic co-operation, and loyalty – the state is expected to promote welfare and shared prosperity.[16] In Lebanon, provision is not a function of the state entirely. Rather, non-state actors and political parties fill the void left by the state due to financial constraints, lack of checks and balances, and entrenched corruption practices.

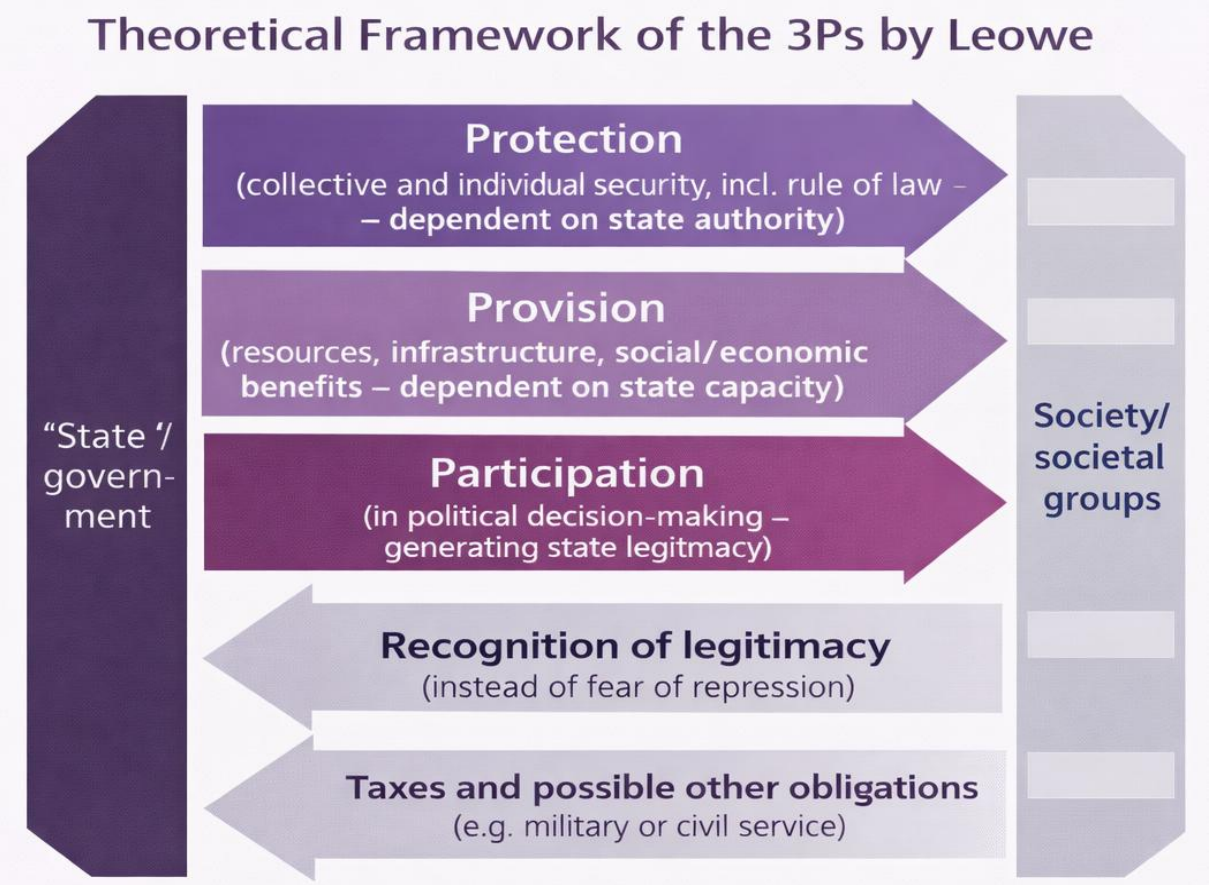

Figure 2: Theorerical Framework of the 3Ps by Leowe

Participation refers to citizens' inclusion in political decision-making and governance processes through mechanisms such as elections, consultation, freedom of expression and association, and accountability channels. Participation highlights that the social contract is shaped not only by what the state delivers but also by how decisions are made, and whether diverse groups have meaningful voice and influence.[17] While the Lebanese enjoy some civil liberties and media pluralism, they also suffer from pervasive corruption and major weaknesses in the rule of law. Lebanon scored 39/100 for global freedom according to Freedom House.[18] According to

[16] Loewe, Zintl, and Houdret, *The Social Contract*.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Freedom House, 'Lebanon: Country Profile,' https://freedomhouse.org/

International IDEA's Democracy Tracker, Lebanon exhibits mid-level performance in the representation, rights, and participation categories of the Global State of Democracy framework, while scoring in the low range for rule of law. Compared to five years prior, it has experienced significant declines in effective parliament, access to justice, basic welfare, absence of corruption, and personal integrity and security.[19]

In the 3Ps framework, legitimacy and stability hinge on delivering all three dimensions in a balanced way.[20] Governments that excel in one dimension while failing in others often face legitimacy strains: security and services without participation, or participation without effective provision and protection, can each generate persistent grievances and weakened acceptance of state authority. Citizens generally expect protection and provision in return for accepting state authority and fulfilling civic duties.

Applying the 3Ps framework in Lebanon also enables systematic identification of grievances, unmet expectations, and legitimacy gaps. This approach assumes that legitimacy depends on maintaining equilibrium between citizen expectations and state obligations; when this equilibrium breaks down, trust deteriorates and instability risks increase.[21] Protection gaps relate to insecurity and ineffective rule of law; Loewe and Zintl note that major breakdowns frequently occur when governments fail to provide adequate protection or uphold the rule of law.[22] Provision gaps concern failures in employment, services, and welfare, often linked to protest dynamics. Participation gaps emerge when citizens perceive limited voice and meaningful representation, contributing to alienation and, in some contexts, contentious forms of engagement. Finally, the framework underscores adaptability and renegotiation, which is essential in crisis-affected settings where priorities may shift over time.[23]

Research methodology

While this section below presents a brief summary of the applied methodology, the full technical methodology with all the details on field work is provided in Annex 2.

The study follows a mixed-methods design, implemented sequentially and iteratively. Quantitative and qualitative tools were not deployed in parallel but informed one another throughout the research cycle. Survey findings guided the refinement of qualitative inquiry, while qualitative insights helped contextualise and interpret statistical patterns. While the research was initially designed to capture intergenerational perspectives, the findings showed limited variation across

[19] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), 'Lebanon: Democracy Tracker Country Profile,' *IDEA.int*.
[20] Loewe, Zintl, and Houdret, *The Social Contract.*
[21] Marco Mezzera, David Sogge, and Sarah Lister, *Engaged Societies, Responsive States: The Social Contract in Situations of Conflict and Fragility* (United Nations Development Programme and the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2016), https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Social_Contract_in_Situations_of_Conflict_and_Fragility.pdf
[22] Loewe and Zintl, 'State Fragility, Social Contracts and the Role of Social Protection'.
[23] Ibid.

age groups. On the other hand, variables such as location, sect, and income level emerged as more influential in shaping responses, and so the analysis was refined to reflect these patterns.

Survey

The nationwide perception survey constituted the core quantitative component of the study. It was conducted by Ipsos International across Lebanon between September and October 2025. Sampling followed a 90% confidence level and 5% margin of error for an infinite population within each cohort. Stratification relied on Central Administration of Statistics population figures, particularly for governorate distribution and confessional composition. In total, the survey targeted 1,100 Lebanese citizens, distributed evenly across four age cohorts (approximately 275 respondents per cohort).

Age cohorts were defined using a context-sensitive generational model tailored to Lebanon's historical trajectory. Rather than relying on imported global labels, generations were conceptualised as socio-historical cohorts shaped by shared formative experiences and major national rupture points that redefined state–society relations. The four cohorts reflect distinct experiences of governance, conflict, economic opportunity, and institutional trust:

- those shaped by pre-war statehood and civil war (born before 1972; currently aged 54 and above)
- those socialised during post-war reconstruction and sectarian consolidation (born between 1973 and 1986; currently aged 39–53)
- those coming of age amid post-2005 political volatility and digital expansion (born between 1987 and 2001; currently aged 24–38)
- those entering adulthood during the post-2019 period of economic collapse and institutional erosion (born after 2001; currently aged 18–24).

While generational analysis was integral to the study design, age was treated as one analytical variable among others, examined empirically alongside gender, geography, socio-economic status, and confessional affiliation. This avoided a priori assumptions about generational determinism and allowed the data to reveal patterns of convergence and divergence.

The survey instrument was structured around the 3Ps framework and followed a fixed sequence: values and rights; citizen–state relations; citizen–citizen relations; resilience; reform aspirations; perceived obstacles; and entry points for change. To capture complexity without increasing respondent burden, the tool relied primarily on select-multiple questions, allowing respondents to express layered priorities. Neutral response options were retained. The tool underwent multiple iterations based on feedback from the advisory board, WFD, Ipsos technical experts, and pilot field testing.

Key informant interviews (KIIs)

A total of 37 KIIs were conducted across three waves between March and December 2025. KIIs were designed to provide contextual, interpretive insights rather than statistical representativeness.

Informants were selected to reflect diversity across sector, geography, gender, age, sectarian affiliation, and political orientation, while also ensuring thematic expertise. Interviews were semi-structured and adapted to the profile of each informant; later interviews allowed greater flexibility, particularly for economic and governance specialists.

KIIs played a dual role: early interviews informed tool design and conceptual framing, while later interviews supported interpretation of emerging survey patterns. Interviews were conducted both in person and online, based on feasibility and participant preference.

Focus group discussions (FGDs)

The study conducted ten FGDs between November and December 2025. FGDs functioned not only as data-collection tools but as dialogic and forward-looking spaces, supporting collective reflection, aspiration-building, and peacebuilding-oriented dialogue.

FGD composition was deliberately informed by survey and KII findings, particularly the identification of location, sect, and income level as influential variables. Eight FGDs were organised to ensure variation across region (central and peripheral), sectarian affiliation, age group, and gender balance. Two additional FGDs focused respectively on the Lebanese diaspora and on labour movements and business owners, enabling exploration of mobility, class, and economic power dynamics.

FGDs were co-facilitated by the Berghof Foundation research team and two external consultants. No recordings were made; detailed session notes were taken to ensure participant safety and openness in politically sensitive discussions.

Data analysis and triangulation

Quantitative data was analysed primarily through Excel-based cross-tabulation, enabling descriptive clustering and comparison across key variables. SPSS was used selectively for inferential analysis (chi-square testing) to assess variable influence and inform qualitative design, particularly FGD structuring.

Qualitative data was analysed thematically based on interview and session notes, with systematic attention to convergence and divergence across tools. Findings from all methods were triangulated to strengthen validity and ensure consistency between perceptions, aspirations, and contextual explanations. Additional data visualisation and dashboards were developed with external technical support.

Governance, adaptation, and limitations

The methodology was developed and refined with the support of an advisory board, which met six times and provided guidance on conceptual framing, tool design, variable selection, and interpretation of findings.

Methodological limitations include the cross-sectional nature of the survey, constraints on tool length, and the non-representative design of qualitative components. However, the study’s

adaptive design – particularly the evidence-driven restructuring of FGDs – strengthened analytical relevance and grounded findings in empirical realities.

Research findings

1. On the contextualisation of social contract concept

This research seeks to understand how the concept of social contract is interpreted and used by citizens in Lebanon. There was broad agreement, particularly by experts during key informant interviews (KIIs), that any meaningful discussion of the social contract in Lebanon requires attentive localisation and historical contextualisation, and that applying Euro-centric or state-centric models without adaptation obscures rather than explains it. Experts also highlighted that the notion of the social contract has been politically charged in the last decade, as certain political parties instrumentalised the concept – or certain aspects of it, such as the rule of law – to take aim at their rivals. Taking into consideration these nuances, the researchers followed a citizen-centric approach, grounded in people's realities, their fears, desires, and expectations to probe their perceptions, needs, and aspirations from their state and vis-a-vis fellow citizens.

1.1. Mediated relations

First, many experts described the social contract as operating through an indirect mediated vertical structure, composed of three interlinked layers: citizens, sectarian or political leaders, and the state. In this configuration, sectarian leaders function as intermediaries who shape the relationship between citizens and formal institutions. These mediators are often religious, sectarian, or political elites – sometimes referred to satirically by interlocutors as 'tribal leaders' or 'communal brokers' – whose primary role is to represent the interests of their communities, provide 'favours' such as jobs and public permits, and ensure state and non-state resources reach the community. This, in turn, serves to bolster the mediator's public image as the guardian of the sectarian community, effectively replacing state functions of providing protection and services. It also bolsters the profiles of electoral candidates who are perceived to represent the interests of the sectarian community at the expense of national interest and meritocracy. It also serves to narrow down the space for political participation particularly for non-sectarian progressive citizens and candidates.

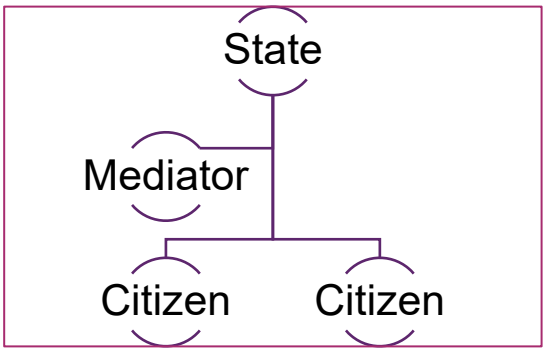

Figure 3 Mediated relations in the Lebanese social contract

This setup shifts legitimacy from the state to the main political – often religious or sectarian – parties. Experts elaborated that state legitimacy stems from the presence of sectarian political parties in government, whereby the state loses its legitimacy if one 'strong' sectarian party is not represented. At the same time, party representatives weaken the legitimacy of the state by relying on or creating sectarian and religious intermediaries to take up core functions of the state. The Lebanese political system functions in this paradox, negatively impacting citizens' relations as it pits one community against the other, and ultimately weakening citizen's trust in the state.

1.2. Horizontal relations and sectarian identities

In addition to the vertically mediated nature of the social contract, Lebanon's social contract functions through horizontal relations among communal elites. This perspective constitutes unwritten agreements among religious, sectarian, and political leaders/groups regarding governance, distribution of power, and management of conflict. One interviewed religious leader gave the example of receiving a request from security forces for support in their crackdown on a shop selling arms without a licence. The security forces asked the religious leader to prevent any local popular reaction that may lead to public unrest during the crackdown. While the shop was owned by a member of one sect, its location was in an area of mixed sects. Therefore, the religious leader sought the co-operation of the area MP from another sect to make sure the security operation went smoothly and people were pacified. Such horizontal arrangements reinforce the primacy of sectarian identity over national identity and position sectarian leaders as primary providers of protection and provision, often replacing or overshadowing state institutions. It also begs the question: if sectarian and political leaders are requested to pacify/manage upheavals, who is to say that they may not be requested to cause upheavals when the political opportunity arises for disruption of certain political trajectories?

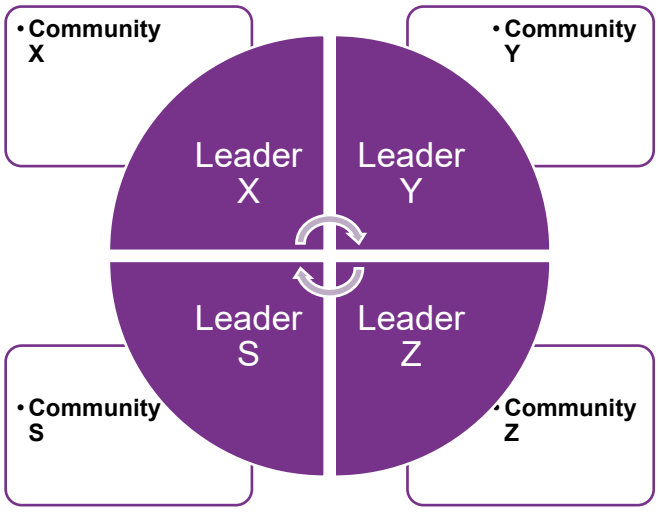

Figure 4 Agreements and relations through communal elites

A member of the board of the Maronite League noted that sectarian identities, along with their institutional structures and power arrangements, predate the emergence of the Lebanese nation-state. Similar expert perspectives emphasised the historical continuity of sectarian communities and their authority both prior to and following the establishment of Lebanon as a modern state. Therefore, the application of the social contract framework in Lebanon should not presuppose the existence of a cohesive state–citizen relationship or that Lebanese people form a unified citizenry. Instead, the framework should consider sectarian affiliation as a major factor of belonging and explore whether that supersedes a shared national identity and how to reverse the trend.

1.3. Historical evolution

To understand the evolution of such patterns, key informants emphasised that current understandings of the social contract cannot be separated from their historical evolution. Several interlocutors, like a professor of the history of ideologies, traced the roots of Lebanon's mediated and communal governance back to the Ottoman 'Millet' system, which recognised communities rather than individuals as the primary political units. Nonetheless, the declaration of Greater Lebanon in 1920 was widely identified as a foundational moment in shaping the modern social contract, according to the majority of consulted experts. The annexation of predominantly Muslim regions to Mount Lebanon altered demographic and geographic balances, producing what several experts described as the first formalised power-sharing equilibrium between Christian and Muslim communities. Moreover, Independence in 1943 and the National Pact, according to interlocutors, further consolidated this sectarian power-sharing and affirmed mutual recognition between Christian and Muslim leaders.

On the other hand, experts identified the 1958 crisis as the first major rupture of this contract, driven by disagreements over foreign policy alignment and growing perceptions of inequality. These tensions escalated into the civil war of 1975–1990, which represented a profound breakdown of the existing order and resulted in the exacerbation of external loyalties. In fact, the Taif Agreement of 1989 that ended the civil war was consistently described as the most influential agreement in a supposedly currently existing social contract. While Taif formally committed to the eventual abolition of political sectarianism, experts noted that its lack of implementation reinforced sectarian divisions as it stabilised elite power-sharing. Subsequent developments – including the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, and the Doha Agreement of 2008 – were described as adjustments to, rather than departures from, the Taif framework.

Recently, the 2019 uprising has been widely recognised as a significant rupture, both politically and socially. Experts have highlighted its unprecedented articulation of non-sectarian grievances and shared socio-economic suffering, particularly in relation to state failures in protection, provision, and participation. However, its inability to translate into structural change reinforced perceptions of elite resilience and the fragility of bottom-up challenges to the existing contract.

1.4. Taxation and economic contracts

Aside from political history, a significant group of experts, such as a researcher at Triangle Consulting, known for his work on governance and political economy, argued that the Lebanese

social contract cannot be understood without placing socio-economic relations at its core. From this perspective, the social contract is a material exchange structured around taxation, redistribution, and the provision of public goods. They pointed to the absence of a meaningful system of direct taxation as a central structural weakness. Rather than relying on progressive income or wealth taxation, the Lebanese state has historically depended on indirect taxes, customs duties, and consumption-based revenues. This configuration weakens the accountability loop between citizens and the state as contributions are neither visible nor experienced as part of a negotiated exchange. As one expert summarised, “There is no social contract without taxation, and there is no taxation without an exchange for loyalty.”

1.5. External influence

Moreover, external dynamics were consistently described as constitutive of, not incidental to, the Lebanese social contract’s formation, evolution, and ongoing fragility. Experts described this contract as unusually permeable to external actors. External actors – whether ideological or geopolitical – were seen as stepping into vacuums left by the state, often through alliances with internal groups. Nonetheless, several experts stressed that this permeability does not equate to a lack of agency. Internal actors were repeatedly described as pragmatic actors using international affiliations as resources in domestic power struggles. This complicates narratives of external domination by revealing how the social contract is co-produced through internal and external bargaining.

1.6. Change dynamics

Despite these dynamics, experts unanimously emphasised that a unified Lebanon remains the only viable political framework capable of containing its deep internal divisions. For example, an informant from the protestant church emphasised that Lebanon is the only place in the region where the value of freedom inspired by protestant teachings has been welcomed and protected despite all the issues in the country. This helps explain why, despite intense polarisation, calls for secession or formal partition remain marginal. This is seen in the survey results where the call for federalism or disintegration as a political solution for the country’s issues was selected by only 6% of the national sample.

That said, experts expressed cautious realism regarding radical change or sudden shifts such as to a de-confessionalised or secular system. There was a broad agreement that major transformations of the social contract in Lebanon have historically been accompanied by violence, bloodshed, and collective trauma, making radical rupture both risky and unlikely. A senior political advisor explained that “every time a sectarian party or community believes that they are strong enough to change the ruling system of this country, they understand, after thousands of causalities, that no one ever can rule over other groups without their consent; power sharing is the only source of stability”. Concurrently, however, most interlocutors rejected the idea that the current arrangement is ideal or immutable. Incremental adjustments – particularly those that gradually strengthen formal state institutions relative to sectarian intermediaries – were seen as both possible and necessary, even if constrained by existing balances. In this sense, expert understandings of reforming the

social contract reflect a pragmatic recognition of Lebanon's deeply embedded structures rather than revolutionary ideals.

2. On values and rights

The findings on Lebanese people's values and rights reveal a structured hierarchy of shared principles that cuts across sectarian, demographic, and generational divisions. At the same time, this normative coherence is accompanied by a pronounced gap between what citizens consider foundational for stability and what they experience as actually implemented. This section therefore traces three interrelated dimensions: the hierarchy of foundational values, the lived experience of their uneven application, and clearly rejected practices.

2.1. Foundational values and rights

In terms of professed values, survey findings point to a highly coherent hierarchy of values considered foundational for a resilient and functioning social contract. Peace and security (82%) and justice (74%) form a clear top tier, selected by a large majority. This convergence indicates that stability is not defined narrowly in security terms alone, nor reduced to economic performance. Rather, citizens associate stability with the simultaneous presence of physical safety and fair predictable treatment under the law. This pairing is analytically significant: peace without justice is not perceived as sufficient, and justice without security is not perceived as viable.

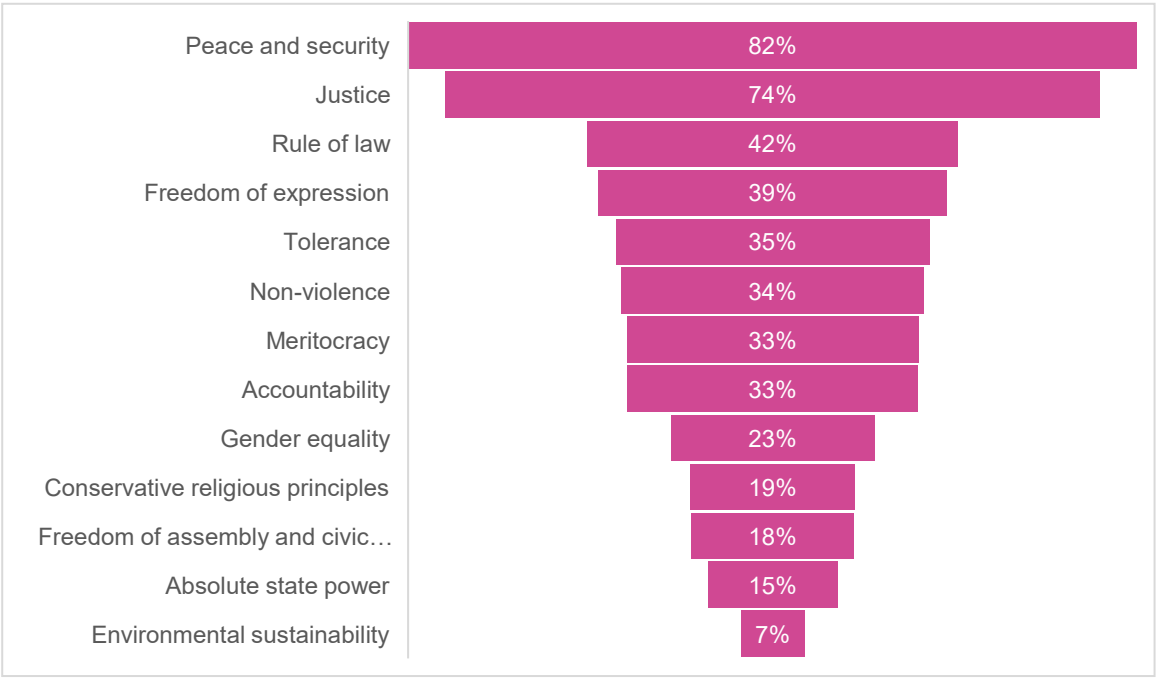

Figure 5 Foundational values for a stable and resilient social contract

A second tier of values – selected by roughly one-third to two-fifths of respondents – includes rule of law (42%), freedom of expression (39%), tolerance (35%), non-violence (34%), meritocracy (33%), and accountability (33%). These values collectively point to expectations of a civic and

rights-based order, where institutions operate according to rules rather than personal mediation. All remaining values occupy a clearly marginal position. Gender equality (23%), conservative religious principles (19%), freedom of assembly and civic organisation (18%), absolute state power (15%), and environmental sustainability (7%) are selected by fewer than a quarter of respondents. The low ranking of absolute state power is particularly noteworthy, as it signals limited public endorsement of authoritarian solutions, even amid prolonged crises.

The overall hierarchy of values remains highly consistent across the variables. Peace and security and justice dominate responses across age, gender, education, income level, sect, and geographic location, indicating a strong cross-cutting normative consensus. Sectarian differences primarily affect secondary values, without altering the core structure. Some variation appears in governance and civic norms. Rule of law tends to be selected more frequently among older, more educated, and higher-income respondents, while meritocracy increases with education and income. Freedom of expression, non-violence, and gender equality are relatively more salient among women and younger respondents. Conservative religious principles show modest increases among older and less-educated respondents but remain secondary overall. Across all groups, absolute state power consistently remains among the least prioritised values.

2.2. Lived realities and experienced values

This normative clarity stands in sharp contrast to perceptions of Lebanon's socio-economic reality. When asked which values are realistically implemented today, respondents describe a profoundly fractured value landscape.

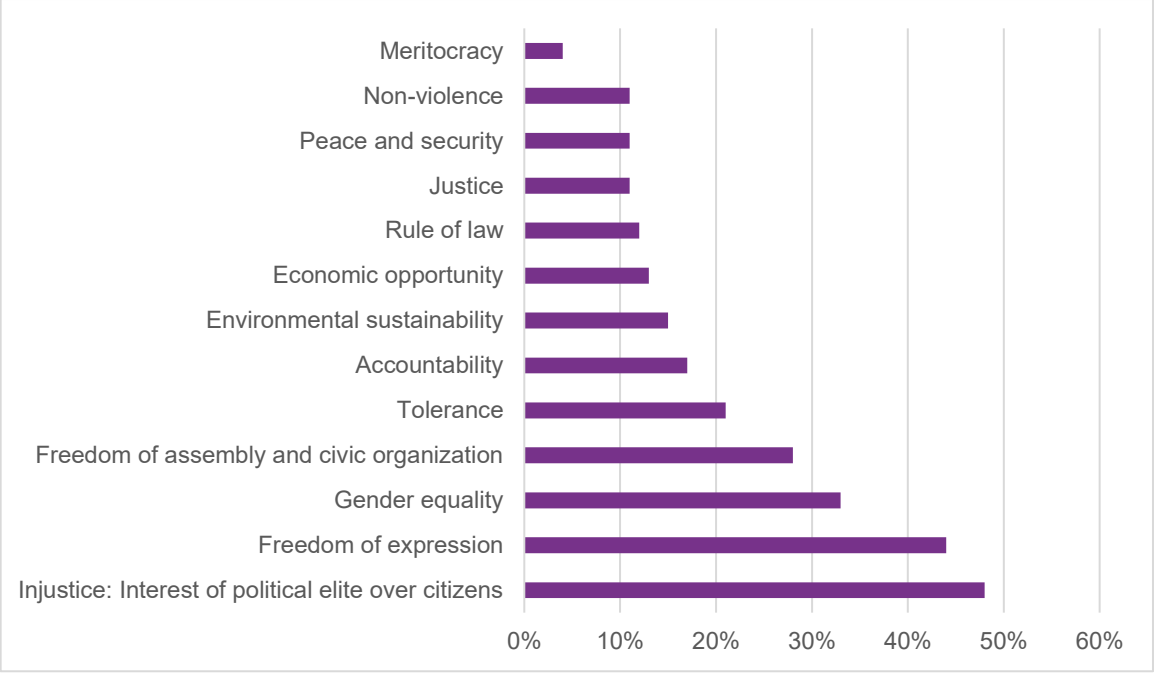

Figure 6 Values and principles encountered in daily life

The two most frequently selected responses are injustice prioritizing political elites over citizens (48%) and freedom of expression (44%). The coexistence of these two perceptions is analytically revealing. It suggests that citizens experience Lebanon as a space where expressive freedoms persist, even as institutional injustice dominates political and economic life. Freedom of expression, in this sense, does not compensate for injustice but coexists with it, producing a form of partial openness alongside deep structural exclusion. In addition, values associated with social and civic life like gender equality (33%) and freedom of assembly and civic organisation (28%) form a secondary tier of perceived implementation. From an intergenerational perspective, those results are coherently similar across the different age groups without any significant variance. The same applies to the gender variable, where both women and men share the same perspectives.

Accordingly – and notably – values that respondents identify as most foundational, namely justice, peace and security, rule of law, and meritocracy, are among the least perceived as present, each selected by roughly one in ten respondents or fewer. These gaps represent structural fractures between normative expectations and lived experience.

Qualitative findings help explain how these gaps are experienced and interpreted. Across interviews and group discussions, participants consistently described values as something citizens attempt to preserve despite the state, rather than through it. For example, justice was discussed in terms of who is protected under the law, who is exposed, and who is held accountable. As one interviewee noted, “people are not asking for more rights, they are asking to stop being treated as inferior or stupid.” In this framing, justice functions as a test of dignity and equal citizenship. Indeed, dignity emerges as a central value on the communal level beyond individual concerns. While not explicitly listed in the survey’s value options, dignity appears repeatedly in qualitative discussions as a priority need amid the injustices faced by all communities participating in the FGDs. Interactions with security forces, public offices, and service providers were frequently cited as moments where dignity is often violated, with participants often citing the need to offer a bribe to get a paper stamped. This conditionality contributes to mistrust between citizens and institutions, and among citizens themselves.

On the societal level, a distinct perspective emerged among Christian older participants (age groups above 38 years), who expressed unanimous concern over what they described as the erosion of religious culture and moral education among younger generations. These participants articulated apprehension toward the adoption of what they perceived as “western woke values”, which they viewed as misaligned with local social norms and potentially disruptive to communal cohesion. This perspective highlights how debates over rights and values are, for some groups, inseparable from anxieties about cultural continuity, intergenerational transmission, and the foundations of social order.

2.3. Rejected values

Beside the normative and the lived values, clear stances on rejected values were also discovered. In fact, the boundaries of the perceived social contract become especially visible in what citizens overwhelmingly reject. Clientelism and ‘wasta’ are identified by 56% of respondents as fundamentally incompatible with stability and security, making them the single most rejected

practice nationwide. Political interference in the judiciary (42%), impunity for corruption or abuse (41%), armed groups outside state authority (37%), and the sectarian quota system (30%) form a coherent second tier of unacceptable conditions. Citizens seem to embrace diversity and pluralism managed fairly and reject practices that institutionalise inequality, arbitrariness, and selective protection. These findings define the cadres of legitimacy and underline a promising common ground among citizens.

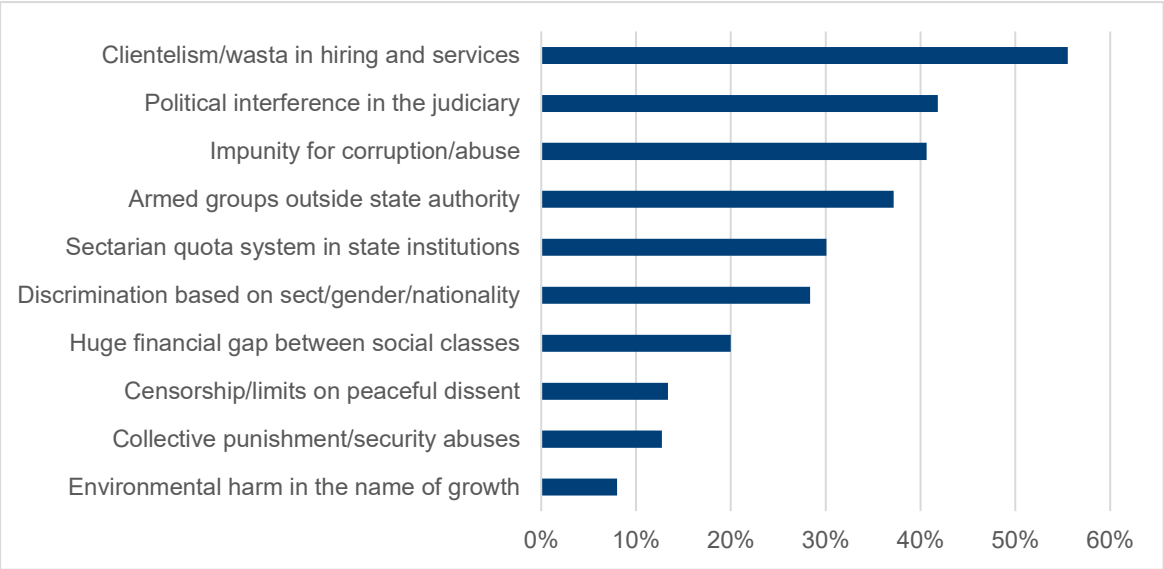

Figure 7 Rejected values that should be part of a future social contract

Survey findings show that the four age groups converge strongly on the same core values, suggesting that generational differences lie not in value systems but rather in the emphasis on certain aspects. Clientelism remains the top concern across all age cohorts; nonetheless, younger respondents (18–24) report relatively higher concern with censorship (19%) and economic inequality (23%) compared to older cohorts, while armed groups are more frequently cited among respondents aged 39–53 (41%). Moreover, throughout the FGDs, generational patterns further illuminate how these values are lived. Older participants tend to emphasise peace and security, shaped by war memory and fear of renewed conflict. Younger participants place greater emphasis on dignity, fairness, and opportunity, linking value violations directly to disengagement or migration decisions.

Taken together, perceptions of values and rights reveal a society with a remarkably coherent moral framework and a deep awareness of its violation; values are not contested. The social contract is therefore perceived as broken because its foundational promises – justice, dignity, and equal protection – are experienced as selectively, not universally, delivered.

3. On state–citizen relations

3.1. Foundational patterns

3.1.1. General perceptions on lived realities

Across all research data-collection tools, perceptions of citizen–state relations in Lebanon are structured around a clear hierarchy of needs. Survey findings show that access to public healthcare is the most important daily need for well-being nationwide, cited by nearly two-thirds of respondents, followed by protection from external threats, identified by over half of the sample. A second tier includes protection from internal threats, access to quality education, and the right to social protection, each selected by roughly one-third of respondents. By contrast, needs related to political representation and freedom of expression consistently rank lowest, cited by fewer than one in six respondents.

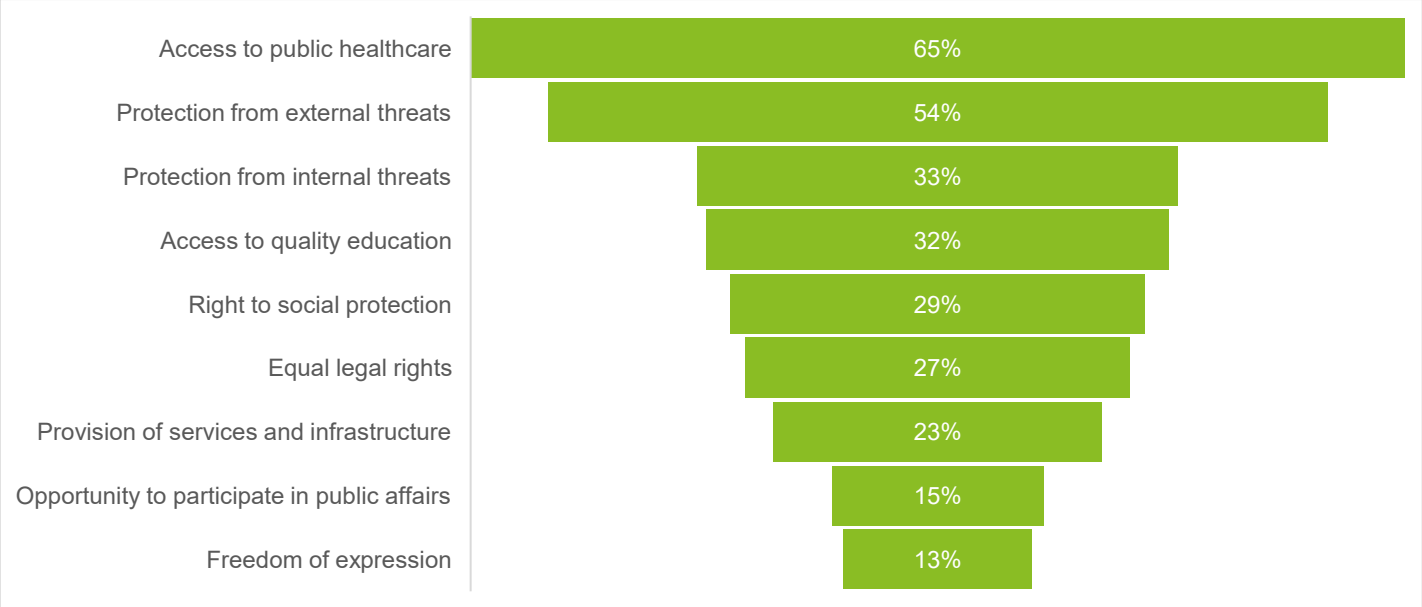

Figure 8 Priority needs for the well-being of citizens

When explaining why these needs remain unmet, respondents articulate a similarly convergent diagnosis. Corruption and governance failures are identified as the primary barrier to accessing daily needs by over two-thirds of respondents, far exceeding any other factor. Political and security instability and unemployment or weak labour markets form a second core cluster, each cited by a majority. Other factors – such as weak infrastructure, discrimination, economic policy orientation, or dependence on aid – are mentioned less frequently and do not challenge the primacy of governance breakdown. These perceptions frame state failure as systemic and structural, rather than circumstantial or group-specific.

Despite this diagnosis, the state remains the central reference point for accessing rights and services. Among respondents, 49% identify state institutions as their first point of reliance, far exceeding political parties (14%), the private sector (10%), religious institutions (9%), or NGOs

(8%). At the same time, FGDs clarify that these non-state actors are not preferred substitutes but necessary intermediaries in the absence of reliable public provision and protection. An interlocutor who is a peacebuilding and good-governance expert emphasised that this reliance by citizens on state institutions can be explained by citizens' conflating services delivered directly by the state and those provided by intermediaries. People often perceive religious or political/sectarian intermediaries as 'the state' if they have a state function, even if the 'favour' they are providing is not provided through formal state channels.

3.1.2. General aspirations for a partnership model

Beyond perceived realities, participants articulated a shared foundational vision for the future relationship between citizens and the state, centred on reciprocity, rights, and legitimacy. Rather than advancing a specific ideological or institutional model, this vision reflects an expectation of mutual exchange: citizens are willing to fulfil civic duties – such as paying taxes and abiding by the law – when the state delivers services fairly and guarantees rights, freedoms, and social justice.

Survey findings strongly anchor this expectation. A large majority of respondents (81%) endorse a partnership model in which civic duties are exchanged for access to services and democratic rights. On the other hand, only a small minority (18%) supports a service-focused model without democratic freedoms. Those preferences hold across the four different age groups who showed the same desire for reciprocal relations on a democratic basis. The same preferences were also echoed across the different variables of gender, geography, sectarian affiliation, education, and income, indicating broad convergence around the desired end-state of the social contract.

Qualitative consultations clarify how reciprocity is understood in practice. Participants consistently described legitimate state authority as credible, impartial, and responsive. Where such credibility is absent, citizens do not disengage entirely but adapt. These arrangements were framed as survival strategies rather than preferred forms of citizenship. This adaptive behaviour helps explain why aspirations for the social contract are framed in functional rather than ideological terms. Participants focused less on abstract constitutional debates and more on how to replace informal substitutes.

3.2. The 3Ps between perceptions and aspirations

People translated their expectations of and aspirations for a new social contract into specific demands related to protection, provision, and participation. These three dimensions were interlinked conditions shaping trust, legitimacy, and national belonging. The sections below examine how citizens articulate their perceptions on lived realities and their aspirations across each of the 3Ps.

3.3. Provision

3.3.1. Perceptions of services and welfare

Provision emerges as the most immediate and tangible way through which citizens experience the state, and the dimension where state failure is most directly felt. It is evaluated through daily unmet

needs and encounters with institutions and markets, making it a decisive factor in judgements about state credibility. It is also widely perceived and lamented as mediated rather than universal. Both survey and qualitative findings indicate that access to services often depends on political affiliation, religious institutions, or personal connections. Accordingly, Lebanon's current provision model was frequently characterised as unreliable – one of survival through informal 'micro-contracts' with political parties, sectarian institutions, NGOs, or local brokers. These arrangements are widely understood as coping mechanisms rather than preferred modes of access, reinforcing the perception that citizenship is conditional rather than equal.

In this context, failures of provision were interpreted as the result of mismanagement, elite capture, and lack of accountability. Provision thus became the most visible marker of abandonment, making provision the clearest material expression of a broken exchange between citizens and the state thereby discrediting the state. This interpretation is reinforced by the survey findings, where governance failures were most frequently identified as the main barrier to meeting daily needs. The survey findings also show that access to public healthcare is the single most important daily need for well-being nationwide, cited by approximately two-thirds of respondents. A second tier includes access to quality education and the right to social protection, each selected by roughly one-third of the population. In fact, the FGDs strongly echo this convergence as participants across regions and social groups described the state primarily through what it does – or fails to do – in health, education, and welfare.

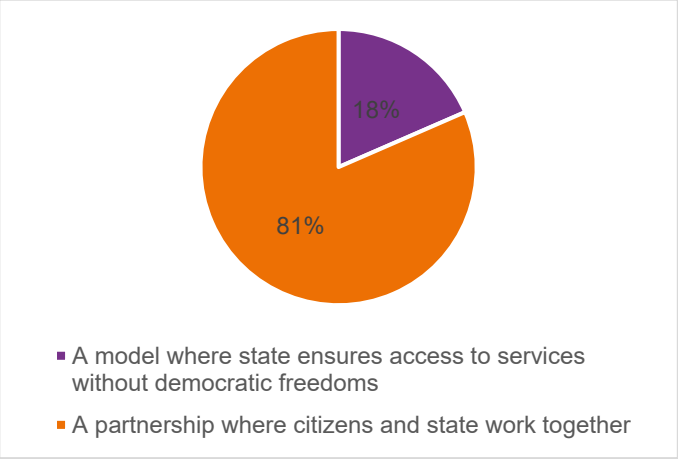

Figure 9 Aspired governance model by citizens

3.3.2. Aspirations for rights-based services and livelihoods

Aspirations related to provision are articulated as a demand for the state to guarantee basic services as rights rather than favours. Participants rejected the current situation of residual welfare instead asserting that it should be a minimum condition for restoring trust between citizens and the state and for re-establishing a credible social contract. The aspiration is not simply for 'more' provision but for a transformation in how access is governed. Participants repeatedly described wanting a future in which services are predictable and applied equally, without requiring personal connections or political loyalty.

With the aim of moving toward a more robust welfare state, aspirations emphasise strengthening state responsibility for service provision. There is very little appetite for privatisation or new modes of governance such as socialism. Scepticism toward privatisation reflects concern that transferring service delivery without transforming governance would simply reproduce elite capture through new channels.

In terms of economic reforms, survey data supports this finding: only 11% of respondents endorse further privatisation of public goods, while support for new economic models remains marginal. In this framing, the aspiration is for building the capacities of state institutions and employees, creating impartial systems with checks and balances and anti-corruption and accountability mechanisms. For example, economic reform priorities show that creating job opportunities and ensuring fair wages leads overwhelmingly at 70%, followed by reducing monopolies and corruption in the economy (59%). Similarly, on social reform priorities, the survey findings strongly reinforce and complement this framing. Healthcare emerges as the single most urgent social reform priority nationwide, cited by 73% of respondents overall, followed by social security (66%) and basic services such as electricity and water (61%).

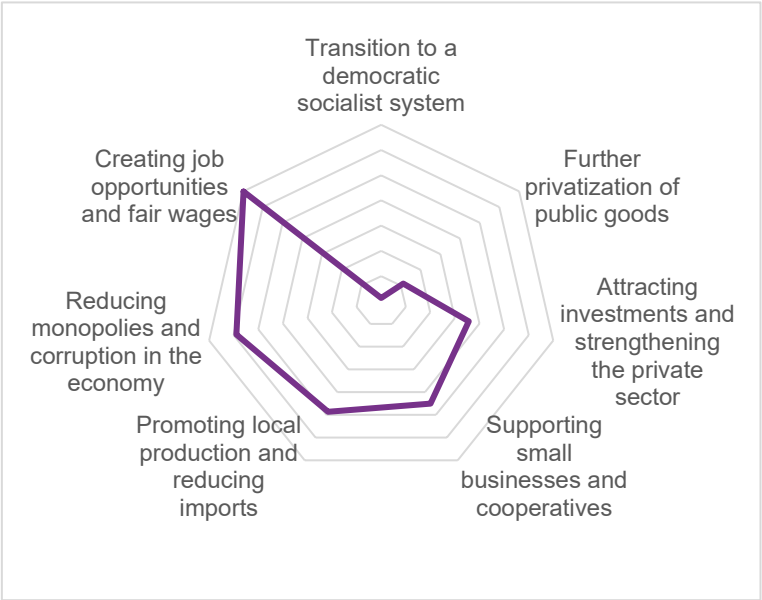

Figure 10 Prioritised economic reform aspirations

From an intergenerational perspective, younger respondents (18–24) place relatively greater weight on supporting small businesses and co-operatives (51%), alongside strong emphasis on job creation (71%). Older respondents, particularly those above 53 years, show a higher prioritisation of reducing monopolies and corruption, which rises to 64%, compared to around 54–60% among younger cohorts.

In terms of social reforms, age-based differences primarily affect the positioning of education relative to welfare concerns. Younger respondents aged 18–24 are more likely to prioritise education (53%) alongside healthcare (68%) and social security (61%), whereas among respondents aged over 53, education drops sharply (33%) while healthcare (75%), social security (70%), and basic services (68%) form a dominant and tightly clustered top tier. This shift suggests

a generational reorientation from long-term human capital concerns toward immediate health and income security with age.

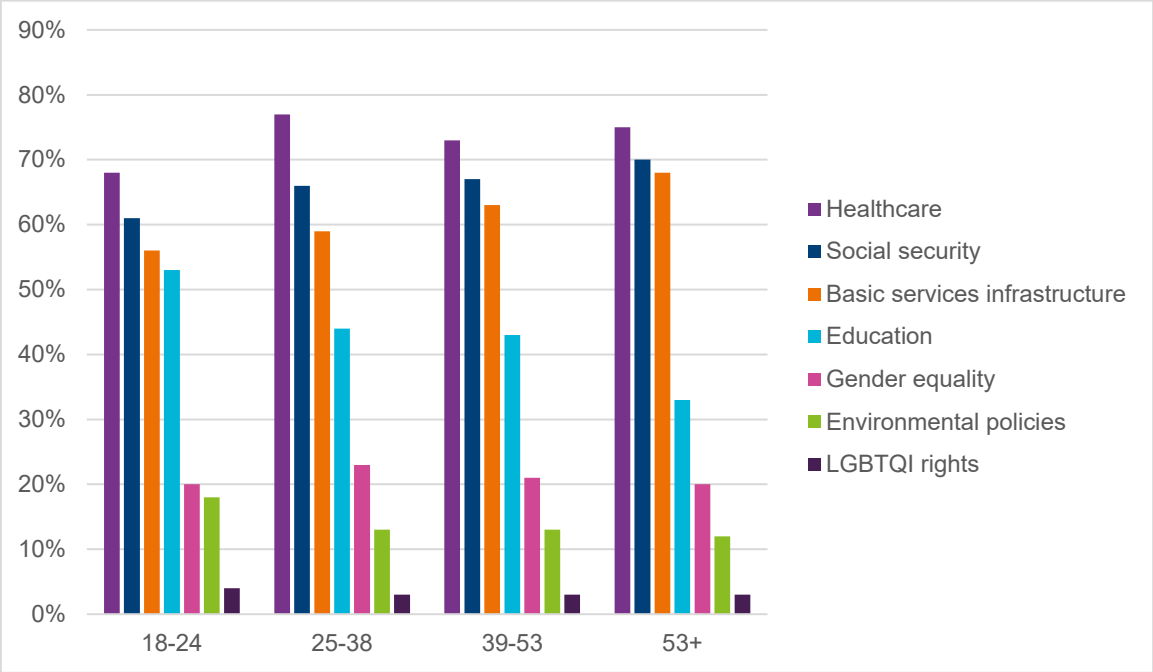

Figure 11 Intergenerational perspective on social reforms priorities

Discussions with younger participants also showed a clear link between provision and the pursuit of fairness, merit, and opportunity. Education and employment were framed as primary pathways out of dependency on clientelism, with qualifications and effort replacing affiliation as the basis for advancement. Senior participants, by contrast, did not emphasise a merits-based system. They did, however, frame provision in terms of restoring dignity, attaining social protection, and preventing further societal breakdown. For them, provision was closely tied to stability and welfare. These generational perspectives reflect different aspirations based on the need of their age: younger respondents emphasise opportunity as they build up their careers, while older respondents prioritise security and continuity.

Geography introduces sharper differentiation in those emphases. Participants in FGDs from peripheral and marginalised regions consistently prioritised immediate, material provision, particularly healthcare, social security, and basic infrastructure. Provision in these contexts was framed as a matter of recognition as citizens as much as resources. Several participants described aspiring to a future in which their regions are not remembered only during elections, emergencies, or security incidents. Quantitative findings mirror these concerns: healthcare reaches exceptionally high priority levels in Bekaa (91%) and Akkar (84%), while social security and basic services also rank more prominently in peripheral governorates. Urban participants, while equally concerned with service reliability, placed greater emphasis on institutional integrity, consistency in provision, and freedom from corruption, reflecting different modes of exclusion experienced in dense urban settings.

From a social class perspective, lower-income and less-educated respondents place a stronger emphasis on healthcare, education, and social protection, reflecting higher exposure to service breakdowns, while higher-income groups express relatively greater concern for infrastructure quality and institutional guarantees.

Gender differences, while moderate, are consistent across the survey results. Women place more emphasis on healthcare (76%) and gender equality (26%) than men (71% and 17%, respectively), while men prioritise basic services more strongly (65% compared to 58% among women). Still, despite these differences in intensity of support, both genders converge clearly around the same hierarchy, prioritising healthcare, social security, and basic services as the principal reform priorities.

Notably, qualitative findings show that gendered aspirations are embedded in broader understandings of provision that extend beyond service access. Women consistently linked provision to education, employment, and the social norms regulating entry into these domains. Workplace inequality, cultural stereotypes, and restricted career pathways were framed as structural constraints on economic security, situating gender equality within material life chances rather than abstract rights discourse. Debates around personal status laws further revealed how legal frameworks shape provision. Positions diverged across age and sectarian groups: some opposed abolishing religious courts (women from rural areas), others advocated for a unified civil personal status law, while many proposed a middle ground that preserves sectarian 'specificity' while making civil law optional. These discussions centred on how legal systems condition access to rights, economic opportunity, family stability, and women's labour participation. Personal status regulations were thus understood as integral to the provision landscape, structuring social protection and life trajectories across genders.

3.3.3. Gaps: from mediated services to rights-based provision

Presently, provision is fragmented, insufficient, and politically conditioned. In the future, it is imagined as standardised, impartial, and insulated from loyalty or identity. This shift carries profound implications for citizenship. Where access to services depends on intermediaries, citizens relate to the state instrumentally and defensively. Where provision becomes consistent and equitable, it has the potential to restore trust incrementally, making the state legible as a guarantor rather than a gatekeeper.

3.4. Protection

3.4.1. Perceptions of safety and security

Protection emerges as a deeply contested dimension of citizen–state relations. It is understood as encompassing physical safety, legal equality, and freedom from arbitrary treatment. While citizens continue to expect the state to guarantee protection, they overwhelmingly perceive this function as unevenly delivered, selectively enforced, and frequently mediated through non-state actors.

Survey findings place protection among the most immediate concerns shaping daily well-being. Protection from external threats ranks as the second most important daily need nationally across all

the 3Ps (after healthcare), selected by over half of respondents, while protection from internal threats forms part of a second tier, cited by roughly one-third of the population. Significantly, in conflict-affected regions like South Lebanon and Bekaa, protection from external threats at current times even surpasses healthcare as the top priority among all prominent needs across all the 3Ps. In fact, this reflects lived exposure to external wars and threats rather than abstract fear on existence.

The KII findings further confirm those readings on protection from external threats and highlight that the question of sovereignty cannot be detached from perceptions of external influence on local dynamics. Several experts emphasised that even internal and local conflicts are usually perceived as externally driven or influenced by regional developments. This view was articulated by an interviewed former member of the Lebanese Parliament, who remarked that “Lebanon’s misfortune is its location in a permanently destabilized region. Every regional conflict finds its way into our internal politics, and every local tension is amplified by external actors.” These perspectives complicate expectations of state protection, which is understood to be constrained by regional dynamics beyond national control. This weakens perceptions of agency among younger and older generations alike. The Sunni, Druze, and Christian FGDs of all age groups reflected even further ambivalence toward non-state armed actors, who are seen as filling protection gaps in some contexts while simultaneously entrenching fragmentation and undermining equal protection.

On the local level, moreover, several consulted experts described the citizen–state relationship around protection as “symbolic rather than functional” with institutions projecting authority without delivering consistent security outcomes. Security arrangements, where they exist, are rarely tied to a coherent national strategy, leaving protection fragmented and politicised. This diagnosis aligns with survey findings on barriers to meeting daily needs, where political and security instability features prominently as a second-tier obstacle, reinforcing perceptions that protection failures are rooted in systemic governance breakdown rather than isolated security incidents.

Locally, protection-related perceptions also focused on everyday security, dignity, and access to justice. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the leadership of each security institution is accorded informally to different sects, arguing that it undermines trust and equal treatment. Youth and women in particular reported concerns related to misconduct, selective enforcement, and disrespectful interactions. FGD participants further described security through everyday calculations of risks, movement, and behaviour across different contexts. Many described adapting speech accents, dress codes, or behaviours to avoid discrimination or standing out in areas outside theirs, framing these practices as pragmatic responses to fragmented protection. Experts also cited examples of how a security personnel’s loyalty to their own area and members of their community supersede their job and duty to preserve order. One KII participant cited his experience of committing a traffic violation but getting away with it when the policeman realised he was from his village. These practices imply a deep mistrust among citizens, on the one hand, but also a lack of citizenship among state employees themselves, on the other. Therefore, mistrust in the state is a result of employee behaviour as much as lack of resources and political will.

3.4.2. Aspirations for security, dignity, and predictable authority

Aspirations related to protection emerge as one of the most complex dimensions of the future state–citizen relationship. Citizens articulated protection as the interaction between two interdependent dimensions: physical security and civic protection. Physical security refers to protection from external threats, cross-border violence, crime, and instability. Civic protection encompasses equality before the law and freedom from humiliation or selective enforcement. Participants consistently emphasised that neither dimension is sufficient on its own. Physical safety without dignity was described as hollow, while legal guarantees without security were viewed as fragile and easily reversible.

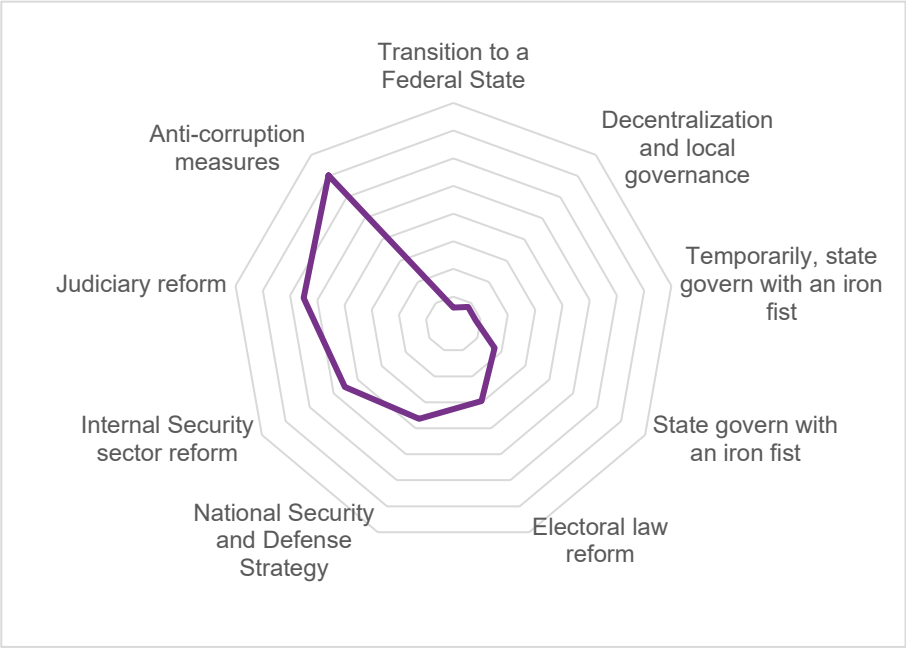

Figure 12 Preferences for political reform priorities

Survey findings strongly support this dual framing. Selected reforms related to protection are clustered around institutional integrity and security from external threats. From one side, internal security sector reform is cited by 45% of respondents as a priority, while 36% prioritise the development of a national security and defence strategy. On the other side, findings point to a strong opposition to granting the state unchecked coercive power, with only 17% supporting an 'iron fist' approach and an additional 8% supporting it temporarily, indicating limited appetite for protection achieved through repression. These findings show that, although the Lebanese people are not law-abiding in general, they are willing to do it when the law is applied equally.

In the sect-based FGDs, participants of the two older age groups (38+) more frequently framed protection as stability interlinked with avoidance of renewed conflict, prioritising peace as a protective right. On the other hand, participants in the two younger age groups (18–38) often defined protection as the ability to pursue economic opportunity without fear of recurrent conflicts, arbitrary detention, or harassment from certain sectarian groups.

Furthermore, geographic location and exposure to risk (and accordingly sectarian identities) strongly shape how protection is imagined. Participants from border and peripheral regions framed protection as urgent and existential against external threats while participants from the centre focused more on institutional accountability in the security sector. In the Beqaa and Baalbek-Hermel governorates, these instances of crises usually refer to border clashes at the Syrian border, intra-tribal clashes where security forces – until only recently – do not interfere. In the south, security threats refer to repetitive Israeli violations of the November 2024 ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel through occupation of land, destruction of properties, and air and drone strikes against civilians. Discussions among participants from the south of Lebanon centred over Hezbollah bearing arms to protect the south since the state is not capable or willing to secure it. In contrast, participants from Beirut and Mount Lebanon more often articulated protection from institutional discrimination and military hegemony by some armed groups. Aspirations in these areas emphasised accountability, equal treatment before the law, judicial independence, and protection from corruption and political pressure.

Sunni FGD participants consistently framed protection through the lens of the rule of law and equal citizenship. Aspirations focused on a future in which security does not translate into surveillance, discrimination, or collective suspicion. Broadly, this was referring to perceived discrimination from the military intelligence against Sunni activists during the rise of radical Islamist groups in Syria and Lebanon (2012–2017). Participants emphasised protection from stigma and reputational harm, in mixed areas and labour markets, where security practices were perceived to spill into social exclusion. For them, protection meant being treated as equal citizens rather than as security risks.

In terms of protection from external threats, Shia participants, in particular, articulated aspirations marked by a persistent dilemma between reliance on existing non-state protective arrangements and the desire for a credible capable state. While some expressed support for a future in which protection is monopolised by state institutions, others justified resistance as a moral response to perceived state abandonment to protect their regions. In all cases, and even where criticism of current arrangements emerged, discussions were shaped by the absence of viable alternatives. Aspirations were therefore about transitioning toward a system that does not force citizens to choose between their loyalty to their state and their right to self-defence. Notably, quantitative findings mirror this ambivalence, with Shia respondents placing relatively higher emphasis on national security strategy and showing stronger resistance to disarmament than other groups, reflecting fears tied to vulnerability.

On the other hand, Christian participants, whose exposure to immediate external threats was described as less direct, framed protection primarily through sovereignty and state authority. Protection from external threats was linked to restoring state monopoly over arms and achieving equality – a condition in which Lebanon is sovereign, monopolises power and arms, and builds peaceful relations with its neighbours out of a balance of power with its adversaries and not out of surrender to them. In this framing, protection was inseparable from the end of external interference, most frequently implying Iranian influence and/or Western influence, perceived as legitimising current elites.

Aspirations for protection seem to be the most divisive, based primarily on the geographic location of the person, followed by their sect. It exposes deep schisms among Lebanese society across all age groups in their interpretation of who the enemy is and who the state should protect them from.

3.4.3. Gaps: from conditional security to credible authority

Evidently, there is a profound mismatch between a lived reality of conditional and mediated protection, and an aspirational vision of protection anchored in impartial institutions and equal citizenship. The gap between perceptions and aspirations therefore lies in security institutions credibility, and lack of resources and capacities. It also lies in its entrenchment in the sectarian power-sharing system. In the present, protection is experienced as conditional: contingent on geography, sectarian positioning, exposure to risk, or proximity to power. In the future, protection is imagined as universal and civic: detached from identity, insulated from arbitrariness, and exercised through institutions rather than intermediaries. This shift implies a transformation in how authority is exercised, not merely in how security is enforced. To make the leap towards a credible authority, de-confessionalised institutions that apply the law equally regardless of loyalty, and with accountable and digitised systems are needed.

Another critical tension shaping protection aspirations concerns sequencing. Some view stability as a prerequisite for reform; others view reform itself as protective. This divergence indicates uncertainty over pathways in a context where protection has historically been politicised and externally constrained.

3.5. Participation

3.5.1. Perceptions of representation, and political agency

Participation is the weakest priority of the citizen–state relationship among respondents and participants. While citizens value political engagement, participation is widely perceived as inconsequential and symbolic. Elections, protests, and public debate were frequently described as forms of visibility that rarely translate into institutional change, reinforcing a perception that participation exists without impact. Unlike provision and protection that are encountered on everyday practices, participation is assessed through outcomes – whether engagement leads to accountability or change.

Survey findings show that participation-related needs consistently rank lowest among daily priorities, selected by fewer than one in five respondents across all groups. Quantitative findings further show that participation ranks low when it is experienced as symbolic and becomes a priority when lack of voice undermines access to protection, services, or livelihoods. Qualitative discussions help clarify this dynamic. The focus group discussion with Sunni seniors was marked by strong expressions of dissatisfaction with what participants described as a vacuum in leadership following the departure of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Participants linked this perceived absence of representation at the executive level to a tangible erosion of influence within state institutions, including reduced access to appointments, services, and protective mechanisms. On the other hand, a Shia representative framed Shia political mobilisation as a historical response to prolonged exclusion from protection and provision, achieved through sustained representation

across state institutions. These discussions illustrate how participation, while not prioritised in abstract terms, is acutely understood through its downstream effects on provision and protection once representation is perceived to be lost.

From an intergenerational perspective, participants of older cohorts (the two older age groups) articulated participation more cautiously, often through a lens of stability and risk management. For this group, participation was acceptable insofar as it did not threaten security or disrupt fragile intercommunal balances. In several interviews, this logic appeared alongside the view that the current political system persists not because it is just but because it prevents renewed conflict. Participation, in this framing, is weighed against the perceived risk of destabilisation, reflecting memories of past violence and a lower tolerance for uncertainty.

Despite the acknowledgement that political participation, in principle, may play a role in stabilisation and reforms, many asserted that the current political system is not conducive to change, with its tailored electoral law made to fit sectarian elites, the lack of transparency of electoral observation bodies, and the sectarianised political parties that leave little room for the participation of non-sectarian parties or individuals. Younger and older generations expressed frustrations from multiple failures and lack of meaningful change across the decades (particularly in the aftermath of the 2019 uprising). Participation was experienced as exhausting rather than empowering, producing burnout and what several informants referred to as “imagination fatigue”. Engagement was not absent, but it was increasingly perceived as emotionally costly and politically ineffective, leading some to withdraw not out of apathy but out of disillusionment.

For example, FGD participants – particularly younger and urban ones – described the 2022 parliamentary elections as a moment of heightened mobilisation, followed by disappointment when outcomes failed to produce meaningful change. Elections are thus viewed as procedurally legitimate but substantively hollow, especially when they fail to restore effective representation. Accordingly, when participation fails to translate into tangible outcomes, incentives for sustained engagement erode, reinforcing broader patterns of mistrust across the three pillars of the social contract.

In response to those disappointments, many citizens, particularly the youth, resort to civil-society organisations to provide opportunities for them to participate. NGOs and civic initiatives play a visible role among educated and urban populations. In response, key informants critically referred to the ‘NGOisation’ of civic activism, whereby reform issues are fragmented and activism becomes issue-based and externally driven by donor priorities. In this view, NGOs are perceived as driving the a-politicisation of youth, thereby disconnecting them from articulating visions, from political programmes, or from creating/subscribing to political groups that could drive change.

From an intergenerational lens, youth participation remains especially ambivalent. Younger respondents consistently deprioritise participation-related needs while expressing acute awareness of political failure. Survey data shows that reliance on the state increases with age, suggesting weaker institutional anchoring among youth. FGD participants framed participation as a burden disproportionately placed on younger generations, reinforcing patterns of disengagement, exhaustion, and outward-oriented strategies such as migration.

3.5.2. Aspirations for influence and accountability

Aspirations related to participation extend well beyond voting or formal political engagement. Participants consistently described participation as the ability to influence decisions, to be heard with respect, and to access the state without intermediaries. Survey findings reflect this distinction between procedural participation and substantive influence. Integrity and accountability mechanisms are clearly prioritised over formal political reforms. Anti-corruption measures are cited by 70% of respondents as a key political reform priority, followed by judiciary reform at 55%, while electoral law reform ranks significantly lower at 30%. This hierarchy indicates that respondents question the credibility of participation under conditions where enforcement is weak and accountability is selective. Participation, in this framing, is expected to follow institutional repair rather than precede it.

Sectarian positioning further nuances participation aspirations. For example, in Shia discussions, participation was often framed as constrained by a security-political consideration shaped by external threats and national debates over resistance. Participation, in this context, was less about access to formal institutions and more about whose narratives are acknowledged and afforded credibility. These concerns were often linked to historical experiences of exclusion from protection and provision and renewed fear of discrimination amid evolving political landscapes.

Nonetheless, aspirations for political participation in Lebanon cannot be understood without accounting for minority-based demographic concerns related to existence, dilution, and survival. Across discussions, participation was repeatedly framed not only as a question of rights or institutional access but as a mechanism for safeguarding communal presence within a system perceived as demographically and politically fragile. This was most prominent among Christian and Druze participants, often wary of new electoral laws that could expose lack of demographic proportionality vis-a-vis the other Muslim sects. These fears form obstacles to meaningful change and are in contrast with Sunni and Shia visions for reform. They also reflect elite propaganda and sectarian political narratives that serve to instil fear and legitimise the current political order.

Consequently, debates around electoral law reforms were highly shaped by sectarian positioning. For instance, some Sunni and Shia participants expressed openness to more majoritarian arrangements, often invoking demographic weight, while Christian and Druze participants articulated strong concerns that such shifts would undermine their political standing. Similar reservations emerged around granting women the right to pass nationality to their children, which some framed through the lens of demographic balance rather than gender equality.

Expert voices approached these claims more cautiously. A sociology professor and editor at Legal Agenda characterised such narratives as part of broader political polarisation, noting that Lebanon’s consociational power-sharing system is neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, it was originally conceived as a pragmatic mechanism to reassure minorities, not as a tool for resource extraction or monopolisation. This perspective highlights the gap between the system’s intended function and its contemporary instrumentalisation.

Finally, central aspirational tension emerged concerning sequencing across different groups. Many participants argued that participation cannot function meaningfully without prior reform of enforcement, accountability, and service delivery. Others maintained that participation itself is

necessary to drive reform, even if outcomes remain uncertain. Aspirations therefore do not reject engagement but place clear limits on how much risk, effort, and exposure citizens are willing to bear in the absence of institutional responsiveness.

3.5.3. Gaps: from symbolic engagement to credible influence

The gap between perceptions and aspirations lies in the viability of political agency. Perceptions show low agency among all generations and sects. Thus, participation is consistently deprioritised in everyday hierarchies of need because it is perceived as ineffective under conditions of selective accountability and weak institutional responsiveness. In the future, participation is imagined as conditional on institutional repair – particularly impartial law enforcement, judicial independence, electoral and political party reform, and protection from retaliation or humiliation. This framing reverses conventional democratic sequencing: rather than participation producing accountability, accountability is expected to enable participation. Until such conditions are met, participation will continue to be deprioritised.

3.6. Cross-cutting themes in state–citizen relations

3.6.1. Sense of equality among citizens

Perceptions of equality and trust constitute a central lens through which citizens assess the credibility of the state and the viability of the social contract. Across protection, provision, and participation, findings reveal not isolated shortcomings but a structurally coherent experience of unequal treatment and conditional trust.

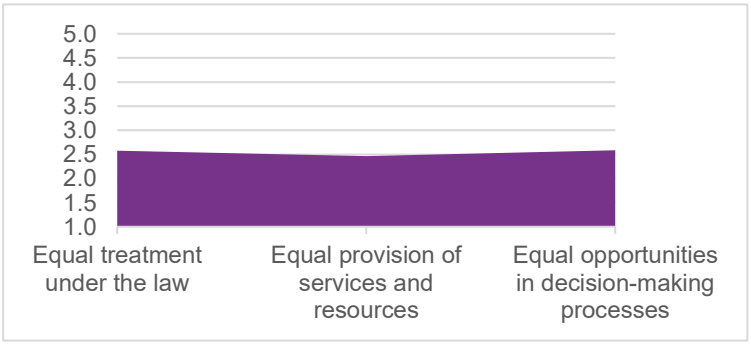

Figure 13 Perceived sense of equality among the 3Ps

Perceived equality across the three pillars of the social contract is consistently weak. Average scores for equality before the law (2.6 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 3 as midpoint), equality in service provision and access to resources (2.5), and equality in participation and decision-making (2.6) all fall below the neutral midpoint of three points. The narrow range between these scores is analytically significant: inequality as systemic and cross-cutting across all sectors by simultaneously affecting legal protection, material provision, and political inclusion. The social contract is thus experienced holistically, with deficits in one pillar contaminating perceptions of the others. Those perceptions of inequality are highly consistent across age, geography, gender,

education, and religious affiliation, indicating that inequality is not understood as a group-specific grievance.

Qualitative findings from FGDs reinforce this interpretation and add important nuance. Across all FGDs, participants consistently articulated a sense of inequality and being 'disadvantaged' vis-a-vis the state, regardless of sectarian affiliation, gender, age group, geographic location, or socio-economic status. Participants from different backgrounds each perceived themselves as marginalised in decision-making. Importantly, these perceptions did not converge around a single, clearly advantaged group. Instead, each group tended to identify other groups as privileged, with assessments varying according to lived experiences, local dynamics, and historical trajectories. The absence of consensus on who is advantaged lends credibility to the quantitative finding that inequality is understood as systemic rather than group-specific.

This dynamic was further contextualised by an electoral expert, who attributed these shared yet fragmented perceptions of disadvantage to Lebanon's consociational power-sharing system. According to this interpretation, the system's emphasis on protecting minority rights and preventing majoritarian rule places all groups in a persistent position of perceived vulnerability. While this arrangement prevents the monopolisation of power by any single group, it also fragments governance functions – such as security, public finance, and economic policy – into spheres informally associated with different political or sectarian actors. As a result, certain state functions are perceived as privileging specific groups at particular moments, even though no single group exercises comprehensive control over governance as a whole. This duality helps explain why the system is simultaneously viewed as protective and exclusionary, stabilising and deeply mistrusted.

3.6.2. Trust in state institutions

Trust in state institutions mirrors – and deepens – these perceptions of inequality. Overall trust levels remain below or just at the neutral midpoint, yet they vary clearly across the 3Ps, reflecting differentiated confidence in state mandates rather than wholesale rejection.

Institutions associated with protection command the highest trust. Confidence in the security sector averages 3.3, exceeding the midpoint and standing apart from other institutions. This suggests that the state's legitimate forces retain a degree of reliability, even amid governance failures and despite protection ranking next in general priorities across the survey. Qualitative insights help contextualise this pattern: several key informants, especially consulted journalists on the ground, noted that citizens continue to rely on specific security institutions, particularly the national army, as a last line of containment in a context marked by regional instability. Trust is considered high in security institutions only when compared to trust in other state institutions.

Figure 14 Perceived sense of trust in state functions across the 3Ps

Trust in participation-related institutions is significantly weaker. Trust in parliament and perceived inclusion in municipal decision-making both score 2.8. The convergence between national and local levels is telling: mistrust is attributed not only to distance from power but to a broader perception that decision-making remains insulated from citizens' influence and needs.

Lastly, trust is lowest in institutions associated with provision. Ministries responsible for public services score 2.5, reflecting deep scepticism toward the state's capacity and willingness to deliver equitably. This aligns closely with earlier findings on daily needs, where healthcare and social protection emerged as top priorities, and where over two-thirds of respondents identified governance failures as the primary barrier to meeting those needs.

3.6.3. External influence on the citizen–state relationship

Perceptions of external influence in Lebanon are strongly concentrated in domains associated with power, security, and political alignment, rather than with social cohesion or long-term recovery. Survey findings indicate that around half of respondents identify security and border control, regional and international alignment, and internal political decision-making as the areas most influenced by foreign actors. By contrast, economic reforms are less frequently associated with foreign influence, while stability and social cohesion are consistently ranked as the least influenced domains. In 3Ps terms, foreign actors are associated primarily with protection, particularly in relation to security arrangements and conflict positioning, and with participation, insofar as they are perceived to shape elite-level political decisions and alignments. Their role in provision, especially in driving equitable reform or social recovery, remains limited in public perception.

On the other hand, aspirations regarding international influence looked at the conditions under which such engagement supports, rather than acts as a substitute for, a functioning state–citizen relationship. Survey findings indicate a strong rejection of the current model of foreign political influence. Only a very small share of respondents (6%) support maintaining the status quo. The most frequently endorsed alternative is the elimination of foreign political interventions altogether (42%), reflecting a pronounced aspiration for political autonomy and a reassertion of national sovereignty. A similar logic of preferences structures aspirations regarding foreign socio-economic influence. The dominant preference is for depoliticised socio-economic support, with 40% favouring external assistance that is limited to economic or cash support without political conditions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that aspirations toward external influence are pragmatic and conditional rather than ideological. Respondents do not uniformly reject international

engagement, nor do they endorse unfettered intervention. Instead, they articulate clear boundaries: external actors are seen as acceptable when they reinforce state capacity, provide material support without political distortion, and reduce elite impunity.

3.6.4. The question of resilience

Across research tools, resilience emerges as a widely recognised but deeply ambivalent condition in the Lebanese context. It is neither rejected nor celebrated uncritically. Instead, findings consistently position resilience as a necessary mechanism of endurance activated in response to prolonged institutional failure, rather than as a value reflecting optimism about future trajectories. Qualitative interviews and group discussions consistently challenge romanticised narratives of resilience. Participants of the FGDs frequently describe resilience as something people are “forced to activate” in the absence of protection, provision, and meaningful participation, rather than a freely chosen or empowering condition. Several interviewees explicitly warned that praising endurance risks normalising deprivation and deferring accountability, framing resilience as a coping mechanism rather than a transformative resource.

A key divergence emerges between expert interviewees and the general public. Experts tend to approach resilience with higher ambitions for structural change and are therefore more critical of collective resilience narratives, which they view as politically containing. Survey respondents, by contrast, are more likely to frame resilience pragmatically as an individual or familial asset enabling survival under constrained choices. Survey respondents strongly agree that resilience is an asset for the Lebanese people that should be fostered (average = 4.0), yet this endorsement is clearly conditional. Respondents tend to disagree that it represents acquiescence to the status quo (2.8) or that it is inherently fragile and exhaustible (2.8). Together, these findings suggest that resilience is perceived as valuable but bounded – a tool for coping rather than a sign of confidence in institutional recovery. This divergence reflects positionality rather than contradiction: resilience is simultaneously a lived necessity and a concept contested for its political implications.

Assessments of national resilience reinforce this interpretation. When asked to evaluate Lebanon’s overall capacity to cope with crises, respondents provide a moderate score (average = 3.3), indicating neither optimism nor collapse. This measured assessment aligns with qualitative descriptions of “continuous adaptation without accumulation, where recovery never becomes development” according to a consulted financial markets expert.

Lastly, perceptions of resilience are closely linked to broader uncertainty about the future. Findings on willingness to leave Lebanon point to collective ambivalence rather than decisive exit, with an overall average of 3.0. Staying, in this sense, is not an expression of confidence but a form of conditional attachment shaped by limited alternatives. Resilience thus sustains daily life under constraint, without signalling trust in institutions or belief in imminent transformation.

3.7. Prioritisation across protection, provision, and participation

When respondents were asked to move beyond general aspirations and identify a single top reform priority, a clear order of priorities emerged; they articulated them as a sequence, in which each function enables the next.

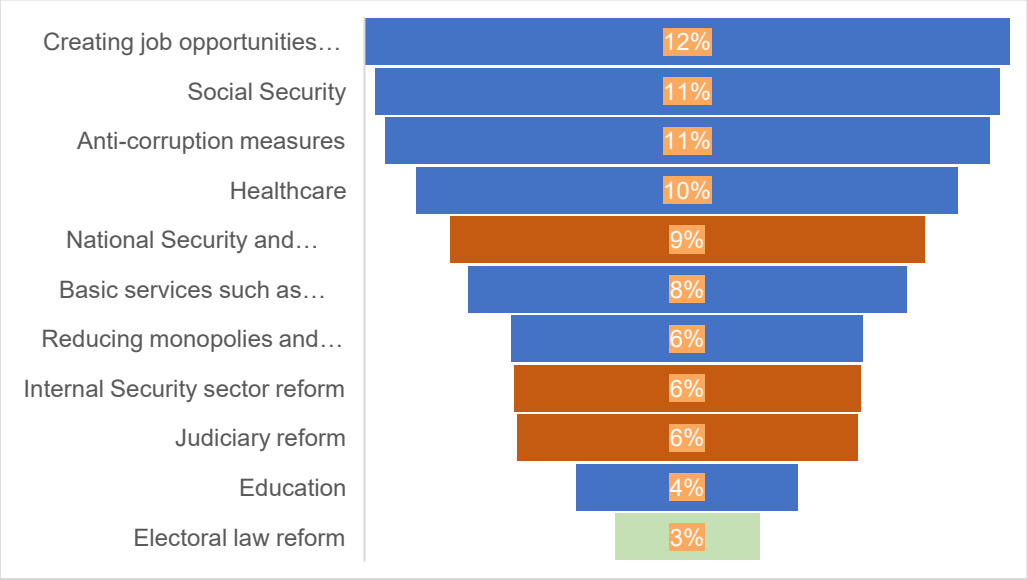

Figure 15 Prioritised single reform across social, political, and economic domains
Note: Blue: Provision. Orange: Protection. Green: Participation.

The quantitative ranking confirms this structure. The highest-ranked priority was creating job opportunities and ensuring fair wages (11.8%) – falling under Provision – followed closely by expanding social security (11.4%) (Provision) and combating corruption (11.0%) (Provision). Healthcare (9.9%) (Provision) ranked fourth, followed by national security and defence strategy (8.7%) (Protection) and basic services (8.0%) (Provision).

Overall, the ranking indicates that provision-related priorities dominate the top positions, with protection and participation appearing as complementary but secondary concerns. The concentration of responses around employment, social protection, and service delivery suggests that prioritisation reflects immediate material urgency and institutional credibility rather than abstract political reform preferences. It also implies that people do not have the luxury to think about institutional reforms for a fair system in the long run. The reforms they demand are seen through the lens of immediate need and might therefore appear short-term and pragmatic rather than ideologically driven. Equality and trust function as the connective tissue binding the three pillars. Inequality is experienced as selective enforcement and mediated access. Trust erodes because repeated encounters signal that rights are conditional. Rebuilding trust therefore hinges more on restoring coherence and reliability across protection and provision.

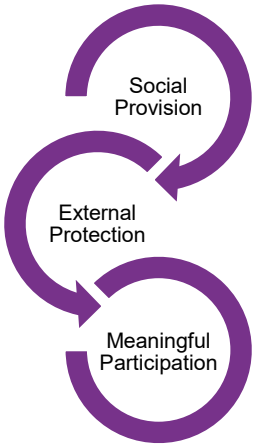

Figure 17 Aspired chain of change

The sequencing logic carries clear policy implications. Interventions addressing a single pillar in isolation risk reinforcing conditionality rather than reducing it. Participation cannot compensate for failures in protection or provision and may deepen frustration if introduced prematurely. Conversely, improvements in security and service delivery are widely expected to create the conditions under which participation becomes safer, more effective, and sustainable.

Figure 18 Chain of credibility building necessary for the renewed social contract

4. On citizen–citizen relations

Across research tools, citizen–citizen relations in Lebanon are best understood as managed coexistence under conditions of uncertainty. Interactions between citizens are shaped by inherited narratives more than interpersonal engagement, unequal exposure to risk, and perceptions of selective protection. While overt violence is generally avoided and functional interaction across communal lines remains widespread, trust is fragile, bounded, and highly conditional. Quantitative and qualitative findings converge on a shared pattern: coexistence is largely maintained, but solidarity remains limited.

4.1. Lived realities and perceptions

Survey findings illustrate this duality clearly. Respondents report very high willingness to work and trade with people from different sectarian or religious backgrounds (average = 4.1 on a scale from

1 to 5 with midpoint at 3), indicating that cross-communal interaction is normalised in public and business spheres – even supported. At the same time, feelings of safety in everyday interaction remain moderate (3.5), suggesting relative stability.

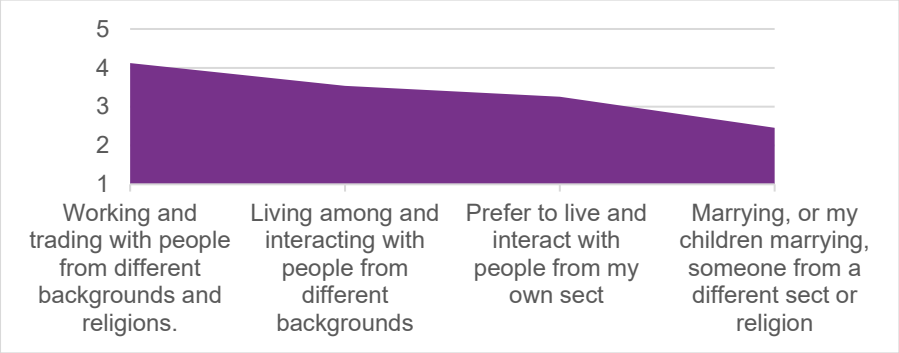

Figure 19 Aspects of intercommunal social cohesion

Nonetheless certain boundaries were affirmed with continued preference for living and interacting primarily within one's own sectarian group (3.3) further pointing to enduring social comfort zones that structure residential patterns and daily life. Notably, the sharpest boundary emerges in the private sphere. Acceptance of inter-sectarian marriage records the lowest agreement (2.5 below the midpoint of 3), underscoring clear limits to social integration at the family level. Together, these patterns highlight a key distinction within citizen–citizen relations: public and business coexistence is robust, while private integration remains fragile.

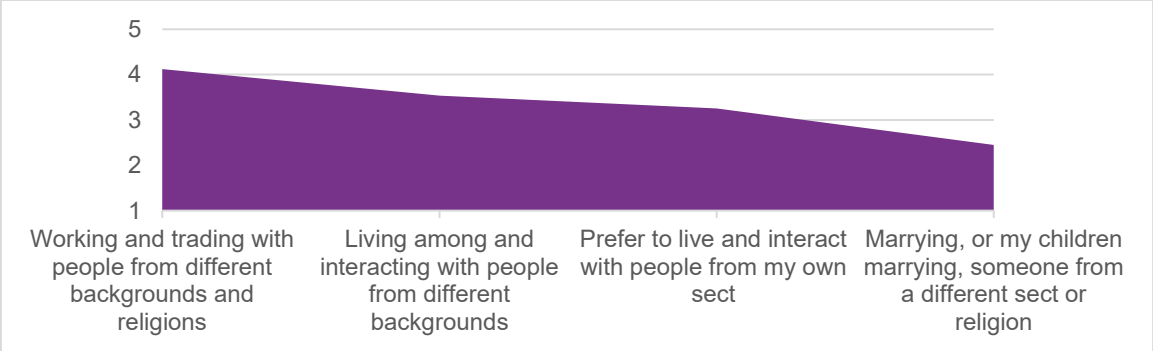

Figure 20 Aspects of intercommunal social cohesion

Disaggregated quantitative analysis shows that age and gender play only a marginal role in shaping these perceptions, while geography, sectarian affiliation, and socio-economic positions introduce more meaningful variation, affecting intensity rather than the direction of attitudes. For example, respondents in Beirut and Mount Lebanon consistently report lower perceived safety and lower acceptance of inter-sectarian marriage, while higher scores appear in the south, Nabatiyeh, Akkar, and Baalbek-Hermel. These patterns suggest that exposure to crisis and historical experience of coexistence shape perceptions of risk and trust more strongly than demographic characteristics alone.

Nonetheless, qualitative insights explain how the intergenerational lens further nuances these perceptions of fear and distance. Older participants across sects tend to frame restraint and social distance as protective strategies rooted in lived experience of violence and instability. For them,

coexistence without deep trust represents a rational adaptation to unresolved trauma. Younger participants, by contrast, more frequently identify fear and stereotyping as inherited narratives rather than personal convictions. Exposure through universities, workplaces, artistic collaboration, and mixed social spaces was repeatedly cited as softening perceptions and challenging assumptions. Citizens tend to assess one another through perceptions of vulnerability, privilege, or exposure to power.

Perceptions of the self – particularly in relation to other communities – were strongly shaped by experiences of stigma and the influence of media narratives. For example, Shia participants described being portrayed in the media as residing in violent or lawless areas, attributing these representations to uneven state presence rather than lived intercommunal interaction. Sunni participants frequently reported associations with extremism or instability, framing security interventions as imposed on their communities rather than exercised for their protection. Druze participants emphasised experiences of labelling outside Druze-majority areas, particularly in Beirut, where they felt reduced to sectarian or political identities. Across groups, media was consistently identified as a key amplifier of fear and misperception. Participants contrasted polarised digital narratives with everyday experiences of routine coexistence. As one participant observed, “even if we live in mixed areas, when opening social media, you feel you are living in a virtually divided country with segregated communities”.

In parallel, the perceptions of the ‘other’ vary across sectarian and geographic contexts, yet they follow a shared interpretive framework.

- Among Shia participants, particularly from the south and peripheral areas of Mount Lebanon, the perceived ‘other’ was most often associated with Christian communities. This perception was linked to national debates over resistance, sovereignty, and arms, where opposition was seen as articulated most visibly by Christian political actors.
- Sunni participants, particularly in the north, most frequently identified the Shia community as the primary ‘other’, followed by Christians. These perceptions were shaped less by direct current hostility than by political narratives, security practices, and experiences of stigma.
- Christian participants often framed the Shia community as the other. Notably, younger Christian participants were more likely to question these inherited narratives, recognising them as politically amplified rather than grounded in lived experience.
- Druze participants described the ‘other’ as a shifting category rather than a fixed group. It used to be the Shias during Hezbollah’s peak of hegemony, while it has recently shifted to being the Sunnis considering the conflict in Suwaida in Syria.
- Notably, an Alawite participant identified Sunnis as the primary ‘other’, reflecting the legacy of localised violence in Tripoli. This case underscores how perceptions of the ‘other’ are often shaped by specific historical and geographic experiences rather than national narratives alone.

Nevertheless, participants highlighted moments of cross-communal solidarity, particularly during periods of crisis and heightened conflict. FGD participants, especially those from previously displaced communities like the Shia from South Lebanon, recalled episodes of spontaneous support across communal lines, describing these moments as genuine yet fragile. Similar

examples were cited after the port explosion. Such solidarities were often short-lived and quickly overshadowed by divisive narratives and political instrumentalisation.

With regard to mechanisms sustaining this fragile social cohesion, survey findings on leadership in resolving intergroup problems further illuminate how coexistence is maintained in practice. Security forces (58%) and municipalities or unions of municipalities (50%) are perceived as the primary actors in resolving local disputes, followed by mukhtars (local mayors), community notables, and neighbours. Courts are cited by only 6% of respondents, highlighting the marginal role of formal judicial mechanisms in everyday intergroup regulation. Geographic and sectarian variations are pronounced: Beirut and the Bekaa rely heavily on security forces; Nabatiyeh and the south emphasise municipalities and neighbours; Akkar shows stronger reliance on religious authorities. These patterns indicate that horizontal relations are regulated primarily through containment and informal mediation rather than through shared norms or rights-based adjudication.

4.2. Aspirations: managing differences and trust in institutions

Respondents articulated clear aspirations for improving relations among citizens as a foundational condition for renewing the social contract in Lebanon. These aspirations reflected pragmatic expectations for coexistence grounded in dignity and reduction of fear. Rather than envisioning idealised unity, participants consistently described aspirations oriented toward stabilising everyday interactions, limiting stereotyping, and enabling interaction across difference without humiliation or suspicion.

Survey findings indicate strong convergence around both political and social pathways for enhancing trust among people from different sects, religions, and nationalities. Politically, the most widely supported pathway is the establishment of civil laws and de-confessionalised state institutions, selected by 61% of respondents nationwide. Civic and political activism (53%) and strengthened civil society (52%) form a closely aligned second tier, indicating that respondents see institutional reform as insufficient on its own, requiring reinforcement through collective engagement and cross-communal interaction. By contrast, structural power-sharing mechanisms such as sectarian quotas (21%), decentralisation (18%), and federalism (10%) receive limited support, reflecting restrained expectations regarding large-scale political redesign as a means of repairing social relations.

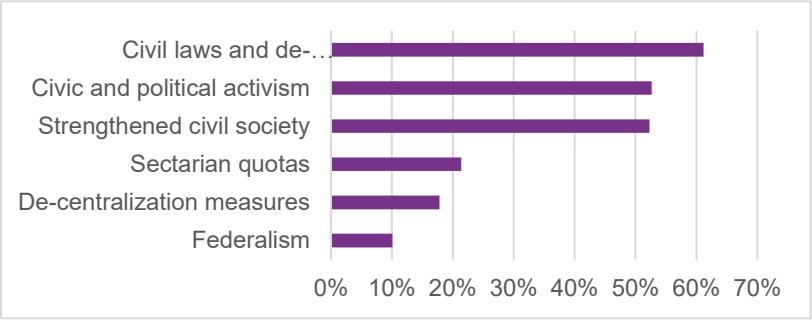

Figure 21 Preferences for pathways to enhance intercommunal trust

From an intergenerational perspective, younger respondents place slightly greater emphasis on mixed educational environments, with support reaching 58% among those aged 18–24, compared

to just 30% among those over 53. On the other hand, older respondents give somewhat more weight to shared cultural values and traditions, rising from 38% among the youth cohort to 57% among respondents over 53. Qualitatively, the younger age group in FGDs expressed stronger expectations for interaction across communal lines, particularly when they had prior exposure to mixed educational or professional environments. For this group, schools, universities, and civic spaces were frequently cited as practical arenas where fear can be reduced and differences normalised. Older participants, shaped by past conflict and unresolved trauma, described social distance as a protective strategy, even while expressing a desire for calm coexistence and non-interference rather than confrontation.

Similarly, gender differences are limited and primarily expressed in intensity rather than direction. Women show slightly higher support for civil laws and de-confessionalisation (64%) compared to men (58%). More notable variation appears along confessional and regional lines. Druze respondents show particularly strong support for de-confessionalisation (78%), exceeding all other confessional groups and contrasting especially with Sunni respondents (57%), indicating a stronger inclination toward secular institutional arrangements. Geographically, support for civil laws is especially high in Beirut, Mount Lebanon, and Nabatiyeh, while it is lower in Bekaa and North Lebanon.

Qualitative consultations refine the interpretation of these political aspirations. FGDs revealed a desire to safeguard the rights of sectarian identities refusing any transitioning to a ‘melting pot’ or suddenly toward a civil or secular state. A majority expressed a desire for the de-confessionalisation in some – not all – institutions, particularly not in the personal status law department. De-confessionalisation was framed pragmatically as a way to reduce inequality and fear in citizens’ dealings with the state. Participants consistently emphasised that sectarian identity remains central to social and familial life. Reform aspirations therefore targeted the state’s reliance on sectarian criteria for access to opportunities, benefits, and protection – not the transformation of social norms or communal affiliations. This distinction clarifies why support for civil laws and neutral institutions coexists with strong communal attachment. Trust, in this framing, does not require sameness or social integration but depends on reducing the extent to which identity determines vulnerability, access, or exclusion in dealings with the state. As one participant summarised, “We don’t need to live like each other. We need to stop being afraid of each other.”

Finally, these aspirations are explicitly conditional on building a culture of citizenship and on improvements in economic security and institutional credibility, echoing earlier perception findings on inequality and selective treatment. Nonetheless, while fragile, they indicate concrete social foundations that could serve as an entry point for broader political renewal.

4.3. Gaps: institutional credibility and equality

The comparison between perceived realities and aspirations reveals a clear gap between coexistence as containment and coexistence as confidence. In the current reality, coexistence is maintained largely through informal regulation and local mediation mechanisms that prioritise stability over rights-based adjudication. By contrast, aspirations locate improved relations in a

different foundation: neutral institutions, civil legal frameworks, and other mechanisms that reduce arbitrariness and make difference less consequential in the distribution of protection and provision.

This gap is closely tied to the relationship between social trust and institutional credibility. Under current conditions, citizens tend to interpret one another less as individuals than as members of groups associated with differential access to protection, resources, or influence. Aspirations assume that trust can expand as inequality and selective treatment recede, underscoring that social cohesion is not only a horizontal challenge but a downstream effect of how authority is exercised. Where institutions are perceived as partial, identity becomes a proxy for risk; where institutions are predictable and fair, identity can retain social meaning without determining security or exclusion.

5. Intergenerational perspectives and beyond

5.1. Intergenerational lens: age as a decisive variable

Research findings point out that intergenerational differences reflect distinct experiential lenses through which citizens interpret protection, provision, participation, and social relations. Across all four age groups, there is strong convergence on core principles – justice, dignity, equal protection, and credible governance. Additionally, intergenerational analysis reveals strong convergence on desired end-states: across age groups, respondents envision impartial protection, rights-based provision, and meaningful participation.

On the other hand, generations agree on the goals, yet differ in the sequencing of reforms, the pace of change, and the risks they are prepared to accept. Younger respondents are more willing to accept uncertainty in pursuit of opportunity, whereas older respondents prioritise stability and seek to avoid disruptions. Age, therefore, shapes risk perception, reform sequencing, and expectations about the timing of change. Accordingly, a compilation of the main characteristics of each age group can be summarised as the following.

Younger generations (18–24 and 25–38) frame their relationship with the state through future-oriented concerns: opportunity, fairness, and the ability to plan a life without constant disruption.

- Protection is understood less as territorial or military security and more as freedom from arbitrariness and selective enforcement.
- Provision is central to this framing. Job creation and fair wages dominate reform priorities among younger cohorts, with education ranking higher than among older respondents.
- Participation, while valued normatively, is widely experienced as ineffective. Findings reveal frustration rather than apathy. Elections, protests, and civic initiatives are described as emotionally costly and politically hollow, leading to exhaustion and selective disengagement.
- In citizen–citizen relations, younger respondents show greater openness to interaction across difference, emphasising mixed educational, professional, and civic spaces as mechanisms for reducing fear.

- In terms of future roles projection, younger cohorts show high emphasis on contributing to economic renewal through regional and international engagement, alongside strong support for modernising governance through technology and sustained civic pressure.

Older generations (39–53 and 54+) interpret the social contract through memory, continuity, and risk avoidance. Shaped by war experience and repeated political disappointment, they prioritise stability and non-recurrence of violence over rapid transformation.

- Protection is framed primarily as preserving fragile peace, even where dignity and equality remain compromised.
- Provision aspirations shift toward life-course welfare: healthcare, pensions, and social protection rise sharply in importance with age, becoming dominant priorities among those aged over 53.
- Participation is approached cautiously; it is acceptable insofar as it does not threaten fragile balances.
- In citizen–citizen relations, restraint and social distance are framed as protective strategies rooted in lived experience of violence.
- In terms of future role projection, older cohorts also express a strong sense of generational agency, alongside continued support for political and economic reform. However, they frame their contribution through preserving cultural and religious traditions and transmitting historical experience.

Along the 3Ps clear differences can be traced then. While protection ranks highly across all ages, older respondents frame it as preventing renewed conflict and preserving fragile order, whereas younger respondents associate it with freedom from arbitrariness and constraints on mobility. Participation is similarly de-prioritised quantitatively, but for different reasons: youth describe fatigue from engagement without results, while older cohorts approach participation cautiously to avoid destabilisation. Similarly, provision priorities also reflect shared goals but distinct time horizons. Employment and social protection dominate across groups, yet younger respondents emphasise education and future opportunities, while older cohorts prioritise healthcare and pensions. Resilience follows a comparable pattern: younger respondents view it as temporary adaptation, often linked to migration aspirations, whereas older respondents frame it as necessary endurance shaped by lived crisis. Overall, age shapes how risk, sequencing, and change are interpreted.

5.2. Other variables beyond age group

Beyond those domains, age does not consistently explain where priorities diverge most sharply. In many core areas, variation is driven less by life-cycle position and more by structural exposure. Respondents of different ages but similar contexts often articulate nearly identical priorities, indicating that age is not the primary source of differentiation. This is most evident in reform priorities tied to material survival and service access. Intergenerational perspectives provide an important but partial lens. Age illuminates how citizens interpret risk, sequencing, and change, but geography, sectarian positioning, and economic vulnerability more consistently explain variation in priorities and intensity.

For example, in peripheral and underserved regions, healthcare and basic services dominate across all age groups, reflecting shared exposure to deprivation rather than generational outlooks. A similar pattern appears in anti-corruption and governance reform: while age shapes how corruption is experienced, prioritisation clusters geographically. Support is higher in central Lebanon and lower in peripheral regions where immediate material needs prevail. Attitudes toward foreign political and economic influence also show minimal generational variation; differences align instead with geographic marginalisation and perceived institutional weakness. Similarly, economic class further sharpens differentiation. Lower-income respondents prioritise healthcare, social security, and basic services as immediate survival concerns, while higher-income respondents place relatively greater emphasis on institutional reform and governance integrity. Class does not produce divergent aspirations but intensifies urgency and reduces tolerance for gradual or symbolic reform.

These patterns show that intergenerational analysis reaches its limits where structural conditions are decisive. Age explains how crisis is interpreted but not where its impacts are most acute. Geography, sectarian positioning, and economic vulnerability consistently provide stronger explanatory leverage. Intergenerational analysis is therefore most valuable as an interpretive tool – explaining how priorities are framed – rather than as a standalone predictor of what citizens ultimately want.

6. Obstacles to achieving a renewed social contract

Findings from both the survey and expert consultations converge on a shared assessment: obstacles to achieving aspirations for a renewed social contract in Lebanon are understood as systemic, historically produced, and mutually reinforcing constraints. Across research tools, reform is framed as structurally limited by political-economic arrangements, institutional practices, and regional conditions that collectively limit feasibility, sequencing, and credibility. In analytical terms, the core obstacle to achieving aspirations for a renewed social contract is the absence of credible pathways through which reform could accumulate without triggering instability or capture.

Survey findings reveal a widely shared diagnosis of reform deadlock. Respondents consistently identify a stable triad of obstacles – economic collapse and fiscal insolvency, political elite control, and sectarian social division – as the most significant constraints on deep structural change. These factors are understood as tightly interlinked. Economic breakdown weakens the state's capacity to provide protection and services; elite dominance constrains accountability, redistribution, and reform incentives; and sectarian fragmentation erodes the basis for collective pressure or unified reform agendas. Reform is therefore perceived as structurally bounded by entrenched power relations and prolonged economic deterioration.

The analysis further reveals that the most binding obstacles are not always those most visible in public discourse. While corruption, clientelism, and weak law enforcement are widely recognised, they are rarely framed by respondents as actionable levers for change. This perception contributes to a credibility trap: even well-designed reforms are met with scepticism because experience suggests that laws will be diluted, selectively enforced, or reversed. As a result, reform fatigue is

driven by accumulated evidence that reform processes rarely translate into meaningful or durable outcomes.

6.1. The flawed system

Qualitative insights reinforce this systemic framing by situating it within Lebanon's experience of rupture and attempted change. At the level of the political system, expert interviews identify Lebanon's consociational power-sharing arrangement as a key mechanism of blockage. A political science professor described the system as a form of 'vetocracy', in which confessional groups wield extensive veto powers that override majoritarian decision-making. Appeals to mīthāqiyyah (consociationalism) are routinely used to block changes perceived to threaten group privileges, even when such changes are limited in scope. As a result, aspirations for renegotiating the social contract are filtered through a political logic in which consensus functions less as a tool for inclusion and more as a mechanism for mutual obstruction.

6.2. Elite behaviour

Furthermore, experts emphasise that obstacles are due to both the system and corrupt elite behaviour. They extend beyond formal institutional design to include entrenched practices of power consolidation and lack of willingness mong political elites to achieve reform. An editor from Legal Agenda characterised the Lebanese system as 'closed', arguing that ruling elites have deliberately sealed off institutional and economic spaces to prevent challenge or renewal. A youth political activist illustrated this through the metaphor of a "leading octopus", controlling interconnected domains ranging from business and banking to the judiciary, security institutions, labour unions, the public sector, and the diaspora. This concentration of control is reinforced by weak separation of powers and the absence of effective checks and balances, limiting the capacity of new actors or reformist ideas to penetrate existing structures.

An interviewed constitutional expert offered concrete explanations for this scepticism. They noted that reform laws – such as those addressing judicial independence or financial restructuring – are often negotiated according to existing power balances and passed in diluted form. As a result, they carry reformist titles while remaining largely ineffective in practice. Similarly, an electoral expert involved in drafting the most recent electoral law described negotiations as driven by balancing the interests of ruling elites rather than values or principles. Electoral provisions, in this account, reflect the relative strength of negotiating parties and, in some cases, incorporate business interests into technical design choices. The same expert noted that reforms publicly advocated by certain parties today were strongly opposed by those parties in previous cycles, reinforcing perceptions of reform as reversible, instrumental, and contingent.

6.3. The pursuit of stability

Concerns about instability and conflict emerge as a particularly influential constraint, especially in relation to political reform. Survey findings show that fears of instability occupy a prominent position, particularly among older respondents and in regions with heightened exposure to insecurity. Political restructuring is frequently evaluated through a risk lens shaped by past and

present experiences of violence, institutional collapse, and regional conflict. Qualitative insights situate these fears within Lebanon's lived history. Experts note that repeated experiences in which reform attempts coincided with violence or destabilisation have conditioned both elite and popular behaviour toward caution and risk aversion. As a result, protection is often implicitly treated as a prerequisite for reform rather than its outcome, shaping how aspirations are sequenced and constrained.

6.4. Shallow knowledge and communal fears

Research findings and observations and expert input point to a persistent dissonance between aspirational values and their everyday implications. While principles such as justice, equality, and welfare provision are widely endorsed, their concrete socio-economic consequences often generate resistance. An ex-member of parliament working in the healthcare sector observed that support for a welfare-oriented state frequently diminishes when citizens confront the implications of higher taxation, reduced private-sector privileges, or longer waiting times in public hospitals. Similar tensions arise in debates over issues such as maternal nationality transfer, where abstract commitments to equality collide with perceived social or demographic costs. This tension signals shallow knowledge of the reforms advocated by the public. This also intersects with intercommunal fears and inherited narratives shaped by past conflict. Experts emphasise that social contract renegotiation cannot be understood solely at the institutional level. Collective memory, stigma, and mistrust – reproduced through families, education systems, and media – continue to constrain social acceptance of systematic reform, even that stipulated in the Taif Accord in 1989, which some experts referred to as the closest pact to a social contract. One interlocutor recalled an attempt in the 1990s to amend religious family laws that failed not because of elite opposition but due to widespread popular backlash. Notably, the same interlocutor observed that political elites, whose families often exhibit high rates of interreligious marriage, were less constrained by such fears than the broader public, highlighting how popular-level resistance can itself become a decisive obstacle.

6.5. External influence

The research finds that regional and international dynamics sometimes act as critical constraints on reform feasibility. Several experts emphasised that even when internal political consensus is attained, it remains insufficient to enable deep structural change. A consulted senior political advisor stressed that major political shifts require external backing (such as from Saudi Arabia or the US), arguing that Lebanese politics should normally align with regional power dynamics. Attempts to alter internal balances – whether through political reform, security sector strengthening, or reassertion of state authority – remain hostage to regional balance. As the advisor stated, "Even if all the Lebanese elites want a certain change, and countries like the US, Saudi Arabia, or Iran decide to oppose it, can anyone really make such a change? No one can do anything in Lebanon without an external green light." This constraint is particularly visible in relation to security and sovereignty such is the extent of funding the Lebanese army. While there is broad societal agreement on the need for a stronger and more capable Lebanese army, experts argued that such aspirations are limited by neighbouring military realities.

7. Opportunities for achieving a renewed social contract

Despite deep frustration and low levels of institutional trust, participants did not describe Lebanon as devoid of opportunity. Across research tools, they identified realistic and bounded entry points through which progress could still be pursued. These opportunities were framed not as comprehensive overhauls but as credibility-building steps: incremental, visible, and enforceable actions that signal fairness, predictability, and the possibility of rights-based citizenship under existing constraints.

Importantly, widespread dissatisfaction with current conditions does not translate into rejection of reform. On the contrary, public opinion consistently appears receptive to any measure that tangibly improves living conditions. Across survey and qualitative findings, respondents expressed openness to reforms that reduce hardship, enhance service delivery, or restore fairness. This discontent constitutes a latent resource: frustration with the status quo creates a broad social base upon which incremental reform can build, provided outcomes are visible and consistent.

7.1. Generational agency

Despite an apparent loss of hope among generations during discussions in FGDs and with experts, survey findings suggest a more optimistic nuance. Across all age groups, only a very small minority (2–4%) perceive their generation as having no meaningful role in shaping Lebanon's future. Therefore, aspirations for change coexist with a belief that contribution remains possible, even in the absence of institutional trust.

Table 1 The top three future roles chosen by each age group out of more than seven potential roles

Age Group	Future Role 1	Future Role 2	Future Role 3
18–24 yrs	Promoting modern technology in governance for more efficiency	Contributing to strengthening the economy by building relations with regional and international investors	Lobbying and advocating for political and economic reforms with local and national leaders
25–38 yrs	Lobbying and advocating for political and economic reforms with local and national leaders	Promoting modern technology in governance for more efficiency	Contributing to strengthening the economy by building relations with regional and international investors
39–53 yrs	Promoting modern technology in governance for more efficiency	Lobbying and advocating for political and economic reforms	Contributing to strengthening the economy by building relations with regional

		with local and national leaders	and international investors
54+ yrs	Lobbying and advocating for political and economic reforms with local and national leaders	Preserving cultural and religious traditions	Investing in local production and agriculture

Generational differentiation appears primarily in the pathways envisioned towards change. Younger respondents emphasise their role in modernisation and reform-oriented strategies, including technological innovation in governance and advocacy for political and economic reform. Older cohorts articulate complementary roles that combine reform engagement with cultural continuity and economic resilience. These patterns reflect differentiated contributions rather than competing visions.

7.2. Technological leverage

Across discussions, technological modernisation emerged as a particularly salient opportunity. Participants frequently referenced global models of e-governance, digital service delivery, automation, and artificial intelligence as pathways for improving efficiency, reducing mediation, and limiting discretionary abuse. Technology is perceived not merely as a tool for modernisation but as a mechanism for institutional transparency and equal access. In this framing, digital systems are seen as capable of narrowing opportunities for clientelism and selective enforcement, thereby strengthening predictability in state–citizen interactions. The rapid global advancement of AI and automation reinforces the perception that Lebanon possesses viable models to emulate, lowering the threshold for incremental institutional reform.

7.3. Existing frameworks

Experts and FGD participants repeatedly emphasised that progress does not require new legal frameworks, laws, or agreements, but the credible implementation of those that already exist. The Constitution, the Taif Agreement, and established legal provisions were frequently cited as sufficient reference points whose selective application undermines trust. For many participants, opportunity begins with restoring predictability: applying rules equally, enforcing decisions consistently, and reducing arbitrariness in everyday governance. As one participant noted, “The problem is not that there are no laws. It is that they apply them when it suits them.”

7.4. Judicial independence legislation

Within this enforcement logic, judicial independence emerged as a particularly salient reform opportunity. The draft law currently under parliamentary review is viewed as a potential credibility test. While expectations for comprehensive judicial transformation remain modest, participants

emphasised that even partial improvements in independence, enforcement, or accountability could carry strong symbolic and practical weight. The aspiration is for visible signals that impunity is no longer the norm. This aligns with survey findings, where anti-corruption and judiciary reform rank consistently among the top reform priorities.

7.5. Uncontested sectors

Participants also identified relatively non-polarised sectors – such as environmental protection, local development initiatives, and small-scale economic projects – as potential spaces for co-operation and trust-building. These domains are perceived as less burdened by zero-sum political competition and more conducive to cross-community collaboration, particularly at the local level. Opportunity, in this sense, is defined less by sectoral content than by experiential qualities: consistency, equal treatment, and reliable follow-through.

7.6. Perceived supportive international climate

Finally, some participants noted that the broader international climate is currently more supportive of Lebanese stability and reform than in previous periods. External actors are perceived as prioritising stabilisation, institutional strengthening, and economic recovery. While scepticism toward foreign intervention persists, there is recognition that international backing – if aligned with institutional credibility – can reinforce reform efforts. Opportunity therefore lies in leveraging international support to strengthen state capacity and reduce fragmentation.

8. Aspired-to reforms for a renewed social contract

Research findings indicate that reform is widely conceived as incremental, pragmatic, and risk-aware. Rapid or comprehensive transformation is perceived as destabilising. Accordingly, aspired-to reforms are anchored in small but credible shifts in practice capable of restoring trust without triggering political, social, or security backlash. Central to this logic is the consistent enforcement of existing frameworks rather than the drafting of new agreements. Reform is therefore imagined less as systemic reinvention and more as restoring predictability, impartiality, and accountability.

8.1. Participation-oriented reforms

- Implementing existing constitutional commitments, particularly the Taif Agreement. Political and legal experts identified the Taif Agreement as the most realistic institutional anchor for reform within the current system. It was framed not as a comprehensive solution but as a framework containing agreed yet unimplemented provisions – including gradual de-confessionalisation, bicameralism, sovereignty consolidation, and the monopoly of state authority.
- Reforming electoral and political party laws to enhance representation and accountability. Participants recommended making electoral frameworks more inclusive, lowering the voting age to 18, and strengthening enforcement of political party regulations. These measures are viewed as incremental steps toward widening institutional access without destabilising the system.

- Elections alone are widely seen as insufficient. Participation becomes meaningful when it reduces exclusion, expands representation, and generates cumulative accountability. Incremental expansion of institutional access – particularly for younger generations – is valued only insofar as it translates into tangible influence rather than symbolic inclusion.

8.2. Protection-oriented reforms

- Strengthening sovereignty and protection of border areas and territorial control. Across backgrounds, participants called for a more visible and effective state presence in border management, addressing external aggressions, combating trafficking, and ensuring safety in conflict-exposed regions. Protection is framed as a core sovereign obligation rather than a selective or episodic function.
- Reinforcing the role of official security institutions as impartial. There is broad convergence around the expectation that the Lebanese army and formal security forces should assume a clearer protective role. Constraints are attributed to limited sovereign resources and insufficient political decisiveness rather than lack of institutional capacity alone.
- Professionalising and de-confessionalising internal security institutions. Reform demands emphasise dignity-based policing, equal treatment, and improved conduct toward citizens. Accountability mechanisms within security agencies are viewed as essential to restoring trust.
- Expanding universal access to legal protection and legal awareness. Participants stressed the need to ensure that judicial recourse is fair and not based on political connections. In this sense, separation of powers is seen as necessary.
- Institutionalising community-based mediation mechanisms. Experts recommended formal recognition of communal mediation and local dispute-resolution mechanisms as complementary to state security provision, particularly in underserved regions.

8.3. Provision-oriented reforms

- Rebuilding public education as a long-term social contract lever. Schools and universities are seen as critical spaces for reshaping civic values and citizenship, fostering critical thinking, and normalising plural coexistence. Curriculum reform and socially mixed educational environments are viewed as cumulative trust-building mechanisms.
- Strengthening universal public service delivery. Reform aspirations prioritise strengthening public schools, universal healthcare, social security systems, and basic infrastructure. Reliable and non-discriminatory provision is framed as a visible test of equal citizenship.
- Depoliticizing access to social protection. Social security reform is envisioned as a mechanism to reduce dependence on sectarian or political intermediaries and shift from discretionary allocation to rights-based entitlement.
- Ensuring governance safeguards in externally supported reforms. Structural reforms of service delivery are recognised as financially demanding and often requiring international support.

However, participants emphasised that safeguards against political capture must accompany external funding to preserve credibility.

8.4. Strengthening oversight mechanisms

- Strengthening oversight and accountability institutions. Participants emphasised reinforcing independent oversight bodies – including audit institutions, anti-corruption commissions, and regulatory authorities – to ensure rule-based enforcement across sectors. Oversight institutions are perceived as essential to limiting arbitrariness and restoring confidence in institutional fairness.
- Institutionalising rule-based enforcement rather than discretionary application. A recurring theme across research tools was that the problem lies less in the absence of laws than in their selective implementation. Strengthening oversight mechanisms is therefore framed as ensuring consistency and universality in applying existing rules.
- Oversight reform thus functions as a cross-cutting enabler: it underpins protection by enforcing accountability within security institutions, strengthens provision by limiting political capture, and enhances participation by ensuring that engagement translates into consequences.

8.5. Sectoral reforms

- Implementing digitalisation and administrative simplification. Expanding e-governance, automation, and standardised procedures is framed as a practical pathway to reduce arbitrariness, limit mediation, and increase transparency. Participants view digital systems as tools for enhancing efficiency and curbing clientelism, provided adoption is sustained institutionally.
- Leveraging non-polarised sectors for incremental trust-building. Environmental protection, support to small and medium enterprises, and localised development initiatives are identified as reform domains less burdened by zero-sum political competition. These sectors offer opportunities for participatory, needs-based collaboration capable of rebuilding trust without triggering high-stakes political confrontation.

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List of annexes

- Annex I: Literature review and bibliography
- Annex II: Detailed methodology section

Access the annexes document.

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