

In this paper, I evaluate MP Fayad's thorough analysis of the complex challenges confronting Lebanon, highlighting the nuances of the nation's socio-political environment. Fayad characterizes Lebanon as a country defined by both its fragility and resilience, emphasizing the urgent need for unity among its diverse religious groups to avert crises and ensure stable governance. Although I largely agree with his assessment, I will delve into several concerns within his approach.

MP Fayad adopts a pragmatic and systematic methodology that advocates for fostering dialogue based on honesty, national responsibility, and consensus. He champions a unified and inclusive political strategy that aims to create an environment conducive to consensus-building and effective problem-solving both locally and regionally. This approach is critical for tackling Lebanon's socio-political challenges through inclusive participation and dialogue, offering a viable pathway towards stability, security, and prosperity.

My critique will begin with an examination of Fayad's portrayal of Lebanon's current situation, followed by an evaluation of his normative approach. I will then outline a roadmap to address these challenges and conclude with a broader discussion on the concerns he raises. This structured critique and proposal are intended to challenge and enhance Fayad's framework, urging Lebanese stakeholders to embrace the opportunity to further the dialogue he advocates.

From a regional perspective, Fayad's remarks suggest a proposition to the United States and Israel, advocating for compromises on various regional disputes, with the notable exception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I agree with MP Fayad's analysis of the evolving regional order and its inherent uncertainties. However, I believe it is too early to declare a definitive victory for the "axis of resistance" and its main supporter, Iran. The recommendation to adjust the regional balance in response to the perceived rise of the axis of resistance and the corresponding decline in the United States' influence over regional affairs is both premature and risky. Given the complexities of the regional and global geopolitical contexts, such actions require a more cautious approach. In this discussion, I will focus specifically on the Lebanese aspects of MP Fayad's remarks, addressing the local implications of these broader regional dynamics.

A Descriptive Overview of Lebanon's Challenges

MP Fayad provides a nuanced and detailed description of the challenges Lebanon is currently facing, skillfully portraying the country's fragile yet resilient societal makeup. He delves into the complex socio-political landscape of Lebanon, highlighting the essential need for common ground among the diverse religious groups to prevent potential crises and ensure stable governance--elements he deems crucial for Lebanon's future stability and prosperity. Additionally, Mr. Fayad emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and addressing the concerns of various Lebanese communities, whether these concerns are political or existential, and regardless of whether they are perceived as real or unreal.

In his analysis, MP Fayad highlights how misconceptions, in 1920, held by specific group within the Lebanese population regarding their geopolitical context have historically led to considerable unrest. Looking ahead to 2024, the MP voices concern that similar misinterpretations could once

again result in significant political disturbances. While I share these concerns, they also suggest a subtle threat to Lebanese communities at large, and particularly to the Christians, regarding their strategic regional positioning. It implies a pressure for these communities to align with Iran's sphere of influence rather than maintaining ties with Saudi Arabia or Western countries.

Furthermore, MP Fayad elaborates on a series of unresolved critical issues that continue to profoundly impact Lebanon. He discusses the longstanding problem of Palestinian refugees, the influx of Syrian refugees, the occupation of Shebaa Farms by Israel and the demarcation of the country's borders, Lebanon's access to its offshore natural gas reserves, and lastly, the critical need for Lebanon to rebuild and strengthen its ties with the Arab world.

A Pragmatic Normative to Lebanon's Challenges

Mr. Fayad advocates for a realistic and responsible approach among all Lebanese stakeholders, promoting a method that acknowledges concerns and pursues practical guarantees. By creating a conducive atmosphere for consensus-building and common ground, Lebanon can formulate a unified strategy to tackle the numerous local and regional challenges jeopardizing its stability and advancement. This strategy encourages collaboration across all societal segments towards a shared objective.

While I agree and see the value in adopting, expanding, and building on this pragmatic, systematic and methodical approach, the push to find consensus and common ground beyond traditional state mechanisms, as argued by MP Fayad, is concerning. It's unclear exactly what Mr. Fayad is advocating for, but it creates an impression that Hezbollah might be pursuing solutions for internal Lebanese problems that extend beyond the existing Lebanese state borders and institutions. I will revert to this point towards the end of this paper.

Moreover, the appeal for Lebanese to address their internal issues while also deciding on a geo-strategic position is similarly worrying. Indeed, the MP argues that tackling Lebanon's complex challenges requires not just a unified and inclusive domestic political strategy but also strategic regional positioning for Lebanon. I view this last point as subtly nudging, once again, the Lebanese, especially the Christians, toward aligning with the Iranian sphere of influence, often referred to as the Shia crescent, rather than siding with Saudi Arabia or the West.

I acknowledge the viewpoint that addressing Lebanon's pressing unresolved issues--such as the situation with Palestinian and Syrian refugees, the Shebaa Farms dispute, access to offshore natural gas, and the crucial rebuilding of ties with the Arab world--requires both internal and regional negotiation and consensus-building. However, as Mr. Fayad suggests, linking these challenges to the necessity for Lebanese to choose the "right side" of history in light of recent developments--and thereby avoiding past errors--by aligning with the de facto Iranian influence in the Shia crescent, might lead to a dramatic geo-political, geo-economic, geo-social, and particularly geo-cultural shift. Such a transformation should not be imposed on the Lebanese.

A Proposed Roadmap

Building on Fayad's systematic and methodical approach, I propose the following strategy: First, the Christian, Sunni, Shia, and Druze communities must agree to a new social contract affirming their commitment to coexistence. Once this critical agreement is reached, a politically neutral

group of subject matter experts, endorsed by all communities, should draft this social contract. This draft would then be presented to the public in a general referendum. Second, if it secures a majority vote, the same group of experts would be tasked with determining the most suitable form of government to uphold and harness this social contract.

To guide their work, several pre-agreed principles should be established. These include the separation and balance of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches; adherence to the rule of law; and a commitment to economic localism. Additionally, existential concerns and guarantees for all four communities should be addressed, such as regulations to prevent demographic shifts caused by one community buying land in regions predominantly inhabited by another.

The proposed government structure--whether a central state, federal state, system of cantons, or decentralized model--along with the accompanying constitution will again be subject to public approval via a general referendum.

Third, a comprehensive National Strategy (NS) would be developed to outline how all Lebanese instruments of power (IOPs) will be utilized to support the social contract, as guided by the constitution. This NS will detail how the executive branch will deploy various IOPs--including the economy, tourism, diplomacy, social diversity, services, natural resources, and security--to reinforce the social contract.

Under the security component of the IOPs, and in accordance with the constitution, a national security strategy will be crafted. This strategy will include the organization of national military forces and community-guard-forces, ensuring that both adhere to uniform training standards, military doctrine, and command structures that are accountable both nationally and to individual communities. This framework will also provide a platform to address the specific issue of today's Shia forces and their role, along with the five unresolved issues previously raised by MP Fayad.

A Call for the Shias to Take Action

Understanding the existential concerns of all communities in Lebanon is essential. Christians view the roles of Syrians and Palestinians as destabilizing, while Sunnis are concerned about Iranian efforts to convert Sunnis to Shiism. Recognizing and addressing these and other community perspectives is crucial for building trust. As the major armed group in post-war Lebanon, Hezbollah plays a critical role in this process. It is imperative for Hezbollah to begin trust-building measures, such as avoiding conflicting media messages and refraining from actions that could lead the country toward war. These initial steps are vital for fostering mutual trust among the communities. Building trust among the four communities and fostering a positive influence on each other is a gradual process.

I have significant reservations about MP Fayad's description of the Lebanese state's alignment with the axis of resistance and its geo-strategic positioning. It is my recommendation that these sensitive topics be deferred for discussion until after establishing a consensus on the social contract, governance structure, constitution, and national strategy. This approach will ensure a more grounded and inclusive dialogue.

Moreover, Mr. Fayad's portrayal of Lebanon as a state in transition, coupled with his suggestions for geo-positioning Lebanon and seeking solutions from outside its borders, raises serious concerns. These propositions imply a potential redefinition of Lebanon and the region aligned with the dynamics of the Shia crescent, suggesting that discussions may be directed towards a preconceived outcome. Such a direction risks compromising the integrity and constructiveness of the dialogue, undermining the need for careful and transparent handling of these issues to maintain the potential for positive change.

Finally, the current balance of power in the Shia crescent and the increasing Iranian influence may tempt parties benefiting from it to make misguided decisions, akin to those highlighted by the MP concerning the Maronites in 1920. While the MP accurately outlines the situation in the Middle East and potential scenarios, the fog of war, the economic center of gravity (as the MP rightly mentions), and the vulnerabilities of supply lines from Tehran to Beirut, which also affect Hezbollah, must be considered. It is, therefore, in Hezbollah's interest to demonstrate maturity and courage by collaborating with other Lebanese communities to achieve stability and prosperity.

In conclusion, MP Fayad's intervention provides a critical foundation for addressing the pressing challenges Lebanon faces. His analysis highlights the need for unity and strategic dialogue among Lebanon's diverse communities to foster stability and progress. Throughout this paper, I have examined the strengths and limitations of Fayad's approach, offering constructive critiques and expanding on his strategies to ensure they encompass a broader range of perspectives and solutions. The proposed roadmap seeks not only to address immediate concerns but also to lay the groundwork for long-term national resilience and prosperity. As Lebanon stands at a pivotal juncture, it is imperative that all stakeholders engage in this dialogue with openness and dedication. By doing so, Lebanon can harness its collective strengths to navigate its complex socio-political landscape and move towards a future that reflects the aspirations of all its people. This paper calls on Lebanese leaders and citizens alike to engage actively in this process, using the insights and frameworks discussed as a springboard for inclusive and effective governance.