



The Salem Initiative's

# Alliance for Lebanon

A Strategy to Address  
Lebanon's Anti-  
Normalization Laws



Photo: Lebanon's Parliament, Beirut

*In July 2021, the Center for Peace Communications convened a roundtable discussion between U.S. policymakers and members of the newly formed [Alliance for Lebanon](#), on new problems arising from Lebanon's anti-normalization laws and potential remedies to address them. This paper, drawn from a rapporteur's summary, explains the nature of the laws and reasons why a growing number of Lebanese citizens oppose them. It then lays out the beginnings of a strategy to ameliorate the laws' negative impact.*

## Understanding the Problem

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, most Arab countries passed laws criminalizing all forms of engagement with Israeli citizens. Over the 40-year course of diplomatic progress which brought six Arab states to peace with Israel, some of these laws were repealed. In the case of the United Arab Emirates, new laws forbidding discrimination against Israelis were also enacted.

In Lebanon, anti-normalization laws dating back to 1955 remain on the books. These laws have in recent years been widely and arbitrarily enforced, sometimes against locals whom Lebanon's political class – mainly Hezbollah – wish to punish. The fact of the laws' enforcement, in turn, has compounded economic damage to the country by deterring Lebanese business engagement with multinational companies that do not exclude Israeli citizens from their work force or partnerships.

The same phenomenon also complicates and confounds the situation of the proportionately large and economically salient Lebanese diaspora. More than 300,000 Lebanese nationals live and work in the Arab Gulf states. The lion's share reside in the UAE, where thousands of Israelis visit or do business on any given day. Israelis' presence and deepening engagement with the UAE's economy and society render large numbers of Lebanese nationals guilty by default of violating the anti-normalization laws. In consequence, the laws have the effect of isolating the diaspora from the Lebanese interior and harm both normal family travel and economic exchanges. Lebanese nationals living in the UAE also face Catch-22-style legal jeopardy: by obeying Lebanon's anti-normalization laws, they violate the UAE's anti-discrimination laws, and vice versa.

The nebulous nature of the laws owes much to the fact that they reside in three distinct “baskets” of jurisprudence: the criminal code, the 1955 Boycott Law, and the Code of Military Justice. Authorities with repression, intimidation, extortion, and political grandstanding on their minds can pick and choose their para-legal weapons from any of the three baskets. In an era of global interconnectivity via social media and other technologies, even an Israeli reply to a Lebanese tweet can provide a rationale for prosecution.

All these problems, in turn, compound the economic devastation in Lebanon, which has reached unprecedented levels. The country’s GDP has declined by more than 40 percent over roughly the past two years. The financial system verges on collapse due to the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrated particularly by the virtual disappearance of Lebanon’s significant tourism sector. Generic corruption and mismanagement on account of the political economy’s rentier structure underlies and exacerbates recent bad fortune. Yet just across Lebanon’s southern border is Israel, an economy 80 times larger than Lebanon’s, whose merchants and consumers are ready to do mutually beneficial business.

The hypocrisy of the arbitrary, politically motivated enforcement of the anti-normalization laws is obvious to attentive Lebanese. Some of the country’s officials have been in regular contact with their Israeli counterparts in recent years concerning mutual interests in negotiating the maritime borders between Lebanon and Israel. The two sides have long been in contact to ensure security at the border point of Ras Naqura/Rosh Ha-Niqrah, which before 1948-49 hosted a railroad station for a train that ran from Haifa to Beirut. They have also discussed the disputed area of Shab’a Farms from time to time, agreeing that it does not belong to Syria.

Because of the clear and manifest harm that enforcement of the anti-normalization laws does to Lebanese interests, the case for raising effective challenges to these laws – if not to the laws proper then to their vagueness and arbitrary enforcement – now exceeds the realm of Arab-Israeli politics. A large constituency has emerged in favor of clarifying, amending, or reinterpreting the anti-normalization laws purely for the sake of free enterprise and freedom to engage the world – a viewpoint shared by Lebanese citizens with a range of views about Israel and its citizens.

## The Case for Legal Reform

Lebanon's present political circumstances make changing the country's foreign policy toward Israel unlikely in the near term, such that the annulling or rescinding of the country's anti-normalization laws remains for now a non-starter. The ultimate power over Lebanon's foreign policy – and far more besides – resides in Tehran, and is administered in Lebanon through Hezbollah and its Aounist allies.

But brave Lebanese reformists regard the pursuit of incremental improvements to be realistic and worth the effort. Within the existing constraints, the basic idea is clear: Assemble a large and diverse enough parliamentary coalition for reform that pressure can be brought against the country's executive to make a bad situation better.

Despite the formidable obstacles to change within the country, it is feasible and warranted to narrow the interpretation of Lebanon's anti-normalization laws, and so curb their use for abuse, as part of a wider package of legal reforms to old, decrepit laws also in need or review, clarification, or reinterpretation. One aspect of limiting the abuse of the anti-normalization laws is to sharply limit, as far as possible, the use of military tribunals to handle cases. It was, for example, a military tribunal that kept a young woman, [Kinda al-Katib](#), in jail for more than a year, exposing her to disease and harm for no valid reason. Other old laws in need of review pertain to gender equality and human rights issues that put Lebanon at odds with international norms and thus harm the country's image and interests. Still others relate to international economic and banking protocols.

Consider a relevant precedent for reform, which arose from the U.S.-led Financial Action Task Force (FATF), designed to curb money laundering on behalf of terrorist and criminal groups. Countries not in compliance with FATF can be, and often are, excluded in whole or part from using the U.S banking system. In 2016, that major threat to the interests of Lebanon's elite ended up pressuring the country's executive into reforms that put Lebanon into FATF compliance.

Constituencies for reform within Lebanon exist over such issues. The task is to bring them together and coordinate a set of efforts that can benefit all coalition parties. The sequencing of a successful effort would involve three concurrent steps:

- Persuade 10-15 members of the country's parliament to sponsor the envisioned package of legal reforms.
- Solicit outside pressure from the U.S. government and European Union, as well as independent actors such as international business and banking rating agencies, in support of the same package.
- Launch a Lebanese and international media campaign to build public and parliamentary support, both within the country and among its diaspora communities, to the point that pressure mounts on the Prime Minister and President to accede to reform or get out of the way.

One potential outcome of the process would be the establishment of a center for compliance, providing Lebanese citizens with straight, clear, and stable answers to questions about how to remain inside the law. Another is to compile research data for media and civil society on how hidebound and obsolete laws harm Lebanon's economic interests and affect all income and wealth cohorts in the country.

Assistance from outside Lebanon, crucial to such an effort, should adopt an emphasis on protecting those Lebanese actors within the country who have already initiated the reforms effort.

## American and European Support

The local taboo on explorations of Lebanon's potential relationship with Israeli citizens poses a challenge to any package approach to legal reform that would, among its merits, alleviate the harm which the anti-normalization laws do. Consequently, as such an effort gains ground, proponents of change will likely find themselves under pressure, including media incitement, threats of legal indictment, and extra-judicial retribution.

To offset these pressures and threats, the U.S. Government can use its leverage in Lebanon via the assistance program to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) – of which the military tribunal is a part – to ensure that civilians are no longer targeted by the military court. This shift could be stipulated as a condition for assistance.

Other methods include stipulations on aid and targeted sanctions. With respect to the latter, both the U.S. and EU could clearly warn – and then sanction – Lebanese officials and judges who arbitrarily arrest, interrogate, or sentence civilians. With respect to the former, as the Lebanese political establishment continues to ask the international community for humanitarian and economic assistance during its current crisis, both the U.S. and EU should consider this issue as an additional condition in the package of requirements for any assistance or bailout.

Targeted sanctions need to be able to pinpoint the treasure and reputations of those who would resist reform and punish reformers. Thus compiling names and assets would constitute a useful research task.

## Discussion

Roundtable participants offered several comments and suggestions to assist the legal reform package effort. Several of the ideas concerned outside assistance to internal Lebanese efforts. For example, Western organizations, notably the EU itself, could assist in the research and international media functions, and also help draft the language of the reform package for use not only in Arabic but in French, English, German, and other languages for international dissemination.

Supporters of the effort in Washington, for their part, could lay the political groundwork by supporting the case for the reforms by drawing public attention to the many problems which they pose. Such support could take the form of Congressional testimony, briefings to policymakers, and media outreach. One roundtable participant opined that the Biden administration can and should do more to lend its voice to the ambient discussion of the virtues of Arab-Israeli civil engagement.

Additionally, since the U.S. Government is party to a variety of international legal instruments having to do with human rights, Lebanese government violations give U.S. diplomacy an entry point to bring representation. Laws that discriminate against Lebanese nationals for contact with Israelis can be raised in tandem, as a matter natural to the tenor of diplomatic consultations. A new bill introduced this year, now making its way through the House and Senate, would systematize such efforts by instructing the Secretary of State to report annually on instances of Arab government retribution for civil peacemakers.

One participant pointed out that, among Lebanon's vast diaspora, some hold dual citizenship with the United States. This gives U.S. officials an obvious mandate to make representation over Lebanese government violations of citizens' rights. It is true that Lebanese officials regularly dismiss any troublesome implications of dual citizenship, but that itself is a violation of customary international law and, if lesser remedies do not avail, can be litigated.

Ultimately, bringing effective pressure needs to be a two-track process, combining activity inside Lebanon with international support. The founding of the CPC's Alliance for Lebanon by Lebanese citizens in Beirut, Abu Dhabi, and Washington reflects a broader trend: demand for the envisioned reform stems from the Lebanese people themselves, and some are willing to take a brave public stand. Hostile forces will inevitably move to stigmatize these reformists by portraying them as "foreign agents" – regardless of whether they actually muster outside assistance or not. It is therefore incumbent on those who support their goals to provide that assistance – rather than leave them to suffer the stigma without it.



**CENTER FOR PEACE COMMUNICATIONS**  
**1623 FLATBUSH AVENUE**  
**BROOKLYN, NEW YORK 11210**  
**[WWW.PEACECOMMS.ORG](http://WWW.PEACECOMMS.ORG)**  
**@2021 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**