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# The situation in Lebanon and challenges for regional stability and European security

**Report**[1]
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
Rapporteur: Mr Tobias ZECH, Germany, Group of the European People's Party

*Summary*

The election of Michel Aoun as President of Lebanon on 31 October 2016 puts an end to a constitutional crisis which posed a serious threat to the fragile balances on which the Lebanese society is based. It does not however guarantee that the country's other problems will be resolved.

The situation of refugees has worsened and today Lebanon hosts an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees, in addition to the many other refugees who were already there, making Lebanon the country with the highest number of refugees per capita in the world. This is becoming unsustainable. The international community should thank Lebanon for its hospitality and should step up, as a matter of urgency, the contribution to support and assist the refugees in the country.

The Parliamentary Assembly should develop relations with the Lebanese Parliament, first by inviting Lebanese parliamentarians to follow its the work and then by encouraging the Lebanese Parliament to consider applying for partnership for democracy status with the Assembly.

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1.    Reference to committee: Doc. 13776, Reference 4132 of 22 June 2015.

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## A. Draft resolution[2]

1.      The Parliamentary Assembly recalls its Resolution 1520 (2006) on recent developments in Lebanon in the context of the situation in the Middle East, in which it stated that a lasting political solution in the region can only be achieved through political dialogue among all parties concerned and that it considered itself to be particularly well placed to pursue such a dialogue at the parliamentary level.

2.      The Assembly recognises the many specificities that make Lebanon such a unique country. It is the most religiously diverse country in the Middle East and the Arab country with the largest Christian population. Lebanon is the oldest democracy in the Middle East. Political power is shared by Christians, Sunni and Shia according to an agreement between the respective communities. Surrounded by conflicts, Lebanon is a good example of peaceful co-existence and should be supported to allow this to continue.

3.      The Assembly welcomes the election of Michel Aoun as President of Lebanon on 31 October 2016, which showed that consensus was possible between the different political parties. The inability to elect a President for more than two and half years had paralysed the country and deprived it of the possibility to react to the challenges in the region.

4.      The election of Mr Aoun, after the longest presidential void in Lebanon's history, put an end to a constitutional crisis which posed a serious threat to the fragile balances on which the functioning of Lebanese society is based. If such balances were to be disrupted, regional stability would be further undermined and, for obvious reasons, security would be challenged in the whole of Europe.

5.      This election does not guarantee however that the country's other problems will be solved. It also brings new challenges: the formation of the government by the Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and above all, political reconciliation among the different interest groups.

6.      Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the Assembly has been drawing attention to the plight of refugees. Already in 2012, it adopted Resolution 1902 (2012) on the European response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria; in April 2013, it held a current affairs debate on "Syrian refugees in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq: how to organise and support international assistance?"; in June 2013, it adopted Resolution 1940 (2013) on the situation in the Middle East; in October 2013, Recommendation 2026 (2013) on the situation in Syria; in January 2014, Resolution 1971 (2014) "Syrian refugees: how to organise and support international assistance?"; and in April 2016, Resolution 2107 (2016) on a stronger European response to the Syrian refugee crisis. These texts list the measures that the Assembly deems necessary to cope with the refugee crisis.

7.      During the last five years, the situation of refugees has worsened and today Lebanon hosts an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees. This number adds to the many other refugees who were already there, making Lebanon the country with the highest number of refugees per capita in the world.

8.      The refugee crisis is becoming unsustainable for Lebanon in many respects: municipalities, on which the responsibility falls, are unable to provide adequate food, sanitation, health care or schooling and it is civil society, together with international organisations, which is trying to cope with the situation. More international solidarity is clearly needed. The economic situation in general is dire and youth unemployment is huge.

9.      The Assembly thanks Lebanon for its hospitality and calls on the international community, in addition to the measures already indicated in previous texts, to step up, as a matter of urgency, its contribution to support and assist the refugees presently in Lebanon. States should, on the one hand, increase their financial support for the humanitarian response on the spot and, on the other hand, increase resettlement possibilities for those refugees who so wish. The Assembly welcomes however the fact that the situation in the Palestinian refugee camps has improved, including living conditions and the legal rights of the Palestinians.

10.      The Assembly calls on the Lebanese Parliament to consider asking the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) for its assistance in revising the electoral law.

11.      Finally, the Assembly decides to develop relations with the Lebanese Parliament, first by inviting Lebanese parliamentarians to follow its work and then by encouraging the Lebanese Parliament to consider applying for partnership for democracy status with the Assembly.

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2.      Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 15 December 2016.

**B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Tobias Zech, rapporteur**

## 1. Introduction

1.     On April 2015, I tabled, together with other members of the Parliamentary Assembly, a motion for a resolution on "The situation in Lebanon and challenges for regional stability and European security". On 22 June 2015, the Assembly referred the motion to the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy and on 30 September 2015 the committee appointed me as rapporteur.

2.     On 8 March 2016, the committee held an exchange of views with Mr Julien Barnes-Dacey, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations in London.

3.     On 15 and 16 June 2016, I carried out a fact-finding visit to Lebanon. I had the opportunity to meet representatives from German political foundations and from civil society organisations and representatives of 10 different political parties. I was also able to exchange views with several European diplomats and representatives of international organisations.

4.     Finally, on 13 October 2016, the committee considered a preliminary draft report, which I subsequently revised to take into account comments made by committee members.

## 2. Background

5.     Lebanon is a small country with an estimated population of roughly 6 million inhabitants, including 2 million refugees. Lebanon also has a certain religious diversity. It is estimated that some 54% of the population is Muslim (roughly 27% Sunni, 27% Shia), 40.5% of the population is Christian, 5.5% are Druze and then there are also small communities of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus and Mormons. Lebanon is the Arab country with the highest number of Christians. The last population census took place in 1932, when the population of Lebanon was less than 800 000.

6.     Despite its relatively small population and territory, Lebanon is a regional centre for trade and finance. However, it is currently experiencing a very serious situation: on one hand, a complex political crisis for more than two years and, on the other, an important influx of refugees from Syria, estimated at 1.5 million, which add to the many refugees already there. Some 450 000 Palestinian refugees are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Lebanon, mainly living in the country's 12 refugee camps; some have been there for the last 60 years and some are in their fourth generation.

7.     The refugee crisis is becoming unsustainable for Lebanon in many respects: municipalities, on which the responsibility falls, are unable to provide adequate food, sanitation, health care or schooling and it is civil society, together with international organisations, which is trying to cope with the situation. More international solidarity is clearly needed. The economic situation in general is dire and youth unemployment is huge.

8.     In July and August 2006, there was a war between the Israeli Defense Forces and Hezbollah's paramilitary wing, which is believed to have killed around 1 200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and 165 Israelis, including 44 civilians. It severely damaged Lebanese civil infrastructure, and displaced approximately one million Lebanese and some 400 000 Israelis. A ceasefire, based on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, was accepted by both belligerents and came into effect on 14 August 2006. Since then, relations between Israel and Lebanon have been tense, the border has been closed and minor violations of the ceasefire have taken place in 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2015. Tourism to Lebanon has never recovered since this war.

9.     The inability to elect a President for more than two and half years deprived Lebanon of the possibility to react to the challenges in the region (see below). The election of Michel Aoun as President of Lebanon on 31 October 2016 put an end to a situation which posed a serious threat to the fragile balances on which the functioning of Lebanese society is based. If such balances were to be disrupted, regional stability would be further undermined and, for obvious reasons, security would be challenged in the whole of Europe.

## 3. Political organisation

10.     There is a long tradition of democracy in Lebanon. The Taif Agreement was signed in 1989 to help put an end to Lebanon's civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990. It also enshrined the organisation of Lebanon's current political system. The Agreement is based on the 1943 National Pact which was an unwritten agreement between Lebanon's first President, Bechara El Khoury, who was a Christian Maronite, and

Lebanon's first Prime Minister, Riad al Solh, who was a Sunni. The Christians feared they would be overwhelmed by Lebanon's Muslim communities and the surrounding Arab countries, and Muslims feared Western hegemony. It was therefore decided that the Christian population would not seek foreign (Western) protection and the Muslim community would renounce its hopes for a union with Syria and accept Lebanon as an independent State. The National Pact also reconfirmed the sectarian organisation of government as high level posts were to be split with a five to six ratio between Muslims and Christians. This ratio favoured the Christian community and was based on the 1932 census.

11.     The Taif Agreement took into account presumed changes in the demographic landscape even though a new census had not been conducted. The Agreement made several changes to the Lebanese Constitution but it mainly transferred executive power from the President to the Council of Ministers, increased the number of seats in parliament from 99 to 128 (which were to be divided equally among Muslims and Christians) and it also reiterated that the President would be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of Parliament a Shia Muslim (as before the Agreement). The Taif Agreement also called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon and the disarmament and disbandment of all militias. Militias were effectively disbanded, with the exception of the paramilitary wing of Hezbollah, which is considered by some as more powerful than the Lebanese army.

12.     The Taif Agreement did not resolve any issues concerning national identity and a split began to grow between Shia and Sunni Muslims, adding to the already existing split between Christians and Muslims. After the assassination of Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on 14 February 2005, relations between Sunnis and Shiites began to deteriorate. It was in the aftermath of this assassination that the "Cedar Revolution" took place, during which the March 14 Coalition was formed, demanding the departure of Syrian troops which had been occupying Lebanon since 1976 (an anti-Syria feeling had been growing amongst many Lebanese during that year) and the March 8 Coalition was also formed after approximately 500 000 Lebanese protesters took to the streets to "thank Syria" for its role in Lebanon.

13.     Relations between Sunni and Shiite Muslims continued to deteriorate in Lebanon even after Syria's withdrawal in April 2005. This resulted in the departure of all the Shiite representatives from Lebanon's cabinet on 12 and 13 November 2006. On 7 May 2008, the cabinet adopted two decrees which were considered to be hostile towards the Shiite organisation Hezbollah and were rejected by the majority of Shia Muslims in Lebanon. In response, Hezbollah seized a large part of Beirut and began fighting rival Sunni groups. 81 people were left dead in the clashes and Lebanon was on the brink of a new civil war which forced the government to retract its decrees and adopt the Doha Agreement which created a national unity government and gave Hezbollah the possibility to veto any major decisions adopted by the cabinet. These historical events have played a large role in shaping Lebanon's current political landscape.

## 4. The functioning of the Lebanese political system

14.     The Lebanese political system is split into three branches: the executive branch, the legislative branch and the judicial branch.

15.     The executive branch is composed of the President, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. The President is indirectly elected. The parliament appoints the President for a six-year term based on a two-thirds majority vote in the first round (absolute majority from the second round onwards). The President then appoints a Prime Minister and a Deputy Prime Minister, after consulting parliament. Lebanon was without a President from 25 May 2014, when former President Michel Suleiman's term of office expired, until 31 October 2016 because the Lebanese Parliament was unable to reach a consensus and elect a new President with the required two-thirds majority (see below Lebanon's Presidency crisis).

16.     The legislative branch in Lebanon consists of a parliament with 128 seats (64 Christians and 64 Muslims/Druze). Members of Parliament are elected by a majority vote in multi-seat constituencies and are elected for a four-year term. However, the last parliamentary elections were held in June 2009. The elections scheduled for June 2013 were postponed a first time for a period of 17 months (until November 2014) due to parliament's incapacity to adopt a new electoral law, which has been in discussion for the last 20 years, and Prime Minister Tammam Salam's inability to form a government.

17.     In November 2014, the parliamentary elections were postponed once again until 22 June 2017, which is the latest possible date according to the Constitution. The reasons given to justify this second postponement were "security concerns linked to the civil war in neighbouring Syria" and the power vacuum caused by the absence of a President. Security concerns are not however an acceptable excuse for not having elections and recent municipal elections prove that it is possible to have them in acceptable conditions. A new president has now been elected.

18.     The two highest courts in Lebanon are the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Council. The Supreme Court is split into four divisions, each division has a presiding judge and two associate judges, members of the Supreme Court are appointed by the Supreme Judicial Council. The Constitutional Council has 10 members, five of which are appointed by the Council of Ministers and the other five by parliament.

## 5. Major political parties in Lebanon

19.     Most political parties in Lebanon are grouped either in the March 14 Coalition or the March 8 Coalition.

The March 14 Coalition, which is Sunni based, anti-Syrian and pro-Western, is made up of the following parties (the number of MPs for all the political parties mentioned varies slightly according to different sources):

–       Future Movement Bloc (a centre right party made up of Sunni Muslims) with 28 MPs

–       Lebanese Forces (a conservative Maronite Christian party) with 8 MPs

–       Kataeb Party (a right-wing party which is officially secular but mainly supported by Maronite Christians) with 5 MPs

–       Social Democratic Hunchakian Party (a centre-left Armenian party) with 2 MPs

–       National Entente bloc with 2 MPs

–       Ramgavar (an Armenian Democratic Liberal party) with 1 MP

–       Democratic Left Movement (a left-wing secular party) with 1 MP

–       National Liberal Party (a Liberal Christian Nationalist Party) with 1 MP

–       Al-Jamaa al-Islamiya / the Islamic Group (Sunni Muslim Islamist) with 1 MP

–       8 independent MPs aligned with the March 14 coalition

The March 8 Coalition is Shia dominated and pro-Syrian. It is composed of the following political parties:

–       Free Patriotic Movement (centre-left party of Maronite Christians) with 19 MPs

–       Amal Movement (centre-right party whose members are Shia Muslims and some Christians) with 13 MPs

–       Hezbollah (Shia Islamist organisation supported by Iran) with 13 MPs

–       Marada Movement (an officially secular centre-right party but which is predominantly Christian) with 3 MPs

–       Lebanese Democratic Party (an officially secular centre-right party whose members are mainly Druze) with 2 MPs

–       Tashnag (an Armenian secular Party) with 2 MPs

–       The Baath Party (a secular pro-Syrian party) with 2 MPs

–       Syrian Social Nationalist Party (a secular nationalist party based on the ideology of a "Greater Syria" which includes Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan and Cyprus) with 2 MPs

–       The Solidarity Party (Christian) with 1 MP.

There are also many independent political parties in Lebanon but only the following have MPs in parliament:

–       The Progressive Socialist Party (officially secular, mainly Druze) with 11 MPs

–       The Tripoli Solidarity Bloc with 2 MPs

–       Non-affiliated: 1 MP.

20.     Lebanese politics have become extremely polarised, especially with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Former President Michel Suleiman launched the initiative to have the Lebanese political parties sign the Declaration of Baabda in June 2012, which calls for a "policy of dissociation" towards the Syrian crisis and recalls that all political parties in Lebanon are attached to the stability and unity of the country. The idea behind this declaration was to preserve Lebanon's stability in light of the Syrian conflict. However, Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian conflict has undermined this "policy of dissociation". Hezbollah has been supporting

and fighting in Syria for Bashar Al-Assad's regime. This has polarised Lebanese politics even more. On the other hand a Maronite MP told me that Hezbollah was protecting Christians in the Baalbek region and if Hezbollah were to leave that region, the Christians would leave with them.

## 6. Lebanon's recent Presidency crisis

21. The term of office of President Michel Suleiman expired in May 2014 and the lack of agreement between the two coalitions (March 8 and March 14) prevented the election of the new President for two and half years. Over recent months, both coalitions have put candidates forward but the Lebanese Parliament was only able to reach a consensus on 31 October 2016.

22. On 2 June 2016, the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, announced that the presidential election would be postponed for a fortieth time. In fact, one of those unsuccessful sessions took place during my visit to Lebanon. Mr Michel Aoun was elected at the 46th attempt.

23. Hezbollah and the March 8 coalition supported General Aoun, who founded the Free Patriotic Movement and who had supported Hezbollah's war against Israel in 2006 and its seizure of parts of Beirut in 2008. Mr Aoun is a prominent leader of Lebanon's Christian (Maronite) community; Hezbollah therefore hoped he would help them gain more support.

24. The March 14 coalition initially put forward Samir Geagea for the position; however he was openly opposed to both Syria and Hezbollah, making it unlikely that the Lebanese Parliament would reach a consensus on him. The March 14 coalition therefore put forward a different candidate: Suleiman Frangieh. Frangieh was close to both Hezbollah and Syria and his Marada Movement was a part of the March 8 coalition. Former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, who is the leader of the March 14 coalition, backed Frangieh over Geagea but many other members of the March 14 coalition saw this as surrender to Hezbollah, even if Hezbollah had not shown any support for Frangieh and had continued to back Michel Aoun. A parliamentarian I met said that it was no longer clear who was in March 8 and who was in March 14.

25. The predominantly Druze Progressive Socialist Party, which does not belong to either of the coalitions, backed Henri Helou to prevent either Aoun or Frangieh from winning. This attempt proved unsuccessful.

26. It was believed by many analysts and some MPs that I met that Hezbollah actually favoured the power vacuum. Due to its ties to Iran, Hezbollah would oppose any nomination seen as pro-Saudi and would continue to block consensus to increase its leverage in the negotiation process. In the end this strategy proved successful as their candidate was finally elected.

27. Each ministry in Lebanon is controlled by a certain group and, without a President to supervise for such a long time, many things had spiralled out of control. It should be noted however that the army and the security forces did not seem to have been affected by the political crisis and continued to work satisfactorily.

28. Europe should help Lebanon by encouraging the different factions to work together and to separate politics from the provision of services. Syria is indeed putting a lot of pressure on Lebanon, but not to the benefit of any particular group. The different groups should understand that power sharing is essential in order to solve problems. The Lebanese model is far from perfect but it has held the country together for a long time.

## 7. Lebanese civil society

29. More than 8 000 civil society organisations are registered with the Ministry of the Interior. To these should be added trade unions and syndicates which are registered with the Ministry of Labour. Through these organisations, Lebanon's civil society has lobbied and protested for changes in the electoral law and the personal status law. Despite raising awareness concerning these laws, no new legislation has been adopted. During my visit, I had the opportunity of meeting a representative of the main non-governmental organisation (NGO), whose aim is to "reform the administrative and electoral systems to ensure an accurate representation and effective participation", the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) created in 1996. LADE is also involved in election monitoring, aims to educate citizens on important electoral issues and puts pressure on political parties to adopt the necessary standards for democratic elections. In 2006, LADE and two other organisations, the Lebanese Transparency Association and the Centre for Lebanese Studies, started the Civil Campaign for Electoral reform.

30.     Civil society organisations in Lebanon have been successful in lobbying for the adoption of legislation concerning domestic violence and human trafficking. KAFA ("Enough") is an important NGO which played a prominent role in the adoption of legislation in 2014 concerning domestic violence. KAFA also helped to train the Internal Security Forces on the new legislation.

31.     The Lebanese Organisation of Studies and Training (LOST), of which I also met representatives, was created in 2008. LOST is committed to creating a more developed and equitable society mainly by working with women, young people and children and through the fulfilment of human rights. There are also other NGOs in Lebanon which promote human rights, such as the Lebanese Centre for Human Rights (CLDH), created in 2006, which is particularly involved in fighting against forced disappearances, arbitrary detention and torture.

32.     The Lebanese Transparency Association was created in 1999 and its main goal is to curb corruption. Instead of looking at specific cases of corruption, the NGO looks at eliminating corruption by advocating reforms and by promoting the principles of good governance.

33.     NGOs also play an important role in helping the flow of Syrian refugees, as well as providing assistance and lobbying in many other domains (environment, illiteracy, poverty, corruption).

34.     The implication of the Lebanese population in political life could also be seen in the recent municipal elections, held on 8 May 2016. These were the first elections to be held in Lebanon since 2010 and were very different from previous municipal elections. In light of the current political climate of clear mistrust of the political establishment in Lebanon, municipal elections have not only acquired a symbolic importance but also a practical importance as municipalities currently have to deal with many difficult situations (rubbish collection crisis, refugees). Previous municipal elections in Lebanon have often been void of competition with the winners of the elections normally being those who have ties to traditional entities of power, whether these are political parties or powerful families. Therefore, the candidates in municipal elections often do not present a programme or an agenda for local development.

35.     The 2016 municipal elections saw a change in this. Beirut Madinati – a social movement – offered an alternative to the traditional candidates and their parties, which are no longer trusted by the population. Beirut Madinati's candidates were not affiliated to any ruling political party and it presented a 10-point programme which prioritised "the primacy of the public good, social justice, transparency, and stewardship of our city for future generations". Beirut Madinati lost the elections but still won approximately 40% of the vote in Beirut, which is relatively high for a recently formed grassroots campaign. The movement has successfully pushed Lebanese politics in a more programme-based direction. Maya Saikali, a creative director involved in the communication aspect of the campaign, said that despite not winning the elections, Beirut Madinati has successfully started a conversation and that the group's aim is to continue this conversation through "continuous work and involvement in our city". Ibrahaim Mneimneh, candidate for Beirut Madinati, whom I met, said that for the first time the Lebanese population was willing to participate in political life, believing that they could bring change.

## 8. External influences in Lebanese politics

36.     Lebanese politics are highly influenced by external powers and in particular by two States: Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two countries back different political organisations in Lebanon.

37.     Hezbollah (or the "party of God') was created during the Lebanese civil war, after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982. Iran played an important role in the emergence of the group as it received training from Iran's Revolutionary Guards and is still heavily financed by Iran today (according to Matthew Levitt, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Iran could be giving Hezbollah up to $200 million per year). In Hezbollah's founding manifesto of 1985, it pledged its loyalty to Iran, urged the establishment of an Islamic State and called for the destruction of the Israeli State and the end of Western intervention in the Middle East. Hezbollah's ideology has made it an important proxy for Iranian foreign policy. Hezbollah has also been largely backed by Syria, which explains its support for Bashar Al-Assad's regime. Through Hezbollah, Tehran clearly has an influence on the Lebanese political landscape. Dr Ali Fayad, the representative of Hezbollah whom I met, said that Hezbollah were extremists in fighting Israel and the terrorists in Syria (Daesh, Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda) but were very moderate as far as Lebanon's internal politics were concerned.

38.     Saudi Arabia played an important role in the peace talks which put an end to the Lebanese civil war. It then went on to support the March 14 Coalition to try and counter Iranian influence in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia has mainly used money to gain influence in Lebanon – or to counter Syrian and Iranian influence in the

country. Saudi Arabia acts as an important guarantor of a major part of Lebanon's debt and supports the Lebanese economy both directly and indirectly. Indirectly through the tourism industry and Lebanese expatriates working in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Directly, Saudi Arabia helps support Lebanon through aid packages. However, in January 2016 the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was attacked by a mob after Saudi Arabia executed a dissident Shiite cleric. After the attack on the Embassy, all members of the Arab League – except for Lebanon – condemned the attack on the Embassy. Lebanon's refusal to take part in the condemnation has severely damaged the country's relations with Saudi Arabia which decided to cancel a $3 billion grant for the Lebanese armed forces and a $1 billion grant to the Internal Security Forces in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia also advised its citizens to avoid the country. Lebanon is no longer the popular destination for Arab tourism that it once was.

39.     I was told that Lebanon had recently received €28 million from the European Union for the education of Syrian refugee children and at the same time it had received €55 million from an anonymous donor from a Gulf State for the religious education of Syrian refugee children. It should be noted that, under the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement which entered into force in 2006, Lebanon already receives €50 million per year from the European Union.

## 9. The refugee crisis

40.     In October 2016, the committee considered a preliminary draft report on "The situation in Lebanon and challenges for regional stability and European security", during the discussion of which colleagues raised the issue of refugees. As I pointed out on that occasion, this is a report to the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy and therefore I wished to concentrate on the political situation. However, as the refugee problem has an impact on the situation, I will briefly refer to it.

41.     Since the conflict in Syria developed into a fully fledged civil war in March 2012, the Assembly has been drawing attention to the plight of refugees. Already in 2012 it adopted Resolution 1902 (2012) on the European response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria; in April 2013, it held a current affairs debate on "Syrian refugees in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq: how to organise and support international assistance?"; in June 2013, it adopted Resolution 1940 (2013) on the situation in the Middle East; in October 2013, Recommendation 2026 (2013) on the situation in Syria; in January 2014, Resolution 1971 (2014) "Syrian refugees: how to organise and support international assistance?"; and in April 2016, Resolution 2107 (2016) on a stronger European response to the Syrian refugee crisis. These texts list the measures the Assembly deem necessary to cope with the refugee crisis.

42.     Lebanon has registered more than one million refugees from Syria, but the total number is estimated at 1.5 million, which represents one quarter of the Lebanese population. This number adds to the many refugees who were already there making Lebanon the country with the highest number of refugees per capita in the whole world. The international community should be thankful to Lebanon for its hospitality and should show its solidarity in a more effective way.

43.     Some 450 000 Palestinian refugees are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Lebanon, mainly living in the country's 12 refugee camps; some have been there for the last 60 years and some are in their fourth generation. Lebanese legislation restricts the rights of refugees (for example the right to work) and does not allow for their integration.

44.     As referred to in Resolution 2107 (2016), in 2015, the Lebanese Government introduced new criteria for refugees to renew their residence permits. According to Amnesty International,[3] "most refugees find it impossible to pay the fee (U$200 per person) to renew their permits and provide the numerous documents required. Without a valid permit, refugees from Syria are considered to be in breach of Lebanese law. This exposes them to a range of human rights violations". In addition, in 2015 the United Nations had to reduce the support and amount of assistance it provided to refugees in Lebanon as it only received 57% of the funds needed.

45.     In view of this delicate situation, the international community, including the member States of the Council of Europe, should step up, as a matter of urgency, their contribution to support and assist the refugees presently in Lebanon. They should, on the one hand, increase their financial support for the humanitarian response on the spot and, on the other hand, increase resettlement possibilities for those refugees who would so wish.

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3.     https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/3551/2016/en/.

**10. Concluding remarks**

46.     Lebanon is going through hard times but is still resilient. The country is a good example of peaceful coexistence of different religions and should be supported to allow this to continue. The crisis in Syria has had an impact and some clashes have spilled over into Lebanon. The economy in general and services in particular are in stagnation. However, the complex status quo works for all the groups as these feel that they might lose if the situation were to change.

47.     The main reason why it took more than two years to elect a President was the fact that the Christian groups could not agree on a candidate acceptable to the two main political coalitions. In spite of the disagreements between groups and inside the groups, there is a broad consensus on avoiding the worst: every political party agrees that the risk of another civil war should be avoided by all possible means. Problems in Lebanon will not be completely solved if Syria is not fixed. Europe, which still has an influence in Lebanon, should support Lebanese resilience mechanisms.

48.     Many Lebanese politicians I met are convinced that decisions concerning Lebanon are taken abroad (in Riyadh, Tehran, Moscow or Washington). Some mentioned that Lebanon was affected by the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and some fear that fighting might spill over into Lebanon, mainly through the heavy involvement of Hezbollah (which is a State within the State) in the war in Syria. The lack of a President for more than two years was seen as problematic. There is no doubt that the Iranian and Saudi human rights records are deplorable. However, these two countries have a real influence in Lebanon and it seems impossible to solve the country's problems without them.

49.     At the time of my visit, all the political parties agreed that Lebanon had to solve three major challenges: electing a president (this has since been resolved); revising the electoral law; and preparing national elections before 22 June 2017. Lebanon could use external assistance at the political level to try to solve the political deadlocks. Those I talked to were willing to let Europe and the Council of Europe play a role.

50.     Therefore, in addition to material support to cope with the refugee problem and technical support, which are already mentioned in previous Assembly adopted texts, I recommend the following:

–     establishing a sustainable working relation between the Parliamentary Assembly and the Lebanese Parliament, first by inviting Lebanese parliamentarians to follow the work of the Assembly and then by encouraging the Lebanese Parliament to apply for partnership for democracy status with the Assembly;

–     offering the expertise of the Venice Commission to the Lebanese Parliament in order to revise the electoral law;

–     offering political support to one of the few stable countries in the region. Stability in the Middle East is security for Europe and therefore it is our responsibility to support Lebanon.