
A state that can only react

Why Lebanon governs in hindsight, and who that serves

By *Abdelnaser Ayi*

CORE GROUP

STC03202605



The Lebanese state does not anticipate. It waits for the collapse and then manages the debris. This is usually explained as incapacity, the result of weak institutions and chronic crisis. This issue argues the opposite: that reaction is not the state's failure but its equilibrium, the mode a particular arrangement of power actively rewards. A state is reactive when anticipation would cost the people who run it more than the crisis does.

I.

There is a rhythm to Lebanese governance that everyone recognises and few interrogate. The budget follows the collapse it should have prevented. The regulation arrives after the transgression it should have forbidden. The reform is drafted in the wreckage of the thing it might have saved. Policy is made in hindsight as a matter of habit, not accident: the state looks backward to explain rather than forward to anticipate, and its working horizon has narrowed to survival. It practises, in the plainest terms, a politics of now with no politics of next.

The standard account calls this incapacity. The institutions are hollowed, the treasury is empty, the crises arrive too fast; naturally the state can only scramble to contain them. All of that is true at the level of description, and all of it stops short of the question that matters. Many poor and battered states still plan. Anticipation does not require wealth; it requires the will to bear a small, certain cost now against a large, uncertain one later. The Lebanese state will not bear that cost, and the interesting question is why a system would so consistently choose the catastrophe it can manage over the prevention it could afford.

II.

Begin by taking reaction seriously as a choice rather than a fate. To anticipate a crisis is to act before it is visible, which means spending political capital and money on a danger most people cannot yet see, and accepting blame if the danger never arrives. To react is the reverse: you spend nothing until the catastrophe is undeniable, by which point the spending is forced, shared, and unanswerable. Prevention exposes the decision-maker. Reaction protects him. In any system where officials fear exposure more than they fear the crisis, reaction is simply the rational strategy.

Lebanon's confessional settlement turns that individual incentive into a structural law. Authority is dispersed across sectarian enclaves, each able to block a decision and none able to compel one, so that every crisis summons not a coherent state response but a mosaic of factions each calculating its own exposure. Anticipatory action requires exactly what this arrangement is built to prevent: a single actor willing to move first and absorb the risk.

Prevention needs an agent. The system was designed to ensure there is never one.

III.

This is why reactivity in Lebanon is not a phase to be reformed away but an equilibrium that reproduces itself. Consider what a moment of genuine foresight would require: an official names a danger before it is general knowledge, commits resources against it, and overrides the factional vetoes that would otherwise delay the response into irrelevance. Each of those steps imposes a concentrated, immediate cost on identifiable people, the holders of the vetoes, the beneficiaries of the delay, in exchange for a diffuse, future benefit to the public. The cost is paid now and personally; the benefit accrues later and collectively. No rational occupant of a veto point trades on those terms.

So the danger is allowed to mature. And when it finally breaks, something convenient happens: the cost of the catastrophe is socialised, absorbed by the whole population through ruin, inflation, and loss, while the cost of having prevented it was never paid by anyone. **Reaction is the mechanism by which those who could have acted are spared the price of acting, and the public is handed the bill instead.** The 2019 financial collapse, foreseen for years and prevented by no one, and the 2020 port explosion, sitting in plain documentation and acted on by no one, are not failures of foresight. They are foresight declined, because declining it was, for the people positioned to act, the cheaper option.

IV.

Recognising this changes what the demand for a more anticipatory state actually means. The familiar prescription, build the institutions, gather the data, train the planners, mistakes the symptom for the disease. Lebanon has had able planners and even, briefly, capable planning institutions; this series has described how they were built and deliberately unbuilt. The constraint on foresight was never primarily technical. A state acquires the capacity to anticipate only when anticipation stops being individually punishing for the people who would have to do it, which is to say only when the distribution of veto and exposure is changed. Foresight is not a skill the state lacks. It is a behaviour the present arrangement penalises.

That is the narrow, firm conclusion, and the track will build on it rather than leap past it. The reactive state is not waiting to be taught to plan. **It is being rewarded, precisely, for not planning, and it will keep collecting that reward until the structure that pays it is changed.** To call Lebanon's governance short-sighted is to misdescribe it. It sees the crises coming as clearly as anyone. It has simply concluded, correctly within its own logic, that the catastrophe it can manage is safer than the prevention it would have to own.

NOTE

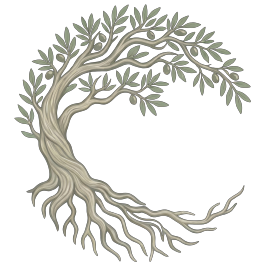
The account of the 2019 collapse as foreseen-and-unprevented draws on the World Bank's characterisation of the pre-crisis model; the port explosion record refers to the documented, unacted-upon warnings preceding 4 August 2020. The institutional history of Lebanon's planning capacity is treated in a companion Statecraft issue.

ABOUT CORE GROUP

Core Group is a Beirut-based strategic foresight house. We produce decision-ready analysis and advisory for governments, diplomatic institutions, and strategic investors navigating Middle Eastern complexity. Our work integrates structured analytical products, applied strategic advisory, and analysis-informed mediation; delivered on daily and weekly cycles calibrated to the speed at which the situation changes.

ABOUT STATECRAFT

Statecraft is Core Group's policy track: sustained analysis of Lebanese state capacity, written to widen the realm of what the state can be argued to do, and to test the institutional arrangements that decide it.



CORE GROUP

Archive code STC03202605

beirutcore.com

info@beirutcore.com

