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# The balance of national capability

*Why Lebanon's "realm of the possible" is larger than it is told*

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*Lebanon is told it cannot plan for its own future. The claim is presented as a sober reading of constraints: geography, sect, regional gravity. This issue argues that it is something else, an alibi. The shared values a functioning state is said to require are not a precondition Lebanon must somehow achieve before it can govern itself. They are a product of institutional design. And treating them as a precondition is the single most reliable way to ensure they never arrive.*

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## **I.**

There is a sentence every Lebanese has heard so often it has stopped sounding like an argument and started sounding like weather. *This is Lebanon*. It is offered to explain why the electricity fails, why the appointment was made on confessional arithmetic rather than competence, why the plan was announced and never began. Pressed into its fuller form, the sentence becomes a theory of the country: Lebanon cannot undertake long-term planning because it lacks the conditions for it. Its geography boxes it in. Its sects cannot agree on a national project. Its position in the region reduces it to a board on which larger powers move their pieces. Strategic foresight, on this account, is something available to states that have already resolved the question of what they are. Lebanon has not resolved it, and so Lebanon cannot plan. It can only respond.

This is the premise we reject. Not because rejecting it is cheering, but because it is false in a specific, demonstrable way, and because its falseness is useful to identifiable people. The claim that the realm of the possible is closed is not a neutral observation about Lebanon. It is a position held most firmly by those whom an open realm of the possible would threaten.

## **II.**

To see why the premise fails, it helps to borrow a frame and then correct the way it is usually read.

In setting out what he calls the seven elements of statecraft, the political scientist Colin Talbot treats government not as the narrow administration of services but as the full science of building, running, and adapting a state. The seven, strategy, structure, scope, size, staff and skills, style, and shared values, are not a checklist. They are a system in which each element shapes and is shaped by the others, all of them turning on the way a government actually exercises power.

The temptation is to lift out the last element, shared values, and set it beneath the rest as a foundation: the bedrock a state must stand on before anything else can be built. On this reading, a society without sufficient shared values, without, in Talbot's example, the "losers' consent" by which the loser of a contest accepts the result rather than overturning the board, is a society on which no durable institution can be raised. Build what you like; without the bedrock, it sinks.

But this misreads the model at the exact point where the misreading is most consequential. Talbot's seven elements are not a stack with values at the bottom. They are a web. Shared values are one node among seven, as much produced by how a state is structured, staffed, and conducted as they are a precondition for it. **The web has no floor. It has only the mutual pull of its parts.**

*That correction is not academic. It is the whole argument.*

### **III.**

Here is what turns on it.

If shared values are a precondition, something a society must already possess before it can construct working institutions, then the fatalists are right and the conversation is over. Lebanon has spent a century failing to produce a single overarching national identity, and nothing suggests one will arrive on a schedule any planner could use. *Forge unity first, then govern* is not a strategy. It is the most respectable phrasing available for never.

But if shared values are an output, if losers' consent is something a state manufactures through the design of its institutions rather than a temperament a nation either inherits or lacks, then the question changes entirely. We stop asking Lebanon to become a nation before it is permitted to behave like a state. We ask instead which arrangements, built how, would produce the consent the fatalists insist must come first.

And here Lebanon should be the last country to doubt that consent can be engineered, because Lebanon has done it. The Taif Accord that ended the civil war was, whatever else it was, a deliberate piece of consent-engineering: a redistribution of power among factions designed to make losing survivable, so that no community's exclusion from one office meant its exclusion from the state. It did not wait for a shared national identity to precede it. It built a mechanism intended to generate cooperation among parties who shared little else, and, for a time, in its own terms, it worked. **Consent was not found in the Lebanese soil. It was constructed.**

The instructive part is what happened next. A mechanism meant to be transitional, one that gestured toward the eventual end of political confessionalism, instead froze. The distribution it set in order to make consent revisable became permanent, and a device for managing a transition hardened into a structure for blocking one. This is the real lesson, and it is not that Taif failed. It is that consent-engineering is demonstrably within Lebanon's reach, and that the task is no longer whether such a mechanism can be built but why the last one ossified, and who is served by leaving it frozen.

*That question is not cultural. It is political-economic. And it is where this track means to do its work.*

#### IV.

Once the question becomes who benefits from the frozen mechanism, the alibi of the closed possible reveals its function. To insist that Lebanon cannot plan, cannot reform, cannot revise its own settlement is to defend an arrangement in which a great deal of value accrues to those positioned at its veto points. Fatalism, in this light, is not the absence of a strategy. For some, it is the strategy, the most effective one available, because it disguises a defended interest as a law of nature.

The recent record supplies the demonstration, and it supplies it not once but repeatedly. The clearest recent instance is the 2022 Staff-Level Agreement with the International Monetary Fund, a comprehensive framework for restoring fiscal balance, restructuring a collapsed banking sector, and rebuilding credible institutions. The capacity to plan was plainly present: the agreement was reached, and it was welcomed at first. Then it was systematically dismantled, not by those who lacked a plan, but by those whose accumulated privileges a plan would expose. The resistance rarely declared itself. It operated through delay, distortion, and the sudden demand for further study, until paralysis itself became the policy.

The episode matters not because it is exceptional but because it is typical. The same shape recurs across every domain, from electricity to the currency to the courts: a workable course exists, it is reached or nearly reached, and it is then suffocated by a structure that rewards no one for acting and penalises no one for blocking. The post-war consensus rule, intended to protect every community, was turned into a mutual veto, an arrangement in which every faction can obstruct any decision without bearing the cost of inaction.

The point is not the fate of any single agreement or any single official. It is that the capacity existed, the data, the framework, the people who could execute it, and that it was suppressed by a system built to suppress it. **The realm of the possible was not small. It was kept small.** A problem that recurs regardless of who occupies the office is a structural problem, not a moral one.

#### V.

What follows from this is a programme, and it is the programme this series exists to pursue.

Core Group is building, issue by issue, a structured analysis of Lebanon's available futures: not forecasts, but mapped alternatives, each stress-tested against the very constraints the fatalists treat as walls. The purpose is not prediction. Whether any specific pathway materialises as drawn remains, honestly, to be seen. The purpose is that the act of mapping and testing is itself a form of capability. It identifies which institutional moves would actually produce consent before the country has to bet on them; it assembles a repository of alternatives that exist whether or not the present arrangement permits them; and it builds the capacity to shape a decision from close to it, rather than to absorb whatever the next crisis delivers.

A state, or those who advise and act around it, that has rehearsed its options is harder to panic, harder to capture, and harder to convince that nothing is possible. That is the safety net: not a guarantee against shocks, but the accumulated capacity to meet them with something other than improvisation.

This is the wager of the Statecraft track, and the reason it opens here. Lebanon's realm of the possible is not fixed by its geography or sealed by its sects. It is, in significant part, a function of what the country will permit itself to imagine, and of who profits, precisely, from keeping that imagination small. The work that follows is an argument, sustained across issues, that the imagination can be larger, **and that the constraints presented as permanent are very often arrangements presented as fate.**

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#### REFERENCE

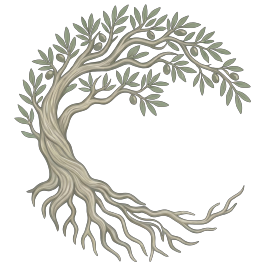
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## **ABOUT CORE GROUP**

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.



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