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National Dialogues in Peacebuilding and Transitions

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Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, right, speaks with Christian leader Michel Aoun, left, as leaders of more than a dozen political factions meet for talks in Baabda, east of Beirut, Lebanon, on June 17, 2010. (Photo by Bilal Hussein/AP)

Lebanon's National Dialogues

By Elie Abouaoun

This case study examines the 2006 and 2008–2012 Lebanese national dialogue processes, chaired respectively by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and President Michel Sleiman. Although national dialogues in Lebanon have succeeded in keeping lines of communication between rival factions open at times of high tension, they have yielded little in the way of tangible results and have ultimately failed to address the core issues driving conflict within the country. The rationale for the dialogues, presented in public statements by President Sleiman and others, highlighted the need to discuss sensitive issues to strengthen institutions and regulate the political debate. However, the post-2005 period has demonstrated that Lebanon's politics could not function without a consensus-building mechanism, for which the successive

rounds of dialogues provided a platform. The dialogue processes—like Lebanese politics more broadly—have been greatly influenced by both the power-sharing agreements and ongoing rivalries between the main sectarian groups and by the powerful regional actors.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Following independence, Lebanon's political system was predicated on an unwritten informal agreement known as the National Pact, which came into being in 1943 and established a unique power-sharing system whereby the president would be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shiite Muslim. A Christian-Muslim ratio of 6:5 was adopted for the Parliament and the rule of parity was

Figure 6. Lebanon Timeline



Note: Not all events on the timeline are discussed in the text.

agreed upon for the government and the administration.¹ However, a mix of factors—the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the Cold War, widespread nepotism and corruption, Christian hegemony over political decisions, and the absence of a balanced policy in social development, among others—deepened the gap between the country’s factions and led to growing frustrations. Muslim communities felt marginalized from the political decision-making process, while Christians feared for their security due to the growing militarization of the Palestinian refugee communities, especially in the late 1960s.

The 1969 Cairo Agreement, struck between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), sought to regulate the presence of Palestinian armed groups in Lebanon, which had begun to cause tensions, primarily with Christian and later to a lesser extent with Shiite communities. Thousands more Palestinian fighters joined their compatriots in Lebanon following their expulsion from Jordan in 1970. The internal Lebanese political divide, coupled with the Palestinian armed presence in country, exacerbated tensions and culminated in a series of violent acts that ignited a fifteen-year civil war (from April 1975 to October 1990) pitting Muslim (supported by Palestinian) and Christian armed factions against one another, and at times including intragroup fighting. The civil war, which also included Israeli and Syrian military invasions, left more than 175,000 dead and 17,000 disappeared and severely damaged the country’s infrastructure and social fabric.²

During the civil war period, no dialogue was able to contain the violence. Between 1976 and 1982, several small initiatives to mediate among the conflicting parties did not lead to concrete results beyond short-lived ceasefires.³ In 1982, American diplomat Philip Charles Habib chaired a mediation that led to the withdrawal of Israeli forces from most parts of Lebanon and the evacuation of all PLO elements and leadership from Lebanon as well as the deployment of a multinational peacekeeping force. In 1983, again with US help, Israel and Lebanon reached a peace agreement known as the

17th May Agreement that—if implemented—would have contributed to the normalization of relations between the two countries. Opposition from Syria and Muslim groups within Lebanon, however, led to renewed internal clashes and pushed Lebanon to revoke the accord, an act that deepened the political crisis. A 1983 national dialogue conference convened in Geneva by Lebanese President Amine Gemayel and a subsequent meeting in Lausanne led to only modest outcomes, in large part because regional powers were unable to reach consensus.

A 1985–86 negotiation process culminated in a tripartite agreement finalized in Damascus and signed by the three parties: the Shia Amal movement, represented by Nabih Berri; the leader of the Druze Progressive Socialist Party, Walid Jumblatt; and the leader of Christian Lebanese Forces, Elie Hobeika. The agreement included political and constitutional reforms—a new electoral system, the redistribution of powers—but was rejected by the major Christian political forces, all of whom believed that it ceded far too much formal influence to Syria.⁴ By the end of 1988, Parliament was unable to elect a successor to the outgoing President Amine Gemayel. Lebanon was ruled by two governments simultaneously: Army Commander General Michel Aoun as a prime minister (appointed by Gemayel) and the pro-Syrian caretaker Prime Minister Salim al-Hoss.

In this context, the League of Arab States (LAS) convened a mediation that included all political leaders and major regional actors, including Syria and the PLO. An interim agreement declaring Beirut free of militias was being negotiated when the tension between the Lebanese and Syrian armies escalated into a full-fledged war in March 1989. The LAS mediation initiative called for a national dialogue conference in Taif, Saudi Arabia. This included a yearlong mediation by the LAS and a two-month meeting of the surviving Lebanese MPs (who had been elected in 1972).⁵ The resulting Taif Agreement in 1989 was a major turning point in the Lebanese conflict because it managed to stop the violence and introduce—at least on paper—a set of political reforms, as

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well as significant amendments to the Lebanese constitution.⁶ Despite the reforms and cessation of violence, many Christians saw the agreement as a capitulation resulting from the fragmentation of the Christian religious and political establishment, the absence of regional or international patrons, and the inability of Prime Minister Michel Aoun to rally a critical mass of Muslim supporters to the War of Liberation to fight the Syrian Army. The agreement effectively led to the international community's ceding to Syria exclusive control over Lebanon's politics and economics for fifteen years.

2006 NATIONAL DIALOGUE

The postwar years (1990–2005) were characterized by Syria's influence in country, with those against the Syrian presence, namely factions within the Christian community, marginalized from the postwar political order.

The undeclared and informal international mandate of Syria in Lebanon faded away toward the end of 2003 over Syria's decision not to participate in the coalition against Saddam Hussein and its support of radical Iraqi elements. The standoff between the West and Syria culminated in the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 on September 2, 2004, which called for the election of a new president, the disarmament of pro-Iranian Hezbollah, and the complete withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon. The next day, under the influence of Syria and its ally Iran, a three-year unconstitutional extension of the mandate of the outgoing and pro-Syria president, Emile Lahoud, was imposed.

On February 14, 2005, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in downtown Beirut. In the aftermath, mass demonstrations and both regional and international pressure led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops and the return to the political sphere of those parties marginalized during the Syrian hegemony period

(1990–2005).⁷ Hariri's camp and their Saudi patrons accused Syria and Iran of Hariri's assassination. An international fact-finding commission (later transformed into a UN investigation committee) was established under UN Security Council Resolution 1595, a prelude to the establishment of an international Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).⁸ The tribunal became another source of division in Lebanon. Whereas the pro-Hariri camp considered it essential to reveal the truth behind the assassination, the pro-Syria camp saw it as a tool to increase the pressure on Syria and Hezbollah that would lead to the dismantlement of the Shiite armed force in which Iran had invested heavily since 1982. This sharp division was reflected in almost every aspect of Lebanon's political life, including minor matters such as the day-to-day work of the government, given that one major coalition called for the president's resignation (March 14 bloc) and a second backed his continued mandate (March 8 bloc). It was in this context in 2006 that Speaker Nabih Berri called for a national dialogue to break the deadlock and defuse the tension between the major political factions.

Establishment and Mandate

The 2006 national dialogue initiative was established informally rather than by legislation, peace agreement, or decree. It was convened by Speaker Berri in an attempt to defuse the tension that followed Rafik Hariri's assassination and the polarization over Resolution 1595. Its informal mandate derived from the pre-dialogue consultations carried out by Berri and his advisers.

Preparatory Phase

As a Shiite leader with relationships with all major political factions, Berri was well placed to convene the national dialogue. Nonetheless, he was initially criticized by some political leaders who doubted that such an initiative could be fruitful at a time of high political polarization, when one major political coalition was

calling for the resignation of the president. As both the convener and the lead facilitator, Berri worked with his political advisers to prepare for the first session of the dialogue, which was held on March 2, 2006.

After announcing his plans to convene a national dialogue, Berri and his team worked to secure major political leaders' commitment to participate. In doing so, he sought prospective participants' agreement on the overall composition of the group. Through early consultations, an agreement was reached that the participants would be equally representative of Christians and Muslims and the March 8 and March 14 coalitions. These quotas were still difficult to fill because the religious leaders were allied with political blocs in varying ways. Berri himself did not decide on the final participant group; instead, he collected nominations and proposed participants before then conducting a sort of shuttle diplomacy between the prospective participants until they reached consensus on the composition of the group.

Agenda

The agenda items for the dialogue included the UN investigation into Rafik Hariri's assassination, relations with Syria (including border demarcation), Resolution 1559, and militia disarmament. The presidential crisis—members of the March 14 coalition calling for the president to resign—was the backdrop for the dialogue and an agenda item in and of itself. During the dialogue, the delegates reached agreements and issued declarations on four items: the Rafik Hariri investigation (which paved the way for the establishment of the STL), Lebanese-Syrian relations, the Palestinian issue, and the Shebaa farmlands.⁹ No agreement was reached on the issue of the presidency or the disarmament of Hezbollah.

The agenda was driven largely by Berri but agreed to by the participants before the start of the dialogue. In its convening, agenda setting, and participant selection, the 2006 national dialogue was very much an elite affair. No citizen consultations were held as the agenda was set, and citizen advocacy had no wider role in the process.

Delegates

At its outset, the dialogue included fourteen senior Lebanese political leaders. Berri, himself a Shia and a member of the March 8 coalition that supported President Lahoud, sought to ensure a balance between it and the March 14 coalition that was calling for the president's removal. The senior politicians were invited to attend with two assistants each. The participants, listed below, represented political groups of various sizes, including leaders of small parties, but the main criteria was that they had representatives in the current Parliament.

- Nabih Berri (Speaker of Parliament and member of the March 8 alliance)
- Fouad Siniora (Lebanese prime minister at the time and member of the March 14 alliance)
- Amine Gemayel (Christian political leader, member of the March 14 alliance, and president of the republic from 1982 to 1988)
- Michel Aoun (former prime minister and Christian political leader and member of the March 8 alliance)¹⁰
- Boutros Harb (Christian political leader and member of the March 14 alliance)
- Saad Hariri (son of Rafik Hariri and member of the March 14 alliance)
- Walid Jumblatt (Druze leader, at the time a member of the March 14 alliance)¹¹
- Michel Murr (independent Christian leader and pro March 8)
- Hagop Pakradounian (Armenian member of Parliament and March 8 alliance)
- Mohammed Safadi (Sunni political leader and member of the March 14 alliance)
- Ghassan Tuani (independent Christian leader and pro March 14 alliance)
- Elias Skaff (Christian political leader and member of the March 8 alliance)
- Samir Geagea (Christian political leader and member of the March 14 alliance)
- Hassan Nasrallah (Hezbollah secretary-general and member of the March 8 alliance)

Figure 7. Lebanon Structure and Delegates

2006 DIALOGUE



2008–2012 DIALOGUE



Structure

All sessions of the dialogue were conducted with the entire group; no subcommittees were formed. The two assistants who accompanied each political leader did not generally speak or even sit at the main table, but instead played support roles; seats at the table were reserved for the political leaders. All decisions were made by consensus, and no deadlock-breaking mechanism was built into the structure.

The 2006 national dialogue had no formal secretariat. Berri had convened the dialogue in his role as Speaker of Parliament, and his office provided the necessary support for logistical and administrative issues (including hotels for participants, who felt that it was unsafe to be moving around the city). No formal rules or code of conduct were in place aside from a general agreement about the agenda items to be discussed.

Convening and Facilitation

Berri convened the dialogue and facilitated all of the sessions. His facilitation style ranged from formal to informal depending on the issue being discussed.

Berri was uniquely positioned to serve as convener. His identity as a Shia and his position within the March 8 political bloc earned him the trust of Hezbollah. At the same time, since he was not directly affiliated with Hezbollah and was Speaker of Parliament and a seasoned politician, he was able to maintain good relationships with other political parties and with the major embassies in Beirut. Having been a warlord and Speaker since 1992, he knew about the intricate histories and past dealings of each of the participating politicians and was able to leverage this knowledge to encourage the group toward consensus.¹²

Berri did not simply facilitate; he also functioned as a third-party mediator in that he proposed compromises and pushed the group to consensus.

Public Participation Opportunities

The dialogue offered no public participation opportunities. Similarly, no track 2 dialogue process supported or fed this track 1 dialogue. The public became aware of the results through formal statements issued to the media by Berri's office. Although there was an informal agreement among participants not to discuss developments to journalists, leaks did occur periodically.

Lebanese public opinion was generally ambivalent about the dialogue. Citizens believed that it was unlikely to produce any concrete gains but acknowledging that it was valuable in temporarily forestalling further violence.

Political and Conflict Developments during the Dialogue

The dialogue commenced on March 2, to the surprise of some observers, who doubted that Berri would be able to convene the fourteen leaders at such a polarized time. The participants quickly reached a non-specific agreement on the investigation into Hariri's assassination. They also made initial progress in deliberations on the disarmament of Palestinians militias, the principle of noninterference of Syria, and the Lebanese identity of the Shebaa farmlands.

After this auspicious start, progress slowed. The participants soon found themselves unable to agree on a replacement for President Lahoud, which would prove to be a sticking point for the remainder of the dialogue. When Druze leader Jumblatt traveled to Washington for a planned visit, tensions rose over the anti-Syria comments he made during the trip and the participation of his replacement Ghazi Aridi in the dialogue during Jumblatt's absence. Amid these tensions, Berri dismissed the dialogue for a brief hiatus until Jumblatt's return to Beirut the following

week. When the dialogue reconvened March 13, the participants reached agreements on disarmament of Palestinian militias, Lebanon-Syria relationships, and the Shebaa farmlands. They then began to discuss the presidency and the disarmament of Hezbollah but were again unable to reach agreement. Berri dismissed the dialogue and asked participants to reconvene on March 22.

Over the following few months, Berri continued to periodically reconvene the dialogue, but he was unable to lead the group to agreement on the issue of the presidency and Hezbollah's weapons. Collegiality among the delegates deteriorated, and the dialogue concluded in July without resolution on the final two issues when hostilities broke out between Lebanon and Israel.

International Involvement

The 2006 Lebanese national dialogue was a marked departure from the peace and dialogue initiatives of the previous twenty-five years in that it was convened and facilitated by a Lebanese politician and included only Lebanese participants. Nonetheless, the main political blocs each had ties to a powerful international sponsor; the March 14th coalition had the support of Saudi Arabia and the United States, and the March 8th coalition had the support of Iran and Syria. This was on full display as Jumblatt's statements in Washington and Berri's visit to Damascus caused tensions within the dialogue.

The international sponsors were particularly opinionated on the agenda item of Lahoud's possible resignation from the presidency. The League of Arab States summit in Sudan in March 2006 included discussion of the Lebanese national dialogue, the Shebaa farmlands, and Lebanon-Syria relations.

Immediate Outcomes

Berri issued a communiqué on March 14 about the agenda item that was decided in the March 2 session of the dialogue ("the question of finding

the truth and its ramifications,” referring to the investigation of the Hariri assassination) and on the agreements that had been reached in the March 14 session. The agreements reached in the March 14 session included “the issue of armed Palestinian groups,” “Lebanese-Syrian diplomatic relations,” and the “demarcation of the Lebanese-Syrian border including the disputed Shebaa farmlands.” The agreements were general and did not provide details on how they would be implemented.

Implementation

As noted, the four items quickly approved at the outset of the dialogue did not provide specific implementation mechanisms. This lack meant that momentum was easily sapped from the implementation process when war erupted with Israel from July through August 2006.

2008–2012 NATIONAL DIALOGUE

The political deadlock gripping the Lebanese political class at the end of the 2006 national dialogue and through the summer 2006 war with Israel persisted into 2007. That year, France convened a meeting in Paris (at La Celle Saint-Cloud) to address this issue, including fourteen Lebanese political parties and two civil society leaders.¹³ The meeting did not lead to specific outcomes but broke the ice between the rivals.

As Lebanon’s executive power is in practice co-managed by both the president of the republic (elected by Parliament) and the appointed prime minister, the expiration of President Lahoud’s extended mandate in November 2007 created a vacuum at the top constitutional institution because Parliament failed to elect a president by the deadline. On May 5, 2008, a meeting of the caretaker cabinet, led by Prime Minister Siniora and lacking Shiite representation, adopted two decrees hostile to Hezbollah that were summarily rejected by the majority of the Shiite community and their Christian allies.¹⁴ Over the days that followed, fighters allied with Hezbollah took over the Sunni area of West Beirut, and on May 10 forced the cabinet to retract

its decrees. Qatar and the League of Arab States brokered a ceasefire on May 15, which was followed by the Lebanese National Dialogue Conference from May 16 to May 21 in Doha.

Establishment and Mandate

After four days of intense discussions, the participants at the Doha conference agreed to elect the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, General Michel Sleiman, as president; conduct parliamentary elections based on a revised distribution of electoral districts; form a national unity (coalition) government; and continue the national dialogue about the other contentious issues after the election of Sleiman.¹⁵ The Doha Agreement—blessed unanimously by the UN and the international community—is considered important because it marked a break after four years of political assassinations targeting the Hariri camp, an eighteen-month political crisis, and sectarian tension that included a sit-in in downtown Beirut. The Doha conference thus provided the mandate for the national dialogue conference that Sleiman would convene in 2009. The Doha Agreement stated that the dialogue “is to be resumed under the aegis of the president as soon as he is elected and a national unity government is formed, with the participation of the Arab League in such a way as to boost confidence among the Lebanese.”

Preparatory Phase

Because the national dialogue drew its mandate from the Doha conference, the preparations that President Michel Sleiman and his adviser Nazem Khoury needed to undertake were fewer than those Berri faced in 2006. Although some members of the March 8 coalition pushed for the inclusion of additional participants, the assumption from the outset was that the participant group would largely mirror the 2006 national dialogue in both size and composition. Like Berri, Sleiman did not select the participants himself but instead facilitated consultations among the prospective participants so that they could identify the final group by consensus.



Fans watch as singer Nancy Ajram performs during a festival for Lebanon's newly elected President Michel Sleiman in downtown Beirut on May 28, 2008. (Photo by Jamal Saidi/Reuters)

During the 2008 preparatory phase, Sleiman and Khoury facilitated agreement among the participants that the main agenda item would be “Lebanon’s defense strategy.” The term was a mutually agreeable one that allowed Hezbollah to remain engaged in the dialogue. Hezbollah saw in this agenda item a scope that went beyond just its arms, whereas the Hariri camp insisted that national defense strategy and Hezbollah weapons were two names for one problem. The preparatory team also approached selected international organizations for technical support, including the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

When the dialogue was dismissed in 2009 in anticipation of national elections and then reconvened in 2010, Sleiman and his team spent the weeks leading up to the first 2010 session facilitating agreement among the participants on expanding the group by five to include independent politicians and academics.

Agenda

The first round of dialogues included seven sessions between September 2008 and June 2009. The primary—and most contentious—issue in this and subsequent rounds was Hezbollah’s weapons. At an early session in 2008, the participants also agreed to discuss the implementation of agreements from the 2006 national dialogue.

The 2008 and 2009 sessions and the five sessions convened in 2010 were marked by contention between the participants about what additional topics should be discussed. Hezbollah and its allies, including the Lebanese Democratic Party, argued that the agenda should not be limited to discussions of Lebanon’s defense strategy. They requested additional issues, such as the disputed Shebaa farmlands and disarming Palestinian groups outside refugee camps.

The agenda of the five sessions held in 2012 was Lebanon’s policy vis-à-vis the conflict in Syria. This ultimately was the only topic on which the participants could make concrete progress. They agreed that the policy toward Syria should be “distancing,” or non-involvement.

Meanwhile, former President Amine Gemayel and Minister Jean Oghassabian disagreed, arguing that the dialogues should concentrate on defense strategy. Social and economic issues, they asserted, should be the purview of the government, and other secondary issues could be dealt with at a later stage within the dialogue after the defense strategy was resolved. The 2010 sessions concluded without any concrete progress on the national defense strategy.

Sleiman reconvened the dialogue in 2012 when the Syrian civil war spilled into Lebanon. The agenda of the five sessions held in 2012 was Lebanon’s policy vis-à-vis the conflict in Syria. This ultimately was the only topic on which the participants could make concrete progress. They agreed that the policy toward Syria should be “distancing,” or non-involvement, and they issued a statement known as the Baabda Declaration on June 11, 2012.

Delegates

When the national dialogue first reconvened in 2008 under President Sleiman, the delegate group was nearly identical to the 2006 group. Nabih Berri joined the dialogue as a participant rather than as a facilitator, representing the March 8 coalition. Mohammad Raad replaced Hassan Nasrallah, and former President Amine Gemayel replaced his son Pierre, who participated in the 2006 national dialogue but was assassinated in Beirut in November 2006. Aside from the absence of Pierre Gemayel and Berri’s presence as a delegate rather than facilitator, the group was unchanged, though the main delegates would occasionally send substitutes when they were unavailable to attend.

When the national dialogue reconvened in 2010 after a hiatus that had begun around the 2009 national elections, Sleiman expanded the group to nineteen,

replacing several delegates and naming four independents to the group. The independents included former Prime Minister Najib Mikati, MP Mohammed Safadi (who represented the March 14 bloc in the previous dialogue), Defense Minister Elias Murr, and academic Dr. Fayez Hage-Chahine. Sleiman also, with the consensus of those in the previous round, replaced several participants. Prior member Michel Aoun was part of the dialogue but did not attend in person. Elias Skaff (March 8 bloc), Ghassan Tueni (March 14 bloc), and Michel Murr (independent turned pro-March 14 bloc) did not return. The new group included Deputy Speaker of Parliament Farid Makari, MP Jean Oghassabian, and MP Michel Pharaon representing the March 14 bloc and Sleiman Frangieh, Talal Arslan, and Assaad Hardan representing the March 8 bloc. Overall, the composition of the 2010 dialogue was seven members from the March 8 bloc, seven members from the March 14 bloc, and five independents. By their confessional identities, the participants were four Sunnis, four Maronites, two Shias, three Greek Orthodox, two Catholics, two Druzes, and two Armenian Orthodox. The announcement of the new participants list was not without conflict; the March 14 coalition requested Arab League observation at the talks, but the March 8 coalition opposed this.¹⁶

Structure

Like the 2006 dialogue, all sessions of the 2008–2009, 2010, and 2012 national dialogues occurred in plenary, and all decisions were made by consensus. Several support structures aided the process. The steering committee included experts selected by the president’s office who contributed their expertise on process and substantive issues.¹⁷ Ad hoc technical advisers were convened periodically to work on the details of a particular thematic issue, such as the national defense strategy.

The Common Space Initiative (CSI) is an independent entity created in 2009 as an offshoot of the UNDP program, in response to the early debates about whether to broaden the national dialogue. It initially relieved some of the pressure to expand the agenda by offering a forum in which government leaders and others could debate broader issues beyond the national defense strategy and break the deadlock on some of the points of contention within the formal dialogue. CSI also supported the national dialogue by offering resources and research. The initiative focused its efforts on bringing together representatives of various parties to jointly generate knowledge regarding the discussed theme and then share this knowledge with their respective parties. CSI also provided technical support and advice regarding the process design to the national dialogue steering committee.

Convening and Facilitation

Michel Sleiman convened and facilitated the 2008–2012 national dialogues as president of Lebanon and per the Doha Agreement. As a former army commander-in-chief whose 1998 appointment to the post was heavily influenced by Syria, however, he did not command respect from all participants. Although Berri's formal role in the dialogues was that of a participant rather than a facilitator, he supported Sleiman by playing the role of backup facilitator, particularly in helping break deadlock through side conversations.

The 2012 style of facilitation was somewhat more formal than in the 2008 and 2010 dialogues in that the parties were invited to present their proposals on specific issues, particularly the national defense strategy. The presentations were followed by facilitated Q&A and discussion.

Public Participation Opportunities

No formal public participation mechanisms were included in the national dialogue. Sleiman or his advisers released periodic statements to the media, but these generally offered little detail.

After its creation in 2009, CSI convened dialogues on a broader set of themes with a broader set of actors, including civil society leaders. Although CSI was not a formal public participation channel within the national dialogue, its role in providing support and research to the national dialogue meant that its staff members could feed a broader set of perspectives into the official dialogue in the form of shared knowledge. Based on the desires of the presidential team, the work of CSI was kept low profile and not publicized.

Political and Conflict Developments during the Dialogue

As the STL policies and procedures were put in place in early 2009, Syria and Hezbollah made efforts to resist and sabotage them. This exacerbated tensions between the March 8 and March 14 blocs within the national dialogue, tensions that continued through 2010 and 2011.

The two main blocs each carried out boycotts at different points in the dialogue, with Hezbollah (a key part of the March 8 bloc) protesting attempts to discuss its weaponry and March 14 accusing Hezbollah of making decisions over war and peace unilaterally and outside of state institutions. The March 8 coalition held an additional boycott in 2012 over the March 14 coalition's position regarding the issue of "false witnesses" linked to the UN probe of former Prime Minister Hariri's assassination in 2005.

Violence near the border with Syria as the Syrian civil war spread into Lebanon prompted Sleiman to reconvene the national dialogue in 2012 after a hiatus in 2011. The intensifying Syrian conflict—and the best way for Lebanon to respond—was an urgent topic that displaced the focus on Lebanon's national defense strategy in the 2012 dialogue sessions.

International Involvement

The primary international support for the 2008–2012 Lebanese dialogues—mandated by the Doha Agreement, born with substantial international

involvement, and subsequently run as a national process—was financial and logistical support to the CSI.

Immediate Outcomes

The 2008–2012 dialogues resulted in fewer agreements than the 2006 dialogue but kept alive the channels of communication between the parties. The participants were unable to reach agreement on the main agenda item: Lebanon’s national defense strategy. This was in large part because the March 14 political bloc believed that the most important subtopic within the defense strategy was Hezbollah’s weapons, but Hezbollah and its allies were unwilling to negotiate on the point. The sole agreement from the national dialogue was the Baabda Declaration, issued in June 2012, which reaffirmed in fifteen points the parties’ commitment to dialogue, good governance, and a policy of distancing or non-involvement in regional conflicts. However, just after it was adopted, a controversy arose over the content and interpretation of the declaration, effectively stripping the document of its already weak legitimacy.

Implementation and Implications

Because the 2008–2012 dialogue produced little in the way of formal agreements and failed to address its original objective, the Lebanese defense strategy, no formal implementation efforts followed.

The Baabda Declaration was never implemented. As of 2011, Lebanese Sunni activists and political parties supported the anti-Assad factions in Syria (including by sending fighters and other types of assistance), and Hezbollah engaged directly in the military operations as of the end of 2012 to support Assad and his army.

Some observers believed that the rounds of dialogue held after 2010 were not intended to reach agreement on its main theme (Hezbollah arms) but simply to contain tension at the grassroots level and to convey a message to the international community that the Lebanese political establishment was working on implementing Resolution 1559 through dialogue.