



Averroes Policy Forum

Advancing Policy Dialogue



**Political and Civic
Engagement of the
Lebanese Diaspora**

Civil Society Organizations
Blueprint

Civil Society Series

Averroes Policy Forum Papers discuss timely policy topics impacting the MENA region featuring insights from active civil society leaders. The papers are also used to create an active engagement with decision makers amid more inclusive policy dialogue.

Author; Kathya K. Berrada

Senior Program Manager at the Arab Center for Research, Morocco.

Expert Contribution; Ibrahim Jouhari

International Affairs and Electoral Engagement Consultant, Lebanon.

Call to contribution

The 2022 Lebanese elections saw a larger mobilization of the diaspora as manifested by a turnout rate superior to the one registered inside the country. Additionally, the diaspora expressed an orientation toward change with 30% vote for emerging nonsectarian parties and independent candidates.

Civil society organizations targeted more actively the diaspora during the last elections in an attempt to mobilize Outside of the Country Vote (OCV) in favor of change.

The Averroes Policy Forum aims at documenting and analyzing CSOs deployed initiatives (both online and offline) amid greater diaspora political engagement with major focus on:

- On the ground efforts deployed in this regard.
- Challenges faced by CSOs in their efforts to mobilize the diaspora.
- Forward looking approaches to sustain a long-term political engagement of the diaspora beyond the electoral timetable.

The study will feature insights from CSOs based both in and outside Lebanon with the aim to generate practical recommendations to better integrate the diaspora in the long-term political process of the country.

We are seeking at this stage insights from CSOs with established initiatives engaging the Lebanese diaspora in the political and civic process. If you wish to participate, please fill in the survey :

<https://form.jotform.com/231036842651048>

A lager diaspora mobilization for the 2022 elections

The economic meltdown in Lebanon has triggered a new large emigration wave starting from 2019. The explosion of Beirut's port and its corollary economic downturns further accelerated the emigration trend. While the diaspora has always been part of the Lebanese history, its role as a political player is rather new following a recent amendment to the electoral law allowing Outside the Country Voters (OCV) to vote for all the 128 MPs instead of limiting their votes to six previously reserved seats.

Alongside other factors, this amendment seemingly led to lager diaspora mobilization during the May 2022 general election as reflected by a significant increase in the number of outside of the country registered voters. This increase has been noted in different regions of the world with five times more registered voters in Asia (mostly GCC), three times more in Europe and Africa and double in North America¹.

However, it is difficult to attribute this unprecedented mobilization to greater political engagement alone as the absolute number of out of the country voters has also significantly increased following the latest emigration wave.

While the absolute number of outside of the country registered voters is insufficient to draw conclusions, the OCV turnout rate of 63.5% in the last election singled an overall larger mobilization than the one observed inside the country which did not exceed 46%. This larger mobilization dynamic was induced in part by the new diaspora composed mainly of youth who left the country recently and still aspire for structural changes in Lebanon. The voting results confirmed the orientation with an almost 30% OCV in favor of change emerging parties and independent candidates.

Conceptually, we can assume that Outside of the Country Voters would vote beyond sectarian lines since:

- They do not benefit from clientelist services.
- They are not target of vote buying
- They generally do not suffer intimidation to vote in a certain way.

A recent amendment to the electoral law allows Outside the Country Voters to vote for all the 128 MPs instead of limiting their vote to six previously reserved seats

A 63.5% OCV turnout rate against 46% inside the country turnout rate signaled a larger diaspora mobilization

¹ The Lebanese Diaspora and upcoming elections, Arab Reform initiative, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-lebanese-diaspora-and-the-upcoming-elections-lessons-from-the-2018-voting/> accessed 2/02/2023

The Lebanese diaspora; a new context with an underlining old story

The history of the Lebanese diaspora is intertwined with the history of the country as a whole bearing its scars and at times embracing its hopes and aspirations. The country has known several emigration waves throughout its history, yet, the size of the Lebanese diaspora is often overestimated. A substantial portion of worldwide populations from Lebanese origins lost any practical ties with Lebanon and fully integrated in their host countries with generations of mixed marriages. This is particularly the case of Lebanese in south America who settled there more than a century ago. Today, what we can refer to us an active Diaspora with established cultural, social and economic ties is composed of different emigrations waves including; massive emigration during and just after the civil war, emigration wave of 2000, 2010 and more recently the one of 2019. The latest wave of Lebanese emigrants seems to be the most politically active, before leaving the country many of them participated in the October 17th Revolution.

Diaspora remittances, a coping mechanism

According to Mercy Corps report², outside remittances accounted for more than half of Lebanon's national income as of 2021, making it the most remittance-dependent country in the world. In the absence of serious political will to engage in institutional reforms, remittances

The latest wave of Lebanese emigrants seems to be the most politically engaged

17th October Revolution at Glance

Series of non-centralized leadership protests in Lebanon triggered by government planned increased taxes on Gasoline, Tobacco and VoIP applications. The protests quickly gained national traction denouncing:

- Rampant corruption
- Lack of public services such water, electricity and sanitation.
- Absence of accountability on entrenched old political elites.

The movement led either directly or indirectly to:

- The resignation of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri followed by the resignation of Prime minister Hassan Diab.
- Resignation of 10 members of the Lebanese Parliament.
- Emergence of reform and change political movement beyond sectarian lines.

² Over half of Lebanon's GDP comes from remittances, The National News, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/12/06/over-half-of-lebanons-gdp-comes-from-remittances-report-says/> accessed 02/02/2023

are mere coping mechanism. The report also estimated that between 15 and 30 per cent of families rely on remittances as a source of income.

Redefining economic and political contribution of the diaspora

While remittances continue to be the most significant economic contribution of the Lebanese Diaspora, other forms of socio-economic contributions are also emerging triggered by larger scale use of technology.

Use of online platform to raise donations

Following the port exposition in Beirut, an online donation campaign was initiated on GoFundMe platform to raise funding for five different NGOs:

- Lebanese Red Cross : On-ground medical emergency services
- Lebanese Food Bank Association : Food supplies to displaced families
- Donner Sang Compter : Blood donations and on-ground crisis relief efforts
- Beit Al Baraka : Comprehensive support for families, including fixing damaged homes, food distribution, and medical coverage
- Offre Joie : Volunteer movement to rebuild homes and clean up debris.

The initiators of the campaign from the Lebanese diaspora ensured that the total amount would be distributed equally across the NGOs which reportedly have undergone a rigorous review process with a strong good governance track record and no affiliation with political or religious groups.

Relaying on technology to raise funds represents in itself a paradigm shift when it comes to moving away from helping close relatives to supporting larger community and causes. Use of crowd sourcing also include elements of accountability

The increased use of technology to crowdfund donations lays the foundations for emerging forms of diaspora socio-economic contributions with underlying principles of accountability

and due diligence which have often been overlooked in the past.

Civil Society efforts to reach out to the Diaspora

Civil Society organizations have deployed during the last years more efforts to politically mobilize the diaspora. An overall better communication strategy with both online and offline components was put in place before the 2022 elections in an attempt to ensure greater political mobilization of the Diaspora. Initiatives like Kulluna Irada and Nahwal Watan clearly targeted expatriates during the 2022 elections.

Kulluna Irada is a Lebanese based advocacy group committed to political reforms and good governance financed exclusively by its members both residents and members of the diaspora. Kulluna Irada engages in multiple stakeholder's dialogue with activists, civil society organizations, experts, political parties in opposition, as well as decision makers.

Nahwal Watan is another independent NGO which provides support for the change movement. Nahwal Watan engaged and mobilized expatriates to rally their vote and engage them with local efforts.

Other civil society organizations also started initiatives aimed at increased diaspora civic and political engagement, in the upcoming study, the Averroes Policy Forum aims to analyze those initiatives and provide research backed recommendations.