

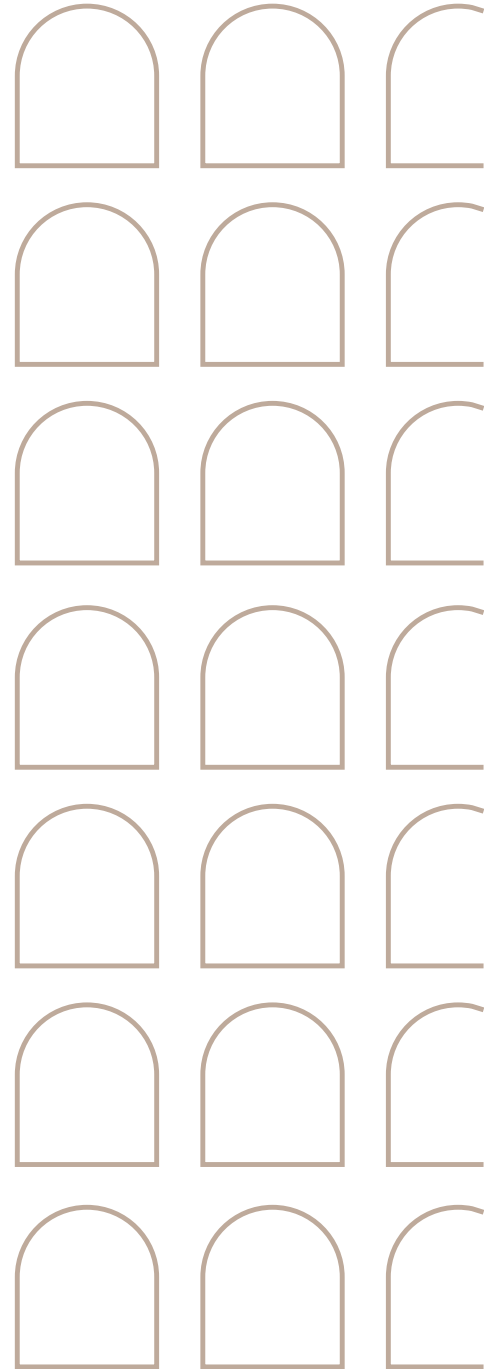
STG Policy Papers

POLICY BRIEF

**BEYOND RHETORIC:
RETHINKING EU'S RESPONSE
TO LEBANON'S CRISIS AMIDST
REGIONAL UNCERTAINTY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

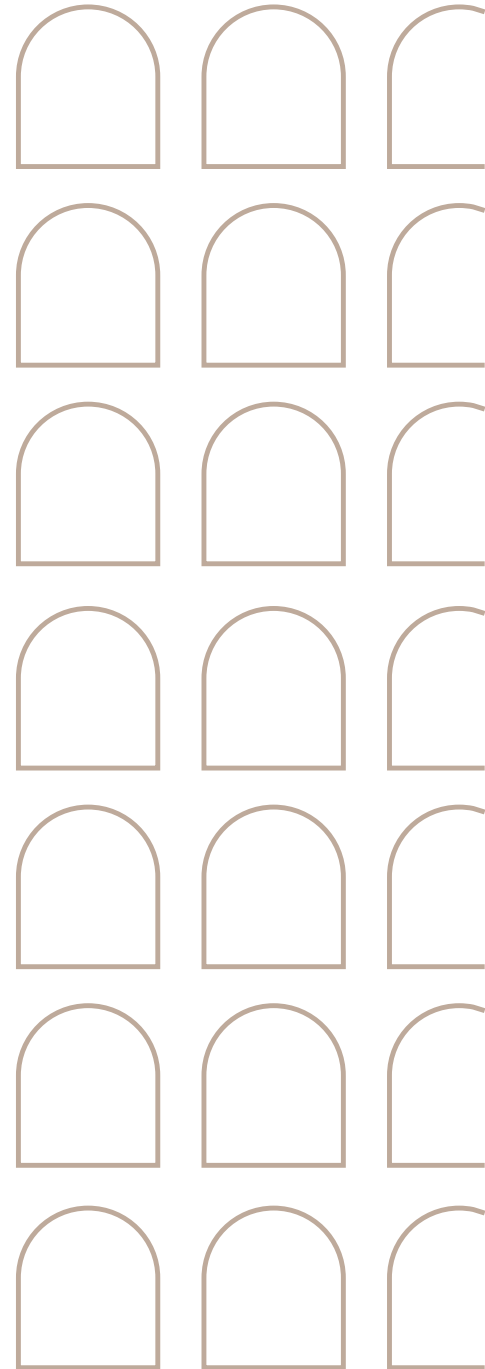
On 2 May 2024, President Von der Leyen [said](#), "My visit today is a strong testimony of the EU's continued support of Lebanon and its people. The €1 billion until 2027 will provide much-needed assistance to the people of Lebanon and contribute to its security and stability." While the EU's financial pledge is undoubtedly a significant commitment, there are compelling arguments to suggest that it may not be enough to address the multifaceted challenges facing the country adequately.

Lebanon is passing through complex challenges, including economic collapse, political turmoil, and regional conflict. The country's stability is crucial for its citizens and regional peace, making the European Union (EU) engaged through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) vital. The [ENP Strategic Plan 2020-2024](#), alongside [Decision No. 1/2016 of the EU-Lebanon Association Council](#), outlines the framework for the EU-Lebanon partnership priorities established by the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations ([DG NEAR](#)). This policy brief inspects the European Union's strategic engagement with Lebanon within the evolving southern neighbourhood, emphasising the urgent need for intervention amidst the country's intricate economic collapse, conflict, and political instability challenges. Critical concerns like security, governance, economic growth, migration, and dialogue are highlighted, urging coordinated efforts for stability, prosperity, and resilience.

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Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute



1. INTRODUCTION

The crisis in Lebanon, a threat to regional stability, requires immediate action from EU institutions such as [DG NEAR](#), [DMAS](#), and [DEMED](#), given their historical partnership dating back to 1977. The EU's unique position enables it to address Lebanon's economic collapse, conflict, and political instability, aggravated by factors like the [Syrian refugee influx](#) and sectarian tensions. A comprehensive strategy involving diplomatic mediation, democratic reforms, and humanitarian aid is essential to mitigate the crisis, particularly in the face of currency devaluation, poverty, and youth migration. Additionally, tensions with Israel heighten the risk of war, necessitating swift EU intervention to prevent further destabilisation.

To tackle Lebanon's challenges effectively, the EU must prioritise empowering youth, fostering community-led solutions, and promoting social cohesion. Initiatives like the [Youth RESOLVE 2 project, funded by the EU's MADAD Trust Fund](#), demonstrate promise by engaging youth in decision-making and peacebuilding activities. Upholding Lebanese sovereignty, diplomatic mediation, democratic reforms, and humanitarian assistance form the core of a comprehensive approach. The EU's MADAD Trust Fund supports youth empowerment and humanitarian aid, while civil society engagement is vital for democracy promotion.

EU institutions are encouraged to invest in youth entrepreneurship, community projects, and interfaith dialogue, aligning

with EU values and contributing to stability and prosperity in Lebanon. Proactive EU engagement through the ENP can avert crises and promote lasting stability by leveraging diplomatic influence and financial resources.

The policy brief urges EU assistance in governance, economic development, job creation, environmental protection, and migration management, focusing on Lebanon's youth population. This effort aims to bolster Lebanon's future prosperity, stressing ecological protection and migration management.

The European Union's revitalised focus on the interconnection between its future and that of its southern neighbours and partners underscores the imperative of cultivating a stable, secure, and prosperous region. Within this context, DG NEAR assumes a pivotal role in steering the Commission towards enhancing Europe's global standing, with crucial priorities encompassing the [European Green Deal](#), [digital innovation](#), inclusive economic growth, and promoting a European way of life.

Lebanon, positioned as a critical 'Southern Neighbour,' presents an opportunity for the EU to reaffirm its commitment and strategic interest in averting further destabilisation amidst the country's precarious situation, characterised by economic turmoil and heightened regional conflict risks. Mitigating this destabilisation is paramount, challenging misconceptions of the Middle East's distance from European realities and underscoring the significance of the ENP¹ as

¹ The ENP was launched in 2003 and developed throughout 2004 to strengthen the prosperity, stability, and security. It is based on the values of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The ENP was reviewed in 2011, following the 'Arab Spring' uprisings. Given the significant developments in the Neighbourhood since 2011, it became essential to undertake a further review of the ENP in 2015, when a Joint Communication setting out the [main lines of the review of the ENP](#) was published, following a public consultation involving partner countries, international organisations, social partners, civil society and academia. On 9 February 2021, 25 years after the Barcelona Declaration, the European Commission published a Joint Communication with the European External Action Service, called "[Renewed partnership with Southern Neighbourhood – A new Agenda for the Mediterranean](#)".

a framework for EU-Lebanon cooperation rooted in shared values of democracy, human rights, and socio-economic progress.

Lebanon has the [highest number of refugees](#) per capita and per square metre globally. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports there are 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 250,000 to 300,000 [Palestinian refugees](#), along with their descendants who fled Palestine after Israel was created in 1948. Additionally, there are refugees from other countries putting pressure on resources. The risk of the conflict engulfing the country and precipitating a refugee crisis with repercussions across the region and into Europe looms large. The EU's engagement in Lebanon's youth, a pivotal change agent in addressing the country's challenges and fostering a more inclusive and prosperous future, is essential. Prioritising youth empowerment and social cohesion initiatives align with ENP principles and underscores the EU's commitment to promoting democracy, human rights, and socio-economic progress in neighbouring countries.

Lebanon faces ongoing challenges with sectarian tensions, fragile power-sharing, and the quest for a national identity. The EU's decade-long support, including substantial financial aid after the Syrian war fallout and the [2020 Beirut port explosion](#), has played a crucial role in averting catastrophe.

Preventing Lebanon's collapse is imperative for the EU to facilitate reforms, manage the refugee crisis, counter extremism, and foster long-term stability. Leveraging political influence and financial resources, the EU can assist Lebanon in securing a ceasefire, advancing political reform, and addressing the humanitarian crisis. This policy brief provides insights into Lebanon's challenges

and outlines the EU's potential role in addressing them.

2. SECTARIAN STRAINS, PRECARIOUS POWER-SHARING, AND THE QUEST FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY

Political instability and governance challenges have deepened Lebanon's struggles for stability and progress. Failing to form a functioning government has created a power vacuum, hindered decision-making, and eroded public trust.

The country's complex history, marked by sectarian divisions and external pressures, has left deep scars and unresolved conflicts. [The confessional system](#), established after French occupation [on 8 October 1918](#), aimed to manage sectarian divisions. Still, it was disrupted by the arrival of Palestinian refugees in 1948 due to the [creation of Israel](#), leading to a civil war from 1975 to the early 1990s. The subsequent [Taif Agreement in 1989](#) attempted to address these tensions but did not fully resolve underlying issues, as evidenced by the continued influence of [sectarian alliances](#). [Syrian forces occupied Lebanon until 2005](#), while Israeli troops controlled parts of South Lebanon. During this time, Hezbollah emerged as a significant armed force, resisting Israeli occupation, particularly in Ghajar, Shebaa Farms, and the Kfar Chouba Hills. Hezbollah's rise as a formidable armed entity, notably after the [2006 war with Israel](#), has added layers of complexity to Lebanon's political terrain. Internal power struggles, exemplified by [clashes in 2008](#), have underscored the nation's vulnerability. Despite initiatives like the 2008 [Doha Agreement/Accord](#) and the election of President Michel Aoun in 2016, political instability persists.

The influx of 1.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011, including undocumented children, compounded Lebanon's

difficulties, stretching its resources. The refugee influx raises fears among various Lebanese communities. Christians are apprehensive about potential demographic shifts jeopardising the longstanding Christian-Muslim partnership, while Sunni populations, particularly in poor areas, feel the strain of heightened competition for employment and resources, intensifying societal tensions. Additionally, there are concerns that the refugee situation might parallel the events of 1948, echoing the Palestinian refugee crisis. To add to the uncertainty, recent events, such as the killing of [Pascal Sleiman](#), increased the hate speech against the refugees and Hezbollah's dominance amid a power vacuum of vacancies in critical Christian positions and extensions of military leadership terms, have heightened internal tensions.

To add to the political ambiguity, new factions call for anti-sectarian reforms to change Lebanon's power-sharing system. In 2022, a [maritime border pact](#) with Israel was agreed upon. However, worries persist about Hezbollah's large rocket stockpile, which threatens regional stability. Additionally, Hezbollah's growing influence, corruption, and nepotism among other factions worsen the situation.

Lebanon faces a crucial moment, dealing with its sectarian past, outside pressures, and internal conflicts. Sectarian tensions, regional rivalries, and non-state actors complicate politics. Corruption worsens instability. Hosting large refugee populations strains services and infrastructure. Lebanon's future is uncertain, with unresolved tensions and the risk of more conflict.

The EU's involvement is crucial for Lebanon to tackle challenges and promote regional stability. This includes improving governance, transparency, electoral reform,

and refugee crisis management. These efforts aim to rebuild trust in Lebanon's political institutions and work towards lasting solutions

3. ECONOMIC MELTDOWN AND RIPPLE EFFECTS

The recent Lebanese economic crisis, which emerged in October 2019, is one of the most severe global downturns in modern history, ranking among the top three crises since 1850, [according to the World Bank](#). The crisis stemming from governmental mismanagement precipitated Lebanon's default on its debt, triggering an unprecedented depreciation of its currency by approximately 85%, plunging once-prosperous citizens into widespread poverty. What is particularly alarming is the crisis's ripple effect, magnifying existing fault lines within Lebanese society, particularly along social and sectarian lines, to unprecedented levels.

The repercussions of the economic collapse extend far beyond financial hardship. They have deeply entrenched societal divisions, eroded trust in governmental institutions, and exacerbated living conditions for a significant portion of the populace. Indeed, the once-stable public sector now teeters on the brink of collapse, compounding the suffering of its employees. Take, for example, the plight of a teacher whose monthly income, once a respectable \$2,000, has dwindled to a meagre \$40 due to the drastic devaluation of the Lebanese pound. This dramatic decline in purchasing power underscores the stark reality that necessities have become increasingly out of reach for many.

Moreover, the erosion of pensions and social security benefits further compounds the suffering of the most vulnerable segments of society. While some sectors have managed to weather the storm by

adapting to pre-crisis dollar rates, a significant portion of the population relies heavily on external remittances, totalling [over \\$6.4 billion in 2023](#). This reliance highlights the fragile state of Lebanon's internal economy, where external support serves as a lifeline for many struggling to make ends meet.

Efforts to instigate change through protests, often referred to as a 'revolution' or 'Thawra,' have thus far yielded minimal results, further exacerbating public disillusionment. The onset of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), compounded by a catastrophic explosion at the Beirut port in 2020, only served to compound the crisis. Mismanagement of relief efforts and botched investigations into the causes of the blast deepened public mistrust in governmental authorities. Consequently, disillusionment has spurred a mass exodus, particularly among the [youth](#), who seek brighter prospects abroad, exacerbating Lebanon's demographic crisis.

The Lebanese economic crisis has inflicted economic hardship, widened existing social and sectarian fault lines, and shattered trust in governmental institutions. Addressing these underlying issues is imperative for rebuilding stability and fostering reconciliation within Lebanese society.

4. LEBANON AMID ONGOING REGIONAL CONFLICT

The war in Gaza has sent shockwaves through the region, threatening to push Lebanon and other neighbouring countries over the edge of stability into the abyss of collapse. A war is vibrating across the borders, and Lebanon finds itself grappling with a myriad of crises. The Lebanese sentiment sympathises with the Palestinian cause. Now Israel has plunged Lebanon into the precipice of war, as [Netanyahu has threatened to "turn Beirut into Gaza"](#).

According to a [report](#) released in early May, the cross-border fighting has forced nearly 93,040 individuals, 51% of whom are women of South Lebanon, out of their homes. To date, at least 73 civilians have been killed since the escalation of hostilities in October 2023, with two additional civilian deaths between 18 April and 2 May, including a woman and her 10-year-old niece who were killed in an Israeli airstrike in Bint Jbeil, South Governorate. In total, the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health has reported 1,359 casualties, including 344 people killed, due to the hostilities since 8 October 2023.

According to the [Washington Post](#), Israel used U.S.-supplied white phosphorus in the Lebanon attack. In addition, [Amnesty International](#) recently stated that the Israeli army fired artillery shells containing white phosphorus, an incendiary weapon, in military operations along Lebanon's southern border between 10 and 16 October 2023. With this use of banned weapons, the Israeli army broke the 2013 pledge to stop using these weapons, wasting the lives of civilians in Lebanon and violating international humanitarian law.

Hezbollah anticipates a war provoked by Israel; it refrains from confrontation to position itself as Lebanon's defender against foreign aggression. Conversely, Israel views the conflict as an opportunity to dismantle Hezbollah's military might, targeting areas south of the Litani River, deep in the Bekka region. However, even Hezbollah's adversaries recognise that eradicating the organisation could ignite civil unrest.

5. LEBANON'S CRISIS: A CALL TO EU LEADERSHIP FOR REGIONAL STABILITY

Lebanon's multifaceted crisis poses a significant threat to regional stability, demanding immediate attention from the

European Union (EU). The EU's longstanding partnership with Lebanon, dating back to [trade agreements since 1977](#), underscores the urgency of addressing the current challenges. Legal frameworks within the [Maastricht Treaty, particularly Article 8](#), highlight the imperative of fostering prosperous and peaceful relations with neighbouring countries.

Several EU member states, including [France](#), recognise the importance of investing in Lebanon for various reasons. Firstly, stability in Lebanon is pivotal for ensuring peace in the Middle East, given the potential spillover effects of instability on neighbouring nations. Secondly, Lebanon's role as a host to a significant refugee population, including Palestinians and Syrians, underscores the humanitarian imperative of investment to alleviate their plight. Moreover, economic investment in Lebanon promises [to foster growth](#) and create employment opportunities, which is especially crucial for its youth population. Furthermore, supporting Lebanon's government and security forces is essential in countering the influence of armed groups and bolstering regional security. Diplomatic engagement offers a platform for dialogue on critical issues such as human rights, democracy, and good governance, which are integral to long-term stability in the region.

Immediate action is imperative to prevent further destabilisation, particularly considering ongoing conflicts such as the ceasefire in Gaza and Lebanon. The EU must leverage its influence to advocate for ceasefires and prevent humanitarian crises, aligning with the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) objectives and ensuring Lebanon's protection.

A comprehensive strategy is needed, leveraging diplomatic channels to advocate

for democratic reforms and inclusive governance structures in Lebanon. This approach involves engaging with regional stakeholders, supporting democratic institutions, and promoting inclusive governance to counter extremist influences and foster stability.

Diplomatic engagement, especially concerning Hezbollah's activities, should be conducted with respect for Lebanese sovereignty. France's historical influence in Lebanese politics could prove instrumental in resolving impasses, implementing reforms, and combating corruption.

Humanitarian assistance and refugee resettlement efforts must be prioritised through collaboration between the EU and Lebanese authorities. This includes focusing on secure resettlement options and legal pathways for refugees, aligning with ENP commitments to address humanitarian crises.

Conditional financial aid tied to political reforms and transparency measures can strengthen democratic institutions and improve stability and prosperity in Lebanon. Linking aid to reforms outlined in conferences such as the [CEDRE conference in Paris 2018](#) offers a tangible pathway towards improved governance.

Civil society engagement is crucial to promote democratic principles and stability in Lebanon. Empowering civil society organisations dedicated to human rights and accountability can foster a more inclusive political environment and ensure effective public service delivery.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EU ENGAGEMENT

That being said, a coordinated approach involving diplomatic engagement, humanitarian assistance, conditional

financial aid, and support for civil society is essential to address Lebanon's challenges. These actions promote stability and prosperity in Lebanon and contribute to regional peace and security. The European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Parliament are urged to prioritise these recommendations and other member states based on bilateral agreements. The policy recommendations can be categorised into key areas:

1) Ceasefire and Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction

To effectively address the ongoing conflict in South Lebanon, it is recommended that a multifaceted approach be employed. Firstly, the EU to take the lead in direct diplomatic negotiations with key stakeholders, such as Israel and Lebanon, is crucial to establishing a ceasefire along with the US. Secondly, collaboration with international organisations like the UN is necessary to provide immediate humanitarian aid to affected regions. Thirdly, forming partnerships with local NGOs and governmental bodies will aid in the planning and execution reconstruction initiatives. However, several challenges must be navigated, including resistance from conflicting parties to agree to a ceasefire and adhere to diplomatic efforts, access restrictions and security concerns hindering humanitarian aid delivery, and limited resources and funding for comprehensive reconstruction endeavours. Despite these challenges, concerted efforts utilising diplomatic, humanitarian, and local partnerships are essential for sustainable peace and recovery in South Lebanon.

2) Addressing the Refugee Crisis and Border Control

Pursuing the following strategies to address the challenges and opportunities in refugee management in Lebanon is crucial. Firstly,

collaboration with the Lebanese government and UNHCR should be reinforced to craft a comprehensive refugee management plan. Secondly, it bolsters border control initiatives by facilitating legal permits for work and residence for Syrians lacking refugee status, thus managing refugee influx effectively. Thirdly, provide support in legal documentation and registration processes, extending assistance to newborn children. However, amidst these implementation strategies, it is imperative to acknowledge and navigate through the encountered challenges. These include the limited capacity and infrastructure of Lebanese authorities, alongside political sensitivities and societal tensions surrounding refugee integration and border control measures. Moreover, financial constraints pose a significant hurdle in sustaining long-term refugee support programmes. Addressing these challenges while implementing the proposed strategies can forge a more effective and humane approach to refugee management in Lebanon.

3) Integrate Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and Proximity Economy

It is essential to adopt comprehensive implementation strategies while addressing pertinent challenges. Firstly, developing SSE capacity-building programs is paramount to fostering partnerships among EU institutions, Lebanese civil society organisations, and social enterprises. Secondly, allocating dedicated funding from ENP resources can significantly bolster Lebanon's SSE and Proximity Economy endeavours. Thirdly, advocating for regulatory reforms within Lebanon is crucial to establishing an enabling environment for SSE and Proximity Economy actors. However, these efforts may face challenges, including resistance from traditional economic sectors to adopt SSE models and

regulatory changes, limited awareness and expertise among local communities regarding SSE opportunities and practices, and the difficulty in promptly measuring the impact and scalability of SSE initiatives. Overcoming these hurdles will require sustained collaboration, targeted education campaigns, and innovative impact assessment methodologies.

4) Engaging the European Parliament

Strategic implementation tactics are advised to tackle Lebanon's challenges and strengthen EU-Lebanon cooperation. Firstly, raising awareness and garnering support can be achieved through parliamentary resolutions and public hearings, highlighting the necessity for EU intervention. Secondly, establishing a specialised task force or working group within the European Parliament would provide focused oversight on partnership initiatives between the EU and Lebanon. Lastly, directing additional funds from the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) through relevant parliamentary committees can enhance support for targeted initiatives, particularly those promoting Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) development in Lebanon. However, several challenges must be acknowledged and addressed during implementation, including varying priorities among EU member states and political factions within the European Parliament, complex bureaucratic processes, decision-making mechanisms within EU institutions, and limited parliamentary resources and capacity for sustained engagement with Lebanon-related issues. Overcoming these obstacles will be crucial for the successful execution of proposed strategies.

These recommendations are intricately linked to Lebanon's multifaceted challenges and address security concerns, humanitarian needs, economic development, and governance issues. The EU can play a

pivotal role in stabilising Lebanon and fostering regional stability and prosperity by intensifying diplomatic efforts, conditioning financial assistance, managing the refugee crisis, promoting social and solidarity economy initiatives, and supporting Lebanese institutions.

7. CONCLUSION: THE IMPERATIVE OF EU ENGAGEMENT FOR REGIONAL STABILITY AND PROSPERITY

The EU's commitment of €1 billion for Lebanon from 2024 to 2027 underscores its dedication to aiding the country amidst crisis, yet it may fall short in adequately addressing Lebanon's multifaceted challenges. The situation demands a more holistic approach. Lebanon grapples with an unprecedented economic, financial, and humanitarian crisis compounded by political instability and the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion. This necessitates a more substantial financial injection to stabilise the economy, reconstruct infrastructure, and deliver vital services. Additionally, the surge in demand for essential services due to the economic downturn and refugee influx may surpass the allocated funds, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups.

EU assistance is contingent on Lebanon implementing critical economic, financial, and banking reforms crucial for long-term stability, but these reforms may require broader financial support and sustained commitment. While the pledge encompasses support for security forces, ensuring lasting security necessitates ongoing investment beyond the stipulated timeframe. Considering prior EU aid and ongoing needs, the current commitment indicates that more substantial assistance is necessary. Overlooking Lebanon's plight risks exacerbating existing challenges, including increased refugee flows and

threats to regional security and economic stability.

The EU can assert its leadership and protect its interests through targeted interventions like diplomatic mediation, governance reforms, and humanitarian aid. It is imperative to prioritise initiatives centred on youth empowerment and social cohesion in Lebanon. By investing in the country's youth and fostering intercommunity dialogue, the EU can cultivate a more inclusive and resilient society, ultimately promoting long-term stability and prosperity.

Despite obstacles, the EU's engagement shows promise. By prioritising initiatives focused on youth empowerment and social stability and navigating geopolitical tensions with respect for Lebanese sovereignty, the EU can play a pivotal role in fostering sustainable solutions and ensuring meaningful intervention in Lebanon's crisis. However, the effectiveness of EU intervention may encounter challenges due to Lebanon's complex political dynamics, regional power struggles, and sectarian tensions. Furthermore, questions about the efficacy of conditional aid in promoting political reforms and combating corruption within Lebanon's governance structures require careful consideration. Additionally, the EU must navigate regional geopolitical tensions, particularly concerning conflicts involving Israel and Hezbollah, while maintaining diplomatic engagement and respect for Lebanese sovereignty and internal dynamics to foster sustainable solutions and ensure meaningful intervention.

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