

Research Article

Beyond the Confessional State: Power, Authority, and Political Order in Contemporary Lebanon

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Abstract

Lebanon is commonly interpreted through confessionalism, but formal confessional institutions alone do not explain how citizens obtain access to the state, how organizations exercise authority, or why political arrangements persist through repeated crises. This article presents a conceptual synthesis of scholarship on Lebanese confessionalism, clientelism, welfare provision, civil society, political economy, and armed authority, supplemented by recent survey research and primary institutional reporting on developments after 2019. It compares how brokerage and relational access operate across political families, sectarian parties, welfare organizations, municipalities, armed actors, diaspora ties, and foreign patronage, and how successive economic, institutional, and security shocks alter the value of those relationships. The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical and does not claim representative measurement of individual attitudes or causal effects. Building on Portes's treatment of the negative consequences of social capital and on network theory's account of position-dependent resources, the article uses social liability to identify the costs attached to otherwise useful ties and network revaluation to trace changes in their practical value. The Lebanese evidence indicates that scarcity can simultaneously weaken patrons' distributive capacity and increase the premium on privileged access, while institutional reform matters to the extent that citizens become less dependent on brokers. The declining need to locate "the right person" is proposed as an observable indicator of reform.

Keywords

Lebanon, Confessionalism, Political Order, Clientelism, Social Capital, Social Liability, Network Revaluation, State-Society Relations

1. Introduction

Lebanon presents a longstanding problem for comparative political sociology. Postwar institutions coexist with clientelism, elite brokerage, corruption, sectarian penetration of public agencies, and overlapping forms of authority [1-3]. Confessionalism remains indispensable because the National Pact and Taif Agreement organize the distribution of major offices and representation [3, 4]. Yet these arrangements do not

by themselves explain why some citizens can obtain employment, medical assistance, administrative action, or protection more effectively than others. That problem directs attention from the allocation of offices to the relationships through which institutions are actually reached.

Lebanese political order is also sustained by ties linking political families, parties, religious authorities, local intermedi-

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aries, municipalities, businesses, charities, armed organizations, civil-society groups, diaspora communities, and foreign actors. Research on civil society and sectarianism shows that formal and informal authority frequently intersect rather than occupy separate spheres [5, 6]. Clientelist exchange likewise persists across social strata [7, 8]. Where procedures are slow, uncertain, or politically penetrated, brokerage can acquire value precisely because an intermediary can make a formal institution work.

The conceptual starting point is established social-capital and network theory rather than a claim to invent their underlying insights. Social capital has long been treated as a resource embedded in relationships [9-12]; Portes explicitly identified negative consequences including exclusion and constraining obligations [11]. Granovetter and Burt showed that the value of ties depends on network position and access to resources [13, 14]. The present article inherits those propositions. Its narrower contribution is to use social liability as a Lebanon-specific analytical label for costs attached to otherwise useful political ties, and network revaluation for changes in their practical worth after shocks to resources, institutions, coercive balances, or external sponsorship.

These concepts generate observable implications. If the argument is wrong, severe resource contraction should simply reduce brokerage as patrons lose distributive capacity; it should not simultaneously increase the premium on access to scarce goods or make some intermediaries more valuable. Likewise, if institutional reform changes rules without changing relational dependence, citizens should remain just as reliant on brokers. A stronger reform outcome should therefore be observable in a declining need to locate “the right person” to obtain a public service, legal remedy, economic opportunity, or physical protection.

Lebanon since 2019 provides a demanding setting for examining those implications. The economic collapse damaged central pillars of the postwar political economy [15, 16], while research on social assistance shows that fragmented protection systems continued to reproduce important features of the sectarian-clientelist settlement [17]. Subsequent institutional crises, security shocks, and reform efforts make it possible to ask not merely whether networks survived, but which relationships gained or lost value and whether formal institutions became more capable of supplying access without brokerage.

2. Materials and Methods

This is a conceptual synthesis rather than an original fieldwork project. It develops its argument through a structured reading of peer-reviewed scholarship and scholarly books on Lebanese confessionalism, clientelism, welfare provision, civil society, political economy, and Hezbollah. Recent survey studies are used where they provide systematic evidence on clientelist exchange and political behavior. Working papers and institutional reports are used more narrowly to document social-protection arrangements, governance conditions, and

dated post-2019 developments; official or primary institutional documents are preferred for specific 2025-2026 claims. Sources were selected because they bear directly on mediated access, welfare and patronage, institutional autonomy, coercive authority, transnational sponsorship, or changes in the value of political ties. The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical: the materials do not constitute a representative dataset, and the article does not infer individual motives or causal effects from aggregate outcomes. No interviews, surveys, experiments, or human-subject data were collected for this article.

3. Results

3.1. Confessionalism, State Formation, and the Organization of Access

Lebanon's confessional arrangements have deep historical roots, although the contemporary system should not be treated as the survival of an unchanging sectarian order. The establishment of Greater Lebanon in 1920 incorporated populations whose political accommodation became central to the new state's development. The National Pact of 1943 established expectations concerning the communal distribution of major offices, while the Taif Agreement of 1989 rebalanced Christian and Muslim representation, reduced important presidential prerogatives, strengthened the Council of Ministers, and formally envisaged the eventual abolition of political sectarianism. Comparative work on the National Pact and Taif underscores that Lebanese power-sharing has always combined formal and informal rules rather than operating through constitutional text alone [4].

The postwar state developed in an environment where sectarian parties, political families, former militia leaders, business interests, and foreign actors retained substantial influence. Leenders [1] documents how reconstruction and state-building were accompanied by extensive corruption across public sectors, while Salloukh [3] argues that post-Taif institutional expansion supplied additional resources for a clientelist political economy. The implication is important: a larger state is not necessarily a more autonomous state. Ministries, public employment, contracts, permits, infrastructure projects, and social programs can become politically valuable precisely because access to them is mediated.

Describing Lebanon simply as a weak state can therefore obscure variation across functions and institutions. The state regulates economic activity, employs large numbers of people, maintains security institutions, conducts elections, and provides a legal and administrative framework. What has often been less consistent is the capacity to apply rules impersonally against politically protected actors. Recent research on the Internal Security Forces, for example, argues that clientelist patronage continues to affect policing and the distribution of institutional attention [18]. The problem is thus not institutional

absence so much as uneven autonomy and enforcement.

For citizens, this is not an abstract institutional problem. A politician or intermediary who secures medical assistance, resolves an administrative difficulty, helps obtain employment, or opens a door to a public agency creates more than a one-time benefit. The intervention has a social history. It may be remembered within a family and may shape later expectations of reciprocity. Survey-experimental research published in 2025 likewise suggests that vote-buying and patronage are embedded in broader material and symbolic exchanges rather than functioning as isolated transactions [19]. A citizen can therefore resent the political system and still find a particular political relationship useful.

3.2. Political Families, Brokerage, and Inherited Access

The endurance of political families illustrates this relational dimension particularly well. Dynastic politics is sometimes presented as a residue of traditional social organization, but established families also possess advantages compatible with modern political competition. Political relationships accumulate over time. A family that has occupied public office for decades may possess connections with municipal officials, businesspeople, religious authorities, professionals, journalists, foreign diplomats, party organizers, and local brokers. Much of this infrastructure can survive an individual politician. The historical sociology of Beirut's political notables showed how class, family, and brokerage became intertwined long before the contemporary period, while later studies demonstrate the persistence of personalized mediation within postwar institutions [7, 20].

The historical figure of the *za'im* is useful in this respect. The *za'im*'s importance rested partly on an ability to connect local constituencies with institutions and resources located elsewhere. Modern bureaucracies did not necessarily eliminate this role; they changed the resources around which mediation occurred. Public-sector appointments, university places, government contracts, hospital access, permits, media exposure, and relationships with national party organizations provided new fields for brokerage. Deets's [21] study of Beirut local politics similarly shows how civic mobilization and sectarian-clientelist structures can coexist and compete within the same urban arena.

Inherited political relationships are not unambiguously advantageous. Families inherit antagonisms along with loyalties, and a surname associated with influence in one constituency may generate distrust elsewhere. The value of an established political name can also change when public attitudes toward the political class shift. The protests that began in October 2019 challenged the political class collectively and sought to cross communal boundaries. Yet established parties and families retained local intermediaries, institutional positions, media access, and organizations capable of responding to constituents' everyday problems. Declining legitimacy therefore did

not automatically eliminate practical utility, a pattern consistent with the broader literature on the reproduction of sectarianism in civil society and political institutions [2, 5, 6].

3.3. Welfare, Patronage, and Everyday Citizenship

Research on welfare provision provides some of the strongest evidence for the political importance of relational access in Lebanon. Cammett and Issar [22] show that the Future Movement and Hezbollah developed different welfare-allocation strategies despite operating in the same national institutional environment. Cammett's later comparative study of sectarian welfare organizations demonstrates that service provision can be used to consolidate core constituencies, attract marginal supporters, and support organizational goals while also delivering genuine social assistance [23]. Hezbollah's nonprofit and social-service institutions have likewise been examined as an integral component of organizational mobilization rather than as a peripheral charitable activity [24].

How a resource is obtained affects its political meaning. Healthcare received as an impersonal entitlement differs from healthcare obtained after a party official, family intermediary, or religious organization intervenes. In the second situation, the resource acquires a social history. Someone made the introduction, arranged the appointment, helped meet the cost, or persuaded an institution to act. No explicit demand for political support is required for an obligation to emerge. Repeated exchanges can create expectations of reciprocity, and the possibility that assistance may be needed again gives beneficiaries an additional reason to preserve the relationship. This is consistent with Cammett's [23] emphasis on the political logic of welfare allocation and with recent evidence that preferences for clientelist goods do not divide neatly along class lines [8]. In practical terms, this is the recurring empirical test: can the claimant obtain the service as a right, or must the claimant first locate the right person?

The post-2019 collapse made these tensions harder to ignore. Proudfoot and Zoughaib [17] find that Lebanon's fragmented social-assistance regime has tended to sustain important features of the sectarian-clientelist settlement rather than sweep them away. Scarcity changes the political meaning of access. When medicine, fuel, hospital treatment, administrative assistance, or foreign currency is difficult to obtain, the person who can secure it becomes more valuable. The crisis weakened the material base of some patronage relationships, but it did not make mediation obsolete.

3.4. Hezbollah and Overlapping Forms of Authority

Hezbollah presents the most consequential case of overlapping authority in contemporary Lebanon. Treating the organization exclusively as a political party, armed group, welfare provider, religious movement, or Iranian ally misses the significance of the combination. Hezbollah participates in parliamentary politics and has held government positions while

maintaining a military organization and an extensive institutional presence within parts of Lebanese society. Studies of its political economy and welfare institutions emphasize precisely this combination of social embeddedness, organizational capacity, political participation, and external support [25, 24].

Its influence cannot be inferred from military capacity alone. Organizational discipline, electoral support, alliances with other political actors, welfare provision, local embeddedness, and external assistance contribute to its position. These resources interact: external support reinforces organizational capabilities; domestic constituencies increase bargaining power within formal politics; participation in state institutions creates additional channels of influence; and armed capacity affects calculations made by allies and opponents. This combination helps explain why debates over Hezbollah's arms have never been merely technical questions of weapons collection. They concern the distribution of political authority and the credibility of alternative providers of security.

The institutional setting around Hezbollah's weapons changed materially in 2025. The dated source used here is the House of Commons Library research briefing published on September 24, 2025 [26]. It records that in August the Lebanese government requested that the Lebanese Armed Forces prepare a plan to establish a state monopoly over weapons and that in September the cabinet reviewed the army's plan without imposing a fixed timetable. Hezbollah opposed disarmament while Israeli forces remained in Lebanese territory and linked the issue to Israeli compliance with the November 2024 ceasefire. The briefing is used as a dated institutional source for the policy sequence rather than as peer-reviewed evidence about Hezbollah's social base.

The 2025 disarmament debate illustrates the article's second implication. Changes in military capacity, external support, leadership, or bargaining leverage alter the calculations of allies, rivals, constituencies, and state institutions. A relationship that once supplied protection or leverage may become more costly when the surrounding coercive and diplomatic balance changes. The relevant empirical question is whether actors continue to behave as if the old relationship retains the same value.

3.5. Economic Collapse and the Revaluation of Political Relationships

The post-2019 collapse provides a direct test of the first implication. A simple resource-depletion account would predict weaker brokerage as patrons lose resources. Instead, scarcity reduced what many patrons could distribute while increasing the value of privileged access to medicine, fuel, hospital treatment, administrative assistance, and foreign currency [17, 27]. The coexistence of weaker distributive capacity and a higher premium on access is precisely the pattern the relational account expects.

The crisis also altered the standing of established relationships. Connections to banks, financial elites, and political actors associated with the postwar economic model were increasingly viewed through inaccessible deposits, currency collapse, and declining public services. Abou Ltaif and Mihai-Yiannaki's peer-reviewed analysis links political patronage networks to the 2019 financial crisis, while the IMF's 2026 governance diagnostic documents continuing institutional weaknesses [28, 29]. These sources differ in type and purpose, but together they show why access that once signaled advantage could also carry financial or reputational exposure.

The trajectory after 2025 further demonstrates the instability of relational advantage. The World Bank's Summer 2026 Lebanon Economic Monitor, the primary institutional source for these figures, revised estimated real GDP growth in 2025 to 4.2 percent and projected a 6.4 percent contraction in 2026 after renewed conflict interrupted the recovery [30]. The IMF's September 18, 2026 end-of-mission statement separately reported significant contraction, double-digit inflation, extensive infrastructure and housing damage, and large-scale internal displacement [31]. These institutional reports document the timing and scale of the shock; they are not treated as substitutes for peer-reviewed analysis of clientelism.

3.6. The Port Explosion, Accountability, and Institutional Autonomy

The Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020 brought the consequences of administrative failure into devastating view. More than two hundred people were killed, thousands were injured, and large parts of Beirut were damaged. Human Rights Watch's extensive investigation traced years of official knowledge, fragmented responsibility, corruption, and administrative failure surrounding the storage of ammonium nitrate, and it concluded that the domestic investigation suffered from serious structural and procedural weaknesses [32]. The case therefore provides more than an example of bureaucratic negligence; it exposes the difficulty of establishing accountability where public authority is dispersed across institutions and politically embedded actors.

Judicial independence is often discussed in constitutional terms, but formal guarantees reveal only part of the problem. A judge may possess jurisdiction while confronting political pressure, procedural obstruction, institutional noncooperation, or campaigns challenging the legitimacy of an investigation. Actors without formal authority over a judicial process may nevertheless possess relationships capable of affecting its progress. Effective institutional autonomy depends partly on whether officials can exercise formal powers despite countervailing political relationships. This is consistent with Leenders's account of postwar state institutions [1] and with the IMF's more recent diagnosis of weaknesses in rule of law and anti-corruption institutions [29].

The port case also makes visible the unequal distribution of relational protection. Networks that help actors obtain access

to government can also shield them from accountability. Relationships that facilitate coordination within political organizations may impede investigations crossing organizational boundaries. Social capital for politically connected actors can therefore become a social liability for citizens seeking impartial enforcement of public law. The response to the explosion revealed the other side of Lebanese relational capacity as volunteers, neighborhood groups, NGOs, diaspora communities, and private citizens mobilized rapidly. Yet repeated reliance on social self-help raises a difficult question: social resilience can mitigate the effects of institutional failure without correcting the institutional causes of that failure.

3.7. Civil Society, Municipalities, and Attempts to Escape Brokerage

Lebanese civil society is often cast as the natural counterweight to sectarian politics, but the record is less tidy. Clark and Salloukh [5] show that civil-society organizations can be penetrated, co-opted, or strategically used by sectarian elites, while civil-society actors may themselves draw on sectarian resources when it serves organizational needs. Kingston [6] reaches a related conclusion in his study of advocacy networks. Cross-sectarian organizing is possible, but it takes place inside a political environment structured by sectarian institutions. Civil society is therefore part of the relational field, not simply an arena outside it.

Municipal politics offers a useful intermediate arena because formal local government is directly entangled with families, neighborhoods, businesses, religious institutions, political parties, and civic organizations. Deets [21], examining Beirut's garbage crisis and municipal politics, shows that urban civic networks can challenge sectarian structures without escaping the clientelist and consociational environment in which they operate. Local politics is therefore neither a simple extension of national sectarianism nor an autonomous civic sphere. It is one of the settings in which alternative forms of organization compete with established brokerage while still depending on institutions shaped by it.

The October 2019 protest movement exposed the same contradiction at a larger scale. Protesters challenged the political class collectively and rejected the idea that public failures should be read only through competition among sectarian leaders. Yet rejecting brokerage is easier than living without it. A citizen may oppose a sectarian leader and still need a party-linked hospital, a municipal contact, or a family intermediary. Someone may demand an impartial state while using personal connections to navigate the state that actually exists. That is less a matter of inconsistency than adaptation to institutions in which refusing available connections can be costly.

3.8. Diaspora, Foreign Patrons, and the Transnational Boundaries of Political Order

Lebanon's political and social relationships extend far beyond its borders. The diaspora supplies remittances, investment, professional opportunities, philanthropy, education, political advocacy, and migration pathways. During periods of economic crisis, a relative earning income abroad may provide a household with access to foreign currency and a degree of security unavailable through the domestic economy. The World Bank continues to identify remittances as a critical component of household consumption and economic resilience, including during the short-lived 2025 rebound [30]. Transnational relationships therefore function as an important form of social insurance.

Access to such relationships is uneven. Households with extensive diaspora connections possess options unavailable to those whose relationships remain primarily domestic. Migration can reduce vulnerability for individual families while widening differences between households. Diaspora organizations can support civic initiatives and reform movements, but they can also maintain ties to established parties, religious institutions, villages, and political families. The political effect of diaspora social capital therefore depends on the channels through which resources travel rather than on transnationalism itself.

Foreign states operate through related mechanisms. Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, France, the United States, and other external actors have cultivated relationships with Lebanese leaders, parties, state institutions, organizations, and communities. Domestic actors can convert external access into resources within Lebanon, while foreign governments rely on local partners to translate regional objectives into domestic influence. Hezbollah's relationship with Iran is the most institutionalized example, but the broader history of postwar Lebanon contains multiple forms of external sponsorship and intervention [2, 25]. Such ties generate resources while exposing domestic actors to changes in patrons' priorities and regional power balances.

This transnational dimension reinforces the concept of network revaluation. A foreign patron's resources may diminish, a neighboring regime may fall, diplomatic priorities may shift, or a domestic actor may find that a previously valuable external relationship has become politically costly. The fall of the Assad government in Syria in December 2024, followed by renewed regional conflict in 2026, altered the environment in which Lebanese actors assessed external alliances and security relationships [30, 33]. The point is not that these developments have a single or predetermined political effect. They show how rapidly external transformations can change the resources, risks, and bargaining value attached to domestic ties. Lebanon's political order is national in institutional form but transnational in many of the relationships through which power is accumulated and exercised.

3.9. Contemporary Reform and the Reordering of Authority

Joseph Aoun was elected president on January 9, 2025, ending a prolonged presidential vacancy, and Nawaf Salam formed a 24-member government on February 8, 2025. The new administration placed institutional reform, implementation of Resolution 1701, reconstruction, and restoration of state authority among its stated priorities [34, 35]. By September 2025, an assessment of the government's first months found greater governmental activity and movement on several reform priorities, but also persistent structural constraints and incomplete implementation [36]. These developments reopened questions about whether institutional changes could reduce dependence on established brokerage rather than merely redistribute positions within it.

The renewed 2026 conflict makes simple narratives of institutional transition even less convincing. The World Bank's Summer 2026 Economic Monitor describes a conflict-torn economy in which renewed warfare interrupted the recovery and intensified humanitarian and reconstruction needs [30]. The IMF's September 2026 mission similarly stressed the economic effects of the conflict while recording progress on budget management and parts of the banking-resolution framework [31]. Reform is therefore unfolding while the state

is simultaneously expected to restructure finance, restore services, manage reconstruction, strengthen the judiciary, and consolidate public authority.

These developments can be interpreted as an attempt to change the relative value of political relationships rather than merely replace one political elite with another. Financial restructuring matters because control over banking and credit shapes dependency. Judicial reform matters because political connections lose protective value when courts can act autonomously. Administrative reform matters because bureaucratic reliability reduces the need for intermediaries. Consolidation of coercive authority matters because protection networks derive value partly from the state's inability to monopolize security. Institution building can therefore produce network revaluation from above: as public institutions become more reliable, some personalized relationships lose scarcity value.

Table 1 is an original analytical synthesis developed for this article. The two added columns distinguish the principal source through which each relationship is likely to be revalued and the evidentiary basis for the row. "Systematic studies" denotes rows grounded directly in peer-reviewed research or scholarly monographs cited in the article; "analytical synthesis" denotes rows that combine multiple literatures or extend the framework beyond a single systematic study.

Table 1. *Relational Foundations of Political Order in Lebanon.*

Relational structure	Principal resource	Potential social capital	Potential social liability	Main source of revaluation	Evidence basis
Political families	Access and brokerage	Employment, influence, mediation	Dependency, inherited political identification	Resource shock / institutional reform	Systematic studies [7, 20, 21]
Sectarian parties	Organization and services	Welfare, representation, protection	Exclusion, political obligation	Resource shock / institutional reform	Systematic studies [2, 7, 8]
Religious institutions	Legitimacy and community	Trust, assistance, solidarity	Boundary reinforcement	Institutional reform / resource shock	Analytical synthesis
Armed organizations	Coercive capacity	Protection and deterrence	Security exposure, contested sovereignty	Coercive shift / external realignment	Systematic studies [24, 25]
Business-political ties	Economic access	Contracts, information, investment	Privilege, reputational and financial exposure	Resource shock / institutional reform	Systematic studies [1, 28]
Municipal relationships	Local access	Services and mediation	Local clientelism	Institutional reform / resource shock	Systematic study [21]
Diaspora ties	Transnational resources	Remittances, mobility, investment	Unequal access, external dependency	Resource shock / external realignment	Analytical synthesis
Foreign patrons	Strategic resources	Finance, diplomatic and security support	External vulnerability, sovereignty costs	External realignment / coercive shift	Analytical synthesis drawing on [25, 26]

Relational structure	Principal resource	Potential social capital	Potential social liability	Main source of re-valuation	Evidence basis
Civil society organizations	Civic mobilization	Cross-cutting cooperation and expertise	Co-optation or donor dependency	Institutional reform / external funding shift	Analytical synthesis drawing on [2, 25]

4. Discussion

The Lebanese case complicates any simple separation of state and society. Formal institutions matter, but their operation is affected by relationships that cross institutional boundaries. Political organizations use state resources while also providing services that substitute for state functions. Families and brokers help citizens navigate public institutions, and demand for mediation reinforces the position of those brokers. Foreign resources enter domestic politics through local organizations and personal relationships. None of these processes requires the state to disappear. In many instances, the state itself supplies the resources around which brokerage is organized.

One reason Lebanon's political arrangements endure is that established relationships perform concrete tasks. They provide welfare, information, protection, employment, representation, and access. Sectarian ideology and elite manipulation are part of the story, but they are not the whole story. Evidence published in 2025 is especially useful here: engagement with clientelist promises is not reducible to poverty alone [8], and survey-experimental work on electoral fraud suggests that patronage practices operate within wider material and symbolic exchanges rather than mechanically determining votes [19].

The value of the social-liability label is not that it discovers a downside to social capital; Portes already established that point [11]. Its use here is diagnostic: it asks whether access to a benefit simultaneously creates dependence, exclusion, obligation, or exposure in a setting where public goods are often mediated. The claim would be weakened if brokered access consistently delivered benefits without such costs, or if those costs were unrelated to the structure of access.

Network revaluation likewise builds on rather than replaces established network theory [13, 14]. Its purpose is to make temporal change explicit in the Lebanese case. The claim would be weakened if major shocks to patron resources, institutional autonomy, coercive capacity, or external sponsorship left the practical usefulness of political ties unchanged. The post-2019 record instead shows variation across domains: some ties lost resources or legitimacy, while scarcity or insecurity raised the value of others.

State-building, from this perspective, is not adequately measured by the size of ministries or the number of formal rules. The more consequential question is whether citizens still need privileged access to make institutions work. A ministry

gains autonomy when an eligible citizen can receive a service without finding an intermediary. A judiciary gains authority when political relationships cannot determine whether an investigation proceeds. A security institution gains credibility when protection does not depend on alternative political or communal arrangements. Institutional change is therefore also a change in the value of relationships.

5. Conclusions

Confessionalism remains indispensable to understanding Lebanon, but reform should also be judged by the degree of relational dependence surrounding formal institutions. The central question is practical: can an ordinary citizen obtain a public service, legal remedy, economic opportunity, or physical protection without first locating the right person? This criterion brings political families, parties, welfare organizations, municipalities, armed actors, diaspora ties, and foreign patrons into the same analytical frame without treating them as equivalent institutions.

For research on clientelism, coding the presence or absence of an exchange is insufficient. Scholars should also record the function performed by the tie, the obligation or exposure attached to it, and whether its value rises or falls after a resource, institutional, coercive, or external shock. A patronage relationship that distributes less material assistance may nevertheless become more consequential if alternative routes to scarce goods deteriorate. Conversely, a formally durable network may lose practical value when institutions become more autonomous or external sponsorship weakens.

For research on state capacity, capacity should not be inferred only from staffing, budgets, legal authority, or the existence of agencies. A complementary measure is the relational premium citizens must pay to make those agencies work. If comparable services increasingly become available through predictable procedures rather than privileged mediation, institutional autonomy has increased even before surrounding political networks disappear. If access still depends heavily on brokers, a central feature of the older distribution of power remains intact.

These propositions provide a standard for evaluating reform after 2025. Changes in government, banking rules, security arrangements, or administrative procedures matter insofar as they alter citizens' dependence on personal and political access. The article does not claim that social liability and network re-

valuation replace established concepts of negative social capital, brokerage, or clientelist adaptation. Their narrower purpose is to organize observable changes in the benefits, costs, and political value of relationships over time.

Abbreviations

IMF International Monetary Fund

Author Contributions

Shaul Michael Gabbay: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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