

# COMPETING NARRATIVES OF GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN LEBANON: THE GENERAL AMNESTY LAW AND THE “DEEP STATE” CONCEPT

## TRENDS **WATCH ALERT**

**BIWEEKLY SUMMARY**

**8 - 22 MAY 2026**

The ongoing war in Lebanon and the broader Middle East has caused a deep divide within Lebanese society regarding this war, its causes, and the responsibility of the parties involved. This internal division is not limited to this issue; it has extended to many domestic topics and positions, so that numerous Lebanese affairs and various political, social, and other stances have become axes of alignment, disputes, and conflicting narratives. Added to this are numerous violent and inflammatory speeches, as well as distorted or false news, which exacerbate internal divisions.

Therefore, this project monitors social and political discourse in the public sphere by following issues that media outlets, political actors, social media platforms, and influencers prioritize, with the aim of shedding light on them, tracking their narratives, understanding who stands behind them, and assessing the risks they carry. These topics often reflect societal trends and reveal the positions of key actors regarding them.

This series of reports is prepared with the support of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF).

# 1. WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?



Between 8 and 22 May, public debate was dominated by the general amnesty law, which has drawn interest after years of stalled draft legislation. There is broad consensus that prison conditions in Lebanon are critical, with Roumieh Prison illustrating systemic overcrowding, poor living conditions, delayed trials, and limited rehabilitation, creating both legal and humanitarian concerns. The debate has renewed attention to human rights issues, particularly prison conditions and prolonged pre-trial detention. In this context, the absence of judicial and penal reform risks reinforcing perceptions of selective justice and widening the gap between citizens and state institutions.



These debates highlight broader structural governance failures in Lebanon and the ways in which they are framed in public discourse. In parallel, the term “deep state” has been increasingly used in recent discourse to attribute responsibility for such failures. This report therefore examines, first, the amnesty debate, and second, the use and meanings of the “deep state” concept in public discourse.



### **a. The general amnesty law**

Parliamentary committees in Lebanon have adopted a draft general amnesty law, which is set to be referred to the plenary session following renewed political momentum and a proposal by the National Moderation Bloc.

The proposal was largely driven by calls to release detainees considered to have been held for long periods without trial, particularly Islamist detainees, against the backdrop of severe prison overcrowding, concerns about delayed justice, and claims that some detainees have been subjected to injustice. Estimates suggest that many detainees are still awaiting final verdicts, some for years.

The debate has also been revived by recent releases of Syrian prisoners and includes politically sensitive cases such as that of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. Importantly, the proposal has expanded beyond a single sectarian demand, also covering cannabis-related detainees and Lebanese families exiled to Israel, reflecting a broader set of political and sectarian interests.

## b. The “deep state” concept

The “deep state” in Lebanon is often invoked in statements by politicians and media figures, and periodically discussed in articles and public debates. Most of these views suggest that there is a “deep state” in Lebanon that holds many of the levers of power and influences the course of the state. The issue was also addressed by several MPs during the parliamentary discussions of the ministerial statement of Prime Minister Nawaf Salam’s government. Many matters are frequently attributed to the “deep state,” including certain judicial decisions, administrative appointments, and the obstruction of reform projects.

The term “deep state” is a theory in the field of political science that generally refers to an informal and hidden network of individuals, or an administrative structure, believed to exert influence over political, economic, and administrative decisions in a country, independently of the visible official authorities.

Discourse surrounding the “deep state” in Lebanon is recurrent and often loaded with accusations, with many decisions perceived as contrary to the public interest being attributed to it. At times, even members of the ruling political class complain about the existence of a “deep state,” while claiming they are unable to confront it.

Many actors invoke the term without clearly identifying who controls this supposed structure, leaving accusations vague and difficult to verify.



## 2. WHICH NARRATIVES EMERGED?

### a- Narratives Around the General Amnesty law

Across print media, there is no real cleavage in how the amnesty debate is framed; rather, it is consistently reduced to political bargaining. As stated in an Al-Akhbar article titled “General Amnesty Proposal: A Discharge for Crimes Not Yet Committed” (4 May 2026), there is a “clear political tug-of-war between parliamentary blocs,” with MPs each seeking to “pull the blanket” in their own direction in order to secure “gains to strengthen its standing within its popular base,” and with an underlying acceptance that this is part of the “rules of the game.”

In a Nida Al Watan article titled “Clash in Joint Committees Over Amnesty Details” (6 May 2026), the debate is described as being driven by “narrow political calculations,” with discussions shifting from a legal framework to a “populist confrontation” and attempts to capitalize on the issue electorally.

Finally, in an An-Nahar article titled “General Amnesty... Have Political Mines Exploded Again?” (12 May 2026), the postponement and broader debate are framed as reflecting “the entanglement of political and sectarian calculations,” with the law becoming a “test of delicate national balances” rather than a purely legal reform.

Taken together, all outlets converge on the same core framing: the amnesty proposal is primarily a space of political bargaining and negotiated power balances, rather than a strictly judicial or technical process.

However, unlike the convergence observed in media framing around the discussions in the joint committees, a clear divide emerged between supporters and opponents of the amnesty law.

Supporters framed the proposal around a narrative of a politicized and flawed judiciary, arguing that many detainees are victims of injustice and prolonged detention.



The Mufti of Rashaya, Sheikh Wafiq Hijazi, stated in remarks reported by Al Liwaa in the article “Friday preachers praise Mufti Drian’s position on adopting a general amnesty law” (9 May 2026):

“There can be no general amnesty without the release of Islamist detainees... under a security system in which charges were fabricated against them and files were falsified in order to imprison them. Clear evidence has proven that they are innocent... Had the law truly been applied and justice achieved, the jailer himself would be in prison...”



Similarly, the political activist Saleh al-Machnouk, in Nida Al Watan in the article “Amnesty for a crime that was never committed” (12 May 2026), describes Islamist detainees as “victims of the confrontation with the brutality of the fallen Assad regime and the terrorism of Hezbollah,” and argues that Lebanese exiles to Israel were abandoned by the state. He adds that these unresolved issues reflect “the continued grip of the ‘Shiite duo’ over the course of events in Lebanon,” and that current efforts are politically motivated rather than rooted in genuine justice reform.



This narrative is further extended through a more radical questioning of the judicial process in the Ahmad al-Assir trial itself, described as a “major scandal” that could be “dismantled” by any informed observer and criticized for failing to investigate any Hezbollah members despite their alleged presence during the events in Abra, suggesting a structurally compromised judicial process, and ultimately concluding that “this (amnesty) is a right, not an amnesty, because that crime... was never committed in the first place.”



In a more institutional framing, **MP Ghada Ayoub** of the Strong Republic Bloc supports the proposal in Nida Al Watan (2 May 2026), describing it as a corrective measure: “We support this proposal in order to correct the dysfunction resulting at times from judicial negligence, the inability in some cases to bring detainees before trial sessions, and the repeated paralysis of the country through delays in judicial appointments and formations, which delayed the implementation of justice and led to the wrongful detention of others.”

Opponents of the amnesty frame the proposal through a “narrative of impunity”, arguing that it risks undermining justice, accountability, and victims’ rights rather than resolving a humanitarian or judicial crisis.



**Gebran Bassil** distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate pardons, stating: “Amnesty for the oppressed is a duty. Amnesty for drug traffickers and killers is unacceptable. Amnesty for those who stole depositors’ money is forbidden. Amnesty for those who killed army soldiers should not even be proposed... We are against impunity.”

In Al Joumhouria (11 May 2026), in the article “The General Amnesty in the Era of State Restoration: Legislation for Impunity or Exceptional Justice?”, Professor Tony Atallah warns that the proposal is not a neutral reform but a political instrument, arguing it “raises serious fears that amnesty may become a political tool to entrench impunity, undermine the principle of separation of powers by bypassing the judiciary, and deny victims their rights.” He stresses that while prison overcrowding is real, “the natural remedy for this dysfunction is not the cancellation of crimes or the erasure of verdicts, but rather judicial reform,” adding that the law risks releasing those convicted of “collaboration, terrorism, and drug crimes,” and could ultimately “destroy Lebanese people’s trust in the future.”



**Bechara Charbel** also warns that the debate has entered “the forbidden terrain of sectarianism and factional interests,” arguing that the solution lies in “fair trials” and judicial reform rather than “forgive and forget,” while highlighting long-standing judicial dysfunction.



**Peter Germanos** contrasts legal tools, stating: “A special pardon is better than a general amnesty. A special pardon solves the problems of individuals, whereas a general amnesty destroys society and erases memory.”



**Ziad Abdel Samad** situates the issue within the framework of transitional justice, arguing that “the explanatory memorandum of the proposed law refers to achieving transitional justice... But transitional justice is not achieved in this way.” He stresses that it “is not merely the issuance of an amnesty law, but rather an integrated process based on truth-telling and reconciliation”. He concludes that what is being proposed “appears closer to a random and dangerous measure that could have major security, political, and social repercussions,” especially given the absence of judicial and institutional reform.

Despite their opposing positions on the amnesty proposal, both supporters and critics share a broader distrust in the Lebanese judiciary and frequently portray it as politicized, dysfunctional, or incapable of delivering justice effectively. However, while supporters use this diagnosis to justify amnesty as a corrective response to injustice and prolonged detention, opponents argue that judicial dysfunction should instead be addressed through institutional and judicial reform rather than through broad amnesty measures that risk entrenching impunity.

## **b- Narratives of Different Actors on the “Deep State” in Lebanon**

In Lebanese political and media discourse, the notion of the “deep state” is highly contested and interpreted through two dominant and competing narratives: one that views it as a cross-sectarian system of entrenched interests composed of the ruling political class as a whole, cutting across multiple sects and parties and collectively forming what is often described as the “deep state”; and another that frames it through a sovereigntist lens linked to what is described as the “Syrian legacy,” referring to practices left behind by decades of Syrian control over Lebanon, during which it exercised significant influence over political decision-making through the selection of ruling figures. Within this perspective, Hezbollah and its allies are seen as having inherited this “state” following the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in 2005.

# A cross-sectarian deep state

This narrative defines the “deep state” not as a single actor or party, but as a networked system of power spanning sects, institutions, and economic elites, driven by shared material interests and institutional capture.

**Journalist Ali Nour El-Din**, in “The Deep State Is Worried: Why Does the Next Phase Frighten It?” (Al-Modon, 3 February 2025), describes it as structurally embedded across state institutions, arguing:

“In Lebanon, there is a deep state whose influence extends across the security, judicial, financial, and monetary sectors... These interests operate beyond traditional political alignments... and are driven more by financial interests than by sectarian or political loyalties.”



Similarly, journalist **Hanna Saleh**, in a 2023 article published in Asharq Al-Awsat, highlights how legislative practices reflect this embedded power structure, where laws are tailored to protect ruling figures and ensure impunity:

“Legislation tailored to specific individuals reveals the deep state’s tendency to entrench guardianship over a system of corruption, nitrates, authoritarianism, and external dependency.”



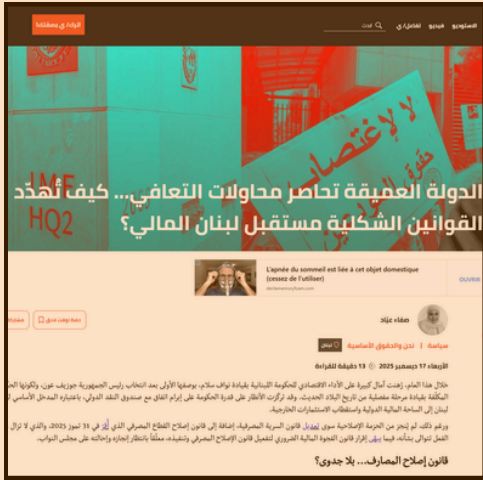
**Ali Tarhini**, in “Deconstructing the ‘Deep State’” (Hura newspaper, 18 February 2025), further expands the concept into a multi-elite governing network:

“What is known as the ‘deep state’ in Lebanon is not merely a binary or sectarian structure, but rather a system involving a broad network of influence that brings together traditional leaders... bankers and businessmen.”



From a governance perspective, **MP Ibrahim Mneimneh**, in an interview with Raseef22 in an article titled “The Deep State Is Besieging Attempts at Recovery...” (17 September 2025), links it directly to institutional stagnation:

“The deep state and its interests are running the institutions as an exception that must be fought...”



**Libnanews, a digital news platform, adds a structural corruption dimension:**

“Corruption is not limited to isolated practices, but forms a structural pillar of the political system.”

**Charles Jabbour**, in “The Deep State and Its Liberation from Hezbollah’s Control” (Nida Al Watan, 6 February 2025), similarly reframes it as multiple overlapping “deep states” rather than a single unified bloc, reflecting Lebanon’s sectarian pluralism, While **Hicham Abou Nasr**, in “Is There a Deep State in Lebanon?” (Federal Lebanon), defines it as: “a network of non-elected bureaucratic institutions... supported by networks within the media and among business elites.”



## A 'sovereignist' narrative

In contrast, this perspective views the “deep state” as a historically rooted structure shaped by Syrian tutelage and later sustained through Hezbollah’s institutional influence, particularly after 2005.

In Al Modon (28 April 2026), in the article “The Lebanese Forces Confront the Deep State: From the Army to Judges and Civil Servants,” it is reported that **Samir Geagea**, President of the Lebanese Forces, stated in a television interview that the deep state is standing by watching Hezbollah, stressing that it is no longer possible to continue in this manner.

The same article also reports that sources within the Lebanese Forces stated the following:

“There is no doubt that the roots of this deep state extend back to the era of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon... The Assad regime controlled the state’s key institutions through three dimensions: first, the military dimension; second, the political dimension through its control over the three presidencies; and third, the administrative dimension and control over security and judicial bodies. Despite the change that occurred in 2005 and Lebanon’s liberation from the Assad regime, this control has continued through Hezbollah...”



From this viewpoint, the deep state is embedded in state institutions and responsible for blocking reform and sovereign decision-making.



**MP Georges Okais, in a post on X platform, links it directly to sovereignty and political order:**

“If we are destined to disarm the militia (Hezbollah), we must also strip away the claws of the deep state.”

In An-Nahar (29 April 2026), in the article “The Lebanese State and Hezbollah... ‘The Necessity of Separation’”, the following is stated by journalist **Nabil Abou Monsef**:

It is certainly not the first time that Hezbollah has opposed legitimate authorities, while simultaneously embedding itself within the state and its deep structures. It has not left any government or parliament since the 1990s.”



### 3. COMMON FRAMING PATTERNS

---

There are several common framing patterns between the narratives surrounding the “deep state” and those surrounding the general amnesty law, despite addressing different issues:

- **Distrust in state institutions, governance, and the judiciary:**

Both debates revolve around the idea that Lebanese institutions are dysfunctional, politicized, or captured by entrenched interests. In the amnesty debate, supporters describe detainees as victims of a biased judiciary and delayed trials, while deep state narratives portray institutions as controlled by hidden political or financial networks. This broader erosion of trust reflects perceptions of weakened governance and limited accountability.

- **Political and sectarian interests overriding institutional autonomy:**

Both debates frame legal and institutional processes as subordinated to political bargaining and entrenched interests rather than operating autonomously. In the amnesty debate, media outlets describe discussions as a “political tug-of-war” shaped by “sectarian calculations” and competing electoral interests. Similarly, deep state narratives portray state institutions as influenced or captured by ruling elites, sectarian patronage networks, Hezbollah, or broader political and financial interests.

---

- **Narratives of impunity and protection of elites:**

Opponents of the amnesty warn that it could institutionalize “impunity” and allow criminals or politically connected actors to evade accountability. Likewise, deep state narratives repeatedly describe institutions as operating in ways that protect entrenched political and financial interests, obstruct accountability, and preserve networks of corruption and privilege.

- **Reform framed as impossible without structural change:**

Both discussions converge on the idea that isolated legal measures are insufficient. Critics of the amnesty proposal call for judicial reform rather than an amnesty law, while narratives on the “deep state” argue that meaningful reform requires dismantling entrenched systems of political and institutional control.

## 4. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? (RISKS AND IMPLICATIONS)

---

In public discourse in Lebanon, the term “deep state” is used to refer to a set of governance failures and serves as an umbrella category for attributing responsibility for various forms of corruption and irregularities across administrative, economic, and judicial domains. In practice, it functions as a political tool for designating those responsible, targeting opposing actors, and justifying inaction, thereby contributing to increased polarization, while key structural issues remain unresolved.

These key structural weaknesses also surface in the debate surrounding the amnesty law, which cannot be separated from a broader crisis within the penal and judicial system. Despite their opposing positions on the proposal, both supporters and critics share a broader distrust in the judiciary, which is frequently portrayed as politicized, dysfunctional, or incapable of delivering justice effectively. This convergence of distrust risks further undermining confidence in judicial institutions and weakening perceptions of accountability and equal application of the law.