



By: TA | AP Insight

Lebanon passes a controversial general amnesty law



Lebanon's parliament Wednesday passed a controversial general amnesty law, a day after a majority of legislators voted to formally **abolish the death penalty**.

Lawmakers who backed the bill call it a beginning to correcting past overreach by the judiciary and security agencies and help reduce prison overcrowding, but critics say it is skewed and largely benefits Sunni Islamist prisoners.

The initial proposal, debated since 2019, has exposed sectarian tensions among the country's multitude of Islamic and Christian sects.

A sweeping law that has exceptions

The last time Lebanon approved a similar amnesty was in 1991, when the majority of the country's combatants and militia leadership were absolved of any atrocities and possible war crimes following the country's devastating 1975-90 **civil war** that killed about 150,000 people and left 17,000 missing.

The new law replaces death sentences with long prison terms, reduces life sentences, and frees some convicted militants and drug dealers.

It excludes rape, trafficking, corruption, terror funding, and premeditated murder, but reduces sentences for killing Lebanese troops. Some detainees will be released immediately.

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It also remains unknown if the amnesty applies

to Lebanese families who took refuge in Israel after occupying Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000 but who were not involved in military operations against Lebanon.

Released foreign prisoners, mainly Syrian Islamist militant prisoners, would be transferred to Lebanon's General Security intelligence agency that is responsible for enforcing immigration laws. It wasn't immediately known if they would be deported.

Concerns rise over the fate of extremist Islamist prisoners

While the law was debated in parliament, lawmakers from various sects made different demands.

Sunnis wanted the release of Islamist militants while Shiites demanded drug dealers, mostly from Lebanon's eastern Baalbek region where cannabis is planted, to be freed.

Christians required amnesty for hundreds of Lebanese who fled to Israel after the Israeli withdrawal.

Many have links to the Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army militia, which collapsed following the withdrawal.

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However, the most controversial point in the yearslong debate was the fate of extremist Islamist prisoners, including firebrand cleric Ahmad al-Assir.

Al-Assir gained support in southern Lebanon for his vocal criticism of the powerful Shiite militant Hezbollah group's involvement in Syria's uprising that turned into civil war.

In 2013, clashes between his supporters and opponents killed 18 Lebanese soldiers. He was sentenced to death in 2017.

His fate remains unclear, but Lebanese lawmaker Waddah Sadek, a Sunni Muslim and supporter of the law, told The Associated Press al-Assir could be released “between a year and a half and two years.”

Some celebrate while others feel wronged

Sunni legislators largely celebrated the law passing.

Bilal Abdullah, who represents the Druze-led Progressive Socialist Party, said the amnesty law is not intended to benefit just one sect.

“We are turning a political page where (Sunnis were) targeted, justly and unjustly,” Abdullah told reporters in parliament. “Targeted by a regime, security agencies, and unfortunately the military tribunal with some of its unjust convictions.”



The families of the killed Lebanese soldiers have called the law a grave injustice

Supporters of detained Islamists claim their sentencings came at a time when the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah militant group had greater political power in the country and larger sway over its security institutions and judicial system, directly targeting the country's Sunni Muslims.

They also said the detainees weren't allowed a

fair trial and some were held for too long in pretrial detention due to Lebanon's swamped courts.

Videos circulating on social media showed Islamist prisoners in the notorious **Roumieh prison** chanting “God is great” in celebration once the law was approved.

The families of the killed Lebanese soldiers have called the law a **grave injustice**, saying that the perpetrators behind the death of their loved ones should remain behind bars or even be sentenced to death.

Civil society and reformists have largely been critical of the move.

Activist and lawyer Nizar Saghie, who co-founded the watchdog group Legal Agenda, said justice “comes through accountability and building institutions, not a general amnesty.”

Saghie criticized lawmakers who called the amnesty a form of justice due to what they said were unfair trials in military and civil courts. However, they haven't made any real structural reforms, he said.

“They talk about injustice in military courts, but they are still functioning as before.”