

EVENT SUMMARY

The International Engagement in Lebanon Post-Beirut Blast: Directions and Objectives

Following the devastating explosion that hit Beirut on August 2020 ,4, causing the death of more than 200 people and thousands of wounded, France mobilized the international community in terms of emergency assistance. In this context and as part of its webinar series, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) organized on Monday, August 2020 ,17 a Webinar titled “The International Engagement in Lebanon Post-Beirut Blast: Directions and Objectives”.

Moderated by IFI’s Affiliated Scholar Dania Koleilat Khatib, the webinar included Randa Takieddine, senior journalist and Arab News En Français chief correspondent, Bilal Y. Saab, senior fellow and founding director of the Defense and Security at the Middle East Institute (MEI), and IFI’s Interim Director Nasser Yassin.

During the session, the panelists discussed the international community’s humanitarian response to Lebanon, and whether it will translate into international momentum for a wider salvation plan, or further consecrate the political status quo. They also examined what sort of “new political contract” in Lebanon are the Europeans pushing for and what is the US position.

Randa Takieddine started the discussion by explaining what the French President Emanuel Macron meant by a “unity cabinet” during his visit to Lebanon in the aftermath of the blast. She indicated that he is pushing for the formation of a cabinet that is largely inclusive of all voices among the people and those demanding change, pointing out that he did not mean a national unity cabinet of traditional parties.

“What he probably means by a “new political contract” for Lebanon is a new electoral law that would bring real change, but I don’t think he has something specific in mind,” she added.

Takieddine also explained that Macron asked Trump to release/diffuse the pressure on Hezbollah and Lebanon, in order to facilitate the formation of a new unity cabinet, especially that “France has interest in engaging in Lebanon since it is the only country where it could still have a regional impact.” However, she thinks, “engaging with the Iranian regime and trying to do a mediation never succeeded before,” adding that “Hezbollah will be the main obstacle to the success of the French engagement in Lebanon.”

Takieddine later pinpointed the success of Macron’s visit that was positively perceived by French internal public opinion given that his engagement in Lebanon can boost him internally, especially that he failed the latest municipal elections in France.

On the other hand, **Nasser Yassin** reminded that Lebanon has already been going through a deep economic crisis before the Beirut blast, a twin-deficit crisis in its balance of payment and its inability to finance its spending. According to Yassin, another twin-deficit faces the aforementioned crisis. One deficit is touching the political class, who proved to be incapable of facing the economic, financial, and banking challenges. Another deficit sits on the level of the new October 17 political movements and groups, as these were unable to create a joint leadership to come up with new tools and ways that challenge the ruling elite.

“What we have witnessed instead is a series of “mini-uprisings” that only benefitted the government, as it resulted in the diffusion of the anger of people,” he said. “There’s a need to change the modus operandi of the new political groups, [because] one major deficiency among these groups is stopping the movement at minor gains, whereas it has to continue to fight the whole political structure if it aims at building a new social contract.” Yassin noted that the political class sees this explosion as an opportunity to engage with the international community, amidst an inability to do real reconstruction without engaging with the central or local government to undertake the needed reconstruction and recovery.

“Those in power are looking for ways to utilize this aid to rebrand themselves and to benefit their clientelist networks,” he highlighted. He recommended an action-oriented inclusion of the international community to decision-making that brings together – and not just symbolically – representatives of civil society organizations and donors, consequently allowing protestors to “monitor for more accountability.” Concerning the investigation, Yassin elaborated on the interest-based operations by foreign powers in the region, considering their will of maintaining a minimal level of stability since “Lebanon falls in their neighborhood.” He further noted that he is “not so keen to going superficially for an international investigation but of course, technical expertise and consultation is needed,”. “It is in the best interest of the Lebanese people to push for accountability linking it to their fight for the independence of the judiciary after the crime of the century took place in Lebanon.”

US-based **Bilal Saab** clarified that the calamity of the August 4 explosion has pushed the US to reconsider its passive response to the crisis in Lebanon via a “process of readjustment of the US policy,” to try to prevent Lebanon from becoming another failed state in the Middle East. “The US looks at the crisis in Lebanon as a collective failure, while Hezbollah has played a large role in contributing to this collapse,” he expressed. “The ultimate challenge of the US policy right now is to balance between diminishing the influence of Hezbollah without contributing to the return to arms and civil war in Lebanon, hence to the failure of the state.” On a similar note, Saab shed light on the US challenge in pushing the conversations for a technocratic government in Lebanon because of the omnipresence of the main opponent to this option, known as Hezbollah. “There is no unity in Lebanon as far as the organization of the protest movements, and no constituency through which the international community can work, and this is what is so different from the support provided to the Lebanese people by the international community in 2005.”

In Saab’s opinion, the Americans are not on the same page with the French, concerning Lebanon. Saab insisted that David Hale delivered the State Department position during his visit to Lebanon. Assistant Secretary Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, David Schenker, will reiterate this position, “push for the reforms, for an independent technocratic government that would oversee a transitional phase in Lebanon, and for the start of a conversation on a new electoral law.” He confirmed that voices that came out of the White House about terminating the aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) still exist, voices that are contributing to a divided policy in the US towards Lebanon.

“I do not predict big difference between the current US approach to Lebanon in case of a Joe Biden presidency” ended Saab. “Should the Biden administration go back to negotiating with the Iranians, and reestablish a rapprochement to the Iranians without addressing the region, the Lebanese might be concerned by how such a process would affect the interest of the Lebanese and would mark the influence of Hezbollah.”