



Issam Fares Institute for Public
Policy and International Affairs
معهد عصام فارس للسياسات
العامة والشؤون الدولية

Press Release

Searching for the State: The Growing Role of Civil Society after the Beirut Blast

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) organized a webinar titled “Searching for the State: The Growing Role of Civil Society after the Beirut Blast” on Tuesday, September 8, 2020, to discuss the consequences of the new roles that civil society assumed after the Beirut Port blast, and its relationship with the international community which, for many years, was a lever for political power in Lebanon.

The talk hosted **Adib Nehme**, consultant on development and member of "Liqa Teshreen", **Mia Atoui**, co-founder and vice president of Embrace, **Alaa Ammar**, migration and restoring family links manager at the Lebanese Red Cross, and **Julien Courson**, executive director at the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA). The talk was moderated by **Fatima El-Moussawi**, researcher and project coordinator of IFI’s Civil Society Actors & Policy Making program.

Mia Atoui started the discussion by stressing the dire need to secure support and resources for civil society, since the relief and reconstruction work, post the August 4 Beirut blast, are enormous responsibilities that civil society cannot fully bear on its own, in the absence of a broader organization at the state level, bearing in mind that this absence compounds and confirms the long-standing lack of confidence in state institutions, according to Atoui.

In the same context, Atoui pointed out the complete absence of the High Relief Commission, for instance, in the first couple of days that followed the disastrous event, versus a strong civil society activity that participated in the relief and the start of the reconstruction of the capital according to several reports, including one by the World Bank.

On the other hand, Atoui highlighted the change in the quality of people’s needs who were directly affected by the explosion, to long-term needs, including mental health care amidst growing difficulties.

On a similar note, Atoui considers the now-cooperation between Embrace and the National Mental Health programme, a successful example of “the importance of a governance model between state institutions and NGOs,” by taking the due diligence principle into consideration.

Alaa Ammar spoke about the 75-year-long history of the Lebanese Red Cross organization, characterized by a cross-regional/confessional/political approach, targeting the whole nation. Ammar emphasized the constant commitment of the Lebanese Red Cross to the aforementioned values, especially during the rescue phase on August 4 and the days that followed. He noted that the aid's amount received by the Lebanese Red Cross is always based on assessment. "We now need financial aid to rebuild people's homes and contribute to paying their wages, and the Lebanese Red Cross has launched a program to collect financial donations," he added.

Furthermore, **Julien Courson** commented that measuring the response of various public institutions to the size of the problems that need to be addressed, proves the inability of these departments to address them to the required extent, given that most Lebanese today agree on losing confidence in the State in general. "Civil society must respect standards of transparency and accountability, to ensure that challenges are addressed, by disseminating all information related to their framework during the reconstruction process," he said. Courson recommended transparency in working with donors on one hand, and towards the Lebanese society on the other hand. He concluded by stating that "The aid's effectiveness and the use of available resources, in addition to transparency, are necessary steps to create a success story in which we press the State to undertake the necessary reforms."

As for **Adib Nehme**, he praised the success of the Lebanese society's absorbance of the disaster of the blast in the first days through an immediate and effective response, but the demands changed later. Nehme focused his attention on the role of civil society in monitoring and pressuring, to hold the responsible accountable, and called on the international organizations to work more effectively and in a non-traditional way. He stated that "No unified committee has yet been established between the World Bank and the United Nations and representatives of civil society, including the large unions and representatives of the affected neighborhoods, to oversee the distribution of aid, and this is what I consider to be a failure by the United Nations".

Nehme also insisted on the civil society's responsibility in pushing the public opinion towards reflecting on the fact that the achievement of the demanded "reforms" - which are basically evident - isn't considered an achievement per se, and that what is required is greater than what the politicians convince us that it is an achievement.



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Finally, Nehme recalled that the stage of the Taif Accord witnessed an organic and systematic destruction of civil society movements, which resulted in the emptying of unions that later became a shadow of politicians, which weakened the pressure of unions, for example.