



**The Lebanese
National
Convention**

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الوطني
اللبناني**

Report on the Proceedings

of the third instalment of the second edition
of The Lebanese National Convention

The Path to the State

Lebanon in a Complex Regional Environment

that took place 4 & 5 May 2023

on the Social Sciences Campus

of the Saint-Joseph University of Beirut (USJ)

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Introduction

The third part of the Lebanese National Convention of its second edition "Convention 2.0: The Path to the State - Lebanon in a Complex Regional Situation," was held at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Saint Joseph University of Beirut (Faculty of Law and Political Science) on May 4th and 5th, 2023. It encompassed four broad topics: the strategic situation in the Middle East, the

struggle among great powers, food security and safety in Lebanon, refugees and internally displaced persons, and irregular emigration from Lebanon. The conference featured 37 experts, researchers, writers, and university professors from various fields, participating in 10 discussion panels. The proceedings of these panels have been documented in this report.

Speakers

Alia Mansour	Writer; Author
Amal Nader	President, Media Research Forum on the Mediterranean
Antoine Courban	Physician; University Professor; Writer; Author
Ashraf Rifi	Member, Lebanese Parliament; Former Director-General, Internal Security Forces in Lebanon
Assaad Bechara	Researcher; Journalist; Filmmaker
Brigitte Khair Mountain	Senior Policy Advisor; Former UN Official; Entrepreneur
Catherine Saiid	Lebanon Country Office World Food Programme
Dania Koleilat Khatib	Researcher; President, Research Center for Cooperation and Peace Building
Dominique Tohme	Liaison Officer, UNHCR
Habib C. Malik	Coordinator of Studies, Project Watan; retired Associate Professor of History, Lebanese American University
Hadi Tawil	Political Activist; Analyst
Hisham Dibsy	Director, Tatwir Center for Studies
Jad Akhaoui	Media Figure; Board Member, The Lebanese National Convention
Joseph Matta	Professor, Saint-Joseph University of Beirut; Director, Applied Research and Testing, Industrial Research Institute
Karim Émile Bitar	Professor of International Relations and former Dean, Saint Joseph University of Beirut; Senior Fellow, French Institute for International and Strategic Relations
Khaled Ezzi	Lecturer, Lebanese University
Khalil Helou	Retired Brigadier General, Lebanese Armed Forces; Board member, The Lebanese National Convention
Lena Dargham	Director General, The Lebanese Standards Institution- LIBNOR
Lina Hamdan	Strategic Communications Expert; Board member, The Lebanese National Convention
Maya Gebeily	Chief, Reuters Bureau for Lebanon, Syria and Jordan
Michael Bauer	Director, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung – Lebanon Office

Nahla Hwalla	President, Order of Lebanese Nutritionists; Former Dean of the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, American University of Beirut
Nathalie Asmar Yaghi	Doctor; Teacher-Researcher, Saint Joseph University of Beirut
Nicolas Badaoui	Doctor; University Professor
Nicole Fakhoury Sayegh	Doctor; Teacher-Researcher, Saint Joseph University of Beirut
Nizar Abdulkader	Retired General, Lebanese Armed Forces; Writer; Author
Paul Salem	President and CEO, The Middle East Institute
Paula Astih	Writer; Journalist
Riad Kahwaji	Writer; Military Expert
Robert Rabil	Professor of Political Science and LLS Distinguished Professor of Current Affairs, Florida Atlantic University
Roula Fadel	President, ACUA Foundation
Saleh El Machnouk	Lecturer, Saint Joseph University of Beirut; Writer
Sami Nader	Director, Political Sciences Institute, Saint Joseph University of Beirut
Tatiana Papazian	Diététicienne clinique et maître de conférence au département de nutrition de la faculté de Pharmacie de l'Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth
Toufic Hindi	Lebanese Politician; Writer; Author
Wissam Saadeh	Lecturer, Saint-Joseph University of Beirut; Writer; Author
Ziad El Sayegh	Expert in Public Policies; Executive Director, Civic Influence Hub

The Strategic Situation in the Middle-East



Panel 1: From a Secret War to a Generalized Conflict

In light of the Saudi-Iranian agreement and the rapprochement between the UAE and Iran, will the secret war between Israel and Iran evolve into a generalized conflict? A question from Khalil Helou to panelists Nizar Abdulkader, Riad Kahwaji, and Toufic Hindi.

EL-Helou

Retired Brigadier General El-Helou commenced the session with a welcoming introduction, providing an overview of the conference's topic, introducing the speakers, and mentioning the session's title.

Former President Michel Sleiman and several newspaper editors, researchers, and politicians were in attendance.

El-Helou stated that according to Global Firepower Index, Iran ranks as the 17th military power in the world and partially exercises control in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Recently, there have been a Rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as with the United Arab Emirates, after a long-standing rivalry that emerged through the wars in Syria and Yemen and Lebanon. On the other hand, Iran has been engaged in direct and indirect, albeit undeclared, wars with Israel for over a decade. Iran has gone

further than Arab countries in adopting the Palestinian cause, and its animosity towards Israel is rooted in ideological hostility. Israel, in turn, is concerned about Iran's nuclear, missile, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) programs. It counteracts these programs through cyber-attacks, assassinations of Iranian officials, and direct strikes on nuclear facilities and drone manufacturing sites within Iran. In Syria and Iraq, Israel targets positions of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and its affiliated militias to prevent them from establishing an operational missile system capable of targeting Israel from Syria. Apparently, these strikes have not been successful, as evidenced by the number of strikes carried out on Syrian territory since the beginning of the year, which amounted to 17, targeting airports, including Aleppo and Damascus, used for the delivery of equipment

from Iran to Syria and for launching UAVs. In response, Iran directly retaliates in the Red Sea and the Gulf against Israeli commercial vessels, and indirectly by supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, as well as Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian territories, providing them with the necessary military means to target Israel. This Israeli-Iranian conflict is a combination of a secret war and a low-intensity conflict. With the Gulf-Iran rapprochement, Arab openness towards the Syrian regime, and the Abraham Accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, will this conflict escalate into an open or comprehensive war?

Hindi

Dr. Toufic Hindi argued that Iran's strategy has not changed after the agreement with Saudi Arabia. He emphasized that Iran has two faces: Persian and Islamic, with the Persian face serving its Islamic agenda. The Iranian constitution highlights the concept of jihad for the Islamization of the world, based on the principle of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist). Given this ideological component and the current circumstances, it is evident that Iran

cannot abandon its jihadist activities, as they are essential to its existence and put its regime at risk.

Dr. Hindi further pointed out that Iran is currently seeking temporary solutions to its conflicts with the Arab world, but it will not relinquish its proxies. Iran may cooperate with the Arabs to de-escalate the situation in Yemen, which also serves Gulf interests. The Gulf-Iranian rapprochement and Arab openness towards Syria have shifted the focus towards Israel as Iran's enemy. There is a new expression within the Resistance Axis referring to "the temporary Israeli entity." Ayatollah Khamenei recently stated that Israel's end will come faster than expected. Meanwhile, Israeli-Palestinian developments are accelerating, and Iran's nuclear weapon raises questions about Israel's existence. However, after Iran's agreement with the Gulf Arabs, there has been a slowdown in Iran's nuclear bomb-making process. Dr. Hindi emphasized the pivotal role of Hezbollah within the Quds Force and the Axis of Resistance, that is comparable to the Syrian regime, the Houthis, and Hamas. He could not envision Iran abandoning Hezbollah, because it is the driving force behind the Quds Force. Following the killing

of General Soleimani in January 2020, Hassan Nasrallah has become its actual leader. The Axis of Resistance has entered its third phase now, which is the offensive stage, after going through the defensive and balance of power stages. In fact, the existential threat to Israel comes from traditional missiles and drones possessed by Iran's proxies and the Axis of Resistance. If Israel faces intense rocket fire or missile attacks from Iran and its tools in the region, from various fronts, intercepting all the missiles would be impossible due to their large numbers and the saturation of the capabilities of Israel's missile defenses. Consequently, Israel would suffer damage to its infrastructure, leading to migration from Israel to other countries. Iran's current strategy is based on a war of attrition with Israel through its proxies in the region. Nevertheless, Israel does not want to engage in direct military conflict with Iran, neither for this reason nor due to the potential nuclear threat, without definite and effective American involvement. It is worth noting that Israel may ultimately choose to "normalize" relations with Iran, similar to the border demarcation agreement in

southern Lebanon, as Israel will be faced with two options: either sliding into military confrontations or interacting with China's role. The success of Arab-Iranian normalization may push Israel towards normalization with Iran as well. Therefore, all options are on the table, including military confrontation and de-escalation with Iran.

Regarding U.S. priorities, Dr. Hindi believed that the United States has entered into conflicts with major powers, with the main focus being the war in Ukraine. This has improved relations between Russia and China. He considered that China's confrontation is not limited to Taiwan but extends to the Middle East, where China has become an international political player through its sponsorship of the Saudi-Iranian agreement. Russian and Iranian influence is growing in the region, and Saudi Arabia maintains good relations with both Russia and China because the United States no longer prioritizes the region. Dr. Hindi added that the Ukrainian war will eventually end, and Western interests in the Middle East will bring America back. These interests include the existence of Israel and the threat it faces, as well as the

world's need for Middle Eastern oil and gas, as renewable energy sources account for less than 40% of global energy needs.

Kahwaji

Military expert and writer Riad Kahwaji considered Israel to be a nuclear state, and added that nuclear deterrence has been in place since it acquired nuclear weapons. He argued that Israel's enemies have long abandoned the idea of launching a comprehensive attack that threatens its existence, because Israel would employ its nuclear weapons in such a scenario. Israel relies on limited wars against its adversaries to prevent them from acquiring weapons that could pose a threat to its existence. Since 1982, Israel has refrained from occupying Arab lands, and in its last war in Lebanon in 2006 (the July War with Hezbollah), it conducted intensive airstrikes and limited ground operations. As for the development of Israeli military capabilities, they continue to progress steadily, including advanced missile capabilities and defensive systems such as the Iron Dome, David's Sling, Arrow missiles, and others. These developments require significant defense budgets. There are currently

voices within Israel calling for allocating budgets to establish a National Guard (or militia) parallel to the army, but this will not affect Israel's military capabilities. The idea of creating such a militia or National Guard is proposed by Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir but is unlikely to materialize. It serves as a pressure tactic on Prime Minister Netanyahu. Israel's main focus remains on Iran and its allies in the region. Regarding the Israeli government's situation and internal divisions within Israel and their impact on Israel's relationship with its ally, the United States, Kahwaji affirmed that Israel stands at a crossroads in its relationship with America and the West. It can either continue as a liberal democratic regime, aligning itself with the Western bloc, or transition to a party-dominated democracy like Turkey, for example. If Israel shifts from the liberal camp to a more hardline nationalist camp, it will adversely affect immigration from Europe to Israel and have negative implications for military service and the Israeli military machine. The military establishment will be ideologically impacted, and in such a case, obtaining the most advanced and sophisticated weapons from the United States

would become difficult, if not impossible. It appears that pressure exerted by Jewish lobbies abroad against this shift and to remain within the liberal camp has succeeded in preventing Israel from sliding into a one-party or bloc-controlled nationalist state. There is a growing belief that Netanyahu will not take steps that have negative consequences for Israel.

Kahwaji further explained that there is currently a stagnation phase in Israel's strategic trajectory, accompanied by preemptive military operations in Syria targeting Iran and its allies, a freeze on military action in southern Lebanon, and a focus on preventing the emergence of a new Hezbollah-like party in Syria.

Abdul Kader

Retired Brigadier General Nizar Abdel Kader considered that sanctions on Iran and its military and nuclear program have been imposed forcefully since 2002. Although President Khatami's presidency brought a temporary respite, the sanctions continued and targeted Iran's sources of financing, particularly its oil exports, which significantly decreased. These sanctions affected any party dealing with Iran. Today, Iran lacks refined oil

products due to a shortage of refining equipment, and it is prohibited from importing these products such as gasoline. The sanctions also extended to non-oil Iranian foreign trade and financial transactions. The United States imposed sanctions on Iranian leaders, and the Security Council also took action. Despite these sanctions, the collapse of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1, and the tightening of sanctions on Iran, it appears that these measures have increased Iran's uranium enrichment but have not yet reached the stage of manufacturing a nuclear warhead and mounting it on its missiles. The problem lies in the manufacture of a nuclear bomb, not the possession of enriched uranium. However, Iran may achieve this within two years. On another note, Iran is convinced that it possesses sufficient military power to respond to any Israeli threat. It has expedited its nuclear program to achieve deterrence against Israel and the United States.

As for Israel, it adheres to the doctrine of Menachem Begin, which aims to prevent any regional state from obtaining nuclear weapons. Israeli leaders realize that Israel does not have the capability to strike Iran's

nuclear program due to several reasons. Firstly, the distance between Israel and Iran is significant. Secondly, Iran's nuclear facilities are distributed across more than 50 sites. Thirdly, some of these facilities are underground and well-fortified. The United States has refused to follow Israel's lead in attacking Iran's nuclear facilities to avoid sliding into a comprehensive war in the region, which it does not desire. The US administration convinced Israel to engage with regional partners, specifically Arab countries, under the auspices of US Central Command. Through the Abraham Accords, Israel succeeded in cooperation and understanding with five Arab countries, focusing on regional defense and alliances. In this context, Israel needs regional agreements

that allow it to rely on Arab Gulf and Jordanian air defense and missile systems capable of detecting ballistic, cruise, and UAVs that Iran could launch. In fact, an alert-sharing system has been established regarding Iranian missile attacks between these countries and Israel, although there is no formal alliance. Abdel Kader emphasized the need to await the results of the Saudi-Iranian agreement, and it is crucial to maintain the status quo. Any deviation from that could lead to war and create problems for Israel through Iran's proxies surrounding it. The outcome of the agreement may not align with everyone's expectations. Iran may appease Saudi Arabia by halting the war in Yemen and restraining its Houthi allies.

Panel 2: Is the Arab World Normalizing with Syria?

This panel explores the geopolitical situation and the strategic forecast in Syria in light of the political movement of rapprochement between the Syrian Baathist ruler and Arab leaders. A conversation with panelists Alia Mansour, Dania Koleilat Khatib, and Khaled Ezzi, moderated by Hadi Tawil.

Tawil

Mr. Hadi Tawil, the political researcher, began the episode by stating that in light of the political rapprochement between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Arab leaders, and the recent visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister to Damascus, which was the first of its kind since the start of the Syrian crisis (this episode was recorded before the Arab Summit), we host in this episode member of the Syrian National Council, Aliya Mansour, political researcher and strategic expert Dr. Dania Koleilat Al-Khateeb, and Professor of Political Science at the Lebanese University, Dr. Khaled El-Ezzi.

Koleilat

Dania Koleilat, the president of the RCCP research center, stated that the UAE's ambition and willingness to engage in mediations with the Assad regime does not mean that

they have the power to impose solutions. However, they provide a platform for dialogue. She pointed out that Gulf countries initially saw Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as an extension of Iran and supported the Syrian opposition at the beginning of the internal conflict. But they now believe that opening up to Assad could serve as a deterrent against Turkey and Iran. As for Saudi Arabia, its movement is driven by its Vision 2030, an economic, social, and cultural program that prevents it from getting involved in regional conflicts simultaneously. Therefore, Saudi Arabia seeks to minimize problems in its vicinity. This explains the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and the openness to Assad, which comes with certain conditions. Saudi Arabia's dialogue with Assad includes limiting Iranian influence and the militias loyal to Iran in Syria, stopping the smuggling of drugs from Syria to Gulf countries, and

facilitating the safe return of displaced individuals. However, Koleilat considered that Assad lacks the intention and capability to fulfill these required conditions. There is no longer a unified Syrian Arab Army under centralized command, but rather the Fourth Division and pro-Assad groups, commonly known as "shabiha," over which Assad has limited authority, if any. He does not control the drug smuggling operations or the manufacturing processes. He is demanding \$7 billion to meet the Arab demands regarding drug trafficking, particularly Captagon, and the repatriation of refugees. Assad expresses flexibility in his positions and a desire to return to the Arab League, but no one trusts him, and no one is enthusiastic about giving him money without supervision and follow-up, which means there will be no aid. On the other hand, Assad has been playing between the Iranians and the Russians in recent years. Koleilat drew a parallel between his regime and Omar al-Bashir's regime in Sudan, which the Arabs accepted but eventually became incapable of surviving. Based on these circumstances, Koleilat doubted the possibility of significant progress in Arab-Syrian relations without Assad

fulfilling the required conditions. She explained that Turkey is also normalizing its situation with Assad based on the condition of ensuring the safe return of refugees because the Turkish President is facing an electoral battle and cannot withdraw from Idlib. The forces in Idlib do not accept Assad, who cannot guarantee the safe return of Syrian refugees. Iran, meanwhile, uses Assad as leverage against Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Mansour

Political writer and analyst Alia Mansour argued that when the Astana process of negotiations started, which included Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the Assad regime, there were no significant achievements. The dictatorial regimes, especially the Syrian regime, are known for their longevity. A partial ceasefire was achieved, but the absence of the United States from the Syrian file allowed Russia to fully control the situation. Additionally, the absence of Washington and the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition have prevented the resolution of the Syrian crisis so far. Currently, there is no global or regional approach that addresses the essence of the Syrian crisis. Mansour

pointed out that the Syrian regime decided to grant Iran greater and unrestricted influence in Syria in exchange for its survival. No one today questions the Syrian regime's connection to Iran. The hypothesis of Syria's return to the Arab League was doubted but it happened. Assad is engaging in a process of blackmail with Arab countries, demanding money for the return of refugees despite the Caesar Act. As for Turkey, a full member of NATO, it made an agreement with Russia in Syria to reduce the flow of refugees into its territory because the refugee issue puts pressure not only on Ankara but also on neighboring countries, in addition to the significant issue of drugs. Mansour emphasized that no one wants to overthrow Assad from the presidency of Syria, and they only talk about a political transition of power. In this context, objectively speaking, there is no viable solution in Syria. It is not enough for Assad to visit countries and receive their representatives. He cannot impose his control over all of Syria, and there will be no reconstruction or return of refugees under these circumstances. Assad will not fall like al-Bashir, and he may continue for many years amid existing intersections. He relies on

chaos and demands that they negotiate with him to stop the export of Captagon and the return of refugees. The concept of the state in Syria is mafia-like. Assad "sells" Syria to Iran to fulfill the debt of Iran's support when his regime was on the verge of collapse. The regime's survival in Syria means that any return of refugees would lead to arrests. It also means that he cannot engage in a peaceful settlement because his regime is based on repression, killing, and torture. Regarding the issue of Captagon manufacturing and smuggling, it is a significant problem, and the quantities seized are small compared to the overall scale of smuggling. Mansour concluded that there is nothing that can make Syrians accept reconciliation with Bashar al-Assad, and this is a fundamental point in the Syrian situation.

El-Ezzi

Dr. Khaled El-Ezzi, a professor at the Lebanese University, stated that a new concept is emerging through a new global system that only arises as a result of major economic collapses. This system has its foundations and concepts, and it appears that major powers are attempting to impose their political

and economic agendas on the global stage. For example, China is currently facing crises in its relations with Europe and the United States, which has led it to strengthen its relationship with Russia. On the other hand, China's political philosophy focuses on avoiding wars and prioritizing economics and trade, particularly through securing the New Silk Road for its 2030 project, where China aims to become a major power. Beijing refrained from getting involved in the European-Russian conflicts in Ukraine, and it is likely to continue on this path. However, China benefits greatly from the war in Ukraine. As for Russia, they believe that whoever controls Ukraine will control Europe. They attempted to use the same scenario that NATO used in Serbia for this purpose. It is clear that Russia, not China, is the enemy of Europe, and the Americans are working to exhaust the Russians in Ukraine. They will not be able to regain their capabilities for years. El-Ezzi pointed out that the Middle East was left vacant after President Obama's abandonment of the region or, at least, as it appeared during Obama's era. Russia decided to fill this void, particularly in vulnerable areas, by entering Syria and

targeting the Syrian opposition. Everyone, including the United States, agreed that changing the situation in Syria is prohibited because it would lead to a change throughout the region. Furthermore, the Russians attracted many parties to fight in Syria, while also bringing in other parties to participate alongside them in the battles. There is a clear Iranian effort to displace the Syrians, and there is a strong and real connection between Assad and Iran. The Syrian regime is involved and participating in drug trafficking. El-Ezzi also noted that there is a problem in the United States' approach to dealing with the region. For example, they seek to change the behavior of the Iranian regime but not the regime itself. The US experience in regime change in Iraq was not encouraging. Washington's priorities are not focused on our region; they are somewhere else. The US adopts a policy of patching, calming, and managing relationships in the Middle East. Interestingly, the Russians and Americans agreed to place the Houthis on the list of terrorist organizations without implementation, which relieves Iran in Syria and the region. The Syrian regime, on the other hand, will not change its behavior. It

demands \$7 billion as a price to stop drug shipments, some of which have been seized, to resolve the Captagon problem. During the Syrian war, Saudi Arabia was kept away from the Syrian file by several parties. There are indications today that the Syrian economy will collapse, and Mohammed bin Salman's project frightens everyone. Saudi Arabia will pursue the development of nuclear capabilities, and the Abraham Accords will not last long. However, Saudi Arabia may normalize relations with Israel based on the principles of peace in exchange for land, as proposed in 2002.

It should be noted that Hezbollah is involved in Captagon operations, and Assad has been estranged from the Arab world since he killed Syrians with nitrate barrels. It does not seem that he will fully and naturally return to the Arab fold.

Panel 3: Lebanon's Relationship with the Arab World: Geopolitics of Restoration?

Paula Astih hosts panelists Antoine Courban, Brigitte Khair Mountain, and Karim Émile Bitar to discuss how the current geopolitical reality shapes the relationship between Lebanon and the Arab World, and asks if we are ready to talk about restoring relations.

Astih

Astih, the director of the episode, stated that Lebanon is cautiously and attentively keeping up with the significant developments occurring in the region, especially the easing of Iranian-Saudi relations, as well as Saudi-Syrian relations. This is due to the pivotal role these countries play in the Lebanese arena and their significant influence on various political forces. Naturally, these forces have started searching for a new discourse and a new role that align with the regional developments, out of fear that Lebanon may bear the costly consequences of these countries' conflicts, without reaping the benefits of their normalization today. So, how does the current geopolitical reality shape the relationship between Lebanon and the Arab world? Are we ready to discuss the restoration of relations? Have the reasons behind the Arab

estrangement towards Lebanon over the past years been eliminated? Is a new system for Lebanon needed to prevent the repetition of past failed experiences, or is there a possibility for fundamental solutions within the framework of the current system?

Courban

Courban criticized the discourse of hatred against Arabs, considering the "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," signed on February 4, 2019, between the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi, as one of the most important documents for the human mind and a translation of human rights. He believed that the Lebanese still perceive themselves as collective entities rather than individuals and citizens, and their discourse ("us and them") is based on interests and privileges.

He expressed concern that the settlements taking place in the region might come at Lebanon's expense, considering France as a country with its own interests, not necessarily gentle or compassionate. We may not like it, but it serves its own interests, especially in its relations with Iran. He questioned why the opponents of the French project (the presidential one) do not present their own program. Why do we pay the price of our stupidity and the price of our foreign policy? He added that we are a people who are not unified nationally, and everyone wants to be the first in their village. The Lebanese do not agree on a central decision and differ on every stance and every statement. He believed that dialogue is a deception and synonymous with the non-application of constitutional and legitimate standards. Thus, the subject discussed in the dialogue becomes at the expense of the law and the constitution. How can you engage in dialogue with someone who possesses weapons and aims them at you? What can you say to them?

Courban also stressed that the Taif Agreement stipulated the dissolution of armed militias, and the concept of the state is exclusive to its use of

violence within the country, with it being the only legitimate authority. So, how can Lebanon achieve its interests and restore its good relations with the Arab world without a state? Where is the authority, its independence, and the center of decision-making? Lebanon has a constitution and democracy, and even if it loses its role as a hospital or an eastern university, it has not lost the culture of freedom. Free speech still exists in Lebanon, a culture that does not exist in police states, and it is a great wealth that is more important than the university and the hospital.

Courban pointed out that Lebanon has received a lot of assistance in the past and has not accomplished anything. To whom will Saudi Arabia give money today when we don't have a state and every official enriches themselves?

He called for overcoming tribal and clan mentalities to reach the state, stating that he is Lebanese by Lebanese law and not due to any other affiliation. This is nobler than any other sectarian or other identity. National identity is built on the law and it protects my rights and defends me...

Bitar

On his part, Dr. Karim Bitar, a researcher at the Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies in Paris, considered that there is a fear of fragmentation, and alliances of minorities in Lebanon and the region. Amid the struggle to preserve the Lebanese idea within a new political system, Lebanon lacks immunity to build a state and institutions, and it has paid a high price for the disputes among regional countries. The problem lies in the Lebanese misconception that major powers are charitable organizations, and the question is: What have we done to build a capable state and to neutralize Lebanon from the game of axes? The causes of conflict still exist. On the other hand, there is a victory for Chinese diplomacy in the region, but the rules of the game have not changed since the Iraq war in 2003, which had a significant impact on the region and continues to have negative repercussions to this day, and we are still paying the price for it.

Bitar added that many have attempted to make the Lebanese think as individuals rather than members of a community, and the problem of citizenship exists not only in Lebanon but also in Israel, Turkey,

and elsewhere. The concept of citizenship is the key to salvation. If we think in terms of citizenship, we may benefit from what is happening in the region. We have paid the price and fought wars for others, not as it is often said, wars of others on Lebanese soil. France, with its secularism, has often used the policy of divide and conquer, attempting to strengthen one sect at the expense of others for a long time. Our interest lies in keeping up with the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement, and we don't have a 100-year strategy for Lebanon.

Bitar emphasized that the first step that must be taken today is the election of a new president, and we can adopt true decentralization within one state, including financial decentralization. The laws are not being implemented, and our constitution has been trampled upon for 40 years. He called for the full implementation of the constitution to give Lebanon all the components of success. Lebanon has broad relations and can engage with everyone, but before reaching out to the outside, we need the immunity of the state: the state of citizenship! We need to build a strong state that respects everyone and secures the rights of all; this is the foundation. The Taif

Agreement has not been fully implemented, and this is a real problem. We have this constitution (the Taif Constitution) that has obtained American, Saudi, and internal approval. If the Taif Agreement is comprehensively implemented, there is no need to search for new formulas.

Bitar said that the fiercest wars in Lebanon occurred within the same sect, not between different sects, and the solution lies in working to build institutions and having exclusive state control over weapons. He considered that each family in Lebanon has its particularities, and the book "June Rain" by Jubran Tuwayni demonstrates the division even within each village.

Bitar clarified that priority for Saudi Arabia lies in Yemen, and if stability is achieved there, Lebanon will be at the bottom of its priorities, as well as for France and the United States. However, Hezbollah is a significant force for Iran, and it is unlikely to easily relinquish its weapons.

Khair

Brigitte Khair, former diplomat at the United Nations, stated that as Lebanese, we have not taken responsibility and chosen a

sovereign majority that would keep Lebanon neutral vis-à-vis from the different regional alignments. She added that we made many concessions after the Syrian withdrawal, but UN Security Council Resolution 1701, following the end of the 2006 war, has not been fully implemented to this day.

Additionally, we have not implemented or respected Resolution 1559, and we jeopardized Lebanese interests when several Lebanese ministers attacked Saudi Arabia and the UAE. We failed to maintain our good relations with the Gulf Arab states and friendly countries to Lebanon, and we have appeased Hezbollah greatly.

Khair also mentioned that Lebanon was not present at the Arab negotiations regarding Syrian refugees, despite hosting over a million refugees. If we are not at the table to participate in decision-making regarding this matter, the decisions may be made at our expense, and we have missed many opportunities. Therefore, we must work to safely and honorably return Syrian refugees to their country because Lebanon has carried a heavy burden. The solution to this issue lies in an international and regional agreement. The Taif Agreement has

not been fully implemented in terms of expanded decentralization and disarming militias, particularly Hezbollah. As a sovereign team, we must reject the firing of rockets from our land by the Hamas movement. Hezbollah's weapons must be surrendered, and the law must be enforced. We must work to achieve a state of law and institutions. Once that is achieved, everything else becomes easier. The process of building a state of law and institutions requires the separation of powers. Khair called for clarity in vision and a unified narrative for

citizens who reject alignments and desire the authority of the state alone. Clarity in vision and a unified narrative facilitate engagement with the Arab and international communities, who cooperated with Lebanon in 2005 when we united to oust the Syrians. International and Arab solidarity with Lebanon can increase hope and reduce emigration abroad. She considered that Lebanon cannot bear another six years with a president from the Hezbollah axis, and the balance between presidencies must be restored.

The Struggle of the Great Powers



Panel 4: The Ascending Power of India: Perspectives on the Upcoming Indian Role in Lebanon and the Middle East

A moderated conversation between retired Brigadier General Khalil Helou and Jad Akhaoui.

Akhaoui

Jad Akhaoui, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Lebanese National Convention, began the episode by stating that during her visit to India in 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described India as a global power, not just a regional power. He highlighted that in 1974, India took a major step by conducting its first nuclear test. After all these years, has India truly become a major international power? Does India's dream and ambition align with this goal? Are there any plans by the Indian government to become a major power? What capabilities qualify India for such a position? Why does India aspire to have strategic and balanced relations with countries in the region, specifically Iran and Israel? Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also have relations with India, and vice versa. So why does India maintain a good

relationship with Iran? Shouldn't the rising power of India be considered a threat to the United States, similar to China, for example? These are questions that General Helou will answer during this episode.

El Helou

In his visual presentation, General Helou, President of the Board of Trustees of the Lebanese National Convention, discussed the rising power of India. He mentioned that India is a nuclear-armed country with 160 nuclear warheads and possesses strategic missile capabilities. It is an English-speaking country (official language) with a good global reputation. India is a large consumer of goods and, as of April 2023, it became the world's most populous country, surpassing China. The population growth rate in India is the highest among major countries.

India is one of the ten countries that own aircraft carriers, specifically two carriers, one of which is domestically manufactured and is preparing to equip it with French fighter jets of the Rafale model. This allows India to deploy military forces for missions beyond its borders.

India is the world's fifth-largest economy after the United States, China, Japan, and Germany, and the third-largest economy in Asia. It is poised to become the third-largest economy globally in the coming years, as it has the highest economic growth rate among major countries. On the other hand, India effectively combats poverty, and its poverty rate has decreased in recent years, although it still remains higher than that of China. New Delhi has good international relations with both the United States and Russia (the main supplier of weapons and oil to India). Additionally, India maintains good relations with China despite border disputes and military clashes between the two countries, as India has remained neutral in the US-China conflict over Taiwan. India also has very good relations with the countries of the European Union, especially France.

India is the world's fourth-largest military power and the second-

largest arms importer globally, after Saudi Arabia. The top four countries exporting weapons to India are Russia, France, the United States, and Israel, in that order. To reduce dependence on imports in the defense sector, India has increased and developed its local weapons manufacturing, especially fifth-generation fighter aircraft, attack helicopters, main battle tanks, small arms, as well as nuclear-powered submarines capable of launching nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. One submarine has already been built and is operational, while two additional ones are under construction. General Helou also mentioned that India has ten military bases outside its borders, including an airbase in Tajikistan and a naval base in Oman.

Regarding relations with Middle Eastern countries, India has excellent relations with all regional powers, especially the Gulf countries, with the United Arab Emirates being its second-largest importer of Indian goods after the United States. India imports two-thirds of its oil and gas needs from Gulf countries. General Helou explained that India also maintains good relations with Iran for several reasons: firstly, Iran is an oil-rich country and the second-

largest gas reserve in the world; secondly, it oversees the important Hormuz Strait, through which Indian goods pass to the Gulf and Gulf oil and gas flow to India; thirdly, Iran's stability is crucial for India's interests in ensuring the flow of oil and gas; and fourthly, Iran shares its eastern border with Pakistan, which has a historical conflict with India. India also has a good relationship with Israel, which sells weapons, spare parts, anti-aircraft missiles, and armored vehicles to India (42% of Israel's arms exports go to India). Additionally, eight million Indians live and work in various fields in the Arab Gulf countries, serving as an important source of income as they

send \$30 billion annually back to India. The Gulf region imports a significant portion of its needs from India, such as 80% of its rice and 65% of other food items.

As for Lebanon, it imports goods worth \$300 million annually from India and exports \$30 million worth of goods to India. Lebanon has an interest in building excellent relations with India as it is a neutral country and has good relations with all competing powers in the region. Finally, there is a competition between the great powers to win the friendship of India, which is keen on a policy of neutrality in major conflicts

Panel 5: Tensions Between Global Powers: Worsening or New World Order?

To better understand the acute tension between global powers, this panel taps into the Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the China-Taiwan crisis, questioning whether we are heading to a deterioration or to a new world order. A conversation between Habib C. Malik, Paul Salem, and Saleh El Machnouk, moderated by Nicolas Badaoui.

El Badawi

In the midst of escalating tensions between the West and Moscow, it is important to remember that the major global powers had pledged to prevent nuclear conflict. China, Russia, Britain, the United States, and France had all agreed on the need to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the occurrence of a nuclear war. However, today we observe tensions prevailing among these major powers, with a lack of negotiation on contentious issues. This backdrop has led to the emergence of a global arms race, particularly between the United States, which has unveiled new weapons it has developed, and Russia, which has announced successful tests of new missiles. On the other hand, Russia's war on Ukraine has deepened the rifts and divisions between the major powers, namely the United States and

Russia. Attempts at communication and understanding between Western countries and Moscow to end this war have failed. In the Middle East, for the first time in history, China plays a significant role in resolving one of the region's crises. The Saudi-Iranian agreement, facilitated by China, has the potential to ease tensions in the Middle East, end American pressure on Saudi Arabia, break the Arab boycott of Tehran, and raise questions among some observers as to whether Washington seeks to undermine the agreement to harm its interests in the region in favor of China and hinder the Gulf states' normalization of relations with Israel. The Saudi-Iranian agreement represents a fundamental turning point in overcoming the dispute between Riyadh and Tehran and is an important step towards resolving crises in the Middle East, particularly

in Yemen. However, it also turns China into a major player in the Gulf region and a potential competitor or alternative to the American role. This detailed agreement between the two major regional players stipulates the activation of the 2001 Security Cooperation Agreement between them, mutual respect, and a commitment not to interfere in each other's internal affairs. It is the result of the first real mediation by China in the Middle East to resolve one of its crises.

Malik

The coordinator of studies in the "Watan Al-Insan" project, writer, and author Dr. Habib Malik stated that the situations in Georgia and Ukraine are extremely complex. He pointed out that the hastiness and underestimation in dealing with the situations of these two countries by NATO have led us to the current state. He emphasized that the expansion eastward by the West and the United States should have happened with wisdom and awareness. We must always bear in mind that there is a culture in Washington that constantly seeks out opponents. The war in Ukraine is a tragedy for both Ukraine and Russia, and a rapid peaceful solution

must be found. He also mentioned that the West has contributed to the tragedy of pushing Russia into the arms of China.

He pointed out that the war in Ukraine has revealed the true weakness of the Russian army. It has become clear that Russia is far from being ranked third in terms of military power and faces difficulties in traditional warfare. If the US administration changes, there may be an opportunity for Republicans to end the war through an agreement rather than by force. He considered that the current importance lies in the adversaries of the US benefiting from the fact that the Biden administration is in power, in order to influence the upcoming presidential elections in the United States. A change in administration may lead to changes in policies and thus to ending the war in Ukraine peacefully. Dr. Malik also believed that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is politically mature and fully understands the risks of selling oil in currencies other than the US dollar. The US response to this would be both political and military because when US national security is affected, Washington's actions and perspective on the situation would be different.

Salem

Dr. Paul Salem, the President of the Middle East Institute in Washington, stated that the global system is undergoing gradual and slow change. Russia has declared its hostility towards the US-led system and has chosen direct confrontation. Being an oil-rich country, Russia has independent energy resources such as oil, gas, coal, and minerals. However, the expansion of NATO after the war in Ukraine has posed a challenge to Russia. Another challenge for the United States today is China, which is not an oil-rich country and lacks sufficient energy resources. China needs to export a large quantity of its industries to the world to secure imports and sustain its economic wheel. Moreover, China has a large demographic size and has a strategic vision and plan until 2045. Until then, China needs all global markets for exports, and it has no intention of challenging the US-led global system. On the contrary, China has tried and continues to benefit from it. At the same time, China is working to develop its industrial and economic system to become a greater power in the future. It will continue to adopt a policy of

maneuvering on the international stage and will not directly challenge the United States, whether in Taiwan or elsewhere.

Dr. Salem pointed out that China has emerged as an economic power, made military advancements, and provided more aid worldwide than the World Bank. The United States used to have a positive outlook towards China, providing assistance and supporting its education system, hoping that China would adopt the path of democracy and align with the West. However, this did not happen, especially under the current Chinese leadership.

He considered that there are significant obstacles to the growth of the Chinese economy, and it will not reach the level of the US economy, especially with European-American cooperation. The United States is an economically open country, and its trade with foreign countries is free, which stimulates long-term growth. For example, India has a greater future compared to China because it is an open and positive country towards the West. India and China have many areas of contention, but India has not yet achieved its ambitions.

Dr. Salem affirmed that the US dollar will remain the primary global

currency for a long time. The future of the Chinese currency is more challenging, and investing in it is nearly impossible due to the one-party system and authoritarian rule, which do not facilitate investment. The Chinese currency is not significant for investors, and therefore, the US dollar is not in danger in the foreseeable future. The currencies that truly compete with the US dollar are the Euro and the Yen, but their combined volume represents only 33% of global trading, while the global trading volume of the Chinese currency does not exceed 3%.

He stressed that the United States, along with its alliances, the United Nations, and the International Monetary Fund, will remain dominant. Russia has attempted to challenge this, but it has failed. China is trying to challenge this system as well, but it is doing so quietly and is not seeking direct confrontation. China has learned an important lesson from the war in Ukraine, fully realizing that any attack on Taiwan would be complex and difficult. Ultimately, the current global system remains in place for the time being.

Regarding the situation in the Middle East, Salem stated that the

agreements between four Arab countries and Israel have made Saudi Arabia consider normalization. Today, there is a significant change with China's diplomatic entry into the region after its economic entry and its sponsorship of the Saudi-Iranian agreement. He also noted that there is a major change in the region, and part of it is the return of the Assad regime to quasi-normal relations with Arab countries. Lebanon must monitor these changes, and its greatest challenge is organizing its internal affairs.

Machnouk

Professor Saleh Machnouk, from the Saint Joseph University of Beirut, stated that defining the current global system is difficult. After the Cold War, the world transitioned to the unipolar American-led system. However, what we witness today does not resemble any previous system, and there is no name for this new system.

Regarding non-Western powers, they are not in harmony. For example, Brazil has not achieved the expected progress, while Russia is facing economic difficulties and is involved in a war. On the other hand, India and China are progressing. Moreover, there are disagreements

between China and Russia, and they cannot be seen as a single power. A new world is emerging, which is neither multipolar nor unipolar, and it does not resemble any historical model. It opens the door for countries to diversify alliances. Despite the China-US conflict, both countries acknowledge and allow other nations to cooperate with each of them simultaneously, which did not happen in the past. He considered that the results of the Russian-Ukrainian war indicate a decline in Russia. The assessments regarding Russian military power were not accurate, and Russia did not achieve the desired results in Ukraine. As for China, its changes have occurred over the past twenty years, and its rise has been remarkable. However, it does not have military bases outside its territory except in Djibouti, while the United States has more than 700 military bases around the world. No one can speculate about China's economic situation after forty years.

Regarding the Middle East, Machnouk stated that the changes in the international system have an impact on the region. The Gulf countries want to maintain relations with both the United States and China. He also noted that China is not ideological in its economic relations and has relationships with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and Iran at the same time. He explained that there is a serious problem in US policy towards the Middle East, and China has filled the void left by the United States in the region. China's sponsorship of the Saudi-Iranian agreement has raised alarm bells in America. There is fear in Lebanon that the Saudi-Iranian agreement might have negative implications. If Iran freezes its conflict with Saudi Arabia, the level of conflict with Israel through Beirut may increase, and Lebanon, as usual, will pay the price for the Saudi-Iranian settlement.

Panel 6: American National Security: U.S. Global Preeminence and Geopolitical Struggle with China

This panel brings together Robert Rabil and Wissam Saadeh to explore how the U.S.A. protects its national security through its political involvement in Africa and the Arctic. Moderated by Maya Gebeily, this panel provides insight on one aspect of the American fight for global preeminence in the face of China.

Gebeily

Ms. Maya Gebeily, the Bureau Chief of Reuters in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, stated at the beginning of the panel that we are addressing a new topic related to U.S. national security. We will try to understand how the United States can protect its interests in Africa and the Arctic region in the face of Chinese expansion there. These are distant regions, but understanding the competition and conflicts between the two global powers in these areas is necessary because it can inevitably have repercussions on our region.

Rabil

Professor Robert Rabil, from Florida Atlantic University, stated that the United States defends its influence and deals with its adversaries to achieve or maintain three goals: strong security (i.e., mitigating or

preventing external influence on Washington's decision-making process), national prosperity, and stability and democracy. This is achieved through alliances with various countries, such as European countries, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Kuwait, through defense treaties.

He pointed out that the US-China dispute and the growing concern over China began in 2000 when China joined the World Trade Organization and started adopting an export-oriented policy to build its economy. This dispute and concern have escalated since then, especially in 2020 when China's economy rapidly grew, making it the second-largest economic and military power in the world with relations with over 75 countries, becoming the United States' primary competitor. The US is greatly concerned about China's

presence in the Pacific, fearing a weakening of its own presence in the region due to the growing strength of the Chinese navy. China openly aims to remove US naval forces from the Pacific, particularly in Taiwan and the South China Sea. These tensions between the two sides have expanded beyond Europe and East Asia, specifically in the Arctic region, Africa, and Central Asia. These three regions have become areas of intense competition and a race for natural resources, including minerals, oil, gas, agricultural resources, and more, between Washington and Beijing. The US presence in these regions is still below the desired level.

On the other hand, the US has a strong presence in India, which has long-standing border disputes with China. America sees China as contributing to the reduction of US global power. Hence, the conflict over the Arctic region, Africa, and Central Asia, where the US did not intervene after the end of the Cold War and left Russia to act without facing any opposition. However, now China has entered these regions to secure various resources, including food, energy, minerals, etc. The future US-China conflict is not only about resources but also about

technology in general, particularly information technology.

Regarding the Arctic region, Rabil stated that Russia is strong there with its stations, icebreakers, and military bases. The US, through a new strategy, aims to advance and penetrate the Arctic, which holds significant resources of minerals, oil, and gas. The US intends to use it as a maritime route after a long period of using the Atlantic Ocean, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and the Gulf passages, which would cut the travel distance in half. The US is concerned about Russian submarines infiltrating beneath the ice of the Arctic region and reaching US waters near Alaska for military deterrence. For all these reasons, Washington considers the Arctic region as a priority, especially since the Chinese-Russian convergence, while not necessarily resulting in a strong and steady alliance, still remains a possible gateway for China through the waterways in the Arctic region since, without Russia, China has no ability to threaten US interests in the region. It's worth noting that Beijing demands its maritime rights in the region. As for Africa, China has built a hundred ports there for strategic purposes, including securing food

resources (as China is not self-sufficient in food) and essential mineral resources for renewable energy. This indicates that China is interested in its vital interests in Africa, not just commercial interests. China does not attempt to solve Africa's problems or interfere in its policies or human rights and freedoms, which reassures African regimes and makes them more inclined to deal with China. In contrast, the United States pushes African countries to undergo reforms in line with the values and systems adopted by the free world. It assists in promoting transparency and democracy in African policies and establishes alliances and economic partnerships with countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Tanzania, which export resources to the United States. All of this means that the US seeks to establish good relations with Africa, based on promoting freedom, democracy, and following the rules of free trade. In the past, the focus was only on security in African countries since security is crucial for strengthening regimes, combating corruption, and reducing the power of militias. Rabil added that Washington utilizes its capabilities to help Africa solve

electricity, water, and infrastructure problems.

Saadé

Dr. Wissaam Saade, a professor at Saint Joseph University of Beirut, stated that China is an empire and civilization that historically did not have an overseas policy or international policy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, China was introverted and distanced itself from the strategic forefront. In the early 1990s, China was only interested in marketing its products, but priorities have changed today, and what we witness is a new Chinese expansion in interests and projects.

He added that historically, China sought to maintain its borders around Manchuria, Mongolia, and Tibet, and it has always faced problems with all its neighbors. Therefore, China's expansion in Africa and the Middle East is easier than its expansion in its immediate surroundings, as there are no disputes with China in these regions. However, in its direct neighborhood, China faces multiple problems with its neighbors, especially Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, India, and others. Chinese penetration in Africa is in

conflict with British, French, and European interests in general, as these countries had colonies in Africa and have a long history of presence and relations there. In this context, Saade pointed out that African economies are currently undergoing the fourth industrial revolution, and China is working to introduce its own version of this revolution to Africa through technological industries. African countries rely on Chinese investments, and there are groups of Chinese immigrants within Africa. Beijing has succeeded in establishing partnerships with South Africa, Guinea, and Madagascar, securing its economic interests. Saade emphasized that China is not concerned with democracy or human rights, nor does it seek to impose them or interfere in the form of systems or the path of governance in African countries that are comfortable with this arrangement. Despite this economic convergence and interconnection between China

and African countries, Saade considered that due to the absence of significant Chinese military bases or naval bases in Africa compared to France, America, and the West in general, except for a small naval base in Djibouti primarily tasked with combating piracy off the coast of Somalia, Beijing cannot play a significant security or military role. Therefore, caution should be exercised in assessing China's role and not consider it a real competitor to the West. The Chinese situation is also dependent on the trajectory of events between Russia and Western countries.

He considered that China invests in the concept of convergence between the Black and Yellow races in the face of the White race, and this may play a role that China could exploit to remove white dominance from Africa, based on the alliance between the Black and Yellow races led by the Yellow race.

Food Security and Food Safety: Impact on Society and Security



Panel 7: Food Security in the Lebanese Crisis: Challenges and Solutions

Nicole Fakhoury Sayegh asks panelists Catherine Saïd, Nahla Hwalla, and Nathalie Asmar Yaghi about the challenges facing food security in Lebanon, with the necessary recommendations and legislations amidst the ongoing acute socioeconomic crisis.

Sayegh

Dr. Nicole Sayegh, professor at Saint Joseph University of Beirut, said that in light of the current crisis in Lebanon, estimates indicate that approximately 1.46 million Lebanese, or 38% of the population, and 0.80 million Syrian refugees (53% of Syrian refugees), are facing advanced levels of food insecurity, and according to the World Food Programme's classification, they fall under the third stage of food insecurity, which is the food crisis stage. It is also expected that the number of those reaching the fourth stage of food insecurity, which is the emergency or complete food insecurity stage, will increase. The expected deterioration in food insecurity reflects further expected deterioration in the economic situation, rising prices, unemployment, and the devaluation of the Lebanese pound. In this

context, according to World Bank figures, Lebanon recorded the highest inflation rate in food prices in the world during the period from February 2022 to February 2023, with a 261% increase in food price inflation within one year.

Hwalla

Professor Nahla Hwalla, former dean of the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at the American University of Beirut and president of the Lebanese Order of Nutritionists, stated that Lebanon recorded the highest inflation rate between February 2022 and February 2023, and that 1.5 million Lebanese and 800,000 Syrians are facing a decline in food security, which has significant repercussions. She added that food security is not only about agriculture but also about the economy. Everyone should be able to afford food that provides a

healthy and normal life. The four basic pillars of food security are: availability of food, access to food, utilization of food, and stability in food supply. In the long term, there should be sustainability in food security and the ability for everyone to secure it. Some causes of food security decline, or complete food insecurity, include globalization, climate change, and the unavailability of essential food items. As for agriculture in Lebanon, it accounts for only about 20% of food security because Lebanon does not have self-sufficiency in food items. It imports about 80% of its food needs. She added that the most affected groups by the decline in food security are the poor, children, and the elderly. Declining food security has a negative impact on human health, leading to malnutrition initially and eventually to hunger. On the social and security level, declining food security or complete food insecurity leads to increased crime, theft, and potentially revolutions like the "bread revolution," as well as economic, social, political, and security instability. Hwalla pointed out that there is no determination of the food basket (the collection of basic food items) for

individuals and their specific needs in Lebanon, and there are no specialists to identify which food items should be supported.

Yaghi

Dr. Nathalie Yaghi, professor at the University of Saint Joseph of Beirut, mentioned that when people try to cope with declining food security by reducing their expenses, they resort to buying low-priced foods of poor quality (such as cheeses lacking essential elements like calcium and protein, and milk with added sugar, among others). These low-quality food choices have a negative impact on health, not necessarily immediately or in the short term, but in the long run. For example, the deficiency of certain minerals (as indicated by tests) and the increased consumption of saturated fats in low-quality foods can lead to higher rates of chronic diseases such as osteoporosis, anemia, diabetes, high cholesterol levels, and arterial sclerosis. Pregnant women and the elderly are the most affected by the decline or lack of food security, as they have additional dietary needs compared to other groups. Failing to meet these needs results in a deterioration of their health.

Yaghi emphasized the importance of dietary diversity and explained that reduced spending on food leads to decreased variety and number of meals, smaller portion sizes, and lower consumption of certain beneficial food items that protect against chronic diseases, such as vegetables and legumes. The decline in the intake and quality of these food items eventually leads to chronic health problems that may not appear in the short term. Furthermore, inadequate consumption of cheeses, dairy products, and meats, which are essential for growth and protection against infectious diseases, weakens the immune system and increases susceptibility to bacterial infections. She stated that the decline in food security not only results in poor nutrition due to the lack of essential components such as minerals (iron, calcium, zinc), vitamins, and proteins but also coincides with obesity due to increased sugar and fat intake in food. Additionally, the decline or loss of food security leads to compromised food safety. In this context, she highlighted the crucial role of awareness, emphasizing the importance of reliable and scientifically backed information from

specialists to educate people about food safety.

Yaghi emphasized the significance of traditional Lebanese dishes, expressing concern about the increasing deviation from them. She stressed the need for media and schools to raise awareness and encourage people to return to traditional dishes, as this helps maintain the minimum dietary requirements within the community. She also noted that women are significantly affected by the lack or decline of food security, and this negatively impacts their children, whether it is due to the quality, quantity, or safety of the food they consume.

Saïd

Catherine Saïd, a representative of the World Food Programme, stated that Lebanon has faced a series of crises, starting from the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, and culminating in the collapsed economic situation. In September 2022, the World Food Programme issued a classification based on several studies by international organizations. The analysis involved 55 experts from 25 organizations, including representatives from

relevant ministries such as health, agriculture, and industry. The purpose was to provide answers and data regarding the following questions: the distribution and location of the population, their vulnerability to deteriorating conditions, and the severity of their situations in different regions of Lebanon.

The results of the classification indicated that no district in Lebanon had more than 40% of minimum food security. Around 38% of the residents faced a severe decline in food security, with Akkar and Baalbek-Hermel being the most affected districts. Regarding the severity of the population's food security, 22 out of 25 districts were classified as being in a food crisis. Approximately 42% of the population experienced a lack of food security, with 15% of them reaching the fourth stage of food insecurity, which is the emergency stage and the most critical.

Saïd mentioned that a significant number of people in Lebanon cannot afford food due to purely economic reasons, especially with the depreciation of the Lebanese pound, high inflation rates, and unemployment reaching around 30%. She highlighted that the

reduction in fuel subsidies worsened the poverty crisis in the country, and the purchasing power decreased to a level insufficient to meet minimum expenses.

In response to the escalating crisis, the World Food Programme aims to increase assistance to meet the needs of both Lebanese and refugee populations on Lebanese territory. Assistance is provided on a family basis, with a five-person family receiving \$125. This assistance is given to approximately 80,000 Lebanese families. Additionally, monthly food rations are distributed to 75,000 other Lebanese families, meals are provided to students in schools, and agriculture training programs are implemented. The assistance also extends to around 200,000 Syrian families. Saïd emphasized that the World Food Programme strives to cover the minimum expenditure required to prevent famine and avoid death from hunger for both Lebanese and Syrian populations.

She explained that the Lebanese people have resorted to difficult coping mechanisms in the face of food insecurity, such as postponing medical treatments, medications, and examinations to reduce expenses. The decline in food security has also

affected the education sector, with parents transferring their children from private schools to public ones. Families have sold their assets and jewelry and minimized their expenditure on energy (cooking gas, heating, electricity, and fuel).

The situation in Lebanon remains critical, and concerted efforts are needed to address the deepening food security crisis and its devastating impact on the population.

Panel 8: The Situation of Food Safety in Lebanon

In the middle of the socioeconomic crisis, Tatiana Papazian asks Joseph Matta and Lena Dargham if the food that the Lebanese are consuming is safe and healthy, and if there is a need for the revision of the existing legislation.

Papazian

Dr. Tatiana Papazian, the host of the panel and a professor at Saint Joseph University of Beirut, began the episode with the following introduction: "Before we delve into the details of food safety in Lebanon, as we all know, life is no longer the same as it used to be. The economic and financial crisis has changed the priorities of citizens and affected their purchasing power. Good-quality products have become expensive and beyond the reach of citizens, or they are simply no longer available. This forces citizens to choose cheap products, overlooking their quality, source, and ingredients. As a result of the decline in the quality of all imported varieties and locally manufactured products, whether due to the deterioration of raw materials or because factories face storage problems due to electricity cuts and the high prices of diesel fuel for generators, we will face a health crisis in the near future

with high rates of chronic diseases (such as cancer, heart and artery diseases, obesity, diabetes, etc.) resulting from the lack of serious control over food quality. The role of control is to ensure the safety of food and its freedom from harmful bacteria and chemical and other contaminants.

As a mother, a homemaker, and a nutrition specialist, I wonder what is in the food we buy and consume."

Dargham

Lana Dargham, the General Director of the Lebanese Standards Institution (LIBNOR), stated that the issue of food safety in Lebanon has become a concern for all Lebanese people, as it has an impact on health and health sustainability. She emphasized that healthcare spending affects the national economy, and measures and procedures must be taken to prevent food contamination with microorganisms, toxins, and

radioactive substances, which have a negative impact on human health. Sound food should not include any of these mentioned substances. She outlined a series of measures that should be followed from production to distribution, transportation, cooling, product display, and other procedures that ensure food safety and protect people's health. She mentioned that these measures require infrastructure and legislation at the country level to ensure the proper supply of food to consumers. Countries that have institutions, legislation, and monitoring control every stage of food transition from farms to consumers and enforce laws to secure safe food for consumers. She considered that control should begin during the establishment and construction phase of a factory, not only when production starts. Countries that are keen on food safety have an integrated structure of procedures, with specifications issued based on technical standards and mandatory decrees, rather than mere recommendations. In such cases, these standards become obligatory and have practical regulatory value. In her presentation of the control system for food and food products in Lebanon, Dargham highlighted the

conflicting and overlapping authorities between the Ministries of Agriculture, Industry, Health, Transportation, Economy, and even the Ministry of Tourism, which all have the authority to inspect and regulate food safety and control non-compliant materials. This leads to negative outcomes, including the diffusion of responsibility, which opens the door to a negative impact on food safety.

Dargham pointed out that the National Food Safety Authority was established by law, and one of its tasks is to provide technical advice to those involved in food handling and consumption. However, its members have not been appointed, and the authorities of relevant ministries have been retained. This lack of exclusivity in inspection and control, leads to the failure of food safety monitoring and problems in implementing laws.

She also mentioned the shortage of many committees, departments, and official institutions concerned with food safety, which have not completed their work. The laboratories responsible for conformity assessment are not monitored by the National Accreditation Council, and the certificates issued regarding food

safety in factories are not always reliable. When a factory obtains a certificate, it reduces the burden on the ministries.

Dargham believed that if official institutions, public administrations, and ministries do not work together, we will not move in the right direction. There is a need for a new workshop to move beyond theories, and the role of ministries in food safety issues should be eliminated or reduced, entrusting them, along with all other food-related matters, to the National Food Safety Authority in the hands of competent specialists, as is the case, for example, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where everything related to food safety is solely the responsibility of the National Food Safety Authority.

Dargham warned against unlicensed factories, considering them a disaster, and believed that municipalities play a vital role in monitoring and following up on these legally obligated factories to adopt international food safety standards. Each licensed factory needs to enhance its capabilities, operations, and compliance with all the standards and specifications approved in Lebanon and worldwide. She asked, "Who is authorized to close unlicensed factories?" Finally,

factories need multifaceted working mechanisms, a clear operating system, and a fundamental monitoring mechanism. A factory that starts with proper and clear specifications and standards will have good product specifications.

Matta

Joseph Matta, professor at the Saint Joseph University of Beirut and the director of laboratories and applied research at the Industrial Research Institute, stated that food safety is linked to specifications that must be mandatory enforced through legislative texts such as laws and decrees. He also emphasized the importance of scientific and applied research in collaboration with accredited laboratories that have sufficient capabilities in terms of facilities and human resources. He stressed the importance of consumer awareness because the majority of consumers choose low-priced goods that combine processed food with inferior ingredients. Citizens should be aware that ready-to-eat processed food may not be safe since it is not monitored. Additionally, there are problems with cheating about the levels of vitamins, fat, and protein in displayed products

that do not meet the required specifications.

He warned against the presence of materials saturated with prohibited chemical elements and unhealthy dyes, such as red coloring for turnip pickles, and white coloring for tahini, which is naturally brown.

Furthermore, there are harmful substances that have been discovered in some products worldwide and subsequently withdrawn from the market, such as the recent withdrawal of a Cadbury chocolate product in Britain, and possibly in Lebanon (samples are currently undergoing examination), found to be contaminated with the dangerous Listeria bacteria that poses a risk to human health.

Moreover, large quantities of pistachios exported from Lebanon were found to contain high levels of aflatoxins, a fungal toxin.

Matta mentioned that it is necessary to ensure the additives used in processed food for preservation or improvement of color and taste.

Some of these food additives are prohibited in Lebanon, while others are allowed but should not exceed certain limits in terms of type, quantity, or proportion. However, in some cases, prohibited additives are added, and consumers mistakenly

believe that food products such as certain cheeses and dairy products do not spoil and remain safe for extended periods. This leads to consuming a large quantity of these products along with the prohibited additives.

There is also an issue related to plastic containers and packaging used in supermarkets, as there is a possibility of leakage of their components into the consumed food, which can have a negative impact on health. These plastic materials can be carcinogenic or cause disruptions to the endocrine glands.

Furthermore, the use of untreated water in factories, which is not processed in dedicated water treatment units, can lead to bacterial contamination in the manufactured food products.

Matta emphasized that the decrees and laws are in place, but their implementation is required, including the control over food products. He mentioned a mandatory decree for inspecting any merchandise entering Lebanon. However, locally produced goods cannot be completely identified and monitored. Moreover, some exporting companies provide samples for laboratory testing before export, which is contrary to the principle of health control, as

samples should be taken by official monitoring bodies.

He emphasized that there is significant pressure on laboratories due to the density of imports and the multiple countries of origin for the same imported goods. As a result, the Industrial Research Center scrutinizes every shipment and all the details, publishing the names of non-compliant goods with specifications every month.

Matta stressed that laboratory test results are the basis for accepting or rejecting specific goods. If any product exported from Lebanon does not meet the specifications, it will have a negative impact on the reputation of all remaining Lebanese products. It is crucial to transition from scientific research to the applied field based on the available data.

**Displaced and Refugees
To and From Lebanon:
a Local Crisis
with International
and Regional
Repercussions**

Panel 9: Refugees or Displaced, between Lebanon's Choices and Challenges

Lina Hamdan talks to Hisham Dibsy and Ziad El Sayegh, as well as Amal Nader and Dominique Tohmé to discuss the complex situation of the displaced and the refugees in Lebanon, and to exhibit the choices and the challenges facing the host country.

The first section of this panel addresses the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon through a dialogue between the host and Dr. Ziad El-Sayegh and Mr. Hisham Debsi.

Hamdan

Today, we will discuss one of the most sensitive issues, which is the refugee file, encompassing both the Palestinian and Syrian refugees. This file presents various security, political, and social challenges. We will start with the Palestinian file, and our guests for this discussion are Mr. Hisham Debsi, a Palestinian researcher and Director of the Development Center for Studies and Training, and Mr. Ziad El-Sayegh, the Executive Director of the Civil Impact Forum and an expert in refugee affairs who previously served as a colleague in the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee. We

aim to conduct the discussion within a methodological framework, addressing four main dimensions that contribute to providing a realistic and accurate picture of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. These dimensions include the political problematic, the security problematic, the socio-economic problematic, and the legal and diplomatic problematic. Secondly, we will evaluate the experience of joint work and the Lebanese-Palestinian relations against the backdrop of a challenging regional situation, specifically focusing on official political representation and the role of political parties from the Palestinian side, as well as the role of the state. Finally, we will strive to propose recommendations directed towards the Lebanese government, parties, Palestinian authorities, and factions.

El-Sayegh

As for the Palestinian refugee file, Dr. Ziad El-Sayegh, the Executive Director of the Civil Impact Forum, stated that according to the latest statistics, the number of Palestinian refugees inside camps and Palestinian gatherings in Lebanon is approximately 184,000. However, there is no official count for those residing outside the camps. The Issam Fares Institute estimated their number to be around 260,000. He highlighted three main problematic areas in this file. Firstly, the humanitarian problematic, emphasizing the need to restore the dignity of refugees and initiate efforts to improve the camps conditions, which were already underway before the Battle of Nahr al-Bared in 2007. Secondly, the arms problematic, including the non-implementation of the Taif Agreement's decision to disarm militias, in addition to what was stipulated in the Second Clause of the Palestinian Declaration committing to Lebanon's sovereignty and relinquishing Palestinian arms within Lebanese territories. This issue should be addressed, similar to the disarmament of Hezbollah, as the Palestinian arms outside the camps have no relation to Lebanon

and serve agendas beyond Lebanese territories, which are not related to the right of return or the social rights of Palestinian refugees and others. Thirdly, the diplomatic problematic, concerning the right of return and the failure to implement the sovereign decision of disarming outside the camps, rather than resorting to intimidation through normalization.

El-Sayegh called for cooperation between the Lebanese state and UNRWA, noting that the Lebanese government has not signed any agreement with UNRWA. He considered the numbers (of Palestinians) in Lebanon to be subjective, and the absence of data is due to political and demagogic manipulation. This issue has not been prioritized on the government's agenda for responsible political and national treatment, but has been confined solely to the security domain. He explained that he has been working since 2006 on a policy to regulate refugee affairs on legal, political, and social levels. However, it is evident that there is a central decision to keep this file within the scope of political investment for sectarian or security matters, or to keep the fuse lit for regional conflicts. He revealed that the

process of improving the situation of Palestinian refugees in the camps was hindered after the Battle of Nahr al-Bared due to ignorance or intention. The necessary funding for camp development was not secured. The current status of the Palestinian file poses several risks, including the growth of extremism, intelligence breaches, and regional exploitation. Some want to keep the Palestinian refugee issue within the security realm and exploit it for regional bargains through a unified operations room in Lebanon. El-Sayegh emphasized that countering settlement does not happen through slogans but through cumulative diplomatic efforts. He noted the international decision to grant refugees the right of return, and there have been agreements facilitating the reunification of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees with their families and the principle of settlement in another country. He questioned what the Lebanese state has done to prepare for negotiations and a resolution to this issue. He called on Lebanon to play its role in preparing its negotiating file on this matter, cooperating with the United Nations, and engaging with international entities based on the shared Palestinian and Lebanese

interests. It is crucial to formulate a plan to address the Palestinian issue in collaboration with Arab and international legitimacy.

He further pointed out that the international community acknowledges Lebanon's uniqueness, as it has not carried out the organizational process. For example, the Lebanese authorities rejected issuing refugee cards and magnetic cards to Palestinians, using the pretext of them being settlement cards. However, the real reasons behind the non-issuance and provision of these cards are political and related to regional and security investments. It is necessary to "ensure the dignity of Palestinian refugees under state sovereignty until their return." If we do not translate this vision into a solution, the static situation will persist. Therefore, this matter should be reconsidered rather than being exploited for security and political purposes.

Debsy

Hisham Debsi, the Director of the Tatweer Center for Studies and Training, stated that the transformations that have occurred within the Palestinian side since the launch of the peace project for the

establishment of two states have constituted a significant transition from the mindset of revolution to the mindset of statehood, and from an externally-oriented project to an internal Palestinian focus. He added that Lebanon was the stage for the launching of fedayeen operations in the 1970s and 1980s, and the transformation following the Oslo Agreement in the 1990s laid the foundation for rebuilding Palestinian-Lebanese relations between two peoples. The exception occurred during the Lebanese Civil War. The opening of the Palestinian embassy in Lebanon reflects the respect Palestinians have for Lebanon and their adherence to Lebanese law and submission to it above all else. He considered the recent security incident in southern Lebanon (the launching of rockets towards Israel, claimed by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza) as a demonstration and not a reliable basis for evaluation. The Palestinian official stance is clear, which is to disengage from internal Lebanese conflicts and respect the sovereignty of the Lebanese state on its territory. No Palestinian can act outside the camps without local support to convey specific messages. The Palestinian leadership recognizes UN

Resolution 1559 and the UN report calling for the opening of camps and the disarmament of militias. The economic and social conditions in Palestinian camps are not being addressed unless the security situation is addressed. Debsi pointed out that the current approach is patchwork and has not been translated into an interconnected strategic program. The actions have been humanitarian aid and rescue policies that provided assistance to rescue the Palestinian situation in the camps from a collapse similar to what happened in Lebanon. As for addressing the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, it is not comprehensive, and UNRWA provides education and healthcare without a comprehensive solution for the situation of Palestinians in the camps. Therefore, it is difficult to achieve calm and alleviate tensions. He affirmed that no Palestinian wants to be settled in Lebanon. Palestinians face the Geneva Accords to find solutions for resolving the refugee issue and compensating them in case of the establishment of a Palestinian state. There are two problematic aspects: firstly, the two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state on part of Palestinian land, and

secondly, the issue of Palestinian refugees. There are no direct solutions proposed for refugees in Lebanon or in the diaspora. The common interest requires supporting the two-state solution and not dealing with the camps in a way that encourages migration through dangerous journeys. If we do not work together towards a political and humanitarian solution, we will not make progress.

The second part of this episode discussed the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in a dialogue between the host and the speakers, including Amal Nader, Dr. Ziad El-Sayegh, and Mr. Dominique Tohme.

Hamdan

In the second part of the episode, we will address the issue of Syrian refugees, which is currently dominating newspaper headlines and news bulletins. Social media platforms are filled with both realistic and imaginary numbers, serving the interests of some politicians who have become the fiercest critics of this refugee crisis. They warn of the danger facing the nation and its identity. We all know that they have not shouldered their responsibilities towards Syrian

refugees from the beginning. They have not taken the effort to guide this refugee influx or establish a national policy to regulate it and keep it under the umbrella of the state and relevant ministries.

Between reality and fiction, constructive criticism and the cheap exploitation of a national, economic, and social issue that affects the lives and livelihoods of every Lebanese citizen without exception, we welcome our three guests: Mr. Dominique Tohme, Mr. Ziad El-Sayegh, and Dr. Amal Nader. The session will adopt an objective approach, far from populist rhetoric, to shed light on the refugee issue through the challenges and problematic aspects it poses on three levels.

Firstly, the humanitarian level through aid provisions to the refugees. Secondly, the official and legal local level, with the burdens and challenges imposed on a crumbling state. And thirdly, the international and diplomatic level, with proposed solutions for the repatriation of refugees to their homeland.

El-Sayegh

In this section, the Executive Director of the Civil Impact Forum, Dr. Ziad

El-Sayegh, stated that the Lebanese state did not deal with this issue seriously and responsibly. Instead, it approached it with denial and populist exploitation, adopting a policy of begging from the international community and also exploiting in this issue, while repeatedly making statements about conspiracy theories. He added that when the establishment of temporary border centers under state sovereignty was proposed, it was blocked due to political, security, and popular agendas. Registration of refugees entering the country was prohibited, and no distinction was made between refugees and Syrian workers. The state did not sign any cooperation protocols with the Refugee Commission, and they prevented the registration of births among Syrian refugees, claiming that it falls under Lebanese state restrictions. However, they realized in 2016 that unregistered births remain undocumented, making them more susceptible to resettlement and naturalization.

He explained that Lebanon did nothing in this regard except in 2017 when the Ministry of Refugees was established, but the state did not undertake any serious work, and what we witness today is due to

official negligence. He considered that Lebanon lagged behind in preparing the file of Syrian displaced persons, as if the intention was to keep this issue within the realm of populist politics. He pointed out that there is an embassy in Syria for Lebanon, and the General Security is in direct contact with Syrians, and two Lebanese delegations have visited Syria, but without significant results. He also mentioned that in Syria, there are those who prevent the return of refugees, and there is a Lebanese party involved in the war in Syria with connections to the Syrian regime, making it difficult for return in the areas where they are present. The official Lebanese authorities are implicated in this matter. He concluded that the Astana process ended without results, and countries contented themselves with folkloric media displays.

Tohme

Dominique Tohme, a member of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), stated that an agreement was reached to provide the Lebanese government with data regarding Syrian refugees. Ongoing meetings between the government and the UNHCR are

taking place to determine the criteria and transfer the data. He added that the UNHCR was officially requested at the beginning of the crisis to register refugees in agreement with the Higher Relief Commission. The number of Syrian refugees reached 1.2 million in 2015, with a portion leaving Lebanon estimated at 90,000. Currently, the registered names with the UNHCR amount to around 800,000, but the total number of refugees is 1.5 million according to the Lebanese government. The UNHCR has not participated in establishing any camps on Lebanese soil, as only about 10% of refugees live in camps. Tohme revealed that humanitarian aid provided by the UNHCR amounted to 1.5 billion dollars last year, divided into two parts: 800 million dollars for humanitarian assistance and the rest for development projects. He explained that every registered Syrian family with the UNHCR receives approximately 7 million Lebanese pounds per month, with an average of 1.5 million Lebanese pounds per person in the family, in addition to food assistance and monthly rations from the World Food Program. He also noted that the UNHCR covers 40% of Syrians in Lebanon and

assists the most vulnerable Lebanese families, providing them with a monthly amount ranging from 45 to 145 US dollars.

He emphasized that the UNHCR is working on all available opportunities for the return of refugees and is in discussions with the Assad regime to address the causes, which include security concerns related to public safety in Syria, compulsory military service, and the lack of services in some Syrian areas.

Nader

Amal Nader, the president of the Forum for Media Research on the Mediterranean and a university professor, stated that there is no unified European policy regarding Syrian refugees, and the European Union lacks solutions to address the issue of migration to Europe. She mentioned that initially, the approach towards migrants was positive and humanitarian, but with the arrival of large waves of refugees, the far-right movement in Europe has pushed to halt this asylum.

She added that the number of refugees who have reached Europe is not significant compared to neighboring countries of Syria. The Dublin Agreement stipulates that

asylum seekers should register in the first country they enter. Therefore, countries located at the entrances of Europe, such as Spain, Italy, Malta, and other countries along the Balkan route, bear the heaviest burden. She pointed out that refugees either cross the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas to reach Turkey through perilous boat journeys or attempt to cross the Balkan route from Bulgaria

and Hungary to Germany on foot, which is less risky than sea voyages. However, the Balkan countries reject the refugees. For example, Hungary's historical perspective on the crisis stems from past invasions by the Ottoman Empire, and it fears an Islamic influx into its territory. This issue creates a crisis within the European Union.

Panel 10: Irregular Immigration from Lebanon: Social Tragedy, Challenges, and Prospects

To navigate the tragedy of irregular immigration from Lebanon, address its existing challenges, and consider possible prospects, The Lebanese National Convention showcases the documentary of Assaad Bechara, followed by a conversation between Ashraf Rifi and Jad Akhaoui, and a discussion with Assaad Bechara and Roula Fadel.

Akhaoui

In Lebanon's history, there has never been irregular or unauthorized migration like the waves of migration witnessed in recent years, where people risk their lives crossing the sea on unsafe boats that do not meet maritime safety standards. Tragically, this has resulted in numerous devastating shipwrecks. It reflects the despair that has affected Lebanese society, especially in the North, where people seek to escape their reality and seek refuge in what they perceive as havens of peace in Western European countries. The tragedy that occurred in September 2022 with the boat that departed from Minieh and was swept away by storms and waves to the coast of Tartous was extremely painful. Those who boarded the boat were relying on escaping death from hunger, only to perish at sea, with 94

victims drowning. Prior to this incident, in April 2022, another boat sank off the coast of Tripoli, claiming the lives of 33 people, settling at a depth of 450 meters. These tragedies sparked anger and bitterness in the capital of the North, leading many concerned individuals in Lebanon and abroad to take action to alleviate this tragedy and attempt to recover the boat and bodies. Former Minister and General Ashraf Rifi, how have you approached this issue as a whole, and what were the efforts made at the time to recover the boat from the depths of the sea?

Rifi

Former Minister, former Director-General of the Internal Security Forces, and current Member of Parliament, General Ashraf Rifi, stated that Lebanon has never experienced irregular or

unauthorized migration in its history, similar to the recent waves of migration through the sea on unsafe boats that do not meet maritime safety standards. This phenomenon has resulted in tragic cases of drowning, and it is a consequence of the despair that has afflicted Lebanese society, especially in the North, where people seek to escape their situation and seek refuge in what they perceive as safe havens in Western European countries. The tragic incident that occurred in September 2022 with the boat that departed from Minieh and was swept away by storms and waves to the coast of Tartous was extremely painful. Those who boarded the boat were hoping to escape death from hunger, but tragically, 94 victims drowned at sea. Prior to this incident, in April 2022, another boat sank off the coast of Tripoli, claiming the lives of 33 people and settling at a depth of 450 meters. These tragedies have sparked anger, sadness, and despair in the city of Tripoli. General Rifi expressed his concern that scenes of these death boats may resurface with the arrival of summer. Addressing this phenomenon cannot be solely a matter of security because, based on extensive experience, security forces can only

stop 10% of migrants crossing the sea. The phenomenon of escape by sea affects not only Lebanese citizens but also Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian refugees. Many have chosen the option of risking their lives rather than staying in Lebanon, unfortunately resulting in the loss of around 250 lives by drowning. The Lebanese state, however, continues to turn a blind eye to this issue. Stopping this dangerous phenomenon begins by addressing the root causes. Injustice is rampant, and the political situation does not inspire confidence. North Lebanon is paying the price for its political stance. The Syrian occupation, which controlled Lebanon, disabled the facilities in the North, from Qlayaat Airport to Tripoli Port, and even Rachid Karami International Exhibition and Tripoli Oil Refinery. These facilities could have provided employment opportunities for thousands of people and supported a sustainable economic cycle. Fleeing from this reality, people embarked on the dangerous adventure of boarding death boats. Furthermore, there are human traffickers whose sole aim is to make money. The captain of the boat that sank in April 2022 received payment and saved himself while leaving the overcrowded and unsafe

boat to sink. The boat was carrying twice its capacity of people and additional fuel tanks, which accelerated its vertical sinking from the back. General Rifi spoke about his personal initiative as a former minister, former security official, and native of Tripoli. In cooperation with Lebanese expatriates in Australia, the Gulf region, and elsewhere, they sought to bring a submarine to recover the bodies of the drowning victims after the tragedy of the boat sinking, which left the city of Tripoli filled with anger, sorrow, and despair. Initially, they managed to raise around \$70,000, but the cost of securing a submarine capable of descending over 400 meters into the depths of the sea was \$500,000. The necessary funds were secured from the diaspora, with the Lebanese Forces also contributing. However, Rifi and his aids encountered difficulties with the company responsible for the submarine's operation, as the company refused to grant permission for the recovery operation in Lebanon. The Lebanese Army issued a letter to the insurance company to ensure the protection and support of the submarine, and the army followed through on this commitment. They also faced obstacles regarding the European

ban on military submarines entering Lebanon. However, the Red Cross issued a statement confirming that the submarine was coming for humanitarian purposes.

Unfortunately, the submarine faced difficulties in reaching a depth of 450 meters, as its maximum diving depth was 400 meters. It was unable to recover the boat due to the water pressure at that depth, and its mechanical arm also failed to reach the required depth. Additionally, due to the advanced state of decomposition, no bodies could be recovered. Therefore, despite the attempt, the operation did not succeed. On the other hand, the Lebanese state did not take any initiative to address the issue. General Rifi emphasized that the solution to the problem of irregular migration from Lebanon is primarily social and political, not merely security-oriented. People are in an abnormal social and economic situation, overwhelmed by despair and the absence of hope, which human traffickers exploit for their own financial gain.

Akhaoui

Acua Foundation (a non-governmental organization) started its activities after the Beirut Port

explosion on August 4, 2020, by rebuilding a street in the Al-Medawar area and transforming it into a model street, earning an award for this achievement. They also supported small artisanal works during the Christmas festival in Tripoli. Additionally, they provided assistance to prisoners and initiated activities for children aimed at instilling citizenship values in them, which is a project of great importance to Aqua Foundation. As tragic drowning incidents continued to occur with irregular migration boats, Aqua became active in trying to reduce this migration and working towards enacting a law to criminalize such actions. We welcome Ms. Rula Fadel, who is behind all these activities carried out by Aqua, and Mr. Asaad Bechara, who needs no introduction and has worked on preparing a documentary film about the issue of irregular migration from Lebanon.

Bechara

Journalist Asaad Bechara talked about documenting the tragedy of the boat sinking in Tripoli in April 2022 and the suffering of the locals through a documentary film. He mentioned that the journalistic investigation with the locals revealed

their determination to repeat the attempt to travel by sea and repeat the tragic experience, despite all the risks associated with these attempts. He also anticipated a significant increase in sea crossings during the summer and when the sea is calm.

Fadel

Rula Fadel, the president of ACUA Foundation, discussed the process of producing the film in collaboration with “Jusur” media team, prepared by journalist Asaad Beshara, which documents the tragic boat incident. She considered that the people of Tripoli have lost trust in everyone and that the crisis in Tripoli is a significant aspect of suffering, marginalization, and poverty. She talked about how they communicate with some individuals who have reached migration destinations where they face great suffering in poor conditions and unsafe places to live. They are exposed to temptations to sell their organs in illegal human organ trafficking, as well as rape. Many of them wish to return to Lebanon. Fadel revealed that the Jusur website aims to produce a second part of the film to educate people about the reality of migration to Europe, which is far from the dream they imagine and is

filled with difficulties and tragedies. The goal is to prevent people from falling victim to migration smugglers and living the nightmare of the sea. She emphasized that obtaining residence permits, work permits, and other visas in Europe is not easy, and most migrants wish to return to Lebanon.

She emphasized that the media campaign conducted by ACUA Foundation aims to raise awareness among people, in addition to working on psychological rehabilitation for those experiencing despair and rehabilitating the families of victims

and some survivors of drowning in the sea.

She announced that they have started working on a draft proposal for a law with the help of lawyer Mohamed Sablough, the representative of the victims' families. Legal experts will review it to avoid any loopholes. The goal is to hold human traffickers accountable and criminalize those who encourage or engage in irregular migration. It also aims to criminalize Lebanese security forces that may have been involved in facilitating boat departures.



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