

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

AUSLANDSBÜRO JORDANIEN

June 24th, 2011

RASHA AI RASHED
DR MARTIN BECK

www.kas.de/amman

The Arab Uprising and its Political Implications on Lebanon

Event: Roundtable Conference

Date/Place: June 24th 2011,

Crowne Plaza Hotel

Beirut, Lebanon

Concept: Mr. Sami Atallah, Lebanese Center for Policy Studies
Dr. Martin Beck, KAS Amman

Program Overview

Friday, June 24, 2011

Opening Session: Welcome Words
Mr. Sami Atallah Executive Director The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies Beirut - Lebanon
Dr. Martin Beck Resident Representative Konrad - Adenauer - Stiftung Amman Office Amman - Jordan

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Roundtable Discussion: The Arab Uprising and its Political Implications on Lebanon
Chair: Dr. Martin Beck Resident Representative Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Amman Office Amman – Jordan
Moderator: Mr. Sami Atallah Executive Director The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies Beirut – Lebanon
Panelists
Mr. Basel Salloukh Associate Professor of Political Science Lebanese American University Beirut – Lebanon
Mr. Eric Mottu Resident Representative International Monetary Fund Beirut – Lebanon
Mr. Michael Young Opinion Editor The Daily Star Newspaper Beirut – Lebanon
Mr. Nizar Saghie Lawyer and Law Researcher Saghieh Law Firm Beirut – Lebanon
Dr. Talal Atrissi Professor of Sociology Lebanese University Beirut – Lebanon

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Roundtable Discussion

The third in a series of closed discussions exploring the Arab Uprising and its political implications on Lebanon coincided with Najeeb Mikati announcing formation of a new cabinet on 13th June which was formed after five months of political bickering and parallel to an uprising in Syria. **Dr. Martin Beck** started the session by welcoming panelists and wishing that the Arab Uprising will be a long elastic way to democracy in the Arab world. The roundtable which was moderated by **Mr. Sami Atallah** started by the question:

- What are the political implications of the Arab Uprising on Lebanon? And to what extent is the new government a product of the uprising? What could Lebanon learn from the Egyptian and the Tunisian experiences?

To begin, discussants stated that the regional scene is not clear yet and it is hard to predict how long the current phase of instability will last, especially because the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have encouraged other Arab nations to get out of their own cocoon of supporting and cheering for a particular president and to start demanding their basic human rights. One of the panelists compared the Lebanese system to the Japanese anti-earthquake building which is swaying and not falling yet.

Lebanon which is part of the regional system was affected by the Arab Uprising differently. What happened in Tunisia, Yemen and Libya had minor effects on the Lebanese street, while on the other side, the fall of Mubarak in Egypt had a greater impact as it meant an ally for some Lebanese parties had been toppled. However, the Egyptian situation is still not clear yet as there are many factors affecting the Egyptian arena between the powers of Islamists, US pressure and other factors and players. Moreover, it was clear that the Lebanese sympathized with the Shiites protesters in Bahrain.



Discussants agreed that the demonstrations in Syria are the one with the greatest effect on Lebanon due to the geographical location of Lebanon and rapprochement between the Syrian and the Lebanese people. A consensus existed that the regional affairs, especially in Syria, delayed the new cabinet formation in Lebanon as some of the political players preferred to hold on and wait until Syria's situation was clear while others preferred it to be formed quickly before any major changes in Syria occurred. However, some debaters stated that the current government is a result of the international tribunal rather than a product of the Arab movement while other debaters considered it as a fruit of regional compromise.

In answering what could be learned from the Egyptian and the Tunisian experiences, some discussants stated that although the Egyptians and the Tunisians have accomplished a lot, it is too early to learn from these two experiences because the transition period is vague, especially because the nature of the new governments has not been shaped yet. Other debaters tried to pick the positive impacts of the two revolutions by mentioning that the judicial sector in both Egypt and Tunisia are much more advanced than in Lebanon which finally could affect the judicial system in Lebanon.

Then the panelists addressed the issue of some Lebanese rebel movements inspired by the Arab Uprising. Starting with the anti-sectarian protests movement, discussants agreed that this movement had started promising then decayed because it faced

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some internal divisions and it had a little effect on the Lebanese street which means that the sectarian system was not exposed to a serious threat. An interesting debate occurred between panelists, as some defended the sectarian system as a concept while pinpointing the importance of profound and fundamental reforms while other participants, opposed to the sectarian system, emphasized that it reinforced the social divisions in Lebanon.



Then **Sami Attallah** raised the second major question:

- What are the challenges facing the Mikati Government? And what are the expectations for the new government? Is there a way to reform the sectarian system?

All discussants agreed that Lebanon is in a transition period particularly since the new government faces many tough challenges. Many panelists were pessimistic regarding the new government, stating that Lebanon became an arena in which all activities will be politicized with little possibility to achieve much, particularly since there is no domestic and international will to push Lebanon for serious reforms. It was also mentioned that it is possible that the government might be dismissed following the demonstrations in Syria. Other participants suggested that the new government should try to earn the people's trust by improving the economic status, granting the citizens their basic rights and reforming the judicial and service sector. Panelists clearly criticized 14th March parties for boycotting the new government since a more constructive approach would have been a good opportunity to influence major changes ahead.

During the session, the discussants mentioned some rebel movements in Lebanon such as the prisoners' rights, illegal building and the children's rights as examples of some of the Lebanese protests which succeeded recently to obtain several of the basic rights. Some of the panelists concluded that reforms might take a different character in Lebanon if initiated by civil society rather than by the government.

Finally, **Sami Attallah** raised a third major question:

- What would happen if the Syrian regime was going to collapse and another system emerged? In which way would it change the balance of power? What are the effects of the Iranian/Saudi influence on the situation?

There was a consensus among panelists that any new government in Syria will try to dominate Lebanon. The discussants put forward several possibilities: Syria might fall apart into two states. This would have a very dangerous effect on the region because it would open the door for major conflicts between different sectarian groups. Others said that Syria did not reach the point of no return yet and would be able to contain the crisis, while other discussants expected the Syrian regime to collapse which would lead to a new sectarian-ethnic power sharing formula.

Regarding the Saudi/Iranian influence on the Syrian situation, participants declared that Iran is putting all its efforts into preventing the Syrian regime from collapsing. However, it is quite clear that Saudi Arabia is trying to benefit from the situation to weaken the role of Shiites in the region particularly after its intervention in Bahrain.

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Conclusion

The roundtable was very beneficial in terms of acquiring better understanding of Lebanese domestic affairs in the light of the Arab uprising.

Various issues, such as the formation of Mikati's government and the Syrian

situation were tackled. In the lively discussions, panelists used their diverse expertise and on-the-ground experience to achieve an in-depth understanding of the current situation.