



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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“Promoting Political Reform in Lebanon: Opportunities and Challenges”
Beacon Hotel
1615 Rhode Island Avenue NW Washington
Wednesday, September 29, 10:30am – 12:00pm

On Wednesday, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in partnership with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) convened a panel to discuss political reform in Lebanon. The panelists were Lebanese Interior Minister **Ziad Baroud**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs **Tamara Wittes**, and IFES Chief of Party in Lebanon **Richard Chambers**. The discussion and the following question and answer session were moderated by **Mona Yacoubian**, the Director of the Lebanon Working Group at USIP.

In his prepared remarks, **Baroud** described a series of issues that impede political progress in Lebanon and explained how his office is working to press for reform. The first issue Baroud addressed was the Lebanese political system. **Lebanon has always struggled to balance its exceptional diversity, Baroud said. The country’s confessional system was an attempt to do this, but it is far from perfect.** During periods of instability, disintegration is always a threat and outside political players have far too much influence over domestic matters. Extensive gerrymandering has also deepened sectarian divides in recent years, Baroud added.

In addition to the failure of confessionalism, Lebanon’s simple majority electoral system also contributes to the cyclical instability, Baroud said. **The “winner take all” aspect of this system is particularly problematic in Lebanon where so many small parties and groups vie for office.** Often a winning party receives only 20% of the popular vote. Baroud believes that Lebanon should transition to a proportional representation system so that smaller voices have a say in politics.

Lebanon must also create and implement stronger system of checks and balances, Baroud said. Parliamentarians should not be allowed to hold cabinet positions and the judicial branch’s ability to enforce laws must be augmented.

On the Lebanese economy, Baroud said that **while free market principles are well established, there are still many issues: rampant corruption, ineffective public administration, an outdated tax system, large public debt, and high unemployment all stunt growth.** According to Baroud, further privatization could help, but public sector reform is essential to future economic development.

Next, Baroud described his ministry’s struggle to decentralize public services. There is currently a draft law before the parliament that, if passed, would help to “make things happen at the local level.” In addition to providing citizens with better services, decentralization may also help to take pressure off the central government, Baroud said.

The Minister then turned to human rights. **While acknowledging that abuses still do take place in Lebanon, he said his ministry is working to draft new laws to ensure that the rights of detainees are protected.** Baroud also said he is pushing for a civil marriage law. On women's rights, Baroud has been working to increase the number of women in parliament through a proposed quota. "Equality is not the issue, it's about participation," he said.

In closing, Baroud said that while Lebanon is a difficult and delicate country with many unique problems, the Lebanese people are capable of coming up with unique solutions. Real reform will be a slow process, but with the backing of Lebanon's citizens it is possible.

Wittes began by describing America's commitment to supporting democracy in Lebanon. By working with both institutions and citizens, the U.S. government is helping Lebanon address the challenges it faces on the path to sovereignty and democracy. According to Wittes, the 2009 parliamentary election was a significant success. But elections are only one aspect of democracy, Wittes said, **adding that in Lebanon there is a vibrant civic spirit.**

Quoting from President Barack Obama's recent speech before the UN General Assembly, Wittes explained democracy promotion is in line with both America's interests and moral commitments. In Lebanon specifically, the U.S. works through the Middle East Partnership Initiative to support the work of local actors, Wittes said citing the work of MEPI program alumni in Lebanon. The U.S. also works to build local capacity through organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and IFES, Wittes said.

Lebanon remains a work in progress—as are all democracies, Wittes pointed out, adding that the U.S. has already contributed millions in support of this process and is committed to continue assisting Lebanese democratization in the future. Wittes closed by saying that the U.S. was particularly interested in working with people like Minister Baroud and looked forward to expanding and strengthening the relationship in the years ahead.

Chambers opened by noting that despite worries about instability, political reforms are moving forward; weeks ago the Ministry of the Interior began the process of writing a new electoral law. Political developments have often grown out of this instability in Lebanon. For example, the progress seen during the 2009 election was largely because parties were forced to come together in Doha following the violence in 2008.

The 2009 election was a remarkable event, according to Chambers. Going in, no one was exactly sure what the results would be or how various reforms including the shortening of the voting period to one day from three would work out. **Overall, he said the election was a success.** There were still problems, for example the lack of ballot paper, but there were far fewer issues than previous elections.

Many challenges remain in Lebanon, according to Chambers. Reforming the Lebanese confessional system and simple majority voting system, like Baroud said, are the long term goals, but in the meantime there are many simple ways to improve the system. **By solving basic issues like that lack of ballot paper, the government can build trust and move forward.** Chambers also said that the dearth of women parliamentarians should be addressed and a truly independent electoral monitoring system implemented.

Chambers went on to say that there is significant potential for reform in Lebanon. People are unhappy with the status quo and view previous reforms positively. **There are still, however, a wide variety of challenges including cyclical instability, indifference to political reform on the part of some political leaders and interest-based opposition for others, and a broader lack of political leadership.** In this environment, Chambers recommended that the U.S. should continue to support Lebanon's active civil society and work to motivate politicians to care about political reform.

Yacoubian then opened the floor for questions. In response to a question on the inability of women to pass citizenship to their children, Baroud said that he has drafted a law and submitted it to parliament, which has thus far failed to act on the issue. Another questioner asked how reforms can continue if the political situation deteriorates and Syria's influence once again grows. Baroud responded that waiting for the perfect time to pursue reforms is not an option: **"It's always a good time to work on reform."**

Multiple questioners pointed out that while Baroud has done a good job of drafting new laws, few of the laws have actually been passed by parliament. Baroud responded that 30% of the reforms he has proposed have been passed and that the act of writing new laws, even if they are not adopted, puts pressure on politicians.

In response to a question about how to motivate politicians to be interested in reform, Baroud said that we should engage politicians with both incentives and the threat of shame. **Chambers added that it is time for the cabinet to live up to its promises to pursue electoral reform and motivated others to do so as well.** Another question dealt with how Lebanon can keep its citizens engaged in the democratic process even when progress is slow. Wittes responded that this is precisely why the U.S. works to assist developing democracies: **"Each country will find its own path, but that doesn't mean they are walking alone."**