

For Immediate Release



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AUB IFI conference with Baker Institute and Carnegie **on building pluralistic and inclusive systems**

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) collaborated with the Baker Institute Center for the Middle East and the Carnegie Corporation of New York to host a two-day conference on “Building Pluralistic and Inclusive States Post-Arab Spring.” The conference brought together scholars and experts to identify effective and sustainable policy options that foster more inclusive and pluralistic systems in the region, countering remaining political, socio-religious, and economic exclusion trends that catalyze instability.

The conference is part of a two-year research project of the Baker Institute Center for the Middle East and the Carnegie Corporation of New York to address governance crises in the Middle East and offer actionable policy recommendations for advancing pluralism and inclusion. Panels were organized with the goal of amplifying the reach of emerging voices from the Middle East and North Africa, essential for better connecting research and policy, both within Arab countries and in the United States.

The conference was comprised of six panels—based on the project’s three working groups on political, economic, and socio-religious inclusion—engaging experts from the working groups as well as scholars and policy practitioners from renowned research centers and universities in Europe, the US, and the Arab region as panelists. The panels covered economic inclusion in the Arab Gulf; pluralism and inclusion in Lebanon; socio-religious inclusion; conflict and post-conflict reconstruction in the Middle East; political inclusion; and presentations and discussions by students from AUB and the Lebanese American University (LAU).

In his keynote address, Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi, former UN special envoy to Syria and former Algerian minister of foreign affairs, gave an overview of the challenges that the region faces today and offered insight on the possible way forward.

“The nature of the region is changing,” said Brahimi. “The Arab world as a functioning region does not exist anymore. The national borders have been much more resilient than the outer borders of our region, and borders that we inherited from colonialism have stood the test of time.” Explaining trends in recent history and changing political dynamics within the region, Brahimi highlighted previously resisted challenges for the possible breakup of states into “statelets” and spoke of the changing alliances between states within and across regional borders. Quoting Jamal Abdel Nasser whom he worked with, he added, “Arab unity would be a more viable project when individual countries have achieved genuine national freedom and economic and social development, and, before that, national unity.”

“The ASEAN model of regional cooperation offers strong and effective incentives to national development, and I agree that this is what the region needs and deserves in the coming years,” he added, advocating “addressing common problems collectively.”

“Progress on the arduous road towards democratic transformation could not be achieved by adopting a presumably universal model of transition,” said Dr. Tarek Mitri, IFI director. “A paradigm for political change has to be better suited to the realities of today, not the lingering hope of an earlier era. Precipitation in moving forward did not adequately recognize the strength of sub-national identity assertion, nor those of cultural resistance to new norms of political practice... Such a principle [of inclusivity] is considered too costly for those in power, especially those who claim representing majorities. They refrain from reaching out to the fearful minorities—whether ethnic, religious or political. Equally, their inability to include contributed to the radicalization of the excluded.”

Dr. Khawla Mattar, deputy executive secretary at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, spoke about conflict and post-conflict reconstruction in the Middle East in her keynote speech, which she presented on the second day of the conference. She called for defining short and long-term priorities and helping mitigate long-term consequences of the crises. Presenting data on the impact of wars on human development in the region, Mattar spoke about the role of UN organizations and collaboration with partners in addressing issues of reform, inclusion, and resilience as people in the region demand greater voice and autonomy and lose trust in their governments, institutions, political parties, and civil society organizations.

“The topics presented and discussed at this conference and the themes of the working groups are key issues and I believe they have been endemic in the Arab world for many years,” said Dr. Nasser Yassin, director of research at IFI, as he demonstrated his point with past and present human development figures for the region. “When we talk about political, economic, religious, or minority inclusion—I believe these issues have been with us for more than 50 years, perhaps becoming more evident and visible as we move in the Arab uprising and we see the mobilization

of groups and communities, but it is good to keep in mind that this is not new to our region and to countries in the Arab world.”

ENDS

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,100 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 420-bed hospital.

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