Prospects for Peace in a Troubled Region

Panel Discussion and University Debate
September 19, 2014
A summary by Bayan Jaber

The disjunction between citizen and state in the Arab world is giving rise to extremist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), creating an impinging turbulence which has started to spill over in Lebanon. On the occasion of the International Day of Peace, the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon held a debate on September 19, 2014 at the Auditorium of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI). The debate titled "Prospects for Peace in a Troubled Region" was jointly hosted by the American University of Beirut's Department of Political Studies and Public Administration, the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies and IFI.

The panel discussion took stock of the current situation in Lebanon and the region, discussed prospects for peace, as well as concrete initiatives on the ground. It also looked at how external actors can support efforts to foster stability, and where their limitations are.

Rami Khouri, a Senior Public Policy Fellow at IFI, stated that there is a clear disjunction between citizen and state. This represents the fundamental reason behind the lack of peace in the region. He also stressed that citizens in the Arab world never took an active role in shaping and defining their own countries. Khouri argued that gangs, militias, and groups like ISIS are emerging due to the void existing between state and citizens. The state is not fulfilling the basic needs of people and so, such militias are taking on governments and creating their own states.

Jean-Paul Chami, Director of Peace Labz, pointed out that people in certain parts of Lebanon feel alienated from the state on a social and economic level. Chami noted that there is an expression of fear and anger amongst Lebanese citizens. Also, people are starting to express intentions to embark on journeys that do not involve the unification of a country, as they do not feel part of it to begin with. Chami called for more initiatives to work horizontally among citizens and vertically through agencies, donors and authorities so as to resolve the conflict at hand.
H.E. Homer A. Mavrommatis, Ambassador of Cyprus to Lebanon, insisted that the problem could only be solved through the engagement of the international community and negotiations with diplomats who provide different methods of problem solving. He saw that large portions of the population are being marginalized socially and economically and this is giving rise to extremists.

H.E. Angelina Eichhorst, Ambassador of the European Union to Lebanon, said: "there is a disconnect between citizen and state and this is what we work to resolve on a daily basis". She revealed that it is a daily job to maintain peace and contain threats but people take peace for granted. She complained that the media seems to deter their work by focusing on negative events and dismissing any positive ones. She also pointed out that there is a lack of strategies when it comes to implementing peace.

Khoury pointed out that Lebanon had constant external interventions and internal tensions but saw that, unlike other Arab countries, Lebanese citizens have total freedom to use all their creative abilities. He suggested that these positive elements should be reinforced because such freedom is what makes the Lebanese people so resilient.

Mavrommatis suggested "promoting the idea of sharing wealth that lies beneath our sea" as a tool for building peace. In this sense, maybe oil and gas could be a basis for peace building, as coal and steel were for Europe after the Second World War. He said that only by giving something can you receive something in return and by sharing wealth, countries have more mechanisms for survival.

Chami stressed that we should not dismiss the past. He pointed out that the Lebanese have different versions of Lebanese history and narrative and saw that we cannot build a common vision if we have different perceptions of the past. Managing political reconciliation is important but more so is reconciliation amongst people.

Finally, panelists gave their own recommendations for peace. Eichhorst saw that to achieve peace there needs to be a functioning institution where people can feel protected and respected. Furthermore, panelists agreed it is very important that the Lebanese army receives all the right equipment and tools to preserve the country's security and dignity.