Diplomacy, one of the prime human techniques to manage relations between politically-organized groups, has undergone a profound transformation in the past few decades, as a result of the information revolution, globalization, and the increased relevance of new non-state actors in international affairs. The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) hosted H.E. François Barras, the Ambassador of Switzerland to Lebanon, in an open discussion on this topic, entitled *The Art of Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Contemporary Challenges to an Ancient Profession*. This was organized as part of IFI's lecture series called "The Ambassador in the Academy".

Barras explained that there is a change of state sovereignty whereby new actors, aside from the state, have become active in international relations. For example, the European Union and non-governmental new actors like NGOs, the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and celebrities have joined the trend. This phenomenon has rendered a diplomat ‘lost among new actors’, as Barras puts it.

Indeed, the development of direct contact among politicians, heads of states and presidents has changed the relationship between diplomats and their respective governments. A diplomat used to be the person who informed his or her government about any developments. The IT revolution is yet another big change, Barras pointed out. The emergence of social media as a communication platform has altered the way diplomats communicate with the public.

Barras continued by stating that it is an ambassador’s responsibility to be visible and to interact not only with the government and parliament, but with universities, think-tanks and civil societies. Ambassadors also practice diplomacy of influence by making their country’s policies better known. Their work goes beyond propaganda and advertising as they try to build a long term relationship with their county of residence. Their jobs include nation branding and lobbying for a certain objective, in addition to defending their country and building trust.

Additionally, Barras discussed other new tasks which diplomats are responsible for. For example, diplomats have taken on the job of servicing and service management whereby they are required to take good care of their citizens in their country of residence. This includes activities pertaining to civil status such as the renewal of passports. Barras also stressed on the importance of crisis management and delivering good services in crisis situations.
Moreover, Barras outlined the qualities of a good diplomat in the 21st century, the first being curiosity. A diplomat must be observant and curious about everything that goes on around him or her. The second quality is having good communication skills and this has changed compared to thirty years ago. A diplomat must know how to address the press and communicate with people. The third quality of a good diplomat is flexibility and adaptability whereby he or she must be open to change, be it with regards to countries, colleagues or environment. Another quality that Barras found very important is 'serendipity', stating that a diplomat should be able to identify opportunities in any given encounter.

Concluding, Barras emphasized on his belief that being a diplomat is a great profession, describing it as an art of life and an ongoing learning process. He noted that diplomats are observers in foreign societies, making them great writers, as his own experience has proved. He noted that unlike other professions, where the job is mostly based on technique, a diplomat’s job is mostly dependent on his or her personality.