



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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"Lebanon: Is Real Reform Possible?"

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
1300 Pennsylvania Ave NW
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The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, in partnership with the Safadi Foundation USA, hosted an event to explore the prospects for meaningful reform in Lebanon. Will the Lebanese government be able to strengthen the institutional framework that is required to expand economic opportunity and break down the clientelist structure of the Lebanese state? To answer this question, **Mohammad Safadi** – Lebanese Minister of Economy and Trade and a Member of Parliament – discussed the current situation on the ground and outlined specific steps to move the reform process forward.

Minister Safadi opened by recognizing some of Lebanon's positive attributes: liberal democracy, comparatively free and fair elections, and protections for many human freedoms. Yet despite these qualities, **Safadi conceded that Lebanon's traditional political class, whose power derives from religious affiliations, is unlikely to push for reforms that may inevitably undermine existing privileges.** "Since independence, Lebanon has practiced basics of democracy," he said, "but the distribution of power according to religious affiliation is in conflict with the fundamentals of democracy that are based upon principles of equal rights and responsibility of all citizens." Part of the problem may be Lebanon's "compromise-based government," which Safadi views as "not very conducive to reform since they cannot respond quickly and effectively to unusual political challenges."

In order to circumvent what he believes is a stalemated political system, Safadi proposed implementing projects that would target social and infrastructural deficiencies, perhaps inducing a higher level of bottom-up pressure for political reform. To that end, he elucidated two different programs: **1) Reforming the education system to improve standards and quality of education; 2) Develop a modern high-speed railway system along the coastline to facilitate the transport of people throughout the country.** Both of these concepts, Safadi contends, would have far-reaching economic and social impacts that would begin to spur a higher level of religious and sectarian integration and mutually-beneficial cooperation.

Safadi then addressed a number of questions, beginning with one regarding the impact of Hezbollah's continued presence on the prospects for reform. Maintaining that these are somewhat separate issues, **Safadi insisted that the government must assuage concerns about weak state institutions that often lead people to rely upon Hezbollah for both protection and sustenance.**

In response to a question about his education proposal, Safadi explained that prior to the 1975 civil war, Lebanon had an education system that was "something to be proud of, but the civil war threw us backward." Today, he said, everything needs to be revamped. **But Safadi was cognizant of the**

potential for "brain drain" if Lebanon's economy cannot satisfy a newly educated public, and he emphasized the need to rebuild industries in order to meet the country's growing employment needs.

Returning to the issue of Hezbollah, Safadi addressed a question about the extent to which Hezbollah has developed into an independent federation with its own institutions and social services. "Yes, there's a lot of infrastructure work that was done by Hezbollah," Safadi said, referring to sewage systems, water services, and even underground communication lines that are used almost exclusively for Hezbollah's para-military operations. To combat this pervasive influence, **"[Lebanon] has to rebuilt its capacity, army, and institutions. The duty of the government is to do the work and ensure that all Lebanese feel that they have one government in charge that is serving all Lebanese, irrespective of religion or political stance."**

Unsure of the roadblocks to enacting Safadi's prescriptions, one audience member wondered if there are religious or political objections. Safadi said no, but admitted that there are a few missing ingredients: willpower, planning, and money. However, he doesn't foresee any structural obstacles.

Finally, Safadi described the ongoing need for diplomatic rapprochement between Lebanon and Syria. Currently, the two government's mutual antipathy has severely damaged Lebanon's transit business and overall economic productivity; Syria controls most of Lebanon's entry points into other Middle Eastern markets, and Safadi described how sporadic episodes of diplomatic tension often prompt Syria to close off "Lebanon's valve" to the outside world.