

Beirut Institute e-Policy Summit Circle 31

Raghida Dergham with esteemed guests Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, Ziyad Baroud, Brian Katulis, and Seyed Hossein Mousavian

Raghida Dergham: Good morning, Washington DC, where I am joined there by Brian Katulis. Welcome, Brian from Washington, DC. And good morning also to Princeton. I have Hossein Mousavian with me. Welcome, Hossein, it's good to see you joining us. And good afternoon, early evening, to Paris, where I have Manuel Lafont, I'm gonna really do this right, Rapnouil. My education is in English, I will ask for your forgiveness if I mess up your name later on many times. And good early evening here in Beirut, to Ziyad Baroud. Welcome all of you, thank you. You honor me by joining me to have a discussion, always the geopolitical discussion on what's going on in this part of the world, plus its relationship with the rest of the world. As usual, we'll have four minutes for each of my distinguished guests. And then we engage in a conversation, we end up with a minute or two for each one, to remind us of what we had forgotten to pull out of him. I thank you again and without further ado, I start with Manuel Lafont Rapnouil. Please start for minutes to you.

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much Raghida, very pleased to be here with the distinguished other speakers. I'm a French diplomat, I head the Center for Analysis, Planning, and Strategy, which means that what I said does not necessarily reflect the official position, just to make that clear for the beginning. Diplomats usually have a preference for stability, even if instability seems the best guarantee for diplomats not to run out of business. There are good reasons why diplomats prefer stability. It's because instability comes with consequences. And if you look at the Middle East, we have reasons in the recent history to be concerned for the disdain for those consequences. I mean, Iraq is the major example of where this disdain for consequences can lead you. And consequences can quickly jump out of hand, and they can reverberate elsewhere. And Syria is another good story of disdain for instability, in this case, probably disdain of the Syrian government for waging a war and ruining your country with consequences across borders and these consequences have hit Lebanon. Of course, we all know that, and those who don't know should look at the figures of the number of refugees in Lebanon. But it has hit Europe too. Refugees, but also terrorism, populism. And terrorism clearly is, in particular, an important factor when France thinks of stability. But still, stability is not an end to itself. It's a means to other ends, it's a means to prosperity, security, development, human rights. And what we sometimes think of as stability, can actually be a lid on a boiling pot. And there too we have several examples in the Arab world more broadly, not just in the Arab world, but in the Arab world, in particular, for the last decades. Because there seems to be some confusion between status quo and stability. And status quo does not provide for the sustainable brand of stability. On the contrary, transformation reform can help, and sometimes are necessary to foster longer term stability. I could speak about Iraq, I think it's a very good example of how you won't have stability there without deeper reforms. But Lebanon, more importantly, more aptly today, is a very good example of that. The current deadlock is not propitious to stability. On the contrary, we need a government, and we need not just a government, but we need a government that commits to reform in Lebanon. And we have this trend situation where precisely instability is not so much of a concern for some parts of the international community, which is why the French are weighing in heavily on this situation. So, we need to take a longer term view on this, to think in terms of articulating our preference for short term stability and the necessity of longer term stability. And that is a way to think in terms of responsibilities and priorities to the longer term issues. And you have an international responsibility there, France on Lebanon, I've mentioned it, you need to avoid the collapse. So, it's a time for mobilization of the international responder community, but it's also a time for pressure on Lebanese actors because, first and foremost, it's about local responsibilities. There is no exoneration from the role that you can expect from international community and there should not be expectations that the international response can be a substitute to local responsibilities. And I'm thinking of the situation in general, I'm thinking of corruption, I'm thinking of the explosion that the world has heard about in Beirut. I want also to stress that this singles out the importance of states. That the reason why when France acts on Lebanon, or on Iraq, it speaks about sovereignty. There's a reason why when we act on Libya, we think of security. But we also think and should make it clear that this is also about redistribution and justice. And one of the reasons why we should also focus on these latter two issues is because as a means to stability, it's also about the importance of civil society and its aspirations, to dignity, to justice, to civil states. And Lebanon is another good example that we've seen that and how it plays. And just as a last word, what I think is very striking to me when we speak about stability and the Middle East, is how little we speak of the longer term challenges for the region-demography, the importance of youth, its aspirations, its employment, or lack of employment, governance, the post-oil economy, the digital economy, climate, which doesn't seem to be very high in in terms of priorities for the regional governments. This is what I wanted to end with for a start.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you very much, very important points you have put forward. But I want to follow up on two points, please. When you said time for pressure on the Lebanese actors, do you mean it's time to impose sanctions on those who are obstructing the normality of this country and sanctions on people in government?

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: As I said, I'm not in charge. So, what I think in terms of whether we should go for sanctions or not, is not really important. I think you have heard the French minister speak about the situation. But what is clear, is that it seems that, and that's not just French actors saying that, I've heard Lebanese voices saying that, too, that the political actors in Lebanon are not really all stepping up to the plate and acting based on their role to address the crisis. It's very striking I think for anyone looking from the outside, that you have the crisis that you see, and that you still don't have a government. So, you need more pressure and there are several ways to increase that pressure, surely.

Raghida Dergham: Alright. We will discuss that in our conversation later on. But now we'll go to Ziyad Baroud. Go ahead, four minutes to you, please.

Ziyad Baroud: Thank you Raghida. I'm very pleased to be with you today. And I would like to focus on the challenges that Lebanon is actually facing, in view of the regional and international recent and ongoing dynamics. I read Manuel Lafont Rapnouil very well when he says that the international community should not be a substitute for local actors or players. We know for a fact that the last year and a half has been exhausting for Lebanon and the Lebanese people. The October 2019 uprising and the popular goals for reforms, the financial collapse, the Beirut Port explosion, plus, of course, the political deadlock, no cabinet now for seven months. This political stalemate is widely perceived, somehow, correctly or wrongly, as very much linked to the regional and international dynamics that I mentioned. And too many questions follow. Where does Lebanon fit in the new U.S. policy for the Middle East? We know that a new window for diplomacy is opening between the U.S. and Iran. Will President Biden's administration respond to present if the EU convenes to a P5 +1 meeting? Are we going to witness a return to JCPOA? And most importantly, what would be the impact on Lebanon in case of rapprochement? In your article Raghida, in *The National*, you mention that the Biden administration seems to be dealing with Syria and Lebanon as a secondary annex of its Iran policy turning a blind eye to the repercussions of the explosive situation in the two countries. Our concerns and fears actually, as Lebanese, is to be on the table of negotiations and not around the table. Will France and President Macron be able to mediate the French initiative to rescue Lebanon which appears to be gaining wide Arab support? Will it likely succeed in converging with the U.S.-Iran new intricacies, which are still totally, totally unforeseen? Because we know that except for the French, Lebanon is somehow left to its own fate, at a time when the international community, the IMF, the World Bank, and the friends of Lebanon should engage positively, if and when a new reformist cabinet is formed, in order to tackle too many issues—the social safety net, the electricity sector, the banking sector, education, hospitals, logistics, and to sustain the LAF efforts in particular, regarding the Lebanese southern maritime borders. The international community in this sense, has an acute interest that Lebanon does not fall into total and severe state failure, for many reasons. Lebanon has been active, inactive, and operative on terrorism. Lebanon hosts more than 1.5 million Syrian and Palestinian refugees, and the collapse of the country would undoubtedly have an impact on Mediterranean Europe. That's why the international community should be or should pay close attention to the ramifications of the regional understandings, if any, and their impact on the fragile Lebanese internal equilibrium. And I conclude, this fragile equilibrium is already enduring a lot. At the time when too many things are challenging in the region, we are heading also toward major electoral deadlines in 2022—presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections—but this is another story. I'm only mentioning it to say that we have a lot coming. Thank you.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you very much Ziyad Baroud, I want to engage you in a bit about these regional dynamics and what the potential rapprochement between the US and Iran, or that lack of a rapprochement and its reflection or impact on Lebanon. I want to engage you later on, during the conversation, on these two points that you raised that are very important. I will go now to Hossein Mousavian and we'll hear the Iranian point of view for the next four minutes. Please go ahead, Hussain Mousavian.

Hossein Mousavian: Thank you Raghida. I just wanted to use my four or five minutes time to talk about Iran-Arab relations. As we all know, the Middle East has been the home of Arabs and Iranians for centuries. And this home today is the most troubled region in the world, in the Gulf with terrorism, civil war, failed state, sectarian conflict, and more. The root causes, we can have a list of tens of root causes, but I would like to mention four or five major root causes, which one is the foreign interventions in our region, wars in our region, dysfunctional government, governing systems, dictatorships, and corrupted systems, Israeli occupa-

tion of Palestinian territory, and Arab-Persian rivalries in the Gulf with an ocean of misperceptions, mutual misperceptions, misunderstandings, miscalculations, and misleading. Two key factors I believe would very important to reach peace and stability in our region. One is a fair solution to the Palestinian crisis. And second is a solution to Arab-Persian problematic relations, since the Persian Gulf is the most strategic region in the Middle East divided between Iran and seven important Arab countries. I have introduced in my new book titled as, "A New Security: A New Structure for Security, Peace and Stability in the Persian Gulf." I have introduced the idea to create a collective regional security and cooperation system in the Persian Gulf using parameters of successful regional cooperation systems like what they have in the EU, European system, OSCE, etc, in order to bring confrontation to cooperation. This regional system, I believe, should be based on principles like mutual respect, mutual interest and equal footing, non-interference, respecting sovereignty and integrity of each country, a WMD free zone in the Persian Gulf, a fair conventional arms arrangement among all countries in the Persian Gulf, cooperation on counterterrorism measures, rejecting the pursuit of hegemony by any country, whether a big power or the regional countries, and ensuring freedom and navigation and free flow of energy. I believe this is time to find a solution for the whole region. And at least if we can start from a sub-region in the Persian Gulf.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you very much, Hussain Mousavian. Trouble is that, of course I'm very familiar with what you argue in the book, and the problem is that you reserve the right to Iran to play the role of an active deterrent role and when we speak of sovereignty, a lot of people question Iran's respect of sovereignty in other countries, when Iran has paramilitary forces in several Arab countries, including here where I sit in Lebanon. So, how do you reconcile the idea of respect of sovereignty with the declared right of Iran to have its paramilitary forces in sovereign countries? I'll give you a chance to answer that before I go to Brian Katulis.

Hossein Mousavian: First of all, if Iran is in Iraq, Iran is invited by Iraqi government.

Raghida Dergham: No, in Lebanon. I was talking about Lebanon, Hussain.

Hossein Mousavian: Okay, if Iran is in Syria, Iran is invited by the Syrian government. Hezbollah is not a proxy of Iran, Hezbollah is part of Lebanon's government, Lebanon's system, official system. Hezbollah is not a non-state, it is a state factor. And as you know, the Lebanese is they need the force of Hezbollah in order to deter Israeli invasion. Hezbollah was created because of Israeli invasion. Therefore, Iran is helping part of the official state of Lebanon in order to preserve the sovereignty and integrity of Lebanon. Otherwise, Israelis could have occupied Lebanon for many years after 1982.

Raghida Dergham: All right, Hussain Mousavian and even the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah says that loyalty goes first to Iran, and that all the weapons are from Iran, and there is a big division in the country over the neutrality of this country and how to find neutrality. I will give you the chance to address that after I give the floor first for four minutes to Brian Katulis. Please, Brian.

Brian Katulis: Hi, it's great to be with you. I'm with the Center for American Progress here in Washington and I'm gonna offer a view of where I think the Biden administration might go on all of these issues. Three points. First, I think the Biden administration has quite obviously signaled a new approach on foreign policy and it has initially placed the Middle East on a much lower priority for the moment, and I'm gonna highlight for the moment. Here's the quick, partial list of the things Biden faced when he came into office: 4000 people dying a day here in America, it's down to 1000; the worst economic situation facing any U.S. president, recently, including 10 million people out of work, more than the population of Lebanon; a domestic insurgency and terrorism threat; immigration challenge right now; and cybersecurity. And that's before we get to foreign policy. And as you see from the early speeches and early actions, the Biden administration has focused largely on China, is building up a team on climate. Its two priorities on the Middle East right now are trying to engage Iran, and I will stress trying, and also trying to end the war in Yemen. And both aren't going very well right now, two months in. So, the real challenge, I think, for the Biden team, on this first point is that though it wants to pivot to sort of broader issues and restore America's economy at home, events in the Middle East may force them into a tactical reactive position, which we may all find familiar from the Obama administration second term. The second point, I'd say, is that Iran is the top priority of the Biden administration. But it is, in my view, approaching the sets of issues with on Iran with extreme caution and looking to avoid the mistakes America made from 2014 to 2020. And there were many mistakes made by both the Trump administration and Obama administration. I think it's too soon to tell which way, in which path the Biden administration will take on Iran. It has signaled a strong desire to return to the JCPOA. I think it is rapidly realizing,

the new team is realizing, that that is much easier said than done. We're in a different moment right now. And I think the biggest mistake, in my view, that was made during the Trump and Obama era, was ignoring the regional reality. Quite often with think tanks here in Washington, the instability in the Middle East, caused by Iran, but caused by other actors as well, is seen as like secondary to the nuclear file and ballistic missiles and things like this, which is why I'm intrigued by Hussain's ideas. I think they're very, very interesting. But they're also, and I went to Princeton as well, in my view, academic. A lot of people aren't buying it, particularly those countries in the region, which, you know, for better or for worse, continue to buy something else, which is a lot of arms, because they feel insecure about the challenges that they face. So, for me, you know, the two key questions I would pose on Iran is, are there any good gestures of goodwill coming from Iran these days? The Biden administration delisted the Houthis as a terrorist organization. Look what has happened in Yemen in the last few weeks. What's happening in Lebanon in terms of Iran playing a constructive role there? And then I think the second big question is which Iran is speaking, is it Javad Zarif? Or is it the Revolutionary Guard or the Supreme Leader? These are challenges that I think this new team will try to deal with in a sensitive and smart way. But I think it will be challenging. The last point, and we can come back to this, is to, in my view, that the current crisis in Lebanon is so dire- and Raghida you know this, you live there-the U.S. policy cannot afford to backburner this issue. It needs to look for ways to work with France in particular, but other actors in the region, to help the Lebanese leaders be more responsive to their own people. And that, to me is the biggest challenge, and I think it reflects our colleague from Paris as well, that the conundrum that's placed here is that Lebanon and its political leaders have been seeing people in the streets protesting before, multiple times, a new generation wants something different, and yet the situation is deadlocked. So, for me, U.S. engagement, of the sort that I think your article indicated, would be good, but calibrating it in such a way so that it doesn't just reinforce the anti-democratic and very corrupt trends that we see at the top of Lebanese politics.

Raghida Dergham: Let me stay with the points and the potential of you and Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, talking about this, because Manuel you spoke of it's time for a mobilization of the international community. I think Brian is also saying something similar. I understand that there was an attempt by France to do so through the EU and I don't know the results of that. If you have any insights on that, I would appreciate it. And otherwise, what is the forum? What is the right forum for mobilizing the international community? I'll start with you Manuel and then I will go around.

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: Okay, to two quick ideas on that. I think what Brian just said is a good sign of how instability plays in in world politics, in current foreign policy these days. When you have a situation of instability, there's no rush to address it from the international actors, which is a problem, and, actually, there is no restraints to risk escalation from some of these actors, which is an additional problem, even more so because of the lack of rush to address it. So, mobilization is partly to stress the importance of what is there and I think that absolutely you need to stress, for instance in the case of Lebanon, why the situation there should be a worry in itself, and not just a kind of pawn in a broader regional game. But even in the case of Iran, where I think people have a sense of why it's important, there is the need to stress the importance of moving towards a new agreement, resuming the political process to address the concerns about Iran's nuclear program. I like also the basic ideas of Hussain Mousavian of collective cooperation as a way to go towards stability. And as a practitioner, as a diplomat, I know it's not just academic. But as a practitioner, as a diplomat, I know that the OSCE is not such a good example. Right now it's not working very well. So, it's not a mechanical solution. It's not because you have these principles, and an organization that supposedly erodes these principles that you have a solution. What do you need? You need confidence-and right now you don't have the good level of confidence between actors-so you need at least a good level of confidence on the rules and on the mechanisms. And in the case of Iran, that's the problem because the Trump reneging on the JCPOA has killed confidence in the rules and mechanisms. And right now, in spite of the Biden's administration return to willingness to return to a deal, Iran's behavior is not helping to open any perspective for lifting sanctions and renegotiate. And that's what I think is missing. And I stopped there to leave some space for colleagues.

Raghida Dergham: Yes, of course. Thank you for your consideration. Who leads such an international mobilization? If it were to be that. I know, in the case of Lebanon, France has been active through its initiative on Lebanon, but unfortunately, it has not produced. And again, back to the issue of sanctions, President Macron had said there will be sanctions for those who are obstructing, and then there wasn't, and then those who are obstructing took it as well, fine, you could get away with it. So, who leads such a mobilization Ziyad Baroud, from your point of view?

Ziyad Baroud: But I don't think that the French initiative is dead yet. And I think that it shouldn't be considered dead because we don't have much choices and much options. France is able to talk to everybody, it seems, whereas others would prefer not to. I'm not saying that they cannot, but they would prefer not to. So, and I think that President Macron is still very keen on rescuing his own initiative and rescuing the Lebanese situation. Now, to what extent would they be able to do so? When his visit to Saudi Arabia was postponed? I didn't take it as a good signal. But maybe it was a purely internal French consideration.

Raghida Dergham: Why? Why Ziyad Baroud?

Ziyad Baroud: Because I because I think that too many players are at stake. I mean, too many players are concerned with the Lebanese issues. And of course, his visit to Saudi Arabia was not limited to Lebanon, but it could have maybe helped in a way. Now, sanctions and any other measures that could be taken would help a lot, but it's a comprehensive approach that we need now, too many players as I mentioned, and in the meantime, we Lebanese cannot afford the burden of the delay. It's a very high cost that we're paying in, I mean, because of the financial crisis, because of too many issues, and most importantly, the political deadlock.

Raghida Dergham: Is it doable without the U.S. Ziyad Baroud? I mean, with all due respect to that French initiative and the French president, of course, but is it doable without the Biden administration stepping in?

Ziyad Baroud: No, I didn't say so. I think that with the new nonconfrontational administration, we have chances that things evolve positively. And I do believe that any cooperation and coordination between the French and the U.S. with would lead to good results, hopefully. Because, you know, previously, in the previous couple of months, I believe there was not enough cooperation between the two countries in order to have a breakthrough. Now, this cooperation would need also to be completed with talks with all concerned-Iran, maybe Syria-because too many are on the Lebanese field of power sharing. I mean, this is why I don't see things working properly without the involvement, with different degrees, of all concerned.

Raghida Dergham: What, Hossein Mousavian, if Iran was to play a constructive role in Lebanon, what is that role from your point of view? Is it to block the international mobilization as Hezbollah says? Is it to oppose neutrality of Lebanon as Hezbollah stands? What is Iran's point of view?

Hossein Mousavian: Perhaps let me go back to what Manuel mentioned, the main issue you raised about international mobilization, if there is going to be an international mobilization, first of all, for every initiative, whether this is Iran, or Lebanon, or Syria, or Iraq, or Yemen, it should come from the five permanent members of United Nations Security Council because they are the highest module responsible for maintaining peace and stability in the world. Today, it is completely unrealistic to talk about international mobilization, because the five powers they are completely divided.

Raghida Dergham: Why? Why? only that Hussain Mousavian? Why there is-

Hossein Mousavian: I'm explaining.

Raghida Dergham: No, the question is to you, why should mobilization, international mobilization, be done only through the Security Council?

Hossein Mousavian: No, no, I'm not saying only. I say the first and the highest body responsible is the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, based on UN Charter. Now, there is a big dispute and divide within the five members. The U.S. is in political war and economic war with China. The U.S. is in security, political economic war with Russia. The U.S. even is threatening Europe for sanctioning if they are going to go to Nord Stream gas pipeline from Russia. We have a totally failed five permanent members to manage, to initiate. This is number one. Number two is about understanding. Manuel mentioned that now Biden is going to return to JCPOA, we need Iran to show goodwill. Let's take JCPOA as an example of how our friends in Europe and U.S.A. are misreading the realities. JCPOA was agreed between Iran and the P5 + 1.

Raghida Dergham: I want to go back to the JCPOA in a bit. Let me finish with Lebanon, please Hussain Mousavian because I want to get into the JCPOA and give it its due. Just focus with me to finish this on Lebanon because I want to finish this part of it. What is wrong with the mobilization of the international community to help this country out of going so downhill that it's about to collapse? What is wrong with-

Hossein Mousavian: There is nothing wrong. If there is an international initiative, if the Lebanese government would support, then I believe Iran also would be supportive.

Raghida Dergham: So that's-

Hossein Mousavian: But there is no international initiative. There is no international mobilization. There is no clear proposal which the Lebanese government up to now has agreed.

Raghida Dergham: So you're really dismissing the French-

Hossein Mousavian: Why in the vacuum of any international mobilization, any international initiative, any initiative which the Lebanese government itself has ever accepted, then now you're coming about Iran? First, you need to go to see what is the international proposal for Lebanon, and if the Lebanese government has accepted or not, and if Iran is making problem or is helping.

Raghida Dergham: Manuel, quick response to that and then I want Brian to, to come in.

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: But I think there is quite an international initiative. There's the so-called 'French initiative', but it's not just French. You have had some mobilization in terms of international financial support, which is not solving the issue, but at least it's preventing further collapse, and that's important. And the idea is not 'you go first, no, you go first', the idea is how do you help the Lebanese people to get a government, and to get a government that is going to be committed to reform? And that is what you need to have. You don't need to have targeted killings, you don't need to have further corruption, you don't need to have further political delay. So, and I'm not saying it's for Iran to do it all by itself, or first, I'm just saying that's what we are doing. I think France and every support that we have from partners is welcome. And we see that not everybody is really willing to fully commit behind the idea of finding a proper solution to the situation in Lebanon.

Raghida Dergham: Brian Katulis.

Brian Katulis: Yeah. Three points on this. First there is an international group, it's called the International Support Group, that operates at the ambassadorial level. It could be elevated. And I would say this is the first point, that France-

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: It was elevated already.

Brian Katulis: Yeah, yeah. And France is taking the lead on this. I would say that Secretary of State Tony Blinken's close ties to France, I think would be encouraging to some in terms of when it gets to sort of this issue of Lebanon, that America could focus on it. My concern here is that with everything else that they're dealing with, they're not yet even considering these questions inside of the State Department. So that's number one. Number two, the issue of corruption, I think is a very, very important one, and the corruption amongst the Lebanese elite. I'll never forget in the spring of 2017, on my last visit to Beirut, one of my meetings was with Riad Salameh, the Central Bank Governor, and one of our colleagues asked a very direct question about corruption and his personal involvement in corruption. His response, he didn't say anything, he walked out of the room, he was embarrassed. This, to me, typifies the challenge that any diplomat faces when engaging with any node, including the Hezbollah node, but a lot of the nodes in Lebanese politics today, is the corruption and the corrupt elite that doesn't respond to its own people, the people that were protesting in this fall of 2019. And then lastly, is the point of democracy and inclusive democracy. Lebanon has an inclusive democracy electorally, but it is not responding to the needs of the vast majority of its own people, the system is broken. The sort of revolution you're seeing in other places and actually existed in the Cedar Revolution did not come to fruition. And to me, the issues, and this points also Iran and its role in who it backs inside of Lebanon, when people are actually murdered, murdered because of their criticisms, things that they write, and this happens too often in the Middle East. We saw it with Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia, but we're seeing it with regularity, unfortunately, it causes a problem with actually saying the Lebanese government, and there is no freedom and democracy. So, to close, you know, to close this out, is what I see in this Biden administration, in its rhetoric, at least, it says, 'we want to emphasize democracy and human rights, again, in our foreign policy writ large, we want to emphasize anti-corruption'. Guess what, those two big issues inside of Lebanon right now are major issues. And right now, I don't see the Biden administration yet focusing on it. But once they sort of listen to international partners and regional actors, they might.

Raghida Dergham: Alright, Ziyad Baroud, I want to sort of finish with Lebanon. But I want all of you to kindly give me like three prescriptions, like three things that must be done to bail out this country before it's way too late. You all mentioned the explosion, the Beirut explosion. Is an international investigation, or at least releasing the FBI investigation, amongst others, with the French as well, is this one of the ways to just really start to handle and take steps? What else can be done to bring in, to bring back, the interest of the IMF? Can you start to give me your three points, each of you, Ziyad Baroud first?

Ziyad Baroud: Well, as Brian said, the system is broken, yes. But you cannot, I mean, you cannot make people live's difficult in the meantime, I mean, pending the new system being put in place. So, yes, there are immediate measures that should be taken. One is forming a new reformist cabinet, a new government that could really take-

Raghida Dergham: But they're not doing it, they're not going to do it. So, what to do about them not doing it?

Ziyad Baroud: Keep pressuring. Because today, the streets are really part of the process. I mean, the people are in the streets, the media is accompanying every single move. And I think that the pressure should be put forward, non-stop until things change. A new cabinet is much needed, not because a cabinet is important, but because too many things are linked to a cabinet, the IMF thing, the social safety net, I mean, too many things need a cabinet to be in place in order to perform the reforms that are that are awaited. I think that also we need to reconsider the way we deal with public issues. This cannot be done the same way, we cannot do business as usual anymore. There is a new generation in Lebanon that is calling for a different approach regarding policies and politics, and they should be heard. In 2022 we have elections. This is a very important deadline. This is a very important opportunity for people to express themselves provided elections are free and fair.

Raghida Dergham: Hussain Mousavian, what is it from your point of view? What is the way to bail out this country? And Hassan Nasrallah has told us that he has a plan. He said that if the government does not deliver, he said, 'I have a plan to do it'. Are you aware of that what the plan is?

Hossein Mousavian: I'm not aware but as Nasrallah publicly said, if the President and Prime Minister they can agree on any government, Hezbollah will support with no condition and precondition, yes.

Raghida Dergham: He says he has a plan.

Hossein Mousavian: And then he says if they cannot agree, he has a plan, I don't know what is his plan. However, I think the first issue and the most important issue would be to address the economic problems of Lebanon. As long as you have economic problems, you would have a lot of more difficulties to come and you will not be able to manage the current problems. Second, when we are talking about international mobilization I really respect what Manuel said, but it was a French initiative. Yes, some countries they supported, but it was not international initiative. Third, if there is an international initiative, if you believe Iran is a key player, you need to count and to invite the regional key players on the table and first would be the Lebanese government itself. Second, would be countries like Iran or Saudi Arabia or any other regional country, which they have a big say in the Lebanese equation. Therefore, they cannot see it and decide and to prepare a plan for Lebanon without the participation of Lebanese government. And we thought the participation of regional key players, if they want, they need to have such an initiative to bring the big powers, the key players in the region and in the center should be the Lebanese government, in order to discuss, first of all, I believe a Marshall Plan for economic situation in Lebanon.

Raghida Dergham: Marshall Plan? Anybody wants to make a comment on the Marshall Plan? One, half a second, 30 seconds. Brian Katulis, Marshall Plan or the IMF? The IMF, please, at least that.

Brian Katulis: Well, first, again, going back to my first point, the U.S. has just spent \$2 trillion in its latest stimulus. And President Biden is looking to invest 3 to 4 trillion trillion more in America to try to jumpstart our economy. So, I think, I would call it a 'marshalling' plan, meaning marshaling the resources of many different people, because there's no appetite in the United States to spend a lot of money in the Middle East. Yeah, but more importantly than the money, is how to incentivize and then disincentivize, the corruption and the anti-democratic tendencies across the political spectrum in Lebanon.

Raghida Dergham: Do you want to say anything Manuel on this?

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: You ask for three steps, three quick steps. The first one, as Riyad Baroud said, you need to form a government because so many things are linked to having a cabinet and then have the government go for reforms. Second, I would rather strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces, if I wanted to defend territorial integrity of Lebanon, then say that this has to be a role or responsibility played by Hezbollah or actually any other. Third reinforce civil society and probably find a way to open a discussion led by civil society on what's Lebanon's social contract, and what's the future of the of the 'Lebanese model'? Because what you want is the government that you need to form has to be responsive to the people, not to the original condominium of the powers that say 'you need to get me around the table first, because I'm original power'.

Raghida Dergham: Hussain Mousavian, let's talk about rapprochement. Is there any? What do you see on the horizon? Do you feel we're going to go into an improved relationship between the United States and Iran? If Iran sticks to its positions right now? Or do you feel there is a potential of a missed opportunity? Do you read any lines on the horizon that there may be rapprochement or do you see confrontation coming?

Hossein Mousavian: Actually, I'm not optimistic, so much about rapprochement by the current Biden administration. First of all, the Biden administration is divided on Iran. Second, Democrats are divided. Third, the Congress is divided. Fourth, Israeli lobby has restarted new pressure. Therefore, I believe Biden, at the moment, is very weak in order to launch a major, courageous and brave decision in order to bring Iranian nuclear deal back to implementation and then start on broader issues, they are too weak. But I believe we need to count more on rapprochement between the regional countries than waiting for the U.S. I believe Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two powerhouses of the region, they really can sit and they can manage the relation, the stability in Persian Gulf and even solution to regional countries like Yemen. Already, we have a security pact in 2000, signed between Iran and Saudi Arabia. They can revive this security pact. They need to start Raghida to talk together, Iran and the GCC. They talk at each other, they talk against each other, they talk about each other. Saudis they go to Israelis, they talk about Iran. They need to talk with Iran in order to solve the problems in the region.

Raghida Dergham: So what are you proposing, other than the regional structure that you built? Many years ago? Let me ask you the question, please Hussain if you permit me, what is it that you're proposing outside the proposal in your book, which is a regional structure for security discussions? Put this on the side because that's another discussion. What are you proposing right now? What can Iran, do-back to Brian's point-what can Iran offer to say, to Saudi Arabia? I am seriously interested in resolving these issues and here's what I'm willing to do about it. Go ahead Hussain Mousavian.

Hossein Mousavian: First of all, the regional cooperation system, which I have introduced in the book is the end state. We have started from confidence building measures Raghida. We need to start from confidence building measures, for example, the stopping the negative hostile propaganda, start in cooperation on common interest issues, like if this is Corona, if this is environment, if this is maritime security. There are a lot of issues for confidence building, which is not challenging between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran and GCC-

Raghida Dergham: Where? In Syria, for example, or in Lebanon or-?

Hossein Mousavian: No, no, you need to start confidence building from those issues, which are not challenging. I mean, we have maritime security, we have energy security, we have environmental challenges, we have drug trafficking, we have organized crime, we have a lot of issues. We need to start from small more steps in order to start a dialogue. [unclear audio] is the most difficult-

Raghida Dergham: Hussain Mousavian, well we can't do that when Iran is supplying the Houthis with weapons, which are threatening the national security of Saudi Arabia. That is one example-

Hossein Mousavian: Iran would say we cannot do this, as long as Saudi continue attacking Yemen, destroying Yemen, the U.S. is providing the most sophisticated armed to annihilating, to destroy Yemen. Therefore, Saudi Arabia should stop war on Yemen, then we would be-

Raghida Dergham: I'm going to give you one more chance to say this, because I really like your idea of opening a new page, I want to get back to you with that, while you're thinking about it. Do you, Ziyad

Baroud, see a way that this might materialize? And comment on the idea of Hussain Mousavian to start with a Saudi Iranian understanding. What are the elements, from your point of view, that could make this happen Ziyad Baroud?

Ziyad Baroud: Well, I have to say that this is not my specialty. But as an observer, I think that what we are waiting for, is a new dynamic in terms of setting the agenda of the upcoming years for when it comes to not only the nuclear thing, but to the power sharing in the region. We know for a fact that the problem is beyond what we see. It has to do with economic interests. It has to do with political agendas. And this is why, as Lebanese, again, we feel that we could at some point, pay the price of not being around the table, of not being decision makers, even if it concerns our fate and the fate of our country.

Raghida Dergham: Actually, it's very important point, being at the table. I mean, again, back to the JCPOA and the potential of discussing it again. And I will give you the floor in a moment, Hussain, but let me go to the other two guests first on this one. It's obvious that Iran objects to the Arabs, including Saudi Arabia, sitting at the table when re-negotiating, or at least to discuss the JCPOA, because Iran does not believe in re-negotiating it anyway. But also, Iran refuses to put the regional behavior as part of the discussion, which then takes away that idea of confidence building measures. Manuel, can you say anything you have in mind on this one? How do you go around it? Suppose the idea of Hussain is going to work? What do you do about this?

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: So, there are several things on which I agree, including the one which is that you need confidence building. But I'm not sure confidence building is going to come from measures. And that's where it gets tricky. It's not going to come just because one says 'you have to stop negative propaganda', and the other one says 'your drone, and missiles are a threat to my national security'. And I know, I've had the chance already to discuss with Hussain Mousavian, so I know his ideas are more elaborate than that. But you need a discussion about precisely how you build a sense of collective security, where regional security is indivisible, and not an addition of national security concerns. And part of the answer, I feel, in the Middle East has to do with reassurance, and reassurance usually come from international actors. And that's the problem right now, because you have the trend that Brian described to us, which is the U.S. is not as interested in the Middle East, as it used to be. You have China who is not interested in endorsing any security responsibility. You have Russia, which is very interested in playing a role, but not really a role in terms of regional security. If you look at the way the OSCE played, there is this disruption, the lines coming from Iran, which is Saudi Arabia should be part of the discussion about the JCPOA, but the US shouldn't be part of the original security mechanism. So, it's a bit complicated. In the case of the OSCE, although it's about Europe, actually, the U.S. is involved, Canada is involved, too. And it wasn't a bad idea. It helped get an impact. It was on the contrary, very important that the U.S. and international actors can have a role to play in this kind of regional security model. And just one last point to get back to something that was said earlier, I'm not going to pretend that the P5 agrees on everything. Maybe there are dividing fault lines between the P5, but they're all telling one same thing to Iran, on the fact that accelerating the violations of the Additional Protocol and the JCPOA is not a good thing, would never be a good thing anywhere, and is not a good thing right now. Again, we need to find ways to move towards sanction lifting and negotiation. That's where we need to focus right now.

Raghida Dergham: Manuel, Hussain spoke of his conviction that he doesn't see the rapprochement on the horizon. Are you worried about confrontation? Do you see a real possibility in military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran? And also, the other thing I want to put to you, because you may have to leave earlier. So, I'll give you the chance to answer these things before I engage the others. So, the other thing is that, has France failed with the Europeans in rallying them to do things that France believes should be done on Iran and Lebanon? I mean, have you failed? Because I think the Iranians have been disappointed from their point of view with the Europeans. And I think you are as France, possibly disappointed in the lack of interest by the Europeans, not to mention the Americas. Manuel to you, please.

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: I'm not sure if we think in terms of being disappointed on Lebanon or on Iran. I don't think the first we are disappointed with our fellow European partners, to be honest. Have we failed? And I think the jury's still out. Have we succeeded so far, clearly no. But it's still work in progress. I am I concerned by the risk of confrontation? Yes, I am. And not just the risk of a confrontation between the U.S. and Iran. Actually, there are many other scenarios without the U.S. being involved of a confrontation. Actually, the confrontation is already there in the region. And they are reasons to be afraid and concern because that's already where we are and there is plenty room for more escalation, more collapses, more humanitarian disasters. And that's what we need to address. So yes, if your question is, am I concerned, I am, but not because I'm a policy planner person, just because I look at the news.

Raghida Dergham: Okay. But I mean, are you speaking about military confrontation?

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: Well, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, tensions in the Persian Gulf. I could go on, I don't have time.

Raghida Dergham: Alright.

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: But I could go on.

Raghida Dergham: Stay with us. And you can leave when you want to. But thank you so much for joining us, you warned me ahead of time that you need to leave.

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil: Welcome.

Raghida Dergham: Thanks for your contribution. I will go to Hussain and then I'll go to Ziyad and then I'll finish with you Brian. Hussain you have-I'll give you a minute and a half each, please.

Hossein Mousavian: Yeah, I have three points. On JCPOA, if there is any blame, the U.S. should be blamed because Iran was in full compliance for three years with zero failure. The U.S. withdrew. If there is any more further there blame, it should be on Europe, because Europe is supported by the world and did zero on action. At the moment, Iran is a member of JCPOA, with at least 50% of compliance. Europe is member of JCPOA with zero compliance. Therefore, if there is any blame on JCPOA, it is on the U.S. shoulders. The U.S. left the JCPOA without negotiation, should come back to JCPOA without negotiation. This is UN resolution 2231. This is obligatory for the U.S. Number one. Number two, when you say that the biggest mistake, I'm coming to Brian, to say the biggest mistake was that the nuclear should not have been negotiated on a nuclear during Ahmadinejad, if you don't know, I know very well. I have been informed in detail. Iran proposed broad negotiations. U.S. and Europe rejected. Iran said broad negotiation on all the issues. Europe and U.S. rejected and they said only nuclear. Therefore, if there is anybody to blame, it is a blame on Europe and U.S. when they rejected Ahmadinejad's offer.

Raghida Dergham: In the beginning and then there was a reversal, but that's okay. Hurry up please.

Hossein Mousavian: Number three? One minute. Number three, on the U.S. role, Manuel, Iranian proposal is based on Resolution 598. It is a UN Resolution. Yes. Even mandate to Secretary General to start negotiation with the regional countries in the Persian Gulf. And the U.S. is member of UN resolution.

Raghida Dergham: I gotta stop you there, I'm so sorry. Stay with me. I'll say goodbye to everyone but Ziyad first. Ziyad Baroud, do you have one minute? Very quick, one minute, and then for you one minute, Brian because I don't want to lose electricity and your online. Go ahead, please, Ziyad Baroud.

Ziyad Baroud: Well, I think that whatever the opposing positions we have, we I mean, the Lebanese people and the Lebanese political groups are called to a constructive, honest, frank and direct dialogue. Because we cannot afford more, we cannot afford the burden of the delay, as I mentioned, and we cannot afford losing time and losing more opportunities. So, this is crucial for us.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you very much, Ziyad Baroud. Brian Katulis, quickly, one minute to you, but anything on the Biden-what's the administration going to do next? And are you worried about the confrontation, military confrontation? Or is this like really far-fetched?

Brian Katulis: I am worried about military confrontation, I think the Biden administration is doing what it does best, which is it studying the issue, and it will take some time. I'm worried that events will actually put them in a reactive posture. Three things I'd say just to close, one, I think we should be positive and look at the big picture. The big picture is that there's a new generation in places like Lebanon that wants something different. And I think the role of the US, France and others, and those in the region, should be encouraged that new generation to come. And lastly, I would just close with this notion. I like the idea of a collective se-

curity pact, as Hussein has said, but you cannot have a collective security pact in a region with so many failed and failing states. The only way to solve that failing state problem is again back to the next generation and to respond to the change that's desired.

Raghida Dergham: And respect of sovereignty of countries rather than have paramilitary forces that report to other capitals, from my point of view. That's my take on this. Thank you so much for joining me. It's always an honor. Hussain Mousavian, come back, I'd like to have you again. As well, Ziyad Baroud and Brian Katulis. I would enjoy having you for a second round of this wonderful geopolitical conversation. Have a wonderful evening wherever you are, or day, and enjoy a DC enjoy Princeton, and Ziyad, you and I will enjoy Beirut as much as possible. Thank you. Bye bye. See you. Thank you very much. Goodbye now.