

An Arab Marshall Plan : A Partnership and Cooperation for the Future of the Middle East

La Maison du Futur (MDF) held its annual international conference on the theme of “An Arab Marshall Plan : A Partnership and Cooperation for the Future of the Middle East” at SerailBekfaya, on Saturday, May 30, 2015.

The conference was organized in partnership with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), a think tank closely associated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU), and focused on the future of the geopolitical order in the Middle East in light of the growing unrest throughout the region. Eminent European, American, Canadian and Arab political and academic figures participated in the conference, which was held in three sessions.

The Marshall Plan, officially known as the European Recovery Program (ERP) was an American initiative of \$13 billion in economic support to help rebuild European economies, secure the free flow of commerce, modernize industry and prevent the spread of communism following the World War II. MDF is looking into a rescue project along the lines of the ERP, designed for the Arab World : An Arab Marshall Plan based on a partnership between the Arab countries and the international community to revamp their economy and achieve wider aims, such as democracy, dignity, human rights, social equality and economic security.

Opening Session

The event kicked off with a welcome address by the Chairman of MDF President Amine Gemayel, who briefed the attendees on the historical role of MDF, as a pioneering center of studies and research in Lebanon and the Middle East since the mid-1970s, charged with the task of promoting peace and furthering strategies and studies to shape a brighter future for Lebanon and the region.

President Gemayel underscored Lebanon’s historical status as a land of freedom, a model of pluralism and a special space for dialogue and coexistence of different cultures, ethnicities and religions. He said that amidst the turmoil that is engulfing the region, it is paramount to keep Lebanon’s stability, highlighting two major challenges : the widespread of illegitimate weapons among sectarian non-state actors, and the overt regional sectarian and ethnic rift and fighting impacting the domestic situation.

Emphasizing the seriousness of countering the spread of extremist ideology and totalitarian projects, President Gemayel made a strong case for the urgency of a large-scale rescue program inspired by the US-led Marshall Plan to rebuild post-war Europe, revamp its economy and prevent the spread of dogmatic totalitarian ideology. He added that the current situation in the Arab countries is not different : We are facing a devastated region with a destroyed economy, shattered social environment and the threat of the radicalism raise.

He said that the recent upheavals and wars that buffeted the region greatly affected the development in the Arab countries, which emphasize the utmost need to establish an Arab Bank for Reconstruction, with the task of creating long-term sustainable development plan to boost economic growth in conflict-devastated Arab countries, in cooperation with the International Monetary Fund, and national resources within the framework of a real partnership and not a tutelage.

The proposed Arab Marshall Plan should also help the prospects Arab states to institutionalize their achievements, embrace the principles of good governance and improve the education systems.

In this vein, President Gemayel said : “(...) the answer and solution to our predicament is an open and civil education”.

Finally, the President pledged that he would dedicate his time, effort and expertise to uphold and sponsor such initiatives for the sake of Lebanon, freedom and humanity.

For his part, Christian Clages, ambassador of Germany to Lebanon gave opening remarks, highlighting the long-standing close relations between President Gemayel and his country. He spoke of the Yugoslav refugee crisis in Europe, in general and Germany in particular, and how the EU dealt with it through partnership memberships, assistance and a billion euros-project. He stressed that the region needs huge investment to create employment and that before the outbreak of the current crises the region’s countries were in need of massive economic and social reforms.

He also added that among the major triggers of the Arab Spring revolutions was the fear of young people that they would not find an appropriate political and economic perspective in their societies at the beginning of the 21st century, which is the key to stability and peace.

He suggested to deal with the current regional conflict from a European perspective and to launch a healthy process for the Middle East, one that can benefit from the European experience.

In turn, Peter Rimmele, KAS Resident Representative in Lebanon, applauded MDF leading role in forwarding its mission to draw a better future, and the key Lebanese intellectuals who were part of it and have striven to achieve a better tomorrow.

“The future is not shaped by itself, but it is being shaped. Where do societies want to go ? MDF mission is to help answering that question, contributing to shaping the future for the Lebanese people and the region,” he concluded.

Session 1 :

The Aptness of Germany’s post WWII experience on the region’s future in the wake of the Arab Spring Joe Khoury, Professor of social psychology in charge of postgraduate courses in social psychology at the Lebanese University, was the moderator of the first session. He introduced the three panelists of the session, Selim Sayegh, former Minister of Social Affairs in Lebanon, Sami Aoun, Professor at the School of Applied Politics, University of Sherbrook, Canada, and Gunther Beckstein, former Prime Minister of the State of Bavaria, Germany.

Sayegh started his presentation by wondering if the concept of resilience equates submission and surrender, adding that this question is an invitation to reflect and determine whether Lebanon’s stability, in the absence of a real social and political peace, is the result of weariness, passivity and a sense of powerlessness against the force of the hegemonic status quo, or otherwise. In his quest to respond to this query, Sayegh distinguished between the resilience of the status quo and the resilience of the transformation.

Speaking about the resilience of the status quo, that is according to him helping maintaining Lebanon’s volatile stability, he outlined its main displays : The nature of the current political system and our inability to change it. This status quo is beneficial since it prevents the recurrence of uncertainties and instability drivers, specific to the advent of new actors within the system, communities’ fear of each other, the centrality of the regional issue, and the marginalization of the Lebanese issue, saying that knowing “what will be the cost of the return of Hezbollah from Syria to Lebanon” is essential to determine whether this resilience is precarious or stable, the capacity to absorb and adapt, and that’s one of the secrets of Lebanon which lies essentially in the Lebanese themselves, finally, the economic resilience which have two pillars : the private sector and the banking sector.

As for the resilience of the transformation explained by Sayegh as an active resiliency that can turn crisis into opportunity, he said it should start by implementing a comprehensive political reform based on an inclusive participation, decentralization, a neutral foreign policy, investing in education, culture and technology and forging a new social pact that enhances the intrinsic Lebanese values of freedom, tolerance and plurality.

For his part, Aoun said that throughout its history, Lebanon has not suffered the pangs of despotism prevalent in the Middle East and long before any other regional nation in the Near East, the idea of a republic and the experience of a civil society had sprouted in its Mountain. He added that despite the obvious failure of establishing cross-community parties and the dominant mercantile mentality, Lebanon has maintained a lead in embracing liberal democracy, and therefore the country could again reconnect with its heritage and survive its current political and constitutional crisis.

Conversely, the fact that The Arab Spring has been a hotbed to extremist ideology using violence as the only way to attain societal changes, shows that the Arab Countries do not share to the same extent the Lebanese liberal and democratic values. The extremist Islamic ideology impedes the democratic culture and shall not be regarded as a solid foundation for social peace and harmony within pluralistic societies.

Notwithstanding that in the near term, the Arab spring prospects are for instability, in the long-term it may usher in an era of a freer Middle East, with nations escaping the handgrip of long entrenched dictatorial regimes. Aoun added that the Lebanese intellectual spectrum and hence La Maison du Futur, should contribute at sustaining this new freedom and supporting transitions to democracy through the creation of liberal institutions and economic problem solving that offer the promise of a region with better governance and less abusive of human rights. La Maison du Futur should also strive to alleviate the regional rampant tension between Sunnis and Shia, and entrench the separation between politics and religion through a liberal perspective.

In this respect, and as the Middle East’s sectarian temperatures rise and the Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry intensifies, Aoun said that walking the tightrope between these two big rivals will prove a difficult balancing act. He stated that neither the Wahhabi model, nor the Iranian clerical model and

not even the Turkish-Islamic one could be applied in the Arab region and hence the urgency for the region to find its own model. Lebanon can help meeting this challenge.

As ways to deter the current Islamist wave engulfing the region, Aoun underscored that Arabic societies desperately need a reform agenda movement leading to formulate an alternative to Islamism that can sustain a pluralistic, participatory politics. He added that in recent years, the search for an alternative to Islamism has been thwarted by the widening sectarian conflict within Islam, which has increased tensions and driven violence across the Arab world. In light of this emergency, the need to reform Islamic jurisprudence and social thought has become more urgent than ever. Islamism's menace to the Arab world, however, has been compounded by the weakened state of critical thinking within Islamic religious and political traditions. In developing a reformist alternative to Islamism, Arab societies will have a substantial body of both historical as well as contemporary thinking that they can draw upon to help improve their political and social structures and create more just, inclusive societies.

Aoun stated in this vein, that we should capitalize on Al Azhar proposed ideas on the rule of law, equity, justice, freedom, which are much more moderate than the conservative Islamist discourse in all its variations.

Finally, Aoun stressed on Lebanon's role in enhancing liberal democracy in the Arab world, fostering dynamic interfaith dialogue and entrenching a culture of tolerance and acceptance of others.

Beckstein provided details on how the European Marshal Plan was implemented in Western Europe after WWII. He started his lecture by saying that when the Second World War ended, Germany was a wasted country economically and intellectually. Without the help of the United States and the United Kingdom, it would have been even much worse, he added.

The idea behind presenting a program for the reconstruction of Germany and revival of European economies, the Marshal Plan was : Only a united Europe can be economically healthy and can oppose any totalitarian regime. The goals were to rebuild war destroyed regions, to remove trade barriers, to modernize industries, and to make Europe prosperous again with the aim of preventing the spread of communism. The Marshall Plan required the lessening of interstate barriers, a dropping of many regulations constraining business and an increase in productivity, labor union membership, as well as the adoption of modern business procedures.

Beckstein stressed that The Marshall plan was one of the first elements of European integration. For hundreds of years, there were wars after wars in Europe. After WWII the European integration had to make war in Europe impossible, he said. The third pillar of the economic miracle was the implementation of the social market economy. He added that in putting social policy on par with economic policy, Germany reached the third way between capitalism and communism. The Marshall Plan was very successful in Germany and in Europe for social welfare and peace and human rights. It was not only an economical program for it created peace by exploring the principles and practices of pluralism, human rights and democracy.

He concluded on stressing that Lebanon with its mosaic of 18 religions and the coexistence of Christians and Muslim Sunnis and Shia, with its culture of tolerance and respect for other religions and political opinions, Lebanon should be a model for a new Arab world.

Session II :

Beyond Turbulence : The Region's Future

John Bell, Director of the Middle East and Mediterranean Program at the Tolido Center in Madrid, was the moderator of the second session. He presented the panelists, Philip J. Crowley, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, Abdulaziz Sager, Chairman of the Gulf Research Center represented by Mustafa al-Ani and Enders Wimbush, Managing Partner of State Various LLC.

Bell said that in order to tackle opportunities to implement a Marshal plan for the region, there are a few questions that need to be raised :

- Is partnership and cooperation between the Middle East and other partners viable ?
- Is the situation in the region containable or manageable ?
- Is there a need to deal with the conflicts of the region before moving on to socio-economic developments, or do these two things happen in parallel ?

Crowly talked about the US policy to promote a new order in the Middle East and praised MDF initiative to hold such debates and dialogues to promote peace and stability in the region.

He said that it is not an overstatement to suggest that we are experiencing the most complex strategic environment in the Middle East in at least 70 years and perhaps a century. The international structure put in place at the end of World War I is coming apart at the seams. In critical places, such

as Syria, Iraq and Yemen, we cannot be certain that the existing order will survive. In any case, repairing the damage will take decades.

He added that given the developments of the past decade, no country is the same as it was, the list of conflicts and challenges continues to grow, as well as the list of regional spoilers, the latest being the Islamic State.

In the midst of this complexity, questions arise. What does the United States want to see in the Middle East? And what is it prepared to do to promote a stable new order?

He underlined the US objectives in the region during the late decades beginning with regional stability, a comprehensive Middle East peace, the security of Israel, combatting violent political extremism and terrorism, protecting the freedom of navigation to ensure the flow of energy across the world, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the containment of Iran, and promoting good governance in the region, greater economic opportunities, and respect for human rights, particularly for women and minorities.

Pinpointing the US achievements in the region as compared to its pre-set goals, he said that a comprehensive peace "is still in a coma," especially in light of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, stressing that the two-state solution is the only viable solution. The US was also unable to protect regional security and toppling regimes in Iraq and Libya backlashed. In the same vein, Crowley criticized President Barack Obama's policy towards the Syrian crisis, describing it as weak and lax. He underscored that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has survived four years of civil war only because of "the support from Iran and Russia."

He also addressed the nuclear negotiations with Iran, stating that despite the "rapprochement" with Tehran, Iran continues to define the United States as the "Great Satan" and most of its ongoing policies are rooted in opposition to the US and its regional objectives. Iran continues also to sponsor terrorism, rebuffing concerns that a nuclear agreement will come at the expense of America's traditional allies in the region.

He stressed that Washington is currently far more cautious about the use of military force today. When it does, the United States hopes to act with regional partners and based on a strong international consensus for action. He added that our recent experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, has become a powerful American political narrative and will be an influential sub-text regarding American policy for the foreseeable future. He refused to brand this policy as "disengagement", rather calling it "sustainable engagement", trying to pursue multilateral rather than unilateral solutions. The question becomes not what the United States decides alone, but what can be achieved together. This requires key actors here to develop a consensus for action that both the United States and the region are able to support.

Mustafa al-Ani, representing Abdulaziz Sager, joined the conference via Skype call.

He stated that from a GCC point of view, and amidst the post-Arab spring hectic regional situation, the urgency for the Gulf States was to avert its repercussions and impact, and to a certain extent, it succeeded in this endeavor due to a series of economic, social and political conditions. However, today the Gulf States have to deal with the repercussions of the Arab spring in Yemen. This is a challenge and a fundamental problem for us, but "I take it that the Arab Spring is no longer a threat for the GCC regimes because we were able to contain it and deal with it", he added.

Al-Ani harshly criticized the US foreign policy, saying that US President Barack Obama wants to avoid any confrontation or engagement and to cut losses during his remaining term in office. He added, today we are paying the price of US policy mistakes, and we are still dealing with the consequences of the US invasion of Iraq. American wrong politics are responsible for a large part of our current problems, starting with the George W. Bush administration's irrational policy and excessive use of unjustified force, to the blurred, ineffective and negative Obama administration's policy towards the region. Al-Ani said that Obama policy in the Middle East is based on the "Too little too late" strategy. He condemned the US "disengagement" policy and raised many questions, saying: "Why is ISIL intervention in Syria seen as a crime and an external interference, while the intervention of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias and Iran's Revolutionary Guard are not seen as such?" "Why does the US policy tolerate Hezbollah interference in Syria? Why is ISIL sectarianism rejected, while the US has supported Nouri Maliki's sectarian policies for eight years, pushing the country towards the edge of the abyss? Why does Iranian General Soleimani move freely in Iraq and Syria's cities, without being tracked down by the US aircrafts?" he added.

Al-Ani also said that there is a major trust issue in the "US lax indecisive foreign policy," especially with Iran's policy of expansion in the Arab world, stressing that the US position towards Iran's

expansionist and interventionist policy will define the commitment and ability of the Gulf States to cope with Sunni extremist groups and terrorism. We cannot fight the ISIL's expansion and Iran's expansion at the same time, especially with the US light-handed policy towards Iran's expansionist ambition.

He urged the US to fight against the Sunni and Shia terrorism on equal footing, away from the policy of selectivity.

Al-Ani also stressed that the GCC believes that the only solution to the Iranian nuclear issue is the political and diplomatic solution, reaching an agreement that inhibits Iran's military nuclear ambition, otherwise, any other agreement would set the wheel of nuclear weapons in motion in the region.

He concluded that the post-Obama era will usher a new form of bilateral relations between the US and the GCC, and will see the emergence of an independent policy less committed to protect American interests in the region.

Wimbush underlined the significance of tectonic shifts in the Middle East and the role of external players on shaping the future of the region, adding that no other region of the globe has been affected so powerfully by the interests of outside actors, whether they seek to harvest the region's abundant resources or enhance positions in an ongoing geostrategic competition that occurs elsewhere, or both. He doubted that the United States' appetite for pursuing what it considers vital national interests in the Middle East has dimmed, anticipating that US interests will remain strong here, and that any new administration will adjust strategies to facilitate the United States remaining a strong player and constant presence for the foreseeable future.

Alternatively, he suggested that despite Russia's fierce comeback into the Middle Eastern political scene, it will not be a durable presence in the Middle East. While Putin's ambitious and assertive Kremlin has behaved as if it is a regime on the geopolitical ascent, by most indicators (political, military, economic and social) the Russian state is actually on a downward trajectory.

Russia is likely to seek new supporters for its risk-taking from amongst state and, particularly, non-state actors who share Russia's risk-taking mentality and antipathy toward the United States in particular and the West generally while bringing to the relationship high geographic reach. This will include, prominently, the Middle East.

Similarly, he stated that Europe as a traditional Middle East actor is also declining in its capacity to play a major role in the region, as investment in military capability is down in virtually every European state. It is not difficult to imagine a Europe in the not too distant future that is divided, weak, and whose deep unhappiness is reflected in the bitter rhetoric of its increasingly dominant extreme political parties, he added. However, individual states, such as Germany, France or Great Britain could play a role in shaping the region's activities.

On the other hand, he stressed that Asia's economy depends – in part – of what happens in the Middle East. He spoke about China and India, which are witnessing significant growth at the economic, military, and energy levels, making them potential major players and place them in competitive strategic positions in the Middle East.

China's continued development depends fundamentally on an uninterrupted supply of energy from the Middle East. To protect energy supplies and to enhance its geostrategic position relative to the United States and, importantly, to rising India, China will invest heavily in securing a strong strategic position in the Middle East, including establishing military installations and relationships.

India is rising, as it is reflected in recent economic growth rates. Its new leadership shows promise for creating a more assertive, outwardly focused India than its predecessors. One example of this intention is India's development of substantially more military power, with special emphasis on naval power, especially submarines, aircraft carriers, and aircraft.

All of these actors – new, old, rising, or declining – will place Iran near the center of their strategic planning. Its size, location, and resources make this inevitable. The tectonic tremors that would result from Iran becoming a nuclear weapons power would affect the strategies of all of these competitors powerfully, and will propel a number of them to begin planning nuclear futures for their countries. He concluded by asserting that The Middle East "I see" will thus increasingly become a tapestry of intersecting strategic interests of relatively new players, while some traditional competitors and forces of restraint – for example, Russia and Europe – will fade. At very least, the strategic architecture of the emerging Middle East will have many more moving parts represented by new actors with significant capabilities pursuing unfamiliar strategic outcomes.

Before lunchtime, Bader Al Humaidi, former Minister of Oil and Finance in Kuwait, applauded the initiative of an Arab Marshal Plan, and expressed his optimism and admiration for Lebanon.

Session III :

Towards a Global Partnership for the

Middle East : A Comparative Geo-Strategic Discussion

The final session kicked off with Raouf Abou Zaki, CEO of Al-Iqtisad wal-A'mal Group, who praised President's Gemayel initiative to revive MDF role and stressed that the Middle East remains central in the international strategies, politically and economically. He presented the panelists, who were in addition to president Amine Gemayel, Naguib Sawiris, Executive Chairman of Orascom Telecom Media and Technology Holding S.A.E and Hassan Mneimneh, Principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington DC.

Before giving the stage to president Gemayel Former Syrian Minister of Economy and Trade Ghassan al-Rifai, made an intervention in the session. He suggested calling the Arab Marshal Plan a "global initiative, as it goes beyond the reconstruction process and economic reforms to reach social pattern," an initiative that should not be funded by Arab players in the region only, but by all concerned actors all over the world.

In the same vein, President Gemayel said that the main objective of this strategy, regardless of its name, boils down to one issue : "How to achieve humanity and the well-being of humans," and uphold human rights, "whether through a Marshal Plan or a Global Initiative," which is the ultimate goal of MDF.

On the ongoing conflicts and struggle against radical movements, Gemayel stated that Sunnis were the first to fight against extremist and fundamentalist groups, whether politically or militarily. He stressed that "several awakening groups" have risen in the face of extremism throughout the Arab world, and that the "dynamics of the goodwill" is victorious over evil to give people back their humanity.

He also said that this subject will be further elaborated on during workshops that will be organized in the future by MDF in coordination with other centers of researches and studies.

President Gemayel focused on four pillars to uphold human rights and to promote social and economic development in the region, starting first and foremost with education, to produce young generations that are open to dialogue, freedom, and acceptance of others.

Secondly, he underscored the need for the establishment of good governance, which is essential to serve humanity and fight corruption, unlike the case of the totalitarian Arab regimes that have prevailed in the region.

Thirdly, there is also need for "development projects," in the region, which are crucial to the Arab world as "its resources are being squandered."

Finally, President Gemayel reiterated the need to engage "in partnership" instead of "paternalism."

For his part, Sawiris, said that the European Marshal Plan in Germany and Europe took place following the end of the war, while the war and conflicts in the region are seemingly dragging on, especially in light of inaction on the part of the US and Europe.

Thus, he suggested a "simpler plan" for the region that could be achievable amidst the ongoing wars, which is "the establishment of safe zones" for investments. Sawiris gave Kurdistan as a successful example of such safe zones, designed to create job opportunities and investment projects under international insurances against political threats.

He concluded that Lebanon is not neutralized in the ongoing regional crises, but "is at the core of the conflict," whether "we like it or not." However, Lebanon could play a prominent role in finding economic solutions to the region.

Finally, Hassan Mneimneh, Principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington DC, talked about the revival of the Arab world with the cooperation of international partners, wondering about the existence of a sole Arab world today, and where is it ? He said that the current state of things propels us to talk from now on about different Arab worlds instead of a single Arab world. He sorted out different regions within the existing Arab geographic reality, and each one of those constitutes by itself an isolated Arab world. These regions are :

- The Maghreb region, (Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria), which is witnessing the ascendance of a "Maghrebian" awareness exceeding the national boundaries and seeks to connect with the European countries instead of the Arab world.
- The second is Egypt and its regional surrounding, currently focused on pursuing its national interests, in addition to the geopolitical factors that push Egypt towards Sudan and up to Ethiopia.
- The third Arab world is the Gulf, essentially connected to Asia. This region is stable and cannot be disintegrated

– The fourth Arab world is the Levant (Mashriq), which includes Iraq and the Levant : Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Israel

He explained that when we talk about the decay and collapse and war-ravaged area, we are actually designating the Levant. He underscored the importance of this area of the Arab world by stating : “should the Levant fail, this would inevitably lead to the failure of the other Arab worlds as well as the entire world”, a fact that was politically and ethically neglected by the American administration.

Mneimneh stressed that Lebanon remains, however, “immune to” what is happening in the region, despite having “an army affiliated with Iran.” He attributed this immunity to the civil war that prevailed in Lebanon and that led Lebanese to give priority to their national interests

He also agreed with President Gemayel on the suggestions he made to promote development and stability in the region. He added the need to uphold “the humanitarian reference,” beyond any other political or religious references and to overcome the crisis of “cultural flattening,” and “the Islamization of sciences.” Furthermore, he spoke of “hollow education,” which is also at the heart of the crisis in the region, stressing the need to introduce reforms in the education sector throughout the Arab worlds.

Mneimneh also talked about optional partners of the Arab world, which include the US, China, India and Russia, while Europe has “no other choice but to be involved” in what is going on in the Arab world, he said, as part of the “Mediterranean partnership and alliance.”

The conference ended with cocktail on the terrace.