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Panel Discussion at AUB Explores Lebanon's Presidential Elections and Statehood Aspirations Through the Lens of Chehabism

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The Good Governance and Citizenship Observatory (GGCO) at the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, at the American University of Beirut (AUB), recently hosted a webinar titled *'Lebanon's Presidential Elections and Statehood Aspirations: Revisiting Chehabism.'*

Opening the session, Dr. Simon A. Kachar, founding director of GGCO at AUB, set the stage by highlighting that, "the political landscape of Lebanon has long been characterized by a delicate balance of sectarian interests and institutional dysfunction. In light of the election of President Joseph Aoun, this panel will engage with the potential for state-building and governance reform in the country," he said. "Central to this exploration is the legacy of late President Fouad Chehab and his vision of a unified, law-abiding nation during his presidency between 1958 and 1964, commonly referred to as Chehabism."

Dr. Kachar emphasized that President Aoun's inaugural address "echoed a vision of urgent reform, emphasizing the need for a citizenship-based approach to governance, a departure from Lebanon's entrenched sectarian political system." He explained that the panel's purpose was to explore whether Lebanon can realistically overcome its systemic dysfunction and advance toward genuine institutional reform.

The discussion featured two distinguished panelists: Frederic C. Hof, senior fellow at Bard College's Center for Civic Engagement, and Lamia Moubayed, president of the Institute of Finance Basil Fuleihan.

"This is a very tough time for Lebanon," said Moubayed, "although with the prospects of the election of President Aoun and the new prime minister and government in place, the hopes and expectations are high." She raised a critical question: Can President Aoun's vision of a unified and law-abiding nation be translated into concrete reforms and action, given the economic, financial, and social crises Lebanon is emerging from, as well as deeply entrenched political resistance? Moubayed also questioned how Fouad Chehab's legacy might be leveraged to

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rebuild public trust and mobilize the necessary resources to overcome the country's dire situation.

Hof expressed cautious optimism, "I am very hopeful that Lebanon under new leadership is moving in a new and positive direction," he stated. "I think the life, the experience, and the leadership of President Fouad Chehab can provide inspiration and guidance in the difficult years to come." He added, "Lebanon seems at the moment to have good leadership. But that leadership currently lacks the resources needed to produce significant results on the ground."

Hof stressed that the new government faces the monumental task of rebuilding from scratch. "This government needs to start from zero, after decades of corruption, cronyism, and incompetence. No doubt there are some very capable and decent civil servants, despite a system that doesn't recruit or promote based on merit." He noted the deterioration and chronic underfunding of Lebanon's civil service as well as the state's failure to deliver basic services. "These things will not be corrected overnight," he said, adding that Lebanese voters will expect tangible progress in areas like economic recovery, post-war reconstruction, and essential services. "Financial resources will be needed, but having the right people in the right administrative positions is also crucial."

The panel also delved into the qualities of principled public leadership, emphasizing the importance of integrity, competence, and a spirit of public service. Discussions explored the need to reengage technical expertise across vital sectors.

One recommendation emphasized the value of direct communication between the country's leadership and the public. "If we revisit the principles of Chehabism, and critically analyze the strategies that he put in place, we see that this is what he did. He tried to instill trust again," Moubayed said, in response to Hof's point on how today's president and prime minister might use platforms such as social media to demonstrate their integrity and communicate a clear governance agenda and plan directly to the people of Lebanon.

The conversation also highlighted the importance of both modernizing and reforming existing institutions—and creating new ones with a forward-looking outlook—capable of attracting fresh talent and funding.

Another crucial topic was Lebanon's relationship with the international community. The panel questioned what tools Lebanon could use to re-engage international stakeholders and development institutions, particularly as past attempts to solicit international financial support have been met with reluctance. The panel explored what kind of narrative Lebanon must project to regain the confidence of the international community including financial institutions.

The discussion also touched on Lebanon's geopolitical challenges, including ongoing instability along its southern border and the situation on its northern and eastern borders with Syria. These challenges, panelists noted, add significant complexity to Lebanon's path forward. In a broader context, the panel reflected on global dynamics, including the rise in violent conflicts and growing concerns over the erosion of multilateralism. In this climate, the panelists considered how Lebanon might still pursue an agenda of peace and sustainable development.

The webinar concluded with an interactive Q&A session, providing participants with the opportunity to engage directly with the panelists.

ENDS

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Note to Editors

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