



**Beirut Security
Debates**

A NEW ERA? SCENARIOS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

8-9 APRIL 2025



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April 8-9, 2025
Location: Amine Maysourie
Conference hall (RFI Auditorium -
Level B)

**A New Era?
Scenarios for
the Middle East**

CONFERENCE REPORT

INTRODUCTION AND OPENING REMARKS

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's (FES) Regional Peace and Security Project, held the third edition of the Beirut Security Debates (BSD) from April 8-9, 2025. This year's event, titled "*A New Era? Scenarios for the Middle East,*" gathered local, regional, and international scholars, experts, and policymakers to examine and discuss pressing security and geopolitical questions at this pivotal juncture for the region.

Organized against a backdrop of regional and global uncertainty, the conference sponsored reflections on the Middle East's shifting landscape and the unpredictability that defines the current international order. Panel discussions explored a range of potential scenarios for the future of the region, including U.S. policy trajectories under President Trump, the evolving Palestinian question, Iran's strategic decision-making amid new regional geopolitical shifts, Syria's prospects for state-building and stability, and Lebanon's role in a challenging and rapidly changing environment. The program also featured a Book Reflection with Minister of Culture Ghassan Salamé, centered on his recent work on war and peace in the 21st century. His insights gave way to a broader dialogue on the fragmentation of the international system, with special attention to the Middle East's persistent volatility, the dynamics of normalization, and shifting power dynamics.

Joseph Bahout, Director of the Issam Fares Institute, emphasized the core of BSD as a platform for open dialogue amid regional crises. He noted that this year's gathering provided a venue for strategic analysis and an opportunity for collective reflection on a global order that remains uncertain and undefined. "With our region in shambles and undergoing a sinuous transition for better or worse," Bahout stated, "these debates reflect our mission—to understand and influence both our national and broader international environment."

Marcus Schneider, Director of the FES Regional Peace and Security Project, questioned whether the Middle East is approaching the end of a prolonged period of turbulence or instead entering a new and even more challenging phase. Citing ongoing crises in Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond, he warned that unresolved conflicts continue to threaten regional stability. Schneider highlighted Lebanon's enduring centrality, both geographically and politically, as it contends with persistent political paralysis and economic collapse. Noting the growing disconnect between European political narratives and realities on the ground, he asserted that the "rules-based international order" has effectively collapsed. Quoting Gramsci, he reflected, "The old world is dying, and the new struggles to be born—this is a time of monsters."



AUB President Fadlo Khuri reflected on Beirut's historical and political significance. He affirmed the enduring agency of the Lebanese people, noting that Beirut remains a space for intellectual freedom and civic expression, often more so than in many Western capitals. Framing this year's central question as an urgent inquiry rather than a rhetorical device, Khuri underscored the importance of rigorous, evidence-based analysis rooted in lived experience at AUB and IFI.

PLENARY SESSION

IS A NEW MIDDLE EAST IN THE MAKING?



The Middle East has recently undergone a series of significant geopolitical shifts leading to the weakening and, to some extent, dismantling of Iranian networks across the region. This moment presents a crucial opportunity for the United States and Israel to consolidate influence through political means. Instead, Israel appears to be engaging with the changing landscape primarily through a military lens. Its operations, aimed at expanding buffer zones and maintaining freedom of intervention in Syria and Lebanon, reflect a strategy focused on coercion rather than sustainable stabilization.

Israel's current approach seeks to leverage military pressure to force political concessions, such as the expansion of the Abraham Accords or the disarmament of Hezbollah, without adequately accounting for regional complexities. This disconnect between ambition and reality risks perpetuating instability, while the United States' tacit approval of Israeli actions further reduces prospects for a coordinated regional strategy. In doing so, Washington may be squandering

opportunities created by the weakening of the Assad regime in Syria, at a time of rising tension between Israel and Turkey.

To avoid further escalation, a new regional security framework is needed to replace the outdated Astana process in Syria. Growing consensus among regional actors, excluding Israel, recognizes that the current political and security landscape hinders unilateral decision-making. As a result, the region is moving toward pragmatic, flexible cooperation, increasingly viewed as essential to safeguarding national interests. This is particularly evident in enhanced coordination among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and strengthening ties between the GCC and Turkey. While the GCC maintains a coherent bloc identity, member states are careful not to overshadow each other's initiatives, especially in their engagement with Ankara. These states also share growing discontent with U.S. policy, especially on Gaza, and exert collective pressure on Washington to better align with their strategic priorities.

Syria has emerged as a focal point of Turkish-Saudi cooperation, where both countries aim to avoid a repeat of the post-Iraq vacuum that enabled Iran's regional influence. Their shared goal is the long-term containment of Iranian influence in a post-Assad Syria, even while acknowledging Iran's diminished capacity to rebuild its networks. This alignment is welcomed by Syria's new leadership, as reflected in President Ahmad al-Sharaa's outreach to both Riyadh and Ankara. This emerging framework, involving Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, is developing amid Israeli airstrikes in Syria, which appear aimed at curbing Turkish influence rather than purely targeting Iranian remnants.

In parallel, Europe's perception of the changing Middle East has been shaped by the erosion of Iranian and Russian influence, which many European governments interpret as an opening for long-term stabilization. However, this optimism is tempered by concerns over renewed conflict and the direct spillover effects on Europe. The Gaza war has already fueled rising racism, Islamophobia, and social polarization across European societies. Furthermore, the European Union's inability to exert meaningful pressure on Israel has undermined its self-perception as a balancing power.

European policy toward Syria similarly suffers from strategic ambiguity. While individual member states—particularly Germany and France—have increased their involvement, the European Union as a whole has been constrained by internal divisions, its overriding focus on the war in Ukraine, and a reluctance to diverge from U.S. positions. These constraints have significantly limited the EU's impact in the region over the past 18 months. The EU's current security-centric posture, shaped by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and tensions with the U.S. over trade, has diverted resources away from humanitarian and development aid, narrowed the scope of transatlantic cooperation to military matters, and risks drawing Europe closer to Israel at the expense of its traditional balancing role.

Given these challenges, the EU has shown growing interest in deeper coordination with Turkey and Gulf states despite persistent obstacles. European policymakers remain preoccupied with Turkey's domestic political trajectory, going so far as imposing punitive measures. Simultaneously, relations with the GCC continue to be shaped primarily by economic and energy interests, with insufficient attention paid to their evolving political and strategic roles.

While the Middle East is undergoing profound internal transformation, these changes are occurring alongside a broader paradigm shift within Western alliances. Several key factors will shape the region's trajectory in the short term. The potential for a sharp decline in oil prices may necessitate a fundamental reconfiguration of economic models and social contracts. Syria's future

remains uncertain, shaped by President al-Sharaa’s ambitions and the possible retrenchment of U.S. involvement. While the rise of agile, illicit networks poses a growing threat to regional stability, outpacing the capacity of fragile states to respond. These challenges are compounded by the recent and sharp decline of international aid and growing uncertainty over who, if anyone, will fill the void left by the U.S. and other Western donors.

WORKSHOP 1

WHAT DOES TRUMP HAVE IN STOCK FOR THE MIDDLE EAST?

The core tenets of former President Donald Trump’s Middle East policy rest on a doctrine of “peace through strength,” with the United States imposing its vision of peace unilaterally. This approach has been most visible in the administration’s handling of Iran and Palestine, where peace is framed not as a negotiated outcome but as a result of the eradication or marginalization of key actors.

A second pillar of Trump’s policy is his determination to eclipse the legacy of his democratization predecessors. This is evident in his push for a transformational, rather than transactional, agreement with Iran, possibly seeking regime change. The administration also prioritizes the Abraham Accords through increased business cooperation among Israel and Arab states, while deliberately sidestepping the political dimensions of normalization, particularly the Palestinian issue.

However, the coherence of this strategy is undermined by internal fragmentation within the administration. Tensions between experienced policymakers and political loyalists have led to dismissals, institutional upheaval, and a growing dominance of ideologically driven figures loyal to Trump. These officials often combine isolationist ideals with a selective willingness to intervene militarily. Trump’s skepticism of expert advice was only reinforced during his first term when controversial decisions, such as relocating the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem or omitting Palestinian statehood from the Abraham Accords, elicited no significant international backlash, contrary to expert warnings.

As a result, the U.S. has repeatedly found itself unprepared for major regional developments—from the 2011 uprisings to the rise of ISIS, the October 7 Hamas attack, and the more recent collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. In the absence of a sustainable long-term vision, the U.S. has often defaulted to short-term military responses, particularly airstrikes, which fail to address deeper structural issues.



The ongoing efforts to finalize Saudi-Israeli normalization must be understood through the lens of elite bargaining. Widespread public opposition across the Arab world, particularly in the context of Israel's war in Gaza, led to a breakdown in normalization efforts. Riyadh made clear that no agreement could be reached without significant progress on the Palestinian issue. While the U.S.-Saudi dimension of the deal, including security guarantees, had largely been negotiated under the Biden administration, President Biden was unable to pressure Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to agree to the necessary conditions.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) holds normalization, including tangible steps toward Palestinian statehood, as a key element in his ambition to position Saudi Arabia as a regional and global leader. He also seeks a binding defense pact with the U.S. to insulate the kingdom from policy reversals like those experienced under Biden. From the Saudi perspective, a second Trump administration offers stronger personal ties, more reliable commitments, and greater leverage, primarily rooted in Trump's favorable view of MBS and Saudi Arabia's role in global energy markets. However, this leverage may prove insufficient. Israel's increasingly hardline stance on Palestine and its disregard for Saudi political sensitivities create serious obstacles to normalization on Saudi terms. Renewed U.S. pressure on Iran risks undermining Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and reigniting regional tensions, and any agreement with Israel could expose Saudi Arabia to retaliation, either from Iran or radical Islamist groups.

Trump's return to power coincides with a region already undergoing structural transformation, but his administration appears largely unwilling to take ownership of these processes. This is most evident in Syria where the U.S. avoids direct engagement but remains a central actor in shaping the country's future through sweeping sanctions, the designation of key government officials as terrorists, or its control over stabilization funding. These actions hinder Syria's reconstruction and, by extension, the stabilization of neighboring states like Lebanon.¹

The U.S. has also set conditions for engagement that are practically unattainable, including broad security concessions in Syria, and the immediate disarmament of Hezbollah in Lebanon, despite the severe institutional and political limitations both countries face. This raises critical questions: What are the consequences of a superpower imposing red lines that cannot be met? And how far will a future Trump administration go to enforce them through punitive measures?

By imposing unattainable demands and aligning uncritically with Israeli policy, the U.S. risks missing a rare opportunity to weaken Iranian and Russian influence and support regional stabilization. Despite this, Arab states remain fragmented and unable to offer a cohesive alternative to U.S. leadership. Their rare collective pushback, such as opposition to Trump's proposed "Riviera plan" for post-war Gaza, should be seen as the exception, not the rule.

¹ The US president announced the sanctions relief in May 2025, ahead of an unannounced meeting with Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/23/us-lifts-first-sanctions-on-syria-following-trumps-surprise-announcement>.

WORKSHOP 2

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION?

The future of the Palestinian question cannot be understood in isolation; it is inextricably linked to broader global dynamics, including the rise of Islamophobia, the resurgence of far-right political movements, and the convergence of their ideologies. The events of October 2023 marked a pivotal moment at the regional level, exposing unprecedented failures in Israel's military and intelligence apparatus. The Israeli response was chaotic, disorganized, and marked by acts widely viewed as driven by vengeance, with unequivocal backing from the United States.

Unlike past regional conflicts, this was not a coordinated offensive by the Axis of Resistance. Rather, it reflected a reactive alignment, aimed at easing the overwhelming pressure on Gaza. Israel's efforts, under the guise of self-defense, sought to isolate and dismantle its regional adversaries, mirroring the transformative period around the 1967 war. However, this time, the backlash was significant: Israel's actions, particularly the forced displacement of Palestinians, raised alarm in neighboring Arab states. These states now increasingly perceive such tactics as moral and humanitarian outrages as well as direct threats to their own legitimacy and internal stability.



The October 7 attack has been viewed not only as an act of violence but also as a form of resistance, resonating with earlier liberation struggles that left lasting marks on global consciousness. These moments of resistance in history challenge entrenched narratives and, in the case of Palestine, have begun to shift international public perception, especially in Western societies. Growing support for nonviolent resistance strategies, such as boycotts and divestment, reflects a shift in public engagement, particularly among youth and civil society. At the same time,

regional diplomatic frameworks, especially the Abraham Accords, have faced significant setbacks. The atrocities committed in Gaza have triggered widespread anger across Arab populations, making normalization with Israel politically untenable for many governments without serious domestic repercussions.

The selective and deeply asymmetrical application of international law further complicates the picture. While Palestinians hold a range of legally recognized rights, enforcement mechanisms are inconsistently applied, particularly regarding Israeli violations. This disparity has significantly undermined the credibility of key international legal institutions. The stark contrast in the global response to Israeli actions compared with those of other states, such as Russia and the war in Ukraine, highlights how geopolitical interests often override legal consistency, weakening the legitimacy of the rules-based international order and undermining the rule of law at all levels.

Within this legal and political framework, the question of Palestinian refugees remains central, despite often being treated as a lesser issue. Refugees face systemic physical, social, economic, and legal marginalization in host countries, remain excluded from political negotiations, and are denied the right of return. This situation is not merely neglectful but increasingly reflects an intentional erasure of Palestinian identity. The decline in international support for key refugee institutions, coupled with open discussions about demographic “solutions,” signals a troubling shift from passive neglect to active displacement policies.

In this context, the Palestinian experience is a sustained struggle against spatial, legal, and existential dispossession. Since October 2023, a wave of dehumanizing discourse has emerged, portraying Palestinians through genocidal narratives that strip them of agency and identity. In response, a growing global solidarity movement, especially among university students and civil society groups, has emerged in support of Gaza. These movements call for the end of apartheid, the dismantling of colonial structures, and genuine decolonization.

This relatively new wave of activism reveals a widening gap between official government policies and public conscience. As solidarity deepens and discourse shifts, the Palestinian question is increasingly being understood not simply as a regional conflict, but as a symbol of broader global struggles for justice, equality, and self-determination.

WORKSHOP 3

WHAT CHOICES DOES IRAN HAVE?

Iran faces a complex set of challenges shaped by mounting domestic economic pressures and evolving regional dynamics. The decline in the regional influence of the "Axis of Resistance" has compelled Tehran to reassess its strategic posture. In response, Iran appears to be moving toward a more minimalist and adaptive approach, shifting away from direct military engagement and emphasizing diplomatic and political avenues instead. Rather than continuing to exert direct influence over allied groups, Iran may aim to position itself as the central actor within a more flexible and decentralized network of regional partnerships.

To understand this rapid change, it is important to examine the regional developments beginning in the latter half of 2024. Between October 2023 and mid-2024, Iranian leaders still believed that their long-standing doctrine of "forward defense" or "extraterritorial deterrence" was still effective. This strategy, developed over decades, aimed to confront threats beyond Iran's borders by building and sustaining a network of proxy actors across the region. The prevailing view in Tehran during this period was that further investment in this approach could enhance Iran's regional influence and security.

Beginning in April 2024 with the Israeli bombing of Iran's consulate in Damascus, this perception of safety or deterrence quickly deteriorated. This blow was compounded by subsequent, unprecedented developments in Lebanon that undermined Hezbollah's role as a central pillar of Iran's deterrence architecture. These events culminated in October 2024, when Israel launched large-scale strikes against Iranian military targets inside Iran itself, exposing Iranian vulnerabilities and marking a dramatic erosion of its strategic depth.

Up to this point, it was expected Hezbollah would respond forcefully to any direct Israeli attack on Iran. With Hezbollah now weakened, this assumption has proven unreliable, leaving Iran increasingly exposed to future attacks without a credible deterrent. The loss of the "forward defense" has triggered a fundamental reassessment within Iran's military establishment, prompting debates over the future of its defense doctrine.

Simultaneously, regional competitors, particularly Turkey, have taken advantage of Iran's perceived weakened position. Iranian analysts and officials are increasingly concerned about Turkey's expanding influence in the South Caucasus and parts of Iraq, viewing it as a growing strategic threat. In response, Tehran is expected to increase its political engagement in Iraq, which, unlike other regional actors, shares a border with Iran and holds significant geopolitical weight in Tehran's regional calculus.

Domestically, Iran is grappling with political fragmentation and looming questions over succession as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ages. The political landscape is shaped by three main factions: reformists, centrists, and conservatives (or hardliners). While reformists and centrists generally advocate for re-engagement with the international community and economic modernization, hardliners continue to emphasize ideological confrontation with the U.S. and Israel.

However, recent setbacks have shifted the balance of power. With reformists largely sidelined in recent years, it is the centrists, favoring pragmatic engagement, who are now gaining ground. The conservatives' record, particularly in managing the economy, has come under intense scrutiny. Public frustration, exacerbated by frequent electricity blackouts and economic stagnation, is fueling calls for a policy shift. There is growing domestic support for renewed negotiations with the United States aimed at lifting sanctions and attracting foreign investment.

This internal momentum suggests that Iran may be more flexible in upcoming nuclear negotiations as Iranian leaders increasingly perceive the threat of a U.S. or Israeli military strike as credible. Whether this leads to sustained diplomatic engagement or a recalibrated form of deterrence remains to be seen, but the current trajectory points to a more cautious, politically driven Iranian posture, both at home and abroad.



WORKSHOP 4

SYRIA: FROM FRAGMENTATION TO STATE-BUILDING

Since October 2023, the Middle East has undergone a series of significant shifts, with the downfall of the Assad regime in December 2024 marking a watershed moment in Syria's modern history. Despite dramatic political developments, Syria remains deeply fragmented and heavily influenced by competing foreign agendas. Multiple external powers, including the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Israel, continue to operate within the country, each advancing their own strategic interests. Israeli airstrikes have intensified alongside newly expanded ground operations, while Israel openly opposes Turkish involvement in northern Syria.

Regional powers also play an active role, often supporting competing interests. Iran and affiliated Iraqi militias continue to support pro-Assad elements and maintain communication channels with Hezbollah. Conversely, Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are re-engaging in Syria, though their levels of support and objectives regarding the current regime in Damascus vary. Notably absent from the political landscape is the European Union, which has been criticized for its limited engagement, with only Germany maintaining a degree of political involvement in Damascus with surprising affect given Europe's proximity to Syria and the potential for a renewed migration crisis should stabilization fail.



Today's Syrian landscape is challenged on three interrelated fronts: military, institutional, and social. Military fragmentation comprises four major types of armed actors that continue to shape the domestic dynamics of the country. First, extremist groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) remain active and retain localized influence. Second, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are increasingly viewed as a priority partner for any prospective national leadership. Third, factions that nominally align with the Syrian government, including elements of the Syrian National Army, often operate autonomously and pursue their own agendas. Fourth, there are groups that have refused to engage with recent political processes, including the "Victory Convention," and remain outside the state control.

Public trust in state institutions has all but evaporated. Traditional structures such as the military, police, health services, and utilities exist largely in name only. Corruption is rampant, unemployment is high, and the state appears functionally bankrupt with wages going unpaid, high

inflation, and banking restrictions limiting cash access. Governance has been reduced to symbolic authority or exercised through informal patronage networks.

In addition to military and economic collapse, Syria is experiencing unprecedented internal divisions. Public discourse is deeply polarized, with even minor incidents sparking intense public debate. Social fractures are especially pronounced between conservative Sunni leaders aligned with the government and secular or minority groups opposed to it. This polarization inhibits meaningful reconciliation and limits the space for inclusive political dialogue or reform.

A key driver of these challenges is the reinforcement of a post-conflict war economy. Power remains concentrated by a select few who govern through exclusion and clientelism. This reinforces institutional weakness, undermines accountability, and perpetuates fear. Attempts at state restructuring have often resulted in the recruitment of regime loyalists rather than competent technocrats, further eroding bureaucratic capacity.

Simultaneously, economic liberalization initiatives have been poorly managed, disproportionately benefiting the elite while harming low-income groups, local businesses, and the agricultural sector. Without protective mechanisms or inclusive planning, these policies threaten to deepen existing inequalities and fuel long-term instability.

Over the last 14 years of conflict, Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a crucial role in bridging the gaps left by state institutions unable or unwilling to meet humanitarian needs. They have delivered essential humanitarian services and contributed to transitional justice efforts by documenting human rights violations and war crimes. As a result, many CSOs have evolved into political actors, participating in international forums and even engaging in UN peace negotiations.

However, civil society today is increasingly disjointed and lacks cohesion. Internal divisions based on politics, ideology, and geography have diminished their collective influence. Without a concerted effort to unify these organizations and integrate them into a broader national reconstruction strategy, their ability to shape Syria's future may be significantly inhibited.

WORKSHOP 5

LEBANON: NEW ERA WITH UNCERTAIN FUTURE?

Following the recent ceasefire, Lebanon has entered a new political phase marked by long-awaited milestones: the election of a President and Prime Minister (January 2025), and the appointment of a new Central Bank Governor (March 2025). These developments, while symbolically important, raise cautious optimism about the possibility of renewal. However, Lebanon remains mired in systemic dysfunction. The country continues to grapple with entrenched structural weaknesses, an economic collapse, eroded public trust, fragile institutions, and unresolved questions regarding both its internal power-sharing arrangements and regional alignment. The cumulative impact of war on social, political, and economic dynamics has deepened pre-existing fractures.



Despite the sense of political motion, Lebanon's domestic environment remains deeply polarized. Partisan divisions continue to weaken national dialogue and undermine consensus-building efforts. Much of the recent political momentum has been externally driven, with regional and international actors applying considerable pressure to push Lebanon toward reform and stabilization. However, reconstruction efforts, estimated to require over \$11 billion, will be impossible without substantial foreign assistance and broad-based economic reforms. Simultaneously, regional instability continues to

influence Lebanon's domestic calculations, constraining its ability to act independently.

Lebanon's multidimensional crisis includes a severe fiscal and financial breakdown, the expansion of an informal economy, and years of government paralysis. To exit this downward spiral, coordinated action and reform in four key areas is required: restructuring the public and financial sectors by resolving the banking sectors massive accumulated losses, enabling a comprehensive IMF agreement; rehabilitating critical infrastructure in war-affected zones and neglected utilities and public works through meaningful institutional reform; enhancing private-sector competitiveness by fostering a business centered environment to restore job creation and economic dynamism; and pursuing deep political reform to replace the sectarian and clientelist system in favor of a more inclusive and accountable state model.

A significant turning point in recent months has been the assassination of senior Hezbollah figures in the wake of Israeli military operations. These targeted killings, combined with Hezbollah's weakened operational and financial capabilities due to the collapse of Syrian support and growing external pressures, have shifted the internal balance of power. The upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for May 2026, are widely expected to reflect these changes, with Hezbollah and its allies projected to lose significant ground. This could mark the beginning of a more pluralistic, post-hegemonic political era.

Lebanon's foreign policy posture has also evolved amid shifting regional dynamics. Three notable developments have shaped this recalibration, including the diminished regional influence of Iran, impacting its allies in Lebanon; the erosion of Syria's historical role as a mediator in Lebanese affairs; and the gradual decline of Hezbollah's political dominance, challenging the status quo.

Lebanon's foreign policy remains hampered by the absence of a coherent national vision and the persistence of sectarian rivalries. This fragmentation reduces the country's ability to assert sovereignty and pursue a unified diplomatic approach. The newly formed government faces the daunting task of stabilizing a state on the brink of collapse while managing high public expectations. The immediate priority must be structural reform, especially in restoring fiscal discipline, strengthening institutions, and rebuilding the rule of law. Accountability mechanisms

are necessary, but they must be sequenced after key structural changes to ensure their effectiveness.

Ultimately, Lebanon's recovery depends on the state's ability to reclaim authority over its institutions and territory. This requires confronting the issue of Hezbollah's armed status, reorienting foreign policy around national and not sectarian interests, and building a sovereign, inclusive, and resilient political order.

BOOK REFLECTION

“THE TEMPTATION OF MARS: WAR AND PEACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY” WITH H.E. GHASSAN SALAMÉ

As part of the 2025 Beirut Security Debates (BSD), a Book Reflection session was held featuring Minister of Culture Ghassan Salamé and moderated by Institute Director Joseph Bahout. The discussion centered on Salamé's recent book, *The Temptation of Mars: War and Peace in the 21st Century*, using it as a springboard for a broader reflection on global fractures, evolving power structures, and the changing dynamics of conflict, with particular attention to the Middle East.

Drawing from over 25 years of experience in international organizations, Salamé outlined the contours of today's shifting global order. He described the post-Cold War era, which was marked by unilateral U.S. interventions in Serbia and Iraq, as the onset of what he termed the “deregulation of force.” This new era is defined by a lack of restraint in the use of military power, where great powers act by precedent, encouraging medium-sized powers to emulate such behavior.



Salamé identified key trends shaping the use of force and the evolving global landscape.

The first trend was characterized by the rise and subsequent decline of democratization, giving way to a wave of military coups in Africa and the rise of populist leaders even within established democracies. This contributed to a global resurgence of authoritarianism that challenges the established liberal democratic order.

The second trend centered on the contentious dynamics and drastic shifts between globalization and protectionism as early support for free trade and multilateralism (exemplified by China's accession to the World Trade Organization) has given way to financial crises, rising socio-economic inequality, and a shift toward protectionist policy and mistrust of global institutions. Further shaping the global landscape is the evolution and revolutions of AI and information

communication technologies, which have reshaped the nature of both war and governance. Originally empowering citizens, these tools have increasingly become instruments of state control. Salamé emphasized that technological advances tend to escape the exclusive control of their creators over time, making them accessible to non-state actors, illustrated by the spread of nuclear technology and the internet.

The final trend identified was the instrumentalization of culture in modern geopolitics. This manifested in two ways: cultural imperialism, where dominant powers impose their values and norms with little regard for local context, and cultural essentialism, where culture is reduced to a rigid and exclusionary identity framework, popularized by Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations. Both dynamics generate tension and conflict by reducing culture to a tool of domination or division.

Salamé's reflection offered an insightful analysis of the global system in crisis. The conversation underscored the need for renewed thinking about the intersections of power, legitimacy, and violence in a complex world, particularly in regions like the Middle East, where conflict and shifting power balances shape political realities.

CONCLUSION



The 2025 Beirut Security Debates served not only as an analytical forum, but as a vital space for regional dialogue and strategic analysis of global issues. By convening scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors in one room, the event showcased a remarkable resilience and commitment to engagement amidst uncertainty. Both Joseph Bahout and Marcus Schneider offered critical reflections on the panels, emphasizing the scale of the region's challenges. Schneider posed the pressing

question: "Where is Europe?", noting that while Germany has taken a leading role in Syria, Europe as a whole remains ideologically unprepared for the emerging global landscape and is being forced to adapt the hard way. Bahout, in turn, pointed to the growing unpredictability at the heart of global power, stating that today "the unknown is in Washington", a reference to the increasing volatility of U.S. policy, not only in the Middle East but across the globe. He further underscored the complexity of developments in Syria and Lebanon, and the deepening uncertainty surrounding Iran's trajectory. Together, their insights captured the urgent need for reform, adaptability, and cooperation in navigating a world in flux.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) – Foundation for social democracy!

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is the oldest political foundation in Germany with a rich tradition in social democracy dating back to its foundation in 1925. The foundation owes its formation and its mission to the political legacy of its namesake Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected German President.

The work of our political foundation focuses on the core ideas and values of social democracy – freedom, justice, and solidarity. This connects us to social democracy and free trade unions. As a non-profit institution, we organise our work autonomously and independently.

The Regional Peace and Security Project in the MENA is based in Beirut and works with partners across Western Asia and North Africa towards a viable regional security architecture for more stability and inclusive and democratic societies.

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs

Inaugurated in 2006, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy-relevant research in and about the Arab world. The Institute aims at bridging the gap between academia and policymaking by conducting high quality research on the complex issues and challenges faced by Lebanese and Arab societies within shifting international and global contexts, by generating evidence-based policy recommendations and solutions for Lebanon and the Arab world, and by creating an intellectual space for an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, scholars, civil society actors, media, and policymakers.



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