

Good afternoon,

Dear Speaker of the House of Representatives, Honorable members of Parliament, Dear Ministers, Dear Ambassadors and Diplomats, Dear Academics and experts, Dear journalists and media professionals, distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen.

It is indeed a special privilege to welcome you today on behalf of the May Chidiac Foundation-Media Institute; and a great honor for our team to have had the opportunity to work on the program “Renewing Lebanon’s Political & Economic Structures” with the Public Affairs section at the United States Embassy in Beirut, which led to the release of a policy paper and a set of recommendations that entail fundamental reforms and targeted support, led by the USA.

Dear guests, allow me to thank Ms. Krisi Hayden the former Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy Beirut with whom we launched this project, and to welcome the newly designated PAO, Ms. Melissa O’Shaughnessy who started assuming responsibilities as Grant Officer for the “Renewing Lebanon's Political & Economic Structures” project since July 5.

Also allow me to thank Mrs. Dorothy Shea, the U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon for taking part in this project and for her continued support, willingness, and engagement.

We all know that Lebanon is going through an acute economic, financial, political and social crisis that are endangering its population, plunging them into poverty and threatening their well-being. And we also know that the political situation that led to complete chaos in managing the country, is a mix of internal and external factors.

The internal factors are mostly related to anti-governance, corruption, religious, and sectarian power-sharing structure issues. While the external factors include those related to the influence of the constant interference from neighboring and their proxies, those related to the nuclear agreement with Iran, those related to the Russia Ukraine war and its long-term impact on the global supply chain, and others.

In such an environment, executing and running a program smoothly, was a huge responsibility, because there was a need to analyze the issues without undue delay, plan, organize and complete eleven panels and two fireside talks, on time, on budget and within scope. The purpose was to detect urgent key challenges, analyze the risks, and provide policy responses that can lower the obstacles and combat the problems in the country.

It would be impossible to mention everyone, yet we salute all different prominent and outstanding figures, senior fellows, ministers, ambassadors, and experts, we had the privilege to receive in-person at our studios, or through virtual or hybrid panels and Fireside chats.

The panelists discussed the complexity of Lebanon's dire situation; its pressing economic situation; the international response to Lebanon's rising humanitarian crisis, challenges, and solutions; Injustice, and the Beirut port explosion; Lebanon's energy crisis; the US policies adopted by the US administration in Lebanon; the elections in Lebanon, the Vienna talks; the US army and the Lebanese army and the trajectory ahead; and the border security situation. But they also debated on humanitarian causes, the refugee's crisis, and social affairs such as DEI (Diversity, equality, and inclusion); how women can play a greater role in conflict resolution and political processes in Lebanon and the region. They also tackled the disability rights and the challenges of inclusion.

The panelists agreed that there is a strong synergy between economic and political institutions in Lebanon. And that one of the major problems of the country is resource access and control. They stressed that the extractive political institutions in Lebanon concentrate power in the hands of a narrow elite who extract all resources from the rest of the society. That, in the absence of direct relations between the two countries, resolving the Israel-Lebanon maritime border dispute is tricky, as it leaves space to geopolitical complications interfering with the exploitation of oil and gas resources. That, agricultural products disruptions related to the Russia-Ukraine war are exacerbating already-rising food prices and deepening poverty in the country.

In this framework, the panelists agreed on the U.S. government necessity for a continued pressure on the country's political elites, but also on the need to find more immediate ways of helping the Lebanese Armed Forces by making creative use of State and Defense.

The strong conclusion is that even if they are not going to work perfectly, the policy paper and recommendations can improve matters from what they otherwise would have been. The MCF-MI should hence pursue its work with the Public Affairs section at the United States Embassy in Beirut, now, in part two of the program, and next year. Deepening and enhancing our cooperation will lead to more policies that will help serve as a path to recovery and as an effective action plan to avoid the country's free fall.

In this sense, we should together construct a new social contract that enables everyone in Lebanon to live a decent and respectful life. We, at the MCF-MI are hopeful that in the long run the country's sovereignty and democracy will win out, and that the ability to reach compromise and consensus will build national cohesion. To achieve this alternative version will require nevertheless collective action, the rule of Law, and the

implementation of the Security Council Resolutions 1559, 1680, and 1701, to expand the State Authority.

So, on behalf of MCF-MI, let me say that I am confident that the US embassy will continue to be a strong and reliable partner for the MCF-MI, as our partnership is an absolute necessity.

Finally, I want to thank all the MCF-MI team and all the members of the Public Affairs section at the United States Embassy in Beirut, for their work, contribution, effort, and achievement. And I would like to express one more time, my deepest appreciation to Madam Ambassador Shea for her continuous support.