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Getting To Know (Or Understand) Each Other: US-Lebanese Dialogue for Democratic Reform ^[1]

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Numerous initiatives, programs and events seek to foster democracy and democratic reforms in the Middle East. Some hit, most miss.

Recently, I had the pleasure of attending a conference in Beirut sponsored by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED). The “Emerging Leaders for Democracy” conference series joined fifteen American and European representatives with fifteen Lebanese representatives ages 23- 35 to discuss political reform in Lebanon and U.S foreign policy in the region^[1]. Both delegations were equally impressive. The American/European delegation ranged from graduate and doctoral students and young professionals from the public and private sector. The Lebanese delegation included an active and engaged array of civil society advocates, public policy professionals and academics as well. Our goal was to draft policy recommendations for U.S. policymakers on how to improve U.S. policy towards the region and encourage democratic reform. The four topics we covered were: elections and political processes, human security and development, women’s rights and empowerment, and religious freedom and inclusion. Each panel included notable speakers from various local and international civil society and public policy organizations, along with international and intergovernmental institutions. As delegates, it was our task to formulate a set of constructive and beneficial policy recommendations based on these panels and our group discussions.

Looking back, I can say that this conference hit its mark. I say that not only for the things that it accomplished, but also in part for the things that it did not. It did not set out to solve the problems of Lebanon, but to provide suggestions on how to improve it and U.S. policy from the perspective of young adults. More importantly though, citizen exchanges, such as this one, are created to build relations and foster dialogue between individuals. Sometimes we agree, sometimes we do not. At the end of the day, the goal is to *understand* one another, not necessarily to agree. Often, exchanges and citizen diplomacy efforts are required to provide tangible and visible results immediately. In a changing and diverse world this is nearly impossible, particularly when dealing with the Middle East. As Americans, we like to look at the Middle East and sometimes think of it as a singular region. That means we may sometimes listen to and address it as such, advocate for it as such, and ultimately expect it to act as such.

What was evident during this conference was that within a country of approximately four million people, represented by a delegation of fifteen, there were numerous divisions. They

were divided not by their nationality or identity as Lebanese, but by differing views on issues associated with the direction of their nation and how to address its growing issues. What was promising was how often people amongst the American and Lebanese groups were in agreement on many issues. I would make the argument that, on some issues, there was more consensus *between* the two delegations than *within* each delegation.

What does this mean for us: American policy, public diplomacy to the region, and Lebanon specifically? It means we need to listen. Just sit back and listen, nothing more. As a student of Public Diplomacy, I know that listening is the first, and sometimes the most important, tenet. What I saw and heard in Lebanon was an engaged and dedicated group who wanted only to be heard, they wanted to speak *their* mind, *tell us* what is wrong with Lebanon, and how *they* think we can help *them* fix it.

What was not absent in Beirut was a lack of opinions and motivation from both delegations, the same motivation and drive that fosters dialogue and creates reform. In a nation where political leaders sometimes outnumber their followers, this new breed of Lebanese, who have grown up amidst political strife that can at any moment erupt into violence, want to move forward. Innovative and engaged, this example of civil society and their work with, and in, non-state institutions provides a possible model for a nation that lacks the presence of a strong government (or one at all).

Although our stated goal was to draft policy recommendations, what we got was a better understanding of each other. What is now required is U.S. policy that follows this understanding. Current American aid and development programs, outlined by American Ambassador Michele Sison, were well received by members of the delegation, even by some who disagree with American policies[2]. The course of this conference was a clear illustration that it is possible for us to accept each other and our views, but at the same time disagree. What is important is how we continue the progress.

What this conference did not do is solve the problems of the Middle East, or even of Lebanon, nor did it provide immediate tangible results. It did not greatly assist us in knowing what it is like to be Lebanese, or for the Lebanese to know what it is like to be American. However, what it did do was help us understand each other, our goals, and the different methods in which we attempt to tackle issues. In the short term, the policy recommendations we drafted should help matters[3]. But to see the true value of this conference and others like it, it might be best to check back in a decade. Hopefully, by then, some of us will no longer be “emerging leaders,” but influential individuals and policy makers in our respective countries who understand each other and can bring about reform through this mutual understanding and relationship.

[1] In addition to Lebanon, POMED also sponsored similar conferences in Jordan and Egypt.

[2] For details on American aid and development programs in Lebanon, visit the U.S. Embassy's website at: <https://lb.usembassy.gov/>

[3] Recommendations will be available at POMEDs website this January.

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