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**“Lebanon: On the Margins of the Arab Spring”
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Ave, NW Washington, D.C. 20036
Friday, February 3, 2012 12:15 PM-2:00 PM**

On Friday, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted an event discussing the implications of the Arab Uprisings for Lebanon’s future. The event hosted speaker **Mohamad Chatah**, foreign policy advisor to former Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Hosting the event was Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace **Marwan Muasher**.

The event began with a lecture from **Mohamad Chatah** where he outlined several general observations of the events of the past year. Chatah wished to move away from the definition of the Arab Spring as a “wave.” This, said Chatah, is **not a process of nationalistic or Islamic transformation but rather people in the Muslim world embracing universal principles of human rights and values that transcend ethnic and religious boundaries**. Chatah went on to say that these principles have come to describe the rhetoric of dictatorships all over the world because “they know its [fundamental principles] desired by the people.” He said it is a process of good, inevitable change that will **lead to governance that represents society and the desires of the people**, which Chatah said by nature leads to better policies and thus advances the societies standard of living.

Chatah said that Lebanon’s Arab Spring began with the Cedar Revolution in 2005, where millions of Lebanese took to the streets demanding an ouster of Syrian occupation. **Lebanon’s great diversity makes it especially vulnerable to exploitation by outside countries and thus is “vulnerable for the same reasons that make it great.”** Syrian occupation denied the Lebanese of real representation in government and were forced to live under an administration that did not represent Lebanese interests. The Cedar Revolution regained Lebanese independence and renewed their chance to develop a system that reflects the people’s desires—a system that works.

Chatah went further saying that **Islam had nothing special to do in any of the revolutions**. He stressed that Muslims can live normally, and have suffered the fate of being labeled “Islamists” and incapable of democracy. “Islam is defining itself fundamentally,” said Chatah. Muslim societies have been “choked” by oppressive dictators—**“What do you do when you are choked? You kick and scream sometimes hurting other people in the process and sometimes hurting yourselves,”** described Chatah.

Geopolitics also has a place, “unfortunately”, in Lebanon’s future. Lebanon serves as the “fault line” between Iran and “the west”. **Chatah** described Lebanon as a “major theatre of the confrontation” taking place. Chatah

said that Iran has championed the Palestinian conflict and thus has “won the hearts and minds” of some of the Muslims and Arabs in the region, but went on to recognize that Iran has also used the cause to spread their own influence, and not necessarily in the interest of solving the cause. Hezbollah, who maintains an alliance with Iran, Chatah said “have done wonderful things in standing up to Israel,” but maintains that **the majority-Shia party has used their success—their “divine victory”---in 2006 to “push” the balance of political power in Lebanon and bring down a government in which they themselves had the majority.** Chatah said that while many Lebanese were grateful and proud of Hezbollah in standing up for Israel, the baggage of their alliances and reluctance of the party to disarm is something “that the Lebanese do not accept.”

Chatah said that “dictatorships search for legitimacy” and found it in ally Hezbollah. Syria attempted legitimacy by “fighting against Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorism, “and intimidated minorities into supporting the regime with anti-western rhetoric. Chatah stressed that the eastern Mediterranean was not polarized into being “Taliban or dictatorship.” He supported his position citing Al-Azhar’s release of three separate declarations of freedom (political, artistic, etc.) Chatah ended his lecture saying the transition in Lebanon is going to be very difficult, but **the real dangers that lie ahead lie in two main issues: the economics of democracy and the Israeli-Palestinian issue.** First, the people will expect immediate economic results, which “unfortunately” is not the case. Chatah argued for the Arabs of the Levant to use their resources they have with the wealthy GCC Arab countries and encouraged the formation of “effective partnerships” that will lift Arab economies “in a credible way so that people will vote seriously.” Secondly, Palestine must become an immediate issue. The issue has been “forgotten” or put aside with the events of the past year. “Ignoring the issue is dangerous,” said Chatah.

During the open discussion, **Chatah** addressed questions about the political system, the impact of Hezbollah’s weapons, and the Syria crisis’ implications. Chatah stated **that the political system had failed Lebanon and needed much reform, particularly in a way that would allow Lebanon to withstand pressures and deal with internal issues on its own.** However, Chatah said, **the political agenda cannot be discussed when there is a controlling militia in the south of the country.** In the event that Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad falls, Hezbollah will not legitimize right away, but regional progress (in particular the Palestinian issue) can assist the process. The change in the Syrian system and a hopeful resolution to the Palestinian Conflict would enable the Taif Accords (which Chatah believes restricts Lebanon’s development) to be reformed.

Chatah described the system of governance that **he believes the Lebanese need is a senate system (not parliamentary) in which the minority communities (all sects are minorities) to choose their community representation** which will be able to make necessary changes to the constitution; a constitution that doesn’t set standards of tolerance of different religions but instead allows for acceptance of differences. Chatah said that the Lebanese need a system, which **currently is constructed in such a way that keeps the class of political elites in power that would use self interests to serve the greater interests of the community.** Chatah ended the discussion stating that democracy is perfectly compatible with Islam. The Arab world, finally gaining its freedom and independence, will be able to elect governments that will represent their interests and Chatah hopes that this will lead to the resolution of the larger Israeli-Palestinian conflict which he said is an “international moral issue” greatly exacerbating regional problems. As for Lebanon’s future, Chatah says **there are more questions than answers but believes with changes “in elections laws, creation of a senate, the removal of ethnic quotas...things will begin to make sense.”**