

Hisham Melhem, DC Bureau Chief of Al Arabiyah on Kalam Al Nass Talk Show

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Hisham Melhem, Lebanese Maronite Pro Democracy and the DC Bureau Chief of Al Arabiyah

Hisham Melhem, Lebanese Maronite Pro Democracy and the DC Bureau Chief of Al Arabiyah tells Marcel Ghanem that March 14 must lead the nation and that Hezbollah is dragging Lebanon into an abyss.

kalam al Nass : Hicham Melhem 15/05/2008 (1)
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kalam al Nass : Hicham Melhem 15/05/2008 (2)
[{youtube}9x-wAuBJ5zc{/youtube}](#)

kalam al Nass : Hicham Melhem 15/05/2008 (3)
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kalam al Nass : Hicham Melhem 15/05/2008 (4)
[{youtube}EzTglZ2-JbA{/youtube}](#)

"The problem is that Hezbollah has a vision that is anathema to many to many Lebanese, including Shiites, Sunnis, Druze and Christians," said Lebanese journalist Hisham Melhem, speaking in Washington at the New America Foundation. "We are dealing with two contradictory visions of Lebanon, one Mediterranean and open, or a vision that says we are in an eternal war with Israel and the West."

So what does Hezbollah want? The movement has opposed the government for months over the choice of a Lebanese president. It is also demanding veto power over government decisions. And it refuses to give up its enormous quantities of arms.

Melhem, one of the smartest Mideast commentators around, says the government "would have been more forthcoming" if Hezbollah's goal was political reforms. He means giving Lebanese Shiites more parliamentary seats, in line with their percentage of the population. But, he says, the government fears Hezbollah's long-term goal "is the radical transformation of the Lebanese polity and the end of Lebanon's western orientation."

Melhem adds: "No Lebanese faction in the previous civil war had such a deep and complex relationship with a foreign patron" - meaning Iran.

Briefing on Beirut

The New America Foundation - May 13th the American Strategy Program
 Featuring Rami Khouri, the Editor-at-large of the Daily Star, Hisham Melhem, the DC Bureau Chief of Al Arabiyah, Nir Rosen, a fellow at NYU's Center on Law and Security and New America, Daniel Levy, the Director of New America's Middle East Policy Initiative, and Flynt Leverett, the Director of New America's Geopolitics of Energy Initiative. Steven Clemons, the Director of the American Strategy Program moderated the event.
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On May 13th the American Strategy Program brought together five leading experts on Middle East and Foreign Policy to discuss the current crisis in Lebanon: a political standoff between the prominent militia Hezbollah and Lebanon's government. Those participating in the discussion were Rami Khouri, the Editor-at-large of the Daily Star, Hisham Melhem, the DC Bureau Chief of Al Arabiyah, Nir Rosen, a fellow at NYU's Center on Law and Security and New America, Daniel Levy, the Director of New America's Middle East Policy Initiative, and Flynt Leverett, the Director of New America's Geopolitics of Energy Initiative. Steven Clemons, the Director of the American Strategy Program moderated the event. An MP3 audio recording can be downloaded below, while video is available at right.

Rami Khouri joined the discussion via telephone from Lebanon. He stated that Lebanon was on the brink of change and the Lebanese people had one choice to make: whether they would move towards Baghdad, a violent civil war based on ethnic and religious divisions or Belfast, an inclusive, fair, and functioning government. Mr. Khouri was optimistic that the Lebanese would be able to work out the internal strife and form a pluralistic society that will integrate the Western and Arab ideals that are prominent in Lebanon. He stated that Lebanon was the best hope for Middle East pluralism and could serve as an example for the rest of the region once they move past the current crisis.

Hisham Melhem was less optimistic about Lebanon's immediate future. He stated that Hezbollah's armed offense signaled "the beginning of the end of Lebanese politics." The rise of the militia's strength and influence represent transformation and the loss of Lebanese liberalism and western orientation. He remained pragmatically hopeful that an accommodation would be reached, yet expressed concern that Hezbollah would become more extreme rather than moderate.

Nir Rosen also participated via telephone from Lebanon. "Nobody really knows what's going on here," Mr. Rosen said on the disarray in Beirut. He drew several comparisons to Iraq: the armed occupation of Beirut, by Hezbollah fighters, and the Sunni-Shi'a conflict. Mr. Rosen also believed that the Lebanese army was complicit, either by looking the other way or supporting Hezbollah during their siege.

Flynt Leverett stated that there have been major mistakes in U.S. policy towards Lebanon. By fully supporting the government led by PM Siniora, the U.S. overlooked unfair representation and power-sharing in Lebanon. Mr. Leverett opined that the U.S.'s role in Lebanon has been erosive to its standing in the Middle East.

Daniel Levy offered a few theories as to why the conflict erupted so quickly. It is possible the government miscalculated Hezbollah's reaction or they were setting a trap for Hezbollah. Mr. Levy said it may have been by virtue of necessity; Lebanon was in a political and ideological stalemate for a long time and needed outside support or intervention.

-Faith Smith, American Strategy Intern Start: 05/13/2008 - 9:30amEnd: 05/13/2008 - 11:00amNew America Foundation1630 Connecticut Ave, NW 7th FloorWashington, 20009 United States

See map: [Google Maps Participants](#)

Featured Speakers

- Rami Khouri (by phone)

Editor-at-Large

The Daily Star

- Hisham Melhem

Bureau Chief

Al Arabiyah

- Nir Rosen (by phone)

Former Fellow, New America Foundation

Fellow, NYU Center on Law and Security

- Daniel Levy

Director, Middle East Policy Initiative, New America Foundation/The Century Foundation

Publisher, www.ProspectsforPeace.com

- Steven Clemons

Director, American Strategy Program, New America Foundation

Publisher, www.TheWashingtonNote.com

- Flynt Leverett

Director, Geopolitics of Energy Initiative

New America Foundation Related Links

- "Four Days that Changed the Middle East" by Rami Khouri AttachmentSizeMP3 Audio Recording of this Event12.21 MB

Reports from Lebanon and Video Coverage of the New America Foundation's "Briefing on Beirut"

May 14, 2008

On Tuesday, May 13, the New America Foundation hosted an event featuring two journalists reporting from Beirut on the unfolding security and political crisis in Lebanon. Rami Khouri, editor-at-large of the Daily Star, discussed the large scale political and social trends that have led to the current crisis. Nir Rosen, a fellow at the New America Foundation, reported live from the streets of Beirut on the tactical gains made by Hezbollah as well as its broader strategy. They were joined by a panel discussion featuring Daniel Levy, former Israeli negotiator and advisor to the Israeli prime minister's office, and current director of New America's Middle East Policy Initiative, Senior Fellow Flynt Leverett, who directs the Geopolitics of Energy Initiative, and Al Arabiyah's U.S. Bureau Chief Hisham Melhem. Director of the New America Foundation's American Strategy Program Steven Clemons, who publishes The Washington Note blog, moderated the event.

Video from the event is on our website: http://www.newamerica.net/events/2008/briefing_beirut

Some notable quotes from the event speakers:

"The people of Lebanon are caught between two cultural and political influences, the West in the form of America and Europe and the East in the form of Iran. A distinct possibility is the formation of a unity government that is secured by a powersharing arrangement between the U.S. and Iran," said Rami Khouri.

"'Bush's policy of attaching onto the leaders of the Cedar Revolution' and 'using it as a fulcrum to push for the withdrawal of Syrian troops' has failed miserably. It has damaged the United State's ability to influence more important actors such as Iran. In fact, Iranian influence has only increased," remarked Flynt Leverett.

"Hezbollah has essentially won the first round. They are extremely competent and well trained and they were aided by the Lebanese army," remarked Hisham Melhem.

"There does not appear to be any ethnic cleansing taking place. Hezbollah is not attempting to segregate religiously mixed neighborhoods at this point," said Nir Rosen.

"'Does the internal trump the external?' Will external influences play a larger role in diffusing Lebanon's political crisis than internal political developments?" asks Daniel Levy.

To arrange an interview with Daniel Levy, Nir Rosen, or Steven Clemons contact: Erin Drankoski, New America Foundation, (202.997.8727; drankoski@newamerica.net)

About the New America Foundation:

The New America Foundation is an independent, nonprofit public policy institute whose purpose is to bring exceptionally promising new voices and new ideas to the fore of our nation's public discourse. Relying on a venture capital approach, the Foundation invests in outstanding individuals and policy solutions that transcend the conventional political spectrum. New America is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and also has offices in California. Learn More About: Daniel Levy, Flynt Leverett, Nir Rosen, Steven Clemons

Related Programs: American Strategy Program, Middle East Policy Initiative

Topics: Foreign Policy, Middle East