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NARRATIVES OF REFORM:

The Media's Role in
Lebanon's Path to Recovery

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This report comes as part of a series produced by the Maharat Foundation and the Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan, reflecting their ongoing engagement with journalists to foster more informed and constructive public debates around economic and financial issues in Lebanon.

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WHY THIS REPORT?

This report comes as part of a series produced by the Maharat Foundation and the institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan reflecting their ongoing engagement with journalists to foster more informed and constructive public debates around economic and financial issues in Lebanon. This aligns with the shared mission of Maharat and the institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan to foster a healthy information ecosystem that supports economic governance reforms. It also sustains Maharat's work to amplify fiscal transparency through media, carried out in partnership with the institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan, which has included monthly media alerts that monitored public discourse on fiscal transparency, and offered practical tips for journalists reporting on fiscal transparency issues.

The institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan and Maharat Foundation are working together to build a community of journalists equipped with the scientific knowledge, skills, and tools needed to serve as watchdogs of governance and reform processes. Through training, capacity building, and fellowships, journalists are empowered to navigate complex economic and governance issues, counter misinformation, and engage the public in fact-based discussions. This initiative also fosters stronger collaboration between journalists and experts, ensuring that media coverage is grounded in data, research, and scientific analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

This report stems from a roundtable that brought together journalists who covered the Spring Meetings of the World Bank Group (WBG) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), whether on the ground in Washington or remotely from Lebanon, as well as others interested in the topic, in addition to economic and financial experts. It focuses on enhancing coverage of international meetings and strengthening economic reporting in Lebanon.

This report highlights the challenges journalists face when covering international meetings, such as the IMF Spring Meetings, and explores practical strategies to strengthen economic reporting in Lebanon, with the ultimate goal of enhancing accountability and supporting the country's recovery efforts.

The need for more effective reporting is particularly urgent given Lebanon's current political and economic context. The country is undergoing a critical juncture marked by renewed international engagement and internal pressure for reform. While the formation of a new government has brought a sense of political momentum, Lebanon's recovery remains deeply uncertain. Misinformation, false narratives, and vested interests continue to distort public discourse and erode trust in reform efforts, ultimately serving those who benefit from preserving the status quo.

In this complex environment, the media's role is more vital than ever. Journalists must go beyond surface-level reporting to clarify, contextualize, and reframe the national conversation. This involves accurately explaining the nature of international assistance, providing substantive coverage of international meetings, shifting from politically driven narratives to economically grounded reporting, and critically examining reform agendas beyond official statements. The media must also challenge narratives that present reforms as externally imposed or punitive. Instead, they should emphasize that these changes are not only aligned with international standards but are also essential to Lebanon's own recovery, underscoring the need to shift from reliance on external aid toward homegrown solutions for long-term financial sustainability.



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REBUILDING TRUST AND ADVANCING REFORMS:

SHIFTING NARRATIVES AND EXPECTATIONS FOR LEBANON IN THE MEDIA

REBUILDING TRUST AND ADVANCING REFORMS: SHIFTING NARRATIVES AND EXPECTATIONS FOR LEBANON IN THE MEDIA

1. THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN REBUILDING TRUST

Journalists have a crucial responsibility in helping the public understand what it takes to restore trust in Lebanon, both domestically and internationally. Years of inaction, the lack of public communication, a predominantly cash-based economy, and failure to align with global standards have severely undermined confidence in the country. Yet Lebanon retains valuable assets, and many international partners continue to believe in its potential.

Rebuilding trust requires the demonstration of clear leadership and a coherent national message, something that has been lacking in the past, when various members of official delegations often delivered conflicting statements. The media should underscore that, during the 2025 IMF/World Bank Group Spring Meetings, Lebanon presented a unified message, an important step toward restoring international confidence. It was also recommended to have, in the future, the official participating delegation organize a press conference or issue an official statement or appoint an official spokesperson to deliver a coherent message to the media.

2. REFRAMING REFORM DEMANDS

It is essential that journalists avoid framing donor expectations as punitive. Instead, they should explain that the demand for reforms stems from a global shift toward financial transparency and accountability; standards that apply to all countries. Lebanon is not being singled out; it is simply being held to the same international norms. The media must move the narrative away from exceptionalism and toward constructive engagement. Journalists should clarify that reforms are not solely a donor-imposed condition, but a prerequisite for sustainable recovery.

3. CLARIFYING THE NATURE OF INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

When covering international assistance, journalists should clearly differentiate between emergency aid and reconstruction funding. For instance, the World Bank's Lebanon Emergency Assistance Project is designed as an emergency response; however, its implementation depends on key prerequisites.

Additionally, the media should highlight that accessing international loans is never straightforward. Projects must meet rigorous standards, and the process, from preparation to disbursement, is lengthy and complex. The public should understand that securing funding is a multi-step process, not a quick or guaranteed solution.

Moreover, international assistance should not be framed as a comprehensive answer to the country's crisis. Such funding can help, but lasting recovery depends on domestic reforms and effective governance.

4. SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE TOWARD DOMESTIC SOLUTIONS

Experts emphasized the need to shift the narrative away from reliance on aid and toward building a fair and efficient domestic system based on progressive taxation and universal social protection. Journalists play a central role in encouraging this shift in mindset. They must help the public understand that financial sustainability must be achieved through domestic efforts.

This reframing also means recognizing who holds real decision-making power. For instance, one expert noted that while the Lebanese delegation's unified stance during the Spring Meetings in Washington marked a positive development, the media often overlooked a critical point: the delegation lacks legislative or executive authority. Instead of echoing IMF demands, journalists should scrutinize the government's own plans and willingness to implement reforms, since it bears responsibility for enacting meaningful change.

Despite institutional and structural challenges, journalists should also emphasize Lebanon's strong investment potential, including its skilled workforce, valuable technical expertise, and appealing balance between work and lifestyle.

5. ENSURING ACCURACY AND AVOIDING MISINFORMATION

Experts highlighted the need for media outlets to have dedicated fact-checkers or verification mechanisms to ensure the accuracy of statements made during interviews. They recalled the confusion in 2019 when banks closed and transfers were restricted, showing how misinformation can exacerbate crises. Rigorous verification processes are essential to maintain media credibility and provide the public with reliable information.



6. ISSUES OVERLOOKED BY THE MEDIA THAT SHOULD BE SPOTLIGHTED ACCORDING TO ECONOMIC EXPERTS

- **Highlighting Longstanding Structural Failures**

Experts noted that the crisis did not begin in 2019; it had already been unfolding for years, as shown by the steady collapse of public services and the longstanding absence of a social protection system, issues the media should emphasize more.

- **Investigating Structural Reforms: Privatization, Competition, and the Role of Journalism**

Journalists should investigate whether the Lebanese state genuinely intends to open key sectors, such as electricity, aviation, and telecommunications, to private investment. Journalists should examine whether Lebanon is ready to move beyond the outdated model of aid dependency and instead promote private investment as a more sustainable alternative to the continual expansion of state spending.

However, in the context of privatization, the media should emphasize that it must be accompanied by fostering competition rather than leading to monopolies. According to experts, the real solution lies in fostering competition, especially in sectors like telecommunications and electricity, as competition would enhance service quality and generate sustainable employment. However, introducing private equity in public establishments is a lengthy and complex process that can also be further investigated by journalists.



- **Addressing the Cash Economy and Restoring Trust**

The media plays a role in helping the public understand the core issues behind Lebanon's persistent cash economy. The problem is not cash itself, but the deep-rooted mistrust in state institutions and the failing banking sector. Rebuilding this trust is essential for any transition to a formal, regulated economy.

- **The Need for Greater Oversight of Commercial Banks**

A lack of scrutiny over the financial sector was highlighted by experts. They pointed out that while banks now have liquidity, there is little transparency about where this money is held. Commercial banks operate with limited oversight, and many funds remain frozen in correspondent banks.

The media must rigorously investigate these hidden financial flows and institutional failures to hold actors accountable and help rebuild public trust.



IMPROVING MEDIA COVERAGE OF INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS:

LESSONS FROM THE 2025 IMF AND WORLD BANK SPRING MEETINGS

IMPROVING MEDIA COVERAGE OF INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS: LESSONS FROM THE 2025 IMF AND WORLD BANK SPRING MEETINGS

1. SPOTLIGHTING INSTITUTIONAL PROGRESS

During the Lebanese delegation's recent visit to Washington for the Spring Meetings of the World Bank Group (WBG) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a significant improvement was noted: unlike previous instances where conflicting narratives were voiced by various delegates, this time the message was consistent and strategically coordinated. The media should spotlight such shifts as signs of institutional progress, contextualizing these changes as part of a broader trust-building process.

2. SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS

Coverage of international meetings should also manage public expectations. The Lebanese delegation's participation in the Spring Meetings in Washington was not about quick wins, but about building credibility. Journalists should frame such events as part of a longer-term process, not isolated breakthroughs.



3. ENABLING THE PUBLIC TO UNDERSTAND CLEARLY THE ECONOMIC AND TECHNICAL OUTCOMES OF INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS

While the delegation's unified messaging marked a step forward in institutional coordination and communication, participants emphasized the importance of going beyond form to assess substance. Journalists were encouraged to examine whether this cohesive stance translated into tangible progress. Specifically, they should investigate whether the Lebanese delegation was genuinely able to leverage the evolving international context and whether there was internal consensus on critical reforms, such as bank restructuring.

Although a new IMF program was announced, media coverage should explore how this agreement differs from previous ones and what it implies for Lebanon's reform path.

Looking ahead, experts also recommended that journalists develop questions based on the outcomes of international meetings and actively follow up on them.

4. BEYOND POLITICAL NARRATIVES: AN ECONOMY-CENTERED APPROACH TO IMF COVERAGE

Framing Lebanon's relationship with the IMF through a purely political lens is misguided, as the country is facing a systemic crisis that includes a depositors' crisis, brain drain, and significant external influences and interference in its economy. When journalists accompany political figures to the Spring Meetings or focus primarily on political narratives, they risk amplifying these perspectives at the expense of explaining the real economic challenges and necessary reforms. Such political framing tends to oversimplify the crisis and divert attention from the technical substance of the reforms needed.

Instead, each media outlet should have relied on economic experts to explain the reforms required by the IMF and what they entail.

The media should also emphasize that IMF's support will not by itself save the Lebanese economy, but it is a gateway to rebuilding international trust. Crucially, the media should highlight that these reforms should not be pursued solely to satisfy international organizations; they are in Lebanon's own interest.

Experts also suggested drawing on international case studies to better understand the IMF's role and its impact in other countries.

5. EXPLAINING THE BROADER REFORM AGENDA

To offer the public a fuller picture, the media should move beyond covering only IMF-required reforms aimed at securing financial assistance, such as bank restructuring. Instead, they should highlight broader structural reforms, such as comprehensive tax reform, and explain how these serve the public interest.





CONSTRAINED COVERAGE OF INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS AND ECONOMIC ISSUES:

THE DUAL IMPACT OF ACCESS RESTRICTIONS AND EDITORIAL AGENDAS



CONSTRAINED COVERAGE OF INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS AND ECONOMIC ISSUES: THE DUAL IMPACT OF ACCESS RESTRICTIONS AND EDITORIAL AGENDAS

1. ACCESS TO INFORMATION CHALLENGES DURING THE 2025 SPRING MEETINGS

Lebanese journalists who were present at the Spring Meetings highlighted the challenges they faced while covering the Washington discussions. These included the time difference, limited access to IMF and World Bank representatives, and the need to track down members of the Lebanese delegation to obtain even basic information.

Participants noted that for those not on the ground, it was particularly difficult to capture the atmosphere of the meetings or delve into the substance of the discussions. As a result, they relied heavily on official statements from the Ministry of Finance, which were sometimes delayed or lacking in detail. It was suggested that the Ministry of Finance could improve communication by holding dedicated press briefings during such visits.

This discussion pointed to a broader need for clearer and more proactive communication channels between public officials and the press. Journalists also faced challenges in obtaining accurate information, as some officials appeared reluctant to engage, possibly due to concerns about potential negative repercussions.

Additionally, the impact of misinformation campaigns was raised as a compounding factor. These campaigns were seen to contribute to a climate of caution among public officials, further reducing their willingness to speak openly with the media and making it harder for journalists to deliver timely, fact-based coverage.

2. EDITORIAL CONSTRAINTS AND THE LIMITS OF MEDIA INDEPENDENCE

In addition to access and communication barriers, participants also reflected on the internal constraints within media institutions themselves. It was noted that each outlet operates within a specific editorial line, which can present challenges when accurate information conflicts with that line. In such cases, publishing content that contradicts the outlet's position can be difficult.

The role of political funding was also discussed, highlighting the influence of funders in shaping editorial choices. This dynamic raises concerns about the media's ability to function independently as a watchdog or "fourth estate."

Another challenge highlighted was the difficulty of identifying fully objective experts, given the diversity of economic and political schools of thought. Journalists acknowledged these limitations and noted that they value partnerships with organizations like Maharat and the institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan, which allow for greater editorial independence in the reporting process.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

To restore public trust and support Lebanon's recovery, a coordinated effort is needed that brings together the government, the international community, and the media. Journalists must be enabled to provide accurate, data-driven coverage of reforms, while public officials should commit to transparent, unified messaging. International actors have also a key role to play in building communication channels with journalists and facilitating access to information. Only through this shared responsibility can Lebanon move beyond politicized narratives, counter misinformation, and foster the public understanding needed to drive meaningful change.



IV

TIPS FOR JOURNALISTS

TIPS FOR JOURNALISTS

1

Prioritize Economic Reporting

- Avoid covering international meetings and agreements only from a political perspective. Instead, highlight the real economic challenges and reforms at stake, and show how these are tied to Lebanon's domestic priorities.

2

Highlight Institutional Progress

- Spotlight positive developments, such as unified messaging from the Lebanese delegation, as steps to rebuild trust and credibility with international partners.

3

Investigate Structural Failures

- Look beyond the 2019 crisis and explore Lebanon's long-standing structural problems, such as the cash economy, the collapse of public services, and the lack of social safety nets, that continue to shape current economic and social challenges.

4

Challenge Internal Editorial Biases

- Even though political funding and editorial agendas can strongly influence how reforms and crises are covered, strive for transparent, fact-based journalism that resists misinformation and upholds accountability.

5

Explain International Meetings' Real Outcomes

- Move beyond official statements. Clarify how international events like IMF/World Bank meetings translate (or don't) into real reform progress.

6

Clarify Who Holds Reform Authority

- Help the public understand that real power to enact reforms lies with the Lebanese government itself, not with international delegations or donor organizations.

7

Demand Clarity from Officials

- Advocate for better communication from ministries, including dedicated briefings, to provide timely and accurate information to the public.

8

Fact-Check Rigorously

- Counter disinformation, misinformation campaigns and misleading narratives by verifying statements and prioritizing data-driven reporting.

9

Diversify Expert Voices

- Acknowledge the limits of objectivity in economic commentary but still aim to feature a range of perspectives for balanced analysis.

10

Focus on the Public Interest

- Frame reforms and policy choices in terms of how they affect citizens, not just political players or international actors.

11

Set Realistic Expectations

- Help audiences understand that rebuilding Lebanon's economy is a long-term process, not a quick fix tied to any single agreement or meeting.

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