**THE BEIRUT PORT DISCUSSION SERIES**

**AUB, IFI auditorium**

**THE FRENCH PROPOSAL FOR THE REGENERATION OF THE PORT OF BEIRUT**

**June 27, 2024**

DISCUSSION by Jad TABET

Thank you for your presentation.

We understood from this presentation that the main objective of your proposal would be to provide a “*pragmatic realistic approach for the regeneration of the port of Beirut that stresses on short term priorities which could be executed considering the limited financial capacities of Lebanese state*” and to propose “*a general scheme for the reorganization of port activities that would not compromise long term developments*”.

This approach is based on two main choices:

1. To rebuild the silos on Mole 2 at the epicenter of the blast and redevelop this mole as a cereal terminal.
2. To keep most of the port area as a secluded reserved territory for port commercial activities with the exception of the first basin devoted to the military base and a passenger terminal in part of basin 2 that could be created in the future.

We regret that your full report was not rendered public to allow us to understand the rationale behind these choices. Hence, allow me to raise some questions in order to render things clearer for the public.

Let me first question the rationale behind your choice to rebuild the silos and the grain terminal at the epicenter of the blast on mole 2 and basin 3. You say in your report, and we agree that the rebuilding of the silos and the grain terminal is a priority for the food security of Lebanon. However, the proposed location looks quite illogical since the area cannot be used for the time-being because the legal case is still going on, and the infrastructural works require first the removal of debris and shipwrecks, extensive geotechnical investigations, underwater survey and diagnosis of damaged structures and then, the construction of new quays.

Such process is likely to take considerable time while the rebuilding of the silos and grain terminal is considered as a priority for Lebanon’s food security as said before. You indicate in your road map that infrastructure works will not be completed before mid 2027 which, knowing the Lebanese administration, will require at least two more years, meaning that the construction of the new silos will not start before mid 2029. Moreover, this solution is very expensive this the reconstruction of quay 9 demolished by the blast will cost alone according to your report 60 million dollars which represents 70% of the total cost of priority infrastructural works. It will also be environmentally harmful since it would require, according to your calculations, around 380,000 to 400,000 m3 of backfill, while environmental issues are becoming a priority in Lebanon today.

How can you justify to embark in such a complicated, lengthy, expensive and environmentally harmful proposal and consider it s a priority, while the World Bank recommended to provide space for the silos and the grain terminal further to the east on mole 3, which could be immediately available and does nor require the construction of new quays, while offering in the same time the advantage of being closer to the containers terminal and concentrates the major commercial activities in the same area? Wouldn’t it be a more practical and realistic solution? Shouldn’t we spare our money for more productive investments?

Another issue relates to the space allocation of various port’s functions. The traffic forecasts presented to us by the World Bank earlier this week show that all port commercial activities (ie. Grain terminal, RoRo and General cargo) could be concentrated in the eastern part of the port, on basins 3 and 4 near the containers’ terminal, which could free spaces in the future for other types of activities related to port-city integration around basins 1 and 2, in continuity with Beirut central district and Gemmayzeh neighborhood. Instead, your proposal is to keep the port territory as a secluded area, closed vis-à-vis the city, which leads to an unnecessary inflation of areas devoted to port’s commercial activities.

As an example, the WB devoted an area of 12,5 ha only for both General cargo and RoRo. Asked about this space allocation, the WB team answered that it was based on forecast assumptions that were voluntary exaggerated in order to prove that there is plenty of space in the dedicated 12,5 ha to cope with any rise of traffic volume in the future and that you can devote the remaining space to port-city integration.

It seems that you took these assumptions as minimal figures, and you inflated them considering they constitute the basis for priority investments. Hence, you propose to build a RoRo terminal[[1]](#footnote-1) for 140,000 vehicles on an area of 11ha alone, while the highest RoRo traffic in the whole history of Beirut port never exceeded 41,000 vehicles in 2016. Knowing that the infrastructures in this country are totally saturated and that the only feasible and environmentally compatible solution is to develop public transportation instead of increasing the number of vehicles, it is difficult to understand why you adopted these figures and considered the construction of such a huge RoRo car park as a priority.

Similarly, you dedicated 5 to 6 Berths and another 12ha area for the General cargo while the maximum traffic volume according to the WB does not require more than two berths. You end up with an area of approximately 24 ha for RoRo and General cargo, while the WB considers that 12,5 ha would be more than sufficient.

All this gives the impression that the rationale behind your approach is to restore the port area as it was before the blast, without questioning neither the unnecessary inflation of space allocation, nor the relevance of the previous model, while avoiding to envision what could be the future role of the port in a changing regional environment. In doing so, you are freezing almost the whole space allocation for port traditional commercial functions, instead of opening the possibility for a new innovative approach that would try to build up in the future another model open to contemporary issues: a sustainable environmentally compatible port that forms part of the urban eco-system, similar to the transformations that were implemented in several mediterranean ports like Marseille, Barcelona or Genoa.

You say you prepared your study in consultation with the Port authority and the Minister of Public works and the preferred option you presented to us was developed based on these consultations. But the recovery, reconstruction and development of the Port of Beirut is a major public issue that concerns all Lebanese people. The port has been the birthplace of modern Beirut when, in the first decades of the 19th century, a small coastal *medina* became the main hub between Europe and the Middle eastern hinterland. The future of this port cannot be decided behind closed doors and the main decisions cannot be taken neither by a Minister that has resigned and whose sole legal power is to manage current affairs, nor by a temporary committee that has no legal basis since the 1990s and continues to manage the port without any governance system. The future of our port should be defined following a large public discussion on how we can Build Back Better, and how the reconstruction of the Port could contribute in enhancing our life, our environment and our economy.

Finally, if you had been able to engage in a public concertation process, as is the case according to French law or even according to the Lebanese law on Heritage Impact Assessment, you would have discovered that the overwhelming majority of professionals and civil society organisations have three major concerns:

1. Preserving the entire blast area in Mole 2, including the remaining part of the silos and the crater in basin 3, as a sanctuarized area accessible to the public, similar to the Genbaku Memorial Park in Hiroshima, which was inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996. And not a small left-over space, wedged between the new silos and the car park as shown in your proposal, which future is unpredictable and which could receive a so-called commemorative monument only accessible to the seagulls. One cannot forget the collective trauma caused by one of the largest non-nuclear explosions, and the site of the blast should be preserved as a silent witness of a crime that caused more than 200 dead, thousands or wounded and 300,000 homeless. The civil society demand to preserve the site of the blast as a site of memory open to the public was supported by numerous international organizations including UNESCO advisory bodies (ICOMOS an ICCROM) as well as the World Monument Fund and cannot be ignored by a decision taken behind closed doors.
2. Finding opportunities for city-port integration in order to reconnect the city with the sea and develop a sustainable green strategy for port development based on the recommendations of the “World Network of Port Cities” which you know obviously very well but which you surprisedly didn’t take into consideration in your study.
3. The prerequisite for any recovery and development project lies in a reform that would put an end to the legal vacuum persisting since the 1990s, with a Port authority appointed on a temporary basis and a patchwork of ad-hoc structures related to various political parties, which ends up with inefficient management, poor governance and lack of transparency and accountability. Such a reform constitutes a necessary condition in order not to risk another catastrophe to happen, similar or even worse than the 4th of august blast.

To conclude, we cannot but regret that you have put all your efforts in trying to provide technical answers to choices that are highly questionable and which would perpetuate a situation of inefficient governance, non-performing management and waste of money on disputable priorities.

Based on my personal experience, allow to say something to the public and more particularly to the younger generation following our discussion. I belong to a generation that criticized those who came before us, architects, engineers, planners, who responded to the demands of decision makers without questioning the pertinence of these demands, which ended up everywhere with social problems and environmentally harmful solutions.

In our contemporary world, marked with complexity and uncertainties, we, you, as professionals cannot hide behind technical solutions to escape our professional and moral responsibilities.

1. RoRo is the abbreviation of Roll On- Roll Off and designates the process of loading and unloading vehicles on specialized vessels called RoRo ships. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)