

USJ conference tackles issues brought forth by Arab Spring

By Ned Whalley
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Panels of international relations experts detailed their latest research to a packed auditorium at Universite Saint Joseph Friday as part of two-day conference on developments since the Arab Spring.

The international conference, "Rethinking International Relations after the Arab Revolutions," is being held at the university's social sciences campus in Huvelin. It focuses on issues that have come to the fore in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. Friday's topics included the changing nature of intervention and the rise and persistence of Daesh (ISIS).

Patrick James, professor of International Relations and director of the Center for International Studies at the University of Southern California, remarked on the importance of holding the event in Lebanon.

"We need exactly this type of dialogue between scholars who are based here – and of course journalists and others, very thoughtful people who have to come to this event – and people like me, who have come from outside," he told The Daily Star.

James presented statistical research he and his colleagues had mined from vast sums of historical data. The work allows for the evaluation of variables such as GDP and

democracy in correlation with the type and prevalence of religion.

"One of the most important things is break down stereotypes," he said. "So for example, the kind of research I do, people think they know something and this type of research will say, 'Not so fast, the way in which variables are connected does not support a generalization here.'"

A difference in style soon became apparent between the more philosophical and sociological discourse of the French experts present, and the data-driven approach of their American and Canadian peers.

Carole Rizkallah Alsharabati, Director of the Political Science Institute at USJ, said one of the goals of the conference was to take advantage of the diversity of the field.

"One [goal] is to try to conform international relations theory to the Middle East reality, the other is to bring two different schools of political science [together]," she explained on the sidelines of the conference.

"The basic thing is to confront [ideas] with one another so the science of politics evolves and develops... [We have] to conform the theory to the reality and see where the theory failed, and what needs to be done, and what are the next steps in theoretical research in international relations."

During a series of talks on the nature of Daesh, Amer Bagherpour,



Academics speak at the USJ conference in Beirut.

co-founder and chief political scientist at Global Impact Strategies presented research on the group's financing.

"My research is on understanding how movements and insurgent groups operate, and given the fact that I'm doing quantitative work, one way to measure the strength of these different groups is by understanding their resource base," said Bagherpour, who was formerly employed by the U.S. State Department.

He said his research demonstrates that Daesh receives the vast majority of its funding from taxation, a sum

that far exceeds its oil revenues or remittances from abroad. Bagherpour argued that Daesh's ability to collect taxes reflects the level of support it has among the local populace.

"They're taxing. You can't have 8 million people against a force of 20,000-31,000. Otherwise why won't they go get Baghdad? Why don't they go up to Irbil? Why don't they go to Damascus? Because they can't. They don't have the support base. Why aren't they in Lebanon?"

Bagherpour said that for residents, the alternatives simply do not offer

the commensurate level of security, and until they can, the group will retain support. He suggested they could remain entrenched for another 20 years. "As long as the Iraqi government doesn't accommodate the Sunnis, they'll be there."

Bagherpour emphasized that the nature of the U.S. bureaucracy and politics results in a dearth of coordinated strategy.

He recounted being limited to 15-minute briefings as he repeatedly attempted to convey complex research to a bloated and ephemeral

cast of bureaucrats that changed with each administration.

James was no more kind in his assessment. "We need to have well – implemented multilateral strategies and here's the hardest part, the most discouraging part, it's very depressing and disappointing to see the extent to which domestic politics factors into decision-making."

"The attention span of the American public is like that of a kitten, that's essentially what it's like at this point."

The conference continues Saturday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.