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By Michel Touma

The fifth annual World Policy Conference (WPC), convened to examine effective ways to improve global government, adjourned yesterday in Cannes after four days of discussion.

Nearly 400 people — including from leaders and senior officials of government, ambassadors, international business leaders, journalists and academics — participated in the meetings held at the Hotel Martinez on the Croisette.

One of the last sessions focused on the situation in the Middle East and its potential impact on Lebanon.

Representing Lebanon at the conference were Ambassador Mustafa Adib, who spoke on behalf of Prime Minister Najib Mikati; Riad Salameh, the governor of the Bank of Lebanon, who participated in a workshop on global governance and finance; Raed Charafeddine, vice-governor of BDL; Riad Tabet, president of Batiliban-France and CEO of Berit International Holdings; and Samir Nasr, CEO of Beirut-based Economic Studies and Consultations.

In a speech Mikati prepared for the meeting that was read by Ambassador Adib, the prime minister sounded an alarm about the current volatile situation in the Middle East. Focusing on present challenges in the region, he suggested that the Arab Spring should lead, as expected, to reforms in democracy, cultural and societal attitudes, and social and economic development.

Mehmet Ali Birand, editor of CNN Türk, led a plenary session on the challenges facing the Middle East and their potential impact on Lebanon, among other nations. The prestigious panel members for the session were Edward Djerejian, former ambassador of the United States to Syria and founding director of the James Baker III Institute for Public Policy; Meir Sheerit, a member of Israel's Knesset who previously served as Israel's minister of the interior; Manuel Hassassian, the Palestinian ambassador to the United Kingdom; Jean-David Levitte, diplomatic adviser to former President Nicolas Sarkozy; and Ms. Mona Makram Obeid, a former member of Egypt's Parliament.

Djerejian was skeptical about the effectiveness of a military strike against Iran to end its nuclear program. An American strike on Iran could delay Iran's nuclear program by four years, and an Israeli strike could delay it by two, he said. "To eradicate the threat, a global offensive would be needed, which no one wants," said the former U.S. ambassador. In addition, a military operation could push Iran to use proxies such as Hezbollah, which could be even more damaging to U.S. and Israeli interests than direct Iranian retaliation, he said.

Regarding the situation in Syria, Mr. Djerejian noted that the Syrian regime — from Hafez al-Assad to his son, Bashar al-Assad — has demonstrated a high degree of resilience. However, "the fact remains, we are now in the post-Assad period," Djerejian said. "This is undeniable. Assad has shown that he is an ophthalmologist without vision." At a meeting with Assad in 2003, Djerejian asked why the reform movement seemed to be stalled in Syria. Assad replied that the Syrian people were not ready for reform and that one had to proceed slowly and deliberately. In public statements in 2011, the regime in Damascus repeated this same incremental approach. This illustrates the fact that Assad is not serious about reforms, Djerejian said.

Although the regime's hold on Syria is weakening, "the opposition is not yet sufficiently united" so that one can predict who will succeed Assad, he added.

The current trend is for "some international intervention" to put an end to the Syrian tragedy, Mr. Djerejian said. He reiterated his concerns regarding a succession in Damascus, saying the longer the crisis continues, the stronger radical currents become. He reported that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger asked President Vladimir Putin what was the greatest danger in Syria. "The rise of Islamic fundamentalism," the Russian president said. Mr. Djerejian added that Russian leaders call Americans "naïve" because they support secular regimes against fundamentalism.

Djerejian also observed that Russia and China oppose a UN Security Council vote against the Syrian regime, which would set a precedent for UN intervention in the internal affairs of a country — and could lead to similar action against Chechnya and Tibet. On a related note, Mr. Djerejian emphasized the importance of safeguarding the multi-ethnic mosaic of Syrian society, and warned that the implosion of Syria would impact not only Lebanon, but also Turkey and even Israel.