Report on the 3rd meeting of the

Lebanese Internet Governance Forum

2021

"Digital Transformation for Resilience"

23 and 24 November 2021 and 7 December 2021

At OGERO and via Zoom

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I- Introduction

The Lebanese Internet Governance Forum is a national initiative that aims to open debate on Internet governance issues in Lebanon among multistakeholders representing the public and private sectors, academics, civil society and technical community. This national forum was established in 2017.

The Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Group (LMAG) is a group representing stakeholders from the Public sector, Academia, Civil society, the Private sector and the Technical community, most notably the Ministry of Communications, OGERO, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Administrative Reform, the American University of Beirut, the St. Joseph University, Maharat Foundation, Bar Association, SMEX, Internet Society, Touch Company, Cisco, UNESCO - Beirut Office, ESCWA and others.

It is noteworthy that Maharat Foundation chairs the multi-stakeholder advisory committee and contributes to the organization of the Lebanese Internet Governance Forum in cooperation with OGERO heading the forum's General Secretariat.

Under the overarching theme “Digital Transformation for Resilience”, the LMAG, in consultation with the Internet Governance Community in Lebanon, organized the annual Forum, in its third edition, which was held on November 23 and 24, 2021 and on December 7, 2021, in a hybrid form, at OGERO headquarters and virtually via a platform zoom.

The forum included 4 main sessions and 3 workshops, in which specialists and officials from all public and private sectors, academia and civil society participated in order to discuss topics related to Internet governance in Lebanon within the four themes identified for the year

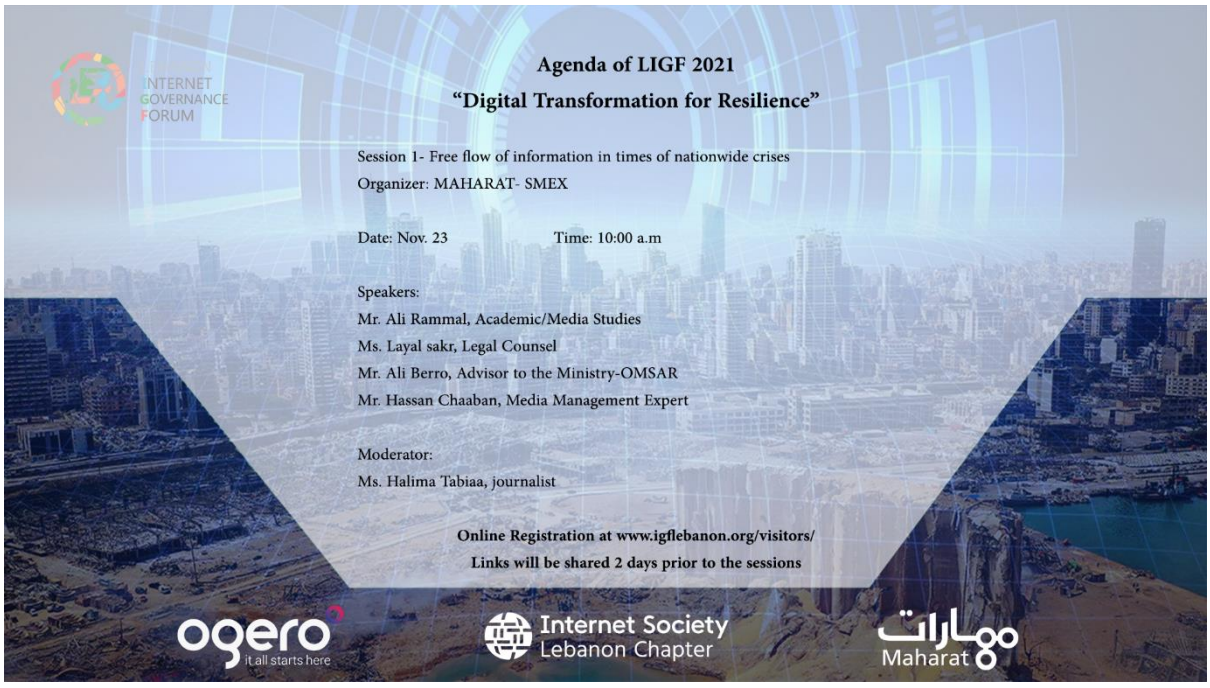
2021: digital transformation, digital access and inclusion, security and trust, digital rights and freedoms.

Key messages were formulated based on discussions during each session.

A number of 280 participants via the Zoom platform and 807 viewers via Facebook participated in the forum, not to mention the great interaction on Maharat's account on Twitter, in addition to about 35 people on site.

II- Main Sessions of the LIGF 2021

1- Main session 1: Free Flow of Information in time of nationwide crises



The session discussed the importance of making information available to enhance media work and scientific research, and the difficulties a journalist faces in obtaining information, as he is viewed with suspicion and as being affiliated with a certain political group according to the

affiliations of the media institution in which he works. It touched on the issue of fragmentation and dissemination of information as an absolute truth. The aim of the freedom to circulate information is to help people to actively engage in public life.

The session also discussed the legal system that impedes the free circulation of information, whether in terms of freedom of publication or in terms of the freedom to criticize public figures. In the constitution and international covenants, freedom of expression and access to information is a enshrined right, but in actual practice, there are a set of laws and practices that impede access to information or even expression on social media which are a major obstacle limiting freedom. The main problem is that everything we publish on electronic means, whether on private or public pages, has become considered a public means of publication, and accordingly the penal code is applied under accusation of Slander, humiliation and harms national unity or national security, meaning that we no longer have a private space on the Internet. If the press is required to tackle a corruption case, it takes independent judges and an independent judiciary. This is the main pillar of a state of law, because in vain journalists try to access information if there is no independent judiciary that guarantees their protection.

The session discussed the digital transformation strategy and its impact on enhancing access and free flow of information. In Lebanon, there is a plan that is being worked on for digital transformation, and it is likely that it will be presented to the Council of Ministers. The law on Access to Information allows any person to request information even if he is not Lebanese. In the event that the administration refuses to hand over the information, several measures can be taken, such as filing a complaint with the State Consultative Council. There are jurisprudences issued by the State Consultative Council to give the citizen the right to obtain information after Lebanon went through a transitional period.

The session also highlighted the importance of access to information for the development of the media sector and for strengthening investigative journalism, as one of the most important elements for the sustainability of media is the right to information. There are about 70% to 80% of investigative journalists who do not have access to information and face many difficulties in obtaining it from official resources, because governmental institutions look at the journalist according to the media for which he works and its political affiliation, but this is not a justification for any official department not to provide Information, this is the right of the citizen, the journalist and all people to obtain it.

The session touched upon the issue of investigative journalists who resorted to electronic platforms as a space to criticize all parties regardless of the political affiliation of the institution in which they work. Media sustainability depends on two pillars: producing quality content and financial sustainability. Usually, financial sustainability comes from non-political sources of income and financing and the institution that produces them, but this does not exist in Lebanon. What is happening is that media organizations start out independently, but encounter obstacles in financing, so they resort to political funding, which reduces the value of the media and reliability of content. In order for these two elements to exist, the media needs laws such as guaranteeing the freedom and rights of the journalist.

At the end of the session, the speakers discussed the issue of the integrity of the information available in official departments and its suitability for investment, and they expressed fear of “fabrication” in information and misleading public opinion. The issue here is often related to financial information such as the information published by the Banque du Liban. In principle, the information issued by an official body must be correct because it is based on reality and

results from administrative decisions, but if there is no confidence in official institutions, and confidence in the mediating journalist in transmitting information is also absent, then there must be a national institution that preserves and distributes this data in a sound format. In addition to holding accountable anyone who manipulates the data.

Session link: https://www.facebook.com/MaharatFoundation/videos/891264438259279

2- Main Session 2: Driving Digital Access and Inclusion in Lebanon

The session discussed the current situation of the infrastructure in Lebanon in light of the economic crisis. The internet has proven its resilience starting from the October 17 revolution, and the telecommunications network is still running despite the electricity crisis and the situation of the country. The network has withstood until now, but it suffers, like the rest of the sectors, from an acceleration in costs due to the consumption of diesel. The telecommunications sector spends about 60 or 70 tons in one day to secure energy to run the network.

Network maintenance is ongoing at a slower pace due to staff difficulties with transportation costs to and from their duty station. Since 2017, the fiber-optic project was launched, and it was supposed to have completed 85% of this project by the end of 2021, but due to the current circumstances, 30% of the project has been completed.

Regarding the situation of women with the Internet in Lebanon and plans for education, the session highlighted the need to defend the rights of students, women's rights at work and the rights of persons with disabilities. Life depends on the Internet, however, devices are not available in all schools. The number of female students in engineering and technology-related disciplines is limited. The solution is guidance from schools on these specializations and guidance from universities on the importance of these studies. The percentage of girls who choose these majors does not exceed 15%. Therefore, university guidance is necessary to encourage female students to specialize in the fields of science and technology.

As for persons with disabilities in Lebanon, their number increased as a result of the explosion of the Beirut port. Some of these people have become without electricity nor internet, and they must be trained in order to enter the future labor market. The internet is no longer used only for social media. The disability may be visual, hearing or other types, and therefore appropriate opportunities must be provided for these people according to the need, as well as the elderly and women among them. Also, a small percentage of children with special needs attend schools, and a small percentage of them work, and this percentage has increased due to the Corona pandemic, the economic crisis and the Beirut explosion. The proposed solution is a human rights approach between people, as they are part of this society, so remote work must be secured and employment opportunities be provided for these people.

The session also touched on the priority of access to food, access to school, learning, and provision of electricity, which are among the basics of life before the Internet. There are approximately 60,000 students who do not have schools due to successive crises in Lebanon.

In this case, the Internet is supportive of overcoming the crisis and is a solution to secure income in foreign currency (fresh dollars).

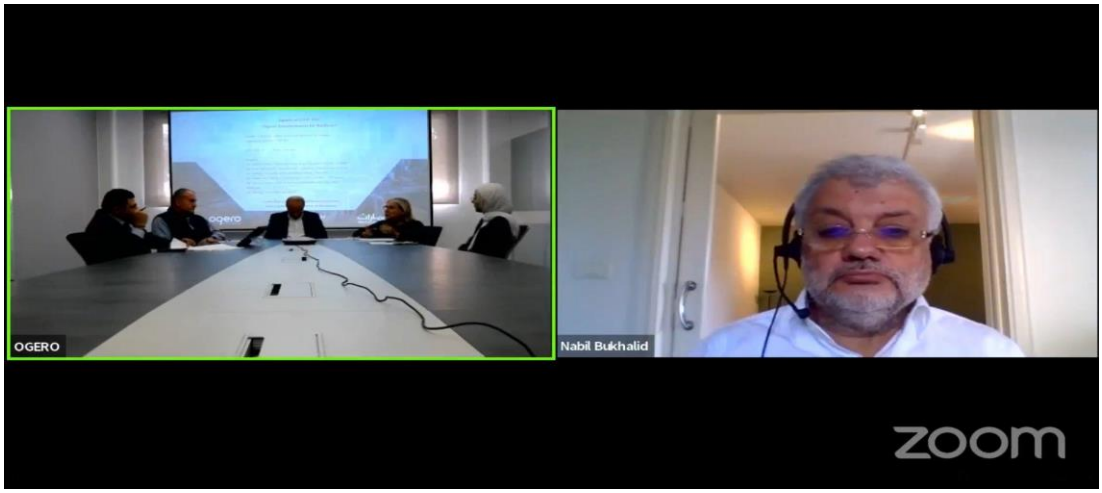
In December 2020, 48% of the companies left Lebanon, and in April 2021 the number increased to 52% of the companies and then became 60%.

As the speakers discussed the energy crisis and its impact on the Internet, the national operator is struggling to secure diesel for the Internet. The proposal is alternative energy, such as solar energy, which provides electricity over 24 hours.

With regard to local domain names, the speakers indicated that there is no fear of their continuity at present.

The speakers discussed the importance of having policies that support the citizen after the low purchasing power and prices of Internet services, and it was found that prices have not changed since 2017, however, following the Corona pandemic, the Ministry of Telecommunications increased the speed of the Internet and the volume of consumption for free, although this caused huge losses to the Ministry. The equipment is paid for in foreign currency while revenues are collected in the national currency according to the official low rate of the dollar.

The ministry is now in the process of submitting studies to the Council of Ministers with the aim of adjusting prices, as any amendment needs a decree issued by the Council. The plan is to develop and privatize the telecommunications sector.



Session link:

https://www.facebook.com/MaharatFoundation/videos/428777605324993

3- Main Session 3: The Leap to Virtual Life: a Challenge or an Opportunity?

In light of the multi-faceted crises that occur locally and globally, it has become necessary for individuals, governments and organizations to take an accelerated leap towards the digital

transformation of operations management, services and education. The Lebanese scene has its own limitations and challenges on multiple fronts.

The speakers in the session emphasized that digital transformation and digital services are part of sustainable development, which in turn has several goals and objectives, including building effective and transparent institutions through the provision of digital services. They also expressed the importance of engaging with individuals through digital means. They explained the guarantee of open data and comprehensive access to information in accordance with national legal frameworks and international agreements that provide the goal of access to information. With the implementation of all these goals, the door opens for building peace, justice and strong institutions.

They then discussed the goal of the Partnership for the Goals, which in turn enhances support for capacity building in developing countries, including the least developed countries. They also stressed the need to build capacity and the need to provide reliable, high-quality, disaggregated and up-to-date data, which is directly related to digital government and digital transformation.

When talking about the application of Digital Transformation in Government work, it is necessary to talk about indicators. The most famous indicator in the field of digital and service services is the e-GDI, which is an abbreviation for the word e-Government Development Index, which is issued by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and updated every two years. e-GDI aims to measure the development of e-government in countries. It includes three main pillars, including: Communications

infrastructure. In order to provide electronic services, it must first ensure the existence of an appropriate basic infrastructure for communications, then human resources, and then the availability of digital services, i.e. online services.

The evaluation of the Arab countries according to their performance according to this indicator and according to its last ranking in 2020 was also presented: that the Arab countries are divided into three groups, the first groups having high levels of service availability, the second group, where Lebanon is ranked 127th, and the third group Which is often still in the conflict stage and comes in the last third of the world rankings.

In a comparison of Lebanon's ranking in 2018 and 2020, it appeared that Lebanon was one of the countries that fell the most compared to the rest of the Arab countries.

Then the session discussed what is related to e-government and the speakers considered that we have to be realistic in applying this type to the Lebanese e-government, as it requires several basics that stem from the information environment, tools, and communications infrastructure, all of which are basics through which we can reach an e-government.

There are different types of e-government services according to the entity receiving the service: from government to citizens, from government to companies and institutions, and from government to public sector employees.

The problem in Lebanon lies not only in its institutions in the public sector, which in turn do not offer their services on the Internet, but rather the problem lies on the engineering of the work process. We present here the treatment of the crisis through a series of solutions.

The term business process is defined as a series of actions or processes characterized by gradual changes that may produce a result. Today, all work and its process are controlled by advanced information systems, which in turn leads to positive results on the process of increasing the effectiveness of communication and coordination between organizational units, which also allows for an increase in the speed, accuracy and confidentiality of information and data exchange.

The Ministry of Administrative Reform began assessing the work mechanism in all public administrations and institutions and what citizens suffer from as an initial step to draft recommendations, solutions and other mechanisms that are consistent with the concept of e-government.

There are complaints on corruption, and this limits digitalization and electronic archiving in the work process, so this should be the first step to combat corruption and the first step of administrative reform by starting to develop a clear plan to organize work process in all public institutions.

The tech community considered that the situation in Lebanon needs: strong and basic infrastructure, building better digital capabilities and skills, a friendly work environment, encouraging digital transformation in general and the digital transformation of government in particular, enabling data at the national level, embracing modernity and the industrial mind.

The knowledge economy should be enforced, and it includes three major axes: knowledge, the Internet, and globalization. There is no economy today that does not include knowledge,

and digital tools, with the aim to reach the world, as not to depend on local and regional markets. Working on the global market has become an urgent necessity.

According to the global innovation index in 2017, Lebanon ranked 81. The session stressed on the importance of the telecommunications sector, which adds a high and fundamental financial value compared to the rest of the sectors. The government should be aware that it is the most important of all, so there's a need to develop a strategic plan with a vision to revive and save the rest.

Session link:

https://www.facebook.com/MaharatFoundation/videos/274791204614585

4- Main Session 4: Internet Governance for Data security

The session began by defining the concepts of information security and privacy, including:

Confidentiality, i.e. privacy of the information is made available to those concerned only

Integrity of information, i.e. preserving information and protecting it from damage and alteration

Availability of information, i.e. access to it when needed.

The speakers discussed the difficulties that workers in the field of informatics are currently facing in terms of implementing information security, including the difficulties in the availability of the Internet, electric energy, and the purchase of necessary equipment and programs in light of the economic crisis and the Corona pandemic crisis. Some guidelines for information protection were also presented.

Then the session presented the applications that were developed to confront the Corona pandemic and organize the anti-corona vaccination process: IMPACT and COVAX and explained how they work and talked about the measures taken to protect the collected information and ensure its privacy.

The session also touched on how to adopt the first remote hearings via the Internet in the Beirut Criminal Court, the methods used and the difficulties encountered, in addition to the procedures for protecting the information obtained and maintaining its confidentiality.

It highlighted the measures taken by the Internal Security Forces to ensure the privacy of the information they come across when conducting investigations, especially the information available on the seized equipment or in the possession of the defendants or witnesses. Some guidelines were also explained to the public to ensure their privacy and personal information.

III- Summary of Recommendations

1- Enshrine the right to Freedom of Expression, including on social media, and the right to Access Information, especially in actual practice, in line with the Lebanese constitution and international conventions that transcend laws and require their application, which secures access to information and combats corruption.

2- Work on developing the infrastructure to secure a solid and basic Internet that contributes to the access for all on Lebanese territory at a reasonable cost and acceptable speed, especially since the Internet has become today a fundamental right, with the Corona pandemic and the transfer of economic activities, education and others to the digital space.

3- Working on the implementation of a digital transformation plan, unifying the administration's efforts in this field, and updating the legal framework that enhances this digital transformation.

4- Working on developing educational curricula, activating the effective use of technology, and encouraging innovation in line with the present and the needs of future generations.

5-Supporting initiatives for development, research and scientific production in order to develop the knowledge economy.

6- Involving all segments of society in discussing the formulation of policies related to the Internet, especially the most marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities, and engaging the youth group to benefit from their energies and progress in the field of technology.

IV- Agenda of LIGF 2021

LEBANON INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM

Day 1: 23/11/2021

Main session 1: “Free Flow of Information in time of nationwide crises”, organized by Maharat and SMEX Association.

Workshop 1: "Access to Public Information and Big Data in Lebanon", organized by Gherbal Session

Link: https://www.facebook.com/MaharatFoundation/videos/891264438259279

Day 2: 24/11/2021

Main session 2: “Towards digital access and inclusion in Lebanon”, organized by Ogero and ESCWA

Workshop 2: "Building digital capabilities after the Covid epidemic", organized by Ogero

Link: https://www.facebook.com/MaharatFoundation/videos/428777605324993

Main session 3: “The Leap to Virtual Life: A Challenge or an Opportunity?” Organized by the Digital Transformation Network, ESCWA, ISACA, the Jesuit University and the American University

Workshop 3: “Gender Approach to the Digital Economy”, organized by Fe-Male

Link: https://www.facebook.com/MaharatFoundation/videos/274791204614585

Day 3: 07/12/2021

Main session 4: "Internet Governance in relation to Information and Data Security"

Organized by ISOC Lebanon