

## China's Belt & Road Initiative Per The Chinese Ambassador To Lebanon

By **Bachar El-Halabi** *Program Officer at The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship*

Last week, China's ambassador to Lebanon, Wang Kejian, was hosted by the American University of Beirut's Public Policy and International Affairs Students (PPIAS) at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), in order to discuss China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and more specifically Lebanon.

According to Mr. Wang, the BRI, also defined as the Eurasia belt road and maritime, is the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the Chinese Silk Road, the ancient network of trade routes that connected the East and West that was central to cultural interaction between the regions for many centuries.

The main pillars of the BRI constitute of policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people exchanges, which all factors into China's self-envisioned role in international cooperation and multilateralism. Indeed, albeit being a socialist republic run by a single party, the Communist party, the Chinese state has immensely benefited from the capitalist model, emerging as the largest exporter of goods in the world. Hence, today, with an explosive economy that started to slow down and the emergence of right-wing protectionist leaders around the world (Trump and the likes), the Chinese model is facing a real test for its expansionism. The emergence of anti-globalization voices, voices calling for custom-trade barriers and the closing-down of other markets in face of the Chinese, extremely competitive goods, all pose a threat to China's worldly vision. As a result, China nowadays is attempting to play a role in advocating for "fair trade" based on mutual respect and win-win situations between countries, instead of adopting protectionist policies that seem to backfire on everyone, according to the ambassador.

On a more regional level, since the launching of the BRI, it has been widely welcomed across the world, 173 documents of cooperation signed with 125 countries and 29 international organizations, 17 of which are from Arab states in addition to Israel and Turkey.

Additionally, Mr. Wang's stressed that the BRI remains to be an economic initiative without any hidden political agendas or aspirations for more influence around the world, as China is committed to other states' sovereignty and stands opposing to any meddling in other countries' politics. Hence why China has been calling for peace in the Middle East instead of taking sides in the ongoing conflicts around the region.

Finally, the Arab world remains to be one of the largest trade partners with China – has been so historically anyways, with Arab markets being major consumers of Chinese goods, however, the region poses challenges on the Chinese such as:

- Regional conflicts
- Terrorism
- Difference in level of development
- Need for development in governance methods

The ambassador finished his talk announcing that China is building a new music conservatory as a symbol of goodwill and cultural exchange.