



Salam: Beirut will continue being the capital of cultural freedom

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Beirut became the Arab world's hospital, university, and publishing house because its freedom attracted Arab petrodollars and politicians, and Beirut is The New York Times' number one clubbing city in the world.

These facts were highlighted by then-Minister of Culture Tammam Salam in his lecture, "Beirut's Cultural Role in the Middle East," delivered at the monthly meeting of the Women's League on November 2.

At the beginning of the meeting, Lebanese flags and the league's newsletter were distributed and the National Anthem and the Alma Mater were sung. Then League President Leila Ghantous, welcomed Salam and AUB President Peter Dorman, pointing out that the league, established on November 3, 1919, was 90 years old.

Salam said that Beirut's cultural role grew in importance in the late 19th century because of its inhabitants' courage and stamina, and because of the city's importance as an economic center. He said the city acquired its prominence in the early 20th century because AUB and other foreign universities brought an atmosphere of freedom and the meeting of east with west. "Cultural freedom," he said, "is one of Beirut's major assets. We have managed to survive situations that could have crumbled bigger nations." He added: "If you are bitten by the Beirut bug, it will obsess you forever."

Beirut's role, said Salam, involved distinguished individuals. Lebanese working abroad carry with them a special "cachet" and are looked at differently, so, many companies seek to employ AUB alumni because they belong to a culture of freedom and the spirit of their Alma Mater. They affect change wherever they go, influenced by the culture of the University and of Beirut.

Salam expects Beirut to continue to play an influential role in the future with development in all fields. He said that naming Beirut as World Book Capital in 2009 was an acknowledgment of its cultural role in the book industry, covering authors, printing, and publishing and this makes all the Lebanese responsible for continuing Beirut's cultural role, adding that reading must be increased and be made a national priority, starting with the country's children. He said Beirut should also step up the sophistication in its hospitalization services and its business and banking sectors.

Salam expressed confidence in the future of the city: "I am sure Beirut will continue being the capital of cultural freedom and the place where people enjoy the differences and live the culture of accepting the other."