

For Immediate Release



Conference at AUB calls for countering sectarian divisions in Lebanon by educating school children on citizenship and coexistence

Beirut, Lebanon- 16/03/2012 - Participants at an education conference at the American University of Beirut upheld diversity as a source of wealth, pledging to work towards a school curriculum that promotes religious diversity while strengthening citizenship.

"Diversity presents us with an opportunity to be challenged, to learn and to grow, said Dean Patrick McGreevy of the American University of Beirut (AUB) Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) during his opening remarks. "Hence diversity is not something simply to be tolerated, but something to cherish."

McGreevy made his remarks yesterday evening during a conference held at AUB and organized by Adyan, a Lebanese NGO for interfaith studies and spiritual solidarity, with the collaboration of the AUB Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Ministry of Higher Education. Held under the patronage and in the presence of Minister of Education and Higher Education Hassan Diab, the conference aimed to come up with a national master plan that will strengthen the concepts of coexistence and citizenship in school curricula while promoting diversity and openness.

Lebanon's centuries long cultural and religious diversity constitutes both its inherent strength and weakness, said McGreevy, and the country has flourished due to the fact that no one group has ever been able to prevail, all of them abiding by the tradition and sense of mutual respect. "Today, in Lebanon and the Arab world, we must resist those who use diversity as a justification for division," he noted. "In Lebanon, we know where this can lead. One site of great possibility is the classroom. It is a place where we can build on the indigenous Lebanese tradition of respect for diversity."

Meanwhile, Father Fadi Daou, Adyan Foundation president posed what he considered the central question for Lebanese: "The key question is what future we want for our nation? Our religious diversity is part and parcel of the Lebanon we want and giving the same personality to every citizen is not the way to go about building the nation."

Daou considered that citizenship, the cornerstone of building the future Lebanon, was still a long way off, as exemplified with the inability to agree on a common history textbook for starters, although cultural diversity for a nation is as important as biological diversity for nature, as highlighted by a UNESCO statement.

"Since 2007, Adyan programs have been running in 11 public schools, with the support of the ministry of education, and 11 private schools," said Hoda Barakat, Adyan Foundation programs coordinator. "The fruit of our efforts is the Alwan program, which implements clubs and workshops for non-formal education on religious diversity, coexistence and citizenship, offering a complete curriculum for citizenship training."

Minister of Education and Higher Education Hassan Diab noted that “education remains the cornerstone of citizenship, and religion plays an important role in education, with the freedom of the latter explicitly stated in our constitution. No matter what the considerations, religion is for God and the homeland is for everybody.”

A quantitative survey done by IPSOS STAT, comprising 30 public and private schools with 431 students between the ages of 12 and 17 polled.

Although the results showed most students to be tolerant and accepting of the other religions with differences concentrated mainly to dress code, beliefs, and attitudes, commentators later questioned the veracity of these results, citing potential sampling bias.

Other highlights from the survey included the following: 42 percent of Muslim students professed to know about Christianity compared with only 17 percent of their Christian counterparts, with both sides highlighting the qualities of the other religion as forgiving and respectful.

Most considered themselves Lebanese first and foremost, after which came religious or Arab identity. The key uniting factors were language, culture and history, while politics, religion and political parties and government proved to be disruptive for most.

Most polled said they had friends from the other religion. Also half of those polled -- both Christians and Muslims-- wanted to immigrate to escape politics, corruption, sectarianism and lack of services in order to find work, continue their education and live in a country where laws are respected, far from political and religious strife.

According to AUB FAS Dina Kiwan the study should revisit its methodology, paying attention to sampling and question formulation.

Kiwan and former Culture Minister Tarek Mitri, who is a published scholar on Christian-Muslim relations in Lebanon and an AUB lecturer, were the two commentators asked by Adyan to scientifically and professionally assess the survey.

Kiwan added that studies from other countries have also shown that it's often more important to establish healthy, fair, and tolerant relationships with the government than to expect all citizens to fully respect and tolerate each other.

“One should go beyond the lateral relationship of citizens among themselves and examine the vertical relationship between the state and the citizen,” she emphasized. “It is the preferential treatment and abuse by governments that erode and fragment the nation, with those in power destroying social cohesion.”

“I was surprised and dismayed at the results of this study,” said ex-minister Mitri. “It seemed that the students were doing a mutual face-saving exercise and engaging in social niceties which is highly reminiscent of dangerous ‘doublespeak’ where we say one thing in private and another in public or social settings.”

Mitri considered that since the discussion was centered on religion then there already is no citizenship to start with, and the question of how to reconcile religious absolute “truths” remains. Moreover, Mitri found it dubious that the majority of students said they had

“friends” from other religions, whereas the reality in Lebanon reveals more segregation and limited intermingling among religions.

“The fact that all our learned professors have not been able to come up with a unified history book, where the different perspectives of the various players can be exposed, is actually appalling,” he added. “Also how can one teach history, literature and philosophy without mentioning the impact that religion had on their development,” he asked.

British Ambassador Tom Fletcher highlighted the lessons learned from the catholic-protestant conflict in Ireland, urging all involved to strive for unity. “The Lebanese ideal is worth fighting for and not worth fighting over”, he concluded.

Other speakers included Sheikh Sami Abi Al Muna, secretary-general of Al Irfan Institution and Professor Rafik Kattan, member of the Steering Committee, “Wahdatouna Khalasouna.”

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor’s, master’s, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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