The Arab region has been at the center of news since 2010 as the Arab popular citizen uprisings swept across the Arab world calling for reforms, equity, justice, and dignity. Most recently, the focus has shifted to the emergent and continuing Syrian crisis which has displaced over 2 million people since 2011, resulting in one of the largest refugee crises in recent history. However, the state of “uncertainty” is not recent in our region. In fact, war for those who live in the region is not transient. It is their daily reality, the context in which people work and live. Since 1948, the situation of Palestine has haunted the Arab consciousness with continuing chronic violations of justice. Lebanon’s civil war lasted 16 years (1975-1991) but an uncertain political environment has pervaded recurrently until today. The situation in Iraq since the 1990s including imposed sanctions, the first Gulf war and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 have fragmented the country and dismantled its infrastructure. In addition to wars, conflicts, and political instability, the region has also weathered environmental disasters such as earthquakes, floods, landslides, and drought that have added to “uncertainties”. Such uncertainties exacerbate the legacy of colonialism which created weak states that generally failed to meet its population needs.

The Arab region is not an exception but a microcosm of many other areas of the world. The last three decades have been characterized by political, economic, environmental, and social uncertainty across the world. Wars, conflicts and environmental disasters have proliferated in different regions of the globe. The conflict intensity index, for example, suggests that many regions of the world are exposed to medium, high, or extreme risk of conflict. In addition, between 2000 and 2009, there were three times as many environmental disasters as between 1980 and 1989. The impact of these disasters is also greater as a result of increasing urbanization, and climate change.

Several questions arise from this global context. First and foremost, how are we - as public health programs and professionals – facing or responding to these uncertainties? What are the dialectics between doing public health in ‘normal’ contexts and in contexts of uncertainty? How does public health – traditionally nested primarily in governmental institutions - operate when states are weak? What different approaches, methods, paradigms, ethics are needed in contexts of uncertainty and weak states? How have we adapted our programs of research, education, and practice to respond to such challenges? What is our unique value-added role in these contexts? How do we set priorities? On the occasion of its 60th anniversary, the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), with partners in the region and beyond, is organizing this two-day conference on December 5-6 2014 to present and discuss these questions.

The Faculty of Health Sciences at AUB
The Faculty of Health Sciences was established in 1954 as the first independent, self-governed school of public health in the Arab region. FHS has been engaged in public health research, practice and education over the last 60 years, most often in situations of uncertainty in Lebanon and the region. Acknowledging the vast needs and challenges in the service of public health education, research and practice, FHS has championed systems/institutions building network approaches, where institutions and individuals come together as partners to co-learn, share knowledge, and collaborate around local, regional, and global
solutions. Grounded in our context, rich experience, and scars, FHS is perhaps uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue on ‘public health in contexts of uncertainty.’ This conference is one way to do so.

GOAL OF THE CONFERENCE
This conference aims to explore how to reframe the role of public health professionals and academic institutions in contexts of uncertainty by bringing together diverse stakeholders/actors to exchange experiences of public health research, education, professional practice, workforce development, and knowledge translation in contexts of uncertainty. Emphasis will be placed on how to adapt disciplinary methods of public health to these contexts. In addition, we hope that networking between conference participants, as well as the conference proceedings, will widen the international dialogue about how to transform public health frameworks and methods to address ‘public health in contexts of uncertainty.

THEMES
The conference will be organized around the following themes:

Thematic Sessions
1. The State and Public Health: Uncertain Directions
Objectives
- Discuss contemporary challenges to the role of the weakened state in public health in the Global South in times of the conflict and uncertainty especially in the Arab region
- Address how the current context of transition in the Arab world is affecting public health actors
- Analyze how conflict and uncertainty is affecting states’ engagement with social policy/social services especially in the Arab region

2. Health System Responses and Dysfunctions
Objectives
- Reflect on / examine current dysfunctions and challenges in existing health systems arrangement (governance, financial, and delivery arrangements) that are inherent in advancing an effective health system response in complex situations of uncertainty (porous borders, protracted refugees, internal conflicts, etc.) and discuss changes that are required for existing arrangements
- Assess gaps of neglected population groups/health conditions/social conditions in the response of the health system in contexts of uncertainty
- Discuss key and innovative responses and strategies that have been implemented by health systems to respond to needs in contexts of uncertainty
- Discuss barriers and facilitators for establishing effective partnerships between governmental departments, local, and international agencies (NGOs and humanitarian agencies) and donors in the response of health systems in contexts of uncertainty (i.e. in the case of war refugees)
- Highlight information needs and research priorities for health systems in the contexts of uncertainty

3. ‘Who serves the health of all in contexts of uncertainty?’ Analyzing the mandates of UN and non-governmental organizations
Objectives
- Discuss the obligation of providing health for all as seen by agencies through their mandates
- Challenges and missed opportunities versus innovations and broadened breadth: exploring how agencies work within their mandates to respond to the right to health in contexts of uncertainties

4. Global Health: History, Power, and Experiences from the Global South
Objectives
- Contextualize global health within historical prisms
- Reflect on intended and unintended consequences of global health interventions
- Reexamine the potentials for alternative futures in global health politics and dynamics

5. Ethics of assessments: Problematizing Concepts and Adapting Methods
Objectives
• Discuss ethical considerations of public health research and practice in times of crisis
• Highlight challenges pertaining to research oversight, accountability and responsibility, and giving back to affected populations
• Examine assessment approaches and intervention prioritization methods in times of crisis
• Problematize (i) concepts such as ‘refugeeness’, ‘vulnerability’ as well as (ii) methods for establishing rigor and quality of generated data

6. Teaching and Learning in the Context of Uncertainty
Objectives
• Discuss methods/best practices used to ‘expose’ students to the contexts of uncertainty in their environments
• Explain ways that students and practitioners were prepared to adapt/transform standard methods of public health or to use innovative non-traditional inter-disciplinary tools and approaches in contexts of uncertainty
• Analyze needed changes in content or pedagogy to equip students / practitioners with tools to be effective in contexts of uncertainty
• Describe the challenges faced in developing/adapting curricula to be responsive to and reflective of often rapidly changing or protracted contexts of uncertainty

CLOSING SESSION
The closing session will review key messages arising from the conference deliberations and highlight the importance of, as well as strategies and mechanisms for local, national, regional and global partnerships to enhance/promote population health in contexts of uncertainty.