

For Immediate Release



Seminar discusses whether Lebanese are destroying their environment

Beirut, Lebanon- 11/01/2011 - Why are so many Lebanese apparently so indifferent to conserving the environment? The American University of Beirut's Ibsar tackled this question in the third debate of their public talk series on December 21, 2010.

A panel of speakers asked whether government, activist groups, or the media, are responsible for under-reporting environmental issues.

Professor Salma Talhouk of AUB's Department of Landscape Design and Ecosystem Management said, "We have a very active Lebanese media and we have a very active destructive population."

Guest speaker Mazen Abboud, a freelance journalist and environmentalist, pinned the blame on the lack of civil society in Lebanon. Instead of a functioning civil society, "There are sectarian communities which are fighting each other." "We've got a lot of freedom but no transparency and no accountability," Abboud added.

Abboud shone a spotlight on the current reality of the Lebanese media: "Our media is for sects. . . Each sect has its own media apparatus for its own goals which do not all the time coincide with the national interests of the country." Because of political support offered by leaders to newspapers and other media it becomes difficult for journalists to address certain issues without risking censorship or even losing their jobs.

Government could be motivated if more focus is placed on the economic effect of environmental degradation, Abboud said. "Looking at the environment from an economic perspective would give it more value," he concluded.

Freelance journalist Sobhiyya Najjar, a presenter of Future News television's environmental program, pointed to the responsibility of members of society to raise their voices for environmental awareness. "Despite the sectarian nature of the mainstream media, we as journalists should be aware of how to work across these barriers so the message reaches the audience," she said.

The problem is not the lack of good journalists. "We have very good journalists in Lebanon," Najjar said, "but we do not have the space or the freedom to talk just about anything."

She recounted how while working on a TV report about a local quarry, powerful individuals made countless calls to the television station demanding the program be removed from the air.

Media all over the world tend to be lethargic about covering environmental issues, according to AUB's Jad Melki, assistant professor of journalism and media studies in the Department of Social and Behavioral Studies. He also blamed the media structure and government policy in Lebanon, but he said journalists, easy targets, should not be faulted.

“Environmental groups are not media savvy,” he said, underscoring a communication problem between these groups and the mainstream media. Activist groups in Beirut tend to shy away from the mainstream media because of its politicized nature; they make use of alternative media mostly on-line. Rima Nakkash, assistant research professor of health promotion and community health in the Faculty of Health Sciences, said it is difficult to point a finger at one specific culprit. “It is a joint responsibility of every sector.” She added that more dialogue among civil society and researchers should take place. Audience member Ziad Khatib, a PhD candidate in epidemiology and global health in Sweden, said he sympathizes with journalists, but he told the journalists on the panel, “I feel jealous because you reach out to the public more than researchers do.”

ENDS

Photo caption: Two in forefront [L-R]: Jad Melki and Rima Nakkash

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Note to Editors

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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 more than 7,000 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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