

For Immediate Release



Former Minister Nahhas from AUB: Student empowerment key to averting Lebanon's brain drain

Beirut, Lebanon- 19/04/2012 - Lebanese graduates must stand up for their working rights instead of emigrating amid an influx of cheap foreign employees, former Labor Minister Charbel Nahhas has told an audience at the American University Beirut.

In a talk on April 18, 2012, organized by AUB's Human Rights and Peace Club, Nahhas urged students to reclaim their futures and fight for jobs in Lebanon once their studies ended.

"Do not consider [migration] as the only viable option for a better future or be taken aback by the 'take or break' proposals offered by our wily politicians," he said. "By opting to fight back and carefully choosing your battles and their venue, you can strive for changes to occur."

Nahas was the Minister of Labor under Najib Mikati's government, before submitting his resignation in February this year.

He stressed the vital role played by students in changing the tide of Lebanon's dire employment situation.

"You represent the pillar for change as, at your age, you retain the freedom of movement and are still not hampered by special considerations," Nahhas said.

Tens of thousands of Lebanese graduates leave each year for work abroad, as cheap foreign laborers are imported in their droves. Nahhas said criticism that Lebanon's universities do not prepare students for work in the country was unwarranted.

"All this talk about our higher education system churning out incompatible graduates that do not satisfy the demands of the job market are complete fabrication and lies," he said.

According to Nahhas, official unemployment figures put those out of work in Lebanon at 11 percent of the population, but this does not account for almost half of all graduates leaving to work abroad.

"Similar to an oil exporting country, we are exporting our human resources instead of oil and are consuming without production with the result being the loss of our society," he said. "The influx of funds from Lebanese expats is in turn filling up the coffers of our banks, driving prices up, especially for land and housing, and forcing even more people to migrate for opportunities. It is an infernal cycle that seems to go on and on."

In addition, Nahhas revealed how the Ministry of Labor processes between 200,000 to 250,000 work permits for foreigners each year, while only 200 requests were received annually from the National Hiring Agency, the department of the Labor Minister charged with Lebanese work demands. Only a few professions - such as doctors, lawyers, government and the military posts are reserved exclusively for Lebanese nationals by law, Nahhas added.

"But even in government that is not the case in certain sectors, like the case of Beirut Municipality," Nahhas said. "Up to 1995 or 1996, we had municipal garbage collection workers who were all Lebanese, but when the service was outsourced to Sukleen, they staffed it with cheaper foreign workers."

Nahhas argued that instead of investing in industry and production for exports, Lebanon's main product was knowledge, the fruits of which are too often enjoyed by other countries. Lebanon has seen a recent mushrooming of universities of varying standards, crowding the marketplace for graduate employment opportunities and forcing many to look abroad for work, the former minister added.

"The economic and labor theories that you study in universities, proposed by some Nobel Prize winner, do not go beyond the classroom," Nahhas said. "Do you see the United States of America, or for that matter Canada and EU countries, freely opening up their southern borders and giving free access to the Mexicans? On the contrary they have laws and regulations tightly controlling the inflow of foreign labor quantity and quality wise."

Nahhas gave numerous examples of how legal loopholes have been exploited by politicians and contractors to prevent Lebanese infrastructure growing and accommodating a rise in new graduates.

"The only solution is to stand up for our dignity and fight back to regain our rights," he said. "And the only way is for you to actively implicate yourself and look for practical alternatives that will change the current status quo and the manipulation of the few for their own gains."

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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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