

For Immediate Release



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**AUB hosts the regional launch of the UCL-Lancet Commission
report on Migration and Health:**

**“Harmful, unfounded myths about migration and health have
become accepted, used to justify policies of exclusion”**

The normalization of myths about migration and health in popular discourse are pervasive and harmful to individuals and society, with millions of migrants and refugees denied access to healthcare. Public health protection and cost savings are often used as reasons to restrict migrants’ access to health care. Yet, as the new University College London (UCL)-Lancet Commission on Migration and Health lays out with new international data and analysis; the most common myths about migration and health are not supported by the available evidence.

The Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) in the American University of Beirut (AUB) organized the regional launch of the UCL-Lancet Commission report bringing together more than 50 public health officials and experts.

Considering the regional context, and with the aim to address the challenges that are directly related to the topic and that were highlighted in the report, discussions focused on “Health System Resilience: Addressing Healthcare for Refugees and Forced Migrants”.

AUB President Dr. Fadlo Khuri praised the findings of this report, highlighting the critical contribution of academic and research institutions in finding sustainable solutions and supporting decision makers in setting evidence-based policies.

“I think one of the most important things that academia can do is to produce new evidence whether in social sciences, natural sciences, health sciences, even in literature and in other areas to address the challenges that migrants are facing,” Dr. Khuri stated. “But that’s not enough in

this era, we also have to take these solutions to policy makers, show them the data, and give them opportunities to improve the lives of the migrants,” he elaborated.

“AUB is proud to be part of the UCL-Lancet Commission on Migration and Health through the contributions of Dr. Fouad Fouad, and to be a partner in the Lancet-AUB Commission on Syria that aims to examine and address the Syrian conflict and its impacts on Syrians in host countries.”

“The Faculty of Health Sciences, whose mission-driven research has achieved the highest rank of grant funding much focused on targeting difficult social and economic inequities that underlie reasons for disparities in health, has proudly contributed over several decades in a number of major projects that had a tangible real impact on health in this country and beyond. It represents the ideal partner and regional framework to launch this great report”, Dr. Khuri concluded, calling for “overcoming disappointments to work for a brighter tomorrow.”

Also speaking in this event, FHS Dean Iman Nuwayhid expressed that “hosting the regional launching event of the Report is a privilege and an honor for FHS, as it also reflects the centrality of the issue of migration to the country and to us as an academic institution.”

“Lebanon might be a dense example of a country defined by migration probably because of its small size and intense history. However it is not unique, as most countries around the globe experience similar types of migrations to variable magnitudes”, added Dean Nuwayhid.

“Who is a migrant? How are migrants categorized?” questioned Dean Nuwayhid, joining his voice to the Commission’s report authors, public health experts, human rights activists, and citizens from all around the globe, warning against categorizing and labelling ‘migrants’. “For example, a Syrian in Lebanon today is referred to as a refugee, a guest, a displaced person, an illegal individual, a migrant worker, and a domestic worker. Most in fact carry multiple labels simultaneously in different circumstances and each could easily move from one group to the other for economic reasons as well as security and political ones at the local, national, or regional levels,” explained Dr. Nuwayhid. “Those labels also impact access to services offered by national authorities and UN and international humanitarian agencies.”

The FHS Dean considered that, since defining migration itself is a dynamic process, the impact of migrants on the host communities “should be evaluated against their contributions to culture and economy”, adding that “perceptions and interventions are also influenced by historical memory.”

“Now in its 153rd year, AUB has lived throughout these regional political changes and population dynamics and its researchers have been leading on this kind of research. At FHS,

which is the leading school of public health in the region, our engagement has been steady since the mid-seventies with the start of the Lebanese civil war focusing on health of migrants and refugees. In all of our work, we are guided by a deep conviction that health is determined by social, economic, environmental, and political conditions and choices,” confirmed Dr. Nuwayhid, stressing that “we at FHS and AUB subscribe to the Commission’s main message that the health of migrants can only be addressed if we use a human rights lens.”

On his turn, Commission Chair Professor Ibrahim Abubakar warned that “populist discourse and questioning the deservingness of migrants for healthcare on the basis of inaccurate beliefs supports practices of exclusion, harming the health of individuals, our society, and our economies”. “Migration is the defining issue of our time. How the world addresses human mobility will determine public health and social cohesion for decades ahead”, stated Dr. Abubakar, emphasizing on the fact that “creating health systems that integrate migrant populations will benefit entire communities with better health access for all and positive gains for local populations. Failing to do so could be more expensive to national economies, health security, and global health than the modest investments required to protect migrants’ right to health, and ensure migrants can be productive members of society.”

Co-Chair in the Lancet-AUB Commission on Syria for health in conflict and professor at FHS Dr. Samer Jabbour considered that in the context of armed conflicts, “we need to address the root causes of migration and displacement, not only focus on what migrants face in host communities.”

Following the introductory speeches, two panel discussions were held aiming to shed the light on health system resilience and healthcare for refugees and forced migrants in Lebanon and the region.

Among the panelists were several international experts and key figures in the public health field in Lebanon and the region, including Dr. Walid Ammar, Director General of Ministry of Public Health, Mireille Girard, Representative for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon, FHS Dean Nuwayhid, Dr. Nasser Yassin, professor at FHS, and Director of Research at AUB’ Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.

Speaking on the response of the Lebanese government to the health needs of the Syrian refugees, Dr. Ammar confirmed that the health system in Lebanon is solid, resilient and has the ability to accommodate the needs of all residents in Lebanon. However, the main challenges faced are rather of an administrative and socio-political nature due to the complexity of identifying the beneficiaries, as well as financial considering the relatively high cost of healthcare in private institutions which are a key component in the Lebanese health system, the high demand for

health services in the country in general, and the lack of support from the international community.

UNHCR Representative Mireille Girard confirmed that “UNHCR works closely with the Lebanese Ministry of Health to improve access to healthcare in reasonable prices for migrants and nationals. Until this moment, refugees in Lebanon seek health services in emergency situations only”, which has a negative impact on the cost of health services considering that prevention, early detection, and intervention are much more efficient from a health perspective, and more cost effective.

In terms of international support, Ms. Girard considered that “the question is not about how the international community could help, but how it should help.”

Dr. Nasser Yassin, a prominent researcher and expert on the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, considered that “it’s not a refugees’ crisis that we are experiencing, but rather a crisis of values”. Dr. Yassin denounced the populist approach often adopted in decision and policy making in refugees-related issues, disregarding the lack of scientific proof of the alleged negative impact of refugees and displaced populations, and discounting the existing scientific evidence of the positive effects and economic potential of this situation when dealt with from a scientific and human rights perspective. “These policies are harmful to refugees and host communities alike. The result is a vicious cycle of economic costs, political tensions, social exclusion, and health burdens to all”, said Dr. Yassin. “Changing the perception is inevitable. It is more than offering solutions to a crisis, but also investing in the potentials of a new situation.”

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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 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,100 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 programs leading to 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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