

Lebanon Promotes 'Back to Public School' Drive

Lebanon is seeking to overhaul its public education sector with \$204 million from the World Bank.

By Samar Kadi - BEIRUT



Lebanese Minister of Education Marwan Hamadeh

With the back-to-school season in full swing, Lebanon is seeking to woo its school-age population back to public education, a sector traditionally seen of lower quality than private education.

"We want to attract Lebanese students who have been mostly accommodated by the private sector to our public schools, now that they are being refurbished and rejuvenated," said Lebanese Minister of Education Marwan Hamadeh.

"We are not seeking to compete with the private sector but we want to provide a good quality education to those who don't have the means to go to a private school," he said in an interview with The Arab Weekly.

Although literacy rates are approximately 99% for young Lebanese, the country has been struggling to increase the quality of public education, notably at the elementary and complementary levels.

The tremendous influx of Syrian refugees in recent years has strained the public education system and led some Lebanese parents to move their children from public to private schools despite high tuition fees.

The World Bank said nearly 75% of Lebanon's 491,455 elementary age students attended private schools in 2015. Transition rates from elementary to secondary education plunged in recent years, as have gross enrolment rates in higher education.

"Lebanese students have been (gradually) deserting the public sector since the war," Hamadeh said, "but now is the chance for them to return to the public sector as it is being overhauled and because private schools are becoming very expensive."

Hamadeh said World Bank grants and loans worth \$204 million would allow the public education system to become as competitive as the private sector. The focus would be on training teachers, renewing school programmes, refurbishing and building new schools, especially in underdeveloped areas, and reinforcing the structure of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE).

"Currently, public education is attracting students in secondary classes in view of the good results in official exams but we have some lagging in the elementary and complementary cycles and that's where we are focusing our efforts," Hamadeh added.

"We are expecting some 25,000 new Syrian children in schools," he said. "They are basically children born in Lebanon after 2011. They are now in ages eligible to go back to Syria but, for the moment, we are ready to accommodate them for the academic year 2017-18."

Out of an estimated 480,000 Syrian school-age children in Lebanon, approximately 240,000 are enrolled in schools. Many refugee parents do not register their children for various reasons, often either because they help them earn a livelihood or they have no legal papers.

The MEHE developed a strategy under its "Reaching All Children with Education" (RACE) program in 2014 to strengthen the public education system with the priority to increase enrolment of Syrian refugee children. They are mostly enrolled in public schools in an afternoon shift specifically tailored to non-Lebanese.

Alternative education programs are also offered, including a new accelerated learning program piloted for both Lebanese potentially dropping and out-of-school Syrian refugees to be taught in public schools to allow them the possibility of catching up to the formal education system. As Lebanon is saturated with professionals such as lawyers, doctors and engineers, more students are enrolling in vocational schools both in the public and private sectors, Hamden said.

"Every year we have thousands of graduates from vocational schools and these find jobs much quicker than professionals," he said. "These are skills for exportation because in Lebanon they find competition from cheaper foreign labour, including Syrians and Egyptians."

Lebanon is home to 42 universities and higher education academies, many of which were established during the civil war and afterward, undermining the standards of higher learning for which Lebanon has been recognised.

"There are good universities and others that must disappear," Hamadeh said, noting that a draft law has been proposed "to establish a national agency for quality assurance in higher education that would hold (private and public) institutions accountable for [services provided] to the public."

MEHE's budget of \$1.2 billion, amounting to 11% of the country's budget, is the second biggest after the Defence Ministry.

'Inspiration': City of Marrakesh Hosts Yves Saint Laurent Museum

Legendary French couturier was entranced by 'ochre city' when he discovered vibrant, easy-going atmosphere of its busy streets.

MARRAKESH - A fusion of Moroccan traditions and contemporary flair that inspired Yves Saint Laurent, a museum to the famed fashion designer is set to be unveiled Saturday in his beloved Marrakesh.

Following three years of work, technicians carried out final checks in a minimalist exhibition hall at the venue in the city that helped shape Saint Laurent's imagination after he first arrived in the 1960s.

Iconic creations -- from the black "Le Smoking" tuxedo to the Mondrian dress -- will go on display, with the museum hoping to attract 300,000 visitors in its first year after it opens its doors on October 19.

"Marrakesh was a place of inspiration for Yves Saint Laurent," said director Bjorn Dahlstrom as he surveyed the last touches being made.

The legendary French couturier was entranced by the "ochre city" when he discovered the vibrancy and easy-going atmosphere of its busy streets, overlooked by the Atlas mountains, with his partner Pierre Berge in 1966.

"It was the place of our meeting, of our love, of our work together," said Berge, describ-



View inside the new Yves Saint Laurent museum in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh.

ing it as "a time when morals were free and sexuality more unbridled".

After dedicating his final years to "transforming these memories into projects", the man who was both Saint Laurent's business and life partner, for some 40 years, died aged 86 in September.

Turning Cannabis into Cabernet in Lebanon

Farmer Turns Multi-Million Dollar Hashish Business into Wine Making Bekaa Valley.



DEIR AL-AHMAR - Sitting among the vines of Sauvignon Blanc and Tempranillo growing on his spectacular farm in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, Michel Emad remembers the not-so-distant time when he opted to cultivate cannabis. The retired soldier was not alone in this illicit trade: cannabis fields used to stretch as far as the eye could see in this part of Lebanon over which the state has tenuous control.

"Everyone used to grow hashish, that was what the market wanted, there was no alternative crop," Emad, a father of two kids, said. Now he and the 220 farmers from the Coteaux Heliopolis cooperative are growing grapes for winemaking in the northern Bekaa Valley's Deir al-Ahmar region.

The area, one of the poorest in Lebanon, is notorious for its cannabis production, which expanded massively over recent decades to turn into a multi-million-dollar industry.

While cannabis farming has only been feebly challenged by the authorities over the years, it remains illegal and the small cooperative has succeeded in luring some producers away from the risky business.

They are looking to cash in as Lebanon's wine industry has blossomed, with traditional heavyweights and myriad smaller producers making inroads on an ever-expanding global market.

"Growing grapes is more lucrative and leaves you with a clean conscience," Emad said, explaining that this year's nine-ton harvest earned him \$10,000 (8,400 euros), twice his erstwhile income from cannabis.

- Cannabis to Cabernet -

On the other side of the dirt road running along his vineyard, the tall stems of cannabis fields are still visible.

Emad spent three years growing cannabis, like many other villagers in Lebanon's Bekaa who see it as their only means of survival.

The security forces regularly raid the cannabis farms in the area and Emad's fields were wiped out twice before he eventually decided to join the cooperative in 2003.

The Coteaux Heliopolis cooperative was

launched in 1999 and now covers around 250 hectares of vineyard (620 acres) in Deir al-Ahmar.

The first harvest in 2003 and the resulting windfall sparked a wave of interest among cannabis farmers in the area.

"We have provided evidence that people don't want to grow hashish. They are obliged to because it is their only source

of income but they don't actually want to live in fear and in violation of the law," said Shawki al-Fakhri, who heads the cooperative.

"If you give them an alternative, a lucrative and legal crop to farm, people will take it in a heartbeat," said the retired engineer, sitting in the garden of the house his grandfather built.

The cooperative's harvested grapes around 400 tonnes in 2017 are then sold on to producers such as Chateau Ksara, one of the biggest players in Lebanon's wine industry, or Domaine Wardy, one of the oldest and most renowned wineries.

The project initially received funding and technical support from France and gradually grew with local loans allowing producers to turn their fields into vineyards.

The grapes of choice are Syrah, Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier.

"These are grapes that like the sun and the heat and could work at high altitude," said Charbel al-Fakhri, who works alongside his father Shawki at the cooperative and got a specialised MBA from France's wine capital Bordeaux.

The cooperative has created its own winery and made a modest start with 100,000 bottles in 2017, only a fraction of the eight million bottles Lebanon produces each year.

"I really believe our white is a little gem, its freshness is remarkable. We also have a very fresh and fruity red," said Charbel proudly.

For him, the switch from cannabis to wine is like returning a historical land to its rightful owner.

Coteaux Heliopolis chose its name as a homage to the nearby City of the Sun Heliopolis was the name of the ancient city of Baalbek where the Roman wine god Bacchus was worshipped.

"The Romans didn't just happen to pick this place. We're 12 kilometres (seven miles) from Baalbek, once the area was covered with vines," the young man said. "Our land is exceptional."

Saudi Airline Flies to Baghdad for First Time in 27 Years

Budget airline flynas makes first commercial Riyadh to Baghdad flight since 1990 in further improvement of ties between two countries.

RIYADH - Saudi budget carrier flynas made the first commercial flight from Riyadh to Baghdad since 1990, as ties with neighbouring Iraq show signs of improvement.

"Our first flight took off today from Riyadh to Baghdad," the company wrote on Twitter, posting pictures of the cabin crew and passengers.

Tickets for the maiden flight were advertised for as low as \$7 (six euros) excluding taxes as flynas CEO Bandar al-Muhanna said the move to reopen the route would help "link the two sisterly countries".

Flights between Iraq and Saudi Arabia were suspended some 27 years ago in August 1990 after former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein ordered his troops into neighbouring Kuwait. After years of tense relations, ties between Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia and Shiite-majority Iraq have begun looking up in recent months. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir headed to Baghdad in February for talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on the first visit of its kind since 2003.



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