

***THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSITY COOPERATION FOR PEACE IN INTERNATIONAL
ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES (LEBANON)***



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University cooperation for peace should represent a key and a more widely utilized tool in international academic programmes, no matter where the teaching takes place. It can in fact prove a precious instrument - if properly tailored- in building a culture of peace and dialogue, in and among the future “elites” of the concerned regions , well before their assumption of responsibilities in their respective countries (or in international bodies) in the private or public sector (key government positions ; Diplomacy; Armed Forces....) .

That is all the more true in countries (like Lebanon and others) characterized by a mix of confessions and identities : confessions and identities which may prove at loggerhead not necessarily in the country as such but in neighbouring regions or worldwide.

By starting so to say a “daily dialogue” and exchange of views while still at the University the future leaders of these countries will have the opportunity to develop a better understanding of the positions and concerns of their interlocutors. An unbiased understanding - and I would say respect for the reasons of the OTHER side - which they would definitely find harder to achieve once absorbed by day to day politics (and sometimes politicking....) and/or institutional responsibilities.

No real peace, as we all know.., can in fact be built on mistrust and lack of knowledge of the background and reasons of the counterpart . That does not mean of course that university cooperation is the “panacea” for all conflict-ridden countries / regions . I mean more simply that it can offer a precious contribution to a larger overall effort by a number of players to have peace and dialogue- albeit slowly - prevail over confrontation and mutual accusations.

Multifaceted problems, such as are in most cases those leading in the end to all out confrontation, require (it goes without saying..) multifaceted answers involving all the interested players and “good will” on the ground (from international Organisations such as the UN or the EU to “like-minded countries “ acting as peace-keepers or facilitators to , and that is exactly the point.., to Universities) .

A case in point is the co-operation , promoted by the Italian Embassy and AESI when I was Ambassador in Lebanon (2006-2010), between USEK University (close to the Patriarchate and the Maronite community) and the Lebanese State University , the largest In the country , multi-confessional (with a large presence of Sunni and Shia students) and the only public institution for higher learning in Lebanon. It was an attempt at creating a stable and lasting interaction - focused on high level courses and masters on peace-building and human rights - between two institutions representing different segments - even from a socio-economic angle - of the diversified Lebanese society. Two qualified Universities (the first one private, the second one, as I mentioned, public) which had never really interacted until then.

At the beginning one could feel a kind of hesitation on both sides towards this innovative approach :an approach which would gradually come to include inter alia joint seminars in Rome and Beirut with first rate Italian Universities and their students. After this initial period characterized by prudence on both sides the atmosphere became however , thank also to the Embassy and AESI constant efforts to this end, more and more relaxed and cooperative . Both sides acquiring gradually the perception that what was at stake was more than a simple inter-academic dialogue – disconnected so to say from real life and real problems and challenges . It was in fact a serious attempt at creating a larger common ground between qualified young people coming from different backgrounds which would one day reach important positions in the public or private sector of their unique country. A message likely to produce a ripple effect in neighbouring countries , all ate more so since it was coming from a Nation (Lebanon) rightly defined once by Pope John II “ ..more than a country , a message (NdR: to the whole world)”.

The fact is , to conclude , that a creative approach to “humanitarian diplomacy” (one , in other words which would put the development of each and every person at the heart of its action , with special regard to the youngest..) may lead to unexpected and positive results.

The example I mentioned of lasting cooperation and dialogue between the USEK and the Lebanese University professors and students was in substance an innovative - and I would say successful - effort to complement other initiatives carried out by the Embassy and by the Italian Cooperation (as well by, and together, with UNIFIL and the Italian contingent in its area of deployment) to reach 2 main goals : A) bridge the gaps and misunderstandings between the different communities ; B) offer young people from all strata of society and from different confessional allegiances but with a strong local presence (the largest communities being the Sunni , the Christian and the Shia: the latter mostly in southern Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut) an opportunity to grow together and share experiences in areas (such as peace-building) of utmost importance for the future of Lebanon and the region at large.

Intra- confessional dialogue and respect remain in fact a key factor for security and shared socio-economic growth in Middle East, Lebanon being one of the most visible test-cases of both its potentialities and of the risks likely to originate from an enduring, mutual mistrust and in some cases all - out confrontation.

The multi - fold projects carried out all over the country by the Italian Cooperation - in close coordination with the Embassy and under the guidance and monitoring of the Foreign Ministry in Rome - are a further tool to improve the living conditions, and their attachment to a civilized co-existence with others, of the most neglected strata of society.

University is just one among others . Another case in point I would like to recall to the benefit of the reader is the following: the games (called “Palestiniadi”) I had the privilege of initiating in 2008 - building on a proposal from the Embassy’s Cooperation Office during my tenure - to provide Palestinian children in refugee camps in Lebanon with the opportunity to compete in Olympic-like games for a week with kids of their age living in other refugee camps in Lebanon (12 in total) as well as in the Lebanese - inhabited poor areas around the camps . The idea being , with regard to this last component , to avoid any feeling of preferential treatment for “Palestinian “ children vis-à-vis their “Lebanese” neighbours . And this , we thought, bearing in mind the frequent tensions between the Lebanese population living around the camps and the refugees in the camps. It was therefore a further effort by Italy to concretely follow an inclusive approach to favour coexistence and erase as far as possible- long -lasting suspicions and misunderstandings in very sensitive areas of this small but so relevant country.

“Palestiniadi” , as far as I know, have never been interrupted since their launching in 2009 representing therefore another success story , complementing the efforts carried out- in a similar spirit of promoting coexistence and better living conditions in and around the “camps” - both by the European Union and the UN through UNRWA.

This interaction has therefore been going for more than ten years .It is is still underway and growing in a most positive spirit the benefit of dialogue and better understanding between the different components of the articulate Lebanese society and stability in the country. It is evident that this kind of approach is fully functional , although with specific instruments, to the efforts conducted in Lebanon , and in the region, by the European Union and the UN to achieve lasting stability and a better coexistence between the different communities on the ground.