

Deborah Trent gives lecture on US Public Diplomacy towards Lebanon

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Reported by Elie Nabhan

Public Diplomacy “is a government’s direct engagement with another country’s citizenry to support official foreign policy as well as goals and interests shared between the two nations,” so explained the summary of the lecture given by Ms. Deborah Trent.

A doctoral student at the George Washington University’s Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration in Washington DC, USA, Ms. Deborah Trent’s lecture *Exploring Diaspora Diplomacy Through the Case of U.S Public Diplomacy in Lebanon* was based on her preliminary findings of her doctoral dissertation fieldwork on US public diplomacy towards Lebanon.



Listening to the lecture of Ms. D. Trent: (sitting front row left to right) Dr. A. Eid, Ms. G. Hourani, Mrs. S. Kassis-Abi Rached, Mrs. L. Haddad with (back row) Mr. E. Sfeir. (May 2011).

Modern diplomacy tends to be formal, even hierarchical and defined by protocol, said Trent. On other levels, however, informal diplomacy, such as the public diplomacy of the US government, expresses itself through educational, cultural and economic programs that engage people and promote better relations in the way that the British government reaches out through the British Council, the French Government with the Alliance Française, and the German government with the Goethe Institute.

The US Administration may regard “diaspora diplomacy as a transnational dimension of public diplomacy at home,” she said. “The government may engage at home with the

Lebanese-American diaspora, seeking the opinion of the Lebanese-American community on certain policies, speeches, and initiatives,” in order to gauge their attitudes and possible reactions.

To address these shortcomings the Lebanese-American Diaspora in the US can help with the study and understanding of Lebanese and Middle Eastern cultures to overcome language gaps and lack of information that US diplomacy may face.

“The Lebanese-American community in the US allows people to sit and learn from each other with great cultural implications,” she added, going on to explain that diaspora diplomacy can facilitate collaboration and engagement programs that improve Lebanese-American relations.

The Lebanese-American community is conservatively estimated at 400,000 and though Lebanon maybe small in size, she said, its strategic location is important and US. Civil Society building programs, along with government investments in a region, she feels, are so challenging for the US government that they lend greater importance to public diplomacy

US foreign policy towards Lebanon, in all different forms of engagement, in terms of identity, culture or education, can be forged with the help of the diaspora, an engagement with the public.



All in attention: Dr. R. Sabat (front right) and Ms. N. Mazraani with NDU students in the background (May 2011).

Networking also plays a part in public diplomacy. Diplomats are known to attend many events through their partner organizations where diaspora policy, as an effective dimension, can focus on groups, promoting dialogue and communication with people on the ground.

Collaborative engagements, she said, can provide for policy and programs whereby shared interests can provide mutual meeting points. This collaboration should be based on trust, she explained, as it plays a vital role in networking public diplomacy, with the work of partners, international programs or government initiatives to keep people connected, more so effective in today's social media age.

“Diaspora diplomacy, reflecting diplomacy at home, can lead to the national development of Lebanon, its reconstruction and growth, by the Lebanese themselves in the same way as other diasporas' involvement in international development,” Ms. Trent concluded.

A question-and-answer session followed with much discussion centered on the effectiveness of lobbying in US politics. Ms. Trent informed her audience of numerous groups and organizations in the US with special appreciation for Lebanon that seek to safeguard and influence in a positive way US foreign and cultural policies towards Lebanon.

Those present at the lecture included Dr. Assaad Eid, NDU's Vice-President for Sponsored Research and Development; Dr. George Eid, Academic Advisor to NDU President; Mr. Mounir Hamza, Vice-Chairman of the Lebanese Nigerian Friendship Association; Dr. Rita Sabat, Assistant Professor at NDU's Faculty of Political Science, Public Administration & Diplomacy; LERC Director Ms. Guita Hourani, NDU students, and members of LERC staff.

Ms. Debora Trent at LERC

After her lecture, Ms. Deborah Trent, paid a visit to LERC to meet with staff members and to be shown around the premises, in her capacity as a visiting lecturer but also as an emigrant of Lebanese descent.

Her grandparents, Mr. Attas Atiyeh Boutros and Mrs. Della Nassif Boutros, born in the tiny village of Ain Arab, nestled in the Bekaa Valley, emigrated to the United States around 1910. This made Ms. Trent's visit to Lebanon, though an essential part of her dissertation field work, also a voyage of discovery.

Throughout her trip to LERC, and NDU, Ms. Trent's discussions with LERC Director Ms. Guita Hourani centered on her fieldwork in Lebanon for her dissertation on US public diplomacy in Lebanon and how, according to her biography, “the cross-sector, transnational relations between and among US and Lebanese governmental and civil society actors inform effective US public diplomacy policy and programs toward Lebanon.”



Ms. D. Trent (right) with Mrs. L. Haddad at the LEAD offices (May 2011).

She was introduced to the materials collected by LERC in its electronic archives, an experience she said that transported her around the world, ultimately reducing her to tears of joy.

“I am overwhelmed with the care and thoroughness of this archive and with all your efforts to expand the history of Lebanese migration,” she said. “The diversity of the people is even greater than I imagined! Bravo!”