

The Future Diplomats at the Lebanese Foreign Ministry

By Myriam Aziz

No cold was going to get in the way of the Diplomacy and Consular Services class, taught by Professor Makram Ouaiss. On Saturday January 12, 2013, the class paid a visit to the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants in Achrafieh, where they were greeted by the soon-to-be Lebanese ambassador to Turkey, his Excellency Mansour Abdallah. Upon entering the main building, out of five others, forming the Foreign Ministry, his Excellency Abdallah announced to the class that Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour was present in his office and would love to meet them. And so it was, the class happily entered the office where Foreign Minister Mansour warmly welcomed the diplomat hopefuls. "We gladly keep our doors open to educational institutions because they hold tomorrow's future: those of you who will become ambassadors, politicians, and leaders of tomorrow." Dr. Ouaiss briefed the foreign minister and the ministry representatives on the class's group projects that involved the students were working on visiting embassies and learning about their work, structure and processes in Lebanon. The class then gathered around the foreign minister and posed for a picture taken by the ministry's photographer, who has been taking pictures of all the great figures that have passed through the ministry over the past decades.

Afterwards, the class was ushered into a conference room for a session about the ministry's work, as well as the role of a diplomat. The class had of course learned about the latter, but it was different listening to personal experiences and genuine testimonies. His Excellency, Ambassador Mansour is a very energetic diplomat who was extremely eager to share with the class the truth behind the media coverage: "Do not ever underestimate the role of the Foreign Minister and Ministry. Despite everything said and done, Lebanon has preserved its representation of a unified Lebanon." Lebanon has 83 missions around the world, which means its representation abroad is much larger than a similar country of its size. The ministry's work is divided between 12 specialized directorates. The class also had the privilege to meet Dr. Toufic Jaber, head of the Political Affairs Department, and soon to be Lebanese Ambassador to Serbia. Dr. Jaber was also one of the members of the team representing Lebanon as a non-permanent member at the Security Council for the past two years. Dr. Jaber talked of Lebanon's success in foreign policy. He explained how his team succeeded in condemning Israel for polluting Lebanese shores following oil spillage in 2006, as well as determining compensation Israel has to pay Lebanon.

The class was eager to hear more of those successes because rarely do they hear of them, since the media covers much of the bad and little of the good. Another example given by Dr. Jaber was Lebanon's abstention from voting on the Iranian Resolution in 2010: "Lebanon was congratulated by the West and its allies, as well as by Iran and its allies, both thinking it did not take sides. This is diplomacy at its best. Never think abstention is no position; sometimes it is exactly the position you need to take."

The two ambassadors also discussed the evolution of the role of the Foreign Ministry as well as the role of diplomats, going beyond bilateral relationships to cater to the changing needs of today. Ambassador Mansour constantly stressed: “Progress occurs in times of peace, not war. The ministry has taken lots of blows over the year because of war and conflict. It is doing its best despite it all”. Moreover, the students expressed concern as to how policy was formulated, constantly asking questions that the ambassadors gladly answered. They explained that diplomats are to convey policy, and not formulate it.

However, they were keen on stressing that sometimes diplomats understand the “international kitchen” better since they are out there, and thus can make sound recommendations and suggestions to decision makers in Lebanon with the goal of enhancing policies and decision making. Dr. Jaber explained to the students the importance of analysis in diplomacy, and using tools learned at university such as SWOT analysis (S: Strength, W: Weaknesses, O: Opportunities and T: Threats), one that he used in 2010 following the Cote D’Ivoire contested elections to convince decision makers to change policy, once the Lebanese communities’ safety and interests had been secured.

No matter how interested the students were in listening to the work the ministry does, they were all the more eager to hear about how diplomats lead their personal lives. Ambassador Abdallah, a very humorous diplomat, jokingly said: “Single diplomats do their work best.” He then of course proceeded to explain that having a family can be hard for a diplomat due to the constant moving and adaptation required. Dr. Jaber informed the students of the six main challenges facing a diplomat: personal, professional, social, reactions from the Lebanese society abroad, security, and loss of objectivity if the diplomat remains in the same country for too long. Foreign Minister Mansour had noticed when the class had briefly entered his office to meet him, that the number of female students was increasing. Ambassador Abdallah then noted that a third of Lebanese diplomats are women, with Ambassador Jaber adding: “Women can be better diplomats than men.”

The ambassadors concluded by encouraging the diplomatic hopefuls to apply for internships or jobs upon graduation for there are many vacancies; they even gladly passed around their business cards in case the students needed any further information. Before they left, Dr. Jaber told the students: “We are regularly invited by different missions to discuss issues about the Middle East, because Lebanon has a unique quality: balance in its analysis of political issues. Do not underestimate the Foreign Ministry. If you work hard enough, you can go a long way.” Ambassador Mansour finally added: “I believe the earth is round; we will meet again I am sure.” The students left the ministry wondering when would be the next time they visit it, and when they themselves would become diplomats...