

Laudatio

Hünemann-Preisträger 2022 / Award of the KAAD Foundation Peter Hünemann

"Lebanon is more than a country. It is a message of freedom and an example of pluralism for East and West," these words were true when Pope John Paul II wrote them in 1989 shortly before the end of the civil war in Lebanon and they are still true today, despite all the different crises/calamities the country is currently going through. Be it the ongoing economic crisis of blatant proportions with an inflation of more than 200 % or the disastrous blast in the port of Beirut in August 2020, be it the health crisis due to the global pandemic in addition to those home-made problems or the current food crisis due to the war in Europe – Lebanon has been shaken by several crises in the last years. – Yet, Lebanon is still a message of freedom and an example of pluralism – and this is due to its vibrant civil society, it is also due to those four persons that are awarded by the KAAD-foundation Peter Hünemann today.

Against the background of the war in Syria that forced almost two million people to find refuge in neighbouring Lebanon and against the background of all the other crises that the Lebanese society is facing, our awardees contribute to giving the younger generation a future in Lebanon and in the region. – With their professions and with their social commitment, also with their work in the KAAD partner committee.

For the past five years, Souad Slim, Roula Talhouk, Father Jules Boutros and Ziad Fahed have formed the KAAD partner committee in Lebanon – with Souad Slim being the constant in this board, being in this committee since its establishment in the 1998 (24 years!).

Let me shortly introduce the awardees:

Prof. Dr. Dr. Souad Slim studied history in Lebanon and in France; she received her first PhD from Sorbonne University, her second from Birmingham University in the department of Christian-Muslim relations. Having received her first PhD in France she went back to her home country in the middle of the Lebanese war and taught history at Université Saint-Joseph. Since 1987 she has been professor of History, Cultural studies and Methodology at the University of Balamand. In addition to that, she currently serves as the Director of the Centre of Documentation and History at the Institute of History, Archeology and Near Eastern Studies. A KAAD scholarship supported her research stay in 2014. From the very moment she heard of the existence of KAAD she was willing to participate in the newly founded partner committee in 1998.

Prof. Dr. Roula Talhouk studied religious sciences and anthropology in Lebanon, finished her studies with a PhD in practical theology from Université Saint-Joseph and with a PhD in France in anthropology of religions, in the field of culture and religions of the Arab and Muslim world. Currently, she holds the position of coordinator of the masters courses of the Faculty of Religious Sciences at Université Saint-Joseph, which include a master's degree in Islamic-Christian relations. She is also the director of the Centre for Documentation and Islamic-Christian Studies and teaches courses in anthropology, practical theology and methodology in the faculty.

Father Prof. Dr. Jules Boutros is the rector of the Syriac Catholic Patriarchal Major Seminary and the coordinator of the youth pastoral work in the Syriac Catholic Patriarchate. In addition to serving as a spiritual accompaniment professor at Sagesse university, he teaches practical theology at Université Saint-Joseph. He earned an MA in Islamic-Christian Relations at Université Saint-Joseph, and a PhD in Pastoral Theology at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome. Until recently he served as the General Chaplain of the University Pastoral Work of Lebanon.

Prof. Dr. Ziad Fahed studied Theology in France and also received his PhD in Catholic Theology. He is the Director of University Mission Office and Full Professor at Notre Dame University-Louaize in Lebanon. His main research interests are religions and politics, Interreligious dialogue and pluralism, the role of the Church during the war in Lebanon, the theology of the mission, and the contribution of the Church in building the Lebanese political system. 12 years ago he founded the NGO DLR:

Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation, for promoting interreligious Dialogue in Lebanon, many of our scholarship holders and alumni were or are committed to the work of DLR.

What is common to all of our for awardees is not only their study experience in Europe – no, something much more important: they all four returned to Lebanon after their years of study, worked for Lebanon during and after the bitter years of the civil war to rebuild the country. They always knew that rebuilding their country after the war (that ended in 1990) goes along with building schools and universities, that rebuilding also means educating people and bringing people of different faiths together. Deeply rooted in their faith, it has been their mission all along to make Lebanon a better place for the youth.

This is the reason why each of them has numerous projects to strengthen the different levels of civil society - and the reason why they are involved in KAAD as partner committee:

Training multipliers, change agents, for the Lebanon of the future is their concern.

Among others, they have been essential in setting up the KAAD-Third-country scholarship programme for Syrian and Iraqi students as well as Lebanese sector experts: In 2015, KAAD was able to set up a sur-place and third-country scholarship programme for Lebanon and Jordan. So far, a total of around 60 Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese students have been able to study for a Master's degree in Lebanon. The overall goal of the project was to offer Syrian and Iraqi students in particular an alternative to leaving their home region by enabling them to continue their education in their host countries. In this situation, the establishment of the Sur Place programme for Jordanian and Lebanese students primarily served to strengthen networking with the scholarship holders who had fled, as well as to alleviate already existing tensions between refugees and the host societies.

Not only that, adding to that all your projects to ensure the peaceful coexistence of the different religious communities, add to that the projects with which you helped those affected by the devastating explosion of 4 August 2020 – even though you yourself were among those affected, you thought of the others first and foremost.

This award of the KAAD Foundation Peter Hünemann is granted to you for your extraordinary commitment for the youth of Lebanon, for your support in establishing KAAD's Sur-Place- and Third-Country-Scholarship-Program, for the commitment you as a committee as well as each one of you is giving for the cohesion of your country, for your civic engagement in Christian spirit in the multiple crises Lebanon has been facing.

Civil society engagement like yours guarantees that, as the Pope put it, Lebanon remains a project of peace. As Pope Francis has put it: "Lebanon is, and must remain, a project of peace". The Pope said that Lebanon's vocation is to be "a land of tolerance and pluralism, an oasis of fraternity where different religions and confessions meet, where different communities live together, putting the common good before their individual interests".

My heartfelt thanks and congratulations!