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AUB Inaugurates the Abu Sittah-Gilbert Humanitarian Award

In a ceremony that honored the courage and sacrifice of healthcare professionals working in conflict zones, the American University of Beirut (AUB) inaugurated the Abu Sittah-Gilbert Humanitarian Award. Established in 2024, this award recognizes health workers and first responders who risk their lives and livelihoods to protect and care for people facing war, siege, and occupation.

The event, which was hosted by the Palestine Land Studies Center at AUB, opened with a minute of silence in respect for all victims of wars and conflicts, followed by a performance by soprano and educator Ghada Ghanem, who recited short poems by Palestinian poet Mosab Abu Toha and sang 'If I Must Die,' by the late Refaat Alareer. Ghanem is a faculty member at AUB and collaborates with the Edward Said Conservatory to bring music to children in Gaza.

Following the opening tributes, the program continued with a recorded message from Dr. Debarati Guha-Sapir, an award-winning expert on the health impacts of disasters and conflicts. "Warring parties are required by law to respect and protect medical personnel. Over the last few years, and as we are seeing Gaza, the complete opposite is happening," said Guha-Sapir. "We are witnessing the attacks that are usually resulting in the casualties among not only medical workers, but health professionals as well. Ambulance drivers, nurses, paramedics, medical assistants form the foundation of the medical sector, and are the ones who are usually in the frontlines and end up being the victims of such conflicts," she continued. Guha-Sapir's message was followed by a recorded video that included testimonies from health workers who are on the ground in Gaza, explaining the dire situation there, and a thank you note from Dr. Khamis Ellessi.

The ceremony continued with remarks by Dr. Iman Nuwayhid, professor of public health and environmental and occupational health at the Faculty of Health Sciences at AUB, who spoke about the award's origins and urgency. "The idea of this award was proposed by my colleague, Dr. Bassem Saab, and was inspired by the resilience, endurance, and resistance of the people of Gaza and the courage of two healthcare professionals—Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah and Dr. Mads Gilbert—who risked their lives and professional careers to support the people of Palestine and beyond," he said, highlighting the individuals after whom the award is named.

Head of the Division of Plastic Surgery and founder of the Conflict Medicine Program at the American University of Beirut Medical Center, Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah, is a prominent plastic and reconstructive surgeon and academic who has spent decades treating victims of war –

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particularly children – in some of the world's most dangerous conflict zones, while championing the rights of the injured and displaced.

Dr. Mads Gilbert is a Norwegian anesthesiologist and emergency medicine specialist who has long stood in solidarity with the Palestinian people, and provided critical medical care in Gaza while advocating globally for justice through his medical and political work.

Nuwayhid reflected on the violence and horrors that have been inflicted on the people of Gaza for almost two years. He also spoke about the reasons behind the selection committee's decision to honor all healthcare professionals of Gaza as the first recipients of the Abu Sittah-Gilbert Humanitarian Award, which came after the committee realized that the award needed to honor all who have contributed to supporting the people of Gaza, "from paramedics, nurses, ambulance drivers, first responders, to the patriarch of a family who sought to salvage everyone from his family who he could reach."

Dr. Mohamad Zeyara, who worked and lived in Gaza, received the award on their behalf. Zeyara is a plastic surgeon currently based in Lebanon and receiving further training in reconstructive surgery under the mentorship of Abu Sittah.

Dr. Zaina Jallad, director of the Palestine Land Studies Center and assistant professor at the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at AUB, also spoke during the gathering, noting that the Abu Sittah-Gilbert Humanitarian Award "is not merely a recognition of courage in the face of danger, it's a recognition of fidelity to life, care, and the irreducible dignity of every human being."

Later in the program, a panel discussion brought together Dr. Gilbert and Dr. Abu Sittah, along with Dr. Ben Thomson, public health professional, nephrologist, and internal medicine physician; and Dr. Noura Erakat, human rights attorney and associate professor at the Department of Africana Studies and the Program in Criminal Justice at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Abu Sittah spoke about his role as a physician. He noted that this role had so far resulted in eight lawsuits that were intended "not to silence you, but to paralyze you, to make an example of you, and to drain you economically and mentally where you spend your life defending yourself." Abu Sittah said that dealing with these lawsuits was "nothing compared to the horrors that happened to others who spoke up."

Gilbert highlighted the disproportionate number of attacks against the healthcare system. "Healthcare workers in Gaza are 0.9 percent of the population, but they also make up 7 percent of the total casualties. This means that healthcare workers are being killed eight times more than civilians," he said. He added that "these attacks are taking place to prevent people from helping in this area because healthcare is a form of resistance in areas where such oppression is taking place."

The event concluded with remarks from Dr. Fadlo Khuri, AUB president. He reflected on the emotional weight of the evening, stating, "It's very difficult to find the words to follow what we've heard tonight from the testimonies of the voices that were nearly silenced but found a way through." Drawing from his own background in medicine, he emphasized the deeper purpose of the medical profession, "As someone who spent most of his life in medicine, I believe that this award encapsulates what medicine is supposed to be about. Medicine is not just a science or a service, but a moral commitment to protect life – especially when it's most threatened." Khuri honored the courage and sacrifice of those the award seeks to recognize, "Today we are honoring those who have upheld that commitment and paid the ultimate price, and also those who continue to serve under conditions that defy comprehension."

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 790 full-time faculty members and a student body of over 9000 students. AUB currently offers more than 140 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

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