



**AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY
OF BEIRUT**

OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Beirut, December 17, 2025

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Five Startups Win \$22,000 in Prizes at AUB's Darwazah Startup Accelerate

The Samih Darwazah Center for Innovation Management and Entrepreneurship at the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business at the American University of Beirut (AUB) celebrated the 12th cycle of its Darwazah Startup Accelerate (DSA) with a public pitch and award ceremony recognizing emerging entrepreneurial talent.

This year, seven finalists advanced through the rigorous DSA bootcamp, with five outstanding teams ultimately earning financial awards. The jury and mentors awarded the first grand prize of \$10,000 to Bilo (Airbnb of billboards). The second grand prize was jointly granted to SnapFit (online fitting room for clothes) and Khazzin (e-commerce fulfillment for micro-enterprises), with each receiving \$5,000. Polyvia (business analytics-as-a-service) and Lextopia (a therapy game for dyslexic individuals) were also recognized as runner-up awardees, each receiving \$1,000.

The Darwazah Startup Accelerate is an AUB student competition that provides a structured bootcamp with training, mentorship, and hands-on support for early-stage startups. Through a comprehensive multi-stage selection process, nearly 50 applications were narrowed to seven finalist teams. The journey concluded with a Demo Day attended by industry leaders, ecosystem experts, academics, and members of the AUB community, including students and faculty.

The ceremony hosted keynote speakers Hana Darwazeh, global vice president of corporate social responsibility at Hikma Pharmaceuticals; Dr. Lina Choueiri, AUB deputy provost; and Dr. Bijan Azad, director of AUB's Darwazah Center.

Hana Darwazeh highlighted the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit of AUB students, saying, "Every challenge you encounter as a founder is an opportunity to grow. These teams have demonstrated courage, focus, and vision—qualities that will shape Lebanon's next generation of innovative companies."

Dr. Choueiri emphasized the importance of execution in innovation, noting, "Innovation is not just about having ideas. It is about turning them into solutions that create tangible impact. The startups here exemplify the power of disciplined planning and creative problem-solving."

Dr. Bijan Azad spoke about the DSA's mission. "The Darwazah Startup Accelerate is both a platform and a sandbox," he said. "As a platform, it provides an intensive learning journey that

American University of Beirut

PO Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon
T +961 1 35 00 00 – Ext 2650 | communications@aub.edu.lb

aub.edu.lb

equips aspiring student entrepreneurs with the skills, mentorship, and support needed to turn their ideas into viable ventures. It is also a sandbox because it offers a forum where startups can road-test their ideas before going to market.”

A special segment of the event was dedicated to the inspiring story of UWYTA, last year’s grand prize winner. Founder Margot Wehbe shared her journey, reflecting on lessons learned from DSA, how she pivoted her business, and how leveraging collaborations with well-known brands helped drive growth. She also showcased new laptop sleeve samples with advanced designs, demonstrating how the products have improved in look and feel, functionality, and overall aesthetic.

The event also featured a fireside chat with Mouin Jaber, co-creator and co-host of the “*Sarde After Dinner*” podcast, which ranked worldwide among the top 1 percent of podcasts on YouTube. He discussed the rapid rise of podcasting in today’s media ecosystem and reflected on the trial-and-error process of “learning out loud.” He highlighted the creative freedom the medium offers—empowering creators to explore a wide range of topics, build intimate communities, and establish credibility with their audiences. Jaber also shared insights into sustainable monetization pathways, including YouTube revenue, Patreon memberships, sponsorships, and branded merchandise.

Since its inception in 2014, the Samih Darwazah Center for Innovation Management and Entrepreneurship at the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business at AUB has supported over 300 startups, helping transform entrepreneurial thinking and practice in the MENA region.

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For more information please contact:

Simon Kachar, PhD

Executive Director of Communications
Lecturer – Political Studies and Public Administration Department
Founding Director – Good Governance and Citizenship Observatory
Former Fellow – Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
Member of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Research, Innovation, and Creativity Hub

T +961 1 37 43 74 Ext: 2676 | M +961 3 42 70 24
sk158@aub.edu.lb

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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About the Darwazah Center

The establishment of the Samih Darwazah Center for Innovation Management and Entrepreneurship at AUB’s Suliman S. Olayan School of Business was made possible in 2011 through a generous gift by the Darwazah

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family, founders of the largest MENA-based pharmaceutical company with global reach—HIKMA Pharmaceuticals, headquartered in Jordan and listed on the London Stock Exchange—capitalized at over \$5 billion. The Darwazah Center's mission is to transform entrepreneurial thinking and practices in the MENA region and help organizations become innovative.

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