



Lebanon: RAMSES runs!

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The nice life in Lebanon. I don't smoke, but in Lebanon I gave a try to this thing called, I think, Hookah or Shisha, or simply water pipe. You can see me with the pipe in hand and also a glass of Ouzo. The hookah implies a lot of puffing and huffing that seemed to me rather pointless, but somewhat fun. Least you think I have added a third vice to alcohol and smoking, let me tell you that the nice looking girl near me is my daughter, Donata. (photo courtesy of Jerzy Karlowsky)



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This post is a report of a trip to Lebanon at the end of July of this year for a meeting related to the RAMSES project. It is about sustainable mechanization in agriculture; something that I described in a [previous post](#). Here, I am just briefly summarizing the project; showing to you photos of the trip with some comments. I don't pretend to describe a whole country in a few pictures: Lebanon is small, but complex; it is interesting, hectic, exciting, surprising, at times startling and always with a sprinkle of madness. In short, a true rollercoaster of a country; you have to go there to understand what I mean. But I hope that, at least, you'll like these images. Unless otherwise stated, all the pictures are mine (or, sometimes, taken by my daughter)



To start, here is the objective of my trip: the RAMSES electric tractor with *Abuna* (father) Paul at the wheel, at the convent of the Saints Bakoss and Sarkis near Beirut. The "RAMSES" system consists of an electric tractor powered by batteries in turn charged by photovoltaic panels. It is a project sponsored by the European Commission under the 6th framework programme. The idea is to get rid of fossil fuels and use only solar electricity for agricultural mechanization; something that I have explained in detail [here](#). Lebanon was chosen as a target country because it is a country heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels.



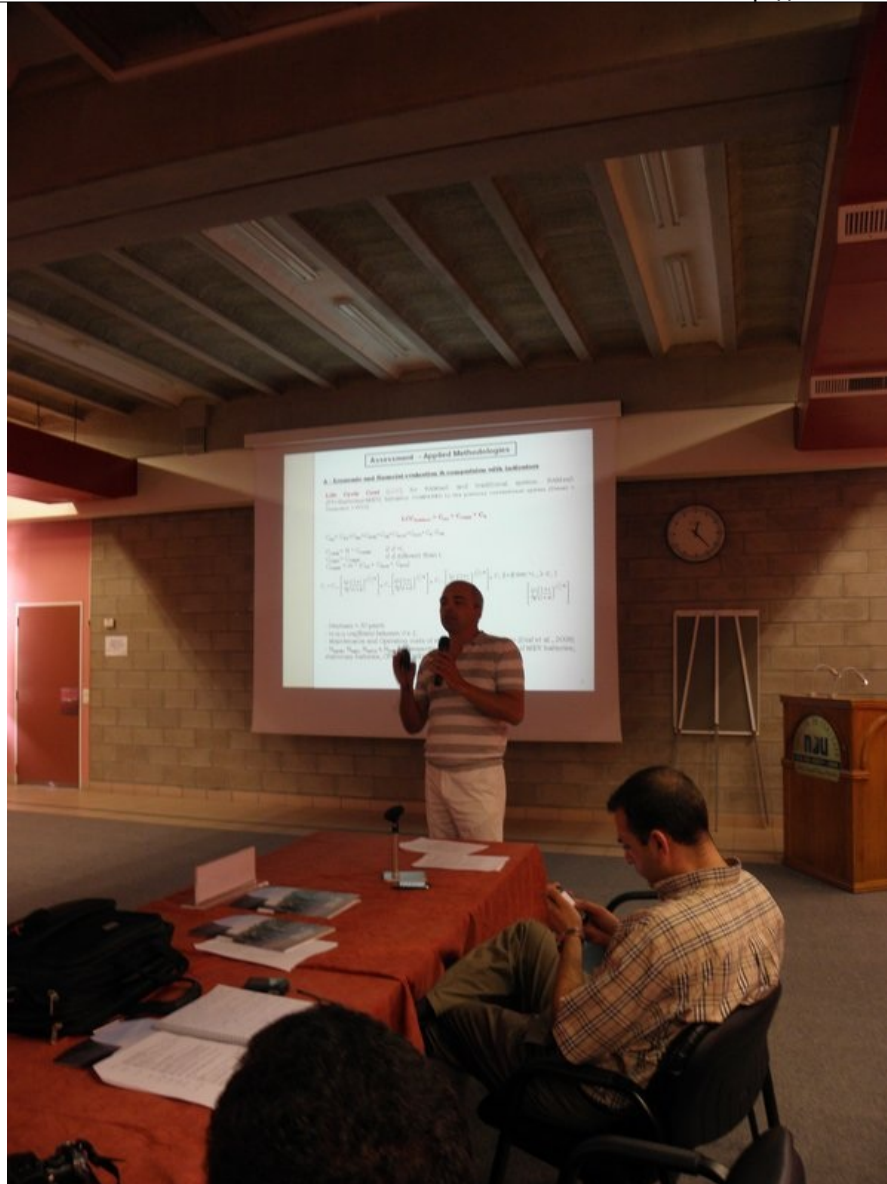
Here is an image of the 20 kW PV plant at the convent. Renewable energy is not so common in Lebanon and one of the ideas of the RAMSES project is to help spread the concept. (photo courtesy of ADM Electric)



The RAMSES tractor has been used at the convent for performing all sorts of agricultural tasks. So far, it has performed very well, and everyone seems to be happy about it.



And here is where the RAMSES seminar was held. It is Notre Dame University (NDU), a private university built on the hills north of Beirut. It is a modern, western style campus that could be anywhere in Europe or in the US. Lebanon doesn't have a public research system worth noting, but private universities are very active in teaching and research. NDU is truly impressive in this sense.



Here, you can admire Toufic El Asmar, coordinator of the RAMSES project, speaking at NDU. Lebanese researchers have been very impressed by our approach of using renewable energy in agriculture. Unfortunately, we are just starting and the old ways are still well entrenched. It will take time (and high oil prices) before agriculture returns to be what it was once: a truly sustainable activity.



Now, let me show you a few images of the trip not related to the RAMSES project. Here is central Beirut on a hot summer day. It is being completely rebuilt after the recent wars, the last one 2006. Skyscrapers everywhere; it looks like New York City.



Really, there are cranes and new buildings everywhere.



Very little is left of the old Beirut which, I think, didn't look like New York City at all. This is an old building in central Beirut which still shows the scars of the past wars. It is being demolished.



Like New York, Beirut is full of surprises. Here is the lush garden of the Robert Mouawad museum, where you can admire - among many other things - the most expensive jeweled bra in the world (total 320 carats of diamonds, emeralds and rubies; see [this link](#)). Then, if Beirut has the most expensive bra in the world, one should not be too surprised that Beirut has also the most advanced electric tractor in the world: the RAMSES.



There are several characteristics that make Beirut somewhat different from New York. One is the large number of armed troops stationed at practically every corner. These two soldiers of the Lebanese army are seeking a bit of shelter from the ongoing heat wave under the shade of the trees of the watchtower plaza, the heart of Beirut. While I was in Lebanon, the heat was unbelievable and it must have been very hard for these guys who had to stand under the sun wearing their uniform; including hat, boots, rifle and sometimes a bullet-proof jacket. Note the bottle of water near the tree; badly needed.



More images that make Beirut looking like New York, but with a twist. Here is a large, modern hotel in North Beirut. Very nice; but note a detail: the plume of smoke that comes out from a smokestack half hidden behind the structure. Beirut suffers of frequent power outages; especially in summer, when air conditioned runs at full force. That forces almost everyone to have a backup power system. This hotel must have a diesel power plant of at least several MW. As I said, Lebanon could really use some more renewable energy. Incidentally, I couldn't even remotely afford to stay in a luxurious place like this one.



Lebanon is an Arabic speaking country. Once, French was the prevalent second language, but today it is rapidly being replaced by English, which also very often used in advertising and street signs. That gives rise to a characteristic mix of languages. Here, a sign in central Beirut shows advertising in English and a welcome in Arabic for his majesty, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who was visiting the town while I was there.



Beirut is a crossroad of the Arab world. Here, you see tourists at the Jeita Grotto; different groups bringing their specific dress codes. You can see that my daughter is dressed in a somewhat different style in comparison with the ladies in black; who all wear a classic "abaya" dress (*). As far as I could see, this kind of dress is not common in Lebanon, so these ladies probably come from abroad, possibly from Saudi Arabia or from some Gulf State. In the Christian section of Beirut, the way of dressing of women is totally westernized, in the Muslim section, women often wear the traditional head scarf, the hijab. The three children, by the way, are the sons of Toufic El Asmar, our RAMSES coordinator.



Being driven along the streets of the hills near Beirut is quite an experience. The streets are narrow, the Lebanese are aggressive drivers, and they often drive big SUVs. Note the image of the Virgin Mary on the windshield. There is a reason for it to be there!



Here is an image of the suburbs of Beirut, on the hills. The city has expanded rapidly and in an uncontrolled way; with buildings appearing everywhere. Note the bad state of the soil; erosion is a big problem everywhere in Lebanon. It is a rainy country and that worsens the problem.



And here is the Cedar Grove, in northern Lebanon. I was very keen to visit this place, since I had in mind the lush forests of ancient Lebanon. I had in mind also the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu; who came all the way from Sumeria to fight Humbaba, the guardian of the trees. Well, to be honest I was sorely disappointed. They say that there are a few thousands trees left, but it is a sad sight, considering how many there must have been; once. There are some nice, ancient trees in the grove, but it looks like a zoo.



If you think that this place - photographed not far from the Cedar Grove - once must have been a cedar forest, the scale of the destruction brought by humans to the Lebanese forests is nearly unbelievable.



And here is something that I photographed near the Cedar Grove: the Christian Cross and the traditional Moslem way of writing "God" in Arabic; both staying together happily on the trunk of a tree said to be thousands of years old. I think it is a nice image that symbolizes what Lebanon is: an old country, several thousands of years old, where different faiths try to live together. They haven't succeeded so well in recent times, but they had done so in the remote past and there is still hope that they will succeed in the future.

(*) Note added after publication: I would like to thank Berthe Choueiry for pointing out that the thing I was smoking should be called "arguileh" in Lebanon ("Shisha" is the Egyptian word, whereas "Hookah" is American). She also points out that I should have used the word "Arak" for the liquor that in Greece is called "Ouzo" (and, I add, in France is called "Pastis"). I would also like to thank "Cocomaan" for correcting the mistake I had made in initially calling a "burqa" the black dress of the ladies at the Jeita Grotto, whereas the correct name is "abay a".



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