

# Lebanon poised to lead Middle East digital revolution, Harb says

By Dana Halawi  
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Creative young Lebanese people have the potential to turn their country into a central hub for the production of innovative digital media, Telecommunications Minister Boutros Harb said Wednesday.

"Although it is true that external demand is greater in size than the

internal market, Lebanon is rich in the creative energies and technical skills of its youth, which has the potential to make it a central hub for the production of Arabic digital content, development, design, innovation and new digital applications," he said during the ArabNet Digital Summit.

ArabNet is the hub for Arab digital professionals and entrepreneurs, creating platforms for them to connect and learn. The conference, held in Hilton Habtoor Hotel, aims to build business bridges across the region, stimulate growth in the Arab knowledge economy, and support the creation of new businesses and job opportunities for young people.

Harb praised the creativity of Lebanon's young people in information technology and telecommunications, and highlighted the importance of their contributions.

"By investing their competencies, whether in Lebanon or abroad, the youths are enabling Lebanon to rebuild itself on the foundation of a knowledge economy," he said.

Harb cited Suleiman Itani as an example of a Lebanese entrepreneur who found success abroad.

"He invented the Atheer Labs' smart glasses which compete with Google Glass, boosting Lebanon's reputation worldwide," he said.

"Lebanese citizens are spread across the globe and they will compensate for losses resulting from the migration of its youth with the successes its people achieve," he added.

In his speech, Harb focused on Lebanon's improvements in the telecommunications field. "In recent years, Lebanon has tried to modernize and develop its infrastructure in order to become the main digital platform in the region and join the ranks of pioneering digital nations by 2015," he said.

Harb said the Lebanese state has developed plans to introduce fiber optic infrastructure, international gateways, IP/MPLS for fixed-line telephones, the Alexandros submarine cable to increase international capacities to 700 gigabytes, the IMEWE cable and both 3G and 4G networks for mobile phones.

"The Lebanese government has also set the regulatory framework for digital zones and the legal framework for preferential tariffs, and has also provided access to infrastruc-

ture for the aforementioned zones, with the hope that they become factories that produce digital services with added value, equipped to create jobs," he said.

He also highlighted the importance of launching free economic zones such as the Beirut Digital District, which places Lebanon within the ranks of nations that are advanced in providing digital services. "We are also planning to launch a free economic zone in the Batroun Caza in collaboration with the Maronite Association and the Archdiocese of Maronites in Batroun, which announced their willingness to donate the land for the project," he said.

Also speaking at the event, Imad Hoballah, chairman of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, spoke about the measures that should be taken to enhance Lebanon's information technology sector.

"We need to provide citizens with very fast Internet connections at very low prices, in addition to giving them access to information without any restrictions," he said. "We even should guarantee, by a written law, the right of every citizen to access Internet at no less than 100 megabytes per second."

Dr. Hoballah also emphasized the need to respect citizens' privacy while using the Internet. "It is unacceptable for political parties, companies, individuals and even governmental agencies to violate users'

privacy," he said.

Hoballah underlined the need to reform the educational system to encourage initiative, innovation and rewarding adventure. "We cannot raise the thinkers and creative businessmen of tomorrow with an educational and intellectual system that belong to a forgotten past," he said.

In his own presentation, Central Bank First Vice-Governor Raed Charafeddine highlighted the role of Banque du Liban in fostering entrepreneurship by launching Circular 331 late last year, a project which allocated \$400 million to supporting investments in startups in Lebanon.

"We have incentivized the historically strong Lebanese banking sector to invest in a new and promising avenue for economic growth, and also by guaranteeing investment in digital ventures up to 75 percent," he said. "This initiative has already shown results through the creation of multiple funds for entrepreneurs, and we hope it will help young Lebanese to build their digital innovations into businesses that leave a global mark."

ArabNet founder and CEO Omar Christidis reiterated that Lebanon was a hub for creative industries, generating music, video, fashion, food, arts and culture trends that have spread far and wide. "It is also the heart of production in the Middle East, with the agencies and development houses that serve the region's biggest clients using it as their creative kitchen," he said.



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The ArabNet Digital Summit brings together professionals and entrepreneurs to promote digital innovation.