

In October 2011, I have been appointed as a lecturer in the Biology Department at the American University of Beirut (AUB), one of the top academic- and research-based institutions in the Middle East. Joining AUB offered me an opportunity to teach and build research skills in the field of Ichthyology, more specifically those concerned with freshwater fishes in the region. Despite the scientific interest and the economic importance of freshwater fishes in the Middle East, this region is largely lacking experienced and well-trained ichthyologists. Being at AUB is a worthwhile investment in upgrading the regional capacity in fish research in a largely neglected region. Prior to joining AUB as a faculty member, I pursued my doctoral studies in Germany where I was awarded a DAAD scholarship. I got my master's and bachelor's degrees from AUB.

As a PhD student, I have joined the Ichthyology Section at Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum which is affiliated with Goethe University, Frankfurt a.M. My PhD research focused on conducting a monographic, phylogenetic and zoogeographic revision of a cyprinid species complex (*Capoeta damascina*) inferred from comparative morphology and molecular markers. *Capoeta damascina* is a widely distributed freshwater fish species in the Middle East whose taxonomic status is not clearly settled. Being found in a wide range of habitats, this species is characterized by high morphological variability (body shape, meristic characters and color patterns) among its various populations and often even within a single population and thus could be regarded as a complex of closely related species. Such variations have led to taxonomic confusion where many authors proposed various synonymies and disagreed with each other regarding the status of this species. The fragmentation of river systems in the Middle East, the numerous number of isolated fish populations over a wide distributional range and the high intraspecific variability in this complex lend themselves to a very promising phylogeographic analysis. This topic was a challenge to me. I take a great deal of pleasure in attacking complex problems by breaking them down and systematically unravelling the mysteries they hold.

I was also involved in various field expeditions in Syria, Lebanon, Iran and Jordan for the collection of fresh material for my study. These expeditions were in the framework of the project "Establishment of a Middle Eastern Biodiversity Research, Training and Conservation Network" which was also funded by DAAD. The field expeditions served scientific and educational purposes, stimulated personal contacts and enhanced mutual understanding of the different motivations, cultural backgrounds and working approaches.

My PhD years motivated me to continue pursuing a career as an academic and research scientist and to continuously explore new avenues in basic science research. My stay in Germany is considered as a life-time experience. It made me feel more mature since being abroad forces one to depend on oneself in all aspects of life and this eventually makes one feel stronger and capable to face most of the difficulties encountered in life. I have become an individual committed to creative and critical thinking, life-long learning, personal integrity and leadership. In addition to that, I had the chance to get to know the German society and culture ad hoc. Being in an international city as Frankfurt, you get exposed to different intercultural backgrounds which widen your education and open you to the world. As a DAAD scholar, I become a catalyst to forge new links between my campus and the institution abroad.

By helping and encouraging students to apply for such a type of scholarship, educational exchanges between my homeland and the host country will be set forth.

Last but not least, being in Germany has opened many insights for intercultural experiences and cooperation that one might encounter once in a lifetime and it deserves to be named “Dialogue through Cooperation” since cooperation cannot be successful if it is not based on dialogue, respect and professionalism. I would strongly urge students from my homeland Lebanon to take up this opportunity as it would be a turning point in their lives on the personal, educational and professional levels.