

# DISCOVER LEBANON

## A MULTI CULTURAL COUNTRY

### WITH A HORSE HISTORY OF 2000 YEARS

By MONIKA SAVIER

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Graphic: Mario Brunetti



The Lebanon, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, is the point where the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa meet, geographically as well as culturally. The country was the ancient home of the Phoenicians who went from there (2700-450 BC) to become the masters of the sea trade and to re-define civilization.

There were Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Mamelukes, and finally French in the country, usually dominating for some centuries, leaving a rich historical heritage and putting their own stamp on the multicultural style that developed. All of them made the cities and landscapes of the Lebanon world-famous, not only as far as demonstrating the power and influence of the respective rulers and conquerors was concerned, but also with respect to the achievements of the civilian society: their sciences, arts, and culture. Horse breeding was probably introduced to the Lebanon by the Greeks. Even for centuries before Christ, they had been masters of the art of riding. It was the Romans, however, who built the first hippodrome 2000 years ago – and it is the only one that has been preserved for the world up to today, at least major parts of it.

The racetrack of Tyr, to the south of Beirut, was built in the 2nd century A.D. It is 1,575 feet (480 m) long and 525 feet (160 m) wide, making it the second largest hippodrome after the Circus Maximus in Rome. It had an estimated capacity of 20,000 spectators who came to see the famous chariot races. Until 150 years ago, the horse markets of Beirut, Aleppo, and Damascus had been the gateways to accessing the authentic Bedouin Arabian horse breeding of the greater area of Syria and the Arabian Nejd. For many of the purchasing expeditions of the European royal houses, these horse markets were the places where their search started for the most suitable breeding stock for improving their cavalry horses at home. During the last century, things calmed down around the authentic horses of Bedouin breeding. What remained, however, was the passion for horse racing, which is why it is not accidental that the most time-honored racetrack in the whole of the Middle East that features weekly horse races is the Hippodrome of Beirut, which is going to celebrate its 100 year anniversary next year.

**This year, it was already the location for the first and very successful Arabian horse show of Beirut.**



Photo: SPARCA



# THE FIRST LEBANESE ARABIAN HORSE CHAMPIONSHIPS AND BREEDERS CUP IN BEIRUT 2015

## From an idea to materialization:

There were lots of horse fans in the Lebanon, and it was their passion and their voluntary commitment that made the first national Arabian horse show in this country possible at all. Ultimately, however, it was Danny Ghosn who had the ideas, pooled the energies, and talked to the right persons in order to make this show become reality. During the turmoil of war, his family had emigrated to the USA, where his father bred Thoroughbreds. Danny grew up with horses, but he felt a pull to return to the Lebanon and to the Arabian horse breed. He invited me to visit his stud.

So we leave Beirut and drive some kilometers up into the mountains, in the direction of Mount Lebanon, where you have a brilliant view of the city of Beirut and the Mediterranean sea, where the air is fresh and clean, and where there are even some of the famous Lebanon cedars greeting us from the edges of the road. In his lovingly and perfectly restored stud, he told me the story of how he has come to organize this very first show.

"It has been since 2013 that we are trying to organize the first Arabian horse show, but due to the tension and wars going on around us, people had other priorities and it wasn't a good time to introduce this new event to the people. After all, the aim is to promote this strong, beautiful and athletic creature, the Arabian horse, in Beirut here in the Lebanon. In the end, however, it was not even that difficult. I was able to make a contract with the manager of the racetrack,

and we were allowed to use the vast premises. Of course, there are not enough free box stalls there to make organizing a big-scale show possible, but I hope that the Beirut city government will finally restore the racetrack as well as the necessary stabling and training facilities. After all, these can also be used for Arabian Show events, so I hope for next year for realizing a big show. The beginning of every road is a challenge, especially when organizing a show for the first time, and according to the international rules and regulations of AHO (the Arabian Horse Organization).

After the first show this year, which was so gratifyingly successful, we are really looking at a bright future for Arabian horse shows. So it's definitely our plan to establish two shows per year at the racetrack: one aiming at local breeders, and as for the second show, we are hoping that our city of contrast and diversity overlooking the Mediterranean Sea can one day become the meeting point between Europe and the Middle East and host an international show. This first show was a wake-up call for the breeders of the Lebanon. Quite definitely, breeders are now more enthusiastic for showing, as they have come to realize that they got a chance to present their horses and get them judged by an international jury. Many Arabian breeders are heading towards the show world and going to breed show horses now.

In 2016, our racetrack in Beirut will be a hundred years old and we are in the process of organizing a three-day horse event that would include an Arabian horse show and races for WAHO Arabians as well as races for our locally-bred horses. As an organization, "The Lebanese Arabian Horse Organization", we are highlighting the importance of races for Arabian horses and we are cooperating with Mr. Nabil Nasrallah, the director general of the racetrack, to establish a consistent race schedule, so more breeders would be encouraged to participate. We are also in the process of organizing a seminar for Arabian horse breeders in the Lebanon, as well as handlers and trainers seminars to inform and educate the motivated owners and breeders here in the Lebanon."



Mr. Danny Ghosn





savier

Mohamed Badrawy, Raouf Abbas and Elisabeth Chat, the judges with Essam Abdulla



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Essam Abdulla, Director General of AHO  
Nabil Nasrallah, Director General of the Hippodrome,  
Danny Ghosn, Show Organisator









The challenges were many, as for some breeders it was their first experience in participating at shows and evaluating their horses, therefore a big effort was done by Danny to better explain the rules and regulation of the show and the judging system. The biggest obstacle was training and handling of the horses, as many of them had been just taken out of the paddocks, for that Danny has asked two renowned handlers in Europe Philip Looyens and Robert Schlereth to come to Beirut and assist the owners in presenting their horses and advising them on conditioning of the horses, along with some young experienced Syrian handlers completing the local team. AHO, the Arabian Horse Organization took over with all practical matters of the show, coordinating the judges, DCs and ringmasters as well as the computer-based grading system, so it was possible to analyze the results on the spot and award the titles at once. Danny himself is a Board Member of AHO and the representative of Lebanon in this organization. About AHO, he says: "AHO is an organization with a clear vision aiming at serving the breeders of the Arabian horse in Arab countries and Europe, through promoting shows and conferences to highlight the essence

of breeding and giving the opportunity for new breeders to showcase their production." Essam Abdulla from Abu Dhabi, the Director General of AHO, was on-site himself and helped explain to the volunteer helpers which would be their respective parts for running the show. Tension was rising, the show ring was packed with enthusiastic young people, both boys and girls. Older horse experts stood along the sides, deep in conversation. They were still looking skeptical, never having witnessed a show like this one before, and were highly expectant. The spectators were greeted: "Welcome to the first Lebanese Arabian Horse show. The Arabian Horse and its grace has long been our rich heritage, where it held a prominent place in the life of our ancestors. The event puts into focus the incomparable beauty of purebred Arabian horses as well as the breeders in Lebanon and the potential in enhancing the world of Arabian horse lovers. ..." Disco music took over in the loudspeakers, warming up the crowd to an expectant mood, and when finally the heat of the day subsided, the first horses were led into the ring.



## THE ARABIAN HORSE SHOW

Altogether 54 horses, observed by hundreds of enthusiastic fans, entered the show ring. The three judges allotting the points to the horses were Mrs Elisabeth Chat from Austria and the gentlemen Mohamed Ahmed Fathy Badrawy and Abdelraouf

Abbas from Cairo/Egypt. The acting DC was Dr. Mamdouh Hassan Fouad Abdullah, and as Ringmaster, Dr. Abdelwahab Ali Amira had been won. Just like in all countries where Arabian horse breeding has not yet been subject to a long-term influence



Gold Champion Yearling Colt- Sami - Owner Sami Wardy



Minister of Tourism Mr. Michel Pharaon with class winner Sarab Al Bekaa - Owner Adnan Mazloun



Representative of the Agriculture Minister Dr. Elias Ibrahim - with the Yearling filly class winner Tania- Owner Maher Hammoud



Gold Champion Yearling Filly - Tania  
Owner Maher Hammoud

Silver Champion Junior Filly - Raghad - Owner Maher Hammoud



Silver Champion Yearling Filly - Leen Al Amin  
Owner Mohammad Amine





Bronze Champion Junior Filly - Racha Al Khalediah  
Owner Fayez Salloum



The Lebanese Artist Assi El Halani with Seif El Assi



Bronze Champion Yearling Filly - Khawater AG  
Owner Ahmad Ghaddar



Gold Champion Junior Filly - Celine  
Owner Maher Hammoud



Seif El Assi  
Owner Lebanese star Assi Al Halani



Silver Champion Junior Colt - Sakr El Sultan  
Owner Abdul Kader Dargham





Silver Champion Stallion - TM Walerian- Owner Talal El Akli



Silver Champion Yearling Colt- Hames - Owner Ahmad Sati



Gold Champion Stallions- FF Falcons psygnature  
Owner Mohammad El Ouraibi



Bronze Champion Junior Colt  
Phantom DA  
Owner Abdulkader Dargham



towards a „show standard“ for type and movements, there were many horses presented in Beirut who represented the variety within the breed, without displaying that certain uniformity of type so common in European shows. But many of the horses had their big points. Some of the show quality horses had doubtlessly been imported from Europe or the Middle East, others were born in Lebanon and home-bred. Some were definitely show talents. The three judges were well experienced and mostly unanimous in their assessments, so owners did not have problems with accepting the votes.





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Nabil Nasrallah, Director General of the Hippodrome,  
 Danny Ghosn, Show Organisator,  
 Judge Ziad Chebib, Governor of Beirut,  
 Essam Abdulla, Director General of AHO



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During the championships, on the second day of the show, Beirut's VIPs graced the show ring. The Minister of Tourism Mr. Michel Pharaon and the representative of the Minister of Agriculture, Dr. Elias Ibrahim, handed over the prizes, as did the Governor of Beirut, Judge Ziad Chebib, an enthusiastic horse fan who holds the idea of maintaining the racetrack, a green island right in the middle of the metropolis of Beirut, near and dear. Most selfies, however, were taken accompanied by the pop star and celebrated singer from the Lebanon, Assi El Halani, who had entered his stallion for the show and finished up third with him.



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Bronze Champion Stallion - Marwin Shah AN - with Polish Emabssador  
 Owner Maher Hammoud



Gold Champion Junior Colts- Shahb El Sultan  
 Owner Abdulkader Dargham



## BEIRUT: A CITY AND HER HORSES FOR A BETTER WORLD

Beirut is famous for being a party metropolis (the “Paris of the Orient”), and the inhabitants of the city are well known for having learned to celebrate whenever they have a chance – after the tragedy of fifteen years of civil war (1975-1990) and with much of the city reduced to rubble then, they know well how to get quite some creativity and passion out of life instead of spending vital lifetime in sorrow and misery. The population gives the impression of having shaken off the civil war just like that, getting rid of the dust of devastation, looking forward and just doing it with a zest for life and a philosophic view of things. Nobody talks about politics, religion, or the skyrocketing rents; everybody refrains from putting a strain on the atmosphere. Instead, the cultural scene in Beirut is flourishing just as much as are the arts and music scenes, and as much as in none of the other Arabian countries. The re-discovery of the Arabian horse is one of the elements of that flourishing, no doubt about that. Which is why certainly, the Lebanese Arabian Horse Organization is going to organize an impressive event next year. For in addition to the 100-year-anniversary of the Hippodrome, this symbol

of the multicultural co-operation of all the citizens of Beirut even during the barbarism of the wars, Danny Ghosn and his team plan for organizing a second Arabian Horse Show as well as a Breeders Conference in Beirut.

This multifaceted city is well worth being visited and enjoyed. For 7 years now, there has been peace in Lebanon, a fact that triggered a tremendous building and construction boom in Beirut. The old Beirut was, by and large, built in Art Deco style, and up to the 1960ies, the impressive feature of the city was the fascinating mix of Ottoman architecture and the turn-of-the-century style from the beginning of the 1900. However, this building stock of old has been destroyed to a great extent, and when the war damage was cleared away, the historic Old Town finally lost its authentic structure. Only a few of the buildings have been preserved, as new investors from the Middle East preferred to tear the old houses down and build whole new city quarters instead, even if partly in the old style. The shopping malls (called the Beirut







Souks) in the Old Town might be taken right out of the proceedings of a modern architectural competition. Barbarism or renaissance? Personally, I see more of the renaissance in that, as the vividly colorful variety apparent in the many Quarters of Beirut corresponds to the multifaceted structure of the population. For many Lebanese, the construction boom is the symbol of a new era, one no longer characterized by upheaval and violence, but by stability and prosperity – in one word, by peace. The Central District displays another kind of fascination today. Not because so many international luxury brands have opened branch stores there, but because the people have succeeded in breathing their very own Lebanese

soul even into this modern, newly established world. It's a quarter that looks like the tolerant, city-run Diversity Management that created it, not only because of the great number of different churches and mosques, not only because of the creative cafés and restaurants, the party and music culture, and the graffiti around – no, what is so enjoyable about it are the atmosphere and the air of communication everywhere. I am looking forward to next year when the Arabian Show is going to take place in Beirut – a terrific motivation to enjoy, in addition to the horses, some days in this interesting city the like of which is hardly to be found anywhere else in the Arabian world.



# RACING WITH A WIND FOR CHANGE

## THE RACETRACK IN BEIRUT: AN UNTOUCHABLE PEARL AND THE GREEN HEART OF THE CITY

The genetic code of the horse makes it react as a flight animal, and in the wilderness only the quick and healthy horses survived and were able to breed. In today's horse breeding, the racetrack is the place that comes closest to reproducing natural selection. Those stallions and mares that make it to the winning ranks are mainly used as breeding stock.

Indeed the ancient Romans built a racetrack on the outskirts of Beirut, in an area that is today near the central District Down Town, they wanted to combine their horse selection with their philosophy of „bread and circuses“ for the population. For centuries, competition was the underlying motive for breeding and racing. In Beirut the foundations for a "new" Hippodrome were laid in a suburb in 1895, and in 1916 it was transferred to the pine forest in the middle of Beirut.

By MONIKA SAVIER

Photographies: MONIKA SAVIER

Graphic: Mario Brunetti









Where did the racehorses come from? It was the Bedouin tribes, originating mainly from the Syrian Hinterland and greater Arabia, that introduced the purebred Arabian horse to Lebanon during their long journeys in quest of food and a better life in a more fertile environment.

Many prominent families in Lebanon founded renowned studs, started to breed with this bloodstock of Bedouin Arabian horses, and presented their products on the racetrack in the city. In the forties Lebanon raced exceptional stallions like Cheikh el Arab, Ghazwane and Machaal, which consolidated the **Lebanese Arabian Racer**.

During the long years of upheaval in Lebanon, a large number of purebred Arabians, especially broodmares, was dispersed and exported to other countries.

This is why when the first studbook in Lebanon was created, only 23 purebred Arabian horses gained entry there – after almost a hundred years of endeavors for their protection and natural selection through the racing activities.

During the civil war, the racetrack obtained a special importance, as the engineer Nabil Nasrallah, who is today the Director General of the Hippodrome, reports. He explained: "There was the famous Green Line, not to be crossed, dividing the city of Beirut into a western and an eastern part. Right on this line was the location of the 20 hectares (99 acres) of the Racetrack and the Horse Park of Beirut, a green oasis in the middle of the city where hundreds of horses were trained. They belonged to people of all religious affiliations, and the same was true for the trainers, the jockeys and grooms – a multicultural melting pot the contents of which were not to be divided even by the war".

When the horse feed ran out, the President of the Republic Elias Sarkis requested an urgent meeting with the American Emissaire Philippe Habib and Arafat ordered his Palestinian PLO guerilla force to keep a ceasefire. Israel's Prime Minister Begin followed suit, and Sharon ordered a ceasefire as well, all so the horses could be provided for. Nabil Nasrallah also tells the story of the many meetings between the enemy forces that took place on the racetrack, a small world of its own of mutual trust.

Despite of all that, nobody was able to prevent a Merkewa tank from reducing mayor parts of the racetrack to rubble later on. Most of the horses died in that pandemonium, and several attempts to re-start racing operations during the war failed.

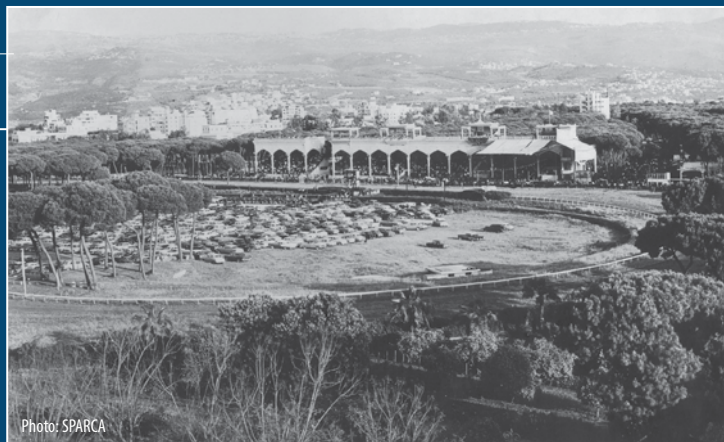
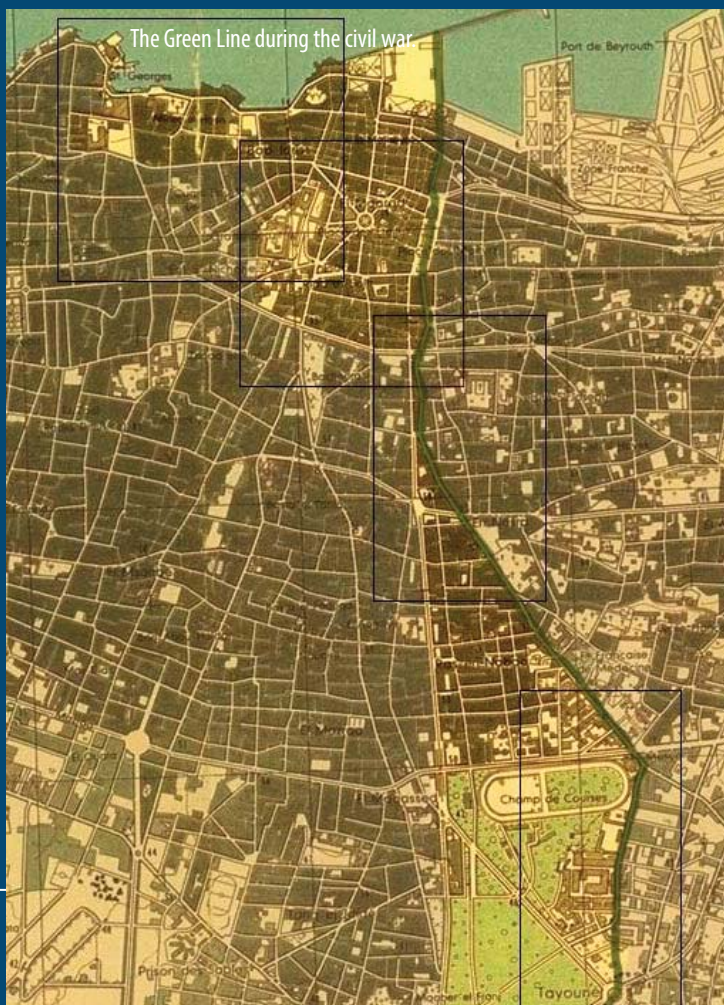


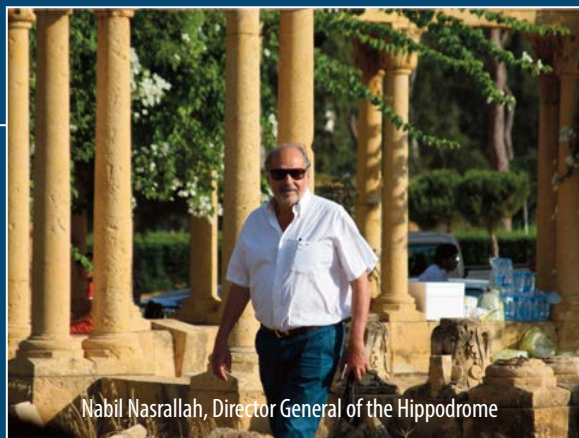
Photo: SPARCA



Photo: SPARCA







Nabil Nasrallah, Director General of the Hippodrome



Beirut is a city that was devastated by war, and now that there is peace, it is faced with and maybe threatened by a construction boom that does not intend to stop in front of the racetrack's boundaries – in spite of the fact that the track was and still is a historic interface for the peace between the cultures. Besides, it is the last green area today that gives Beirut some breathing space.

**One could say about the Hippodrome that in war times it was devastated and in Peace it is now threatened.**

But despite this the Racetrack is viewed by many of the Beirut inhabitants as one of the Christian-Moslem peaceful coexistence centers in the city, making up one of the cornerstones of Lebanon's integral statehood.

The governor of the City, his Excellency, Judge Ziad Chebib in cooperation with the responsible society of the racetrack is now attempting to give the whole area of the hippodrome an important role for the future, and he is also aiming to raise the awareness of people in Lebanon, Europe and the Arabian world for the events planned for next year.

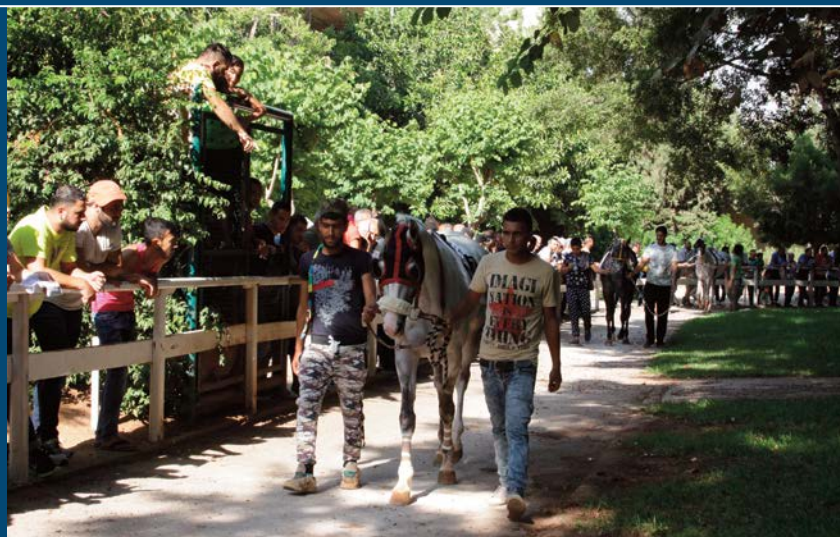
This will include as an important date for Beirut in 2016, a festival to mark the 100-year anniversary of this legendary hippodrome, an event which will demonstrate Beirut's firm intention to regenerate the historical site.

With breeders participating from many other countries, and with the sponsorship of the races and other events such as the Arabian horse show, it is hoped that there will be greater awareness of the multi-cultural history of the racetrack and the role it has played in symbolizing the ideas of peaceful co-existence in this case on the part of horse lovers from across the country irregardless of their cultural background. In addition Shows for Arabian horses featuring the „WAHO Arabians“ are just as popular as races, and this is particularly true with the people from Europe and the Middle East, who are sure to insist on visiting a great event such as this one. There will be a wide range of festivities to celebrate the occasion, including races, Arabian horse shows, conferences and exhibitions.

Even if right now and as far as structural conditions are concerned, the racetrack gives a somewhat neglected impression, according to experts' opinions, the hippodrome has great development potential as an interface between the cultures of the West and the East.

In the near future, Lebanon could well become a growth engine by organizing international races and Arabian horse shows, and this could be extended to providing ideal training facilities for horses from the Middle East and Europe. Nabil Nasrallah suggests however that at the moment there are not enough facilities there to train as many horses as





would be necessary to be internationally competitive. He says "only 360 box stalls and one race track are operational, as compared to another 1500 box stalls that were available before the war in the 1970ies. With the help of a new investment it might be possible to organize additional training premises in the city's outskirts, or to install several hundred more box stalls in the Hippodrome area, so more breeders of Arabian horses will have the opportunity to professionally train their horses".

He and the breeders from Lebanon are hoping that new sponsors from all cultures would find themselves motivated to invest in the country and her long-lasting peace. We all hope that the racetrack, once more, will be the platform that enables the Western and the Eastern worlds of Arabian horse enthusiasts to meet.



Nabil Nasrallah, Director General in his office