

## Off-grid solar beirut

Built on time and under budget at just more than \$3 million, the Beirut River Solar Snake Project is claimed by its creators to be the only one of its kind. The government-funded project is set to be completed in a matter of weeks as part of a drive to make 12 percent of the country's energy renewable by 2020.

Pierre El Khoury, director of the Lebanese Center for Energy Conservation, explained that the 300-meter-long structure is both a practical response to a problem and an effort to spur the solar industry.

"Solar farms are very important but solar farms use a huge amount of land, and land in Beirut is extremely expensive," he said, adding that "the idea is to give a strong signal that Lebanon is really committed to producing electricity from renewable energy sources."

A legacy of underinvestment, inefficiency and corruption that date to the country's civil war make power cuts an endemic part of daily life, with many parts of the country getting just a few hours of grid electricity a day.

"Lebanon has witnessed a huge increase and boost in the renewable-energy business, thanks to the encouragement and strong signals that the Beirut Solar Snake has given to the private sector," he added.

Since then, he said, the industry has seen a growth in interest among the public and business, partly spurred on by interest-free loans for renewable-energy projects from the country's central bank.

"When I started, there were about 20 companies [in the solar energy business], but now there are 50 or 60," Kradigian said. "Before, there was not education around the issue, but now you see electives to study it in universities."

There is a growing market in off-grid electricity, with many people relying on diesel-powered generators. But those who use them must pay both for state and private power, leading to greatly inflated bills, plus high levels of pollution from the generators.

"Of course, that will have an influence on everything: on you and on those around you, on your work. You will have a little more money for yourself," she said. "My family dwells here, so they will as well benefit from this."

The Lebanese Center for Energy Conservation is looking at the possibility of a new solar farm in south Lebanon, as well as examining less densely populated parts of the country like the Beqaa Valley.

Raymond Ghajar, a professor at the Lebanese American University and an advisor to the government, told VOA that the state "doesn't allow the private sector enough safety or security" to emulate large-scale



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renewable projects like the Solar Snake.

"All new projects should be owned and operated by the private sector, but the private sector will not come to an entity that is broken," said Ghajar, who claimed that efforts to begin reforming the sector that began in 2010 had been stalled in parliament.

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