Founders’ Day Ceremony 2015

President Fadlo R. Khuri’s Speech

Your excellencies, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, students, staff, and honored guests, good afternoon.

Let me give you a quick recap of the past 150 years.

Borders have been drawn and redrawn, and of the 195 present-day sovereign nations, only about 60 existed in 1866.

Women have gone from having no vote in any nation to almost full suffrage everywhere.

The earth’s population has more than tripled.

And in terms of technological advances, well, the big news in 1866 was the laying of the first permanent telegraph cable between Europe and North America.

Here at AUB, the changes may have been smaller in scale, but no less dramatic.

On this day in 1871, Daniel Bliss said, “This college is for all conditions and classes of men without regard to color, nationality, race or religion. A man, white, black, or yellow, Christian, Jew, Mohammedan or heathen, may enter and enjoy all the advantages of this institution for three, four or eight years; and go out believing in one God, in many gods, or in no God. But it will be impossible for anyone to continue with us long without knowing what we believe to be the truth and our reasons for that belief.” Where else but in Lebanon’s uniquely diverse and tolerant society could Daniel Bliss have sought to fulfill these goals? Where else could AUB and its liberal influence have flourished so vibrantly?

150 years ago, this university was founded by missionaries in a house with a freshman class of 16 and a distinctly faith-based raison d’etre. The language of instruction was Arabic, but accepted students were expected to know or learn English and French.

Today, we are a large, emphatically secular American-style liberal arts college and research institution with nearly 8,000 students, almost perfectly divided between women and men, and more than 60,000 graduates in practically every country on earth. And all 60,000 of them believe they can make a difference.

Most of us here know the what of AUB. It’s a good story, one often told, one worth repeating and celebrating. During the coming year, you will see and hear a lot about our history and accomplishments, the people and events woven into our fabric.

What I want to consider today is the how and the why of AUB.

How did the Syrian Protestant College, the germ of which originated in a small seminary school in Abeh, endure to become the American University of Beirut? How did we come to be so instrumental in virtually every social movement, every scientific advance, every literary and artistic feat in the Arab world?
Why, we must ask ourselves, are we still here? How are we relevant today, and how will we continue to be relevant tomorrow? Through world wars, through the forging of new nations and the fall of empires, through a Civil War that nearly dismantled this country, how have we remained a force to be reckoned with?

The answer, quite simply, is that this University, its leaders and its faculty, its staff and students, have always preferred to shape events, rather than be shaped by them. To act, rather than be acted upon. For the past 150 years, we have stood for the highest ideals, even—and perhaps especially—when to do otherwise would have been far easier.

**We have stood for engaged leadership.**

Describing the years immediately following World War I, then AUB President Stephen Penrose wrote, the call came “from Lebanon and Syria, Palestine and Transjordan, ‘Iraq, Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, Persia, Ethiopia, Zanzibar and the Sudan. It came to the American University of Beirut with special force because for fifty-eight years the College had been supplying just the kind of men who were needed.”

What they were needed for was the building of nations emerging from under Ottoman control. To be the “teachers, doctors, pharmacists, engineers, economists, and political scientists” who would leave their indelible mark on the world.

To date, no other institution in history has educated more presidents, prime ministers, members of parliament, and other influential political figures in the Arab world than AUB. Faris Al Khoury, a graduate and later instructor at AUB, was instrumental in founding the modern Syrian state and twice served as Prime Minister in the 1940s and 50s. Alumnus Ismail Al-Azhari became Prime Minister of Sudan in 1954, and later President. Charles Malik, alumnus and professor, helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, one of the most important documents of the modern era, affirming that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” The current President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, graduated from AUB in 1973 with a degree in Political Studies.

But, as Penrose notes, it is not only politicians who forge societies. After listing the many high-profile positions filled by AUB graduates in the Arab world, he writes:

“Such a list omits any reference to the much larger numbers of municipal officers, civil servants and teachers. It does not mention the entrepreneurs, business men, farmers, and professional men,” and I will add women, “who have... contributed largely to the development of national life in their respective countries.”

Think about this for a moment. We have helped develop societies from the ground up. Today, we continue to shape the physical and economic landscape of the Middle East in remarkable ways, through the vision and influence of alumni like Emile Boustany, founder of CAT; former trustee Kamal al Shair, founder of Dar al-Handasah; and members of the Sabbagh and Khoury families, who formed Consolidated Contractors Company while at AUB. At the same time, the work of Samir Makdisi has been hugely influential in our understanding of economies in the Arab world.
And through studies on novel technologies and those applied to society's neediest, AUB continues to lead the way in developing new approaches to societies in turmoil and transformation.

This is part of the monumental legacy that makes this University unlike any other in the world. The building blocks of civil society all over the Arab world—the food that citizens eat, the buildings they live in, the schools their children attend—can be traced back to the knowledge, skills, and tenacity that countless men and women developed here, at AUB.

We have stood for gender equality.

It is hard for us to imagine today the incredible boldness of the decision by the administration in 1924 to admit women and make AUB a co-educational institution. After all, this was some fifty years before Harvard, Yale, and Princeton opened their doors to women. In the United States at the time, as in this part of the world, the possibility of having women in classes with men was widely viewed as being damaging to students of both sexes, if not immoral. AUB’s radical move was a sign of things to come. In the next few years, AUB graduated female students in Pharmacy, Dentistry, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Midwifery, Business, and in 1931, the first female medical doctor, Adma Abu Shdeed.

Five years later, in 1938, the mother of our esteemed Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Philip Khoury, because AUB’s first female instructor. Angela Jurdak Khoury taught Sociology and went on to become Lebanon’s first woman diplomat, in addition to numerous other prestigious positions and honors.

Today, and for the past three decades, women have outnumbered men in nearly every incoming freshman class at this University. For them, as for their trailblazing forebears, AUB is an incubator for creativity, a remover of obstacles, and an enabler of ambition.

We see this in women like Salwa Makarem, class of 1958, who revitalized AUB’s School of Nursing in the early 1990s and founded the Lebanese Order of Nurses in 2002; women like Zaha Hadid, who began as a mathematics student at AUB and went on to become the world-renowned architect behind such celebrated works as the MAXXI-National Museum in Rome, the London Olympics Aquatics Centre, and our own IFI building; women like Dima Jamali, who holds a chair in the Olayan School of Business, and who has been recognized as a major advocate for corporate social responsibility; and women like engineer Aya Bdeir, class of 2004, a leader of the open-source hardware movement and founder and CEO of LittleBits, an innovative modular electronics company.

Like so many of you, who work in what are still heavily male-dominated industries, these women were beneficiaries of a long-held belief in gender equality at this institution. As such, we have established the Task Force on the Lives and Careers of Women Faculty at AUB, co-chaired by Dr. Howayda al-Harithy and Dr. Huda Zurayk. The Task Force will explore the “gender discrepancies” in “well-being, in income, in leadership, in recruitment and in opportunities for academic advancement.” What, it will ask, are “the obstacles to achieving full gender equity.” Because, as we know, without true gender parity, a university and, more importantly, a society cannot fully progress.
We have stood for service in times of great need.

The 20th Century provided no shortage of opportunities for AUB to prove the sincerity and efficacy of its public service ethos. For example, the humanitarian work of the doctors at this University has been well documented. In the 1912 Battle of Beirut between Ottoman and Italian forces, the college took in refugees and its doctors worked as medics to treat the wounded. During World War I, SPC doctors, nurses, and medical students were central to Red Cross relief efforts. What we today call AUBMC has time and again served as a war hospital, staffed by doctors and nurses who made great personal sacrifices in the face of dwindling supplies to be able to keep up with the ever-growing scale of each catastrophe.

Lebanon’s Civil War was the inferno out of which AUB’s humanitarian spirit emerged crystallized. As our own Cynthia Myntti, Rami Zurayk, and Mounir Mabsout documented in a 2009 article about AUB’s public service legacy, it was no small feat to keep the university open amid damage to infrastructure, unthinkable violence both outside and within the University walls, and the near impossibility of maintaining the necessary faculty and staff.

But, they add, “AUB records ...also describe heroic voluntary efforts to keep the hospital emergency room functioning when it was too dangerous for essential staff to get to Ras Beirut, ... or when displaced persons were cared for in West Hall during the Israeli invasion of 1982. And when feasible, some faculties continued community-based research. The Faculty of Health Sciences, for instance, conducted... epidemiological surveillance; disease control activities, and in particular the monitoring of drinking water quality; evaluation of services; and research on the effects of war on the Lebanese population.”

Accounts such as these read more like descriptions of government and aid agencies, not a university. As an institution we have never doubted the notion that we exist for the benefit of the people around us, or questioned the size of our role and responsibilities. Today, our exemplary team of researchers from the Faculty of Health Sciences is leading the study of health conditions in war time societies.

A Wall Street Journal article from June of this year entitled “Beirut Hospital Offers Hope for Civilians Injured in Iraq, Syria,” details some of the ways we continue to take this role very seriously and innovate new methods to serve those who need it most.

The article states, “The hospital is using cutting-edge technology to treat blast-wound patients from Iraq and Syria as it seeks to position itself as a global leader in conflict medicine, a growing field in light of the continuing violence in the Middle East and the mass migration to Europe of refugees, many of them war-wounded. ...Later this year, the medical center’s doctors plan to test a device that would enable them to virtually guide and assist in surgeries being performed in conflict zones.”

That such stunning technological advances in the field of medicine are being used to care for the region’s most vulnerable makes them a true testament to what we stand for.

Today, from the AREC farm’s contributions to agriculture in the Beka’a, to the mission of the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service, to scholarships for refugees, we continue to take as a given our unflagging obligation to the societies and people that both sustain and need us.
We have stood for groundbreaking intellectual and artistic accomplishment in the Arab world.

Cornelius Van Dyck is known for being one of the founding professors of SPC and for establishing the Medical School. A true polymath, he was also a tremendously important scholar of Arabic, who contributed a wide range of Arabic textbooks for use in Syrian schools, as well as texts for medical students. Most famously, he created Arabic translations of the Old and New Testaments, along with Yacoub Sarrouf, Boutros al-Bustani, Nasif al Yaziji and Yusuf al-Asir, all of them important figures in the Nahda, or the Arab Renaissance. In doing so, Van Dyck helped lay the groundwork for an extraordinary revival of Arab intellectual and scientific achievement.

The first fifty years of the University were a galvanizing time in this part of the world. The Nahda took shape in the late 19th century, adding fuel to a wide-spread movement of Arab-initiated reform. It was a time of prodigious productivity and innovation in literature, journalism, and political thought. The beauty and importance of the Arabic language were reaffirmed.

And, as you would expect, AUB was a crucible for some of the most original and game-changing intellectual work being done anywhere at the time, during the Nahda and beyond. Phillip Khuri Hitti, who graduated in 1908, is considered the father of modern Arabic studies. Constantin Zurayk, class of 1928, was proponent of secular nationalism in the Arab world and a peerless thinker who originated the idea of the Palestinian Nakba. Ghassan Tueni, class of 1945, served as editor of An-Nahar newspaper and came to be known as one of the region’s most respected journalists. Ghada Al-Samman, class of 1965. She did her graduate work in Theater here, back when we had a thriving Theater program, and has written acclaimed novels about Beirut during the Civil War.

Inextricable from the War is Khalil Hawi, celebrated Lebanese poet whose life came to a tragic end in 1982.

يقول الشاعر الخلاق خليل حاوي في قصيدته المشهوره “البحار والدرويش”:

هات خيَّر عن كنوز السَّرَّت
عينيَك في الغيب لِلعيْق
طرقَ التُّحرِيْر سِهْها تَتنائى
حنِّ بابي تُنهي كُل طُريقٍ
Coming of age a decade after Hawi, historian Kamal Salibi, class of 1949, wrote essential texts on the history of Lebanon and the region. In 1953 he returned to AUB, where he spent more than thirty years in the Department of History and Archaeology. Samir Khalaf, a contemporary of Salibi’s, has also made critical contributions to our understanding of Lebanon, and still teaches at AUB.

Izzat Tannous and George Habash, major architects of Palestinian nationalism, were among the many who found their inspiration here. As the bastion of academic free speech and progressive thought in the Arab world, this University has always had a place for unconventional, even radical thought.

Our academic and intellectual leaders have helped transform a broad spectrum of modern Arab thought and politics. It is precisely for this reason that we sought to restore tenure, as approved recently by the Board.

This critical development will help us attract the brightest minds in their respective fields and support the faculty we already have, who are upholding the standards of their predecessors. People like Philosophy professor Raymond Brassier, historian Nadia al Cheikh, and Ramzi Baalbaki, one of the world’s foremost authorities on the Arabic language.

And there are many, many others, past and present. Scholars and artists of exceptional stature, to whom we owe our understanding of the world, of who we are and how we fit into the big picture, individually and collectively. They set their critical eyes to the society around us and help us know ourselves. After all, this is the promise and the importance of the humanities.

We have stood for pioneering research.

The liberal arts seek answers to difficult questions. It is a mode of education that is particularly conducive to exploration. And the cornerstone of all great research is the will and the willingness to explore.

Across all faculties at this University, difficult questions have been pursued. Few have had the scope of Post Herbarium. Dr. George Post was a professor of Medicine at SPC. An accomplished botanist, in 1883 he published *The Flora of Syria, Palestine and Sinai*. To this day, it is the definitive work on the plant life native to the region. Complementing the book is the incredible Post Herbarium, which remains one of the few herbaria in the region and the only one in Lebanon. Housed there are more than 20,000 specimens. The importance of this collection and the work that has gone into it cannot be overstated. Its usefulness extends to medicine, to ecology, to conservation, to biology, to agriculture, even, arguably, to fine arts. Its interdisciplinary implications—and its significance—are tremendous.

No doubt ICARDA had this legacy in mind when they entrusted AUB this year with the safekeeping of the Doomsday Seeds, a choice with enormous implications for the future health and wellbeing of the region.
So it is with all important research. It should make a difference, leave an imprint. Raja Khuri, my father, was a pioneer in the field of renal physiology; Adel Afifi, in neuroscience; Suhail Jabbur, in neurophysiology. Each of these men not only influenced how we heal our patients, but was instrumental in shaping our institutional commitment to impactful research.

And our impact has been undeniable. The famed Beirut Reaction, discovered by Makhlouf Haddadin and late AUB Professor Emeritus Costas Issidorides, was implemented by Pfizer to enhance the safety of animal feed.

Alan Shihadih and Najat Saliba have led a groundbreaking study on the impact of emissions and inhalational exposures.

Iman Nuwayhid spent many years studying these very effects on poor child labor conditions in Lebanon. In 2012, Nuwayhid’s findings ultimately resulted in the passage of Decree 8987, prohibiting children under 18 from working in hazardous environments in Lebanon.

At the Issam Fares Institute, the lived realities of refugees and internally displaced persons is being documented as part of an ongoing research project that aims to influence the way we discuss and try to ameliorate the refugee situation.

In the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture alone, we have more than 30 state-of-the-art laboratories, where students and faculty are pursuing research questions in Hydraulic, Fiberoptics, microprocessing, robotics, fluid mechanics, and renewable energy, to name just a few. We are witnessing cutting-edge work by in Robotics, [pause]

in sustainable energy, [pause]

in tackling epilepsy, [pause]

as in understanding the implications of design in Islamic cities. [pause]

Our faculty are investigating fundamental questions about how to create environments in which human beings don’t just survive, but thrive. We are creating and disseminating the knowledge needed in the region, to make the Arab world more reliant on Arab expertise.

At AUBMC, we are finding ways to address head on the evolving medical needs of the Arab world, to be proactive as well as reactive. Our research is accomplishing this already. We have major pioneers in the fields of Diabetes, Leukemia, and Multiple Sclerosis.

These are just a few examples. There are so many, doing such critical work. But 150 years in 30 minutes is no small feat. What you should take from this glimpse at our history is both a sense of pride, and a sense of urgency. We have work to do.

**So what is this work that needs to be done? With such a heritage, where do we go from here? What do we stand for today?**

To begin with, we need to continue the work that has already been started.
We are profoundly grateful to the Board of Trustees, who have reinstated tenure, so that we can once again be a magnet and safeguard for the greatest minds working today. We need to revive the AUB Press, which was once a thriving and prolific publisher of pivotal titles. We need to stay at the forefront of pedagogical innovations, using all the tools available to us in this ever-shifting technological frontier, and to re-establish AUB's pre-eminence in the humanities in the Arab World. We need to make AUBMC world-class once more, to compete on a global level through centers of excellence and make an even greater impact in the region. And we need to make AUB more accessible than ever to the best and the brightest students and scholars everywhere, to become an institution that can attract people from all walks of life, so that they can be transformed by their experience here, and that their impact and ours continues to disseminate far beyond our walls, and reach beyond the limits of their and our imaginations.

A legacy such as ours should always inspire us to take more risks, to deepen our culture of community service, from the humblest Lebanese villages to the neediest Syrian and Palestinian refugees, and dare to live up the lofty ideals of the many who have gone before. The stakes have always been great at AUB, as have the challenges. We in the AUB community would not have it any other way.

Thank you.