Inauguration Ceremony of the Photo Voltaic Plant
July 11, 2016
President Fadlo R. Khuri’s Speech

I left my speech behind when I saw that I was a little later in the program, and most of what I had to say would be covered. I want to talk about a few relevant issues today for the government officials and the students.

Your Excellences, colleagues and friends, I want to point out that one should never waste a good crisis. Today, we have a real environmental crisis, and we should emerge a better society once it is over. In the 1850s and early 1860s, Lebanon had its first true civil war in Mount Lebanon; and out of that terrible war emerged some of the drivers of the Arab Awakening; principle among them Boutros El-Bustani who was a great scholar, and came from Mount Lebanon. Boutros El-Bustani actually converted to the Presbyterian religion and worked for the rest of his career with the Presbyterian missionaries at the American University of Beirut. And as much as anyone else, he was the driver of the Arab Awakening. He founded the Wataniya School, which I will have an opportunity to tour in few weeks with his excellency Mr. Sheheyeb. What came from that period was an era of tremendous innovation, mostly in literature, but also in a number of other areas such as science and religion.

Along this line of not wasting a good crisis but also of sensing a real crisis, I want to read from a speech that I have never forgotten because I got to watch it live on TV. This speech was delivered by Jimmy Carter on April 18, 1977 during his first few months as president. He said: “Tonight I want to have an unpleasant talk with you about a problem unprecedented in our history, with the exception of preventing war, this is the greatest challenge our country will face during our lifetimes. The energy crisis has not yet overwhelmed us (– remember this is 1977 –) but it will if we do not act quickly. It’s a problem we will not solve in the next few years, and it is likely to get progressively worse through the rest of this century; we must not be selfish or timid if we hope to have a decent world for our children and grandchildren. We simply must balance our demand for energy with our rapidly shrinking resources; by acting now we can control our future instead of letting the future control us.” I think this is still just as important a message for Lebanon and for the Arab World in 2016 as it was for the American people in 1977.

In the next few years and decades we will see the reconstruction of major societies in our part of the world; in Lebanon, in Syria, eventually in Palestine, whether our Israeli neighbors will like it or not. There will be free states here, where people will have real rights; and everywhere where free people have the right to express their opinion, they will have the ability to move forward with the pursuit of happiness and a happier, healthier life. But this is contingent upon our being resourceful and responsible stewards of the environment. I have never liked or voted for Al Gore, but the one thing he and I agree upon is that we are destroying our environment. We can see that global warming is a real phenomenon, and for me, who grew up in the very progressive state of Lebanon in the 1960s, when really there was a very progressive government that put in from 1958 to 1970s some remarkably entrepreneurial resources in electricity, water, and other areas – and agriculture I might add - ideas that were never fully implemented because of the war, the opportunity is now to start to implement these things; implementing them through a public/private/academic partnership.

We've spent much of our last year – AUB’s 150th year – but my first year on the job, reaching out to these partners; be they in Saint Joseph University and other universities, or in the government, or in the private sector. And this is a wonderful first launch of entrepreneurship and that the dean of
engineering—who is entrepreneurial in his very core—and his team have decided to launch; it is responsible, it is progressive, it is societally conservative in a good sense that it conserves energy but it creates new resources. It was deeply depressing for those of us who had seen the previously progressive, ordered Lebanon to see the extension of electrical cords, legal and illegal, that have now proliferated even further after Israel has devastated the infrastructure of Lebanon in 2006 under the pretext of a retaliatory war.

From my point of view, we need to invest in sustainable energy that creates opportunities for the future. This is the responsibility of the universities. We have more intellectual capital than others; and we’re not just doing it out of our generosity, but rather because the primary driver of our agenda as an administration is to have a more intellectually, economically, and environmentally sustainable AUB. We have to be not just good citizens, but leaders in the stewardship of our resources and the national resources.

So for me, this is a very proud and happy day. It is a small but very significant first step. I want to thank the EU, the UNDP, the government, all of the sponsors, and to say that we will meet you more than halfway moving forward as we try to be responsible stewards of the future of the young people of this nation…. Thank you very much!