

# Founders Day Remarks, 2011

President Peter Dorman

Dear friends of the AUB community, welcome to this year's Founders Day ceremony, which commemorates the establishment of our university 145 years ago. It is not every day that we have the chance to welcome the Founders themselves back to AUB: so I offer them our warmest greetings as well.

The Syrian Protestant College, opened its doors on December 3, 1866, with just a handful of students, using for its campus only a few rooms in what Daniel Bliss described as "an insignificant building."

He yearned to establish a more substantial base, but wished to ground the College in a solid educational philosophy. Bliss recounts in his memoirs that, "We were not anxious to appear great, but we were anxious to lay foundations upon which greatness could be built."

Within five years, the cornerstone of the original College Hall was erected on the site of our present campus. Ten years later, the student body had grown to 77, increasing to over 600 by the time Daniel Bliss resigned the presidency in 1902.

We now have almost 8,000 students pursuing undergraduate, graduate, and medical degrees. Since the first class of students graduated in 1870, AUB has awarded over 82,000 degrees and diplomas. From our own perspective, the Founders of AUB certainly achieved their goal of laying the foundations of greatness.

The essential foundation of this university, which we continue to build upon, is not one of bricks and mortar, but an abiding commitment to serving the people of this region

and beyond, by providing outstanding liberal arts and pre-professional education, supporting research that creates knowledge, and servicing the broader community through the best healthcare in the region and through a deep dedication to community building.

In closing his “Reminiscences” Daniel Bliss also says this: “The question of who made the college is not so important as the question: What has caused its continuance and its remarkable growth?”

As we approach the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the university in 2016, this question remains as relevant and as poignant now as then. I believe one answer is that our academic philosophy is based on a strong model of liberal arts education, and at the same time we are steadfastly committed to values that are of great importance to the Middle East today.

We strive to remain relevant to this region and its people, and have done so throughout the myriad and substantive changes of the past 145 years: from anti-colonialism to regime changes to the Palestinian *nakba*—and now the citizen-led uprisings collectively dubbed “the Arab spring.”

Today we honor the legacy of the Founders: AUB is of and for the people of this region and will remain so, as the first faculty and Board intended, and we will continue to build on this strong foundation.

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This year, we invited all our undergraduate students to participate in the 13<sup>th</sup> annual student essay contest for Founder's Day, writing on the following topic:

**In light of AUB's historic legacy as an institution that fosters social advancement, what role can our university play in this region during the time of the Arab Spring?**

My special thanks go to the faculty committee who were asked to select the winning submissions: Dr. Bashshar Haydar, Professor of Philosophy; Dr. Mounir Mabsout, Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering; and Dr. Rami Zurayk, Professor of Landscape Design and Ecosystem Management. Let me also extend my personal thanks to all of the students who took the time to write an essay this year. This year the faculty committee decided to award prizes to two essays.

- Second prize has been awarded to junior **Karim Nasr**, a Biology major in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, who wrote an essay called "The Arab Winter".
- The first prize winner is **Aliaa Mostafa El Zeiny**, a senior Political Studies and Public Administration major in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

I am delighted to introduce Ms. El Zeiny who will now read her essay, entitled "An Egyptian, An Arab, An AUB Student."

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It is a distinct pleasure for me to introduce the main speaker for Founder's Day 2011, H.E. Leila Sharaf. An alumna and trustee emeriti of AUB's Board of Trustees, Leila

Sharaf has been a pioneer and champion of human rights – particularly the rights and empowerment of women – in this region. She was the first woman to join the Jordanian Senate as well as the first to hold the portfolio of Minister of Information. Despite the prestige and honor of these positions, she decided to resign both of these posts rather than sacrifice her principles. A fervent defender of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, democratization, and liberalization, Leila Sharaf has shown her abiding commitment to the betterment of this region and its people throughout her life's work.

A true citizen of the world, Leila Sharaf was born and spent much of her youth in Lebanon. She earned her B.A. and M.A. in Literature from AUB, during which time she met her husband, Abdulhamid Sharaf, and later moved with him to Jordan. She also lived many years in the United States while her husband was Jordan's ambassador to the United States and delegate to the UN. She has served on numerous prestigious Boards, including The Arab Thought Forum, the Institute for Human Rights in Tunis, the Amman Center for Human Rights, and as Chair of the Board of Trustees of Philadelphia University in Jordan. Leila Sharaf is also deeply committed to preserving the environment, having served as President, Vice-president, and as a Trustee of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature.

And as a personal note, I'd simply like to add that Leila Sharaf is a remarkably generous and warm person, who remains passionately dedicated to AUB.

Please join me in welcoming her, to deliver this year's Founder Day address.