The Middle East in 1958: Reimagining a revolutionary year

March 22, 2019

President Fadlo R. Khuri welcome speech

Distinguished scholars, partners from peer institutions, colleagues, and friends, I am very pleased to welcome you to this reexamination of regional and global political history that shaped—and continues to shape—the modern Middle East.

Although not often recognized as such, 1958 was a pivotal year. Transformative changes came about across the region—from the Maghreb to the Gulf—and not least in Lebanon, which was the scene of the United States’ first deployment of combat troops in this entire region. The amphibious landings near Beirut took place against a turbulent backdrop, the violent coup in Iraq, the union between Egypt and Syria, and growing political and religious tensions in the Lebanese body politic. But if the Marines were expecting another D-Day on July 15-16, 1958, contemporary accounts and photographs reveal the comical reality, that the battle-ready American troops were met not by armed resistance, but by curious locals and tourists dressed for a day at the beach. Given the carnage that has followed in this region in the last 61 years, this is a narrative that turns on its head Marx’s view about the repetition of history as tragedy and then farce. In Lebanon, American military intervention in the Middle East started to some extent with farce, and repeated itself as tragedy.

This conference, “The Middle East in 1958: Reimagining A Revolutionary Year”, is based on a forthcoming volume that revisits the debates that existed at the time through the different lenses of political, social, economic, anthropological, and historical study, to recognize the true centrality of that year in the history of the modern Middle East.

It is only fitting that the American University of Beirut should play host to this international, interdisciplinary conference. This campus community—its faculty, students, staff, and alumni—has played a key role in shaping, analyzing, and documenting a broad swathe of the history of this country and the region. This institution has never hesitated to question what is assumed to be unassailable truth. In their quest, the scholars of AUB have always delved into critical interpretative questions to reach new levels of understanding. These traditions are deeply rooted, going back to the first days of the Syrian Protestant College, which was founded primarily to serve the peoples of this region by teaching the gospels—but it quickly learnt the lesson itself that the best path towards service was found through the enlightenment of liberal education. Today, AUB remains committed to the ideal of graduating enlightened and inquisitive leaders who are prepared for spirited intellectual engagement in a bastion and beacon of free thought and free expression.

While it is not the purpose of this conference to examine how instrumental AUB was in the swirl of revolutionary, post-colonial, and Cold War activity that characterized 1958, it is worth
bearing in mind that political activism and thought leadership have been a feature of life at AUB since well before the independence of any Arab state. Its foundation and development went in tandem with the growth of the political role of Lebanon at the end of the 19th century and the emergence of An-Nahda, the Arab Awakening. The birth of al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqa in 1918 kindled the Arab identity. In the 1930s and 1940s AUB students, under the guidance of Professor Constantine Zurayk, founded the Arab Nationalist Movement, which influenced Nasserism. Another key AUB figure, Charles Malek, contributed not only to domestic and regional politics, but also to the international legal framework that exists today. While ideologies clashed, AUB remained a haven for freedom of thought, transforming ideals into action from the College Hall plaza and the Medical Gate, spreading throughout the Levant and North Africa.

In 1958 itself, ar-Rābita (The Lebanese Student League at AUB) was founded under the supervision of Dr. Kamal Salibi, to champion Lebanese sovereignty and challenge the Arab nationalists’ sway over AUB politics. But amid this clash of ideas, the AUB community was able to peacefully incorporate the different ideological trends. In his annual report to the Board of Trustees, my predecessor, AUB’s fifth president, Dr. J. Paul Leonard wrote:

“The week set for the opening of school in September 1958 was one of a 24-hour curfew in Beirut. The opening was postponed, but during the week students came to the University from the surrounding countries. The University enjoyed complete protection and respect during the troubles, and when school opened in October 1958, it opened with the largest enrolment in its history. Even though difference of opinion among faculty and students lingered throughout the past year, their devotion to duty has been exemplary, and the President wishes to congratulate both the students and faculty for their loyalty to their responsibilities during this troubled period. The University emerged from these troubles with renewed respect and strength.”

What remains constant at AUB is the legacy for inquiry and the persistent passion to learn and revisit these shifts as well as documenting them. Our library archives hold rich, multilingual documentation of the region’s history, from 1958, and from across the spectrum of modern and contemporary politics and social conditions. With these resources, AUB, its Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, are among the first scholarly institutions to bring the debates of 1958 into sharp focus. These efforts will enable us more than ever to examine the convergences and collisions of domestic and foreign interests and alliances in the 1950s, the domino effects, the dominant and dormant factors, the crises and revolutions, the stumbling blocks and windows of opportunity.

Our approach to scholastic understanding is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. We look at the complex world around us in all its stages, with all its facets, and from all its angles, concurrently. Looking at 1958 and at today’s reality, we must ask ourselves the hard questions: Have we learned the lessons of the impact of propaganda and mistrust? Are we cognizant of the internal factions and external alliances that impel our actions and impact on the stability of
this region? Or have we acquired that knowledge so we may recognize windows of opportunity and navigate around the stumbling blocks?

If there is anyone who can help us achieve these feats, they are sitting in this auditorium today. I wish you a fruitful exchange over the coming two days and a continued knowledge towards a better world.

Thank you.