

Opening Day Address 2020
“Am I my brother’s keeper?”
President Fadlo R. Khuri
September 7, 2020

My dear AUB Community, I hope you and your families are all as well as possible on this most unusual 155th Opening Day for AUB. Absent the usual pomp and ceremony, please allow me to share my thoughts with you on this September afternoon, in the modest belief I have some important points to make in these desperate, divided, and yet still hopeful times.

The very first Bible story my father read to my brother and me is one most monotheists are well familiar with. The story is a simple one. Two brothers are born to Adam and Eve. Cain became a farmer and Abel a shepherd. They both brought their offerings to God, but the Almighty accepted Abel’s offering of livestock while rejecting Cain’s offering from his fields. In his anger, Cain tricked and killed his brother, after which God stepped in and began a conversation with Cain. *“Where is your brother Abel?” God asked. “I don’t know,” Cain replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”*

Like many linguistic fossils preserved in our modern vocabulary, the phrase “my brother’s keeper” has taken on a different meaning to the original spirit in which it was used. With our modern sensibilities, most of us will infer that, yes, we *are* responsible for looking after our brothers and sisters, unlike the evasive and cynical Cain. So my question today is, how does our AUB community learn from the liberal arts canon, from history, from ethics, to look after those less fortunate than ourselves, to ensure that more lives are lived abundantly, at a time when we ourselves are feeling neglected, vulnerable, and angry?

While we are a university whose influence has spread well beyond Lebanon and the Arab World, AUB makes its home in Lebanon and is very much “of Beirut”, Lebanon’s diverse, culturally rich, vital capital. Lebanon is a chaotic, corrupt, though somehow inclusive, democracy and oasis of freedom, unique in a region stretching from Turkey to Afghanistan. The steadily growing influence of not-for-profit, independent institutions of higher education, which maintained a degree of quality control even through the war years, along with the impressive work ethic of the emigrating Lebanese, is arguably what really led to the disproportionate success of this country’s diaspora. The diaspora’s attachment, bordering on extreme, to the motherland is what consequently led to the large number of remittances Lebanon received. This kept the economy alive for 29 years after the end of the Civil War, despite the absence of real state-building, needs assessment, or sustainability during that period.

Unfortunately, the inevitable happened, and now people have lost their savings, their hopes, their futures. Some 300 billion dollars were on various Lebanese bank ledgers when things began to crumble. Absent planning and accountability, everything collapsed, including the standards and regulations that should be every state's basis for maintaining the safety and wellbeing of its citizens. After August 4, the evidence of tangled metal, destroyed homes, and broken lives made this shocking defect obvious to the whole world.

For AUB to continue to serve others meaningfully, to fulfill the modern understanding of “my brother's keeper,” and not the original Biblical one, we must enhance our relevance, resilience and sustainability. Many have growing concerns about the sustainability of higher education and healthcare, in light of the challenges these sectors are facing, in Lebanon and globally. If we do not address these and step up to serve as “our sisters' and brothers' keepers”, then in the words of Billy Joel's *Goodnight Saigon*, a hymn to the American troops who came back—or did not—from the Vietnam War, “we would all go down together.” I will explain my logic here, as there is a sense of responsibility on my part about the necessity of immediate, coordinated action and open dialogue.

Arguably the country's greatest asset, and our greatest cause for hope, is the head start that Lebanon was given thanks to the pre-existence of AUB and USJ to the founding of the Modern Lebanon in 1920. Much of what is good in the culture and diversity of Lebanon and the region emanates from this inclusive, high quality education and healthcare that these two universities have provided for generations. Its established higher education sector made the newly independent country attractive for people from all over the region and beyond. Like AUB and USJ, La Sagesse also has its roots in the late 19th century as a college of law. LAU underwent a near two-century evolution from a private girls' school, adding a junior college and a women's college, to become a university in 1994. USEK was founded as a theological college in 1938, the first higher education institution to be established under a Lebanese initiative and gained its university status in 1962. Several other schools were launched in the middle part of the last century, including the public Lebanese University, Haigazian University, and the Beirut Arab University. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the founding of Balamand, the Islamic University, Université Antonine and Notre Dame-Louaize. The 11 private universities have come together based on our common purpose and shared mission to educate and create opportunities for future generations.

AUB is a truly international and world class university, with students from 96 countries, a meeting place for outstanding scholars coming from vastly different backgrounds and many different nations, a transformative message, and a track record of placing students in the best jobs, graduate schools, postdoctoral fellowships. We at AUB have

recognized our role in collaborating with and leading our sisters and brothers in the global university system, deepening ties over the last several years with universities in Lebanon but also the Americas, Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Arab World, our goal being nothing less than to emerge as one of the world's finest universities, and a model for higher education in the Global South.

Another vital asset for Lebanon is its quality healthcare system, where private and public hospitals and a previously highly collaborative Ministry of Public Health had seen Lebanon's median lifespan improve by leaps and bounds since the end of the Civil War, to the point where median lifespan for women and men in Lebanon had approached those in the United States and other developed economies. This too has been threatened by the economic collapse whereby hospitals and health systems were no longer able to reimburse their services in a sustainable manner. Further massive strain on the system was induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the August 4 explosion, resulting in layoffs already exceeding 3,000 individuals, with many talented physicians, nurses and others choosing to emigrate. I toured five of our fellow teaching hospitals in Beirut following the August 4 explosion. The damage is indescribable, and a conservative estimate of the cost to repair damages to the private hospitals of Beirut including the St. George, Sisters of the Rosary, Geitaoui, Hôtel Dieu-USJ, LAU Medical Center-Rizk, AUBMC and others is north of \$150 million. This is particularly daunting when 85 percent of healthcare in Lebanon is delivered by private health systems, and the blast has disabled around 800 of 2,000 teaching hospital beds in Beirut all while the pandemic escalates.

These existential threats to the pillars of quality education, diversity, healthcare, opportunity, and diversity are everywhere, including recent support of for-profit education as somehow equivalent or superior to the not-for-profit model. Such an ideology is wholly inconsistent with working at AUB or any of our sister non-profit institutions. It implies that the more inexpensive the education and the tuition, the better the margin, a campaign built not on outcomes data for those educated or long-term societal impact, but purely on greed and an absence of societal responsibility. It devalues quality in favor of "affordability," failing to take into consideration that the sharing of common values, such as understanding different cultures, development of critical thinking and analytic skills, and conduct of research, all require investment of resources. The model actualized by AUB and others emphasizes education of the best and brightest in a responsible manner. It values and accounts for the differential between diverse families' resources by ensuring financial assistance for those who cannot afford tuition. This nuanced model ensures that 60 percent of undergraduate and graduate students at AUB receive some form of financial assistance. This is no one size fits all, no drive by/fast food model.

In this very dangerous moment for higher education in Lebanon, and therefore for the Lebanese national identity as a whole, we should all be part of the national debate, especially when deliberate, profound, even radical changes in favor of for-profit education are introduced that run counter to more than 100 years of pedagogy and scholarship. If I fail to speak out on this, I would betray the legacy of this university, especially the legacies of Howard Bliss, who stood up for Arab self-determination, and Stephen Penrose, who stood up for Palestinian self-determination. That is why, on this subject, at this time, I cannot and should not stay silent. But others who believe this with me must also speak up.

Speaking truth to power is a critical component of reform. In an era when African American men are shot down in broad daylight by the very people who are supposed to serve and protect them, there are no choices. In Lebanon, the curse of *Kafala* has allowed non-resident alien domestic workers, overwhelmingly women, to stay in bondage without protection by the law, and to be abandoned in the streets when they are considered surplus to requirements. The same kind of inhumanity was manifested after August 4 when the Lebanese state abrogated its responsibilities to care for and heal the wounded and the survivors of the blast. If we are not all of our brothers' and sisters' keepers, then we ourselves, Lebanon, and perhaps the wider world, will surely suffer. And few would argue, particularly in this difficult year that Lebanon, and the wider world, have suffered enough. All the more reason to cultivate and protect future leaders at AUB in order to have a better, more inclusive future for the peoples of the region.

What can AUB do to provide hope, to nurture and graduate scholars and scientists, paragons of virtue that can help overcome despair, disillusionment, and darkness? After all, we have just been forced to take the most painful decisions in our history in order to save the institution, to reduce our workforce, and release beloved members of our AUB community, our family, during this social, economic, political, humanitarian, and health maelstrom?

I believe the answer is that we can still lead by example in so many ways, in our leadership of the USAID-sponsored COVID-19 consortium of private, teaching, and academic health systems in Lebanon; in our physicians' and nurses' heroic response to care for the wounded on August 4 and after; in leading an effort to obtain and deliver medications and supplies from our friends and our diaspora in a direct person-to-person action that continues to give hope. We can lead during the worst economic recession since the Great Depression by continuing to place our students in good jobs and top graduate and professional programs in the West and East. We can lead when more than 800 faculty members dedicate themselves to learning and improving their online educational capabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. We can lead by creating

opportunities for young people, and old, to obtain a world class, affordable education in order to dream of a better life here in Lebanon and the Arab world, a life based not on fossil fuel production and consumption, but on the preservation of our environment and its energies for future generations.

We can lead when we help raise funds for other needy and deserving institutions with whom we partner to face formidable challenges together. We can lead by creating educational opportunities and a medico-social fund for our departed staff to ensure care for them and their families and education for their children. We can lead by establishing an AUB Relief and Reconstruction Initiative to support multiple educational, healthcare, and cultural entities that are vital for the future of Lebanon. We can lead when our magnificent Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service takes to the streets of Beirut to help remove the rubble and help rebuild homes and lives, not just today and tomorrow, but by making a long-term commitment to the communities they serve. We can lead when a group of independent faculty members come together (under the banner of *Khaddit Beirut*) to develop concrete, achievable, and evidence-based plans in support of local health centers, environmental health, education, and industry. We can lead when our engineers establish a free hotline to inspect buildings for structural damage and our architects set up a global hub and geographic information system to connect international aid with neighborhood housing reconstruction efforts. We can lead through these and innumerable other community-focused action-research and experiential learning projects that provide food, shelter, medical and other kinds of support, and hope to a suffering population in dire need of it.

Finally, we can lead when, even in the direst times, we refuse to strike down or speak ill of our brothers and sisters, if they anger us, hurt us, denigrate the best of our intentions. Rather we can recognize that they are in pain, and they need our support. We can lead when we truly embrace the words of the late Chaplain of Yale College William Sloan Coffin, who when his own patriotism was questioned, as he helped lead opposition to the Vietnam War, responded: “There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country.” We can lead as Coffin’s “good patriots,” carrying on an ever-faithful lover’s quarrel with AUB, with our higher education and healthcare systems, with Lebanon, and with the world. We lead through Excellence in the Pursuit of the Greater Good, whether in our capital Beirut, in Lebanon and the region, or in the Global South, our greater home. That is how we ensure that in the final analysis, we at AUB are truly our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.