

AUB President Fadlo R. Khuri

Founders Day

December 6, 2021

Deans, faculty colleagues, staff, students, and honored guests, welcome to this celebration of the 155th anniversary of AUB's founding. We gather each year to pay tribute to those who began what was then the Syrian Protestant College and set it on the path to become the diverse, inclusive, and transformative seat of higher learning and research excellence that it is today.

One thing that was true in 1866 and remains true today, is that philanthropy is a key element in our success: from the original donors who made opening this university a possibility, to the generous thousands who help support us today. To celebrate this long history of philanthropic support, AUB organized its first Giving Day on Founders Day in 2018. Now, after a hiatus due to the pandemic and other crises, we are again celebrating Giving Day and asking our alumni and friends around the world to help support this vital institution and our ongoing mission to serve.

This year, we are also marking the 100th anniversary of AUB admitting women to its classes, diplomas, and degrees. Although our founders imagined only male students and faculty, the principles upon which the university was founded pointed towards inclusion, as can be seen in the oft-quoted passage from Trustee William Dodge's speech upon laying the cornerstone of College Hall in 1871: "This college is for all conditions and classes of men." Some 50 years later, as society was coming around to the idea that women should be considered equal members of society, the trustees of this university took the momentous and historic decision to allow women to apply for admission to regular degree programs.

As I noted in the most recent President's Perspective, it took the Ivy League and other great Western universities almost half a century to follow our lead, by which time AUB had already graduated female diplomats, educators, nurses, physicians, writers, and other trailblazers. Having launched the Middle East's first nursing school in 1905, AUB opened its doors in 1921 to brave, creative, and groundbreaking women in every field of enterprise.

The first few generations of AUB alumnae included the influential advocate for women's rights Anbara Salam, founders of the transformative Al-Ahliyah School, Wadad and Salma Makdisi, and Angela Jurdak, who became Lebanon's first woman diplomat and helped author the UN Charter on Human Rights. A few decades later, the irrepressible Ghada Samman would become one of the boldest and most fearless writers in the Arab world and ground-breaking architect Zaha Hadid would later become the first woman to ever claim architecture's prestigious Pritzker Prize.

Certainly, all of these great women were determined to blaze trails that few others could see at the time, much less attempt. But perhaps they also shared a sense of confidence and empowerment not only from their diverse upbringings in various countries across the region, but from their matriculation at the American University of Beirut; a space where their confidence was grown and their ability to see and seize opportunities reinforced.

A strong thread links these remarkable women with newer generations. In modern times, AUB has nurtured great female biological scientists as diverse as the world-renowned neuro-geneticist Huda Zoghbi and the great bone metabolism researcher Ghada Hajj Fuleihan. The exceptionally accomplished chemist Najat Saliba and epidemiologist Abla Mehio Sibai were both remarkably named laureates of the prestigious Loreal UNESCO For Women in Science Awards in consecutive years.

We also have many initiatives centered on equality and inclusion, such as CIBL—the Center for Inclusive Business and Leadership for Women—that is actively working to promote equity in the MENA workplace. Currently, a plethora of women occupy senior leadership roles at AUB including deanships, chairships, and senior administrative posts. I am also confident that women will be among the leading contenders to succeed to AUB’s presidency when my own term ends.

While acknowledging the long road traveled, we must acknowledge the equally arduous path ahead before true gender equality at AUB can be achieved and celebrated. Toward that end, six years ago we launched the first presidential task force on the lives and careers of women faculty. Their exhaustive report found that much progress had been made, but inequities remain and their recommendations are now being followed up on by a standing committee.

This year we celebrate the gains represented by AUB’s Coed Centennial, yet also reflect on what still needs to be done, which is the theme of this year’s Founder’s Day Student Essay Contest.

Watching our students navigate their way through the pandemic and the confluence of challenges and catastrophes that Lebanon and the world have faced, seeing them grasp opportunities that seemed so unreachable, so impossible just a few short years ago, to graduate full of life, confidence, faith, and determination is a powerful reinforcer of hope for us that *she* will continue to have life and have it more abundantly. At AUB, at least, hope continues to spring eternal despite the odds.

Student Essay Contest:

Before we hear from our keynote speaker today, the incomparable Sheikha Altaf Al Sabah, I have the honor to present three prize-winning student essayists, who were asked to reflect on the historical milestone of AUB’s coed centennial as well as to discuss the biggest challenges still facing women today, particularly in Lebanon and the Global South, and what AUB can do to help address those challenges. But first I would like to commend and express our profound appreciation to the essay selection committee who gave their time and expertise to help carry on this important Founders Day tradition.

Third prize goes to Hussein Mousa.

Hussein is a senior at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences majoring in economics and minoring in Arabic literature. He is the Arabic senior editor of *Outlook* and ranked first in the Lebanese Baccalaureate exams of 2019, in the economics and social sciences section. Hussein's essay casts light on what distinguishes *AUB women* and how AUB can provide more opportunities to women in and outside its campus.

Second prize goes to Yalda Negah.

Yalda joined AUB all the way from Afghanistan and is now in her third semester in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, with a view to majoring in political studies. She is one of our outstanding scholars in the transformative Education for Leadership in Crisis scholarship program. Yalda's insightful essay offers a strong message— particularly at this time—about women, herself, and the powerful role of women in realizing a better tomorrow.

Now it is my pleasure to announce our first prize winner: **Rita-Maria Ibrahim**

Rita-Maria is a junior at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, majoring in English literature, with a minor in both gender studies and creative writing. One of the top students in her class, Rita is a passionate writer and a poet who is guaranteed to be seen writing in her spare time. She took initiative in further enriching AUB's student cultural organizations and became president and founder of AUB's Dead Poets Society student club, and she is currently training to volunteer with the Red Cross.

I will leave you to enjoy this first-prize-winning essay. Congratulations to all our creative writers and thanks to everyone who engaged in this Founders Day tradition. **Rita-Maria, the podium is yours.**

Keynote Introduction:

Now, it is my enormous pleasure to introduce Sheikha Altaf Salem Al Ali Al Sabah as our Founder's Day speaker. She is an inspiring leader, philanthropist, and herself a pioneering AUB alumna with both a bachelor's and master's degree in anthropology (BA Sociology and Anthropology '71, MA Anthropology '75). An expert on the material culture and traditional textile arts of Kuwait, she writes and lectures on this subject and has authored two books: *Kuwait Traditions, Creative Expressions of a Culture* (2001) and *Ibjad: Ornate Tent Dividers and Weavings of the Kuwait Desert* (2006).

We are honored to have Sheikha Al Sabah as a member of AUB's International Advisory Council. She is also honorary president of Sadu House, a cultural center and museum in the heart of Kuwait City. In 2017, Sheikha Al Sabah established the Altaf S. Al Sabah Visiting Chair in Women and Societal Development Studies at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at AUB to empower women and promote gender equity in the region.

It is especially poignant to have Sheikha Al Sabah, an accomplished scholar, cultural champion, distinguished author, and advocate as our keynote speaker for this Founders Day, as we celebrate our coed centennial and 100 years of empowering women.

Now we will hear from Sheikha Al Sabah, who is speaking on “Commemorating Excellence... Celebrating Hope and Equal Opportunity...”