

Commencement Exercises and Honorary Doctorates Ceremony 2014

AUB graduation remarks by Rami Khouri

Chairman Khoury, President Dorman, Provost Dallal, members of the board of trustees, our distinguished AUB faculty, and parents, families and students of the 2014 AUB graduating class,

Thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts with you at this pivotal and joyous moment in your lives. I am one of the few things standing between you and those diplomas, and some great Beirut celebrations tonight, so I will keep this short and to the point.

Every student experience at college is meaningful and often thrilling, and every graduating class is special in its own way; but you, this AUB class of 2014, are unique, both for your experience inside AUB and for what your fellow Arab young men and women have unleashed across this region during the last four years.

Just a few months after you enrolled in AUB, in mid-December 2010 demonstrations in rural Tunisia sparked a series of rolling uprisings and revolutions that continue to reverberate in different forms across the Arab world. And just a few months ago, in January 2014, the newly empowered citizens of Tunisia completed a feat that had never before been achieved in the Arab world. Millions of Tunisians across society debated, negotiated, completed and validated their own constitution. This may be the first time that such an Arab document of common values, rights and responsibilities was not imposed by narrow elites or foreign powers, as happened with all previous Arab constitutions, but by the values and aspirations of ordinary citizens across the land.

Your four years at AUB have been bookended by these two epic developments, whose final outcomes will only become clear many years from now, though present outcomes are very mixed across the region, including regime changes, democratic transitions, counter-revolutions, and active warfare. You graduate amidst an Arab world in the midst of profound transformations, where in more and more instances, and for the first time ever, the individual counts, and has voice — whether this happens digitally and virtually, or on the streets and in voting booths. Citizens in all Arab countries, without exception, no longer fear to proclaim that they have rights, and they will organize and mobilize peacefully but forcefully to make sure that those rights are respected.

We must never lose sight of the underlying values that motivate the demonstrators and the constitution writers. In every country across the Arab world — again, without exception, in wealthy and

poor countries alike — people who were long docile and intimidated now speak out to demand their citizen rights to be governed well, and to shape their governments in a manner that reflects their values, and meets their needs. They seek to replace autocracy with democracy, humiliation with dignity, marginalization with empowerment, and national mediocrity with an Arab rebirth.

The late writer and teacher Samir Kassir wrote at the start of his prophetic little book *Being Arab* in 2004 that, “The Arab people are haunted by a sense of powerlessness.” He thought it was too ambitious to envisage an end to the cycle of malaise in the immediate future, saying that Arab underdevelopment has reached such proportions that one cannot expect spirits to lift straight away. He concluded that, “Nothing, neither foreign domination nor the economic structural flaws — let alone Arab cultural heritage — should prevent one seeking the possibility of some form of equilibrium, despite the terrible conditions at present.”

I believe the ongoing protests and national reconfiguration efforts represent what Samir Kassir anticipated — that one day Arab citizens in their neighborhoods and capitals would break out of their powerlessness and malaise, and seek to rebalance their lives and societies, and re-legitimize their governance systems. Slowly receding into the past are the days when ordinary Arab men and women were only helpless subjects, consumers, or objects of cruel and episodic paternalistic welfare, anchored precariously in the whimsy of individuals and military officers that ruled entire countries.

The central moral dimension of this historic process is that demonstrators across the region articulate this struggle in a powerful vocabulary of ethics. Peaceful protests in almost every Arab country did not demand power, revenge or wealth. They demanded social justice, dignity, freedom and respect, certain that their world could be defined by more equity, accountability, and opportunity. Behind these calls are massive national challenges, related to hundreds of millions of Arabs’ need for clean water, affordable food and housing, decent jobs, gender equity, and an opportunity to live a normal life free of exploitation, marginalization, poverty and constant war.

Hundreds of thousands have now died, and millions have become displaced refugees, because of their determination to overturn a stubborn, old and mean order; millions still suffer, fight and risk their lives. And for what do they do this? For abstract nouns, like dignity and justice, which they insist must form the bedrock and operating systems of their world.

But also within these campus walls, some of you demonstrated for your own abstract nouns, related to your lives as university students — on issues like participation, accountability, affordability, transparency, and sound management. Some students and professors questioned established operations and procedures, and successfully engaged the administration of AUB in a valuable dialogue, even some negotiations, in a responsible and effective manner. The administration responded, some procedures were modified, some decision-making systems were redefined for the better, and the discussions continue — as they should, in an institution based on the rational quest for knowledge and social harmony.

Some of you even slept in tents, affirming your grievances and your rights, and also your capacity to work peacefully to have a serious discussion on how to define and achieve those rights. As you travel throughout the Arab world in the months and years ahead, you will also see many other tents, mostly of refugees and displaced citizens, or perhaps of poverty-stricken homeless people. You might also run into other spontaneous tent encampments in cities across the world, as we have seen recently in New York, Madrid, Istanbul and Sao Paolo.

In many ways, tents will be the symbol that defines your generation and your world. So maybe now is the time to start thinking about whether you might erect and inhabit a new kind of tent in the years ahead — a large, inclusive social and national space that accommodates different ideologies and identities, respects equal rights, listens to all its citizens, and affirms the majority will while protecting minority rights.

Our generations before you never had the opportunity to attempt such an audacious venture as building Arab pluralistic democracy. You do have that opportunity, and it is only likely to expand in the coming years as citizen activism spreads and deepens throughout this region. As you enter the workforce, continue studying or start families, you have the option, should you chose it, to play any role you desire in the greatest adventure the Arab world has ever experienced: statecraft at the hands of its own free citizens. You can do this in your personal, professional or public lives — in politics, civic activism, cultural expression, education, business, and, perhaps most importantly, by nurturing dignity, respect and opportunity at home, among your children, siblings and parents.

So speaking for myself, but also I suspect for many others across this region, I ask you to please go out into the world and built that great new tent for us, for yourselves, and for future generations to come — please build us a large, light-filled, breezy and colorful national and social space where we can manifest

our full humanity, and live life to its fullest; where we can express our individualism, dress as we like, read what interests us, but respect the identities of others; where we can practice democracy, engage authority, and debate, disagree and negotiate new norms with civility; where we can set free our cultural and artistic spirits, live in peace with all religions, and above all, have fun and enjoy life.

You are among a very small minority of people in the Arab world who have already experienced all this, because these values and ethical norms defined your life experiences at AUB these last four years. So please keep doing all this and more, as you now venture outside these wonderful walls.

Congratulations to you all, and thank you again for this opportunity to share in your accomplishments and joys.