

Commencement Exercises and Honorary Doctorates Ceremony 2014

Undergraduate student speech by Yasmine Saker

Two years ago I lost my sense of belonging; I no longer had a home to go back to in my war-torn country. I was forced to be away from my family, friends and everything that gave me an identity. However, it wasn't long before I realized that I DO belong somewhere. I belong to this campus where I spent countless nights studying between the stacks of books at Jaffet library. I belong to my favorite bench overlooking the sea, where almost every cat in AUB tried to steal my lunch. I belong to the Green Oval where I spent hours with my fellow students preparing signs and stands for Outdoors. I belong to the dozens of homemade cupcakes I sold in charity bake-sales at West Hall to help refugees. I belong to the political studies and media studies student societies where I learned to work as part of a team. I belong to the lifetime friends I made in the halls of Nicely and Jessup. I belong to my dear professors who not only taught and advised me, but also took time to sit with me and help me plan my future.. who day after day gave me sympathetic glances whenever Syria was discussed in class.

I belong to the American University of Beirut, where I experienced democracy firsthand in the student body elections. I belong to the only place where I was equal with my male colleagues, a right often confiscated by our patriarchal societies. I belong where I could fully exercise my freedom of expression through class discussions and assignments..where I could safely say what I think, away from the culture of fear instilled in the region. A place where I would not be investigated with over a story I've written- and I truly wish I was not speaking based on personal experience when I say this... I belong here, where I found my passion in journalism, to give people the voice that AUB has given me..where I was –and always will be-a part of the most diverse community in the Middle East..a place where tolerance, integrity and cooperation stand in contrast with the prejudices and narrow-mindedness spread widely across the whole region... If a place that empowers people to reach their full potential is not a home, then we are all eternal refugees.

My AUB journey took me to Salzburg, Austria, and Aarhus, Denmark, where I studied journalism and media literacy in a foreign context, with many international students-some of whom became lifelong friends-. It was the tolerance that AUB instilled in me that allowed to me to accept and respect others' cultures, backgrounds and opinions, even those very far from my own. It was the open mindedness I acquired here that allowed me to shatter the stereotypes my foreign colleagues had about the Middle East. It was the training I received in AUB that allowed me to perform well and compete with experienced students from around the world.

As I walk up the chemistry stairs for the last time after the commencement exercises, I take with me much more than the shortness of breath I am sure many of you suffered today. I take a sense of gratitude for being able to stand here as a graduate of this esteemed institution. I take a sense of assurance for having already secured a job that I love, in a region where youth' unemployment rates are among the highest in the world. I take with me hope that Syria's coming generations will not be deemed

“lost generations” with no access to education. I take with me a responsibility to do my best for these generations to find their way as I did.

I remember the first time I was on the Dean’s honor list in my freshman year. My parents almost called everyone they knew in my hometown Homs, only to find out to their disappointment that, no, my picture will not be posted on a huge canvas on campus. Four years later, they are here today and they had no idea I would be speaking. I hope they’re not still as disappointed- and that they haven’t started with the phone calls already-. I would not be standing here today if it weren’t for their love and support over the years.

Thank you all for being here tonight, celebrating our achievements.

Class of 2014, we did it !