



**AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY
OF BEIRUT**

Commencement Address 2023
By **Fadlo R. Khuri**

Whither the Cedar in Lebanon?

Good evening trustees, honorands, administrators, faculty, staff, and students and especially the graduates, parents, and family members of the class of 2023. This is your evening, a night when all gathered from the graduating classes and the four distinguished recipients of honorary doctorates on stage will long remember. You will celebrate tonight with loved ones and then, the majority of you will follow the path that generation after generation has followed before you. You will leave AUB and Lebanon for opportunities abroad and look back, not in anger but wistfully. You will wonder what if Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, and the Global South offered more durable chances, more stable and happier environments for your career and life to take root. Here, in the habitat of the most famous tree in the region, the Cedar, *cedrus libani*, hope and opportunity have been ephemeral for far too many generations.

It was not always this way. In Psalm 92:12, in the Old Testament, are etched the immortal words: “The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, he will grow like a cedar in Lebanon.”

Do these words still apply in the lands of the Cedar? Thousands of years ago, men and demigods fought over the Cedars according to the Epic of Gilgamesh, the ancient tale of Sumerian civilization you studied in CVSP. Early Egyptians used Cedar mainly in the temples, for shrines holding the statues of the gods, and for making large funerary objects, such as sarcophagi. King Solomon built his temple and much of Jerusalem from the Cedar. Christianity is replete with references to the Cedar, and those same famous forests of Cedars have been the home and safeguard for some of the oldest Eastern Christians for well over a century and a half. Some scholars of Islam consider that the *Sidrah* referred to in the Qur’an is most likely a Cedar. This tree (Sidrat-al-Muntaha) is the tree of the furthest or extreme boundary in the seventh heaven which ‘marks the bounds of heavenly knowledge as revealed to men, beyond which neither Angels nor men could pass’, and ‘beyond which no creature's knowledge can extend.’. The Cedar is therefore an indelible part of the region, its origins and

endgames, and of the three monotheistic religions that sprang from around the Mediterranean.

It's interesting to note there are only four types of true Cedars with upright cones, by genus and species. *Cedrus libani*, native to Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, and *Cedrus brevifolia*, native to central Cyprus are two, showing yet more linkages between Lebanon and Cyprus, where our first twin campus, AUB Mediterraneo, will be inaugurated in September 2023. Are you all catching my drift? If we are to insist on fidelity to the tree that has been our emblem since the university was founded, the other two Cedar types would necessitate that our next twin campuses be in the Atlas Mountains, which cross Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, with the fourth twin campus somewhere in the Himalayas!

Yet here in the “Land of the Cedar,” the famous Cedars of God have been repeatedly deforested, to the point that many of us who host guests from around the world ensure they also visit the more vigorously protected Barouk Cedars, where the trees appear more abundant. The same can be said about the best minds who inhabit the region, who are ready and prepared to help lead a new Arab intellectual awakening. Other than our resiliently excellent university, most young scholars and physicians overwhelmingly choose to emigrate rather than spend the bulk of their careers in the region, especially in the current era. Why have we, the people of the Levant, been such poor stewards in protecting our most enduring botanical marvel in its original habitat, and why have we been even less effective over the last 200 years in providing opportunities for our best and brightest youth to “flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon?” As we bid farewell to yet another stellar class of AUB graduates and honorands, can we take advantage of deep ties that bind us together and to our homelands to create opportunities, not only in Lebanon but across the more than 80 countries where our students come from, to better sustain, nurture, and create cross-generational opportunities to plant these graduates, these formidable Cedar roots, hardened to cut through rock and soil, closer to each of our native lands?

I am confident we can. Indeed we have consistently championed more diversified economies for the region, ones that can bring you all together with those you love with greater frequency than annual family vacations or FaceTime calls. But tonight is an occasion to reflect, however briefly, on the prodigious feats of our students, faculty, and staff, which give us confidence that you **already have**, and like our four magnificent honorands, one day **will** make a difference, not only for your loved ones but for others the world over.

Each one of you on the Green Field and on the stage tonight has been part of something larger than yourself. Tonight is a night to acknowledge a few of these Promethean efforts. The students, faculty, administrators, trustees, alumni, and staff have banded together to light up villages in some of the most obscure and ignored parts of Lebanon and rallied to provide sustenance to earthquake-devastated Syria and Turkey. We have

raised our collective voices and the necessary funds to establish a permanent testament to the courage of Shireen Abu Akleh, the brave, martyred Palestinian journalist. You have supported access to education for the most vulnerable and marginalized, especially young girls and women. You have launched technologies, and companies for critical cardiovascular, endocrine, neurological, hematological, and malignant diseases. You have created music, poetry, culture, and studied civilizations at AUB, and across the region and globe. You have produced new knowledge, insight, greater empathy and understanding for all.

In the midst of the worst pandemic of the last hundred years, our nurses, physicians, faculty, staff, students, and administrators treated the sickest patients in the country and in the region, vaccinated 99.7% of our community, and mobilized to educate those least fortunate, to protect and provide for them in the midst of this modern day plague. You cared for the wounded, rebuilt their homes after the catastrophic August 4 explosion, inspiring philanthropic efforts from the diaspora and the global community. You have become role models. You, our students, have been a major part of all these efforts, and in fact, you have often driven them forward at great personal risk and cost.

Just this Thursday, our Board formally commended the leadership, courage, and heroism of our community during this pandemic. When the next pandemic, challenge, economic or political collapse comes, let no one doubt the American University of Beirut's resolve, ability, and determination to make an extraordinary difference in the lives of the peoples it serves.

In the midst of the worst financial crisis in Lebanon's history, the third worst socio-economic depression witnessed globally in the last 150 years, our community banded together, led by our trustees and administrators, to increase financial aid this year to \$110 million, one year after recuperating only \$15 million in tuition fees from parents and guardians. We continue to restore the salaries of our faculty and staff, irrespective of this country's sustained economic turmoil, such that by this fall, our faculty and staff will have regained on average 80% of their 2019 total compensation when benefits are calculated.

I am confident that by 2025, through the sheer determination of our Board and administration, we will fully restore our community members' buying power, while providing more financially sustainable and socially engaged opportunities for our students to live an enriching and transformative AUB experience, without placing unfair burdens on them. We will make certain that when all is said and done, the opportunities you have grasped continue to expand for future generations of AUB students.

Already, the American University of Beirut's graduates and trainees are among the most sought after in the world and by far the most sought after in the MENA region. And why not? The great companies, graduate and professional schools, research, innovation and training centers know your quality. Our students excel academically but

they are also responsible citizen-leaders of the university, their nation states, and the globe. This year and every year, you light up our campus with concerts and plays, with AUB Outdoors, and many other remarkable undertakings. You excel at case competitions, Model United Nations, athletics, and job fairs. You provide a sense of empowering hope that spreads far beyond this campus, to give the people of your home countries and beyond a demonstration of the power of knowledge, resilience, faith, and yes, anti-fragility. Are you not exactly the kind of citizens who can forge a better, more inclusive future for tomorrow, one where there is a broad and well-knit social safety net and better opportunities for all?

For 8 and 1/2 years, ever since I first accepted this awesome responsibility, the greatest honor of my life (other than marrying the wonderful lady seated somewhere there to my right,) it has been my privilege and joy to see you grow, become more confident, more self-aware, more purposeful, and determined. Every one of you, from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia, Europe, know that you carry within you, like the seeds of the immortal Cedar, the confidence, ability, know-how, and desire to make a difference not only where you are planted, but in your ancestral lands, where your roots run deepest.

On behalf of your faculty, staff, alumni, administration, trustees, for however much longer we have the opportunity to help guide future generations of AUB-ites, as we have gotten to know you, we thank you and share our pride in you. We will watch over future generations as we have you: with love and devotion, and return them, like you, more empowered, capable, and confident. We release you to your parents but also to the wider world, “to flourish like the palm tree, and grow righteously like the cedars in Lebanon.” And we know you will never forget your roots. Thank you, God bless you, and congratulations to each and every one of you and to your families and loved ones.