



**AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY
OF BEIRUT**

2023 Student Commencement Address

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Beirut, Saturday, June 10, 2023

Esteemed Trustees and faculty, friends, family, chosen family, and of course class of 2023,

Good afternoon!

When I started drafting this speech, I was a bit hesitant about what I should pack into a 5-minute valedictory from my fully packed four years here, so I decided to share my story. My journey getting here is one of how hope, perseverance, and hard work can coalesce to make what is highly improbable happen.

Before I came here, I attended a small public high school for gifted students in my city in Syria while part-time tutoring middle schoolers and teaching myself English. Although I did not have access to the best opportunities at that time, I was determined to prepare myself for a world-class education beyond the borders of my war-torn country. One I can use as a transformative tool to make real change happen. I always dreamt about this education and this change; but with my family's limited resources, my country's turmoil, and no guidance, I had no idea how I could do it.

After high school, I went through the prescribed path for me and started med school in a different city. There, I struggled daily within a fractured and war-scarred society between the checkpoints, the bombing, and the cruelty the world has displayed so creatively in my home country. But my dream did not die. After one year, I decided –to the horror of my parents— that I wanted to drop out because I had found a scholarship program, the MEPI-Tomorrow's Leaders Program, that I could apply to, so maybe, highly improbably but

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potentially, if I am lucky, they would take me, so I could study at AUB!

I worked diligently to make it happen. My parents, never understanding me yet whole-heartedly supporting me, gathered whatever minimal resources they had to pay for my IELTS exam and send me to Beirut to take it. My mom said: *“All right, I have a distant relative living there who might be able to help.”*

Long story short, I came to Beirut (duh!), took my exam in Sodeco, then, on the way back, I passed in a *Bousta* in front of Charles Hostler Gate (the very gate you see behind you!), and when I saw on that iconic yellow brick wall the golden printed letters that spell boldly, *“The American University of Beirut,”* I leaned out the bus window at an ungodly angle to peek into the inside of the campus. Pulling my head back in, I looked at my relative –whom I had met for the first time the day before— and said: *“That’s where I see myself!”*

Flash forward to an afternoon later that year after receiving the MEPI Scholarship and officially becoming an AUB student. I go for a walk on the *corniche* to watch the beautiful sunset. Returning afterwards, I re-enter through that same gate. The guard, eyebrows raised, dramatically leans forward over the desk and asks me suspiciously: *“2enta AUB?”* *“2eh,”* I answer, *“2ana AUB.”* And he lets me in.

That day I thought to myself that I, the kid from a small town in Syria who was peeking through the bars of the gate, an otherwise complete stranger, is now the human embodiment of AUB! With its 61-acre beautiful campus, all the trees, the fields, the hundred-something-year-old buildings, and, of course, the thousand-something cats all over this place! It was a strange idea that day, but over the years I learned that this place grows as an extension of your identity. It becomes part of who you are. A narrative through which you actively define yourself. You become AUB!

Here, I found that my education can in fact be transformative. I learned to make noise about the causes I believe in, and that noise was embraced, echoed, and most importantly never silenced. I worked with the Civic Engagement Center to address refugee education, rebuild Beirut, and start my own initiatives at times. I learned that leadership is the interplay between the individual and the collective. Leading by example, AUB demonstrated this by being at the forefront of the efforts to make the community thrive. From lighting the neighboring

streets, sending an earthquake-relief taskforce to Syria and Turkey, starting the Shireen Abou Akleh scholarship for free minds and voices to flourish, and many more initiatives that make all of us proud of our soon-to-be alma mater.

But for now, looking at you in your caps and gowns, I know all the historical difficulties you went through: a pandemic, an endless economic collapse, an explosion, and even earthquakes. Yet, we kept the hope, perseverance, and hard work. Each one of you will exit one last time through that storied gate with your unique stories and so much pride. The guard –and the world— will say to us all, "2ento AUB" forever more!

Graduating class of 2023, I cannot wait to see us flourish as the days come, but for today, congratulations! You have made it!

Thank you!