

For Immediate Release



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AUB pays a “long-overdue tribute” to Sadiq Jalal Al Azm

In honor of philosopher Sadiq Jalal Al Azm, a tribute to his life, thought, and legacy was held at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in the presence of intellectuals and academics, as well as his students, colleagues, family, and friends. The event was organized by the Department of Philosophy, in cooperation with the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies; the Center for Arts and Humanities; and the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies, four months after his passing on December 11, 2016 at the age of 82.

Born in Damascus, Sadiq Al Azm graduated from AUB with a BA in Philosophy with Distinction. He then went to Yale University where he received his PhD in 1961. He taught at Yale, Hunter College, and the University of Damascus before joining the Department of Philosophy at AUB in 1963 as an assistant professor.

As a figure of great influence, the publication of his controversial book on Islamic thought “Naqd al-Fikr al-Dini” (A Critique of Religious Thought) (1969)—which followed his first book criticizing Arab conduct and intellectual thought leading up to the 1967 war “Al-Naqd al-Thati ba’d al Hazima” (Self-Criticism after the Defeat)—resulted in enormous controversy and his consequent detention for a week. At the time of the unfolding of these events, he was no longer a faculty member at AUB.

“Scholars can be correct or incorrect, but we cannot allow them to be persecuted. This was a persecution for intellectual courage and an intellectual deviation from the norm, which is after all what we pay and encourage and enhance our scholars to do,” said AUB President Dr. Fadlo R. Khuri who described Al Azm as a “fierce and fearless champion of intellectual freedom and free speech.” “The loss of individuals of courage and of character diminishes an intellectual community.”

Dean of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Nadia El Cheikh, used excerpts in her presentation of Al Azm's correspondence with AUB as well as interviews and news articles that depicted the controversy, the events that followed, and Al Azm's reaction to them.

"I don't go out of my way to stir up hornet nests, nor do I knowingly bait my intellectual adversaries (some of whom are personal friends) with critiques. I deal with and become engaged in thorny issues that are taboo or prohibited at times... I shall continue to poke my finger into sore spots when I think it necessary and when I see that ignoring the issue will involve a certain loss," Dean El Cheikh quoted Al Azm in his interview published in the Journal of Palestine Studies in 1998. "Throughout his life, Al Azm's work reflected both breadth and depth of knowledge and immense intellectual courage," she said.

Dr. Bana Bashour, chair of the Department of Philosophy, spoke of a time when "Al Azm's students were his only fans," referring to not only students who enrolled in his classes but also students from all over campus who attended parallel sessions he held off and on campus as "he never seemed to stop teaching."

"He was living the life of an educator to its fullest," said Dr. Bashour. "When he tackled any subject, no matter how taboo, he approached it with the clarity of thought and intellectual honesty any admirable interlocutor ought to have."

Following the opening session, the one-day conference continued with moderated sessions on four themes: Al Azm's Philosophical Legacy; a Debate on Secularism; (Reverse) Orientalism; and Al Azm's Political Commitments.

"The idea of being part of what seemed then like a great new world in the making appealed to Sadiq," said Dr. Amr Al-Azm, Professor of Middle East History and Anthropology at Shawnee State University, in his keynote speech about the defining moments in the life of his father, Professor Sadiq Al Azm. "There was something more ambitious, fulfilling, and rewarding than simply pursuing a routine academic career in the US or Europe. He decided to return home where he felt he could make a difference and where the action was. He opted against being an active Arab intellectual in exile, yet it is in exile that he ended after so many years."

"Al Azm is a public intellectual known for defending human rights issues and freedom of expression. This event is not to honor him but a solemn moment of critical reflection on his great thought and legacy," said Dr. Sari Hanafi, chair of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 130 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 420-bed hospital.

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