



**AMERICAN  
UNIVERSITY  
OF BEIRUT**

**AUB Founders Day 2023**

**December 4, 2023**

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**The Odyssey of Hope: How Education Fanned the Flames of My Civic  
Awakening Amid the Ashes of War**

The scent of smoke and ash permeated the air as I walked home from school amid falling bombs. Rockets scattered like malevolent fireworks as the siege tightened its stranglehold on our spirits. Each day was a perilous journey, merely to grasp at the dream of an education. Our ambitions seemed lost behind the specter of death that haunted every corner. Yet even as fear and destruction rained down, I clung to hope, pressing onward, my sights set on a brighter future world where democracy's embrace could free people from brutality's claws.

One moment remains etched into my memory – facing down a rifle barrel, my heartbeats compressed into mere seconds as I stared down the specter of death. It was a dance on destiny's knife-edge, where the danger of losing dreams, loved ones, and life itself unfolded in slow motion. Though racked by dread, I emerged alive yet haunted, afraid of fading into obscurity without realizing my full potential.

My odyssey exemplifies how education and universities can nurture engaged citizenship and be catalysts for change even in the darkest times. As institutions founded on ideals of academic freedom and critical discourse, universities empower students to challenge the status quo and build a more just world. Their hallowed halls become bastions where imagination takes flight and dreams claw free from the talons of tyranny.

This transformative power was evident in my journey. Despite the bombs' deadly symphony, I never relinquished my ambitions kindled in childhood. Each arduous step towards exams and interviews testified to an inner flame that could not be extinguished. Though doors slammed shut, exclusion and injustice only fueled my fire, channeling it into active citizenship.

Under siege, securing bare essentials like stable electricity for an interview required meticulous planning akin to a military operation. The smell of jasmine, once an innocent fragrance, became tainted by fear until it transformed into the scent of freedom – a symbol of hope and rebirth.

At the American University of Beirut (AUB), the broken fragments of my aspirations found a haven to thrive. AUB fixed what the world had shattered. Once at AUB, new vistas opened up for me. No

longer constrained by my homeland, I flourished in an intellectual hothouse where diversity and critical discourse were nourished. Freed from the siege mentality of war, my mind expanded, garnering accolades for my campus leadership and engagement. Through navigating AUB's participatory structures, I gained tangible skills for effective civic participation.

In the grand orchestra of citizenship, AUB stands as a lighthouse, guiding individuals through the complex interplay of privileges and responsibilities. It emphasizes that citizenship is not a mere legal status but a profound connection, a merging of personal fate with the collective destiny. AUB's vision is inclusive, recognizing that active citizenship involves not only political and civic rights but also extends to cultural dimensions, everyday life, and entertainment.

Yet universities' true power lies in fostering the habits of mind and values necessary for engaged citizens advancing social progress. By exposing students to diverse perspectives, they teach open-mindedness, empathy and respect for difference – crucial for civic participation. Immersion in an academic culture of unfettered inquiry instills the qualities to fulfill citizenship's promise – inquisitiveness, analytically balanced thinking and appreciation of complexity.

Moreover, by upholding inclusive, socially-conscious values, universities model the democratic ideals undergirding civil society. From policies to curriculum, they mirror and disseminate the principles of diversity, social justice and free expression. This demonstrates students' civic duties to stand up for the marginalized and challenge unjust systems.

As my journey shows, these lessons in engaged citizenship have deep resonance for the Global South. By nurturing students' sense of ethics, agency, and empathy, universities cultivate the soil for human rights and democratic participation to take root and blossom. They play a vital role in transforming 'subjects' into empowered citizens, equipped to challenge unjust structures.

At AUB, I was judged not by my nationality or origins, but by my character and achievements. Though denied visas to top global universities despite having full scholarships, at AUB I found a home. I rose to lead the TEDxAUB club, serve as Secretary-General of the Beirut Model United Nations, and represent students on the Title IX Discriminatory Harassment Subcommittee. Pursuing a dual degree in computer science and business administration with concentrations in entrepreneurship and family business promised bright prospects ahead. For my engaged campus contributions, I received the Student Excellence and the Empowering Change through Student Engagement awards.

My trials getting an education in war-torn Syria reveal the obstacles strewn across the road towards engaged citizenship, especially in the Global South. Entrenched inequalities, conflicts and threats to academic freedom can choke the seeds of civic participation. Yet AUB showed that universities can nourish the values for democratic participation, advancing justice and human rights.

As institutions built on free inquiry, universities must champion unhindered speech, open debate and tackling controversial ideas. Only through wrestling with hard truths and questioning assumed 'wisdoms' can critically engaged citizens emerge, equipped to advance society. Suppressing academic freedom breeds a culture of silence and docility that is anathema to participatory citizenship.

Additionally, through curriculum, universities must address issues of social injustice, discrimination and marginalization restricting civic life. By teaching equity, diversity and human rights, they can cultivate students' moral resolve to challenge systemic exclusion. However, mere curriculum reform is insufficient without universities themselves modeling these democratic values in their own structures, policies and practices.

Beyond internal reforms, universities have a duty to foster social innovation and engage externally with partners to solve local challenges. Rather than cloistering knowledge within ivory towers, they must actively participate in public life and policy-making, lending their intellectual capital to overcome societal roadblocks. Their convening power provides opportunities for diverse stakeholders, including industry, government and civil society, to co-create novel solutions.

As I approach the end of my journey at AUB, I must admit that though I will leave physically, AUB will never leave me. Its spirit will stay engraved in my heart and mind, lighting the way forward. Wherever life takes me, I hope I can pay it forward by creating an 'AUB' for others – a shelter where they too can heal, grow and spread their wings.

The road is long, but education lights the way. From the rubble of war, universities can sow freedom's seeds and cultivate engaged citizens. Like me, students can become agents of change, guided by academia's light towards a more just, democratic world. The pen is mightier than the sword, and the mind empowers progress.

But in darker times, when freedom's lights dim and conflict festers, universities must shine brighter still. No longer remote havens for the elite, they must stand witness in the streets. Their words must become flesh – birthing justice, shouldering burdens, challenging false powers.

Let campuses be valleys where differences merge as strengths. Where bright minds illuminate all that is obscured, and daring hearts push new frontiers of thought and action. Make libraries into strongholds upholding reason and truth. Forge classrooms into workshops of conscience. And let town squares become the public squares where ideas are exercised for the good of all.

Let every graduate cross into the world a pioneer. No longer content with a frayed fabric, they will remake society strand by strand. Casting petty comforts aside, they will live for lasting change. With the wisdom of universities as their bread, and service as their creed, they will be midwives of a bold new age.

This is the anthem of progress – where the last may be first, and the meek are lifted up. Where justice drowns out the drums of war. Where humanity lays down its arms to raise each other higher. And where education's light guides the way through all that divides towards unity again.

Let this be the song of our time.