



**AMERICAN  
UNIVERSITY  
OF BEIRUT**

2023 Commencement Exercise

**Elias Khoury**

Beirut, Friday, June 9, 2023

Mr. President of the University,  
Chairman and members of the Board of Trustees,  
Esteemed audience,

Thank you for this honor that brought me back to the moods of Beirut that I love. This is the city that was -- and will remain -- the spirit on whose shore the words of dream and change were born.

I stand on this podium and listen to the voices of the great teachers who formulated new meanings, resisted destruction and tyranny, and worked to build a second renaissance for the Arabs through university education and writings.

I listen to the voice of Constantine Zurayk as he tries to grasp the meaning of the "Nakba", and I see Anis Freiha looking for gems of words, Ihsan Abbas formulating the Andalus of desire, and I catch sight of those teachers who transformed the university into a platform for freedom, research, and discovery, from Jurji Zaidan to Antoine Ghattas Karam, all the way to Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm, and I see the shadow of Edward Said, the public intellectual, critic and thinker who triggered a radical revolution in critical thought, establishing postcolonial studies.

My memory is full to the brim with the names of those whose writings formed me intellectually and taught me that the role of the intellectual is to be independent and free, a defender of what is right and a voice for the marginalized and the oppressed.

How I wished, on this occasion, to address the graduating students by recalling the voice of Khalil Hawi, who laid out his ribs before them a solid bridge they cross “from the caverns and swamps of old east into the new”.

But I feel that words are betraying me, for Beirut, once a city of poets, adventurers, strangers, and refugees, is now shattering in front of our eyes.

And I ask, can we find Beirut in Beirut today?

Beirut the mirror of the Arab East, is now besieged by the darkness of tyranny and occupation. It is stifled by sectarianism and racism and is dominated by the specter of an economic and political collapse, disintegrating with the ongoing repression of a ruling class that toppled the nation.

Facing this darkness, shine the words that have become today the last trench of defense for freedom and for tomorrow's possibilities.

"In the beginning was the Word," and the word shines, because its light kindled from the olive tree of freedom and resistance, whose oil "glows even if not touched by fire."

Beirut is the "apple for the sea", as our great poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote, and the sea does not drown, and its apple shines amidst this thickening darkness.

And Beirut, whose soul they are trying to destroy, will dwell since: “Beirut is built of gold and fatigue of Andalusia and Sham”.