

For Immediate Release



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AUB's 154th Founders Day ceremony:

“salvaging hope and turning crisis into opportunity”

The American University of Beirut (AUB) commemorated the 154th anniversary of its founding with the annual Founders Day ceremony held this year online, and attended by AUB community members in Lebanon and around the world, including trustees, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends. This traditional celebration pays tribute to AUB's founders and reiterates AUB's commitment to the values instilled by them since December 3, 1866.

The event featured the traditional address by the AUB president, the announcement of the annual Founders Day student essay contest winners, and a keynote address on “turning crisis into opportunity” by AUB trustee and multiple award winner, Dr. Huda Y. Zoghbi.

The President's address

Dr. Fadlo Khuri, AUB president, delivered his address titled “The few, the many, and those in between.” He began by saying that normally this would be an occasion for celebration, but in 2020, “facing the most devastating contagion since the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic,” and “a year that has seen some of the most divisive political rhetoric in many a generation, we are hardly in the mood for celebration.”

He spoke about the difficulties that have passed in Lebanon during the last 15 months, beginning with the forest fires in the summer of 2019, “followed by a popular uprising that gave brief hope, only to be met with more political inertia,” and the “severe devaluation of the Lebanese pound which was compounded by the consequences of COVID-19,” as well as the August 4 Beirut explosion.

“Lacking leaders, and short on trust and resources, the explosion pushed so many Lebanese who had previously been heartened by a popular, non-violent uprising, who had clung against all odds to invest their hearts, souls, and destinies in Lebanon, to turn away; to head West or East; and—this time—to pledge to never again look back to their native, ancestral land,” Khuri said. He added that “the loss of hope can be the last nail in the coffin of a cause or a country.”

Khuri then moved on to speak about what best determines the optimal path forward and how AUB can contribute.

“This year has been a very difficult year for AUB,” Khuri said, explaining that AUB has already witnessed the departure of more than 1,500 faculty and staff members, and over 250 students in the aftermath of the August 4 explosion. The university revenues tumbled by more than 70%, “an amount that in almost any other university would force far more Draconian measures than those we have undertaken, including closure of large swaths of operations,” Khuri added.

“The campus itself feels abandoned in the successive waves of pandemic-related closures. This has caused us to reflect a great deal, but also to take decisive actions to save that which makes this university so essential, so necessary for a better tomorrow for Lebanon, the Global South, and the world,” Khuri continued.

On this occasion, Dr. Khuri asked AUB students to compose essays on Founders Day describing “what it is about AUB that is most vital to preserve during these terrible trials.”

The Founders Day student essay contest

Out of more than 100 essays, “four aspiring, and insightful students,” as described by Dr. Khuri, successfully distilled what it is about this university that is so fundamental to salvaging hope for this region. “That hope may seem fleeting at this time but we must trust that it will redound even more vibrantly in the better times that we must purposefully strive to achieve,” the president said.

The winners of the Founders Day student essay contest were introduced, with Fatima Kassem Moussa, majoring in English literature and minoring in creative writing and translation in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, as the first prize winner for her essay "AUB Privilege to the Less Privileged." The second prize was awarded to Aws Dek Albab majoring in history from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences for his essay "Maintaining Humanities at the Heart of AUB." As for the third prize, it was awarded to Joodi Mourhli, majoring in nursing in the Hariri School of Nursing and Rima Kamel majoring in psychology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences for their essay "Boldly AUB."

The keynote address

AUB Trustee Huda Y. Zoghbi, MD, the event’s keynote speaker, joined the event from Texas.

Dr. Zoghbi studied biological sciences at AUB and began her medical training in 1975. She completed her MD in the US at Meharry Medical College before joining the Texas Children's Hospital at the Baylor College of Medicine as a resident where she became interested in pediatric neurology. Zoghbi is a world leader in hereditary and neurodegenerative diseases. Her lab unlocked the mysteries of spinocerebellar ataxia type 1 and Rett syndrome and is now making significant progress in our understanding of Alzheimer’s disease. She has received the Shaw Prize in 2016, the Breakthrough Prize in 2017, and the Brain Prize in 2020.

She began by saying that “for although on Founders Day we rightly celebrate AUB’s magnificent history, this particular Founders Day we must also admit that we are in the midst of many crises, and we are not the only ones. What is true for Lebanon is also true for nations around the world,” counting the many devastating crises and disasters the world is facing now. “As we ponder such calamities, we must also remember that we are not without hope, and we are not without help.”

Zoghbi added that the AUB community recently showed true Lebanese resilience when it sprang into action after the explosion in Beirut. “Your determination, courage, and heroism inspired many of my American friends and colleagues to support AUB’s efforts.” She continued, “the real challenge however is not the acute crisis but the long aftermath.”

“The question I want to consider today is how do we keep going? How do we continue to do the right thing when problems seem so large?”

Zoghbi shared with the audience some of her own experiences that may be similar to what everyone is going through now and what she learned from them. She spoke about the hardships and risks of continuing a university school year in Beirut during the war, and the challenges she faced after moving to the US unexpectedly and trying to continue medical school there without any interruptions due to her delayed application. She then spoke about her inspiring career path, research, collaborations, obstacles, losses, lessons learned, and successes.

“When I look back on these experiences I am struck by how often success has seemed to rest on chance. Often these chances don't look like much... If I were to draw lessons from my experiences, I don't think that I could do better than to use the words of the great tennis player Arthur Ashe who expressed his code for living as ‘start where you are, use what you have, and do what you can’,” she said.

As an example to explain this code, Zoghbi spoke about AUB’s founder Daniel Bliss, who grew up poor, funded his education with farming, and was sent to Lebanon to teach school children. “His success with the boarding school eventually grew into the founding of a new college that became the American University of Beirut. As Bliss saw it, his mission was to educate rather than just inform. He thought facts are like seeds, they are of little value unless by reason, will, and consciousness, they are nurtured into ideals that bear fruit. We are here today because Daniel Bliss quietly set about doing what he thought best, step by step. There are now many thousands of AUB alumni, and many of them have had an outsized impact on the world through their work as diplomats, engineers, writers, teachers, historians, artists, politicians, nurses, doctors, and scientists.”

Zoghbi ended, “solutions to the multiple crises we face are not going to be achieved by a single individual act, they will not be achieved without all of us acting individually. Step by step, hour by hour, we can make the world a slightly better place. Let us face our challenges collectively with each of us starting where we are, using what we have, and doing what we can.”

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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 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 140 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 365-bed hospital.

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