

Sawiris at Samir Kassir Foundation lecture: Businesses can enhance democracy and poverty eradication

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Capitalists go where there is profit, and that is not a crime; however, multinationals have a responsibility to improve the living conditions of ordinary people, said Naguib Sawiris, Egyptian business pioneer and executive chairman of Orascom Telecom Holding, during a lecture held at AUB on June 2, 2010.

Entitled, "The Role of Economic Legends in National and Regional Politics in the Arab World," the lecture was organized by the Samir Kassir Foundation, as part of the 'Beirut Spring Festival' 2010, an annual ceremony sponsored by the European Union. During the festival, awards are also distributed to the best investigative reporter and the best opinion writer from the Arab region, said Gisele Khoury, president of the Samir Kassir Foundation. Kassir was a well-known Lebanese journalist who was targeted in a fatal car bomb explosion five years ago.



“Being able to acquire cell phones has given people, like the North Koreans, the biggest freedom they had ever [had],” said Sawiris, referring to a trip to North Korea that revealed to him the role of the private sector in human development. In 2008, Sawiris launched the first mobile operator in North Korea.

Sawiris spoke to a large AUB audience, which included MP Atef Majdalani, MP Nuhad al-Mashnouq, MP Tamam Salam, Elias Tawq, representative of the Lebanese Internal Security, Eddy Abillamaa, representative of the Lebanese Forces, Egyptian Ambassador Ahmad Bidawi, as well as AUB faculty and students.

Sawiri highlighted the main obstacles to progress in the Arab world, namely, poverty, political and religious fanaticism, and lack of democracy and respect for human rights. “We are lacking in democracy in the Arab East, and business companies have a role to play in reviving the democratic [spirit],” said Sawiris. Orascom Telecom Holding has achieved some measure of democracy, noted Sawiris, and has indirectly contributed to economic growth.

Sawiris also noted that when his company makes a profit, many stand to benefit. “I open up opportunities for my employees, thereby enhancing profitability,” said Sawiris. Moreover, by enhancing job benefits for employees, for instance, OTH contributes to enhancing the economy.

Sawiris added that the areas he is most interested in contributing to, are: poverty eradication, encouraging dialogue of religions and cultures, and establishing a foundation for the oppressed.

The Orascom Group is Egypt’s largest private-sector employer.

Sawiris is currently executive chairman of Weather Investments and chairman of the board of Wind Telecomunicazioni SpA in Italy. Sawiris' vision and the bold decisions he has made have affirmed OTH's position on the telecom world stage. He started the company by launching the first mobile operator in Egypt, Mobinil. Today, OTH operates in 12 countries.