

For Immediate Release



AUB's contribution to Arab awakenings highlighted at 2012 Founders Day

Beirut, Lebanon- 03/12/2012 - During the 146 years since its founding, the American University of Beirut has been contributing to political and social change in the Arab region through the 82,000 graduates it has released into more than 100 countries and dozens of leadership roles. Today, AUB is again urged to act with the faith of its first founders to help the rapidly changing region face renewed challenges, said the keynote speaker at the 2012 Founders Day ceremony.

“AUB has a proud history, and it must forge an even brighter future,” said Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut and a former AUB professor of political studies in his Founders Day keynote speech.

“Daniel Bliss (AUB founding father) was a courageous man,” he added. “He and his colleagues believed in the need for progress and change and committed their lives to planting the seeds that would bring that change about. Their actions liberated hundreds, then thousands of minds that opened up to the possibilities of rational thought, science and learning. Once liberated, these minds could not be enslaved again; once out of the bottle, the genie could not be coaxed back again.”

He added: “The power of thousands of minds working and growing independently helped change the Arab world.”

Salem underscored how AUB graduates and professors, long before the current Arab uprisings, had contributed to an earlier Arab spring, some 150 years ago, “when Arab thinkers began to rethink their approach to religion, politics, language, culture and social organization.”

People such as Boutros al Bustani and Nassif al Yaziji, both writers, working closely with American missionary and Arab scholar Cornelius Van Dyck, helped systematize and modernize the Arabic language that is the medium of thought and communication in our region today.

Later, after World War II, AUB became a hotbed of activism that produced leaders in Arab nationalism, Arab Socialism and the Palestinian National Movement, and it continues to this day to supply the Arab world with political, scientific and business leaders who inject innovative ideas into their worlds, Salem added.

Just as education and liberal thought helped liberate the minds of thousands of AUB graduates, so too, the recent Arab uprisings have liberated millions of citizens who had been trapped “in the prison cells of fear, passivity, and despair,” and who rejected the unbearable political and social conditions under which they lived, noted Salem.

Nevertheless, political change is not easy, he added. “Removing a dictator, as hard and difficult as that may sometimes be, is a simpler proposition than agreeing on a constitutional and democratic way forward.”

That’s why many Arab countries are still facing turmoil, bloodshed and serious disagreements over constitutional provisions, the role of religion in politics, and the exercise of power in government.

Salem’s advice to AUB when looking at the challenges ahead, and facing a tumultuous and rapidly changing region is for it to act with the faith of its first founders: “Empowering young minds with the tools and methods of independent rational and critical thinking will ultimately help bend history in a more rational and progressive direction.”

Salem’s address followed a formal procession of faculty members and senior administrators, with AUB President Peter Dorman opening the ceremony and highlighting AUB’s commitment to a liberal education and creative thinking to enable students to make their educational journey last a lifetime. “We do this at AUB by creating a safe haven for exploring new ideas, meeting different people, and pursuing novel experiences,” he said.

This year, the ceremony also highlighted AUB founder Daniel Bliss’s letters on the fledgling university, around the time of its birth in 1866. A booklet offering translations of excerpts from the book *Letters from a New Campus*, which compiles Bliss’s letters to his family between 1873 and 1874, was distributed outside Assembly Hall, along with some dried apricots and apricot jam, which Bliss used to find delectable. The booklet was the result of a class project by students of Professor Rula Baalbaki’s Arabic-English translation course. Some of these students arrived at the ceremony in 19th century outfits, to better capture the spirit of the period.

AUB Press also set up a stand for selling books published by AUB about the University. They included books on the history of the campus and its educational accomplishments.

During the ceremony, in which the Thomas Kim-led AUB Choir participated, the winners of the annual student essay contest were announced. Tying in first place were fourth-year electrical and computer engineering student Mahmoud Kambris and sophomore Zeinab Mohamad Bailoun, majoring in political studies and public administration. Kambris and Bailoun, each of whom received a \$750 cash prize, read their winning essays at the ceremony. Placing third was Samar Michel Semaan, a fourth-year chemical engineering student, received a \$250 cash prize.

This year’s student essay competition asked students to “think inventively and just write about what you don’t know,” a theme that was inspired by an 1888 speech on the race of life made by Bliss.

For Bailoun, her ignorance is what drives her to read and write stories, which “tell of what we know and what we don’t know, of what we may never have the chance to find out.”

Indeed, she invited her classmates and the audience to “be of those people who let their ignorance become a catalyst for understanding.”

Bailoun added: “Let us be of those who let human stories drive them to meaning and purpose. Let us be of those who allow stories to connect them to what they do not know. Let us be of those who read, of those who write.”

Meanwhile, Kambris built the premise of his essay around the rhetorical question: “If I do not know myself, then is it possible for me to know anything at all?”

He continued, provocatively noting that in order to know himself, he would need to understand the world around him which influences his views. “To know the world I must know myself and to know myself I must know the world,” he argued. “But if I do not initially know either, how can I ever know anything at all? How am I to achieve the aspired correspondence between perspective and reality?”

Kambris observed that he did not choose his brain or the environment in which he was born. “How, then, is it, that we say that we freely choose our answers? Do my ideas truly belong to me?” he pondered.

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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 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the 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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