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2014 Founders Day keynote speaker: AUB can serve as the region's collective Mandela

Beirut, Lebanon- 01/12/2014 - Absence of diversity and pluralism has been the main cause of Arab political and cultural stagnation, said the keynote speaker at the 2014 Founders Day ceremony, marking AUB's 148th anniversary on December 1, 2014.

But AUB has all the intellectual and moral powers that allow it to act as the change agent the region needs.

“For a variety of reasons, a Nelson Mandela, a Mahatma Gandhi or a Martin Luther King Jr., has not emerged in the region today,” said Marwan Muasher, AUB trustee and vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “There is no reason why AUB cannot serve as a collective Mandela, Gandhi, or King.”

Muasher argued that democracy, pluralism and liberal values require decades of hard work, leadership as well as a vision people can rally around.

“AUB must take the reins again, and harness the tremendous, unparalleled intellectual power it has in the region... It can direct the new generation to believe in this region, stay in it, and provide it with the necessary skills so that the transition from protests to nation building is made possible,” he added.

The official Founders Day ceremony started at noon in Assembly Hall with a procession of faculty members and trustees in academic regalia, led by AUB chief marshal Huda Zurayk.

AUB President Peter Dorman then opened the ceremony, underscoring AUB's liberal arts educational model's role in fomenting positive change during times of uncertainty.

“Universities such as AUB play a unique role as institutions of cultural continuity and positive instruments of social change,” Dorman told the Assembly Hall audience. “They are vessels of academic ferment, guarantors of stability and future promise, exemplars of community engagement, and producers of future leaders.”

Dorman then announced this year's Founders Day essay winners before introducing keynote speaker Marwan Muasher whom he described as a "tireless advocate for peace in the Middle East and the advancement of the region."

Muasher previously served as senior vice president for external affairs at the World Bank and had held numerous high-level governmental positions in his native country of Jordan, as foreign minister, deputy prime minister, ambassador to the United States, minister of information, senator, and government spokesperson for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Muasher's speech focused on the Arab world's role in the "second awakening."

"Now that the Arab uprisings have launched a process that will necessarily unfold in decades rather than years, how do we ensure that it leads to stable, prosperous and pluralistic societies rather than to violence, exclusionist discourses and sectarian divides?" asked Muasher.

Describing the current Arab world's state as "not good," Muasher argued that uprisings that started four years ago have failed to result in stable, democratic and prosperous societies, falling short of transforming themselves from protests to democratic institutions and cultures.

Aside from Tunisia which is faring better than the rest of the struggling Arab world, extremist groups, like ISIS in Syria and Iraq are hitting at the region's cultural diversity and threatening centuries of coexistence among the different communities in the whole Levant, said Muasher.

"We now know that the label 'Arab spring' has proven too simplistic, since such transformational processes defy black and white outlooks or expectations and I call this process a second Arab Awakening," he said. "The first one started with an intellectual renaissance that found its way eventually into popular movements, and the second awakening started with popular movements that have yet to be contextualized within intellectual frameworks."

According to Muasher, so far these movements have better articulated what they are against than what they are for in a detailed manner, lacking the capabilities or experience to transition to democracy. "But the debate to define what this awakening is about has started, perhaps 70 years too late, and that is healthy in itself. The principal fight in the Arab world from now on should be a battle for pluralism and not simply one against despotic rule. Without the commitment to pluralism, none of the objectives of freedom, dignity and justice can be achieved," he said.

Invoking AUB's success in graduating great leaders that promote diversity and pluralism, Muasher invited the University to continue in its noble mission of spreading its liberal arts and forward looking intellectual values in the region.

“AUB has gone on to graduate great leaders in all walks of life, hailing from all parts of the political and economic spectrum, to lead their countries into modernity, often against the obstacles of foreign domination, domestic authoritarianism, or the creation of the state of Israel at the expense of Palestinians,” said Marwan Muasher, listing the likes of Yacoub Sarrouf, Charles Malek, Ihsan Abbas, Walid Khalidi, Kamal Salibi, Constantine Zureik and many others.

“As the region underwent its first renaissance movement in the 19th and 20th centuries, AUB played a central role in helping provide intellectual frameworks as well as in training future leaders for the entire region,” he added. “AUB’s faculty was at the forefront of propagating ideas for a better Arab world.”

Citing Constantine Zureik, AUB professor, former interim president and the intellectual father of pan-Arabism, Muasher said: “A progressive society is one which is harmonious, where all citizens enjoy equal opportunity, where no individual or group monopolizes another because of birth, heritage, gender or any other claimed difference, as all individuals are at their core equal in their citizenship and humanity.”

“These were written 57 years ago in his urging the Arab world to adopt modern civil structures and emancipate itself from foreign domination and stagnant societies,” noted Masher.

For Zureik, signs of societal progress include the presence of political, social and intellectual freedoms, an independent judiciary with social and economic justice and equal opportunity for all.

“In this region, truths are still regarded as absolute, and a single person, party or ideology is presented as the holder of all the answers to all the problems with the role of the public being largely to submit,” Muasher added.

Arab countries should focus on creating strong national identities that would trump all other allegiances; otherwise democracy may never take hold, and reinvent their national education systems accordingly with subservience and devotion to an all-powerful leader or group being supplanted by an allegiance to the nation, argued Muasher.

Touting AUB as the change agent that the region needs, he added: “I can think of no bigger challenge, no higher cause, no nobler objective for AUB to adopt in this new era than this. It has all the necessary ingredients, and one hundred fifty years of preparation and capacity building, to adopt this role.”

As every year, the Founders Day essay competition was launched at the beginning of the year, inviting students to write an essay this year on the theme of “the time when you learned something important from an unexpected source.”

The winning essay was by Majd Salim Nassan, a political studies senior, titled “Never Forget Passion” and the invaluable lesson he learned from a taxi driver who rekindled in him to study the field he held dear to his heart instead of something that would secure a paying job upon graduation.

Freshman Norma Zoghbi came in second place her essay, “The Harmonious Cure” in which she shared an invaluable lesson she learned from an infant afflicted with Joubert Syndrome: that one can find joy (in music, in this case) despite suffering.

Meanwhile, biology sophomore Rayan Al Barry landed in third place with “A Summer to Live” and some invaluable lessons from a homeless man in Corfu, who taught him about the importance of giving and positively influencing other people’s lives.

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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 700 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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