

For Immediate Release



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**AUB awards honorary degree to Adjani, Fakhro, Helou, Koh, and Shafik and graduates 524 and will celebrate tomorrow the graduation of 1708 undergraduate students**

**Khuri: “Life is a marathon, not a sprint”**

The American University of Beirut (AUB) ceremoniously graduated 524 students in Graduate, PhD, and Doctor of Medicine programs and will celebrate tomorrow the graduation of 1708 undergraduate students.

During the ceremony, AUB granted the Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters to acclaimed French actress Isabelle Adjani; inspirational physician, writer, and political thinker Ali Fakhro; groundbreaking astrophysicist George Helou; renowned public health policy leader and physician Howard Koh; and erudite scholar and economist Nemat Shafik for their world-renowned achievements in their respective fields.

The ceremony was attended by Defense Minister Yacoub Sarraf representing the President of the Republic of Lebanon General Michel Aoun, MP Dr. Fadi Alameh representing House Speaker Nabih Berri, and Culture Minister Dr. Ghattas Khoury representing Prime Minister Saad Hariri, as well as members of the Board of Trustees, parents, alumni, and friends.

After the graduates' procession and the academic procession of the university President, Provost, Deans, Faculty members and Trustees in their full regalia, the ceremony started with the Lebanese National Anthem. AUB President Fadlo R. Khuri then spoke to the audience.

**Fadlo R. Khuri:**

President Khuri addressed the ceremony. He said: Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, honored trustees, deans, faculty, staff, parents and families, and—most especially—the AUB Class of 2018, Welcome to your graduation.

Today is your day, a day which you will share forever with all our graduates, including these five distinguished honorands who have impacted the world through their lasting accomplishments, in cinema, theatre, banking, public health, public life, in science and astronomy, who are also your fellow graduates. Each one of us, on the stage or in the audience, has their own unique story, their own frame of reference.

He continued: We all have our favorites. Two months ago, I was reading in one of my favorite newspapers since childhood, the *Guardian*, a column by Jonathan Freedland, whose writings I enjoy. In it, the writer lamented what he called the “casual dismissal of verifiable facts” that seems so common today in public discourse at the national and international level. He cites a phenomenon dubbed “tribal epistemology” where information is evaluated not on the evidence, but on whether it supports your worldview, and whether it has been uttered by your leaders, or the leaders of their enemies. As a result, Freedland worries the great division of our time may not be between Left and Right, or North or South, but something more fundamental still: between true and false.

He added: Over the twentieth century, the United States built the greatest research armamentarium in the world by becoming a haven to the finest scientists from central

Europe and Asia, people who emigrated in order to find a better future, to ensure the safety of their families and the sanctity of their science.

Lebanon, on the other hand, has made a near miraculous achievement. It has exported its best and brightest talents for more than a century and yet remained competitive with the level of the most developed nations until the early 1970s when the civil war broke out. Yet despite all these challenges, this small nation and some other nations in the Arab world are starting to show some signs of real progress, in knowledge, literature, technology, and empowerment. This nation can be particularly proud of its guardianship of freedom of speech and dissent. Tom Wolfe, the American author and journalist who died last month, could have been thinking about Lebanon when he wrote, "One of the few freedoms that we have as human beings that cannot be taken away from us is the freedom to assent to what is true and to deny what is false. Nothing you can give me is worth surrendering that freedom for."

He continued: Recently, we concluded one of our most magnificent Middle East Medical Assemblies, the 49<sup>th</sup>, which focused on the importance of mental health across the life span. Of particular note was the importance of sound sleep in mental health. So while Frost spoke to us metaphorically about sleep, I encourage you to develop far better habits than I in getting your required amount of rest. Recognize that life is a marathon and not a sprint, even for you, the best and brightest students of the American University of Beirut.

He ended: Congratulations AUB class of 2018! Go forth to change the world for the better.

### **The Graduating Class Speech:**

Rafic Hariri School of Nursing student Grace Hakim spoke on behalf of the graduating class. She said: It is a bittersweet moment. The few years of sleepless nights spent

here seem to have gone by swiftly and merrily. Although we are finally moving towards our next goal, it feels difficult to leave this valuable platform of personal and intellectual growth.

She added: Indeed, AUB helped each one of us cultivate meaningful values and principles that are influential in our community. For many of us, it started when the AUB Hariri School of Nursing was nurturing our nursing skills. They said, to launch and sustain a successful nursing career, we need to show compassion to our patients, commit to their well-being, maintain an ethical demeanor, attend to details, and sharpen a clinical mind to support our decision making.

She continued: We have to continue to yearn and seize potential opportunities that have a meaningful impact on our profession. When I attended my first course in the graduate program, I knew that pursuing a master's degree while working would undoubtedly be met with hurdles. Soon enough, deadlines started to pile up, and so did the items on the to do list of my personal and professional life. However, the reserve of opportunities that was accessible in AUB encouraged me to remain productive and, more importantly, contributed to my growth in all aspects of my life. And for that, I am eternally thankful.

She concluded: Fellow graduates, each one of us has a distinct goal in mind. After years of hardship, the path to this goal looks shorter. Well done! We must, nonetheless, commit to a shared goal among us: serving our country. Combined, our different backgrounds and the values that AUB has instilled in us prepare us to make unique contributions to our community in Lebanon.

### **The Honorary Doctorates:**

President Khuri then took the podium again saying that according to the authority vested in him by the university's Board of Trustees, he is conferring the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities pertaining thereto, to acclaimed French actress Isabelle Adjani; inspirational physician, writer, and

political thinker Ali Fakhro; groundbreaking astrophysicist George Helou; renowned public health policy leader and physician Howard Koh; and erudite scholar and economist Nemat Shafik. The five honorands received the degrees and were hooded by Provost Dr. Muhamed Harajli. Each of them then gave his/her acceptance speech.

**Ali Fakhro:**

In his acceptance speech, Fakhro said: Thank you very much for your words, Mr. President, for which I take great pride, and thanks to our cherished and distinguished university. The honorary doctorate that I receive today is a lustrous call to action for me, and a tribute to my country, the Kingdom of Bahrain.

He continued: I state with all sincerity that all I believe in and what I struggled to achieve sprang from values and humane moral obligations nurtured in us by the curricula of this university, a liberal university open to all cultures and all masterpieces of thought. These values and obligations were taught to us by a brilliant rational generation of distinguished professors who believe in dialogue.

He added: Here we learned responsible commitment to issues of our Arab world. Here we learned the virtue of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Here we acquired the thirst for knowledge, truth and the defense of justice.

He said: Nationalism is dying, patriotism is dying, and humanity is dying and all will be replaced by the stunning rise of the power and domination of global financial institutions, transcontinental corporations and the babbling of social media. In the foreseeable future, artificial intelligence will replace humans, starting a dark phase full of ghosts and dangers threatening humanity's long historical journey.

He concluded: Knowing my university, the answer is yes, the determination and creativity of this historically inveterate university can do it.

May God preserve our university and bless all those who work and study in it.

**Howard Koh:**

In his acceptance speech, Koh said: Over the course of my career, I have had the honor of meeting so many professionals who were proud graduates of the American University of Beirut. Some of them were my closest mentors, teachers, colleagues and friends. They were not just smart; they were worldly and wise. As a physician, I found that my fellow health professionals from AUB always ranked in the top echelons of our field. Many of them achieved so much to become great healers, despite enduring great sacrifices. After a while, I came to realize that the name “AUB” was synonymous with “outstanding” and “world class”. I found myself hungry to learn more about the noble history and enduring values of this stunning university. Moreover, through my beloved Lebanese wife, Dr. Claudia Arrigg, I came to cherish the culture, one that is now also proudly shared by our three children.

He ended: So, today, it is a privilege beyond words to receive this honorary degree from President Dr. Fadlo Khuri, a highly respected and admired physician leader both here and in the United States. Your commitment to serving as a beacon of enlightenment for the world inspires us all. Claudia and I are so grateful for your extraordinary hospitality, warmth and generosity. AUB will live forever in our hearts. Thank you.

**Nemat Shafik:**

In her acceptance speech, Shafik said: It is a great honour to accept this degree from the American University of Beirut. Even when surrounded by ignorance, conflict and prejudice, AUB has stood out as a beacon for something different – education, resilience and tolerance.

She added: I was born in Alexandria, a city that sits, like Beirut, on the Mediterranean and has a history of trading and being open to people from all over the world. My family

left Alexandria after the revolution and subsequent nationalisations in Egypt and had to start again from scratch in a new country. Growing up, my father would always say to us “they can take everything away from you, but they can’t take away your brain.” For him, education was what saved us and was the most important asset in life.

She continued: This experience, alongside a commitment to spreading opportunity to those less fortunate than myself, has shaped my personal history and career, across my time at the World Bank, the IMF, the UK Civil Service – and currently as Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science, a university that, like AUB, was established with a social purpose.

She ended: It is a real pleasure for me to join in AUB a community of distinguished scholars, students, staff and alumni who share a commitment to these ideals.

### **George Helou:**

Helou said in his keynote address: Dear Graduates, Congratulations! You are now hope. You are the hope of your family and community, the hope of your profession, and the hope of the world at large. You represent the leading edge of enlightenment, and according to the champions of Enlightenment from René Descartes to Steven Pinker, you represent our only bridge to a bright future.

You have worked hard and accomplished great things. You all have smarts, perseverance and drive to spare. So what advice could I possibly provide that would be useful to you? I could tell you about pursuing your passion with joy and enjoyment; or about staying hungry for new ideas and opportunities; or about taking your work seriously but not taking yourselves too seriously; but you already know all about that, or you wouldn’t have made it this far.

He continued: So rather than offer advice, let me invite you to ponder with me a question that is the stuff of science fiction, yet is traceable to the writings of Epicurus in Ancient Greece. Intense interest in this question has been re-ignited by astrophysical discoveries from the past ten years. The question is remarkably simple and yet very profound: *Where is everybody?*

Let me tell you first about our recent astrophysical discoveries. During the past decade we have found and measured thousands of exoplanets orbiting distant stars, including hundreds that resemble Earth. Most of these exoplanets were found by surveying a tiny piece of sky using NASA's Kepler Observatory, and much about their nature was learned from studies using NASA's Spitzer Space Telescope. From these finds we infer that our own galaxy, the Milky Way, contains tens of millions of Earth-like planets with temperate conditions; planets where water could rain down on soil and rock, and where waves could break on sandy beaches; wrapped in atmospheres and magnetic fields, such planets would be hospitable to life not unlike life on Earth. Tens of millions of Earth-like planets with Earth-like temperatures and many of them with water and atmosphere.

He added: If life emerges on even a small percentage of these exoplanets, and if life evolves to intelligence in only a small percentage of cases, and even if intelligent beings pursue technology infrequently, we would still expect thousands of technological civilizations inhabiting our galaxy, very probably communicating among themselves, and possibly traveling between planetary systems. This estimation is known as the Drake equation. It implies that some sort of contact between humanity and such civilizations is extremely likely, but has not happened yet; thus the Cosmic Question *Where is everybody?*

Let me give you a bit of my personal history with this question. I feel fortunate to have grown up in Lebanon, in a society that valued education, and provided access to books and ideas. I read voraciously in high school and was fascinated by this question when it came up. I pondered and discussed it walking around this campus as an undergraduate

student; Astrophysics then was a distant dream for me, but AUB was the perfect environment for these discussions, and the perfect launchpad for my trajectory. During my graduate studies at Cornell the question re-emerged when I helped in the assembly of the Golden Record which is out there today, roaming the Galaxy on board the Voyager spacecraft. Even then I realized that my multi-cultural background was a tremendous asset in thinking about interstellar communication and about summarizing Earth on a Golden Record. AUB had been indeed a perfect launchpad, an intellectual melting pot within multi-cultural Lebanon. By all evidence, AUB still is a unique launchpad, and I hope you will all soon experience this for yourselves. The Cosmic Question remained a secondary pursuit for me while I studied galaxies and cosmology and surveyed the infrared universe.

He continued: Now you may be wondering: How can you help ponder this Cosmic Question?

Well, the biologists and medical scientists among you could tell us how likely it is for life to emerge in Earth-like environments over a billion-year history. And how likely it is for evolution to promote intelligence.

The chemists, physicists and geologists could tell us how likely it is for Earth's environment to remain life-friendly for a typical star's lifetime. Conversely, how likely is it that Earth is a fluke?

The educators, historians, and social scientists could tell us how likely it is for an intelligent society to move towards enlightenment, rational development and technology. And how likely it is for a mature civilization to maintain curiosity and exploration after thousands of generations.

The business graduates could maybe figure out societal drivers on a planetary scale in the vast expanse of space.

The aggies could tell us about the ultimate limits of food production for advanced civilizations.

The architects and engineers could tell us how advanced civilizations commanding huge resources might modify their environments to ensure long-term stability. How would they camouflage themselves if they wished to hide and cocoon?

The literature and communication specialists could tell us how to communicate with a species when we know nothing about their history, intellect or spirituality.

He added: I started out promising no advice today, but I have changed my mind; here's my advice to all of you: Once in a while, find some dark night-sky and look up at the stars. Let your eyes adjust to the darkness and let the twinkling stars draw you closer to the Universe. As you look out, your eyes may see only a few hundred stars, but they are taking in the imperceptible light of millions of galaxies, stars and exoplanets; they are taking in the light from nebulae, supernovae, black holes, and a host of weird and wonderful phenomena dotting the cosmos; they may even be taking in faint signals from a distant civilization.

He concluded: We are not only citizens of the cosmos, we are inseparable from it. Answering the question *Where is everybody?* will reveal more about ourselves than about the others.

### **The Degrees:**

After that, President Khuri and the Deans distributed the degrees to 524 graduates:

Medicine 100

MA / MS 411

PhD 13

## **Saturday's Ceremony**

Further to this ceremony, AUB will be holding its graduation ceremony for undergraduates on Saturday at 8:00 pm where 1708 undergraduates will receive their degrees. Ceremony speaker will be Dr. Howard Koh.

**ENDS**

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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 8,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 130 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 420-bed hospital.

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