

## ***For Immediate Release***



### **Keynote speaker Rami Khouri to Class of 2014: Build an Arab world that allows people to express their individuality**

*Student speakers praise AUB for offering a space of freedom of expression and diversity*

Beirut, Lebanon- 31/05/2014 -Some 1531 AUB students have earned their bachelor's degrees, in a ceremony held at the American University of Beirut Green Field on May 31, 2014.

A procession of professors and trustees in academic regalia, led by Chief Marshal Huda Zurayk, opened the 145th commencement exercises, which was live streamed on several screens on campus and online for the second year in a row.

“For all of the members of the Class of 2014 at AUB, I offer my warmest congratulations, for you are the beneficiaries of a university education that is second to none in the Middle East,” said President Peter Dorman.

“Behind each diploma lie historic generations of men and women who have left their significant mark in the world, and whose ranks you are about to join.”

Addressing his fellow classmates, Raed Riad Al Kontar, a candidate for the degree of Bachelor of Engineering in Civil Engineering from the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, reflected on his AUB experience.

For Kontar, “the little secure bubble,” as AUB is described by alumni, is a haven for minorities, promoting tolerance and a diversity of opinion, while encouraging everyone to think radically and dream of a positive change.

“I will always remember the AUB elections I participated in this year,” Kontar said. “In a country that is almost ripped apart each time an election comes up, I saw ... students from different ideologies walking calmly towards each other, congratulating each other, hugging each other and remaining friends despite everything. This is AUB, our bubble in a world where elections are tense, dangerous and uninspiring.”

He added, “Every single AUB student fought for something bigger. We even caused our administration a fair amount of trouble this year with our refusal to abandon our idealistic views. Is it a wonder then that after years of looking forward to this moment, it remains a bittersweet moment? Today, we leave our warm bubble to a place where voicing a dissenting opinion can be dangerous.”

Kontar then prodded his fellow classmates to practice, in the real world, the skills gained by fighting for causes on the AUB campus. “The Lebanese are demanding a higher standard of

life. They need us and our experience of fighting for our causes. And, hopefully, we will not fail them.

Fellow student Yasmine Walid Saker, a candidate for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, with a double major in Political Studies and Media Studies, from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, then took the stage.

“Two years ago I lost my sense of belonging; I no longer had a home to go back to in my war-torn country,” Yasmine, Syrian national, said. “I was forced to be away from my family, friends and everything that gave me an identity. However, it wasn’t long before I realized that I DO belong somewhere.

“I belong to the American University of Beirut, where I experienced democracy first-hand in the student body elections. I belong to the only place where I was equal with my male colleagues, a right often confiscated by our patriarchal societies. I belong where I could fully exercise my freedom of expression through class discussions and assignments, where I could safely say what I think, away from the culture of fear instilled in the region. ..I belong here, where I found my passion in journalism, to give people the voice that AUB has given me, where I was -and always will be--a part of the most diverse community in the Middle East, a place where tolerance, integrity and cooperation stand in contrast with the prejudices and narrow-mindedness spread widely across the whole region... If a place that empowers people to reach their full potential is not a home, then we are all eternal refugees.”

Keynote speaker Rami Khouri, director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs and a fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, and formerly regional editor of Lebanon’s Daily Star, then delivered the keynote speech, highlighting the transformations that took place in the Arab world over the past four years.

“Every student experience at college is meaningful and often thrilling, and every graduating class is special in its own way,” he told the graduates. “But you, this AUB class of 2014, are unique, both for your experience inside AUB and for what your fellow Arab young men and women have unleashed across this region during the last four years.”

“You graduate amidst an Arab world in the midst of profound transformations, where in more and more instances, and for the first time ever, the individual counts, and has voice – whether this happens digitally and virtually, or on the streets and in voting booths. Citizens in all Arab countries, without exception, no longer fear to proclaim that they have rights, and they will organize and mobilize peacefully but forcefully to make sure that those rights are respected,” noted Khouri, the 2006 recipient of Pax Christi International Peace Award for his efforts to bring peace and reconciliation to the Middle East.

“I ask you to please go out into the world and built that great new tent for us, for yourselves, and for future generations to come – please build us a large, light-filled, breezy and colorful national and social space where we can manifest our full humanity, and live life to its fullest; where we can express our individualism, dress as we like, read what interests us, but respect the identities of others; where we can practice democracy, engage authority, and debate, disagree and negotiate new norms with civility; where we can set free our cultural and artistic spirits, live in peace with all religions, and above all, have fun and enjoy life.

“You are among a very small minority of people in the Arab world who have already experienced all this, because these values and ethical norms defined your life experiences at

AUB these last four years. So please keep doing all this and more, as you now venture outside these wonderful walls,” he concluded.

President Dorman and the deans then distributed diplomas to the proud graduates.

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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 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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