

Rima Khalaf's Speech Commencement 2006

President Waterbury,
Distinguished deans and faculty,
Graduates, proud parents and honored guests,

Thank you, President Waterbury, for your kind and uplifting remarks. It is an honor and pleasure to return to my *alma mater* on this happy occasion. Exactly thirty years have passed since I graduated from AUB, thirty good and full years during which, whenever I became anxious about the future, I found that one of its most reassuring parts was always just behind me. I mean, of course, that part formed at AUB, whose influence has been a bridge across my adult life.

When I graduated, my excitement was diluted by a sense that the happiest days of my life might be ending. Little did I know that they were just about to start. When you graduate from AUB, you stop living within its protective walls, but if my experience is any guide, AUB continues to live with you. What you gained here will continue to light your road. Your open minds, your ability to test assumptions and your readiness to break taboos will distinguish you in any crowd.

AUB stays with you in other ways. As successful doctors, engineers, businessmen, or social scientists you may savor the best restaurants in the world. But no delicacy in Nobu, Maxim, or Le Cirque will taste quite as good as the treats you lingered over around campus. You may tour the most spectacular sites on the planet, but even the gardens of Versailles will not outshine the warmth and beauty of the Green Oval.

You may sail the greatest oceans, but this tiny Mediterranean slip will always be the fairest of them all.

So first, congratulations to all here this evening: to you parents, for motivating and supporting these young people through the most cherished investment of their lives; to you, the faculty, on seeing your dedicated work and scholarship bear fruit; and to you graduates, for crowning long years of study with success on the threshold of what I hope will be a fulfilling and prosperous future.

Dear graduates, and as of now, fellow alumni,
Bright as your future may be, it still carries serious challenges and risks. Here I will start with the most unpleasant part of my speech: a quiz. But don't panic, there's only one question, and a multiple choice one at that, the easiest kind. Here it is:

"What do the following have in common: the right to life, to education, to liberty, security, equality, freedom of movement, and freedom of opinion and expression."

Now, your choice of answers:

- a) Together, they contain all the letters of the alphabet.
- b) They are all rights that every Arab enjoys.
- c) They were all slogans of the French Revolution.
- d) All of the above
- e) None of the above.

The correct answer is: None of the above.

What I cited are the inalienable rights to which each and every one of us is entitled according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, embraced by the international community in 1948.

Sadly, more than half a century later, we Arabs are still prevented from enjoying many of those rights. The most sacred of them – the right to life itself – is shamelessly violated. The worst offenders remain the Israeli occupation authorities. For 40 years, the occupiers have subjected Palestinians to the worst abuses of rights and freedoms, not only confiscating their political rights, but destroying their very lives through countless acts of brutality.

In many Arab countries, assassinations target the very forces who defend us against the darkness swallowing our rights: the voices of reason, the advocates of freedom and good governance, human rights activists and the independent media.

Most of us still live in unfree environments where the political freedoms of opinion, expression and association are frequently denied. As a result, our creativity falters and our horizons shrink. And the situation has worsened over the past three decades.

In the sixties and early Seventies, we used to fear only the heavy hand of autocrats. Since then, decades of repression have spawned crippling ideologies that have swelled the effort to silence us and made an independent mind even more risky. Today, alongside governments, two new groups encircle our freedoms. The first, the “Takfeeriyoun,” are extremist groups that demand strict adherence to

their exclusivist vision. They tolerate no dissenting opinion or other belief. Perhaps taking their cue from the super power that told the world "you are either with us or against us," they offer only one choice: "you are either with us, the believers, or with them, the infidels."

The second freedom-hostile group consists of those I call 'al-Takhweeniyoun," people who accuse anyone who disagrees with them of treason. Talk about political reform, and you are a stooge of imperialism, support educational reform and you are an agent of the West, underscore the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, and you are the fifth column.

Between one group that sets out to exterminate opponents and another that seeks to belittle them, many will end up labeled either infidels or traitors. Not all will be intimidated, and not all will knuckle under, but I fear that some will. Both groups are trying to create new, stifling and irrational norms of discourse. They want us to conform out of fear for our lives and they have become the biggest obstacles to an Arab renaissance.

So this is my first message to you today. The farther away anyone takes your priceless rights, collective or individual, the faster you must run to claim them. And never let anyone intimidate you into giving up those rights yourself. Life is tough enough anyway, a permanent challenge laced with promise. But if you throw in the towel, it will become hopeless. What the powerful steal from us can be restored by redistributing power, but what we surrender by default may never be recovered.

A second obstacle you will encounter is the incessant effort to demean your Arab identity. Many have tried to give Arab nationalism a bad name. They have cast doubts on our very eligibility to be a nation. Perhaps that is because our leaders have seldom shown enough interest in welding us into one. Our ruling regimes have long disparaged regional cooperation and ignored economic integration, which they thought would erode their legitimacy. Foreign powers supported the division of our Arab patrimony because the alternative could reduce their influence. However, the greatest damage came from some of the very regimes that ruled in the name of Arab nationalism. Their oppressive policies and corruption discredited the noble banner they took shield behind, and some people found it hard to differentiate between the avowed ideal and the corrupt rule hiding behind it.

When I call today for Arab cooperation, coordination, and economic integration, I do not envision constructing a fortress against the rest of the world but rather a zone of prosperity for the citizens of this region, a space open to, and engaged with a globalizing world. Every aspiring continent, whether Europe, Asia, Latin America or Africa, is now the scene of vibrant regional groupings. For most countries, regional unions represent a ticket to the future, the entrance to a more level global field and the shortest route to sustainable human development, and more jobs and wealth for their citizens. For our small Arab economies, greater regional integration is a matter of survival. For your own sakes, and that of your children, you must work to make it happen. In the final analysis, we are not simply an Arab region; we are a proud Arab nation of all our citizens. Let our course in history be

defined by the enlightened unity of which we are capable, and not by the fragments into which we often disperse.

Your third big challenge relates to the erosion of values. You are exchanging a place where the faculty and administration listened to your voice as students, for one where governments will barely hear your claims as citizens. You are departing from an institution that prizes knowledge to join societies where, often, it's not *what* but *who* you know that opens doors. You are leaving behind brilliant examples of dedicated scholarship to live among many who consider access to power more important than industry or study.

These clashes go beyond the differences between town and gown. They stem from the specific character of our rent-based economies, and are consolidated by despotic rule where accountability is absent and the state is free to act without checks and balances. In society at large, the lure of easy riches linked to oil or corruption has long sapped initiative and innovation by rewarding rent-seeking at the expense of good business management, enterprise and hard work.

So if, as tomorrow's entrepreneurs, scholars and professionals, you want to live in a just, accountable and thriving society, you will have to make yourselves felt and heard against the wind. The values you developed at AUB will be your anchor in this storm and by holding fast to them; you will change society around you for the better.

A fourth challenge I would cite is the splintering of our societies along ethnic or sectarian lines. Partisan social conflicts have risen alarmingly in the last decade. Some of you will say that external powers have

something to do with this. And I will not argue with that. But I have to add that we ourselves have failed to deal with the problem at times, and made it worse at others.

While the power structure marginalizes most Arab citizens, ethnic and religious minorities are excluded twice over. Laws discriminate against them flagrantly, but worse still, society treats them as lesser citizens. Leaders have questioned the patriotism of certain groups merely because of their religious affiliation. Though reformers, intellectuals and the media have been quick to support just causes in Asia, Africa or Latin America, they have sometimes looked the other way when prejudice struck nearer home. Who spoke out when the previous Iraqi regime persecuted the Kurds, or when Sudan forced Sharia law on non-Moslems, or when certain countries discriminated against religious minorities such as Shiites or Christians? Know that you will never be totally free until every member of our societies is free and enjoys full citizenship rights. Cultural diversity is not a cause for fear. It is a strength that should be protected, enriched and celebrated.

Your final challenge, as I see it, is the post-911 world beyond the region, where Arabs are "the other". If you work, live or travel abroad, you may encounter ethnic profiling and cultural stereotyping not experienced by Arabs since the Orientalists held sway. This blowback from the so-called war on terror could knock you off your feet unless you are prepared for it and understand the anxieties that have dethroned rationality and frozen hearts and minds in countries that once welcomed us. You will need a balanced perspective on your ordeal and that of your hosts.

But you should also be aware that the thoughtless way in which this “war” is being conducted has damaged the pillars of freedom in once exemplary democracies, licensed Arab regimes to pile more repression on their people and sent more recruits into the loathsome camp of terror. And you should hold out for a better system of global justice, one applied equally to all, the strong no less than the weak. Knowledge is strength. By grasping the origins and effects of today’s “new normal” abroad, you will be able to hold your heads up under scrutiny and remain true to your identity and history in a world suspicious of both.

Lastly, I emphasize that, in your lifetime, as in mine, no freedom can be considered secure, no right completely established and no capability, human, national or regional, fully unleashed so long as the freedoms, rights and capabilities of women are denied. Let your generation be the first to uphold and celebrate the full equality of our women and men, recognizing their common rights and respecting their differences, without detriment to those rights, as interlocking cornerstones of strong and just societies.

In speaking to you, I have mentioned matters for which you, our graduates, are not responsible - the failings of my generation. My hope is that you can learn from where we stumbled as we pass the torch to you, and that you will carry it much farther than we did.

Most commencement speakers sprinkle their remarks with sharp quotes from eminent thinkers and writers. For this occasion, I prefer to close by quoting a song, one both apt and bitter-sweet. The song is “Bridge over Troubled Water.” Perhaps I chose that classic 70s

anthem because it filled the air at the milk bar in my day. And perhaps because it reminds me how my generation failed to be the bridge that might have saved you from troubled waters. We caused times to be rough for you and the evening to fall so hard; we let darkness come and pain to be all around. And still today we tell you to sail, we say your time has come to shine, and all your dreams are on their way. See how they shine...

Yes, more than any previous generation, you, the graduating class of 2006, will have to take the bitter with the sweet. Yet if you succumb to pessimism, it will blind you to the light inside you. Instead, use the fine talents you polished at AUB as your compass to steer by the stars. You have had the best learning experience in our region. That gift will always be right behind you, your bridge across the foaming waters of life. You are entering a graduate network, whose members have graced cabinets and boardrooms across the Arab world and won stellar awards for scientific and engineering breakthroughs and for literary innovation. Your place is with them and the thousands of other AUB-ites who have built happy, productive and fulfilling lives, striving to excel in all they do and to serve their communities with passion and commitment. And if each of you gives those goals your best shot, even if you sometimes fall short, you will have done all that anyone can reasonably expect of you. Better than that, you will have kept the promise you accepted for yourself when you set foot here, to find life, and have it more abundantly.