

Founders' Day
Student Essay Contest:
The role of AUB in national and regional crises

No man is an island. Every day, we discover how true the poet's simple words are. Our daily routine involves constant interactions with others, those we like as well as those we do not necessarily like. It is all about give and take, and we are all at the heart of this continuous trading process. It is no surprise that Aristotle believes that he who lives outside the social and political community is either a beast or a god, for it is this very friction with others that enables us to fulfill our human nature. We are indeed political animals.

Similarly, no society or institution is an island. They both operate within a given local and international environment and are thus shaped by external conditions. We, in AUB, are part of a society. Think of the very name of this institution, American University of Beirut. Each one of these three words entails a whole set of implications. It is an American university catering values of freedom, democracy, knowledge, tolerance and diversity. It is a university providing mental, physical, social and cultural education to students through a highly professional academic body. Finally, it is situated in Beirut. Those who had the chance to live in Beirut will not need a definition of this city, for it is a self-defining phenomenon. Much has been said about Beirut which can be summed up in one word: open. It is exposed to everything, from the latest fashion trend to the heaviest diplomatic feud. Exposed, affected, influenced, influencing; all can be said about this open city, and consequently about our university. Although the borders of AUB are clearly defined from Bliss Street all the way to the Corniche, these frontiers hardly exist with the outside. In this sense, AUB is a continuation of and not a rupture with the outside.

We, as students, faculty and staff are the essence of AUB. Besides fulfilling our duties, be it teaching, working or studying, we drag our very humanity along with our morning coffee into this university. Our concerns, hopes, biases, problems, affiliations and prejudices become part of this institution which, by encompassing them all, becomes a complex mirror image of who we are and consequently, of what the world is. Economic, political, diplomatic and cultural crises waltz their way into the city and consequently through the Main gate into our campus. Although not necessarily taking place within its borders, these crises influence the very functioning of our university which then, is no longer neutral and external to these events.

Not only is it shaped by the outside, AUB also helps in mutually shaping its environment through direct and indirect actions. But what is it that is shaping AUB today?

If we were to sum up today's world, two major concepts arise: war and democracy. By preventing the former and enhancing the latter, AUB holds a central role in this interplay of forces.

Wars are an extreme form of life and perhaps represent a paroxysm of crises. The last July war is a tragedy that has affected the nation and the whole world for that matter. Ras Beirut might have been spared the direct physical damage, but this did not stop the plague from reaching each and every home, shop, and institution in the country. AUB could not have stood still when faced with the tragedy. In fact, raising donations, cleaning the streets of Beirut, gathering livelihood products for the displaced were all features on AUB's war-time agenda.

As for democracy, it is perhaps the most used term in contemporary politics. On November 15, students cast their votes during what is considered to be the most important student event, namely the SRC elections. Throughout the last couple of years, these elections proved to be highly influenced by the outside. This year was no exception; the current political turmoil in Lebanon found its way into AUB. The bipolarity on the Lebanese political scene manifested itself through two electoral blocs competing over SRC seats in all faculties. Through its SRC elections, AUB offers its students the chance to be part of a democratic process; by enabling them to fulfill their citizenship in AUB, the university is preparing students to fulfill their future rights and duties within the Lebanese society. However, this democratic process was disturbed this year by political tensions on Bliss Street. The announcement of electoral results was postponed to prevent a potential crisis from arising from within AUB's borders. SRC elections were a concrete manifestation of AUB's crucial role within its national and regional community. A major responsibility had to be assumed and crucial decisions had to be made in order to prevent possible upheaval of events and a potential cataclysm.

In both instances, AUB had the choice of isolating itself from the outside. However, it has realized that it cannot and should not be an island. As a cosmopolitan university, not only does AUB gather people from all around the world, but it also has the ability to make great use of its cosmopolitanism; create a certain unity from diversity. Diversity is a key word in Lebanon and the region as a whole; our region has been characterized by tribalism, sectarianism, and divisions, which have so far manifested themselves in numerous crises. By encompassing diversity, AUB can participate in preventing the metamorphosis of healthy differences into dangerous schisms, and the degeneration of natural diversity into animosity and conflict. Pacify, not oppress; participate not isolate; choose the multicolored over the monochrome. By encouraging plurality and enhancing tolerance, AUB would be solving our two major crises: war and democracy. By promoting real democratic values of participation and tolerance, it will help prevent future turmoil, conflicts and wars. AUB is a treasure island; its treasure lies in its very own ability to remain an original isle while serving as a vital part of society. What we need today and tomorrow is to remind ourselves of the peaceful ways that can be used to prevent violent outbursts, namely toleration, deliberation, and compromise. Forget about copy/pasting the wrongs of our societies, which is in itself a crisis. Be original, creative and imaginative, and see how far this can lead you. AUB should enable us to challenge the mainstream while being a part of it.

At 9:40 pm, after a long and turbulent day of elections, competition and diversity; after a very strident demonstration of freedom of speech; multicolored AUB students sat down on the multicolored floor in front of West Hall, grabbed their sandwiches and drinks, and shared normal and peaceful conversation in the remains of the long turbulent elections day. West Hall, 9:40 pm; this is what AUB should aim for.