

Class Reunion 2006
Abdel-Muhsen Qattan Speech

Mr. President, Alumni, Ladies and Gentlemen, I was very honored to be asked to address this distinguished gathering today.

When I came to AUB as an undergraduate in late 1947, it was the first time in my life that I was leaving Palestine. As I prepared myself for the trip, my mother warned me to be particularly wary of the women in Beirut and their notorious love of dancing which, to her mind, represented the lowest possible forms of immorality. Little did I know at that time what I was to expect; nor did I suspect that I would not see my hometown Jaffa again for another fifty years or so.

What I found at AUB was a wonderful space of freedom, full of stimulating men and women who mixed together in ways unheard of in most places in the Arab world of the time. AUB was also a place where we were encouraged to value our freedom of thought and right to self-expression, to defend our point-of-view and to be independent. The fact that the university was based in Beirut was of course very significant: in this beautiful place with its great diversity and its relaxed, liberal atmosphere, so characteristic of our coastal cities, one could meet Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Persians and Europeans from more than two-dozen denominations and faiths. Many were refugees, as we would become, others were simply seeking a living in the city. There were the venerable, the conservative and the highly liberal, the communist, the nationalist and the downright opportunist. Every color and variety of citizen of the Arab East seemed to exist in Beirut and though this reminded me of Jaffa in many ways, it was being part of such a distinguished school as AUB which made my first year so thrilling.

Our professors were attentive, stimulating and, like all first-class teachers, unforgettable. The late Stephen Penrose, president of AUB at that time, would attend Student Council meetings and take part in discussions with us in an atmosphere of open debate and mutual respect. Professors would let us sit our exams without invigilating them. The shy young man that I was quickly gained confidence. I eventually became editor of the Arabic student magazine, *Al-Urwa Al Wuthqa* and a member of the student council. The self-confidence which these experiences instilled in me was immeasurably valuable to me in later life. Never again would I be afraid to express or debate my point of view, or shrink from defending it.

Our favorite meeting place was a restaurant called Faisal across the road from Main Gate. Many of us were too poor to have more than one meal a day and it would usually be at Faisal's, whose such was the restaurants fame that a fellow student from Nablus once received a letter from his father addressed to him as follows: "The American University of Beirut, opposite Faisal!"

Yet the freedom and excitement I felt when I arrived at AUB were soon overshadowed by the calamitous events of the Nakba in 1948. When I rushed home to find my mother and my siblings, Jaffa had already fallen. When I finally located them, it was in a house without windows in Amman. My father had died some years previously, so that my eldest brother and I suddenly faced the burden of supporting our large family.

However, it was also difficult for any young person at the time not to be moved by the loss of Palestine, the war in Algeria, the struggle over ownership of the Arab and Persian oil reserves, the great ideological battles, and not to become engaged in the struggle for the causes. Thus, in 1950, I signed a petition calling for the nationalization of Arab oil. President Penrose called me up to his office and without warning or threatening me, reminded me of my family responsibilities and admonished me not to jeopardize my last year at AUB because of rash political activity. "Graduate first" he advised me, "then do and say what you like."

This was advice I was obliged to heed – there were seven mouths to feed at home, and six siblings to send to school. Indeed, as soon as the Nakba occurred, I had decided to change my major from Politics and Economics to Business. And I have been extremely fortunate to be able to use this education in my subsequent career, first in the Kuwaiti Government where I worked for ten years, then in my own construction business, which I started in 1964 principally because I needed a larger income for my growing family.

AUB graduates have been tremendously successful in medicine, engineering, education, business and other fields. The relatively small numbers of its graduates since its founding – about 50,000- have had an incommensurate influence over many aspects of the region's economic, political and social life- considerably more than hundreds of thousands of graduates who leave most of today's Arab Universities with little qualification for leadership.

But this relative success is meaningless if it is not coupled with a strong sense of social responsibility. The region today could sink into an even greater chaos if we do not wake up to this dreadful realities of injustice, corruption, inequality and unsustainable contradictions: islands of enormous wealth surrounded by tens of millions of needy and frustrated citizens. This can only lead to instability, violence and eventually destructive revolution unless Arab money is repatriated and invested in real, long-term development- in industrialization, first class research and education, social and economic advancement and so on.

In other words, we are in dire need of the sort of development which can make a serious difference to the public welfare of our countries and is not only guided by self-interest, as has been the case over the last decades.

Today, in the absence of a common social or political project, the Arab World has become cynical and tolerant of corruption in all its forms. The Arab countries may have a lot of cash but they are not wealthy! We need to ask ourselves why. Many of you are involved in business and investment and know that most Arab money is today invested in the stock markets or in real estate—both of which sectors are generally unproductive and liable to extreme fluctuation and sometimes to collapse. A lot of wealth has also fled abroad. Why?

Because the chances for meaningful, long-term and productive investment, in a stable environment of freedom, democracy and rule of law, whether in industry, research and development or education are very rare. In the current economic and social climates, the cash will either flee or be squandered, as has often happened in the last seventy years.

There have of course been exceptions—individuals or institutions that have tried to reverse this trend but they remain a drop in the ocean. For this reason, I appeal to you to continue to support the AUB in its great mission and to encourage it to invest in further research, particularly of the kind that can translate knowledge and ideas into community projects, so that it can remain the beacon it has always been—a place where students can acquire great professional skills but above all a strong sense of commitment to public welfare and the pursuit of truth.

When I finished my finals in 1951, I was forced to sell my mattress in order to afford the price of the trip back to Amman. But I was leaving with a head full of ideas, unafraid of the world I was about to face,

confident of my ability to think my way through its difficulties. The education I left AUB with was a decisive element of the success that I have been fortunate to enjoy in my business career. But it was also one of the driving factors which encouraged me to invest a substantial part of the fruits of that success in educational, cultural and social development in Palestine and the rest of the region. Above all else, it is this investment that has given most meaning to my life and has afforded me the greatest personal satisfaction. I hope that you and others will follow this path.

Thank you.

Abdel-Muhsen Qattan

June 2006