



The 5th Annual Commencement Ceremony
Commencement Address
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President of the American University in Cairo

May 28, 2016

No Easy Answers
Leadership for Times unlike Past Times

Welcome, Ahlan wa sahlan, Bakher hatn.

Good evening, Ewaratan Bash, Masa' al-Kheir. Peace be upon us all. Excellency, Minister of Education Yousif Goran; Members of Parliament and of the diplomatic and consular corps; Founding Chairman and esteemed friend, Dr. Barham Salih; Interim President Esther Mulnix; members of the pioneering faculty and staff; generous trustees and donors; loving and dedicated parents; dear members of the graduating class of 2016:

Thank you for the privilege of joining your celebration today. I congratulate the graduates for your remarkable individual accomplishments. And I congratulate no less the impressive institutional accomplishment of AUIS, as embodied in your latest fine graduating class. Dr. Barham, I have witnessed your visionary leadership over many years and your achievements in so many fields. But I am certain that no single element of your life's legacy is more durably impactful, nor more widely cherished, than your establishment of the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani.

AUIS stands as the most vital monument to the gathering triumph of Iraqis over the horrific traumas which, sadly, are not yet consigned to painful memory. You shine for us all as a beacon in civilization's epic struggle against dark forces attempting to pervert religion into tools of cruelty, hate, fear, and ignorance. In your celebration of human diversity in the pursuit of knowledge and truth, you constitute the most powerful antidote to the poison of takfirism.

Thanks to the selfless philanthropy of so many and the sacrifices of your parents, your lovely physical campus reflects the enduring strength of AUIS in its noble mission. But it is all of the people here today: students, faculty, parents and trustees, who constitute the soul and energy of this special institution. As high state officials and foreign diplomats bear witness, your vibrant young University stands at the razor's edge between civilization's bright future, and the angry darkness which, together, we must illuminate and banish.

University graduation is an ancient ritual through which elders mark the regeneration and vitality of our societies. We select each year's crop of our most talented youth and proclaim them as ready and committed to shoulder their own individual missions in life. Here in Iraqi Kurdistan, your country is at a dynamic and pivotal point in its history. Hence, even more than your cohorts graduating from other fine universities around the world this spring, you now assume a special responsibility. It now falls to you, with your parents, to advance and to redefine your great national purposes, as no less the good of all the neighboring communities represented here, all of whom must live together in peace in this troubled region.

Whatever a student's field of study, however brilliantly she may have succeeded in her coursework, or how passionately he may have pursued his academic quest, university graduation marks the very moment of the student's acceptance of the full rights -- and the responsibilities -- of adulthood. There is no turning back now! The path ahead only gets harder, and there are no easy answers.

Many students around the world go to universities to seek the *answers* to life's most profound questions -- the eternal truths as revealed through religion and the enormous and growing volumes of data accumulated by empirical observation.



In choosing AUIS, however, you and your parents have chosen a bolder course. You have chosen not only to study the burgeoning quantity of established truth, but also deliberately to learn to *question* what is generally accepted – to dig more deeply, to push the frontiers of science and of your own intellects, to innovate and to create new knowledge.

Such an education is by design an unsettling and stressful process. Dear graduates, each of you certainly knows far more today than when you entered AUIS. But the true measure of your wisdom will not be the quantities of “facts” that you have memorized and reproduced for examination. Rather, the truest measures of the success of your AUIS education henceforth must be your *application* of the keenness of your observation, the rigor of your analysis, and of your confidence and readiness to engage intimately with others of different fields, formations, and faiths, to the benefit of all.

Your new University deliberately adopted an exogenous, global curriculum and pedagogy based on inquiry rather than memorization of revealed truth. You have learned to respond to the injustices and outrages of our times by aspiring all the more passionately to build a bright future, rather than madly to destroy in the name of recreating a darkly hallucinatory past. AUIS graduates do not cower in fear. You look outward to embrace and to compete with the wider world. You do not simply blame “the other” as “the enemy” or “the House of War,” and thus the sole source of all the ills that befall you.

As I thought about what makes AUIS so special, three quotations of wise people – two from the East, one from the West, leapt to mind as applying particularly well to inspire those graduating from AUIS today.

First, AUIS evidently epitomizes the wisdom of one of the fathers of the founding era of Islam. The beloved cousin and son-in-law of The Prophet himself, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, saw no contradiction between accepting the revealed truth of faith, while always pursuing new and deeper knowledge of God’s world through ever-changing times. Regarding education, he warned those who would re-impose the past:

“La tarabbu abna’kum 3la ma rabbukum aba’kum; fa qd khuluqu li zaman ghayr-i zamankum.”

“Do not raise your children on what your parents raised you, for [your children] were created for times other than your times.”

Poets everywhere sing that “the times they are a-changing.” But nowhere is this as dramatically or traumatically true as in this region. The very concepts of “Iraq” or “Kurdistan” or “Syria” into which you were born are very different from those concepts when we, your parents and grandparents were born. Certainly, the wisdom of your parents and of visionary leaders like Dr. Barham will guide and inspire you. But now, it will fall to you to determine what such concepts of community and state will mean for your lives and for your children.

A second age-old insight likewise should serve as a guide to us all, and it seems particularly apt in describing the proudly diverse AUIS. This wisdom too came from one of the greatest Eastern teachers whose words even today inspire the West no less than the East. Maulana Jalal ed-din al-Rumi said:

Our lanterns are many, but our light is one.

AUIS has drawn together as one the powerful light of many lanterns: male and female, young and old, Kurd and Arab, Turkoman, Yazidi, Sunni, Shiite, Christian -- Iraqi, and even American. May your many-lanterned graduates and faculty ever carry forward that single light.

Friends, in these last minutes of your formal education, I cannot offer you any fresh “knowledge” or “answers” that you’ve not already acquired in your years at AUIS. But I dare hope to reinforce the instinct which you have nourished here always to inquire, to investigate, and to push the limits of your own comfort, your knowledge, and achievements. I hope that you will do so in the service not only of your selves, families, and immediate communities, but also for all humanity.



AUIS is, after all, an American institution, so let me close with a quotation by one of America's most beloved and iconoclastic writers, and one who himself journeyed to the East to stretch the limits of his own imagination. Mark Twain urged:

*Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you **didn't** do than by the ones you **did** do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.*

During your lifelong voyage, please do visit to explore, dream, and discover with us at your sister institution on the Nile, The American University in Cairo. And in the United States!

Thank you all again for your gracious hospitality.

Congratulations! Alf mabruk! Piroza!

Peace be upon us all.

