

For Immediate Release



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**AUB awards honorary degree to Akil, Haraoui, Shaheen and Soueif,  
and graduates 514 and will celebrate tomorrow the graduation of 1668  
undergraduate students**

**Khuri: “Go into the world with determination and modesty,  
and let no doubt deter you”**

The American University of Beirut (AUB) ceremoniously graduated 514 students in Graduate, PhD, and Doctor of Medicine programs and will celebrate tomorrow the graduation of 1668 undergraduate students.

During the ceremony, AUB granted the Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters to scientist Huda Akil, former first lady and philanthropist Mouna Haraoui, musician Simon Shaheen, and writer Ahdaf Soueif for their world-renowned achievements in their respective fields.

The ceremony was attended by Minister of Education and Higher Learning Marwan Hamadeh representing the President of the Republic of Lebanon General Michel Aoun, MP Dr. Atef Majdalani representing House Speaker Nabih Berri, and Minister of Culture Dr. Ghattas Khoury representing Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Deputy Prime Minister -

Minister of Public Health Ghassan Hasbani also attended the ceremony, as well as members of the Board of Trustees, parents, alumni, and friends.

After the graduates' procession and the academic procession of the university President, Provost, Deans, Faculty members and Trustees in their full regalia, the ceremony started with the Lebanese National Anthem. AUB President Fadlo R. Khuri then spoke to the audience.

**President Fadlo R. Khuri:**

President Fadlo R. Khuri addressed the ceremony. He said: "Your Excellencies, esteemed Board of Trustees, parents, families and friends of our outstanding graduating students, our splendid faculty and staff, congratulations. Congratulations on seeing your efforts pay off with yet another superb class, the AUB Class of 2017. Our magnificent students, it is an honor to greet you tonight, years after you first entered the gates of this University, to wish you the best on this new journey awaiting you ahead.

Your journey at AUB has been full of rich and powerful experiences. You entered the gates of this University coming from various streams of the country, of the region, and of the world. You left your parents' nests to be embraced in this great font of struggle, knowledge and enlightenment, a place committed to inclusivity and diversity, and unequivocally to excellence. You have come a long way to be here tonight, and you have shaped and tailored your personalities through experiences interacting with your fellows, engaging with your professors, and serving in various clubs, organizations, and publications. You have grown through the knowledge you have acquired in both your major and elective courses."

"Today you are ready to take a major leap into the great unknown, into a world that is both frightening and exciting. When these moments become overwhelming, remember that it is these very trials and challenges that you have been through that expand your knowledge, broaden your horizons, and help you define your character." He continued.

“Every human starts their life with vulnerability, and puts in a lifetime of effort to overcome it, while following their ambitions. Follow your dreams, not solely looking into yourself, but look around you – look at your community, understand what is lacking towards establishing social justice. Human transformations do not come clear and curated. You will be offered opportunities in your career that will make you think twice, and you will engage yourself in long deliberate thought about seizing those many humanitarian opportunities to impact the lives of those less fortunate. A whole character is embedded in a community and the wealth of that character depends on the health of the community, and so it is incumbent upon all of us to be engaged, involved and doing the best to help others. It is in these moments of doubt that a person often finds their purpose and their vocation.” He added.

“Two and one half years ago, I was first offered the chance to lead this historic institution. I reflected carefully on this opportunity to completely change gears. It was unquestionably a moment of great doubt, but it is precisely in those moments of doubt that we find our True North. It is important that you genuinely challenge yourself, determine your personal mission and fulfill it –always keep an eye on the community you serve, and understand how your own skills can best create a lasting and meaningful impact.

So, every time you are faced by genuine doubt, recognize that the power to effect meaningful change resides in precisely these defining moments, and that it is in your hands to take a decision that might forever alter the course of your life and those of others. But that decision may well place you in a position where your service will most benefit those around you. In your decision-making process, reflect on Kant’s three different but equivalent formulations of the universal moral law:

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.

Thus the third practical principle follows as the ultimate condition of their harmony with practical reason: the idea of the will of every rational being as a universally legislating will.”

Throughout the course of my own life, I have learned that one can serve their fellow man through unanticipated avenues. You are graduating from a University whose founding father, the great Dr. Daniel Bliss, said in words that still resonate to this day “We were not anxious to appear great, but we were anxious to lay foundations upon which greatness could be built.”

The epitome of service is the surrender of entitlement in order to do good for those in greater need. With Lebanon ever precarious, with a war-torn Arab World, and the biggest humanitarian crisis happening right at our door, it is you, our graduates, who are looked to as beacons of hope, hope for a better tomorrow. You are the bringers of change, the salvers of wounds, the providers of hope, and caregivers for communities. All of this can be achieved only through real doubt and introspection, by service and sacrifice, by application, by knowledge.” Khuri said.

“Mouna Haraoui had to face doubt to help children with thalassemia. Doubt helped Ahdaf Soueif put herself in the minds of those suffering through, and after, Al Nakba. Doubt is what Simon Shahine feels every time he composes a musical oeuvre, and doubt is what Huda Akil studies the biology of when she tried to understand the biology of complex human emotions. For all four of our distinguished honorands, doubt became the bridge to empathy and to service. Service and empathy that they subsequently focused on those less fortunate. And once that empathy is focused and translated to good, and that service is done well, and it is time to move on, don’t look back in anger or in pride.” He added.

“Today you graduate more confident and more capable, equipped with the faith, skills and knowledge necessary to change the world for the better. You have learned much at AUB, you have learned resilience and perseverance, and today, we are all proud of you, administration, faculty, staff and parents. You have emerged stronger and wiser, with your views, whatever they might be, sharpened and tested, though you still have a lifetime of learning ahead. Look back at your parents and loved ones gathered here today and those who could not be here. They have believed in you, nurtured you, and deserve your thanks, and your applause.

Go out now into the wider world and do not be daunted by doubt. There is much exciting knowledge to acquire through endurance and stamina. Look around at your classmates, and then go forth into this world with purpose and humility.

I, today, have hope more than ever, that it is you that will remold and reshape Lebanon, the Arab World and beyond, to best serve our wounded populations, that they, like you, “may have life and have it more abundantly.”

Congratulations, AUB Class of 2017. Go forth and change the world for the better, as all of us assembled here, and most importantly, as you yourself, now know you can!” Khuri ended.

### **The Graduating Class Speech:**

Faculty of Arts and Sciences student Merilin Ekzarkova spoke on behalf of the graduating class. She said: “Before I say anything else, I want to say thank you. Thank you to my parents and my amazing fiancée. I would not be standing here today if you had not loved, supported, encouraged me, and in some cases ate my homework or caused me serious injuries so that I could stay home and rest. I am of course talking about my sister.

A special thank you goes to Dr. Fadlo Khoury, President of AUB who continues to work tirelessly to better this place we love and call our second home, to Dr. Talal Nizameddin, Dean of Student Affairs, who is always there for us, and to Dr. Maryam Ghandour, whose leadership of the Career and Placement Services has helped hundreds of students each year and whose personal support to me I will never forget.”

“The biggest question we all have is what if? What if we don’t end up where we want in life, or achieve all of our goals, or succeed in our professional and personal lives? What if this is as good as it gets? Unfortunately I can’t answer these questions. I ask them myself everyday. I simply don’t know. In fact, no one knows. So instead of dwelling on what we don’t know, which is infinite, I would like to share with you two absolutely certain things that AUB, the one constant in our lives so far, has taught me.” She continued.

“I would like to end by asking you to look back on all of the hard work, late nights and challenges you have overcome to be where you are now, and to take a minute to appreciate yourselves. Each one of you has overcome innumerable obstacles, defied naysayers, and made yourself and your loved ones proud. I ask you not to forget that you always have a choice, don’t be afraid to make it, and to remember that you are all good people and because of that you will make this world better for those who will sit in your places in the future.” She ended.

### **The Honorary Doctorates:**

President Khuri then took the podium again saying that according to the authority vested in him by the university’s Board of Trustees, he is conferring the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities pertaining thereto, to scientist Huda Akil, former first lady and philanthropist Mouna Haraoui, musician Simon Shaheen, and writer Ahdaf Soueif. The four honorands received the

degrees and were hooded by Provost Dr. Muhamed Harajli. Each of them then gave his/her acceptance speech.

**Scientist Huda Akil:**

Huda Akil said in her speech: “My heartfelt congratulations to each of you-- the graduates-- and to your proud families! Today you are receiving an amazing gift, and I hope it feels wonderful.

I am thrilled to be sharing this very special day with you. For me this is beyond wonderful—receiving an Honorary Doctorate from AUB is the greatest honor of my life. AUB is an institution I love, an institution that has transformed my world and that of my entire family.”

“Each of us is probably here, in this happy place, due to a series of small miracles that have shaped our lives, and I hope we can take a moment to simply be grateful and joyful. As I look back and you look forward, the parent in me hopes you feel this great lift that joy can bring and that you revel in it; and the neuroscientist in me wonders: “How does that happen? What just went on in your brains when you felt joy?” This thinking is automatic for me since I study the brain biology of emotions and moods. Over the years, I have tried to understand how we feel pain, cope with stress, develop addictions and succumb to chronic depression. I find it endlessly fascinating to study why we are each different in the way we react and cope, to contemplate the positive power that emotions can have in our lives, but also the price we pay for them when they become overwhelming or dysfunctional.” She continued.

“We live in times where emotions are running high, and most are not positive. Anger is rising, hatred is blooming, beliefs are narrowing, tolerance is fading. It’s a vicious cycle where negativity feeds upon itself to grow ever more powerful. Indeed, this is a devastating moment in the history of my country, Syria, and a profoundly challenging moment for anyone who hails from this region. The feeling of helplessness and

hopelessness can be overwhelming, and the thought of what is happening to so many children is often unbearable.” She added.

“The recovery of Lebanon after its long civil war is a manifestation of remarkable resilience. Active resilience is the courage of people carrying on with their lives amongst the wreckage in Syria, refugees who are finding a new path in spite of total dislocation. It is the daily heroic efforts of medical personnel and field workers who are saving lives under horrendous conditions.

Active resilience is also your secret weapon as you embark on a new phase of life-- when you’re trying to redefine yourselves, balance multiple desires, fantasies and realities, hoping to fulfill yourselves while considering others, in an uncertain and complex world.” Akil said.

“None of us live in a bubble—we live in a context that matters to our sense of self and our humanity. Social support is a two-way street, and *part of active resilience is to reach beyond ourselves to help others*. We can support our kids, especially those living in traumatic conditions to endow them with greater inner strength. We can support their families, as children absorb their emotions from their parents. And the best support in stressful and unpredictable times goes beyond providing fundamental necessities— food, water, shelter and healthcare. It involves giving people some control over what happens in their immediate environment, a way to manage their own emotional algebra. There is nothing more stressful than loss of control and lack of predictability. When the sky is falling and the universe is mad, the ability to effect even a little bit of change in your surroundings is amazingly important. Why? Because it makes you feel empowered, it tells you that bigger change is possible-- it gives you hope.” She continued.

“Hope needs to be palpable and manifest in some real positive change. It is delicate and has to be kept alive. It can only be sustained if all of us, but especially you, the talented young people, are engaged—if you do not ignore the suffering of others. If you

fight for humanity in all its manifestations, with whatever tools you have. Think about it—you have the power of youth, the power of a stellar higher education, the power of connections. You can choose to deploy your power not only for your own good, but to help those who are less powerful. Your efforts need not be fancy-- they simply need to be authentic. They need to engage and empower those you're trying to help. In this way, you will become the creators of small miracles that transform lives. Magically, your generous behavior will be contagious. It will spread and inspire others to do the same.” Akil ended.

**Mrs. Mouna Haraoui:**

In her acceptance speech, Haraoui said: “I am very touched and grateful for this honorable degree and thank you for including me in the great company of three Arab luminaries.”

“Dear President Khury, thank you for acknowledging my contributions to society and believing in the value of my work. The years of strife that we lived in Lebanon, brought the best out of me. It would not have happened without my husband, President Elias Haraoui empowering me; it would not have happened without the Lebanese people inspiring me.

My public involvement facilitated addressing the urgent humanitarian issues during and post civil war. My commitment emanated from my heart. I believe in human rights and that all people are equal in the eyes of God. This is why I was determined to help the less privileged; they have the right to live decently in our society. In parallel to supporting children with chronic diseases, Type 1 Diabetes and Thalassemia, I focused on improving the state of Lebanese women and safeguarding our national heritage. I did it with the invaluable help of many great persons.” She continued.

“Dear Graduates, I would like to salute the parents and families who facilitated the means for you to attain higher education from a prestigious university, AUB.

I would also like to express my strong admiration for those among you who managed to attain this goal through priceless sacrifices and countless efforts.

You are the future of your country. I do hope that part of your skills will be invested in improving the state of humanity. My congratulations to you and to your proud families.

As to me, this Honorable Degree **empowers me even more** to persevere in my contributions to Lebanon's well-being. I will continue walking through that path for as long as my health permits it." She added.

**Writer Ahdaf Soueif:**

In her acceptance speech, Soueif said: "Today is a day of celebration, when many hundreds of your graduates go out into the world, and I wish them well.

They are going out into a world where they will need to make a difference – and graduating from AUB they are excellently equipped to do so."

"In the last 2 decades we have seen violence expanding, populations impoverished and terrorized, the earth depleted. We've seen the ethnic cleansing of Palestine intensify, the torment of Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, the epic and perilous exodus across the Mediterranean, the current triumph of the counter-revolutions in the Arab world, the rise of DAESH and its affiliates and its beloved enemies West and East." She continued.

"For we have lived the Arab revolutions, and we've seen the world take them to its heart. We see the just cause and the grace and resilience of Palestine capture the imagination and the goodwill of the world. And we see large portions of civil society across the world stand up for the migrant and the poor. A world community is being formed, and this is where you will find your natural place." She added.

“Lebanon, this beautiful, varied, edgy and energetic country holds a great many lessons for us. Its story, as with the best narratives, is often terrifying, but ultimately uplifting.” She said.

“And AUB itself is an inspiration, growing, changing, excelling, despite contradictions and fault lines, manoeuvring, battering down and blossoming out, a model of the university as part of civil society, engaged with it and working for it, drawing energy from it and serving it. This is so clear from just a tiny selection of your activities over the last few days - from the spectacular student-led “AUB Outdoors”, to hosting the Environmate Hackathon, to the conference just yesterday discussing how to ameliorate the effects of civil conflict on social structures in the context of Syria to your known engagement with issue of public health.

I offer my congratulations on your graduation, and also on belonging to an institution that treasures and respects its young people, that recognises their - your - potential and helps you fulfil it; that is now sending you out into the world with a top academic qualification, and also with a clear direction towards social engagement.” She ended.

### **The Degrees:**

After that, President Khuri and the Deans distributed the degrees to 514 graduates:

Medicine 95

MA / MS 403

PhD 16

### **Saturday’s Ceremony**

Further to this ceremony, AUB will be holding its graduation ceremony for undergraduates on Saturday at 8:00 pm where 1668 undergraduates will receive their degrees. Ceremony speaker will be Mrs. Mouna Haraoui.

**ENDS**

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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 130 programs leading to 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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