



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Higher Education Scholarships (HES) Program Graduation Speech

June 2, 2026

AUB President Fadlo R. Khuri

Good afternoon, class of 2026. I recognize quite a few of you, not only because you have been here, but because last spring, spring of 2025, we had some conversations. You also had conversations with the provost and others about your concerns regarding finishing your time as scholars, thanks to the US government.

I want to start by offering my sincere thanks to the Director of the Higher Education Scholarships (HES) Program Samar Harkouss who has done an extraordinary job. She has kept what the British like to call “a stiff upper lip” throughout this whole process. I am really grateful to our friend and US Chargé d’Affaires to Lebanon Keith Hanigan for navigating the more-impressive-than-ever Beirut traffic and coming on time. Thank you, Elizabeth “Liz” Marini. Thank you, friends, students, families, and staff. It is really a pleasure to be with you here today on this special occasion. Over the years, I have had the opportunity and the honour to meet many students in this program, sometimes in moments of uncertainty, sometimes in moments of quiet confidence. What has always stayed with me is your determination to keep moving forward.

Since its inception in 2011, the program has graduated more than 800 scholars, with a commitment to equal access for women and men. More than 550 of those total scholars have already graduated from AUB. Each year, around 50 students from across Lebanon, Lebanese citizens and refugees alike, are given the chance to study here, and next year there will be another cohort that comes in here. They will not replace you, but succeed you.

Each and every one of you represents a widening circle of opportunity across regions, communities, and backgrounds that all too often remain underserved. This program is the United States’ long-term investment in equity, dignity, potential, and possibility in Lebanon. As you have heard, it is not only for students who are Lebanese, but for Syrians and Palestinians who are residents in Lebanon. You, the class of 2026, have honored that investment through what you have achieved and who you have become.

I am going to step back in time to make a point. Fifty years ago, during the month of May, the Lebanese Civil War was raging. I was the only American citizen in my family. My father was struck by a shrapnel in his head. It was a near-fatal injury. After that, I finally acquiesced, as the only American citizen in Lebanon, to be evacuated. And we were evacuated by the USS Coronado from—as Lebanon and its curious history would have it—the port of Beirut, then safeguarded by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which made sure we all got on. I made it in time to the United States to enjoy America’s 200th anniversary. And it was a magnificent anniversary. This year marks the 250th anniversary. On that trip, a friend who was on that same ship was hit by a car in Athens and did not

make it to the US. He died on impact. At the age of 12, I had already seen how ephemeral life was and how important it was to live every moment while trying to do something meaningful with your life.

This scholarship has led to you receiving a degree from AUB. You have excelled academically, learned to serve the communities, to test assumptions, and to remain open to perspectives that are different from your own. This is a gift from the American people and from AUB. I want to talk about what America means as someone who was born there. I have not lived a day on this planet in which America has not been a highly contentious topic. People want to argue about personalities, principles, presidents, power, but that is not what America is. Do you know what America is? It is a promise; a promise of a better tomorrow. And the American people are the most generous people on the planet. There is no other country that allocates three to five percent of its private funds for philanthropy year after year—the country that rebuilt Europe and the country that is reaching out today to give you guys and ladies that possibility. It is a promise of a possibility. You have to fulfill that possibility, and you have taken a huge step towards doing that today. AUB was the beginning of that American promise of possibility.

One hundred and sixty years ago, Presbyterian missionaries came very deliberately to Mount Lebanon, then to Beirut, and set up this institution, which is the one that you have grown up in, learned from, and engaged in. I give enormous credit to our Center for Community Engagement and its leader, Rabih Shibli. Thank Rabih for showing you that an education is not simply confined to the classroom. It is about your engagement in working for the greater good. You came here as individuals who needed the opportunity to break through an economic titanium ceiling, and you have done it. And I know that you will create such possibilities for others. But when you do, you need to remind them that an education is not exclusive to the classroom or the fields. It is everywhere.

Thirteen months ago, I visited Washington, DC yet again to follow up on the allocation of these scholarships, which were candidly continued only for AUB and a couple of other universities. I had tremendous confidence they would be continued. Although we did not meet with the Secretary of State Marco Rubio, it was made crystal clear to us that he, himself the son of immigrants, understood what America was and would make sure that your academic journey would not be interrupted. So, I do think we all owe a debt to Secretary Rubio for all he has done for Lebanon and, particularly, for our community.

Now, we can disagree about people, principles, policies, presidents, and anything you like. That is your right as citizens in a free country, which Lebanon, for all of its flaws, is. But, as much as America has given you that possibility to advance your journey and make a difference, I want you to dedicate your lives to not only the success, which will undoubtedly come your way, but that promise and that possibility to be applied for the Lebanese, Palestinians, Syrians, and all the peoples of these lands. So go forth, our soon-to-be graduates. Congratulations and God bless you.