

## **Commencement Speech**

### **American University in Cairo**

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It is a great pleasure to be with you today. I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Board of Trustees of the American University in Cairo, and to AUC's highly respected leader, President Lisa Anderson.

At the outset, please allow me to extend immense congratulations to AUC's graduating class of 2011. Well done! I am delighted to be part of the celebrations of your achievements, and I join the thousands of others in this room in congratulating you for your accomplishments at AUC. You did it, and you did it very well!

I am also immensely thrilled and humbled by this wonderful degree from such a center of learning in Egypt. Thank you very much for this great honor; and thank you for providing me with the opportunity to be here in beautiful Egypt, to see so many friends and acquaintances, and to meet many heroes who sacrificed so much to put this country on the road to greater individual freedoms and democracy.

I suspect many of you are wondering whether I have any prior association with AUC. Well, the answer is yes, and no!

As a child growing up in Egypt in the 1960s, I aspired to attend this wonderful university. Members of my family had the privilege of studying at AUC, opening up for them many opportunities here and abroad.

My desire to attend AUC was greatly amplified by my father's emphasis on the importance of education. It was a constant and loud refrain in our home, and rightly so-reflecting how transformational education had been for him.

Born and raised in Damanhour, he excelled at a local school. Enabled to attend Cairo University, he subsequently earned a government scholarship to travel to Columbia University in New York where he obtained his doctorate degree. In turn, he used his education to serve Egypt-including as a professor of

law at Cairo University, then as a diplomat representing Egypt abroad, and finally as a judge at the International Court of Justice.

Throughout my childhood, he encouraged his children to view school and university as a means of personal growth and enlightenment, and as a great enabler for giving back to our communities and helping those that are less fortunate than us.

So, on my side, I too embarked on many years of studying and learning. But my aspiration to attend AUC never turned into a reality.

With my father posted abroad as a diplomat, I attended high school outside Egypt and went to University in the UK. Yet I never stopped being interested in AUC.

Many of my friends came here. Over the years, I have interacted with several AUC faculty members at various conferences. I have followed the evolution of the university and admired its achievements. And I remain impressed by its willingness to invest in its students and faculty to grow and flourish--be it through curriculum, infrastructure or thought leadership.

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At this time, and more than ever, AUC and other centers of learning in Egypt occupy a very important position in a country that is in the midst of historic transformations. In today's Egypt, universities are--and should be--much more than centers of learning. They are critical facilitators of beneficial change for millions of Egyptians; for current and for future generations; and for the wellbeing of a country, a region, and a global system.

People look to our centers of learning for education and thought leadership. They look to them for guidance in navigating complex economic, institutional, political, and social transformations. And they look for them to develop the future leaders of society at every level.

All this gives our centers of learning a critical role in Egypt's already rich and inspiring history. It is a privilege for AUC and other universities in Egypt. It is also a huge responsibility.

I have no doubt that, with sustained effort and steadfast commitment, you will deliver; and do with pride and excellence.

Speaking today at an academic institution, I could -- and should -- support this assertion with a well-formulated theoretical foundation, empirical evidence, and peer analysis. I should, but I will not. Instead, I will illustrate it with two very down-to-earth analogies that reflect the importance of never forgetting the insights of simplicity.

The first comes from the 1980s. I was traveling from Cairo to New York on the direct, non-stop EgyptAir flight. We left Cairo 5 hours late, had an uneventful flight, and experienced the perfect landing that Egyptian pilots are internationally renowned for.

Sitting next to an American, we did not exchange a single word during the 10 hour plus flight-that is until we landed.

Just after the wheels touched down incredibly smoothly, this gentleman turned to me and said "typical Egypt." "Excuse me" I responded. He repeated "typical Egypt." And then went on to share with me an explanation along the following lines: "Leave Egyptians to do things on their own, and they will deliver a world class outcome. That is why we had such a perfect landing. But place them in an inefficient system, and the outcome is far from world class; and that is why we are five hours late."

This EgyptAir story is illustrative of the fact that there are many examples of Egyptians shining in the toughest of worldwide competitions. It is about a Naguib Mahfouz and an Ahmed Zewail winning Nobel Prizes. It is about Egyptian doctors that are among the very best healers in the most respected hospitals around the world. It is about Egyptian professors that are first-class educators and researchers. It is about Egyptian artists who bring music, movies and art to millions. And it is about Egyptians football stars helping their teams win league championships in tough national and regional competitions.

Speaking of football, allow me to share the second simple analogy. This one comes from my childhood.

Growing up in Egypt, I was always among the very last kids to be picked for a football team at primary school. And sometimes, I would not be picked at all. Instead, I would be asked to stand behind the goal to retrieve the balls rather than play on the field.

Well, as a 10 year old, I followed my father to New York as he assumed his post at the Egyptian Mission to the UN. I joined a school there and, quickly, I became the captain of the class football team.

Now it could be that I experienced some remarkable transformation during the trip to New York. I did not. The reality is that Egyptians were simply better at the sport than Americans at that time.

I share with you these simple stories because I believe that Egypt, led by Egyptians, is today at a very special juncture.

Egyptians have a remarkable opportunity to shape a new and better destiny for their country. And the rare combination of both willingness and ability comes wrapped in a new sense of purpose, energy and engagement on the direction of the country.

Owing to the tremendous sacrifices of its many heroes, Egypt is in the midst of a revolution - a truly transformational moment in a history that goes back over seven centuries. We thank all those that bravely took to the street, forming a movement that helped all Egyptians overcome decades of fear. In the process, they united Egyptians of all ages, social classes, and religions around a simple aspiration of a better tomorrow.

To use a song that I came across when watching a wonderful American television ("60 Minutes") interview with Wael Ghonim, and one that has been played many times in our home and at presentations that I have made in the US on the Egyptian revolution-Sout el Horreya, or the Voice of Freedom sung by Hany Adel and Amir Eid: "Our dreams were our weapon...[and] all barriers have been

shattered." And to use New York Times columnist Tom Friedman's characterization, what was delivered was a revolution "made in Egypt, by Egypt, for Egypt."

But most revolutions are not discrete events; they are transformational processes. They are seldom easy; they can take many months and years; and the first, most visible part of a successful revolution—that of overthrowing a regime—is often a necessary condition for a successful revolution; but this huge and courageous step alone is not sufficient. It improves the probability of achieving the objective of the revolution—that of a better society for all of Egypt—but it does not guarantee success.

In today's Egypt, the required transformations involve challenges that cut across politics, economics and finance. They have important social and geo-political dimensions. And they operate in fluid regional and global contexts. And they will not happen without continued steadfast commitment.

Each of these realities is extremely complex.

Think about the challenges inherent in altering the structure of an economy so that it can deliver in a decisive and lasting manner the combination of more inclusive economic growth, greater poverty alleviation, improved international competitiveness, and low inflation.

Think of the importance of reaching the most vulnerable segments of the population in a timely manner -- providing better access to education, health, nutrition and other essential social services.

Think of the challenges of keeping the country's finances in order at a time of reduced tourist receipts, lower remittances from workers in Libya and elsewhere, and high food and commodity prices in international markets.

Think of the challenges of constructing an open and transparent political process after many decades of repression, suppression, and too much control by too few.

And think of the importance of institutions. As Jean Monnet, the famous French father of European unity, observed: "Nothing is possible without men and women, but nothing is lasting without institutions." Egypt today faces the complex challenges of quickly adapting and building institutions that are credible and efficient.

None of these are easy; and the significant degree of difficulty compounds quickly when the challenges interact, as is the case in Egypt today.

It is tempting for a nation and for a society to feel overwhelmed by all this. Today's Egypt should not. These are all surmountable challenges, especially if the country retains its unity, commonality of purpose, and purity of aspiration.

It may also be tempting for some of you here to feel powerless, believing that your own potential contributions pale in comparison to these significant societal challenges. You should not.

Every single one of you has the ability to make a difference in today's Egypt. Indeed, many of you already do so, day in and day out.

You maintain the momentum for positive change. You work hard to counter the huge disparities in income and wealth, and the extremes in access to education, health and other basic social needs. And you are unwilling-and rightly so-to see millions of your countrymen and countrywomen condemned to a life of poverty, human degradation and despair.

All of you are facilitators of a better tomorrow for Egypt, of the "new Egypt."

Indeed, nothing gives me greater joy than to hear all the stories of Egyptians volunteering to make a difference in a village, in a slum, in a school that has insufficient books, and in a hospital overwhelmed by patients.

Just a few months into Egypt's revolution, we see concrete changes on the ground. And it is not just about new political parties, broad-based national debates, and a more generalized sense of empowerment to influence the country's outlook. It is also about multiple daily wins.

It is about young volunteers adopting villages and neighborhoods to help make a difference on the ground. It is about individual Egyptians, like Wael Ghonim, setting up NGOs to improve the future of other Egyptians families. And it is about true visionaries, such as Ahmed Zewail, who is inspiring and leading a national project to help Egyptian society attain the scientific and technological advancements that are so essential to sustain growth, poverty alleviation and employment creation in today's rapidly changing global economy.

AUC has also been at the forefront of change. New courses have been created to put the revolution in context, both historical and forward looking. New initiatives, such as the Tahrir Dialogues, are part of an effort to help "build a better Egypt." Public seminars are being held to encourage debate among the many and facilitate civic and political participation. And web-based approaches are being used to facilitate volunteerism and community service.

A lot is already being done; and a lot, lot more will need to be done.

To be associated with a university in Egypt today is to occupy a very special and important place. Whether you are members of the student body, educators or administrators, you should always remember that privilege comes with enormous responsibility.

As John F. Kennedy once said, "To those whom much is given, much is expected." And Egyptians living outside Egypt, like me, are committed to help you and others in whatever way we can to ensure a truly successful revolution and a better Egypt for current and future generations.

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Thirty years ago, my family suffered a great personal loss--the sudden passing away of my father from a heart attack. It was a very sad time for us. It was also a time of intense reflection.

To this day, I remember vividly what my grandfather said when discussing with us the enormity of sudden change. He looked at us and reminded us that our father had given his children something that

no one could ever take away. It was neither wealth nor a position in society. It was the gift of a strong education

This is what all of you have here at AUC. And it will be with you for life. It's a huge enabler of sustainable success. Please use it wisely.

Use it to your benefit and to benefit you family, community and country. Use it to help create jobs, to provide economic opportunities for others, to enhance the provision of education and health, and to reduce human inequalities.

Make it a personal priority; and inspire others. If you do, the gift of your AUC education will have payoffs that you, and all of us, will be enormously proud of for many, many years.

Allow me to conclude by referring again to the Sout el Horreya song. And I do so by paraphrasing and adapting its lyrics: Please don't walk out on your dream; and please continue to make sure that the beautiful voice of freedom continues to ring in every corner of Egypt.

It is truly an honor to be at AUC today. I feel privileged and humbled by this wonderful honorary degree that you have bestowed on me. And I am grateful for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

Thank you again very much to the Board of Trustees and President Anderson. I wish you, and all of AUC-its students, faculty, and administrators-continued great success.