Leading with Care

For AUC’s 13th President Ahmad Dallal, a culture of excellence and care for the community is key

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On the cover: AUC’s 13th President Ahmad Dallal focuses on excellence and care for the community, photo by Ahmad El-Nemr
It’s great to be back! #AUCBackToCampus

This fall, we’re back on campus face to face after almost a year and a half of being online and working remotely. It feels lovely to be around people again; to work in the office; to see students, faculty and staff walking on campus; to find the library, bookstore and food outlets open; and — I never thought I’d hear myself saying this — but even to commute to and from campus. It all feels normal again, and I miss every bit of it.

Having said that, things are not completely like they used to be — we still have to wear masks, keep a distance and be cautious about our safety. COVID-19 is not over, but we have to learn to live with it.

In this issue, we highlight AUC community reflections about being back on campus — a mix of excitement, nostalgia and even “weirdness” for some (p. 28). And this partial return to normalcy goes hand in hand with the return of commencement (p. 12). Mabrouk to the three classes who celebrated their graduation this semester! You are all #MakingAUCProud.

That’s one big thing.

The other exciting part is welcoming AUC’s 13th President Ahmad Dallal, the first Arab American to lead the University and a prominent Islamic studies scholar with a mechanical engineering background. President Dallal loves poetry, looks forward to exploring more of Cairo — an “inexhaustible city” — with his family and wants to lead AUC with a “culture of care,” building on its “track record of excellence.” Those who previously worked with President Dallal commend his caliber, integrity, hard work and humbleness (p. 18). As AUC Trustee Tarek Masoud, who served as head of the Presidential Search Committee that selected President Dallal, puts it, “That the result [of the presidential search] yielded someone who is as ideally suited and of the stature of President Dallal speaks to the allure of AUC and the promise of its future.”

We also explore a number of contemporary issues on the regional and global fronts: finding a treatment for COVID-19 patients (p. 3), vaccine inequity worldwide (p. 6), Palestine and the global reawakening (p. 24) and the enhancement of teacher training through Peer Communities of Learners (p. 34). We feature two of our alumni — the first woman to head Microsoft Egypt (p. 10) and a diplomat who is using the Arabic he learned at AUC to enrich his work with the Indian Foreign Service (p. 16). And we spotlight a scholarship student from Yemen who joined AUC one month before the pandemic and lockdown, spending her freshman year online (p. 36).

This fall marks important milestones for AUC. Hopefully, as COVID-19 subsides, more and more of our previous normal life will be restored. In the meantime, we have to continue taking all measures to stay safe — for our sake, for our families and for everyone around us.

Dalia Al Nimr ’06
Motivated to unlock the potential of synthetic biology, a team of undergraduate students have developed a groundbreaking approach for treating COVID-19 patients, earning them a silver medal at the 2020 International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM) competition.

Biology majors Rana Salah, Salma Abou Elhassan and Ahmed Magdy ‘20 led a team of 13 AUC students in pioneering a theoretical model that promises to spur even more innovation in the field of biology, should their research be continued in a lab setting.

“This has a huge impact in terms of early detection methods for any type of virus with known genetic sequences, and it also provides a fast and robust tool to develop in the case of a future pandemic, God forbid,” shared Anwar Abdelnaser, assistant professor at AUC’s Institute of Global Health and Human Ecology and the team’s research supervisor. “In terms of synthetic biology, the research can be further optimized to not only be a diagnostic tool but also a therapeutic one.”

Unlike the approach of a vaccine, the team’s research revolves around a therapeutic model for the treatment of COVID-19 patients that would work to eliminate the virus by preventing it from replicating itself within the human body.

Their model hinges on the use of a toehold switch — a type of circuit or a set of genes that code with a particular purpose.

“We worked on applying the contemporary methods of synthetic biology through toehold switches loaded with siRNA (small interfering RNA) targeting the replicate mRNA (micro RNA) of SARS-CoV-2 to inhibit the virus replication cycle. This is then combined and carried as cargo to be delivered with the aid of a virus-like particle system,” Abou Elhassan explained.

One of the main challenges the team faced in developing their research was determining how to safely deliver the toehold switch they developed into patients, Salah explained. “We worked first on developing virus-like particles, or decoy COVID-19 virus particles, that mimic the virus in order to reach only the cells that are targeted by the virus itself.”

Eventually, their research led them to the discovery that antivirus vectors infused with spikes of the COVID-19 virus produced within a plant cell system could boost the production of the virus-like particles for delivery into the human body. “This research has huge implications for the potential treatment of patients with COVID-19,” said Abou Elhassan. “In the long term, our research could help us develop an effective, cost-efficient treatment to stop the virus replication cycle and invasion of other healthy cells.”

Applied in the form of a diagnostic tool, the team’s model could also be used beyond a therapeutic purpose to reshape the way we currently test individuals for COVID-19. “It can be applied as a diagnostic kit that uses cells from outside the human body, so we wouldn’t require a PCR test,” said Salah.
Due to restrictions on indoor gatherings as a result of the pandemic, the team did not have access to labs for the competition and rather focused on testing their research through theoretical modeling. In the future, Salah, Abou Elhassan and Magdy are hopeful that they can conduct lab work that would allow them to refine their model for application in the real world. “We hope that our model will make its way to the appropriate pharmaceutical company,” said Magdy. “This will enable us to conduct further research and go through the clinical testing process, which will make this possible treatment affordable and accessible to many people. Yes, we are trying to save the world, and we will achieve our goal.”

The team’s research applies methodologies and knowledge from synthetic biology, a growing interdisciplinary field of science and engineering with potential for combating health challenges. “It’s actually a kind of science that integrates everything,” Salah explained. “It is at the core of the sciences, combining biology, chemistry, computer science and machine learning. A lot goes into this phenomenal new area. It can solve many problems, such as cancer and diseases.”

According to Salah, despite the endless innovative possibilities attached to the field of synthetic biology, it has yet to attract enough attention, particularly in Egypt. “If people in our community started to be more aware of synthetic biology, we would have a lot more experts and students enrolling in the field,” she said. “We don’t currently have a well-developed or established research center focused on this field, so this was part of our main idea.”

With the support of an undergraduate research grant from AUC, Salah, Abou Elhassan and Magdy were able to recruit a team of 13 students from a range of departments — biology, business, actuarial science, engineering, chemistry and journalism and mass communication — to build a business model and outreach campaigns highlighting the value of investing more in this budding sector. “There was a lot of diversity, and that’s the point,” Salah explained. “Synthetic biology is a place where everyone has an opportunity. This also really fits with AUC being a liberal arts University, and we’re grateful for the support we received from AUC.”

The team used dynamic approaches, including biotech games, educational workshops, webinars, social media campaigns and art contests, to expose more youth to their research and generate interest in synthetic biology. Through their outreach efforts, the team was even able to raise public awareness of the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic and the steps people can take to protect themselves and others. “We went to an orphanage to talk to kids who didn’t know anything about biology,” Salah said. “We used games and art contests, and that made them more willing to take precautions. Now they understand what we are facing, and they also understand that they still have the opportunity to work in biology. We also talked to high school students from STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) schools. We developed workshops about biosafety and biosecurity in the form of a crisis simulation. So we focused on the measures people need to take if there is a certain crisis to be solved through synthetic biology.”

Apart from earning recognition for their innovative approach to COVID-19 treatment, the students also distinguished themselves in iGEM as one of two teams from Egypt and one of three teams from Africa participating in the competition. “This is a worldwide competition that has no restrictions on the number of participants from any country,” said Abdelnaser. “Winning the silver medal in the team’s first participation is a testament to the quality of teaching and research at AUC. In addition, this recognition promotes AUC
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as a global academic institution that was able to participate and win in a worldwide competition while operating under pandemic conditions.”

For team leads Salah, Abou Elhassan and Magdy, their participation and recognition at such an internationally renowned competition represents a major accomplishment and source of pride. “I felt like a global citizen, like we were part of a bigger message, which is connecting the world together through science. The moment we won, I felt both elated and proud of myself, my team, my University and, of course, my country,” said Abou Elhassan.

Now working as an international team mentor for iGEM, Salah hopes to support more students in Egypt, especially those at AUC who are interested in participating in iGEM in the future. She has plans to hold the iGEM Africa launch event at AUC in November 2021, a step toward establishing the University as an iGEM hub: “What I would really like is to launch an iGEM student organization at AUC that would help students join every year and represent AUC internationally at one of the most prestigious competitions in synthetic biology.”
The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light health inequities across the world, underscoring disparities among lower-income communities in terms of both rates of exposure to the virus and access to vaccine supplies. Jamal Haidar, assistant professor of economics, reminds us that while such inequities in the global health space are not new, the scale and gravity of the current pandemic captured international attention more than ever before. “Vaccines and drugs that cost cents to make don’t reach millions of people who need them. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequities in a striking manner,” Haidar noted.

The disparity in vaccine access can be seen in international trends of vaccination. “Today, some rich countries are vaccinating children as young as 12 years old, who are at an extremely low risk of developing severe COVID-19 illness, while poorer countries don’t even have enough shots for health care workers,” said Haidar. “Of the COVID-19 vaccine doses administered to date, 75% have gone to people in high-income and upper middle-income countries. The low-income countries received only 4%.”

Shahjahan Bhuiyan, associate professor of public administration and associate dean for undergraduate studies and administration at AUC’s School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, shared similar sentiments: “With some exceptions, the 72 countries who have succeeded to vaccinate over 50% of their populations — meaning they have administered at least one dose — are predominantly resource-rich countries. It is evident that resource-rich countries are quickly transforming into vaccine-rich ones due to their capability of either producing or controlling the large share of vaccines manufactured globally.”

These disparities are particularly disconcerting when put into a cross-country context. “While 69% of the people in high-income countries, as defined using the World Bank country income classification, received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccines as of now, only 2.3% of the people in low-income countries did,” said Haidar.
Economics and Governance

Despite COVID-19 vaccines being licensed for use around the globe, low-income and middle-income countries are struggling to sufficiently expand their supply of vaccine doses in order to move toward a more rapid path of recovery from this major health crisis.

Highlighting four factors that continue to pose challenges to countries that have not been able to vaccinate their populations at the same rate as higher-income states, Haidar explained, “In addition to licenses, vaccines need to be produced at larger scales, priced in ways to allow low-income citizens to afford them, allocated widely so that they are available where needed across the globe and efficiently deployed in local communities. These dimensions of the vaccination challenge are still barriers preventing lower-income countries from accessing vaccine doses and distributing them rapidly.”

Haidar noted that while development banks and international institutions like the World Bank have set aside funding to support countries in accessing vaccines, the economic states of these countries still present major obstacles. “Many of these low-income and middle-income countries are already under huge debt and thus may be less willing to borrow more for much-needed vaccines, as that could deviate domestic resources from other investment priorities they have,” he said.

Many of the obstacles preventing the access of lower-income countries to vaccine doses may also be rooted in deep-seated governance problems, Bhuiyan said. “It is interesting to note that most of the lower-income countries that are currently suffering due to their lack of access to vaccines and inability to distribute them are also ranked poorly in the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators. Good governance deficits, among other things, play a key role in reducing the capacity of these countries to deal with major challenges, including vaccine-related issues.”

Another core issue is one of public demand for vaccines. “Intellectual property protection for COVID-19 vaccines have been waived, allowing for new manufacturers to help increase the supply of vaccines,” added Haidar. “In the long run, demand matters more than supply constraints. This is the sense in which supply bottlenecks are a red herring. They slow you down, but without demand, you don’t reach the vaccination goal at all. That said, more work is needed from governments in low-income and middle-income countries in order to create more awareness and increase demand for vaccines.”

Global Consequences

While it may initially seem that disparities in access to vaccine doses pose a threat only to those countries unable to secure sufficient supplies, vaccine inequity is an issue of global concern. As both Haidar and Bhuiyan note, this matter is deeply intertwined with a range of other social issues. For example, Bhuiyan

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pointed out that the COVID-19 crisis has had a significant impact on access to employment. Referencing the 2021 World's Employment and Social Outlook Trends issued by the International Labour Organization, he explained that employment gaps are expected to reach 75 million in 2021 — and 100 million when reduced working hours are taken into account. “This example paints a gloomy picture of the suffering that all countries are experiencing, predominantly in the Global South,” said Bhuiyan. “In addition, evidence suggests that the countries suffering from lack of access to vaccines are also encountering challenges in health security and employment, as well as economic, political and governance-related issues, which are likely to have a disastrous impact on the lives and livelihoods of their people.”

It is also important to look at vaccine inequity through an international economic lens. “There’s an economic reason to distribute vaccines more equitably,” Haidar said. “As the World Health Organization puts it, ‘no one is safe until everyone is safe,’ as countries are economically interdependent.”

Given this interdependence, the pandemic’s negative impact on lower income countries can generate economic consequences for the entire global economy. “Vaccines have the potential to enhance public health, life expectancy, educational attainment, work productivity, adult earnings and economic activity,” Haidar added. “In addition, vaccines can reduce government spending on disease treatment. In the absence of vaccines, new diseases can spread faster, and immunity may take longer to develop, causing broader inequalities between and within countries and slowing down economic output at national and global levels.”

Finding a Solution

The complexity of vaccine inequity makes it a difficult challenge to solve in the short term. “There is no quick solution to this ‘messy’ problem,” said Bhuiyan.

While there have been attempts to tackle vaccine inequity by international initiatives such as COVAX — led by Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and the World Health Organization — they have not yet been as successful as anticipated. This is, in part, because of the speed with which resource-rich countries have gained monopolies over available vaccine supplies. “COVAX was established to expedite the manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines and increase equality worldwide in the early stages of vaccination,” explained Haidar. “However, COVAX lacked the money to compete with rich countries that captured the market early on by striking purchase deals with vaccine makers.”

Still, Bhuiyan and Haidar see potential for COVAX to accelerate access to vaccines in the immediate future — that is, if the initiative finds increased support from the...
international community. “For the short term, it is the responsibility of resource-rich or vaccine-rich countries to strengthen the COVAX initiative for global equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and advance the World Health Organization mantra that ‘no one is safe until everyone is safe,’” explained Bhuiyan.

Haidar further emphasized the potential role that COVAX can play. “What COVAX can hopefully achieve is to help countries procure doses at lower prices and thus launch their vaccination campaigns earlier than they would without external assistance,” he said. “With additional funding, COVAX could probably compete better in the global scramble for vaccines and secure a place further toward the front of the queue.”

In the longer term, Haidar noted that the global supply of COVID-19 vaccines still needs to be addressed. “First, production of vaccines needs to expand,” he stressed. “Manufacturers of licensed products need to build new plants and establish new relationships with other manufacturers. Second, more knowledge needs to be shared. For instance, allowing more companies to follow the vaccine recipes developed could boost output.”

The question remains as to the exact financial role high-income countries can play to quicken production and tackle vaccine inequity. Given that lower-income countries are still dealing with the dilemma of prioritizing vaccine production over other debts, Haidar mentioned two approaches: “The global community needs to decide whether to provide funding via lending only to countries that want to borrow or to try financing global public goods, such as vaccines, especially as vaccines have global spillovers as well. In such a setting, institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund may need to offer more grants or softer loans to allow countries to buy more vaccines, especially when countries need additional fiscal space as well.”

For Bhuiyan, it is also critical that countries direct their attention toward the underlying gaps that have weakened their access to vaccines. “In the long term, vaccine-poor countries also need to develop dynamic governance designs to deal with any future crises of the COVID-19 nature,” he noted.

This advice extends to resource-rich countries as well. “The pandemic has clearly exposed the unpreparedness of both developed and developing countries to deal with public health crises of this magnitude, as well as the lack of capacity of governments to deliver the needed health care services to treat coronavirus patients,” said Bhuiyan.

Share of people who received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, Sep 28, 2021
Total number of people who received at least one vaccine dose, divided by the total population of the country.

Source: Official data collated by Our World in Data – Last updated 29 September 2021, 17:20 (London time) OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY
Tech Triumphs

A computer science alumna is the first woman to head Microsoft Egypt

By Reem Abouemera

“Of course, I was frightened, but it was also a dream come true — the dream of making a difference,” she said. “It’s always challenges and changes that provide the most exciting experiences.”

Early on, ever since she received her bachelor’s in computer science from AUC, Arif knew exactly what she dreamed of achieving. “I realized that what I want to do is make a difference, and that’s what has been motivating me ever since,” she explained. “I didn’t want a career with no impact because that would be just a job, so I chose a career that drives impact. I’ve been taking leaps of faith since then.”

From day one post-graduation, Arif has been striving to make an impact everywhere she goes, taking unconventional career strides in the hopes of accomplishing just that. From working in the oil and gas industry that she “knew nothing about” to holding a government role, she sought new experiences in the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

Today, she takes immense pride in her current position, especially that when she began, the COVID-19 pandemic started taking its toll on the economy, with institutions and organizations having to shift their operations remotely. “To businesses, we were the first responders of the digital world just like health care providers were for the society at large,” reflected Arif.

This is exactly the type of “tangible impact” she’s been seeking. “The reason this is one of the best roles I’ve held is because I’m doing it in Egypt. Nothing beats driving impact in your own country,” she said. “Technology is pivotal to Egypt’s economic reform, and the country has a
great opportunity to not only recover but also leap forward.”

When it comes to leadership, Arif doesn’t consider herself a boss. “I’m a member of the team. I just have the role of the general manager,” she said. “While many managers prefer to lead right from the front line, I prefer to lead from within. It’s never my way or the highway. I believe in empathetic leadership with a growth mindset,” she explained.

Arif has always juggled multiple things at once, and that’s why she’s used to the challenges that come with a position as significant as hers. In fact, a couple of years after completing her undergraduate studies, she pursued an MBA in marketing and operations at AUC, graduating with a 4.0 GPA, while she held a full-time position and was pregnant with her first baby.

When asked how she does so many things at once, Arif shrugged, “I have no idea. I think when you’re passionate about something, you go the extra mile.”

But it’s not haphazard. To avoid getting overwhelmed, Arif relies on her planning skills. “I plan things to death,” she said, laughing. “It’s like running a marathon. You have to prepare, pace yourself and make sure you are headed in the right direction. I always know where I want to go. I set small milestones to complete along the way, and this gives me a sense of accomplishment, confidence and perseverance to continue despite any challenges I may face.”

Arif’s kids are also key supporters in her journey. “When I see pride in my kids’ eyes, that’s when it’s all worth it for me,” she said.

With regard to her children, Arif has a unique take on work-life balance. “Everyone is always striving for work-life balance, but personally, I believe it’s really about managing the imbalance,” she said. “There will always be phases when my children will need me more than work will and other times when my professional commitments will need me to spend more time at work. It’s a matter of managing and accepting that it won’t always be a balance.”

However, Arif emphasized the importance of having a support network. That’s what encourages her to keep going. “I never shy away from help when I need it, and I believe that support is part of how you succeed,” she said.

As an AUC student, Arif made a deliberate effort to join as many student organizations, cocurricular activities and trips as possible and still graduated top of her class, earning the President’s Cup. “I miss that mix,” she said. “They were the best days of my life. AUC is an eye opener in many ways. For instance, diversity is now becoming a buzzword, but it’s been a core value at AUC since forever. To me, AUC is home. Whenever I hear about anything related to the University, I’m like a magnet attracted to it instantly. One of the reasons I did my MBA was to keep going to AUC.”

Offering advice to young aspiring women, Arif said, “Nothing should stop you. Don’t shy away, dream big and go for it.”

“Photographs courtesy of Mirna Arif
The Fall 2021 semester witnessed three classes of graduates attend their commencement ceremonies — a first in AUC history. After the University shifted to online instruction in March 2020 and continued with virtual and hybrid classes for a year and a half, students who graduated in Spring 2020, Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 did not have commencement ceremonies. This fall, with the return to face-to-face instruction, these graduates celebrated their joy together at AUC’s 97th and 98th commencements.

Nadeem Tameesh ’20, a computer science major with a minor in business administration, initially felt a lack of excitement when the ceremonies were announced, but she soon changed her mind. “I almost debated not coming, if it weren’t for my parents,” she said. “However, once we had the rehearsal, things were different. I started feeling nostalgic — walking through campus and seeing all my friends in one place — and I was looking forward to my commencement.”
Dr. Hossam Badrawi, chairman of the Nile Badrawi Foundation for Education and Development, was the keynote speaker at the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy commencement. Hisham Ezz El Arab, managing partner of HE Advisory and former chairperson of Commercial International Bank, and Alaa Hashim '97, founder and executive partner of Transcendium, address School of Business graduates

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Michael Essam ’20, a double major in business administration and accounting, was also eager to live the experience. “Even though commencement was postponed for a year, I was still excited about it,” he said. “I wanted to share this once-in-a-lifetime moment with my friends and family, especially my parents. They waited a long time for this. I wanted to make them proud.”

Reflecting on the past period, Tameesh said, “During the lockdown, a lot of things didn’t go according to plan. I even had to present my thesis online, which is something that would never have occurred to me.” Essam added, “There was a lot of uncertainty and difficulty at first, but we adapted and things went smoothly. I was upset that my last semester at the University was online, but I am thankful and appreciative.”

Tameesh looks back on her time at AUC fondly. “A year ago, I would have probably said that I felt robbed of my senior year. I don’t feel the same way anymore. I tried out a lot of things at AUC — I joined clubs and the Student Ambassadors Program. I spent a summer abroad and made new friends. I just wish I had more time to spend on campus. Other than that, I am grateful for everything that happened.”

Azza Alawady ’20, an electronics and communications engineering major with a minor in computer science, feels the same. “It was a bit overwhelming because not only were we as students new to this, but so were the professors,” she said. “I really wanted to continue my activities, such as teaching dance classes at the AUC Sports Center and jogging early in the morning around campus. But everyone was so nice and cooperative — it went better than I expected.”
“Ma ismak?” Diplomat Dhruv Mishra (ALI ’21) remembers being asked this on the very first day of his Arabic Language Intensive Program (ALIN) at AUC’s Tahrir Square campus in 2019. “That was the first question I answered in Arabic, and from there, we would keep building and building. Every day, something new used to happen,” Mishra reflected.

Since that first day at AUC, Mishra’s Arabic vocabulary has expanded to a conversational and almost fluent level, helping him settle into his new position with the Indian Embassy in Abu Dhabi as the second secretary of political affairs. Aside from the Arabic skills he was able to gain during his time in Egypt, Mishra was exposed to an entirely new world, meeting people from different backgrounds who helped him cultivate a new understanding of the region and perspective on his career as a diplomat.

As a member of the foreign service, Mishra’s training required that he study a new language, and he was immediately drawn to Arabic. “I had some exposure to Urdu as a language in my school years. I was interested in Urdu poetry, and Urdu has a lot of Arabic and Persian influence,” he explained, describing his interest in exploring the links between the two languages.

Beyond his personal interest in the history of the Arabic language, Mishra also saw immense professional value in the opportunity to study Arabic as a diplomat. “The Arab-speaking world is a very interesting place in terms of its history, culture, and people,” he said. “It’s also an important place because of the political and economic realities that we live in today, and it’s significant for India and its people.”

Mishra is not the first member of the Indian foreign service to have spent time at AUC. Over the years, cohorts of diplomats from India have enrolled in the Arabic Language Intensive Program. “For the last two decades, if not more, new Indian diplomats who choose Arabic as their required foreign language have studied at AUC,” Mishra said. “After two years of Arabic-language training, they come out of the University well versed in Arabic. Those who invest their time and effort have been a good asset to the ministry, and that’s why we have continued to study at AUC.”

For Mishra, AUC’s Arabic Language Intensive Program is unique in that it is tailored to the specific needs and interests of members of the foreign service. “My colleagues and I have been lucky that the program is designed for diplomats,” he said. “The content is very contextual and relevant to what we do as diplomats, and now I am able to read local media and listen to people in their own language. The experience has been enriching for me.”

Although his time on AUC’s campus was cut short by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mishra remembers his experience in Egypt as an eye-opening period during which he was able to familiarize himself with the country. “I met so many people from different backgrounds and countries,” he reflected. “Apart from that, AUC made sure we visited a lot of other places. I remember the University arranged trips to Alexandria, Saqqara and Memphis; cultural walks through Old Cairo; and other visits. That immersion into the country and culture was a great help.”

This infusion of cultural experiences into his academic program significantly shaped Mishra’s growth as a foreign service professional, helping him strengthen his language abilities and deepen his understanding of the Arab region. “First and foremost, the Arabic language opens a lot of doors,” he said. “Then there’s the cultural part of it. It has informed my understanding of the Arab region. You realize some cultural nuances. During the courses, there were some modules that had components on Arab and Islamic history and on verses from the Quran. These are the things that help you have a better understanding of cultures, people and what is important to them, and what the sensitive issues are.”

Mishra’s cultural immersion in Cairo was exactly the kind of experience he was in pursuit of when he began his journey with the Indian foreign service in 2018. “Now that I’m almost beyond the training stage, I realize the opportunity of being in the foreign service is very unique,” he said. “I get to experience cultures around the world, whether it be the Arab world or let’s say after three or four years, I will be posted in another country and maybe another region. It’s a constant learning experience.”
As Mishra explained, this opportunity to build knowledge also feeds directly into his work, helping him increase his understanding of global affairs and impact his own country. “You get to meet so many people and experience different cultures. Then you go back to your home country with your experiences, and you spend time there, contributing in terms of what you learned. As diplomats, words are all we have. There is no stick that we carry, except our pens and words, so it’s a cerebral exercise. I'm grateful that I landed here.”

Now in his first posting in Abu Dhabi, Mishra has a range of responsibilities, including monitoring the bilateral and multilateral engagements of the United Arab Emirates on issues relevant to India. “A typical day in my job would consist of remaining up to date on media coverage and anything that concerns the host country and my own country — to analyze issues that are going on and report them back to my country with actionable input,” he explained. “I am also responsible for reaching out to my counterparts and fellow diplomats working in different countries to understand other parts of the world, how the host country is engaging with them, and how we can learn from them or what we can contribute.”

In the current context, Mishra’s priorities have also centered around India’s recovery from the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. “Now that we’ve lost so much time, so many lives, so many loved ones, and even in terms of the economic progress that has been wiped out because of the lockdown, the major focus is how we can work with friendly countries and partners to get out of this faster and build back better,” he explained. “We want to try to get back to where we were in terms of our trade relations and the movement of people, helping those who have been adversely impacted by the pandemic.”

Looking forward to his future career, Mishra reflected on his desire to continue growing through exposure to new environments. For him, the prospect of more travel and exploration is valuable in that it can bolster his ability to serve his own country and the foreign service. “I would like to see as much of the world as possible and interact with as many different people as I can,” he said. “Moving forward, I would like to become a little more opinionated based on experiences that can help me build an informed perspective and add value to how decisions are made.”

In the meantime, as he prepares to take on new parts of the globe, Mishra is concentrating on making use of his newfound Arabic abilities in his current role. Thinking of all he absorbed during his time at AUC and in Egypt, Mishra emphasized the importance of spreading his learnings and widening people’s perspectives of countries outside of their own. “I want to break stereotypes,” he said. “When people think of Egypt or India, for example, they have a certain vision in their minds — so the more people you know, the more you see the world, the more you realize that this is an armchair view of life. People who don’t know have created these stereotypes.”

Photos courtesy of Dhruv Mishra
Leading with Care

For AUC’s 13th President Ahmad Dallal, a culture of excellence and care for the community is key

By Dalia Al Nimr
I’m excited to be part of the AUC community. I’m here because this is a community that is inspiring, and I look forward to serving it, working with it and belonging to it. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t believe in this impressive community.”

For AUC’s 13th President Ahmad Dallal, people matter and openness is crucial.

“I have every intention to engage with our community — honestly, faithfully, transparently,” he said. “We will agree, disagree and debate — this happens in our homes, with our families, everywhere. It’s impossible — indeed undesirable — to start with consensus. We are academics. We should bring to the table different perspectives and points of view.”

The first Arab American to lead the University, Dallal is a prominent scholar of Islamic studies. He served as dean of Georgetown University in Qatar; provost of the American University of Beirut; and professor at Smith College, Yale, Stanford, and Georgetown, where he was also chair of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies. He earned his BE in mechanical engineering from AUB and his MA, MPhil and PhD in Islamic studies from Columbia University.

Engineering and Islamic studies?

“Yes, this is an aspect of my background and career that some people might find surprising,” Dallal said, smiling. “I was pretty good at school, and in our part of the world, if you’re good at school, you either study medicine or engineering — perhaps business. I enjoyed math and the sciences, so I chose engineering, even though my father, a medical doctor, was hoping I would opt for medicine. I told him that if I did opt for medicine, I would be fully immersed in the field and won’t get a chance to do other things in life.”

Even as an engineering student, Dallal strived for more. “I deliberately chose engineering because I didn’t want to limit myself to a narrow field of study. I audited most of the history courses available at AUB while pursuing my BE and developed a deep interest in history.”

Dallal practiced engineering for almost five years working in the aviation industry, where “precision is critical for people’s safety,” he reflected. He acquired all Federal Aviation Administration maintenance licenses in mechanical systems. “Then I got to a point in my career where I had to make a decision on whether I will continue with engineering. I could either do what many in my generation did — get an MBA, combine it with engineering and then work in a field connected to engineering management, or deviate from the usual path and opt for something totally different. I chose the latter, took a leap of faith and moved to another field, and I never regretted my decision. I’ve practiced and enjoyed both disciplines, and this has informed my ability to work across these areas and understand the associated challenges and social pressures. In fact, one of the first things I did was to work in the history of science, combining the two fields.”
Family Man and Intellectual

Dallal comes to Cairo with his wife, Dalal El Madade, and his 8-year-old daughter, Kinda. The Dallals have a 26-year-old daughter, Shezza, who is practicing law in New York as an appellate defender. “Interestingly, my wife’s first name is similar to my last name, but they’re not the same. If you don’t know Arabic, you might not notice the difference, but thankfully, you can easily tell us apart,” Dallal pointed out with a laugh. “We’re excited about being in Cairo; I’ve always thought Cairo is an inexhaustible city, so there’s so much to look forward to. It’s one of the few cities in the world where you could live your whole life and never grasp everything about it. When I was young, I spent some time here exploring, but I only saw a tiny fraction of Cairo and Egypt’s treasures. Cairo is obviously a historic city with multiple layers of civilization and culture. I sincerely hope I have time to explore these layers with my family.”

Traveling, visiting cities and learning about different cultures are some of Dallal’s hobbies, but he particularly cherishes the time he is able to spend with his family. “At my age and given my responsibilities, what I look forward to the most is having quality time with my family,” he said.

Contemplation is also essential to his approach. “I cherish the opportunity to have a little time to just step back and think, and reflect on what I’m doing and where it fits in the larger scheme of things.”

Of course, an academic and scholar who likes to reflect naturally likes to read, from books by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, cultural theorist Raymond Williams and literary critic Edward Said to historian Eric Hobsbawm, sociocultural anthropologist Talal Asad and 11th-century scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, often described as the founder of anthropology. Dallal also enjoys historical novels, such as Gamal al-Ghitani’s Zayni Barakat, and especially poetry. “I love poetry in many languages, but I appreciate Arabic poetry in particular,” said Dallal, who is fluent in English and Arabic and reads French, German and Persian. “I read classical and modern poetry by poets such as Mahmoud Darwish and Agha Shahid Ali — it’s all amazing. Actually, if I have a little time to read truly for pleasure, it’s definitely poetry.”

A prolific author, Dallal has written dozens of articles, book chapters and publications, as well as several books that include An Islamic Response to Greek Astronomy: Kitab Ta’dil Hay’at al-Aflak of Sadr al-Shari’a (1995); Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History (2012); The Political Theology of ISIS: Prophets, Messiahs, & “the Extinction of the Grayzone” (2017); and Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought (2018). At AUC, Dallal is a professor in the Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations.
How does Dallal find the time to juggle all these responsibilities? “You just work,” he simply stated. “It’s okay to be overwhelmed at times, but be persistent and keep at it.”

**At AUC’s Helm**

When asked about his top priorities as president, Dallal reiterates that it is essential to foster community. “I want to continue supporting the AUC community to forge a culture of excellence in academia and scholarship — and a culture of care as a community,” he said. “Our commitment to excellence is coupled with our community’s well-being. Combining the two is a big challenge, but it’s important. Engaging with the community is not a means to an end; it’s an end in itself. I want to engage with our constituents: faculty, on whose shoulders the University stands; students, whom we serve and measure our success by their success; and staff, our valuable and essential enablers.”

For Dallal, this engagement with the community is one of the things he looks forward to the most. “I’ve dealt with members of the AUC community, and I’m impressed by the passion for AUC that I saw in everyone I met and by their inspiring work. I really want to learn more about what they’re doing, engage with them, and facilitate and support that work. We also have our alumni, who are successful and influential in society. We need to not only engage with them but have them regularly connect with our students.”

In the end, community is at the heart of what we do, Dallal affirmed. “The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us many things, like adopting digital tools that we didn’t use before — at least not on such a scale — but it also taught us that we learn better in communities. In fact, the loss of a sense of community during periods of lockdown affected people’s ability to learn as well as their well-being and mental health. So we should never compromise the community part.”

Along with community engagement come the nuts and bolts of University leadership. “We will work on specifics as we move forward, but some of the challenges we face are not unique to AUC. There is a pressing need for all higher education institutions to rethink their models, and we need to be part of that global conversation on issues such as the value of higher education, or the balance between the liberal arts and professional programs. Specifically, in our context, the landscape in which we operate is much more competitive, not just in Egypt, but in the Arab region and globally. We need to sharpen our competitive edge, expand access for excellent students who can’t afford AUC, introduce new disciplines and constantly think about how we can do better as an institution — both from efficiency and ethical points of view — and how we model integrity in our institutional practices. We also need to make use of what we learned during the pandemic and lockdown, primarily that digital tools complement, not replace, what we do in person. Education is transforming, and we have to think about the future of higher education from all these prisms and perspectives.”

And AUC stands on solid ground, Dallal emphasized, because of its heritage, reputation, quality education, vibrant community and its location in Egypt — the heart of the region and Africa. “We are a small institution, but being in Egypt, with its cultural and human depth and sociopolitical weight, is a huge asset,” said Dallal, who first encountered AUC while conducting research in the library on the Tahrir Square campus in the late 1980s.

Dallal was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon, and spent 25 years studying and teaching in the United States. This unique blend gives him an insider’s perspective — both on the region and U.S.-style liberal arts universities. “I am fortunate to have


“...I want to continue supporting the AUC community to forge a culture of excellence in academia and scholarship — and a culture of care as a community.”

deep knowledge and experience in the best academic setup worldwide, U.S. higher education, which, to me, is America’s greatest and most enduring legacy. Everyone today is trying to model U.S. higher education institutions. I hope this will help me serve AUC, one of the handful of truly U.S-style legacy institutions in the Arab region. AUC is structured as an American higher education institution, but it’s in the region, of the region and for the region. So that combination is unique.”

Being an American citizen of Arab descent gives Dallal a rare vantage point. Having studied the region and addressed contemporary scientific and historical issues in his writings and research is crucial to his understanding. “I hope that my experience, research and knowledge of the sensibilities and aspirations of the region — and knowledge of higher education in the United States and the Middle East — make me better equipped to serve AUC,” he said. However, Dallal is quick to point out that such insights are useful but have limitations: “Success in leadership requires being attentive and receptive to input from the diverse constituencies of the AUC community.”

Enhancing Excellence

During his tenure, Dallal plans to build on AUC’s “track record of excellence,” he said. “I’m not coming to an institution that just started yesterday. AUC is deeply rooted. When I say legacy, I don’t just mean AUC being 100 years old. It’s an institutional legacy that enabled AUC to produce extraordinary people who are well-placed, successful, and serve their communities in Egypt and beyond.”

Dallal’s vision for AUC rests on two main pillars: students and faculty. “I want AUC to be known as the place that produces the most qualified, sought-after, well-trained graduates — ones who contribute to their nations and communities and are problem solvers who can think outside the box to address new issues every day. It should also be known for faculty who are the go-to experts in their fields, whose research is mindful of the challenges facing us and provides answers to relevant issues locally, regionally and globally. This is already the case, but we want to develop that further.”

The areas in which AUC trains its students are also critical. “Fields such as artificial intelligence and data science didn’t exist a few years ago. Now they shape humanity,” Dallal said. “The environment, climate change, water scarcity, energy — these are all challenges that are becoming more acute exponentially, and we need to train students to deal with these problems. We have a basis to build on, but we must intensify our efforts.”

And, of course, there is liberal arts, which also defines AUC. “I’m a strong believer in the vital role of a liberal arts education,” explained Dallal. “By and large, our institution is committed to liberal arts, but what exactly does that mean at this point in time? After COVID? In the next few years? How do we integrate that into our educational model? The exact answer is something the community has to work on; we have to come up with the specific formula together. We have to revisit, rethink and redefine our commitments. We will definitely engage our entire community to decide what it’s going to look like, today and tomorrow.”

This constant reassessment is a normal part of any institution’s advancement. “Work in these areas is never finished. We must be attentive to changes happening in higher education, and be able to evaluate and rethink our approaches. This is the hallmark of successful universities,” emphasized Dallal.

At Georgetown University in Qatar
"As our chief academic officer, Ahmad Dallal has been the primary driver of programs that have resulted in AUB achieving the most prolific research output in Lebanon and the region, and the implementation of processes that have greatly enhanced both teaching and learning. Ahmad set a high bar for AUB’s academic and institutional integrity. He not only helped us reach that bar; he ensured we would exceed it."

American University of Beirut Board of Trustees Chairman Philip S. Khoury, 2015

"Congratulations to him, The American University in Cairo and all AUC students.”

Saber Sufyan Al Daery

"Best of luck. Hope this brings fresh change and collaboration with alumni, students and stakeholders.”

Amr Abouelazm

“What People Have to Say”

“It’s refreshing to have such an astute academic and accomplished administrator to lead AUC and build on our enviable legacy. Our brand can only soar higher. Congratulations are in order.”

Gabriel Meiriga Alhassan

“Wonderful news. Dr. Dallal is a competent educator and administrator. AUC made the right choice with this appointment. Congratulations, Dr. Ahmad Dallal. Congratulations, AUC’s Board of Trustees.”

Amine Daouk

“Congratulations. You deserve the best.”

Fatma Tarek

“How lucky is AUC to have Ahmad Dallal as its new president? To those who don’t know, Ahmad Dallal served as AUB provost, [and] no one had or has been able to match Ahmad’s high academic caliber nor his full dedication to AUB. I was so lucky and fortunate to witness Ahmad’s hard work and great achievements for AUB as we served together in the Academic Affairs Committee at the university’s Board of Trustees. [His] ever-going energy and success led Ahmad to become dean of Georgetown University in Qatar and now AUC president in Egypt. But what mostly made me write this note is Ahmad — the genuine and real person, the humble and very smart intellectual. Behind Ahmad’s success are a wonderful and fully supportive wife, Dalal, and their beautiful children. Upward and onward, AUC, and good luck to my friend, President Ahmad Dallal! Mabrouk!”

Fawzi Melhem
The recent clashes in Sheikh Jarrah and Gaza have triggered a shift in international public opinion. It was a sudden reawakening that Palestine remains a very important issue in the conscience of Arabs and the world at large,” said Walid Kazziha, professor of political science.

To learn more about this resurgence of public interest in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, AUCToday spoke with faculty members about the factors driving this shift in international opinion and what these changes mean for Palestine, the Arab region and other key global players.

Revival of Public Concern

For some time before the latest eruption of tensions between Palestine and Israel, international attention had been directed elsewhere. Nabil Fahmy ’74, ’77, dean of AUC’s School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, refers to this as a “dormant” period during which states refocused their energies toward domestic policy: “When things are calm, people assume problems have gone away. The Palestinian issue was being forgotten by the international community,” Fahmy said.

Bahgat Korany, professor of political science, similarly reflected on states prioritizing other issues during this dormant period. “In the last decade or so, other conflicts took over, such as Iran’s nuclear issue, the Arab Spring and its consequences, and some inter-Arab conflicts,” he explained.

However, the increased media coverage of the violence against Palestinian children and civilians raised public concerns. “It shed light on a strong violation of basic human rights for Palestinians and, therefore, resonated throughout the world, not only in the Middle East, especially among youth and human rights activists,” said Fahmy.

These human rights concerns have introduced a new lens through which the public has begun to understand the conflict in Palestine and Israel. “The recent Israel-Hamas war brought back the conflict to its central place in the region but with a change,” explained Korany. “The new emphasis is on the conflict’s social
dimension as a struggle between two communities rather than a traditional inter-state conflict.”

**Repositioning the Palestinian Question**

According to Kazziha, the global movement toward a humanitarian perspective of the conflict can be seen in the recent rise of the use of the term “apartheid” in rhetoric about Palestine. “There is a growing number of people who feel that the way Israel is treating Palestinians is similar or identical to the way there was apartheid in South Africa,” he said.

Ibrahim Awad, professor of practice in global affairs and director of AUC’s Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, shared similar sentiments. “Fifteen years ago, when former U.S. President Jimmy Carter wrote his book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, he was attacked, especially in the United States, for using the word apartheid in the title,” said Awad, explaining that this characterization of the treatment inflicted by Israel on the Palestinian people is justified by its policies toward them. “In contrast, there’s wide acceptance of this term now; at least it is discussed. The Palestinian issue is now a question of human rights: the right to self-determination, the right to live in peace, the right to life — all of these values.”

What exactly has sparked this shift in public perception? Kazziha explained that this transformation did not happen overnight but was rather the result of a set of gradual changes taking place around the globe over time. “Beneath the shift we have witnessed, there was a growing current that was slowly growing and gaining momentum around the world. When the time came and we had that eruption in public opinion, international conscience was directed toward the Palestinian issue,” said Kazziha. “As a result, a collective feeling and collective consciousness have been created, and it’s going to be very difficult to ignore this anymore.”

Some professors draw clear ties to the recent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and the way it has shone a light on systems of social injustice around the globe. “At least in the American context, I think it’s important to put the question into the context of the success of Black Lives Matter activists in changing the way the public at large discusses and thinks about social justice and racial inequalities or, at the very least, the conversations to which the public is exposed,” explained Sean Lee, assistant professor of political science. “Many BLM activists are also involved in activism for Palestine and vice versa, and this connection has succeeded in reframing the discussion of Palestine and Israel as a discourse based on the struggle for equal rights.”

**What This Means for Other Countries**

The change in the public narrative of the conflict between Palestine and Israel across the globe has hinged on the values of human rights and social justice, but questions still remain as to the impact this recent breakout of violence is having — and will continue to have — on neighboring countries in the Arab region and international stakeholders, such as the United States, who have long intertwined themselves in Arab-Israeli relations.
As for Arab states, the recent events may prompt leaders to reconsider their responses and the measures that are necessary for maintaining a sense of stability in the region. “This mutation will reinforce the hands of the Arab actors who have been, since the genesis, direct parties to the conflict,” reflected Awad. “It will reinforce their role in seeking some sort of settlement in the region because the continuation of this situation is detrimental to all the parties that are directly impacted: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. It does not make the countries surrounding Palestine and Israel feel safe or comfortable in planning for the future because there is always the threat of reignited conflict.”

Korany explained that pressure from civil society is likely to shape how states respond in the future. “As Israeli occupation practices and discriminatory treatment of Palestinians continue, Israel’s relations with Arab states will suffer from a cold peace,” he said.

Kazziha reflected on the critical role Egypt has adopted. “Out of all these Arab parties, like the Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco — all those who have built a new relationship with Israel — none were able to take on the role that Egypt has played as a mediator between Palestine and Israel,” said Kazziha.

Reflecting on the United States, Lee explained that shifts in public opinion have not translated into immediate policy changes. “In general, U.S. financial, military and diplomatic support have meant that Israel never really has any external incentives to change the way it treats Palestinians,” Lee noted. However, he added that despite slow shifts in perspective within the U.S. government, there is a chance for change. “Public stances being taken by legislators like Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, Cori Bush and Bernie Sanders, among others, are a reflection of movement on that front,” he said.

**What Is to Come?**

Following the brokering of a ceasefire between Palestine and Israel and the announcement of the new coalition government in Israel, attention has now turned toward the future of the conflict and the steps needed to develop a settlement.

For Fahmy, there are four tracks that should be prioritized simultaneously moving forward: ensuring that the ceasefire continues, highlighting Israeli violations of human rights in international fora, emphasizing discussions of the rights of Israelis of Arab origin who have been treated as second-class citizens, and recodifying the tenets of the peace process. “Over time, there was an attempt to water down the tenets of the peace process: that occupation and the acquisition of territory by force are unacceptable, that a two-state solution should be the foundation based on the 1967 borders with some negotiations, the right of return or compensation, and the right of security for all,” he said. “Over time, people have started to ignore these as facts.”

“Out of all these Arab parties, like the Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco — all those who have built a new relationship with Israel — none were able to take on the role that Egypt has played as a mediator between Palestine and Israel.”

Fahmy further argued that an international response to the conflict should aim toward a comprehensive resolution. “Let’s not try to deal with it one by one — security versus identity versus Jerusalem versus territory versus right of return. Let’s try to put it all as a package on the table at the same time. So it would be the solution versus peace or the lack of a solution versus continued conflict. I think if it’s placed this way, both sides will respond much more constructively.”
As for the new Israeli government, faculty have differing opinions. On the one hand, some are hesitant in pre-empting any changes given the political leanings of members of the coalition. As Korany explained, “This heterogeneous government will continue to be fragile, surviving with only one-vote majority in the Knesset. Netanyahu will continue to be influential in the opposition, and the impact of orthodox Haredi Jews could pressure this government to carry out their settlement policy and attempts at ethnic cleansing.”

On the other hand, other faculty members shared more optimism, though still expressing reservations about any signs of change in the near future. Kazziha sees the potential for shifts in opinion stemming from within Israel. “The shaking of the ground has already taken place,” he said. “Yes, Bennett is a right-wing Israeli politician, but he’s also in coalition with the left-wing, the center and other right-wing groups. The earlier, very determined, almost fascist attitude of Netanyahu has faced its last days. A growing number of Israelis will become aware and conscious of the Palestinian plight, and we’ve seen part of that recently during the demonstrations in Jerusalem. It’s not an overwhelming movement at the moment, but I think it’s going to gain more and more ground.”

According to Fahmy, this change in government will not have a direct impact so much as it will present an opportunity for change. “Arabs, the Palestinian Authority and Palestinians need to take advantage of that by raising the normative aspect of the conflict and of these rights, as well as the political side of the problem. So if things calm down, people’s attention won’t sway away from these elements. It’s important for one to seize the opportunity,” he said.

While Awad similarly does not expect any direct changes to come with the new coalition government in Israel, citing its far-right makeup and fragility, he does see change from within Israel, as well as continued shifts around the globe both at the institutional and civil society levels, as necessary for resolution-building to succeed. “We need changes at different levels with an increased weight and affirmation of the new narrative that is now becoming more accepted: the narrative of Palestinian people deprived of land, state and rights who live under an apartheid occupation regime,” he said.

Although long-term action and change are tough to predict, most faculty members agree that the shift in public perspective spurred by the recent acts of aggression and repression imposed on Palestine is a significant one. As Awad noted, however, resistance to this shift by Israel’s friends remains active and forceful. Nevertheless, he sees potential for the future translation of this shift in narrative into policy action. “This movement has every chance to continue growing. Of course, it will not grow only with wishes and hopes because the opponents of this new mutation will fight it, but this is a movement that is broad enough not to be vanquished easily. This has been purposive action; it was not haphazard. So as this movement continues for some time, it will be reflected in policy — no question about that. But when will this happen and how? This is still an open question.”

For Kazziha, despite the potential for resistance, this recent reawakening of public interest in the conflict has certainly raised the stakes of the conflict and reignited a sense of hope for the future. “I’m so persuaded now by the righteousness of the Palestinian issue than ever before, and I’ve always supported the Palestinians. I’ve been committed to that cause since I was a young boy,” reflected Kazziha. “Today, I consciously see that the issue itself has taken a turn where, for me, it’s not anymore a question of whether Palestinians are going to gain their rights. They’re going to get what they deserve, which is their human right. The change is very substantial and, I believe, irreversible.”

“Over time, there was an attempt to water down the tenets of the peace process: that occupation and the acquisition of territory by force are unacceptable, that a two-state solution should be the foundation based on the 1967 borders with some negotiations, the right of return or compensation, and the right of security for all.”
AUC was proactive in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and faculty and students share their feelings about being on campus.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, AUC has continued its active efforts and ongoing measures to uphold the health and safety of its community.

Keeping AUC Safe
A trendsetter, AUC pioneered the shift to online instruction in Egypt in 2020 and 2021, adopting hybrid classes as needed. The University is also the first in Egypt to make COVID-19 vaccination mandatory for accessing campus starting Fall 2021, facilitating registration and providing on-campus vaccinations for its community members in collaboration with Egypt’s Ministry of Health and Population. Anyone on campus is required to wear a mask indoors and outdoors while keeping a social distance, and AUC community members must conduct an online self-check before coming to campus each day. The Keep AUC Safe initiative, established by Hanan Sabea ’85, ‘87, associate professor of anthropology, and Helen Rizzo, associate professor of sociology, helps keep the AUC community protected by creating a volunteer group to remind people on campus to wear their masks and adhere to safety measures.

With the return to campus in Fall 2021, AUC established the Back to Campus Task Force and a subsequent Scientific Advisory Committee, made up of faculty experts and administrators and headed by Hassan Azzazy, distinguished University professor and chair of the Department of Chemistry. The committee provides scientific recommendations that inform the Back to Campus Task Force’s decisions on coronavirus measures and guidelines.

In addition, the University offers comprehensive diagnostic and screening.
testing of suspected cases, and unvaccinated community members are required to undergo a weekly mandatory testing program to protect themselves and those around them. The AUC community is now 90% vaccinated.

Campus Sentiments
With the start of Fall 2021, for the first time in 18 months, some semblance of our “normal” life has been restored to AUC, as students, faculty and staff have returned to campus. Each day, the bustling New Cairo campus teems with excitement as thousands of community members walk its grounds. But the scene is far from business as usual, as the University is enforcing strict anti-coronavirus measures, such as mask-wearing, social distancing in and out of the classroom, and mandatory vaccinations.

“It’s exciting and stressful,” said Ahmed Ashraf, computer engineering senior. “Campus feels crowded, especially as we have four semesters’ worth of freshmen exploring it for the first time. But AUC is doing a good job, especially considering the constantly changing circumstances and guidelines.”

Freshman Jomana ElDamanhoury shared similar emotions. “It feels really weird, especially after nearly a couple of years of being partially or completely online, but I really love the environment. I love how people are so interactive and friendly. It makes coming here really special.”

Most students are relieved to go back to face-to-face learning. Freshman Eman Allam had to complete her senior year of high school entirely online. “It was awful,” she recalled. “But I feel safe on campus, and I am looking forward to making new friends. It feels great to be here.”

Petroleum engineering sophomore Bassel Abdelaty, however, did not mind being online. “I was on campus during my first semester in 2019. It was good, but I got used to taking my lectures online last year — and my commute to campus is two hours,” he said.
Youssef Mohamed, also a petroleum engineering sophomore, is excited to be on campus for the first time. “I’m looking forward to joining sports teams and meeting new people,” he said. “AUC has done what it can to keep us safe; the rest is on us.”

A similar mix of relief and caution was noted among faculty members. Doris Jones, senior instructor II in the Department of Rhetoric and Composition, said, “While Zoom has proven to be a resourceful alternative for classroom instruction and other purposes, I think the vast majority of the AUC community would not want to experience yet another shutdown if we do not remain vigilant about safety.”

Jones added that beyond the day-to-day in-person interactions, one thing that she missed the most was the physical beauty of AUC’s campus, commending the University for maintaining its natural environment despite the lockdown. “From a philosophical standpoint, I personally feel the innate human need to connect with nature,” she explained. “The University is continuing to make its biophilia a central part of our social, intellectual and psychological human well-being on campus. We must follow the health and safety guidelines to keep the campus open so we can also enjoy its aesthetic beauty.”
With travel restrictions easing but not fully lifted, the AUC community is happily welcoming the return of international students. And the feeling is mutual.

“After almost two years of lockdowns and restrictions, it feels amazing to live somewhat of a normal life again,” said Ariana Bennett, a third-year journalism and political science major from Northeastern University who is spending the fall semester at AUC.

Alexander Reiffenstuel, an Islamic studies undergraduate at Freie Universität Berlin, is especially happy to be on campus, describing his experience with online learning last year as monotonous and difficult.

“It feels incredible and invigorating to look beyond my computer screen to learn and meet students,” he said. “Language courses have regained their initial excitement, as I can improve my listening and speaking skills in Arabic more easily. Online courses undermined the joy of University life and limited my personal learning experience tremendously. I believe that the return to campus reduced student psychological and academic hardships, which were developed over the past year and shouldn’t be overlooked.”

Despite the difference between Egypt and other countries in terms of vaccination rates, study-abroad students generally feel safe on campus, mostly because AUC boasts a 90% vaccination rate. “I feel safe being back on campus primarily because I have the privilege of being vaccinated and know that the majority of students and faculty are too,” Reiffenstuel said.

For Bennett, wearing a face mask and keeping a distance on campus aren’t a big deal. “The safety measures are definitely easy to follow,” she said. “We’ve been wearing face masks for almost two years now, so it’s really nothing new.”

Both Reiffenstuel and Bennett are looking forward to their time at AUC, noting its rich diversity in students and ideas. Since arriving in late August, Bennett has already made friends from Spain, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and other countries, all of whom have taught her something new about their cultures or lives. “I’m mainly hoping to keep learning new things,” she said.

Reiffenstuel is excited about the social interactions. “I’m looking forward to having dinners with other students to develop deep friendships beyond the academic semester,” he said. “My favorite moment so far was a game of soccer with international and local students on the AUC pitch and the following dinner with a wide range of students from all over, during which we exchanged personal and cultural experiences. All of this cannot be achieved in a virtual environment.”
In March 2020, when Egypt’s schools and universities shifted to online instruction, a group of teachers had just acquired collaboration skills in Peer Communities of Learners, which came in handy at the time. But what are PCLs?

“PCLs rely on the principles of teachers learning collaboratively from one another’s practices and experiences,” explained Malak Zaalouk '71, '76, professor of practice, director of AUC’s Middle East Institute of Higher Education and the project’s principal investigator. “This requires organizational skills, agency and a strong willingness to reflect and learn while allowing teachers to own their learning.”

In 2017, a project development team coordinated by MEIHE initiated a school-university partnership to introduce the concept of collaborative institutional learning among schools and universities in Egypt with the overarching aim of improving the quality of teacher and student education and enhancing learning outcomes, explained Zaalouk.

The initiative, School and University Partnership for Peer Communities of Learners, was established through a consortium of eight higher education institutions and 43 public schools in Egypt. The partnership was supported by an Erasmus+ project awarded to MEIHE. According to Zaalouk, the project was created in a context where Egypt had shown a keen need for reform at the school and university levels and where faculties of education had acquired the reputation of operating in an “ivory tower divorced from the practical field of school improvement,” she said.

The idea — and popularity — of school-university partnerships goes back to the 19th century when education reformer John Dewey established the first laboratory school in the United States to train teachers based on a model of experimental education, research, professional development and innovation. Similarly, in 20th-century Egypt, education reformer Ismail Al-Qabbani introduced the idea of experimental classes tied to the Institute of Education, where he served as dean, to train primary and secondary school teachers and enhance their skills. “PCLs have the power to bring about dual reform at both schools and universities, empowering teachers and creating deep cultural transformations,” Zaalouk noted.

Through effective PCLs, new teachers are able to apply theoretical concepts and practice their teaching in a supportive setting, veteran teachers act as mentors and enrich their professional development, and school and university educators engage in research to come up with new ways of doing things. This way, teachers get into the habit of viewing learning as a social process, whereby their needs are met through collaboration and sustainable learning.
efforts — enhancing their pedagogical skills and content knowledge and improving student learning, Zaalouk explained. “In the process of collaborating within PCLs, teachers and educators learn to make their practice public and open to scrutiny by their peers. Teachers become agents of change, as they’re the only ones capable of bringing about cultural change within their own institutions,” she said.

Through the project, more than 100 PCLs were created in Egypt. New concepts were introduced, such as global citizenship, sustainable development, and the integration of science, technology, engineering, the arts and math. In addition, teachers were mentored and introduced to innovative pedagogies, learner centeredness, Special Education Needs, digital tools, and technologically enhanced learning and networking.

There were, of course, challenges along the way. Heba EL-Deghaidy, chair of the Department of Educational Studies and co-principal investigator of the project, noted that the declining social and economic status and low motivational levels for teachers were among the main difficulties they faced. “Having to understand and work with schools to build their autonomy took time as we worked our way to create rapport among all members,” she said. “The project established strong partnerships between universities and schools, where the latter are well known for their centralized operations and partnerships in general, and [collaborations] between universities and schools are far from the norm.”

Through their research, Zaalouk and the team members asserted that the PCLs resulted in “deep transformations and new habits of mind,” sharing that “collaboration, as opposed to competition, became the leading mode of learning and defined all relationships.”

Personal and cultural transformations also became visible. “For the first time, teachers practiced reflection and research as part of their professional development,” Zaalouk noted. “Collaboratively designing and planning their classes resulted in feelings of autonomy, self-confidence, self-efficacy, motivation, trust and rapport among school teachers and university educators, who grew closer to one another and to the students. Innovative pedagogies were implemented, lifelong learning habits were adopted, and a sense of empowerment emerged among the teachers. This all had a positive impact on student learning.”

To ensure the sustainability of the outcomes, Zaalouk highlighted that a large part of the project engaged policymakers in the dialog to guarantee that the benefits will not only be sustained but also grow. “The dialog took many shapes and involved various levels of policymakers, from the central authorities to the local and school-based ones. The positive outcome of this project has not only been recognized by the funding agency but also at the national level, where Egypt’s Supreme Council of Universities formally acknowledged that the project needs to be mainstreamed and scaled to the national level,” she said.

In addition to Zaalouk and EL-Deghaidy, the team for this project consisted of researchers Lamiaa Eid (MA ’20), Lujain Ramadan ’17, Dana Sabbah (MA ’11) and Ahmed Younis.
Joining AUC one month before the pandemic and subsequent lockdown was extremely challenging but also very rewarding. I applied while I was living in my home country, Yemen, because an Egyptian colleague of mine from the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Young Peacebuilders program recommended the University to me in 2019. I knew nothing of life in Egypt, and coming from a public school in Yemen, my English was not great.

Shortly after arriving, I experienced one of the best moments of my life. The University was celebrating its centennial, and I took my visually impaired friend to the festivities. I was describing the scene to her, the fireworks, the people — and I felt utterly present in that moment. I thought to myself proudly, “I am part of the next 100 years of AUC’s history.”

Now that I am here, I believe that my journey is just beginning. Upon leaving home, I held the idea that I was successful, but it turns out I was quite ignorant about a lot of things. Back in Yemen, I was completing my law degree at Hadhramout University and heavily involved in advocacy work in my community, including pushing for the reopening of Al-Rayyan airport after the al-Qaeda capture of Mukalla city ended in 2016. I had also traveled abroad multiple times for various conferences. Despite all of that, nothing prepared me for such a drastic change.

My first semester at AUC was somewhat of a disaster. I found that expectations were much different here in terms of schoolwork and even dress. On top of that, while I was living at the University Residences, nearly everyone left campus when we went fully online right after the semester began. I was alone, stressed and thinking, “Why did the world fall apart before I even had a chance to start?”

But living on campus while it was closed pushed me to find different ways to connect with people and myself. It was during that time that I found a new love of swimming and remotely organized a TEDx event for women back in my hometown of Hadhramout, Yemen. Now that campus has reopened, I am looking forward to getting to know my peers and being active in student organizations.

Overall, I am grateful for the experience because studying at AUC has exposed me to diversity not only in race and language, but also in ideas and culture. It’s here that I’ve learned to listen and engage more thoroughly.

With the University’s numerous well-being initiatives, massive library and supportive professors, I have been comfortable enough to discover my true self separate from the problems of my home country — the self that I hope will one day be able to improve the situation back in Yemen.

Aisha Aljaedy is a sophomore and a recipient of the Hadhramout Foundation Scholarship for Yemeni Students. She is also a senior law student at Hadhramout University, where she studies remotely. Aljaedy was selected by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations among the 2019 Young Peacebuilders in the Middle East and North Africa. She is a research coordinator at the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies and a volunteer with the World Literacy Foundation. She has published articles on gender and anthropology and previously served as a consultant with the London-based Oxford Research Group as part of their Strategic Peace Project.
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With the University’s return to full face-to-face instruction after more than a year of online and hybrid classes, our eagle mascot, Horus, went around campus thanking AUC community members who adhere to the COVID-19 safety measures, including wearing a mask indoors and outdoors #MaskUpAUC