

MARK S. WARD

The Importance of International Education to Development in the Middle East

P E R S P E C T I V E S

The “dialogue of civilizations” that is practiced and preached in the universities is an important counterpoint to the “war of civilizations”—and one of its most effective antidotes

SAMUEL B. HUNTINGTON has famously (or infamously) argued that humanity’s future will be characterized more and more by civilizational wars. This is because different civilizations are guided by fundamental beliefs or values that are incompatible with the values of other civilizations, and there can be no

compromise. In the shrinking space of the world today, frictions arise and ignite conflict among the different peoples of the world.

Some believe the wars in the Middle East today are evidence of civilizational conflict between East and West and confirmation of the Huntington thesis. In other words, the differences between civilizations are “unbridgeable”—and hostility and war follow inevitably.

In fact, the Huntington thesis does considerable violence to history. The foundation for the Renaissance, the greatest flowering of Western civilization, can be traced to the discoveries of Muslim scholars centuries earlier and the advances they pioneered in mathematics, the physical sciences, astronomy, medicine, and engineering. Later, the science that grew out of the Renaissance transformed the Arab and Muslim world. So if we were to consult history, we would not see an *unbridgeable*

divide between these two great civilizations but a considerable amount of interpenetration, if not cross-pollination.

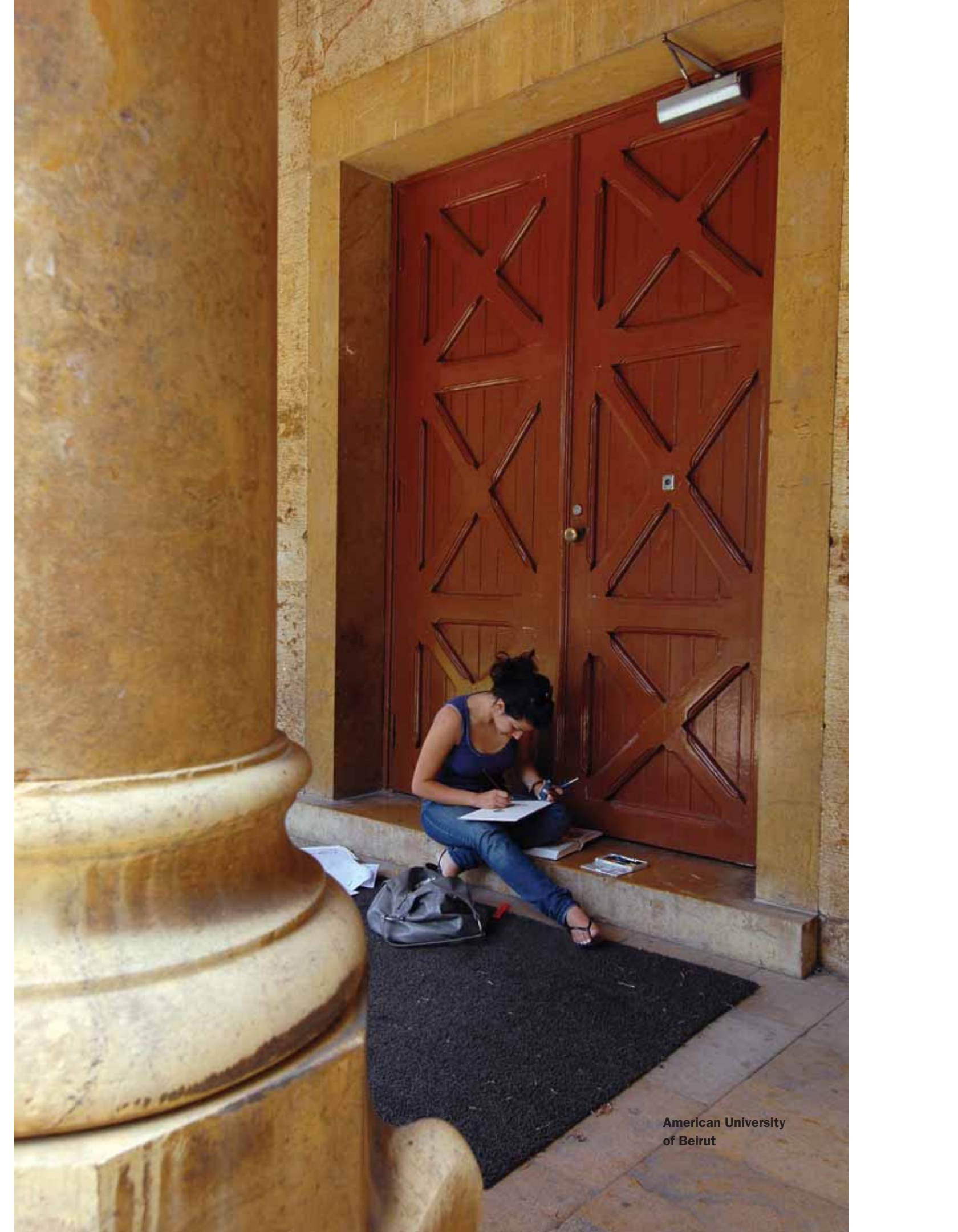
The three faiths in the Middle East trace their origins to one common father, the prophet Abraham. In fact, the three religions pray to the same one and universal deity. It is also the case that the two great civilizations, East and West, owe their greatest achievements to common roots, not only in Jerusalem, but in Athens, and to the appreciation of reason as the most divine attribute of humanity.

A shared belief in God and reason unites our civilizations, and the modern university can help reestablish and maintain solid bonds between our civilizations by honoring the fundamental values we share. The American universities in the Middle East, which are strongly committed to the humanities and include civilizational studies among their core courses, are uniquely positioned to do this. A deepened understanding of the Other—what both *unites* and *divides* one people from another—is the path to greater self-awareness and mutual respect. The “dialogue of civilizations” that is practiced and preached in the universities is an important counterpoint to the “war of civilizations”—and one of its most effective antidotes.

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The cause of development

The cause of development is one of the most potent forces uniting peoples today across so-called civilizational divides, as well as one of the most effective tools for defusing conflict. The cause of development is a matter of urgent necessity for the Middle East, as it can bring palpable improvements to the societies



in the region and the individuals that live there. At the same time, in the United States, *development* has come to be much more than a noble cause. The cause of development now has an unprecedented hold on the public consciousness in America. It is transforming curricula in universities, the languages that are being studied, what we see on television and in film, as well as what we read. It is the common discourse of rock stars. The cause of development has also become a mainstream concern of the United States government.

Undoubtedly, 9/11 played a huge role in pushing the cause of development into the headlines—well, at least onto page two—and the Situation Room at the White House. We Americans now know, from the painful experiences of that day, that our own peace and prosperity are tied to the fate of peoples far from our shores. We now know that deprivation and despair, when neglected and left to fester, threaten our civilization—and our lives, too. Accordingly, since that day, we have seen in this country an unparalleled commitment of resources to the cause of development. We also have seen a wholesale reform of government institutions and decision making about development programs to make them a more effective and accountable arm of American foreign policy.

While Huntington and others might argue that the forces of globalization in our shrinking world inevitably bring dislocation and violence among its many peoples, I would argue that it has also united men and women of good will, across civilizations, through a sense of common destiny and given them the tools to address some of our most pressing problems. The smaller world of today makes it much easier to share ideas and best practices. There is no longer any excuse for cookie-cutter approaches or ignorance.

The American universities in the Middle East

In the tradition of the universities of the Middle Ages, today's universities bring together a diversity of peoples from many countries as scholars and students. Approximately twenty thousand students, representing more than seventy nationalities and most of the world's confessional groups, are attending classes at the four American universities in the Middle East this year. Among the matriculated are

the future leaders of their societies and the world. They are studying medicine, pharmacology, architecture, modern communications, law, information technology, business administration, modern languages, economics, and government—all key to advancing development in their societies and integrating them into a world of wider opportunity. They are learning to build bridges, literally and figuratively.

These students will join other alumni who have risen to the highest ranks of their governments' ministries and have become renowned educators, physicians, poets, and business leaders all over the Middle East. The list of



graduates from the Lebanese American University (LAU), the American University in Cairo (AUC), and the American University of Beirut (AUB) is impressive. Notable Americans include Zalmay Khalilzad, the former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq and the current U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, as well as Thomas Friedman, author and columnist at the *New York Times*, among many others.

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woman in the history of that country to hold a federal ministerial position and she is a prominent figure at international gatherings such as the annual Davos Conference.

The American University of Sharjah also has graduated prominent leaders, including Sheikha Lubna Al Qassimi, who graduated with the first cohort of Sharjah's Executive M.B.A. program and is now minister of economy and planning of the United Arab Emirates. She is the first



**Lebanese American
University**

**American
University
in Cairo**



It is vitally important that the opening (or *bridge*) these universities provide to leadership positions in the Middle East not be reserved only for privileged students. For the 2006–7 academic year, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided more than 1,250 students with scholarships to attend AUB and LAU. USAID also supports the Leadership for Education and Development program, which provides fifty-four full scholarships per year for young Egyptians from the public national schools to study at AUC. Two students (one male, one female) are chosen from each of Egypt’s twenty-seven governorates. This is the third year of the program, which means that a total of 162 students have received USAID support.

Moreover, a sizeable portion of the operating expenses of the American universities is

dedicated to scholarships and financial aid. It is noteworthy that at AUC, for example, 75 percent of the students receive financial assistance. LAU allocated \$14 million in financial aid for the 2006–7 academic year. Assistance is offered in the form of a work-study grant that can be complemented by loans, scholarships, and grants based on need and academic qualifications. Around 1,600 students received financial aid in 2005–6. During the same period, AUB provided almost \$9 million in financial assistance.

The experience of the United States in this regard can be instructive. After the Second World War, when academia opened its doors to minorities and others formerly too poor to attend, the university became one of the most effective engines of social change. In the Middle East, the pace of such change is daunting

to some, but it is critical to defusing the grievances that come from exclusion and answering the needs of a burgeoning young population.

As a measure of the commitment to inclusiveness and diversity, it is noteworthy that over 50 percent of the chairs in undergraduate classes at AUC are occupied by females. If that doesn't spur change, I don't know what will. Some 21,000 women have graduated from AUB since the policy of female admission was adopted in 1921. In 2003, there were 2,400 female undergraduates at AUB and 400 female graduate students. Forty-eight percent of all AUB students are women.

LAU was founded as the American School for Girls in 1835. Since 1973, LAU has grown from a college of 1,000 students on one campus in Beirut to a university with 5,900 students on campuses in Beirut and Byblos. Its student body today is 51 percent male and 49 percent female. In 1973, LAU founded the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World.

At Sharjah last year, there were nearly 1,800 students in residence in the university's dormitories. The undergraduate student body is 57 percent male and 43 percent female. Approximately 2,000 students receive some form of financial assistance either from university funds or from external sponsors.

As the United Nations Development Programme's *Arab Development Report* (2002) forcefully argued, Arab countries will not advance when one half of their populations go uneducated. The American universities in the Middle East are showing the way forward with a commitment to gender equity and innovative programs.

Extension programs are one critically important way of bringing education to underserved populations. The Center for Adult and Continuing Education at AUC, for example, brings educational programs into the community by providing low-cost educational and training opportunities for over 33,000 people of all ages each year. The center also uses closed-circuit television to reach students in remote areas of Egypt.

It bears mention that these universities, while important centers of culture, are also an important part of the social and economic web of the

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cities in which they are located. They are a force for development as generators of employment in teaching, administration, and the support services that sustain modern universities. Drawing on a jointly programmed special account, the government of Egypt and the U.S. government

have provided approximately 600 million Egyptian pounds to help AUC construct a new campus. The new campus is a mark of confidence in the future. It will also relieve the congestion of downtown Cairo and be an anchor for development of a "new face" of Cairo in Katamaya.

Conclusion

We need to find ways to get the word out about the continuing support of the United States for the American universities in the Middle East. A better understanding of American generosity toward these institutions may help give future leaders in the Middle East a more sophisticated understanding of the multifaceted engagement of the United States in this critical region, and provide a needed corrective to some of the most blatant propaganda spread against us. It should be made clear from all the years of support to these universities that the U.S. government has not, and will not, try to influence what is taught. The U.S. government and the American people are proud to support these students and to partner with these universities in bridging civilizations. □

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REFERENCE

- United Nations Development Programme. 2002. *Arab human development report: Creating opportunities for future generations*. New York: United Nations Development Programme.