Betty S. Anderson


The American University of Beirut (AUB) is a remarkable institution, and its establishment and transformation over time reveals the story of the often difficult relationship between Western educational ideas and rising Arab nationalism. Indeed, AUB’s emergence as one of the most important academic institutions in the Middle East is surprising. It is a foreign transplant that gained prominence in an era of Arab nationalism. It is a private institution, while the pattern in the region is for public universities. It emphasizes an American-style liberal arts curriculum, whereas most universities in the region educate for narrow professional specializations. AUB is an English-medium institution as well as an American institution although the United States has, at times, been unpopular in the region.

One wishes that this book would explain how AUB achieved its impressive success and influence. Unfortunately, the goals are more limited—to describe some of the historical elements in the university’s development, to focus on curricular developments over time, to explain the relationship between AUB and emerging Arab nationalism, and to analyze aspects of student life. In these respects, the volume is useful. Further research is needed concerning AUB’s remarkable influence as a premier university in the Arab world.

AUB’s origins are important for understanding its early history but also the university’s ethos over time. Established by American Protestant missionaries in 1866, its founders wanted to enhance Protestant Christianity in Lebanon and Syria. American Protestantism in the mid-nineteenth century was concerned with expanding the reach of its version of Christianity and saw education as a key not only to the necessity of being able to read the Bible but also for social advancement. Many of those deeply involved in the leadership of the anti-slavery movement prior to the American Civil War were Protestant ministers.

Betty S. Anderson analyzes some interesting clashes in the early days between religious motives and the realities of establishing a successful university to educate local students. The numbers of students actually converted to Protestantism was in any case modest. Inevitably, local values influenced how AUB developed in its early days and how it continued to adapt.

From the beginning, the AUB student body was quite diverse, and for many years the majority of students were Christians. Significant numbers of Jewish students were also enrolled, and Muslims constituted a minority of the student body for decades. Anderson points out that relations among the different communities on campus were friendly and free of tension.
Liberal Arts

One constant, however, was a commitment to the ideal of liberal education: the idea of what AUB leaders called “making men”—and later women, when they were admitted, first to graduate education in dentistry and medicine in 1921, and fully to all undergraduate programs in 1952. The liberal arts emphasis, stemming from the private liberal arts colleges in the United States where many AUB leaders and faculty members were trained, never wavered and has remained at the core of the institution throughout its history. After AUB’s crisis during Lebanon’s civil war, the university again devoted itself to revamping the liberal arts curriculum.

The use of English as the medium of instruction from AUB’s establishment is peripherally discussed in the book. Given AUB’s mainly American faculty at the beginning and the continued use of non-Arab instructors historically, there was little choice. Nonetheless, the decision was an act of great genius, since English gradually became the global language of science. It would have been impossible to foresee that development in the mid-nineteenth century. Using English permitted AUB to hire international faculty and to obtain the latest textbooks. At the time, higher education literature in Arabic was almost entirely absent. English also permitted AUB to differentiate itself from other academic institutions in the region, to provide opportunities for graduates to seek employment outside of the Arab world, and to proceed easily to graduate studies abroad.

It takes significant vision to start a university in what in many ways was hostile environment in the mid-twentieth century Ottoman Empire. It also requires money. Anderson does not discuss much how AUB was funded in its early days, although support from the Protestant community in the United States was important. Later, as the university grew and added expensive programs—like medicine, dentistry, and several others—funding was also an important variable. No doubt, student tuition paid for much of the undergraduate programs, although fundraising in the United States was likely necessary throughout AUB’s history.

Arab Nationalism and Activism

AUB’s history coincides with the rise of Arab nationalism. Betty S. Anderson discusses this topic at some length in the book, pointing out that both faculty members and students were deeply involved—often to the chagrin and sometimes the outright opposition of AUB administrators. A significant part