



# Rami Khouri Convocation 2017 Address

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**August 20, 2017**

Northwestern University in Qatar



Several years ago when I addressed the graduating class of Northwestern University in Qatar, I stressed what a special group they were. Those young graduates found themselves in the midst of perhaps the greatest political upheaval of the modern Middle East, the Arab Uprisings of 2010-11. Not only was this the greatest story to be told by journalists and communicators like them; those graduates were special because they were the story to a large extent, as young people across the Arab world whose stressful lives and uncertain future compelled them to agitate peacefully for social justice, accountability, and responsible governance in many countries.

Today, you entering freshmen and women and upper class students find yourselves in the midst of an even more complex and historic situation, which also combines your studies and professional aspirations in journalism and communications with changing conditions across the Arab world. The media world in many ways is at the center of the current political conflict between Qatar and the four Arab countries that have tried to lay siege to it and force it to change its policies and values, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain. They want Qatar to close Al-Jazeera and other media outlets it funds, and they also use the most virulent propaganda and attack journalism the Gulf region has seen in modern times. In this, they have made media both the object of their political campaign and a tool of their predatory assault, and transformed your world of media, journalism, and communications into a battleground. You must now grasp and analyze the full dimensions of this situation, communicate these to the world, and stand strong in defense of the values of professional journalism, quality communications, and human decency and dignity that are hallmarks of both the State of Qatar and Northwestern University.

Let me suggest three critical components of what is going on here and now, but that you should also keep in mind throughout your lives. These are the personal, professional, and political dimensions of who you are, what you do, and the societies you live in. The personal refers to your values that you mostly develop at home and in your community, such as humility, mercy, patience, diligence, honesty, respect, and valuing shared human dignity. The professional refers to the values you apply in your work as journalists and communicators, such as seeking facts and the truth, being fair to all people and institutions you deal with, shunning propaganda and deliberate lies, and honoring and further developing the great legacy of the thousands of quality journalists and communicators who came before you. The political refers to the exercise of power in society at the national and international levels, the fair allocation of resources within a country, and the constant quest for social justice and order in society.

You are fortunate to be students at Northwestern University in Qatar, where you can study these issues and put these principles into practice. This new building is an amazing place to learn — not because of the advanced technical facilities, but because nowhere else in the world – *in the entire world* – is there such an institution that combines scores of quality professors and media professionals from the Arab World, the USA and other countries, whose expertise covers all dimensions of Middle East studies along with the entire media and communications world. You have a unique opportunity here to develop your professional skills, sharpen your personal values, and understand the political winds that blow all around you.

I know something about this from my own university experience exactly 50 years ago, when in the late 1960s I also pursued university journalism and political science studies in the United States during a period of intense political change and social upheaval, often in contexts of intense confrontation. In the era of the anti-Vietnam War movement, and struggles for environmental protection and gender and racial equality, we changed some things with our activism and our innovative journalism, and we failed to change many others. But from those years and the next four and a half decades of my journalism career in the United States and the Arab World, I learned many valuable lessons.

The most important one that I would like to share with you today is this: develop your professional competence here, work to understand the political currents all around you, but always remember that your peers and history will not remember your impact in life because of your political or professional achievements, but rather for your personal values and how you applied them in the professional and political worlds in which you lived.

Let me suggest to you how you might know this already from your experiences at home and in your community, and in high school and university here. Think back for a moment to those few individuals who most impacted you in life, who made lasting impressions on you, and ultimately helped to shape your character and your life values. Your parents, siblings, cousins, friends, neighbors, or teachers and administrators in your school, or maybe the local grocery store clerk, or the drivers, cooks, and janitors in places where you studied or where your parents worked.

Some of them took the time to teach you in school, and to help you understand new things in all arenas of your life. Some helped to clarify to you certain confusing aspects of your world, maybe just to listen to you and to discuss a very personal dilemma you faced. Some of these people helped you to identify your strengths and your passions, and ultimately your career aspirations that brought you here. These individuals took the time to spend with you because you mattered to them — but not only to them. They knew that you mattered in your wider society as individuals who could one day contribute to a better world of peace, prosperity, dignity and common respect among all human beings. They understood that human empathy, generosity of spirit, and giving of one's time to another person make a lasting imprint on any human being, but especially on a young student. So they listened, chatted, took time to discuss things you wanted to discuss, and helped you figure out some things that were not so clear to you. They helped you understand your world a little better – but in fact they only helped you understand yourself better, and how you fit into the world. They helped you discover your capacity to make your world a better place, most importantly by being considerate of other people's needs, concerns, and rights.

How does this relate to Qatar today and your studies here at Northwestern University? Several parts of the mass media and the communications industry are directly involved in the political battle taking place within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Al-Jazeera and other Qatari-backed media organizations have been targeted by the siege states, who have also unsuccessfully harnessed the destructive power of public relations, advertising, and propaganda to discredit Qatar's reputation in the world. These four states have also turned their own mass media into attack dogs that spread exaggerated, distorted, and false news about Qatar. In a few cases they have even used the media to threaten Qatar or people who fly on Qatar Airways, with video clips showing a Qatar Airways civilian airliner being shot down by a missile fired from a fighter-jet. Many parties are spending millions of dollars on propagandistic attack advertising around the world that does not achieve any meaningful results, but only plunges honorable advertising and public relations activities into the gutter of political desperation.

These and other facts will challenge you as you work through your four years of media studies and start practicing what you learn. You have a special obligation and also an opportunity — in this building and university, in this country, at this pivotal moment — to stand up firmly and reaffirm the value and integrity of quality journalism and professional communications industries, and protect them from the ravages of political hysteria and extremism.

You must also work to counter a recent trend in some Middle Eastern countries that have slowly closed the spaces available for free expression in the political, social, cultural fields. In some countries, including in the states trying to pressure Qatar, free expression is even being criminalized, with some individuals who tweet opinions contrary to official policies sentenced to jail terms. It is no wonder then that in the face of such restrictive official media platforms, unregulated social media has exploded in the Arab world, especially the GCC states, faster almost than any other part of the world.

Yet millions of tweets and Facebook posts by anonymous senders end up creating a virtual universe that is very busy, but neither meaningful nor constructive. It is often mostly noise, in a chaotic virtual realm that is not linked to the real lives of real people like yourselves.

So this is where you enter the picture again, at this pivotal moment of historic change in our region. Your combined opportunity/responsibility today is to affirm and strengthen those links I mentioned earlier among the personal, professional, and political dimensions of your life. You do this in the rough-and-tumble context of a turbulent Gulf and Middle East region that is plagued by aggressive siege diplomacy, expanding circles of official and freelance violence, stressful life conditions for half the 400 million Arabs, accelerating Arab and foreign military interventions, and an out-of-control social media sphere that begs for order and utility. So your task — each and every one of you studying here, and collectively as Northwestern University in Qatar — is to push back against the media's entanglement in these negative phenomena, by acting on the three dimensions of your lives: be the most professional, ethical, dynamic, and constructive journalists and communicators you can be, anchored in your personal values, to minimize the excesses of the contentious political and professional spheres all around you. As you become better journalists and communicators, your skills can touch the lives of many people, just like other caring men and women have shaped your lives to date. In the long run, your empathy, patience, dynamism, and ethical professionalism will leave behind landscapes blessed by gracious, dignified, and peace-loving human beings who are busy building just and stable societies and countries.

The cornerstone of lives and careers in communication and journalism is the persistent quest for the truth — in the form of accurate and fair news reports, films, podcasts, advertisements, public relations campaigns, and other products you will generate in your careers. In the popular television drama series many of you follow these days, a defining driving force for the action is that, “the North remembers”. In the saga of our lives as communicators, the Truth remembers. And you are the newest custodians of our ongoing endeavor to identify and safeguard the truths that we discern through diligent research, reporting, and production. You will succeed by being the best journalists and communicators possible, on the foundations of your integrity, humility, and compassion as human beings.

The United States and Qatar recently signed an agreement to fight terror financing. Well, perhaps we should view Northwestern University in Qatar and the United States as partners in the battle against the intellectual and media terrorism that has risen up again in parts of the Arab world in a most brutal and shameful form, as we have witnessed in the current political attacks against Qatar. You stand on the front lines of defense against these new threats to sovereignty, dignity, and integrity across the Arab region, and other parts of the world that are similarly plagued by false news and vicious media attacks.

Thank you for letting me share this moment with you. I wish you well in your careers at Northwestern and beyond, and I look forward to celebrating your professional accomplishments and personal joys with you in the years ahead.

## RAMI KHOURI BIOGRAPHY

Rami George Khouri is a Palestinian-Jordanian and U.S. citizen whose family resides in Beirut, Amman, and Nazareth. He is a member of the Joint Advisory Board for Northwestern University in Qatar. He is the founding director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut. His journalistic work includes writing books and an internationally syndicated column. He also served as the editor of the Beirut-based *Daily Star* newspaper and the Amman-based *Jordan Times* newspaper.

He spent the 2001-2002 academic year as a Nieman Journalism Fellow at Harvard University and was appointed a member of the Brookings Institution Task Force on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. He was a senior associate at the Global Affairs Institute at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, and a fellow of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs. He served on the board of the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, and the international Advisory Board of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

He wrote for many years from Amman, Jordan for leading international publications, including the *Financial Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Washington Post*. For 18 years he was general manager of Al Kutba, Publishers, in Amman, and in recent years served as a consultant to the Jordanian tourism ministry on biblical archaeological sites. He has hosted programs on archaeology, history, and current public affairs on *Jordan Television* and *Radio Jordan*. He often comments on Mideast issues in the international media and lectures frequently at conferences and universities throughout the world.

He has BA and MSc degrees respectively in political science and mass communications from Syracuse University.

