

**EXTRACT FROM SPEECH BY REVD JONATHAN AITKEN AT
THE ANNUAL LUNCH OF THE SAÏD FOUNDATION
ON
10 JUNE 2023 AT THE BEAUMONT HOTEL W1**

41 years ago I was honoured to attend the first ever Board Meeting of the Saïd Foundation as one of the original trustees.

At that 1982 trustee's meeting, and at the characteristically delicious lunch afterwards in the Dorchester Hotel, I don't think that any of us who were present would ever have dared to dream that the small philanthropic acorn we were planting would, one day, grow into the great oak tree of educational encouragement, and excellence which we are celebrating today.

The branches of the oak tree have now grown so large that they cover:

The Saïd Business School at Oxford University (we are delighted that Professor Dutta the new Dean is present today);

The Saïd Rhodes Scholarship partnership (we are delighted that Dr Kiss, the Warden of Rhodes House is with us today);

And the panorama of Saïd Scholarships awarded annually which in the past four decades have enabled some 1,900 scholars most of them from foremost deprived countries in the Middle East – Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine to receive their graduate education at some of the greatest universities in Britain and in the world.

Why and how has this great success story been achieved?

One clue which has tumbled out of the attic of my memory dates back to something of great importance said by our Foundation Chairman, Wafic Saïd, at that first Board Meeting.

At that time, I was a new young MP and I thought I should ask a question which was:

“What is going to be the philosophy of the Saïd Foundation?”

Mr Saïd replied in these terms:

“Our Scholarships will be awarded entirely on merit. Factors such as religion or family connections or political support will not be taken into account in choosing our scholars. They will be awarded their scholarships on merit alone.”

That philosophy was unusual indeed unique in the world of Middle Eastern education foundations at that time and we have upheld the principle and the philosophy ever since.

And that is why you Saïd Foundation Scholars here today at this lunch can be proud of your achievements because you have won your scholarships and your prizes on merit and by merit alone.

Another important point about the Saïd Foundation is that in addition to being a great educational foundation, it is also a great family foundation.

It drew its original inspiration from the founding father of the Saïd dynasty Dr Rida Saïd the father of Wafic Rida Saïd.

Dr Rida Saïd was not only a brilliant ophthalmologist trained at the leading eye hospital in Paris, but also the first Dean of the Medical School of Damascus. He went on to become the Founder of Damascus University and a great reforming Minister of Education.

His genes, his high standards of medical excellence and his encouragement of talented young Syrian students are a continuing source of inspiration to the work of the Saïd Foundation today.

Another source of inspiration to the Foundation was Nelson Mandela. He became a friend of our Chairman, Mr Wafic Saïd.

Part of the Saïd Business School is named after him and he delivered a great speech at the school.

One memorable quotation from Nelson Mandela are contained in these words from him:

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.

That sentence leads me to my final words to all you young Saïd Foundation scholars present here today.

I would like to tell you about inscription on a well.

It is an obscure well in a rural village in Northern China and it has these words carved on the rim:

“To everyone who draws water from this well – always remember the people who dug it”.

So I say to those of you who have been given an opportunity to drink deeply from the well of educational excellence.

Remember the people who built the well – the founding Saïd family who created the Foundation, who gave you your scholarships, who provided you with a beacon of hope and a bridge of opportunity.

And having remembered be inspired by the examples of great men like Rida Saïd, Wafic Saïd and Nelson Mandela and go out on your journey, to change for the better, your communities, your countries and the world in which you live and serve.