The 2001 A-L-I Fire

*Sound effect – Fire burst and crackling 0:00 – 0:14*

*Fades out at 0:14 *

Fire…one of the 4 elements along with Earth, Wind and Water. One of Man’s earliest and most important discoveries, it has helped him keep warm, see in the dark and cook his food.

*Sound effect – Fire burst and crackling ends*

However nothing in this world is without its consequences.

In 2001, The American University’s Arabic Language Institute (more commonly known as A-L-I) suffered from a massive electrical fire that destroyed much of the department. I’m Tarek El Deeb, let me take you back a couple of years and with the help of 3 witnesses, bring you a little piece of history.

*“Arab Classical Music” – “Dawr Kadnil Hawa” Plays 0:00*

The American University In Cairo (also more commonly known as A-U-C) was established in 1919 as a symbol of modern western teachings in the Arab/Egyptian World. *“Arab Classical Music” – “Dawr Kadnil Hawa” Fades Out 0:11*

Since its establishment, it has continuously graduated students in Bachelors of Art and Science, whom eventually excel in their community workforce.

*“Arab Classical Music” – “Dawr Kadnil Hawa” Plays Again 1:00 – 1:41*

30 year old Jessica Hullon is an A-U-C alumni class of 2000, with an Art and Vision major and a minor in psychology:

(Soundbite: Jessica)
“The A-L-I building was actually on top of the Ewart Hall…and that was in the Main Campus. Basically, it didn’t look like much from inside but when you were outside looking at it the building was beautiful. The architecture was amazing…and when you went inside it was kind of small so it was a nice cozy feeling. It wasn’t always that busy either so you can usually see people that you knew there and hang out sometimes and things like that”. (0:47)

*Nat. Sound – Ambient Street Sounds Plays 0:00*

Before its major move to the 5th Settlement dessert region in 2008, the A-U-C was settled in the downtown heart of Cairo also known as Tahrir. The A-L-I was located in The Main campus, one of the 3 campuses that make up A-U-C, along with the Greek and Falaki.

According to the former A-L-I department employee Manal Magdy, the fire happened on Wednesday 21st of November 2001, a day before the 2001 Thanksgiving celebrations. It also happened to be during the holy month of Ramadan around 5:30pm, just when the employees were about to break their fast. Manal claims that because the fire happened at around that time, people’s lives were spared since many were out of the office to break their fast.

Jessica who was not present during the A-L-I fire itself, had previously experienced another A-U-C related fire in 1997 but on a much smaller scale. She describes how she heard about the A-L-I fire and when she saw the aftermath:

*Nat. Sound – Ambient Street Sounds Stops 1:00*

(Soundbite: Jessica)
“Well I wasn’t there for actual fire itself, I was away on vacation. But when I went back I was really shocked because the outside of the building was just completely black. The walls were black and the windows were black. And when they started taking out the furniture it was just...I mean some of it was really burnt, you can’t use it again. And it really, really hit me and hit other people too because these were things that we had used. We sat on these chairs, we’d used these desks and things like that. Everyone was shocked and it took us a while just to get used to everything”. (0:33)

Although, the A-L-I fire didn’t result in any casualties many A-U-C employees and other people in the building were quickly evacuated and rushed to nearby hospitals.

*Nat. Sound – Ambulance Sound Effect Plays 0:00 then fades at 0:04*

The official report claims that all the people transported to the hospitals suffered from trauma, dehydration and most importantly chest pains. George Peter, is also an A-U-C alumni and was an Arabic professor’s assistant at the time. He was also one of the victims the night of the fire:

(Soundbite: George)

“When the fire started, I remember hearing lots of screaming and lots of commotion, we didn’t exactly know what was going on. So when we went to go see what’s going on, people were running all over the place, some people were actually heading towards the fire...And we went and we pulled out some of the people outside of the building we would just tell them ‘come on guys let’s leave, you should get out of here’. It wasn’t too crazy at that moment but you know it was still potentially could become a danger to everyone else”. (0:33)
The official fire report handed down by the fire department does not clearly state the cause of the fire however George estimates that the overheated fuse was the initial reason.

(Soundbite: George)

“I don’t think there was a fire report in the end all they said the most probable cause was the electrical fuse or something like that. Some kind of electric circuit that got overheated and so forth. And you know I kind of believe it, it’s an old building anyways that old building probably has lots of other hazards that could be dangerous that could cause further fires”. (0:29)

According to witnesses from the Arabic department, the fire itself wasn’t that big despite burning for many hours. They also claim that the most dangerous effect was that of the fumes and smoke that eventually led to many being treated for chest pains and respiratory problems.

(Soundbite: George)

“The fire actually lasted for quite a long time we were standing outside the building just watching it. And people were trying to put it out for a very long time. The smoke was constant, it was black…it was really into our chests. We actually had problems breathing. A couple of my friends actually got asthma attacks from the amount of smoke that was going around”. (0:22)

The fire marshals also released in their reports that the smoke that surfaced that night was not that of an ordinary fire. Back in 2001, the A-L-I was not equipped with the proper extinguishing tools to deal with electrical fires. Another major issue that came up that night was the that the fire trucks and firefighters arrived late at the scene despite that
the fire department is located at the Mogamaa building, just a couple of blocks away from A-U-C. Fire marshals blamed heavy traffic and the fact that most firefighters weren’t ready to battle the blaze due to Iftar. Firefighters who eventually arrived on the scene used a Wet Chemical-based solution that is often used to douse normal fires and not effective during electrical fires. An electrical fire would usually be put out by “Dry Powder”, “CO2” or “Halon 1211” fire extinguishers.

31 year old, Karim Yousef, traces back his steps to that near-fatal night shortly before closing his store.

(Soundbite: Karim)

“I was working at the pharmacy and I saw the fire and smelt a strange scent. I then saw a big fire at the American University. I was scared, really scared. I closed my shop and went to go see what was happening. I knew some of the security guards working at the campus. They went and helped extinguish the fire. It was scary and the smell was awful. But thank God they took out the fire quickly and no one was hurt”. (0:49)

*“Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind OST” – “Bookstore” Plays 0:00*

The total value of damage was never calculated but the A-L-I secretary office and adjacent toilets and classrooms were completely devastated and the department was forced to set up in a temporary office in the Main Campus while the building was being renovated. By March 2002, the new A-L-I department was ready to re-open and was given a safety approval.
The fire mostly damaged furniture such as desks, chairs and carpets but also wiped out all computers and other machines. Despite this loss, Manal claims that the biggest loss that night was the A-L-I rare tapes collection that was in her office.

On a lighter note, important archives and documents were recovered thanks to an old heavy-duty, metal cupboard that was ironically scheduled to be replaced with a newer, less resistant one. Today, Manal and other A-L-I employees use similar metal cupboards and refuse to trade them in for newer ones.

*“Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind OST” – “Bookstore” Fades out 1:18*

A-U-C radio would like to thank the following people and departments for their contribution, and for making this project possible

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- &
- “Arab Classical Music” – “Dawr Kadnil Hawa” by Al Kindi

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