



Address

by

H.E. General Michel Aoun

President of the Republic of Lebanon

at the

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United Nations General Assembly

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*Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations
866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 531, New York, N. Y. 10017*

Your Excellency Mr. Miroslav Lajcak, President of the General Assembly,

Your Excellency Mr. Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations,

Heads of States and Governments,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I would like to extend my congratulations, Mr. President, on your assignment for the presidency of the current session of the United Nations General Assembly and I wish you all the success in your tasks. I would also like to thank his Excellency Mr. Peter Thomson for his efficient management of the previous session.

I would also like to salute the Secretary-General Mr. Guterres for his efforts in revitalizing the role of the United Nations.

Mr. President,

We are here today, in New York, in the month of September. Our memory will certainly drag us 16 years back to remember when terrorism struck this city causing thousands of victims. From this podium, we reiterate our solidarity with their families and with the families of all the victims of terrorist crimes around the world.

This tragic event was the start of an international war against terrorism that was shortly ramified, scattered, lost its goals and ignited fires in many countries especially in the Middle East where its effects reached all the region's countries; some were directly affected whereas others were affected by its consequences. It has created and fueled the most brutal form of terrorism aimed at the destruction of the human being, the culture and the civilization. It has also perpetrated the most heinous crimes against the peoples of our region sparing no civilian, child, woman, elderly person or archeological, cultural and religious site. Terrorism has then extended its activities throughout the five continents striking them with the most terrible and deadliest ways thereby violating all the international laws, norms and conventions. No one knows to which extent terrorism will expand and when or how it will be brought to an end.

With the beginning of the events in Syria the situation in Lebanon has declined and it seemed clear that Lebanon was listed among the Arab countries targeted to fall into the clutches of terrorism but it managed to avoid falling into security deterioration by preserving its national unity despite the existing acute political divisions. Indeed, it did not cross the red line that is engraved in the conscience of every citizen and this is what safeguarded the unity of Lebanon and preserved its security despite the infiltration of terrorist elements into certain regions where they formed armed cells in some towns and cities. However, Lebanon managed with all its forces to gradually eradicate them. Furthermore, our army has successfully achieved recently a great victory in its final battle along our border with Syria against the terrorist organizations Daesh (ISIS) and Nosra and has eliminated their military presence in Lebanon.

Burdens inflicted to Lebanon because of the Syrian war is heavier than this country can bear. The Lebanese people proved that they are humanitarian and responsible people.

They received the displaced persons in their homes, their schools, their hospitals and shared with them their living and labor market throughout the previous years and until this very day, thereby increasing drastically the unemployment rate in the country. I would like to point out that more than one half of our public schools operate on a double shift basis, in the morning and in the afternoon, to accommodate and educate the Syrian children.

Lebanon is a small country, densely populated with limited resources. Its economy has been affected by several crises, to start with the global economic crisis followed by the regional wars that surrounded the country and prevented it from moving towards the East and the Arab states, states that constitute support to Lebanon. Waves of displacements and refugees appeared afterwards adding a total of 50% to the country population which means for every two Lebanese citizens, there is one displaced or refugee. The population density has increased from 400 persons per square kilometer to 600; a severe overcrowding spread over 10452 square kilometer leading to a deterioration of the economic conditions and to the increase of the crime rate in its various types. More dangerous is the fact that terrorist groups have taken shelter in refugees' gathering areas transforming them into an enabling environment aiming to carry out terrorist activities and claiming innocent lives.

Hence the need to regulate the return of displaced persons to their homeland has become urgent as the situation in most of their first places of residence has settled.

There are those who talk about a voluntary return while we talk about a safe return and we differentiate between the two based on the reason of displacement, which have been confirmed by the International Syria Support Group meetings, return is either voluntary or safe depending on the reason of displacement; in case of asylum is individual and for political reasons threatening the safety and security of the individuals, the return shall be voluntary, i.e. it is granted for political refugees who themselves decide the timing of the said return, coupled with the acceptance of the host country. As for the current form of the collective asylum in Lebanon, it has happened for economic and security reasons and as an escape from the dangers of war. Therefore, we consider it a displacement rather than asylum; it was not coupled with the acceptance of the host country and was not limited to "individual" asylum, but rather in the form of a population invasion.

As for the claim that these people will not be safe if they return to their country, we are all aware that this pretext is unacceptable; on one hand the Syrian government has taken back around 85% of its territories, on the other hand, if the Syrian government is reconciling with the armed groups that are fighting them and is granting them the freedom to choose between remaining in their villages or moving to other regions, so how would this government act with the displaced people who fled the war? And what happened during the last events in Lebanon confirms this.

Moreover, the displaced people are living in misery and in an unhealthy environment despite all the support provided by the international and Lebanese institutions, and it is painful for us to be unable to improve their situation due to their numbers and our limited potentials.

There is no doubt that it would be better if the United Nations assist them in returning to their homeland rather than helping them remain in camps lacking the minimum standards of a decent living.

In addition to the Syrian exodus and the foreseen financial collapse of the UNRWA, Lebanon is burdened with the 500 Thousands Palestinian refugees who have been displaced from their homeland for 69 years now and are still waiting for their return to Palestine.

We do not see any serious efforts from the United Nations or the Security Council to execute the "two-state solution", on the contrary, the international community, with all its institutions, is unable to stop Israel from establishing new settlements. Violence remains unabated because people with stolen identity and land cannot be subjugated.

Israel's approach to the solution has always been based on military force and violation of rights. Lebanon is the best witness to this matter; Israel is always and repetitively violating Lebanese sovereignty and resolution 1701. During the past few days, the Israeli air force have bombed the Syrian territory from Lebanese airspace, then a few days later, they carried out an imaginary raid breaking the sound barrier above Saida which caused material damages. Moreover, Israel installs from time to time spy devices in the Lebanese territories. These violations are not new; this is what Israel has been doing for seven decades now. Records shows that there are at least 100 land, sea and air, violations to the Lebanese sovereignty each and every month. Lebanon has been filing complaints to the Security Council, who did not manage to stop these violations.

Dear Mr. President,

These seven decades of war with Israel proved that the cannon, the tank and the plane do not result in any solution or peace. There is no peace without justice and there is certainly no justice without respect of rights.

This crime of expelling Palestinians from their land and displacing them cannot be rectified by another crime against the Lebanese by imposing naturalization thereon and against Palestinians by denying them the right of return. The weakening of UNRWA's role is nothing but a step along this path aimed at the elimination of refugee status in preparation for the naturalization process. Lebanon will not allow this to happen, it will refuse having refugees or displaced at any cost.

All these wars left deep wounds in the society and among individuals and destroyed conscious social thinking and the principles of coexistence, solidarity, tolerance and acceptance among individuals and groups in the world. Our region became trapped in poverty and turned into a hotbed of extremism, thus creating continuously growing crises.

Therefore, any solution should be accompanied by economic and social measures that can achieve growth and improve social conditions of the people in the region in order to ensure a decent and stable life. I therefore call upon you to seriously consider establishing a joint eastern market to ensure a living, in the shadow of freedom.

Lebanon itself is a microcosm of diversity, in terms of the variety of people, culture, and civilizations accumulated from ancient times; from Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ, to Arabic, the language of the Prophet, in addition to Phoenician, Roman, Greek, Latin, Persian and the Nile Valley...

Not to forget that the Lebanese people are bringing Muslims and Christians from different sects together with the history of war and its repercussions, peace and its positive aspects. Given its experiences in coexistence and its comprehensive culture, Lebanon can be an oasis where the world can meet and engage in dialogue.

Mr. President,

Honorable attendees,

After the World War 1, the League of Nations was established in aim to maintain world peace, but it failed, and the World War 2 broke out in less than three decades. At the end of the said war, the United Nations was established, and its first objective was to peacefully address all disputes that may arise between countries, and prevent any future war. However, was it able to achieve this goal?

The answer to this question is easy, this explosive world around us is the best answer. World War 3 has taken a new form; it is no more a war between nations but rather a devastating internal war. Numerous are the countries in which wars have erupted from within for religious or ethnic reasons due to extremism and rejection of the other's right to exist.

The division of states into sectarian or ethnic groups is not the solution and it would not prevent wars. On the contrary, this approach would increase fanaticism, extremism and conflicts. The solution will only come through intellectual and cultural change. Hence the need for an institution dedicated to providing peace education has become crucial, noting that only a new culture of peace and forgiveness that teaches the principles of living together or the what's so called "coexistence" in which people respect freedom of belief and the right to have different opinions, can face terrorism and create societies that are capable of establishing peace between people and nations, bring people together, contribute to strengthening relations between different societies and assist in adopting the language of dialogue as a mean for conflicts resolution.

The role of Lebanon, and indeed its mission, is war against the ideology of terrorism. Being characterized by its pluralistic society, Lebanon is the antithesis of the unilateralism represented by Daesh and its peers. This is the basic effort that the United Nations must undertake; i.e. intellectually fighting terrorism which has neither limits nor limited geography, but is an intellectual infection electronically transmitted around the world.

Thus, for all the above mentioned reasons, I propose Lebanon's candidacy to be a permanent center for dialogue between different civilizations, religions and races, as a United Nations organ. We hope that the Member States will support Lebanon in its pursuit of this request when it is suggested to work together to secure the aspiration of the United Nations, as an institution and nations, to seek peace and a decent life for all people in a world of security and stability.