

Speech at the opening of Maison du Futur

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Saray-Bikfayya

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Maison du Futur has returned to the historic Saray in Bickfaya. Maison du Futur has returned after a compulsory absence, imposed by an eclipse of civilization at one point during the Lebanese War. Maison du Futur dates back to the mid-1970s. It was the leading studies and research center in Lebanon and the wider Middle East, and also a haven for the elite and people of dialogue where they found a space to overcome all boundaries. All parties met, away from violence and weapons for the sake of Lebanese accord, which I fought to achieve during, before and after my term as president.

At that time, Maison du Futur shone as a beacon of light in a community accustomed to practicing politics with no consideration whatsoever for the future. Alas, the past, the present and the future took their revenge. However, so that we do not remain victims, Maison du Futur opens its doors again and welcomes all the Lebanese people, as well as Arabs and people from all over the world, to take part in the development of man through education, growth and values, in other words, through dialogue.

Maison du Futur regains its role amidst tragic Lebanese and Arab circumstances. In Lebanon, there is an open, national crisis, and in the Arab world, there are revolutions with no horizons, wars with no restrictions and regimes with no future. Our peoples seem to disagree over all matters, after they thought that they see eye to eye on everything. They disagree over God and Man, over regimes and entities, over identity and lifestyles. In the name of History, we abolish modernity. In the name of change, we destroy our fellow men and by returning to our roots we wipe them out. We are given an opportunity to have a say in our fate, but we turn it into a chance to annihilate our fate.

Today we are invited to put an end to the deterioration of Lebanon and the collapse of the Arab world. We are invited to regain our fate and destiny, and to put aside all trivial considerations during this era of sweeping conflicts. If it is challenging to come up with solutions to the Arab wars, marked by blood, terrorism and fighting, then why fall into that trap? What is stopping us from creating a decent future for us and for the new generations? What is stopping the Lebanese people from solving their national crisis by resorting to their Constitution and electing a president?

The ongoing presidential vacancy threatens the Republic, and not the presidency alone. Disrupting the constitutional process is a coup against the regime, and overthrowing the regime negates the Lebanese entity humanly and as a geographic territory. We turn to our national partners and call upon them to reveal our true intentions. Enough with the scheming! Loyalty to Lebanon commands us to elect a president. Failure to elect a president only discredits loyalty of those disrupting the election.

Until recently, I used to think that the salvation of Lebanon and the Middle East requires that citizens change from sectarian citizens to state citizens, only to find out that, in light of the raging wars, this transformation is not enough. What we need is for citizens to change to human citizens. We were created in the image of God, but we act in the image of Satan. How else would you describe what happened and what is happening in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Libya and Afghanistan ? (And more is yet to come).

The attempt to bring about change in the Middle East started with a political opposition, followed by a popular opposition, which turned into a fundamentalist then military opposition. Today, it has entered the realms of takfiri terrorism. For longtime, we were left between the choice of military regimes or revolutions, then between military regimes or terrorism. However, some are calling us today, in unprecedented insolence, to choose among an array of fundamentalist terrorist organizations : al-Nusra, Daesh, the Houthis and al-Qaeda.

Despite the volatile conflict between the East and the West, it seems sometimes that they agree on breeding some kind of extremism. The East grows more radical in the name of religion, while the West grows radical in the name of freedom to the point of moral degradation. In the name of religion, Eastern people are drawn away from spirituality, and in the name of freedom, Western people are drawn away from values in their historical sense. In our region, religion has turned into apostasy and there secularism has turned into atheism. While religion and freedom are as far as can be from extremism, ironically the East and the West are using as motto for war the defense of values, God and people. It is a deadly intentional ambiguity.

Based on this reality that threatens our Lebanese and Arab existence, let us look together for real solutions instead of getting sucked up into crises and wars. The earnestness of these efforts requires that the rulers and leaders of Eastern countries involve academic and thought leaders to lay down a strategy for solutions, because the problematic strategies which some of us blame the West for are not laid down by Western governments exclusively, but by research and analysis centers and are later adopted by governments.

Peoples do not live by national and philosophical theories that hinder their progress, but on programs that carry societies from inaction to modernity and innovation, and from the trinity of illiteracy, ignorance and violence to the trinity of education, development and values. Every actor in national affairs, whether king, president, leader or party, needs an ideological backbone for protection against improvisation and arbitrariness.

Maison du Futur aims to be an intellectual reference for social movement, in partnership with similar institutions in the Middle East and the world. Maison du Futur can, in utmost intellectual and academic independence, support those active in the public field with projects, studies and scientific and objective data to be able to carry out their national and external roles. After a forced, temporary absence, Maison du Futur, in partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, held a conference in Washington, entitled "After the Storm, Democracy and Development in the Middle East." It also organized a conference in Beirut in cooperation with Conrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, under the title "Media and Freedom of Expression", and another in Bikfayya, at these new headquarters, in partnership with Dutch NEXSUS, entitled "Is the European Extremist Ideology on the Rise Again ?"

As part of these efforts, Maison du Futur plans to gradually introduce many initiatives, at the Lebanese and Arab levels, chiefly:

– First : By the end of this month, on May 30th, and at these headquarters, it will hold a conference on a civilized, developmental Marshall Project for the Arab World, while keeping up with the ongoing negotiations to put an end to wars, reconcile

peoples and rebuild destroyed countries. You are all invited to take part along Arab and international experts. People in Lebanon and the Middle East feel the need to work together, in partnership, to build instead of wreak havoc, war and destruction.

– Second: Mobilize the Lebanese and Arab elite to promote the spirit of partnership, moderation and tolerance, instead of terrorism and different types of fundamentalism, and also promote human rights and empower women. I had previously launched in this context the Charter-Framework for Arab revolutions and alternative regimes.

– Third: In cooperation with Lebanese, Arab and international institutions, we plan on organizing training sessions to prepare new elite groups to practice transparent governance in managing the affairs of the state and the people.

The Maison du Futur workshop is ambitious, requiring perseverance, attention and time. I intend to dedicate my time, energy and expertise to launch and follow this initiative.