

Intervention of President Amine Gemayel

17 June 2022 Conference

« Rethinking Lebanon »

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« Rethinking Lebanon » is not an easy undertaking, especially at the critical juncture that we have reached. Some Lebanese citizens are wondering today if Lebanon is still a viable country capable of recovering from the crisis; while others are in denial, refusing to accept this unfortunate reality.

To understand important aspects of our national problem, allow me to remind you briefly of the genesis of the Lebanese Nation, with all the prevarications and desires that preceded the adoption of the « Greater Lebanon » constitution, which aftermath continues to mark and perturbate the history of this country. I will also speak about the strenuous and significant efforts of the Lebanese – that one could compare to the Legend of Sisyphus – to build the State they aspire to.

The 4 sessions of this conference will analyze the situation in all its dimensions politically, structurally, institutionally, economically, and socially; and design constructive ways to rebuild Lebanon in accordance with its universal vocation.

Going back to the genesis of Lebanon, we shall briefly comment on the efforts made by the Lebanese, their partners, and their allies, especially France, who were, since the beginning, keen on establishing this Lebanese nation in an unstable and torn apart Orient; a nation carrying the message of amity and peace.

In 1919, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the destiny of Lebanon rested in the hands of big powers. Stimulated by the Lebanese citizens in Lebanon and abroad, from different sectarian confessions, the Maronite Patriarch Elias Hoayek, commissioned by the Council of Mount Lebanon, was taking over the role of Daoud Ammoun as the representative of Lebanon in the Versailles Conference, and followed relentlessly the discussions held with the French administration to decide on the future of the country. Due to the advanced age of Patriarch Elias Hoayek, a delegation headed by Bishop Abdallah Khoury ensured the continuity of Lebanon's representation in this "conference".

Since the beginning of the negotiations, tensions prevailed between Lebanese and foreign interlocutors, namely around the demarcation of the borders of the new State. This had repercussions on the demographic and social levels, with a direct impact on the issue of popular affiliation * that remained a source of constant concern for the Lebanese* and a reason for foreign interferences in Lebanese national affairs. Lebanon will, throughout its history, endure the resurgence of “the demons of identity” because of these geographic and social tensions.

Around a hundred years ago, negotiations for the proclamation of Greater Lebanon started on August 27, 1919, as soon as Patriarch Hoayek arrived to France and met with President Raymond Poincaré, followed by the presentation of a memorandum on September 25 during the Versailles Conference. On November 10, Georges Clemenceau who was the French Prime Minister and President of the Versailles Conference was to officially notify Patriarch Hoayek by means of a letter of intent dated November 10, France’s acknowledgment of the legitimate Lebanese grievances, notwithstanding the reservations and pressures of French and foreign counterparts.

The issue of borders demarcation and institutions within this entity was nevertheless not resolved.

- Prince Faysal of Iraq expressed the first opposition, on December 25, 1919. The latter was motivated by the ambition of establishing an Arab kingdom including Lebanon, and was therefore against the idea of an independent Lebanon.

On January 6, 1920, Faysal explicitly declared that he was opposed to the establishment of a Lebanese entity and especially to the annexation of the Bekaa, Hasbaya and Rashaya. He reiterated this position during a visit to France on February 21, 1920.

- The statement of Prince Faysal caused a public outcry in Lebanon, and large multi-sectarian meetings were held in Bkerke in support of the mission of the Patriarch.
- Francois Georges Picot announced on February 16 his intention of excluding Beirut and Tripoli from the Lebanese sovereignty, a position that was confirmed by Robert de Caix, chargé d’affaires for the Near East in the Versailles Conference and the Quai d’Orsay. He was to confirm the intention of dealing with Beirut as a Free City and coming up with a special status for South Lebanon, the Bekaa and Rashaya.

- De Caix used as an excuse that the Lebanese did not have a unanimous agreement on the demarcation of borders. He envisaged a special status for Beirut and Tripoli.
- It was only on August 4, 1920 that General Henri Gouraud declared during a visit to Zahle “the reunion of the four cantons in Lebanon: Bekaa, Baalbeck, Rashaya and Hasbaya”¹, while the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexandre Etienne Millerand was announcing the decision taken by the French Government to accept the request submitted by the Lebanese delegation for the acknowledgment of Lebanon in its present borders as already defined by France in 1860.
- On September 1st 1920, General Gouraud announced from the Résidence des Pins in Beirut, in presence of all Lebanese political and religious dignitaries, the birth of Greater Lebanon in its current borders under the French mandate.
- On November 22, 1942, following a political uprising, the Lebanese government unilaterally announced the end of the French mandate and declared the independence and sovereignty of Lebanon.

This brief overview’s aim was to highlight to which extent the declaration of the independence of Greater Lebanon was subject to difficulties, pressures, objections, and negotiations, that left their traces during the following years on the political and institutional path the country took. Even after the official proclamation of Greater Lebanon on September 1st 1920, followed by the declaration of its sovereignty in 1943, the many diverse claims and destabilization attempts were not to be halted.

In 1948

The creation of the State of Israel called into question the borders of the Near East and destabilized Lebanon. The impact of the inflow of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees into Lebanon threatened the Lebanese demographical balance and the economic and social life, and became the source of many crises that have often been bloody.

¹ Al Muzakkara, (Mémoires de Mgr Abdallah Houry) Publications NDU

In 1955

The repercussions of the Nasserite revolution on Lebanon as well as the unionist attempts of President Abdel Nasser will be a considerable destabilization source for the country. It was only when the US Marine deployed to Lebanon in 1956 that the country became protected from the Egyptian President's grip on Lebanon.

In 1969

The repercussions of the Palestinian Intifada and the attempts of the PLO to establish in Lebanon a pseudo-Palestinian sovereignty with the active approval of Arab countries transformed Lebanon from a pacifist country into a country of uneven military confrontation against Israel.

In 1977

The Syrian grip on Lebanon as a pretext to restore peace, and the withdrawal of the Syrian army in 2005 after a French American ultimatum.

In 2005

Iranian stranglehold under the guise of a Shiite resistance against Israel.

Let us not forget the many Israeli invasions namely in 1982 and 2006...that made bloodshed and violence inevitable, had disastrous repercussions on the sovereignty, national unity, and security of citizens.

That was the path taken by Lebanon during the first century following its independence. For a very small country, this was too much. Was a small country like Lebanon capable of countering all these strong interventions in its affairs? In this context, it was a miracle that the country was still able to survive and preserve its institutions, its vocation, and its message.

During a hundred years, Lebanon resisted, persevered, and achieved, against all odds, many national objectives:

Was it not able to stand out during a specific period of its modern history by becoming a good governance model under the mandate of President Fouad Chehab?

Was it not able to stand out, despite all the difficulties, for being a unique country in the region, proud of its culture, its role, and the universal message it represents as described by Pope John Paul II?

Let us restore law and justice in Lebanon after the alarming rates of assassination and activists' harassment and the absence of attempts to bring the perpetrators to justice and prosecute them in order to prevent the repetition of such crimes and end impunity. Gone are the days of impunity with the last judgement pronounced by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon that sentenced the two presumed Hezbollah members to life imprisonment for the crimes they have been found guilty of committing. What about other crimes perpetrated in Lebanon since the assassination of Mufti Hassan Khaled, Kamal Jumblat, President Bachir Gemayel and President René Mouawad, in addition to the victims of the Cedar Revolution Pierre Gemayel, Antoine Ghanem, Gebran Tueini, Samir Kassir, Mohamad Chatah and the recent assassination of activist Lukman Slim?

The Lebanese people remain, despite their hardships, an example of permanent resistance for the preservation of the unity of the country and of the values that Lebanon was always keen on defending.

The objective of this conference is to draw the lessons and conclusions from the past and to suggest beneficial solutions for a future of peace and prosperity. This future will not materialize without a return to the fundamental principles according to which Lebanon was established, and that preserved this country and maintained its role.

I mean by fundamental principles the following:

1. Respecting national sovereignty. A Lebanese citizenship cannot be possible without allegiance to the Lebanese State and its institutions exclusively.
2. Respecting the universal values of equality between citizens and respect for human rights recognized by all international charters. These same values are what differentiates Lebanon from other countries in the Middle East.
3. Respecting the Lebanese Constitution rethought and readapted to the needs of the nation.
4. Modernizing the socio-economic structures capable of boosting the Lebanese economy and restoring social peace.

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