

# BEING LEBANESE: WHAT SHOULD IT MEAN TO YOU?

By Dr. Philip A. Salem

We are all gathered here today not only because we love our country, but also because we care for it. Over the last two days this conference focused on the making of the future of Lebanon. I am now speaking in the closing ceremony to examine why it is important to support Lebanon, and why I am proud to be Lebanese.

Since the creation of Greater Lebanon, Lebanon has been struggling to define its identity and to crystalize a clear cohesive political vision. However, its people have already defined a distinct culture in the Middle East; a culture characterized by tolerance, freedom, democracy, and above all multiculturalism. This was achieved in spite of severe anguish in recent history and in spite of its tragedy. The tragedy of Lebanon is in geography as the land is crucified between Israel, Syria and the Mediterranean Sea. Only the sea embraces the land with love. Lebanon is where Christianity embraces Islam and where eighteen different religious sects live in harmony. Forty years of war and there are no barriers between these sects. Muslims and Christians continue to share pain and joy. The Lebanese wars were not religious; they were political. Religion was used as a political tool to advance political agendas. In addition, Lebanon is the land where different cultures thrive and flourish. The culture of the West embraces the culture of the East. The Anglo-Saxon intertwines with the Francophonic civilization. The culture of Arabs thrives with other cultures. Lebanon has not witnessed confrontation of cultures; it has witnessed integration of cultures. To the countries on the eastern borders, Lebanon has been a threat because it symbolizes freedom and democracy. It is true that freedom and democracy have recently been partially damaged in Lebanon, but the infrastructure to build them in the future is still there. To the southern border, Israel may claim freedom and democracy, but it is certainly not the land of multiculturalism and pluralism. The issue of multiculturalism is extremely significant as it is the avenue to the future. Refusing to embrace the other because he is different should not be acceptable. Lebanon has also distinguished itself from its neighbours as the only country where the state has no official religion. Israel is insisting on becoming a Jewish state, and on making Judaism the official religion of the state. On the other hand in the Arab world, every Arab state has an official religion and this religion is Islam. I believe the model of Lebanon is a model against terrorism and radicalism. It is also a model for stability and prosperity. We, the Lebanese, would like to offer this model to the world, and ask "*Do you really want to promote democracy in the Middle East? If yes, here is Lebanon. Do you want to promote freedom? Defend Lebanon. Do you want to promote tolerance and multiculturalism? Support Lebanon.*" Above all, we should say to the West "*Do you indeed want to fight terror? If so, the model of Lebanon, should be promoted and nurtured; it should not be sacrificed.*"

We are all aware of the diseases that plague the landscape of politics in Lebanon and the obstacles that hinder the attainment of a strong state. We are also aware of the immense corruption that paralyzes the government and state institutions. However, Lebanon will never die. It refuses to die. This is because of its soul. This soul is the essence of Lebanon and it is eternal. This soul is what identifies you as Lebanese, and this is why you should be proud:

1. You belong to a people who had built in the past great cities like Byblos, Sidon, Tyre and Baalbeck and who had established a great civilization when there was no civilization in Europe and the West. Your people at one time dominated the Mediterranean Sea and built colonies on its shores. Your people were crucial in the development of the alphabet; the very basic tool for the growth of human civilization.
2. You belong to a people who have built in Diaspora the civilizations of the world. Wherever the Lebanese went, they built. They never destroyed. They contributed. They never detracted. Wherever they went, they integrated and they were grateful to the countries that embraced them. Here in America, not only did we contribute to this country, we contributed to the whole world. Michael DeBakey did not invent his heart surgeries for American patients, but for every patient in the world. Danny Thomas did not build St. Jude's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee for American children only, but for all the children in the world. St. Jude's is now the leading cancer hospital for children in the world. The Lebanese/Syrian Hospital in Sao Paulo has the best cancer treatment and research program in all Latin America. Gibran Khalil Gibran did not write to just Americans and Lebanese, but to all mankind. The message of Lebanon, and that of the Lebanese in Diaspora, have always been global.
3. Forty years of wars and there are no walls between the different religious groups that share the country. There has been no ethnic cleansing. Forty years of wars and the Lebanese continue to embrace each other. Christianity continues to embrace Islam. Multiculturalism has survived and it continues to thrive.
4. Forty years of wars and there is not a single Lebanese beggar in the streets of Las Vegas, New York, London, Paris, or Damascus. Forty years of wars and there is not a single Lebanese refugee who lives in a tent and who survives on aid from the United Nations. Being Lebanese means you belong to a people who have dignity and pride. We should always remind the world that Lebanon takes care of more than 2 million refugees, while the world does not have to take care of one single Lebanese refugee.
5. Forty years of wars and our economy remains solid. An apartment in Beirut is a little more expensive than a similar one in Houston. The economy remains strong because of the contributions of the Lebanese in Diaspora, and also because of the unique fabric of the Lebanese family. Our culture is one where a brother does not let his brother suffer in poverty without extending a hand.
6. Forty years of wars, blood shed, and immense pain; and yet Lebanon remains the capital of joy in the Arab World. The wars could not kill our love for life. Despair failed to conquer hope.
7. Lebanon is a very special piece of land beautifully anchored between the blue Mediterranean Sea and the yellow Arabian Desert. Magnificent

mountains rolling slowly down to the sea. Villages and towns scattered here and there. Villages where our fathers, and forefathers lived. This is where we have families that go to bed every day dreaming of seeing us again. This is where people love us eternally and unconditionally. This is the only land in the whole world which is truly our land.

Gibran Khalil Gibran once said “*You have your Lebanon and I have mine.*” I fully understand him and I share his vision. “Their Lebanon” was different from his. However, it is now our responsibility to make their Lebanon ours, and to make these two Lebanons one; a Lebanon that we could all be proud of. I must remind you that the responsibility of war was ours. Also, now the responsibility of building peace and prosperity is ours. It is needless to emphasize that we should pay allegiance to the countries that have embraced us. We, the Lebanese, have never been ungrateful. However, at the same time we should be grateful to our country, to our fathers and forefathers, to Lebanon. Loyalty to your adopted country does not exclude loyalty to your country of origin. We should also learn from other immigrants how to help and promote each other and how to reconnect with our roots. I strongly share your disappointment with politics in Lebanon and your distrust in politicians, but we should never allow despair to defeat us. The sun always rises after the dark night.

At the end, I want to say that I’m very, very proud to be Lebanese. Let our motto be “Lebanon, you will always be in my heart, and I will always be your son”.