

Beyond the Ceremonies

Lebanon's Independence: A Work in Progress

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My Fellow Lebanese,

More than six decades have passed since national independence from the French was proclaimed. The greatest dream of all Lebanese, to be free and masters of their own destiny seemed realized on that day.

The attainment of independence on November 22, 1943, remains and will always be an outstanding landmark in the long history of struggles of our people for freedom. It was the culmination of centuries of monumental battles against injustice that first brought down the cruel system of the Ottoman Empire and secondly the bondage of the French Mandate. Independence was a defining moment: finally the exploitative systems of imperialism and colonialism came to a crashing end.

Thus began the life of a new but historic nation called Lebanon and thus we renewed faith in ourselves to be masters of our own destiny.

As we look back on that day in history, it is important to keep in mind that it was but the beginning of our march towards true independence and towards freedom. For our nation has yet to come to grips with its unity, its identity and its historic purpose.

Over the past sixty years, we have struggled with existential problems ranging from ideations of regional nationalisms that threatened to efface our Lebanese identity, to neighborly ravenousness and occupation that ravaged our land and demolished our political, social and economic infrastructures.

But our nation through the determination and resilience of our people, victoriously overcame some of these problems. In 2000 we celebrated the liberation of the South from Israeli troops and earlier this year we celebrated the liberation of the rest of Lebanon from Syrian military occupation.

Our thoughts at this time turn to all those who sacrificed or dedicated their lives to the noble cause of liberation and independence, because they will live-on forever in our hearts and in the memory of all the Lebanese people.

As we do so, it is fitting that we commit ourselves, once again but with even greater fortitude, to serve our people and country and resolve the remaining problems that keep us from being unified and truly free.

Let me first congratulate you for our continued progress towards true independence, for keeping the peace despite the daunting circumstances, and for respecting the constitutional processes like a truly democratic nation worthy of independence.

However, our independence will remain a work in progress as long as parts of our land continue to be the subject of conflict with Syria or occupation by Israel and as long as we continue to struggle with our national identity and historic mission.

Therefore, the next step in our progress towards true independence must be the formalization of the borders with Syria to be followed by the liberation of any remaining Lebanese territories under Israeli occupation. Whereas the first step involves good will negotiations between friendly neighbors, the latter requires a strategic plan that necessitates among other factors the continued readiness of a national resistance movement working side-by-side with the Lebanese army under the civilian command of the Lebanese people.

The time has come for us to move from the narrow sectarian divisions that plagued our nation over the past thirty years and kept us from becoming one people, to a national union that we embrace as citizens of one nation. The

time is now for us to start having leaders who agree on a national progressive agenda and to have national institutions who serve the people regardless of creed, faith or lack thereof.

Inevitably there will be differences and disagreements between and among political parties. This is the nature of a democracy. This is especially true in Lebanon where we have recently recovered our freedom of speech, freedom to assemble, and begun the process of restoring a free judiciary and independent national institutions.

But let our differences be based on national political philosophies and not on segregated sectarian interests. We cannot go on to become one nation if we continue to frame arguments along sectarian lines and without a unifying national vision. We cannot be one nation if we fail to come together - as citizens of one nation rather than followers of many sects - in our national decisions whether to choose the next president or speaker or prime minister or to decide the legitimacy of our resistance movement.

It is important for us to resolve our differences in a manner that allows for continued development of our country. I believe that our politics has to mature to the point where we can solve our problems without resort to threats of violence or holding hostage the proper functioning of national institutions.

In a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society like ours, politicians and all others must eschew postures that can sow the seeds of discord and division.

The unity of our people must always be paramount.

The evolution of the national dialogue was a national necessity to end the war. It was intended to build trust and create a national ethos of respect and tolerance, and an atmosphere of harmony and security. Thus it must be pursued on the belief that all Lebanese have a stake in the future of our country and it should not serve selfish political interests. Dialogue cannot be switched on and off at the behest of political expediency.

Equally important is that we Lebanese have broadened and deepened our rights and freedoms. Today we have one of the most advanced constitutions in the Middle East that has constructed a modern framework for our citizens to live in equality and security.

Today we need to define the road we are going to follow in order to strengthen our democracy, the speed at which we will go and the partners with whom we will share interests, with reciprocal advantages. We also have to be able to determine with the requisite flexibility the role of each internal factor in the process – the state, the public administration, political parties, companies, organized civil society and so forth.

In this era of globalization, in which every country is a market within a global market, in which information and the values of a universal culture, and the norms of western civilization are disseminated without boundaries, those who are incapable of administrating their market and preserving the values of their identity, and transforming them into a contribution to the global process, will become ineffective and eventually obsolete.

The events of 2005 taught us much about ourselves as Lebanese. We understand our limitations and shortcomings but also our strengths and capabilities much better than before. Many of us have discovered internal strengths within ourselves that we never thought existed. We have endured setbacks. At times, our expectations have surpassed our abilities and, in many cases, our resources. Yet, we have endeavored to remain focused on the task at hand to build a stronger, freer and more independent Lebanon.

The resilience and fortitude that makes us what we are today continue to shine through, diminishing the efforts of those few detractors who only wish to hold us back. Instead of hate and spite and demonstrations here and there, let us organize work brigades to build with love houses, factories and playgrounds and replenish the green nature of our country.

My fellow citizens,

Let us ensure that the Lebanese spirit continues to carry us upwards and onwards. This is what we should expect of ourselves and this is what we, together, demand of our government and our leaders: to live up to the Lebanese spirit.

It is no longer acceptable to have a government with a narrow vision and a single approach to all problems, a government that reacts to crises instead of anticipating them, or a government fragmented by sectarian strife. The Lebanese people can no longer tolerate to place their lives on hold pending an international process. Similarly they do not accept that a number of ministers in their cabinet stand aside, for purely sectarian reasons, while the Lebanese Prime Minister is under a gratuitous attack by a foreign leader.

The current government in Lebanon must come together and remain resolutely focused on our national development agenda – one based on wise political strategy, prudent economic management, and support for the private sector, inclusive governance and the provision of better infrastructure, social services and security for all our citizens.

Peace and democracy

It is imperative that the Lebanese government today consolidate peace and the democratic process. True peace must be based on justice and the balanced sharing of national revenue. It must also be based on respect for one's fellow and tolerance for differences of opinion. Our differences should not be used to divide or create separation between us. On the contrary, they enrich our common heritage and strengthen our national identity in a multi-ethnic and cultural diversity. Therefore, we need to:

- 1) Promote social solidarity. This must be a priority of the government for it enriches and strengthens the peace and the national reconciliation process.
- 2) Setup a time frame to handle the reintegration into society and production of former soldiers, resistance fighters and prisoners of war and their families. The same attention should be paid to displaced persons and refugees, who have or have not yet returned to their home areas and also to handicapped persons.

Peace, national reconciliation, freedom and social stability are essential to consolidating our democracy.

- 3) Make sure that there are no prisoners of conscience in Lebanon; that no citizen is detained for his or her opinions in the country; that everyone is free to express his or her ideas and make whatever criticisms deemed opportune, provided the rights of other citizens are not violated.
- 4) The situation in the country today permits us to envisage the holding of the next elections with optimism. Prepare the material, institutional and psychological conditions for these elections to be free, transparent and with a high level of participation, without any constraints or pressures of any kind. Parties and coalitions of parties must be able to compete freely and on an equal footing, in accordance with an equitable law.

Economy

Given the severe economic constraints and the tremendous amount of debt, the current government must work assiduously to enhance our economic fortunes. Strengthening our independence requires a carefully planned economic plan that lays the foundations for building a self-sustaining economy based on three key principles:

- 1) Adjusting our economy to keep abreast with international trends, especially trade liberalization and a global economy. Privatization, while a possible remedy to some of our economic ailments, is not a magic bullet and must not be the only solution to our problems.
- 2) The present world situation is cause for concern – high budget and balance of payment deficits among industrialized nations, currency and stock market volatility, skyrocketing oil prices, diversion of official development assistance, armed conflicts and terrorism impact on the well-being of many countries including Lebanon.
- 3) Drastic changes in weather patterns over the years have resulted in catastrophic disasters, un-seasonal rainfall and severe droughts around the world. These natural phenomena and the threat of disease pandemics are having a severe impact on many economic activities globally and nationally. Appropriate measures must be taken to counter their effect.

Together, we must usher in a new era of predictability and confidence essential to new public and private investment and economic growth.

This requires taking the following steps:

1. Maintaining the stability of the national currency and of prices of goods;
2. Rehabilitating all facilities ravaged during the Syrian occupation and developing them;
3. Ensuring the recovery of production and increasing the domestic supply of goods and services.

Chronic monetary instability and high and uncontrolled prices must become a thing of the past. The government must endeavor to maintain and strengthen macroeconomic stability and re-launch productive economic activity, heeding the failings and imperfections of the market, and thereby protecting the purchasing power of workers' wages, creating conditions to consolidate and diversify the financial system and increasing national and foreign private investment essentially in production.

In addition, the government must strive to create a more just and supportive society, using taxation policy to promote the redistribution of revenue for the benefit of the neediest strata.

A balanced and carefully planned program that takes into consideration the concerns expressed above could be a catalyst for our economy, since it will permit the free movement of people and goods and involves a great volume of investments that will open the way for national entrepreneurs and for the employment of a great deal of manpower, absorbing many people who are now unemployed. Hundreds of thousands of new jobs will be created, providing new work opportunities for the youth.

Social Programs

The economy alone is not sufficient to build a modern country. Of particular importance is the expansion of the social programs to deliver more and better quality social services. The Lebanese need to see huge investments in education, health, housing and energy and water sectors.

Education

We need significant reforms in the education system, to make it better suited to the pressing needs of our medium- and long-term development. For this, we have to lay the human and material foundations, through the training and further training of teachers and technical personnel, for producing the administrators and managers of school establishments.

As a start, I propose the development of a course in national and civic education that will be uniformly taught in all schools in Lebanon, private and public, at all curricular levels. This course will educate the students in the meaning of Lebanese citizenship and prepare them for democracy, ethics in government and the free market.

We also need to make an extra effort to ensure that, from their earliest school years, pupils start to familiarize themselves with the new information technology, and that some of our higher institutes of science and technology and the universities transform themselves into catalysts of applied scientific research.

Civic, moral and patriotic education, combined with academic, physical, technical and vocational training, given from the earliest years until the completion of education, will guarantee the coming into being of the kind of Lebanese men and women we need to build a better Lebanon for all.

Health Care

In addition to education, the government's great emphasis must be on health. Both education and health are essential factors in human development and ones that can contribute to increased wealth and social wellbeing.

In the area of health, we need to train more personnel, so as to provide better care for the whole population. In order to improve health care nationally, we need to establish new health centers in the major municipalities, particularly those remote from the capital. Within a framework of cooperation with the WHO and other donors

and philanthropists, we need to rehabilitate our public hospitals and refit them with the most modern medical and surgical equipment. This effort must be accompanied by personnel training, because if these new units are to function normally we will need a large number of nurses, nursing assistants, doctors and hospital managers.

Social Security and Retirement Planning

An overhaul of our social security programs is necessary in order to bring about a comprehensive program that provides retirement income, health care for the aged, and disability coverage for eligible workers and their dependents. New policies are needed to ensure that all people have adequate economic and social protection during unemployment, ill health, maternity, child rearing, widowhood, disability and old age, by means of contributory and non-contributory schemes for providing for their basic needs.

Security

For the Lebanese to be productive and lead meaningful lives they must live in peace and security. The crime situation is cause for concern particularly in light of the terrorist attacks that took place this year. The government has been expending more and more resources on the security forces to improve their crime-fighting capabilities and to maintain law and order in the country. I want to commend the members of the security forces for the work they have done in bringing the situation under control. However, we must not be complacent. I urge the citizens to play their part in the continuing battle against crime and against terrorism.

Public Administration

We need to restore public administration throughout the country.

The power of the central government has been restored in many regions after the war and the liberation and what is now needed is to expand it to all regions and to create the indispensable conditions, in material, technical and remunerative terms to achieve administrative decentralization.

Instances of misuse of resources, mismanagement of resources and corruption must be weeded out.

I call on the National Assembly to pass a Fiscal Management and Accountability Act which establishes a modern and comprehensive framework for the administration of public finances and the reporting on public financial management. A major aspect of this legislation will be the reaffirmation of the role of the National Assembly in the budget process. This must be followed by an Audit Act which will strengthen and give greater autonomy to the Auditor General's Office. To complement this program of legislative reform, a number of associated administrative reforms need to be undertaken. These include the introduction of an Integrated Financial Management and Accounting System which lends itself to more efficient and transparent management of public finances.

There are many other measures which the government can introduce to heighten transparency and accountability. For example, I call for the establishment of an active Integrity Commission: all top government officials, functionaries and parliamentarians, including the President and Ministers, must submit their financial statements to the Integrity Commission.

Master plans need to be drawn up for the modernization and development of our cities, whose financial, banking, commercial, legal and other institutions can serve as a springboard or driving force of our development.

Our Role in the World

We have shown the world that the Republic of Lebanon, despite the external aggression and permanent destabilization to which it was subjected, is a peaceful country. Today it has relations of friendship and cooperation with nearly all the countries in the world. We must ensure that we continue to be a factor for peace and regional stability and world security, and a fair partner ready to share interests and cooperate on the basis of reciprocal advantages in building an ever better world for everyone.

The Lessons of History

Our successes in the past are a great source of encouragement to us as we continue on the path of progress. However, as we move ahead, we must take time to learn from past mistakes so as to avoid pitfalls that could thwart our growth and development. At all times we must remember that it was only when our people were united and free, were they able to overcome difficulties. If we continue to embrace this legacy and live and work in harmony we will achieve that brighter future.

In our march onward, we must be careful to create an enlightened environment that is conducive to the participation of all citizens in the political, economic and social life of the country. Reforms must allow for more active participation and inclusiveness of all sections of society. It is this environment that will contribute to the success of a national dialogue.

The road yet to be traveled after 62 years of independence offers us an opportunity to shape a future that brings hope for a better Lebanon and a better life for all Lebanese. It gives us a chance to rekindle in our people that which is the best. It provides us the possibility to make the best use of our creativity in service of the public good. It gives us a chance to shape a land of prosperity for all and harmony among all.

The lessons of the past will serve us well as we shape the future. Let us seek inspiration from the experiences of our ancestors as we face new challenges re-building our nation. I am confident that our present generation is imbued with a similar strength of character and determination to accomplish the lofty aspirations that excited our people upon attaining independence.

Let us reflect on these opportunities and keep reminding ourselves that the road traveled so far has not been easy. The road ahead will also present its own difficulties. But our commitment to place our country and the well-being of our people above everything else will bring us the success we aspire to.

Long live Lebanon!

Happy Independence Day!