



Statement

by

H.E. Mr. Gebran Bassil
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of the Republic of Lebanon

at the
Ministerial High-level Meeting on the Syrian Crisis
“Rethinking the international response to the crisis,
providing hope for a better future”

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Thank the co-chair, the EU and Jordan.

The fight against terrorism and the mass influx of refugees are the two major challenges that are facing Lebanon today. We are not so many, a population of hardly 4 million. We do not have much, a small territory of 10452 sqkm with scarce resources. We end up receiving more than 2 millions refugees and displaced which represents 50% of our population (220/sqkm) and fighting terrorists on our borders and land.

Let me share with you some figures:

- 210,000 additional Syrian children are integrated in our schools out of 525.000 children in age of being enrolled in our education system, while our children in public schools are 225.000 (4 out of 9)
- 70,000 additional newborns over the past four years
- 10 billion USD in direct and indirect cost (direct spending: electricity, water, infrastructure. Economy shrinking)

This crisis is unseen and unprecedented in Human history. We had foreseen its implications and had warned about its adverse repercussions on Europe. It has now grown out of control as predicted and this is only the start. It requires an international response and real burden sharing as optimistic expectations are that only 38% of the pledges will be honoured by the end of this year.

Sharing the burden is about sharing the numbers. The EU member States, with a population of 512 million (area: 4,4 million sqkm) have agreed to receive 120,000 displaced from Syria. In comparison with the EU, Lebanon, with a population 128 times smaller, (area: 440 times smaller) is hosting a displaced population 15 times bigger.

It is high time to rethink the matrix of the Syrian crisis and for the international community to renew its political, economic and socio-cultural approaches to the Syrian crisis and to avoid the stumbling of the region's tolerant and diverse countries, mainly Lebanon.

A new political approach has to be through an all-inclusive process that will enable the Syrians to fulfil their legitimate aspirations. While in progress, it can also pave the way to establishing safe zones in Syria that will constitute proper livelihoods for Syrians displaced internally and externally.

Considering that the integration of displaced and refugees is constitutionally prohibited in Lebanon, repatriation remains the only durable solution.

In addition, the rapid deterioration of the living conditions of the migrants, stuck between the exacerbation of violence in their homeland and the rise of xenophobic behaviours in host countries, is giving way to alarming signals that could lead to radicalism.

This has a direct impact on the security and the stability of neighbouring countries. It threatens to spill over to other neighbouring countries and so on. Containing this menace is not a matter of geography only, rather of ideology also.

A new economic approach is also needed where keeping the displaced in Syria is in fact more cost effective than monitoring their migration to Europe. We call to focus on an approach that would combine both developmental and humanitarian segments. Fields to explore could include offering incentives for local entrepreneurs to invest in agricultural and agro-industrial projects –sectors with high rates of employability for Syrian workers–.

Moreover Lebanon should not suffer anymore a kind of double punishment due to our categorisation as a middle income country, as this deprives us from acceding to international preferential financial instruments. We believe that offering us the opportunity to benefit from soft loans is a minimum that can be done to demonstrate the international solidarity, if not relieving us from our external debt. We look forward to receiving encouraging signals from the coming World Bank meeting in Lima.

A new socio-cultural approach is also needed with respect to its impact on the countries' social fabrics. This is particularly flagrant in Lebanon where the country is articulated on a fine balance between its religious communities. Besides being constitutive of a crime against humanity, the forced mass displacement of communities and the transfer of populations, on the sole basis of their religious identities, are crimes against the diversity in the Middle East.

Lebanon, a model of coexistence and tolerance between diverse religious groups, Lebanon has developed a pluralistic political system, unique in the world, based on parity between Christians and Muslims and on democratic power sharing mechanisms. At times when sectarian entities are mushrooming and threatening to irreversibly reshape the Middle East while pushing minorities away, we, in Lebanon, remain committed to protect our pluralistic political model. Unless we do so, we will neither be able to carry out our message of diversity nor to share our values of tolerance and humanity. We believe that democracy is the only guarantee for our social diversity to prevail over sectarianism.

In situations of harsh crisis where difficult decisions must be taken, countries are in need of a strong leadership enjoying real legitimacy. Any solution based only on the humanitarian axis and which weakens the terms of this equation will jeopardise the socio-cultural balance in Lebanon. In this vein, we consider that encouraging mass migration to Europe, by offering incentives, or selecting the candidates for resettlement according to their sectarian or educational backgrounds are counterproductive measures that directly affect the diversity in the region and encourages terrorism. On the contrary, we call for policies that would keep the social groups rooted in the region.

Finally, we look forward to contributing to the enhancement of the efficiency of the humanitarian work, with many ideas to explore, the most important of which is the channelling of aid to governments and public institutions instead of international agencies and NGOs, in order to stick to the needs and priorities of the host countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have been dealing with a local emergency. It has now unfolded to become a global challenge. The world is witnessing the exodus of entire communities away from their cradle in the Middle East. It is time to act. It is our collective responsibility. We cannot escape from it and we cannot afford passivity.

Thank you.