



Address

by

H.E. General Michel Aoun

President of the Republic of Lebanon

at the

Seventy-second session of the

United Nations General Assembly

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*Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations
866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 531, New York, N. Y. 10017*

Your Excellency Mr. Miroslav Lajcak, President of the General Assembly,

Your Excellency Mr. Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations,

Heads of States and Governments,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I would like to extend my congratulations, Mr. President, on your assignment for the presidency of the current session of the United Nations General Assembly and I wish you all the success in your tasks. I would also like to thank his Excellency Mr. Peter Thomson for his efficient management of the previous session.

I would also like to salute the Secretary-General Mr. Guterres for his efforts in revitalizing the role of the United Nations.

Mr. President,

We are here today, in New York, in the month of September. Our memory will certainly drag us 16 years back to remember when terrorism struck this city causing thousands of victims. From this podium, we reiterate our solidarity with their families and with the families of all the victims of terrorist crimes around the world.

This tragic event was the start of an international war against terrorism that was shortly ramified, scattered, lost its goals and ignited fires in many countries especially in the Middle East where its effects reached all the region's countries; some were directly affected whereas others were affected by its consequences. It has created and fueled the most brutal form of terrorism aimed at the destruction of the human being, the culture and the civilization. It has also perpetrated the most heinous crimes against the peoples of our region sparing no civilian, child, woman, elderly person or archeological, cultural and religious site. Terrorism has then extended its activities throughout the five continents striking them with the most terrible and deadliest ways thereby violating all the international laws, norms and conventions. No one knows to which extent terrorism will expand and when or how it will be brought to an end.

With the beginning of the events in Syria the situation in Lebanon has declined and it seemed clear that Lebanon was listed among the Arab countries targeted to fall into the clutches of terrorism but it managed to avoid falling into security deterioration by preserving its national unity despite the existing acute political divisions. Indeed, it did not cross the red line that is engraved in the conscience of every citizen and this is what safeguarded the unity of Lebanon and preserved its security despite the infiltration of terrorist elements into certain regions where they formed armed cells in some towns and cities. However, Lebanon managed with all its forces to gradually eradicate them. Furthermore, our army has successfully achieved recently a great victory in its final battle along our border with Syria against the terrorist organizations Daesh (ISIS) and Nosra and has eliminated their military presence in Lebanon.

Burdens inflicted to Lebanon because of the Syrian war is heavier than this country can bear. The Lebanese people proved that they are humanitarian and responsible people.

They received the displaced persons in their homes, their schools, their hospitals and shared with them their living and labor market throughout the previous years and until this very day, thereby increasing drastically the unemployment rate in the country. I would like to point out that more than one half of our public schools operate on a double shift basis, in the morning and in the afternoon, to accommodate and educate the Syrian children.

Lebanon is a small country, densely populated with limited resources. Its economy has been affected by several crises, to start with the global economic crisis followed by the regional wars that surrounded the country and prevented it from moving towards the East and the Arab states, states that constitute support to Lebanon. Waves of displacements and refugees appeared afterwards adding a total of 50% to the country population which means for every two Lebanese citizens, there is one displaced or refugee. The population density has increased from 400 persons per square kilometer to 600; a severe overcrowding spread over 10452 square kilometer leading to a deterioration of the economic conditions and to the increase of the crime rate in its various types. More dangerous is the fact that terrorist groups have taken shelter in refugees' gathering areas transforming them into an enabling environment aiming to carry out terrorist activities and claiming innocent lives.

Hence the need to regulate the return of displaced persons to their homeland has become urgent as the situation in most of their first places of residence has settled.

There are those who talk about a voluntary return while we talk about a safe return and we differentiate between the two based on the reason of displacement, which have been confirmed by the International Syria Support Group meetings, return is either voluntary or safe depending on the reason of displacement; in case of asylum is individual and for political reasons threatening the safety and security of the individuals, the return shall be voluntary, i.e. it is granted for political refugees who themselves decide the timing of the said return, coupled with the acceptance of the host country. As for the current form of the collective asylum in Lebanon, it has happened for economic and security reasons and as an escape from the dangers of war. Therefore, we consider it a displacement rather than asylum; it was not coupled with the acceptance of the host country and was not limited to "individual" asylum, but rather in the form of a population invasion.

As for the claim that these people will not be safe if they return to their country, we are all aware that this pretext is unacceptable; on one hand the Syrian government has taken back around 85% of its territories, on the other hand, if the Syrian government is reconciling with the armed groups that are fighting them and is granting them the freedom to choose between remaining in their villages or moving to other regions, so how would this government act with the displaced people who fled the war? And what happened during the last events in Lebanon confirms this.

Moreover, the displaced people are living in misery and in an unhealthy environment despite all the support provided by the international and Lebanese institutions, and it is painful for us to be unable to improve their situation due to their numbers and our limited potentials.

There is no doubt that it would be better if the United Nations assist them in returning to their homeland rather than helping them remain in camps lacking the minimum standards of a decent living.