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Address by

His Excellency the President of the Lebanese Republic

General Michel Aoun

Tunis, March 31, 2019

Your Majesties, Your Highnesses, Your Excellencies,

At the onset, I would like to congratulate His Excellency President Beji Caid Essebsi on presiding over the 30th session of the Arab Summit, wishing him success in this mission, thanking His Excellency and the dear Tunisian people for their warm welcome. I also wish to thank His Majesty King Salman Ben Abdel Aziz for his efforts in conducting the previous Arab Summit throughout the past year.

Your Majesties, Your Highnesses, Your Excellencies,

Nine years have gone by since the beginning of the terrorist wars in the Arab States, in which hundreds of thousands of victims fell and millions were displaced, in addition to thousands of disabled, injured and missing people as well. Regimes fell, presidents disappeared, entire cities were destroyed, landmarks were wiped away and peoples were torn apart... and everybody lost.

Today, the roars of gunfire and the blasts of explosions have declined and the bleeding has receded, but the wounds that were entailed by wars left a deep scar in the Arab conscience and the Arab societies, adding to their fragmentation and deepening the cracks between them.

Yes, war has already or almost set subsided, but its consequences have not yet set in. Till when shall we wait to start restoring what has been broken and wiping away the painful repercussions? More dangerous than war are the political projects, the deals that are looming after the silence of the cannons, and the existential threat they imply for our States and peoples. Indeed, the fragmentation of the region and the confessional segregation pave the way for the project of aimed at striking the concept

of 'one unifying State' to the benefit of confessional racist entities, and they have imposed a new political and geographical reality which converges with and justifies the declaration of Israel as a Jewish State.

Yesterday, the American President signed a decision that recognizes the sovereignty of Israel over the Golan Heights, following his previous decision acknowledging Al-Quds (Jerusalem) as a capital for Israel and transferring his embassy to it, in contradiction with all the relevant international resolutions, including paragraph 4 of article 2 of the United Nations Charter, in which all the member States undertake to "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State."

This decision does not only threaten the sovereignty of a brotherly State, but rather threatens as well the sovereignty of the Lebanese State which owns lands that were gradually bitten off by Israel, especially in the Shebaa Farms, the Kfarshouba Hills and the Northern part of Al-Ghajar village. The Lebanese property of these lands is proven by internationally recognized documents and maps.

So how can we, small countries, feel reassured anymore when the international charters and rights are being undermined, and when the international legitimacy which governs the UN recognized borders between States is being challenged.

What is the fate of the Arab Peace Initiative after what happened? Does it still stand tall or did it receive a 'coup de grace' and has thus become vain? Because, after the land is lost, what is left of peace??

How will the international protests, denunciations and condemnations of what happened and what is happening materialize? Will the Security Council be able to protect the right of Syria and Lebanon to their occupied territories?

And what about us? How are we going to face these schemes and these violations of our rights? With borders that are still closed between our States? Or with seats that are still vacant among us here?

Fellow brothers,

If, gathered and united, we can barely counter such projects, how then if we are scattered and dispersed as it is the case today?

You may be wondering with me, brothers:

Do we want Syria to return to its normal place among us and to the Arab family?

Do we want Yemen to be happy again and its people to enjoy security and stability?

Do we want Palestine not to be lost and violated along with Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and all its religious holy places?

Even more... do we want security and stability for all our States, safety and prosperity for our peoples?

If we truly wish to protect our States and peoples, and safeguard their unity, sovereignty and independence, we must recover the Initiative, and get together to seek encounter and dialogue, reject extremism and violence, and dry out the springs of terror.

Over the past years, the world has spent billions on armament, killing and destruction. Had it used this money or some of it on development, education, evolution, industry, agriculture, investments, and creation of job opportunities for the youth... what leap would our States have made? Would our youth and children have been an easy prey for the radical thinking which turned them into terrorists and into war and destruction machines?

Dear brothers,

If the projects set for the region are alarming, Lebanon is the most concerned...

We are concerned about the insistence of the international community to keep the Syrian displaced in Lebanon although it is aware of the poor conditions in which they are living, although it knows that most of the Syrian regions have become safe, and that Lebanon is no longer capable of carrying this burden which puts strains on it at all economic, social and security levels, and despite the affirmation of international humanitarian organizations that 80% of the Syrian displaced in Lebanon wish to return to their lands and properties.

We are concerned about the term "voluntary return", and about dealing with 1.5 million displaced as if they were all political refugees, while most of them have sought asylum for security reasons or due to the economic crisis that normally accompanies wars.

We are concerned about the insistence on linking the return of the displaced to the political solution, rather giving precedence to the political solution, although we all know that it might take long. Does the international community seek to turn the displaced into hostages in order to use them as leverage against Syria and Lebanon as well, to make them accept the solutions that may be imposed?

The Palestinian cause which has been lingering for 71 years is the best witness to the absurdity of linking the return to the political solutions, because what is looming about it after all the years of waiting is an attempt to impose a settlement to keep the Palestinians where they are and annihilate their case.

We are also concerned about Israel's attempts to blow Resolution 194 and ultimately deprive the Palestinians of their land and identity, the adoption of the "Jewish Nation-State" law for Israel and the denial of the right of return, with all what this means, namely the attempt to settle the Palestinians of the Diaspora where they are, and Lebanon has the largest share of them.

Dear brothers, Lebanon is too small for its own population, with scarce resources, a weak infrastructure and all its economic and social problems. It is not capable anymore of hosting the equivalent of half of its citizens, and it will absolutely not accept any form of settlement.

The in-cash and in-kind assistance from the international institutions are still offered directly to the displaced, without passing through the official channels of the host country, and this is an express encouragement for them to stay where they are and benefit from all the allowances without incurring any obligations, while the host countries are languishing under their growing burdens. This is why, in the Beirut Economic Summit, we called on the international community - and in particular the donor countries - "to fill their role in shouldering the burden of the displacement crisis and deliver the funding they had pledged for the host countries to cater for the needs of the displaced, support the infrastructure, and also offer assistance to the displaced in their countries to motivate them to return."

And here I would like to underline that supporting the host countries is very essential to enable them to carry on. Yet, what is more essential is to provide assistance to the returning displaced in their country, to give them an incentive to return and participate in the reconstruction, rather than staying homeless, longing for the roof of a country which protects them and a land which represents their dignity and identity.

Dear brothers,

In the past, our wise men said "united we stand, divided we fall". Today, we are neither asking for unity not for union, but rather for a minimum of coordination and cooperation to face what awaits us.

Thank you.