



ADDRESS

BY

**H.E. GENERAL MICHEL SLEIMAN
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LEBANON**

**AT THE
HIGH-LEVEL MEETING
OF THE
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
ON THE
DIALOGUE BETWEEN CULTURES AND RELIGIONS**

ITEM 45: CULTURE OF PEACE

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*Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations
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Mr. President,

Here we are once again, meeting at the United Nations General Assembly on agenda item 45, "Culture of Peace," in order to promote dialogue and cooperation among people of many cultures and followers of various religions, and to stress our interest, as the international community, in developing understanding amongst each other within the realms of knowledge, interaction, and mutual respect on the basis of justice, right, and equality.

Convened by the President of the General Assembly, our meeting today bears particular importance, because it is held at such a high level in response to the initiative of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, who last July in Madrid launched a process of dialogue, cooperation, and solidarity that was joined by many people in a desire to chart a path towards achieving common human purposes and establishing relationships of tolerance, mutual acceptance, and respect for religious and cultural particularities.

Our common interest in the invitation to dialogue and the commitment to its ethics is compounded by the prevailing critical circumstances in inter- and intra-State relations. There are fears and risks that may surge as a result of the extremism of those who exploit religious emotions and the cultural traits of peoples and communities, in order to fuel struggles for power and attempts to impose convictions by force. To that end, they pursue radical policies that do not hesitate to channel the attachment to identity and the right to uniqueness towards hostility to others who do not necessarily share their creed, affiliation, or opinion.

The interest of the international community in dialogue has grown as a result of the concern over phenomena characterized by confessional and ethnic violence, terrorism, intimidation, coercion, defamation of image and reputation, and assault on dignities. Consequently, the community has come to view the concerted efforts aimed at putting religious and cultural differences in their context and at expanding the horizon of understanding, not as a luxury or a concern confined to one particular cultural group, but as a vital cause that relates to all of us and as an urgent matter that leaves no room for delay or hesitation.

We may strongly need to ward off the evils caused by the violence committed in response to calls to exclude or even eliminate the different other. To that end, it is imperative that we engage in a genuine dialogue, a dialogue of life and ideas, a dialogue that is patient but bold, in order to lay the foundations of the relations between the followers of diverse religions and cultures on the building blocks of awareness of the commonalities and recognition of the particularities.

The best way to achieve that purpose is by bringing hearts and minds together to believe in genuine and humane religious values. Many experiences, including our own Lebanese experience, teach us that the real test of any dialogue is whether it can, in times of concern and intimidation, empower the people to build alternative bridges to those destroyed by fear and terrorization, and to put out the fires fanned by tensions and fanaticism.

However, the abrupt recourse to dialogue in order to settle existing conflicts or defuse simmering ones will not yield any results unless it is based on a long cumulative process that has diligently and regularly woven the relations of trust in and openness towards others, who in turn should be committed, deep in their minds, convictions, and practices, to the justice-based spirit of a genuine dialogue. Within the context of such a process lies the significance of the cultural, educational, and media efforts that should accompany the dialogue, and launched or supported by the United Nations and its specialized agencies, mainly UNESCO and other organs that the Madrid World Conference on Dialogue created and committed itself to pursue.

The effectiveness of the dialogue in question remains subject to the dynamics of asymmetrical power relations. Furthermore, the continuation of control, oppression, and arbitrariness puts the credibility of any dialogue at stake. This is primarily true in our Arab Levant and Holy Land. For how could any dialogue flourish and progress where the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian and Arab territories persists, where the national and human rights of the Palestinian people are systematically violated, including the right of the refugees to return to their territory and homeland, and with attempts to impose a final settlement on the Palestinians? Such a reality is in contravention with the resolutions of the United Nations that has gathered us here today and with the spirit of justice that must embrace any dialogue to which we might aspire. Therefore, Jerusalem, the city of peace, where believers in the monotheistic religions come together, would not realize its historic mission unless the injustice imposed on its sons and the Palestinian people is redressed, and the occupation is ended.

Mr. President,

It is no secret for those who love and know Lebanon — and they are not a few — that our country embodies unique characteristics that have withstood the ordeals which tested our will to live together in one country, rich in its diversity and solid in its Arab belonging, and that interacts with world cultures. Such characteristics, in addition to our deeply-rooted experience in our modern history that combines unity and diversity, freedom and mutual respect, genuineness and

modernism, have turned Lebanon into a place of encounter and openness. Indeed, these attributes qualify it to be the widest and richest space for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue, serving both the Arab and Islamic worlds, and the interest of the world at large.

In my statement before the General Assembly last September, I had the opportunity to state that “the philosophy of the Lebanese entity is based on dialogue, reconciliation and coexistence.” I stressed our ambition to see Lebanon become an international center for the management of the dialogue of civilizations and cultures, and consequently a global laboratory for that inter-entity dialogue, especially since Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution stipulates that the freedom of belief in Lebanon shall be absolute, and that the State shall respect all religions and sects and ensure the exercise of religious rites under its protection.

Lebanon is not merely a country. It is, rather, as declared by His Holiness Pope John Paul II and confirmed by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, “a message of freedom, a model of pluralism, and a space for dialogue and coexistence of different cultures and religions.” Lebanon seems, therefore, to be a necessity and a need to both the East and the West, and thus deserves the full support and endorsement of the international community. Felt at many levels, such support can only be promoted by achieving a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, based on the resolutions of the United Nations and the Arab peace initiative as a whole, and in accordance with the spirit of justice that constitutes the essence of religions.

Mr. President,

We gather here today to renew our rejection of the clash of ignorance and to stress our will to work together in the fields of ethics, culture, politics, and sound international relations. Our gathering today in this august body, with all its symbolism, prompts us to remember together the strong link that exists between our choice of the approach and culture of dialogue and our commitment to the United Nations Charter. Such an invitation reminds me of what brings Lebanon closer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which it took part in drafting, and to this international organization that stood by my country in defending its freedom, independence, sovereignty, and stability so that it would remain a country true to itself and a witness to the richness promised by the encounter of religions and the intercultural dialogue that is based on the respect of principles and values that aspire for good for all mankind.

Thank you, Mr. President.