

**AFTER LIBERATION:
TIME TO REBUILD OUR DEMOCRACY**

My fellow compatriots in Lebanon,

I greet you in the name of freedom, peace, and democracy.

This is indeed a joyous day in our history; we have been awaiting it for three decades. Lebanon is finally free from Syrian troops and we are delighted.

This is one of the most important moments in the life of our country. The blood of our martyrs, the sacrifices and tears of our mothers, and your tireless and heroic struggle and sacrifices have made it all possible.

You have survived 30 years of unrelenting persecution to emerge today as a free and independent people looking forward towards a bright tomorrow, filled with hope, rich with dreams and crowned with victory.

I write to you today with a heart filled with deep pride and great joy:

- pride in the ordinary, humble people of our country. You have shown through the years a resilient calm and a patient determination to reclaim this country as your own, and you never gave up despite the impossible circumstances.

- and joy that we can loudly proclaim from the rooftops of our buildings, from the bell towers of our churches and from the minarets of our mosques - free at last! Free at last!

This freedom, however, remains tainted as long as there are political prisoners in Lebanese jails and Lebanese citizens imprisoned in the Syrian and Israeli jails. I call upon the government of Lebanon to free all political prisoners and call upon the international community to help us free the Lebanese political prisoners in Syria and Israel.

Our march to freedom has only begun. But it will remain lacking unless we carefully plan to rebuild our country, learning from past mistakes. Our only cause today should be consolidating our Lebanese society and strengthening our internal unity around important national themes vital to our survival in a modern era of globalization. These themes include:

- 1) the finality of our national identity; we are all Lebanese and proud,
- 2) the equality of our citizens and their rights regardless of ethnicity, faith or creed,
- 3) the reform of our governmental institutions,
- 4) the open access to and the transparency of our government,
- 5) our freedoms of expression, speech, worship and creed,
- 6) our privacy and freedom from governmental intrusion,
- 7) the vitalization of our economy, creation of new jobs and retention of brainpower,
- 8) the modernization of our education, health care and retirement systems,
- 9) the outreach to and involvement of the Lebanese Diaspora in our rebuilding plans, and
- 10) the democracy of our decision-making process.

You are all invited to be part of this dialogue and to contribute to these reforms. After all this country is for its people, all of the people not just a class of politicians and these are matters of primary importance to everyone of us and to our children.

Let us steer away, for good, from the divisive empty rhetoric of the ideologues of hate, and the exclusive ideologies they uphold and the zealous religious wars they claim to fight. It is similar hate rhetoric and those same exclusive ideologies (many of which ironically originated in Lebanon) that ripped us apart in the past. And it is in the name of these ideologies that our small and vulnerable country was injected into the Israeli-Palestinian military conflict (Cairo 1969), and was left alone thereafter to fight 30 years of an existential war, to a large extent about foreign ideas and esoteric dogmas.

Our brothers in Palestine are preparing today to build one of the first true and pluralistic democracies in the Middle East. We wish them all the luck in shaping it up and liberating its land, and we look forward to the near future when we can build with them new and strong bridges of peace, prosperity and cultural exchange.

To the Palestinians in Lebanon: you have been our guests for decades and admittedly your stay in Lebanon has not always been the most hospitable, without assigning blame. We call upon you today to help us rebuild our country by complying with international law and laying down your arms; for your arms in Lebanon have only contributed to its destruction and weakening your cause. Our fear is that your arms may bring upon all of us the same fate again.

Our brothers in Syria are facing their own existential problems today and our prayers go to them to peacefully reach their own solutions. We look forward to build with the Syrian people strong and friendly relations rooted in mutual respect of the sovereignty and specificity of each of our countries. However, for the time being, let us put everything on hold until we reclaim our government and rebuild our institutions.

We are thankful to the international community for UN Security Council Resolution 1559, without which we would not be celebrating our liberation today and regaining our sovereignty and national pride. We look forward to a full and complete implementation of all the terms of 1559; for our sovereignty will not be complete and our democracy will not flourish as long as there are armed groups in Lebanon beyond the control of the collective will of the Lebanese people, and outside the framework of the Lebanese army.

This sovereignty will also remain incomplete as long as there is any foreign intervention in the Lebanese internal affairs, be it from Iran, Saudi Arabia, France or the USA. Therefore, we say to the governments of these countries and to the Lebanese groups and politicians who peddle their policies in Lebanon: if you really wish to help us rebuild, then in the words of the late Anwar Sadat: "Take your hands off Lebanon".

My fellow Lebanese, it is my sincere hope that this message will reach you and touch your hearts. I was 7 years old in 1975; the only Lebanon I remember is a country ripped by hate, destroyed by wars and divided over petty claims. I do not wish to pass my experience with that Lebanon to the seven year-olds of today or the youth of tomorrow. Neither do you.

So stay away from those who call upon your darkest demons with their war rhetoric; they have only death and destruction with no future, to offer you and your children. I call upon your best angels to join me today for peace and democracy and let us brainstorm together to bring about modern reforms and a stable society to a country that will remain a beacon of civilization for generations to come.

God bless you and God bless Lebanon.

Elie Al-Chaer (*April 27, 2005*)