

The Challenges the Christians face in Lebanon

General Introduction: (First Session)

Several dangers stand in the face of the effectual Christian presence in Lebanon, and in consequence threaten its role during the first quarter of the twenty first century. Among those dangers are the ones resulting from its social environment and internal structure; others result from the enigmatic relationships with the rest of the religious sects in Lebanon; others still are a reflection of the critical status of the whole region; some are also the result of the international order that prevailed after the Second World War resulting in a change of the Western view point towards or interests in the Middle East.

Even more hazardous than all of the above is the total absence of a futuristic vision for Lebanon and the status of the Lebanese presence in it as well as the absence of a serious endeavor to clarify a comprehensive outlook for a communal life amongst the Lebanese, and the refusal to involve in a serious dialogue with the Moslem leaderships regarding their viewpoint of their futuristic role and intentions regarding the Christian presence in Lebanon.

Perhaps, the major reason for this critical Christian state is the long period of war that had exhausted the Christians at all levels, followed by a period of Syrian military and political control that shook the fundamental constituents of the Christian presence politically, socially, economically, and demographically. However, the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, was supposed to bring about a period of stability during which the Christians would regain their status of rebuilding their political, social, and economic capabilities. On the contrary, the ensuing hard political and security events led to freeze the modernization of that structure and consequently to the incapacity to build the personal strength capable of confronting those major challenges that the Lebanese Christian presence in Lebanon was faced with.

For all the reasons mentioned above, and for the fact that the Lebanese Christians were vertically divided between the two poles of conflict in all the Arab countries and not only in Lebanon, meaning the Sunnis and the Shiites, they were not allowed to rise from their stumble, organize their ranks, and consecrate their capabilities to fortify their presence and deal with the issues that could threaten them in the years to come. Those issues, or rather latent challenges, are considered quite serious and could transform into elements harmful to the role of the Christians in both Lebanon and the Arab region if we do not rectify the causes and be heedful of the consequences. Following are the most important challenges which I will list and elaborate separately: the demographic fallback, the purchase of Christian owned land in various regions, the rupture of connections between the Lebanese abroad and their homeland, the naturalization of tens of thousands of non-Christians, the escalation of the factors that cause emigration, the instability of the Lebanese situation and its reflection

on economic development, and the continuation of regional crises that cause the Lebanese situation to remain vulnerable, and finally the involvement of the international community with matters other than the Lebanese ones considering the latter a secondary issue on the list of priorities.

Those are big major challenges for the Lebanese Christians; however, the Christian history, and in particular the history of the Maronites, has never been at any time easier than what it is nowadays. Yet, the Christians were able to triumph and benefit from certain turns in history and some favorable circumstances to achieve gains that safeguarded their continuity and capability to develop their skills and move from a state of defense for survival to a period of interaction with the peoples of the Arab Levant and leave an impact on the course of their civilization. It is important to stress on and point to the role played by the Christian Lebanese immigrants during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the most part of the twentieth century to support the project of creating Greater Lebanon and defend it whenever it was threatened.

A. The Demographic Fallback (second session)

The basic challenge that threatens the effectual Christian presence in Lebanon in particular, and in both the Near and the Middle East in general, is the demographic fallback and consequently the decrease in the percentage of the Christians with respect to the total population count. It is self-evident that this demographic fallback would reflect negatively on their role, their effectiveness, their presence, and their impact on the goings-on in the various sectors of the Lebanese public life in general. The percentage of the Christian Lebanese according to the 1920 census was higher than that of the Moslem one (55% Christians and 45% Moslems); nowadays, that percentage has changed dramatically and became 65% for the Moslem sects and 35% only for the Christian sects altogether.

The most significant factors that led to the fast Christian demographic fallback in an unusual manner are three: the intensive emigration of the Christians, the fallback in the birthrate among the Christian families, and the 1994 Naturalization Decree.

1. Emigration:

Emigration was the principle factor that led to a fallback in the growth of the Lebanese Christian population; especially because the return of the emigrants decreased in time, and the concern of the Lebanese immigrants to register their children grew less and less. On the other hand, the Lebanese Moslem immigrants seem to express greater attachment to both issues than the Christians do; they hold on strongly to their national identity and to the

links with their homeland and their villages, as well as to an interest in the political, economic, and developmental affairs. Many Moslem religious leaders and men of thought, since the thirties, the eighties, and the nineties of the twentieth century, have pointed to this issue and bet on its role in tipping off the balance sooner or later.

The causes of emigration were and still are economic in the first place. Many contemporaries of the first immigration waves relate that the greater percentage of the immigrants, up to the beginning of WWI, were keen on returning to their homeland to buy property and build "brick-roofed" houses as an expression of their achieved prosperity and success in the countries of their immigration. However, the long absence from Lebanon caused by the war, in addition to the long distances, as well as the continued economic straits which escalated at the end of the twenties and the beginning of the thirties due to an international crisis, all were factors that led to the loss of the strong bonds with the homeland. All and notwithstanding the regulations in effect in the countries of immigration that strictly forbade carrying two nationalities.

Furthermore, the war that erupted in Lebanon in 1975 and lasted till 1990, added a security cause that contributed to the multiplication of the number of emigrants, especially following the displacement of whole Christian towns and villages in the southern suburbs of Beirut (Haret Horeyck, Mraijeh, Tehwitat al-Ghadir...), the Bekaa, North Lebanon, Mount Lebanon, the region east of Sidon, and others. After the war ended, another reason caused a new wave of emigration and that was the Syrian hegemony over Lebanon, which tightened the grip on the Christian elites and cadres in the Christian political parties due to their opposition to Syria. That was a reason for many Christian Lebanese youth to emigrate for good; while on the other hand, the non-Christians held on strongly to the homeland despite the economic straits even after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the absence of a political pretext.

2. The fallback in birthrates among the Christian families:

This fallback was due basically to social reasons related to the civil life of consumption that swept most of the regions and milieus with a Christian majority in particular after the surge in the migration from the countryside to the cities during the forties, fifties, and sixties of the twentieth century. That migration led to a significant decrease in the birthrate caused by the life style prevalent in cities and along the coastal region where agricultural communities, distinguished by a high birthrate, faded gradually. On the other hand, improvement in the level of education, both at the school and at the university levels, led to amelioration in the standard of living causing as well a rise in the cost of living, which led many Christian families to adopt the choice

of less number of children for a better standard of living. In contrast, the Moslem families in Lebanon, and they are country people in their majority, have a high birthrate reaching sometimes thirty or even thirty eight children of one father but more than one female spouse.

In addition to the social causes for the rise in birthrate among the Moslem families, there are the strategies adopted by the Shiite communities during the sixties, the seventies, and the eighties, and among the Sunni communities during the nineties and the first decade of the twenty first century, strategies that strongly encourage child birth. The political parties and currents in both Moslem sects still apply that strategy based on the huge social and financial assistance they are offered by the oil countries.

3. The 1994 Naturalization Decree:

Very simply, the unfair and illegal 1994 Naturalization Decree, which granted the Lebanese nationality to more than one hundred thousand Sunnis, thirty to forty thousand Shiites, and only forty thousand Maronites, caused a serious demographic imbalance. Even more serious was the distribution of the newly naturalized citizens in the electoral districts and regions of a Christian majority such as the Caza of Zahlé thus changing its identity and consequently controlling its political decision. It is superfluous to say that the naturalized Moslems were not members of an educated community that could live in harmony with the Christian communities and pursue the same rate in child birth; on the contrary, birthrate among those communities still reaches record rates.

B. The interference of Iran and the Gulf states in the Lebanese affairs, and the lack of attention on the part of the Western world (third session)

Even long before the Sunni-Shiite conflict intensified at the level of both the Near and the Middle East, a strong hidden dispute erupted between the Sunni countries on the one hand and the Shiite Iranian state allied with Syria controlled by the strong Alawite grip on the other. That was regardless of the fact that the Alawite sect, historically a Shiite branch, is a small minority compared with the Syrian Sunni population. That dispute reflected in a competition between them to promote and fortify their positions waiting for the confrontation that today, it seems, they had both expected and prepared for one way or another. Notwithstanding that both parties realize they could not escape it for ever.

Since the beginning of the eighties at least, Lebanon has been one of the major areas contested over. In preparation for the major immanent conflict, both parties started to compete over both of the basic strategic factors: encourage childbirth rate among the corresponding sects and buy land lots in Lebanon owned by the Christians who were first considered to be the major landlords, and second

because the Christians were suffering from weight loss due to displacement, destruction, and internal strifes among their leaders, and third because they were neglected by all countries in the world basically the Western world whose countries couldn't care less about Lebanon but were concerned more about their interests with the oil countries and with Israel thus neglecting all what might have negative repercussions on those two files. Within this framework, it is important to emphasize that in contrast a high concern, was and still is, expressed by the Sunni and the Shiite countries towards their Lebanese allies at the political, military, financial, economic, and social levels, in addition to the huge budgets that exceed one billion dollars that have been donated annually to each of the two parties over the past thirty years. The Western world, on the other hand, totally ignores the Lebanese Christian issue and the Lebanese Christian community because those are complex issues which require major efforts and probably at a high cost, resulting perhaps in some embarrassment towards the oil countries that feel absolutely no embarrassment when they offer all kinds of support and assistance to one single Lebanese community.

Within this context, there is a dire need to highlight the fact that the percentage of land sales has reached a serious level. Some Christian owned land lots in the southern suburbs of Beirut, regions east of Sidon, in addition to some regions in the North have been confiscated then bought. The confessional identity of all those regions changed from having been one hundred percent Christian to ninety percent non-Christian within few years. Furthermore, buying out Christian owned land lots by oil countries expanded to reach regions that have so far been inhabited by a Christian majority. Construction sites have already begun in Furn al-Shebbak, Ayn al-Remmaneh, Achrafieh, and other Christian suburbs of Beirut, and apartments in those new construction projects are being sold to non-Christians after the contractors bought the land from the original owners at fanciful prices compared to the rates current in those regions.

The Sunni and the Shiite oil countries are deeply involved in financing the operations of buying Christian owned land lots while the Western world totally neglects the Lebanese cause altogether. Those oil countries also continue to offer substantial financial assistance to social, educational, and health organizations. All that is reflected on the purchase capacity of the non-Christians after massive amounts of money have been pumped into the economic cycle of the non-Christian communities in Lebanon, which explains the escalation of the economic crisis that the Christians in Lebanon suffer from, and which eventually leads to the continuous emigration of the Christian youth from Lebanon, in addition to other social crises.

C. The implantation or the permanent settlement of the Palestinian refugees (fourth session)

Resulting from the complexities of the regional situation in the Middle East or the local situation in Lebanon, in addition to the deterioration in the international interest in the Lebanese cause, and the foregrounding of the interest of the Hebrew state in contrast to all other issues in the Middle East on the agendas of the capitals of the international decision mainly the USA and the EU, there remains a persistent international endeavor on the part of the international community, which is an eternal threat to Lebanon represented by the implantation of the Palestinian refugees on Lebanese territories. The international communities express their tiredness of the consequences of that cause and have not been able to find a just solution for since 1948; hence, the international community has been looking for the easier solution to the problem, which is keeping the Palestinian refugees wherever they were, and getting them to assimilate into the communities where they live, and annulling their right to return to the cities and towns where from the were expelled when the state of Israel was created.

Regardless whether it were possible to reach a final solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict based on that policy since there are other factors that could impede the implementation of that solution on the long run, Lebanon is certainly unable, under any pretext, to absorb the Palestinian refugees found on its territories. Besides, any attempt to that effect would definitely destabilize the Lebanese entity, and seriously threaten the Christian presence in Lebanon. Besides, this small country does not have the capacity, whether with respect to its area, its raw materials, or its economic capabilities to endure such an unjust measure; besides, Lebanon suffers from high population density and high serious unemployment rate.

1. Politically:

The implantation of about four hundred thousand Palestinians, which is almost ten percent the population of Lebanon, will tip off what has been left of the demographic balance among the Lebanese communities. Following the Naturalization decree and the policies adopted during the past two decades which led to the weakening of the Christian role, implantation of the Palestinian refugees will represent a major challenge or in fact a serious danger that requires the collaboration of all efforts to resist and impede its implementation.

The Lebanese constitution clearly rejects implantation in its preamble; all Lebanese political parties of all religious sects also express their rejection of the implantation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. However, such apprehension is twofold:

On the one hand, the international community does not seem capable of coming up with a solution other than the implantation of the refugees in the countries where they happen to be trying constantly to circumlocute, and close the eyes to the rejection of such a solution raised by the Lebanese as well as the Palestinians and some Arab capitals. Day after day, we realize that this implantation solution is a fixed item on the agendas of the international communities concerned with the peace process in the Middle East.

On the other hand, the Palestinians seem tired and hopeless of reaching a just and comprehensive solution for their cause. Regardless of the desperate conditions of the life of some of them, mainly residents of refugee camps all over Lebanon, and the fact that the international community is supposed to bear responsibility towards those refugees specially after an international resolution safeguarded the creation of the state of Israel in 1984 thus causing the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, we witness a vast trend among the Palestinians living in Lebanon, in particular the financial and social elites, to totally integrate into the Lebanese society through acquiring certain rights to practice free professions, own property, and even acquire the Lebanese nationality. Needless to say that such a trend can at the very least signify permanent settlement or implantation.

2. Economically:

In addition to the above mentioned political considerations, giving the Palestinians the right to own property in Lebanon and practice the free professions restricted to the Lebanese, despite the fact that the negative economic repercussions of such rights would affect the Moslem community in the first place because of their openness unto the Palestinian milieus, granting the Palestinians all the above-mentioned rights will eventually lead to a general economic disaster which the Christians would not be able to escape due to the eventual rise in unemployment, in the cost of land, and in housing property. At the least, that would lead to the in-pour of thousands of lawyers, engineers, architects, and medical doctors to the job market, and to the need for about thirty housing apartments. Just imagine then the negative impact of all of that on a country that already suffers from high population density in comparison with its surroundings and mainly with the most densely populated countries. A comparative statistical data is available at the following website:

3. Culturally:

The implantation of a number of Palestinians in Lebanon, whose number is more than ten percent Lebanese population, would have serious repercussions on the Lebanese cultural identity; especially if we take into consideration that that percentage is bound to rise when we deduct the

number of Lebanese immigrants who still carry the Lebanese identity and whose number is around one million. Eventually, a serious transformation would take place in the Lebanese identity, or rather a threat to its culture, customs, traditions, style of life, and other characteristics of the Lebanese civilization.

4. Security-wise:

Regardless to say that the Palestinian refugee cause has as well negative dimensions and repercussions on the security plane. The Palestinian organizations whether inside the camps or outside are still armed; this presents a concealed pretext for Hezbollah to hold on to its arms claiming they are used for confronting Israel. Moreover, the Palestinian refugee camps all over Lebanon are the asylum for fundamental Islamic organizations and other groups of unknown identity and affiliation and even to criminals and fugitives running away from Lebanese justice. All round tables and dialogue meetings among the Lebanese have not yet succeeded in finding a solution to that crisis.

D. The absence of a clear vision for the future (fifth session)

Despite the big challenges that face the Christians, it seems that the Christian leaders, in general, are busy with issues other than the vital ones. First and foremost is the enlarged decentralization stated in the Taef Accord. So far, no party has yet presented a clear proposal regarding that matter; next is a law that should facilitate reclaiming the Lebanese nationality, and redressing the Naturalization law which tipped off the balance and speeded the process of demographic disproportion among the Lebanese communities. The Christian leaderships and organizations, and we can no more talk of Christian political parties since real democracy has now become far from this framework, seem to restrict their concern to the issue of preparing for the 2013 parliamentary elections, to be followed by the presidential elections in 2014.

Here, it is fair to state that the deterioration of the Christian situation is mainly the responsibility of the political, cultural, social, and educational elites who have not, despite the withdrawal of the Syrian army eight years ago, been able to crystallize a political, social, or economic project capable of drawing a clear road map for the future of Lebanon and the future of the Lebanese and all the religious communities that constitute it. However, that responsibility is not restricted to the Lebanese in general or the Christian residents in Lebanon in particular, but it is equally the responsibility of their emigrant compatriots, especially those who could influence the decisions made in the countries of their immigration regarding the Middle East.

During the past years and decades, the Lebanese immigrants have played a significant role in offering financial and social assistance to their families and

parents. In many cases, they played important roles on the political level and succeeded in influencing the international meetings and assemblies to protect Lebanon against some policies that tended to disregard its rights. Yet, we need to preserve that interest and place it within the framework of clear and serious institutions and initiatives.
