
Speech delivered by
The Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants
Gebran Bassil

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"Supporting the Rights of Christians,
and Particularly in the Middle East"
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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Pope Jean Paul II once said that Lebanon was more than a country, it was a message. Obviously, Lebanon has proven to be an idea, a nice one of tolerance and coexistence, and we are proud to be here carrying these values to the whole world. Our aim is to bring to you our testimony, a live experience from a region swinging between violence and dialogue. Lebanon can be, in its role and daily living, a determining factor in turning it, either to an extremism-exporting region, or a model of moderation and diversity to be cloned.

Today, I am glad to be offered the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience on a topic that relates to the very essence of my country.

Lebanon is the historical cradle for diversity. It is, in the Middle East, the only place where all social components regardless of their belief, their religion or their language are interacting positively, and are theoretically engaged in an equitable power-sharing thus adding value to the already rich cultural melting pot.

At this juncture, the Middle East at large, and Lebanon in particular, seem to be particularly stuck at the crossroads of violent extremism that has been trying to destabilize our region for ages. Daech and its affiliates are just another version of these oppressing waves that have targeted minorities, especially Christians, in the region. Haven't we witnessed over the years authoritarian empires, forcefully moving populations and savagely eradicating communities in their entirety?

2015 marks the 100th commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, and the mass deportation of millions of individuals on the grounds of nothing but their religious belief. That year also witnessed the famine attack that was launched on Mount

Lebanon by the Ottoman Empire. This methodical starvation resulted in the death of one third of our population, amongst whom 2000 individuals from my home city, and another third was obliged to flee the country and to move to different parts of the world, mainly in Latin America. It happens that I am coming back from a tour visiting ten cities where our emigrated populations had chosen to settle.

This is to remind you that the emergence of the Daech doctrine is not a new phenomenon in the region; and that Lebanon has historically represented a freedom haven for all those oppressed. This is the essence of our country; this is the spirit of our nation; this is the substance of our existence since contemporary Lebanon first emerged as a nation-state, in the aftermath of the cataclysmic and bloody end of the Ottoman Empire. Since then, the Christians in Lebanon played a profound buffer role between different Muslim sects in the region, and between the north and south shores of the Mediterranean.

Lebanon nowadays is at the forefront of the battle against terrorist organizations committing crimes of war and crimes against humanity. We feel abandoned by the rest of the world, which is only paying lip service to the necessity of protecting Christians and defending them. We cannot believe that a coalition of 60 countries is not preventing the occurrence of the following facts (which are characterized by their gravity, their scale, their magnitude and their geographical extent):

1. In Iraq, the Christians decreased from more than one million 20 years ago, to 400 thousand in the beginning of 2014, and then to sharply less than 200 thousand now. In Palestine, Christians in Nazareth and Bethlehem decreased in the last decade from more than 85 % and 90 % to less than 12 % and 4 % respectively.
2. The violence against places of worship has worryingly increased, as more than 500 Christian places were targeted and more than 200 were totally destroyed.
3. Firsthand accounts report cases of collective rape, as violence against women has become both a weapon for intimidation and a practice of collective punishment.
4. Trafficking of women and children has become characteristic of the regions falling under the authority of Daech, and first hand witnesses' accounts report the distribution of price lists of human beings sold on slaves' markets.

5. The systematic mass deportation of Christian and Yazidi communities, in areas under the control of terrorists, where houses belonging to members of the Christian communities were marked with the distinctive "N" sign, with reference to "Nassara" –an old word for the early Christians-. In July 2014, 200 thousand Iraqi Christians, in their historical cradle, Mosul, were offered the choice between renouncing their religion and adopting Islam, remaining Christians and paying the dime, or leaving the region. Few hundreds were killed, all the others were forcefully deported. This was not considered as unbearable and unacceptable by the international community, nor did the international justice machine operate, which encouraged the terrorists to go far more.
6. Only last week, 21 Egyptian Christians in Libya were decapitated, more than 200 Syrian Christians in North East of Syria were abducted, and 20 Assyrian villages were massively attacked. More than 5000 Syrian Christians in the same region were forcefully deported, and one of the oldest churches in Syria in Tall Hermez was destroyed.

In the meantime, the abduction of two Orthodox bishops almost two years ago, is still under silence with no sign of serious measures taken against the states responsible for that symbolic crime.

Despite all these shocking examples, we should not limit ourselves to the verbal denunciation of these crimes. We cannot just accuse these terrorist groups of being intolerant, fanatic and criminal. We cannot only say that these organizations deny any right to be different, that they silence all discordant voices, and deny the inalienable rights to all freedoms.

Daech is much bigger a threat. It has the ambition to reconstruct the political landscape in the Middle East and refashion its identity while moving rapidly towards Europe and the rest of the world. In openly pursuing the objective of establishing a State, Daech is reshaping the region politically, through imposing the following approach:

- a- Destruction of the States' institutions and Weakening of the States' authority by hitting at their lack of legitimacy;
- b- Exhaustion of the national armed forces in maneuvering direct confrontation with mobile terrorist units;

- c- Ethnic cleansing and mass deportation with a view to imposing the sectarian homogeneous State as the single model of Statehood in the Middle East, alongside with the promised Jewish state of Israel.

This is the expression of a subtle political strategy of expansion and domination, which carries the most dangerous threats posed by Daech to international peace and security. Mass deportation and forced movement of population and methodical displacement of communities are not the simple result of a fanatic equation; Radicalism, takfirism, salafism and other dark ideologies are only tools to serve the political strategy which goal is to redesign the Middle East into entities colliding with each other based on their differences in religions, confessions and sects, rather than opening to each other's differences in open societies and wider borders.

Nevertheless, Daech is now engaged in a zero sum game. In response to its spread of fanatic sectarianism, the fire has started at ends as well, and Daech's strategy is to keep on fueling it. The voices of extremism from all sides have taken the lead over those of moderation. At each end of the sectarian divide, fanatics are trying to rise in different forms; militias in our region, and PEGIDA-like groups here. Fears are of domino effects that would reach all the Middle East, and the world at large, and the Mediterranean would not be any more a basin of diverse humanity.

The Arab world has failed to react firmly to Daech and its ideology, as if the basic ingredients for coexistence were suddenly made unavailable, paving the way for the blooming of homogeneously sectarian States. In parallel, Israel has led down this sectarian path. In doing so, the clash is inevitable: a clash of religions and civilizations, where humanity, and particularly its moderates, are paying the price.

- The engagement of military forces in the battle against Daech is certainly essential. Meanwhile, military action, on its own, is not sufficient.
- Putting an end to the impunity of the perpetrators and their sponsors and bringing them to justice is undoubtedly necessary. The credibility of the International Criminal Justice is at stake. If it fails to act, it will be hard for it to recover.
- Preserving the existing institutions, despite their deficiencies. They remain a landmark which is preferable to the chaos that threatens to fill the gap .

In order to avoid seeing the entire Middle East slipping towards the abyss, losing the very essence of its nature, all efforts should be focused on maintaining the diversity.

The coexistence of various social, ethnic, linguistic and religious components is a source of wealth.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The fight against terrorism requires a comprehensive counter offensive, which takes into account the military, cultural, and demographic challenges. It would be a mistake to keep on restricting our approach to the protection of minorities in general, and of Christians in particular, in the Middle East, to the humanitarian aspect of their predicament. Compassion, though commendable, is definitely not the most appropriate way for dealing with the dangers that all of us are facing.

Middle Eastern Christians are actually the best guarantee, not to say the only one, for avoiding the transformation of the region into a launching pad for global terrorism. Only their effective presence alongside with their full political role, not a symbolic one, will preserve the Middle East from major sectarian reshuffling as orchestrated by Daech and Israel. Would the Christian population be forced to move away gradually from the Middle East, Christianity, in its essence, will be threatened. If such plans are successful, the geopolitical balance of the region will fall apart. The current fragile equilibrium is quite likely to give way to chaotic scenarios that will certainly jeopardize Russian interests in the Region. Russia has the interest and the moral obligation to maintain equilibrium and diversity. In fact, Russia along its history, has played a role in protecting the rights of existence in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Middle Eastern Christians are rooted in their part of the world. This is where we come from and this is where we intend to stay. We actually know how to deal with our Muslim brothers. We have been living side by side for centuries and we have developed, together, a *modus operandi* between our communities. Middle Eastern societies need the Christians in the region for the cross-fertilizing role they have always played, generating positive reciprocal interferences amongst all social and religious groups.

Is it our fate to remain abandoned or is it not time for the international community to act firmly in order to protect the rights of the minorities, and of the Christians in the *Mashreq*.

We have heard a lot about the "responsibility to protect" doctrine. R2P had become the motto of international affairs during the past decade. It seems that it has faded,

that it has become less fashionable. We have witnessed more recently a significant rise in unilateral interventions in foreign conflicts. We believe that the Middle East has no room for unilateral actions. The responsibility to protect falls under the control of the Security Council of the United Nations. Isn't it time for this forum to assume its responsibilities and to take action in the Middle East?

If time has not come yet for the light to appear, then obscurity, from inside, will be even darker and the stone will split in two, causing the shaking and trembling of the whole humanity.