

Intervento dell'Ambasciatrice dal Libano S.E.Mira Daher

COMMISSIONE AFFARI ESTERI DEL SENATO

27 OTTOBRE 2020

Signor Presidente, Signori Senatori,

è per me un grande onore essere davanti a voi e vi ringrazio molto per l'invito che mi avete rivolto.

Permettetemi ora di continuare il mio discorso in inglese:

First i would like to congratulate the Italian Government for all the measures taken during the Covid 19 times and to praise the tremendous efforts exerted by the health and medical services to face this pandemic. The transparency practiced by the Italian authorities was exceptional. Keeping everybody fully informed, us as Foreign Missions, as well as the Italian people was so unique to Italy and very much appreciated. All our prayers go to the families of those who have lost their loved ones, and our best wishes for a quick recovery for the sick ones.

Wishing everyone a good health and awaiting for the new wave to end soon, without any casualties, is what we hope for at this moment.

This Pandemic will leave its marks on the history of humanity and its devastating results worldwide, on the economy, tourism, education, unemployment, just to state a few, and let us hope to witness the light at the end of the tunnel in the near future.

Availing myself of this opportunity, my utmost gratitude goes to the Italian Government, and all the ministries concerned, especially the Farnesina and the Ministry of defense, the Embassy of Italy in Lebanon, the UNIFIL, the Italian NGOs, the Italian media, and all the Italian people, for standing with us fully, from the first moment of the devastating explosion of Beirut's port on the 4th of August 2020, that left 200 people dead, thousands of injured, hundreds of thousands of houses totally or partially destroyed, hundreds of thousands of families displaced, major hospitals demolished, hundreds of schools (both public and private) severely damaged, businesses of all kinds lost.

With an already overburdened economy and rising unemployment, the Lebanese people started protesting in the streets asking for economic reforms, and early elections. The government resigned, a new one was formed, only to face a new impasse: the Covid 19. Lebanon reaction to this pandemic was exemplary, both at the social and medical level. The Government imposed a very necessary total lockdown of the country internally and externally.

It aggravated the economic crisis, but saved lots of lives. Then came the Beirut explosion on August 4, 2020, considered to be the worst non nuclear explosion in the history of humanity, destroying half of the city, and plummeting the economy totally.

The main reason for the explosion was the presence of 2750 tonnes of ammonium nitrates stored unsafely in the port of Beirut for more than 6 years.

An investigation is still in place, culprits are to be identified and put to trial.

The then seven months government resigned under the protesters pressure, an attempt to form a new Government did not succeed, and few days ago Prime Minister Hariri was renominated by the parliament to form a government. We hope it will be declared shortly.

These are one of the darkest moments in the history of Lebanon, and we could not have done it after the catastrophic blast without the assistance of friends like you. So a big thank you from the heart.

Helping others is in the core of the Italian culture, they are the best when it comes to being there for the people and to establishing peace; the UNIFIL is the most successful example for us. The world needs more givers like you to become safer. Grazie Italia.

I have been asked by your esteemed committee to talk about the actual developments in Lebanon and to give an insight of the intertwined reasons, nationally, regionally and internationally, that led to the very complicated situation we are witnessing these days.

I will be brief and concise, for I would like to benefit the most from your questions which I will answer gladly.

I consider Italy to be a safety net for Lebanon, not only for being our first trade partner, but for many other justified reasons.

Our common worry nowadays is mainly Terrorism. It is a fight that we are all leading together.

Terrorism is:

*lurking on us all;

*has no space, place or time;

*has no norms or guidance, to be studied in order to avoid it.

*has no race, color or Religion

*a phenomenon endangering all those who live in peace.

*targeting you, me, our children and families without any distinction and for no obvious reason.

*Traveling dangerously around the world with many faces, on a planet that became one small village.

*a terrorist nowadays move as a lonely wolf, which increases the scope of insecurity.

*using social media as the main tool to spread dangerous ideas of all sort.

*Fake news is the new destructive weapon.

*The new Pandemophobias of this era are Extremism,Fanaticism,Radicalism,Fundamentalism, stating only few.

Terrorism did not find a place in Lebanon

Lebanon,as you all know, is Situated in the Middle East,with an area of 10452 km², bordered by Syria to the North and North East,Israel to the South,and the Mediterranean sea to the West.(I am locating lebanon for you to figure out the extremely difficult environment we live in,internally and regionally).It has 5.5 million people,in a multi confessional model made of an amalgam of 18 confessions officially recognized(a confession is not a religion),a multiparty system with tens of political parties active on ground.

A Lebanon,worn out by 15 years of civil war,and by proxy ones,overburdened with a load of refugees(almost 2 millions),yet terrorism did not succeed to settle in and to grow.It had been completely vanquished and totally eradicated,despite the extremely difficult economic conditions,considered to be one of the main essence to growing terrorism.

How?by being true to ourselves and making it clear to them that they were not welcome by any Lebanese,and were immediately fought by each one of us;fierce battles were fought by our exceptionally robust Lebanese Army,and an extensive war is declared on them anytime they reappear.

Being an amalgam of parties and religions,no majority succeeded to impose itself on others,even democratically.A combination of many minorities,shifting alliances has constantly been the political game,keeping the results of all players at the level of a “zero sum game”,or no winner,no loser.

Many would consider this as our weakness,for me it is our strength.I compare it to the rules practiced at the General Assembly of the United Nations:One Country,One Vote ,regardless of the size of the country;It is a unique model of a beautiful mosaic,in which the tiniest pieces are needed to achieve the big picture,yet so complexed to be recreated.

Interesting facts:

*In Lebanon we do not COEXIST with each other;we simply EXIST together.

*In Lebanon we do not try to understand the other ,because the other is me.

*You can rarely find a family that is not a total mixture of many confessions,celebrating festivities together,under one roof,without even realizing how special this is,since it is done so naturally .

*Tolerance,acceptance,understanding,these words are not key words for us,because we have a unique built in mode of living that surpassed them by far.

*your liberty stops where mine begins.

*No belief is allowed to be better than the other; respect is the base for total harmony.

*we defend each other because we totally believe in each other.

*As Pope John Paul said about the Unique Lebanon: It is more than a country it is a message.

I mentioned all this in order to describe a simple reality, that many are not able to witness about Lebanon, due to the media role that focuses on all the negative aspects, instead of highlighting the beauty of this harmony. Understandable, for international media covers hot areas, and this is why on the other hands we have been pioneering the news for the last decades.

Refugees, displaced and migrant issues:

Why did Lebanon witness drawbacks in its history and why this free fall now, and how crucial is Italy's role for us?

Any simple observer for the sequence of events since 2011 would have predicted this economic collapse in Lebanon. The unfair International Foreign Policy which has been implemented on Lebanon based on erroneous information helped the development of the economic crises. I would like to emphasize on how crucial Italy's role would have been to change the outcome, specially in the foreign policy of the European Union, and that of the Agencies involved in Lebanon, if facts were given their face value.

1) The Syrian case:

I have been watching cases about the migration issues in Europe in general and in Italy in particular, and for sure Italy has one of the highest level of compassion in the region pertaining to the migrants, however, the debate, always is:

should we or shouldn't we receive them?

how many can we afford to have in our country and on what basis?

do we have enough shelters for them?

Shall we put them together or rather scatter them not to form ghettos?

Are they integrating in our societies?

Is it about sovereignty or international law when it comes to human rights?

Who is allowed to decide and what basis? the interest of my country and or in compliance with the international community?

And here we are talking about countries in Europe! About fully institutionalized countries, able to apply rules and regulations, about countries not constantly suffering from internal and regional wars, with a destroyed infrastructure, getting loans to rebuild, only to be destroyed again, even before finishing the first loan.

Developed countries receive migrants according to their capacities to cope with, and very rarely accept a case of political asylum.

Each migrants' case is studied thoroughly before approving the stay, otherwise the migrants will be returned to his country of origin, and the numbers of those who receive the approval are very limited.

Now I will explain Lebanon's case :

*Can you tell me, in any developed country what is the biggest number of migrants that you were bale to receive at once?

*In Italy, did you ever receive 15 million migrants at once, or did you ever live in a density of 1500 persons per km², while your own economy was already struggling so hard and unemployment reaching its peak for years?

*Where you ever sanctioned by the International community for not being able to repay your debts while being compelled to pay for the existence of almost the number of your population, without any real help, because of the sanctions, and yet if you don't abide you will be sanctioned even more?

*what would you have said to the International community when the migrants staying in your country, and that you received at the beginning of their war compassionately, but then a year became a decade, a crisis become a status, and it is a fact that the security back home is better than yours, that employment in their home country more available, but being helped with money by NGO's, directly, is more beneficial than any work they will do back home?

*How can you justify to your own people that unskilled and cheap labour, is competing with your people, without even paying taxes or spending one penny in your country?

*How can you explain that they can afford to 9 and 10 kids, with no resources, while in a tent, yet the international community will accuse you of racism if you ask this question because they want to convince all the sponsoring countries that these people are in serious danger back home?

*How can their going back and forth to their country be justified, if they are in great danger?

*How can you Be persecuted politically in your country, yet you will be the 1st to stand in line to vote for the president who is endangering your life?

*How can their embassy get the approval to legalize their personal papers, if they are wanted in their country?

Nowadays it has been common knowledge that these refugees are economic ones, and they have a network of illegal workers lobbying among each other ,posing imminent threats even to our social strata ,yet the international community insist on considering them as refugees in danger to keep their projects going on.

What human rights and compassion allow a developed country, where you have long time refugees from your own country denied their stay ,and sent back home along with their children who don't even speak their mother tongue, because the refugee you hosted is taking his place (regional quota)?

All the above and much more ,lebanon has been living with the International community since the war erupted in Syria in 2011.

Unlike our neighboring countries, Syrians are scattered all over Lebanon; our ties are very strong. We received them with compassion and understanding; but a refugee needs to go back home and live with dignity. Instead they are encouraged by the International community (for some mysterious reasons) to stay where they are. How are refugee assessment policy taken and on what basis in Europe and internationally is to be asked.

2) The Palestinian case:

Another example, In 1948 Israel decided simply to declare its own state and to replace the Palestinian people in their historical land and asked them to go and find a new one to take from others, the way they did.

So Palestinians found themselves overnight homeless, stateless, statusless, invading their neighboring countries, trying to find a shelter, and to understand the meaning of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was created, ironically in response to the "barbarous acts which (...) outraged the conscience of humankind" during world war II. The 3 pillars of this declaration are: **Freedom, Justice and peace.**

Charles Malik, our Lebanese Representative to the United Nations then, was the President of the Commission on Human Rights.

So Lebanon, the newly independent country (22 November 1943) had to receive since hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Refugees as of 1948.

Lebanon found itself suddenly responsible for one of the most select people in the region, denied its right to return to its country.

Not accepting such an unacceptable injustice, the Palestinians tried to find the closest place to create a base of resistance, to use it as a platform to fight Israel.

Lebanon was the closest (not to forget Jordan).

The so known double standards of the International Community and the United Nations, they decided to ignore this Palestinian Right of Return, and instead established the UNRWA in 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programs for Palestinian refugees. One year after evicting a whole population, they started calling them Refugees; and the International Community instead of denouncing these inhuman behavior, was finding adjustments. (Surely some countries protested, but didn't make a big difference). And who paid the price? The Palestinians for sure and Lebanon and Jordan, mainly. The price by having them as refugees, trying to understandably get back their country, started their fight from Lebanon, and the International community used our land by proxy whether with them or against them. And The righteous Israel invaded Lebanon on and on, destroying our infrastructure and economy, because their security (as if ours was very safe!) was endangered resulting from the unjust situation they created, but blamed the Lebanese for it! Adding to all these stated problems, aid to the UNRWA stopped recently, and this money is so badly needed for the survival of the Palestinians, already suffering from bad conditions of living. This our 2d case with

the refugees and the International Community, and it was Italy, this peace loving country, which interferes to restore security, interfered with its forces to secure the borders between the 2 countries through Italcon from 1982 until 1984 and The United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (known as UNIFIL) from 1978 until now.

Italy and its major role in establishing Peace in Lebanon:

Art 11 of the Italian Constitution states the following:

Italy rejects war as an instrument of aggression against the freedom of other peoples and as a means for the settlement of international disputes. Italy agrees, on conditions of equality with other States, to the limitations of sovereignty that may be necessary to a world order ensuring peace and justice among the Nations. Italy promotes and encourages international organisations furthering such ends.

Nothing could be more meaningful than this article, in the core of the Italian constitution and its strive to maintain not only internal peace, but world peace as well. And in Lebanon, I can tell you very clearly, that Italy has fully succeeded in that. With wars erupting so easily in different parts of the world, Multilateral peace operations have become a necessary tool of international politics.

If I am asked to give one reason to keep the UNIFIL in Lebanon, I would simply say to maintain peace and stability in the region, and not only in Lebanon.

True, the UNIFIL is the security valve of the area; by keeping them, security in the world will be preserved.

Today, not one country is safe enough when another country is in war, no matter how far geographically they are. Ideologies, media, power, recognition everything could endanger the situation if not well controlled.

Italy's peacekeeping practice, in harmony with the local population and the Italian tradition of peacekeeping grounded on neutrality and comprehensive dialogue.

Our gratefulness and utmost respect goes to all those who served in Lebanon, all those who lost their lives there, and a special thank you to all those who were key people in maintaining peace in very difficult circumstances.

So let me close this topic by being realistic:

Europe has a serious and difficult situation to face in the form of migrants assembling on its borders. Lebanon was able to pull miracles until the 4th of August 2020, to keep your shores safe. But with the apocalyptic explosion of Beirut's port, and the total collapse of the economy of Lebanon, it will be very difficult not to see the flux of migrants arriving in masses.

for this to be avoided the International Community should be rushing to participate in the rebuilding of Beirut, and a necessary investment in Lebanon, to halt the total crash, and to restart a functional economy again. By resuming our role, we can keep your shores safer.

On the other hand the international Community should have one target: on a humane basis and for everyone's benefit all the efforts should be to resettle them back in their respective countries. The refugees have to leave this status and regain that of citizens in their countries. What is the excuse to keep the Syrian for more than 10 years now, while it is common knowledge that only very few places in Syria are still not safe. Having a refugee crisis cannot be a permanent one, otherwise it will not be a crisis anymore.

Having said all that, it does not mean that our internal situation is not the major one responsible for the situation we are in now, but in my intervention I dealt with what could be avoided in the European foreign policy in general and the Italian one in particular, to help Lebanon in these extremely difficult moments.

I will briefly mention about the Maritime indirect discussions between Lebanon and Israel, The UN and the US as mediators. Let us wait and see, with all our wishes for Lebanon to start benefiting from its Gas and oil, and surely with our main Italian Company: Eni.

Thank you for your time and now I am ready for your questions.