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### **The Role of NDU in Challenging Times**

Today, we live in a world where shady political agendas on a global scale reign and uncounted atrocities abound. A quote that best describes this alarming situation says, “We live in an age where terrorism, madness, rage, chaos, and killing prevail.” The entire world reeks with the stench of blood and misery. Primitive barbarity is now on par with a new type of violence spurred by technological advances, blurring the line between these two evils. The world has rapidly degenerated into a systemic mess in which blind madness dictates the fate of humanity.

To try to understand a world devoid of sanity, we need to ask ourselves some hard questions: “Is humanity doomed to live an uncivilized and unbalanced existence, which is fueled by an inexplicable drive to kill one another? When did the staunch moral citizens of the world renounce their values and principles, and sink into a quagmire of immorality with no sign of recovery?”

This gloomy outlook weighs heavily on the minds of many philosophers and intellectuals. Our morally reprehensible world is particularly disturbing and requires us to tread carefully and remain on high alert. As educators — Administrators and Faculty — we are called upon to reflect inward to avoid falling into the trap of contributing, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to this sharp decline. For if we choose to ignore the present reality, we would be like an ostrich hiding its head in the sand, waiting for the danger to pass in the false hope that it will emerge unscathed.

Dear Friends,

Lebanon is but a mere drop in the ocean. We do not shape events; events shape us. Like countless other nations, we try to determine a direction to follow, but we lack a compass to guide us. Instead, we “sit on the wayside,” waiting for things to happen while the world around us crumbles into a sea of hostility, and the very earth moves beneath our feet.

In the case of our leaders, personal interests take precedence over national interests in the murky waters of politics. Here, we must remember what His Beatitude Patriarch Cardinal Bechara Boutros Rahi wrote in his first Annual Letter. He says, “Political rivalry is a natural and necessary phenomenon in any healthy democratic system. It is unacceptable, however, that political parties relentlessly seek to cause political fragmentation, and continue to illicitly share in the State’s assets and squander its resources.”

Our leaders thus far have come up against a brick wall, finding it seemingly impossible to form a new government, to enact a new electoral law, or to implement free, democratic parliamentary elections. By implication, this means that we are not qualified to lead this country.

Despite this looming reality, we must refrain from leveling accusations. Instead, we must honestly ask ourselves, “Who is to be held responsible for the current situation in Lebanon? When and why did we reach this critical state, which is negatively affecting all spheres of life: social, political, economic, and educational?”

At this juncture, I admit that we, leaders of educational institutions and particularly universities, are partly to blame for this crisis.

The truth, my friends, is that for nearly forty years, Lebanon has been plagued by a unique and complex predicament, which has adversely affected its role as an independent and civilized state. Today, we find that we are unable to build a nation, maintain a government, develop a viable economy, or live in harmony under the banner of national unity.

We have turned into a nation of feuding tribes and clans driven by a lust to kill whenever we are called to arms. Our television screens have become a showcase for accusations, rumors, and outright lies. Our educational institutions have been repeatedly smeared. These falsehoods at one point almost made us believe that, just maybe, we were impotent and incapable of building a nation.

Why are we responsible? My answer is three-fold.

**First**, since its inception as an independent entity, Lebanon has been entrusted with upholding a ‘civilized’ role in the region.

What does this mean? It means: freedom of expression, including the right to demonstrate; free press; free publication and media; liberal education, i.e. art and culture (theater, films, music, poetry, etc.); sports; and, of course, tourism for all seasons.

This role embodies the human journey par excellence, because according to Georges Duhamel, “If civilization is not in the inner self, it’s nowhere.”

Do we still maintain this role? Have others overtaken us? Have others taken advantage of our troubles by robbing us of our hard-earned position (and maybe rightly so)? Students from across the Middle East have always sought out universities in Lebanon, because our universities used to be a living and breathing example of free thought and innovation, and a dynamic stage for popular uprisings and calls for change. Does this unique characteristic still hold true today?

If we lose our role as the seat of culture, as a nation, and as a University, then we lose everything.

**Second**, Lebanon has existed as a country, which embraces diversity in all its forms: cultural, religious, social, and ethnic. God has bestowed upon us a nation set in spectacular natural beauty, and our strategic geographical location has been recognized for centuries as the gateway between the East and West. Countless others have believed in us and supported us across the ages. Pope John Paul II once said, “Lebanon is more than a country; it is a mission.”

In his second Annual Letter, Patriarch Rahi writes, “Based on the National Pact, Lebanon is not a religious state, it is a secular one. In other words, neither religion nor religious books such as the Bible or the Qur’an are used as a source of legislation.”

Dr. Charles Malek, a Lebanese scholar, says, “When Muslim-Christian equality ceases to exist in Lebanon, Lebanon will cease to exist.”

Given this diversity, where do we stand today? Doesn’t the threat of an impending exodus hang over the heads of all our communities day in and day out? We are presented with new road maps for the Middle East each day, which serve to further divide, destabilize, and weaken the region. In addition, we live under the threat of blind and widespread fundamentalism and extremism in every corner, both locally and regionally. Mutual respect is but a memory, an individual’s destiny becomes the property of the tyrant, sovereignty is shunned, and the rule of law is blatantly disobeyed.

As educational institutions, have we exerted ourselves to foster diversity instead of contributing toward its death and burial?

If universities lose their role in preserving and developing diversity, we lose Lebanon. Universities were established to bring together men and women, different beliefs, different political parties, different religions, different social classes, and different nationalities. Universities were founded to serve as an open forum for dialogue, discussion and interaction, and to provide again a venue for students to meet, learn, and get to know one another.

Dear Friends,

I reiterate, if we lose our role as a nation and as a University to preserve diversity and to respect plurality, we lose everything.

**Third**, we are responsible, because our faith in God makes us the children of faith. Christian churches, monasteries, and shrines, belfries and minarets, Muslim mosques, and Druze prayer-houses (*khalwat*) flourish in every Lebanese town and village from north to south and from the highest peaks down to the coastal regions. This unique demography raises the existentialist question: Are we true believers – in both word and deed – or mere religious fundamentalists?

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI declared 2013 the “Year of Faith.” Let us probe our conscience to find out whether we are true believers or not.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ asked us to love one another. He saved us all, without distinction, without exception.

The Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, convening in the Vatican City in 2010, announced, “Religious freedom is above all freedoms. It is, hence, vital to move from forgiveness to religious freedom. Religions can meet to serve the common good and to build society. Seek to live in union, respect, and brotherly communion with one another.”

The *Sura al-Imran (Verse 64)* of the Qur’an, says, “O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you—that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah.”

This is true faith, which is far removed from resentment, fundamentalism, and murderous identities.

If the University loses its role in deepening the Christian faith in the hearts of its administrators, faculty, staff, and students, then what would be its role and its future?

If we lose the battle to deepen our great faith — in our national role and in our role as a University — this nation would witness religious confessions, serving as a rallying point for warring camps in an atmosphere of pure hatred. Instead of defending human rights, we would end up defending the rights of confessions, which would ultimately lead to war. May God deliver our University and other universities and educational institutions from blind confessionalism. True faith must be preserved, for it is only through true faith that unity and human dignity can be achieved.

We live in a world dominated by chaos and death. We are invited, therefore, to join hands to triumph over hatred and violence, and to regain our three-dimensional role by:

- Preserving civilization in the region;
- Fostering human relations in terms of diversity and plurality;

- Deepening our faith in God so that He may guide us away from our selfish desires and lusts. We can truly be His children, united by His love, and guided toward the Good, the Just, and the Beautiful.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
Dear NDU Community Members,

This is my message today. I am not afraid, and I am willing to take a stand. As many of you are aware, we, as a University, are using all means in our power to initiate reform, maintain our high quality of education, and ultimately obtain institutional accreditation from one of the most recognized accrediting bodies in the world. I can assure you today that we are getting closer to our goal.

Yet, we carry a heavy burden due to the prevailing situation in our country and the entire region. I call upon you once again to join hands with us to save our University, to save our country, and I would not be exaggerating by also adding “to save the world,” for we are all responsible before God, before our conscience, and before humanity.

Today, we celebrate Founders’ Day. On this special occasion, which is an occasion of celebration and contemplation, I thank you all for your cooperation: the Maronite Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary, represented by Superior General Abbot Boutros Tarabay; the Order’s Supreme Council; Dr. François Bassil, President and members of the Board of Trustees; University administrators; faculty; staff; students; and alumni.

I firmly believe that God is always with us. May God bless you all.

Long live NDU! Long live Lebanon!