

"Monday Morning": Wednesday, March 17, 2010

MICHEL SLEIMAN IN SAUDI ARABIA NATIONAL UNITY, THE BEST RESPONSE TO ISRAELI THREATS



President Michel Sleiman received by King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia



The prime minister with the emir of Kuwait

Lebanese President Michel Sleiman made a two-day visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia last week. Coinciding with the presidential visit to the kingdom was a trip by Saad Hariri to Kuwait for talks with senior officials. At King Khaled International Airport, the president was received by King Abdallah bin Abdelaziz Al Saud.

The president was also received by Prince Nayef bin Abdelaziz, second deputy prime minister and interior minister; Prince Salman bin Abdelaziz, governor of the Riyadh Region; Minister of Social Affairs Dr. Yousuf bin Ahmad al-Othaimeen, minister of Social Affairs; Chief of Royal Protocol Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al-Tubaishi; Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal; Prince Mikren bin Abdelaziz, head of General Intelligence; Prince Turki bin Nasser bin Abdelaziz, general president of Meteorology and the Environment; Prince Dr. Mansour bin Miteb bin Abdelaziz, minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs; Prince Miteb bin Abdallah bin Abdelaziz, deputy commander of the National Guard for Executive Affairs; the Lebanese ambassador to Saudi Arabia and the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon; and other princes and senior officials. and other princes and officials. King Abdallah held a dinner in honor of the president and his accompanying delegation.

Later, President Sleiman and King Abdallah had talks focused on regional and international issues and Saudi-Lebanese relations.

The session was attended by Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdelaziz and other princes and senior officials.

During the talks, the two leaders stressed the necessity for the Arab countries to intensify their collaboration in order to reach the unity and solidarity of the Arab nation. They underlined as well the importance of the relations between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, the political and economic cooperation between the two countries, pointing out on this occasion that benefit should be drawn from the presence of Lebanon as a non-permanent member of the UN

Security Council in 2010 and 2011 to assist Arab countries.

President Sleiman, who was making his second visit to Saudi Arabia since his election in May 2008, visited during his stay King Abdallah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Jeddah, a world-class research institution.

The president could observe there the ultramodern equipment of the campus which stretches over 36 thousand square meters and is equipped with sophisticated laboratories and research centers. On the campus, Sleiman described the university as “a home of wisdom and a leading beacon of peace and hope”.

Addressing King Abdallah, he indicated that the monarch’s wager on “education in general and on higher education in particular is just and wise, emanating as it does from a deep conviction about how education will allow our societies to make a qualitative leap forward”, he said.

The president also met with members of the Lebanese community in the kingdom during the reception held in his honor at the embassy by Lebanese Ambassador General Marwan Zein. Addressing the Lebanese there, President Sleiman considered his visit to the kingdom “indispensable” as a means of coordinating efforts, discuss bilateral relations, including the developments of the Arab-Israeli peace process and the international issues, especially since Lebanon is a non permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2010-2011.

According to a statement issued by Baabda Palace, the president affirmed that his talks with King Abdallah turned on “all issues”. He also thanked Saudi Arabia for its support to Lebanon, particularly in times of crisis, since the conclusion of the Taef Agreement in 1989 to the war in 2006 and, more recently, during the crisis the country went through from 2006 to 2008. President Sleiman, moreover, underlined the importance of political and economic cooperation with the kingdom, notably the volume of Saudi investments, loans and contributions to Lebanon, plus the Saudi tourists who had come to Lebanon.

Going over the various stages which enabled Lebanon to regain its position on the international scene, to recover its financial position, its security stability and its tourism, the head of state said: “This stability is a source of concern to Israel, which is not pleased to see the members of 18 different Lebanese religious confessions living in amity together since it belies its contention that Palestinians and Israelis could not coexist in two states living side-by-side in peace”.

“Israel”, he added, “does not want to give to the Palestinian their rights; on the contrary, its daily behavior bears witness of its racism as it emphasizes the Jewish character of its state, while we deepen the democratic character of Lebanon and the fruitful cooperation of its communities. This represents a challenge for us, knowing that the success of this experiment is an example for the world, which between 2000 and 2010 endured serious crises on the levels of both terrorism and finance”

He continued: “As a time when Israeli police are besieging the Aqsa Mosque and turning places of worship into archeological sites, Lebanon has declared the feast of the Annunciation an official holiday to be celebrated by both Muslims and Christians”.

Noting the reforms that Lebanon should start, he clarified that such a decision

necessitated “courage”. “The Council of Ministers knew how to show courage by agreeing on the project of the municipal electoral law”, he indicated. What has been realized on the level of the municipal elections is a prelude to the reforms of the law on the legislative elections”.

Recalling that “the reform process starts with the administrative appointments” which should be based on the criteria of competence, Sleiman told members of the Lebanese community that “no one can take us back”, before pointing out that Lebanon is proud of the participation of all its religious communities in the political life, but it does not want political confessionalism to exist indefinitely.

Returning to the dossier of the administrative appointments, the head of state indicated that a correct system of appointments which adopts competence as a criterion would make it possible to lessen the disadvantages of political confessionalism.

“The political affiliation of this or that ministerial director-general is not so important for me. What is important for me is that he reaches this post because he is considered competent to hold it”.

Addressing the issue of the reforms now being considered, the president indicated that there was no question of a linkage between the lowering of the minimum voting age and granting the right to vote in Lebanese elections to Lebanese living in the diaspora. “It is necessary to have faith in young people and give them the right to vote and to take part in political life”.

Sleiman stressed that it was necessary to take Israeli threats against Lebanon seriously and to guard against Tel Aviv’s attempts to drive wedges among the Lebanese.

For the president, the best response to these threats remained “national unity and consolidation of the capacities of the state. When discordant voices are raised in Lebanon, dissensions increase, and it is for this reason that we have rapidly formed the national dialogue conference, which will enable us to reach agreement on a strategy of national defense”.

In an interview with the newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, the president expressed his gratitude to Saudi Arabia for the initiatives it had taken to assist Lebanon in times of serious need. The president also highlighted the situation in Lebanon, stressing the need to maintain the internal strength and national solidarity.

...And Hariri in Kuwait

The emirate’s ongoing support for Lebanon

Also traveling abroad was Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who indicated last week that the latest report of the **Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)** gave him hope that the murderers of the martyred former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri will be identified”.

“The report gives us hope” that the murderers will be identified and “gives a clear indication of the credibility of the tribunal” he declared to reporters.

“The report shows that the tribunal needs more time to reach the truth and the people and the government should wait”, he added.

Arriving in Kuwait for a two-day official visit, Hariri was received, respectively, by Emir Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah and Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser

Mohammad Al Ahmad Al Sabah, at the Seif Palace. The meeting took place in the presence of the members of the Lebanese delegation: **ministers Michel Pharaon**, Adnan Kassar, Wael Abou-Faour and **Fadi Abboud**; former MP Bassem el-Sabeh, Lebanese Ambassador to Kuwait, Bassam Naamani; the head of the prime minister's office, Nader Hariri, and his advisors Mohammad Shatah, Hani Hammoud and Fadi Fawaz.

On the Kuwaiti side, Crown Prince Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah also attended this meeting, which was followed by closed-door talks between Hariri and the emir. The discussions focused on the latest regional and international developments as well as bilateral relations. The two men broached also the issue of the Israeli threats against Lebanon and other issues of mutual interest, such as the cooperation between the Lebanese and Kuwaiti parliaments.

Earlier, the prime minister went to the Bayan Palace, where he was received by his Kuwaiti counterpart, with whom he agreed on the formation of ministerial committees between Lebanon and Kuwait", to see how to improve relations, in particular in the economic and commercial field.

During the afternoon the parliamentary speaker, Jassem Mohammad Al Khorafi, who insisted on the necessity of maintaining the follow-up of the works of the joint parliamentary committees and this, in the interest of the two countries.

Asked by the press on the nature of the support that Kuwait is ready to extend to Lebanon, the prime minister affirmed that Kuwait has always supported "the land of the cedars", notably during times of crisis.

He pointed out that the Kuwaiti Fund and the Arab Fund was proposing projects of development.

"Kuwaiti support to Lebanon is permanent (...) any project which serves the interest of the country, be on the level of electricity, or **telecommunications**, water, infrastructure, bridges, schools or hospitals, the two Kuwaiti and Arab funds are ready to help us to build it", he answered.

Moreover, asked to comment on the report of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the prime minister said: "We have always said and we reiterate today that the tribunal is doing its work and needs time to reach the truth. We as a state and people should wait for what the tribunal will say and this shows its credibility".

Concerning the possibility that the national dialogue conference could be able to reach a national strategy of defense, Hariri said: "Certainly, however this will take time".

Then, the prime minister and the delegation which accompanied him took part in the luncheon hosted in their honor by the president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Mohammad Thanian al-Ghanem.

Hariri, received at his place of residence at the Bayan Palace, the director-general of the Kuwaiti Fund for Arab Economic Development, Abdelwahab Badr, as well as the director-general of the Arab Fund, Abdellatif Al Hamad. In a speech delivered to the representatives of the Lebanese community in Kuwait, which comprises around 100,000 persons, the prime minister invited Lebanese expatriates, "who contributed all over the world to the building of prosperous states", to invest in Lebanon. "You, members of the Lebanese diaspora, you are Lebanon's treasury. Your country needs your capacities, your expertise and your knowledge", he added.

Hariri urged Lebanese expatriates to invest in Lebanon, "in order that we will be able to put in common our capacities to build the state of which we all dream and that none of us can build alone".

And he continued: "Let us combine our efforts to realize the common dream of passage towards the state", before explaining that "the passage towards the state means to pass to the law, security, stability and social security, to the balanced development, to uninterrupted electricity supplies, to sufficient water resources and to an preserved environment".

According to Hariri, the passage to the state means also "a passage to a professional army, having the latest technologies and equipment; to internal security forces which watch over the protection of the rights, properties and interests of the citizens and fight terrorism and the collaborators of the Israeli enemy. It is also, the passage to an independent and equitable justice, to free media which respect the law and say the truth without fear and without shame, which do not nourish sectarian, communal or racist feelings, but combat them with determination".