

Grand Serail

Presidency of the Council of Ministers

Press Office

Dialogue with Caretaker Prime Minister, Dr. Hassan Diab

Sunday, November 29th, 2020

Q- Tonight, we are taking a peek at the ruins of Beirut ... The sad and distressed Beirut ...120 days after the crime of the century ...and a week after Greater Lebanon's Independence Day... Everything has changed ... Many Lebanese wish for the return of the mandate, for the pain they are currently undergoing is indescribable ... Do you stand here throughout the nights? Do you see lights? Do you see life in this distressed city?

A- It is indeed the crime of the century. This explosion is said to be one of the three or four largest explosions in history. This is a great disaster for the port of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon and the Lebanese. Of course, the blast has deeply affected me and all the Lebanese. Regarding the mandate, we are advocates of independence. However, the explosion in this hangar is a form of corruption. Unfortunately, corruption is rampant in this country today. But the worst and most dangerous thing is the corruption of the minds, for it leads to an explosion on the ground. Corruption must be fought.

Q- It still reeks of death here ... How do you feel in the face of all this darkness?

A- I am undoubtedly deeply and extremely saddened, just like any Lebanese citizen, by what happened to Beirut, Lebanon and the Lebanese.

Q- A slogan at the Serail's entrance reads: "If political rule lasts perpetually for anyone, it would not have reached you". If you were to add to this slogan, what would you say?

A- The great and inclusive Serail.

Q-The Serail area witnessed many demonstrations, before and after your arrival ... Were you watching the revolution of young men and women from here?

A- Of course. In fact, the revolution began with the young men and women. I am of course close to the youth since I have taught at the American University of Beirut and perceived the accumulated difficulties they have been facing for years. The youth have expressed their rightful demands, seeking a better future.

Q- Sometimes, the security forces used bullets and water cannons in deterrence ... Many of the young demonstrators were injured or hurt ... They were calling you and calling "All of them means all of them" (kellon ya'ani kellon) to resign. Faced with this outlook, didn't you yourself say: What am I doing here ? Have you ever thought about resigning before the actual resignation?

A- If we go back to October 17 of last year, we see that most of the uprisings were already there before the government won the vote of confidence. This is an expression of rightful demands which I clearly embraced upon my designation.

Q-How do you picture the future of Beirut?

A- May it be a brilliant one, hoping that Beirut will remain a beacon and will rise as it did in the past.

Q-The port crime is the crime of the century ...It is like the end of story... You became aware of the existence of ammonium nitrate and remained silent ... You backed out of a field visit to inspect the port's hangar 12... You were interrogated and stated before Judge Fadi Sawan the reasons that deterred you from doing so ... You provided explanations that did not convince people ... Didn't you feel guilty deep down?

A- It is really strange to reduce the past seven years to seven days. It is true that the port visit was scheduled, but I received conflicting information within two hours, so I asked that the unfinished file be completed and promptly returned to me so that I can visit the port while being informed of the facts. I got inaccurate information. I received the file about two months, three weeks later, so I transferred it to the relevant ministries to provide me with relevant data.

The more relevant question to be asked is how come such a large quantity enters the port and is stored there? How are we supposed to sort out, in seven days, what they couldn't fix in seven years?

I received, on Tuesday, a call from the Public Prosecutor, Judge Ghassan Oweidat, asking me if I had any objection to meeting with Judge Sawan for a deposition. I accepted it, of course. Judge Oweidat responded that the meeting would take place on Thursday. So I told him, let it be held immediately. Judge Sawan met with me and I gave him my statement.

Q- The Lebanese judiciary is politicized, and many question its integrity. Not a single investigation, in any file, has ever reached a firm conclusion. How do you see the Lebanese judiciary?

A- The judiciary, like any institution, has its own system in place, and it revamps itself. The Army has done so after Taif, and so does the judiciary on a continuous basis; it knows better how to overhaul itself. I have full confidence that the Judiciary is carrying out its duty separately from the executive authority.

Q- But it is not independent from political forces...

A- You say it.

Q- This is evidenced by the judicial appointments

A- I did not approach the judicial appointments and formations from a political standpoint. I did not introduce any changes to the file when I received it, for I believe that the judiciary knows best.

Q- Is the port crime deliberate?

A- It is up to the judiciary and not the executive authority to rule on this.

Q- Hezbollah denied, from the very beginning, the possibility of having Zionist hands behind the explosion ... Do you share the same analysis with them, knowing that Israel had benefited the most from what happened?

A- You are right, but the judiciary has relevant information and it is up to it to figure this out.

Q- You made a promise to deliver outcomes within five days, but it didn't work that way. Does anyone refuse to see investigations yield conclusive results?

A- This issue was made clear. The explosion took place on August 4. I immediately called H.E the President of the Republic to convene a Higher Defense Council meeting. We formed an administrative – not a judicial – inquiry committee comprised of ministers. The committee conducted a five-day administrative inquiry, from August 5 till August 10, date of the last Cabinet session before resignation. The committee was tasked with gathering information from all relevant ministries and stakeholders, and reporting to the judiciary. Most importantly, the Council of Ministers unanimously endorsed the referral of the file from the Military Court to the Judicial Council for several reasons. On one hand, the Judicial Council's decision is final; on the other hand, the persons affected by the explosion could file lawsuits to obtain their rights. Besides, there was a decision to vote on the disbursement of 100 billion pounds in compensation for the persons affected by the blast, and I believe that the sum has been distributed among them. Also, the last Cabinet session voted on all the recommendations that emerged from the administrative committee, then I submitted my resignation.

Q- Some are betting on the fact that people will forget this crime, at a time when not a single politician has been arrested?

A- This is a bad bet.

Q- Beirut port blast was followed by various events, some of which were described as new stabs, such as the fires that broke out; a fire in another hangar; failure of investigation to provide clear and convincing explanations about the ammonium nitrate stockpile; corona spiralling out of control; unprecedented mass

prison break of sixty inmates from Baabda district prison; prison overcrowding... Were these incidents contrived? Do they not serve the idea of federations, or perhaps self-security?

A- Maybe, but most of these matters and files are still under investigation and we are awaiting the results. We are living in very difficult circumstances. The government is handling numerous and difficult files. Unfortunately, this government has been subject to successive calamities since its formation and even before the vote of confidence.

Q- Several international services participated in the port investigation. In conclusion, so far, the port blast was caused by negligence. His Excellency President Michel Aoun asked his French counterpart for satellite images of the port before, during and after the explosion. You have also requested the French and Italian governments to provide the Lebanese investigation with these images, and you said that you do not know why these governments did not answer your request. Do you think these images hide evidence of a missile?

A- Indeed, I asked for this, but to date, my government has not received any satellite images. Yes, investigators have been hired to analyse data on the crime scene, and I am awaiting the results of the judicial investigations to establish the facts.

Q- Your name was put forward out of a sudden ... You became a prime minister from outside the club of former prime ministers ... Who was the first to whisper in your ears that you would become the Prime Minister of Lebanon?

A- I consulted with H.E President Aoun three days prior to my appointment. I met again with H.E on the evening of my

designation, and we agreed on the principle of a technocratic government. My sole condition was the formation of a technocratic government, since I am an apolitical, independent technocrat.

Q- It was widely felt that you were Hezbollah's candidate ... How do you perceive this saying?

A- This is simply not true. I am independent. This issue has become like a "broken CD".

Q- You wanted to form a government of technocrats. What is your take on this?

A- A technocratic government is a government of specialists, non-politicians, and non-partisan ministers. My government is indeed comprised of non-partisan and apolitical ministers. Also, the people took to the streets, demanding that the government be formed of new faces, other than those who were in the previous Cabinet.

Q- Some consider that your government's task was to absorb the anger on the street and "to keep Saad Hariri's seat warm".

A- I was never a crossing bridge for anyone, or someone who "keeps the seat warm" for anyone. I came with a patriotic mission, carrying a vision and a plan of action.

Q- Lebanon's history has witnessed 11 governments of technocrats, including two after the Taif Accord. Have you reviewed the fundamentals of the formation of such governments while "engineering" your government?

A- The mechanism for forming a technocratic government totally differs after Taif than before it. In 2005, Premier Najib Mikati formed a government of technocrats to prepare for the parliamentary elections. Today, in order to address the current financial, economic and social crisis, there must be a technocratic government to handle the situation pragmatically, apart from the vertical political divide in the country, so as to find appropriate solutions. The collapse dates back to the period before the government won the vote of confidence.

Q- On August 9, you said: “Since the corruption system is bigger than the State, I announce the resignation of my government”. You had previously labelled the system as the “Deep State”; the Lebanese want to know about what you call “corruption from the inside”. Let us expose this system... Who are those individuals who comprise it today? ... Who are the corrupt?

A- The system is a lightning rod; so is corruption. It is deep-rooted in the country and blocks every reformist project, no matter who the Prime Minister is or what the government is all about. Corruption is not a person but a system. Unfortunately it has become a culture. We need to destroy this culture and bring about the culture of the state and the citizen.

Q- Today, the country faces the abyss. Why are you hiding behind flimsy words? Tell the people, while you address them in your first talk-show appearance, about the system you keep on blaming for the failure of your government. Who forms the system? Who is behind it? Who is protecting it?

A- As I said, corruption system is not limited to a person; it is deeply-rooted in all the joints of the state; unfortunately, it has become a culture. We must face it. That is why the government’s first task was to fight corruption. Most of the government’s

decisions, decrees and bills, including the seven measures to fight corruption and the law to lift banking secrecy, were geared to that. We have asked for a forensic auditing in order to access the clues and find out about financial offences, which will enable us to identify the names of those involved.

Q- What governs Lebanon? Security or politics?

A- Corruption governs the State.

Q- Some say that you pertain to the power-sharing system?

A- Me? How come?

Q- You fought hard to appoint certain people to specific positions.

A- There is no criterion but competence. Appointments were never made on political grounds.

Q- Friendship often played a role...

A- Perhaps competence and friendship meet together, and there is no problem with that.

Q- You fought for your friend, Demianos Kattar, and delayed the Cabinet formation because of him, but he was the first to resign from the government.

A- Yes, but that is something else. On the level of friendship, circumstances were such that I got to know some ministers before. I have no political reference point and I am not affiliated

with any political party; I am neither in quest of nor thinking of running for the parliamentary elections. I have adopted no criterion but competence.

Q- You have promised to score achievements in 100 days ... Then, you addressed the nation to enumerate the accomplishments which were seen by the citizens as a show-off ...Have you cut too deep ? Do you usually rush into setting deadlines?

A- My previous promises were not a show, for the ministerial statement on the basis of which my government took confidence, and which constitutes a pact with the parliament and the Lebanese people, detailed a set a goals distributed over 3 stages: 100 days- featuring 33 goals, one year, and three years. The ministerial statement constituted a roadmap for the achievement of the desired goals, in order for us to be able to get out of the tunnel and overcome financial and social crises. Regarding the first stage, we have achieved 32 out of 33 goals.

Q- Your relationship with the President of the Republic was very good ... Some considered that he was able to bend you to his will... Is it true that you have got to know him for many years?

A- Neither does the President of the Republic embrace such a logic, nor does my character prompt me to think that way. I have known him since I became prime minister. I met him once, when I was Minister of Education and Higher Education.

Q- It is said that President Aoun had made a positive impression about you since the first meeting, describing you as a polite and confident man ... How is your relationship with the master of Baabda palace today?

A- My relationship with the President of the Republic is very good; it is governed by the Constitution.

Q- Is it just a formal relation?

A- It is characterized with cordiality, respect and appreciation.

Q- Gebran Bassil was a roadblock in Saad Hariri's governments ...How did you overcome this roadblock? Have you given in and up?

A- I did not give in to Minister Gebran Bassil. I have the Constitution as a reference point. I communicated with him just as I did with the heads of other parliamentary blocs.

Q- It was said that you became "obedient" to them over time. Is that true?

A- Those who know me know quite well that I cannot be subjugated.

Q- You are an obstinate man.

A- I cannot be subjugated.

Q- No one can deny the difficulties you have encountered, culminating with the Covid -19 pandemic; nevertheless, no one can forget the decisions you have made, such as withholding the payment of Eurobonds, which has cost Lebanon additional bills ...Do you acknowledge having made a mistake?

A- On the contrary, I made no mistake. The government has been in place for 6 months now, and it is not the one that brought the country to the brink of collapse and dire conditions. The last

decades have witnessed successive governments. We won the confidence vote on February 11. We had 3 weeks to take a historic and crucial decision as to the payment of Eurobonds which amounted to 1.5 billion in March. Our initial goal was a rescheduling, not a restructuring of the sovereign debt. For the rescheduling to take place, bondholders must own more than 75 percent of the total debt, distributed between the banking sector and the Central Bank of Lebanon. Actually, we had the possibility of rescheduling maturities; I wished the banking sector would not sell the bonds. Simply put, rescheduling would take a year, two or three years. The aim was to add the two or three years and postpone the payment to 20 or 30 years in order for the banking sector to take a breath, while we reshuffle our economic and financial program in order to restore life to the banking and financial sectors. Unfortunately, the banking sector had sold the bonds a few days before the decision was taken, and the liquidity remained abroad. We reached a point where we had to make the default decision.

Q- Was it a consensual decision? Who advised you to do so?

A- It was a consensual decision agreed upon by the three Presidents, and it was a right decision. Today it is said that the mandatory reserve cap will stand at 15 percent, or 17.5 billion. If we had paid \$ 5 billion, we would have been in a catastrophic situation. How were we going to subsidize flour, medicine, foodstuffs and oil products? Those who are keen on preserving the mandatory reserves should have been keen on preserving the Lebanese people's deposits as well. More than \$ 150 billion of depositors' money have been transferred abroad, and \$ 10 billion were said to have been stocked at homes and institutions. The alarm has sounded since 2011. Dollar outflows have exceeded dollar inflows. This problem dates back to 9 years ago.

Q- The forensic audit makes the news in Lebanon ... How much has Lebanon really paid so far?

A- We didn't pay anything to Alvarez and Marsal. But if they insist on withdrawing from the contract, they are entitled to an amount of \$ 150,000.

Q- There is information circulating that the forensic audit was buried after the Central Bank's governor refused to cooperate. Information which has been leaked from Baabda Palace suggest that Prime Minister-designate, Saad Hariri, requested that the forensic audit be stopped. Can the caretaker government assign another company to carry out the audit?

A- Forensic audit will reveal the causes of many problems, including the financial collapse. It will open doors and audit all accounts: Central bank's accounts; Account No. 36; state's account; balance-sheets of funds and ministries that are not subject to bank secrecy; bank accounts reflecting the results of financial engineering. Forensic audit is a financial analysis, followed by a financial audit, then a forensic audit that exposes financial crimes. I wonder why they are referring to the Banking Secrecy Law. Was this Law issued in 1956 to hide financial crimes? Or to attract foreign capital?

Q-The Parliament has responded to President Aoun's desire to submit all institutions, ministries and departments as well as the Central Bank of Lebanon, to forensic auditing. Why did the Lebanese parliament miss the opportunity to pass the law on lifting bank secrecy?

A- First, I praise the position and letter of His Excellency the President of the Republic, and I also salute H.E the House Speaker's speedy response and the position of the Parliament in taking action. The banking secrecy does not impede the

completion of the forensic audit. If the BDL rejects the Parliament's decision as it has rejected the Cabinet's decision, I think that this will open the door for several matters. Banking secrecy could be waived for this particular contract to complete the forensic audit; it will pave the way as well for the reconsideration of the Monetary and Credit Law. What is happening is unreasonable. They did not implement the Council of Ministers' decision. I hope they will attend to the Parliament's decision. This file must be completed, be it through Alvarez or any other company.

Q- How many statelets are there in Lebanon?

A- There is one State.

Q- How many statelets are there inside the State?

A- No doubt there is corruption in Lebanon, but there is a Lebanese state... there is the rule of law.

Q- But there is also the statelet of arms, the statelet of banks and the statelet of the Central Bank's governor. You have attacked BDL's governor in an unprecedented manner. You made him responsible for the fallout. You have questioned his performance and said that "the state will act firmly".

A- The state has acted firmly; it has taken measures and asked relevant security services to take action; this has led to arrests in the banking sector. I reiterate that such a system is strong and huge.

Q- Prime Minister Saad Hariri answered you saying that you were engaging in the vindictive approach that has prevailed since the

late nineties ... Does Riad Salameh bear all the responsibility alone?

A- First, are we seeking revenge by looking for people's monies? We are not taking revenge on anyone; we just want the truth. Therefore, it is everyone's collective responsibility. I do not hold the current governor or any other governor accountable. I hold everyone responsible: successive governments; the banking sector; the Central Bank. Isn't the Central Bank responsible for the stability of the Lebanese pound and for the Monetary and Credit Law, which the BDL states as being the reference in this matter? The Central Bank of Lebanon bears a great responsibility.

Q- BDL's governor is a state employee. Where does he get this power and influence to stay in office? Is the system that you talked about that stands behind him, protects and supports him? Does he derive his strength from the fact that he holds the strings of many files, thus protecting the corrupt and senior officials in Lebanon?

A- Maybe, I don't know.

Q- Riad Salameh is a unique case that goes beyond the well-known Lebanese divisions and ruptures to become the subject of a quasi-collective, popular and political ostracism, as we see in the various media outlets. Nevertheless, Riad Salameh was able, owing to this power vested in him, to challenge the decision of the State's highest authorities regarding the conduct of the forensic audit, including the President of the Republic and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

A- There is no doubt that BDL's governor is supported by parts of the political, financial and economic class.

Q- Do you admit that Riad Salameh is stronger than you?

A- By law, no. But there is no doubt that Riad Salameh has great support and in practice, he is stronger than me. In fact, he has not implemented the Council of Ministers' decision.

Q- Will the Lebanese people recover their money?

A- People who worked hard to make money should get it back; this is not negotiable.

Q- What would you say to the Lebanese who are watching you tonight? What about the dollar? What is its rising cap? Is there a ceiling?

A- The official dollar exchange rate still stands at 1,500 Lebanese pounds for medicine, loans, hospitals, flour and tuition fees; 70 percent of exchange operations between the Lebanese pound and the dollar are made on the basis of 1500 LBP, which preserves the cohesion of the social system to a minimum. Imagine what would have happened if the dollar exchange rate had become 1,800 LBP; a social disaster would have occurred. Lots of things are paid on the basis of the USD-LBP exchange rate of 1,500 LBP. Everyone bears responsibility and people's money must be returned. There may be a haircut for those who have reaped huge benefits from the financial policies and who have accumulated high interest rates on their wealth; those barely account for 0.7 percent of depositors.

Q- From the forensic audit and the relationship with BDL's governor, we move to your relationship with the Sunnis. We are both AUB alumni. We do not speak in sectarian or confessional terms; but this is a fact in political practice. Apart from the international isolation you were subject to, you also fell victim to

a harsher internal alienation at the heart of your confessional denomination. The Mufti of the Lebanese Republic, Sheikh Abdel-Latif Derian, followed all the others at the beginning, before receiving you, then visiting you at the Grand Serail. Did he want to give you another chance or was he forced and obliged to do so?

A-The Sunni denomination cannot be reduced to a single person; it is characterized by diversity, for the confessional denomination is not a party. What is the standard of the sect's orientation? This is a politicized rather than realistic topic. I have known His Eminence, the Mufti of the Republic, for years, before I took office.

Q- We all recall when late Prime Minister Martyr Rafic Hariri asked Mufti Mohammad Rashid Qabbani about the Lebanese Sunni Muslims' reference; the Mufti replied: the Premiership. In fact, most of Dar Al Fatwa's administrative and financial transactions do not become effective until approved by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. This legal reality always forced the Mufti to give consideration to the third presidency and to reckon with the idea of relinquishing it. Have you ever met late Premier Martyr Rafic Hariri?

A- I met him once.

Q- Have you previously had any contact with Prime Minister Saad Hariri?

A- I first met with Prime Minister Saad Hariri about ten days before my designation, at his invitation. The encounter with Prime Minister Hariri was full of affection and chemistry. I told him that I have been teaching at the American University of Beirut for 34 years, have been serving as Vice President for 14 years, and have taken part in all Board of Trustees Meetings; he

is a BOT member, but I did not happen to meet him. So the meeting was good and we did not talk politics.

Q- Former Premier Najib Mikati, who headed the Cabinet in which you served as Minister of Education in 2011, has completely boycotted you. You are on bad terms with him and you haven't been connecting. Some say that you disagreed with PM Mikati, and shortly after his resignation, you went to Haret Hreik and put yourself up for him; you were told this will happen at the appropriate time.

A- That is unsubstantiated gossip. There is no estrangement between PM Mikati and me, at least not on my part. I always have respect and affection for him, and I wish him the best.

Q- You have been at the Grand Serail for 10 months now, and there was no meeting between you.

A- No former prime minister has visited me.

Q- Why has the club of former prime ministers boycotted you?

A- I do not know if this is a boycott or if such visits usually take place.

Q- Is it because you are an outsider to this club? Is this club exclusive to the popular names?

A- Ask them, I have no idea. I said that I am coming from outside the political club; I pride myself on being independent and I say it loudly.

Q- If you had money, would they have accepted you?

A- Maybe, but I don't know if I would have agreed. I have a national project.

Q- Is it true that you went to Haret Hreik and put yourself up for Premier Mikati?

A- Not at all. This is not true.

Q- What is your stature in the Sunni community today?

A- What is the criteria for determining the stature?

Q- Popularity?

A- How do you measure popularity? Who defines it? What data sources are used?

Q- Cyber armies on social media platforms?

A- Have you done any statistics?

Q- No, I am just asking.

A- I don't know.

Q- From your relationship with the Sunnis of Beirut and Tripoli or with the Sunni leaders in Lebanon, I would like to turn to your relationship with Speaker Nabih Berri. Many controversial files have accumulated between you and Speaker Nabih Berri. Some say that there is no chemistry between the academician and the veteran politician. Some said that you have completely different

personalities, and that he refused your intrusion into the power-sharing system from outside the “system” we have been talking about tonight, and which is on everyone's lips. How true is that?

A- I continuously engage with Speaker Berri, and as you know, we agree on many files; we certainly disagree on some files, and this is normal. I was doing my job as Prime Minister.

Q- You did not intend to confront M. Nabih Berri; it happened inadvertently.

A- There is no confrontation. If there are differences of opinion with any politician or president, that does not mean confrontation.

Q- You opposed the nomination of Wassim Mansouri, who is close to him, for the position of First Deputy Governor of the Lebanese Central Bank. You called as well for early parliamentary elections, and some considered this as a sin that you committed with regard to Speaker Berri who considered it a misplaced demand?

A- I was not the only one who called for this; many ministers have done so in the Council of Ministers. It was not unexpected since it was mentioned in the ministerial statement. I had positions in this regard during government formation; this was also voiced by the popular movement.

Q- By the popular movement and the opposition as well.

A- Regardless of the opposition. I am talking about the popular movement that I resemble; I said since my designation that I will embrace the demands of the popular movement, including the call for early elections.

Q- Is this an appropriate time to discuss a new electoral law?

A- Of course it is. If the elections were to be held on time, this will take place in a year and a half. If the parliament wants to consider a new electoral law, this will take about a year or a year and a half.

Q- Speaker Berri's project aims to turn Lebanon into a single electorate on the basis of proportional representation outside sectarian restrictions.

A- I endorse this proposal. However, it is up to the parliament to decide on that.

Q- It is believed by many that the port's crime was not the sole reason behind your resignation, but Speaker Nabih Berri who was intending to hold the government accountable.

A- As I previously said, this is a catastrophic explosion. In the wake of any explosion in any port or city, it is the duty of the concerned government to resign, and this is what our government did.

Q- He who does not know my personality does not have the right to judge my behaviour; so let's get to know Hassan Diab more ... Hassan Diab, the University Professor, do you yearn for university teaching, students, dynamism, energy, engineering theories and strategies?

A- In fact, I am starting a new chapter.

Q- What is it about?

A- I shifted from academics to public affairs.

Q- It is said that your life was greatly influenced by the president of the American University of Beirut, Malcolm Kerr, who spent his life at the AUB and who was born, died and assassinated in Lebanon in 1984. Why and what did you find in his personality that you did not find in others?

A- I haven't met him but I have read about him. I have all the respect for him. I met his family, children and grandchildren about two years ago. Dr. Kerr is an orientalist and defender of national causes. Some Lebanese can remember that in 1982, when the Israeli enemy entered Beirut, Dr. Kerr was standing at the AUB's gate, and he told the Israeli enemy: "If you want to enter, then it will be over my dead body." These are patriotic positions that I highly respect. Dr. Kerr also made significant contributions to the American University of Beirut that I love and cherish.

Q- Your Excellency, you have served the American University of Beirut for 34 years, but the AUB did not back you for premiership; it has submitted a list with different names to the President of the Republic, and your name wasn't on the list. Why did it give up on you? Why didn't it back you?

A- This is a thorny issue. For me, I put the American University of Beirut and the Board of Trustees in one basket, and the University's Administration is another basket. I have all the respect and love for the institution, University and the Board of Trustees, and I know most of BOT members. This university is the first in the Middle East and North Africa, and one of the most important and top 220 universities in the world. I have served the American University of Beirut for 34 years; I resided there and my children graduated from AUB; I have affection for this institution. As for the Administration, this is another matter and I rise above talking about this topic.

Q- Your Excellency, all diplomacies have closed the door in your face. You worked at an American academic institution. As Prime Minister, you met with US ambassador in Beirut more than once; you also met with US envoy David Hale, and I heard that you asked him, “What do you have against me” and he replied, “We have nothing against you; we would have followed the same policy with any other prime minister”, is this true?

A- Regarding the meeting with David Hale, all I can say is that meetings are confidential. But I am on good terms with the US ambassador.

Q- Did David Hale tell you that your government was Hezbollah’s government?

A- True, he said so.

Q- What did you tell him?

A- This is simply not true. This issue has become like a “broken CD”.

Q- You think he was convinced?

A- I think he was already convinced even before he said so. This is a political decision, plain and simple. Be it Hassan Diab or anyone else in this position, the US administration would have taken the same stance.

Q- Your Excellency, what do you think about US sanctions?

A- We encourage the US government, the European Union, or any country that has corruption files on Lebanese individuals to

send them to the Lebanese government so that we can refer the files to the competent judicial authority in Lebanon.

Q- Hassan Diab, the calm and pacifist person, when does he lose control over his temper?

A- When I am hurting humanely.

Q- You're calm, yet just too opinionated and not diplomatic. You have been accused of contributing to cutting bridges with the last friends of Lebanon, namely the French State, the day you said about the visit of the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to Lebanon that "It did not carry anything new". That day, Saad Hariri commented by saying :“I do not know where he is taking us with this diplomacy”. How do you conceive diplomacy?

A- I am asking you: what is diplomacy? Transparency? Peer-to-peer approach? Honesty? My remarks in the Council of Ministers were taken negatively and out of context, then exploited by some media outlets.

Q- Do you feel lonely today?

A- No

Q- The entire world, from Ocean to Gulf, has alienated you.

A- My strength lies in stating the truth.

Q- Your government lacked harmony. Everybody knows that. I want you to describe, in one word, each of the following ministers :

Q- Zeina Akar

A- Hard-working and active

Q- Nassif Hitti

A- Diplomatic

Q- Raymond Ghajar

A- Methodical

Q- Raoul Nehme

A- Financial

Q- Demianos Kattar

A- Political

Q- Mohammad Fahmi

A- Military

Q- Marie-Claude Najm

A- Reformist

Q- Your Excellency, your mother was an educator, and she passed away when you were Minister of Education, so you named a school after her. What can you tell us about your mother who makes your eyes shine and water whenever you talk about her?

A- It is perfectly normal for the relationship with my mother to be special. I lost her 4 days before my appointment as Minister of

Education and Higher Education. I felt that it was a great loss. The third day of condolences was a Sunday, and on Monday, the government was formed, in June 2011. I always remember her; she is my heart and soul, and the reason for my success. Satisfaction of parents is satisfaction of Allah, and her satisfaction was precisely very important to me.

Q- Your wife, Nuwar Radwan Mawlawi, is an academic professor at the Lebanese American University. You have three children, two sons and a daughter. Your wife spoke about you and said, “My husband needs no one to push him forward, but only someone to pull him back a little. He is very ambitious, workaholic, and works day and night whenever he sets a goal for himself. When he is about to achieve this goal, he sets his sights on his next target”. What if you fail a certain goal, what happens?

A- I stand ready for another goal. Nuwar is my life partner. She always stood with me in all my milestones. We have been married for 34 years and have gone through great difficulties. I returned to Lebanon in 1985 and the war was still going on. The 1990s were very difficult for someone who had lived ten years abroad. I faced great challenges because my goals were overly ambitious; my wife was standing by my side; of course, this helped me reach the successes I have achieved; these successes are not only for me, but also for my wife and family.

Q- This female presence that accompanied you throughout your life, from the mother to the wife, has constituted a great driving force that made you appreciate the female presence, and acknowledge women and their capabilities. You always say that your female students are more successful and more perseverant than male students. You were the one who supported the presence of 6 female ministers in your government, that is to say one third

of the Cabinet. Do you think that female ministers in your government have served the government or themselves?

A- I firmly believe that women are full partners with men in all fields. The overarching framework of the government has been formulated in such a way that it would include 6 non-partisan, apolitical and specialist female ministers - one third of the government, and I was adamant about this from the outset. I am proud of all male and female ministers, and I think that my government was a distinguished one; that is why I called it the “government of facing challenges”.

Q- You are widely considered to be an irredeemable power-loving; however, at private gatherings you say, "I wish to handover the Presidency of the Council of Ministers to my successor soon."

A- Of course, I wish Prime Minister Hariri success in his endeavours; he called me upon his designation; I congratulated him and I wish him well.

Q- Do you expect him to succeed in forming a government?

A- The government must be formed. The country cannot wait. Political forces should help in forming the government and easing tensions. The current divide is unacceptable in these circumstances.

Q- However, the prevailing atmosphere confirms that the government will not be formed in the near future. Various politicians are calling for the activation of the caretaker government’s work, especially Mukhtara leader, Walid Jumblatt. He sent you a message through a tweet and you did not reply to the message?

A- I have got the message.

Q- Do you believe in returning to manufacturing and agriculture, and heading eastward towards Iraq, Iran and East Asia, including Syria, so as to dispose of Michel Chiha's saying that "Lebanon's strength lies in its weakness, in assuming the role of mediator between East and West, and in contenting itself with the banking industry"?

A- Of course. Lebanon has been at the crossroads of East and West for hundreds and thousands of years. However, the current economic model, which focuses on a specific geographical area, is neither sufficient nor useful for the future. We are open to the United States of America, to Europe and to other countries; but Lebanon must do what is best for its economy and its economic outlook, and open up to the entire world. In this sense, the Council of Ministers has approved industrial, agricultural and tourism plan. These plans fall under the umbrella of the economic plan, which must be given priority in the next government in order to open up to the whole world. We must seize every opportunity which serves Lebanon's interest, be it in the field of economy, tourism, or finance. We are no longer able to deal exclusively with a specific geographical region, party or policy.

Q- Today is the last day of the nationwide lockdown in Lebanon. Tomorrow we shall return to our "normal life". The coronavirus has reached its peak and is still spreading; tomorrow is another day. What do you say to the Lebanese?

A- Of course, tomorrow, Monday, we will reopen the country. We have imposed a 16 day-lockdown to give the health sector a chance to catch a breath. And now the economic sector must be able to catch its breath as well. During the lockdown period, there were several targets to be met. All countries around the world are

facing a trade-off between economy and health, in light of the coronavirus pandemic which has turned down the largest economies, such as the United States of America. As for us, we are grappling with a bad financial and economic situation, a financial distress, and the spread of the epidemic. If we look back at the 14 days which have preceded the lockdown, we can see that the lockdown has halved the mortality rate, which had reached 29.4 percent before the closure. There was a large number of infections in the health sector, nearing 1,600 cases; this percentage has also decreased during the lockdown. The fear was that we would reach the Italian model, as the number of available intensive care beds for corona patients approached zero. During the lockdown, and thanks to the Ministry of Health, we managed to raise the capacity to 94 beds, including 64 in public hospitals and 30 in private hospitals. About a hundred ICU beds will give the health sector a little breath. We are planning to add 100 extra ICU beds over the next two weeks. As for the next stage, the economic sector will heave a sigh of relief according to a clear plan and controls.

Q- What would you do on the day that will follow passing the torch to your successor?

A- I miss my children. I will travel to visit them since I haven't seen them in so long.

Q- As we near the end of our interview, I want you to conclude by addressing people: how will you behave while you might stay in office for a long time, with the powers of the caretaker government? How will you run the country? Is there anything you might or could do? I will leave the final word to you.

A- In Lebanon, reforms must start inside-out. If we do not rely on each other, and if all political forces do not joint efforts, then this

will make things worse for Lebanon and the Lebanese people. I wish a better future for the Lebanese, and as I always say, may God protect Lebanon.