



Date: 26/01/2018

The Lebanese Customs Administration celebrated World Customs Day by holding a conference entitled "A Secure Trade Environment at the service of Economic Growth."

The ceremony included speeches by the sponsor of the conference, Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil, the Chief of the Higher Customs Council, Brigadier General Assaad Al-Tufaili, and the Director of Customs, Badri Dahir. During the event a presentation was given on the simplification of customs procedures, from their first to their last stages, with the issuance of Customs Certificates. Another presentation about the ISO certificate and its different specifications and advantages in meeting clients' demands was also given.

The Customs DG, Badri Daher, explained the strategic plan developed by the Customs Administration, highlighting its most important objective which is improving the image of Customs and communication with others. He mentioned that the Customs' mission is not limited to its financial role of collecting fees and taxes or its economic role of protecting and encouraging through its main tool: Customs tariff according to the coordinated system. On the contrary, its role includes other important tasks such as preventing the illegal entry or exportation of goods and monitoring land, maritime and air borders, as well as other locations subject to Customs' control in order to implement existing laws and regulations, as well as all provisions related to the entry, exportation or acquisition of goods. He added that the Customs have played an essential and efficient role in countering drugs.

The Chief of the Higher Customs Council, Brigadier General Assaad Al-Tufaili, stressed on the importance of the role of Customs and the need to revitalize it through advanced strategies, indicating that Customs need the efforts of all parties. He praised also the efforts of the Finance Minister and his concern for the unity of Customs. He promised to protect the Customs Administration and everyone in the Higher Council so it becomes one of the most efficient Administrations. Al-Tufaili discussed the strategy that is currently being developed by Customs, indicating that "it has a reform and

development dimension and we are trying to use it in order to instigate a qualitative transformation in the Customs systems and their working procedures in order to push the Administration forward toward becoming a world-class advanced Customs Administration. At the organizational and procedural levels, we are currently tackling the accumulated issues of the past years and establishing new foundations for the management of Customs operations based on the principles of simplification, facilitation and coordination, which saves time and costs for concerned parties such as merchants, customs clearance officers, citizens and others.”

Minister Khalil’s statement

“Today, the Customs Administration is facing a new era where stability is prevailing, for the first time maybe, at the level of the General Directorate of Customs and the formation of the Higher Council. Therefore, we should bear the responsibility that falls on our shoulders. Indeed, in my opinion, when officials tackle public issues with transparency and before the eyes of the people, accountability is increased and highest levels of efficiency are achieved in the implementation of the tasks entrusted to them. Today, we should be able to develop the Customs Administration, through the reached structure and with clear political coverage that keeps in mind the interests of the people, the State and all those involved in this sector.

We, at the political level and at the government’s level, are absolutely committed to support all legal procedures aiming to enhance the performance of Customs without red lines or political covers within administrations, cross points, checkpoints and crossings, and without ambiguous matters. It is not allowed anymore to talk about groups that are untouchable. The solution lies in formation, accountability, control and the use of all inspection tools, in addition to good governance in relation to different individuals, leaders and officials.

Yes, I am confident that there will be an integrated Customs Administration and not limits and obstacles between those involved in this sector, as by existing laws. All parties, including civilians, military, the Higher Council and the General Directorate should work together as one, away from obstacles, restrictions and details that hinder performance and prevent it from achieving its full potential so all those dealing with this sector would have trust in this administration. I am confident that when intentions are

sincere, we can achieve so much in this sense and in a very short period of time.

In all honesty, allow me to say that we do not have too much time to hold each other accountable. Let us start by asking ourselves: what have we achieved? I have expressed my satisfaction regarding the positive results attained, which complement a number of steps that had been previously taken. Those steps must be continued and followed by many measures that would ease the burden. Here, I would like to stress that we cannot keep pace with change while using the same organizational mechanisms and tools that existed decades ago.

Progress has been achieved at the level of technology and the mechanisms used at the borders' crossings throughout the world; our Administration in Lebanon must reach such a level, which would greatly simplify procedures and minimize contact between the client or the company and the Customs officer during the clearance of goods.

We have to move to a new, more flexible, simplified and time efficient phase. I have heard a lot of feedback, over the past years, from companies, institutions, suppliers and exporters about how their budgets and businesses are directly affected by delayed transactions. Time is as valuable for us as the amounts we collect in revenues from the Customs. Another issue that is as important as our work on increasing revenues from the Customs, and a matter that we have always worked on and are currently working on, is that we should implement the slogan that has united us during the presentation, namely, how to turn the Customs Administration into a tool that helps achieve economic growth in the country.

It is true that we have a plan that we have previously discussed with the Higher Council and with the Directorate. Discussions are ongoing about how to adopt a clear plan and strategy to move forward; but I know that the economic and financial challenges that we are facing at the level of the country do not give us much time, and losing time has become dangerous at this point because it directly affects our economic, financial and social situations, as well as our stability at all levels.

We will seriously monitor all the procedures and I promise you that the accountability, follow-up, inspection and control will not be seasonal or casual. We do not want to remain, before the public opinion and the Parliament that is regularly holding us accountable, in a defensive position

concerning the work of Customs. We should reach a stage where we stand tall in all decision-making positions and in front of the public, proud of our achievements.

We can recall here dozens of accomplishments that we can be proud and that are related to the work of Customs and of various institutions in the protection of social security, the control of drug smuggling and smuggling in general, in addition to many issues that have served, are still serving and shall always serve people, all the people in this country.

I would like to reiterate that we are facing a difficult economic and financial situation. Many politicians in charge do not like to hear such words. But I am making this statement so that all the leaders and officials in the country realize that if we do not achieve real reforms, we cannot continue as we are. On the contrary, we are walking toward further problems and crises. In order to avoid ambiguity or distortion of truth, let me tell you that I am confident about the stability of our financial and monetary positions regarding the Lebanese Lira and its exchange rate, as well as regarding the general banking situation and the Lebanese banking relations with similar institutions in the world which fulfil the highest standards of compliance in accordance with laws and regulations.

We have not heard from anyone; there won't be any new punitive measures or legal procedures relating to the functioning of a sector or individuals. This is another matter. Personally, I am not worried about the course of things, and we are monitoring the situation closely, in thorough cooperation and integration between the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank, to overcome any gap. Such a complementarity serves the monetary and financial stability and helps stimulate the economic situation. However, concerning the economy, the administration of public finance and the trends to be followed by the State Budget, we must take additional steps to show the willingness of the State to initiate critical reforms and to shift from adopted policies that have further deepened the crisis. Some might say that these words should be addressed to us.

We have prepared the ideas that must be included in the draft budget, and benefited from the adoption of the 2017 Budget to review the draft budget that we submitted within the constitutional deadline before the end of August 2017. We have made the necessary amendments and included many reform items, some of which were issued some days ago by the Prime Minister in a circular on the reduction of spending. This might be a small

detail, but it must be completed with procedures which facilitate and help the different sectors, have the ability to move our economy forward and increase investment spending, so as to enlarge the economy and increase growth. Indeed, if we do not achieve real growth in the coming stage, we will be facing a real problem as a result of the great imbalance that we are witnessing today due to the existing public debt-to-GDP ratio.

We should be aware of that. I would like to state today, on the occasion of World Customs Day, that I shall open this discussion in the coming days and tackle it thoroughly in order to keep the public informed about the State budget and our vision for the next stage in total transparency.

There are several conferences to support Lebanon:

- Rome conference that supports the Army, and releases the pressure imposed on the Budget, while being also an investment.
- Paris 4 Conference, which we hope will achieve some of our expectations regarding a massive development process in the country.
- There is also the conference on Host Communities Support. In my opinion, focus should be on this topic, because Lebanon that has endured the burden of this global matter for many years can no longer do so, especially in light of the decrease in all types of assistance related to this case. Lebanon can no longer stand more pressure on its budget or economy, neither on its economic and social structure.

We must realize that we won't achieve any results if all these conferences are not accompanied by a Lebanese internal will to implement comprehensive reforms across the entire State and its administrations, and if we do not achieve a rational and wise administration and spending of public finance.

It is about our will as Lebanese and about our ability to make the right decisions.”

At the end of the ceremony, the Minister of Finance, the Director General of Customs, the General Manager of ISO LIBAN and the Chairman of the Association of Lebanese Industrialists Fadi Gemayel signed the ISO Certificate that was granted to the Customs Administration.