

Good Evening, Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this gala dinner in support of the British Lebanese Association. And I would like to extend a very special welcome to our Guest of Honour, Salma Hayek. We are absolutely delighted that you are able to be with us this evening and we look forward to hearing you in conversation with Baria Alamuddin.

In a few moments Lisa Zahkem, the Chair of our Events and Fund-raising Committee, will thank the many people whose hard work and generosity have made this evening's dinner possible. I would like to take this opportunity to say a few words about the BLA, but I do not want to do so without first saying a heartfelt thank you to Lisa herself. As she has done so often for the Association, she has worked tirelessly to prepare what I know is going to be a splendid and memorable evening.

For nearly 35 years, the BLA has been promoting understanding and friendship between Lebanon and Great Britain, helping Lebanon through difficult times, and sponsoring events that sum up all that is creative and excellent about Lebanon and its highly talented people. We can be extremely proud of what we have achieved.

Proud of the many wonderful exhibitions, amazing concerts and outstanding theatrical performances that we have sponsored and organised.

Proud of the support we have given to numerous charities in Lebanon, including Um el Noor, Arc-en-ciel, the Red Cross Lebanon, Father Roberts School for the Deaf, SOS Lebanon, Dar al Amal, Lebanon Food Bank and Embrace.

And proud of our Scholarship Fund which has given some of Lebanon's brightest students - who would otherwise be unable to afford it - the chance to pursue their post-graduate studies at Britain's top universities and then return home with new expertise and new skills to help build a better future for Lebanon. Some of those students are here this evening.

That we have been able to accomplish so much is down to the extraordinary generosity of our members, supporters and well-wishers.

Thank you all for joining us on this very special evening and please help us to continue the BLA's vital work.

Sir David Richmond - Chairman