



**Conclusions and Recommendations**  
**of the**  
**National Conference for the Rights of the Refugees from Syria,**  
**Including the Most Vulnerable Groups**

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Hotel Rotana Arjaan, Rawshe, Beirut

Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)  
Registration 218/2008  
Bakhos building – 7<sup>th</sup> floor – Dora – Beirut – Lebanon  
Tel / Fax: (+961) 1 24 00 23

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## **Discussions on preconceived ideas regarding the refugees**

This national conference gave Lebanese officials, Lebanese and Syrian civil society activists and international institutions the opportunity to convene and share their perceptions of the current humanitarian crisis shaking Lebanon.

Some preconceived ideas about refugees from Syria circulating among the Lebanese host community were debated and contrasted with facts in order to discuss in greater depth the effective challenges faced by the refugees and the host communities.

Hence, the first session witnessed fierce debates on these preconceived ideas that are largely circulated through political speeches but that have also gained ground within civil society.

### ***- First concern: Will refugees from Syria destabilize Lebanon demographically?***

Nowadays, Syrians represent 20% of the population of Lebanon. Some people in Lebanon are concerned that they might destabilize the country at a demographic level. Indeed, since Lebanon's political system is based on religious denominations, the influx of Syrian refugees, a majority of which are Sunni Muslims, can be perceived as a danger.

This preconceived idea that refugees from Syria intend to "invade" Lebanon and settle in the country permanently - a fear that is aggravated by the history of occupation of Lebanon by Syria - was challenged during the discussions by a very important fact:

**Most participants explained that refugees from Syria remain deeply attached to their country and are strongly determined to return to Syria once the conflict ends.**

### ***- Second concern: Are refugees from Syria contributing to an increase in criminality?***

A widespread preconceived idea is that Syrians contribute to an increase in criminality in Lebanon and are responsible for crimes such as thefts, robberies, kidnappings or other crimes in Lebanon.

The number of prisoners in Lebanon has reached an unprecedented high level with nearly 5500<sup>1</sup> inmates. 24.5 %<sup>2</sup> of these are Syrians. In 2010, the number of Syrians residing in Lebanon was estimated at 200.000 (roughly 4,7% of the population), and the percentage of Syrians among Lebanon's prisoners was calculated at 8,6%. The increase in the overall number of prisoners seems mostly due to demographic reasons, or simply speaking: With an overall higher number of residents in Lebanon, the number of prisoners has also increased.

**To understand this issue better and to address the problem of criminality in the right way, it is necessary to conduct further research on the frequency and kind of crimes committed.**

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<sup>1</sup> 5480. Figure provided by the Ministry of Justice as of 12/03/2014

<sup>2</sup> Figure provided by the Ministry of Justice as of 12/03/2014

# Discussions on challenges faced by the refugees and the host community

The richness of the panel discussions then allowed a very large number of challenges faced by both the refugees from Syria and the host community to be discussed:

## I. General concerns for all refugees from Syria (Syrians and Palestinians)

### *- Discrimination*

Participants raised many examples of direct racist acts perpetrated against refugees: refugees are often forced to wait when accessing certain services for the sole reason that they are foreigners; Lebanese parents put their children in other schools because they do not want them to attend schools where new Syrian pupils are integrated; and Burj Hammoud municipality reportedly recently expelled Syrian inhabitants who had been living in the suburb for 10 to 15 years. Even some conference participants considered refugees 'guests who overstayed their welcome', suggesting that they 'could stay in Syria in safe areas', 'spread diseases' and 'use the services that should be offered first to the Lebanese'.

Most participants perceived Lebanon as a racist country, and mentioned the treatment of migrant domestic workers as another example.

Another important point is that discrimination against this specific population group from Syria reportedly stems mainly from economic reasons: Syrians are discriminated against because they are seen as a burden for a country that is already economically challenged and has a serious problem with high unemployment rates. In addition, the poorest areas of the Lebanese territory host most of the refugees. It was also raised that some Lebanese employers lay their regular employees off in order to be able to employ refugees whose wages are lower.

**In order to put an end to discrimination, actors in charge of the refugees are exploring solutions such as assistance to both refugees and the host community in order to build win-win situations and social cohesion. The issue of confronting the problem by improving governmental control to ensure employers respect Lebanese labor law should be discussed.**

### *- Freedom of movement*

Freedom of movement is challenged at international and national levels.

At the international level (movement of population between Syria and Lebanon), freedom of movement is allegedly respected for Syrians but seriously violated for Palestinians from Syria (see: Palestinian Refugees from Syria).

Within Lebanon, freedom of movement is violated by the curfews imposed on refugees by some municipalities preventing refugees from circulating freely at night. Such measures are reportedly forbidden by the Ministry of Interior that considers the implementation of a curfew only vindicable if

particular circumstances persist. Nevertheless, the municipalities allegedly defend their practices by saying they are not curfews but local security measures which they are allowed to take.

**These violations of the freedom of movement remain a serious concern for human rights and humanitarian organizations.**

### ***- Access to basic rights***

Services offered to the refugees still do not cover the whole Lebanese territory, and hence do not reach the whole refugee population. The most vulnerable groups among the refugees are severely affected.

A number of neglected basic needs such as access to water, food and health, shelter and education were discussed during the conference.

For instance, large numbers of Syrian children are not integrated into the school system, and many families are homeless or compelled to permanently change their location because they cannot afford rental costs that have considerably increased since the beginning of the crisis. At the same time, the Lebanese host community also suffers from this increase in living costs, and refugees are accused of 'taking some opportunities from them, such as housing opportunities' or of 'putting pressure on the infrastructure'.

The participants also raised the point that services are sometimes disorganized. For example, a large number of hotline numbers supposedly dedicated to the refugees exist that are reportedly not effectively operational; similarly, access to health care in hospitals is sometimes compromised by a severe lack of coordination between the various stakeholders.

**All participants at the conference (NGOs, institutions, state representatives) agreed that the main issue affecting the basic rights of the refugees is the lack of international funding to respond to this crisis.**

Notes: One of the issues affecting the fundraising might be that the Lebanese government does not have a unified position regarding the issue of refugees. On the one hand, the government continues to qualify them as 'displaced' (as if this population had moved internally within Lebanon) to avoid recognizing that they are in fact 'refugees', with rights pertaining to this status. On the other hand, the government did not define clearly the needs of Lebanon towards them. Some politicians are in favor of the idea of establishing camps, others are against it, and some even recommend expelling refugees to safe zones within the Syrian territory. Finally, the level of corruption in Lebanon may also hinder funding from the international community.

### ***- Protection issues***

Lebanon did not ratify the 1951 Geneva Convention on the refugees' status and its protocols. Refugees from any country who arrive in Lebanon can hence register with the UNHCR but that does not give them any legal status in Lebanon. In addition, since 2003, ***no new Memorandum of Understanding has been signed between the UNHCR and the Lebanese authorities*** that could constitute a legal basis for solving the legal issues of the refugees.

This lack of legal framework places the refugees at risk of arbitrary arrest and deportation every time they are not able to obtain residency papers in Lebanon. Until August 2012, deportations of refugees from Syria without proper documentation took place, in violation of Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture which Lebanon has signed and ratified. Since then, no new deportations have been reported. Nevertheless, actors dealing with refugees continue to report **arbitrary arrests and detentions of refugees on the sole basis of their illegal status in Lebanon.**

Recently, another problem has appeared: the General Security now requires any refugee from Syria who is **above 15 years old to pay 200\$** in order to be able to renew his/her residency papers in Lebanon. Since many refugees cannot afford this amount, it places more and more of them in an illegal situation.

Another point raised during the conference was that, after having been arrested for any reason, most refugees are denied any legal status in Lebanon and are **officially required to leave the territory** although they have nowhere to go. Even if deportation decisions are currently not being implemented, this decision also places more and more people in an illegal situation.

Finally, the problem of birth and marriage registration was raised by the participants. Indeed, civil registrars reportedly **refuse to register births and marriages** when refugees do not have sufficient documentation. A recent random survey mentioned by UNHCR shows that 25% of the new-born from Syria born in Lebanon have not been registered at birth, in contradiction with international standards regulating the treatment of refugees<sup>3</sup>.

**The serious breaches in the protection framework of the refugees from Syria remain a concern for humanitarian and human rights organizations.**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/3e37e5ba7.pdf>

## II. Specific concerns for vulnerable groups

*Note:* The below mentioned concerns are additional concerns to the above mentioned problems affecting the entire refugee population.

### ***Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS)***

The main concerns that are specific to Palestinian Refugees from Syria appear to be:

- a. PRS reportedly need much more documentation and a permission from a designated Syrian security branch in Damascus to access Lebanon. Many PRS have problems accessing the designated security branch while others are scared to go there because of their political activities. They also report problems with renewals of their residency permits.
- b. The lack of emergency funds available to UNRWA that would allow the Agency to respond to the crisis. As a result, PRS live in deep poverty.
- c. The harsh living conditions and discriminatory laws and regulations affecting Palestinian refugees in Lebanon also apply to the PRS.

### ***LGBTs***

The main problems specific to the LGBTs from Syria seem to be:

- a. They are allegedly often registered in Lebanon as single men and are thus only occasionally eligible for assistance. Lebanon prohibits and has limited social tolerance for homosexuality and thus they are unable to work and to provide for their own needs in most cases.
- b. Although no statistics are available, many abuses are reported to NGOs such as beatings by individuals or officials because of the sexual identity of the LGBTs.
- c. They were often subjected to detention, torture and discrimination in Syria and are at risk of new abuses in Lebanon such as arbitrary arrests on the basis of law 534<sup>4</sup>. Some report having been subjected to “anal tests” in police stations, aimed at determining their sexual orientation, in violation of their rights<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> "All sexual intercourses contradicting to nature are punished from 3 months up to 1 year, additionally to a penalty between 200 and 1,000,000 Lebanese Liras" - Article 534 of the Lebanese Criminal Code

<sup>5</sup> In 2012, Justice Minister Chakib Qortbawi stated in an interview with Al Akhbar newspaper that he had sent a memo to the attorney general urging him to halt random rectal examination procedures.

## ***SGBV victims***

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence affects both women and men (86% women, 14% men) who are subjected to sexual violence, rape, moral abuse, slavery<sup>6</sup> etc. The main problems specific to SGBV victims raised during the conference are as follows:

- a. Services are insufficient to serve all victims of SGBV (for example some regions cannot be accessed by service providers, lack of referral program, no national action plan etc.).
- b. Early marriage affects young girls who are forcibly married to adults. This phenomenon is particularly widespread in Lebanese villages where the population is not ready to acknowledge and fight this practice but the refugees settle there because UNHCR has an office in the region.
- c. Girls do not attend schools; hence, they are more exposed to abuses (see: access to basic rights).

## ***Activists (journalists, human rights defenders)***

The specific concerns of activists from Syria who are currently in Lebanon are the following:

- a. They live in permanent fear of persecution.
- b. They are allegedly more often subjected to violations than other refugees, but feel they cannot always report to the services because they sometimes have no papers or are afraid of being subjected to more violations if they report.
- c. Activists from Syria fear the repercussions of the Syrian war in Lebanon (they are afraid of the security services, Hezbollah, Amal, Nusra...).

Other vulnerable groups were briefly mentioned during the conference such as **the physically or mentally challenged, children** who have to work to sustain their families, **Iraqi refugees from Syria**, and **the Syrians** who were **living in Lebanon before the crisis**.

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<sup>6</sup> Information disclosed by Ms. Ghida Anani, Abaad representative, during the conference

# Recommendations

## *I. Recommendations to the Lebanese authorities*

### At the political level:

- Lebanese authorities should recognize the refugees from Syria as refugees with rights recognized by the international community and pertaining to the refugee status
- Lebanese authorities should put an immediate end to any hate speeches towards refugees from Syria and reject biased information to be disclosed on this issue
- Lebanese authorities should continue to make sure that Lebanese borders are open to any person seeking protection including Palestinians from Syria
- A new Memorandum of Understanding should be finalized between the UNHCR and the Ministry of Interior of Lebanon that would give a legal status to all asylum seekers and refugees on Lebanese territory
- Lebanese authorities should make every effort to prevent corruption at all levels of the state

### At the legislative level:

- The Lebanese Parliament should ratify the 1951 Geneva Convention on the refugees' status
- Discriminatory laws and regulations against Palestinians in Lebanon should be abolished
- In order to keep Lebanese employees in their positions and avoid exploitation, the issue of better governmental control to ensure employers respect Lebanese labor law (especially the minimum wage) should be discussed.
- The Lebanese Parliament should abolish Law 534 that is sometimes being used by the Judiciary to punish homosexuality

### At the executive level:

- The Ministry of Interior should put an end to curfews imposed by certain municipalities on refugees from Syria
- Civil registrars should register births and marriages and consider the international standards on this issue, tolerating that the refugees do not always have all their documents and cannot approach their embassy
- Security services should be ordered by their respective ministries to put an immediate end to arrests and detentions of asylum seekers and refugees for the sole reason that they lack legal status

- The General Security should stop giving orders to some refugees to leave the territory and provide them with adequate documentation in order to avoid them being involved in criminal activities to survive
- Lebanese authorities should review the cost of the renewal of residency papers for refugees from Syria considering the fact that most of them cannot afford the required 200\$
- Lebanese authorities should order the security services to systematically investigate violence and discrimination against refugees
- Lebanese authorities should order the services to put an immediate end to “anal tests” conducted in police stations aiming at determining the sexual orientation of individuals since it represents an offense to human dignity
- The Ministry of Labor of Lebanon should identify and punish employers who fire their Lebanese or regular foreign employees to employ refugees because their wages are lower

## ***II. Recommendations to the UN agencies, their partners and the international community***

- UN Agencies and their partners should develop their identification of the most vulnerable groups within the refugees as well as their assistance to them
- UN Agencies and their partners should continue to encourage social cohesion through assistance activities benefiting both the Lebanese host community and refugees in order to end discrimination against the refugees
- UN Agencies and their partners should improve their coordination and make sure that a fair distribution of assistance is taking place
- UN Agencies and their partners should educate society about human rights, with a particular focus on LGBTs, victims of SGBV, Palestinians, and the definition of refugees (refugees did not leave their country by their own will)
- The international community should improve its funding of agencies up to the point that refugees should not be obliged to work illegally in Lebanon in order to survive
- The international community should work hard to make sure vulnerable refugees are provided with durable resettlement solutions
- The international community should develop more scholarships opportunities for refugee students who had to stop studying because of the war

## Speakers at the conference

### *State representatives:*

**General Pierre Salem** – Ministry of Interior Representative

**Mr. Andre Assas** – Ministry of Information Representative

**Mr. AbdelNasser el Aye** – Representative of the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee

### *Representatives of international institutions:*

**Ms. Ann Dismor** – Country Director of UNRWA

Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was established by United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programmes for Palestine refugees<sup>7</sup>.

**Ms. Inna Gladkova** – Senior Protection Officer at UNHCR

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established on December 14, 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. The agency is mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide<sup>8</sup>.

### *Representatives of international NGOs:*

**Mr. Nadim Houry** – Country Director of Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people worldwide. The organization investigates abuses, exposes the facts widely, and pressures those with power to respect rights and secure justice. Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization that works as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights for all<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c2.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/about>

**Ms. Niamh Murnaghan** – Director of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

NRC promotes and protects the rights of people who have been forced to flee their countries, or their homes within their countries. It is the only Norwegian organization that specializes in international efforts aimed at this target group<sup>10</sup>.

**Mr. Haid Haid** – Heinrich Boll Stiftung Representative

Fostering democracy and upholding human rights, taking action to prevent the destruction of the global ecosystem, advancing equality between women and men, securing peace through conflict prevention in crisis zones, and defending the freedom of individuals against excessive state and economic power – these are the objectives that drive the ideas and actions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation<sup>11</sup>.

***Representatives of Local NGOs in Lebanon:***

**Ms. Ghida Anani** – Director of ABAAD

ABAAD (Dimensions)-Resource Center for Gender Equality is a non-profit, non-politically affiliated, non-religious civil association founded in June 2011 with the aim of promoting sustainable social and economic development in the MENA region through equality, protection and empowerment of marginalized groups, especially women<sup>12</sup>.

**Mr. Bertho Makso** – Director of Proud Lebanon

Proud Lebanon is a non-profit organization working to achieve protection, empowerment and equality for marginalized groups through community service activities<sup>13</sup>.

**Mr. Wadih Al-Asmar** – Secretary General of CLDH

The Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH) is a local non-profit, non-partisan Lebanese human rights organization based in Beirut. CLDH monitors the human rights situation in Lebanon, fights enforced disappearance, impunity, arbitrary detention and racism and rehabilitates the victims of torture<sup>14</sup>.

**Mr. George Ghali** – Program officer at ALEF

ALEF seeks to strengthen the respect and fulfillment of human rights as a cornerstone of social, economic, and political development. By embracing a comprehensive approach to monitor, defend, and educate on human rights, ALEF aims to complement and gear all efforts towards the achievement of an influential human rights constituency, and the realization of a durable peace<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nrc.no/?aid=9160690>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.boell.de/en/foundation/foundation>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.abaadmena.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ProudLebanon/info>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.cldh-lebanon.org>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.alefliban.org/>

**Mr. Ghassan Abdallah** – Director of the Palestinian Human Rights Organization

The Palestinian Human Rights Organization (PHRO) is an independent, non-governmental, non-partisan and non-profit Human Rights NGO which was formed by a private initiative. Established in 1997 and based in Mar Elias Refugee Camp, in Beirut, it is recognized in Lebanon under registration no. 36/AD. PHRO is devoted to the promotion, protection and defense of the human rights of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the wider MENA region<sup>16</sup>.

**Mr. Ayman Mhanna** – Director of Samir Kassir Foundation

The Samir Kassir Foundation is a non-profit civic organization, working within the civil society and cultural circles to spread the democratic culture in Lebanon and the Arab world, encourage the new talents of free press, and build the movement for a cultural, democratic, and secular renewal<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.palhumanrights.org/aboutus.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://samirkassirfoundation.org/en/Samir-Kassir-Foundation/About-Us/Mission>