

Civil society organizations deal anxiously the Lebanese Government's policy towards Syrian refugees and so-called safe return

مجموعة من منظمات المجتمع المدني تنظر بقلق إلى سياسة الحكومة اللبنانية تجاه اللاجئين السوريين والعودة الآمن

In its session on 14 July 2020, the Lebanese Council of Ministers gave preliminary approval to a paper prepared by the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon outlining its plans to organize Syrian refugees' return to Syria and its policy to deal with the Syrian file under three main areas: the Lebanese dimension, the Lebanese-Syrian dimension and the Lebanese-international dimension. The undersigned organizations condemn this paper, and have serious concerns about it in case this version is correct.

The plan, which has not been officially published but has circulated in several local and regional media outlets, relies on information containing a number of inconsistencies, including relying on information that a report by UNHCR concluded that 89% of Syrian refugees intend to return to Syria. In fact, the UNHCR study concludes that the circumstances are not appropriate for safe return, and shows an increase in the percentage of Syrians who do not intend to return to Syria from Lebanon during the next year, by 85% to 88%.

The UNHCR study also confirms that safety and security concerns, followed by the lack of livelihood opportunities, are the main factors affecting refugees' decisions, contrary to the Lebanese government's paper, which claimed the improvement of living conditions in Syria as its justification for adopting such a policy. In addition, the paper contradicts the conclusions of surveys and studies prepared by countries that have accepted a large number Syrian refugees. For example, a study prepared by the German Foreign Office last June concluded that the security conditions in Syria are not safe to return.

The Lebanese government paper also cites a number of measures and procedures adopted by the Syrian government, including a set of amnesty decrees that cover a number of violations and crimes committed in Syria. However, these decrees have mostly not applied to prisoners of conscience, political detainees, aid workers or public figures, including humanitarian workers, which raises real concerns about the capacity of these decrees to remove threats against returning refugees.

The policy established by the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs is also based on the measures taken by the Syrian government on border crossings including establishing some facilities to facilitate the return of refugees, in complete disregard of the many cases of detention following their return, where reports have documented that more than 2,000 Syrian refugees were arrested upon their return, in addition to a statement by the Lebanese Minister of State for Refugees in November 2019 that 20 Syrian refugees (including two children) were killed under torture after returning to Syria.

The Lebanese government plan in its three axes places "encouragement of refugees to return to Syria" as a main goal, contradicting its own preamble which affirms commitment to human rights principles, foremost among them the principle of non-refoulement.

The document also considers the Syrian government a partner for sharing information on the pretext of overcoming obstacles to the return of refugees, ignoring the fact that the Syrian government is a major party

to the conflict, has committed the largest share of violations occurring in the past nine years, and its security policies and military forces are major factors pushing Syrians to migrate outside their country.

In addition, the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs' plan includes media campaigns and awareness activities to encourage Syrian refugees to return, which would increase tensions and sensitivities between the host community and refugees, and could motivate the host community to increase acts of hatred against refugees to pressure them to return to Syria. Such a policy would push more than fifty thousand refugees to return to Syria despite knowing that their return is not safe.

This plan prepared by the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs rejects any measures that would resettle refugees in Lebanon, yet it calls for allocating funds for the resettlement programs of the same refugees in third countries.

Civil society organizations and NGOs have serious concerns about aspects of the plan which include language on sharing full information about their projects and activities benefiting Syrian refugees with the Lebanese government in its capacity of leadership to the refugee response, in addition to imposing control over funding for the refugee response, and excluding NGOs involved in responding to refugees needs from the planning process despite their full willingness to cooperate .

The signatory organizations to this letter call for:

- 1-** The Lebanese government to repeal the plan, and stop any pressure on refugees to return before the start of a democratic political process in Syria that guarantees safe, secure, dignified, and voluntary return, and commit to the universal declaration of human rights which guarantees in article 14 the right to seek asylum from persecution for everyone.
- 2-** The Lebanese government to take all necessary actions to prevent the expansion of provocative discourse against Syrian refugees in the host community and encourage launching media campaigns to bolster the relations between the refugees and the hosting community.
- 3-** The Lebanese government and UNHCR to cooperate to find permanent solutions to issues relating to personal identification documents for refugees in Lebanon to prevent occurrence of any future dangers, taking into consideration the restrictions imposed by the Syrian government for refugees to obtain new official documents and the fact that 74% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not have valid official documents.
- 4-** The Secretary General of the UN and the UNHCR to take all necessary steps to guarantee the independence of the humanitarian response towards the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, prevent politicization of the refugee issue, and allow no role for the Syrian government in procedures to facilitate the return of refugees, including by ensuring that no documents or papers relating to Syrian refugees in Lebanon are shared with any Syrian government institution.
- 5-** Donor states and funding bodies to increase and speed up their allocations to the humanitarian response for refugees in Lebanon, taking into consideration the huge needs and increased burden upon the host community and making provisions to facilitate and fully guarantee the independence of these programs, projects and allocations, facilitating the work of organizations and implementing agencies with independence, security and neutrality.

Signatory organizations and institutions:

1. Adel Center for Human Rights
2. Al-Kawakibi Center for Transitional Justice and Human Rights
3. Amals Healing and Advocacy center
4. Badael Foundation
5. Basamat for Development
6. Baytna
7. Bonyan Organization
8. Bousla
9. Caesar Families Association
10. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
11. Children of One World
12. Families for Freedom (FfF)
13. Fraternity Foundation for Human rights FFHR-Biraṭī
14. Human Rights Organization in Syria - MAF
15. Impunity Watch
16. Insight Advisory Group (IAG)
17. International humanitarian relief-IHR
18. Jana Watan
19. Kesh Malek Organization
20. Kurdish committee for Human rights.
21. Local Development and Small-Projects Support (LDSPS)
22. Musawa
23. Pro-Justice
24. ProPax Platform
25. Rethink rebuild Society
26. RMTeam
27. Sewar
28. Shaml Syrian CSOs Coalition
29. Space Of Hope
30. Syria legal network in the Netherlands
31. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
32. Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA)
33. Syrian Lawyers Aggregation
34. Syrian league for citizenships
35. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR).
36. Syrian Women Committee (SWC)
37. Syrian Women League
38. Syrian Women Political Movement
39. Syrian Women's Network
40. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ)
41. The Day After (TDA)
42. The Syria Campaign
43. The Syrian British Council
44. Urnammu for Justice & Human Rights
45. Woman support association
46. Women Now for Development