



Recidivists Couldn't Be Happier! The Lebanese Judiciary's Failure to Prosecute Acts of Racism and Discrimination Leads to More Abuses...

On August 22, 2019, a press conference was held in Beirut to announce the launch of an initiative entitled the "Lebanese Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism."

That same day, two lawyers who are part of the *Initiative's* core group filed a complaint with the Lebanese judiciary against a number of public figures, including former Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, regarding their explicit discriminatory and racist statements which are, in their view, likely to provoke sectarian and civil strife.

It is a matter of great regret, and indeed a source of legitimate civic resentment, that the legal action undertaken on behalf of the *Initiative* by lawyers Diala Shehadeh and Mahmoud al-Hafi, is still not being investigated.

The acting chief investigating magistrate in Beirut, Judge George Rizk, decided "not to hear the complaint due to incompetence and incapacity." The Beirut Public Prosecutor, represented by Attorney General Ziad Abu Haidar, followed suit by stating that it would "not hear the suit due to the plaintiffs' incapacity."

One of the main motives for launching the *Initiative* —

besides the ethical duty of condemning discriminatory or racist acts — was the growing concern among its founders regarding the de facto tolerance shown by the Lebanese judiciary regarding the increased number of discriminatory and racist statements and acts.

As stated in the initial text that accompanied the launching of the *Initiative*, once a dynamic of discrimination is triggered, it takes on a life of its own. And if discrimination targets first the weakest segments within a society — “refugees” in the Lebanese case — it doesn’t take long before it metastases and spreads, sparing no one as it goes.

One need only examine the developments over these past weeks to see the level to which discrimination, racism and xenophobia has increased. One must also follow the course taken by these plagues, which are likely to undermine the cohesion of any society, to assess their impact on Lebanon’s social fabric, the cohesion of which is being challenged daily.

Let us recall an incident which took place recently and which provides an eloquent illustration of these risks. On Wednesday, February 5, the bodyguards of MP Ziad Aswad physically assaulted and verbally abused a number of protesters gathered outside a Jounieh restaurant where Aswad was having dinner. During the attack, the bodyguards asked where the protestors were from. One of them answered that he was from Tripoli, a largely Sunni city. He was mistreated verbally and physically under the justification that a Sunni from Tripoli has no right to protest in Christian Jounieh... As expected, the incident provoked a no less violent reaction in Tripoli...⁽¹⁾

While this incident may seem relatively minor, our evaluation

⁽¹⁾ For a thorough report of the incident and to watch a series of videos taken on the night, please visit: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200206-protesters-disrupt-lebanon-mps-dinner-two-nights-in-a-row/>



argues to the contrary. This incident is an additional landmark in a cumulative string of discriminatory and racist acts whose authors are never held accountable for their deeds. In fact, the discriminatory behavior by the bodyguards of MP Ziad Aswad cannot be seen outside the repeated exclusionary and discriminatory statements that the MP himself has made in the past and keeps making.

It must be remembered that Mr. Aswad was one of the individuals against whom the *Initiative* had filed the abovementioned complaint. As a result, it is the responsibility of the Lebanese judiciary to decide on Mr. Aswad's responsibility, or lack of it, as the instigator of the acts committed by his bodyguards. However, from a moral perspective, and based on the reaction of a wide sector of Lebanese public opinion that was expressed through social media, the Jounieh incident is another case of "recidivism" being given a free pass.

The *Lebanese Initiative against Discrimination and Racism*, which, on the occasion of this incident, renewed its denunciation and condemnation of all actions and acts of discrimination and racism by any party and under any pretext, confirmed that it will continue to call on the Lebanese judiciary to assume its responsibilities in prosecuting acts of discrimination and racism—be they verbal or physical.

Therefore, we firmly express our solidarity with all voices calling on the Lebanese judiciary to investigate the Jounieh incident. The *Lebanese Initiative against Discrimination and Racism* renews its commitment to keep advocating for the right of the Lebanese people to address the judiciary and have their complaints heard and followed up. The obvious outcome of the judiciary's failure to react to acts of racism and discrimination is further racism, discrimination and violence— both among Lebanese and non-Lebanese.

