

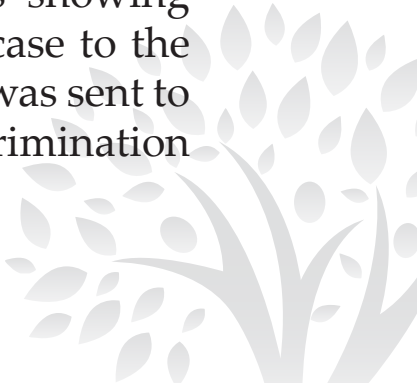
## One Pandemic May Hide Another... “Social Distancing” Does Not Excuse Discriminatory Behavior!

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**A** week ago, on March 30, the Lebanese Minister of Health referred to the State Prosecutor’s office the case of a Syrian woman who passed because of the refusal of several hospitals in northern Lebanon to admit her and provide her with exigent medical care.

According to Lebanese media, the minister, in his correspondence with the Prosecutor’s office, highlighted the fact that “non-assistance to a patient in danger is a criminal act punishable under Lebanese law and by the deontological code ruling the practice of medicine.” In addition to inviting the prosecutor to “request the most severe punishments against those who are responsible for the passing of this patient,” he underscored that “at the hospitals where the patient attempted to seek admittance, it was the duty of the emergency units there to examine her and provide the necessary first aid, *regardless of the diagnosis*, and later on, in the event that further action would be required, to transfer her to another hospital.”

Despite the Health Minister’s clear attempt at avoiding mention of the designation “Covid-19” in his statement, the context clearly implies that the patient was showing symptoms of this virus. Hence, in referring this case to the office of the State Prosecutor, an indirect message was sent to the Lebanese hospital sector that no level of discrimination



would be tolerated in relation to containing the spread of Covid-19 within Lebanon's refugee demographic.

While the Minister of Health deserves to be praised, pragmatism based upon past cases causes one to lower expectations over the eventual action of the judiciary and the deterrence effect it might have over future cases.

From this unfortunate incident arose the opportunity to take a step back from the torrent of breaking news and revisit the various discriminatory statements and behaviors that were eventually tuned out due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The *Lebanese Initiative against Discrimination and Racism* considers that it is an ethical and citizen imperative to denounce such behaviors, and to encourage others to do so as well, irrespective of the fact that denunciation under the current pandemic circumstances is mainly limited to social media expression.

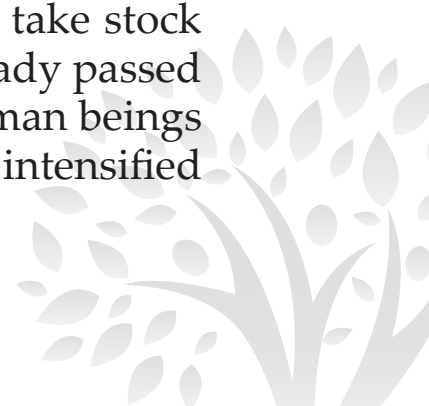
Hopefully sooner rather than later the pandemic will be over, or at the very least contained. However, the memory of

this pandemic, such as any intense moment of communal life, will not quickly fade away. Whatever the justifications and excuses of such discriminatory behaviors and expressions, be they discrimination among Lebanese themselves or among Lebanese and the people residing in Lebanon, these behaviors and expressions will be recorded in the memories of their victims. On the day when we eventually take stock of the pandemic damages, the time will have already passed to realize that the losses were not confined to human beings and material wealth but that the harm also intensified

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tensions among communities—regardless of whether those communities exist really or are imaginary constructions.

Our responsibility today, as individuals and as communities, is not only to avoid an intensifying of the pandemic by respecting “social distancing,” among other measures of prudence, but to counter all attempts to interpret social distancing as a green light to embark on discriminatory behavior and discourse. Such behavior and discourse will only further contribute to tearing down Lebanon’s shabby social fabric and provide the memory of Lebanese and non-Lebanese with more conflict-driving rationales and features.

