

Who is to be held responsible for the affront
and discrimination suffered by Tarek Abu Taha?

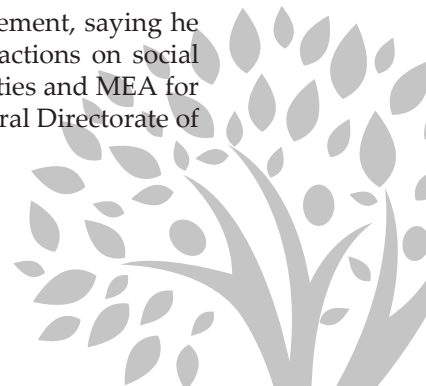
The Lebanese Art of Blame Gamming

On May 3, 2020, Tarek Abu Taha, a young Palestinian man living in Lebanon and holding a travel document issued by the Lebanese authorities, tried to board an MEA evacuation plane in Dubai scheduled to fly to Beirut. He was discriminated against, being called a “thug” simply because he was Palestinian, and mistreated, being set aside for a long period of time before getting bounced from taking that flight to Lebanon – his “homeland” – as he wrote on his Facebook account.

The National Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism would like to salute Abu Taha’s courageous post about the incident, which prevented the act from passing unnoticed and added a level of culpability that transgressors usually do not have to deal with because most victims abstain from going public.⁽¹⁾

While the Initiative believes that denunciation of the incident is the least one can do, it maintains that denunciation is not enough. The only way to make sure that such an incident does not occur again is through accountability... someone, some institution

⁽¹⁾ On May 5, Abu Taha posted a video on Facebook to clarify his original statement, saying he does not think Lebanese are racist nor does he agree with the aggressive reactions on social media that depict Lebanese as such. Additionally, he thanked the UAE authorities and MEA for their help, as he initially did, but also the director general of the Lebanese General Directorate of General Security.



needs to be held responsible for what happened... unless what happened is reduced to the rank of a random incident that is not worthy of investigation.

As a civil initiative it's not within the realm of our mandate or capacity to legally investigate who is to be held responsible. However, we are able to call for such an investigation and highlight its importance and pertinence as one looks at the rhetoric of the Lebanese authorities that accompanied this issue, which clearly aimed to avoid accountability for the degrading and discriminatory act faced by Abu Taha.

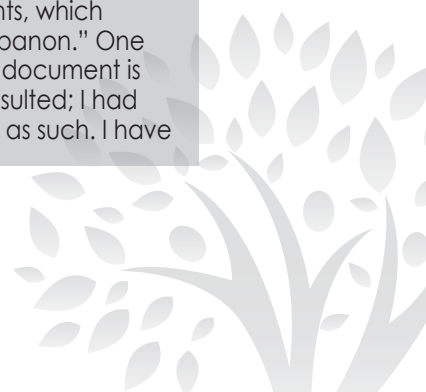
A WhatsApp message, signed by Lebanon's embassy in the United Arab Emirates and sent on the eve of the May 3 flight, says, "Disallowing Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and domestic servants from boarding repatriation flights" is "in accordance with the May 1, 2020 circular of the Lebanese General Directorate of General Security." Of course, this completely disregards the Council of Ministers' decision about repatriations,

Abu Taha's May 3 Facebook post about the incident

I would like to share something that happened to me today and I hope it reaches all. My name is Tarek Rafik Abu Taha. I'm a young Palestinian man. I was born in Lebanon, as was my father. My grandfather came to Lebanon when he was 14 and later married a Lebanese woman. I finished my studies, thank God, as my parents invested a lot in me. They deprived themselves of many things in order for me to study. I graduated in engineering and found a job. I never had any political or partisan activities. I didn't get into any sort of trouble.

Due to financial difficulties, I traveled to Dubai to look for work and like many people, I got stuck there because of the coronavirus pandemic. I applied for repatriation to Lebanon (my homeland), and was selected to take one of the flights so I prepared myself and went to the airport. I passed all security and passport checks and reached the plane, enthusiastic to see my parents, wife, son, and friends, who were waiting for my return.

At the plane, two Lebanese General Security officers took my passport (a special document for Palestinians issued by the Lebanese Republic). One of them was surprised, saying, "Why is this document different?" I told him, "I'm Palestinian." He asked, "Does that mean that your father and mother are Palestinians?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Step aside." I stood there for an hour, during which my passport was taken away and brought back by several people. An employee on the plane asked the General Security officers, "Whats wrong? He's got Lebanese documents, which means he's from Lebanon." One officer replied, "This document is for thugs." I felt so insulted; I had never been treated as such. I have



which included people with valid Lebanese residency permits as one of the eligible groups for the flights back.⁽²⁾

A statement published on the day of the incident by the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee says the body “is carrying out the necessary contacts on the highest levels to amend the decision of the 'National Disaster and Crisis Management Committee’⁽³⁾ to stop Palestinians living abroad with travel documents issued by the relevant Lebanese authorities from returning to Lebanon. The Committee believes that this discriminatory measure, which arose during the second round of repatriation flights, contradicts the first round’s procedures.” Checking the National Disaster and Crisis Management Committee’s statements, one cannot find any reference to “a

⁽²⁾ *Al-Akhbar*, May 4, 2020.

⁽³⁾ The “National Disaster and Crisis Management Unit” was formed under decision no. 41/2013, issued by the Council of Ministers on February 18, 2013. The decision stipulated the creation of a committee to coordinate efforts to address national disasters and crises of all sorts and allocated the committee’s chairmanship to the Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Defense.

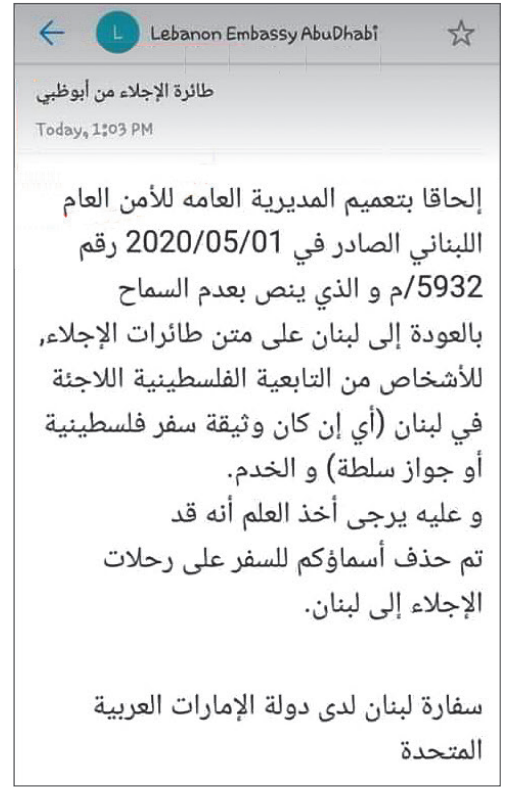
always been respected and have never mistreated anyone.

Asked again, the officer said, “I won’t bear the responsibility of allowing him on the plane. Maybe he’s a terrorist.” A hostess said to him, “Poor guy. Let him sit down. He’s been standing for an hour.” He ordered me to sit on a chair near the door. I didn’t know what to do so I called my father to tell him what happened and ask him what I should do if I’m not allowed to travel. The officer saw me and said mockingly, “He’s making calls [to try and reverse the decision]. Nothing will make him board the plane.” I was told to stand outside and stood for 30 minutes in dusty, humid, and sunny weather on the stairs to the aircraft.

Finally, I was ordered to leave because I’m banned from boarding the plane. Thank God, staff from Middle East Airlines and Dubai security and passport control were very helpful and allowed me to get back into Dubai. However, I don’t get it: If I’m Palestinian, does that mean I’m a thug? Many thanks to the Dubai security and passport control staff that facilitated my reentry and showed compassion towards me. If they didn’t (it’s their right because my passport was already stamped “exit”), what would have happened? Would I have had to sit in the airport until Lebanon’s airport reopens? Lebanon’s General Security Directorate should have empathized with me: I live in Lebanon and was in a position that doesn’t allow for racism. I didn’t understand the racism shown by the officer. All my friends and loved ones were waiting to see me. My son is three-and-a-half years old and was waiting for me, saying, “Dad’s coming.” What shall I tell him now? I know that maybe 99 percent of the Lebanese aren’t like this, but I was insulted. I cried bitterly because I couldn’t go back home [...]. But why should I feel despised by some people or be prejudiced because of my national affiliation?

decision to stop Palestinians living abroad with travel documents issued by the relevant Lebanese authorities from returning to Lebanon.” Even more importantly, the National Disaster and Crisis Management Committee is just one of nine official entities of the Coronavirus Follow-up Committee.⁽⁴⁾ Thus, the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee displayed cowardice and avoided addressing the liable parties, opting instead to aim their statement at an entity on the margin of the issue at hand.

The day after the incident, and with it becoming a public opinion issue, the General Directorate of General Security published a statement on its Facebook account saying, “There has been information shared on social media about an officer from the General Directorate of General Security preventing a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon from returning aboard the plane that brought home Lebanese nationals from the Dubai airport yesterday. The General Directorate of General Security would like to clarify that it is carrying



A WhatsApp message from the Embassy of Lebanon in the United Arab Emirates that announces that Palestinians and domestic servants are forbidden from returning to Lebanon aboard repatriation flights based on General Directorate of General Security circular 5932/M dated May 1, 2020



A Facebook post, dated May 4, by the General Directorate of General Security that passed responsibility for the incident onto the cabinet.

⁽⁴⁾ www.drm.pcm.gov.lb

out the decision of the Council of Ministers to only bring back Lebanese nationals for the time being, and non-Lebanese who have the right to enter Lebanon will be brought home at later stages.” While taking a look at the Council of Ministers’ decisions — at least those made public — one will not find backing for the circular of the General Directorate of General Security, which not only discriminates against Palestinians but also considers “domestic servants” to be of a standalone *nationality* – as if a Lebanese cannot be a domestic servant of another Lebanese.

Accountability for allegedly minor violations is no less important than accountability for major ones...

And it was not over. As the “scandal” continued spreading over social media, more conventional media reported it, making the Lebanese authorities even more embarrassed... and even more confused in dealing with the repercussions of a decision for which no one wanted to be held responsible.

To further avoid accountability, the Supreme Defense Council issued a statement after its meeting on May 5 that stated: “After the director general of General Security discussed the issue of repatriating Lebanese nationals, the fact that preference and priority should be for Lebanese nationals was underscored.”⁽⁵⁾ Any reader of the statement would be very naive not to notice the polysemous term “underscored”: Was an earlier decision underscored, a decision whose makers did not want the public to become aware of? Or was it a matter of foregone conclusion that did not need clarification?

Still, there was more. On May 11, Middle East Airlines

⁽⁵⁾ See the statement of the Supreme Defense Council:
www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/HigherDefenseCouncil/Pages/Details.aspx?nid=25954



(MEA) issued the following statement: “Further to MEA’s statement... on May 10, 2020⁽⁶⁾ and to clarifications by the General Directorate of General Security,⁽⁷⁾ the company would like to state that if vacancies are available on its planes, Palestinian travelers, bearing travel documents for Palestinian refugees issued by the Lebanese authorities, will be allowed to come to Lebanon on board the repatriation flights...” Hence, MEA’s statement sent the decision and responsibility for it back to the starting point, leaving the question about who allows or disallows people to travel to Lebanon without a satisfactory answer.

By detailing Tarek Abu Taha’s case and after denouncing the act of discrimination he was subjected to, the National Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism considers the way Lebanon’s authorities, both civil and security, handled this case-scandal is part of the incident’s discriminatory character and further evidence of the Lebanese authorities’ “failure” to fulfill their duties.

Finally, the National Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism reiterates that accountability for allegedly minor violations is no less important than accountability for major ones. It also reiterates that it is time for Lebanese authorities to stop playing the blame game and take responsibility for their actions.

⁽⁶⁾ This statement included the amended schedule of MEA’s third round of repatriation trips between May 14 and 24, 2020.

⁽⁷⁾ We could not find these clarifications in any open source. Moreover, it is not standard protocol for state entities to use “clarifications” as means of communication, be it with other State agencies or non-State ones.

