



RAFTO

Rafto Prize 2019 Award Statement 26.09.2019

The Rafto Prize 2019 is awarded Rouba Mhaissen, the founder and director of Sawa for Development and Aid (SDAID), for defending human rights from the local to the global level for people living as refugees

Refugees are a particularly vulnerable group from a human rights perspective. Human rights are universal, yet the realization of these rights are left in the hands of nation states and their governments. Globally, it is estimated that 70 million people are displaced, the vast majority residing in lower-income countries. The refugee system set up after the Second World War is unable to protect the people forced to migrate and millions of refugees are left in limbo, lacking any meaningful protection and human rights. The rights of refugees and other migrants are routinely disregarded and violated when they are pitted against the interests of citizens and national governments.

Rouba Mhaissen has contributed locally to improving the lives of people living as refugees in Lebanon in ways that protect their dignity and right to self-determination. At national and global levels, Mhaissen stands out as a relentless and powerful defender of the human rights of refugees. The Rafto Prize 2019 underscores that everyone, not only citizens of nation states, is entitled to legal protection and basic human rights.

Human rights defender Rouba Mhaissen

Dr. Rouba Mhaissen (31) is a Syrian-Lebanese economist, activist, community mobilizer and development practitioner who works on forced migration and the Syrian refugee crisis. She is the founder and director of Sawa for Development and Aid, and an outspoken defender of the rights of people living as refugees. Her relentless demands for human rights for all refugees have been heard in international fora. Through her advocacy for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Mhaissen underlines the importance of treating refugees and other migrants with dignity and as people with the right to form their own lives and destinies:

“Talk to us, don’t talk about us and do not speak in our name”

- Rouba Mhaissen (“Supporting Syria and the Region” Conference, London 2015)

Rouba Mhaissen stands out by defending human rights for refugees in three distinct ways: First, Mhaissen runs a small but important NGO aiming to improve the living conditions of Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon, with particular focus on women and children. Working on the ground, Sawa offers relief, alternative education, health care, and livelihood support. Second, Mhaissen has led Sawa’s research work, documenting the Syrian refugees’ experiences and livelihoods in Lebanon, and in particular, the experiences of those returning to Syria. This work is a crucial step in informing policy processes and knowledge-based decision making in Lebanon, Syria, and in international fora. Third, Mhaissen is an eloquent and fearless speaker, advocating the human rights

of refugees internationally and campaigning to build solidarity with citizens in other democratic countries.

From “policy of no policy” to forced return

Lebanon, a country of 4.5 million people is hosting an estimated 1.5 million Syrians displaced by civil war, the highest number of refugees per capita in the world. Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, the Lebanese government has maintained open borders for Syrian refugees. The early arrivers were allowed to work in certain sectors of the economy, despite being exposed to expensive fees for work-permits, marginalization, and limited freedom of movement. But as the civil war endures, the refugees’ situation has become precarious. The demographic, political, and economic balance in Lebanon is fragile as a third of the local population lives below the poverty line and one out of four are refugees. Lebanese authorities routinely blame the country’s hardship on the refugees, and the economic crisis has further increased the suspicions of refugees.

In this increasingly volatile situation, the Lebanese government has begun emphasizing return-policies toward Syrians living in Lebanon. According to Amnesty International, people living as refugees are forced to return through a combination of restrictive policies and rampant discrimination. Unlawful evictions, harassment, intimidation, and attacks on refugees leave many with no choice but to return. Upon their arrival in Syria, many have faced arbitrary arrests, interrogations and torture. For Syrian refugees, both residing in Lebanon or returning to Syria represent impossible “choices”.

Rouba Mhaissen is fighting these battles with, and on behalf of, the people she works with. She is a vocal and courageous front figure, speaking out against mounting pressure for the forced return of Syrian refugees, using insights and documentation of the experiences of those that have returned. In an environment where political activism among and for refugees is met with suspicion, Sawa continues to criticize the premature and relentless returns and for ignoring the voice of those returned.

At the local, national and global level, Rouba Mhaissen articulates the long term perspective of a rightful claim of a democratic Syria. Improved living conditions is a prerequisite for refugees to be able to engage in the forming of a future Syria. She believes that in order to achieve changes for the Syrian people it is vital to build solidarity with citizens in other democratic countries using a bottom-up approach:

“In Syria, we have lost half a million people and twelve million have been displaced because we wanted democracy. This is why in countries that have democracy we really need to push people to use it, as there are people out there who are fighting to be able to enjoy the same agency and power.” - Rouba Mhaissen (SOAS Blog, 8/3-2017)

A broken system of responsibility sharing

In the early days of the development of an international protection regime for refugees, key concerns were to ensure refugees legal protection, promote self-reliance, and enable the refugees to settle down and rebuild their lives. Fridtjof Nansen, the first High-Commissioner of Refugees, issued passports that enabled some degree of free movement. The 1951 Refugee Convention affirmed the right to work to ensure social and economic integration. Today, the freedom of movement of refugees is severely constrained by non-arrival measures in the higher-income countries and the vast majority of the world’s refugees find themselves in neighbouring lower-income countries where local integration seems economically or politically impossible.

The international support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) resettlement program is now at a historical low. Durable solutions- either resettlement, voluntary return, or local integration- all seem infeasible. The ongoing refugee crisis in Lebanon is exacerbated by lack of international support. Currently, we lack a functioning international system of responsibility sharing for people living as refugees.

Human rights for all: Sharing the responsibility of safeguarding the rights of refugees and other migrants

The Rafto Prize 2019 is an acknowledgment of Mhaissen and Sawa's grassroot and global level work to promote the human rights of people living as refugees and their right to be included in discussions regarding their own future. Nationally and internationally, Mhaissen is an outstanding voice of refugees and other migrants documenting and speaking out about harsh living conditions, the experiences of those returned to Syria, and the lack of durable solutions and international responsibility sharing.

We call upon governments to ensure fundamental human rights for refugees. We urge Lebanon to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention and fulfill their commitments to the Human Rights covenants that they have ratified. Lebanese authorities are legally bound by the obligation not to forcibly deport anyone to Syria as per the Lebanese Constitution, the customary principle of non-refoulement and Article 3 of the Convention against Torture, which Lebanon ratified in 2000.

The Rafto Prize 2019 is a call to protect human rights for all, irrespective of our legal status. We call upon all countries, international agencies and non-governmental organizations to jointly take responsibility to provide humanitarian aid in acute and chronic crises and to work toward an international system of shared responsibility for refugees and other migrants.

In particular we call upon affluent and democratic states to show responsibility of safeguarding people living as refugees, by assisting host countries overwhelmed by the numbers of newcomers. The current international neglect of the human rights situation for people living as refugees must stop: In the short-term this means financial support, in the long term assisting resettlement and facilitating return or local integration.

The Rafto Foundation,
Bergen, Wednesday 14 August 2019

The Rafto Prize will be presented at 18.00 on Sunday 3 November 2019 at The National Stage, Bergen

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About Dr Rouba Mhaisen and SDAID

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