

Key note for Kick-off event of IBM Lebanon Phase 2

Speech by Mr Michael Spindelegger, Director General, ICMPD

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues, Partners and Friends,

I am privileged in joining you today to mark the start of IBM Lebanon's second phase, and to acknowledge the collective efforts exerted by the European Union, the Government of Lebanon, and various European states represented here in supporting Lebanon's pursuit of security, stability, and prosperity.

During my meeting with His Excellency Prime Minister Salam yesterday morning, I reiterated my view that while irregular migration has increasingly captured the attention of the international community since the turn of the century, few countries in the Middle East, if not globally, have felt the immediate ramifications of the mass movement of people as Lebanon has in the past 5 years, namely since the Syria crisis unfolded in March 2011.

The war raging less than 100 kilometres from this very platform has inevitably resulted in the mass influx of vulnerable groups to Lebanon at unprecedented levels; there is currently an estimated 1.5 million displaced Syrians in Lebanon, stretching the country's already-scarce capacities to their limits. We understand these are difficult times for Lebanon, and we express our support and solidarity with you. As part of the mosaic of active international stakeholders represented in Lebanon, ICMPD and its Member States have vested interests to contribute to the concerted international efforts aimed at supporting Lebanon to overcome these challenges.

Lebanon has been able and willing to absorb refugees from its neighbour in crisis, and has become a key destination of refuge for people fleeing the devastation of war, along with Jordan and Turkey, and to a lesser extent, Iraq and Egypt. Despite its non-party status to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Lebanon has lived up to the challenge, and this is to be commended, not least from the humanitarian and humanistic perspective.

Yet ultimately, it is crucial that the discourse and debate on the refugee crisis be carried beyond the focus on mere numbers of those affected by it, and repositioned on the fundamentals of sound policy. This is twofold:

- Regional and international powers alike must strive to address the root causes of the conflict in Syria, and exhaust all means to end the war.

Without a comprehensive political solution to the conflict, and an end to the bloodshed, people will continue to exercise their inherent instinct as human beings to safeguard their security and wellbeing, and flee the devastation of war at any cost (legally or otherwise).

Therefore, it is our collective responsibility to employ reason into the discussion on Syria by calling for, and working towards, an end to the bloodshed, if we are sincere in our efforts to address and reverse the refugee crisis.

- It is equally important to reinforce the need for shared responsibility and solidarity in addressing the crisis.

There is a dire need, particularly on the part of EU Member States, to exercise rationality, caution, vision and foresight in the aftermath of the EU-Turkey agreement of last month to end irregular migration from Turkey to the EU. It is crucial to ensure that the letter and spirit of the agreement to contain irregular migration through Turkey does not result in the increase of refugees in transit countries, such as Lebanon. A balanced approach is needed here, whereby the EU-Turkey agreement is upheld on the one hand, while efforts to support other countries absorbing the ripple effects of the war are equally sustained.

Lebanon continues to be directly affected by regional developments and emerging threats, increasingly placing heavy burdens on Government and society alike, including security vulnerabilities, which brings me to the focus of today's event, namely the EU-funded project Enhanced Capability for Integrated Border Management in Lebanon (IBM Lebanon Phase 2).

In itself, the concept of Integrated Border Management (IBM) stands as a concrete example of cooperation and coordination; a concept based on the European experience, which aims to safeguard the sovereignty of national borders on the one hand, and harness the opportunities presented by a functional border system on the other hand (such as trade facilitation, mutual economic prosperity, and long term stability and security). It is these fundamental objectives that ICMPD strives to fulfil with Lebanon through our work with the various border agencies, namely the Lebanese Armed Forces, General Security, Internal Security Forces, Customs, and Civil Defence.

Through "trial and error" this concept of intra and inter agency cooperation and international cooperation was developed to address Europe's changing political climate in the 1990s, and testifies to the need for all partners in Lebanon (national and international) to 1) pursue best practices within their domains and learn from good practices in other countries and regions, and 2) strengthen collaboration and communication with like-minded institutions.

These pillars perhaps best describe the work that has been sought and achieved in the EU-funded IBM Lebanon project so far, and I look forward to hearing of the continued success of the project in the years to come.

While I do not want to exceed my time!, I wish to end on the following (positive) note: we must extend our common vision and look beyond the challenges, and we must strive to pursue the opportunities that present themselves within a society as diverse, as vibrant, as mobile, and as young as Lebanon. The potential opportunities available to Lebanon as a regional hub for skilled youth, and the rewards that can be reaped by a country with a flourishing Diaspora community are not to be dismissed or underestimated, but rather nurtured and encouraged.

In cooperation with all relevant entities present here, ICMPD is prepared to utilise its expertise for Lebanon, in all relevant fields, both at the policy and operational levels; we view the second phase of IBM Lebanon not only as an opportunity to put the principles of sound Integrated Border Management to practice, but also to assess what can be done in the immediate future to address Lebanon's emerging challenges, and reap its potential opportunities for further development and prosperity, in a spirit of partnership.

I wish to thank the European Union, represented by Her Excellency Ambassador Christina Lassen, for its support and unwavering commitment in making this cooperation possible.

I extend ICMPD's sincere gratitude to the Government of the Netherlands, represented by H.E. Ambassador Hester M.J. Somsen, for its commitment and additional support to the IBM Lebanon project.

My utmost gratitude and appreciation goes to our Lebanese Government partners, especially the colleagues within the various agencies, who have made this cooperation between our respective institutions possible.

Finally, I wish to thank the Army Officers' club for hosting us at this beautiful facility in Jounieh.