

# MP Dr. Bilal Abdallah Pledges to Enact Universal Health Coverage

As many countries worldwide intensify efforts to establish universal health coverage—a system guided by the World Bank and recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO)—the passage of such a law in Lebanon faces numerous obstacles. The most prominent of these are financial and economic challenges, political divisions, and administrative conflicts among relevant institutions.

Studies indicate that more than half of Lebanese citizens lack any form of formal health coverage, highlighting the magnitude of the problem and the urgent need for a solution. This situation, however, also reflects the significant challenge of including everyone under a single umbrella.

To clarify the situation, we asked MP Dr. Bilal Abdallah, head of the parliamentary health committee, about the key issues. Dr. Abdallah hopes the project will be implemented before the end of 2025. The following questions were tackled:

- What are the obstacles to enacting the law after its progress through committees, and what is its current status, especially since financing and governance were among the most prominent hurdles?

- The estimated cost is approximately one billion dollars. Is this figure final? Will fees be a primary funding source, as included in the budget?

- Is the project's objective still to provide coverage for the uninsured, and will it cover preventative care (such as medications) for those who already have insurance? How does this differ from the comprehensive health card?

Here is what Dr. Abdallah replied in an interview with **"Human and Health"**:



Dr. Mohammad Jawad Khalifeh, former Prime Deputy Minister and Minister of Public Health Ghassan Hasbani, and former MP Dr. Assem Araji. A plan was developed to redraft the proposal to align with current circumstances."

This redrafting was based on a detailed and extensive study that considered Lebanon's economic situation, healthcare reality—including the availability of doctors and nurses—social needs of citizens, and relevant international standards. "This was certainly done in cooperation with both the WHO and the World Bank," he added. "For approximately a year, the proposal was discussed, and many aspects were amended in the subcommittee."

## Cost close to one billion dollars

Dr. Abdallah continued by adding that "comprehensive and detailed studies" have addressed the estimated cost of providing hospital care for the uninsured and preventative healthcare for all Lebanese people through healthcare centers. **"The cost is close to one billion dollars**, perhaps slightly more or less," he stated.

First, Dr. Abdallah started by explaining that the draft law on universal health coverage was developed after reviewing previous legislative attempts made over decades by Parliament. "An initial meeting was held with all previous proponents," he said, "including former MP Dr. Atef Majdalani, former Minister of Public Health

Funding could come from state allocation and some fees. He highlighted the disparity in current funding: "The Ministry of Health's budget is currently around 250 million dollars, while the need is three times that. This amount [one billion] could provide adequate hospital coverage, modern preventative healthcare, and support for health centers in all regions."

"This is a new approach in Lebanon," Dr. Abdallah said. "We have reviewed the experiences of several countries and attended the 2024 World Health Conference organized by the World Bank. There are encouraging examples in African, Asian, and Latin American countries that have advanced their health rankings through the very indicators used in our evaluation... In Lebanon, there is a gap between the healthcare we provide and what the people receive, or what they have to bear the cost of. Of course, providing this is the responsibility of the state, with contributions from society."

He also emphasized that **"This project is the health card**. This card will be registered at all centers—private and public hospitals and primary healthcare centers—so that citizens without any other hospital insurance can benefit from health coverage. Patients currently relying on the Ministry of Health are the primary target, and therefore, all Lebanese people will benefit in the area of prevention."

He added: "The project is being monitored regularly on daily basis by the WHO, the World Bank, and even the International Monetary Fund. We have had a series of meetings with their representatives, and they have been encouraging and supportive. The indicators we are working on in our proposed law are very similar to those being implemented in Egypt, while accounting for the specificities of the Lebanese context."

Dr. Abdallah pointed out that while Egypt can proceed more easily due to its political structure and President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's clear desire to implement it, the process in Lebanon is more complex. "In Lebanon, we need a law issued by the Parliament, approval from the government, and the cooperation of the Ministry of Finance... In other words, the constitutional mechanisms are more complex."

## Independent Administrative Body

The head of the parliamentary health committee



highlighted the fact that **"the project will be managed by an independent body**. The Ministry of Finance will allocate the necessary funds. **The body governing will be administratively and financially independent, possessing its own legal status and a separate account at the Central Bank**. It will be chaired by the Minister of Public Health to ensure unified health decision-making."

In conclusion, Dr. Bilal Abdallah pledged: "We pledge, at least within the parliamentary health committee and its subcommittee, along with colleagues who have worked with us, in cooperation with the Minister of Health and the WHO, and with the direct support of His Excellency the President of the Republic, the Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, the Prime Minister Judge Nawaf Salam, and through the perseverance of the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Elias Bou Saab, who also chairs the joint committees, to continue advancing this project for its approval in the joint committees, in preparation for its ratification by the plenary session."