Lebanon’s Growing Humanitarian Crisis

Event Transcript:

Featuring:

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I’m Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East Program, senior vice president, and Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy here at CSIS. I’m delighted to welcome you to this very important program on the crisis in Lebanon. CSIS is especially grateful to USAID, which has provided support to CSIS for this event. We’re here to discuss what seems to be an increasingly complex situation in Lebanon—a situation which continues to shock us with the speed and the scale of the country’s downfall. Lebanon has generally been considered a middle-income country—known for its well-educated and cosmopolitan population—but earlier this month, the United Nations’ special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights concluded after a visit that Lebanon is a rapidly failing state. He warned that unless swift and decisive measures are taken, its downward spiral will accelerate.

Lebanon’s crisis has clear economic and political components, and its failure has profound implications, not only for the growing number of Lebanese who have fallen into poverty, but also communities of perhaps a million Syrian refugees, more than 200,000 Palestinian refugees, 200,000 foreign workers and others at the bottom of the social scale. This event seeks to provide a better understanding of the current humanitarian conditions in Lebanon. In light of the country’s downward spiral, it’s an effort to examine what is unique about this crisis, an effort to identify opportunities for external actors to improve conditions for the most vulnerable, and an effort to think about what external actors should do and shouldn’t do.

I really couldn’t be more excited about the lineup of speakers we’ve assembled today. Georges Kettaneh has been the secretary general of the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) since 2013. He’s served in the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement for more than 23 years and has extensive experience in all aspects of its work. He previously built-up Lebanon’s renowned emergency medical services network and managed the Red Cross’s emergency relief operations.

Sally Abi Khalil is Oxfam International’s Middle East and North Africa director. She’s a humanitarian and development practitioner with more than 20 years of experience across the MENA region. She was previously Oxfam’s country director for Lebanon, making her the first Lebanese woman to lead an INGO response to the Syria crisis.

Haneen Sayed is the World Bank’s lead specialist working on social protection and jobs in the Middle East. She’s worked at the World Bank for nearly three decades and led the World Bank’s coordination of the Syria crisis response from 2011 to 2017. Since the onset of the crisis in Lebanon, she’s been leading the World Bank’s social response, including a large-scale Emergency Social Safety Net program.

Dr. Maha Yahya is director of the Malcolm Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. Her work focuses on political violence and pluralism development and social justice, the challenges of citizenship, and the political and socioeconomic implications of the migration and refugee crisis.

We’re putting this group into the capable hands of my colleague, Will Todman, to moderate the discussion. Will has been working with me as a fellow in the Middle East Program at CSIS for five years, and his research focuses on humanitarian issues, displacement, and conflict in the Middle East with an emphasis on the Levant. He’s conducted field research in seven countries across the Middle East and North Africa and his analyses have been published in peer review journals by think tanks and humanitarian organizations. It is a very important topic, we have an incredible panel of people to discuss it, and I’m very much looking forward to your engagement and your questions. Will, over to you.
Will Todman:
Thank you so much, Jon. As Jon said, we really want to explore today what external actors can do to try and improve the situation in Lebanon, and I’m absolutely delighted to have these four incredible guests today. The structure of the event is going to go a bit like this. We’re going to start with opening remarks from each of our speakers, then I’ll ask them some follow up questions. At the end, I’m going to open things up to the audience, so if you have questions that you would like to submit, please do so on the CSIS website. If you go to www.csis.org, then click on events, you’ll see this event there and you can see a button to submit your questions.

I wanted to start with you, Mr. Kettaneh, if possible. The winter is coming in Lebanon. It seems humanitarian conditions are only going to get worse in the months ahead and I wanted to ask you, what do you view as the current humanitarian priorities in Lebanon? How is your organization, the Lebanese Red Cross, shifting its response to address these issues?

Georges Kettaneh:
Thank you, Mr. Todman, Dr. Alterman, and distinguished audience. I would like to thank CSIS for inviting this broad audience to raise interest in the current humanitarian situation. I will start by reading about the Lebanese Red Cross in the country, and then I will address the challenges. As you know, the Lebanese Red Cross started in 1945 in Lebanon. I will not talk too much about the LRC. We are the leading ambulance service in the country and the leading blood bank. This is why we are responding to more than 80 percent of emergency medical services and providing more than 30 percent of blood for all the hospitals. All of these missions are for free. We are proving support according to needs, to sectors ranging from youth, EcoSec relief, cash relief, WASH, shelters, healthcare, and primary healthcare.

This is something that can help you also to continue and it is the sector that can support in disaster risk reduction programs awareness, restoring family links and migrants, and managing dead bodies. The Lebanese Red Cross prepared a plan of action beginning in October 2019—from the forest fires to the manifestations, the Beirut blast, and socioeconomic situation—where we start responding and helping. This has especially been true with the Covid-19 pandemic. We are continuing to transfer suspected and confirmed cases, and we continue to help the people. There’s a lot of need in the country in the health sector. There are two main problems: health and relief. The people are in need. There is a lack of medication. There are a lot of problems regarding the health sector—regarding the chronic medicines—and regarding others sectors. This is why the Lebanese Red Cross continues to maintain the movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in helping the community with other programs—with the European Union (EU) and with Madad. Now, we are working with the World Bank and another program for the Covid-19 vaccine. We work with other programs to see how we can manage to maintain help and support for the community. The advantage of the Lebanese Red Cross is that we are established in every Lebanese territory, we are accepted by the community, and our mission is free. It is neutral, independent, and impartial. We have safe access from the north to the south—from the Bekaa Valley to Mount Lebanon and elsewhere. The big challenge is how to continue to respond to health problems in the community, with the Covid-19 pandemic, accidents, heart attacks, and other health challenges. For chronic illnesses, you cannot find some needed medicines. The other big challenge includes medicine, the health sector, and food. This is a big tragedy. We are trying our best to see how we can help and preserve the dignity of the community, and save lives. This is a big challenge for the Lebanese Red Cross.
Also, we cannot forget the Syria crisis. We have a lot of Syrian refugees—we are trying to help them and the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in parallel. As the Red Cross, we need to help everybody, according to our fundamental principles. Maintaining this response, maintaining this help is a challenge with the public health sector where we are finding that—and the majority of the hospitals in Lebanon are private, and outnumber the public hospitals—there's a big challenge receiving Covid-19 cases or other cases. Another challenge is that 30 percent to 40 percent of medical staff, physicians, and nurses left the country.

The other things are the equipment, the material, and the running cost. People have to pay, and they have to help, and they have to support each other to be accepted. The Red Cross will focus on the areas that I mentioned—especially the health and relief sectors. Cash is something that’s very important. We respond to more than 11,000 families and provide $300 disbursements per month over a period of seven months for between 2,100 to 11,000 families. We continue to undertake clear assessments in order to see the needs of the community because there is a lot of change. There are a lot of people that lack resources. There is a lack of milk for children. There are basic needs not being met.

I cannot talk on behalf of the others, but I know there is a high unemployment rate. There are immigration issues, and electricity is being cut. The Red Cross has been alert since 2019 trying to respond to this crisis, and trying to help anyone who needs us. This is the challenge of the Lebanese Red Cross—how we can maintain and sustain all of these programs for the long term.

Will Todman:
Thank you so much. There's a lot there to follow up on later, but if I can next turn to you, Sally Abi Khalil, you as regional director are responsible for managing Oxfam’s response to some of the world's worst humanitarian crises, from Syria to Yemen, and in many ways, I suppose the crisis in Lebanon looks quite different. We haven't yet seen really widespread displacement or violence. There isn't really widespread hunger or famine—at least, yet—and I wonder if you could touch on what you think is unique about the crisis in Lebanon and what that means in terms of your response and the priorities that Oxfam has.

Sally Abi Khalil:
Thank you, Will, it's a privilege to be on this panel with my colleagues here today, so I really appreciate the opportunity. Indeed, the Lebanon crisis cannot be compared to the humanitarian situation in Syria or Yemen, as you had suggested. I think what makes this crisis unique in its nature, is that it’s not really caused by a single moment or event, but a series of crises and events that have compounded the situation to deteriorate over time and impact all communities across Lebanon. Lebanese communities are impacted, but we also have Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees, migrant workers, and other communities that are often forgotten—like LGBTQ communities in the country.

I think the main crisis that really focused Lebanon for the international arena was definitely the Syrian refugee response in response to the Syria crisis. Lebanon opened its doors and has been hosting over a million Syrian refugees in the country. This led to a wide scale international humanitarian response under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan. This was followed by an economic financial collapse, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Beirut blast, and many little, small crises here and there in between all of them. This is where we are today.

Really what is most unique about the Lebanon crises is that—outside of the Syrian refugee crisis and the response itself—the crises that followed are really manifestations of a government that refuses to take the necessary steps to protect its own citizens and other communities on its territory and to address the
multiplicity of crises. It's about political will—or the lack of political will that is in the country—that impacts the most vulnerable in the country.

Just to highlight some of these vulnerabilities that are really present in the country at the moment—and my colleague Georges definitely touched upon some of them—we have extremely elevated poverty figures. The most recent vulnerability assessment that UNHCR does for Syrian refugee sites shows that nearly half of Syrian refugee households are currently moderately or severely food insecure. This is 1.7 times the level in 2019. We also have vulnerable Lebanese families that are struggling to cope. We have over 50 percent of households that are considered poor according to World Bank data, and there's a UNESCO study on multidimensional poverty data, that cites higher figures as well. 79 percent of Palestinian refugees—both Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Palestinian refugees from Syria—are poor or extremely poor and have incurred new debt in the law three months. We're seeing a rise in intercommunal tensions as well. This past August new data from a perception survey that monitors social stability and social cohesion, indicates that about 36 percent of respondents are reporting negative intercommunal relations between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities. This is compared to 21 percent in 2018, so we are seeing high levels of insecurity and violence that are being reported and this is increasing over time.

Looking specifically at women and girls, they continue to be disproportionately affected by gender-based violence in Lebanon. 97 percent of survivors that are reporting an incident to the GBV Information Management Systems, are female. The most common type of incident that is being reported is intimate partner violence, and it's quite high. We're seeing exasperation in family tensions because of the dire economic situation and the reduction in purchasing power of families, that is really causing extreme stress.

We see child labor on the rise. There's been an increase among Syrian refugees from four percent of to 5.3 percent, but we're also seeing this trend of increase across Lebanese and Palestinian families as well. We have Syrian refugees holding valid legal residency that has also decreased from 20 percent of over 15 year olds in 2020 holding legal residency, to 16 percent so that we are seeing a decrease. Our own gender analysis as Oxfam in Lebanon is also seeing a de-prioritization in women's hygiene needs as well, related to menstrual health management. This is also increasing the vulnerability and adding the stress on women in particular, both for Lebanese families and Syrian women.

Again, as I said to start with, the data is really telling, it's really concerning. We're seeing a downward spiral, but there still continues to be a lack of data in particular for Lebanese, which I'm sure Haneen will talk about specifically. But again, this is result of a lack of political will, a lack of decision making by a government that is really hampering the situation. Yet nonetheless, we have a responsibility to respond. We have a responsibility to continue to address vulnerabilities in Lebanon, across all communities, to Syrian refugees, so that they are not forgotten. And to continue to look at Lebanon as part of the global good they're offering. As well, to address the vulnerabilities that continue to increase, and be imposed on Syrian refugees with what we call programming in the NGO sector, across the triple nexus from a humanitarian developmental lens, but also from a peace building or social stability lens, if you like.

Will Todman:

Thank you so much, Sally. My colleague, Natasha Hall, wrote a policy brief about this, this time last year, which focused on how to help marginalized groups. That focused on Syrian refugees, Palestinians, and migrant domestic workers. Sadly, I think the findings are still certainly relevant a year on, so I would encourage people to find that.

Haneen, if I can turn to you, you've spearheaded the World Bank’s Emergency
Social Safety Net program, which includes planned cash transfers to vulnerable households. I wonder if you could tell us a bit about how donors are trying to advance social protection initiatives in Lebanon, and also how they're trying to encourage reforms at the same time.

Haneen Sayed:

Thank you very much Will, and first let me extend my thanks to the CSIS for this kind invitation; it's always a pleasure to be back with you, so thank you very much for this opportunity. I think Sally and Mr. Kettaneh described very well the dire humanitarian and developmental situation in the country, and I won't go into that. I think when we get straight to the second part of your question, which is about how should donors respond, or what the donors should do or not do, I think we have to keep our eye on the ball of reform. Lebanon cannot get out of where it is without reform. Humanitarian support is critical but without doing the fundamental reforms—addressing the fundamental dysfunctionalities in sector after sector—it will be hard to see how Lebanon can get out of this.

The task is daunting because almost every sector needs significant reform and doing reform requires consensus—it requires capacity, actually—of government and other stakeholders to do it, so where does Lebanon start? I think the best way to start is working through a program with the IMF. At least, it focuses policy makers and society's attention on the absolute key elements to get Lebanon out of its hole.

These things are known—whether it be restructuring the banking sector, something has to be done to address and figure out who's going to take the losses and so on. There's the electricity sector, which is fundamental, and now we're seeing even more so, the more neglect there is for the reform of the electricity sector, the less Lebanon's able and the Lebanese people are able to cope, and this brings on an additional dimension to the humanitarian crisis.

We have public services. All of public services essentially have come to a halt. Government services in education, in health, transport—everything is very stretched. You go to a ministry today—staff come normally just one day a week, on Wednesdays for a few hours and so on. That's partly because the crisis has brought on a serious deterioration of their purchasing power, so they're almost paid nothing.

Then on top of that, there were fuel crises over the summer—initially, there was no fuel and now there is fuel at very high prices. To address this fundamental issue requires looking at public sector administration and working out an agreement about how to reinvigorate the public sector. Again, that would be part of, for example, I'm not predicting what an IMF program would have in it, but I'm saying that these are very fundamental issues which require consensus, but which Lebanon has to address.

The donor community is stressing that, whether it be the international organizations such as World Bank—this is a regular urge. We urge the government at every occasion. This morning the 3RF Consultative Group headed by EU and UN and World Bank was at the Serail with the prime minister chairing, again urging the government to address a key reform, to come to a program with the IMF and the like. I think this is something that we have to keep at.

In parallel, we have to address people's humanitarian needs. Sally described it really well—it's very severe and it's not getting any better. There's just no way it will get better without the bigger picture coming in. We can put money into it, and we are, and we should, but there's also the opportunity of the international community's attention. If another crisis breaks out somewhere else, the international community's attention will move there. Lebanon really needs to start taking opportunity of the funds that are coming now,
which could be much higher if Lebanon implemented some of these reforms.

For example, what is coming into the sector of social protection, which I work deeply in, consists of significant programs to help people survive through cash transfers and even the Lebanese Red Cross. Mr. Kettaneh mentioned that this is a new area for the Lebanese Red Cross, but they have also seen how effective this can be. The World Bank’s Emergency Social Safety Net program is providing the government $246 million to implement a major cash transfer program for the extreme poor.

But it also—and this is also something very important—is trying to preserve human capital through making sure that children at risk do not drop out of school. Because with all of these humanitarian crises that we talked about, what I worry about is the long-term impact on human capital—on people's mental health. These are humanitarian crises that you can't reverse if you let them go on for too long, so any program must also look not just providing families cash, but also how to help them in a more developmental way.

I think the donor community is quite in agreement in terms of the importance of social protection. There are many areas of social protection, and ultimately, we want to see a much more universal approach. Lebanon, in this current fiscal situation, probably cannot be providing overnight universal health care and so on—but it should start in that direction. We, the donor community, are supporting the government, we're looking at a more comprehensive approach, but then what are the really urgent, urgent needs? Cash transfers to poor families are very urgently needed.

Lebanon has already been feeling the impact of removing the subsidies on fuel as well as the foreign exchange subsidy. Fuel prices have gone up to very high levels, and inflation is also similarly reacting, and people's purchasing power continues to deteriorate. Providing a compensation package for Lebanese and as well as non-Lebanese populations is going to be important in the coming year. Now, this has already been discussed, it was already planned more than a year ago, and yet it hasn't yet happened. It hasn't yet been launched and everybody's asking why the government hasn't yet started with the broad coverage cash transfer program to help people mitigate the impact of the fuel subsidy removal.

This brings us back to really the fundamental blockages of governing that take place. It's not just the government, it's also the parliament—it's the political actors and how they all interact, where decision making in Lebanon just gets blocked, for whatever reasons is too complicated to get into. To summarize quickly, I think donors have to keep the ball moving on reform—keep talking about that, keep pushing the government on that. In parallel, donors must help the government with putting functioning public services like education and health back in place and help families with meeting basic needs through cash transfer and other humanitarian programs.

One last topic, which I can speak more about later, is system building. You need to build systems to be able to implement all these programs, and this might provide some avenue or some hope to being able to get out of this crisis. I'll stop here, thank you.

Will Todman:

Thank you so much, and I definitely want to ask you more about the systems that we can be building a bit later on. But I think we've heard from Georges Kettaneh, we've heard from Sally Abi Khalil about the humanitarian needs and the scale of them. I think we've also heard from Haneen that really the only solution is reforms, ultimately, and until there are serious reforms made by the government, none of these issues are going to be truly addressed.

And Dr. Yahya, if I turn to you—I'm afraid I've given you the really difficult question here, which is can external actors catalyze a different type of politics in Lebanon? Can they exert pressure to really induce the scale of reforms that are needed? And if you can touch on how the challenges of the political system really play...
out when thinking about aid and humanitarian aid, how can we ensure that aid doesn't just further these networks of patronage, which the political elite have relied on for decades?

Dr. Maha Yahya:
Thank you, Will, and again I want to add my voice to my co-panelists for inviting me to be part of this very timely discussion with Georges, Sally and Haneen, and yourself of course. Now for the tough question; for external actors, I think they're already doing a very important job in pushing for reforms, which Haneen has just spoken about. What has been interesting is the extent to which they really are speaking with one voice. I'm speaking obviously here about the EU and other Western donors. The idea that this is not something we're not willing to provide—we can provide a lot more funding to help Lebanon in the midst of its crisis, but we will not provide it unconditionally, particularly when it comes to development aid—as there needs to be systematic reforms across the board.

Just doing what was done before, where you promise that there will be reforms, and this has happened systematically over the past few decades, and then we kind of leave it till later, this simply will not fly anymore. Some of the reforms that are already being asked, I think are quite manageable. I agree with Haneen that the task is daunting, particularly in the context that both Georges and Sally, I think have captured how painful it is and how horrific actually. This is a country that is literally experiencing whiplash. If we just remember that in October 2019, Lebanon was considered a middle-income country, and yet now we're talking about more than 60 percent poverty rates, and I mean, you've heard the rest. The kind of reforms that are needed need to be paced. They're overwhelming in the sense of how much needs to be done, but I think they can be paced in a way that makes it achievable.

One thing is that external actors, and I hate to say this, in trying to catalyze a different politics, they definitely should not get involved in the upcoming elections, since we're talking about the political context. Adopting any candidate or any list is a kiss of death, and it's not something they should be doing. This is a homegrown effort and it needs to be done as a homegrown effort. I can talk a bit more about this if there is interest.

If we want to talk a bit about the politics of aid—the system in Lebanon, as Haneen described, is completely deadlocked. In my mind, it's one that can only produce crisis rather than find solutions. The collapse of state institutions and society didn't seem to be impacting the ruling cartel until now. We're looking at, for me, if I were to describe it, I'd say there's criminal neglect of both the country and its people and of the refugees residing in it. The Lebanese state is not fulfilling its duty either to protect or to provide for its citizens.

The cash transfer program that Haneen just mentioned has been ready for more than two years, and yet it's stuck in the midst of political bickering between parties. One part of the tug of war is over which database to use and where the data should be hosted. And the issue here is not the data, but rather that they [parties] are still looking at ways to extract rent from the state in any shape or form possible. The data here provides an opportunity to service their own clients, to expand patronage networks, particularly in a context where again, the socioeconomic situation is so dire and people desperately need help. This gives a sense of the extent to which there is almost a divorce from reality as whatever happens to people almost doesn't seem to impact the calculus of the country's political leadership.

The higher level of insecurity; my concern is as we move forward, the higher levels of insecurity that Sally mentioned are going to be amplified. We're already seeing a lot more incidents, particularly in peripheral areas, but also in the cities. The race to the bottom between Lebanon's poor and refugees is very much there. In this broader context, I think humanitarian support has the coordinated effort, but it should not be conditioned. I think
this is where I would like to emphasize what donors can do. There's a desperate need for humanitarian support, and that support needs to continue coming in, both to NGOs, and there are plenty of very credible NGOs, but I would not completely discount all state institutions. We don't throw the baby out with the bath water.

There are functioning institutions. For example, there's a desperate need for support in the education sector. And Haneen was the lead on much of that so she can talk a bit more about this, but there is a desperate need. Today the education system in Lebanon is buckling under the pressure it's facing. The transfer, I mean, the number of students that have moved from the private schools to public schools has increased tremendously. They were talking about 18 percent to 20 percent at a time when the schools are already doing double shifts, morning for Lebanese students and afternoons for refugees. Teachers are suffering, they can't make it to schools, et cetera, we won't go into the details.

There needs to be a real support to that sector, for example, and the health sector is another one. Because if we lose those, the medium- to long-term impacts on Lebanon are huge. Frankly this is a real transformation of a country, a fundamental transformation in the very identity of a country that has always prided itself on its human resources, on the high education of its people.

Another issue is timeframes and exit strategies. There is a genuine concern that Lebanon becomes a society that is like a broader refugee community—In Lebanon or elsewhere—that is totally dependent on aid, because of the lack of a political vision of how to get out of the deadlock. There's no political consensus. I agree with Haneen. Even if there's the best reform plan that is carved out by the team with the IMF, I don't see any political consensus on moving forward with that kind of a deal. The same goes for exit strategies and I think this is where donors need to continue to insist.

Humanitarian aid should not be conditioned on this, but they need to continue insisting on seeing exit strategies. “Okay, we will provide humanitarian aid for you, let's say for five years, but after five years, what are you going to do?” What are the exit strategies so that we don't end up with a society that is totally reliant on international support? Because that international support will not stay. There will be other crises and Lebanon is in a region that is rife with crises and ongoing wars. There are at least four active conflicts in the region at this particular moment, including coup d'états. The developmental impact of the last decade has been huge in terms of rollbacks on development gains, whether in health, education, or a broad range of other issues. Just look at Syria where—other than the refugees—we're looking at 6.7 million people internally displaced. I think this is something to keep in mind as donors engage with Lebanese politicians and the political leadership of the country.

Will Todman:
Thank you. I certainly want to get into the medium- and longer-term impacts of these crises later on. But firstly, I want to turn back to the more immediate future and to take a scenario in which, unfortunately, this current trajectory continues, where this downward spiral continues and conditions continue to get worse for the most vulnerable. The political class doesn't really feel the effects of that and doesn't implement these reforms. In the near to medium term, Mr. Kettaneh, how does the Lebanese Red Cross shift what is it doing to respond to even more humanitarian need? How do the social and political obstacles that we've been talking about shape and limit your response?

Georges Kettaneh:
We took these lessons from the manifestation of different crises like Covid-19 and the Beirut blast. The blast was a mess; it was a tragedy for us, for the hospitals, and for the health sector. If
you evacuate more than 3,000 people in 24 hours and deliver 1,500 blood units and help 11,000 families in a cash transfer program, and other efforts, the the socioeconomic lessons you learn cause you to revise your strategy in a way that shifts the gears. Our strategy in 2018 was something for five years, and now it is something else. We are always living in a crisis, and this is why we start to think about the operational priorities of the strategy of the Lebanese Red Cross in Lebanon to ensure that victims of accidents, illness, and major incidents receive prompt and effective emergency care.

Then we provide safer blood products to patients in Lebanon. The Lebanese don't have access to reactive services, they don't have good ambulances, and they don't have the equipment. Thirdly, the Red Cross improves access for the population to quality primary healthcare services. These are three main operational priorities of five. The fourth one is basic needs—Ecossec, WASH and cash, where we need to respond to vulnerable people affected by prices and emergencies.

Number five, we reduce the impact of disasters on the population because the local community are the first responders. We are the second responders, and this is why you have the training to raise awareness for the governorates, the municipality, the local community, the public, and the private sectors. This is the advantage of the Lebanese Red Cross—we are strong enough to be accepted by the community, to get safe access, and to have all these contacts with all the parties in the field.

Since 2012, we are also responding in parallel to the Syria crisis. We cannot stop helping them. The second response is national society development. We need to develop our 10 national society development objectives from engagement to financial transparency. We need to continue due diligence, volunteering and peer support, supply chain, and logistics. We need to have a strong system in logistics and customs and others. We need branch development—we have branches in all the territories and they're facing a big challenge because they are decentralized. We have information management and digitalization, disaster preparedness, integrated programs, and restoring family links, psychosocial support, response and preparedness mitigations, livelihood, and schools and others, and training and development. We always continue to do this training and development. Cross-cutting teams are something very important, and this strategy ensures the protection of gender and inclusion, community engagement and accountability, and the social environment impact.

This is why we have to respond to any crisis. We have to prepare because we are always revising. Our contingency plan speaks to our response. This is what we had with the experience of Ebola in 2014. That is why we responded to Covid-19 without problems—with PPE, equipment, and all this work. We didn't face the challenge of losing equipment or material because in Lebanon, we are always living in crisis. It's not new for us and all our friends. Since there's no peaceful conventions in Middle East, we are always living in crisis and this is why we need to prepare ourselves to be ready in human resources and logistics and other services—so that we can continue.

The challenge is how we can maintain this service—how we can help the community. As Haneen mentioned, we started the cash transfer program with the Syrians before—we increased it during the blast and now we have to continue because there's a mass of needs of this community in poverty and other problems. Health is a big challenge to accept. If we face the same problem like at the end of 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic, we will face a big tragedy with the hospitals because they are not ready to accept or to receive the cases. I remember in the end of December and early January 2021, we were transferring 350 Covid-19 cases daily to the hospitals. I don't know if we can receive and accept them again. This is why the vaccine center, the vaccinations, the
chronic medicines, the awareness, the training, and the PCR needs support.

As Dr. Maha mentioned, the challenge is that even if we’re working for three, four, five years, or more, we need to prepare the community and not always count on donors. We need to go back to normal life. Usually in Middle East, we want to solve the world’s problems in 24 hours. We cannot. We have to work for the long term. We thought the Syria crisis would be finished in three months. Eleven years later this crisis continues. This is a big challenge. We have to maintain and sustain the program, to build our capacity, and continue volunteer management. It’s a big challenge. How can we maintain the volunteer who is giving thirty hours per week for free? This is a big challenge.

The staff who are leaving, the people who are leaving the country, the people who are suffering, and the education system cannot continue. The challenge according to the strategy is to complement the role of the others—to help. Our advantage is that we are in the entire country, have broad community support, and can help each other to continue—not to compete or duplicate. This is the big challenge—sharing data, sharing information, experience, lessons learned, and helping the community in saving lives and preserving dignity.

Will Todman:
Thank you. Haneen, because I think some of that involves creating these systems that you talked about beforehand, I wonder if you could talk a bit more about what kind of systems you are referring to when you say that donors need to be building systems in this moment?

Haneen Sayed:
Lebanon came into this crisis. Well, which one? Which crisis? Let’s just say the financial economic one, with very weak social protection systems. I’ll talk just about social protection for a moment. What this specifically means is that it didn’t have a robust database which could be relied on by different actors—including, for example, the Lebanese Red Cross, who wanted to do cash transfers—that is a reliable one that could be used to identify and support people. There was a small one that had been putting along for 10 years, including with our support—the National Poverty Targeting Program—but we weren’t able to scale it up. And that has to partly deal with the fact that the government was not giving priority to social protection, social assistance before the crisis. Now, everybody wants to do this—everyone gets into the game, all the donors and government agencies, so it’s good in one sense. It means all the more that the systems have to be there.

Very concretely, you need a database that is based on the fact that every person in that database is identified with, one number, a unique identifier. Actually, it's household based. They get assistance and they're logged in the system. They’re identified with that. If there's other assistance to be provided to them, you can address the issue of duplication and the like. It sounds kind of simple or sounds minor, but it actually isn't. It can be transformational in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, better targeting, all kinds of things. Most countries have moved already in that direction, including in the region. You have Jordan, you have Egypt which has already developed and uses a unique number for its social assistance. Years ago, Turkey and Iran acquired databases. Iran has 28 social databases which are connected to what they call the social registry, and therefore things really move very efficiently, effectively. You really need that. Now we are building this. That's the nice thing, actually, that is, finally. Without it, it is difficult, as Maha said, because the deep state rears its head when you start talking about data and data access, and where the databases sits and that. Of course, part of it is also not understanding how data works these days. The data can sit anywhere; it doesn't mean it has to be the ministry social affairs for the ministry to have control of it or anything. We’re moving in that direction, and what has really helped is coming back to this notion of
trying to build on what is working in the government. You all know last year the experience with registering for the COVID vaccine through the IMPACT platform, which was developed under the Central Inspection, which is a government entity. It’s a supervision entity responsible to supervise government agencies, and quasi-independent. They developed this IMPACT platform where people could register for COVID. While in the beginning there might have been some birthing pains, it worked very well and it actually built a lot of credibility with the population through dashboards, public communication to people and so on. We built on that and this is where the new registration platform for social assistance will be based. This has now been agreed upon with a decision from the prime minister, to use a unique number for every Lebanese citizen, and you start building what’s called the national social registry, so that next time you have a crisis—and we know in Lebanon there will be another crisis soon, unfortunately—you can very quickly and rapidly help people in an efficient, effective, equitable way.

There are other parts of such systems which are important, like monitoring. Independent monitoring must be a standard feature of these programs. You have independent monitors, whether it be from civil society or what have you, and grievance, because these programs will always have grievances. People always say, "Why did I not get something but my neighbor got something?" So you have to address them, and there could be one, two, three different building blocks of systems for these programs to run properly. I think there is progress on this and we hope, let’s say within a couple of months, these systems will be in place. It will be around the same time as the actual launch of the ESSN and the ration card program for the population.

Will Todman:
Thank you. Sally, if I can turn to you, I heard that you did a podcast recently for the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. And you were talking about some of the priorities as you see in the IMF negotiations as the Lebanese government is just beginning consultations in preparation for negotiations on this package. You mentioned before the particular vulnerabilities that different groups face. Can you tell us a bit about your priorities that you would like to see, to ensure equitable social protection out of those talks?

Sally Abi Khalil:
I think the biggest priority right now is that we need to respond to the current vulnerabilities that are present in the country, and we’ve covered quite extensively in this talk, while looking at more longer-term developmental priorities at the same time, and ensuring that we can really look at things from a social stability lens as well. Just to refer back to the nexus approach of programming that I mentioned earlier, we have basic unmet needs and we need to ensure that those are addressed. While we need to take a systems level approach that Haneen just very clearly explained from a social protection perspective—where we can contribute to specific programming for social assistance while taking a more universal, longer-term approach to a comprehensive social protection system that is clearly necessary in Lebanon—at the same time, outside of the more immediate humanitarian needs for Lebanese communities, Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees, to meet their basic needs, we can look at more longer term programming. Because it's only through longer term contributions that we can really also play our part in contributing to a bottom-up systems level change as well in terms of the governance shifts. We’re already seeing that at the community level. We see social solidarity initiatives that are really rising, and youth initiatives, social entrepreneurship, economic development programming from a local economic lens, that are really important. While at the same time, really engaging in intercommunal discussions and support to
really challenge this narrative that is being raised, and creating these tensions among communities as well.

We really have to look at it holistically from us as the NGO community. Here I'm talking about civil society, INGOs, local organizations as well. But also, in engaging networks of other groups to bring into this discussion and debates that are not always potentially represented, but also have a voice. It's only by then that we can really contribute to this more longer-term approach, and ensure that the necessary protections are in place for the next crisis.

Will Todman:
I want to remind everyone in the audience, please do submit questions through that button on the website. I've seen a couple have come in and I will get to those in a minute. But first, if I can turn back to you, Dr. Maha, you mentioned the elections. The elections are supposed to be scheduled for either March or May. It's not completely clear, and you said that donors shouldn't try and get involved in any way. Can you talk a bit about how you think donors should be thinking about the elections and what that means in terms of the pressure that donors can exert? Is there any hope to do anything before then, or is it just a waiting game now to see if they do take place? And then if they do, what the result will be?

Dr. Maha Yahya:
I think what donors can do to help is insist on free and fair elections. It's not enough to hold elections, I think this is something we need to be very conscious of, but rather that they really are free and fair. There are specific issues that civil society, organizations and activists have been asking for, that would support the possibility of having elections that are transparent and that are free, and that are fair. These include the implementation of an oversight board that's part of the existing law, because the oversight of the elections right now, for example, is undertaken by the ministry of interior.

The election law has provided for the possibility of creating an independent board that actually oversees the elections, and this would go a long way in preventing gerrymandering or the use and abuse of votes, let's put it this way, as has happened in the past. Another key issue is how to deal with the expatriate vote. There's been a drive to get expats to register. There was an expat marathon just over the weekend. I think the deadline is the 20th for all Lebanese out there. I mean, the idea there is a drive to get expats to register, so guaranteeing that their vote will go where it needs to go, and that again, these will be free and fair. The implementation of mega voting centers, this will go a long way in encouraging people to vote where they are rather than having to go to their areas of origin, particularly at a time in a country where there's no viable public transport and people are really limiting their movement because they simply cannot afford the price of fuel. Haneen talked about teachers, for example, where the price of fuel for them to get to school is more than what they're making in terms of salaries, so this is incredibly important.

I mean I'm not going to go into all the details, but there is the independence of the media, election spending, there's a lot that the donor community can do in terms of pushing on the kinds of reforms that need to be put in place to ensure that those that are challenging the current political leadership, stand a chance, that they will not be intimidated, and that the issue of election spending doesn't dominate, particularly again, in a context where there's so much vulnerability. Lebanon has a history of politicians basically buying votes, so to make sure that people are protected against these kinds of practices. There's a lot that the donor community can do on the framework.

What they should not in any way, shape or form do, is get involved with who's running, why they're running, supporting specific candidates over others, et cetera. This is not the job of the international community. They can really support just the process. And just on this issue, there is a lot of movement happening. I'm in
Washington right now, and I keep getting asked, "So who's the credible opposition?" Well, there is an opposition emerging. There is no Gandhi here that's about to emerge or, I don't know, a Gamal Abdel Nasser. You don't have a charismatic leader who's leading the charge. Politics have changed, the nature of political movement has changed, we're in the 21st century. But what we are seeing is grassroot leadership emerging in a number of places. Let's keep expectations down; we're not looking at radical change, but there is an expectation that it's possible to have some breakthroughs within parliament if the elections take place. I think we need to really try and create as much space as possible for that to happen. If people are interested, I can talk a bit more about what we're seeing, but I think that's enough for now.

Will Todman:
If I could just ask you a quick follow up question, which is our first question from the audience. This is from Edy Semaan—who is a communications specialist with the World Bank, but I think asking this question in a personal capacity. Do you expect that the upcoming elections will bring a new set of leaders that will be more willing to contain damages and start to bring about real change? Should we be hopeful?

Dr. Maha Yahya:
I think we should be hopeful that—and this is what different groups within civil society are doing right now—they're trying to help the various political groups that have emerged out of the October 19th demonstrations, but some of whom actually have been active prior to that. This is an accumulation of political activism over the past decade, at least, if not much longer. The idea is to try and put together a broad-based opposition that is in agreement over a political program. You're not voting for X or Y because they happen to be from your sector or your family, et cetera, but you're voting for people because there is a political and an economic reform program, and a social agenda that is part of their platform.

Now, will that bring about dramatic change? I think we should be hopeful that this could lead to some breakthrough in parliament, but keep in mind, change takes time. We're talking about a system that's incredibly entrenched. We're talking about people who've been running the show not only since the postwar period, but many of them actually were the leaders of the civil war between 1975 and 1990. They simply moved from the street to government, so turning this around will take time.

But for me, this is the only way forward because the alternative is either leaving the country or it descends into violence. There isn't much more room to maneuver. So keep expectations low, don't raise expectations, but I think there will be some breakthroughs. And if you have a coherent opposition—it doesn't matter the size it is—but if you have a coherent opposition, you can already begin impacting decision making within parliament, which can also then translate to the executive and to the presidential branch.

Will Todman:
Our next question is from Carla Humud who's with the congressional research service, and Haneen, this one is for you. Carla asks if you could speak a bit more specifically about the obstacles to the implementation of both the ESSN cash transfer program and the ration card program. I think you touched on some of those, but her other question I think is interesting, which is a question of currencies. What World Bank programs, if any, are currently disbursing aid in dollars? And has this generated any tension among aid recipients receiving aid in Lira?

Haneen Sayed:
I'll take the last question first, because that was one of the issues that we spent a lot of time with government trying to negotiate, and one of the elements leading to delays. Indeed, the
World Bank had always believed, given the multiple exchange rates in Lebanon, and the fact that there is no macro framework and so on—which is translated into its very high inflation and rapid currency deterioration—that the best way to preserve the value for people receiving cash transfers is to pay them in dollars. Ultimately, of course, people should be paid in the national currency, but until that time, and until inflation is arrested and so on, our programs should disburse in dollars. It took a long time negotiating this with the government and central bank, but that has been achieved. Therefore, when we start with the ESSN, disbursement to the beneficiaries will be in US dollars, again until that time when there's a unified exchange rate and the like. For other programs, we don't disburse cash, per se. We have an education program, but here we pay school fees, we help with curriculum reform. There is now, however, in the education sector we are supporting, incentives and top ups for teachers for them to come to schools and survive. This will be paid in Lebanese pounds, but at a close to market rate. And many humanitarians are coalescing around the same thing, i.e., paying either in foreign currency, in dollars, or if in Lebanese pounds, very close to the market rate. So yeah, obstacles to getting ESSN, and equally important, the ration card program, up and running, one, as I mentioned and Maha also stressed it, is the agreement on what data and what database to use. There were months and months of conversations about this with the previous government in particular. And finally in one meeting, we said, "Okay, forget all these little databases you have here and there." Even among themselves, they couldn't agree which one to use. So, we said, "Let's start afresh, let us start a new registration and intake platform process database," and it was accepted. I think this happened because there was such disagreement internally between the different government agencies on which database that should be used, that they all could not say no to this suggestion, and that's what launched the work on IMPACT. But again, that took months and months.

We've had other legislative issues with ESSN where a program was changed when it went into parliament, and this is again being now rectified, and essentially the rest is procedural. Now we have pretty tough conditions to be met because in this environment, you have to—in terms of audit and third-party monitoring and so on—and so we will not disburse money until they're met. I think the Lebanese government knows that, obviously, and they're seeking now to meet them. But we stuck to those standards. We cannot, especially with elections coming up—this is not going to be election money—this needs to go to the right people, those who deserve it, who are verified, and so on. So that's where we are.

Will Todman:

I apologize to those of you in the audience whose questions we haven't asked, but I do want to do one final quickfire round, around our four speakers, and ask each of you if you have a call to action, either for those in the audience who are watching today, or for the US government, or for other donors. The focus of this talk is on how external actors can help. What would you like to see people do or not do, if that may be the case? If I can ask 30 seconds each? If I could start with you, Mr. Kettaneh?

Georges Kettaneh:

Well, frankly, as Dr. Maha has said, the aim is to help, through humanity, the people. They need a lot of support. And I think according to our plan as international and local NGOs, there's a need to support through these plans. We don't want to have something where it's not accepted, or it cannot be delivered or helped and supported. The main thing is to focus on the health sector, the cancer needs, the cancer medicine needs, the chronic medicines, the support of the health sectors, and also with all the needs of the support of the health sectors.
Also, the socioeconomic, the cash transfer programs, and others, the insurance, the cash in health, the cash for social needs is something where it's very important to see how we can help in this period. As especially Dr. Maha said, for this temporary time, one year, two years, three years, it depends according to the needs. Then we have to move forward and to sync together because, usually the problem in Middle East is that we are working as one and not as a team. We need to work as a team, and to take lessons learned and to follow up; not to repeat the same problems. We like to always maintain accountability and transparency as the Lebanese Red Cross, in a way that we will maintain this service in helping the people according to their needs, and according to the priorities like chronic medicines and the needs of the country’s health sectors, and in socioeconomic situations. Thank you very much.

Will Todman:
Thank you so much. Next Sally, if I can ask you the same question?

Sally Abi Khalil:
I'll try not to repeat what Mr. Kettaneh has said, but I think the data on poverty and vulnerability across communities and the tensions rising, is very worrisome. My message is, “Just imagine if the current responses were not even there, if the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan didn't exist, or the pledges currently made at the Emergency Response Plan in Paris to Lebanon aren't made, and the various, the blast response and the COVID response weren't made.” Imagine what conversation we would be having on Lebanon and the situation in Lebanon, if these didn't exist. Therefore, my message is we do have frameworks; we do have plans. There are mechanisms in place, and we have a responsibility to continue to support while ensuring that accountability and transparency is put at the heart of all of these responses, for us to continue to serve the communities that are most vulnerable in the country.

Will Todman:
Thank you. Haneen?

Haneen Sayed:
I pretty much agree with Sally's message. The international community should continue to provide humanitarian support to the Lebanese in the different ways that exist, but not lose sight of the pressure on reform. That's absolutely a must. Just keep on with the pressure on the governments and the political class and the institutions to undertake reforms. Thank you.

Will Todman:
Thank you, and last but not least, Dr. Maha.

Dr. Maha Yahya:
I agree with what Sally, Georges and Haneen, obviously, have said. Maybe I will add one thing, which is also as humanitarian support is being provided, but that this support is also complemented with some strategies to get some development activities going. Including for example, support for small and medium-sized businesses, businesses that are failing but should not be failing because they're otherwise successful, and it's the economic crisis that's pushing them to the ground. There's a lot of work that can be done in that area that would help also people basically continue standing on their feet, without having to be totally reliant on aid. I think that's incredibly important, complementing the humanitarian support that's incredibly urgent, with other development related projects that support people, that help people stand up. I'll stop there.

Will Todman:
Thank you so much. I think we've heard today about the really dire humanitarian conditions in the country, and unfortunately they seem to be worsening by the day, but I think there is a sense among us that we need to ensure that aid continues to get to those who need it most. And that we really mustn't have any conditionality in
terms of humanitarian aid, while really keeping a focus on conditionality for larger scale reforms to unlock more significant aid. I think there are some opportunities in these crises to be building data sets so that we can better target those in need, to be building some of the systems that will serve Lebanon in the longer term.

I think there are some nuggets of optimism that you have provided us with also, so thank you so much to our four speakers for this really enlightening discussion. Thank you to those of you who watched at home and if you are interested in following this topic further at CSIS, we're going to be releasing a policy brief on this matter before the end of the year. I would encourage you to follow more of the work that that our speakers are doing, so thank you so much.