Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
Lebanon’s Latest Explosion

Guest:
Nora Boustany

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Jon Alterman:
Our guest today is Nora Boustany. She worked for decades as a writer for the Washington Post. She's Lebanese and she's back home in Beirut. Nora Boustany, welcome to Babel.

Nora Boustany:
Thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you, Jon.

Jon Alterman:
The first question is, how are you? Were you affected by the blast? How is your apartment? How's your health, your friends, and your family?

Nora Boustany:
I'm fine. Our apartment was very marginally affected. We felt an earthquake and then there was this huge blast and I rushed out to the balcony, and saw this huge column of smoke billow into white, and black, and orange, red, and crimson. And we didn't really know what was going on. But I don't know of one friend, or one cousin, or one relative on the other side whose house has not been almost totally gutted. It's been really, really bad. I mean, not the only glass and doorframes, but furniture and kitchen appliances, and walls, it really was horrific.

Jon Alterman:
And this comes on top of what has been a complete meltdown in the Lebanese economy over six months. Somebody sent me an article you wrote about Lebanon's crisis, about how the economy was melting down. People couldn't make ends meet, but it was from 1987.

Nora Boustany:
Everyone's been sending me this story. It's almost a replay, except, in the middle of the war, we had more hope, we had more stamina to face adversity. This country has been through so much and the last 10 months have been such a roller coaster—from the whole country suddenly realizing we've been had. We've been led by crooks who have consistently institutionalized organized theft —mafiosi tactics that have ruled our lives. Lebanon, I think, largely exists through private initiative. Had it not been for that, I don't know how the Lebanese would have coped. Still, the last 10 months have been very, very difficult: closures, large scale demonstrations, COVID, for four or five months a really severe shutdown, which affected the economy even more. We have a banking system that has taken 70% of our savings in dollars and invested it in toxic debts.

When I go to access my dollar account, I'm not allowed more than $500 a month, others are allowed more. And economically the country is really hurting. On top of that, you had that explosion knock the wind out of our lungs. It was too horrific of a blow.

Jon Alterman:
Does that plant the seeds then for a coalition among different Lebanese who say, "We are all together. It is the political class that is preying on us." Does all of this add up to that? Why or why not?

Nora Boustany:
That momentum has already started. It started with the October 17 uprising. We need to update the Ta’if Accords, which ended the war back in 1989. We need a secular state. You even have people like Nabih Berri and Walid Jumblatt, who have never uttered these words, now say, "We need a secular system of governance." And that is encouraging, but there are stumbling blocks, of course.

Jon Alterman:
And of course, Lebanese look around the region and they remember the enthusiasm other places had for the Arab spring, the Arab uprisings—the sense that in places like Egypt and elsewhere that the system would change. Then the system fell and then regenerated itself, some argue even more vigorously than before. How does Lebanon capture this moment? If, indeed there is a popular desire to change the system, how do you change the system in a durable way, even with the crises that are also going on right now?

Nora Boustany:
To answer this question, I have to go a little back in time. At the end of ‘89, we were so punch drunk from war, and fighting, and street battles, that the Lebanese were willing to accept anything. The warlords, along with the kind of octogenarian parliament, everyone was paid off to stop the war, and there was a general amnesty. We started, so to speak, the end of the war by laying the seeds for what we have now: a corrupt elite that was almost rewarded for the role that it had. Instead of being held accountable and scrutinized, they were given positions of power and they became wealthy. And you know, when you get away with murder once, you get away with other crimes, like, as I said, consistent, organized institutionalized theft. Now during the October uprising, people finally, it dawned on people. It hit them between the eyes—whether Sunnis, many Shia, Christians, Jews—that, okay, these leaders we have had, have been throwing sand into our eyes. This is new.

Jon Alterman:
Is there a danger, as somebody who lived through Lebanon’s civil war, that this may descend into another civil war?

Nora Boustany:
We hope not, but there’s always a fear—there were many layers. You talked about the Arab spring. You know, we thought wrongly that we had our Arab spring in 2005, when we kicked out the Syrians after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Maybe we won that by getting them physically out of Lebanon. There have been so many layers that have kind of fed the financial oppression of what an economist I know calls the “sectarian banking political complex.” So no one is going to put up with what we have today.

The big question is whether Hezbollah, which looms large right now, with most, if not all of the Shiite community, whether they’re willing to kind of go along with necessary reforms that are imperative for lifting Lebanon out of its mess. Right now, we are totally at the bottom of the pit. I mean, we are on our knees.

But, speaking to some of my knowledgeable Shiite friends who really can read what’s going on in the community, Nasrallah has never faced as much challenges and opposition within his own ranks and people, as he has in the last few weeks. Still, he has an arsenal that nobody can match. The Shiite community is about 37%, it’s the largest single sect. And what has made them even stronger in parliament has been the Christian cover, that President Aoun’s party and that of his son in law, have given them. They have come down on the side, all that is in flux.
Jon Alterman:
You talked about Hezbollah. You talked about Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, who was killed. And we just had the special tribunal for Lebanon release a verdict, which after 15 years seemed not to find much of anything. Is that surprising? Does that help Lebanon by not highlighting the Hezbollah role in his assassination? Does it hurt Lebanon by reviving the ghosts?

Nora Boustany:
It's a two-edged sword. I think it's a beginning of bringing justice through an independent international platform, which is the special tribunal for Lebanon. Now they did indict and pass judgment on Salim Ayyash, who is a Hezbollah member. Now the person above him, who was the commander who replaced Imad Mughniyah as the supreme military chief of Hezbollah forces, Mustafa Badruddin, was killed in very murky circumstances in Syria a while ago.

And the judgment by the STL does three things. First of all, it accuses someone after a very lengthy and costly judicial process. It did not come out swinging against the Hezbollah leadership or Syria's, although everyone knows that they are implicated, but what it has done in a positive way, I think, is prove to the very critical eyes of the Shia community and Hezbollah, specifically, that this is a highly professional, independent judicial process, that is not funded or manipulated by U.S. and Israeli interests, or Western interests, as they like to say. And if you are a Sunni, people are very disappointed. They thought that this should have gone much, much further after 15 years and close to $800 million, like $60 million a year, the Lebanese government has been paying.

Jon Alterman:
So you mentioned the international community, you mentioned the United States. Does Lebanon's current environment create an opportunity for the United States? And what should the U.S. think about its role, going forward? How should the United States think about Lebanon, both for its own interests, but also for Lebanese interests?

Nora Boustany:
I think there is a role for the U.S. Right now, it has to tread carefully, of course, because it's always, people like to suspect it of furthering interests that are not good or beneficial for Lebanon. There are many-

Jon Alterman:
There's a former U.S. ambassador who told me that the press in Lebanon at the time was up in arms because they were accusing him of doing what the French ambassador actually was doing.

Nora Boustany:
What the French ambassador? Yeah, probably. Now I know the U.S. has its own problems, economic, and with the pandemic, and the election, but you have academic institutions. The first thing the French did long before this explosion, was come in and say, "We are going to help 50 schools that are threatened with closure."

There is soft American power. We have seen the American role kind of take a back seat. I'm not saying it should come in and hoist the American flag on every street corner, but there are so many things that are required. There are a lot of social initiatives that are happening between people in Europe and the U.S. and their Lebanese counterparts beyond the government, and that has heartened the Lebanese.
And I think it provides an opening for a slow, carefully considered, well thought out way back into Lebanon. The American role should not be one of coming on one side, like the Phalangists. Any kind of assistance now is welcome, as long as it's not done with one faction in mind, but the middle classes. 55% of the Lebanese population is now under the poverty level, according to a study released by. There are so many avenues for America to have a role.

**Jon Alterman:**

Under Secretary of State David Hale was in Beirut. He came back and said that the U.S. would help Lebanon, but it wouldn't help the Lebanese government until there was really substantial reform. Is there a potential U.S. role facilitating, encouraging, consolidating a shift in the Lebanese government and the way the system works—as you said, as there was a popular demand to do? Would U.S. involvement cripple any movement toward that transition? Should the U.S. seek to accelerate and facilitate? Or should the U.S. wait and see what the results are, in your judgment?

**Nora Boustany:**

I will tell you where the U.S. can play an amazing role. It should not directly be involved with how the next government is formed, because that will face a backlash. However, as Lebanon is trying to, or as a new government, I hope will try to enforce reforms, this should be met with open arms. It should be encouraged in global financial institutions, such as the IMF, the World Bank, other such platforms and forums by being on the side of the Lebanese people. Already the World Bank is conducting all kinds of surveys of houses and businesses that were hit, small businesses, like little Armenian artisans on Mar Mikhael Street, that street that was worst hit. So it can do so through international organizations without being visible and without making a target of itself as the process evolves. I'm assuming that it's going to evolve in a positive way, but of course I have no way of knowing.

**Jon Alterman:**

So, let me ask you a final question. Lebanon went through a wrenching civil war for 15 years. Did that experience and the empowerment of warlords after the war create fault lines in Lebanese society, or did it create a certain resilience that Lebanese have committed never to fall back to civil war and actually strengthened societal cohesion? As you look at this time of remarkable stress in Lebanese history, not unparalleled, but certainly paralleled at a time of war, do you feel Lebanon is stronger because of its civil war experience or weaker because of its civil war experience?

**Nora Boustany:**

There are many levels to your question. On one level, the civil war and the way it ended kind of emboldened the culture of impunity among leaders. And we are really fighting against that right now. On an individual level, we who have lived through it, don't want to ever see it again. And what has come to light right now is that even the younger generations who knew very little about the war and learn even less from their parents, do not want to be exploited for religious divisions. These kids are very avant garde in their lifestyle, they want to live together. I see it among my students at AUB, you would have someone in shorts, and a halter top, and flip flops, walking alongside her classmate, who's wearing a headscarf and they hug one another, and they study together.

And so I think it's given us a sense of who we can be. And for all the horrible fallout from the war, there was stability, that was wonderful, in the last, let's say 15, 20 years in spite of all the assassinations and hiccups. There are hotels, there are restaurants, there are nice beaches, and it's not enough. Now people realize we need more industry. We need to be close to our roots. We need more agriculture, but
resilience as a word has become a bad word in Lebanon. We all think that because we wanted to move on and live and enjoy all these avenues of fun, we have allowed these corrupt, rotting individuals, oligarchs to keep leading us by the nose.

So it's a different kind of endurance. We want to live, but we want to redraw the foundations of this country on more egalitarian grounds. And you sense that a lot, all over the country, you no longer just have an elite. And now with Achrafieh in ruins and all these beautiful Ottoman, French colonial mansions, completely wrecked, there is a sense of cohesion, of what this neglect and corruption has done to us as a society. And we have to start on a sounder foundation.

Jon Alterman:
Nora Boustany, thank you very much for joining us.

Nora Boustany:
Thank you for thinking of me.