Event Transcript

Supporting Marginalized Groups amid Lebanon's Cascading Crises

Featuring:

Sahar Atrache

Yasmin Kayali

Banchi Yimer

Hosted By:

Jon Alterman

Jake Kurtzer

October 6, 2020

This event was made possible by general support to CSIS.

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES | MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

Jake Kurtzer:

Good morning, my name is Jacob Kurtzer. I'm the interim director of the Humanitarian Agenda at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. On behalf of CSIS and the Middle East program, thank you all for joining us today.

Prior to the onset of Covid-19, Lebanon faced a daunting set of crises, including a collapsing currency and economic and political turmoil. An estimated 50 percent of the population is now in poverty, and in 2020 alone, the level of extreme poverty has increased to nearly 25 percent of the population. Lebanon has long been a destination for refugees. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon currently number nearly 500,000, and tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees entered Lebanon during the peak of the war in Iraq. Beginning in 2011, the Syrian Civil War has displaced over one million refugees, including additional Palestinians.

Conflict between Hezbollah and Israel has historically triggered internal displacement and humanitarian need. The large-scale conflict of Israel in 2006 displaced nearly one million people, triggering further economic volatility. And in 2020, clashes between Hezbollah and Israeli forces on the southern border have stoked further tension.

Through it all, marginalized groups, such as expatriate domestic workers and the substantial refugee population, face heightened risks as Lebanon's large-scale crises collide. Migrant workers are experiencing rising unemployment and homelessness due to Lebanon's deteriorating economic climate. And well challenges for marginalized groups is not new, the increase in humanitarian need following the Beirut port explosion has brought the feeling to the forefront. Many refugees and expatriate domestic workers report being denied domestic humanitarian aid due to their status.

Today's discussion gives us a chance to talk about how to respond and support all people in Lebanon during this difficult moment. And so I thank our panelists for joining us today for sharing their time, and for ongoing work. I'd like to now hand it over to our moderator, Dr. Jon Alterman. Dr. Alterman is senior vice president, holds the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and is director of the Middle East Program at CSIS. Over to you, Dr. Alterman.

Jon Alterman:

Thank you very much, Jake, and thank you very much for joining us today. As Jake said, Lebanon has often been a site of turmoil, but we haven't really thought either about the acute turmoil that Lebanon is facing now or the effect of that turmoil on marginalized groups. We are tremendously fortunate to have three excellent speakers today to help us understand the role of marginalized groups in Lebanon and the effect of Lebanon's cascading crises on them.

I'd like to introduce them in turn. The first is Sahar Atrache, senior advocate for the Middle East at Refugees International. She was the senior advocacy officer for the Syrian American Medical Society and was a senior analyst for the Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group.

We also have Yasmin Kayali, co-founder and CCO of Basmeh and Zeitooneh, a nonprofit organization launched in 2012 that seeks to empower Syrians in exile to live lives of dignity. Basmeh and Zeitooneh designs and delivers effective relief, education, and livelihood and protection services to marginalized communities in six centers across Lebanon.

And then we also have Banchi Yimer, a former domestic worker who lived in Lebanon for nearly a decade. Alongside fellow Ethiopian migrant workers, she founded Egna Legna—Us for Ourselves—a community-based organization working on migrant domestic workers' issues and women's issues in Lebanon and Ethiopia. To all of our panelists, thank you very much for joining us. We have a lot to cover. First, I thought we might start with Sahar. How does the Lebanese system work in general, and how do these marginalized groups—people from outside of Lebanon either by birth or origin—how do they fit into the Lebanese system?

Sahar Atrache:

Hi, thank you Jon. I think the government structure itself—how the Lebanese system works itself—I think it leaves a lot of the communities inside Lebanon vulnerable and marginalized. I just want to first explain very quickly what was going on in Lebanon in the past 20 years. I'm not going to go into the details; I just want to talk about the heavy polarization that we've witnessed, the paralysis over and over that struck the system in Lebanon. But overall, the Lebanese system is based on patronage. It's a sectarian system where political leaders and political parties have been governing this country for decades, and don't really have an interest in promoting a rule of law and state institutions that would work and govern the country on a merit basis.

So basically, there's an interest within this political class, all parties alike, it's basically to leave a wide range of the society dependent on the political leader, dependent on the system to access even the most basic needs. Healthcare, for example, is not accessible for many Lebanese. Most of the time, you have to go through a leader—what we call in Lebanon wasta—to be able to access healthcare, even sometimes water, and other services. The state's institutions don't work on a competency basis, as I mentioned. This is part of the system as a whole.

The Lebanese political class in general, because this is the sectarian and patronage-based system, has no interest really in dealing with the non-Lebanese community. What we've seen—for example when it comes to Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees, but also migrant workers—is they are mostly left for others. Most of the time, it's the so-called international community, agencies, or civil societies organizations to deal with, because there's no interest really in having a society where these different leaders take responsibility and assume their role. It's mostly, again, working for their very own interests.

What we've seen, for example, with the Palestinian community, regardless of the history between Lebanon and the Palestinian presence, is that it's mostly dealt with by UNRWA and the Lebanese government doesn't even enter the camps. We've seen the same kind of phenomenon of course to varying degrees and with a very different history, but also with the Syrian refugees. Except for a few times, like when the Lebanese Ministry of Education or Ministry of Health was able to deal with the presence of Syrian refugees. Overall, this presence was mostly left to the UNHCR and to international humanitarian workers.

Jon Alterman:

The point I understand you making is that it's a system that relies on patronage to get things. If you don't have citizenship, you have to rely on forces outside the country rather than forces inside the country, because the forces inside the country are all aligned to different patronage networks, which are tied to political and economic power. Does that capture it?

Sahar Atrache:

Yes, very true.

Jon Alterman:

Yasmin founded an organization that was intended to address this problem. So Yasmin, could you tell us about Basmeh and Zeitooneh and what you're trying to do, and how you overcome the system that Sahar just described?

Yasmin Kayali:

So just as Sahar described, usually the humanitarian sector or the philanthropic sector within Lebanon always has a belonging or a pegging, either to a sect or to a political party, et cetera. I, as a Syrian national married to a Lebanese, back in 2011, co-founded Basmeh and Zeitooneh along with my peers. We were all just volunteering at the beginning with relief work, hoping to fill the gap that the INGOs were leaving behind, because there was a huge exodus of Syrian refugees into the country, they didn't know what to do with them.

And also, just to set up the context, as Syrians, we were not used to reaching out to organizations. We didn't know how to manage this, we didn't know how to manage the registration with the UNHCR, etcetera. And so you had people who were really falling through the cracks. We were trying to go there, trying to go to the most marginalized. The fact that the status of the Syrian refugees within Lebanon was very unique, in that they were not recognized as refugees—they are immigrants in Lebanon—which does not allow them any rights. They are hosted within already highly marginalized communities. One of the biggest settlements would be in Shatila camp, which is originally a Palestinian camp, one kilometer squared, detrimental infrastructure, and that is where we setup our first center.

Working in Lebanon is a challenge, to say the least: politics, stigma, banking, retention of employees, being able to legally register an organization as Syrians. The only reason I was able to register the organization is because I got Lebanese nationality from my husband, or else we would not have been able to actually register the organization and apply for grants abroad. The recent crackdown also on Lebanese CSOs, even before the revolution started, has made things even more and more difficult, and you see that most of the Lebanese and the Syrian minds that are capable to work in this sphere are all leaving the country because they need to search for opportunities elsewhere.

We started our work to respond to the needs of Syrian refugees. Slowly, we started to also service Palestinian refugees, and then as the situation in the country grew more and more difficult, we started to service the whole community. We believe in the community center, we believe in entrenching ourselves within the community, and being responsive to the community and its needs.

Jon Alterman:

With community, who does that encompass?

Yasmin Kayali:

Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis, Kurds, migrant workers, Sudanis, Ethiopians, Lebanese. Lebanese living in the south, Lebanese living in Tripoli, Lebanese living in Nabaa. These are highly marginalized areas with no infrastructure, with no support, even when it comes to education. A lot of these areas, the schools cannot support even the local community let alone the refugee community. This is going to be much worse this year, especially with the explosion and with

Covid-19. The public sector in education cannot even support the Lebanese kids, how about all of these other migrant kids that the Ministry of Education tried to absorb? We have 500,000 Syrian kids alone. 250,000 were absorbed by the public education system. But now, you have all of these Lebanese children leaving the private schools, the private Lebanese schools, and going to public schools.

There's no place for Syrian kids. So on top of the 250,000 already on the streets with no chance of education, that is if they live within proximity to a school in the first place. Because for example, in the Beqaa, if you don't secure transportation for kids, they cannot go to school. They cannot make the transportation. But the Basmeh and Zeitooneh school is the only school for Syrians, and there's one school for UNRWA. That's the only school. All of the migrant workers that were living within the camp did not have any access to any education.

Jon Alterman:

I wanted to bring Banchi into this conversation because you've been a member of a group that is one of the marginalized groups that Yasmin and Sahar were talking about—no citizenship, often limited access to legal protections. What was the environment you saw, and how has that environment changed since Lebanon's economy weakened, and Covid-19, and everything else?

Banchi Yimer:

Most people think the problem for the domestic worker just started because of the financial crisis, or the explosion, or Covid-19. But the abuse against domestic workers didn't start here, it starts over decades. But what we're facing, because of the kafala system, we don't have a right even to organize ourselves. We have no right of movement or leaving the country without a sponsor's permission. With the kafala system by itself, once when you enter Lebanon under your sponsor's name, you have no right to quit, you have no right to travel. It's up to your sponsor, it's up to your agency, to allow you or not. If you don't like your job, if you're sick, if you're being abused, they have no right to quit and travel home.

Also another side, no one to protect us. There's no accountability. And a domestic worker by herself, she cannot go out and complain about her sponsor. It's a lot to take in. From the day I arrived in Lebanon until now it has been nine years. Nine years since I saw my own passport. I left in the middle without my passport. Since you arrived in Lebanon, they'll take your passport, you'll never see your passport. We have no right even to our own ID or passport.

Even before the financial crisis, we met a woman who paid for over six years, ten years, and 12 years. And the woman was being enslaved, the woman was being raped, the woman was suicidal. Two domestic workers died after a week, and no investigation. And every report is the same, either she fell when she cleaned, or she lost her mind or she's crazy and then she hanged herself, or she throw herself. That's the things that we dealt with even before the financial crisis itself.

Jon Alterman:

To give us a picture, how many domestic workers are there in Lebanon, and where are they from?

Banchi Yimer:

According to the Ethiopian Ambassador, there are 400,000 domestic workers in Lebanon. According to the Lebanese government, all domestic workers, including Ethiopian, number over 200,000 in Lebanon.

There isn't an exact number, how many we are. Everybody is giving their own guess. We have over 12 nationalities of domestic worker in Lebanon; the majority are African. Ethiopian are 77 percent of domestic workers in Lebanon. All nationalities are facing the same, and for Ethiopians it is even worse because our government is not responsive, there are issues with the embassy, and also we are the majority. All of us receive the same treatment in Lebanon.

Jon Alterman:

I want to go back to Sahar. We've heard about different groups. We've heard about domestic workers, we've heard about Syrians, and Palestinians, and Iraqis. As you described the Lebanese system, a lot depends on patronage. Do these groups experience things differently depending on where they're from? Is it different for Arabs versus non-Arabs, is it different for Palestinians versus Iraqis, versus Syrians? How does it manifest when you're talking about individuals and breaking down the groups?

Sahar Atrache:

Sure, I definitely think there's differences that these different communities experience. I bet for Banchi, she's working with a bunch of Ethiopian workers. There's a racist dimension to it that we also see within the Lebanese community. There's, unfortunately, the sense that African workers are considered less. The difference, I think, between Arabs and non-Arabs, mostly if they're Africans, there's also increased racism against them. But I definitely think yes, we can speak a lot to the racism also that is experienced by Syrians, Palestinians.

So for Palestinians, for example, there's the history of the war between Lebanon and Syria, and a lot of Lebanese blame Palestinians for what happened and don't take responsibility for our own role in the war and what has also been inflicted on Palestinians. For example, during the August 4th explosion, there was this sense of community that has been talked about. And some Syrians, and some Palestinians, and even a few other groups tried to come and support people who have been affected by the explosion. And we've heard reports about some residents refusing to accept this help, just because we're talking about a Palestinian organization, or another Syrian organization.

So unfortunately, there's the social dimension. There's no education for the Lebanese society about their rights. For me, how I see the main problem is a rule of a law problem, because in Lebanon, because it's a system that is based mostly on networking and relationships and patronage with political officials and leaders, and sometimes even tribal connections or family connections. In a lot of areas, we feel there's a lack of sense of the right of others. Many communities are denied rights. As Banchi mentioned, the simple right of freedom of movement for domestic workers, specifically those who work in houses, is denied. Their ID is basically confiscated.

But the problem is that the state institutions basically implement these measures. When domestic workers arrive at the Beirut airport, and I've seen it with my own eyes, the officer would hand the passport to the employer, assuming this is a very normal thing to do. Again, we go back to the whole system that really doesn't have the protection of individuals, of citizens—whether they have the nationality or not—in their mind.

Jon Alterman:

I wanted to ask Yasmin, because you both deal with a variety of these groups, and then you said you also have a lot of Lebanese

who you work with. First, how do the different groups who don't have citizenship in Lebanon relate to each other in your experience? And also, are you seeing changes in the ways marginalized Lebanese are dealing with marginalized Syrians, marginalized Palestinians, marginalized domestic workers, and others?

Yasmin Kayali:

On the first point Sahar was saying, it's actually not only the domestic workers that don't have the right for freedom of movement. I'm sure you're aware that there are curfews that are imposed in certain areas in Beirut where Syrians are not allowed to leave their homes after certain hours. Also, even if you apply for the renewal of your residency or iqamah, and you pay for it, and you have all the legal papers, for months and months, you wait for a response from the security general, and you don't get it. Even now, passing through Lebanon for the last two years has been even impossible, even if you have a visa to go to another country. You need to secure cash, and have a confirmed hotel booking, etcetera. It's becoming like jumping through hoops, even just to pass through Lebanon, not to even reside in Lebanon, let alone have legal work papers.

And that is why you will find that the Syrians are attracted to certain areas to live, where they feel that it's easier for them to move around. For example, Shatila. People assume that people go to Shatila because it's cheap. Shatila is not cheap at all. The smallest shack, because these are not houses, they are shacks that they live in, goes for $200 a month. And you can pay rent for up to $1,000 a month in a place that is a slum, but it's because it's not a hostile environment; they feel they are welcome. There is a unity of challenges, if I may say. The Palestinians, I have to admit, have been very welcoming.

We have many challenges. One of the biggest challenges that we have as Syrians is burial. When somebody passes away, it is so difficult and so challenging to finalize their papers and to find them a burial spot, especially when you're fundraising. You're fundraising, for example, to secure medical support for someone, education, whatever. You're asking somebody to pay for a burial site, or to finalize papers for someone. It's very difficult. The Palestinians have been very welcoming when it comes to this and have helped us a lot.

And we do have running programs that are programs that try to integrate. For example, there was a lot of friction in the Beqaa region, specifically, because the narrative by the government has always been, "You don't have jobs because the Syrians came. We don't have electricity because the Syrians came. We have economic problems because the Syrians came." Actually, the Syrians injected loads of money into the banking sector, if we're talking about the upper class of Syrians who left Syria and moved their money, and the only place where they could open accounts was in Lebanon.

Second, all the aid that was coming in for the Syrians and wasn't reaching the Syrians—be it for education, be it for any other kind of support—this was all supporting the system, which finally crumbled because of the deep pockets and the amount of corruption. But it's very unfortunate that what Sahar was saying is very true, that even when we went down from the first day of the explosion, and we set up our tent in Karantina, as Basmeh and Zeeitoneh, some Lebanese channels were conducting interviews with the volunteers and activists on the ground. And when they were doing an interview with us, and we identified ourselves as Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese trying to help, the journalists would walk away. They don't want to acknowledge even that we are working on

the ground, even though we were clearing out debris. We were distributing food to people, we were distributing aid. We have never differentiated on people's sect, where they belong, their political affiliation, it doesn't matter. When you're in need, you're in need.

And even many other organizations who are conducting these assessments, as soon as they knew that it was Syrians or foreign workers who were residing in that home, they would walk away and they would not include them in their assessment. We know for a fact a Sri Lankan lady—20 years living in Lebanon—and she's the door woman of the building, and she helped everybody clean out their house. But when it came to the distribution of aide and to fixing up the little room that she lived in, no NGO was willing to help here. And there are numerous, numerous cases like this. And it's a shame, because if that lady had lived in any other country after 20 years and birthing her children there, she would have citizenship. She has more right to the citizenship, she has served this country and its people for 20 years.

And this is what we tell them. Even us, we're always on the defensive like, "Why are you, as a refugee-led organization, now involved in the rebuilding of Beirut?" Forget me, okay? Forget me, as I'm married to a Lebanese and my children are Lebanese. All of our volunteers and even our beneficiaries tell you, Beirut has hosted us for the last ten years. It is our home. So many Syrians were impacted by the explosion, so many Syrians passed away. Karantina, all the workers from the port, all the daily workers who lived there, they have nothing. They are still sleeping outdoors on tattered mattresses, and nobody has reached out to help them. We are trying our best to fundraise and get the funding and the support to help rebuild their homes and other homes of Lebanese equally. But we're always on the defensive, we have to defend why we want to do and why we want to take this initiative.

Jon Alterman:

I wanted to go to Banchi and ask more about solidarity between marginalized groups. And I do want to get to this issue of the international angle. Banchi, you said that the domestic workers are a varied group. Yasmin described partnerships between Syrians and Palestinians and combinations. How does it work among domestic workers? Are there ties across nationalities? Does language prevent that? How is that community of people, however many hundred thousand there are?

Banchi Yimer:

When we started in Enga Legna, we just started for Ethiopian domestic workers because we are the majority and we have difficulty with communication and language. We are very strict in culture. Since the financial crisis, we are helping all nationalities of domestic workers in Lebanon, even Sudanis. Yasmin mentioned most of it, so I'm trying to do my best not to repeat what they mentioned. For the domestic worker, the racism is there. In the beginning, even in those crises, most of the time when we need assistance, we are left alone to starve. One embassy office helped us. Other than that, all embassies. all governments back home, and most organizations that have their own nationality, left the domestic workers to starve alone.

So limited kinds of assistance, no food assistance, the landlords were kicking out domestic workers. Even by Lebanese government law, no one has the right to kick out the domestic worker. What they do is just leave us on the street. Even yesterday, six domestic workers were kicked out from their apartment in Beirut. We had to pay and talk to the landlord to get them back. In this

moment, this is the time where you, either Lebanese or Ethiopian or Syrian, it doesn't matter, we all are human beings and we're facing hard times, so we should be able to support each other. I saw Ethiopian, other nationalities here. Everyone was cleaning the street and fixing the house. That's why we get bitter at starving alone and nobody supporting us.

What we do is our organization is collaborations with other nationality's community leaders. True to them, so we have a system so they can go and reach out and see what the community needs. Based on that, we assist in whatever is needed on a daily basis. We receive 3,100 calls per day for food assistance. So we mix all nationalities, whoever calls gets the food. So we don't say, "This is Ethiopian, this is Sri Lankan." It's equal, what we do, in terms of medication, or food assistance, rent, or any house supplies.

I want to mention, after the explosion and after the financial crisis, the woman who had been a maid for ten, 12 years. Her sponsor stopped paying any salary. The woman had said thousands of domestic workers are inside the house, no salary. The sponsor refused to send them home, also they refused to pay them. And most of them are undocumented, they have no insurance, they have no medical access. And still, some of them running in the street exposed to Covid-19, and some of them even thrown out on the street by their sponsor. You see all over the media, seeing Kenyan, Ethiopian, Gambian, Nigerian.

We have to go to every embassy to set up food, the masks, and sanitizers. I check the medical record every single day. The majority of those exposed to Covid-19 are the ones who are kicked out by the sponsors who are on the street or are have run from abusers. We don't even have free PPEs; we don't even have free access for medication in this bad time. So we are still communicating, we are still doing our best. The racism is there, we don't have anyone to help us. We have to help each other, even though we're not allowed to help each other.

Jon Alterman:

First, I want to remind our audience that if you'd like to ask a question to our panelists, there's a button on the event page on the CSIS website. You can submit a question. I have several questions; I'd be happy to take some more. I want to ask each of you about what the international community can do, both international organizations, governments and what from your perspective is missing. And then also, before we go to audience questions, I want very quickly what you think people in the audience can and should do.

So first, what do large organizations outside of Lebanon, what can they do? What should they be doing that they're not doing? I say whether it's the UN, whether it's the U.S. government, whether it's the EU, what do you think the big players in this need to be doing that there're not doing?

Yasmin Kayali:

I think beyond just the UN and the EU, even if we're talking about the larger donors or the larger INGOs, I think it's been some time now, not only for refugee-led organizations, but the general civil society in Lebanon has grown and matured to a level where we can now stand up for ourselves and we can voice our opinions. But they need to give us that channel, like you're doing today, so we need to get connected through their powerful connections and networks. We need the opportunities to have our voices heard. It's not just about relief funds, and distributions, and food baskets, it's about real and tangible advocacy for all these causes that we're talking about. Applying pressure and leaving no one behind, so everybody being included in this.

Last but not least, for us as an organization, they really need to look at empowering the organizations, allowing organizations to design whatever programs and responses they deem best for the communities they serve, and to have long-term partnerships. So we don't want those six month interventions and then they turn away, we need multi-year, long-term interventions that will really have an impact on these communities. Change is not going to happen, not in four months and not in six months. It takes years. You're changing mentalities, you're changing livelihoods, and you're trying to better people's quality of life. This is not going to happen in a couple of months, and this is the kind of commitment that we need.

Banchi Yimer:

We're struggling also in defense. We do the biggest job in Lebanon for domestic workers, but we're not getting any funds. We get a few organizations for involvement, and we pretty much do GoFundMe. To us, thousands of domestic workers, they don't have to say, "This is a domestic worker organization," because we are the ones doing the job, we should have the support. This is my message: you need to support us more so we can do more.

In terms of government in Lebanon, we have two problems. One is domestic workers, they've been working for like years. This financial crisis started in 2019, but even before that, some of them are getting paid, and after that, also no one's getting paid. The one also was being abused, run on the street, they have no money, they didn't even ask for food or any medication assistance. They want to go home. They don't want to stay in Lebanon, they want to go home. They're stuck for two reasons. One is they don't have any money for repatriation and they needed the support. Two is the system. It's still in this bad time, and the system is there, the woman has to wait outside on the streets sleeping until the paper is done. So the exit visa is very complicated. We want them to push them into government, and the existing process has to be removed.

Domestic worker should be allowed to go home. We want the international people or governments, U.S. government or anyone, to push the Lebanese government. They have to remove the system before anybody can go home.

Jon Alterman:

Okay, thank you. And Sahar?

Sahar Atrache:

I definitely agree with Yasmin and Banchi. There's already a strong civil society in Lebanon that really needs to be empowered, and that needs to be given the opportunity to plan for what's going on in the country. I think that the approach where UN agencies or internationals who come for limited time have proved sometimes to be a bit problematic. But there's definitely the broader picture, where we're not just talking about the humanitarian aid, like the direct supporting food assistance or shelters. We're talking about the country, which really is on the verge of a humanitarian crisis, it's on the verge of collapse. And I think there's a wider international role to be played here by donor countries, by the UN, by international organizations to support the Lebanese society, because basically what led the country to where we are right now to the verge of collapse is a political class that's been doing the business-as-usual, entrenching its own interests, ignoring the interests of communities and citizens inside the country.

This is definitely going to be very challenging, because the question is how can you support the Lebanese society, how can you support Lebanon to help bring it back

from this economic downturn, from the impact of the August 4th explosion, while the institutions are festering in corruption and mismanagement? I don't claim to have an answer for that, but there is definitely some work to be done. Maybe starting small with what Yasmin mentioned is really supporting the so-called local actors.

Jon Alterman:

So I think maybe we'll close with the issue of what the audience can do. We got a question from Madeline Murphy in Glasgow. "What can stakeholders do to bring host communities and refugees together?"

Yasmin Kayali:

Actually, we have many programs, social-cohesion programs, that we run. And they are based on psycho-social support with the help of social workers, and drama and art and theater, in order first to break down the walls that are between the host communities and the marginalized communities, in the sense that we all have the same problem. We're all suffering from the same thing. I think that now our major issue is that resources are so scarce, and people are so hungry and scared, and so you tend to stick with your own. Now is a very difficult time to administer these kinds of programs, but before we were really advocating for them because it's so important. It's so important to raise awareness, because in the end there are many things that are ingrained.

Because like Sahar was saying, there's all the history with the Palestinians, with the Syrians, with the domestic workers, all those stereotypes that the Lebanese society has ingrained into it, and you need to work on this and chip at it. And it takes programming, it takes long-term programming to do something like that.

Jon Alterman:

We have another question from Alia Hindawi from the Business and Human Rights Resources Centre, I think it's probably for Sahar. "To what extent are international financial institutions responsible, for either creating or abetting, the system of patronage that discriminates between beneficiaries that seems to exclude some people from economic opportunity?" Is there a broader responsibility, a broader role, that needs to be faced here?

Sahar Atrache:

Sure, yeah, and I'm not going to be politically correct at all. I definitely feel that Lebanon's so-called friend, whether it's France, whether it's previously the United States, the European Union in general, have in the past decades really played, for me, a role where the aim was always to seek Lebanon's stability, especially with what was going on in the region. They bet on the same political class that led the country to collapse. So there's definitely a responsibility where I see the role of these international stakeholders seeking a status quo that was more or less working just in terms of stability, turning a blind eye on the other abuses. Or sometimes, not to be a bit extreme, they've done some behind-closed-door advocacy.

I can give an example where the European Union would fund the program for cyber-intelligence that would be used against demonstrators or against political dissidence, and that would be arrested. These examples where sometimes the international support has mostly served to entrench a situation, discrimination, and lack of respect of rights, that's been, in my view, problematic. That is where the international stakeholder needed to be more vigilant and requires more accountability and transparency in their support.

Jon Alterman:

We have a question from Dr. Hussein Amery from Colorado School of Mines about environmental sustainability, which we haven't talked about, but which arguably affects the living conditions of marginalized groups. Is there an environmental sustainability piece, access to water, access to sanitation, that we need to be addressing? Are there ways in which environmental sustainability—being more environmentally conscious—can both alleviate some of the suffering but also pave a way toward better living conditions for all Lebanese? Is there an environment piece that we need to address that we haven't made part of this conversation yet?

Sahar Atrache:

The environmental piece of it is a component. Unfortunately, now in Lebanon with everything that's going on, the economic crisis, the explosion, it feels like a bit of a luxury to talk about. But just to talk about the trash crisis that's been going on for years now, there's really again this lack of sense of responsibility. And here, I would hold everyone responsible, whether the state, the political leaders, but also the society itself. And I don't think there has been a conscious about how to protect resources so it can serve everyone.

There has been reports about pollution in the river. All these problems I think would be very hard to address. Even the projects that was funded by the European Union for waste recycling ended up being a waste basically and is still not functional. So anyway, I don't know if this really answers the question, but at least it's definitely a problem that we have to keep in mind.

Jon Alterman:

Yasmin, did you want to come in on this?

Yasmin Kayali:

Yeah, I wanted to talk about the situation in the camps, the environmental situation. Every year we know that the Beqaa floods and people's tents are flooded. We only start receiving funding when the babies start to freeze or to die of hunger. We have come up with several plans with other NGOs to actually build up the area so the flooding doesn't happen, and it was rejected by the municipalities even though it's much more environmentally friendly to do this, and to set these stones and pick up the tents, and this will be much better. There was no support.

We had another program which was for the cleanup of parts of the Litani River. Because of the amount of trash and debris in the Litani River, a lot of the agricultural farmers suffer with lack of water, and we were working on this. Again, there was no support from the municipality. And finally, in Shatila, all of the Palestinian camps, we know very well that there is no infrastructure, there is no clean water, electricity is a huge problem. Yearly, we have people dying of electrocution because all their electricity is exposed and it turns together with the water. So there's a lot, a lot of work to do on the environmental infrastructure element, definitely. Now more than ever, we need this kind of intervention.

Jon Alterman:

Beth Graham from RC Atlanta asks, "How can Americans amplify advocacy efforts, and what agencies deliver the biggest impact that people should be supporting?"

Sahar Atrache:

I'm based in DC and it's been a bit challenging to do all these advocacy efforts in DC. There's a kind of disinterest in the region in general—except from an Iran perspective, to put more pressure on Iran. So

we've seen growing disengagement from mostly the Trump Administration in the region, on Syria specifically, but also on Lebanon. And now, the approach is to increase sanctions, basically to target Hezbollah. But these sanctions are hurting the whole society. I think that in the United States, Congress and even the administration, they respond to public pressure. And since this is a question coming from a U.S. citizen, there needs to be more public pressure from us as organization, but also from individual.

The United States dispatched a disaster team to Lebanon, but then withdrew very quickly. So we've heard some action that has been taken at the early beginning when the August 4 explosion occurred, but now I don't think they're continuing any support. It's just very challenging, to say the least.

Yasmin Kayali:

Like Sahar was saying, there's generally a disinterest in the whole Syrian refugee crisis, actually the whole Syrian crisis. I tell them, when we first started this work, everybody wanted to get involved and support, and now actually things are getting more and more difficult and more and more challenging. We're finding it very hard to find the monetary and the moral support for the crisis.

The Syrian crisis is not sexy anymore, just like Lebanon. We were in the news at the beginning of the explosion, but now people have moved on to the next headline. Actually, I was contacted by several journalists, and then they're like, "You know what? No, now we're covering Sudan. No need to cover Lebanon anymore." So we need to keep Lebanon, and Syria, and the region on top of people's minds. And yes, there are a lot of agencies that are delivering a lot of impact, but then I reiterate again, go to the smaller agencies, the people who have boots on the ground, not the people who are covering overheads and marketing costs. There are many agencies doing very good work, very good work with beneficiaries on the ground and who can really give you a lot for your dollar.

Jon Alterman:

Okay, so I guess that leaves us in the final moments to “how can people help you?” You have an audience watching this that's interested; they've made it through 54 minutes of important discussions. What's your call to action for them? What should people be doing?

Yasmin Kayali:

Do your research, look at who's active on the ground and what they're doing. For example, with our education program, we have moved the children into a completely virtual education model where we're providing them with tablets in order to educate them. We educate more than 2,000 refugee children, and we have more than 2,000 children on the waiting list. And we're fundraising for tablets, tablets that you can secure and buy through our online fundraiser. Support things like that, give direct support to education programs, development programs.

And again, help us advocate. Help us stay in the news, help us put together fundraising tours, set up introductions for us for people to hear, like you did today, Jon. This is an amazing platform for us to speak, to give us a voice. And you never know who you might meet in one of these calls and what they might be interested in. It's so hard to tap into American foundations, it's one of the things that I've been trying to do for years. But if you don't get a personal introduction and somebody to vouch for you, we are so foreign to what they're used to and we're so far away. And even now with Covid-19 and the restrictions, it's very

hard to even get anybody interested to visit and see the work on the ground.

Jon Alterman:

Thank you. Sahar?

Sahar Atrache:

Advocacy, I think, is a very important tool here in the United States, and I think you have a system where representatives really listen to their constituency. We've done this on Syria before where you call your representative. We need to both keep raising our voices about the situation in the region in general, in Lebanon now, since we're talking about Lebanon, but also channeling advocacy. Keep supporting initiatives and highlight initiatives that really showed solidarity among the different communities.

It was interesting to see how after August 4th, most of the work that has been done has been done by civil society organizations and members of the community. And I think the lack of a strong state requires the support from other states, just to support these initiatives I think.

Jon Alterman:

I think we may have had a technical problem and Banchi dropped off. Let me thank all three of you for compelling and very important contributions to today's discussion, I appreciate your joining us. I'm grateful to the audience for joining us. These are important issues. As you've suggested, these don't get fixed in a month or a year, it's a long-term effort, and I think we have a lot of work to do together to address these all. So thank you very much for giving us your time today, and we will continue to work on these very, very important things. Thank you for all that you are doing for marginalized groups in Lebanon. Thank you very much.