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Online Event

“Reflections on Syria's Decade of Conflict”

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FEATURING:

Alex Mahoney,
Syria Response Director, Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance,
U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

Basma Alloush,
Policy and Advocacy Advisor,
Norwegian Refugee Council

Amany Qaddour,
Regional Director,
Syria Relief and Development

Mais Balkhi,
Program Manager of Humanitarian Practice,
InterAction

CSIS EXPERTS:

Jacob Kurtzer,
Director and Senior Fellow, Humanitarian Agenda,
CSIS

Jon B. Alterman,
Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director,
Middle East Program, CSIS

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Jon B. Alterman: Good morning. I'd like to welcome you to CSIS. I'm Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and director of the Middle East Program. On behalf of the Humanitarian Agenda Program at CSIS, the Middle East Program, and USAID, thank you for joining today's event.

A little less than 10 years ago I remember being in a seminar room at CSIS for a discussion about Syria. Many in the room assumed that Bashar al-Assad would soon fall, and we were looking at a conflict that would last weeks, or maybe months. When a political scientist raised the possibility that a conflict like Syria's could last as long as a decade, there was an uncomfortable silence. I think we had all been Syria and it was hard to imagine how a decade-long conflict would tear that country apart.

We no longer have to imagine. Half of all Syrians have fled their homes. Tens of thousands, and perhaps more, have disappeared into prisons where the tales of torture boggle the imagination and haunt the conscience. Two-thirds of Syria's population requires humanitarian assistance, and more than a million who would die without food assistance. We stopped counting the dead at half a million. And much of the world has moved on. The news coming out of Syria is mostly about ISIS and militaries skirmishing for control. We've become numb to the ongoing humanitarian cost of the Syrian conflict. Quietly, governments pour billions of dollars every year into the humanitarian response in Syria, with the United States being one of the largest donors.

The Syrian uprising that dissolved into unspeakable violence started 10 years ago today. And we're here to mark the occasion with solemnity. In preparation for this day, the CSIS Humanitarian Agenda Program, led by my friend and colleague Jake Kurtzer, commissioned essays from 10 humanitarian organizations that have been working to provide relief to more than 10 million Syrians who are refugees and internally displaced. We will hear from Jake and the authors of three of those essays shortly.

And now we'll hear from Alex Mahoney, the Syria response director and acting deputy director of the Office of Middle East, North Africa, and Europe for USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance. Alex joined USAID in 1997, and he's worked on more than 20 major international crises responses around the world, from hurricanes, the floods, to earthquakes, to tsunamis.

In 2017, the partnership for public service awarded Alex and his team a Service to America Medal for their work on the humanitarian response in Syria.

Alex, welcome to CSIS and thanks for joining us today. Ten years into this conflict, how has the U.S. government refined its approach to humanitarian assistance to Syria to ensure that our aid is having the positive effects we're seeing, and how can we minimize the negative effects of this long-term assistance?

Alex Mahoney: Thank you, Dr. Alterman. And good morning, everyone. Thank you for being here.

Let me just start by taking stock of this, because as we just heard we cannot become numb to this crisis. So 10 years in it can seem like there is no end in sight. Conditions have continued to worsen, compounded by Covid-19. We've seen widescale displacement and escalating economic crisis and, sadly, at least 264 aid workers have lost their lives since the start of the conflict. Food insecurity has reached a historic high, with 60 percent of the population now food insecure. That's exacerbated by food prices that have reached levels 236% higher than December 2019. We're now seeing rising levels of malnutrition, which is an extremely concerning signal. From the beginning, we've also seen this as a protection crisis, with high levels of gender-based violence, indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure, and direct violations of basic human rights.

How do we respond to this? The U.S. government has been and will continue to be a leader in provision of assistance to vulnerable Syrians in the country and throughout the region. That includes emergency food, water, shelter, health, as well as general livelihood programs, which are ever-more important with the continued deterioration of Syria's economy. In a dangerous and constantly shifting conflict, principled humanitarian programming has remained vital to accessing people in need. We've continued to support this principled approach to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, focused on aid reaching the most vulnerable people, targeting based solely on need, no matter where people reside, in the programs we support and also in our advocacy.

From the beginning we've also emphasized, and will continue to, the irreplaceable role of Syrians in this massive program, both in the vital role as local partners as well as the Syrian staff. In recent years, we've increased our efforts on capacity building of local NGOs, which includes training and oversight of internal controls, beneficiary feedback mechanisms, technical assistance, and also small grants to implement aid programs. Recognizing the risk of diversion and the importance of assistance reaching the people that it's meant for, we also have a toolbox of risk mitigation measures, including third-party monitoring, that reinforces monitoring that our partners do.

For the past decade we've stood with the Syrian people, and today I want to reaffirm our commitment to them. The U.S. is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance, both in Syria and across the region. We've contributed more than $12.2 billion since the start of the conflict, and we're going to continue to urge other donors to focus their resources on the rising needs – most notably on food insecurity inside Syria as well as the neighboring countries.

I also want to spend a few moments on U.N. Security Council Resolution 2533, which is the critical resolution which authorizes the U.N. to deliver aid into northwest Syria. And it's up for renewal later this year. Given the needs that we see today, now is not the time to take away any of these available tools. And meeting enormous humanitarian needs requires all routes of access – both cross-border and cross-line within Syria. And that includes the Bab al-Hawa crossing, a lifeline for millions of people in the northwest. That crossing is only going to become more important as the World Health Organization starts to bring in Covid vaccines through the crossing to reach nearly 2 million at-risk people.

I have to be clear on this: The ability to vaccinate the population in northwest Syria is completely contingent upon the renewal of that U.N. resolution. The closure of Al Yarubiyah crossing in January 2020 resulted in a steep decline of medical supply deliveries to health facilities in the northeast. That affected nearly a million and a half people. Losing Bab al-Hawa, which is at stake with this renewal, would be much more dire a catastrophe. It has to be renewed.

In closing, while assistance is vitally important to keeping people alive, we also have to recognize that aid alone cannot solve the crisis. We have to continue to work for a political settlement that addresses the factors that drive the violence. As Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said today, we cannot let the 11th anniversary look like the 10th. I want to end by reiterating our gratitude to the courageous women and men working on the ground every single day. It's an honor to be here today and to hear from some of those working to deliver aid to vulnerable Syrians. Their dedication is an inspiration to all of us. Thank you.

Mr. Alterman: Thank you very much, Alex. You know, as I was preparing the – my introductory comments for you and I started reading about the things you've done, you've had just a tremendous career helping people in acute need. Much of the early part of your career was about acute problems. It was about earthquakes and hurricanes and tsunamis, and things like that. And I don't – I'm not sure you ever contemplated doing crisis support for a decade-long crisis. I'm not sure we ever thought there could be decade-long crises. How does the fact that this has endured for a decade change what our approach has to be? And how does it inform how we approach immediate crises if we think they might have longer tails? I mean, as I said,

the word "crisis" and "10-year" don't normally go together. How does that shape what you do?

Mr. Mahoney: That's a really good question. And you're right, we've had to change in real time as we – as we have adapted to the scale and duration of this crisis. As you said at the beginning, in the early days it was possible to envision a fairly rapid end to this. And we traditionally have been set up to respond to short-term disasters that, you know, have an end in sight. And we have mechanisms, such as disaster assistance response teams and response management teams, that are designed to deploy rapidly, ramp up aid very quickly, with the thought that within six months to a year the crisis moves on to a recovery phase.

So we had to grow and change in response to this. We went from using temporary staff to hiring people specifically for Syria. We have people permanently based in Turkey and Jordan now for this response, as well as people permanently assigned here in Washington. And I would say the nature of aid programs has to change as well. And some of the papers that have been written for this event speak to that. There's a continued need for urgent assistance to meet immediate needs, but we all have to be thinking beyond that to interventions such as livelihoods, such as cash, helping people be the architects of their own humanitarian solutions.

It's further complicated, however, by the continued violence, which in a sense keeps bringing us back to this – to this crisis mode, keeps driving new displacement. We have – we have people who were serving who have been displaced multiple times. So that is part of it as well. And it really requires all of us to think outside the box and be creative and as forward-leaning as we can.

Mr. Alterman: Thank you very much. Thank you for all the magnificent work that you and your team have done for millions and millions of Syrians in vital need. I want to turn it over now to, as I said, my friend and colleague Jake Kurtzer to lead the discussion. Alex, thank you again for everything you and your team are doing.

Mr. Mahoney: Thank you.

Mr. Alterman: Jake, over to you.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thank you, Dr. Alterman. And thanks, Alex, for your contributions this morning and over the past 10 years. Before we begin I want to remind people viewing online that we have an ask questions functionality. So you can feel free to submit questions for our panelists.

We're going to turn it over to three colleagues who have contributed for past few years to the humanitarian response and to our essay series. We have Basma Alloush, the police and advocacy advisor for the Norwegian

Refugee Council, Amany Qaddour, regional director for Syria relief and development, and Mais Balkhi, program manager of Humanitarian Practice and InterAction.

Before I drop the first question to you, Basma, I want to also acknowledge the other contributors to this essay series, as well – you know, in the sense that they represent also the thousands of colleagues, the Syrians that have been leading this response. So a token of gratitude to Kat Fallon of MedGlobal, Barrett Alexander from World Vision, Oula from the Norwegian Refugee Council, Emily Galloway from Global Communities, Rehana Zawar Ali from the International Rescue Committee, Mazen Kewara from the Syrian American Medical Society, Bernice Romero and Jiwan Said from Save the Children, and Dr. Altinci and Dhabie Brown from CARE, and a special thanks as well to Dhabie and Kari Reid from Mercy Corps for facilitating this essay series and today's event.

Basma, I want to start with you. Norwegian Refugee Council has been one of the only NGOs operating on both sides of the front lines within Syria, in government-held areas and from cross-border regions. How has that access picture changed over the past decade? And what lessons can be learned from NRC's experience today, working throughout the country in such a complicated environment? Thank you for being here.

Basma Alloush: Thanks, Jake. And thanks for having me. So I think access has, as you mentioned, changed drastically over the past years. For organizations that didn't have existing registration in Damascus, their way of reaching Syrians relied on the ability to cross informally from neighboring states. And in 2015, the U.N. Cross-Border Resolution formalized this kind of modality of reaching Syrians in nongovernment-controlled areas.

However, as the government regained more territory over the years, we saw a shrinking space for NGOs, until today where we only have one crossing point from Turkey into northwest Syria. While the cross-border access seemed to work for many organizations, access to particularly besieged areas across Syria was almost impossible to reach these populations. And so with very few cases where U.N. convoys were allowed in, most of the besieged populations were actually really out of reach.

Today, however, the ways of working in Syria have changed. And, like I mentioned, there's only one crossing point that the U.N. is authorized to use to enter northwest Syria, but NGOs still use informal crossing points to reach northeast Syria and to reach other areas as well. But the scale of assistance that the U.N. used to bring is really missing. And many NGOs withdrew from areas that were regained by the government because they didn't have registration in Damascus, leaving the responsibility to respond on the U.N. – to the U.N. and the very few INGOs that do have registration with the government.

So this means that some agencies are now able to access areas that were previously besieged and newly retaken. But a lot – you know, a lot more needs to be done to strengthen this cross-line modality, where organizations based in Damascus are able to cross conflict lines to reach areas under nongovernment control. And I think to your question about the main lessons from the past years' experience is that NGOs really need to work together with the U.N. to push back against access impediments imposed by all parties to try to create more space for civil society organizations to reach Syrians across the entire country, regardless of who's in control.

And I think one of the most pressing things that we need to be mindful of is really the protection of our Syrian civil society partners that are working on the ground that are really bearing the brunt and are on the front lines of this response, that need our protection and our support.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Basma. I'm hoping we have time to get back to these questions about cross-line and cross-border. But when you talk about the protection of your colleagues, one of the particularly devastating impacts of this conflict has been the attacks on healthcare workers and the attacks on the health systems.

And turning to Amany, in your piece you wrote about – you discussed how the healthcare system has become fractured, and it's become decentralized. And you have local directorates replicating or replacing the role that a national ministry of health would carry out. And obviously the question on everyone's mind, you know, globally is with the response to Covid-19. But can you talk a little bit about the challenges facing humanitarian workers, international and Syrian, working in the healthcare sector? And in particular, in combatting the spread of Covid-19. And how as this complicated the response? And to the extent that there are solutions, what we can be thinking about going forward?

Amany Qaddour: Yeah, thanks, Jake. Thanks for having me. And obviously to my co-panelists, Mais, and Basma, and Alex, it's an honor to be here, despite the somber reason that we are here.

I think in terms of challenges – I guess I want to highlight two tracks, really. One, you know, that has obviously had a cyclical effect on everything else we're doing, which is the most salient, is attacks to healthcare – attacks to health infrastructure, health-care workers. And I think we all know that the security risk or profile of Syria means we've continued to see a slew of human rights violations against humanitarians and more generally to the civilian population. I think the other track is deeply – is the deeply fragmented health system. Obviously, a consequence of these particular attacks, but just generally in its ability to adequately meet the needs of the population.

I think when we've got millions of people displaced at this point, overcrowded living conditions, and of course this recurrent vulnerability to infectious disease – obviously now with Covid, but in the past we've seen it with polio, with cholera, with leishmaniasis. I think it's always been a particular challenge. To add to this – and this is something Kat and I have highlighted in articles – really the shortage of medical personnel. I think at this point there's – over 70 percent has left Syria, for reasons obviously that Alex mentioned and Jon. You know, detained, persecuted, disappeared. And as we know, these humanitarians, these health-care workers are some of the most vulnerable themselves since they've endured this decade of crisis now, obviously being exposed to Covid and just generally some of the dire conditions that they face on a daily basis.

I think in terms of immediate solutions, obviously the vaccine is only one component, considering we're dealing with a decade of crisis. But we know that its distribution – particularly from an equity standpoint – is going to be quite challenging and obviously much more gradual and slow moving than other advanced nations, including the U.S. And I think, in a parallel, of course, we have issues of stigma, misinformation, disinformation that have been quite rampant throughout the Covid pandemic.

And obviously just as someone who's a public health practitioner, looking beyond simply Covid itself and this public health crisis that we're facing right now, but a host of other circumstances that the population has faced – economic deterioration, food insecurity, and obviously in terms of women and girls the violence that they face that has emerged more strikingly as a consequence of this pandemic. So I'll stop there because I know we'll be circling back, but over to you. Thanks.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks. And these issues reinforce each other – the economic impacts, and the food insecurity, and the attacks on the healthcare system. And it's a downward spiral. I want to – I want to turn to you, Mais, now because you wrote in your essay about various legal and regulatory impediments imposed on NGOs. And you said that the burden of identifying and implementing solutions should not fall solely on the frontline aid workers and aid agencies that already shoulder the regulatory and security risks. So can you – for the people watching – can you unpack a little bit what you're referring to when you talk about these legal and bureaucratic impediments, and what efforts we should be thinking about in the policy community that can best help NGOs – like the InterAction membership and like the Syrian organizations working – in the future?

Mais Balkhi: Yeah. Thank you so much, Jake. And thank you so much for having me, also for my co-panelists as well. These two Syrian amazing women who are working within humanitarian response, and to all the other women who are working on the ground as well.

So for the bureaucratic and legal impediments, for example, securing NGO registrations, work permits, visas, and movement-related permissions are a part of these legal impediments. For example, to operate in Syrian government-controlled areas, you do need a legal official registration in Damascus. If you need to operate cross-border operations from Turkey, you do need a – to be legally registered in Turkey, and so on.

As for counterterrorism regulations, part of them are also part of DTGs, which are designated terrorist groups. And these measures are applied through either legislations and donor agreements. The counterterrorism legislation applied to humanitarian organizations through either binding U.N. Security resolutions – for example, 1265, 1375 – or through state domestic laws, like counterterrorism laws. These measures criminalize financing of terrorism – freezing funds, denying financial access or financial support to anyone involved in terrorism. Some donors as well have clauses prohibiting NGOs from providing aid to anyone living in areas controlled either by DTGs or any part of these groups.

We can see the impacts of these impediments on formal funding decrees, by blocking off projects, suspension of programs, and most importantly is the struggle in designing projects that are driven by needs. Concerns about compliance mean that humanitarian organization avoid working in areas where terrorist groups are, and those are the places where most vulnerable communities are. And of course, like I mentioned, bank de-risking has one of the chilling effects of some of the counterterrorism measures and sanctions, as well.

What efforts from the policy community to help NGOs in the future is simply to minimize the bureaucracy in emergency response situations. I mean, I'm using the word "simple" here, but it's really not that simple. But it's definitely possible. I already touched on the efforts by the U.S. government on bank de-risking and how we should build on these efforts to indicate – bring awareness to financial sector on safe and flexible transaction channels. Exemptions could prove to be one of the most efficient methods to protecting humanitarian organizations and staff from sanctions regimes and counterterrorism measures. If they are written in an efficient way and provided to NGOs with comprehensive and clear guidance, without leaving room for interpretation, they can really help. And we've seen efforts before, and we can build on these efforts.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you. We've painted a bleak picture, I think, of the operating environment for the humanitarian community. We've got the things that Basma talked about at the onset, the navigating cross-lines and cross-border. And, Mais, you're talking about the bureaucratic, and the processes in Syria and Turkey, but also from the donors. And, Amany, you talked about a devastated, you know, health system, and the implicates that has in various different ways. And so while today is a bit of a reflection on years past, you know, we're not – this is not a moment of history. There's urgency

at this moment to continue to respond to the needs of the civilian population in Syria.

So I want to come back to you, Basma, and get a sense from the perspective of NRC, what are the most immediate needs in the weeks and month ahead for the population in Syria?

Ms. Alloush: Yeah. I think really timely question and something that we need to keep in mind. You know, this – like you said – has been ongoing. You know, this crisis has been ongoing for years. And we still see immediate needs and emergency-like needs that are going on in Syria. So I think I would basically categorize the needs in two kind of sets that need to be really addressed in parallel. It's difficult to look at one without the other. And so the first is the most emergency needs.

So the World Food Programme estimates that about 12.4 million Syrians are now food insecure. This is an increase of about 4.5 million in the last year alone, and it's the highest number ever recorded in Syria. And so as you have Syrians that are on the brink of famine, this comes at a time where inflation and economic deterioration are adding immense pressure on civilians that have really lost almost everything as they weathered the previous years of violence. So food assistance and the need for medical and shelter assistance are among the most pressing needs to stave off thousands of Syrians from becoming even more vulnerable and in more precarious situations.

The other set of needs that I want to highlight are more long-term facing, as Alex had mentioned in his opening remarks, where people do need, you know, job opportunities, proper housing that last and is not based on – you know, that will not deteriorate depending on the season. They need a predictable access to basic services and stable schools. These are equally urgent and pressing needs that Syrians must have access to in order to decrease their dependency on aid and to provide them with the resources to start planning for their future and recovery.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Basma.

I want to come back to you now, Mais. When thinking about the emergency needs, you know, the context – and the long-term needs that Basma described. The context in Syria has been fairly contentious for 10 years. And, you know, in humanitarian programming, humanitarian advocacy, having one voice within the operational NGO community does allow for that more principled humanitarian action that Alex talked about at the beginning. And so, you know, InterAction, as a coalition of U.S.-based NGOs, can you tell us a little bit about how coordination has between NGOs working in Syria over the past years, and how it can be improved moving forward?

Ms. Balkhi: Yeah, thank you. This is a very good question, because I can't stress enough how important collective action is. I have to admit that NGOs in general experience difficulties, and specific situations, and challenges in establishing joint positions in general in part due to maybe poor understanding of a specific concept, like counterterrorism measures, which is a very complicated concept to begin with. But also sometimes fear of negative consequences. But de-risking advocacy has proven to, like, be relatively successful in joint advocacy, mainly because the impact is easier to demonstrate comparing to other impediments, and also because the impact was felt across all actors in Syria, whether you are an organization operating in government of Syria-controlled areas or other locations in the country.

So examples of collective efforts – and I'll talk about the Syria Working Group in InterAction for example – operational organization inside Syria through the Syria Working Group share specific examples with the Treasury Department, the Commerce Department of the unintended consequences of U.S. sanctions on humanitarian conditions, particularly in light of Covid-19, and also to seek clarity regarding the implementation of sanctions. While we usually welcome the approach of case-by-case basis that acknowledges the conflict situations in which humanitarian organization operate.

But due to the challenges NGOs are facing in Syria with this approach, consume a lot of resources, take a long time, we do want to explore other options. So to improve the policy communication, continue dialogue with the humanitarian community to share guidance, collective evidence. And from our part internally as humanitarian organizations, to develop further guidance for field staff and adapted to specific situations, develop a practical context-based guidance to ensure field staff have the information they need to carry out their work.

The other successful examples of coordination that I wanted to talk about as well is the NGO or global coordination group for cross-border resolution. This group, which includes representations of each of the regions – like northeast Syria, northwest Syria, Oman, New York, D.C., and EU capitals – where we share information and we agree on unified messaging. And that has been really successful for cross-border resolution, for example.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Mais.

So I want to then turn to Amany. I can remember, you know, as Dr. Alterman was referring to, sitting in some meetings. I remember being in a different professional capacity as well in the first years of, you know, first the protests and the revolution, and then as the conflict started, and being incredibly impressed by the way in which Syrian Americans at that time were coming together and forming organizations. And can you tell us a

little bit about how Syria Relief and Development has been able to operate differently in Syria in comparison some of these other international NGOs?

Ms. Qaddour: Sure. Thanks, Jake.

I mean, I think we've seen such a duality today in what everyone's been saying. And I will highlight that again. I think SRD in particular, as a diaspora humanitarian NGO, has really been caught between two worlds. I think, like many other actors who operate directly on the ground, we have a large network of humanitarian aid workers – I think over 2,200 physicians, nurses, midwives, social workers, and other vital staff members. I think a critical part of growing this network has been some of these long-term relationships that have been established. And more important than that has been the trust between the communities and within communities that we've served.

And I don't say that to discredit the work of some of our really incredible partners from the U.N. agencies or other international NGOs. I think that collaboration piece has been a really vital part of this response and has only enhanced, you know, our work and our reach. But I think there's been a lot of innovation and creativity, particularly since there's always an aspect of unpredictability with this crisis. So on the one hand, as I said, you have this incredible technical capacity and expertise – which I think is quite different than a lot of other crises just because you start it at a different baseline. Obviously losing a lot of health workers and capacity and brain drain has impacted that, but I think that contextual knowledge or expertise can always trump, you know, some of the humanitarian pedigree that we see in different contexts. I think, you know, understanding context is the first aspect of do no harm.

And I think on the other side, and this is what I meant by duality, is, you know, as a diaspora agency, and many other, you know, incredible NGOs that have worked on this response, you are able navigate some of these bureaucratic waters, for lack of a better word, and have a solid or more robust understanding of some of these compliance issues and impediments. I know Mais touched on these. Obviously bank de-risking is huge, bank closures. So much of what she touched on obviously we relate to.

And I think a bit part of that is because NGOs, specifically diaspora, have to answer to their own HQs, whether it's the U.S., the U.K., or Turkey. I think sometimes there's a patronizing assumption that they aren't familiar with how to navigate these waters. I think it's important to recognize that they're also stewards of the donor dollar, and work to maintain that high level of engagement with decision and policymakers.

And I think just one last thing I'll say is I think this is a time of hope that we can change how we respond to other crises – whether, you know, it's Yemen, or the Rohingya crisis, or Syria. Whatever it is, it's really

understanding that we need to have some kind of paradigm shift in how we engage with communities, not imposing further bureaucratic impediments on them. And it's not to say – to do away with everything, but I think particularly in this era of enhancing, you know, local voices, the localization agenda, even decolonizing aid – I think we really need to absorb some of these best practices and apply them not only in Syria, but also in other contexts. So I'll stop there.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Amany. And interesting that you mention – you referenced Yemen, because I think for the humanitarian community the issues around de-risking and working in areas with the presence of terrorist-designated groups has been a challenge for 15 – really, 20 years. And you know, we saw at the onset of the Biden administration a revocation of the terrorist designation – for the first time, really – with consideration of the humanitarian impact of such a designation.

So this may in fact be a moment of opportunity to rethink some of the balance in contexts like this where there is pressing humanitarian need. Definitely the presence of armed groups that engage in truly horrendous, you know, acts of violence against civilian populations. But it does strike me as there's a moment of opportunity or at least reflection in Washington about these kinds of designations.

I want to stick with you, Amany, for a follow-up question, because you talked about – you talked about a slightly different way of working as a diaspora-based organization. And obviously the immense human cost of the conflict, the ongoing civilian toll doesn't really allow us to think about success in terms of humanitarian response. And yet, a lot of money has been spent and a lot of people have done really important work keeping communities alive, keeping people healthy. And so are there – are there things you would look back at as successful in terms of the humanitarian response – speaking on behalf of SRD or looking larger? What strategies have worked well for you, and what have not? And how do you adapt to the changing realities?

Ms. Qaddour: Sure. Yeah, I think it's always hard to say anything is a success story with a crisis. But, you know, and I touched on this earlier, I think specifically from a health standpoint – which has been, you know, a massive part of our work, including other protection programs. But I think we've seen a great deal of collaboration between agencies in the sector. I think that's something that's really emerged. I think there's – you know, and Mais and Basma obviously touched on this. And also living proof that civil society, I think, is – and its enhancement has been one of the most prominent parts of the crisis.

But I think, you know, unfortunately, you know, some of these best practices don't always translate to long-term solutions. I think just as a humanitarian – and, you know, humanitarian NGOs generally, you know,

your hands are tied a lot. And balancing between some of those immediate needs and urgent needs, and also thinking long term – including with the Security Council, you know, renewal on a six month or yearly basis. You're constantly working with contingency plans that can change at any moment.

I think if we're looking at what didn't go so well, obviously we would be here a lot longer. I think highlighting some of the most obvious ones have been, you know, looking at some of the paralysis in response in some of these major crises that we've seen within the crisis. And those include some of the mass displacements – you know, thousands upon thousands if not millions displaced, some of the sieges, you know, if you think of Idlib, or Ghouta or Aleppo city. And also other red lines that we've seen crossed, including chemical weapons attacks in Khan Shaykhun and Douma. So really, really tragic incidents that have happened that, you know, had action been prompted earlier we would not have had as many people in peril.

I think, you know, that's why I'd really like to highlight sort of this renewed set of mechanisms to be put in place that really emphasize, you know, protection of populations first and foremost, and how this trickles down all the way from the top to those – to those affected communities. And I think there's also, you know, this line drawn between humanitarian organizations and, let's say, human rights organizations. And, you know, everyone's encouraged to stay in their lane, for a lack of a better phrase. But I think right now Syria and other conflicts that are deeply complex, protracted, and are, you know, so drawn out are really showing us that we need to think about it much differently, and integrating a lot of those human rights implications into some of these crises. So I'll stop there. Thank you.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Amany. You mentioned a bunch of different moments – the sieges or these other inflection points. And I want to turn to you, Mais, and think about it again from that Washington policy perspective. Were there moments of particular importance that you think about where things could have been done differently or that we – that you reflect on as these moments of significance in looking back at 10 years of work in Syria?

Ms. Balkhi: Yeah, thank you, Jacob.

From a humanitarian perspective for, like – for policies, I – it's not like we directly related to the humanitarian response. But the cut and halting of civilization funds to northeast Syria in 2018, and before that northwest, these decisions put the burden on humanitarian organization to work in a space of civil society, which NGOs are not actually equipped to fill. And these civilization projects are very important to – for recovery from war – from the war-ravaged country. The work is essential also to getting areas ready for Syrian refugees to return.

Also, not considering education as an emergency fund is also one of the policies that I feel that this should be reviewed. Also the policy community

should continue to support the development of civil society inside Syria, and among the refugee communities. When the Syrian crisis began, civil society was building a very strong foundation. The lack of support and funding created a huge gap in the past few years.

On legislations and resolutions, the NGO community should be consulted and involved. We did have some experiences where NGOs were successful in having a voice and in some of the legislations, for example, that had the chance to provide humanitarian language and recommendations to ensure the humanitarian principles in some cases. But it happens often late in the process, which doesn't give room for much influence at that stage. Like, the Caesar Civilian Protection Act and the sanctions legislations, the Wilson bill, and also some of the decisions like creating a safe zone, for example. We do need to have enough room to have an influence. And that would actually improve as us, like, working together for improved policies.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Mais.

Basma, Mais just mentioned the humanitarian principles. So I'm going to ask you two questions. One is, we have a new administration and we're starting to think about – you know, there's surely a lot of policy conversations happening on humanitarian, but also the big picture. And so the first question, I think, is, you know: How do we look – how do we learn from 10 years of practice and look forward, you know, to a better humanitarian future within the context of a better peace and security future in Syria?

And a second question, you know, if you – if you feel comfortable to address it, is on this question of humanitarian principles. I mean, Mais raised it, we have a question from the audience as well, about these humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, independence being the bedrock of addressing needs in conflict. And given how politicized this crisis has been, how effective do you think the humanitarian community has been in navigating and maintaining independence in the face of the politicization?

Ms. Alloush: Thanks, Jake.

So if I can take your second question first, if that's OK, on kind of maintaining our adherence to humanitarian principles, and especially the principle of independence, I think a distinction that I would like to kind of say first is that humanitarian operations are always in highly contentious, highly politized, you know, emergency situations where, you know, there's a crisis that's ongoing and we have to respond to numerous, you know, bureaucratic impediments, multiple types of challenges that we have to overcome, while trying to operate and provide assistance to people that are severely impacted by the conflict.

I think Syria is no different. It is definitely a politicized and highly contentious context that is polarizing in some cases. But I think humanitarian organizations have – you know, came to this response with experience that organizations have had in other contexts and applied it to Syria. Obviously, there were lessons along the way that we needed to learn, and reform, and adapt to the specific context in Syria. But I think the larger frameworks of trying to adhere to our principles and also manage between, you know, principle of independence, of neutrality, of humanity – and trying to make sure that all of them are kind of adhered to equally is not an easy thing to do, but I think humanitarians do have the experience, and the frameworks, and the safeguards in place to try to adhere to them as much as possible.

To your second question on kind of what can we learn from the past and looking forward to the future of Syria, I want to highlight a few things. The first and, I think in my opinion, one of the most important lessons learned over the years is that the status quo is not enough. You know, this conflict is not a humanitarian crisis. A humanitarian fix, I think Alex had mentioned this, will not address the underlying needs. There must be a political – there must be political will and serious investment in addressing the root causes of the Syrian conflict to prevent another decade of instability, insecurity, and more displacement, really.

So actually NRC, if I can shamelessly put in a plug here, recently published a report called The Darkest Decade, that outlines the concrete measures that parties to the conflict and international donors can take to prevent Syrians enduring another conflict – another decade – sorry – of unrest and limbo. And one of the main recommendations that the report prioritized is really the investment in sustainable solutions that end Syrians' displacement. So again, this goes back to what I was saying before about, you know, meeting needs – both the emergency and the long-term needs – in parallel.

I think this mentality of us siloing the different phases of the Syrian conflict and saying, you know, OK, now we're in an emergency, we're going to shift to early recovery, and then stabilization, reconstruction – things in real life are so murky in between. And it's not easy to just bucket each kind of stage with a start and an end date. I think we need to learn how to program in a more salient way, in a more fluid way, where we address the needs as they really are on the ground. If that means it's emergency, you know, we address that appropriately. And if it means more long term, then I think then that needs the attention as well.

And I think the last thing I want to say about the lessons learned and, you know, touching somewhat on Amany's point, and Mais' as well, I think thinking back over the past few years and the formation of the humanitarian response, you know, Syria was a country where civil society was, you know, incredibly limited. And there were very few, if any, independent civil society organizations. And now we have hundreds of

highly skilled Syrian organizations, that in some areas are actually taking full control of the delivery of assistance.

And I think this kind of development, this capacity building, you know, fostering these skills and enhancing these skills and these talents of highly – like, high-caliber Syrian organizations, is really one of the strengths, I think, of the humanitarian response, and I think something that we really need to build on. Because in areas – I mean, as we've mentioned, in besieged areas, for instance, when we had populations that were completely cut off from the rest of the world, they couldn't access – you know, international organizations couldn't access these populations.

And so the burden and the onus really fell on local actors. And unless these local actors are empowered and, you know, have the resources that they need, I think that is one of the first steps that we can take to really enhance our response and to safeguard against, you know, other Syrians falling, you know, to the margins, falling, you know, away from the kind of view of international organizations.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Basma. And, you know, in the whole discussion about localization it's clear that it's not the local office of the international NGO that's often at the frontlines of the humanitarian response. It's civil society organizations of a whole host of stripes – community groups, religious organizations, neighborhood associations. And we have a question here, I want to turn to you, Amany, about, you know, you talked about this paradigm shift to an approach to humanitarian assistance, referring to this.

So how – the question is, who should be leading this shift? But you know, how does this shift happen and how do we – how do we harmonize the things that you're talking about from a diaspora side, that Basma's talking about happening organically in these communities that are either cut off or that have existing organizations. How do we harmonize this shift between, you know, diaspora or organically with, you know, large international donors who have, you know, accounting and responsibility mechanisms to their, you know, congress or parliament, and then ultimately to the taxpayer? You know, what are – what are the steps that we can think about going forward to make these structures work together and really push that localization agenda forward naturally?

Ms. Qaddour: Sure. Thanks for that question. It's not an easy one. (Laughs.) So I'm going to try to formulate some type of coherent answer. I mean, it is complicated. I think, you know, no one agency can lead this entire effort. I think it's been a collective effort until now. But unfortunately – it's ironic, because the organizations on the ground, and I think I've mentioned this before, is that, you know, they're tackling these risks, these things that are threatening their livelihoods, their safety, constantly putting their lives in peril, in the quest for service delivery.

On the other side, what's crushing them, or killing them in some incidents – in some scenarios, is really navigating these waters and understanding what's happening upstream. So, you know, when you have a bank closure out in another office or in another country, that means you can't transfer to your aid workers. This is their only form of livelihood. This is how they get paid. You can't fund services, let's say, at a – at a maternity and children's hospital. So you have people who can't access, you know, basic labor, basic delivery, other vital services for months at a time when you cut off some of these services.

So I think it's really – part of it is understanding the deep impact that some of these bureaucratic impediments have, but also, you know, bringing different stakeholders together. So whether it's the donors and understanding this, and international partners understanding, you know, it's not just being late, you know, for a financial report. It's what's happening underneath all of this. So I think part of it is really, you know, working together, and some of these, you know, high-level donors and stakeholders really using their leverage in helping kind of alleviate some of these – some of these impediments that continue to take place.

I know Alex touched on this earlier and, you know, it's been such a vital part, meaningful capacity building I think is a huge component of it. I think sometimes in humanitarian crises so much time is invested, obviously, on building technical capacity and expertise and the delivery of services, but on the other side of that you have some of this operational capacity building that relates to finance and HR. A lot of that does not always trickle down to local organizations.

You know, when you look at things like core funding, support for building some of these systems and structures that are necessary, given how highly regulated this sector is, we really need to do better from that standpoint. It's not just about service delivery. It's about also making sure that all of these other systems and structures are in place so that the risk is not just continuously passed down to local organizations. So I hope – I hope that helps answer a bit, obviously. But we still have a long way to go.

And I think a way to address that is really being very transparent in what some of the challenges are. And also, on the recipient end, is understanding: What are you going through? What are some of the things we can help with? What are some of the barriers so that we can help in an immediate sense, but also in terms of, you know, policies and procedures across the sector, so that we're not only adding more burden to different organizations on the ground.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Amany. That's comprehensive. We've heard, I think, over the course the last half an hour or so a lot of different, you know, ideas and challenges going forward. You know, Basma, you talked about the siloing of different sectors of work that doesn't necessarily reflect the challenges on

the ground. Mais talked about the bureaucratic and regulatory obstacles, particularly from the donor side and, Amany, you just touched on that. We have this challenge of, you know, the capacity building, but the meaningful – you know, the capacity exists, but the capacity that that relates to the donor requirements, right, this core funding.

So I think there's a lot of important things that we can work on going forward to improve the humanitarian response while it's needed. But we do, I think, have an acute moment coming up. But I want to come back to you, Mais, before we wrap up. You talked about the – you know, the international work between the U.S., the EU, Oman, Turkey with respect to the cross-border resolution. And so thinking back to some of the previous moments, what are some of the lessons learned as we look ahead to July that we should be thinking about, you know, in terms of policy and for your community advocacy around that – around that upcoming moment?

Ms. Balkhi: Yeah. I think from – as I mentioned, from the humanitarian NGO's perspective, we do need to work better together for coordination, having more unified messaging, unified position. So this is something that we have learned from the past and we are improving now. So this – from our side, we know – we struggled in the past. We're having a lot of challenges. But we are trying to overcome those challenges.

But from the U.S. side, let's say, and other donors as well, we should renew all diplomatic efforts. We should work with Turkey, and Russia, and all other parts, and push for, like, a serious – as my colleagues have mentioned – not only, like, a serious political solution, but – because that's the ultimate goal – but also for the cross-border actually work with other – with other partner, with other allies, and also with the NGO community to have this dialogue that – what do we need to do differently on the ground to maintain access? And how the U.S. can be an actual ally with us on this?

So I think we do – yeah, we're in March, and July is coming, and these conversations should happen as soon as possible. As I said, from our side, we are talking about this, but we do need our donors to actually also work with us on this, work with the U.N. on the cross-border. Yeah.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Mais. I want to – we're running short on time. So I want to just turn to you maybe in the same sequence you started and, you know, in addition to being professionals I think there's also a personal element here. So is there any last reflections you'd like to share for our audience as we think about what we all can do going forward? Starting with you, Basma. Any last thoughts?

Ms. Alloush: Yeah, just really quickly. I think, you know, one of the factors that drove, you know, the Syrians to speak up, and to rise up in 2011 and that, you know, unraveled into a conflict after a few years, I think the crisis that we currently have is really a crisis of service and provisions of services. And I

think people's access to basic human services – I mean, things – lifesaving at times, is really the front and center of their motivations back in 2011. And I think those needs still persist. So I think having that in mind, and kind of viewing Syria in that frame, and trying to program and design assistance to address those specific needs is really the most vital way to help Syrians, to support them, and to prevent them from falling further in worse situations.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks.

Mais, over to you. Any last reflections?

Ms. Balkhi: Just in terms of the bureaucratic impediments specifically, I think the U.S. government should integrate humanitarian safeguards, including OFAC licenses, into the sanction policies with clear guidance. Jake, you mentioned the Yemen example with revoking the FTO designation, and also adopting an OFAC general license which the scope was very large to actually ensure humanitarian operations are not dramatically impacted is very essential. I would also touch base for a durable solution for refugees. This is something that is very important. And also, the U.S. should start putting policies into that as well.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Mais.

And Amany.

Ms. Qaddour: Sure, thanks. I mean, I think for the sake of this panel obviously we've each focused on, you know, one aspect just for the sake of time. But the reality is I think all of these elements are happening in parallel at the same time. And we need to find, I think, solutions for each aspect or challenge that we're dealing with. But I also think we're entering a new era of conflict or crisis when so many red lines are constantly being crossed. I think, you know, we'll look back in the future and wonder, you know, why did this happen? Why weren't some of these things stopped earlier?

So I think just the fear is that this has shaped a precedent for the future. So that's why I think it is a really critical time, a reset, a starting over, a critical time of reflection, I think, to understand what are a lot of the implications of this crisis, apply them obviously to, you know, other tragedies around the world, but also in understanding, you know, what could we do to move forward. Thank you.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you.

You know, on behalf of our program, CISIS Humanitarian Agenda and Dr. Alterman's Middle East Program, and I think on behalf of the people viewing at home I just want to express immense sense of gratitude for your work and for the work of your colleagues, and for taking the time to be with us today and share these reflections. And, you know, we will continue to work

with you and with the rest of the humanitarian community to try to identify these solutions that can help alleviate some of the suffering, you know, of the civilian population going forward.

So thank you, Basma Alloush, Amany Qaddour, and Mais Balkhi for being with us today. Thank you for those of you viewing at home. The event will be posted on our website in its entirety shortly after its conclusion. And we look forward to hearing from you, as always. Thank you.

(END)