

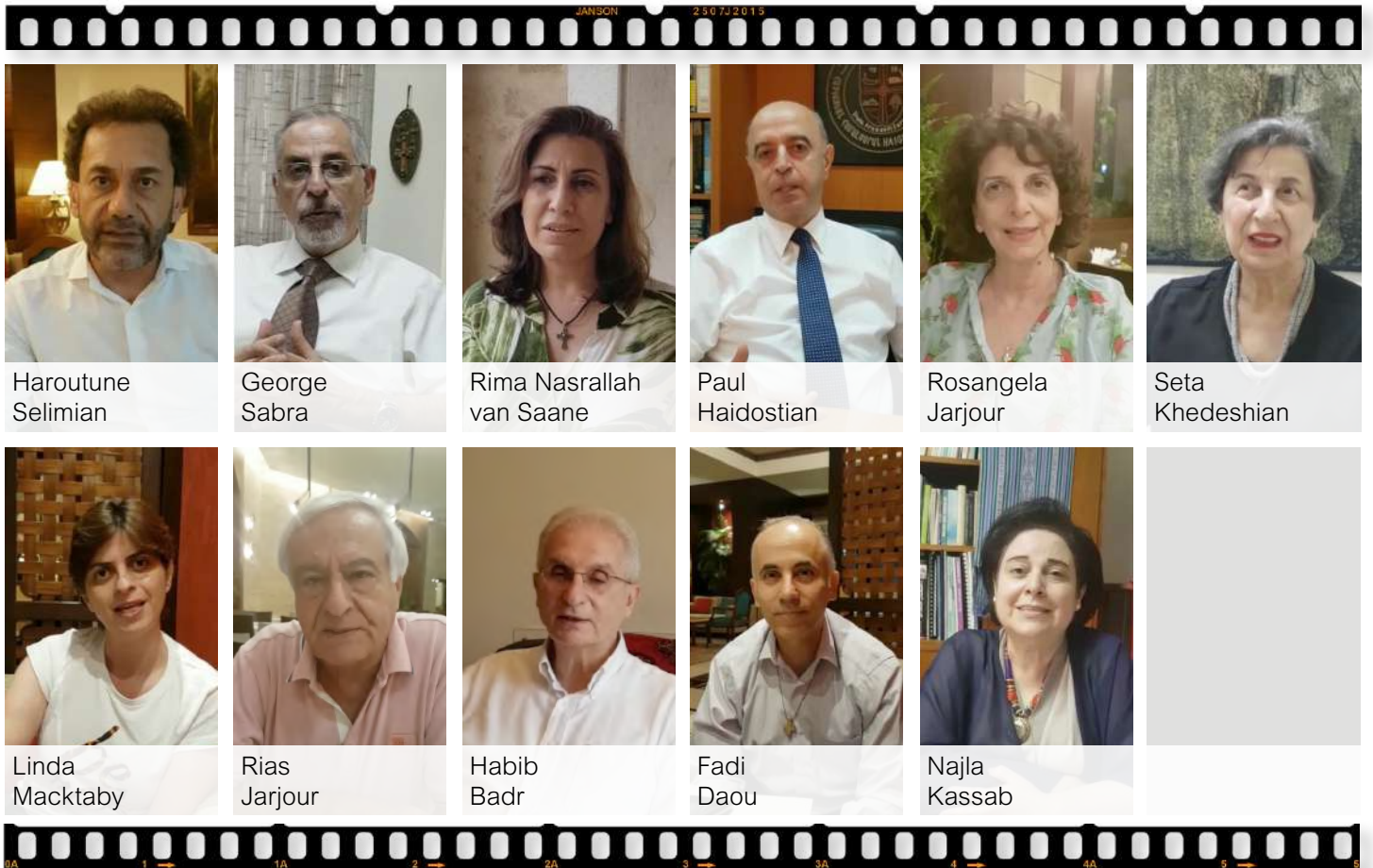


Protestant Church
in Switzerland

Visit to Beirut – 21-26 September 2020

Serge Fornerod (PCS) and Tabea Stalder (HEKS/EPER)

From 21-26. September 2020, Serge Fornerod, Director of External Relations of the Protestant Church in Switzerland (PCS), traveled to Beirut on behalf of the Council together with Tabea Stalder, who is in charge of the church cooperation program of HEKS/EPER, the aid organization of the Protestant Churches in Switzerland. The PCS wished to express its tangible solidarity and sympathy with its partner churches in the area after the Beirut port explosion in early August. Lebanon has been experiencing a series of political and economic shocks over the past year that has put the coexistence of the various communities at risk. The churches play an important part in this context. In addition to this blog, Serge Fornerod also produced short films (in English) with the various interlocutors he interviewed during his trip, which can be seen at evref.ch/en/topics/international-relations/beirut-blog/videos-to-beirut-reports/



Haroutune
Selimian



George
Sabra



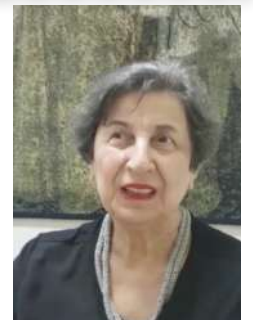
Rima Nasrallah
van Saane



Paul
Haidostian



Rosangela
Jarjour



Seta
Khedeshian



Linda
Macktaby



Rias
Jarjour



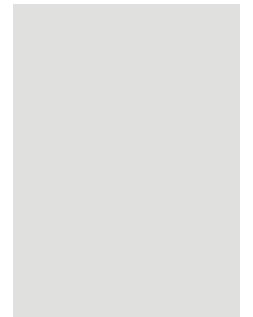
Habib
Badr



Fadi
Daou



Najla
Kassab





Protestant Church
in Switzerland

Visit to Beirut – 21-26 September 2020

Monday, 21 September

Two thirds of the airplane seats are occupied, as full as it gets during the coronavirus pandemic. A complete crosssection of generations is represented on board, Swiss citizens of Lebanese background, families living apart, young travelers, and older people probably returning from visiting with their children. Everyone was tested for COVID-19 shortly before the flight and all wear a mask on board. And when the passengers do need to squeeze more closely together on the airport bus, they turn their backs to one another and eye each other suspiciously. The flight attendants dress like hospital nurses. We receive a cold meal on the flight, packed in plastic and tins.



Anyone who has ever flown into Beirut has seen and admired the view: The airplane descends parallel to the coast in the minutes before landing so that you can see the entire city in its full expanse with the port, city center, and Shiite quarters – a fantastic panorama in the evening light. This time, we hesitate however before looking towards the port. There is only emptiness to be seen, a wasteland. During the final approach, a short “welcome” film is projected onto the screen: Khaled sings and laments the battered city, as you see images of the city after the devastation, quickly passing by, with the Lebanese flag flying above crossed by a broad ribbon of mourning. We are immediately overcome by emotion.

The first surprise comes at the airport: We need to take yet another Covid-19 test. Passport control is over in no time, however, and customs and security controls are ... non-existent. I am out of the airport in less than five min-

utes, a completely new experience for me. Just a few people are to be seen inside the airport concourse, which is normally packed, and coffee shops are empty.

“What are those dolls all about”, our driver wants to know. The dolls in question tell the story of HEKS/EPER and its work with the churches of the region: There are 17 Protestant congregations in Syria and Lebanon that provide an educational program for children. This is not only a matter of teaching the catechesis, but also about social cohesion in each village (since not all children are Protestant) as well as a degree of psychological support for children who have experienced trauma in recent years. The teachers are always looking for useful aids so that the children are not just able to play and learn with them, but also find help in finding their own voices. Seventeen Reformed parishes in Switzerland wished to help the project, each donating a doll to a local parish. The story is as simple as it is touching.





Protestant Church
in Switzerland

Visit to Beirut – 21-26 September 2020

Tuesday, 22 September

Today is the first of the two days of quarantine that we are required to observe as we await our corona test results from the airport. It is a good opportunity to explore the immediate vicinity of our hotel. The Hamra neighborhood is usually swarming with activity, with shops and boutiques side by side with hotels and bistros. Outdoor life seems strongly muted today, however. There is relatively little traffic, few people are in the cafés, many stores stand empty or are closed, beggars can be found at every street corner. Only a scattered number of young people sit together smoking and sipping at their coffee, looking unconcerned as if nothing were amiss. People wearing masks can be seen all throughout the streets and masks are mandatory inside shops. Everyone needs to have their temperature taken to enter the hotel, hands always have to be disinfected first. Some buildings show signs of the explosion, but not as many in this part of town. A number of hospitals are located nearby, all filled with people.



Tabea Stalder (HEKS/EPER), Rev. Haroutune Selimian (Aleppo),
Serge Fornerod (PCS)

We had a bit of unexpected luck this afternoon: Pastor Haroutune Selimian, president of the small Armenian Protestant Community in Syria, stopped by. He is from Aleppo, where the people – with their lives already a living hell due to bombings and blockades – were hard hit by Covid-19 in August: 68 doctors died there in August alone, as did over 180 members of the Armenian congregations. Medical equipment is scarce, whether masks, disinfectant, or medication, but also the medical expertise needed to fight the pandemic. An aid package from Russia with medical equipment, organized by a German NGO, has been blocked at Latakia, a Russian naval base, and Pastor Haroutune needs to contact the city's mayor to arrange for a military escort of the shipment to Aleppo: "Otherwise militias will steal it all." He stresses that Western economic sanctions seriously exacerbated the situation among the people and is very angry about it.

The schools have now just reopened for classes. The Armenian Protestant Church's school has around 220 students, including many non-Protestant children. How are the pupils expected to deal with COVID-19 when not even the teachers and doctors know what to do exactly? Many parents didn't even re-register their children, choosing instead to wait and see how the epidemic develops. There are three Protestant pastors in Aleppo with congregations of around 200-300 families each. At the moment, however, the parishes are involved in providing humanitarian aid and social work for around 800-900 families. "The church brings about life," Pastor Haroutune explained. The congregation is therefore active in the community in many different places, offering sewing courses to women, as well as courses for manicures, pedicures, and cutting hair. Pastor Haroutune is also helping women there to open their own salon. He is sometimes asked whether it is really a matter for the church to help women open a beauty parlor. His answer is a simple: "But of course." He is nearly taken aback by the question in view of the current economic situation in Syria. He would in fact most like to see a whole bunch of small shops pop up – "just like when you make popcorn." He also has to deal with a lack of pastors. The next parish over has in fact recently been affected as well, when its pastor decided he would rather move to Lebanon. "A rural pastor in my church in Syria earns around 50USD. He gets 1500USD here in Beirut. I often talk to theology students and tell them that being a pastor is a vocation and not a preference. There is nothing to add to this, truly nothing beyond the question of how one can take such a situation for years and still maintain so much hope and dedication.



Protestant Church
in Switzerland

Visit to Beirut – 21-26 September 2020

Wednesday, 23 September
Part 1

This morning, we paid a brief visit to the part of the port that has been destroyed. You just stand there and gaze at the scenery in disbelief. Small memorials with the names of the victims have been fastened to the concrete barrier aside the main road, sometimes with the nationality added as well. Not everyone could be identified, however, including a number of children. The rumor continues to spread that Hezbollah brought the chemicals into the country or employed them there. This however remains an unconfirmed assertion. There is no investigative commission so that information continues to be undisclosed. We meet to talk with George Sabra, dean and president of the Near East School of Theology (NEST), who cautiously mentions the hypothesis that the explosion was in fact the result of an attack and that Israel might have sought to destroy a nearby Hezbollah ammunition dump (as there were two explosions in quick succession), something that had occurred in the past. Just yesterday there was an explosion at a Hezbollah arms depot in the south of the country, right in the middle of a town. Sabra remembers hearing aircraft flying over ahead that day, as did others. It all remains a riddle and is likely to remain one for a long while. In view of the political constellations and alliances in Lebanon, only a few groups have an interest to see the truth come to light.



The local churches have reacted in different ways. The Maronite Church speaks out loudly and clearly with its popular position that the proportional representation system by religious group needs to come to an end. There are however also voices that question the intentions of the Maronite Church, suggesting that it seeks to make itself indispensable in the search for a negotiated solution with Hezbollah. The Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Beirut has also spoken out decisively. While the other churches share these views, they are reluctant to express them as clearly in public perhaps because members of their churches live in Syria, who are allied with Hezbollah.

George Sabra speaks to us of three devastating events that impacted his country this year: the economic col-

lapse, Covid-19, and the harbor explosion. Corona is the least of the population's concerns at the moment, which perhaps explains the recent outbreak. The people have indeed been facing ruin. Over 45% of the population is now officially below the poverty line, which is currently set at 400 dollars. The Lebanese pound has lost 80% of its value since the beginning of the year, with only 20 dollars left for every 100, like at the height of the 2008 financial crisis. Dollar accounts have been frozen in many banks, and when people withdraw money, the value of the Lebanese money is down 30% on the dollar. There are several different exchange rates: the official rate, the Central Bank's rate, the rate used among the different banks, the black market rate...



Near East School of Theology Staff (left to right): Wilbert & Rima Nasrallah van Saane, George Sabra, Peter Ford



Nobody is able to keep track. NEST was able to repair nearly all of the glass panes that burst in the explosion – and one company installing a large glass door demanded 8000 pounds on the dollar! Just a few months ago it would have only been 1500 pounds. Everyone likes to have fresh currency, since bank regulations do not apply and it can be exchanged at any particular rate, on the black market of course as well. All of it is subject to daily fluctuations.

Classes begin again at NEST on Monday. The plan is now for students to attend in person. The number of students is much lower than usual as foreign students did not come and others can no longer pay the fees. There is therefore expected to be enough space for appropri-

ate hygienic measures to be implemented. The students were not happy with online learning and they missed the personal contact. The courses will, however, continue online should it become necessary. President Sabra is concerned about having enough future pastors and instructors at NEST. There are too few candidates and NEST is increasingly dependent on support from instructors from the West. The new academic year will therefore open with a verse taken from the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair ... struck down, but not destroyed." (2 Cor. 4:8-9)



Protestant Church
in Switzerland

Visit to Beirut – 21-26 September 2020

Wednesday, 23 September
Part 2

An economic and political inferno; perdition for spirituality and morale

Pastor Habib Badr has long played an important role in the Protestant Church in the Middle East. He succeeded his father at the head of the oldest Arabic-speaking Protestant church in the region, which was founded in 1848. This independent church in Beirut has grown to span eight congregations in the vicinity. It runs the Schneller schools there, as well as a home for seniors, a training facility for digital technology, and a program to support women. Around 900 families were members of the church before the War in Lebanon, but many have since left the country. Only around 300 families remain. Habib is, however, primarily concerned about the future: Since the port explosion, many have already left and still others have expressed their wish to follow, mainly young people. It was the straw that broke the camel's back – with despair and hopelessness.



The church is located in the middle of the city, not far from government buildings, and only a few meters from Parliament. The church is affected by street barricades whenever anything occurs with serious political consequences in the country. It is also situated relatively close to the port. All of the windows of the church and the neighboring parish house exploded in the incident, all of its doors and pews blown away. Habib was sitting in his office at the time, preparing a wedding. After the first explosion, which he thought was an earthquake, he hid behind an inner wall, just in time before the second explosion hit that wiped everything away. "It was like something from a biblical story", he exclaims.

The economic and political situation has become unbearable for the people there. The currency has lost 80% and the purchasing power of a pastor's salary

along with it. During the worship service, Habib attempts to answer the question "Where is God in everything that is happening to us?". Biblical lamentations are read in church groups along with Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and the story of Jesus sleeping in the boat during the storm ... Believing in something that cannot be seen is particularly difficult at the moment. But is there any other choice? God never promised his disciples a rose garden.

The situation has reached a point of no return. There are numerous examples for solidarity among the Lebanese people, across all ethnic and religious lines. Demonstrations have brought down two governments since October 2019, massively disrupting parliamentary sessions. Women have mobilized as never before, with all generations taking to the streets. The August explosion, however, put an end to the final hopes of most demonstrators. The French initiative for a new political model is one answer to this mobilization. Change will occur one way or another, as nothing else is possible: Either the current system will be fundamentally reformed or it will be followed by a piecemeal solution or even collapse. The Shiite community is demanding the share in power to which it is entitled in view of its demographic strength and its political support from Iran and Syria. Other communities, including the Christians, will have to yield to this. The idea of filling key ministries in a system of rotation among the country's different communities, could prove convincing.

We then meet to speak with a sociologist, who is less optimistic. He points out that 53,000 homeless people now live in Beirut and explains that the oligarchy in

power only sought to cling to its privileges in a system that has become so complex that it can no longer be reformed. He expresses his consternation at the contempt that those in power showed towards others, and that the indifference of the privileged to their own responsibility could be sensed everywhere. Lies and corruption, he adds, have already ruled much too long. It is believed that 56 ministers were aware that ammonia was being stored in the port. The people are now fed up and have been leaving the country in droves, with 83,000 emigrating since October 2019. It is said that the Saudi embassy is currently receiving 3000 visa applications a week, he pointed out, and some now believe that

the over half a million people will leave the country by the end of the year. The people's hope and morale have been torn apart by the explosion once and for all. And the very same business attorneys who supported the government for years in building up the system of corruption, while making large profits in the process, are now advising international NGOs in connection with the administration and distribution of the flood of humanitarian aid and funds for the reconstruction of the country. He lastly asks where one can find honest, reliable, and humane people in Lebanon today, answering his own question with the bitter response, "certainly not among those in power".





Protestant Church
in Switzerland

Visit to Beirut – 21-26 September 2020

Thursday, 24 September 2020

Solidarity among Armenians

Seta Khedeshian is a typical Lebanese woman in many ways: energetic, elegant, modern, independent, selfconfident, friendly and considerate, highly qualified. She is a member of the council that assists the Catholicos of Cilicia, the Armenian Patriarch Aram I. She has until now been the director of Diakonia and Social Justice at the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and was head of the Armenian Red Cross in Lebanon before that. She is a well composed and experienced individual who has lived through the history of Lebanon of the past decades as well as that of Armenia, although from a distance. Conflicts, clashes, drama, and catastrophe are nothing new to her. But the recent events in her country have shaken her to the core. Her emotions are palpable as she speaks with us, shaking us up as well. She is angry and outraged, does not mince her words, and gradually gives up her traditional Middle Eastern reserve in the course of our conversation. “We have to struggle with so much grief that it is no longer bearable.”

She is proud of the young people in her country who have been protesting in the streets, saying: “We will not emigrate even if it is difficult for us here. Our future is not in Europe but here. This is our land. If anyone needs to go, it should be the old men who led us into this dead end!” She explains that, for lack of their own program and leadership, they were not however able to bring down the corrupt government, which had lost all of its dignity and decency. “We’d have to have a French Revolution, off with their heads!”, she submits angrily, even as she laughs at her own boldness and hyperbole.

Many Christians numbered among the victims of the explosion; and the most heavily hit area is a business district with a Christian majority. The Armenian Bourj Hammoud district was also strongly affected. Catholicos Aram, who had been on holiday in the mountains, immediately sped to Antelias (the seat of the Patriarchate) and – after taking account of the extent of the damage – visited the Armenian district, which he already suspected had borne the brunt of massive destruction. He approached people who made their way numb and in shock through the streets, spoke with them and listened to what they had to say. The next day, he published a communiqué urging the government to respond to the people’s needs. He then called upon leading figures from the Armenian Protestant and Armenian Catholic churches to join together in setting up a relief committee. Over 3000 needy families received money and a group of engineers and architects put together a list of materials needed for repairs. Money was collected in the diaspora for this as well. They also decided to set

aside school fees for children in Armenian schools during the 2020/21 school year. Convinced that the systems and officials of the state, police, and army, who should have been taking stock of the damage and coordinating the distribution of relief goods, were in fact part of the endemic corruption, they sought to take responsibility for the community into their own hands and organize themselves, expecting practically nothing from the state. “We Armenians are ‘genetically’ preprogrammed to react to catastrophes quickly,” Seta Khedeshian states. Her two identities, Armenian and Lebanese, melted in this circumstance into one. She would like the community identity to no longer prevail over the Armenian one as has often been the case in the country. “The mentality and the people who propagate this mentality have destroyed the identity of the Lebanese people. It is so tough”, she adds, hardly able to hold back the tears.



Tabea Stalder (HEKS/EPER), Serge Fornerod (PCS), Joseph Kassab (President of NESSL)

We then head to the mountains above the city, where the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL) is headquartered. It is the most important Reformed church in the country, extending into Syria as well. The church includes 14 congregations in Syria alongside 9 in Lebanon, with a total of around 40,000 members and sympathizers each. Around a quarter are active in the church. NESSL also administers 11 schools with around 12,000 students, two day nurseries, and other facilities. This allows the church to finance a large portion of the salaries of its pastors and approximately 80 employees. Education is a signature feature of the region's Protestant churches, as acknowledged and recognized throughout society, and the reason why a good portion of its members have been part of the middle class until now. The economic collapse not only had an effect on collection plates, however, but also on the schools, as many parents could no longer afford to pay the fees. The number of students has fallen so precipitously that the church's budget is under threat and emergency measures have become necessary such as shifting funds from other projects and reducing salaries.

As NESSL President Joseph Kassab puts it, the people feel abandoned by God, like Jesus on the cross. "The people ask whether God still loves them. Of course they

continue to hold to their Sunday hopes for an Easter. But people in the Middle East now have the feeling that Friday and Sunday are not separated by three days but by several decades."

A new aid agency

As of January 1, 2020, NESSL called into being a new NGO by the name of Compassion Protestant Society (CPS) in order to raise the visibility of its social and diaconal efforts. CPS Director Georges Ziadeh spoke to us about the extremely difficult situation for the new NGO in the current context: while it came into being with but a modest budget, the organization had to react quickly to disasters like the port explosion and COVID-19. And this all came in the midst of an economic crisis with only a small team, just as the NGO was seeking to raise its profile, collect donations, and develop internal strategies and procedures. They are currently carrying out seven projects so that it will take more time before results can be shown that meet goals and expectations. There was, however, not very much time for any of this. Several European aid agencies, including HEKS/EPER, have therefore sought out ways to help CPS on its way.





Protestant Church
in Switzerland

Visit to Beirut – 21-26 September 2020

Friday, 25 September

Feelings coming to a boil

Today's focus lies on the Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East (UAECNE) and its work, and its projects that are supported by HEKS/EPER in particular. This included for the first time a humanitarian aid project for the repair of homes that were destroyed by the explosion on 4 August. This has been a new experience for UAECNE as well. The district that was affected particularly strongly by the explosion is in fact a historical Christian area with impressive examples of nineteenth-century Lebanese architecture, and it is predominantly Armenian. The UAECNE administrative center was entirely destroyed by the explosion, as was the district's main church. Pastor Megrditch Karagoezian, President of UAECNE, spoke to us about the historical relations between UAECNE and HEKS/EPER along with the Swiss churches.

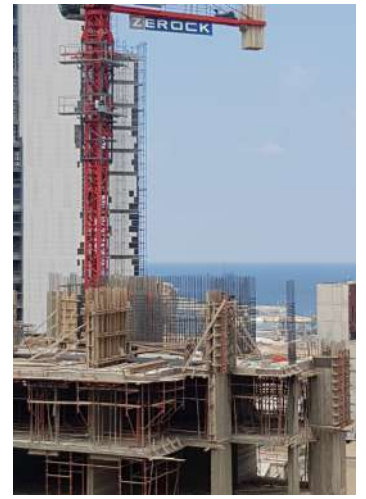


Left to right: Prof. Paul Haidostian (President of Haygazian University), Serge Fornerod (PCS), Rev. Megrditch Karagoezian (President of UAECNE), Tabea Stalder (HEKS/EPER), Nishan Bakalian (Coordinator of Church relations of UAECNE)

The Union spans the entire Near East (Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Cyprus – and even Australia) and has 6000 members in Lebanon and just as many in Syria, with around three times as many additional supporters. Its focus has always been placed on education, which is sometimes referred to internally as the “neuronal pipeline”. The situation has, however, also grown increasingly difficult in that regard due to the economic crisis, as the people have seen around half of their wages “stolen” by the exchange rate, which the government artificially tied to the dollar. Current estimates place 60-70% of the population below the poverty line, while some 20% are more or less able to make ends meet, even as 10% remain extremely rich. The Lebanese refer to their previous savings that were affected by these measures as “lollar accounts”, a portmanteau of the pound (livre in French) and the dollar. Just like NEST,

UAECNE has seen its economic model come under considerable pressure and has been forced to make difficult and controversial decisions.

Afterwards, Professor Paul Haidostian, President of the Armenian Protestant Haygazian University in Beirut, accompanies us to a meeting with the different project heads. It is, of course, not really a common daily task for a professor of systematic theology to take on the responsibility for this type of project. Paul Haidostian also represents the church in the interdenominational committee that the Armenians established to coordinate their relief measures. It was clear to UAECNE that its everyday role would change following the explosion and that it would need to take on reconstruction efforts on behalf of its community. Dozens of NGOs came forward to take stock of the current needs, canvassing streets and homes for weeks. One particular individual whom we visited was sought out by 30 different organizations on a single day, which were variously carrying out measurements, taking photographs, asking many questions, filling out forms, and promising assistance, but without actually delivering on it. Frustration has now followed on the dramatic events, which often cost the people their memories and years of their lives. Our host tells us how he has had an increasing feeling of guilt in the course of his inquiries, whenever he had to bother the people to ask them about what they needed, while only raising hopes in the process without the certainty of any positive outcome. The credibility and reliability of UAECNE were also at stake. Everyone knows everyone here. He is therefore visibly relieved this morning when he receives – as in other three cases that we would inspect later – a definitive positive response from HEKS/EPER on the financing of



the most important repairs, including that of doors and windows. They are set to receive 1000-3000 Swiss francs over the next two weeks. Winter is only around the corner with the rain it will bring.

We ran into at least a dozen NGO teams in under an hour there, including USAID, Save the Children, Medair, UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontières, and Muslim NGOs – a veritable aid bazaar! Most of them were only there to take a few photographs to send to their major donors, with little to no work actually being carried out. The army is coordinating aid efforts, dividing the disaster area into 36 sectors. The NGOs report their service offers and potential financial capacity and are assigned part of the area in return. UAECNE works to reach the members of the Armenian community, regardless of their religious affiliation.

We then visit a series of devastated apartments, where the tenants are willing to “open” their doors to people like us (even as most actual doors were ripped out or demolished by the explosion). In the course of our visits, we draw ever nearer to the center of the explosion and are better able to comprehend the incredible destructive power that was unleashed there, third only in history to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The scenery is indeed more reminiscent of a bombing attack, our minds fail to grasp it all. Nearly everyone we meet survived only by some sort of miracle – and are all traumatized. The explosion occurred at 6 p.m., a time when most offices are empty. The school vacation, coronavirus, and the economic crisis also combined to reduce the number of people out on the streets. One hesitates to think of what would have happened at another time of year or under other circumstances. Standing on a balcony with a view of the sea, around 250m from the highway that runs alongside the port, I notice that the thick iron railing is fully twisted. A large piece of cast iron, around 1m long and 20cm wide, lies on the floor, also completely deformed by the explosion. The owner of the apartment points out a rusted boat in the harbor, around 1km away, and explains that this is a piece of the ship’s rail that landed over here. Pieces of glass, 2-3cm in size, became lodged in the concrete wall of the balcony and can no longer be removed. We also heard how the same boat’s anchor landed even further away, first piercing its way through the ceilings of a 6-floor building.

We later visit the UAECNE social work center in the middle of the Armenian district. Sebouh Terzian, director of the neighboring CAHL nursing home for the elderly,

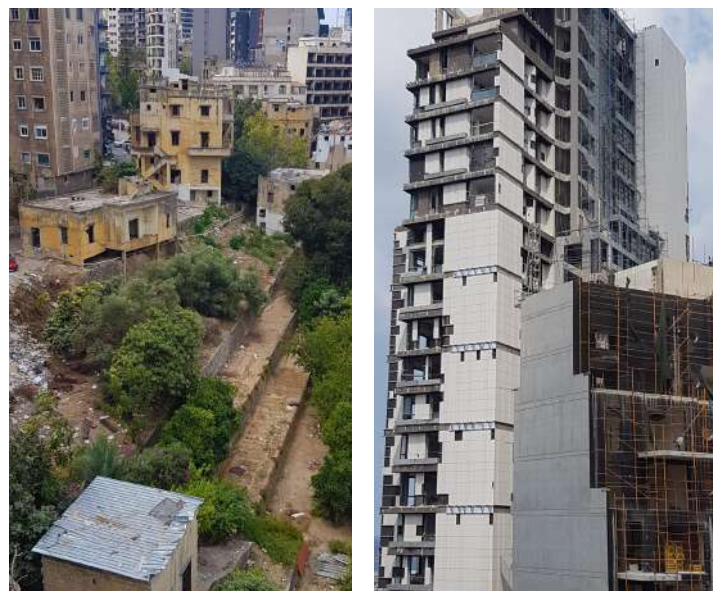
Lena Danaoghlian and her team explain how requests for aid, counseling, and support have drastically grown over the past months. Unlike state agencies, their work focuses on treating every person, every human story with dignity and respect. Listening is important and partly makes up for the bitter truth that they are not able to help everyone. It is a heavy emotional burden that they have to bear. The team has therefore begun to meet for recreational activities to find a way to relax. The people are angry. The walls are covered with graffiti calling for politicians to “all be hanged” with clear illustrations to that effect. The ministers are described as “warlords”. Paul Haidostian nods and affirms this, while adding: “We however need to note that, until last October, when the banks began to introduce strict restrictions on the withdrawal of money, hardly anyone was accusing the authorities of corruption. Until then, everyone was profiting from the system and its arrangements at all different levels. But now that the wallets of ‘normal’ people are being affected, everyone is upset and has turned against the very people they voted for to keep the system running. But this system has been around forever, all the way back to the Ottoman Empire. And the churches have also been a part of it...”

We have another stroke of luck in the evening, as we meet two exceptional people who are happy to take time for us despite all their various obligations and tasks. Linda Macktaby is the director of a boarding school for children with special needs, which was founded in 1868 by British missionaries as the first of its kind in the entire Middle East. The school is run by the NGO Lebanese Evangelical Society. Originally established as an institute for the blind, children with a wide variety of handicaps attend today, ranging from learning disabilities to autism. Macktaby is a theologian and



psychologist specialized in post-traumatic treatment. The school's 74 students are taught by around 40 teachers, with 20 students, some of them older, residing on campus. Macktaby fights to provide dignity to these individuals, who are frequently treated as if they are crazy or like small children. She also employs her own money and that of her family and close friends to pursue goals in civil society, reflective work, and political and humanitarian activities such as packing bags with food for the needy. The economic crisis has made it impossible to provide as many bags as before, with only one a month instead of one a week. Just yesterday, Macktaby distributed 70 such bags supplying essential commodities including disposable diapers, which are now otherwise prohibitively expensive. Her work is based on a (seemingly) simple notion: you need to love yourself before loving and working to help others. And not only external matters such as career success and the like, but your own innermost personality, the way you truly are – just as God loves us. This is the starting point to be able to help others and to change oneself. Her motto is that one needs to change from being a passive giver AND recipient to become an active giver AND recipient. Both aspects are equally important, as donors often remain passive in not following up on the gifts they give or the people who receive them. And recipients remain passive as it is always easier to merely receive alms than to change oneself. Her wisdom and her will, both of which appear unshakeable, stick firmly in my mind. Macktaby took part in demonstrations and saw how another spirit prevailed there, a “Yes, we can – Yes, we want it!”. People were even in good spirits the day after the explosion, helping each other clear the streets without asking each other where they came from. She believes that the demonstrations came to a halt due to fears – fear of the coronavirus and fear of the constantly growing number of rioters, most of whom had lost their work and only hoped to survive somehow. She did not want to become a pastor and rejects the model of pastoral authority over believers as practiced by the churches. “The church is a business today”, she says. The current situation involving the church schools would appear to prove her point: when the schools begin to cough, the whole church winds up in intensive care.

Fadi Daou, by contrast, is a Maronite priest but, more particularly, President of the Aydan Foundation, which is



active in political strategy consulting. He is a master at the game played among the different national, regional, and international actors in the region, and is able to explain to us, in only a few minutes, the confusing scenarios and processes that are currently possible or to be feared. The impact of the explosion is comparable with the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States: There is a before and an after.

Our two interlocutors went further than just the negative impressions and information on the future of Lebanon that we received over the past few days, adding yet another layer to the story. The exchange rate of the Lebanese pound is expected to fall even further (it was at 1500 pounds to the U.S. dollar a year ago, is now 8000 to 1, and could soon be 30,000 to 1). According to Daou, three political scenarios are possible today (although that can certainly change again by tomorrow!): The least



Fr. Fadi Daou

negative scenario is the one they are fighting for and so many people are hoping for, although it has a real likelihood of only around 5%. This involves finding a reasonable and acceptable compromise for the Shiites with a transition period of around 2 years, in which the current system is transformed into a new system that is based less (or no longer at all) on communitarian law. The second scenario would see the continuation of the economic and social collapse, which would lead to violence, conflict between the communities, and more or less controllable chaos, likely to culminate in a civil war. This scenario has a likelihood of around 60%. The third scenario would in fact be the worst: an expansion of the conflict to envelop the entire region through the intervention of foreign armed forces and a new war between Israel and Hezbollah. One variant could also see the second scenario leading to the third. An intervention on the part of the great powers is, however, viewed as unlikely; there seems to be very little willingness to find a compromise between the local actors at any price; and an awareness and admission of guilt on the part of the elites and major system profiteers is completely unrealistic. Emmanuel Macron's two visits stirred much sympathy and hope among the populace. This was, however, a “standard” sort of hope that only exists because local actors have no other satisfactory plan of their own. There is therefore also little chance of suc-

cess. Should communitarian law be loosened or eliminated, it will be the Christians who are the hardest to convince since the system has provided them with security and protection. We must also not forget that the most heavily hit district is a historical and Christian one, where rents are very low and the people generally poor. The reconstruction will lead to gentrification and hence to a demographic mixing of the population there to the detriment of those currently living there. The Christians will consequently be forced to leave this area as well...

The contrast between these gloomy scenarios and ourselves, as we relax with a glass of wine in the tastefully decorated European-style lobby of the hotel, gives us a sudden feeling of discomfiture. We look at each other in silence and hesitate for a moment to think any further ...

Serge Fornerod | September 2020



Tabea Stalder (HEKS/EPER) and Salpi Jalian (member of UAECNE project committee)



Left to right: Razmig Kaprielian (member of UAECNE project committee), Tabea Stalder (HEKS/EPER), George Abdoyan (UAECNE project coordinator)