

*Patrick Fine:* Welcome to the Deeper Look podcast. I'm Patrick Fine, CEO of FHI 360. This year, we're going to start our podcast series with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals, and today, I've got the great honor of being joined by a leader from the Middle East, Ayman Mhanna, who is the director of the Brussels-based Global Forum for Media Development. Ayman, I'm so pleased to have this opportunity to have a conversation with you.

*Ayman Mhanna:* It's great to be with you, Patrick. Thank you for having me.

*Patrick Fine:* Ayman has been the youth leader of Democratic Renewal Movement, a Lebanese secular social Liberal party, and he is now the Secretary General of that party.

For the last five years, Ayman has also been leading the Beirut-based Samir Kassir Foundation, which is a prominent press freedom organization in the Middle East.

I'd like to start by asking you about your views of press freedom. You've been engaged in promoting press freedom and freedom of expression in a region that is not always welcoming to freedom of expression. Can you tell us a little bit about the role of media in achieving development goals, and in particular, in achieving the SDGs in the MENA region?

*Ayman Mhanna:* Thank you, Patrick. It's a real pleasure for me to be with you.

Historically, the Middle East has been one of the most difficult places for journalists to work freely. Our political regimes are often autocratic. Crimes against journalists have gone unpunished. However, the issue of press freedom is no longer confined to countries that are still in [the] development process, in the Middle East or in sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, risks related to press freedom are becoming global risks. Recent political development[s] in the United States, in Europe, and the level of mistrust in the media created by the phenomenon of fake news has put journalism as a whole in danger. It's no longer viewed as respected as a trustworthy profession, which opens the door for aggressions and assaults against journalists.

This year, one of the major successes within the Sustainable Development Goals was the adoption of goal 16-10 pertaining to protection of fundamental freedoms and public access to

information. Because we truly believe that without a well-informed citizenry, there is no accountability. There is no ability to hold those who rule us to their words and therefore make sure that development serves everybody.

*Patrick Fine:* You mentioned the importance of an informed public in order to hold leaders accountable. And certainly we've seen in our country, in the last six months, the impact of fake news in shaping opinions and the inability really of established media outlets to counter. Do you see this movement of now using fake news to shape public opinion affecting political outcomes in the Middle East?

*Ayman Mhanna:* Yeah, it is a real risk in the Middle East, first of all, because we live in a region where conspiracy theory has always been popular. In addition, we live in a region where the penetration of social networks is very high, and at the same time, we live in a region where the culture of fact-checking and of verifying sources is very weak.

But journalists are also concerned about the inability to retaliate given the very weak economic situation of most independent media outlets here.

The only media outlets that have the ability to compete on a global market are directly connected to very wealthy businessmen or very strong governments in the region, and therefore, do not abide by the same quality standards that we all hope for, whereas the smaller independent media outlets are struggling for their survival.

So the issue of independence and sustainability of the media is equally important to the issue of press freedom because one cannot work without the other.

*Patrick Fine:* So this really points to a resurgence of a threat to the idea of using information to inform people so they can hold their leaders accountable.

*Ayman Mhanna:* Another element, especially in the last two years, where very often people in the development community, I would specifically say in the donor community within the United States or Europe, are trying to push journalists to engage in strategic communication and in messaging, even with the best intentions. But, by thinking that messaging and journalism are the same thing, we are doing a big disservice to the society because this is also undermining the trust that people have in the news. They are seeing journalists as

conveyor[s] of messages, rather than conveyor[s] of information that is about them that can also help their lives. This is why supporting the development of a vibrant quality media sector all over the world is actually something that can truly help democracy.

*Patrick Fine:* So the strategy that you're advocating to use information to truly inform the public sounds like a strategy that's aimed at more objective reporting of the facts.

*Ayman Mhanna:* But it needs to be complemented by two actions. One [is] the side of the private sector, especially the large social media networks. If they are truly about transparency and access of everyone to being an information gatherer, information maker and information consumer, I think we can all start to think of ways where we can demand more transparency.

For example, if a piece of news is posted on Facebook, that there should be a way, for example through a right-click on the transparency button somewhere, to understand who posted it. What account was used to post it, and when was this account created?

We cannot only blame the social networks, we cannot only blame political parties that are trying to manipulate the news, but there is also something that media networks have failed at. The large networks, even when they are producing quality-based media, and this was something that was clearly visible in the recent U.S. elections, but also when they cover the Middle East.

They keep telling us what candidate A said, what candidate B replied, what this party thinks, what the policy issue is, but we saw very little information about communities, about real people, about people who were struggling to support their family's needs.

So this idea that journalism must serve the public and must be about the public has unfortunately been lost.

*Patrick Fine:* I'm wondering what the impact of youth will be on the discussion, especially if you look at the MENA region, where you've got a huge youth bulge. Sixty percent of the population is under 30, and that population is one that is more and more connected through social media than previous generations. How do you see that affecting the strategies and the discussion over access to information?

*Ayman Mhanna:* Having such a large population of young people in the region is a huge potential, economic potential, commercial potential, and this is the main angle through which the population is being looked at.

The potential for this population to be a newsmaker and information provider is relatively new, and to be honest, it's more connected to an urban elite. In the last few months and last few couple of years, we realize[d] that there is still a disconnect, especially towards the non-educated or non-urban young population that is connected but that is consuming everything that is being posted online, rather than playing a more fundamental role in talking about its own needs, its own concerns, and producing alternative information.

There is a fundamental aspect also of the SDGs which is related to education, and it's about media literacy and digital media literacy.

People are only consumers of whatever is online, even when it's not real information, so in order for the youth in the region to play its full role, any work must be complemented by strong investment in media and digital literacy.

*Patrick Fine:* How vulnerable do you think youth are in, say, in Lebanon in particular, because that's the area you're most familiar with, but then more broadly in the MENA region?

How vulnerable do you think youth are to being manipulated by false information?

*Ayman Mhanna:* The risk is very high, because people are manipulated by false information when there is an enabling environment. So the enabling environment is economic, it's social, but it's also about feeling excluded, feeling marginalized, whether it's a real reality or a perception.

When people of their community, whatever they define their community to be is – are perceived to be sidelined, not having a political say, there is a high risk of falling victim to manipulation and propaganda. This is why we need to call for consistency in foreign policy.

For example, ISIS propaganda, there is fundamental work related to foreign policy that has never been done to undermine the perception that ISIS invests in and benefits from in order to recruit.

The same applies to those trying to spread false information about economic opportunities in Europe.

The failure to act on development, on political representation, highlights the risks related to being manipulated by information, but we'll be doing a huge, huge mistake if we think that we can correct it through communication.

Communication is only an enabler, is only a channel through which some ideas materialize, but what leads to these ideas lies within development and political representation issues.

*Patrick Fine:*

You mentioned ISIS, which makes me think in the Lebanese context about the huge influx of refugees that the country is now supporting. I think it's about equal to a third of [the] population of the country, are now Syrian refugees and refugees from other parts of the region.

What are your concerns about the long-term impact on your country and on the region? How do youth perceive that crisis, and what role do they have in helping to resolve it?

*Ayman Mhanna:*

A large majority of those refugees are also young people. Lebanon chose not to create official camps where refugees would be settled. Turkey chose to have camps. Jordan chose to have camps. In Lebanon, the situation is less organized. Refugees are literally everywhere in some unofficial camps, but also in neighborhoods, in cities and communities, and this is creating tension with local communities.

Tension because most of the refugees are not located in the wealthiest parts of Lebanon, but in the very marginalized rural areas, and in some cities that have not benefitted from the development that Beirut and its surrounding have. There is a huge perception of unfair competition coming from the refugees. What has to be done is always a combination of better communication but also better development opportunities.

Recently, the international community understood the need to support host communities, but supporting host communities does not only mean providing small project[s] in that village that would involve young people from Lebanon and young people from Syria together, because we can have amazing short-term projects,

but as long as very fundamental things related to resilience of societies are not present, it won't be enough and what --

*Patrick Fine:* What kind of things are those, Ayman?

*Ayman Mhanna:* Making sure that schools are big enough to host enough students, making sure that the sewage systems are able to deal with a higher number of people, making sure that permits that are granted to open a sandwich shop in a certain area take into account previous permits.

So things truly related to comprehensive development at the local level. Unfortunately, we've missed so many opportunities to build such a resilient social economic environment before the refugees came. So we are finding ourselves in a state of emergency when nothing was prepared in advance, and things should have been prepared in advance. If there [weren't] these horrible levels of corruption, these horrible levels of patronage by political leaders who care more about getting votes and giving jobs right before an election cycle and then forgetting about the people.

This connects us back to the whole issue of the Sustainable Development Goals, where we cannot look at them in a siloed way where, oh, let's focus on education here and let's focus on access to information there. It is only through a comprehensive approach that combines the various goals that societies are able to deal with the problems that will emerge, and more problems will emerge. More problems will emerge in our region if climate change is not tackled. Now we have refugees that are coming to our countries because of conflicts, but these conflicts are deeply linked to climate change and to having no water, and to drought.

These problems are likely to continue. Any approach that's all about fixing today's problem without looking at the deeper infrastructure issues, at the deeper societal changes, will not produce anything but temporary solutions.

*Patrick Fine:* Well I love the fact that you've mentioned, one, the need for systemic changes, and you gave some great, practical examples of that, and two, that you're talking about comprehensive approaches, uh, which we refer to as integrated development.

*Ayman Mhanna:* Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* You can't address these problems in siloes, because it doesn't really meet people where they live. It doesn't reflect the way people live their lives.

At FHI 360, we've done research around integrated development approaches to people-centered development, and we've found that there's a strong evidence base to show that when you design programs to be more comprehensive, and to address people's needs in an integrated or more comprehensive manner, that you get better results.

*Ayman Mhanna:* Absolutely, and maybe because I come from the democracy and governance background, I have a special emotional attachment specifically to goal 16, everything related to governance and rule of law.

At the end, this is where we can create sustainable political systems that can take an integrated development approach. Having weak institutions will mean that we will have to always rely on donor funding.

*Patrick Fine:* You just don't have the foundation on which to build strong, social action.

*Ayman Mhanna:* Exactly, and today is more dangerous, because there is a tendency in the West in general to revert back to inwards, and the interest in international development and international aid, we feel, is dwindling, maybe because also Europe, the United States are facing their local problems.

The idea of spending money abroad, to strengthen development, to strengthen governance abroad, is not perceived as a national priority. Populist governments that are on the rise play to the public by saying we will keep the money inside.

Actually from a global perspective, from an integrated approach perspective, this is recipe for a disaster tomorrow that might be higher than the ones we've known today.

*Patrick Fine:* And I'm hopeful that in the U.S., that there is a recognition amongst policymakers, including amongst policymakers in the administration that will be coming into power in January, that America's security is directly linked to global security, and that this goal 16 around peace and justice is fundamental to the well-being of our country, just as it is fundamental to the

*Patrick Fine, Ayman Mhanna*

well-being of other countries.

I do think you're right in your assessment that donors are, um, moving towards more transactional kinds of approaches, because they seem to be easier to do and easier to measure, and so things like institution building and the more systemic approaches, um, I fear will be less supported or less popular because they'll be perceived as being more difficult.

*Ayman Mhanna:*

This is a risk, but at the same time, it's our role in the international civil society, and as local civil society organizations, to engage in conversations, not only to engage in conversation with policymakers.

We have the ability to go to the European Parliament in Brussels, to meet with people at [the] State Department or at the Congress. But, there should be ways and organizations like ours, like yours, by being connected to each other and to the communities we serve, we need to find ways to build these bridges between people, between communities, because this is how we can have allies all over the world, instead of only focusing on the situation, also from a transactional perspective, where we go and lobby specifically only the decision-makers.

*Patrick Fine:*

I agree, and then you get people speaking with one voice, you build constituencies that appeal to political process not only in your home country, but more globally, internationally.

*Ayman Mhanna:*

That's why we all need to encourage young people to engage in politics. It's true, I get my salary from uh, NGOs; however, we need also to recognize that NGOs cannot replace political parties ultimately.

*Patrick Fine:*

Right.

*Ayman Mhanna:*

NGOs, by representing specific concerns, are on the demand side of policymaking.

But actually, the supply side needs to come from political parties and need[s] to come from government institutions. It's like a market. If the demand is very high for good policy and the supply is very weak, the price of democracy becomes higher. This is what also drove me to focus back on Lebanon, and to think of creative ways to engage in politics, outside the typical, corrupt, client-base[d] relationships, by trying to provide a political translation to the ideas we've all defended within civil society.

*Patrick Fine:* I think one of [the] huge gaps and errors in international development, and the whole theory around international development, is that it discounts and oftentimes ignores the fact that social change is a political process.

*Ayman Mhanna:* Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* And the only way for it to be sustained is if it's carried out by the communities involved through their own internal political processes, and that might be through national parties or national political processes, or it could be at a local level through the local political processes.

And the idea that you can do development parallel and aside from the actual political processes that govern the communities or the societies I think is a fundamental error in judgment, and it undermines activities and is one of the reasons that we haven't seen more long-term successes from the development investments that have been made.

*Ayman Mhanna:* And we have another responsibility to make sure that our work, uh, in order to implement the SDGs is to be honest, not only left to the statisticians in charge of compiling the indicators every year and comparing countries.

Their work is fundamental, is very important, but we need to be more involved in all these discussions to make sure that these numbers mean something. I follow very closely because of my work as I mentioned, SDG 16-10 on protection of fundamental freedoms and access to information.

We all know that if the indicator is only about the countries, for example, that pass legislation related to access to information, well, this doesn't mean much.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Ayman Mhanna:* If press freedom is only calculated according to the number of journalists killed every year, a country like Kuwait, or a country like Morocco or Jordan, might appear as extremely free, whereas we all know that the realities are different.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Ayman Mhanna:* So, if by engaging with the people who know the situation on the ground that we can refine the way we measure also the goals, we have this responsibility.

*Patrick Fine:* Ayman, thank you so much for really a tour de force in looking at the role of information, of informing the public, and particularly how it applies to the MENA region with respect to achieving the SDGs.

*Ayman Mhanna:* We are in the business of hope and [the] business of optimism, but let's say that we are very worried optimists these days, and we work accordingly.

*Patrick Fine:* I remain optimistic. I think that if you look at the broad sweep of history, that society, civilization has been moving in a more positive direction.

*Ayman Mhanna:* Yeah, and how young people have been voting. This is actually also a very promising cycle.

*Patrick Fine:* That's right, and the role of young people, and now the way technology is going to continue to shape how people — all people — interact with each other and with political processes and systems, will really be fundamental to the achievement of the SDGs and to what we see over the next 15 years in terms of how much progress we make and how quickly we make it.

*Ayman Mhanna:* It's great talking to you Patrick, and I hope that next time, it will be face to face.

*Patrick Fine:* Yes, thank you, Ayman, great talking to you. And thank you to the audience who has listened in to this. If you have comments or you want to join this conversation, you can do so. We'd love to hear from you.