

Lebanese elite network aims to solve country's problems

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BEIRUT: At an event in Ashrafieh's Liza Restaurant, 35 socially and politically connected Lebanese gathered for the first time to inaugurate Nexus Lebanon. At the center was Lynn Zovighian, who welcomed her guests with an ardent vision for paving the way to a better Lebanon and region. "Peace is actually a collective of attitudes, characteristics and resources. Peace is not an aspiration, it is an action plan," Zovighian told her guests in her welcome speech.

The Nexus Global Youth Summit was founded in 2011 as a global movement to connect young social entrepreneurs, philanthropists and activists to create an active network of changemakers. The mission of the movement is to lend members the tools they need to efficiently accomplish political and social change. It was initiated with the support of the United Nations to "catalyze new leadership and global solutions."

The event was attended by a hand-selected group of Lebanese nationals and members of the diaspora who represented a diverse array of social entrepreneurs, philanthropists and business leaders. The majority of the guests did not have prior exposure to Nexus, and were introduced for the first time Saturday evening.

Zena el Khalil, prominent artist, writer and activist, was one of the invitees. Currently, Khalil is working on a reconciliation project for Lebanon. "This is my first time at a Nexus event. I'm so excited [about its inauguration]. There are a lot of things to do, but the great part is there are also a lot of people doing things ... a lot," the artist divulged optimistically. "Because we have a dysfunctional government, private citizens have to take initiative, but we don't all know each other. So this is the perfect opportunity to connect and empower one another."

In an interview with The Daily Star, Zovighian explained the indigenous nature of the project. "I really wanted to push a very strong social innovation agenda in the Middle East. I believe in a framework that is locally curated, locally bred," she said.

"I do not believe in the concept of importing things, force-fitting, expecting them to work. We've seen this model so many times, and it fails ... if not in the short term then certainly in the long term."

Membership in Nexus is selective, and privately chosen. A particular set of prerequisites are enforced, setting Nexus apart from other changemaking movements.

"There is a sense of privilege, and I mean that in a positive way, not in an elitist way. The whole purpose of this network is that members already have everything they need to succeed," Zovighian stated.

"Nexus helps them recognize those resources and how to bring those resources together. We're asking leaders to succeed at a much faster rate than they would if they had not already come from a place with preexisting resources at their disposal."

Today, Nexus has thousands of members from 70 countries around the world. It has hosted over 20 summits globally including ones in Thailand, China and Australia.

Yet the organization's presence in the Middle East and North Africa is lacking. "Despite having members from the region, including myself, Nexus hasn't really had a presence in the Middle East and North Africa," Zovighian admitted. "So this is the first time that Nexus is coming to the Arab World."

A Lebanese national of Armenian descent, Zovighian was partly raised in Lebanon. Her personal relationship with the country, as well as her experience in finance, consulting and philanthropic work, led the young business leader and philanthropist to catalyze change in Beirut. She is currently the managing director of her family's philanthropic

venture, the Zovighian Partnership, which currently holds the Nexus trademark in the MENA region and runs the movement's operations within the Arab World and the diaspora.

Though Zovighian has pioneered the initiative, detailing its mandate, selecting membership and pledging initial funding, she has had the support of other Lebanese Nexus members, who also see the significance of beginning in Lebanon, with Beirut as its headquarters.

Adib Daba, a Lebanese national who is the founder and lead architect at theOtherDada and a longtime member of Nexus, explained in a press release, "Lebanon has had a learning curve in social impact and philanthropy, perhaps unlike any other country in the region or even the world. Nexus Lebanon can and must build itself to become a serious authority on sustainable and pertinent social change in our country."

The inauguration event took place Saturday evening, held in honor of the International Day of Peace. The event included a reception introducing Nexus, and a brief outline of its vision in Lebanon. Speeches were followed by a dinner closed to the media, allowing the chapter's new members to meet and discuss the direction of Nexus in Lebanon.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on September 26, 2016, on page 3.