

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Suchitra Vijayan on the Politics and Rhetoric of the Refugee Crisis

Carnegie New Leaders, CNL Podcast

Suchitra Vijayan, Alex Woodson

Audio

The co-founder of the Resettlement Legal Aid Project in Cairo during the Iraq War, Suchitra Vijayan discusses the refugee crisis from a legal, political, and humanitarian point of view. She details the remarkable empathy needed to work in the field and why the United States and Europe have an ethical responsibility to respond to the situation.

Transcript

ALEX WOODSON: Welcome to the Carnegie New Leaders Podcast. My name is Alex Woodson. The Carnegie New Leaders Program provides enrichment opportunities for the next generation of leaders who are interested in exploring the ethical dimensions of issues relating to business, foreign policy, and economic development.

Today Suchitra Vijayan is returning to the CNL Podcast. Suchitra is a lawyer, political theorist, writer, and photographer. [Last time](#) we talked about her [Borderlands Project](#), which is a travelogue chronicling stories on India's 9,000 miles of borders, but today we are focusing on the [refugee crisis](#).

Thanks for coming, Suchitra.

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: Thanks for having me, Alex.

ALEX WOODSON: In addition to the Borderlands Project and many other things that you've done, you are a co-founder of the [Resettlement Legal Aid Project](#) (RLAP) in Cairo. You worked there 2008-2009. I bring this up because we're talking about the refugee crisis today. How does your work at RLAP inform your thinking about the refugee crisis today and some of the issues pertaining to that in Europe and in the United States?

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: Thanks for the question, Alex. I will start by talking about why the Resettlement Legal Aid Project was created and why Cairo. That will set the scene for our other conversations that we will have.

Cairo has always been the hub for refugees because the largest UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) departments are there, and you have had a trillion Ethiopian and Sudanese refugees coming to Cairo to get refugee status and to later get resettled to a third country. On an average, in a year, Cairo alone—and again we don't have data on other cities—gets up to 8,000-10,000 refugees at the minimum, and often these numbers are refuted. They say between 10 and 12 million refugees live in the cities around Egypt.

Often what happens is that these people come into various countries and they don't have access to legal aid. Just because you cross into a country doesn't mean that you automatically become a refugee. We often use the words "refugee" and "asylum-seeker" interchangeably. By the very act of fleeing persecution and coming into a country like Egypt, all you are is an asylum-seeker. You need to

go through various organizations either UNHCR, IOM (International Organization for Migration); or if you're wanting to be resettled to a European country or the United States, you have to go through those respective embassies to get first refugee status and then to be resettled.

With the [war in Iraq](#), what you saw was a disproportionate amount of Iraqis leaving Iraq. This was one of the results of the [invasion](#) and occupation of Iraq by the U.S. forces, followed by which you had one of the worst urban [civil wars](#) in which Shias and Sunnis were slaughtering themselves. Between 2003, and even until now, you had Iraqis fleeing Iraq in huge numbers. Often, these Iraqis would first go to Syria and then Jordan and then, since Syria and Jordan were more expensive to live in, or Lebanon, they would finally make their way to Egypt, where it is much cheaper to live.

At one point in time, another thing is that the Egyptian government—this was before the [revolution](#)—almost all NGOs would apply for a license to give legal aid or provide any humanitarian services, but would never really get a license, which meant that the Egyptian government could shut it down any moment.

By this time, Professor [Barbara Harrell-Bond](#), who is a professor of refugee studies and was also the founder of the [Refugee Studies Centre](#) in Oxford and the American University in Cairo, had already started another NGO called [AMERA](#) (Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance), which was giving legal aid for other refugee groups, whether it's the Sudanese, Ethiopians, Eritreans.

We were afraid that if we started giving legal aid to Iraqi refugees as part of AMERA, then the Egyptian government would shut us down. So the best that we could do was just start RLAP as a way of just providing services for Iraqis, because this was a time when the Egyptian government actually banned—if two or three Iraqis were standing on the street in Egypt, they could be picked up and arrested. This was still the emergency provisions. So RLAP was started as a result of making sure that we were a small group, we could still provide refugee services out of a small room with broken computers, with a bunch of volunteer lawyers, and if the Egyptian government shut us down, AMERA would still be safe, which meant that providing services for one refugee group would not damage provision of services for other groups.

One of the things you increasingly find working or setting up a refugee legal aid organization is that you understand how the humanitarian organizations are completely broken. UNHCR is broken in terms of funding, it's broken in terms of qualified people, actually.

So as I said, first, just because somebody comes into a country does not mean that they become a refugee automatically. The UNHCR has to interview you and they have to listen to your entire life story, and then one person decides if you are a refugee or not.

So if you get refugee status, you get the right of residence and maybe, in some cases, the right to free government education for the kids, and most of the time no right to employment.

Once I remember seeing this one officer who worked for the UNHCR, and was this young graduate from one of those very fancy, elite Egyptian universities, who had a Bachelor's degree in business and commerce. She had never studied refugee law, she was not a lawyer, and yet this was a person who had been hired to decide if someone who has left their home had the right to come in, and she was deciding if this person deserved to be a refugee.

The second thing is that just because somebody gets the refugee status in a place like Egypt, that doesn't mean you automatically have the right to be resettled to another country. Resettlement to, say, Australia, Europe, or the United States is often preferred, simply because if refugees come to the United States, they have pretty much the same rights as, say, an American citizen, and often they get citizenship very early on, and then they actually have an opportunity to rebuild their lives.

But in a place like Egypt, it's just almost impossible. Not to mention the fact that xenophobia is almost always present.

This experience is very fascinating to me, because today some of the questions that I hear regularly about the [Syrian refugee](#) crisis is that, "Oh my god, what do we do if we have millions knocking on our doors?" Millions never knock on your doors because often the system is so flawed that a very small percentage of people, deserving people, actually, even make it through the process.

Second is that we forget that often these conflicts are not the result of domestic conflicts or civil war or violence that is domestically created, but often these are conflicts in which the West actually has a stake. Often, the West is the reason for this conflict.

There is a really great website called therefugeeproject.org. It visualizes the data from the UNHCR and other data sources and gives you the list of conflicts and where refugees have come from, from 1975 to 2012. That's where we have the data.

If you look at every year, initially you will have Sudan and Angola, and then you start seeing Iraq, and then you start seeing Kuwait, and before that you have Vietnam, and then you have Afghanistan and Iraq. All the countries—whether it's Iraq, [Afghanistan](#), [Somalia](#), [Syria](#) now, and [Congo](#)—all these conflicts are either the result of direct U.S., NATO, or Western intervention; it's a result either of that, or many of these conflicts have their origins back to [Cold War](#) proxy wars, or in a place like Congo simply because of its mineral mining rights and various countries are [fighting](#) over mining rights. Often the conflict makes it absolutely cheap for all these resources to be mined, which means that a lot of the refugee crisis actually has its beginnings in terrible policies. Often that is a dimension that we never look at.

So these are the basic, fundamental things that are never looked at. I think it is very interesting and it is very important for people to know that these are the basic things that we have to understand, and also inform ourselves, so that at the end of the day the people that we work for actually do the right thing and they make right policies, because immigrants/refugees are not passive. They are some of the most hardworking and entrepreneurial groups and they would enrich a population. No single refugee who has been granted asylum in this country has actually planned or executed a terror attack. It has never happened.

ALEX WOODSON: One part of the world that seems to be helping this refugee crisis is Scandinavia. I've read a lot of things about that. I think Sweden is probably the best example. What are they doing that the United States is not doing or other European countries aren't doing, and what can some of these larger countries with more resources learn from some of the Scandinavian countries?

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: I think Scandinavian countries are better than the United States or others. But the problem is that even Scandinavia is not doing—they used to have a much more open policy. Scandinavia's policy has always been to be open. That is beginning to change. A lot of written material exists.

Scandinavia has also always been very involved in the [Sri Lankan issue](#); they have even been moderators, negotiators. But now, increasingly, with more North African Muslim populations coming into Scandinavia, there is again a sense of resentment that is happening.

There is this really great book, [Calculated Kindness](#). It was written in 1986. It is the first book that was written in the United States about the U.S. refugee policies post-[Second World War](#) and up until the Cold War. When I was reading that book for today, I realized so much of that critique is valid today.

I think, first, that the U.S. immigration policy is absolutely broken. I don't think the policies actually

reflect what is happening on the ground. The nature of immigration has changed. The nature of the demographics of the United States has changed. I think the immigration policy is fundamentally broken and that has to change.

The fundamental problem is that we believe that all migration is by choice. It is not by choice. Forced migration means that there are people who leave their countries, their homes, not by choice but because it is forced. I don't think that has fundamentally taken root within the policymakers.

The second thing is that the lobbying within the U.S. legislative lawmaking system means that voices that have the most amount of money are the voices that really amplify. For example, the Cubans have a very strong say in U.S.-Cuban policy. Often those policies which could have made sense 30, 40 years ago no longer make sense today.

Now if you look at it, Iranians are becoming increasingly more powerful within the U.S. lobbying circuit, which means that today they are able to push for policies and agendas. I think that is another in which there are groups that have valid claims, valid interests, that still cannot push for those claims simply because the lawmaking today is not visionary. Nobody is thinking "In 20 years' time, how do we deal with it?"

What is mostly happening is that you have these short-term goals that need to be met and in the Congress or the Senate there is just so much disagreement that nobody really moves this forward.

The second thing is that the United States actually does not fill the amount of quota it is supposed to. I think every year after the war in Iraq the United States had "N" number of families to be resettled. It was, I think, between 3,000 to 4,000 families who would be resettled. These are families who are facing risk of persecution, death, because they associated with the U.S. forces, they helped the U.S. forces, they worked in the Green Zone. And yet, I think only 33 percent, on average, got filled, which means we are not even keeping the commitment to the people who actually helped us go to war and helped us sustain the military-industrial complex in these places. That's true of Afghans; it's true of Iraqis; it's true of [Vietnamese](#).

I think those are the fundamental questions that one really has to think about. These are fundamental questions. I think until the United States goes back and answers those questions, it is going to be very hard. What you are really going to get is [Trump](#) and his rhetoric, and you're going to get [Ben Carson](#) and his rhetoric, and sensible voices are going to get drowned because they just don't have the kind of amplifying effect.

ALEX WOODSON: Yes. It sounds like kind of a hopeless situation almost in the United States.

Is there anything practical, tangible, that anyone can do, that lawyers can do, in the United States, or is this just the cycle that we're in right now? President [Obama](#) wants to bring in 10,000 Syrian refugees. That seems like an extremely small number. Is there any reason that we can hope that the immigration policy of the United States will be fixed anytime soon?

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: I think there are great initiatives. I think we forget that great work gets done at the grassroots.

I'll also be very candid and say that I couldn't cut it, because when we started RLAP, in that one year between early 2008 until 2009 when I left, after running it for about a year, we had seen about 1,000 Iraqi families.

We didn't have our entire running budget. Nobody took salaries. We didn't have salaries. All the money we raised, which was I think 5,000 euros in the first round—that's all we could raise—went towards

paying local Iraqis who were also kind enough to come and interpret for us. Everything went toward just running the organization.

I think we met with and we spoke to about at least 1,000 Iraqi families, which meant that I at least listened to 700 of these stories myself. It's not one time. If you sit with a family, you sit with them at least three times. You listen to their story just to prepare—you know, you are writing their story and it has to be precise.

There are times a woman would say, "These soldiers came and something terrible happened to me and I don't want to talk about it." But I need to know, I need the detail, I need to know what horrible things happened to her.

At one point in time, I knew every family. There was a day when somebody came in. We had no electricity. It was in the middle of Egyptian summer. It was just terrible. And then this person came and I said, "I think it's file 1-something. I just don't have time."

That's when I realized that I just didn't have the empathy anymore, because after knowing every single one of your clients and everything else, one day you just don't, and they become a file number. That is despite someone—and nobody there took a salary for a year. Everybody was dedicated. And these are people who believed in change. That's when I realized that these grassroots people are exceptionally important. Without them the world would not run. And yet, real policy change was happening in DC. If DC decided that, "You know what?"—we would send in one memo to the embassy in Egypt and say, "You know what, we don't care; you have to interview so many people and make sure if they qualify you resettle them," that would have just made life easier for us.

There is only a very small fragment of the population that actually came to us for help. There was this one family I remember. He had lost his entire family. This was a Shia family. And his entire neighborhood had been cleansed. So neighborhoods that were Shia-Sunni had now either become completely Sunni or completely Shia, which means that all these families were dead. He had lived in exile for about three years now. They were running out of money.

He said, "I have to go back. I can't work in Egypt. I don't have access to anything. I'm running out of savings." He came to my office and said, "I only have three weeks' worth of money left, and if I go back I will get killed." This was a kid who had spent time delivering goods from his father's produce shop to the Green Zone in Baghdad.

After three weeks, he came back again and he said, "I'm leaving." I said, "Why don't you wait? We will talk to you." I already had 10 families waiting there. By the time I got to him, he had left. He just couldn't do it. Then, two days later when I tried calling him, his number was shut off. For all purposes, Amir has gone, with his young wife and his kid, back to Iraq, and I don't know if Amir is alive today.

That is how heartbreaking this work is. Which means that—and there are people who do that here. There are people who run refugee legal aid services here. They do an amazing job. But the problem is the people who do such great sacrifice don't have the ego or the megalomania to walk into the corridors of DC and demand that these things get done, which means that DC still has this amazing power to do so much.

There was once when I think somebody made a call to the UNHCR office in Lebanon and, all of a sudden, I think 30 families were resettled in the course of two months, which had never been heard of, which means somebody somewhere important decided that they have to do it. They picked up the call.

That's why I think I can no longer cut it. I thought I could. But the moment you lose your empathy, which a lot of the people who do that work do, because you are exhausted, there is no money in it,

there is no—I wouldn't say recognition because I don't think anybody does that for recognition. It's just frustrating.

Maybe we resettled 20 families out of the 1,000 people, but that's nothing. And those 1,000 families who didn't get resettled deserve to be there just as much as those 20 lucky families who did.

So in that sense I think DC is still powerful. It only needs people with some sense of intelligence and a little bit of ethics and a little bit of decency and morality, and I think things can be fixed. It's not unfixable. I don't think that it's so broken beyond that that we cannot fix it. But I think it is fixable, it's very much fixable.

ALEX WOODSON: One thing that I saw that was really interesting was an [article](#) in *The Guardian*. It quoted this report from the German Institute for Economic Research.

The [head](#) of the research institute says, "The long-term economic gains from the huge number of refugees arriving in Germany will far outweigh the massive cost of the crisis."

The article went on to say "the refugees would boost the German economy and 'act almost like a stimulus program' by forcing long-overdue investments in Germany's weakened infrastructure," and the big reason for this was because the refugees are under the age of 25. And as you said, these refugees and immigrants come into these countries and they want to work.

I think maybe something like that would be a great thing to keep in mind for a lot of people in Washington, the fact that if they can see Germany increasing its economic output, that's a pretty strong argument.

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: I think the United States has some of the smartest people working for it. It has some of the greatest resources. What a lot of people don't realize is that [Kissinger](#) was a refugee himself, [Madeleine Albright](#) was a refugee from Czechoslovakia. Which means that we have people who have gone through this. [Einstein](#) was a refugee, [Karl Marx](#) was a refugee, [Marlene Dietrich](#) was a refugee. [Sergey Brin](#), the co-founder of Google, his family left the Soviet Union because his father felt that the Russian Jews were being discriminated against, and today he runs one of the biggest, most successful companies, which is at the cutting edge of innovation.

But the thing is that everybody I mentioned happens to be white or considered—I mean Jews were not considered racially white a couple of years ago. But while we can throw out these examples, I think there is a race bias.

Today we are—I think somebody recently said that we should protect the Christians of the Middle East. I said, "We should just protect people." I think sometimes I look at it and I think it's bipolar. I mean where does it begin?

For that matter, even a place like Germany, that puts out this report, has become a very racially insecure place.

For instance, soon after the [Charlie Hebdo incident](#), I think [Lassana Bathily](#), who was a North African Muslim man who saved people—if you look at history, he is from Mali. He comes into France. He learns, I think, plumbing, tile work. He tries to learn French. I think he studied like five different things. He sleeps on a friend's couch. All because he just wanted the right to work. Finally, he gets a mentor who gets through the legal system and gets him a work permit. That takes him like four years.

Then, finally, there is this crisis, and here was a man who tries to save people when everybody is running away. Finally, the French say, "He's as French as French and this is what the French Republic is," and they give him citizenship. That for me is a farce, because here is someone who is young, he

has come here.

I don't know how many American kids try to learn seven different work trades so that—these are people who are very, very active. They don't have a passive agency. They are actually active. They have a real agency. They want to make something out of themselves.

And that is true of most people. We forget how human resilience is. Everybody just wants a better life. The greatest Biblical story of Moses starts with a mother being afraid that her son is going to be killed and puts him in a small basket and sends him off, and the pharaoh's daughter—that's how your greatest Biblical narrative starts.

Which means that I think if we had better politicians who were not pandering to rhetoric but genuinely just to the humanity next to you—I think these are simple things. I don't think it requires a great policy shift. It simply requires that people do the right thing.

Ethics is an important thing, that we make ethics a part of our life. Ethics transcends politics, and it always has. The best things this country has ever done are when ethics has always transcended politics. So I think those are still things that can be done.

I do think the very fact that someone like Bernie Sanders today has more young people supporting him and they believe in democratic socialism means that maybe the other politicians really need to think what the young people in this country are thinking. I think that is more towards the ideas of equality and not toward the sense of elitism that the United States thinks it should be based on.

ALEX WOODSON: Definitely.

We're talking about this just a couple of weeks after the Paris attacks. It seems like, just on a superficial level, the rhetoric has gotten a lot worse since then.

What have you seen, just coming at this from a legal point of view and from an actual point of view, since you know what it takes to get people resettled? What do you think the real long-term effects of this attack, the real first Islamic State (ISIS) attack in Europe, is going to have on this situation, once all the rhetoric dies down and everything is a little more even than it has been?

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: For me this is very eerie in how similar it is to 9/11.

ALEX WOODSON: Yes, definitely.

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: When 9/11 happened, I was much younger. I had just left high school and was about to start as an undergraduate. Everybody was talking about the sense of moral outrage.

There's a very fascinating interview where Susan Sontag goes on television and says: "Hold on a minute. We have this moment. There is this huge rupture, and we have this moment of rupture to just sit down and think and figure out. Let's stop the noise. Let's just figure out why this is happening."

When that ended, everybody said, "Oh my god, the world is going to change." I said, "No, no, maybe there is this moment of silence and maybe the world will change." Maybe we had that opportunity to really sit down and think why did this happen and maybe forge another path, a path that did not involve attack on Afghanistan, did not involve Iraq, did not involve anything else.

Now I see this and I think there was a brief silence. Increasingly, more people now I feel believe that eventually liberty should be the paramount—my freedom to be who I am is more important than living out of fear and insecurity. The state's job is to provide me security. It's not a new job. That's the fundamental reason why Hobbes and everybody wrote about the Leviathan and they wrote about the

state: "The modern state exists to protect me." It's not a new job. That's the job it's been doing for the last 200 years.

It should do that, and it should do that keeping in mind that eventually my freedom is the single most important thing the state should protect. It's not the other way around.

I think, the world is changing in a way that—as humans, we are just incapable of seeing what is going to happen five years from now. Long term is something our minds just cannot understand, we cannot articulate.

That's why every single political pundit is wrong—he will be wrong; she will be wrong—simply because if we could predict human behavior, we would be a very different race.

Soon after the attacks France announced a state of emergency. States of emergency are very, very difficult things because whatever laws that come into place during a state of emergency often stay. The [Patriot Act](#) has stayed. It continues. It means that today's surveillance is a result of that. Today's surveillance of Muslim communities by the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is a result of that. It's very hard for us to go back.

The other day somebody was telling me, "Oh my god, the police is a very racist institution." Maybe it is. But the police no longer care about policing. The police has been militarized to a point where they only care about stopping the next attack.

That's exactly what the NYPD (New York Police Department) has become. Yes, of course, it has these racist elements. But the NYPD today doesn't really care about New York City residents or citizens as policing them or policing their well-being or taking care of theft. Their biggest role today, with counterterrorism being added to NYPD, is to prevent another major attack on New York City.

That is the only reason why in [Ferguson](#) everybody was so surprised to see these militarized police. It is a result of the fact that police are no longer policing. Their job is to protect from another attack happening, which means that you have taken the role of policing out of communities.

That's the biggest problem. Once you have come very far, you cannot go back and pull it back.

Somebody wrote an article saying how [Edward Snowden](#) is responsible for the Paris attacks because if we had all the surveillance—no. Every single person who is responsible for the attacks has been under surveillance. And yet we didn't do anything with it.

There is another very interesting analysis I think that was also published in *The Guardian* that says that the reason ISIS is planning these attacks is because it is inherently becoming weak. Actually, ISIS has lost more territory in the last year. Today there is this very tacit agreement that [Assad's](#) troops will not attack ISIS and ISIS will not attack Assad. So who Assad attacks are the [Free Syrian Army](#).

Similarly, within [Iraq](#) there is a very tacit agreement that nobody is really fighting ISIS. If you really fought ISIS, ISIS would not exist.

ALEX WOODSON: Right.

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: So what ISIS requires is a polarization as a result of Western emergency laws. That is something we have to stop, because once we go that one step forward—Trump [saying](#) that we should have a database of Muslims and give them collars that mark them—it's exactly the same as what you did to the European Jews. You create a database, you identify them in a certain way, and then what are you going to do with them next?

And this is somebody who is running for president! Yet, there is no national uproar. People think it's funny. It's not funny. [Hitler](#) was not funny. He was a funny-looking man, but he was not funny.

That I think will change, because at one point in time there was a terrorism financing law which came in, which is now revoked, which said that anybody remotely connected to anybody who could have aided terror was automatically disqualified. This meant that in my community if my uncle believed in [al-Qaeda](#), and maybe went to the mosque and in the mosque general donation box put some money in, I would automatically be disqualified for refugee status or resettlement because that would be giving material aid to a terrorist organization. I didn't even have to know.

There are British kids who are now held in solitary prisons in the United States, British citizens of South Asian origin. The reason they have been picked up is because one of the kids sent a rain jacket to some guy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa who later turned out to be somebody who worked with the [Taliban](#). This kid didn't know. He's autistic. He didn't know that the raincoat he was sending for someone was for—and this kid has been in solitary confinement for the last 12 years.

We have brought him from England all the way to the United States. A judgment was given last year to say that this confinement without a court ruling was wrong and we released him.

These are rules that exist. Often these are stupid. It makes no sense. If someone had the kind of money—if you had the kind of money the [bin Ladens](#) did, the day after 9/11 the entire bin Laden family was flown out of the United States to the UAE (United Arab Emirates), I think well-known to the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). The kind of people who finance terrorism at that level have the resources to get away. Often these laws affect the most disadvantaged.

Just because I'm related to someone who might have a different opinion than me should not be the reason why I am disqualified. I have friends, I have family, who are Republicans, and I think it's a horrible thing. But for me that should not be the reason why I am judged differently, or whatever. That sounds a little harsh. But I mean it in the sense that people have the right to have different opinions.

I think those are the kinds of laws that have affected the U.S. immigration and the refugee policy. But hopefully, I think—I mean crisis is always a good time for change. Behavioral economics says that great institutional changes have happened in times of crisis. Hopefully, at this time of crisis we move forward and not backward. It's the only way forward. Otherwise we are just going to go the next 20 years in which you are going to have protracted conflicts everywhere. People are going to be fighting all over West Asia, in the Middle East, and the reality is that these wars are going to come to our cities. There's no stopping it.

The only way to fight it is to have sensible policies and not rhetorical policies. Under the [Bush administration](#) rhetorical things became policies. That's the worst thing and that's the worst way forward. So hopefully that doesn't happen.

ALEX WOODSON: Just to wrap up a little bit, we've been talking about refugees and immigration. Tied into that are questions about citizenship and identity. This relates back to your Borderlands Project. We talked about this last time. We talked about [Kashmir](#).

What's the status of the Borderlands Project? Can you just give us an update on how that's working?

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: The research part is done. I would tell anyone not to undertake the task of traveling 9,000 miles. Most of the research is done, which is good, because now I just need to sit down and finish the book as the process.

It has been a very interesting time because the Borderlands Project started just as the [Arab Spring](#)

was happening. Over the last three and a half to four years, just the way the world has transformed drastically, and how the ideas I thought or arguments I was making that I felt didn't have proof or could not be substantiated, I now actually have physical proof. Things have happened that the arguments I made three years ago now make more sense because the world has gone in that direction. So on those moments you feel maybe there is something that one could learn from this.

But the other thing is that I think fundamentally the questions we are asking are the questions of conflict, citizenship, and capitalism. I think those are the three things that bring together the Borderlands Project, with the idea of refugees or forced migration, or even migration in general—while we talk about the refugee crisis, we talk about it in a very—it's always isolated. But it's not.

It's also a question of conflict and how does conflict begin, who is responsible. Nobody wants to actually say someone is responsible. We always say, "Oh my god, this happened, it's historical." But somebody is responsible. So I think the responsibility of conflict, who creates it, who benefits from it, why do conflict entrepreneurs continue to thrive, is an important question.

Second is the question of citizenship. What does citizenship mean in a world when Britain today says that it wants to revoke citizenship of people who were born in England but, say, of South Asian or Muslim identities, if they even go and work or support ISIS, that they will be stripped of citizenship. But these are people who have no other citizenship. These are families that were born and raised in England. For all purposes they are British.

Would they do the same for others? But this question was never there when there were British citizens who openly aided and abetted, say, fascist Germany. So again, the question of, is citizenship today more tainted by race and ethnicity and where you come from. That is an incredibly important question.

Similarly, we have questions of migration. For example, we are okay with looking at these people who come from these parts of the world as labor, labor for the world economy, whether it's starting from slavery, whether it's migration, whether today it's Mexicans coming into the United States who are seen as nothing more than cheap labor. And yet, when these people start demanding rights as political citizens or political subjects, we have a problem with it.

So is there simply a hierarchy that says that one group of people has access to these citizenship rights and consumer rights while one group of these people are only subject to laws but have no rights? That is another important question.

Then, finally, global capitalism is implicated in all of this, whether it's the industrial complex, whether it's mining in Congo. There are probably four or five families or companies in this world that benefit from all of this. I think refugee crises also mean that we need to question how global capitalism is changing, how neo-liberalism today has completely changed the face of the world today.

It's not just the government that is creating surveillance. Google and Facebook are the biggest agencies that store data about you. They know more about you than anyone else. What does that mean for rights, what does that mean for rights within nation-states? But nobody is questioning Google or Facebook. We still get to question the government.

I think those are all very important questions about how the future of the state will evolve and how people's rights within that will evolve.

ALEX WOODSON: So you're tying this all together for the Borderlands book or is this just—

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: I don't know.

ALEX WOODSON: —different things that you're working on?

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: No. I think, as I said, every book has its natural conclusion. I think while it starts with the idea of the border of Afghanistan—because it is the war in Afghanistan that took me to Afghanistan in 2010. I really wanted to know why American troops were sent to Afghanistan and why is this country so important to what happened to so many of us.

There was a point in 2002-2003 when people would look at me and they would think I am Afghan. It's absolute ridiculousness. But people simply branded. I look less Afghan than anyone else. But the point is that there were racist taunts and things, and some people definitely had worse. I probably had a couple of things. But still this changed the world. That's why I initially went to Afghanistan and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border became the basis of the Borderlands Project.

Over the course of those four years the world has drastically transformed. In another few years the Middle East as we know it—Syria and Iraq will not exist. Countries created by the British as geopolitical fictions are breaking apart. I think that's where the book is going to end. It is going to end with the fact that the borders that were created 70-80 years ago have just come to their natural conclusion, which is disintegration.

"Crisis" and "critical" have the same Latin root word. So I think that's how the book would end, simply because I think that's the natural progression of the book. But let's see. Let me finish writing it. I still have another six months of just sitting and reading and writing it. So let's see how that goes.

ALEX WOODSON: That's great. It seems like you're just taking it very naturally.

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: As I said, as humans we are incapable of figuring out what's going to happen. We have conversations about Syria and Afghanistan. A year ago I thought Afghanistan was going to implode. Afghanistan hasn't imploded. It is hanging by a thread, but it's hanging by a better thread. And I always felt that Iraq would make it through, and Iraq hasn't made it through. Which means that inherently we assume and we make so many mistakes that there's no point in predicting, but there is a better point of making sense of the chaos that we are living through.

Hopefully, there is something for people to take away from it at the end of all of it.

ALEX WOODSON: I'm sure there will be.

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: Thank you.

ALEX WOODSON: Thank you very much.

Again, this was Suchitra Vijayan in a Carnegie New Leaders Podcast. My name is Alex Woodson. You can find this at carnegiecouncil.org and iTunes.

Thanks for listening.

Read More: [European Union](#), [Intervention](#), [Warfare](#), [Armed Conflict](#), [Economics](#), [Ethics](#), [Human Rights](#), [International Relations](#), [Iraq War](#), [Migration](#), [United Nations](#), [U.S. Foreign Policy](#), [World Poverty](#), [North Africa](#), [Europe](#), [Middle East](#), [North America](#), [Egypt](#), [Germany](#), [India](#), [Iraq](#), [Sweden](#), [Sudan](#), [Syria](#), [United States](#)