CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org
Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript: Q&A

Syria's Refugees: Regional Implications of the Conflict

Hrair Balian

Director, Conflict Resolution Program, The Carter Center

Dr Christopher Phillips

Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Chair: Clarissa Ward

Foreign Correspondent, *CBS News*

11 February 2014

SYRIA'S REFUGEES: REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONFLICT: Q&A

Question 1:

Mr Balian, in your presentation you mentioned something interesting: the glimmer of hope which you talked about, and saying that the regime needs to be part of the solution. Most of the opposition agrees with that, saying yes, we are ready to discuss or negotiate with the regime. But they add that they do not want to talk to the president and his immediate coterie. Do you see any kind of possibility of detaching the regime from Bashar and his immediate surroundings? I notice, for example, that the head of the Syrian opposition delegation, Ahmad Jarba, yesterday said: we'd like to talk to the vice-president, for example, let him come and talk to us. So there's no opposition in principle to the regime, it's just the figure of Bashar that represents a problem. Can you perhaps elaborate on that?

Hrair Balian:

The president is not in Geneva, in this negotiation. It's other government officials who are in Geneva talking on behalf of the regime. Moallem, Mikdad, Shaban – they're the ones in Geneva talking to the opposition. The issue is, I think, more fundamental than who is representing the regime in Geneva. The question is what kind of a transitional government would be created out of the Geneva talks. As you know, the first Geneva document, the June 2012 Geneva communiqué, has one clause in it which calls for the creation of a transitional government with full executive powers. There was a reason why this clause was left ambivalent as it was formulated, obviously because the sides discussing did not agree on a more precise formulation as to what exactly they mean by this. There is disagreement about it.

So the question is: what is this transitional government that is going to come out of the discussions? Not who represents the regime in the talks in Geneva.

Clarissa Ward:

But do you think that within the people who are representing the regime, or within the regime itself, are there elements that would be willing to participate in a transitional government that did not involve Bashar Al-Assad?

Hrair Balian:

I don't know. I have not talked with them, I don't know if they would be willing to be part of the transitional governance. I don't know, I cannot answer that question.

Christopher Phillips:

We don't know. One of the ideas behind Geneva II is that in the back corridors there could be perhaps feelers out to members of the regime, to see whether or not there would be people willing to do that. The problem of course is that no one of any real substance has been sent to Geneva. It's only ministers, there's no security chiefs, there's no one with any real power. The other question that remains a great unknown is whether or not Russia and, if invited, Iran actually have the influence over other members of the government – not Bashar – to be able to sort of say, look, we'll support a transition, can you get rid of Bashar? I don't think we know the dynamics of the regime. Indeed, I think there's a great assumption that Iran and Russia have that influence over the regime.

Clarissa Ward:

We don't know.

Christopher Phillips:

I certainly don't know. Other people might have their opinions on it.

Hrair Balian:

We may not know the dynamics but we know that discussions are taking place in the corridors, in the back rooms, between the US, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia. What is being discussed is anybody's guess. Obviously the wildest guess is that they're talking about humanitarian confidence-building measures, but hopefully they're talking about more than that. But even if they are discussing that, it's a good start.

Question 2:

I have a question for Hrair. As far as I know, if I'm not wrong, you have met with Syrian officials in Damascus, or you visited Damascus and maybe met

with [inaudible]. My question is, what kind of TGB (transitional governing body) do you think the Syrian regime would accept? At the same time, I have a question to Christopher. You mentioned the impact of the Syrian refugees on Lebanon. But don't you think the involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian war played a role in the security threat in Lebanon?

Hrair Balian:

What kind of transitional government would the regime accept, or the people I talked to in Damascus accept? I don't know. That is not a conversation I've had with them. But the conversations we've had with them is the need for some sort of a transitional arrangement to be put in place. In fact, during the early stages of the conflict, in December 2011, the Carter Center and myself personally were involved in a discussion with government representatives in Damascus, discussing how the reforms being put forward by the government at the time – if you remember, legislative changes were taking place, a constitutional commission was formed by the government (not elected but formed by the government), and they were entertaining constitutional reforms. We just point-blank told them: I don't think anybody considers these reforms on any level as serious reforms. There are ways that we can perhaps help you, help both sides in Syria, to make more fundamental reforms to the system, and perhaps we could go back and forth between the various protagonists in the conflict. Mind you, this is the very beginning of the crisis, when the armed conflict was not as intense as it became in early 2012. At some point, some of the government officials we were talking to accepted a role that the Carter Center could assume in trying to make their reform process more credible, but obviously others in the government turned that down. Nothing came out of the attempt there.

Now, what kind of reforms they would accept? I don't know. We are working on the constitutional and legislative architecture of a transitional governance system, together with Syrian judges, lawyers and academics from both sides, participating in workshops. Our report is public. It's not on our website, if you'd like, please give me your card and I'll send it to you. We're continuing these discussions with the Syrians from across the political divide.

Christopher Phillips:

Absolutely, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war has played a huge role in dragging Lebanon into the crisis. But that absolutely illustrates my point. That would have happened irrespective of the refugees. The fact is that

Hezbollah is a military asset to the Syrian regime, that it is utilized to fight in its civil war. If there were zero refugees in Lebanon that still would have been the case, to plug the holes in their own military capabilities. So it illustrates my point, the role that Hezbollah have played in politicizing Lebanon, dragging them into the crisis.

Hrair Balian:

But with or without the Hezbollah role in Syria, Lebanon was already with very deep economic difficulties as a result of the crisis. Before the Syrian civil war, the Lebanese GDP growth was 7-8 per cent per year. Since the crisis it's come down to 1-1.5 per cent growth per year. That alone tells you something about the difficulty the Lebanese economy is suffering. The unemployment rate in Lebanon stands at a little over 20 per cent (official figures) today. If the war continues, the crisis continues in Syria, through this year 2014, it is estimated that the unemployment rate will increase to 49 per cent in Lebanon. If it continues through next year, 2015, the unemployment rate is estimated to go up to 65 per cent by the end of 2015. These figures tell the story as to what is happening to Lebanon.

Question 3:

I would like to ask an immensely speculative question, maybe in many ways hypothetical, but it takes me back to a barroom conversation in Beirut in 2006, during the 2006 war. I was sitting with a colleague of mine and we were having a beer at the end of a hard day. The Israelis were bombing the southern suburbs. He said: you know, sitting here in this bar tonight makes me wonder if it felt a bit like this in Central Europe in the mid-1930s. As the years have rolled by since then, I've thought back to that conversation. Clearly, direct historical comparisons are not apt, but I think what he was getting at was this sense of something bad coming, something bad around the corner, which you could feel in 2006. Since then, if you look at the situation, the way it's deteriorated since all the hopes at the beginning of the Arab uprisings at the beginning of 2011 – the increased sharpening of sectarianism, the trouble in different countries, the way now that this disastrous war in Syria seems to be set on a course perhaps, like the Lebanese civil war, lasting a long time – a lot of fault lines coming out from that particular place through the neighbours, as we've been discussing. Do you get the same kind of sense as what I'm saying? As I say, it's an

immensely speculative, barroom-type question, but I'd be interested to know your opinions.

Hrair Balian:

It's more than a sense that we get. What Chris earlier said about complacency and the Syrian news disappearing from the front pages of the newspapers and the first few minutes of news broadcasts is very telling about what is going on out there. We are in a situation, as you described, perhaps before World War II somewhere in Eastern Europe. Okay, we're not talking about a World War II, but the explosive situation in Lebanon, the cleavages in Lebanon and in Iraq, are getting aggravated because of the sectarian aspect of the war next door spilling over into the neighbouring countries. One fact is that in Lebanon the political parties are starting to arm themselves with heavy weapons. We're not talking about side arms and Kalashnikovs – with heavy weapons again, just like in the early 1970s. I don't want to be a doomsday predictor but the situation is really dangerous in Lebanon. Lebanon, I think, is on the edge of a precipice today, as a result of the Syrian conflict and as a result of the internal tensions in the country.

Complacency will not help Lebanon. The Lebanese politicians, one of whom, Mohamad Chatah, who was killed just a month and a half ago, would say: we've learned our lessons from Lebanon's 15-year civil war and we're not going to repeat it again. But I'm afraid Lebanon is sleepwalking toward a civil war. That's what scares me. Sleepwalking. At the same time as saying, we're not going to repeat the same mistakes – but nobody is taking steps to defuse the time bomb in Lebanon.

Christopher Phillips:

I would add to that, I think that's the situation across the region. What we seem to be seeing now, the fallout from the Arab Spring or Arab uprisings or whatever we want to call it, and the Syrian civil war and the Middle East we're looking at today – it strikes me that what we've got is a succession of really unresolved conflicts, unresolved issues, dating back a very long time. The very fact that you've got incredibly weak states in the Middle East that were basically regime constructs rather than actually strong institutions, things that can crumble relatively quickly – as we've seen in Iraq – when a strongman falls. We're seeing it in Syria as well. You've then got conflicts that weren't resolved properly – Lebanon is a good example. The Taif Accord was meant to be an interim issue and to set off things. It does say in the Taif Accord that

we should eventually get rid of confessional politics and have a genuine representative, democratic system. Part II was never completed, that was never moved forward. So what you've got in Lebanon in many ways is the same sectarian politics that led to the civil war in the 1970s, just put on hold. It seems to me it's war-weariness that's holding it back rather than any sort of structural reasons against that. Likewise Iraq – everybody seemed to celebrate in 2010, the Iraq civil war is over because they've stopped fighting. Well, no, none of the problems were dealt with – they just stopped fighting. Actually what you're seeing as a consequence of the overspill from the Syrian civil war is that conflict just reigniting again, because the opportunity is there once more.

Then you project onto that quite significant regional and global shifts. The regional shift is that because of the 2003 Iraq war, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry is far more open than it has been in the past. Saudi in the past used to use proxies to guard against Iran, but Iran has the great benefit of the 2003 war, has now got its feet far more firmly into the region, and Saudi is using any opportunity it can to confront Iran. The Syrian civil war is currently the arena for doing that.

On top of that, you've got a global shift. After what was clearly massive overreach and overstretch from the United States in Iraq, you are seeing retrenchment and a moving away from the Middle East from the United States, which is the only real superpower that can impose upon the region some kind of orderly framework. There is a reluctance from the United States to do that. Some would say, why should they? But there is a reluctance to do that.

Hrair Balian:

One of the points I want to add, and we haven't touched on that issue, is the very sad fact that one of the components of the Syrian social and historical fabric – the Christian communities in Syria – are disappearing very quickly. They have been dislodged from their historical lands, where they have been going back to the 4th, 5th, even earlier centuries. Maaloula is one example. They're at risk of disappearing, just like the Christian communities in Iraq mostly have disappeared already. That's one thing to keep in mind as well.

One point to a previous comment about conditions to the negotiations in Geneva. We know from mediation and conflict resolution elsewhere, and Syria is not different, that when you put conditions before negotiations start, it's just not constructive. It's not productive. Keep the conditions but discuss

them in the talks, not as a precondition to the talks. The more conditions there are before talks start, the more difficult it becomes to convene discussions and then to find a solution.

Question 4:

How much worse does the situation have to become before the international community can think only in terms of some sort of international mandate for Syria or, if things get worse in Lebanon, for Syria and Lebanon?

Hrair Balian:

I'd like to look at that question from a different point of view. What would it take for the international community to act in unison on ending this conflict in Syria? Not how much worse it's going to get before – because it can get as bad as you want, if the international community cannot agree on a common agenda or common action, it's not going to end. It's not going to come to a consensus in the Security Council. There are the elements for a consensus among the international community. What are the red lines of the international community that the Russians and the Americans, for example, would agree? No state collapse, no jihadi takeover in Syria. Those are at least the very minimum two red lines and the two countries agree on this. Another red line was no use of chemical weapons, and that produced the chemical weapons agreement back in September, that hopefully will come to a conclusion in the next months. Yes, they are behind schedule, but at least it's moving in the right direction. Why can't we do the same thing on the political front? There are red lines that the four main supporters of this conflict – the Iranians, Saudis, Russians and Americans – can't they agree on a common approach to some of the red lines with which they agree? Okay, it's arguable perhaps that they don't all agree on the same red lines, but there are common interests.

Christopher Phillips:

I would just add that the question that needs to be asked is: under what conditions will Iran be invited to the talks? It strikes me that the reality is that actually there are large chunks of the opposition that won't be included in the talks no matter what and there are some rejectionists that are going to reject everything no matter what, so you need to get some element of the opposition that is willing to negotiate and persuade them to come together in some

remnant in the regime, and collectively try to eject the radicals on both sides. It feels like fantasy but it seems like the only way some of that is going to happen. Therefore you need to ask: how are you going to persuade the regime, which at the moment is incredibly obstinate – I don't think the regime is even slightly interested at the moment in actually negotiating, they're just using the peace process as a means to continue pursuing a military solution. So they need to be persuaded that the military solution is not the option. How do you persuade them? I personally don't believe that Russia alone is sufficiently capable of persuading the regime to do that. I think Iran must as well be doing the persuading. Therefore you have to ask: under what conditions are the West and Saudi Arabia willing to entertain Iran as a serious partner in trying to bring forward a transitional government? Unfortunately, I don't think that either the West or Saudi is willing to entertain that notion for quite some time.

Hrair Balian:

I think there are elements on both sides – the opposition and the regime – who would push for a military solution and would accept nothing short of a military solution. There are elements on both sides who are exploring ideas of political solution, political resolution to the conflict.

Question 5:

My question is for Mr Balian. You say that one should not enter negotiations with preconditions or preset ideas, but you are entering the mediation yourself with a very strong statement. First, you make equivalence between the two sides. This is a very strong statement, from my point of view. Second, you say that the regime has to stay, in the sense that we have to deal with Assad. That's not being a mediator who is impartial. You are setting, in a way, an imbalance, or let's say an appeasing one, to the regime. It's like if you tell, if you're nice enough to Assad and you say please, maybe he'll stop bombing. I wanted to clarify this.

Hrair Balian:

Let me clarify – that's an oversimplification of what I said. I never said the regime should stay. What I say is that the regime has to be part of the discussions. When you have a conflict between two sides, the sides have to be part of the discussion, period. There is no other way around it, I'm afraid.

Now, what emerges from those discussions is another issue. That's why we're talking about a transitional government, maybe power-sharing arrangements. But some sort of a change will result out of this discussion. That's what I'm trying to say. But from the outset, you cannot put conditions that so-and-so should not participate in the discussions. It just can't be done. We've been trying it for the last three years, it hasn't worked. Let's try something different. We, meaning the international community.

Clarissa Ward:

I'm afraid we have run out of time, which is very frustrating because I think we could all sit here for another few hours and continue to hammer away at this issue. I'm terribly sorry for anyone who didn't get to ask their question. Thank you so much again to both of our speakers for such a lively discourse.