

The Syrian Conflict: Four Years On

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Michael Williams

Okay, now I'm going to open it up to the floor for questions. If you could stand when I identify you and identify yourself and any institutional affiliation that you may have. Now the first gentleman that caught my attention is in the second row, there.

Staffan de Mistura

Since I'm not writing, can we have question per time, one question per time.

Michael Williams

Yes, of course. Absolutely.

Staffan de Mistura

Otherwise, I would have to write every question. And I'm sure there will be one question with three points.

Michael Williams

In Chatham House, that's a minimum.

Question 1

I'll try to make it just one. I'll try to make it just one question.

Michael Williams

Very good for you.

Question 1

Hugo Dickson, Reuters. Do you think that the US military involvement in Syria has been helpful towards pushing parties towards a peace process, or harmful?

Staffan de Mistura

It's not for me to express a judgement on that honestly. What I can say is that there's been a new factor and as ISIS and the involvement of ISIS inside Syria has been a new game changer. Horrible, but a game changer, a wake-up call. The reaction to the presence of ISIS, both in Iraq and in Syria, have been also a game changer. Now, what influence will that mean for finding a solution or inducing everyone to actually be attentive, seriously attentive and not lip service, to a solution? We will see.

Certainly, it is a reminder to Daesh, ISIS to remember that there is a physical limit to what they can try to do. I can't show the map because you are many, but if you look at the map of Aleppo, for instance, and not by accident, we also chose Aleppo, Daesh is only 20 kilometres from there, apart from the conflict between the sides.

Question 2

Thank you. Catherine Davies from Iguazu, the CEO. I just wanted to thank you first of all for your time, sharing your overview which was very, very helpful for us. Iguazu is a platform, it's a new platform for the global public and the public look at Syria and millions of people see what is happening in Syria and have the desire to do something, but of course, it's so complex and so unclear what they could possibly do to help. So they let go of that compassion and they get on with their lives.

We're trying on the platform to give them effective actions they can take to support the people of Syria. We have an extensive network in Syria and identifying effective organizations the public can support. But that's not all they can do, they can share information, they can do all kinds of different things. I just wondered if you had any particular view to share that could help us in informing the public on what's an effective action they could take. Thank you.

Staffan de Mistura

Thank you. First of all, thank you for doing that, by the way, because my biggest concern for Syria is that Syria becomes a statistical issue. That's why this book is so important to me, to be reminded about what we are talking about.

Secondly is that it gets off the radar, it had gone off the radar and it was becoming a disturbing reminder of things which went wrong. That's terrible because there is no case... look I mean I am basing myself on my experience, but it's fact, I've not seen any tragedy, humanitarian tragedy in the last 40 years as bad as this one when you combine it to all the rest. And the potential explosion or implosion and effects on the region and beyond, when on top of it you have got suddenly Daesh, ISIS, taking advantage of it you can see what a horrible mixture of bad news for the people.

So any information that we can provide on the human rights issue, for instance, so that people who relate to it, can be actually feeling outrage and concern, rather than just looking and turning the page about the statistical issue. That's why I do like and I see here with us Rim Turkmani, about the initiatives that she and her own team have been doing about local ceasefires, but not the way that they are imposed, but the way that would reduce the pain and therefore the suffering of the people.

I was with Lyse Doucet recently in Homs, trust me, I've seen so many horrible conflicts, I was Lebanon just after the end of the conflict, I was in Kabul and in Baghdad and I've never seen that type or level of destruction. That's why we need, while we are waiting for the moment of pushing a political process, to have some type of reduction.

Michael Williams

James? Wait for the mic please.

Staffan de Mistura

Good to see you James.

Question 3

James Bone, journalist and Institute member. I would ask a question that Michael asked about Iran and Hezbollah, but in relation to Daesh, you sketched a rather idealistic view of a UN official who is able to talk to everybody. Are you even allowed to talk to Daesh, do you have any possibilities through intermediaries, have you had any contact with Daesh? What is your approach, what kind of approach would you like to have with Daesh?

Staffan de Mistura

It's interesting, you're the third person today asking me about Daesh and I'm just wondering whether there is a special urgency about it, but I can address it in different ways. The first one is I've been meeting many people that my mother would not be proud of. I really did.

Michael Williams

Throughout your life.

Staffan de Mistura

Yes. No, I did really. I don't want to mention them, most of them are not there anymore, but still they were pretty difficult, but if the issue is saving lives, that's what the UN is supposed to do, together with [indiscernible] and others. Therefore from that point of view I think we are expected to meet as many as possible. From a political point of view, an official point of view, they are on a list of terrorism and therefore on a Security Council resolution, very clearly.

So the third point is there will be a moment, we saw it in Afghanistan, we saw it in Iraq where there may be the need for having informal contacts, that if nothing else, to avoid the worst case scenario for the people in the area. At the moment, I'm not talking to them and I don't have the feeling that they are in a hurry to talk to me.

Question 4

I'm Rim Turkmani from the LSE. Thank you so much for mentioning the local ceasefires, which were not really our initiatives, I mean what we do usually is support what people already started. So I would to emphasize that the most successful local ceasefires have to be the ones that came naturally or organically out of the situation because it means that the situation is mature enough to produce a process that leads into negotiations.

And in my view just having studied many of these cases, the most successful way to support any negotiations is to look for already started because the people on the ground, especially civil society, local administrative council, the people who work for the people. You said no one mentions the people, talk to them, all what they do is about the people.

Those people have looked for the keys and cues and how to create links and show to reduce the violence, they know the key, they know the links, they already started them, there are negotiations all over Syria going on. Most of it is invisible, but the results are

visible. Because of negotiations we have water in Aleppo now. Negotiation between ISIS and the regime. So I would say look for these links and build on them. Confirm what's already there, rather than inventing a solution and applying it on the people.

The other thing I would like to say is that actually we realized in several of these cases is that often the spoiler comes from the outside. People in Syria want peace. The regional countries don't, international actors are not helping and I think in the case of the special envoy, it's the mandate that is not helping. I mean when you took over Mr Brahimi, your mandate was still the same and we do strongly think that you really need a much stronger mandate that reflects the international will to have a solution that enables you to deploy a real mission on the ground to make a difference.

Michael Williams

Thank you Rim. You can say that, but you don't need to answer it.

Staffan de Mistura

But Rim just said the right thing about how to approach some concrete issues bottom-up, rather than top-down. The top-down has already been tried. We had Geneva I, Geneva II, there will be one day the possibility of calling a Geneva III or whatever we want to call it.

Meanwhile, we need to reduce the pain. If that comes from local initiatives, so Rim's comment in a way, leads also to the fact that Aleppo perhaps was not right. But for the reasons I said, there is a moment when you have to also stimulate, iconize, push in a certain direction, and therefore perhaps making it right, but the idea would be, that if they say, 'Are you only focusing on Aleppo?' No. we need to focus as well, in fact, for those stories, it's the stories, which are already progressing, but need a further push and I'm committed to that.

Question 5

I will need to withhold my affiliation for security reasons.

Michael Williams

I'm sorry, we only take speakers who are identified.

Question 5

Okay well, Mr Andy and I work for an organization that works extensively inside Syria; this is why I would like to not mention it. My colleagues have seen an increasing level of exhaustion among different groups, supporting different fighting forces. On the point of focusing only on Aleppo, I would say, now understanding, there is a mature possibility in other areas, why can't we do these phrases simultaneously keeping Aleppo as the signature effort, but at the same time, deploying resources and capacity elsewhere. Because there seems to be a point coming in terms of success and building up areas of less pain all over the country.

Staffan de Mistura

Thank you. I would reply to the gentleman in spite of his unknown identity, your point is valid and I think Rim was referring to it too. At the moment I'm not, as I said, in the position of commenting on what we are going to do and what we are doing in Aleppo because we have a special UN mission there. But there is no question that, and I've said it time and perhaps now is the time to say it again, the ideal vision for us is to have a signature for the reason we said, but also many more places. So that it doesn't appear to be, for whatever reason, selected for political or geographical, but it is basically for whatever is needed. So thank you for your point. I share it.

Question 6

Thank you. William Morris from the Next Century Foundation. There have been some Russian mumblings about an Oslo I, does that have any credibility? And if it does, are we going to see more involvement from the secular groups? Some of them are maybe not politically correct, but you have the Iraqi Baath, they call them, the Syrian Baath opposition and you have [indiscernible], UNDA, you have the PYD, the major, actually the only major Syrian Kurdish group with real troops. Furthermore are we going to, I mean if this is going to progress, are these people going to be invited or are we going to see the same figures that we've seen up until now?

Staffan de Mistura

Okay, thank you. First of all, the Norwegians are strong UN partners, they've been constructively, effectively and generously supporting not only my mission and my predecessors', but any mission in this difficult environment. So whenever we will, they told me several times, 'Whenever you need help or if you need a place to meet or whatever, we are available'. Having said that, there is not at the moment, on the radar screen an Oslo I. Okay, but we are always thinking about them as a very proactive partner.

Regarding the second part, either we believe it or we just use it as lip service. Any political process must be inclusive, and by the way, look at why Daesh has been able unfortunately to have such a space, because of exclusion, of the Sunni community in Iraq and in Syria too. That has given a feeling that there was someone who perhaps might have helped them. So the key to solving any of these issues, including the conflict in Syria and addressing the issue of Daesh in a more global way, is inclusion, means everyone.

Question 7

Thank you, Mustafa, [indiscernible] Foundation. Actually my question is that before it was a national plan with Kofi Annan, and Brahimi and now you, just moving to be local based plans like Aleppo. Don't you think that this will also intensify the conflict in Syria, considering what's happening right now in the south where also there is a huge operation and also now there is a plan for another huge operation also in Hama in the middle of Syria? Another point that there is a UN Security Resolution 2139, so why don't we focus on that? Because everyone is ignoring that and it was very difficult to get this resolution as well.

Staffan de Mistura

Okay. All right, look at what happened in Ukraine recently, how difficult, painful and complicated and fragile it has been. It looks better now, but every time that you are, in history, in a conflict, particularly if it is an ugly, ugly conflict like this one, that there is a rumour, an idea of a ceasefire. In our case over freeze, unfortunately the tendency and that's biological almost, unfortunately, tendency by sides, all sides to try to take a better position before that becomes a reality. And that is the tragic, collateral effect of a very good medicine in theory.

So I'm afraid you're right, we have seen intensification around Aleppo for instance. It might have been connected to the fact that they have been feeling that it is getting close to a freeze, we have been seeing explosions in Aleppo, it might be not because of that. But as far as I'm concerned, that is even more so a need for accelerating, getting something clearly agreed upon. Just because this is happening or could be happening. Now, regarding the other issue, there are quite a few of UN Security Council resolutions which are, at least three I have in my mind, which are a chapter seven. I mean they are strong resolutions in spite of the veto, which have been taking place.

The one about humanitarian assistance, the one, which is not chapter seven but almost, that had been in effect had taken place across borders, and then the one about terrorists and about the foreign fighters. None of them are perfectly implemented at the moment and we should be pushing for that and that's why every time we make an intervention of the Security Council, is to say one of the formulas to reducing the tragedy in Syria is at least to see those resolutions really implemented.

Question 8

Thank you. Ian Black from the Guardian. I want to be persistent, though I hope not rude; I know you didn't really want to answer the question about whether you thought that the US-led coalition against ISIS was a good thing or a bad thing. But I wonder whether in your contacts, meetings with President Assad you had formed an impression as to whether he feels encouraged by what's happened or more pressured by it. You described the arrival of ISIS as a game changer, but I wonder what you think it's done to change, if at all, Assad's game.

Staffan de Mistura

Thank you Ian and can I be equally careful in not being rude. No, I work for the UN and I've been learning for many years that you never make comments about the thinking or about the perception of the interlocutors I have. So I would not comment on that. Forgive me.

Michael Williams

Very good, well done, I was going to say Ian's always a dangerous man. Rim, did you want to come back?

Question 9

I bring a little bit of personal history here, 30 years ago, my grandmother was exactly where the front line is now in Aleppo between the two areas. She watched her husband, children and other family members be murdered in front of her eyes by the forces of Mr Rifaat al-Assad who William Morris just told us is part of the secular opposition that you should include in talking to.

Staffan de Mistura

Thank you.

Question 9

You mentioned that we should be inclusive in talking to them and I'd say not to a war criminal who was, he actually was part, what he did in the past was just a small scale of what the current regime is doing.

Staffan de Mistura

Rim, thank you for qualifying that.

Question 9

And I'm really surprised that as a UK based organization you can associate yourself with such a name.

Staffan de Mistura

Rim, thank you for qualifying that. The principle I was referring to was about the fact that any solution in Syria needs to be as inclusive as possible, but then it's up to the Syrians to be able to remember who cannot be into it. So thank you for qualifying that.

Question 10

Thank you, Rahim El-Farsi from Sky News Arabia Television. The opposition fighters in the north of the country are talking about, are watching what the world is doing with the new elements on the ground, which is Daesh and how the international community is facing it, while they are talking also, or alleging that Iran is having more feet, more boots on the ground. They are asking what the international community is doing to stop the increasing Iran presence in Syria. Thank you.

Question 11

Thank you very much for your talk. Sorry, my name is [indiscernible] from King's College here in London. I also have a bit of a cheeky question although I'll try not to be rude. Yesterday, I came across a cartoon drawn up by a Syrian cartoonist, you may have seen it. It's not a very flattering cartoon and you are in it.

Staffan de Mistura

I've seen many.

Michael Williams

It's not for the first time in his career.

Question 11

I will just describe it very briefly because I think it has an underlying serious message and I was wondering about your response to it. You are shown in this cartoon as a carpenter and...

Staffan de Mistura

I didn't see that one.

Question 11

Right I can send it to you if you like. You are shown as a carpenter and you are standing next to Bashar al-Assad and in the middle of you two is Bashar's throne and you are busily getting all sorts of tools out of a toolkit trying to fix that throne and of course, it's in direct reference to your plan of the fighting freezes. How do you respond to that perspective?

Staffan de Mistura

Well, I didn't, first of all, thank you, I didn't see it, I am collecting them, quite a few and very few are flattering but I recognize that and I understand that when you get in action and you're involved... I was told that you will be having, whatever action you do, you will be having some people disagreeing and pressure.

By the way, the UN in this type of operation, you know very well, has been and can be criticized for not doing enough, for doing too much in the wrong direction sometimes, or for not being active and so on. But one thing I really have been always worried about is being irrelevant, if the UN is irrelevant and therefore any initiative, that even appears to be imperfect or gets the wrong interpretation, but hopefully then leads to others to take other initiatives in the right direction, better than simply writing a report and complaining to the Security Council, this day is 225,000 instead of 20,000 and what can we do?

Let's hope that no one will continue fighting, that there is no political military solution and so on. So the fact of me being interpreted by doing certain things in Aleppo, reinforcing or not reinforcing the current regime, frankly I think, wait and see what will be the outcome of all this. The outcome is up to the government to respond to our appeal to do something about Aleppo, to the opposition and other places and for the people of Syria, finally to decide where the [indiscernible] and where the future of their own government should be. I have no saying on that.

Michael Williams

Now we have 10 minutes left and we'll try and get two or three more questions in. The gentleman right at the back.

Question 12

I am a Syrian journalist. Good to see you here again and [indiscernible], actually I have one comment and two questions. I'll try to be very brief.

Michael Williams

You're allowed one question.

Question 12

One comment and one question. Actually it's a correction, you mentioned that Aleppo is a diverse city, actually it's not the most diverse city in Syria, compared to Homs and other cities, it's not. And you know there are no Alawites, no Shiites, very little Christian community. That is the comment, the question is...

Staffan de Mistura

I'll take that, it's a valid one. I was referring also to the cultural aspect and the historical aspect.

Question 12

But because you mentioned the [indiscernible], the question is actually the whole plan of the freeze, we were talking about freezing all over Syria, or ceasefire all over Syria, then freeze in Aleppo, then stopping the shelling for six weeks on Aleppo. And now you are talking about two streets in Aleppo, [indiscernible] and your mission is there actually. My question is, we know Al-Nusra is dominating part of these two streets and following up on James' question, are you willing to talk to Al-Nusra? Second, yesterday there was an explosion in the air force intelligence site, do you think that explosion was directed to your mission? Thank you.

Staffan de Mistura

Well I think he deserves a comment on that frankly, definitely. First of all, I take your point regarding whether other places in Syria are even more multi-ethnic or religious than Aleppo, but Aleppo still remains iconic about this incredible cultural combination. There is a majority of one group there, but many of them have left on top of it, but anyway I take your point and I recognize it. Regarding the issue about the freeze, I think you are, and that shows why we need to do more explanation. Today I hope is a contribution, I tried to do that at BBC this morning, I may do more of it, an explanation.

What we have been appealing to all sides, starting with the government because they have the most egregious capacity of bombing and about having weaponry and I don't need to

remind you about that, you're [indiscernible] enough to see it, is a freeze of heavy weapons, let me say it again, heavy weapons. Because the small weapons, you will never be able to for a long time and we have seen it in Lebanon during the ceasefires, there were 20 per day, because one Kalashnikov can break it. Secondly, 80 per cent of them killed, were killed by the heavy weapons. So let's try to at least... plus it's easier to monitor.

Michael Williams

Much easier, exactly.

Staffan de Mistura

So the request, the appeal is about stopping for six weeks aerial bombing, artillery shelling, rockets and mortars all over Aleppo, not a street, not a district, all over Aleppo. We need to see what we mean by all over Aleppo and the mission is working at the moment, not by accident there. Now, one district, which is not small, which some people tell me is larger than the centre of Geneva, it's not peanuts.

Because Aleppo is a very big city, will be hopefully, if there is no bombing from one side or the other, during six weeks, the opportunity for the UN to increase substantially its aid into that one to show that what happens if in a pilot area, there is no aerial bombing, or bombing from all sides, in other words if there is a lull. And use that district as a showcase to everyone else and say, 'This is what can be done by the UN being allowed due to the lack of bombing all over the city'.

So please put it in the right context. I would have never proposed or accepted all this just because of a street or a simple district. Now, the idea is I never started with the idea of a freeze all over the country because I was told, by history and by experience that when you propose it, it doesn't happen.

So at the same time, I'm convinced and we will discuss it with Rim about it, that if it does work in Aleppo and if it does produce some type of momentum; the obvious second, but quick answer to that would be let's do it in two or three other places where in fact, there is a lot of need and I mentioned Huta, Daraa and Damascus. Regarding talking to Al-Nusra, we just had a conversation about it and I would refer to what I just said before.

Michael Williams

Very good, I can take one more question, the gentleman here on the right.

Question 13

I'm a Syrian management consultant and a member of the house. How inclusive is your plan to the views and interests of other regional players like the Saudis, the Qataris who exert some influence to say the least on the armed groups and are they sympathetic at all to your reference?

Staffan de Mistura

Well, when that's the strength and perhaps the weakness of proposing something as uncontested as this one. The strength is that hardly anyone I talked to formally, officially can say, 'No, we want a lot of bombing and we want everybody dead in Syria'. Okay, clear. At the same time, does this mean that de facto they're realizing that the machine needs to be then controlled, stopped and that we don't go at the same time for a military solution? Well, that is where the discussions will continue and I hope also facts on the ground will prove that that can happen.

Question 14

Thank you very much. Hamid Abdullah from Iraq, member of Chatham House. Mr de Mistura, how can you separate the Syrian issue from the whole issue in the Middle East; Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, and even Daesh. It's not easy to separate from them, especially the partners are looking to take the upper hand in it, this is first. Secondly, how... it's a point inside the question, it's about Iraq. What are your expectations about what's going to happen in Iraq because definitely it will affect Syria? Thank you very much.

Michael Williams

We always end on the easy questions for you.

Staffan de Mistura

First of all, it is all clearly interconnected. Daesh itself has produced that, there is in a certain area between Syria and Iraq no border anymore. There is this large area, more or less controlled by them. So what's happening in Iraq as a response to the Daesh presence can and should be perhaps an example of what we could handle and should be handling in Syria.

Regarding what would be the future in Iraq, I am biased you know. I've been working and living there for a long time. So I have an enormous, perhaps naïve confidence in the fact that the Iraqi people and the Iraqi authorities have learned from the past and that by excluding the Sunni community, that has produced a space for all sorts of bad news. And the only way... and Sunni, if you want the Shia, I would say it for the Shia, but in this case was the Sunni, let's be honest and therefore the only formula for the future of Iraq is having a respectful inclusion of Kurds, Sunni, Shia and Christians and all the other minorities. If that works in Iraq, you would see very little Daesh presence and you would see a country which finally could start being rich as it is from their own history.

Michael Williams

Staffan, thank you very much indeed and my apologies to the people I couldn't identify, but we are very grateful for your giving some time to us and I'm sure we all wish you the very best in your future endeavours. Thank you very much.