

# The Syrian Conflict: Four Years On

Staffan de Mistura

United Nations Special Envoy for Syria

Chair: Lord Michael Williams of Baglan

Distinguished Visiting Fellow, Chatham House

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10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710  
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## Michael Williams

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Michael Williams and I'm a distinguished visiting fellow here at Chatham House amongst other things running a project on Syria and its neighbours. I'm also formerly an official of the UN; latterly their special representative in Lebanon, before 2011 and it's a great privilege to share this meeting and to introduce a long-standing friend, Staffan de Mistura. Staffan has served the UN for many years, very many years, if I may say that Staffan, 42, I don't believe that it's more. But I think of particular interest to the audience today is the fact, of course he's the special envoy for Syria, a post he's held since July 2014, but that his previous background has been so involved with the region.

In the last decade, when we first met I think was in Baghdad when you were deputy special representative in 2005-2006. Later he was very involved as a UN special envoy in Afghanistan and then back to Iraq as head of the UN mission there and now he's charged with the UN's endeavours to address the terrible conflict that has unfolded in Syria in the last several years. Curiously the other evening, I was looking in a diary for something I'd written in 2011 and I came to an entry in the diary for the middle of March 2011 and the entry read 'meeting with Farouk al-Sharaa', the vice president. A meeting which, in fact, never took place because he had to leave Damascus to address what were then peaceful protests in the southern city of Daraa, an event which, in many ways was a prelude to what we now see in Syria.

This meeting is on the record and it's also being live streamed. I'm told, I don't know how you do these things, but you can comment and ask questions via Twitter using #CHEvents. That's enough of that from me, I turn over now to Staffan. Please.

## Staffan de Mistura

Thank you, thank you very much. First of all, Michael, thank you for inviting me here and I like the idea of being at Chatham House, but in particular also being with you. You're a colleague who had been showing a lot of competence when you were there and I know you understand our limits and what we can do and what we're trying to do.

So let me go through a little bit of some points that I would like to share with you in terms of what we've been trying to do and then of course, the most interesting part would be when you're raising questions. I would appreciate rather than simply raising questions, which are more than legitimate; I would appreciate very much if some of you have got also some ideas. We are looking for ideas, we are looking for how to actually make mission almost impossible, becoming potentially doable at the time when the time is of essence, we are getting close to five years, starting from 10 days from today.

So it's not accidental that I'm keen in advocating what we're trying to do and advocating for good ideas so that we don't meet in a year again and become six years and nothing has changed. So facts, first of all, when I joined the mission, which exactly was in July 2014, I was told that there is really nothing moving and the position of everyone is actually stuck. As we know on the Geneva II when the whole thing was blocked and that two very eminent and highly respected by me and I'm sure by all of you, are the predecessors Kofi Annan and Lakdhar Brahimi at a certain point said, 'There is no willingness, there is no

interest, there is no wish by the Security Council to be united and by the regional players who are very much involved, and by the government in finding a political solution’.

So I was convinced to do what can be done, or at least trying to when I was reminded about the figures. So I want to remind you too, because they’re being a major reason for us to try to do something, like we are trying to do in Aleppo and elsewhere. One hundred thousand last year, more 70,000 plus others, we have 220,000 people killed in Syria at the moment.

The second point is that there are – and we never forget that, we should not – more than a million wounded, 3.2 million refugees, they are all over the region, they’re being potentially destabilising neighbouring countries. Lebanon has got an enormous number proportionally to their own population. Turkey have been welcoming and generously taking care of 1.6 million and then you have Jordan plus Iraq. And on top of it, you have 40 years backwards, the whole economy of the country going backwards, you have about 4,800 local beautiful, historical, religious sites either damaged or destroyed.

Then you have about 13 million of Syrian people, proud people, who used to be proud of their own agriculture, economy, to actually depend on humanitarian external aid, and all that, leading to what? Leading to the fact that I think anyone, around in his own right of mind today, after four years, would recognize that there is no military solution and the only form should be a political solution. Fine. They all agree. When you talk to anyone of the 18 different entities, groups, countries, who have some type of stake or are involved in the Syrian environment. But then, de facto everyone seems to be going on an automatic gear and that in fact, the machine goes as if there was some hope by some, that there would be a military solution.

So when we realized that by going around the meetings and conferences and meeting everyone, I realized also that if that was the case, we are in a stalemate, except for two new factors. One is that Daesh, ISIS came on the horizon brutally all over Iraq, the northern part and in a large part of Syria and that I was believing, in September-October that there would have been a wake-up call for everyone to start thinking, while everyone is still going on automatic machine, in terms no military solution, but de facto, continuing on hoping that a military solution would take place. Then reaching the point that there would be the urgency of addressing the issue of Daesh. The only way to do so would be remembering that if there is no solution to the conflict in Syria; Daesh will continue taking advantage of it. Like a disease, which takes place in a body, which is weak, or it has got weaknesses.

In the second new element, new factor, which is still there, is the decision by the international community of some countries in the international community will get physically, militarily involved in the coalition against Daesh, flying both in Iraq, but also in Syria. Are these two new factors waking up everyone in thinking that it would be the need now to actually address what we all say, but perhaps we don’t mean yet, i.e. a political solution?

Well, not necessarily and perhaps not now, but here is where things change and I’ve been trying to think why I’ve joined the UN and why we are there and this is this book. Look at it. This is a book not of numbers, but of names. These are 100,000 people, names, but

people. Women, men, children who have died and are not there anymore. They have an address, they have a name, they have a birthday. They are not there. And this book is small, there should have been a double one.

Are we remembering this? Are we thinking that there is a time when we should be actually also remembering that I don't hear the people's issue? I hear whether I'm gaining, winning, whether that would give an advantage to one side or the other, but not about where they are tired and they are dead and there are still many who could be dead by the time that we decide that we should be moving on the political process.

If that is the case, I thought that the entry point, to moving things, to try to actually produce some type of urgency has been, and is, remembering that after four years and almost five, this is going on. Secondly, to try to find any occasion, any opportunity for reducing at least the violence. When there is a disease, that there is not a clear cure, or we don't see the cure or we don't have it, what do we do normally if you were a doctor? You try to reduce the pain; you try to prolong the life, in order to reach the point when actually the treatment, the cure is there. Can't we try at least to do that one in Syria at the moment, before it gets off the radar screen, like it was almost doing before ISIS got violently, horribly on the radar screen and drew attention again on Syria?

Second, if we do then have some initiative about reducing violence; can that not give a little bit of a dim of hope? Can that not possibly also produce an alibi for those who are thinking that the automatic machine of the conflict can continue for years, because they are far away or they are involved in a distant way? Well, that's our hope and that's anyway our needed feeling of intellectual honesty coming from the UN.

The next point is, is that enough? Obviously not. If at the beginning, hopefully because it can produce a confidence building measure, which could then produce an alibi for saying, 'Okay, perhaps now it's time for having the famous political process', again, starting again. And therefore, we came to choose one city, but in fact, our aim is to, through that city, remember many other places – Huta, Daraa, Damascus. Many places were in fact, [indiscernible] where in fact people had been suffering and still are.

And why Aleppo then? The most difficult one, the most impossible in the mission impossible. Because Aleppo is Aleppo, because Aleppo is known around the world, because Aleppo is the last large city in Syria which is still contested and divided, because it is the mosaic of all our cultural relation to a wonderful mix of cultures that exist in that city. From Islam to Christianity and onwards and because if it did fall, it would be a humanitarian catastrophe, 400,000 to 500,000 people moving towards Turkey, but it is the most difficult one. I recognize it.

Therefore, we propose the freeze, freeze, a different word than ceasefire. Why? Because the ceasefires, in Syria at least, so far, although there have been some cases which could have been more or less, less unhappy, unfortunate, but it has a connotation of what has happened in Homs, for instance and therefore we need to call it differently and simply because this would be proposed by the UN. That's what we did. We made an appeal to both sides; first of course, to the government because the government is the one who has got aerial bombing capacities, who has got the barrel bombs, the government is the one

who does have the artillery shelling, but also the other side has got rockets, mortars and the so-called canisters.

To say the UN would like to request an appeal to both sides, starting with the government, which has got the heaviest capacity of military assets to actually respond to a request for contributing with a humanitarian assistance to the people of that city and only talking at this stage about heavy bombing. Because 80 per cent of this book have been killed by heavy weaponry and many of them by the aerial artillery. Entire houses collapsing, entire buildings collapsing.

Where are we on that one? Well, at the moment, and therefore I will appreciate if you don't ask me any questions on it, we are not, I'll tell you why. I do have currently a mission in Aleppo. It's the first mission of the UN political environment going to Aleppo and it's currently working there. So I'm not in a position of going into details until they come back with an assessment.

I heard, respect, and understand that some in the military position have opposed it because they've said that they should be done in other places. That's exactly what we hope to do in fact. We hope to see Daraa, we hope to see Huta, we hope to see Damascus actually benefitting from a similar lower degree of violence, while hopefully there will be a beginning of a political process. But we need start somewhere, and we started, or we plan to start without excluding the others, in fact, the aim is to get there in Aleppo, for the reason I just mentioned. Now, if this means that we will all limit ourselves simply to a humanitarian aspect in reducing violence? No. But look at every single peace plan, proposal, road map which has been done and we don't need to reinvent the wheel.

It started with the Geneva communiqué which remains the only communiqué and the only paper which has been agreed upon by everyone; Russia, to the US, from the region onwards. But then let's also see whether the first step is what, and that was ceasefires. Following the ceasefire, then a political process, which is well elaborated and needs to be obviously adjusted to the current environment, because when the Geneva communiqué was issued then agreed upon, painfully, but it was agreed unanimously, there was no Daesh in the environment. So let's see if we can metabolize that aspect too, into it. And then have a political process starting. There are already signs of it. Signs such as the one we are seeing with the Cairo meeting, Cairo I and I hope Cairo II. Moscow I and I hope Moscow II.

There was also recently a good meeting in Paris, all aiming at having both the coalition having more of a coherent approach and there are signs that they are reaching that, or at least aiming at that and we support that, and b) that there would be a beginning of a dialogue between the opposition and the current government. If that then leads to a real opportunity for the UN to have picked up the pieces from Cairo, Moscow, plus, and have them into a common meeting which the UN only can call on because of the convening capacity and including all and everybody in it and not excluding anyone, that's why I say without any precondition, we may finally perhaps start talking about a political process.

What will be the end of this political process, that's up to the meeting but above all, up to the Syrians. Question to me, 'But Mr de Mistura, you said in Vienna that in fact, there is...' and so on. Well let me say that in that case, I did insist on the fact that I was referring and

I still refer, to the military aspect of it. Anyone who has got the capacity of reducing violence and has got planes, helicopters, and bombs and artillery, should be involved by us in reducing the violence. The rest is up to the Syrian people.

Or do we just make lip service when we say it should be a Syrian led, Syrian included formula? That's where we are at the moment, but bear in mind please that at this stage, the priority for us is to not forget the real priority. Can we continue just waiting for the moment when the whole international community, the region or the country will start saying, 'Now we can sit around the table'? Or shall we say, on behalf all the Syrian people, those who are dead, and those who are alive, 'Let's start pushing for remembering that they are the ones we should be focusing on and therefore we need to start a political process, but by reducing this unsustainable level of violence.' Thank you very much.

### Michael Williams

Thank you very much. Staffan, thank you very much. I was going to start by asking you a few questions and then we'll open it up to the floor, but from an apparently bleak picture from afar, you've given us some notes of encouragement. I wonder if you could say anything further about the discussions in Moscow, for example, in the past few weeks and whether the Russian government has kept you informed of those talks and whether you see a possibility of that process going further.

### Staffan de Mistura

We have said it publically, also to the Security Council, we've said it privately, we feel that any initiative that brings more the Syrian opposition and the Syrian opposition and the government to talk, instead of fighting and to talk about the future of Syria, is welcome. Secondly, Russian Federation has leverage, has contacts, that we don't have, or no one has except perhaps Iran, with the Syrian authorities. So their involvement is important and useful.

Now, what we need is that this process, that they have started, continues. It may not be perfect; it may have a lot of limitations, but is in our opinion, a good one. At the end of the day, both Cairo and Moscow should be, in a way, connected with what would be a UN initiative, picking up the good pieces from both or the three, Paris had a meeting too, and what we are doing as well.

### Michael Williams

Now, in the past you've been a frequent visitor to Iran, when you were an envoy, and Afghanistan and of course, in Iraq. You've been there in your current role, is that right?

### Staffan de Mistura

Yes, yes. More than once actually. Well I hope that no one has any doubts that in order to find a political solution for the current tragedy in Syria, we need to engage Iran, as a neighbour, as a regional player, as a country which has got substantial influence on the regime and at the same time as a country which is interested and involved. So there is no

doubt about the fact that I need to and continue to insist that they need to feel that they are part of the work we are doing.

### Michael Williams

Very good. Now you and I, of course, in the past both served in Lebanon and one of the most important political and military actors there is Hezbollah, who is heavily involved in Syria, to a degree almost unimaginable two or three years ago. Have you had any direct contact with Hezbollah and spoken about the issues in Syria?

### Staffan de Mistura

Yes, and first of all, thanks to our joint period in Lebanon, we did have opportunities. You see, I don't know how many of you are aware of it, but I'm sure you do, but I'd like to confirm. One of the great things of working with the UN and I've worked now for 43 years in 21 conflict environments, is that the UN is expected to meet everyone and it's expected to work possibly out some formula for saving as many lives as possible by the time the conflict is over. Apart from working for finding a solution for a conflict. So in that sense, yes.