

## **“My Mission in Syria Is Considered as “Mission almost Impossible” – But it Is Necessary.”**

*Interview with **Staffan de Mistura**, UN Special Envoy for Syria, on the situation in the country, the stance of Russia and the USA, as well as on perspectives for a political solution of the conflict.*

**Question: Mr. de Mistura, last weekend you have met the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem in Damascus. Are you disappointed that he rejected your proposal for autonomy of the Eastern sector of Aleppo?**

Yes, I am. The point is that the civilians in Eastern Aleppo cannot become the victims of the end of the conflict. So, I have made and I will make that point. The Government and the Foreign Minister did not agree to the fact that I would insist on a special exception for Aleppo. I think Aleppo cannot become like other places, like Homs, which were bombed for months and months and then people were exhausted. Those who could still leave on their legs, left at the end of a medieval siege. We are in a different moment.

**The war in Syria is in its fifth year now, with a death toll of 470,000 and almost five million Syrians seeking refuge in neighboring countries and in Europe. All strategies to end the violence have failed so far. On the contrary, the situation has worsened over the years. Why?**

There are so many reasons. You know that my mission is considered officially and unofficially a “mission almost impossible”, and this is not a surprise because of the unique complexity of this conflict. Think about how it has developed: First of all it was a revolt, a civilian revolt at the beginning which was peaceful. Then it turned into a military response and a counter-military revolt. Then it became a national insurgency and a *de facto* internal civil war. Then it got mixed up with a regional context and proxy wars: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. Plus then, it got also geopolitical, with Russia and the US involved, too, member states of the Security Council, which were – at least then – not just *not* cooperating, but have different positions. All that, combined with one additional element that no conflict had before, except now Iraq: Da’esh. So when you see all that you can see how complicated that conflict is. The opposition is not united, they are much diversified. It is very difficult to have for instance groups all together, speaking with one voice. There are 98 armed groups in Syria at the moment. So when you have to reach a ceasefire, just a simple ceasefire, you have to take all these players into account.

**You have worked in 19 conflicts in the past. Would you say the unique complexity leads to a failure of strategies to end the war?**

The complexity is unique and also responsible for the ongoing violence. When I was very young, I wanted to become a doctor. So, I do have a medical analogy sometimes to the conflict management. In medicine, a disease needs to be addressed quite early, otherwise it gets complicated, complex, and you have additional opportunistic agendas or microbes. In

this case it was Da'esh. This conflict is by far the most complicated and the most tragic we have seen. It is the largest humanitarian tragedy we have had since the Second World War.

**Russia has just recently started a military offensive in Aleppo. What has led to this escalation and do you understand Russia's stance in this conflict?**

We should be accurate on this. My information and my understanding on this is that this very recent intensification of military activities is not coming from Russia. It is actually most likely the Syrian Government. The Russian military involvement is clearly substantial, and they have even increased their own assets. But they have actually been bombing more around Aleppo, the access roads, to stop the insurgents to move in, I presume. Who has been reportedly bombing the city of Eastern Aleppo has mostly been the Syrian Air Force, with helicopters and rockets. We should never forget that West Aleppo has got 1.3 million civilian inhabitants and most of them have nothing to do with the conflict. They have also been targeted by mortar shelling – the other day on schools. In this cruel war every rule of humanitarian law has been put aside, with attacks on everybody and everything: doctors, nurses, children, hospitals, schools, and mosques.

**Staffan de Mistura**, born 1947, is the UN Special Envoy for Syria since 2014. He started working for the UN in 1971 as a World Food Programme (WFP) Project Officer in Sudan. From 1972 to 1987, de Mistura was working for the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). He served as the Deputy Chef de Cabinet of FAO from 1976 to 1985. From 1988 to 1991, de Mistura served as Director of Fund-Raising and External Relations at the United Nations Office of the Coordinator for Afghanistan. De Mistura held various positions in the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) during the 1990s, e.g. in the Balkans, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. From 2000 to 2004, he was the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General in Lebanon before he served as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Iraq (2007–2009) and Afghanistan (2010–2011).

**Why did not a single resolution strategy – safety and no-fly zones, humanitarian corridors, curbing the influx of weapons, and local ceasefires – work so far?**

You are right and you quoted almost all of them. Now we go back to the same medical analysis. I have been using each one of those strategies, which you have mentioned, during these 19 conflicts. During the civil wars related to the Cold War period in Central America or when we had the conflict in Ethiopia or in Somalia, we very often used vaccinations as an entry point; then a humanitarian corridor and we had humanitarian access; and afterwards safety zones emerged and we used that one to enlarge the possibilities.

Well, we are being watched by those who are now involved in the Syrian conflict. They are studying what we have been doing. If we come with the suggestion of medical evacuation, for example, the question is: Would that be a complicated, unjust and difficult thing to do?

The answer is: No. We have the trucks and ambulances ready and 200 people should be evacuated from Eastern Aleppo. And who has been complicating it? The Government, because they feel that there should only be a medical evacuation, no medicines, no food aid and no new doctors. But, also the opposition has made it more complicated.

Having said that, let us look at the other side of the coin. John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov have been working well together. I have been watching them, because I have been part of it. When they came to a common agreement for a ceasefire on February 26, 2016, it worked. During three months there was no fighting, even these 98 groups of fighters stopped. In my opinion we were able to actually save almost 11.000 people and 1.2 million people were reached by aid. And then spoilers came in. This war one day will be described in terms of how many times spoilers interfered with what they didn't want to happen, on both sides by the way.

**What in general do you expect from the new US administration under President Donald Trump?**

I am extremely impressed by the commitment of John Kerry and his own capacity on never giving up when he had a determined position in his mind. And I must say the same applies also to Sergey Lavrov. They did work very well together and I believe that they were themselves undermined by spoilers when they tried to have a deal together. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, it is still President Obama and John Kerry. I would not be surprised if they would be very firm on some of their attempts until the last moments. That would create their legacy of having not given up on reducing the violence in Syria and fighting Da'esh.

I have not met President-elect Trump or his own team. The foreign affairs team has not yet been established, except for the national security advisor whom I know from Iraq. So I can only judge from what I have heard from Mr. Trump publicly. He has been focusing on the issue of fighting Da'esh and terrorism. For the UN point of view there are only two terrorist organizations: Da'esh and Al-Nusra. The Syrian government often tries to say that everyone who is fighting against the government with military means is a terrorist. The USA and Russia, at least at the Security Council, agree on the UN position. So, if that is the priority that President-elect Trump has, I think it is a good priority, because we all are concerned. Even here in Germany, or anywhere in the world, if you ask about what is their concern, it is terrorism.

But here comes the point – perhaps we will be having the opportunity of elaborating with the new US administration: If you really want to defeat Da'esh, not only fight it but defeat it, you need to address a political, inclusive, comprehensive solution in Syria and in Iraq. Da'esh has been taking advantage of the feeling of non-inclusiveness, especially of some communities, the Sunni community in particular. Otherwise, what will happen if you will have victories but not a complete defeat? Da'esh will prop up like a mushroom again. This could be seen after Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his supporters were killed. They were defeated, and Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi came up. Today he and the Da'esh are much more effective than they used to be in the past. If you want to go back to the medical analogy,

fighting Da'esh would be an antibiotic. In order to actually save the body you need to make sure that it will not be affected by other diseases in the future. That means a political inclusive solution.

**That would be more imaginable with Trump?**

If the new U.S. administration wants to talk seriously with Russia about fighting Da'esh, then they should actually agree on how to defeat Da'esh. They have to agree on their cooperation: Russia, which has a lot of influence on Assad, and the Americans who have an influence on those who support the opposition. This is the way to have an inclusive political solution along UN Security Council resolution 2254.

**The UN had been accused of working too closely with the Syrian government and failing to distribute humanitarian aid. Can you understand when people say that the UN failed in Syria?**

If you want to talk about failure, it has been the international community which failed, all of us. The international community, including the Security Council, did not take sufficient quick action on what was going to become the worst humanitarian and political tragedy of this century. Let us look at what we mean by failure. Failure in not being able to reach peace? Reaching peace when you have 98 different fighters and twelve countries involved, regional and global interests play an important role and you have Da'esh and a government that does not want to yield any concession is not an obvious achievement. Four million people every months in Syria are receiving UN aid – through WFP, UNICEF, WHO. Those four million people happen to be often in government-controlled territory. Does this mean we should punish them by saying we should not go through the government to reach them? There are 1.3 million people living in besieged areas, 18 besieged areas, of which 16 are besieged by the government. Should we not negotiate and push the government to allow those trucks to get there? Should we only protest or sit in Geneva and make big declarations? Or do we want to reach these people so they would be alive by the time a political solution would be found?

That does not mean that people should not be careful on how we actually deal with the government. But let me give an example. The UN has been accused of giving money to the government by using the local telephone system. I have been talking, I do talk, to the opposition, the fighters. We have contacts with them. They are using the same phones – are they contributing financially to the Syrian government network? Our priority is talking to people, reaching them, getting there. I think, we should be less dogmatic on that and be more realistic. Our priority is to save people. If that means talking to whoever is in charge, then we are doing it.

**How do you assess the idea to circumvent the blocked Security Council by calling for an Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly? The Assembly may adopt a resolution empowering a coalition of states to intervene militarily in order to end the war, referring to the historic “United for Peace” resolution. Would that be feasible?**

It is up to the member countries and to the General Assembly. What I can say is that the key for solving a conflict like this still remains in the Security Council which has the capacity of enforcing chapter VII. Let us not ignore that after the Kerry-Lavrov-Agreement, the ISSG (International Syria Support Group), the Vienna meeting and the Munich meeting which we were all part of, we had two Security Council resolutions unanimously adopted. The US and Russia have to agree again on some type of parameter on how to fight Da'esh and try together to insist on a political inclusive solution. We should not go back to what it used to be before, or have a complete vacuum like we had in Libya or the catastrophe in Iraq when the army was dismantled. "United for Peace" is a very important signal which can be done and used and was done only once, but it is up to the countries. I believe the solution is still in the Security Council.

**Maybe the next Munich Security Conference in February 2017 could be a place where another ceasefire will be agreed?**

Well, by that time the President-elect Trump would be President, even if not for a long time. That is a very interesting moment to verify where we will be with the new U.S. administration and Russia. In my opinion, this is vitally important for the solution of the crisis in Syria. I don't think Russia has any interest in remaining engaged and bogged down into the Syrian crisis for the next years, and certainly not interested in reconstructing Syria financially. So, I see some space, and it could be that the first signals of those discussions may take place around the Munich meeting.

**Countless crimes committed in the last five years amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. Will these crimes be investigated and the perpetrators held to account? How could this happen?**

This has been always a big dilemma. The question is not "if" but "when". The issue about accountability and transitional justice is a vital principle; otherwise there would be a jungle approach in the future. But "when" to actually start doing it, is a matter that requires to be put into context. Because if you are insisting on transitional justice immediately it may deter any type of negotiation to start. So, the bottom line is: the principle needs to be there, will be there, will always be there; when it takes place, and how it takes place, that is, frankly, also up to the moment of judgment.

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