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INTERVIEW

Moving forward:
Geir O. Pedersen on
developments in Syria

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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

Co-hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and HD, the Oslo Forum, is a discreet and informal annual retreat which convenes conflict mediators, peacemakers, high-level decision-makers and key peace process actors.

The following interview was conducted in early-May 2019 as part of the briefing material for Oslo Forum participants. This interview does not represent the positions of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

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Moving forward

Geir O. Pedersen on developments in Syria



In May 2019, in preparation for the Oslo Forum, the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, discussed his views with Dr David Harland and Ms Dareen Khalifa on the conflict in Syria, the mandate of the United Nations Security Council, the return of refugees and the inclusion of women in the UN-led process.

About half of all people killed in warfare this decade have been killed in Syria. Why do you think it has been so hard to find a path to a negotiated settlement?

There are several factors that have complicated the path to a negotiated settlement. First, you have the complexities of Syrian society, and, of course, the developments in the Arab world since 2011. Second, you have to look at the regional context and the proxy war elements. Third, you have the international context: the lack of cooperation between the permanent members of the Security Council (the P5), despite some elements of agreement, and a lack of common understanding of what it would take to end the conflict. As you remember, Kofi Annan resigned because he knew he needed the full support of the P5 and he felt that the P5 members were committed to their own narratives, their own policies, instead of fully supporting the UN process. That was divisive, and it did not allow him to succeed. For Lakhdar Brahimi, this was also a key factor. I think he felt in particular that the relationship between the US and Russia was not conducive to finding a solution. Lastly, the enormity of human suffering in the conflict contributed to entrenching the conflict parties rather than helping to end the war. It contributed to radicalising the narratives and deepening the divide internally, regionally and internationally. To move forward, you need to move around these different elements.

When I took on this job as the fourth Special Envoy, I realised that the situation was very different from when Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi and Staffan de Mistura started. The war may be winding down but it is clear that the conflict is not over. The government controls a large part of the territory and ISIL is territorially defeated. But Idlib, with about 3 million

people, is controlled by groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – recognised as a terrorist entity by the Security Council; the northeast is controlled by Kurdish elements supported by the international coalition; you have 6.6 million internally displaced persons and 5.6 million refugees; and you have massively increased socio-economic challenges. So, yes, the situation for the government has improved but it remains complex.

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What does UNSCR 2254 mean to you?

The first thing I did before I started was to read carefully through the resolution and to try to see what it actually means for the day-to-day work we are doing. My line to both the Government of Syria and the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission (SNC) has been that UNSCR 2254 contains all the elements necessary to find a solution to the conflict. My first priority was to deepen the dialogue with the government and the SNC to see if it was possible to develop some commonalities that could be the starting point

to build trust and confidence. I have challenged both the government and the SNC on the importance of working on several issues in parallel to be able to move forward.

One other priority issue is the people that have been arbitrarily detained, and those abducted and missing. This is an area mentioned in UNSCR 2254, and it has been picked up within the Astana process, with Russia, Iran, Turkey and the UN, but it has not moved forward in any substantive way. It is an issue that has such a deep impact on Syrian society. Properly addressing this issue could help to heal wounds and build confidence. Of course, it is itself a humanitarian issue, so I have been appealing that we need to see bigger unilateral steps on this.

We understand that the Constitutional Committee is going to be taking priority over the next phase of the process, but what is going to be your focus?

It was agreed with the Secretary-General that we should continue to move forward with the Constitutional Committee but not only focus the discussion on the selection of members. So we have done a lot of work on issues related to the Committee's terms of reference and rules of procedure, so that if the Committee meets in Geneva, it can start working immediately. Negotiating this with the government and the SNC, we managed to narrow the gaps on the rules of procedure.

Obviously, a Constitutional Committee in itself will not change much. But if handled correctly, and if there is political will, it could be a door-opener for a broader political process.

Do you think that the Constitutional Committee will include sufficient representation from most parties, if not all of them?

I've said that the Constitutional Committee will hopefully represent the broadest possible spectrum of Syrian society, with 50 people nominated from the government, 50 people nominated from the opposition, and a third group constituted of civil society representatives. It is a compromise, and, as with all compromises, it will not be perfect. However, we hope it will be a compromise that will enable the Committee to work on finding a solution that will address the issues that are necessary and that it will be seen as legitimate by all key actors within Syrian society.

Do you feel that there is an unrealistic element to some of the mandate and architecture of the UN process that has contributed to making it harder to reach an agreement? For example,



seeing the SNC as a partner somehow equivalent to the government, not having the Kurds who control a third of the country there, refusing to acknowledge that ISIL and HTS are relevant to some extent. Is the UN ignoring the first rule of mediation, which is to have to deal with the reality as it is?

I think that there have been dramatic developments since Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi and Staffan de Mistura. There are obviously new realities. UNSCR 2254 is not a straightjacket and it is very possible to work within the context it provides, and I think the challenge is within Syrian society itself, and also with regional actors who have very clear diverging interests. Then there is the international set-up. This is not the first occasion in which the UN will have been restricted by this kind of reality. What is important is that we are aware of the limitations of our actions. Keeping that in mind, we will continue to follow very closely all of the elements that will be needed to find a just and comprehensive solution to the conflict, with our contacts within the Syrian parties, regional parties, and the international parties, in particular Russia and the United States.

How can you make use of parallel processes, such as the Astana process, but also avoid them hindering your work?

I believe that the solution to the conflict needs to be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned for it to be sustainable. At the same time, there needs to be an international set-up that is developed in such a manner that it can actually be seen as supporting the work that I am doing with the parties to bring them together, and that has some leverage over them. I believe there are shared interests on this in the international community, and international support is needed. There is also the whole question of timing and whether the conflict is ripe for mediation. I have said to the key actors that I need a different international set-up. I would like to convene a group of influential actors, including the Astana Group, the Small Group and all permanent members of the Security Council. What I need is a commitment from these actors that they are there to support the Geneva process. Let's say that we are able to call

for a meeting on the Constitutional Committee, I would like at the same time to have the group I mentioned be supportive of what I am doing. I think that is possible. This is indicative of the fact that we are in a new phase, that there is actually a certain sense that this has been going on for too long, and it should be possible to move forward. This would of course require a deeper understanding between Russia and the US on how to move forward. We are also working on that.

In the next phase of the conflict that you are describing, do you see a way to have more meaningful inclusion of women in this process?

We know that, if women are not included, it will have a serious negative impact on the negotiation and its outcome. An agreement will not be as sustainable if women are not included. Not only is it because women represent half of the population and should therefore be at the table, but also because of the different ideas and perspectives that women bring to all topics under discussion – not just so-called 'women's issues'. As you know, Staffan de Mistura and his team came up with the great idea of a Women's Advisory Board. I have already had the pleasure of meeting them a couple of times. They are a very diverse group, with different political affiliations, communities and views on

religion. It has been extremely impressive to see and actually quite encouraging that such a group is able to sit down, have serious discussions and to agree on something. For me, it also gives hope that it should be possible to move forward with trying to end the Syrian conflict.

Do you see any prospects, even in this difficult-to-mediate context, for the return of refugees or reconstruction?

I have had several rounds of discussions in Damascus on this and I think we all hope that it will be possible for refugees to return. Of course, in the end, return has to be voluntary and informed, and it will be up to the refugees to decide when they feel that they are ready to move back. When I talk to refugees,

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there are some crucial issues that they see as a hindrance. These are issues that the government is well aware of. If we were able to have a peace process where we see real progress, I believe this would have an immediate impact on how refugees see the situation and feel safe about returning. If we were able to move on missing persons, abductees and detainees for example, that could also have an impact. If you were able to move on a nationwide ceasefire, it would also have a tremendous impact on the refugees. Also, if the issue of conscription is addressed. Of course, the whole question of livelihoods and economic opportunities is important too.

If there is no progress, the danger that we may face is one of many years of a prolonged 'no war but no peace' scenario where nothing is resolved: the front lines freeze or shift depending on ceasefires or lack thereof; five international armies remain;

international confrontations continue; ISIL continues to regroup, while HTS remains in the northwest; IDPs and refugees do not go home, at least not in any critical mass; and there is the ever-present danger of major escalation, as Idlib reminds us. This scenario is a recipe for renewed instability, violence and suffering.

To be able to move forward, the Syrian people will need to see that there is a new beginning. This can start with the Constitutional Committee launched in Geneva – accompanied by real steps of confidence-building, and an internal forum to support a renewed political process, and where the international community is willing to support meaningful steps with meaningful steps.

This interview was conducted in May 2019 by Dr David Harland, HD's Executive Director, and Ms Daren Khalifa, Senior Analyst on Syria at International Crisis Group.

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