Interview

“At All Costs”

Former U.N. Syria Envoy Staffan de Mistura Recounts Unrelenting Efforts Towards Peace

By Matt Trevithick

Staffan de Mistura, an Italian-Swedish diplomat with a 40-year career in the United Nations, last served as the UN Special Envoy for Syria from 2014 to 2018. Appointed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2014, he worked tirelessly with all sides in the conflict to work towards peace, brokering ceasefires and reducing human suffering wherever possible. Executive Editor Matt Trevithick of the Yale Journal of International Affairs sat down with him shortly after President Trump’s announcement of a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria in October 2019.

Matt Trevithick (MT): Starting with your background and a bit about who you are, can you explain the process by which you came to be so involved in conflict zones and international humanitarian work?

Staffan de Mistura (SM): I wanted to be a fireman when I was a kid, and then I wanted to be a medical doctor. But then my father rightly reminded me that since I spoke five languages, why couldn’t I do something more international? I ended up in the job of being a de facto doctor of countries, seeing them as critical patients.

The critical point was when I volunteered in Cyprus when I was about 18, accompanying a World Food Programme food assessment mission. While I was working on the Green Line separating Turks and Greeks, I was exposed to something that changed my life: a child shot by a sniper. I was profoundly outraged because I could not understand why a kid who was playing football on the Green Line had to become a tool of showing who is stronger, when men did not have the courage to fight each other. That’s what should have

A young boy at the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, where nearly 80,000 Syrian refugees are living. Photo by the United Nations/Sahem Rababah.
been done instead of sniping at children. That level of outrage kept me going and is why I have been accepting jobs mainly in war zones – 21 missions in war zones over 47 years of service – always fueled by that level of outrage, by that one event.

**MT:** When you accepted the mission as the UN Special Envoy to Syria, what were you and the UN thinking about regarding the conflict, what were you preparing for, and what was in the works?

**SM:** I accepted the position in 2014. At the time, the UN was in a moment of great doubt, because the two preceding UN Special Envoys to Syria, Secretary General Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, had given up. They decided to resign, the first after 8 months and the second after 14 months. The general conclusion was: Syria is “mission impossible” because there was very little space for a mediator, as the sides did not want to recognize each other. So, why did I accept? Many advised me not to take the position.

The UN at that time was in a vacuum. Brahimi left after the second major UN conference in Geneva failed. When the Secretary General called me in the middle of the night, I said well, it’s been 43 years of this, and I think it’s time for me to deliver someone else to this. But he sent me the statistics, and I saw how many people were being killed and slaughtered in this phase, which had not yet reached the 450,000 of today. I couldn’t sleep that night.

He sent me the statistics, and I saw how many people were being killed and slaughtered in this phase, which had not yet reached the 450,000 of today. I couldn’t sleep that night. The UN at that time was in a vacuum. Brahimi left after the second major UN conference in Geneva failed. When the Secretary General called me in the middle of the night, I said well, it’s been 43 years of this, and I think it’s time for me to deliver someone else to this. But he sent me the statistics, and I saw how many people were being killed and slaughtered in this phase, which had not yet reached the 450,000 of today. I couldn’t sleep that night. Remembering that outrage of before, I called him back the same night and said that I would accept the position, but I wanted to apply a different approach.

**MT:** What was that approach?

**SM:** From the lessons of my predecessors, you cannot and should not call a peace conference. Even if you think you have some changes. Why? Because spoilers will spoil it. By doing so, you put all your eggs in that basket, and you put your identity and perhaps your ego into it as well. Then you have no other option then to say “I have to resign.” I devised a new technique I called geometry invariable. You never really call a conference. You invite sides for talks. You invite them for consultations. If they don’t agree in coming, you say, no problem, I’ll meet the others, and you can come when you’re ready, the door is always open. You don’t provide – as much as I could over four years – the occasion for any spoiler to play the final card.

There were no angels in this conflict, as you know well. In the beginning it appeared that one could make a distinction, but more and more it became difficult. Although some side did commit horrors, like the Syrian Government bombing the hell out of cities.

**MT:** There is a lot of gray area in war zones, but bombing hospitals seems like a very clear line.

**SM:** Bombing them twice!

**MT:** How did you respond to that? Was there anything you could do?

**SM:** There are many ways we tried to respond, but the moral response was: this is horrible. This was a complete breach of what used to be the rules of the game. Of course, when you listen to one side, they will say, “in that hospital they were keeping weapons. Behind it, they were hiding with rockets.” Whatever the reason. But you don’t hit the hospital, and you don’t hit it a second time to target the first responders. Sadly, in this period of history, that taboo seems to have been broken. Why? Why on earth? Many actors felt remorse about this, but they told me the strategy – which is brutal – is very effective. The civilians, in particular those who have children, would like to think that, in spite of all the difficulties in a war zone, there is still a chance, in case my son is hurt, to bring him somewhere. But if that hope is gone, and my wife is pregnant, I better move. The whole idea was – by bombing the hospitals – you make civilians move, which means that the only ones left are the fighters. Therefore, you can bomb the hell out of it without being criticized for killing civilians. But in order to do so, you are actually killing civilians, so it is a horrible tactic.
We tried at a certain point by saying to the Syrian government and their allies – we will tell you where the hospitals are. We will put them on the map so there is no confusion. Because every time they tell us “there was a mistake” or “there was a misunderstanding,” we actually put a UN flag on the map locations of the hospitals, so they had a comprehensive list. Then, if they hit them, they cannot claim a mistake. Believe it or not, even that was not enough. Eventually even those hospitals said “we don’t want to be marked.”

MT: What does it take to work together with the Syrian Government on a day-to-day basis in Damascus? What does that relationship look like?

SM: During my time, I had no option but to be extremely critical and try to interfere wherever I could to what I saw as a brutal, medieval siege. Eastern Ghouta, Darayya, Aleppo, and so on. With barrel bombs being dropped all over the country, all over dense civil areas. Inaccurate and brutal.

My approach was to meet them and tell them, “I can’t imagine that you believe that even if you win the war, you think you can go back to normality by doing this.” Why can’t we find some formula by which you avoid bombing a whole city because in one area you have terrorists. You don’t destroy all of Manhattan because one street is full of problems. Their answer was always defiant. But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be defiant too.

First, the reason I left was deeply personal. It was clear the war – and I insist on that word, the war – had been almost won territorially by Bashar al-Assad thanks to the support he got from Russia and Iran. No doubt about it. You need to not only win the territory, but you need to win the peace as well. That’s the real challenge.

My successor didn’t see – with his eyes – the bombing. So, like a doctor, he only picked up the patient from where it was. That’s what he’s trying to do. But I still had some doubts at the end of my tenure. Perhaps I could do the last push at the end of the war.
A group of analysts who had been studying war all over the world contacted me. They said, Mr. de Mistura, you may be having some doubts about your departure. But you should know that these days, hardly any war ends with a conference. There is no Treaty of Versailles or Dayton Accords. You have a meeting, acknowledging the deflection, defusal of the fighting; you find local arrangement, and you try to package it in some type of form that looks sustainable. And hopefully stays sustainable.

What you should know, they told me, is that during your four years, every month coming up with new ideas, a new convoy, meetings that were not productive but kept people talking – during that time the fighting was getting more and more embarrassing. By getting the Americans and the Russians to discuss a ceasefire, and by making public appeals and initiatives related to all this, we calculated that instead of 450,000 people killed, it would have been very close to 700,000. So that is what you and the UN should be feeling, even though you did not stop the war.

Remember, I wanted to be a doctor. Doctors can’t cure all diseases. Cancer, Alzheimer’s – you just can’t. Would you then resign, because you can’t cure one of these? Or would you rather, as most doctors in fact do, keep the patient alive, keep up the atmosphere of hope, and continue reducing pain? Tomorrow you may have a new entry point or new treatment.

This could be the moment we are seeing in Northern Syria today. When the United States made decisions to draw down, others are ending up winning the war and inheriting responsibility for the country. How do they make it more inclusive? How do they manage it responsibly? How do they avoid a new al-Qaeda? Maybe that will lead to some concessions, which may lead to a sustainable peace.

MT: What were the greatest UN successes in Syria?

SM: I would never call it a success because it’s like a punching bag. There were moments of breakthrough, but when I look back, there were one or two magic moments. First, when Russia and the United States came with a common approach, the other players did adjust. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met and came up with this Vienna Process, which I and the UN sponsored and supported. 27 countries, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, sat at the same table in order to at least have some humanitarian aid convoys or some ceasefires.

Second, there was a magic moment when Kerry and Lavrov actually, with strong support from my side, came up with a very good agreement. In August 2017, the Russians agreed to guarantee grounding the Syrian Air Force. No helicopters. No airplanes. No Barrel Bombs. Most of the war for the government – most of the killing and destruction – had been fought from the air. Not very many ground battles. The United States were committing themselves to disconnect al-Nusra, which is a franchise of al-Qaeda by the way, from the rest of the Syrian opposition forces. That made sense. Only the United States and Russia would be the ones flying, with both aiming at al-Nusra, which should be the common enemy. Then the UN would be able to reach everywhere with convoys. If that would have been applied properly, we would have cut short the war.

But, spoilers jumped in and ruined the chance, and we went back into the Battle of Aleppo. There were moments of light and hope, but then they quickly collapsed.

MT: Is there one moment that you remember particularly vividly from Damascus in your time there that will always be with you?

SM: I went through many moments where I asked, “What on earth are we doing here? Are we just witnessing a horror, or are we able to make a difference?”

Outside of Damascus, I met a woman with eight children, living in a tent. Her husband had been killed in a bombing, but he had nothing to do with the government or the opposition. He was one of the classic, typical victims.
in Syria. When I came up with a ceasefire during the Vienna Process period, she told me, “I believe in the future of my country. And I will take this tent with my children, and bring them back to the place where my home has been destroyed by a bomb, because I will put a tent there. Because I want to believe in the future of my country.” This helped me a lot.

I saw this a lot in the Balkans, too. When you see people, particularly women, believing they can make a difference by insisting and hoping for their own country, we cannot abandon them.

MT: Is it important to keep the discussion going at all costs? Critics of the UN would suggest that talks for talks’ sake can’t be that important.

SM: Yes. At all costs. Because you may have new opportunities and new entry points to make change. That doesn’t mean you just talk. You have to make convoys, run vaccination campaigns, and still force those convoys through. There would have been many more victims if we had not done that. Talks are not important just for talks’ sake. Taken alone, talks could be a cover for continuing the war, which was never my intention.

MT: Do you think the fundamentals of the UN are sound? Or do we need to re-think some assumptions about how organizations like the UN respond to crises like Syria? Was Syria particularly bad and therefore an outlier, or are discussions on major policy shifts necessary?

SM: After 47 years in the UN, service with 9 UN agencies, and working with 4 Secretary Generals I think I can give a good perspective on this. There is a need of substantial re-thinking. There is a need for making sure that the UN response is much more preventive. The problem is that in order to be preventive, you need active cooperation between the Security Council, Secretary General, UN Secretariat, and member countries. It needs to be much more cohesive, thorough, and much more effective, no doubt. This requires a Security Council that at least doesn’t stop this work through a veto. This has been a major tragedy, the use of vetoes when there is a humanitarian or human rights issue.

MT: What do you think the UN or the world has learned from the Syria Crisis?

SM: History will judge based on the outcome. The final outcome is what matters. But I think they learned that when there is a crisis, it needs to be addressed at the earliest stages.

There were three circles in the Syrian Conflict. The first circle was internal protests, mostly peaceful. The second circle became the regional involvement. On the one side, Saudi Arabia and its allies, and on the other, Iran. And then the third circle: Russia and the United States, playing a big power game in that environment. If you diagnose the disease early, you can make a major impact.

Secondly, there is an aspect which we have to recognize. The major reason for this type of crisis is a huge competition. Not only in Syria, but in Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq between the Sunni and the Shia. Between Saudi Arabia and Iran. And we are being pulled into it. In Europe, we went through a long war between Catholics and Protestants. More recently, in the Balkans, between Orthodox Christians and the Muslims. We learned about the Peace of Westphalia. We need a Westphalia for the Middle East.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Trevithick, a graduate student at Yale University, is a native of Boston, MA with a decade of experience on the ground in the Middle East and Central Asia in higher education and international development. He is a graduate of Boston University and recipient of their Distinguished Young Alumni Award. A member of the Dartmouth Conference—the longest continuous bilateral discussion between citizens of Russia and the United States to avoid nuclear war and strengthen ties—he also has a certificate in Persian language from Tehran University and has published widely in the American media on foreign policy issues.