

Brussels Forum

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The Fate of Syria Three Years On

Craig Kennedy: Okay. Okay, let's grab a seat everybody. Welcome back. Welcome back to Brussels Forum. That was a terrific first day. If you had a chance to look at a television this morning, a lot of you show up in broadcasts from just about any country yesterday. There was an awful lot of coverage, especially of the Sec-Gen discussion.

I wanted to give you a little few statistics on the Connect App. So on the first day alone, we've already had 279 business cards exchanged, much better to use the app than to hand out these old paper things, 304 items saved to the briefcase and just to add a little edge here, there's going to be a competition to see who will have the most business cards exchanged today and the winner will receive a prize after today's trade session.

So now it's my pleasure to introduce the next session after these very good breakfast sessions this morning, I hope you all found one or another to go to. It's now my pleasure to introduce GMF Senior Transatlantic fellow Hassan Mneimneh who will lead the next discussion. Hassan?

Hassan Mneimneh: Thank you. Thanks. So the question is, was it worth it? Three years ago, the world was

captivated by a series of uprisings, awakening they called it, an Arab Spring. Everywhere from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya to Syria to Yemen to Bahrain, everyone was very hopeful, very optimistic. But looking at the scorecard three years later, it's all abysmal.

In the case of Syria, we have a series of peaceful protests that turned into a civil war, then a proxy international war and then some would like to see it as a burial ground for today's terrorists. Others are afraid it might be a breeding ground for tomorrow's terrorists.

In the case of Libya, well, Libya was able to get rid of its despot, but not the despot's weapons. They are there, poisoning not just the swords of Libya, but points beyond.

In the case of Egypt, the democrats fought the autocrats and caused a regime change. Then it seems the theocrats stole the thunder of the democrats so the democrats called on the autocrats to get rid of the theocrats. Well, will the autocrats give back to the democrats what they are owed? Still to be seen. In the case of Yemen, well, we're heading towards what seems to be a federal system that recognizes the fact that Yemen is severely fragmented. It's not really a question of federalism for local rule as much a federalism that recognizes a segmentation that is incurable.

In the case of Bahrain, it seems to be business as usual for the Fifth Fleet, except what are those protests that seem to be continuing about rule of law and other things? Well, so was it worth it? Only in Tunisia it seems that there's a glimmer of hope about something positive, maybe through a national dialogue of some sort. So the question may be, was it avoidable? What is shared by all these countries is, in fact, an unstated--what was shared, an unstated social contract through which the political class demanded and received acquiescence from its public in exchange for a promise, a promise for services, such as education, health, employment, retirement. False promises because they were not tenable. Maybe tenable for some time in some places, but positively not tenable for everyone.

So was it avoidable? It seems that because of the false promise, because it was not tenable, sooner or later this was bound to happen. No one could tell when it would happen. No one could tell that a lonely street vendor in provincial Tunisia would ignite what he has ignited. Well, when we act to the region, the fact that we have the perennial Israeli-Palestinian question, we have an Iran that would like to be a regional hegemony and we have al-Qaida springing from the region, we realize that it's a very difficult region. However, the community of values, that is the Transatlantic Alliance, could not ignore it, not because of values,

but also not because of interests. It cannot be ignored.

Accordingly, what the German Marshall Fund has been doing for quite a while, through our (inaudible) and strategy meetings, we have had, we have always invited public intellectuals and officials from the region to discuss with their counterparts from Europe and the United States and beyond on the best ways to deal with the issues of the region.

In our Ankara office, we have always focused on the important role of Turkey, not as a possible model, but really as a major actor and a major influence on a region that proves to be of crucial importance to our soul. In our recently opened Tunis office, we really have an innovative program to support civil society in a region in which maybe the counterbalance to the state will be a citizen empowered through civil society. We have partnerships from Morocco to Lebanon, and through all of it all, I would say we have an ambitious program, an ambitious program that is worth it, even if it is ultimately a modest step forward.

Probably in all of these regions, all of these countries with all the problems that we face in all of them, probably the most acute and the most tragic is Syria, and this is indeed the subject of the next panel. Thank you very much.

Xenia Dormandy: Good morning. I'm Xenia Dormandy. I'm from Chatham House. But I think we're going to start today with a video. Do we have a video?

Narrator: Three years on, the war in Syria has decimated the country's population, forced millions out of their homes, devastated the infrastructure, caused major strain on regional resources, metastasized into multiple proxy battles, but remains, as of yet, without any possible end in sight. Policymakers in the United States face a tough choice, intervene and receive blame for the inevitable damage or refrain and be criticized for inaction? The spillover, both through the outflux of refugees and the influx of militants, is an established threat to Syria's neighborhood. What steps could be taken to mitigate the catastrophe while waiting for a resolution? What are the prospects of radicalism and counter-radicalization in light of the Syria conflict? Can the interest and concerns of Russia and China be recognized in the common international roadmap for the resolution of the crisis? What role is there for the United States, Europe and NATO in the Syria crisis moving forward?

Xenia Dormandy: Good morning, everybody. Thank you for coming out on a Saturday morning. We have a great session in front of us with a great panel. But let me start by perhaps just giving a little bit of facts on the grounds that we're all on the same page.

In security towns, Assad's forces are on the rise and there is internal fighting amongst the opposition. Politically, the second round of the Geneva talks that took place in February did not appear to go anywhere. There is apparently going to be a third round, but we do not have a date. And the two sides can't even agree upon what should be the topic for discussion. The civilian opposition is also fractured and we'll hear a little bit about that. And, of course, the Assad regime called for an election in April of this year.

On the humanitarian side, according to the U.N., an estimated 9.3 million people inside the country require assistance. Of those, approximately three million remain trapped in areas which are hard to access due to the fighting. There are 6.5 million internally displaced, another 2.3 million fled to neighboring countries, and we will also talk a little bit about that.

And then, finally, the international. Russia, Iran and Hezbollah continue to support the government, the West and the Saudis principally continue to support the opposition, different opposition groups. There's a Saudi-Iranian proxy war playing out. And just so that we can have at least one piece of good news, it was announced this past week that 45 percent of the Syrian chemical weapons have actually now left the country.

They're a little bit behind in the shipments, but nevertheless.

With that intro, I want to, first of all, go to a quick poll to see whether it really is as black in everybody else's mind as the facts would suggest. Can we put the poll up on the--everybody get out your electronic gadgets, your pads, your phones. Can we get the poll on the screen possibly? You can get me on the screen. The poll would be far more interesting. Thank you very much. What is the most likely scenario for Syria in the next two to three years? You have six options. You're going to have 15 seconds to decide. The first one, opposition wins, regime falls and the country goes into transition, option two, Geneva II creates a transitional government, three, a stalemate, four is that the regime prevails, five is that Syria is divided into a stable south and volatile north, and six, contagious instability in the region. So, please, will you press the button now? You have 15 seconds. I feel like I should be on a talk show with the ticker timing down. That's a little scary. If I need another occupation, I know where to go. Vanna White or something. It's--OK. Everybody else is as pessimistic as I am. That's rather sad to see.

As I said, we have an absolutely fantastic panel in front of us. Let me briefly introduce them because you actually have them in your books. On the far right is--

well, the far left as you look at it--we have Kristalina Georgieva, the commissioner for international cooperation, humanitarian aid and crisis response at the European Commission. Next to her, Alia Mansour, member of the Syrian National Coalition. Next to Alia, we have Soli Ozel from Kadir Has University. And, of course, on the far right, Dr. Anne-Marie Slaughter, who's the president and CEO of New America Foundation.

Let me, if I may, start with you, Alia. The opposition is fractured. You represent the Syrian National Coalition. What actions are you doing to bring together the civilians, the Syrian civilians, to really represent all Syrians? What are you doing and what are the obstacles you're facing at the moment?

Alia Mansour: Actually, the opposition is united. We have the same goal. We have different point of views, which is normal, but we have the same goal, to build a democratic free Syria. We have the same--one enemy, which is Bashar al-Assad and his regime. But the international community is looking for a reason not to support us, which he did not find it as a reason not to support our colleagues, our fellow in Yemen or in Libya or in Egypt. No, we are united. We have the same goal, as I said. We need to get rid of Assad. And we have to keep in mind that after 40 years of dictatorship, we lack the political experience.

Xenia Dormandy: But how did you, 'cause I know that there was a--it was enormously controversial when you decided to start negotiations in Geneva II with the Assad regime. How are you dealing with the fact that many people thought that was the wrong decision?

Alia Mansour: Even people who thought it was a wrong decision supported the delegation group in Geneva. Only the regime was not believing in the political solution. All the groups of the opposition, when they--if they went to Geneva or not, they were supporting the delegation in Geneva.

Xenia Dormandy: Well, that's good to hear. One of the more positive than we hear in our papers and we'll come back to that idea, I'm sure. Kristalina Georgieva, there is huge problems with getting humanitarian aid to the region. As we know, there was a U.N. Security Council resolution that said both sides need to provide access and yet it isn't happening. How are you dealing with that? How are you actually putting more pressure, if that's what's needed, to actually get that kind of access?

Kristalina Georgieva: Today is exactly one month since the adoption of this resolution and it requires reporting of what has been achieved. And there will be a report and it would be long, but it would say in one sentence, we are bailing the ocean with a slightly bigger spoon. What is happening is the needs are so

great, the fighting still so intense and the economy so destroyed that even the progress that we are now seeing is not enough to change course in humanitarian terms. Let me just make three points.

First, why access is so critical. It is absolutely paramount because unless we succeed to do more in Syria, the suffering there would be enormous, but also the flow of refugees to neighboring countries will continue and may even intensify. And that means destabilizing the region even further with unpredictable, horrible consequences. Secondly, if we don't get access inside Syria, with the prediction that there is not yet anything like peace inside, I just don't know how these people that are there are going to cope and how the country would then rebuild when this madness is finally over.

So what we do and what we can do more of. What we do is we have been relentless to get more humanitarian organizations capable to operate inside Syria, both in government-controlled and opposition-controlled areas. Today, the whole of the U.N. can do it and we have 16 international organizations operating inside Syria. We are relentless on making sure that convoys go into government-controlled areas and opposition-controlled areas. We, from the EU, have put 2.6 billion euros, by far the largest donor in humanitarian aid, and we defend big chunk of that--actually, 50 percent from my

budget--to go inside Syria, despite all of the difficulties. What we now have as a result of the resolution--this is our bigger spoon--we finally do cross border operations, finally. And two days ago, 79 trucks crossed from Turkey into Syria.

What we can do more of? I think this is the most important question. First, I'm turning to everybody in this room. We have to keep our eyes on Syria. As international community, we are pathetic in our ability to deal with more than one crisis at one time. We are eight-year-olds playing soccer. We go with the ball. We don't cover the whole terrain. We have to stay focused on Syria. This is the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our times. This is guilt on each of--every one of us on our consciousness. We have to be focused on Syria. Secondly, we have to be creative in what more we can do. For example, I look here at Cathy Ashton. In Europe, we have done something quite remarkable. We have taken seriously humanitarian exceptions from our sanctions so we can get more help inside Syria. But we have to work on making these exceptions. Deliver agricultural inputs so people can farm, medicines, more food.

And third--and this third is actually the most critical. We have to pursue peace in Syria. This is the only way to put an end to this madness. And we in the humanitarian community believe there is no military

solution. We believe in it, but we are the people without guns. The people with guns don't yet believe it so we have to make them believe there is no other way but through a peace negotiations and, you know, push for that.

Xenia Dormandy: I am so tempted right now to go to you, Anne-Marie, on the guns, but I want to just squeeze in a quick question there to Soli Ozel. I mean, you saw the numbers up there that this is going to spread. We heard it, the numbers of refugees crossing the border is getting higher, they're climbing higher and higher and higher. What does this mean to the region? What should the countries around the region-- what can they do? What are they doing? What are the challenges that they're facing?

Soli Ozel: Well, just two days ago, we've heard that a car that was coming from the Province of Hatay on the border with Syria, crossing the Province of Medan was stopped by the police and the gendarme and when the guys were asked for their identifications, they started shooting with Kalashnikovs and threw a couple of grenades. Then they were finally captured, one dead, one escaped and I think three of them were apprehended. They seemed to be Arabs. They hold Albanian and Kosovo passports. Our transparent government obviously doesn't give us any information about what had gone on. But that is, if you will, the

first known sign, of course, of what many of us have feared in terms of contagion.

We know from newspaper reports that there are recruitment offices in Turkey for jihadist elements and that several provinces nearby have been affected by it. Fathers are going to Syria to search their sons.

I'm sure similar things are happening in all the surrounding regions already. The contamination from Syria to Iraq, which doesn't need much contamination to begin with, has given us a re-flourishing of the civil war there and the imbalance of political forces.

So in all cases, Syria is poisoning all the surrounding areas and disturbing the demographic-- putting demographic pressures, resource pressures on everyone. Turkey, which is probably the more comfortable country around, has been able to provide about 220,000 Syrians, Syrian refugees, with decent housing and stuff. But, of course, this is way beyond our means now and the Turkish government is eating its pride and basically asking for help from the humanitarian help community.

Unfortunately, I wish I could be as sanguine as you that, one, arms would stop because these are wars that are not going to stop until we have a sense of what the political sentiment is going to look like. And the thing is, this is not a political settlement that can be imposed, number one.

Number two, we don't have an international community. The word international community is just not a truth. I mean, it's just not a reality. Russians, who are a party to this conflict, obviously do not care about the carnage. The others talk a lot about the carnage and how heart-bleeding that is and obviously, they don't--or if they do care, they really cannot do much.

So this is a political and geopolitical struggle and until and unless we find ways of detangling certain things and then bringing all the interests together to actually strike a deal, nothing is going to happen. And the way the world looks today to me, nothing is going to happen.

And finally, on the Syrian opposition as well. I mean, I have met many people from the opposition, but I read also the recently-resigned American Ambassador, Robert Ford's notes on what happened in Geneva, and quite frankly, I don't see a united front. I don't see a regime that feels that it is under any pressure whatsoever to cut a deal. And everybody's so preoccupied with everything else, domestically and internationally, that unfortunately--and I really mean this because we feel the heat of it, Syria is going to continue to poison the entire region.

Xenia Dormandy: So we have a bit of a political position. We have the humanitarian, we have the local,

regional, Anne-Marie Slaughter. Let me ask you about the border perspectives. I mean, America has come under a lot of pressure to do more than it's doing. So has Europe. Why is so little being done? I mean, you've suggested there's a much more active position, a much more use of military force position by the U.S. Why is it not being done, what's the pressure against it, why are we seeing this essentially kind of status quo, this static position?

Anne-Marie Slaughter: The United States is stuck in a constant loop of we can't figure out what to do. And then six months later, it looks like we could've done something six months ago, but now it's too hard to do something. And that's been going on for two full years, even beyond.

From my point of view, Syria is not only the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time, it is the greatest strategic crisis of our time. And I say that fully aware of what else is going on in the world. It is the greatest strategic crisis of our time. And the way to see this is precisely to start with the humanitarian. This is the Rwanda of our time. Rwanda happened 20 years ago. We are still dealing with war in the great lakes region of Africa as a result of the moral crisis, of the genocide in Rwanda, but that genocide led to huge outflows of refugees and fighters who then have destabilized the region. And that's what

we're looking at in Syria. It is the moral equivalent, when we finally find out how many people have died and a country destroyed.

But equally, all those refugees, the number of refugees in Jordan, is the equivalent of all of Canada being in the United States. Just think of that. All of Canada being in the United States. That's in Jordan alone. With respect to Turkey, with respect to Iraq, with respect to the fact we are now creating a homeland for violent extremists, jihadi terrorists, that is not in the caves of Afghanistan, it is very close to Europe and the United States.

So from my point of view, this is--Obama is going to leave a legacy where he shut--he ended the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and he created all the dangers that were once in Afghanistan and originally in Iraq right smack in a completely destabilized Middle East.

The reason we're not acting was initially political. He didn't want to act during the election campaign. Since then, you had the people who were pushing for action no longer there, Petraeus and Secretary Clinton. Secretary Kerry wants there to be much more action. But the overall view is the United States people don't want to support it so we're not going to do it.

Xenia Dormandy: I'm going to come to the room because I really want to get everybody's involvement so

catch my eye, I will add you to a list. But I want to push you just a little bit before I--while people, if they needed to think of any questions, did what should, in your view--you've written quite a lot about this. What should America be doing?

Anne-Marie Slaughter: In my view, the United States should, under our own authorization and in violation of international law, but still, I would bomb Syria's air force on the ground to stop it, at the very least, from using barrel bombs against its people. If you look at what they're actually doing with those planes, they are killing people in the worst possible way. That would be a start, from a humanitarian point of view.

But more importantly, strategically, it would signal that we are prepared to use force. The only time we've done anything in Syria was where we threatened the use of chemical weapons, which actually, the Assad regime believed and suddenly, you've got a willingness to bargain.

I think unless we're prepared to use force, we will not get the political shift that we need. Because I agree, there's no permanent military solution to change the dynamics, to make the regime actually willing to bargain, to then cobble together something that could actually stick.

Xenia Dormandy: Thank--

Soli Ozel: What do you do with an opposition that is not under a single command?

Xenia Dormandy: You put--

Soli Ozel: Under those circumsta--I mean, I would like to see the Assad government go tomorrow. But what do you do with the situation on the ground, whereby if the good guys are not really militarily potent or powerful and they can be easily overwhelmed by forces that are actually not very nice?

Anne-Marie Slaughter: Understood. In the first place, there are--I do think there are more forces, more moderate forces that are being strengthened right now. But what you do is you put together a transitional government that does include--it includes people from everywhere in Syria, including members of the current regime. Probably not Assad himself, but others. And then you back that up with some transitional forces and with an international agreement.

Xenia Dormandy: I think--

Alia Mansour: And the international community did not really support the moderate Free Syrian Army.

Soli Ozel: I agree.

Alia Mansour: As soon as they will take that decision to support it, it will be the strongest. And we have been fighting al-Qaida for a while now. We have been fighting al-Qaida and the regime.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: But also, the use of force would also make a difference in terms of al-Qaida. When they thought we were coming in on the chemical weapons, al-Qaida headed for the hills. They were convinced that our drones were coming for them. So I actually think that there are ways you could make a difference on that score, as well.

Xenia Dormandy: Let me go to the audience. I'm going to--this gentleman first, and as we bring a mic over, please introduce yourself to the audience. Please make your comments, your questions--happy to have a comment, but make it short and sweet and have a question mark at the end, if you can.

Also, please address two specific members. We're going to try and get as much commentary around the room as possible. I am going to spread it out. If you want to email your questions, I will try and remember to look at this. But, sir.

Pervez Hoodbhoy: Pervez Hoodbhoy from Pakistan. For your information, I'd like to tell you that the Saudi government announced--gave, rather, \$1.5 billion to Pakistan. Immediately thereafter, our government switched its policy on Syria and will now be aiding the Syrian fighters militarily, which means helping the Sunni extremists in Pakistan, those who are indebted to Saudi Arabia.

As you know, Saudi Arabia funds thousands of madras, as in Pakistan, and was the force behind the Taliban there. If you want to ask what is it that the West should do, what is it that the United States should do, I'd say stop Saudi Arabia from spreading extremism throughout the Muslim world and in aiding this Shia genocide, which is now happening not just in Iraq, but ever more in Pakistan, as well.

So your first duty is to stop Saudi Arabia and break your alliance with it.

Xenia Dormandy: Thank you. I'm not sure that there was a question there so I'm actually--unless anybody--fascinating, but I'm not sure there was a question there. This--

Anne-Marie Slaughter: Can I say one sentence in response? We could--to do that, we'd have to act, ourselves. If we're not prepared to act ourselves, we're going to rely on proxies.

Xenia Dormandy: I'm going to keep going around to this lady here. And by the way, even if I know you, I am not going to mention your name. So do not think me rude, but go ahead.

Unidentified woman: (Inaudible)

Xenia Dormandy: Keep going. I think it will probably come on.

Unidentified woman: I'm a (inaudible) journalist from France. And I'd like, you know, to tell that it's

a little difficult for the media, for the small media, to cover the Syria, to cover humanitarian aspects like the refugees because now, there's so much going on, you know, everybody wants to take Ukraine. But what about Syria? And we keep pushing it, but don't forget Syria.

And I know, for instance, I've got colleagues, photographers, and they went at their own expense to cover the refugees--Syria. They can't sell their story. So please, Commissioner Georgieva and other members of this panel, give us some positive stories coming from the refugee camps or coming from the neighboring country. The solidarity in Lebanon, in all the neighboring countries, give us some positive stories so that we can attract our editors to continue publish...

Xenia Dormandy: Okay.

Unidentified woman: ...about Syria.

Xenia Dormandy: Great, thank you very much.

Commissioner.

Kristalina Georgieva: I could not agree more with you that we have to all mobilize to make sure that we don't lose sight of Syria. I was in Iraq last week with a group of journalists exactly for this reason, to show one positive story. And it is how the Kurdish region of Iraq hosts 230,000 refugees, takes care of them in a way that is heartwarming. And the stories went out, these stories went out.

But the question for us is how to keep attention, political attention, focused on multiple crises. How to do that? Because what I worry is that we slip into whatever is the biggest crisis at the moment. Right now, obviously Ukraine is drawing a very deep shadow over all places that suffer, not only Syria. Central African Republic, South Sudan. How to do that? And I would very respectfully disagree that we should give up on the international community. You, yourself, use the phrase, we should untangle. Who is we? Who is we? This is us. It is a matter of recognizing our responsibilities and having the maturity to act on them, the politicians, the media, the ordinary citizens. That is what this forum, I believe, is doing, raising our responsibility for us to bear.

Soli Ozel: Yeah, but lease, I didn't--I said the international community, as you put it, currently does not exist. Iran and Russia is not part of your or my international community. Iran and Russia are supporting a regime. They don't mind that it is an extraordinarily bloody regime using every means available to destroy civilian or fighting forces inside Syria, and obviously we don't speak the same language with them. The other community, the rest of those who care about the humanitarian debris that is left behind, is not acting with full force perhaps and leave you and your organization basically alive--I mean, alone.

Alia Mansour: There is...

Kristalina Georgieva: Well, we can take that for a long time.

Alia Mansour: For this...

Kristalina Georgieva: For a child that survives and goes to school because of people here through their contributions making it possible, there is international community. I shut up, but it's...

Alia Mansour: Yes, a sad story about the refugees. In Lebanon, for example, you have around 90,000 people who are living under siege of Hezbollah, the Shi'ite extremist group, and as so we are not able to give them any help because of Hezbollah's fighting inside Syria and in Lebanon. He is not allowing us to deliver any humanitarian aid to these 90,000 people.

Xenia Dormandy: Too many sad stories. This lady here and then I have this gentleman here.

Bente Scheller: Hello. My name is Bente Scheller. I'm the Director at the Middle East Office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Beirut. I have a question basically to Alia and to Soli Ozel because you were mentioning the divisions within the opposition, which, from the beginning, have been mentioned as one reason not to really fully support the Syrian Revolution. I mean, especially we're looking at Geneva, too. It was so clear that also the international community was maybe more divided than ever. Who inside the opposition

to support, with what? The question of this panel is what can the international community do to address the crisis, right? My question to you would be do you see any real efforts of external support to stop the opposition to find a joint strategy or is it all directed towards the opposition itself always saying, well, they can't unite. I think that there is such a rule of international actors and their divisions that I would like to take your opinion on how much is happening on unifying the external actors as such.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: Great question.

Alia Mansour: Actually, we don't have to be unifying under one umbrella, under one group of--we're not the Ba'ath party. We don't need to have the same point of views on every single matter. We have the same goal. We have the dream of building a new, free Syria. We don't have to be under the name of one party. I think the international community is more apart from what's going on. They did not really support the opposition from the beginning, and we can see what happened in Libya or Tunisia or Egypt. They did not wait for the opposition to be united. It's the reason the international community is using not to support us.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: Soli, let--put you and then I'm going to come to Anne-Marie also for you, if I could.

Soli Ozel: Well, I mean...

Xenia Dormandy: How do you get the international community solidified?

Soli Ozel: Yeah, but the thing is I honestly am not sure that outside forces can settle this issue, nor do I think that without their cooperation can it be settled by regional powers. But you've got to, I think, see the fact that regional powers are engaged in Syria for their own geopolitical reasons. There is no force from outside--nuclear the United States, nuclear Russia, whomever--that can actually prevail on them so long as they're not ready to occupy Syria and basically put order there so I...

Xenia Dormandy: What first? What first? I mean, who--what division needs to be addressed first? I mean, some people will say it's the kind of Iranian-Saudi great game playing out. Where do we start?

Soli Ozel: I guess you will have to start with, first of all, Turkey and the United States will have to agree on a project, and then the United States, despite domestic opposition to dealing properly with Iran, will have to actually start making a deal with Iran. Then I heard that on the sides in Geneva, the Americans and the--when the security--intelligence chiefs met in Washington, Saudi Arabia was represented by someone other than its own chief and that was given as a sign of maybe the United States and Saudi Arabia would be

treating Syria a bit differently. Those are the kinds of things you need more of because time is running out.

I mean, look, I come from a city where it's probably at least 150,000 to 200,000 Syrian refugees. Some of them are prosperous. They have opened their shops. They have opened their businesses. Some of them are middle class. They may even be working professionally. But a vast majority of them are new beggars. Every streetlight, every street, in the cold, in the heat, they are barefooted. I mean, this is not something that I'm speaking about in the abstract. I see this every day. But without the geopolitical deal, we're not going to be able to help them.

Xenia Dormandy: Just very, very quickly Anne-Marie, does he have it right? It's Turkey-U.S., then it's U.S.-Iran, and then it's Saudi. Is that the right order of...

Anne-Marie Slaughter: What the U.S. is hoping, and I do understand that if we got a nuclear deal with Iran by July--big if, particularly what's happening now, but if we did, then there would be a possibility of then engaging Iran more on Syria, which is the hope that then you can start putting pressure on the government, then you can start putting together the political deal. Given where we are, that may be--it may make sense to sort of see if that could happen in July, but if it can't--and more broadly, my point is there has to be

some action. Right? I mean, 75 percent of this room basically said five years from now, we're going to be in the same situation but worse. And I'm saying no matter how bad the options are now, that's not...

Xenia Dormandy: It's going to get worse.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: It's going to get much worse.

Soli Ozel: Yes.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: And it's gotten much worse. Two years ago, I was sitting on this stage talking about this issue, and now look where we are.

Xenia Dormandy: What a way to start a Saturday. This gentleman here.

Karoti Dugami: My name is Karoti Dugami (ph). I'm a former MP from Japan. I'd like to ask the question what is the accurate portrayal of what's going on in Syria? I think the American view, which is shared by most Western countries, is that as much as we would like to see Assad go, it is a battle between a dictator and the people. Is this really an accurate view? There is another interpretation where you can say Assad was propped up as a leader because most of the Shi'ites, the other ethnic sectarian groups, did not want a Sunni government. And what I'm saying is that is it really a practical view if, you know, the common view is if you get rid of Assad, then you have the opposition come in then everything will be all right? But the other view is if you have the opposition coming into power, you

will have another bloody massacre because it is not a battle between a dictator and the people. It's more of an ethnic sectarian battle within Syria.

Xenia Dormandy: Alia Mansour, why don't you...

Alia Mansour: No, I totally disagree with you. We started our revolution three years ago. It was people and still people from all of Syria asking for free Syrian against the regime. The regime is not protecting any minorities, if you want to call it. He is using everyone to protect himself. We have Alawites, we have Christians, we have Kurds with us in the coalition. We are representing all sects of Syria, but the regime is only representing his self and his family, despite the fact that he does not represent the Syrian people, not any sect.

Xenia Dormandy: Although he has very much changed the narrative, hasn't he? It is a very different narrative going on at the moment. This gentleman here. Yes. I know I know you.

Steven Erlanger: Yes, I know, and I know you. Steve Erlanger from the New York Times. The Syria we talk about is over. It's gone. I mean, let's start from there, whether it's divided, what happens to it. What I want to ask you is talking to people in the White House, they suddenly say we have a national interest in Syria, which is what they didn't used to say. What is the national interest? It's the lawless territory in

which terrorism flourishes. My question to you, the panel, is if you are judging American policy from the outside, wouldn't you conclude that actually America is backing Assad at this point?

Xenia Dormandy: We're going to come to Anne-Marie last.

Kristalina Georgieva: Well, I would let you answer the specific question. One thing that is clearly changing is the spillover from Syria in neighboring countries, and among the neighboring countries, one that gets very little attention, but is in very deep trouble is Iraq, and I cannot imagine that this is of no interest to the United States. What is happening in Anbar Province is under the radar screen of the world, but is incredibly worrisome because we have now over three months only 340,000 displaced people because of Sunni-Shia fight, the sectarian fight. They are moving also towards the Kurdish region of Iraq where people are now sandwiched between the refugees coming from Syria and the internal displacement coming from Anbar Province.

When you see that risk of Islamic state of Iraq and Syria in Syria and Islamic state of Iraq in Levant in Iraq connecting, that, to me, is a very dangerous development, even more dangerous of the pressure that refugees are putting on Lebanon because of the extremism and because of the danger it has on what may

happen in Iraq. So that spread, I can imagine, is of everybody's keen interest to follow.

And actually, I would agree very much with people on the panel who are saying Syria, despite of the fact that Ukrainians now face, may be the more dramatic geopolitical challenge.

Xenia Dormandy: Alia, do you want to answer that question as well?

Alia Mansour: Yes. Concerning this extremist, I'm not sure if Mr. Obama is supporting the extremist, but what I'm sure of is that Bashar al-Assad is supporting the extremist. We, the Syrian opposition, has been fighting al-Qaida and Bashar al-Assad troops. We have been fighting the extremist, the Revolutionary Guard coming from Iran and the sectarian militia coming from Iraq and from Lebanon, Hezbollah, and above all, we are fighting al-Qaida. What can we do?

We were hoping that the international community and Mr. Obama would support the more moderate Syrian people--we, as opposition, as the Syrian population. But unfortunately, he was doing nothing for the last three years. He was just drawing red lines and letting Bashar al-Assad to cross it. And at the end, not only Syria will be paying the price of these extremist groups, the whole world will pay. The whole world will suffer.

Xenia Dormandy: Soli, do you want to...

Soli Ozel: Yes, because first of all, I agree with the premise that Iraq and Syria, as we've known them or as they have been actually manufactured 90 years ago, are no longer going to be there. It will be very difficult to put, as President Clinton once said about Bosnia, Humpty-Dumpty together. In fact, I would like to urge you to see--and sorry, this is a strategic session, but historically what we are seeing is in the past 20 years is really the final settling of scores and homogenization of all societies from the last remnants of the Ottoman territories from the Balkans all the way to the Middle East. I personally don't think we know how to deal with it.

Given the example of Iraq, the real issue in Syria would be whoever displaces Assad, you cannot allow that remaining state apparatus to actually be dismantled because otherwise we will have total chaos. But with the degree of state apparatus, we may be able to put the pieces together, but they will never be the same as they were before.

Alia Mansour: Nobody talked about this. We are talking about rehabilitating, correcting the state apparatus, not dismiss it.

Soli Ozel: I didn't mean your...

Xenia Dormandy: Yes. I think you're agreeing on this one. Anne-Marie?

Soli Ozel: Yes, of course.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: I agree. We finally say we have an interest. We always had an interest. We were just too obdurate not to see it, but I don't think it means we're supporting Assad. What it means is we're no longer supporting the opposition as we were. We originally had the narrative that we supported the opposition, Assad must go. We now cannot bring ourselves to support Assad, rightly, but neither can we then say no, but we're going to support the opposition all-out so we're stuck. So that what it has meant is we're not doing anything. We are supporting the moderate opposition in some ways. We're training them, but not enough.

What it probably will mean, just as we used drones in Yemen and in Mali, we have the authority under our law to now go after alQaida in Iraq and in eastern Syria, of course. alQaida has actually disavowed ISIS. They're too extreme even for alQaida, but it does mean that now seeing that, we have a different view in terms of that's a direct threat to us and I suspect we might go there.

Alia Mansour: And do you remember who are sending the (inaudible) and the terrorists to Iraq for the revolution? It was the Syrian regime.

Xenia Dormandy: It's becoming, if anything, more complicated. This lady over here.

Elsy Oueiss: My name is Elsy Oueiss. I come from Lebanon, from the Lebanese Forces Party and my questions go to Commissioner Georgieva. We are formally in Lebanon and, as you know, we have over 1 million 300 Syrian refugees, which is almost 25 percent of the country so we have a humanitarian crisis in Lebanon. We have an economical crisis because 28 percent, almost 30 percent, are unemployed and we have political (inaudible) crisis. Would it be possible to have camps for refugees inside Syria under, let's say, secured by the international community first in order to avoid any bad results in the neighboring countries? Second, for-I don't recall your name, but for the terrorist thing of Saudi Arabia or other things, I have to tell you that in Lebanon, in 2008, we had a war and (inaudible) camps in the north and it appeared that the terrorists were brought from Syria. And in August, we had two attacks in Tripoli and the Ali Mamlouk, which is the head of Syrian intelligence, was the one means responsible. And we had also a year-and-a-half ago, a former minister, with Ali Mamlouk, were bringing to Lebanon 23 bombs in an attempt to make terrorist attacks in Lebanon.

So I can say that Assad is the one manipulating first the terrorists and Assad is using it and the West has receive it, that the only solution is if you drop Assad, then you are encouraging the terrorism. So we

think the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army are now fighting against the terrorists and there's no more argument to say that you cannot support them first. Second...

Xenia Dormandy: Okay, no, no, no.

Elsy Oueiss: Just one more thing. On the Christian minorities.

Xenia Dormandy: Ten seconds. Ten seconds, literally ten seconds.

Elsy Oueiss: Yeah. We are Christians in Lebanon and we were persecuted for 15 years from the Syrian. Only in 2005 after the Cedars Revolution, we could work again. We were banned even to say that we are Lebanese Forces Party by Assad regime so Assad is only using the tools of the Christians and terrorists...

Xenia Dormandy: Great.

Elsy Oueiss: ...and the west has received it unfortunately.

Xenia Dormandy: It's an important point, but let me get back to the panel.

Kristalina Georgieva: Okay. To the question you directed to me, two parts of the answer. First, we are very determined to deliver as much as possible assistance inside Syria exactly because if you don't do it, not only people will suffer tremendously, but the flow of refugees will continue. That doesn't mean that it is easy to set up camps inside Syria because if you

take responsibility to set up a camp, we also have to protect it. And without boots on the ground, that is really not an easy thing to do, but we can do much more than we currently do to deliver assistance inside to people where they're displaced, not necessarily under the banner of an institutionally set up camp, so achieve the same objective you are asking for.

But equally important, it is to continue to support the countries in the region, to support them in humanitarian terms, but also to help local communities. A year ago, Cathy's here, she was a part of it. In the EU, we made the decision not to provide only humanitarian aid to refugees, but also to provide help to local communities who are hosting it and macroeconomic support to Lebanon and Jordan so they can withstand because what the refugee flow is doing is depressing wages, Syrians work for nothing, and increasing costs and that is an enormous hardship for people there.

That comprehensive approach to the refugee crisis is what we are advocating for and putting our money where our mouth is and funding.

Xenia Dormandy: I was given some rules and it wasn't in the rules that I wasn't allowed to take two questions at the same time. So as we're running out of time, I am going to take this gentleman in the second

row and then the gentleman right in front of him, please.

Unidentified man: Thank you very much. My name is (inaudible). I'm from Tunisia. What I'm asking in a question--which everybody might know the answer, but it might be good to put it in public. Really, what is real conflict right now in Syria? Is it just a conflict between the Syrian people and Assad regime? Who is really fighting who in Syria? Is it just really Assad's regime and the Syrian people? If the international community is trying to tell us that they are incapable of solving the problem, might it be a good solution to try to ban other political agent to interfere in Syria? Because it seems that the fight is not really justified between the Syrian people and Assad's regime and it seems that it is really making it worse and worse. Thank you.

Xenia Dormandy: Good question. The gentleman in front?

Unidentified man: Thank you. (Inaudible) from Pakistan. I'm just a little concerned that because of (inaudible) phrasing of the question, it hasn't really been answered by the panel so let me put it in the form of a question. Why is nobody really addressing the role that Saudi Arabia has played in Syria and the role that Qatar has played in Syria and why are none of the questions or the answers dealing with the absolutely

malevolent role that those two countries have played in exacerbating what is true? And I would agree with all the friends here that say that Assad is rank evil, sure he is, and he must be got rid of somehow, but it takes many to tango and among those that are tangoing are the unspoken Saudis and the Qataris. Why won't somebody address that issue?

Xenia Dormandy: I think that's a great question and the two of them fit quite nicely together. This is not really, is it, about Assad versus the opposition? There's all sorts of other players and how do we deal with the other players? Maybe Soli, do you want to start?

Soli Ozel: I thought--at least I tried to address this. Again, this is a regional power game and obviously Saudi Arabia is a party to it just the way Iran is. Their competition or their struggle started with the Iraqi invasion, which by an incredible historical blunder, the Americans made the Iranians the more powerful force in the Gulf region and everything actually followed from that and the Saudis have been adamant in fighting this.

They've been adamant in fighting the direction of history in Egypt. They have been adamant in fighting the direction of history everywhere else that they could and in Pakistan as well. I am well aware of the--and by the way, I mean, it's not just in Pakistan where

the killing of the Shia had begun even in the '80s and it has now intensified. Everywhere this sectarian language is taking hold and it is continuing the poison.

And, of course, the continuation of the war in Syria is exacerbating the situation. Turkey, which used to have a secular foreign policy, advertently or inadvertently fell into the trap of that sectarian polarization and God knows what kind of prices we're going to pay.

So it is true that one has to do something about it and the American debate doesn't really address it and somehow sometimes, you know, the American debate, what we all look to because, you know, international community and all that, we've got to look at the United States, is just driving anybody who can think sensibly crazy because it really has very little relevance to exactly what's going on regionally. And it addresses America's domestic issues but it doesn't address the international regional issues. That's why that is not mentioned in my view.

Xenia Dormandy: Go on, Anne-Marie. You stand up for the...

Anne-Marie Slaughter: There's so many different aspects of the American debate that could drive you crazy. I'm trying to figure out which part specifically you're talking about.

But wait a minute, I want to be--you're not really suggesting the Saudi government is funding alQaida in Syria. There are plenty of Saudis, but not, I mean, let's be clear about what the government is doing and what broader supporters are doing.

But my point, again, was if the US wasn't willing to act, and we weren't, then what we did was to turn to proxies and that was my answer there. That's part of the reason we're there. And until we're willing to act directly--we want support. We want support for the opposition, that's where we turned.

Xenia Dormandy: Thank you. We have far more questions than we're going to get to. I want to go to another quick Word Cloud. You can tell I'm technologically maybe not quite up to this. Can we put the Word Cloud up on the screens? Hopefully the technology people are up to it, however.

I'll tell you what the question is going to be. We've heard about the humanitarian disaster problems not just within Syria, but within the region. We've heard about the political challenges. Is the opposition together? Is it not? We've heard about the military challenges, far too many players. We've heard just recently about the fact that this is not about Syrian opposition versus the Syrian government. This is far broader than that. There are far more players.

So the question that is in a Word Cloud--so if you can open your pads, I'm going to hopefully get it up on the screen--is what should be the international community's priority for Syria? And you're allowed one-word responses. There you go. So if you can go to your pads and the Word Cloud section of your pads, we had it up there for a second. I hope everybody read really fast.

What should be the international community's priority for Syria? One word. One word. We could just not use technology. Give me one word. Any word. Come on. Panel--from the panel.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: No idea is two words.

Xenia Dormandy: Peace. Peace.

Kristalina Georgieva: Peace, (inaudible), in any language.

Xenia Dormandy: Is it humanitarian? Is it military? Is it Syria itself? It is the Saudis? Is it the Turks? Is it the Americans? What's the priority? Is it humanitarian? Is it political? Non-intervention. Stability. Containment. Refugees. Reconciliation. Level the playing field and then you can talk about solutions. Fantastic, we have it.

The reason I think this is interesting--so thank you all for stepping in where technology briefly failed. This is interesting to me because there isn't

an answer and I think that's certainly what I've been hearing today.

There's so many parts of it that need to be addressed and perhaps need to be addressed all the same time. Where do you start? And I want to actually just finish by taking that question to each of the panelists. Where do you start? The stability in Russia? Peace? Intervention?

Kristalina Georgieva: Oh, no. In this order...

Xenia Dormandy: What's the next stage?

Kristalina Georgieva: In this order, my buck would go on the countries that are put there.

Xenia Dormandy: You don't need to follow them, but where's the next step to move the situation in Syria forward? What do we need to do next?

Kristalina Georgieva: The next step is to persevere with the peace process.

Xenia Dormandy: Peace process.

Kristalina Georgieva: It is going to take a long, long time, but we have to persevere with the peace process. We cannot just drop it and then so, oh well, it's very difficult. So persevere with the peace process.

Xenia Dormandy: And do we have the right people in the peace process?

Kristalina Georgieva: Part of the discussion here indicated that we need to be more forceful of making

sure that everybody that plays a role regionally is in. I mean, my personal solution, get all these guys, put them in the room, lock the door, throw the key, you can get out only when you have peace.

Xenia Dormandy: Will you be providing humanitarian assistance to them in the room?

Kristalina Georgieva: I would give them a little bit of bread and water and that's it.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: Let's add a few women to the guys.

Xenia Dormandy: Alia, do you want to...

Alia Mansour: For the Iranian and Hezbollah militias and the Iraqi militias to pull out of Syria.

Xenia Dormandy: How do we make that happen?

Alia Mansour: By a no-fly zone, by more pressure from the international community, even by threatening to use power.

Xenia Dormandy: So you'd say a military...

Alia Mansour: Yes.

Xenia Dormandy: If necessary. And how do we differentiate the good guys from the bad guys?

Alia Mansour: We now have far less good guys now in Syria. It's not time for tourists.

Xenia Dormandy: Everybody on the wrong side of a line that moves is bad.

Alia Mansour: Everybody from outside Syria to leave Syria now. We don't need foreign fighters.

Xenia Dormandy: Okay. I still think it's kind of hard to identify them potentially, but Soli.

Alia Mansour: No, it's very easy when you are on ground.

Soli Ozel: Whatever can be done within reason on the humanitarian issue, institutionally helping the countries that are actually getting the refugees as well while at the same time, basically by Western powers really making up their minds. Since they cannot do with all the parameters, stick to one.

If Iran is the key, then just deal with Iran and that may alleviate the problems of Lebanon as well. And, quite frankly, what's going on with Russia, I see no other major actor key than Iran and that way you can also get to the Saudis.

Xenia Dormandy: So it's humanitarian and it's Iran and...

Soli Ozel: The humanitarian thing is immediate, is immediate and it is getting out of hand, destabilizing all the countries all around.

Xenia Dormandy: Anne-Marie?

Anne-Marie Slaughter: Not humanitarian, but humans. I'm looking up at the stream. You know, there are two ways to think about Syria and we focus mostly on the geopolitical proxy war, the chessboard, the strategic calculations between Qatar and Iran and Saudi Arabia and Russia. I want to start with the humans.

Europe, more than any place on earth, should understand that when a government massacres its own people, bad things follow. That's why you could see what was going to happen three years ago. That's why we are still where we are. You start with a proposition that a government that is massacring its own people in the worst possible ways, and as far as I'm concerned, if your kid is killed by a barrel bomb versus a chemical weapon, it doesn't really matter. That's what you have to stop. You have to stop that killing. Not just the refugees, the humanitarian, but the destruction of human beings within Syria. If you focus there, everything else will follow.

Xenia Dormandy: I don't know about anybody else. I started off extremely depressed and I actually, I finished just marginally depressed, which is a good thing. I want to thank our panelists for joining us today. And at least for me, putting forward some optimism that there is something can be done in some of these little areas that can make small steps for progress. Maybe we have to wait a little bit longer to see how the Iran nuclear deal plays. And to thank you all for coming on a Saturday morning and joining us. But please join me in thanking the panelists.

Mr. Craig Kennedy: And thank you so much, Xenia. That was--I won't say uplifting, but it was really informative. Thank you so much.