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Mediation for peace

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Interview

Mediation through a media lens

About the Oslo Forum

Co-hosted by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), the Oslo Forum annually convenes senior conflict mediators, high level decision-makers and key peace process actors in an informal and discreet retreat to share their experiences, identify challenges and reflect on mediation practice. It is widely regarded as the leading international network of armed conflict mediation practitioners.

About the Oslo Forum Interview

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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.

Photo credits (page 3)

Photo of Mr Ghaith Abdul-Ahad – Stine Merethe Eid
Photo of Mr Roger Cohen – Stine Merethe Eid
Photo of Ms Lyse Doucet – Stine Merethe Eid
Photo of Ms Janine di Giovanni – Courtesy of Rannjan Joawn

Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

Ghaith Abdul-Ahad is an Iraqi writer, journalist, photographer and correspondent for the *Guardian*. A deserter from Saddam Hussein's army, he began doing street photography in 2001 to document conditions during the first Iraq War. By the second Iraq War he had begun working as a journalist for the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post*, as well as publishing his photographs in the *New York Times* among many other publications. In 2008 he was voted Foreign Reporter of the Year in the British Press Awards. In 2014, he won the Orwell Prize for Journalism.

Roger Cohen

Roger Cohen is a columnist for the *New York Times* (NYT) and has been Editor-at-Large for the *International Herald Tribune* since 2006. He was Foreign Editor of the NYT from 2002, and Bureau Chief of that newspaper's Berlin bureau from 1998. He was a correspondent in its Paris bureau from 1995 to 1998, and *The Times*' Balkan Bureau Chief based in Zagreb from 1994 to 1995, as well as European economic correspondent based in Paris between 1992 and 1994. Before joining *The Times*, he was a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*.

Lyse Doucet

Lyse Doucet is the BBC's Chief International Correspondent and a Presenter for BBC World News TV and BBC World Service radio. She is often deployed to anchor special news coverage from the field, broadcasting across the BBC. She has been reporting from the Middle East since 1994 and has covered all major conflicts and peace processes in the region since then. She is a regular visitor to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and has reported from both countries for more than two decades. In 2014, Ms Doucet was awarded an OBE in the Queen's Honours List for Services to broadcasting.

Bissane El-Cheikh

Bissane El-Cheikh has been a journalist and op-ed writer with *Al-Hayat* newspaper since 2001, and a documentary producer since 2010. Based in Beirut, her main focus is investigative reporting and political analysis. She has reported from war zones in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, conducted special reports in Jordan, Iran, Tunisia and Turkey, and covered radicalisation in prisons (Iraq, Guantanamo, Lebanon). Since 2007, she is also a media trainer and consultant with international organisations. In 2008, she was a visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington DC.

David Gardner

David Gardner is international affairs editor and associate editor at the *Financial Times* (FT), which he joined in 1978. He has worked mainly as a foreign correspondent and writer on international affairs, reporting from more than 50 countries. His assignments have included: Spain correspondent, Mexico & Central America correspondent, European Union correspondent, Middle East editor, South Asia bureau chief. Mr Gardner is the author of *Last Chance: the Middle East in the Balance*. He was made a Senior Associate Member of St Antony's College, Oxford in 2008.

Janine di Giovanni

Janine di Giovanni is the Middle East editor of *Newsweek* and the Pakis Scholar at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. She is also a non-resident International Security Fellow at the New America Foundation, and an Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. She is a former adviser on the Syria conflict to the UNHCR, and has provided policy advice to senior officials of the EU, NATO and others. As a journalist, she has reported on war and conflict, and its aftermath, for more than 20 years in the Middle East, the Balkans and Africa.

Mediation through a media lens

A frank conversation with the journalists Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, Roger Cohen, Lyse Doucet, Bissane El-Cheikh, David Gardner and Janine di Giovanni

What do you consider as your role or responsibility when reporting on a conflict or peace process? Consequently, what type of information do you value most, and why?

Lyse Doucet: Most journalists working in mainstream media would regard their 'role' simply as covering the news. Their 'responsibility' is the same as for all stories: try to confirm reports if they come from only one source; check facts; provide context. But there is now a vast array of social media and more journalists from more countries. There can be different understandings of rules regarding 'on/off the record' or 'on background'. For some media, there can be 'the story that's too good to check'. Journalists who specialise will want to know more. They will be more aware of the sensitivity of the process. They will look for in-depth briefings, exclusive interviews, even leaked documents. My experience is that mediators will stay in touch with journalists they know and trust – sometimes on the record, sometimes off – to help understand the process. This kind of relationship is highly valued but it should not be forgotten that journalists and mediators have different roles.

> *Journalists are not only observers but also actors.*

Roger Cohen: Reporting on a conflict or an attempt to end a conflict is much like reporting on anything else. You are trying to report in as full, vivid and fair a way as possible. And for that you want to speak to all the actors, that's to say the people who are dying, local authorities, whether they are municipal or military, and international diplomats, military representatives or NGOs. You want to fill out your picture of the conflict as it is lived, as well as covering the attempt to resolve it.

Ghaith Abdul-Ahad: As journalists we are ultimately storytellers. The most essential piece of information I can get out of a conflict is the story of the people on the ground. The killers, the murderers, the hostage-takers, the gunmen, the fighters, the civilians – all these people have their own narrative. So personally I am more interested in the one gunman on the street than in the politics, the national councils or the international agendas behind the conflict. If we can narrow each conflict down to these stories, it would be easier to understand.

Bissane El-Cheikh: I believe every journalist reporting on a conflict has the ethical duty to draw a clear picture of the players and the balance (or imbalance for that matter) of power both on the ground, and in negotiation halls, to the best of their knowledge. In times of conflicts, or peace processes that follow, our role as journalists is also to focus on the victims and those who don't have other means to make themselves heard by decision-makers.

Janine di Giovanni: The role of the reporter is to be objective and to bring facts and analysis into a narrative that readers, viewers or listeners can comprehend. My technique has always focused on letting people tell their own stories. The most important information for me is the information that comes in from the ground. For instance, during the Syrian peace process, what was happening in Vienna or Geneva had very little relevance to what was actually happening in Homs, Idlib or Aleppo. It's rather arrogant and colonial to assume that a group of diplomats in Vienna knows what is best for the Syrian people. In many ways my reporting is very similar to Track II because I usually go to places that the UN or international organisations do not go to. Journalists are not only observers but also actors. So many diplomats are locked up in their embassies and they don't actually know what's going on outside in the street in Kabul or Baghdad. Many times I have been asked by diplomats or by military figures 'what's happening out there, what are people saying or doing?' That has been an unspoken rule for many years: diplomats use us, we use diplomats; we get information from them, they get information from us.

David Gardner: Like any journalist, I value accurate and timely information. That is what enables you to make a judgement on where things really stand. It may be part of the role of diplomats to, at times, project optimism about their endeavours; one thinks of John Kerry on Syria, for example. But wishful thinking is not a substitute for reporting and analysis, which is what journalists should be doing – to help everybody from ordinary readers to policy-makers, combatants to mediators, in making their own judgements.

How can the media be useful/detrimental to a peace process?

David Gardner: They can be useful by doing the above – and, of course, putting facts and fact-based analysis into the public domain can help persuade public opinion of the need for negotiated, transitional outcomes from conflict. Detrimental? Mis-stating facts or bending the narrative come to mind. There has, for instance, been a media 'surge' in 2014–16, arguing that the reality of ISIS/Daesh and hopes for eventual stability in Syria demand the continuation in power of Bashar al-Assad. The facts, at least to me, suggest otherwise. It was the Assad regime that funnelled (then) al-Qaeda-linked jihadis into Iraq in 2003. The same regime answered what began as a broad-based civic uprising against tyranny in Syria in 2011 with total war, documented, industrial-scale torture and 'disappearances', indiscriminate shelling and barrel-bombing, starvation as a weapon of war, etc. It also released a large number of jailed jihadists, in a nakedly sectarian attempt to self-fulfil its prophecy that what it had been facing from the outset was al-Qaeda and its ilk. And, until recently, Damascus barely laid a glove on ISIS. A formula for future stability? It will be interesting in the future to unpick how this idea came into circulation – assuming Syria has a future.

> *The media can be as dangerous as the people carrying the guns on the ground.*

Janine di Giovanni: I think it depends on the journalists and what they are after. Is it a scoop, or are they concerned about lasting and long-term peace in the region? I have colleagues whose primary interest is in scoops, but that can be damaging if a peace process isn't ripe, if the actors on the ground are not yet committed. I have colleagues who would say: 'Who cares about these arrogant diplomats so interested in their next

promotion? They don't really care about what's happening in Syria.' But I think that ultimately journalists have a responsibility to protect their work and also to expose flaws and weaknesses, because we have an awful lot of power. We can affect policy and we do – we did it in Bosnia. We can use compassion as a form of outrage, so that we can affect decision-makers and pressure them to bring about more lasting peace. We have a lot of knowledge that can be highly useful or extremely dangerous – we need to use it with integrity and responsibility.

> *We are not there to be useful or detrimental to the peace process. We are there to report what is going on.*

Ghaith Abdul-Ahad: The media can be utterly devastating for a peace process. If you look at Syria at the moment, you see that the local media coverage as well as coverage in neighbouring countries is sometimes more dangerous and more devastating than the militias on the ground. Of course these media outlets reflect the point of view of militias and sectarian rulers, but at the same time they spread their messages. So the media can be as dangerous as the people carrying the guns on the ground. There is a lot of demonising in the media. And when I say the media here, I mean the local and the international media. In the Syrian conflict, a lot of the media came with the supposition that one side is evil and one side is good. And after one or two years we concluded that there are murderers on both sides. The media should have played a more careful role in the beginning of the conflict. But the media can play an amazing role, if they report objectively, if they can tell the actual story on the ground and if they can leave their nationalist prejudices behind.

Lyse Doucet: As mediators know, leaked stories on sensitive issues at crucial junctures can cause damage. Equally, there will be moments when mediators wish to send messages or updates through the media to advance the process or inform a wider audience. With social media, and a multiplicity of sources, information emerges more quickly in our age. So does the truth. When countries are involved, journalists are usually briefed by their own officials. During the Iran nuclear talks, Iranian journalists were briefed daily by Iranian negotiators. Selected Western journalists were briefed by Iran at particular moments. American journalists travelling with the US delegation were briefed by Americans. The French confided in French media, etc. At key junctures, open press briefings were held with top negotiators/mediators on the record. But, in all cases, information was widely shared among journalists once it was published or broadcast. So the system seemed to work.

Roger Cohen: Well, that is not our role. We are not there to be useful or detrimental to the peace process. We are there to report what is going on. When I was covering the war in Sarajevo, I was reporting on atrocities every day, with Serbian shells being dropped and markets being blown up in a European city besieged for 14 months. Spotlight on those events creates pressure on mediators or politicians to try to do something. Often when there is an intractable conflict – like in Syria today – the political desire is to side-line it, because all options are difficult. I think the role of the press and the media is to keep reporting, keep reporting from Damascus, from Aleppo, from wherever we can reach. The material you collect can then create pressure on or at least the context for mediation efforts.

Bissane El-Cheikh: If convinced and well informed, journalists can be very useful to a peace process because they can promote it adequately to their audience and create a public opinion in its favour, without necessarily resorting to cheap 'propaganda'. Journalists can succeed in this only if they have the right resources and are able to present any critical views, which could create a healthy debate.

What are the main challenges you face when reporting on a peace process and in your relationship with mediators?

Janine di Giovanni: Well, mediators aren't going to tell you much. Even if you have a trust-based relationship with them, even if it's late at night, and even if they are frustrated; they can't tell you much because that can compromise the talks. Also, they might know what's going on between the Russians and the Americans in terms of their ministries but I don't think their knowledge of what's happening on the ground is that developed. That's where journalists or organisations like HD come in. We can supply them with facts and with reports on the atmosphere on the ground. If a Special Envoy goes to Sana'a for a couple of hours, he is not going to be able to absorb what we could from weeks of working there. I think that there has to be a much more open dialogue, informally and off the record. I think it would be great if there were more forums like the Oslo Forum where we had bilateral meetings and came together and said, 'Look: this is what I know from North Aleppo and this is what's happening in Mogadishu and this is a person you should talk to', and so on.

> *"There has to be a much more open dialogue, informally and off the record."*

Lyse Doucet: The challenge for both sides is greatest when journalists are getting no information about what is happening behind closed doors but are still under pressure to write or broadcast. At times mediators may instruct all sides in the process not to speak to the media because negotiations are at a delicate stage. News can still slip out. When it does, other journalists will be under pressure to confirm or advance it. Negotiators will often leak or confide in certain media to advance their interests. This may complicate the mediators' task. But the journalist is only doing their job to report all sides. And, when there is more 'process,' than a likelihood of peace, media outlets on tight budgets in a busy news cycle will stop following the story. This can help a difficult process which needs time out of the spotlight. But it can also take away momentum and pressure which can be useful to keep the process going.

Bissane El-Cheikh: Among other challenges, I believe the major problem is the mutual mistrust between journalists and mediators. Working through different channels, with different tools and catering for different audiences and needs creates a sense of competitiveness rather than integration.

David Gardner: The challenges are always the same: access to accurate information, informed by contextual judgement. A variety of people can provide this, including mediators.

Roger Cohen: All of us – including mediators, diplomats or journalists – tend to be generally well inclined towards people who speak to us. And journalists tend to be less favourably disposed towards diplomats or officials who are evasive or who don't speak to them. A good example would probably be Richard Holbrooke. He was an expert at speaking to the press. The press of course liked this but he was also at times trying to use the press to his ends. Now, any alert journalist is aware of this. We are listening and then pulling it through the folds of our journalistic sensibility. I think some diplomacy has to be done in private but if a mediator wants to create forms of pressure on other actors, or publicise his or her efforts, then clearly he or she has an interest in being as open as possible with the press.

Ghaith Abdul-Ahad: The main challenge of reporting in a conflict is of course security – the kidnapping and the killing. If I was a mediator, I would of course be very careful when talking to a journalist. A peace process is built on secret negotiations and on confidence-building. As a negotiator, I would not be able to talk about everything that is happening – as frustrating as this might be for journalists. Having said that, people on the ground nevertheless need to know. Negotiations are often shrouded with mystery and leave affected communities unaware of what is happening. The ultimate challenge, and at the same time a goal, is transparency.

How can mediators use the media to advance a peace process? What pitfalls do mediators fall into when dealing with the media? How might they avoid them?

Roger Cohen: Well, I would hope that mediators cannot use the media. We are not there to be used and are not going to be used. That is not what journalists are for. That said, there can be a mutually beneficial interaction between mediators and the press if mediators are ready to speak to the press. Speaking for myself, journalists respond very favourably to having situations explained to them from the standpoint of a mediator who is trying to advance peace in a situation where there is war. One pitfall is to avoid the press. Another pitfall is to imagine that the press can be used. If you are trying to sell a line to the press, it is the journalists' role to be alert to this effort of bogus salesmanship, see through it and either debunk it or not write about it.

Lyse Doucet: As a journalist I can't advocate that media should be 'used'. There is a public interest in knowing if a process is succeeding or failing, which trade-offs are being negotiated and which principles are guiding the talks. But experienced journalists will understand what is at stake. Choose who you wish to speak to at moments which matter. Maintain a balance between exclusive interviews which can have a big impact, and keeping all media informed, especially influential local journalists from countries involved in the process. Take the current Syria talks: even though there is not much movement, there are still regular briefings to satisfy the demands of a large number of journalists. Most journalists are active on social media so every twist and turn, every smile or frown, every sighting – however distant – ends up in the public domain.

> *"Choose who you wish to speak to at moments which matter."*

Bissane El-Cheikh: Mediators should not 'use' the media to advance peace processes, just as journalists should not 'use' (and abuse) mediators to strengthen their positions and points of views. New channels of trust, working on more shared values and achievable common goals, would be more beneficial on the long run, than 'exchanging services' occasionally.

David Gardner: I would advise against any formula containing the words 'use the media'. That is not because the media can't be used; evidently they can. But manipulation very often ends badly. If there is a 'reality problem' in there, it will not be hidden for long. As for pitfalls, the surest way to strain credibility with trained sceptics such as journalists is to misrepresent reality. I refrain from naming anyone in the current situation in Syria, but by now many people know who they are.

Janine di Giovanni: The worst thing you can do is lie to a journalist. It's such a bad tactic, because we will find out you are lying, and then there will be no trust on any level and there will be no forgiveness [laughs]. Journalists have long memories! My advice: be open to journalists. The smartest diplomats and the smartest military officials work hand in hand with journalists. General Sir David Richards, who was commander in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and East Timor, and I always worked together in a way. I could go off into the forest with rebel groups for days, and find out what they were doing and come back and tell him over a drink. It wasn't anything I wasn't going to report at one time or another but it was information that was useful to him. But it has to go both ways because he would then say to me: 'well, this can fit into a larger strategy this way or that way'. He understood the importance of the media.

Ghaith Abdul-Ahad: One of the greatest mediators in recent years is de Mistura. He is subtle and he does not appear to be trying to mislead or misinform you. At the same time he is really cautious with the amount of information he provides. De Mistura is a perfect example of how a mediator should handle the media. Some mediators try to manipulate the press in order to deliver a message. This can be very dangerous. Again, transparency – without affecting the outcome of the negotiations – would be the ultimate goal.

How can mediators and journalists ensure both transparency and confidentiality of peace talks? Is there a happy balance?

Roger Cohen: [laughs] That is a tough one! In general, if you want something to be confidential – don't speak to a journalist. Our job is to get information out. But certainly there can be happy compromises at times – off the record, on background, or briefings of various kinds. This can be done on varying bases and journalists, good journalists anyway, respect those terms. There are all kinds of conversations and cooperation that can work without compromising confidentiality. But some forms of diplomacy need to be done behind closed doors and require forms of pressure and awareness that only mediators provide.

Janine di Giovanni: There has to be transparency without compromising sensitive information that is not yet ready to come to light. The mediator has to be very deft and skilful in balancing the supply of information with maintaining confidentiality necessary for leverage at the table. Another really important consideration is language. Often, UN people, diplomats or international civil servants baffle you with textbook jargon that makes no sense at all. 'We are working towards a political process' – what does that mean? It's almost as though they are taught these stock phrases. In a sense I'd like to sit down and open a consulting business where I train these guys in how to talk to journalists, and actually give real information that is solid and helpful. They are so used to talking to their ministers or writing reports for the Security Council that they've forgotten how to talk to people outside their bureaucracy.

David Gardner: It is always hard to strike a balance between transparency and confidentiality. Obviously there needs to be a relationship of confidence between the two sides. Both sides need to have enough experience to know how to establish that, and why, when and for what purpose. We all know there are risks. In the 1980s in El Salvador, for example, I used to talk regularly to Iñaki Ellacuria, the Jesuit scholar acting as an intermediary there between (sectors of) the government and the insurgents. He was murdered in 1989. Towards the end of that period I also had regular contact with another Basque Jesuit, the papal nuncio in Panama, an intermediary between Noriega and the US. I never once, directly or indirectly, quoted either of them. Yet the value of what they had to say was immense, and generously given.

Bissane El-Cheikh: Realistically, a happy balance is hard to achieve in any conflict or peace process for both mediators and journalists. Transparency, confidentiality, objectivity and many other boundaries are challenged at every step. Yet moving within a framework of trust, informing journalists regularly – not only when needed – and engaging them in the process can help to develop a certain balance.

> *"Your ultimate goal is to cause no harm."*

Ghaith Abdul-Ahad: Of course there is a happy balance. As a journalist dealing with different elements of a conflict, your ultimate goal is to cause no harm – to neither the people you are talking to nor the general situation. You never reveal your sources; you shield certain parts of information if this could harm the people who are talking to you. The same conditions apply to talking to mediators. I doubt that a journalist would willingly shatter a peace process just because he or she wants to get a scoop. I think that we should follow the same criteria or guidelines for a peace process that we follow in dealing with sources on the ground.

Lyse Doucet: Journalists will want to know as much as possible. Mediators will want to give only what is necessary to keep the public informed but not jeopardise the outcome. Skilled mediators find ways to say something. Try to avoid briefings which say nothing and can end up provoking a press corps maintaining a stake-out day in day out, sometimes for weeks. The venue matters. The Iran nuclear talks were held in European hotels where, at first, journalists roamed the corridors and sat in the same cafes as negotiators. In the final weeks, journalists were confined to certain areas. When that happens, regular briefings are essential to avoid a bored, unhappy press corps – journalists will go home, or find something else to write. In the protracted Yemen negotiations, for example, the mediator chose a remote location that the media could not reach. That may be necessary at times. But a public eye on negotiations can also help move a process forward – when it's ready to move.

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