

[00:00] - Lyse Doucet

We sat in that room and we heard first the government set out its aspirations for peace; the Taliban set out their aspirations for peace. And when they were done, there was this pause in the room, as if everyone was holding their breath. And then the Norwegian mediator paused and then he said, there's more common ground than there is things which separate us. And you felt, wow, this could actually be a step forward in one of the most destructive wars of our time.

[00:39] - Adam Cooper

From the Oslo Forum, welcome to The Mediator's Studio, a podcast about peacemakers, bringing you stories from behind the scenes. My guest today is unique in so many ways, not least because she's the only person in this series about mediators who is not herself a mediator. As a journalist, she's covered all the major conflicts of our age, from Syria to Afghanistan to Israel-Palestine, and she's known the mediators at the heart of efforts to end those wars. Lyse Doucet, Chief International Correspondent of the BBC, welcome to The Mediator's Studio.

[01:12] - Lyse Doucet

It's a great honour to be speaking with you, Adam, but most of all, it's a bit jarring for me because I feel as though I'm in the middle of a coup that someone has taken over my seat interviewing mediators, but instead I'm answering the questions.

[01:28] - Adam Cooper

Well, we have indeed turned the tables, but only because there's probably no one better than you, Lyse, to give our listeners an unvarnished view on mediation. In your long career, you've been at so many peace talks. What are the qualities of the great mediators you've seen at work?

[01:44] - Lyse Doucet

If you would look at the men and women who made history, who made peace, who move countries and people away from war, they're all very different. You get a Martti Ahtisaari, who I spent a great deal of time with on the road. I was asked by the Nobel Peace Center to go and interview him in Helsinki when he won the Nobel Peace Prize for all of his efforts. We spent hours and hours together talking about what does it take to be a mediator.

And he was very blunt. He said, I'm not neutral. Mediators don't have to be neutral. I come from a small Western democracy and I go into mediation knowing what we should discuss and what we shouldn't discuss. And so when he was discussing with the Free Aceh Movement, he was so blunt with them. He said, "if you're going to come here and discuss independence from Indonesia, then don't waste your

time. That is not on the agenda." And then he would say to them, "if you think that we're going to discuss independence", he said, "well, you go back home and you keep fighting and you dig your graves".

[02:47]

So he was very clear. And he also believed that for every conflict, there was a solution; that every conflict could be resolved. He was asked, he told me privately, to become one of the mediators for Syria. And he told me he said, "I told them, I told the Secretary-General, OK, give me a plane and I will go from capital to capital and I will see whether or not they are serious about making peace. And if they're not, then I'm not going to waste my time". And of course, he didn't take on the job and I don't even think he got the plane.

[03:16] - Adam Cooper

Syria has been a challenging mission for some of the most seasoned mediators. Lyse has covered all of those who've attempted to bring peace there.

[03:25] - Lyse Doucet

The first mediator was Kofi Annan. And everyone listening will have their memory of Kofi Annan. He was taken away from us, taken away from the world far too soon. His soft voice, his velvety voice. And yet inside that, those velvet gloves was a rock, a hard rock, a tough negotiator. And I remember him telling me that when he had to go as the Secretary-General and talk to Saddam Hussein to try to avert the threat, which, of course, became the reality of the Iraq war, a journalist in New York asked him, "are you tough enough to go and talk to Saddam Hussein"?

[04:01]

And he told me, "what a stupid question that was. What do you mean? Am I tough enough to talk to Saddam Hussein"? And he would say, "you can't go in saying this is a bad man or a bad woman, bad person. You just have to go in and try to discuss with them". And he remarked at the time about how he realized that everyone was terrified of Saddam Hussein. It was like he said, as if you were with a head teacher and all the school children.

But he went in, perhaps there was a bit of fear inside him, because he knew the weight of the world upon him. He knew that the United States was rearing to go after Saddam Hussein and his alleged weapons of mass destruction. And so he had this huge responsibility, but he saw it as his mandate. But he was much more softly spoken. And unlike Martti Ahtisaari, I don't think he went in knowing exactly what had to be done. So he went into the Syrian conflict. I remember him standing up to the UN

Security Council and saying in ringing tones, "there must only be one mediator". In other words, we have to have a coherent strategy. And I will lead that strategy so that we have one voice on this one conflict.

But of course, when he resigned, he resigned bitterly, saying that the Syrians weren't serious about negotiating. Neither the government nor the opposition, both believed, that was so early on, in retrospect. Little did we know then how long and brutal the war would be. But also he was deeply, deeply frustrated and angry about the gridlock in the UN Security Council.

[05:35]

The mediator who followed Kofi Annan, this was a huge bear of a man in the Middle East, Lakhdar Brahimi, who went into Syria knowing the culture, speaking the language. He had been there many times before, he knew Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad. He didn't have to learn much, but he was a listener. Again, softly spoken, but someone who would cut to the quick and say what needed to be said at the right time and in the right kind of voice. And I remember there was one time early in his negotiations where he was becoming increasingly frustrated with the intransigence of President Assad and his unwillingness to make any compromises, any steps, any genuine steps towards a true political transition and one that would be acceptable to the Syrian opposition and indeed to the rest of the world.

And we were having a conversation. I've known Lakhdar Brahimi for many, many years from Afghanistan, from many of the other - and from Iraq, many of the other places that he had worked. So we often used to discuss and I, of course, understanding the line between what was a privileged conversation and what was on the record and able to be reported. He was so angry and he says, "I think we should do an interview". And I said, "are you sure"? He said, "yes, yes, yes. I really want to say something". So I went to Paris to interview him. And one of the lines he used and I, I remember every single word because he was so careful - careful, cautious, but plain-speaking Lakhdar Brahimi. He said, I think we have to say, "it is a little bit too long for a family to be in power".

In other words, that the Assad family had been running, ruling Syria with an iron hand for 40 years. And he said, "you understand that, you know, I'm being very careful with my words". And I did understand, and I was very careful in my wording. But of course, the media picked it up and it got shortened to '40 years is too long for the Assads'. And he called me up and he said, "Lyse, what - what happened"? And I said, "no, no, I did. I was faithful".

And of course, the meeting went badly with President Assad and their relationship unraveled. President Assad didn't see him for a long time. And then he did then eventually get another meeting with President Assad. And the journalists reported, "well, after a very bad meeting earlier with President Assad in earlier years, Lakhdar Brahimi has had a very good meeting with President Assad". And with a nudge and a wink, Lakhdar Brahimi said to me, "Lyse, they're all saying that I didn't have an earlier good meeting with President Assad. My meeting went well, it was your interview that was the thing which went wrong".

[08:13]

But he was careful and he knew that he had to send that message. And he, he chose me to send that message. And mediators do that at a certain time. They will turn to the press when they want to go public. And other times they may confide in journalists that they know and trust. But discretion is better, especially at most sensitive moments of mediation. Problem now is, of course, everything leaks.

[08:35] - Adam Cooper

And you take someone like that, Lyse, a man like Lakhdar Brahimi who listens very carefully. And I think of your own reporting, which has really been to sort of highlight the voices of survivors of a conflict. How important do you think it is for mediators to show that same kind of empathy?

[08:53] - Lyse Doucet

Isn't mediation about trying to get inside the heads, inside the history, inside the grievances, the hopes, the anger of the warring sides? You know, we often use this expression of standing in someone's shoes. You have to be able to feel their hurt to understand why they're demanding this or that. And one of the great strengths of mediators is they have to sometimes listen for hours on end, sometimes days on end, sometimes years on end.

And the hope, of course, is in listening to the stories, and as the stories come tumbling out, that you can somehow try to see within those stories a way forward and trying to mesh those - the stories of the competing narratives of history, because often it is about history that is very much lived in the present - and mesh them together to try to find a way forward, a kind of a middle ground that both sides and often more than two sides can actually live with. And I think this is also what journalism is about, too.

[10:07]

I always say about journalism, and I'd like to think it's, it's about mediation, too, is that no matter how complex or consequential a story of an individual, of a people, of a nation or region is, it comes down to people. It comes down to men and women, to fathers and mothers, to families, to streets, sometimes to

grandfathers, to generations. It is a human story. I think this was really driven home to me very early on in my career as a journalist, and understanding in that reporting on war and peace, and often the absence of peace and the atrocities of war - even though I must say I don't call myself a war correspondent - was being in Afghanistan in 1988, 89.

I lived in Kabul to cover the Soviet troop withdrawal, and I was there for pretty well a year as the Soviet troops pulled out, and there were rocket attacks on the city every day, almost without exception. And so almost every day we would run out, if we were in Kabul that day, to see what had happened. And there was one day where we drove quickly to the suburbs of Kabul and there, in a very poor neighbourhood, a mud house with a gaping hole that had taken a direct hit by a rocket. And the family was wailing. And we approached the man who was wailing to say, you know, "what happened? Tell us about it". And he just looked at us and he said, "why should I talk to you? Why should I keep talking to the media? I tell the media my story and nothing changes".

[11:47]

And I did what we call a piece to camera, in television terms. You say something in front of the camera and it's, it's supposed to be your distillation of what matters in that day. And I sent it off to London and one of my editors said, "Lyse, Lyse thank you very much for your piece to camera." And one editor got a call, and said, "you know, you seemed a bit angry", which, of course, is a criticism. We shouldn't really - journalists' job is very important that we not be emotional. And then the editor said, "well, I understand it". I think I've been acutely aware since then about, you know, being careful what you convey in what you say.

But it also underlined for me that it's often stories of hurt and loss, that it drives us as journalists because our job as journalists is to report the human consequences of conflict and sadly, in war, that's a story of sorrow and suffering and loss; and mediators, you know, their job in pursuing peace and ending war in resolving conflict is also about ending pain, about changing stories, and that it is a very human story. And so I think the qualities of empathy, of understanding are absolutely essential.

[13:03] - Adam Cooper

That need for empathy is perhaps best illustrated by the most intractable and complex conflict of our age: between Israelis and Palestinians.

[13:13] - Lyse Doucet

You cannot spend any time in the Middle East without pondering the balance between war and peace, and certainly for me, my time in the Middle East has been bracketed by the search for peace and the

suffering, the deep suffering and unfulfilled hopes for peace. And I still work in the Middle East to this day where the search for peace goes on. And when I arrived in Jordan in 1994, my very first story was a story about peace.

It was the first steps after the Oslo Peace Accord, which, of course was one of the triumphs of diplomacy at that time, and had just been signed with all the clicking of the world's camera, when Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn. Yasser Arafat was going to come home to Gaza. And I was going to witness this from Jordan, from Amman. And I watched his arrival on TV in the family of Bassam Abu Sharif, who had been a Palestinian hijacker whose hand had been blown off by a letter bomb said to have been sent by Israel's Mossad.

[14:31]

And he became a peacemaker in urging Yasser Arafat to turn towards peace. He's regarded as one of the architects of the Oslo Peace Accord. And I sat with him that day. I was so new to the Middle East. And here he was with stubble on his face, gleaming in his eye, and he cried. He cried and I looked at his tears and I thought, wow. He just looked to me. He said, "we want to go home. We want to end this war". And then the next day, also, I met Palestinian refugees living in Jordan and they, too, were crying, crying for what they had lost and wanting most of all to have peace from the very beginning. It was all about war and peace.

And I feel it was a privilege to have been there at post-Oslo Peace Agreement. But of course, everyone will know, if they know anything about the Middle East, about the torturous process where for so many years there was some peace and a lot of process and then there was a lot of process and no peace. And of course, today there is no peace and there is no process.

[15:44]

But I watched the mediators in this time. We used to go often to the places where they'd be negotiating. This was the main story around the world. So we'd spend hours and hours and hours waiting for the mediators to come out. And I remember there'd be moments where they'd be in the room, locked in the room, only coming out for a cigarette or a coffee or to go to the bathroom and then going back in. And sometimes the meetings go on for like 12, 14 hours. And then they come out and go, the journalists rushed toward them, saying, "what did you, what did you agree, was there any progress"? "Yes, we made progress". "So what happened"? "Well we changed the text"! "Oh, wow, so what are the changes to the text"? "Well, we succeeded in changing 'the' to 'a'". "'The' to 'a'"? "Yes, so important". And I exaggerate a little bit and mediators listening will know that sometimes it comes down to the 'the' or the 'a'.

But I also saw the sizzle, the magic of mediation. What happens in such a long process? The whole dynamic of mediation is that the two sides should one way or another come closer to each other. They may never completely cross the line, but they will at least get to know each other's stories. And what we saw in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the early years was that Israelis and Palestinians, can we say, they became friends. They certainly got to know each other. So after a day, a long, hard day of shouting across the table, there'd be moments where they would meet in the hotel lobby or in the hotel bar. There'd be laughter. There'd be slapping on the backs. There'd be jokes shared. Their families celebrated together, and they lived through this process together, which is why when things broke down, it became so painful because they felt betrayed.

[17:38]

And there was a moment when the Labour leadership in Israel, you know, the greats of Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, who were very, very much in their terms committed to peace and went to the Likud. And I interviewed Hanan Ashrawi saying, well, "what's it going to be like now? Because you're going to have to be negotiating with the people who were not part of the original Oslo Accord". And I can still hear her voice to this day where she said, "you know, peacemaking is about talking to our enemies and not talking to our friends". So peacemaking became bittersweet and there was a sense of betrayal and loss on both sides.

[18:16] - Adam Cooper

Well, Lyse, this time of year, we'd normally be bringing those enemies together for the Oslo Forum, which, for the listeners at home who don't know it, I suppose the best way of describing it is a sort of gathering of the good, the bad and the ugly of the conflict world. So you've got government negotiators there, armed group leaders, the mediators who sit between them, and often, you, Lyse, you know, interviewing them in the real life Mediator's Studio. What are the moments from years gone by that stick out in your mind?

[18:45] - Lyse Doucet

There have been so many memorable moments, including moments which were absolutely breathtaking; moments where the room was electric. And for me as a journalist invited to this forum and I have to say that my badge of honour is that I have attended more Oslo Forums than anyone else in the world. But I do that as not a mediator. And they trusted me from the beginning to come and to help with, well, the Mediator's Studio - and here we are, Adam, you've taken over the studio - on the understanding, of course, that this was all off the record. But it's still my favourite forum of the year because it's not just about talking about the conflict, dissecting the conflict, you know, the intellectual

satisfaction of deepening our understanding of the conflict. It's about trying to move away from the conflict. So there's always a pragmatic, a practical, a hopeful note. And I think that's what makes it worthwhile.

And there are so many moments over the years because, of course, the Oslo Forum is threaded through the successes and failures of mediation in the real world. In June 2009, when we met, it was in the wake of the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka, which hadn't come to a negotiated end with Norwegian mediation, it had come to a brutal military conclusion. And the ramifications of that are still with Sri Lanka to this day. And I can still see in my mind's eyes-the Norwegian mediators at the Oslo Forum that year. And there was a pall which hung over the Oslo Forum, because, of course, it's an article of faith for mediators that there is no military solution. So suddenly there was this body blow that a war of our time, and with Norwegian mediators, had not ended. The way that it was felt was the best way to end it. It was a sudden jolt of reality, a very harsh reckoning. But then there were the moments that were absolutely of a different kind.

[21:04]

And that was in 2015, where one of the most important speakers was the Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos. And I was the moderator, the moderator for the opening panel. So I was sitting on the stage and I was looking out at the audience and he stood up, and in ringing tones, he used the mantra that had been used by Yitzhak Rabin during the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, which is "I will wage war as if there are no peace talks and I will talk peace as if there is no war". In other words, "I, Juan Manuel Santos, do not believe in a ceasefire because it will only benefit my enemies". And I looked out at this gathering of mediators and in the front row were members of the Afghan Government and in the third row at an acceptable distance were members of the Afghan Taliban.

And I could see them all taking notes. And I was thinking, darn this, you know, of course, there should be a ceasefire in Afghanistan because, people are - lives are being lost. And I looked at the faces of the mediators because, again, for many of them, the ceasefire is the first article in the sense of building confidence, reducing the loss of life, moving the peace process forward. But here was one of the negotiators of our time saying that you didn't need to have a ceasefire. And this crackled through the whole days that we met at the Oslo Forum. And we kept, every time we'd meet, often when we had, you know, in the buzz of the coffee room: "did you hear Juan Manuel, what did you think about that"? There was also in that Forum what was for me, an absolutely extraordinary moment, a moment of history, and I - everyone felt so privileged, you could feel it in the room. There was this square table and on one side of the table, there were the members from the Afghan Government.

[22:57]

On the other side, there were the members of the Afghan Taliban. And on the front and the back, there was the UN, there were Norwegian mediators. And we sat in that room and we heard first the government set out its aspirations for peace. The Taliban set out their aspirations for peace. And if my memory holds me correct, they both had 13 points. And when they were done, there was this pause in the room, as if everyone was holding their breath. And then the Norwegian mediator who you could tell was overwhelmed in this moment, and he paused. And then he said, "I think there's common ground here, there's more common ground than there is things which separate us". And you felt, wow, this could actually be a step forward in one of the most destructive wars of our time.

And for me to be there is something I will never forget, but it's also something we will never forget because it's a reminder of how fragile these moments are, because within months came the announcement that Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, not only had he died, he had died two years earlier in 2013. In other words, that the Taliban negotiators at that table, that table of such consequence in Oslo, had been living a lie. They were representing a man who was dead and whether they knew it or not. So they left their positions in the Taliban's political office in Qatar. And then that thread for a moment, then, was cut. But that moment, the magic of that moment fizzled out. Those are the most crushing moments.

And I think they happen more often than not and so much so, and this is one of the issues we discussed, when President Santos was with us at the Oslo Forum, is that post-conflict - the phase after a peace agreement is signed - is no longer recognized as the period without conflict. It is regarded as the next phase of conflict, because the process of implementing the peace is as full of danger as the final moments of trying to clinch the peace.

[24:38]

And there was another, another hard reckoning, which again played through the Oslo Forum when John Kerry, the U.S. Secretary of State, flew in and flew out in that John Kerry kind of way - tall, brimming with confidence, and full of that satisfaction that he had played a defining role in what was in 2015, 2016, regarded and was still regarded in retrospect as one of the greatest triumphs of multilateral diplomacy of our day. And that was the Iran nuclear deal. And he, in a rush and a roar, he talked about what it was like being at the table month after month, year in, year out, to get the deal the world wanted. Some doubted it. And that, of course, we've seen now it's almost at the point of just hanging by a thread. He got a standing ovation. There were tears in the eyes of some of the mediators. It's often said that mediation is 500 days of failure and one day of success. Lakhdar Brahimi used to use that a lot. And the mediators know that now in our time, it's often 5000 days of failure and maybe not a day of

success. To actually touch that moment - not only did diplomacy work, but the power of diplomacy was confirmed and its impact on the world was one of those, those moments that I think mediators cherish.

It was such an important moment and it was important for another reason, may I say as well, because one of the other threads which has wound through the Oslo peace process is also the importance of getting different mediators at different tables, people with different backgrounds and different experience and different qualities. And one of them is being a woman, being a woman mediator. And there was one Oslo Forum where not only was there John Kerry, but Javad Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister, was there, Federica Mogherini, the EU Foreign Policy Chief, as well as top members of her team. They were also in one of the opening sessions at the Forum.

[27:21]

And then when it was over and everyone retreats, of course, to the coffee room, everyone is shoulder to shoulder, ear to ear, cheek to cheek, talking to each other, whispering in the corners, discussing, laughing, sharing, drinking coffee, drinking tea. And so I made my way through this, these knots of people, you know, really engaged in conversation. And there's a side room where these, the important bilateral meetings take place. And I looked through the, through the glass doors and I could see on one side of the table was the European Union delegation, which had negotiated the Iran nuclear deal. On the European side, it was all women. And the Iranian delegation, all the top Iranian negotiators were there at the Oslo Forum, and it was all men. So all the women and all the men.

And when I had Cathy Ashton as one of the guests in The Mediator's Studio, she talked about how, in her mediation, there were many leading - Wendy Sherman was on the American side, Cathy Ashton, who, of course, was before Federica Mogherini, Helga Schmidt, who was the political director for Federica Mogherini. They played absolutely decisive roles. And Cathy Ashton was in no doubt that women, having women at the table, can make a difference. As a journalist, I don't see politics, society through a gender lens, but I do see gender as one of the qualities of our identity, of what makes us who we are. And it is important to have all genders as part of this process.

[28:45] - Adam Cooper

Lyse you mentioned those 500 days of failure that mediators very often experience. And I'm thinking back to Syria and the times that you've spent interviewing survivors of the conflict. If you were talking to someone who had lost their home or their family and had probably given up on mediators coming to their rescue, are we right to give them hope that one day it might not be so bad, that even if success is rare, mediation can very rarely work?

[29:15] - Lyse Doucet

That belief, which is a, it's the rock of all mediation, it is what drove Kofi Annan for six months, it is what drove Lakhdar Brahimi. It is what drove Staffan de Mistura. It is what drives Geir Pedersen now, who is the current Syria envoy. That someday, someday, the moment will come. And Lakhdar Brahimi used to say this as well, is that, the job of the mediator is just to be ready to do everything possible, to be prepared for that moment, when the warring sides will say, now we want to talk. Now is the time to make peace. And that moment eluded Kofi Annan. It eluded Lakhdar Brahimi, although it started talks, indirect talks started. Indirect talks continued with Staffan de Mistura. And now you have here Pedersen, who's having the talks with, with the sides in the same room, finally, for the, for the constitutional talks. That's his way of trying to approach these talks. But I have to say that, that sense of when a peace process is when there's hope in the process and hope that, in fact, is backed up by tangible signs that this process is moving, however slowly, however uncertainly, but moving in the right direction. That is something, they were moments you savour.

[30:48] - Adam Cooper

Another moment which Lyse savoured with a bittersweetness, was the first round of talks on Yemen between representatives of the Houthi armed opposition and the ousted Government, which took place in Stockholm.

[30:59] - Lyse Doucet

From the very first day, the two sides, the opposing sides, sat down together in the same room. They talked to each other and one of my colleagues from Syria was covering those talks with me. And we almost, we almost cried, because we remembered when the talks began in Montreux in Switzerland between the Syrian opposition and the Syrian Government, and how for years they refused to sit in the same room and talk. And I said to my Syrian colleague, who we met in the lobby of the hotel, you know, when we were covering the Yemeni talks, and I said, "oh, my goodness" I said, "it just feels like Montreux". And he says, "it does". And then the next day, he said to me, "Lyse, I didn't sleep. I didn't sleep at all last night because I was so upset", because it reminded him of just how hard it was to make any progress at all on the Syrian track".

[32:02] - Adam Cooper

So, Lyse, after four decades of reporting on wars, do you ever allow yourself the luxury of optimism?

[32:10] - Lyse Doucet

When I began covering conflicts, I used to fall back on Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist who used to talk about optimism of the will and pessimism of the intellect. And then when I decided I should update,

you know, more of a Cold War mantra, I fell back on Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who used to say in his lovely and inspiring way that only Archbishop Desmond Tutu can, about how we are prisoners of hope. But of late, I've been thinking of my dear friend and really a respected mediator, Ghassan Salamé, who put every effort of his being and his intellectual prowess into trying to make peace in Libya. So much so, he collapsed. When I asked him in The Mediator's Studio how he describes himself, he says, I am an active, very active, very active pessimist. And that is to say, you know things can and will go wrong. But as a mediator, you will be as active as possible to ensure that you can try to put it right.

[33:16] - Adam Cooper

Well at a time when the world is facing so many challenges, Lyse, I think we need that spirit of optimism that we, we try, no matter how large the challenges.

[33:24] - Lyse Doucet

Thank you so much. Good to talk to you. I think you should take over The Mediator's Studio.

[33:28] - Adam Cooper

I couldn't possibly. That was Lyse Doucet, Chief International Correspondent of the BBC, in The Mediator's Studio, the new Oslo Forum podcast brought to you by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I hope you'll join me in The Mediator's Studio next time, when my guest will be that active pessimist that Lyse mentioned, Ghassan Salamé, talking about why he took on mission impossible mediating Libya's civil war, and how he nearly lost his life in a Baghdad bomb. And if you've enjoyed your time with us in The Mediator's Studio, please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts, and please do recommend it to a friend. You can also find them at OsloForum.org. And please feel free to continue the conversation with me on Twitter @adamtalkspeace. For the moment, that's all from me, Adam Cooper, thank you for listening.