

There Is Still Time To Find a Peaceful Solution to the Syria Crisis

Mohammad Mahfoud, an independent Syrian activist and president of the Danish-Syrian Friendship Society, was interviewed by Tom Gillesberg, chairman of the Schiller Institute in Denmark on Sept. 3.

Tom Gillesberg: Mohammad Mahfoud, you are the chairman of the Danish-Syrian Friendship Society, but you are also very well-connected, through family and many other things, to many different places in Syria, and follow very closely what is going on there, on a day-to-day basis. So first I would like you to say something about what the situation there is presently, because the media coverage here is very colored by the fact that many countries in Western Europe and the United States are almost at war [with Syria], and therefore do not really cover what is happening on the ground, and instead, is running a disinformation war.

Mohammad Mahfoud: Yes. Our information—the more correct information about Syria—we get from our families and our friends in Syria. They live all the way from the South to the North. We have a lot of members in our organization, who are calling their families and their friends in Syria almost every day. Of course there is something happening in Syria, but not everywhere. The biggest problems are now in some parts of Aleppo.

Gillesberg: In terms of military fighting?

Mahfoud: Yes, military fighting. Aleppo is a very big city. There are about 2-3 million inhabitants. There is fighting in

maybe two or three places, especially in the center of Aleppo, which has very small streets, and many more inhabitants. And of course, it is a very big problem for the military to fight in such places, because it causes a lot of damage for the civilians. The army and the government are very aware of that, and try not to damage the civilians, because as is known, Aleppo is a town which is supporting the President of Syria and the government in Syria. And that's why those we call "the rebels" are using the civilians as a shelter in Aleppo.

And we have, of course, some very small places like Latakia, close to the border with Turkey. Sometimes, there is fighting between the military and what you call the "Free Syrian Army." There are some problems around the border with Iraq. But generally, the situation in Syria is much better than it was before, even if you don't hear this from the media.

Gillesberg: So, basically, the military fighting is actually not all over Syria, but is in very few places, where



Mohammad Mahfoud (left), interviewed by Tom Gillesberg of the Schiller Institute in Denmark.

Schiller Institute in Denmark

you could say that the rebels use the civilian population as hostages?

Mahfoud: Yes, because what you call the “opposition” is fighting a guerilla war. They are not everywhere, but you never know when they will attack, when they will shoot, and they don’t care. They shoot at people, at civilians, or at military forces. They only have to shoot at someone to make trouble, to create damage to the civilians and to the government.

Sanctions Are Hurting the People, Not the Government

Gillesberg: When we spoke earlier, you said that right now it’s actually not the military fighting that’s the biggest problem for Syria, especially for the population, but the sanctions that have been imposed on Syria. Could you explain that for us?

Mahfoud: Yes, when we talk to our families and our friends in Syria, the biggest problem for them right now is that everything has become very, very expensive to buy. For some things you have to pay five or six times the price as before. They need medicine in the hospitals, they need food, fuels. There is a shortage of some foods and fuel and the things people need for everyday life.

And even those of us who live in Denmark or in Germany and other places outside of Syria, we have problems; for instance, to send money to our families in Syria. If I want to send a little bit of money to my family to help them, I can’t. If I have to travel to Syria, to visit my family, I can’t. Because we can’t fly from Copenhagen; we can’t fly from England, from France. There are many places from which you can’t travel to Syria right now.

And of course, those sanctions are not hurting the government. I believe that the government was prepared for those sanctions, and they have what they need; but the people in Syria—the poor, the ordinary people—they pay for those sanctions. And I believe that if the situation stays as it is now, then, in maybe half a year, we are going to have serious problems in Syria because of these sanctions, affecting the ordinary people, not the government.

We know from the Iraq War, that the sanctions through 12 years didn’t affect Saddam Hussein or the



VOA

Some Syrian refugees are invited into Turkey, Jordan, or Lebanon, to play the “refugee card” against President Assad, charged Mahfoud. Shown: a Syrian refugee center on the Turkish border, August 2012.

government, but it was the ordinary people, the Iraqis, who paid a very high price for those sanctions.

Gillesberg: In the media, or from the governments of the West, it has often been said that we will not go to war—at least not right now. Instead, we will choose something peaceful, sanctions, in order to get a change. What you are saying is that in reality those peaceful means are actually a war—but a war directed against the population?

Mahfoud: I believe that if you ask a Syrian, they would prefer that the West was attacking Syria militarily, because they would then maybe kill 20,000, 40,000, or 100,000, but those sanctions are killing 24 million. I don’t believe that the Western countries are punishing the government; I believe that it’s a punishment for the Syrians because they are supporting their President. They want to make them suffer, to get hungry, and then they will agree to the West removing Bashar al-Assad. As long as they support Bashar al-Assad, I believe that the Western countries will keep those sanctions against Syria.

Gillesberg: To collectively punish the population for not making an uproar against their government.

Mahfoud: Exactly.

Refugees: The Propaganda War

Gillesberg: Something similar seems to be the case with regard to refugees. With all this fighting that has been going on, there are a lot of refugees in Syria, not only Syrians [displaced by the war], but also because Syria historically has been one of the places that has

been receiving lots and lots of refugees from many other countries in the region. So a lot of these people are now in trouble. What is the situation? I know there are a lot of refugees internally in Syria that are running away from fighting, but there has also been this buildup of refugee camps in Turkey. Could you say something about that?

Mahfoud: Yes. The real refugees are inside Syria. We have, for example, people in some cities that are receiving refugees from other cities. Their families, their friends—and they are helping each other. Some of the refugees who, for example, go to Turkey, to Jordan or Lebanon, were invited to go there, to use the refugee card against the President, Bashar Al-Assad. Turkey wants to show the world that they have problems with refugees, and something has to be done: Establishing what they call a “no-fly zone.”

They are using the refugees as in propaganda war against the government of Syria. We saw refugees inside Turkey that were fighting to get back to Syria, but the Turks said no. The Turks said, “No, we cannot guarantee your safety in Syria.” They are prisoners now in Turkey.

Gillesberg: They are not allowed to go back home?

Mahfoud: They are not allowed to back to Syria; even if most of them would prefer to go back to Syria, and the government of Syria is willing to help them and hopes that the refugees will come back home to Syria. They know that all the Western countries and the entire world is watching those refugees in Turkey and in Jordan. I believe that the government will do everything to get those refugees back to Syria.

Gillesberg: There have been stories—we know that there are these refugee camps in Turkey, but nobody really knows what is going on there, because they have been cut off. The media, but also politicians, the Red Cross, and other organizations, have not been allowed to come in and check what is going on.

Mahfoud: Yes, we heard from Turkish newspapers that they were talking about almost 400 girls from Syria that were raped in those camps. We saw in a newspaper from Saudi Arabia, that some Saudi Arabians are buying small daughters from the camp in Turkey, and the price was between \$500 and \$800, or something like that. And we believe that the Syrian refugees in Turkey are treated very very badly. They are being kept as prisoners in Turkey.

And the same situation exists in Jordan. We saw that two weeks ago, there was a fight in the refugee

camp in Jordan, and it was the police and security forces from Jordan who were fighting against the refugees. They were very badly treated in Jordan, and most of them would prefer to go back inside Syria again.

Gillesberg: Because a lot of them have also been tricked. They have been promised that if they left, they would get maybe money, or they would be allowed to immigrate to western European countries, the United States.

Mahfoud: And some of them were forced to flee from Syria. Some of them were told, “If you don’t leave the country, we will burn your houses and kill your families,” and so on. There are a lot of things that have forced these people to take refuge in Turkey or Jordan.

The Truth About the Massacres

Gillesberg: The Western media has taken organizations like the Syrian Human Rights Observatory [HRO] in London at their word, and simply blamed all the massacres we have seen in Syria over the past 18 months, on the government. What do you know of the reality on the ground? Because I know even there was, a week ago, a new massacre, right?

Mahfoud: Yes. Most members of this organization are from the Muslim Brotherhood, and they are from the opposition. How can you get the truth from the opposition? We never hear about people who are maybe supporting the government, what their opinion is about the situation in Syria. We always get the news and the information from the opposition from the Syrian HRO, and most of its members are from the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, which is fighting against the government.

Gillesberg: With weapons?

Mahfoud: Yes, with weapons. And that’s why we don’t believe in these human rights activities, and everything from London.

Gillesberg: But what can you say then about these massacres?

Mahfoud: Yes, massacres have happened in Syria. But most of them are committed by what you call the Free Syrian Army. And they blame the government and the Syrian Army for doing that. Many supporters of the President and of the government were killed in those massacres. How could the military and the Syrian Army kill their own people and their own supporters?

Gillesberg: So most of the massacres were actually



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Some people were forced to leave Syria, because they were threatened by the Free Syrian Army, Mahfoud explained. "They say, 'If you don't leave Syria, we have to kill your family, or burn your house.'" Shown: shelling of Homs, June 2012.

massacres of people that were supporting the government?

Mahfoud: Yes, most of them, from all of the religions. It is not a problem between Shi'a Muslim and Sunni Muslim. They are killing everyone who is not supporting the rebels.

Gillesberg: There has also been a lot of talk in the media, that now you see all these defections—military leaders defecting; the prime minister defected a month ago; diplomats defecting. So, is this a pattern, that most people now are trying to flee from Assad, because they know that he is going to be overthrown soon? Or is it actually the case, that most of the government and the military is actually standing together to defend Syria, and these defections more are a product of bribes and blackmail and situations like that?

Mahfoud: Yes, but basically all, even the Americans and the opposition from Syria were disappointed that only a few persons left Syria after one and a half years of this problem. The truth is that very very few persons have left Syria. And we know that those people are leaving Syria for money. We know that Qatar is inviting all the officers or people who are working in the government; that huge sums of money [are involved];

that some people are trying to get money from this situation right now.

Or some people maybe were forced to leave Syria, because we know the Free Syrian Army is treating people. They come with some information to some person, and they say, "If you don't leave Syria, we have to kill your family, or burn your house."

So, some people do it for money; others are maybe forced to leave. But the truth is, that very very few persons have left Syria after one and a half years.

The True Opposition

Gillesberg: Prior to this eruption of foreign-funded and armed violence in Syria, during the last year and a half, there was actually an opposition

within Syria, which was demanding reforms from the Assad government, with peaceful means, and they participated in the recent elections and have been pressing for dialogue. Has that voice been totally stifled, or is it still there?

Mahfoud: Well, as you mention, there is some opposition in Syria. We have to differentiate, what we call opposition in Syria. We have the honest opposition in Syria, who live in Syria right now. And they are demanding some reforms from the government and from the President. And the President and the government in Syria have agreed. And we get a new parliamentary election in Syria. And we have two ministers from the opposition right now in the government in Syria.

And this kind of opposition in Syria, they don't recognize the opposition that is living in Istanbul, in Turkey. They disagree on how they will treat the situation in Syria.

Yes, there are still some people that want a peaceful solution for the conflict in Syria. But we in Syria believe that it is not the opposition which is deciding whether they want to go to discuss with the government or to keep fighting. We believe that Turkey and Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and of course, the United States—they are refusing, they are pushing those

people to not agree to discuss or to have a peaceful solution in Syria.

I don't believe that even the rebels in Syria benefit somehow from this situation. They are destroying Syria!

But I believe that they don't make their own decisions, about whether they want to discuss with the government or keep fighting. I believe that it is from the outside, from the United States, and especially, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and Qatar; they are keeping those people fighting in Syria, because they don't want reforms in Syria, they don't want democracy in Syria, they want to destroy Syria.

Gillesberg: So what is the best outcome you can foresee at this point? What would you like to happen right now to get out of this mess?

Mahfoud: I hope that all the world, even the U.S.A., and Russia and China, will put pressure on both sides, the government and the opposition, to have a dialogue, a peaceful solution. And we have a Presidential election in 2014, and of course, we have to get a free democratic election in Syria, and the Syrians will vote. Maybe in-

ternational observers have to ensure that the election will be fair, and of course, the Syrian people will respect the elected President in 2014.

Gillesberg: So you are basically saying that if the Western world, instead of trying to make regime change and having permanent war, would just sit down with Russia in the United Nations Security Council, and actually follow what they agreed on through the United Nations, of having peaceful negotiations, then there would actually be a way out?

Mahfoud: Yes, if the United States, of course, indirectly, through Turkey and Saudi Arabia and Qatar, stops sending weapons to the Free Syrian Army, and if they stop sending money to keep those people in action, I believe that a peaceful solution will be a reality in Syria. Because I believe that most of the people, maybe 90% of all the Syrians, want a peaceful solution. But the problem is that, with all the money and the weapons that are getting into Syria through Turkey and Jordan, it will be impossible to have a peaceful solution.

Gillesberg: Thank you, and we hope that you will succeed in having that future for Syria!

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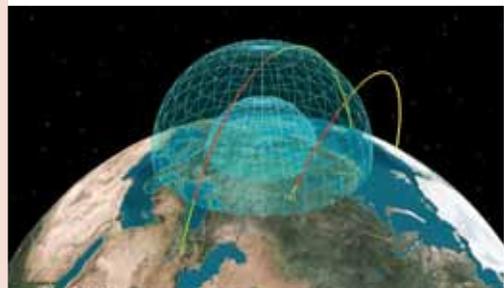
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