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AIDING CIVILIANS IN A SECTARIAN CONFLICT:

CAN ASSISTANCE TO SYRIA HEAL WITHOUT HARM?

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PARTICIPANTS:

Moderator:

WILLIAM McCANTS
Fellow and Director, Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World
The Brookings Institution

Panelists:

ABED AYOUB
President
Islamic Relief USA

MOUAZ MOUSTAFA
Executive Director
Syrian Emergency Task Force

MARIA STEPHAN
Strategic Planner, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations
U.S. Department of State

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. McCANTS: Hi. Good afternoon. I'm Will McCants. I'm a fellow at the Brookings Saban Center, and I direct its project on U.S.-Islamic world relations.

Today, we're here to talk about aiding civilians in a sectarian conflict, with the focus specifically on Syria. The question I'm trying to get to the bottom to this afternoon is whether nonlethal assistance to Syria can be used to help heal the sectarian divide without making it worse. I mean, there's a number of ways to look at the conflict in Syria. You could divide it along ethnic lines, religious lines, and so forth.

Today, the focus is going to be on the conflict between the Sunni and other religious groups in Syria. We've got a terrific panel to help us answer this question.

On my left is Dr. Abed Ayoub, who is President of the Islamic Relief USA, which has provided humanitarian aid to more than half a million Syrians. Islamic Relief USA was founded in 1993, and is part of the larger Islamic Relief organization, which started in the U.K. in 1984.

Although Islamic Relief focuses on countries with large Muslim populations, its promotional material claims that the organization aids citizens of those countries regardless of creed.

Before becoming President of the Islamic Relief USA, Dr. Ayoub spent years working in the international development sector. His bio also says he's working on a second Ph.D., which is pretty amazing.

Mouaz Moustafa, to his left, is executive director of the Syrian

Emergency Task Force, which provides humanitarian assistance and training to Syrians primarily living in the north, I gather.

MR. MOUSTAFA: Yep.

MR. McCANTS: Some of the aid has been in the form of communications equipments, and the training has included assisting local councils in Idlib and Aleppo, and documenting human rights violations, and coordinate emergency responses.

Mr. Moustafa has worked closely with the privately-owned Syrian broadcasting company, al Hud TV to produce media that unites all the factions in Syria, regardless of creed. He's also helped relocate Christians in Idlib Province.

Finally, Dr. Maria Stephan is the lead foreign affairs officer for the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations -- CSO. She's with CSO's Policy in Middle East-North Africa Operation Teams.

Before joining the government, Dr. Stephan taught at Georgetown, and worked for an NGO that focused on nonviolent conflict. She's also written two books on nonviolent resistance.

Before we get to our panelists, who I very much want to hear from, I wanted to sort of sketch out the dynamics of one part of the funding that is fueling this sectarian conflict in Syria. It hasn't been in the news much until recently, and it's an area I focus on only because I study Salafi militia groups around the world, and now there's quite a few operating in Syria.

So, I have -- as incidental to that kind of research, I have seen how these Salafi groups have been nourished over the past two years of the conflict in Syria by money that's coming from the Gulf.

Now most people, when they hear "money coming from the Gulf," they think, "Ah, this must be state support. It must be Saudi or another country," but, in fact, the countries like Saudi Arabia have actually been funneling a lot of their money towards the organizations that the United States is supporting -- the governance organizations or the supreme military council.

A lot of the money that's coming to the Salafi groups -- almost all of it is coming from private individuals in the Gulf. And there are millions of dollars coming across the border, a lot of it being carried across in suitcases and bags. So, it's very hard to track.

There was a fantastic article yesterday in *the Washington Post* by Joby Warrick on the money that's coming across. And he got a quote from a senior official who has access to classified material -- U.S. official -- saying that they estimate $600 million has made its way from the Gulf in this manner.

Again, very hard to track, but just to give you some sense of the scale of what is coming across -- now bear in mind, this is in a context of at least militia groups that don't have a Salafi orientation who are part of the FSA complaining about not getting money to pay troops, not getting enough money to pay troops, not getting enough regular ammunition, not getting weapons. And they're looking at these Salafi groups that are getting all the goodies, and they're looking on them with envy, and, in some cases, some of them are leaving to join these groups, because they're just better provided for.

Salafism, as far as I can tell, in Syria, did not really have strong roots in the country before the Civil War. Of course, there were some Salafis in Syria, but they weren't highly organized, and it didn't seem to be too widespread.

What has happened with the conflict is that the Salafis that were there -- and Salafis who have joined them -- are using it as an opportunity to really shore up the support for their ideology and their organizations, primarily by attracting money from the Gulf, because they understand that this is where the money is.

And you even have instances of people who were, at one point, you know, with short hair and clean-shaven all of a sudden, growing a beard, adopting a certain kind of clothes. There's also examples of brigades naming themselves after a particular Salafi sheik, because they're hoping they'll attract money from him. This is the kind of pull that the money is having.

If you're one of these groups, how do you go about making your pitches for this money? They do it on Facebook, on Twitter, on YouTube. It's almost like a Kickstarter-type campaign, where you're trying to produce very glossy photos and glossy videos to demonstrate that you're doing something on the ground.

When there are attacks carried out, these groups are some of the best at producing videos of them and repackaging them, precisely because they are trying to attract this sort of money from abroad, whereas some of the less Islamist-oriented groups are much more quiet about what they're doing, because they're getting money from other sources.

But for these groups that need to impress a certain audience, particularly in the Gulf, they're much more open about what they're doing in trying to attract a lot more of that support.

A major part of the pitch for this kind of money is anti-Shia

sentiment. The conflict is being framed very much as a sectarian war -- that the West has abandoned the Sunni community in Syria, and that these groups are the ones who recognize the real danger that is being presented by Shi'ism, with Iran in its lead, supporting the Alawite President of Syria.

This is quite popular in some circles in the Gulf, where this private money is being raised. And, of course, you remember, in a number of these states, there is also a lot of paranoia about their own minority or majority Shia populations. And so some of these fears go both ways that they're playing on.

So, they will make very public pitches on Twitter to other like-minded people for money. And they're very explicit in their fund-raising. You can follow their hashtags easily. They set certain dollar amounts. They explain how to get in touch with them in order to contribute money, and this money is flowing across the border. And in a number of these countries, there aren't very tight regulations on how this money moves.

And even when countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar try to clamp down on this private fund-raising -- which they have -- a lot of that money will move to more lax countries, particularly in Kuwait. A lot of this money is being raised in Kuwait -- and I hate to single the country out, but that's just the fact of the matter -- that a lot of these Salafi groups are making their money based on these fund-raising bundlers that live in Kuwait.

This money coming in is not only having an impact on the militias, I would argue, but, I think, is also exacerbating what is already a very wide sectarian divide. And as a lot of these militias move into a position of offering governance to their people, I think they're going to be providing a lot more public

services based on sectarian lines, and not necessarily based on a person's identity as a Syrian national.

So, I wanted to begin, then, by just sort of giving you this broad-brush overview of the most extreme case of using aid from the outside - and this includes lethal aid and nonlethal aid - to affect the conflict in Syria in a way I think is quite harmful and detrimental to its future. I mean, dividing the country along sectarian lines does not bode well for a future united Syria.

But I also think there are many cases where religiously-motivated organizations are also trying to work against this, and are adopting aid strategies to heal this divide.

So, what I want to do at this point, then, is to turn it over to the panelists, give them each about five to ten minutes to talk about perhaps some of the negative effects they've seen from this kind of funding coming from abroad, from aid agencies, but, also, to talk about more positive instances of aid organizations working to heal this rift in Syrian society.

So, Dr. Ayoub, you first, please.

DR. AYOUB: Thank you so much. Thank you so much for inviting us, and it's my honor to be here today.

Actually, I just want to remind you that the conflict, when it first started in Syria, did not start at the sectarian; it was actually part of the Arab Spring. And the demonstrations was very peaceful demonstrations and so on. Then, after that, things turned into violence, and the problems started.

To me, you know, it's a -- I'm a humanitarian worker, and we, as in Islamic Relief, part of our mission is actually to provide aid regardless on color,

faith, or gender. So, for us, we don't discriminate -- and, actually, we do believe that the misuse of relief -- when you start using the relief to advance any political agenda, ideology, or even religion -- relief, as we believe in it, as a Muslim, we believe that the relief should be for the sake of God. We are in a position to give, and others in a position that they are actually in need, we should provide it, regardless.

And that's -- definitely match with the humanitarian aid principles -- and if you look at the Red Cross -- how they operate -- and other organizations -- how they operate -- it's how we operate. It's neutral, and the aid has to be, neutrally and without any discrimination, distributed.

We try to stick to these kind of principles, and we try to encourage others to stick to these principles. But we know, also, it's very difficult. It's not that simple.

And we know that, you know, certain, you know, NGOs or organizations, they do use the humanitarian aid to advance political agendas and so on.

But for us, you know, this is something that we always preach against, and we try to have the humanitarian workers to stick to the humanitarian aid principles.

We got into Syria late, actually. Islamic Relief, our focus was on the refugees only, simply because Syria was blacklisted. And for us to get into a situation to help, it has to be physically possible and legally permissible.

But we tried to go to the Treasury Department, and the State Department, and the White House, encourage them to issue an OFAC license

that the Syrian organization -- or those who wants to help in Syria can really go there and help, because, simply, we want to stay in compliance.

And as a Muslim organization operating in the United States, we know it's not that simple. We know it is very difficult, and we know, you know, any mistake can result in shutting the organization down. We have to be very careful and to stay in compliance.

And we provided aid in Lebanon to everyone who actually fled Syria. We provided aid to the Syrian refugees in Jordan. And we went to Turkey when, also, the Syrian refugees start going to Turkey.

And after the United States issued the OFAC license that the organization can go inside Syria, we start to find ways how to get inside Syria and help inside Syria. But we know, also, that, you know, Syrian situation is totally different. This is a new thing that we learn how to deal with it.

The crisis in Syria is totally different than the crisis that we responded to before. This is not an earthquake. This is not a flood. This is a war, and there's so many different parties got actually involved in this. So, you have the regime, you have the government, and you have other groups who are actually armed and so on. It is extremely difficult to balance and to operate.

And we find that, you know, other groups, you know, whether they are Sunnis, or Shi'ites, or Alawites, or Druze, or whoever it is, that they need help -- that we find ourselves actually there to help them, and to assist them.

And a half million of people actually benefited from Islamic Relief work. So, that including Christians in Syria.

And we're proud that we also partnered with others. You know,

Islamic Relief doesn't work by itself, you know. We partner with the Mormon Church. We partner with the Catholic Relief. We partner with Oxfam, Save the Children, Care International, and others who are trying to do good work. And Islamic Relief is part of these efforts.

And we not only respond to the Muslim world, by the way. So, even with the Mormon Church, we went together to Samoa. We went together to Haiti, and to many places around the world.

But we try to stick to that, and we're trying to do our best.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. Mouaz?

MR. MOUSTAFA: You know, first of all, thank you for having me here, and it's really an honor to be here with this distinguished panel.

And, you know, what you were saying earlier is right, you know. We have huge amounts of money that are coming from religious establishments based in the Gulf that go to militias, to armed groups inside of Syria, and these militias -- what's most disturbing is that they're not -- you know, first of all, you know, they're not exactly who represent the initial sort of heart of the revolution, which is a secular, or a democratic, pluralist Syria, civilian-governed.

And that money's used for arms, but, at the same time, it is used for consolidating governance. And that's what's most disturbing.

And, again, you have a wide range of different militias operating -- things like al Haroshem, and then you go sort of another step higher, like Jabhat al Nusra, and then the most disturbing -- and, I think, the latest edition -- is the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, and their way of not having any red lines in between being an armed force fighting against the regime, but also fighting, by

the way, against the FSA many times -- and then, also, being sort of the judicial branch, Sharia courts that can establish judgments in three to five days, as opposed to any sort of, you know, due process and so on -- and religious leaders and so on.

So, for them, they can take this money, and, without any red lines, be judge, executioner, civilian governance structure, and military group. And I think that is incredibly disturbing -- and humanitarian aid that comes out of that base on these very specific ideological, you know, agendas that they may have.

And I think the most important thing in providing humanitarian aid to Syria -- specifically, in the north and liberated and contested areas -- is to do it through civilian governing structures that are there from the ground up, that are there legitimately -- at least sometimes pseudo-democratically, or elected, or, you know, legitimate to the populations, you know, that they run. These are their own towns, these are their own villages, and so on.

And aiding humanitarian aid through these governing structures is the only way to really push back against some of these groups that have very specific agendas. So, politicizing the aid that's coming in is the most disturbing thing, and that's what, I think, adds to the sectarian aspects of the conflict in Syria.

And I don't want to under, you know, play the sectarian divide that exists there, but I think it's important to remember that Syria specifically is a country that has a very wide sort of mosaic of different religions, and ethnic groups, and cultures.

And that's a merit not to the Assad regime, as he tries to put out in

his propaganda, but that's a merit to the Syrian people. This is a country thousands of years old, and the people that are there have lived together for hundreds and hundreds of years.

And knowing that, again, gives sort of greater, you know, evidence that supporting civilian councils in these governing structures that are arising, as the Syrian people themselves, from the ground up, in these areas -- that have done, by the way, amazing work with very little or no resources at times -- are the best ones to aid -- and to also remember that in this area -- and just from multiple visits there -- you see people reverting many times to sort of their circles of security.

When there is no security in the regime, when there is constant shelling, when there are different groups that are sort of going around, people, you know, come back to their geographic area, and, then as things get worse, come back to their religious group, and then the sect within their religious group, then their clan, then their extended family, and then, at the end of the day, to their immediate families.

And that gives off the perception of this greater sort of sectarian divide that exists. And it gives the opportunity for different groups with specific agendas -- the sectarian agendas -- to sort of take advantage of that. But it's also to remember that that is a big factor in what we see, in terms of these divisions and -- you know, like Christians living alone together, or the Alawites fleeing from an area, and so on.

But from experience -- and when we go inside, and you see -- for example, in Idlib Province, there are three villages: Kanaieh, Judeida, and

Yacobiyeh. These are exclusively Christian villages, and we had went there very soon after their liberation.

Actually, we were helping deliver a hospital for the Italian government close to that village, and when we realized that these three villages were liberated, we went and we spoke to the residents. And we were surprised to find that, for example, the FSA did not carry arms close to some of the churches -- or even the courtyards of the churches.

It was surprising to see that the Christian villages had opened their doors to thousands of Muslim refugees that had escaped just where fighting was ongoing -- and continues to be close by.

And all we tried to help do was facilitate some sort of formal agreements written down and establish a civilian administrative council that was mostly Christian. There was a couple of Muslim members in it. And we saw that when you support the civilian councils that rise up in that area, it is the best way to really sort of keep away these other politically agenda that comes with these different, you know, organizations, like Jabhat al Nusra or others.

And most of these battalions, by the way, are transient battalions. A lot of them are not localized and so on, and they really are very well aware of their public relations in that area, and they always take a step back, you know, if there is, you know, a big amount of support for the civilian council. And these civilian councils are seen as very legitimate by the people of the area, so it's the best way to sort of drive them back without having to fight them, you know, and so on.

So, I think it's important to remember two things. And one is that

they have no red lines. These groups and armed groups that go in -- especially the sort of more Salafi extremist groups -- have no red lines. They can take the aid, they can use it for arms, they can use it for humanitarian aid.

They use it to consolidate governance and intimidate people -- specifically in Aleppo now, where you see Islamic State of Iraq and Sham controlling most of the power -- you know, sending their own preachers to mosques, where -- you know, speaking to people inside.

It's disturbing during jama'ah prayer, during the sermon on Friday. You know, they would say these prayers that are so extreme that people don't even say "amen." This is something that doesn't happen in a mosque; everybody says "amen" as they hear sort of the prayers from the preacher, from the imam.

But for civilian councils, it's more difficult. We have to be able to send humanitarian aid, but with a bigger strategic plan. We have to know that they need flour, they need oil, they need clean water, and so on. They need medicine, but, at the same time, they need to have a civilian police force that is seen as non-corrupt, as operating on the ground, as sort of going back to the civilian council for their orders.

They need to know that the armed groups in the area act as the Department of Defense against the regime, but do not administer these areas, do not become the judges, or the executioners, or anything else -- or the police.

And we have to know if you have prison, you have to have flour to feed the prisoners. If you want due process, it takes weeks, instead of a Sharia court that may take two or three days.

And I think having a comprehensive plan when we give aid, where we're aiding these civilian governing structures that are rising up and emerging in these liberated areas -- which is our best hope -- and having the red lines that these civilian governance are not led by anyone that leads an armed militia or a religious scholar, regardless of the faith.

I think if we do that, and we do it effectively, and in a greater way, that's the only way to help marginalize and combat these different groups that bring in the sort of sectarian tensions that's growing more and more every day in Syria.

And I'll end there.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you, Mouaz. Maria?

DR. STEPHAN: Right. Thank you, Will, and thanks to Brookings for organizing this panel today.

I'm pleased that my co-panelist, I think, helpfully reframed the challenge a bit.

What is happening in Syria is definitely a political conflict that's developing sectarian overtones. I think it is helpful -- and we often forget that this did start as a cross-sectarian popular nonviolent uprising for basic rights and human dignity.

Unfortunately, there was a pretty brutal response by the regime, and people took up weapons for reasons that are pretty easy to understand. And since that time, a lot of outside actors, as we've discussed, have gotten involved. They have different political agendas.

And about two and a half years later, we have over 100,000 dead,

millions displaced, and a real tragedy unfolding in a beautiful country.

I think I speak on behalf of all of my colleagues in the U.S. government who are working on Syria here in Washington and out in the field when I say that everyone is very frustrated and deeply troubled by what is happening inside Syria. Obviously, the frustration we feel is nothing compared to what Syrians are feeling and experience on a daily basis. There's probably not a single Syrian who is not affected in some way by what is happening inside the country.

The U.S. continues to support the Syrian people's desire for a democratic, pluralistic, unified Syria, and we support a transition, along the lines of the Geneva II framework. Although my bureau -- the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations at the State Department -- does not focus on humanitarian assistance, I think it's worth pointing out that the U.S. has provided over $1 billion in humanitarian aid to the Syrian people -- more than any other country. And this is for Syrians, obviously, inside Syria and in the surrounding region.

Apart from the purely humanitarian assistance, we've committed over $250 million in nonlethal transition support to the Syrian opposition. Mainly, this has taken the form of aid to the Syrian Opposition Coalition, to local councils -- including some of the same councils that Mouaz has mentioned and is working with -- some civil society organizations, professional groups and unions, basically to help them provide services to their communities, to extend the rule of law. And you won't find many Syrians who don't list security and rule of law as their top concern and priority in their area -- and to enhance stability inside the

liberated parts of the country.

We're also using this funding to provide nonlethal aid to the SMC -- the Syrian Military Council -- of the Free Syrian Army, under General Idris.

More specific to what my bureau is involved in, in the overall Syria support effort -- we, since the beginning -- and I actually -- I spent a year out in Turkey, and in Istanbul, and in Southern Turkey, working with the Syrian opposition in 2012 through 2013. And the vast majority of our aid is going to groups inside Syria. Our approach is very much bottom up and inside out, in terms of the support we're providing.

We mainly focus on a few lines of effort, with the first being an integrated community security program -- really, to address many of the issues and concerns that Mouaz raised. This is providing assistance for public order in specific areas. The goal is to link police, judges, lawyers with each other, and with local and provincial councils, including, increasingly, elected councils in these provinces -- with the idea that, really, security is the prerequisite for effective governance in these areas -- and as a bulwark against extremism.

The second main line of effort for CSO is civilian train and equip. So, this is training and provision of equipment, mainly in the communications realm, so that Syrians inside can communicate effectively with each other -- including when there are internet blackouts.

And the purpose of this effort is to link, again, the local councils, civil society organizations, unions to each other and other activists, and to increase the cohesion and connectivity, again, of groups inside Syria -- and to improve their ability to provide essential services and essentially compete with

the groups that we're talking about today.

The third main line of effort is the provision of nonlethal aid to the SMC -- the Syrian Military Council. Again, this is mainly in the form of vehicles, communications equipment, medical and other nonlethal aid to enhance the SMC's operational effectiveness as the moderate voice of the armed opposition.

CSO is also heavily involved in supporting independent media. A lot of that assistance is going to independent FM radio and satellite TV stations. Again, these are independent entities; these are not promoting USG messaging or anything of the sort. It's not strategic communications; it's very much to empower independent media voices, and to help counter regime and extremist narratives, hold the opposition accountable, and hopefully lay the foundation for a tolerant national dialogue about the future of the country.

Perhaps getting even a bit more granular, CSO has been involved for over a year and a half in efforts to strengthen civil society and to prevent intercommunal violence. Actually, the first workshop that we helped support when I arrived in Turkey was a workshop focusing on bringing together various representatives of different sectarian groups to counter sectarian violence, and to develop unified narratives.

And, actually, that particular workshop featured Syrians from all the different sects, and this group remains especially close in communicating via Facebook, and they're involved in each other's activities, even to this day.

An effort along the lines of civil society support is in the independent media. We're really focusing on supporting independent media outlets, provide civic messaging, news across, using multimedia platforms --

again, to encourage national dialogue, to counter the more vitriolic sectarian rhetoric that exists -- and which, by the way, has a very regional presence, as well. It's not only in Syria but in the region.

We're supporting an Ambassadors for Peace program. The goal of this program is to train and help create a network of local Syrian leaders who are skilled in conflict resolution, nonviolent approaches to addressing communal conflict.

Increasingly, because of this security situation in the country, we're supporting a "train the trainer" model so that Syrians can go in and replicate the trainings inside, which is an effective model, I think, in this current environment.

We're providing support to the Syrian business community through trainings and skills building, and creating a network of Syrians who are already involved in investing or considering investing in the liberated parts of the country.

An important facet is, I think -- a helpful program is the work that CSO is doing to support women in security. I think it's a pretty clear argument that women play an important role, I think, in all these environments in countering extremist voices and supporting voices of moderation.

We've been working to help train local women leaders -- notably, from marginalized communities to prevent intercommunal violence and developed, again, sort of nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution.

I spent a lot of time with Syrian women. I recall from a couple of the trainings, women who participated in the trainings from Tel Rifaat went on after the training to lead civic mobilization efforts in their local community, and

(inaudible) against some of the extremist voices that were entering and starting to impose some draconian social measures on the community.

So, the women, I think, are going to play an incredibly important role in challenging these extremist voices in the future.

And then, additionally, we've been helping with some basic negotiations and conflict resolution training -- which, at the end of the day, everyone wants and aspires for a political solution to this conflict.

And I think, in support of whatever political deal is eventually reached whenever that happens, supporting constituencies inside Syria who are able to actually enforce a future settlement is very important -- and so something that we're pretty heavily invested in.

So, I think I'll leave it there, just to say that I think I concur with my co-panelists that focusing in investing on these local indigenous structures -- whether they're local councils, whether they're networks of humanitarian aid organizations -- in this incredibly difficult environment may be the best that we can do at this time to challenge the more heavily and more robustly funded and supported groups from the outside, and, hopefully, give them the strength and resilience to endure and lead Syria to a different future.

So, thank you.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you very much.

So, I have a question that kind of arose from the discussion about the Sharia courts. And I'm curious to know, for the NGOs that are trying to get aid to the people of Syria, how do they interact with those courts? I mean, do they seek -- I get the sense that, in some measure, they're seeking to promote

alternative structures to those courts. But in some places, those courts have quite a bit of authority. And how do these NGOs kind of work with that? Can you work with that authority, or are they just too extreme to work with at all, Dr. Ayoub?

DR. AYOUB: Well, actually, it's very -- it depends which group you're dealing with and so on. Most of the NGOs develop a strategy that they actually hire local Syrian people to deliver the aid, and the local Syrian people know, you know, the head of the tribes -- so the people who are in charge of these groups and so on -- and they know how to deal with them.

And that give them, actually, a lot easier access. You'll find most of the international relief workers, they don't go inside Syria. And if they go inside Syria, they go individually, one or two, whatever. But they don't go in large groups.

But they rely heavily on the Syrians to do the negotiations for them, and they rely heavily on the Syrians to deliver the aid.

And I believe that was a successful strategy, somehow, for most of the NGOs. And that save a lot of headaches, because you know also that the aid itself is a target.

Aid itself -- you know, we find, you know, some cases that the army group that actually do steal the aid. And the army groups do sometimes negotiate to get some part of the aid and so on. This is realities that, you know, most of the NGOs are actually facing.

But we found that the NGOs who actually stick to the humanitarian aid principles, and they resist to give the aid to the army group and so on -- by

using the Syrian themselves to do the negotiation and talk to these people, we found it a successful way of doing business.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you.

MR. MOUSTAFA: I mean, it's a very interesting question. The thing is, the Sharia courts either exist in areas where there are no other alternatives for rule of law. And so in those cases, you have to deal with them. They are providing sort of a service that's simply not there in a certain area.

And it just reminds me of a very sort of interesting meeting that we had set up at one time, about a year ago, I think. And what we did -- we brought the head of the High Sharia Court, which sort of overlooks the other Sharia courts -- his name was Abu Abdelrahman Al Suri -- and he's somebody who came -- was one of the people that had set up a (inaudible) brigade -- one of the stronger Islamist brigades on the ground -- not as extreme as Jabhat al Nusra or ISIS, but remains, you know -- their vision of Syria is not a democracy, you know, and they say that plainly.

And we had brought Orthodox Christian religious leaders to that same meeting, and it was fascinating, because you see the stable, and you have on one side, you know, the Islamists -- heads of Sharia courts and part of these Islamist battalions -- but the whole sort of Islamist garb, and then on the other side of the table, these Christian leaders, you know, with the big cross, and, also, the whole sort of clerical/clergy-like -- you know.

And it was fascinating, first of all, because we were bringing together here, you know, people that we tried to find as far -- I mean, we chose for examples specifically Orthodox Christians, because they're more likely to be -

- at least in sometimes -- with the regime than, like, Catholics, for example. And we chose the Sharia courts, we chose -- and we also brought a head of the free judges and head of the free lawyers to sit down and discuss.

And a discussion surrounded around, okay, well, set up Sharia courts here. You know, the regime is gone and so on, and we had Syrian law. And by the way, nothing was wrong with Syrian law; what was wrong with it is the implementation by the regime -- the corruption and the sectarianism that the regime itself has.

I mean, I think it tries to come off as a sort of secular, nonsectarian regime, but it very much is a sectarian regime that drives wedges and divisions between the people in order to benefit at the end of the day.

And the results of that meeting was, okay, so how will you deal with Christian villages that are exclusively Christians, or Christian areas of Syria? You know, they don't go by Sharia law. And how can there be -- and what was established in this meeting was surprising.

Again, it's surprising -- when you bring Syrians together, no matter their ideologies, or where their funders are, and so on -- but they sit down together, face-to-face. They talk. You reach really sort of amazing results.

I mean, at that time, they had said, okay, well, the Hudud of Islam -- these major rulings, like the cutting off of the hands, and stoning, and stuff like that -- would be out of the question, because we're in a stage of war -- that the Christian villages, you know, when they're dealing with matters among themselves, the Sharia court has no jurisdiction.

But if somebody comes with a complaint, Christian or Muslim, to

the Sharia court, that then the jurisdiction of Sharia court comes into play -- but also allowing a Christian priest to be available with sort of, you know, his own say, in terms of what judgment happen.

I mention that because -- oh, and finally, what we discussed was integration of lawyers and judges -- people that studied Syrian law, you know, and legal matters, and so on -- to be either integrated into these courts -- was that allowable? And at that time, the Sharia courts said, "Okay, well, that's something we can discuss."

But also, if we establish civilian courts inside of Syria, would they be attacked, or would they be seen as sort of encroaching on the territory of the Sharia courts?

And, again, at that time, it was almost a challenge. Go ahead. Establish civilian courts; no problem. And, you know, we won't attack them. We won't see them as sort of encroaching on the jurisdiction of the Sharia court.

But they were saying it in a challenge because they knew how little resources that free judges, free lawyers -- these people that defected from the regime -- had in coming back and establishing these things. They knew that, for them, the due process is much longer than a couple of days. They knew that, you know, you need to have flour to feed these prisoners that would be there for a month until the ruling comes out.

And that's what's most heartbreaking, is that, you know, they're saying, okay, you can do this stuff, but then, you know, the inability to be able to provide these huge amount of funds that come sort of unfettered from religious establishments in the Gulf and that go onto these groups that can do all these

things. He was (inaudible) Commander, but he was also the High Sharia Court.

The civilian council cannot be a Commander of a FSA battalion. And the police cannot be part of the battalion or the ruling. They're police -- and so on.

These divisions make the job for people that want to see what the vision of Syria that we all want to see is -- I think is, you know, what the international community would like to see -- a free Syria. And then the people that started out, as Maria said, in this revolution that was cross, you know, ethnic and religious lines.

It's much more difficult to establish that when you have to establish these red lines between who the police are, who the courts are, and so on.

Now as far as, you know, how they -- you know, do they make it more difficult to deliver aid? I and the Syrian Emergency Task Force organization have not experienced that, but I have heard, from speaking to, I think, Dr. Katranji of the Syrian American Medical Society at one point, saying that he found some difficulties having to deal with Sharia courts that may have these red lines or these guidelines that they don't necessarily agree with. But personally, in delivery of aid, I haven't seen a problem with them.

But what is important is that at times when they allow integration of judges and lawyers into that system, we should do that. And then in areas where Sharia courts don't exist, we should move quickly to establish rule of law in courts. And that's, I think, something that CSO has done an amazing job in doing.

And I want to reiterate, by the way, just the role of women in this whole thing. You know, even extremist groups at times try to figure out ways -- I think there was -- at one point, Jabhat al Nusra tried to do this women's program and so on. But they're the backbone of society. I mean, you know, in the dissemination of any specific ideology, I think, a lot of times, comes, you know, from women that are in these areas.

So, the greater leadership role they take, and the more amount of time that we can sort of spend in empowering them, I think it's also very, very essential in combating different sectarian narratives.

DR. STEPHAN: I'll just maybe very briefly -- I mean, it's certainly not the role of the United States or the United States government to dictate what system of law Syrians follow in general -- and certainly during this time of transition.

And often, you know, coming up with a system of law in a time of transition is very difficult, because there are competing interests. But, I mean, the one thing that we can do, in addition to supporting basic rule of law, paying police stipends, helping the police connect to the lawyers, and the judges, and the clerics -- the imams in a particular area -- is to foster platforms for a national discussion and debate about the type of rule of law that Syrians want.

And it's very true that, you know, the lawyers, the judges have studied Syrian law, and so this is what they're the most familiar with and comfortable with.

So, I think, in terms of the support that we provide for the media and through our rule of law program, just to ensure that all the voices are being

heard and integrated so that they're not drowned out just because a particular aspect of rule of law is receiving more funding.

MR. McCANTS: Okay, so we touched on the difficulties in navigating these different institutions that are popping up around Syria, particularly those on the more militant end of the spectrum.

I want to come back to the United States, and maybe, specifically for you, Dr. Ayoub – many have asked this question -- what challenges are there legally, at home, to getting aid to certain communities? I mean, in a number of these places where, you know, the service providers are the ISIS or Nusra, how -- I mean, I imagine that you have to be very careful in how your aid moves and who it gets to, because you don't want to get crosswise with the U.S. government. Perhaps you can talk about some of those obstacles.

DR. AYOUB: Definitely. I think one of the biggest challenges for any NGOs is how to stay in compliance. You know, this is the biggest headache, usually -- especially for Muslim organizations.

You know, we understand that staying in compliance is not an easy thing, and inside Syria, since we are dealing with so many different groups -- and the function, actually, that the United States put -- it's not on the country; it's on a certain entity or individuals that make it even harder for us to operate.

If we know, like, Syria's under sanction, we don't go to Syria -- you know, end of the story. But if you want to start dealing with entities and individuals, that make it very difficult on NGOs to identify those individual, and identify these entities that we should not deal with them.

So, we are trying our best, you know. There is a checklist that we

go over, and, you know, we try to get even IDs and names, and make sure that, you know, these are not the sanctioned entities that provide the aid.

But we have another difficulty, actually. There's a lot of checkpoints. Even when you deliver the aid inside Syria, there's a lot of checkpoints, and you don't know who's going to stop you.

And now the negotiation will start sometimes on the checkpoints -- you know, how to cross, you know, these checkpoints and go to another neighborhood. There is also certain cities under siege, you know, so you cannot even deliver the aid inside it.

And I can give an example -- like the Palestinians who live inside Syria -- like the Yarmouk camp. It's very difficult, including for the United Nation, to deliver the aid for the Palestinians who live inside Syria.

Homs, another city that also lack aid, and it's been months that aid could not deliver easily inside this area -- that force even some NGOs to start doing what they call underground operations, so they can smuggle the aid inside these areas. And those ones who stay 100 percent in compliance, they don't even go. So, they don't go to these areas. They don't (inaudible). They stay away from it.

But that, you know, puts a lot of people who are actually in need -- they don't receive the aid -- not because the NGOs cannot deliver the aid or they don't have the material; simply because they don't have the capacity to break the siege and go inside and deliver the aid.

MR. MOUSTAFA: I think Dr. Ayoub brings, you know, very, very valid points.

I mean, you got to remember, first of all, that, in terms of refugees, you have five million internally displaced refugees. That's a much higher number than those outside the neighboring countries, and they're located in areas like the northern areas of Syria -- Aleppo, Latakya, Northern Latakya Province -- and, again, throughout the country.

And they lack access of sort of UNHRC World Food Program and all these things that can't go. They have to go through the regime points and so on to get there from the South.

So, I've run into World Food Program, you know, representatives and officers on the border, and, literally, they just -- a few kilometers -- just cross the border, and you'll have plenty of people that you need to help -- yet, they're there to sort of look at the situation, but then they have to go through, like, Tartous, the coast, or to Damascus, and then all the way up.

So, there are huge difficulties -- which leaves a huge amount of work to organizations like Islamic Relief and other humanitarian organizations that are trying to sort of cross from the north and so on, and reach these populations.

I think, you know, compliance and ensuring that, you know, with the laws of the United States -- I think that's the number one priority for all Syrian American organizations -- or relief organizations in general.

And that's something that could be eased by, I think, easing the licensing for specific organizations that are seen, vetted, trusted by the United States government to do this sort of work. So, the more we can expedite from 501(c)(3) to OFAC or BIS licenses to help the Syrian people, I think that is huge

and helping.

And as Dr. Ayoub mentioned, you know, you're dealing with specific entities now that are sanctioned by the U.S. -- like Jabhat al Nusra. And, you know, for different reasons -- I disagreed, for example, with placing Jabhat al Nusra under the terrorist organizations list -- not because we at all agree with their ideology, but for the fact is that it does make life a bit more difficult when you're working in there. You do have to stop at different checkpoints.

And we're not allowing this aid to go to any of these groups, but you have to deal with them constantly, and that just brings a greater amount of headache when you're just trying to ensure that you're abiding by U.S. law and so on, going forward.

So, I think expediting helping and getting -- you know, allowing these relief organizations -- Syrian American or others -- to get these licenses that they need, and, you know, understanding that they're dealing with realities on the ground, and addressing a huge humanitarian crisis for the internally displaced people -- that, you know, international -- like, you know, organs of the U.N. cannot reach.

I think it's important to keep in mind, in order to help us do a better job of helping the people that need it most.

MR. McCANTS: Do you want to comment, Maria?

DR. STEPHAN: Yeah. I mean, I guess I was saying to Dr. Ayoub before, I share his pain when it comes to the rules and regulations. It's one of the major challenges, let's say, of working in the government. And this is -- you know, it certainly disadvantages us in many respects, in terms of speed and

efficiency. So, we're often not able to compete with some other actors that can cross borders very easily with suitcases full of cash.

So, because we have this thing called Congress and accountability practices, we have to take these kind of rules, and regulations, and vetting procedures very, very seriously.

At the same time, I know that my Treasury colleagues are sensitized to this issue of licensing and fast-tracking, you know, certain licenses -- it's probably not as fast as it could be, but I know it's something that they try to improve in terms of efficiency.

And certainly, on our end, I think, you know, in general, the State Department is not a startup organization. And so, you know, developing quick mechanisms to support people in the midst of a revolution is difficult to do. I think we've adapted readily, based on the changing situation on the ground, and we are able to respond in a more expeditious manner.

But, at the same time, this is a bureaucracy that has lots of rules and regulations.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you very much.

I want to open it up for questions now, but before I do, I have to plug Brookings's new report from the project on internally displaced peoples, looking at the Syria refugee problem -- both inside the country and in the surrounding countries.

Okay, hands? Yep.

SPEAKER: Hi -- Joe Batasili.

I just had a question. You guys have all talked about a lot of

money. The figure $1 billion from the U.S. government -- I mean, this is a lot of money going to a lot of places, trying to do a lot of good, and that's great.

But I was wondering about the challenges -- and even ability to apply feedback, and metrics, and analytics to what's working, what's not, and the challenges, and what's coming out of those efforts, and those accountability reports.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. Maria, you want to take a shot at that?

DR. STEPHAN: Well, in terms of the $1 billion for humanitarian aid -- again, since this is not what my bureau is focused on, I wouldn't be able to offer any help in terms of the metrics that my humanitarian colleagues from USAID and PRM -- the Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration -- are focused on, and can certainly connect you to them for more of that kind of information.

But I can say, at least for the CSO programs, every single line of effort and every single program that we support financially has a pretty extensive set of metrics involved. In fact, this is sometimes what slows down going from step one to step two -- because we require our implementing partners and our Syrian partners to report out -- not only when it comes to equipment, that they've received the equipment; it's being used for the purposes that it was set out to being used -- which can take the form of, you know, taking videos when they go back into the country with particular satellite communications equipment, sending us videos or broadcasts of what they're reporting on.

We follow very closely the broadcasts that our partners are

producing, for content and who they're reaching. You know, I think right now, the radio broadcasters that we're supporting are transmitting to about 80 percent of the country at this point in Syria, so they've got a pretty extensive reach -- and, also, in terms of the training and equipping -- the capacity-building work focused on.

Whether it's women in security or whether it's civil administration and planning, every single workshop comes with an evaluation that we all read pretty closely, and offer feedback to the implementing partner.

So, it's a very back-and-forth and iterative process. So, yeah.

MR. FERROGGIARO: Will Ferroggiaro, from Internews Conflict and Media Project.

Question -- Dr. Stephan referred to efforts to counter messages that are promoting violence and sectarian. I wonder if you could describe a little bit about the role -- maybe operationally, how these outside external funders are facilitating messages and media within the country -- or from externally into the country -- just a little bit more operationally, and a little bit about how you're countering that and the effectiveness of that, from each of you -- both from the humanitarian implementer perspective -- how do you deal with the impact of that -- as well as your policies.

Thank you.

DR. STEPHAN: So, in terms of the media support that we're providing -- again, I should clarify -- really, this is not a U.S. government strategic communications program. The intent of the media capacity-building is to support independent Syrian media broadcasters -- radio and television -- many of whom

are inside Syria, or they're going back and forth across the border regularly. So, they are developing content. They are developing messaging.

I can say specifically to the sort of countering extremism/countering sectarian violence -- at least one of the radio broadcasters that we've been supporting has covered the local mobilization against extremist groups in places like Saraqib and others, and they've been broadcasting this -- which I think has amplified and encouraged civilian mobilization in other places against this type of activity.

So, it takes more the form of providing these journalists with the equipment, and capacity, and freedom, frankly, to develop platforms that encourage national debate dialogue, and, frankly, counter one-dimensional -- you know, one-sided coverage of any particular story.

MR. MOUSTAFA: Can I -- just to add a little bit -- I think, first of all, these independent radio and TV broadcasters are so essential. I mean, they are Syrian. Most of them are inside Syria or just across the border in Turkey and other areas. And, you know, the aid that they receive -- I can't stress how important it is, you know, regardless of where it comes from, but the support that it gets from the United States government is essential.

And it's very refreshing to see that it doesn't come with any terms or conditions. This aid goes to these broadcasters because they are seen as independent and free broadcasters. They are Syrian, and they play a very, very major role.

Now, as far as extremists, I think YouTube and their own sort of online social networking sites and so on is their main vehicle for sort of, you

know, putting out their propaganda.

For these revolutionary radio and TV channels, they play a huge role -- things like al Hud TV, which was mentioned that, you know, we had been in contact with them and so on. They do amazing work, in terms of putting programming of sort of reconciliation -- people living together and that, you know, Alawites, and Christians, and Muslims, and Kurds, and so on -- and the programming that sort of looks farther than where things are now. In the future, this is a Syria for everybody.

In Aleppo, at one point, there was a hospital where an extremist group came, and had put a flag -- the black and white lettering flag of Jabhat al Nusra, I think, at the time, on top of the hospital. And the doctor who owned the hospital brought down the flag, and he was arrested by the group a couple of days after.

And Aleppo Today, which was a TV channel (inaudible) radio, I think, did a great job of talking about what happened -- that this was a flag that was put up. It wasn't brought down because we're anti-Islam; everybody's Muslim, at least in that hospital specifically. It was brought down because it was seen as a specific political group, or ideology, or battalion.

And it mentioned, I think, in the broadcast, that it was wrong to arrest the doctor, and if the flag had been a white flag with black lettering, we have all respect for Islam and other faiths in the area; it wouldn't have been a problem.

I think that broadcast directly resulted in freeing the doctor and the owner of the hospital soon after. So, the role they play is immensely important.

And, really, you know, their support needs to come, again, as a total package of supporting humanitarian aid, civilian governance, and this free media that can sort of restart a national dialogue across Syria, where people are, again, sort of connected with what's happening in different places -- because from province to province, sometimes from village to village, it's a whole different story of what's happening on the ground.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you.

Here?

MR. BLANEY: Harry Blaney from Center for International Policy.

I'd like to ask the experts on our panel who have been very much engaged with the people of Syria and helping them -- and for Ms. Stephan, although she may, like myself -- my past diplomatic history -- may not be able to comment fully on this, but, anyway, if she could -- what do you think is going to be the result?

At some point, when there is a, if you would, either a hiatus in the fighting -- (inaudible) stopping of it -- where some kind of a brokerage solution of the work that you're doing or what you think needs to be done that isn't the work you're doing, but needs yet to be done -- that can be put in place or needs to be put in place to stop sectarian warfare starting all over again, between the various groups that are, at this moment, fighting.

It seems to me that that may be one of the more important macro-issues, and I would like to have the comments, if you would, particularly your views of whether what we're doing is, one, sufficient, what we need to do that we're not doing, and what the outcome will be -- and, also, whether the

imposition of peacekeepers or peacemakers from the outside that are neutral would help that situation.

Thank you very much.

DR. AYOUB: I think, right now, we're trying to find, like, a political solution. And, sometimes, we're talking about in the conflict with arms solution, and go and bomb Syria or whatever.

So, I truly believe that we have to find a humanitarian solution to the crisis, because everybody is suffering. And if you follow the news, you find, like, more than 4,000 schools has already been damaged -- is not functioning.

That means that millions of Syrian kids are not going to school. So, you need to look back at the history; look what happened in Lebanon, for example, and you find kids are carrying guns, instead of carrying pencils.

But we have to find a humanitarian solution to the crisis, and end it as quickly as possible, that doesn't escalate further, and the human suffering should stop right away.

MR. MOUSTAFA: I think one important thing that must be focused on -- especially looking forward to a possible -- as Maria stated earlier, everybody wants a political solution to this crisis. Nobody in Syria wants to see the social fabric of Syria ripped apart even more, and institutions destroyed in the country than losing -- it is a country of institutions; it is a country where there is a very strong social fabric and so on.

I think that there needs to be an effort focusing on these already -- the Department of Agriculture has thousands of workers, you know, and different agencies within the Syrian government has thousands of workers; not

necessarily pro-regime, or pro-revolution, or, you know, they could be sort of on the sidelines.

I think engaging with them, and engaging with people that are currently in the government, to where, as we get to a transitional period, we are not simply throwing away everything that's there -- sort of like the de-Ba'athification of Iraq; that was a horrible, I think, idea.

But ensuring that you can sort of, you know, continue these institutions that are already well-established with many employees, and working together with the transitional government that may come to sort of take out, again, the dictator and his inner circle, which are sort of, again, that's controlling what they believe is their farm -- that is Syria.

I think if we do that, but ensure that we have some sort of continuity as we go forward, and effort into bringing the people in governance now and people that may come transition from the revolutionaries and working together on a way forward -- I think that's very essential. That's something that needs to be focused on, as we get hopefully closer to some sort of solution.

DR. STEPHAN: Yeah, I mean, sort of at the macro-level, I think, you know, the ideal is along the line of the Geneva II framework to support the creation of a transitional government with full executive authority. Everyone knows that will include parts of the current government, along with parts of the opposition inside and outside Syria.

And, I mean, I think from a U.S. policy perspective, no one wants to see the collapse of institutions in Syria. Everyone wants to support their preservation.

Mouaz makes a good point; there are many people in the current ministries who, let's say, are defecting in place. They're not with the regime; they're not proactively fighting, let's say, with the opposition, but they're not enthusiastic about what is happening, what the government is doing.

And these individuals, these technocrats -- and, in fact, there are many technocrats who are still on the government's payroll, who are also supporting the opposition. So, I think empowering these individuals and these technocrats who are going to remain the backbone of this country staying together and not fragmenting, I think, is very important.

Down the road, I think, you know, there will be a debate had -- a vigorous debate about a peacekeeping, you know, operation. It's hard to say what that looks like. I'm sure conversations are being held now, with the idea of protecting communities and helping prevent fragmentation.

At a more micro-level, I think the best that we can do -- and maybe do more robustly now -- is to empower the real bridge-builders inside Syria. So, those individuals, leaders -- secular, religious -- who are able to navigate between different communities -- not only between communities in the opposition, but between communities who are either on the fence, or in the proverbial silent majority, or even with the regime -- because these are the individuals, really, that are going to be in the best position, if and when a settlement is reached, to hold it together, and to actually enforce it.

DR. AYOUB: And these include people in the regime's army, by the way, that have not taken part in fighting. There are many -- you know, he's used specific brigades and so on. So, we also have to keep that in mind, as well,

because you need an institutional army, not these random militias and so on that are running around.

MR. McCANTS: Way in the back?

MR. AMITAY: Thank you. I'm Mike Amitay, from Open Society Foundation.

Dr. Stephan, much of the programming that you've described seems to be focused on the day after, as opposed to sort of strict humanitarian assistance. And I understand the U.S. government has provided more than $1 billion of the humanitarian assistance, but I'm just wondering whether you feel that your bureau has sufficient funding to meet the demand that you see for the types of programs that you're funding, or whether you feel that you're operating essentially on a shoestring, and that there's, you know, enough capacity inside the country that you're really struggling to find additional sources of funding for your work.

DR. STEPHAN: Well, in general, I'm pretty confident that we'll secure additional resources to support a continuation of the programming that we're doing. I don't know what the level is, but I think we have indication that there'll be further funding for this type of work. I mean, anyone could always want more money, I suppose, to do the work that they're doing inside the country; at the same time, I'm generally of the opinion that small amounts of targeted aid are much more effective than just pumping in a lot of big money into a country that may not be able to absorb it.

And, you know, the sort of "do no harm" approach -- you don't want to encourage corruption when there are enough problems already in the

country; at the same time, yeah, I mean, more support -- CSO is obviously -- and our humanitarian colleagues -- are not the only actors. We're working, also, with other programming offices and USAID, with MEPI -- with other groups inside the government.

And so these offices and bureaus also have -- and DLR and State Department, others -- they have their own funding to support programs along these lines.

So, you know, it's hard to say -- is it enough? I think, you know, more funding to support local capacity is helpful, and I think it will be forthcoming.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you.

SPEAKER: (inaudible) I'm a Syrian American. I've lived for 20 years in Aleppo, and I've been working to assist Syrian refugees over the last year and a half.

As Mr. Ayoub and Ms. Stephan pointed out, when the events in Syria initially started, it was a revolution by the people, for the people, against a tyrant and a dictator who had failed to deliver on his promises of reform and democracy, and had pursued an economic policy which contributed to the demise of the Syrian middle class.

So, initially when I was discussing the situation in Syria with Syrian citizens, even Alawites -- a lot of them were actually opponents of the Syrian regime and the Assad regime -- as opposed to now, when I discussed with the same individuals -- the Alawites who were opponents initially -- they're actually now supporting the Assad regime, because of the fear of a potential ethnocide or secticide by Salafist jihadist extremist organizations.

So, my question is the following: Do you think that the evolution of events in Syria, from revolution to a sectarian conflict -- was that the result of a strategic plan that the Assad regime pursued in order to maintain his authority over the Syrian society, or was that the result of the emergence of Salafi Wahhabi extremist jihadist organizations funded by the Gulf States or independent entities within the Gulf region?

Thank you.

MR. McCANTS: Who wants to take this question?

MR. MOUSTAFA: Yeah, from day one, the Assad regime's narrative was, these are terrorists -- these are Sunni terrorists fighting against everybody else. They were not (inaudible) the minorities; they wanted to -- this was his rhetoric from day one.

And I think, simply, that's my answer. I mean, I'm not saying that there is nothing to -- absolutely, there are selfish groups that have come in. There are a bunch of sort of, you know, different interests within the region that are supporting specific groups, again, that don't go with the ideology of the revolution that began, and exasperate that.

But that's a regime -- you know, first of all, it's a regime that is very much in tune or good at infiltrating extremist groups. And we saw in Iraq that he had sent many into Iraq to fight against American troops there. We saw that he had released specific people that now are in leadership of things, like al Nusra, from his jails. That came out in our working there.

So, this is definitely something that Assad wanted to see. I mean, this was a strategy that he pursued, and he kept talking sort of, "I'm the secular

regime. This is all just a terrorist, you know, uprising against secularism, democracy, and the minorities."

And so it's definitely a strategy that he adopted from day one in this conflict. But, you know, at fault are, also, different religious establishments in the Gulf, as was mentioned earlier, that are supporting these groups, that are sectarian extremists.

And, unfortunately, you know, I'm convinced that, you know, at least from my experience, that their numbers are very small compared to the armed militias -- or to the armed FSA in general. But they are much more dominant, and they are much more dominant because they're much more well-resourced. And that's a big problem.

And I think we still have a chance at marginalizing these groups by helping the right guys, the moderate guys on the ground, and, most importantly, helping the civilian governing structures that are emerging that are the only way to reassure minorities, and different sort of ethnic communities, and so on, that everything will be okay -- because, again, Syria will be given back to Syrians that are invested in their country, that the merit of them living together goes back to the Syrian people, not to this regime that has never been interested.

Look at how many Christians he killed in Lebanon, and Alawites that he put in his jails for tens of years for opposing them -- and the retribution that goes against the people from the Alawite communities and others that stand up against Assad are much worse than what he does to Sunnis.

So, I think it's largely -- you know, when you speak to people now,

and they say, "Well, we're scared of what we may come, and we support Assad because we're afraid of sort of ethnic burn in the region," that is hugely due to the propaganda of the Assad regime.

And, you know, I think one way -- look at the many videos that are leaked out from the army, torturing citizens. It's Alawites, right, killing everybody else -- and, in that way, tying their fate to his.

And when you speak to Alawites, you know, no human can see these things and say this is okay to do, but you got to understand their fear that, you know, if I'm a Sunni, and I'm watching this, I would hate Alawites and so on.

So, you know, efforts the State Department is helping doing and so on, in terms of reconciliation, bringing people together, are really, really, really important. And being able to allow Alawites that defect from the regime not to feel that they've lost everything at this point, but to know that, you know, they'll be cared for and so on; they'll still have a place.

I think that's very important, and you can't bring Alawites, put them in a Sunni refugee camp in Turkey, and expect everything to be okay -- simply because many Sunnis, when they hear the accent, are reminded of the security forces -- and of these many videos.

So, that propaganda -- leaking out of those videos, I think, are intentional -- by the Assad regime has been the most effective. His other propaganda saying that sort of the protector of all minorities and everybody else is terrorists is just straight-up lies, and is less effective than those videos that leak out.

DR. STEPHAN: I mean, I think from the beginning, just the

targeted arrests, and assassinations, and killings of some of the most, you know, prominent supporters of a multiethnic nonviolent uprising was very effective. I mean, the regime knew what it was doing by going after these activists.

And so I don't know if there was, you know, a 100-page strategic plan for turning this into a sectarian conflict, but, you know, I've heard enough Syrians say that, essentially, Assad got the resistance that he wanted, based on what's happened in the country.

And, I think, also, I've spoken to, you know, some political prisoners, including Christian political prisoners, and they say that the line of interrogation is very, very different. And so what they hear from their torturers and tormentors in prison is very much about how they're betraying their people, and this is a government that is out to protect the minorities, and, you know, how dare they betray their people. So, even the way they're being tortured is in sectarian terms, as incredible as this may sound.

And so I think that, certainly, on a tactical basis, in terms of arrests, in terms of, you know, how the people are treated in prison, and in terms of the media -- and, I mean, I think a lot -- you know, from the beginning of the uprising, the beginning of the revolution, some of the most sectarian voices were coming from outside Syria. I mean, on both sides -- you know, whether it was, you know, Sheik (inaudible), or whether it was, you know, coming from, you know, Hezbollah or others, it was very much coming from the outside, and then sort of amplified on local media.

And the regime has a very strong propaganda apparatus, so they knew how to use their propaganda, as well. So, sort of a conflagration of these

factors, I think, helped turned this into, you know, a nasty situation.

MR. WEINBERG: Hi -- David Weinberg with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

I wanted to ask about what kind of role the Gulf's long-established charitable institutions have been playing in the conflict in Syria -- and, also, if you see them responding in any particular ways to these sorts of localized, direct appeals through things like social media -- for instance, something (inaudible) or maybe Kuwait's Revival of Islamic Heritage Society.

MR. McCANTS: I can speak to that a little bit. I'm not sure about the more established organizations. The ones I read about more and the ones I see appealed more for funding grew up over the course of the Syrian conflict -- and they're sort of more popular committees for supporting, you know, the revolution in Syria.

You know, you have some of the same sort of actors who have been around, who have supported militant Salafi movements for several decades. You have some of the same kinds of players, but I don't recall seeing a lot of the bigger, older organizations getting involved as much as these new, kind of ad hoc committees.

Other questions? Yep, here.

MS. KOCH: Hi. My name is Madeline Koch. I work for an NGO that supports women's activism in civil society.

And you talked about how important women are for peace, and security, and combating extremism. And I'm wondering how these extremists -- particularly the ones who are consolidating governance -- like you've talked about

are affecting these women, and how the outside funders are influencing or talking about the effect on women.

MR. MOUSTAFA: I think what they've -- you know, it's funny. I think Deborah Amos of NPR did a story -- either her or a colleague of hers did a story about a lady in Raqqa who ran the women's prison for, like -- I forget -- it was Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (inaudible) or something like that.

And so, I mean, they're getting these sort of specific roles within these things, but, you know, there's one activist -- amazing woman activist there. And she was, at one point -- they tended to recruit her to sort of run sort of a civil society women's program, you know, on behalf of an extremist organization there.

And so I think what they're trying to do is identify people that have the potential of leadership or have risen up, and try to co-opt them. I think that's the ways that they've tried to sort of attempt at doing that.

I think what's very important to do is to help encourage the role of women in civilian administrative councils that are rising up. There's a very small amount of women in these councils that come up. I think that's very disturbing.

I know that, you know, in places like Idlib and other places, it's more of a conservative society and so on, but I think their role is really essential. There is, for example, one woman member of the civilian administrative council of Idlib Province, and she's amazing. I mean, she's online all the time with all these activists. She does a lot of great work on the ground, and people swear by her.

When I met her, you know, I was there with some activists that

hadn't met her before, but knew her from Skype and, like, not her real name, but the name that she goes by.

So, I think they really play a major role. The more that we can push them to be part of the civilian administrative council, to be part of these efforts at civilian governance, or even humanitarian aid, or civil society, and so on, the better.

And I think, to answer your question, what they do is they try to coopt women leaders that they see are doing a good job, and then implement these sort of programs to where they try to get the women to teach, you know, children in the family those radical ideologies that they go by.

And so that's what I've seen, at least.

MS. McAVOY: Thanks very much -- Jenny McAvoy, from InterAction. Thanks very much for that explanation of the support to civil society that CSO's giving.

An area that's a little bit less clear relates to the Supreme Military Council -- and in particular, what sort of obligations or conditions are attached to that support, in terms of their own conduct in compliance with international humanitarian law, human rights law? How is that monitored? I mean, you described a quite sophisticated remote management mechanism. How does that translate in that arena of issues? And what have you experienced in that regard, in terms of their interest and ability, indeed, to comply to those standards?

Secondly, a comment and possibly a request -- I very much appreciate the distinction between humanitarian and nonlethal that is made -- and particularly in the context of CSO's important support to civil society. But

that precision is not being used across the board, and it can be quite dangerous for humanitarians.

When aid, which is inherently political in character -- which is, I believe, what's described in terms of the local councils, associated with certain groups and others, and so on -- what that effectively is. You know, shoring up their governance capacity, their ability to deliver basic services, et cetera, et cetera -- as well-intentioned as it is, it's not humanitarian. It's inherently political in character.

So, humanitarians need to be able to cross sectarian lines, but they also need to be able to cross front lines, and, you know, be confident that they are able to interact with any party. You know, they need to be able to interact with the parties to conflict that are targeting medical workers, and hospitals, and what have you.

And the more something that is inherently, you know, well-intentioned but inherently political in character is called humanitarian, it becomes quite difficult for the humanitarians to operate. And I wonder whether you feel that's becoming clear or more blurred in the Syria context.

DR. STEPHAN: Okay. So, SMC support -- this is a fairly new line of effort for CSO. But I know, as a fact, that before SMC leaders -- Idris and other commanders -- are receiving any of the medical, communications, equipment, vehicles, that sort of thing, they are required to sign a contract that does include provisions from international IHL Geneva conventions that they will not engage in any practices that violate human rights, humanitarian law.

So, I know that is part of the overall package. I think, you know,

it's very much at the beginning, in terms of, you know, this is something we'll be monitoring very closely. The vetting, as you might imagine, involved in providing nonlethal assistance to the SMC, is rigorous, so this is not something that the State Department takes lightly.

And so I think through the process of vetting and then continual follow up with the groups that are receiving the aid, this will certainly be something we'll be following very closely.

The HA nonlethal -- yes, I think, for sure, when we're providing support to local councils and others -- especially in the liberated areas -- this definitely has a -- it's a political form of assistance.

I think, though, you know, inherently, especially in a conflict like this, it's very difficult, if not impossible, to have a completely clear break between humanitarian and political. I mean, I think humanitarian assistance inherently is political, even in these environments -- and even when, for example, it's going through normal channels in particular regime areas. If it's being directed in a certain way, it has a political outcome, even if it's humanitarian intent.

But we, with our humanitarian colleagues, are very clear about what HA does, what USAID, and what PRM does, and what we do.

I agree with you in the media. I think it's fuzzy, and there's a lot of mixing, you know, which is problematic. So, I think in terms of how we describe what we do, we need to be clear that this is not humanitarian assistance, what we're doing, but I also think that the reality is that it's very, very difficult in this environment to have a nice, neat, clear cut distinction between what is purely nonpolitical, apolitical, and what has political objectives.

So, that would be my assessment.

MR. McCANTS: One more quick question -- in the red, in the back.

SPEAKER: I raised my hand 10 times.

MR. McCANTS: Many people have raised their hands many times. I'm going with the lady in the red, in the back; thank you.

MS. STRUCKE: On a similar note, on the humanitarian aid, you mentioned the need, Dr. Ayoub, for a humanitarian solution, and you also identified the problem of the United Nations and other organizations not being able to transport aid across borders of some of the neighboring countries because of different restrictions -- for example, by the United Nations.

So, I was wondering, some groups have been calling for a U.N. Security Council authorization of cross-border aid, which would enable a lot of these groups, such as U.N. agencies and such as Islamic Relief, to be able to reach populations in areas of need because of the huge gaps in which places are currently receiving aid.

So, I wanted to know what the panel thought about pushing for that solution. Is this a good solution, and why aren't we seeing kind of more progress on that front?

DR. AYOUB: We actually --

MS. STRUCKE: Oh, and I'm sorry. My name is Michelle Strucke, from the Syrian American Medical Society.

DR. AYOUB: We actually pushed for that. We met the Red Cross, and we met the United Nation, and we tried to push that the humanitarian

workers need to have a safe passage so that we can actually deliver the aid.

As you remember, even Red Cross could not deliver aid in certain areas. So, United Nation agencies and all the agencies, you know, find it very difficult to provide aid to certain areas.

And I was meeting with even (inaudible) who are responsible for the Yarmouk camp inside Syria. They found it very difficult to bring aid inside that area.

So, we are pushing for it, but I don't think anyone is, so far, listening really carefully.

MR. MOUSTAFA: And, you know, this point -- I'm so glad you raised this point, because this is, I think, a perfect time to bring that up again. You have, you know, negotiations and talks about securing of chemical weapons, and ensuring chemical weapons inspectors have a safe way in, and these chemical weapons can, you know, be controlled and taken out.

Yet, you know, why is nobody speaking about the fact that we also need to have a safe haven and safe way in for humanitarian support for groups like SAMS and groups like Islamic Relief and others to do so?

If the Russians are willing to work and pressure the regime to allow the securing of chemical weapons and the safety of inspectors and so on, why can't they do the same thing for humanitarian aid to areas like Yarmouk refugee camp and many others across Syria that don't have that?

And I think that's something I am sure and I hope that the United States sort of pursues in talks with the Russians and so on, but I think that's a very, very important aspect to bring up.

DR. STEPHAN: My guess is, this would be on -- I mean, I'm not privy to the agenda for the Geneva meeting, but my guess is, this would be certainly a major discussion item.

MR. McCANTS: I think this has been a great panel, and I hope you'll join me in thanking our panelists for participating today.

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