

# EVAP Ep. 20\_ Meena Syed

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Meena Syed, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall

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### J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today, I'm joined by Meena Syed, who is Minister Counselor at the Permanent Mission of Norway to the UN, and was Political Coordinator at the Mission during Norway's 2021 to 2022 tenure on the UN Security Council. Thank you for joining us today, Meena.

### M Meena Syed 01:03

Thank you for having me.

### J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:04

As I just mentioned, Norway recently concluded its two year term on the Security Council, during which there were numerous international crises from the coup in Myanmar to the conflict in Ethiopia, and, of course, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Based upon your experience as a diplomat working on the Security Council, what would you say are the biggest challenges of the Council in carrying out its mandate to maintain international peace and security and specifically in relation to atrocity situations?

### M Meena Syed 01:36

Well, I think the Security Council is facing several challenges at the moment, and has been over

the two past years. In that sense, it has been a challenging two years for us as an elected member of the Council, but also for the whole Security Council. We entered the Council in the time of COVID, which very much sort of impacted our full first year of the Council, both in terms of how we were working and the world around us. Our second year, obviously, was very impacted by Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine, which, in many ways impacted the whole work of the Security Council. I think, in many would say that sort of the war in Ukraine has put the functioning of the council to a test in a sort of truly existential way. And obviously, that war, which has now lasted over a year has sort of shaken the trust and confidence in maybe the whole UN institution, and perhaps specifically the Security Council. Facing this, while being a member of the Security Council, obviously, was quite significant for Norway. Norway sits on the Security Council an average of every 20 years. So, being there, when this happened, obviously, was quite special for us. Sort of, in that situation, it did become important for us both to see all venues of how to sort of respond to that particular situation, but also, in parallel, to ensure that the council was able to continue to act on, exactly as you said, what is the mandate of the Council, also on all of the other issues that were on the table and on the Council's agenda. I think that so far, at least for the last year of our membership, the Council was able to continue to act on its mandate on several of the sort of files that were sort of on the table, including files that Norway were sort of lead on, for example, as pen holders on the UNAMA mandate renewal on Afghanistan, on being able to adopt a continuation of the Syria cross-border humanitarian mechanism. Despite high odds, getting some sort of achievements made on, sort of, numerous situations on the Security Council agenda. But when it comes to sort of prevention I think that it's so anchored in the UN Charter as being one of the main mandates of the Security Council. It's vested in Chapter Six, the Council actually has a full toolbox to use. For Norway, this was a priority to try to strengthen the council's actually preventive mandate. I think that the geopolitical situation that the council and the world is in today makes it perhaps more difficult than it has ever been at least post cold war. Those were some of the struggles in our daily sort of work in terms of dealing with both atrocity prevention and broader sort of conflict prevention.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 05:55

You just mentioned the preventive mandate of the Security Council, as someone who is sitting on the Council or your Mission was, how did you guys envision the preventive role of the Security Council?

M

Meena Syed 06:13

Well, there are, as I mentioned, it's a key part of the council's mandate, and going into the Council, this was something we were sort of very cognizant of. Chapter Six of the UN Charter basically sets out a number of tools that the Council has at its disposal, and we were very cognizant that well-timed prevention measures often can sort of help in critical moments when societies stand at the brink of conflict or risk lapsing back into it. Getting it formally on the Council agenda, various situations, I think, requires Council members, elected members like Norway to sort of use the tools, but also to find creative ways of bringing situations to the Council's attention. It can be formally or informally. During our time on the Council, I mean, just requesting what's called AOBs, any other matters under the Security Council meetings for updates on emerging situations seem to sort of be one venue. Another way to address issues on the horizon is through what we call the SG lunches. So the Security Council meets with the

Secretary General every month both in a sort of composition of the 15 members, but also the elected members. The elected members monthly lunch with the SG includes the E10 members setting the agenda and asking the SG to address various issues. I think it has become one of the venues to get an informal update from the SG personally, but also from the Secretariat, on situations, big and small, or trends, including situations not directly on the Council's formal agenda, but that are a bit on the horizon. It's served as a way to sort of actually discuss some of those issues. Further to that, Norway especially worked hard to try to sort of restart something that used to be called, the informal situational awareness briefings that were held by the Secretariat to Council members. We spent quite a lot of time sensitizing Council members to what that was seeing that COVID had to kind of put a stop to that activity and that regularization. As you know, even though elected members come and go on the council, I think even amongst permanent members, some of the sort of muscle memory when it comes to how the Council works, disappears, after sort of almost two years with COVID and working on the screen. So it actually was quite difficult to try to restart some of these more informal activities that had been part of the Council's work before. At the end of our term, we weren't able to sort of restart at least holding some in of these informal situational awareness briefings by the Secretariat in the format of the Elected 10. It seemed to be something that I hope that the Elected 10 will continue to do, and possibly also the wider Council membership. I mean, obviously, there are other ways of emphasizing the Council's prevention role. One is sort of its interplay with other regional organizations. I think, both in the issues of Myanmar and Ethiopia, which both came to the forefront while we were sitting as members and are sort of crisis situations that are examples of the difficulty of actually preparing to sit on the council because many things happen that are difficult to prepare for, you didn't necessarily expect. In these bodies, situations, and many others, I mean, the importance of regional organizations such as the AU and ASEAN became sort of important in terms of, yes, the interplay between the council getting briefings from regional organizations. I think some might say at times that the regional organizations can also be a bit of an impediment in terms of Council action. I think we saw sort of both sides of that story of the importance of the regional organizations on various issues, and providing updates to the Council and actually doing a lot of the work that they can do on the ground. But also at times that it seemed to be, if not misused then at least used by some Council members as a reason to sort of delay action or even the Council considering specific issues.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 11:58

You just mentioned one of the initiatives that you did as an elected member with sort of bringing back those more informal meeting settings. What overall do you think is the unique role that the E10 can play on the Council, particularly in navigating challenges of Council dynamics?

**M** Meena Syed 12:23

I think the E10 play an immensely important role on the Security Council and as a group as an entity, you know, called the E10, the E10 have kind of reasserted themselves in terms of agency on the Council over perhaps the last 10 plus years. Of course, the E10 is not a constant, its composition changes every year, and will depend on sort of the configuration and the composition of the E10. The E10 at times consists of small island states, small and medium sized states, to sort of, large regional powers, and aspiring permanent members of the Council

who sit frequently, and countries who may be sitting for the first time on the Security Council. So it's definitely not a homogeneous group, but I think there are some things that the E10 have in common that can drive the agency of the E10. Obviously, one of them is the fact that they are elected, which is in their name, and by that there is a form of sort of accountability, I think, towards the UN membership, who have elected them to sort of serve on their behalf. That sort of cognizance amongst E10 members, some of whom have campaigned and competed to get a seat on the Security Council and gone through an election by the general membership. I think there is an awareness of basically what is in the UN Charter in Article 24, that they are sort of acting on behalf of the whole UN membership, and that the whole UN membership has conferred on to them the primary responsibility of the maintenance of international security through the Security Council, and that they act on their behalf. So that's one common denominator that brings the E10 together. I think often other issues such as a strong belief in multilateralism, a belief in the Security Council and sort of an interest to serve may also drive a willingness getting the Council to to act while sitting on the Council for those elected members for their tenure on the Council. I think we've seen over the years that certain sort of thematic issues seem to at least frequently surface as popular items to deal with amongst elected members. Many of them are, you know, related to, as I mentioned, thematic issues such as the protection of civilians, humanitarian issues, but also issues such as climate insecurity which I think has its exceptions, obviously, amongst some elected members, but it's driving some of these thematic agendas on the Council, has been one of the common denominators of many of the elected members. I think a very sort of staunch example of it is the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian File, which has since 2014 always been an E10 file on the Council agenda. It's always been E10 co-penholders who have drafted and led negotiations on the cross-border Syria resolutions, often on behalf of the 10 elected members group, and it's sort of shown the agency of those 10 members. I mentioned earlier that the E10 members have monthly lunches with the Secretary General, and he often says and reminds the E10 of the fact that the E10 have sort of **the fixed** veto, in the sense that you need nine affirmative votes in order to pass any resolution in the Security Council. So obviously, if 7 of the 15 members don't support an initiative, you're able to block it. I think there's examples of this, for example, the Syria cross-border resolution that Norway and Ireland co-penned last summer in terms of extending the possibility to bring cross-border humanitarian aid into the northwest of Syria was carried by all of E10 members who voted in favor of it and obviously, the fact that there was no veto against it. But we've seen examples of resolutions where a majority of the permanent members have abstained and the resolution has been carried through the fact that there's a unanimity amongst E10. More than that, I think what often, many sort of think of when it comes to the E10 is more agreement in terms of the working methods of the Security Council. And obviously, that might sound very, sort of procedural from the outside, but as you and probably many others know, at the UN procedure basically becomes politics and politics becomes procedure and, sort of, knowing your way in the Security Council, through navigating the working methods is extremely important in order to do politics. I think that it's an issue of sort of power relationships between the permanent members and the E10, and it's an area where the E10 cooperate quite a lot in terms of often common issues such as bringing more transparency and inclusivity into the work of the Council. I think for Norway on this example, transparency and inclusivity has been extremely important. Also through bringing civil society into the council's work through having civil society briefers, through having initiatives of specifically women civil society briefers, and practitioners from the field ensuring that the countries concerned are consulted ahead of meetings and the general membership on what happens in the Security Council, and bringing some degree of transparency to the work of the Council that is done behind closed doors, both to the general membership, but also to the global public, has been some of the issues that Norway has been prioritizing, and found a lot of support from E10 members. That doesn't mean that it's not important for the P5, it's just examples at least, of

issues that we've collaborated very well with other E10 members. There is a sort of, I don't know if I should say power rivalry, but there's a lot of discussion around the issue of penholderships in the Security Council, given that penholders are the leads on various files, geographic or thematic. The majority of the penholders are normally held by P5 I think in fact, P3 members. And E10 kind of asserting themselves in taking the pen has been, I think an important test to the E10 over the past years, and at least during our membership, we had a lot of good experiences in being co-penholders together with other elected members, both in terms of, sort of, the large files that are continuously on the Council such as Afghanistan. I mentioned we were co-pens with Estonia our first year and we were penholders alone the second year on Syria cross-border together with Ireland. But also, on initiatives and resolutions such as a resolution on the protection of education that we brought forward our first year on the Council, Resolution 2106 on the Protection of Education together with Niger, a resolution that was sort of the first of its sort, and a normative resolution that was unanimously adopted and had around 100 co-sponsors. That experience was very fulfilling, I think for us and also for Niger and an example of initiatives that elected members can take in order to drive, sort of, normative agendas on the Council as well.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 22:47

It's really interesting how, you almost get to become the norm champions, because you can take a thematic issue that's important to you. I mean, in this case, it's also important to the rest of the membership, but because it's important to you, you get to elevate it to a different level during that time on the Council.

M

Meena Syed 23:08

Yes, and I would say, so for Norway we had four priorities going into the Council related to the protection of civilians, women peace and security, climate peace and security and peace diplomacy building on our experience from peace and reconciliation efforts around the world, and you can kind of champion these priorities in different ways. I mentioned one, which was putting forward a thematic normative resolution such as the one on protection of education, which obviously was also linked to the fact that Norway was chairing the working group on children in armed conflict while we sat on the Council. But I also think even more than that our sort of daily work in getting language, for example on women peace and security or climate and security into the mandates and the daily work of the Council wasn't even, was just as much a part of our impact on the Security Council. I mean, an example of that is Afghanistan, which I touched on earlier. We were penholders on Afghanistan, and when we went into the council, I think very few of us expected to fall a few months, eight months later, and the immense sort of challenging situation that the country has been in ever since. So that role of being penholders became quite different, and we sat with the responsibility of renewing the mandate for the UN on the ground in Afghanistan. First just the month after the fall of Kabul in September 2021, and also last year in March 2022, just three weeks after the Russian invasion on Ukraine, we were negotiating the UNAMA sort of new 12 month mandate. It was a very challenging situation, because it was a time where I think many who looked into, sort of, the crystal ball at the end of February 2022, after the Russian invasion and made predictions on how Council work would be in the coming months would predict that there would be a stalemate, as we saw, sort of, during the Cold War. This actually became one of the important tasks for Norway to, on the one hand, obviously, we were very clear and strong in our statements and actions on the

issue of Ukraine, in the Security Council, but on the other hand, facilitating our role as facilitators and as penholders, for example, on Afghanistan, and making sure that the Council was able to deliver on its mandate. I think it was challenging, but in the end, we were able to both isolate situations from each other in order to make sure that there was some form of compartmentalization on the different files and that the Council was able to adopt in the end for Afghanistan, a very robust new mandate for UNAMA on the ground which has been important in terms of getting strengthened both political and human rights components into UNAMA's mandate in a period that was and has been characterized by great volatility. And Afghanistan is another example where we brought the E10 together also later on last year, when the Council in fact, was not able to agree on a statement on girls' education in Afghanistan in September. We gathered the elected 10, together with in fact, the incoming five who had been elected to join for this year, in a stakeout and making a strong sort of statement on girls' education in Afghanistan.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 27:33

I really appreciate what you said on the role of penholders, because I think that it's something that gets underestimated by people who don't, you know, read a resolution year after year and see how much shifts and how, even, you know, one to two line changes can make a world of difference in a mandate. So it's really interesting, since you mentioned, sort of the challenges that came about from Ukraine and a kind of anticipated stalemate, and disagreements, I wanted to ask about the veto, which is obviously a huge part of Council dynamics. I know that recently, the General Assembly passed a resolution that calls for the President of the GA to convene a special session, within 10 days of a veto cast by a P5 member of the Security Council. There have been a lot of veto initiatives in the past from the ACT code of conduct to the French-Mexican veto initiative, and this is sort of another new iteration of responding to the veto. This has been a significant development and we've already seen at least one, actually a few of those General Assembly meetings. What are your views on this veto initiative and how it might improve the capacity of the UN system as a whole?

M

Meena Syed 29:00

I think in fact, over the last year, some of the most significant issues that have happened historically for the UN and the Security Council have been precisely in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion and the outbreak of the Ukraine war in the sense of how the Council reacted and also the interplay between the Council and the General Assembly. So before getting to the veto initiative, I just wanted to also reference the fact that days after the full scale invasion of Ukraine started, several of sort of so-called like-minded countries in the Council came together to put a resolution on the table condemning the invasion and demanding that Russia withdraw from Ukraine. It was a resolution that inevitably we knew, everyone knew would be vetoed. But as a result of that, and as a response to the veto, the Security Council swiftly moved to put a new resolution on the table and invoking the Uniting for Peace mechanism which had not been used by the Security Council in 40 years, which was quite significant. The resolution was put forward by the US and Albania and because it's a procedural resolution cannot be vetoed. I think that was significant for everyone who sort of follows the United Nations and the interplay between the Security Council and the GA, precisely because Uniting for Peace is something that we all are very familiar with, and has been used in history. But it seemed extremely unlikely just weeks ahead, that the Security Council would ever again invoke Uniting for Peace in that



manner. Within days, then, after that, the Uniting for Peace obviously was used and GA met for an emergency special session, the 11th emergency special session and adopted a resolution condemning the invasion with an overwhelming majority, and has since had several meetings and resolutions, both condemning the war and in many senses, I would say through its voting results, both isolated Russia, but shown sort of the world that even though the Council was blocked from action, the voice of the United Nations was not muted. And following this, even more, or just as interesting with that, within weeks, the veto initiative came into play. And I think to many of us, Norway is sort of a founding member of the ACT group, which you mentioned the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group at the UN of member states who work for more transparency in the work of the Security Council's working methods. Through that we had worked previously on the ACT code of conduct, which deals with sort of security action in response to mass atrocities, and which has had now I think over 120 signatories to it, and also sort of engaged on the initiative from Lichtenstein relating to the veto initiative. The way that initiative then sort of came into play as a mechanism where, as you said, whenever a veto is used in the Security Council, a GA debate would automatically be scheduled for the GA to express its views on that situation. That has been significant because it raises the threshold for the use of the veto, and it makes sure that the last word is not said by the veto power in the Security Council. And as you said, the GA since has held such debates following the casting of a veto, not on the issue of Ukraine, which I think many perhaps anticipated, would be the triggering case of the veto initiative, but following a veto both then on DPRK, a non-proliferation resolution, and also following the veto on the Syria humanitarian resolution in July of last year. I think it is significant that the Council and the UN GA was able to react in such a manner, especially from a sort of, a UN nerd historical perspective. So I mean, one other thing to mention, in addition to that was another response that came from the GA obviously was the decision to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council, which I think was also, sort of, an example of the GA exercising all of the mechanisms at its disposal. Now that you've had a few months away from the Council, how does Norway plan to use its experience as an E10 member to better ensure the UN system can effectively prevent and respond to atrocity crimes? So the two years that we sat on the council were obviously of high priority. But our daily work at the UN as one of the top contributors to UN activities continues and will, and that is the core of our UN activity and also a cornerstone in Norwegian foreign policy as such. Of course, we now bring with us a lot of experience from sitting on the Council, that I think it's natural to bring the synergies in our continued work for preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, and atrocity prevention. And I think that's where a little bit of what we discussed earlier, of seeing the, sort of, the holistic approach to conflict prevention is extremely important. Prevention mechanisms, everything from sort of, supporting the UN special envoys, the SG's special envoys, the political missions on the ground that are sort of in the frontlines of both preventive diplomacy but also other sorts of early warning mechanisms, including obviously also long term investments in human rights, but also climate change adaptation, transitional justice, and other socio economic development is very much part of Norway's holistic UN engagement. But I think we bring with us these tools from the Council and also a lot of positive collaboration with other member states, having worked with, as I mentioned, other elected member states on the Council. But also dealing more in-depth with so many of the issues that the Security Council faced, and listening to other Council members, including the countries concerned, has brought in one way, richness in our engagement, foreign policy wise and UN wise going forward. It's interesting, as I mentioned, it's 20 years since Norway sat last on the council. But many of our sort of prioritized engagements over the last 20 years have stemmed from issues that we dealt with when we sat on the Council 20 years ago. So, I wouldn't rule out that some of those experiences that we bring with us now having left the Council will not become priority, or continue to be priorities in terms of our foreign policy work.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 37:56

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