



# THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

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## ARAB PEACEMAKER

*Veteran United Nations mediator Lakhdar Brahimi recounts his missions to Middle East hotspots and reflects on the challenge of political Islam*

When **Lakhdar Brahimi** was awarded the Dag Hammarskjold Honorary Medal in 2004, then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan praised the veteran Algerian diplomat for being “one of the finest mediators and negotiators the United Nations has been privileged to call one of its own.” Brahimi was 70 and had just wrapped up a mission in Iraq, yet he was hardly retiring. Amid the Arab Spring uprisings, he was tapped as UN special envoy to stop what had become a full-blown civil war in Syria.

Brahimi became the go-to negotiator due to his legendary acumen, patience, courage, dedication, and modesty—and perhaps partly thanks to the diplomatic credibility he brings to mediating complex geopolitical conflict as a figure from the independence struggle that ended 130 years of French colonialism in Algeria in 1962. He joined the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) at age 22, served as its representative in South-East Asia for five years (1956–61), and after liberation went on to become Algeria’s ambassador to Egypt (1963–70) and the United Kingdom (1971–79) before serving as foreign minister (1991–93).

As an Arab League envoy he brokered the Taif Agreement ending the Lebanese Civil War in 1989; later, he served as UN special envoy to South Africa (1993–94), Haiti (1994–96), Afghanistan (1997–99 and 2001–04), Iraq (2004), and Syria (2012–14). Successful UN mediation is dependent on support from the major powers, but Brahimi often expressed his personal remorse in the face of failure. Proving unable to end the Syrian conflict, he announced with typical humility: “I am very, very sorry, and I apologize to the Syrian people.”

Brahimi is a member of The Elders, a group founded by Nelson Mandela to work for peace and human rights. He also is a Distinguished Professor of Practice at l’Institut d’études politiques de Paris (Sciences Po). *Cairo Review* Managing Editor **Scott MacLeod** spoke with Brahimi in Paris on January 27, 2015.

◁ **Lakhdar Brahimi, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Jan. 27, 2014. Denis Balibouse/Reuters/Corbis**

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What was the effect of colonial occupation on Algeria?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Colonialism ended in 1962. That is well over fifty years ago. Even our people probably have forgotten what colonialism was. Recently, I was terribly shocked to read one young writer saying that the colonial days were perhaps not as bad as what is happening now. He clearly hasn't read his history. The French decided that Algeria was part of France. When the revolution began, the French used to say—maybe you remember this beautiful phrase: “The Mediterranean runs in the middle of France like the river Seine runs in the middle of Paris.” So, on both sides of the Mediterranean it was France. When they invaded Algeria, the war was terrible. The French were extremely harsh and the massacres committed during those years were really unbelievable. The best lands were taken over by the colonists. It impoverished the people very, very much. One of the scenes I remember in 1945: there was a typhus epidemic, people were dying en masse. On my mother's side, in the extended family of forty men, thirty-nine of them died in that epidemic. And hunger. One of the images I remember is people running around trying to collect some kind of grass to eat. No more than 10 percent of our people went to school. We were ignorant and poor.

The war of liberation under the leadership of the FLN, the Front de Libération Nationale, was also extremely costly. Torture was infamous. [The French] used napalm and planes, destroying villages. Rounded up tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of people, and put them in concentration camps. We say that more than a million of our people were killed. I hope we're exaggerating, but I don't think we're exaggerating much. Colonialism was really a debilitating state, where the individual and society as a whole were strongly affected and destabilized. Algeria and Vietnam were the two big struggles that weakened French colonialism. Of course, the Vietnamese inflicted on them a humiliating military defeat, Dien Bien Phu, on May 8, 1954. Our own liberation started a few months later on November 1, 1954. Less than a year later, there was the [Asian-African] Bandung Conference, so internationally our liberation struggle got its first recognition on April 24, 1955. There was one line in the conference communiqué saying that the Algerian people have the right to their independence and to struggle for it by all means. That was quite a thing for people like [Jawaharlal] Nehru to accept to sign on to that. So we built on that and did fairly well. The French were forced to give up and negotiate with us, and practically accept our terms for full independence and territorial integrity.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How did you join the FLN?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** We had a student organization with the political support of the FLN. We had lateral contacts with people we knew as individuals in the FLN. I never applied for membership in the FLN, it just happened. We were here in Paris, I

was vice president of l'Union Générale des Étudiants Musulmans Algériens. In 1955, there was the Bandung conference. The Indonesian students by the end of 1955 got in touch with us saying, "We want to organize an Afro-Asian student conference to commemorate the first year after Bandung, so we'll have it in April 1956." Mohammed Benyahia, president of our chapter in Algiers, and I were designated to go to this conference in Jakarta. Benyahia would stay as the representative of the FLN in Jakarta and I would stay with him and learn a bit of English then go to New Dehli to open our first office in India. But Benyahia fell sick so I stayed five years in Jakarta.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What has happened to Algeria since liberation?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** You see we were probably over satisfied with ourselves that we have achieved this. In the Third World, we were greatly admired everywhere. But we had no experience with how to run a country. When I look back now, we were pretty well ignorant. Our diplomacy was reasonably effective from day one. For all the rest, I think we were learning. I think we really worked hard and we really believed in what we were doing. In those days, nobody was thinking of becoming wealthy—I mean, when I see now how people are obsessed with money—we were not interested in that. We were really working for our country and we did reasonably well. Some of our leaders started saying to the French, "In three years, we're teaching French to much more people than you did in 130 years." We did extremely well in education in the beginning, because then what was required was quantity not quality. Schools were opening up all over the place.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *So what went wrong?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** The short answer is that I don't know. I think that some of us, at least, were aware that our leaders and even cadres, lost touch with our people. As somebody said, we didn't go anymore to popular cafés and cheap restaurants. We took the villas that were left empty by French colonists. We took over from the French and perhaps we were behaving a little bit like that. In the liberation movement there has always been an Islamic trend. It didn't disturb anybody that people had an Islamic language, behavior, style, in their private lives. Who cares? We didn't see that becoming a political movement. With the death of [Houari] Boumediene, something happened similar to what happened in Egypt after [Gamal Abdel] Nasser died. The successors thought that Boumediene in Algeria, and Nasser in Egypt, had taken the country far to the left and that it wasn't bad if you now allowed the Islamists to express themselves and to reestablish a little bit the balance. In Egypt, those Islamists that Anwar Sadat encouraged ended up killing him. In our case, we woke up and found that our youth were very unhappy and there were demonstrations on October 5, 1988. And for the

first time, the army was brought in and shot at our kids. Then they had what I called a precipitated multiparty system. They put an end to the one-party system and allowed parties to form and rapidly went to election. The best demonstration of what I had been saying for a long time, that we had lost touch with our people: the leaders, the government, and the FLN party, were absolutely certain they would win the election easily. Of course they didn't. The amazing thing is that the parliamentary election took place in December 1991. Now just a year earlier, there were municipal elections that the Islamists won in a way that was humiliating for the FLN. Still the government and the FLN thought they were going to win the legislative elections. So I don't think we understood their message in 1990 and I don't think that we really listened closely to our people to hear what they were thinking. So this is when we plunged into civil war.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why didn't the FLN democratize from 1962 onwards?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I don't think we felt a need. Certainly, the first few years, say until 1974 and 1975, we were close to our people. Our people were satisfied with the system we had. Try to think of what existed in those days. Having a one-party system was not outrageous. Maybe it was outrageous for the United States, but I think it wasn't outrageous for most people in Europe. We had extremely good relations with people like [Olof] Palme in Sweden, with the Italians, and with a lot of the French mainstream left. We had perfectly good relationships. They weren't really shocked there weren't several parties in Algeria, nor were we. The thing is, we became aloof to what was happening. The country was a victim of its own success. I remember telling Boumediene, "You don't govern a country where only 10 percent of the population knows how to read and write. You run a country where you have 90 percent of the kids in school. It's different." Perhaps this is what we didn't notice well enough.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *In hindsight, was it a mistake?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I don't think so. Don't forget that perestroika was just starting in Russia. People were talking about democratizing and so on, and in particular the economy. "Open up; don't leave it all in the hands of the state." The regime in place after Boumediene was hesitating where to go. The rhetoric was still leftist, but the practice was not leftist anymore. And I remember telling one of the main [leaders], "In our country, we have now a strong current of people who do not believe in socialism very much. Why don't you join them and clearly you will have a lot of support? There is also a lot of support for socialism. But you can't sit in the middle. You're neither here nor there." And as I've told you, they encouraged Islamist groups, mainly in the universities, as a way of counterbalancing the leftist tendencies that existed, that were left behind by Boumediene. I think that is where we went wrong.

And then when the price of oil shot up in the early 1980s, more money meant more corruption. That made common people angrier than ever. Before that, there may have been petty corruption, but not much really. Then with money and liberalization, they were importing all sorts of things: cars, televisions, and so on and so forth. Then corruption, and dissatisfaction, went up in the country. So we had socialism without real socialists, and then we had democracy without real democrats.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Meaning the government?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** The government. Democratization was a way of staying in power, not of taking a genuine risk of losing power. They demonstrated that in January 1992 when they stopped the electoral process when they saw they were losing. If you ask me now: was it right to stop the electoral process, or not, I won't be able to tell you. One day I say it's utterly wrong, one day I say it was unavoidable. What I consider as a big mistake was actually going for elections when we did. We didn't have to. We gave in to FIS [Front Islamique du Salut] pressure, who wanted an early election. I was telling everybody, "Please, you don't have to. Don't. Because there is a possibility that you might lose, and what the hell are you going to do?" The army had said publicly, "We will never hand over the country to the people who want to bring us back to the Middle Ages." So what are you going to do? They said, "No, no, no, they are not going to win, so don't worry about that." This is what I always tell people now in the international community who think that the best exit strategy after a conflict is an election: please, think before you go for an election. An election can start or restart a war.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What did you learn about political Islam and how to deal with it, as part of the society?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** The people who really politically are deeply convinced and adhere to political Islam are very, very few. I think that where we went wrong was that we estranged ourselves from our people. We closed the door in front of our people. They had nowhere else to go except to these Islamic parties. We stopped giving the image to our people of being people they can trust. This is where things have gone wrong. People are supporting political Islam by default. When they had other people to support, they didn't go to political Islam. Having said that, yes, political Islam is a reality. They can say, I think with some justification, that the first opportunity they had of proving what they can offer to the people was in Algeria, and we didn't allow them, we didn't give them the opportunity. When the so-called Arab Spring started, I said several times this is now the opportunity for political Islam to show what they are capable of.

Most probably, they are saying the same thing they said about Algeria: “In Egypt, we were not given the time to demonstrate what we could do.” But it’s not quite true. Because they said they would run for 35 percent of the constituencies, and then went for 100 percent. They said they would have no candidate for president, and then they had a candidate. And you remember how they forced the constitution through in the middle of the night. So they did have an opportunity of showing that they can be part of a polity, and they have failed the test. Whether their adversaries are doing the right thing or not is a different question. We were looking at Turkey, where political Islam was showing that they can successfully run a country, and live with the rest of the country. I’m afraid, with the last three or four years, Turkey is starting to show some negative aspects of political Islam. The other place where there is promise is Tunisia. The Al-Nahda party, all in all, and definitely Rachid Ghannouchi, its leader, have behaved in a remarkably interesting and promising manner. In Morocco, too, the late King Hassan had prepared the scene for his son extremely well. Islamists there have been in parliament for a long time, and now they are heading a coalition in the best possible manner. It will be very interesting to see how they will do in the next election. Until now, the country, or the leader who has handled the Arab Spring best, is clearly Morocco.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Was there a real danger if the elections had gone ahead in Algeria?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** We don’t know how they would have behaved. Some of them are very clearly extremely conservative. They would start to ask women to stay at home and implement cutting off hands. There were people asking for that. So from this point of view, perhaps it was difficult to just say, “Go ahead.” And by the way, what is not appreciated enough after the first round of the election, the army was not the first to say, “Let’s stop that.” It was the trade unions and women who took to the streets and said, “We will never allow FIS to take over the country.” The women kept that militant position throughout the horrible seven years. From that point of view, maybe there was no other way. But on the other hand, we lost between 100,000 and 200,000 people. They destroyed everything. Factories were blown up, telephone lines, electricity, schools—that’s 200,000 people and everything we had built gone. Perhaps it’s better to let them take over for a little while?

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *If democratization had started in the 1960s and 1970s, would Algeria have had a more inclusive society to handle these things?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Maybe. But don’t look at it with what is common wisdom today. Look at it from the point of what was common wisdom in the early 1960s. Common wisdom was that a single party is much better than this multiparty corrupt system with political parties being affiliated with Moscow and others with Washington

and so on. That was common wisdom. I'm not saying that it was right. I'm saying that with what we understood in those days, that seemed to be the natural thing to do. I think if somebody like me or anybody else had said, "Let's have a multiparty system," the question would have been, "What the hell for?" And young people were quite happy with the system. It wasn't a police state. People were fairly satisfied that those who won independence for them were running the country and trying to give them schools, give them a salary, give them a house, and that was taking place.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Arabs are ready for democracy? Democracy is a good thing?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Ultimately, yes, more and more freedom for the individual is important. But I think freedom for the community, for society, collective needs, are more important to satisfy at a certain stage of development. I'm a great admirer of Deng Xiaoping. A single party has not prevented this incredible progress that China is achieving. Compare China and India, two Asian countries, large populations—one trying to do it through a multiparty system and the other with a one-party system. Yes, India is doing well, but I don't think you can say India is doing better than China. And also seeing what has happened in the 1980s in Africa, what is happening now, there are a lot of things that are unsatisfactory. And look at those incredible statistics: eighty-two people owning as much wealth as half the population that is poor. Or one percent owning as much as the rest of the world—that's not great, is it? The thing is, what we are seeing now, in Africa in particular, is that there is a little bit of democracy and a lot of so-called capitalistic economy. Naked capitalist economy is geared to be a system fit for foreigners more than the locals. In South Africa, what is happening now is that a few blacks have been co-opted by the former ruling class, but the majority of South Africans are not doing very well. So yes, we made a lot of mistakes, we haven't achieved half of what we were dreaming of, but I'm not sure that a multiparty system in the 1960s would have really achieved for us much more or much better.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Going forward, how should countries in the region deal with political/radical Islamism?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Don't forget that political Islam did not start the Arab Spring. As a matter of fact, they did not believe in it. They really jumped on the train while the train was already running. And of course when the Islamists came on board, with their organization and experience, it wasn't that difficult for them to take over. I rather liked [ousted Egyptian President Mohammed] Morsi. I met him three to four times. He is a decent person. But what I hear is that he wasn't really allowed to be president. He was really the representative of the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. What I hear also is that [Abdel Fattah] El-Sisi was actually handpicked by

Morsi, that he tried to advise the president to behave in a different manner, and failed. There were thirty million people in the streets saying “We don’t want this.” This is a fact. Thirty million people is almost three-quarters of the adult population of Egypt. I would rather say that political Islam has not organized itself properly to take advantage of the huge opportunity that came their way—and *our* way, because I would like political Islam to be integrated in the political life of the region.

It’s a little bit too easy, as is the case now in the United States, to look at them as victims only. Yes, some of them are victims. Also a very, very important point, as far as the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood is concerned: they are the mother ship of political Islam. For them to say, “We have nothing to do with Al-Qaeda. We have nothing to do with violent Islamists.” They all came out of that tree—they are branches of the same tree. The trunk cannot say, “Those branches up there, I never heard of them.” You have some very interesting first class intellectuals in political Islam who are affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. [They] should try to think in a constructive manner to see how we can move toward a situation where political Islam is a political trend in our countries, just like any other. The first thing is to fight against the most stupidly outrageous things that are taking place in our part of the world. The attitude to the Copts: where did this come from? Certainly not from nationalists or Nasserists—that came from them [the Islamists]. They have got to fight it much better and much more strongly than they have. Where in God’s name did this business of destroying churches come from? Somebody has really to put an end to this. Those who have to do more than others are certainly those in political Islam. The first thing you have to accept, if you see yourself part of political Islam, is that there is a division between “church and state.”

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Do you see any possible compromise in Egypt?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Definitely by temperament and profession these last twenty-five years, I’d like to see people reaching a compromise and agreement, and make room for political Islam and also get political Islam to accept to have a place in Egypt and not “Either we run Egypt or no one else will.” My Egyptian friends tell me, “Our temperament is different from yours, and therefore we won’t go to the extremes that you went to in Algeria.” I very much hope that they are right.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Are there patterns in the crises you have dealt with as a United Nations mediator?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** There definitely are similarities, but the very, very big mistake that we sometimes make is to think that experience you acquired in dealing with one conflict can be taken—almost as is—to another conflict. That’s not true. The fundamental principle is that no two conflicts are alike; every conflict has its own reality,

own characteristics, and hence the extreme importance of really trying to understand the place where you happen to be. You are tempted to say, “I’m coming from Afghanistan, for example, and I have seen it all. So, what is it that I can do here in this other conflict that I did over there successfully?” It doesn’t work that way. I tell young people in the UN, “Yes, what kind of experience you have is good and useful, but your first asset, your most important asset, is an intimate knowledge of the situation in the country where you are, and also all sorts of interferences that are at work, whether they come from inside, outside. This is your asset, this is what makes you a good negotiator, a good mediator, or not so good.”

But there are all sorts of [common] qualities. It’s an internal conflict, but that conflict is greatly influenced from outside, and it greatly influences its environment outside of its borders. It is practically true of every conflict—if the conflict is not resolved, it will most probably spill over outside of the borders. There is one way in which that spill will take place very early on and that is with refugees. I don’t know a conflict where people don’t get on the move and go to the nearest border and try to cross to the neighboring country.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What is the role of the United Nations?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** The UN is extremely important. Let’s say international organizations—chiefly the UN, but not only the UN—have a legitimacy that nobody else has. People tend to have confidence in the UN in a manner that they don’t in others—neighbors, in particular. As likely as not, relations between a country and its neighbors are always full of complicated issues, and big powers are always suspected of having agendas. The UN has no agenda or is supposed to not have an agenda. In some cases I think the only problem with the UN is to prove they are not being used by big powers. Otherwise, they have a legitimacy that big powers don’t have.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Did you have to deal with the United States or big powers trying to use you for their purposes?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** More than the big power trying to use you is the *perception* that you are being used by a big power. When I went to Iraq in 2004, it was extremely difficult to tell people that I’m not being used by the United States. Because of what happened to [UN diplomat] Sérgio Vieira de Mello a few months before I arrived, I was protected by the Americans. I was staying with the Americans, traveling in American planes, and when I get out I am protected by big Humvees—so it was extremely difficult to avoid that accusation. I think that I have been an independent agent working for the United Nations. This is the beauty of the UN: it has no private interests, no national interests. So what I tell people is that when I go somewhere on behalf of the UN, my interest and the interest

of the UN is that of the people I'm dealing with and nobody else. If I serve that particular people well, then the UN would be well served. You have to convince the people you deal with of that. UN people have to make sure that [UN legitimacy] is real and protected. You've got to make sure you don't give the wrong impression, and that is not always easy.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Would your job as a UN negotiator be easier or harder if the United Nations Security Council was expanded, as many countries are asking?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I don't think it will make a very big difference. It will still be the Security Council and I would be acting on behalf of the Security Council on the basis of the mandate they give me. Would it be easier to craft a mandate or more difficult? Now we have five [permanent members] and it's bad enough, once we have ten it will be that much more complicated. Legitimacy will probably be greater because the Security Council would be more representative.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Some of your missions have been more successful than others: the Taif Agreement for Lebanon, Haiti, South Africa. Do some factors make a conflict harder to solve, or does it depend on the situation?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Invariably, the neighborhood where you are is a factor. They can be a help or hindrance. If you look at Syria now, it won't be solved until the neighbors come to a serious agreement to solve it. When I took over, I saw immediately that the main countries supporting the opposition were not really in agreement. The Americans, the British, the French, the Saudis, the Turks, the Qataris, the Egyptians—in the last stage they were calling themselves the London 11—they were not in full agreement. Of course there was one big absentee and that was Iran. Most people were saying that Iran is part of the problem—perfectly true. But then some were saying, “Because it is part of the problem, it has to be part of the solution.” While others were saying, “Never! These people have created enough problems, keep them away!” You cannot possibly ignore the fact that neighbors have interests. They have legitimate interests. But they also have hidden objectives that are not so legitimate.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How do you summarize your experiences in Afghanistan—the two missions?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I went in 1997 to 1999, and then in 2001 after 9/11. I started in July 1997 and in September 1999 I told [UN Secretary General] Kofi Annan, “It's enough.” I went down to the Security Council and I told them, “Look, I have done everything I know and it has got me nowhere. And the main reason is that you, the Security Council, have sent me there, but you have no real interest in Afghanistan. It's a far away country, a poor country, and if they want to kill one another it's of no concern

to you. Or so you think.” Almost in these words. “I’m nobody in Afghanistan, I don’t represent anything except you, and the Afghans know how interested or disinterested you are. So if you are not interested, then I don’t represent anything.” I don’t know why I added the following words, but I did: “You think that Afghanistan is a poor country far away and whether they kill one another it doesn’t matter, but you are wrong. One day it’s going to blow in your faces.” When it did they said, “Please come back.”

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Osama Bin Laden had moved back to Afghanistan in 1996. Didn’t that get more interest on the part of the United States?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Mildly. They got a little bit more interested after the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were attacked in 1998. You know again about Bin Laden, I told the Taliban, “Look, I hear that Bin Laden is here, and that he is threatening, preparing something.” The UN has no intelligence, but we have a lot of people who are all over the place and we heard that Bin Laden was up to no good. So I told the Taliban, “This man, you say he’s your guest, he’s a man who supported you, and so on, but he is up to no good and may do things that may be harmful to Afghanistan and to you.” They said, “No, it’s not true.” After the U.S. embassies were attacked, I saw Mohammed Omar. You know, I’m the only UN man, or non-Saudi, who met Mohammed Omar. So I told Mohammed Omar, “I warned you, and look at what has happened.” Mohammed Omar said, “He says he didn’t do it.” I said, “He did.” He said, “Look, at any rate, it’s our tradition and culture: he’s a guest. The guest in your house is the master of the house.” I said, “You tell that to real foreigners, not to me. That culture is mine too. Your guest is master of your house until he starts throwing stones on your neighbors. The day after that you tell him, ‘Now you leave.’ That’s not an argument you can use with me.” We had several opportunities to talk with the Americans. I was telling them that Bin Laden is up to no good and I think they knew it. They talked to the Pakistanis, but probably not firmly enough.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *In Afghanistan during your time in the 1990s and 2000s, what did you see as your mission, and how did it go?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I think the first phase was to try and see how the civil war could end. There we made terrible, terrible mistakes. Putting human rights first in a country like Afghanistan is understandable. To then decide that the Taliban were bad guys and we shall not talk to them or deal with them is not justified. By the end of 1998, the Taliban were controlling 90 percent of the country. The UN has legitimacy. The UN needs to have open doors. Anybody could walk in and talk to the UN.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Your hands were tied? You couldn’t deal with the Taliban?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I dealt with them. I saw Mohammed Omar three times I believe. But the international community, the Security Council, the General Assembly, treated the Taliban as if they did not exist. Their government was not recognized. We did not deal with them. I think that was a very, very big mistake. The international community should have given full recognition to the Taliban and dealt with them—criticize them, yes, but don't ignore their existence.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You had those things going against you: the Security Council not interested, and not willing to engage one of the large parties.*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** In the second phase, in the Bonn Conference which I organized and chaired, the Taliban could not be there because they were bombed and routed and dispersed out of all big cities. But as soon as we came back to Afghanistan, on December 22, we should have reached out to the Taliban. Some of us said, "Where are the Taliban? These people control 90 percent of the country, where have they gone? You are talking about maybe 100,000 or 200,000 people, who were in administration, army, police—where are they? Why don't we try and find them." But most people were saying no, the Taliban were finished. Iran, the United States, Russia, India, were all saying, "Forget about the Taliban." Even Pakistanis were keeping their own contacts with the Taliban but they never pressed for us to [do so]. So that was a terrible mistake. Maybe I should have been a little bit more insistent. I wasn't. So what we were trying to do was to help Afghanistan rebuild a state. We haven't done a very good job of it.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why do you say that?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Look where we are now, fourteen years later. Evidently we haven't done a good job. Civil war has restarted. Corruption is worse than almost anywhere else, or has been until recently—I don't know how it is in the last year or so. Clearly the country is not standing on its own two feet, although a lot of money was spent. There again, the Americans had bombed their way through. Having had their revenge—that's how they looked at it for 9/11—in Washington there was very little interest in Afghanistan. What we didn't realize is that practically while they were bombing Afghanistan, they were actually preparing to go to Iraq. In the fall of 2001, they were talking in Washington much more about Iraq than about Afghanistan. We were not aware of that fully.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is Afghanistan a lost cause, or did you achieve something, at least a foundation?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Oh yes, we achieved a lot. First of all, the first two years were quieter for the people of Afghanistan than it had ever been for the last thirty years

or so. Schools reopened. Now there is some kind of healthcare available for people in Afghanistan almost everywhere. That has never been the case in the history of Afghanistan. You have now telephones, I don't know how many million mobile phones there are—practically everyone has a phone. Television, I don't know how many stations. Electricity has got to a lot of places and some roads have been built. So a lot has been done. But a key element of what a state needs is not there—and that is security.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What is the solution now?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** With the new president [Ashraf Ghani]—I think [Hamid] Karzai has done a reasonably good job. I'm very sorry that in the last four years or so the relationship between the White House and Karzai has not been great. That is unfortunate. Now there is a new president who is a very brilliant man. His associate [Abdullah Abdullah] is a very experienced and able man, too. How are they going to be able to work together is a question. I hope that they would manage to work together. If they do, I think there is a very good chance that Afghanistan can move forward. I think they have to answer a very, very big question and choose—because I don't think they have the same view on this—whether to negotiate with the Taliban, or not. And if they want to negotiate with the Taliban, they should go ahead and do it, the earlier the better. Also the relationship with the neighbors—and the neighbors in this case are really just Pakistan and Iran—has to be established on a good footing. China is another neighbor, they have only ninety kilometers of border, but still they do have a common border. China seems to be ready to play a big role. Some say they are ready to replace the Americans. I know that Ashraf has also good relations in Washington and in London, so I hope this will help. But it's an uphill struggle. The Taliban, we cannot just ignore them.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You went from Afghanistan to Iraq?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Those were the worst days of my life. It was extremely difficult to say no. If you remember, the Americans went to the Security Council in June or July after the 2003 invasion and said we want to be recognized as the occupying power and they got that. By the end of the year, all of a sudden they said “We want to re-establish Iraqi sovereignty,” and they came to New York and told [UN Secretary General] Kofi [Annan], “We cannot do it alone, you need to help us.” And they also told him, “The man we want to work with is Brahimi.” Kofi could not say no. You are the United Nations. Somebody tells you, “I want to end occupation.” You cannot say no. And I thought I could not say no, either. The country is in my neighborhood, in my region, people I know, and so on. I was against this invasion and said so publically although I was a UN official. But it was extremely unpleasant being with the occupier. I was eating with them, living with them, talking to them, and so on—that was really difficult.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What are you getting at there?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Psychologically it is very difficult to be cooperating with an occupation that you condemned and didn't like. But the occupying power was now asking you to help end that occupation. How can you say no? What we achieved was reasonable, but not really great. I helped form a government that was certainly better than the government of [Paul] Bremer, and we managed to exclude people like [Ahmad] Chalabi and some other bad characters.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Was it possible to build a new state after the fall of Saddam?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Until now, I annoy American officials by asking them, "Why did you invade Iraq? Give me a real reason, good reason." If even I knew that there were no weapons, surely the United States also knew that? If Scott Ritter, an American and the most energetic UN inspector—the Iraqis hated his guts—is saying, "There is nothing anymore," surely the American establishment must have known that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq anymore. And don't tell me they went there to promote democracy. And if that's what they wanted, they certainly did not do a great job of it. Until now, I don't know what the real reason was they invaded Iraq. A lot of people in our part of the world think this is an Israeli [plan]. It's a fact that a lot of the people who were very close to [Benjamin] Netanyahu were very active in pushing for the invasion. I told my American friends: "Actually every single person who knew anything about Iraq on your side, in your government or past governments—especially ambassadors, Arabic-speaking—all told you the one thing you don't do is dissolve the army. General [Jay] Garner who was briefly in charge of Iraq before Bremer, who was still in the country, went to Bremer and told him, "I hear you're going to announce the dissolution of the army." Bremer said, "Yes." He told him, "Don't do that. We are talking to hundreds of officers and they are willing to come back and work with you." Bremer told him, "I have my marching orders. I have my instructions. I'm going to do it." The general said, "Can we please go to your office and call [Donald] Rumsfeld and let me tell him what we're doing, and he'll maybe tell you not to." And Bremer said, "No, I have my orders. I don't need to call anybody." So why did they do that against the advice of every single American who knew Iraq, many of them Republicans? I still don't know why they did that. De-Baathification, this was done by Chalabi. But the dissolution of the army was done by Bremer.

I visited Mosul, and was told they had no teachers. Mosul is known to be the cultural center in Iraq. How come you have no teachers? They were fired because they're Baathists, I was told. I made a public statement questioning that decision. I was bitterly criticized by Iranian media and some of the Shiite extremists in Iraq. Again in Mosul,

I was told by some doctors and surgeons, “We have no thread to sow a wound, we don’t even have alcohol and cotton.” I told Bremer, “How come? In addition to your own money, you have countries that pledged billions to help Iraq.” How the Americans run the place, I don’t know. The corruption started under the nose of the Americans, and it soon became worse than it ever was under Saddam. Now I tell my American friends, “The only thing you have properly democratized is corruption. Before it was only Saddam and his cronies, now it’s democracy—everybody is corrupt.” So that is why it was so terribly unpleasant.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *When you left, did you have any hope the country could be put right?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** [Colin] Powell wanted me to stay. Kofi wanted me to stay. I had committed just to form the government and then go. I said, “No, it’s enough.” Another thing, I don’t mind if you publish it: Tariq Aziz is not a friend of mine. I knew him. I dealt with him, but we were not close. I thought that keeping him in jail was terribly unfair and unjustified. This man surrendered. He was not caught hiding by the Americans. He came and said, “I’m Tariq Aziz. Here I am.” He had exactly the same career as Sadoun Hammadi. They both were foreign ministers, they both were ministers of information, they both were deputy prime ministers. When the regime fell, Sadoun Hammadi was speaker of parliament and Tariq Aziz was foreign minister and deputy prime minister. Sadoun Hammadi was released after three months. I got him a visa to go to Germany for treatment—he passed away. Tariq Aziz has now been in jail for thirteen years. Yes, he has been sentenced to death, but as far as I know, and nobody has told me the opposite, he’s not corrupt, he has not killed anybody. The only difference between the two: Sadoun was Shiite and Tariq Aziz is Christian. I gave a note to the White House: it is shameful you have given him to the [Iraqi] government. You should have tried him as a prisoner of war. If you have a prisoner, you try him or release him. Let him go and die with his wife and children.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How do you see the outlook for resolving the internal crisis in Iraq?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Bombing Daesh [Arabic for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS] will yield absolutely no results if it is not part of a political process, both in Syria and Iraq. Look at how long it has been going on. Was it President Obama, or somebody else, who said, “Since this bombing campaign started in Iraq, Daesh has lost about one percent of the territory they have occupied.” One percent in eight months? So how long is it going to take? If it is part of a political process, then yes, it will work. Daesh will be defeated, definitely. But it’s a hell of a difference whether it’s defeated in two years or twenty years. You need to make it happen in two years, and for that you need a political process.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What's the political solution?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I don't want to pontificate on things that I'm not close enough to. Broadly, I think you need to have in Iraq a state that is reasonably fair to all its people.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What was your mission in Syria? What did you aim to do?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** It didn't go very well. I tried to bring the two parties—unfortunately there are not two parties—bring the government and those that are opposed to the government to accept some kind of negotiated settlement. For more than a year, the official opposition—the people who were outside, in Istanbul and elsewhere—were extremely suspicious of us. Because their friends, their supporters, were telling them, “Bashar is gone. He's finished. It's just a question of weeks.” I was saying that Bashar is not leaving. Somebody in New York told me, “How could you say that? For all you know, we may hear, right now, while we are talking, that the man is gone.” This was in the end of 2012. So this opposition, they were told by their friends—everybody, the British, the Americans, the French, the people in the region, Turkey, the Arabs—that Bashar is finished. Everybody was talking about the “day after,” and we were saying, “No, we need a negotiated settlement.” They said, “This man is trying to protect Bashar. Why do you want to negotiate with Bashar while he's falling? It is as if you had invited Tunisians to negotiate with [Zine El-Abidine] Ben Ali in Tunisia on January 13—the man fell the next day.” Only after one year did this opposition start to realize that I was perhaps not an enemy.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why were you so sure Bashar would not go like Ben Ali?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Because I know a little bit what Syria is. I told a lot of people that Assad—the father—has participated in every coup for twenty years until he did his own. So he had a lot of experience. His regime was built like a dome, where there is no wood or iron, or anything—but there is a keystone in the middle. The keystone is the president. Most Syrians realize they cannot take him because then the whole thing will collapse. This is what we have now. In hindsight, people seem to understand now that it is much better to work for change to happen in a negotiated manner. Actually the Russians said from day one, Syria is not going to go the way Egypt and Tunisia went. I have always been aware that the Russians know Syria extremely well. Their number two in the ministry of foreign affairs, [Mikhail] Bogdanov, has been ambassador in Syria for nine years, in Egypt for six, and in Israel for five years—so he knows his Middle East. You have a lot of people who served in Syria—not only diplomats, officers, engineers, and so on. It was unfortunate that people did not go to the Russians from day one and try to work with them to see how the Syrians could be helped to solve their crisis.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You went in as UN-Arab League envoy, to try to negotiate some kind of agreement between the opposition and the government. Why didn't this work?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** It didn't work because the opposition was divided and the people who supported the opposition and many of the opposition outside the country were certain they were going to win—so why negotiate? George Sabra was criticizing me every day, “Why doesn't this man leave us alone?” He didn't say it in so many words, but practically, he seemed to be confident that they were on their way home and I was bothering them. I don't blame them because if you have the mythical MI6 and CIA and everybody saying that the man is gone—President Obama was saying, “Bashar is finished”—why would they believe me? Had the Russians and the Americans worked together a little bit more effectively, it would've been a little bit easier for us, but they didn't.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What's the political solution for Syria then?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** You've got to have a political solution that is accepted by not all, but most of the people in Syria. What we were saying, what the United Nations was saying, has been always that you don't need more weapons in Syria, you needed no weapons. The secretary general [Ban Ki-moon] and I, and Kofi before me, we always were saying, “Stop providing weapons to all sides, including the government.” How this may be done now, in my opinion, you have got to bring in all the neighbors.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You criticize the UN Security Council for not being so unified.*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Certainly the Security Council was paralyzed, no doubt about that. Libya had a lot to do with it. The resolutions that were voted for Libya, the Russians thought that they didn't vote a resolution to allow bombing and regime change, so they think they have been tricked. Not only them, but also the Chinese, the Indians, the Brazilians, the South Africans, who all happen to be members of the Security Council, even the Germans—they all thought they were tricked by the British, the French, and Americans. So then the Russians were extremely suspicious of any move for a resolution [on Syria] in the Security Council.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How do you analyze the rise of Daesh in this context?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** Daesh is an Iraqi product, not a Syrian product. Daesh is the mutation of Al-Qaeda, which had been defeated through the [David] Petraeus process. Al-Qaeda was defeated by the Sunnis and promises made to them were not kept, so some of those Al-Qaeda and non-Al-Qaeda started a movement against the government in Baghdad, and they called themselves the “Islamic State of Iraq.” They moved into Syria and changed their name. [Ayman] Al-Zawahiri as a matter of fact

told them, “No, no, no you are in Iraq, stay in Iraq. Al-Qaeda in Syria is somebody else, it’s Al-Nusra. If you want to go and help, that is fine. But you don’t call yourself the ‘Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.’”

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How big of a factor is Daesh?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I don’t think that for the moment it is realistic to expect them to be part of the solution. I think they need to be defeated. For them to be defeated, you need a political process. If not, if they continue to prosper and to dig deep in the two countries for another five or more years from now, I don’t know if you are not forced to talk to them. I don’t know. But what I have been saying from day one is that Daesh will be defeated, but it will be defeated faster if there is a political process.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *The problem of Palestine?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I’m sorry to say that Arab governments have for all practical purposes given up on Palestine. The support now they give the Palestinian people is lukewarm. Now the Arabs are telling them, “Well you have the lead, this is your country, do whatever you like.” Of course Hamas is criticized. The PLO is criticized. Mahmoud Abbas is criticized. What I say is that the people of Palestine have rights. Whether their leaders are good or bad, whether their leaders are leading them properly or not, the Palestinians have rights and that needs to be supported. I’m encouraged to see that in Europe, all of Europe, this is starting to be understood. There is clear annoyance with the behavior and practice of the Israelis. I think it’s high time that the Arab governments *and* people say the same thing: what Israel is doing is unacceptable, the people of Palestine have rights whether their leaders are good or bad, and those rights have to be supported. One idea I’ve been throwing out is that we need to form a group of likeminded people in the Arab World, some personalities, political, intellectuals, former government or international officials like myself, and reach out to the Europeans, but at the same time, reach out to the Arabs in Israel and to the Israelis who really believe in a fair solution for the Palestinian people, and that is the creation of a viable state, not a patchwork of bantustans that the Israelis are offering for the moment. We should reach out to these people, and work for the boycott, not only BDS [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement], but a real boycott of Israel exactly like South Africa was. In South Africa, people used to tell the black population, “This will hurt your population.” And they used to say, “Yes, we know, we accept that.” If you say this would hurt the Arabs and hurt the Palestinians, so be it. We have to talk to the Israelis so this is not a racist undertaking, it is a political movement to support the legitimate rights of the Palestinians.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *The Arab Spring brought a lot of hope in 2011, but things aren't going well all over the region now. What message do you take from the uprising?*

**LAKHDAR BRAHIMI:** I spoke to [BBC correspondent] Lyse Doucet in May 2010 in South Africa, and we were speaking about Africa. I was telling her that, in Africa—north and south—our population is very young and impatient and they are unhappy with things. So unless our leaders wake up and deal with issues like corruption, there will be revolutions everywhere. And she laughed, “Revolutions?” I was not surprised that the lid blew off in several places. Perhaps I was over optimistic. I thought that our people are craving for change, real change. In every country, the present leadership can lead that change, but if they don't, they will be the victim of it. I still think that this is valid. I don't think that in the short term anything can happen, but in the medium and the long term the Arab World is not going to be what it has been. Change is going to take place. What form it's going to take and what kind of convulsions it's going to go through, it's not something that is going to happen overnight. So these convulsions are now taking place. In Egypt, you see what is happening. People are saying El-Sisi is going to be [Hosni] Mubarak. No sir, he cannot be Mubarak, he will not be Mubarak, and Egypt is not going to be Mubarak's Egypt. And it will be the same thing everywhere. Syria will be different from the Syria that existed in March 2011. In Syria, the foreign minister told a mutual friend, “Poor Brahimi. He believes in the Arab Spring. He believes it's something positive.”

The Arab Spring is perhaps is a misnomer. But it's certainly a genuine, popular movement that came from our entrails. It has done the destruction part quite effectively in three or four countries, but the rebuilding is going to take different shapes and it's going to need time. Somebody said the French Revolution actually ended in 1871, almost a hundred years later. The convulsions were incredibly important: the terror of Robespierre, Napoleon, the Restoration, Napoleon III, all these were things resulting from what happened in 1789. You could say the American Revolution has taken a long time. It has thrown out all sorts of things until the present day. It is still a reference in American politics. In our part of the world, we come from a very, very deep hole. Sometimes we dig; we go further down rather than up. I think that is part of this change that people are craving for and fighting for. When is it going to deliver all its promises? I don't know. But you are right: at present, it doesn't look great.