

# **Interview with Ambassador *Lakhdar Brahimi***

## **The United Nations Representative and Peace Envoy**

*Interview by Hind Arroub\**  
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*In November 2016, I attended Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi's talk at MESA in Boston. Mr. Brahimi's talk on "Working for peace on behalf of the United Nations and with Big Powers (The Elephants as he called them)", was truthful and insightful.*

*Worried by the global misery that the world is living, I decided to ask him for an interview. Mr. Brahimi accepted and an interview between two different generations happened and driven by the same worry that is how to make this world peaceful. An interview illuminated by the presence of Dag Hammarskjöld's spirit.*



- ✓ **The Secretary General of the United Nations is appointed by the Members of the Organization and works for all 194 of them. The UN need a lead like Hammarskjöld.**
- ✓ **The Elephants (the big powers) share responsibility with the Syrian Regime and some of the armed opposition groups for the utter destruction of Syria.**
- ✓ **Arab nations need to learn from the collaboration of the ASEAN ‘Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ while Morocco and Algeria should learn from the Indian-Chinese lesson.**

### ***Interview:***

**H.A:** Thank you, Mr. Ambassador for accepting my interview.

**Mr. Brahimi:** My pleasure.

**H.A:** My first question is about rethinking the United Nations systems. Do you think that reforming the UN system is enough or do we need to rethink radically this institution, to make it more relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**Mr. Brahimi:** Well, you know, the United Nations has been created in 1945. Essentially, the basic thinking came from the Americans and the British. They were joined by the countries that won the Second World War. Its Charter was adopted by the less than 50 independent states at the time. Since then, the membership has increased to 194: the UN is now a truly universal organization. I think the organization is useful and has done fairly well in the 70 years of its existence. People often forget that the organization belongs to its members and that it is up to them to make the best use of it. Obviously, that it is quite a challenge as the 194 countries are supposed to have equal rights and responsibilities. For them to forge a consensus on every issue is never easy.

People generally look at the Secretary General and applaud what he says or does or, on the contrary, bitterly criticize his action and do not take into consideration the fact that the Secretary General is appointed by the Members of the Organization and works for all 194 of them.

**H.A:** If I heard you correctly, you mean that the SG is just an employee.

**Mr. Brahimi:** Yes indeed. He is a very high official. He is a respected international official. Some have called him *a Secular Pope*. But he is responsible to the members of the UN.

**H.A:** What is the core objective of the organization?

**Mr. Brahimi:** The core objective of the United Nations is to preserve peace and security in the world. When tensions arise or conflicts erupt, the UN is expected to move rapidly to help re-establish peace and security. The organ which is responsible for peace and security is the Security Council. The Security Council today, is composed of 15 members: 5 are permanent

members and each of them has a veto right. The other ten are elected by the General Assembly for a two year term. There is full agreement in the world that the Security Council is not representative anymore. Discussion about its reform has been going on for many years but there is no progress. It was taken for granted that with the end of the Cold War, the reform would be very easy to achieve. But things proved to be more complicated. The P5 are quite happy with the status quo. Actually, they can afford to say that they are ready for the reform and hide behind the fact that all regional groups remain divided on the subject. Several suggestions are on the table but no progress has been achieved yet.

**H.A:** What role is being played by the “Elders”, the organization you belong to, to fix such issue?

**Mr. Brahimi:** The “Elders” is a group of independent retired statesmen and personalities created at the initiative of President Nelson Mandela in 2007. Mandela asked The “Elders” to offer their services for the cause of peace and justice in the world. In 2015, for example, an “Elders” delegation went to the Security Conference in Munich and made suggestions concerning the reform of the Security Council and the election of the Secretary General. Some of the ideas of the “Elders” are shared by Civil Society and a large number of Governments. The election of the Secretary General in October 2016 has taken place on the basis of some of those ideas. But on the reform of the Security Council, no progress has been made. There are ideas about how to limit the use of the veto by the P5. But no agreement is in sight on this or on other issues related to the Security Council.

**H.A:** So, let me ask you more about the veto right. In your famous report, the Brahimi’s report, which is about UN Peace Operations, very little has been said about the veto right and on how it may help or hinder the action of the UN for preventing or resolving conflict or about peacebuilding peace.

**Mr. Brahimi:** Yes, we did not say much about the veto power of the P5 specifically, but I think we did say quite a lot about the Security Council. The veto can hardly be used to help resolve a conflict or reestablish peace. It is rather the contrary: the veto is far too often used to paralyze the Council and prevent it from making a strong call for a cease-fire, protect civilians or more generally take action in the cause of peace. So far, there is no agreement even to achieve this rather modest objective. Everyone remembers the agonizing situation when Aleppo was bombarded and the Security Council was not even able to make a serious call for a cease-fire. When people are dying like in Aleppo, a call for a ceasefire cannot, should not be vetoed. Now, if and when additional Permanent Members are added, will they also have a veto right?

**H.A:** You said earlier that the Secretary General is just the head of the Secretariat and that he is an employee responsible to the member states. What kind of relationship exists between the Security Council and the Secretary General?

**Mr. Brahimi:** Let me specify. It is true that the Secretary General works for the members of the Organization and is responsible to them. But the Secretary General is a key institution, side by side with the General Assembly and the Security Council. He (or she, of course) can do quite a lot, including in the field of the maintenance of peace and security. It is enough to point out that the Security Council will always act (or refuse to act) on the basis of a report from the Secretary General. In the Report of the Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations, which you mentioned a moment ago, we called on the Secretary General to "tell the Council what they need to know, not what they want to hear". Dag Hammarskjöld who is unanimously respected and considered as a particularly successful Secretary General spoke very forcefully and resisted attempts of big powers to influence his decisions. He enjoyed strong support from the overwhelming majority of the membership.

**H.A:** Are you saying Hammarskjöld was courageous and did not care if his action pleased the Security Council or not?

**Mr. Brahimi:** Yes. Of course, Hammarskjöld and all his successors did their very best to establish a good working relationship with the Security Council. But Hammarskjöld was a pioneer and tried to hold his ground when one permanent member or the other tried to impose their narrow national interests on him.

**H.A:** Some may tell you that Hammarskjöld benefitted from the Cold War and the divisions that existed between the P5 members. He also enjoyed the support of the Non-Alignment Movement. Today the P5 are left alone; the Non-Aligned Movement exists only in name. When the P5 agree, they decide alone for the rest of the world. Would you say that for the UN to be a functional and influential institution, a more balanced world is needed?

**Mr. Brahimi:** The end of the Cold War has created a new situation in the world. Non-alignment was considered - especially by the Americans - as an opportunistic attitude adopted by a number of countries trying to play one camp in the Cold War against the other. That's not true. Nonalignment, for most of its members, was based on deep understanding of the dangers of the constant tensions between West and East. Non-aligned countries considered that they would better serve the cause of peace by NOT joining one camp or the other. These countries thought they would better serve peace by pleading all the time for peaceful co-existence. This is not an opportunistic attitude, this is an attitude of principle. That is what non-alignment was at its origin. Non-alignment is today a shadow of what it was.

The U.S. seemed to consider that the Cold War was not different from a "hot" war and they, (the US) had won that war. They thought that their victory gave them the right to unilaterally dictate the conditions of peace in the future. America has won the war; it is the sole super power, and it's now the American Century. In one sense, the end of history meant that the struggle between different ideologies had also been won. The victorious ideology had to be accepted by the rest of the world. That was the meaning of several speeches made by President George H. Bush about the New World Order in 1991 and 1992.

**H.A:** Can you emphasize this point?

**Mr. Brahimi:** In fact, the end of the Cold War did not produce a New World Order. International relations entered into a long transition period which is slowly coming to an end. A new multipolar world is coming back into existence and is in the process of shaping up a New World Order, and that multipolar world is in the process of trying to organize a new order.

**H.A:** So what would be this new order? It's clear that we are living the emergence of a multipolar world? But what will be the meaning of this "multipolarism"? Will it be led only by the former leaders of the world: U.S., Russia replacing the USSR, France, and the UK? What role will be played by countries like Germany, China, and the so-called New Emerging Powers?

**Mr. Brahimi:** You have also now the Europeans as a group among the emerging nations, you have India. At least if you want to look at the big powers, you have powers that were not prominent during the cold war and the immediate post-cold war. You have China, India and Japan; you have a revived Russia...

**H.A:** What about Brazil as an emerging power and the Asian Tigers?

**Mr. Brahimi:** Yes, so at the very least you have an emerging Russia, China, soon to be the biggest economy in the world. I remember in 2002, the military budget of the United States was equal to the combined military budgets of all countries. By 2012 or 2013, it was equal to the 15 largest military powers. So, it has decreased but it is still huge. China, Russia, France, Britain, India, and ten others combined, their military budget, is less than the military budget of the United States.

**H.A:** But all those powers are now competing on Syria and perhaps even fighting one another through proxies. The Syrian conflict represents to them a strategic conflict and you declared this year that we must hold those countries accountable for destroying Syria. So were you thinking about those powers facing each other in Syria?

**Mr. Brahimi:** Yes, several countries share responsibility with the Syrian regime and some of the Armed Opposition groups for the utter destruction of Syria. As you are aware, respect for human rights in all circumstances, accountability etc. have become much more important than they were during the Cold War period. The ICC (International Criminal Court) could not have come into existence during the Cold War period.

**H.A:** But the International Justice System is weak and major powers, especially USA, do not participate in the ICC.

**Mr. Brahimi:** True and this is a very serious problem. The Rome Statute of 1998 was a huge step forward in the establishment of an international judicial system which could intervene when a national system is failing. However, a large number of countries, including the US, Russia, China and India, did not adhere at all. Others became members but never ratified. The Rome Statute was put together by all countries: India, Russia, China, and the United States were there. But when the ratification came, they did not ratify, so they stayed out. Indeed, the US actually withdrew all together, or "unsigned" as President W. Bush said. Furthermore, More than 100 States have signed bilateral agreements with the US not to implement any order from the court concerning a US citizen. The ICC has issued an arrest warrant concerning President Omar Al-Bashir of Sudan. It will never do the same for a US citizen, no matter what he or she has done or may do in the future.

**H.A:** Like Bush, Paul Bremer, Donald Rumsfeld, and other members of that hawkish administration?

**Mr. Brahimi:** Yes. The international community started to build an international system of justice, but has stopped halfway. Many people - chief among them Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the UN and Chairman of The Elders, say the system is imperfect and we should try and improve it but it can function while we change it to bring it to the high standards of the Rome Statute. As you are aware, a number of African countries are considering quitting the Court.

**H.A:** Most of the Arab countries are not participating in the ICC except few of them like Jordan, Palestine, Djibouti and Comoros.

**Mr. Brahimi:** Right! So the system is anything but perfect. Justices, by definition universal. If it is not, it can't be called justice.

**H.A:** When you declared "we must hold those who destroyed Syria accountable", who, in your view, is responsible for the destruction of Syria? Who would be able to hold them accountable?

**Mr. Brahimi:** This is very complicated. I think that there was an international commission that has documented very seriously crimes against humanity and war crimes that were committed in Syria. It is a fact, however that it is generally those, who win the war who will decide what to do with such reports. In South Africa, Mandela and De Klerk went for a justice and reconciliation formula. I think it did work for them. In Syria, entire cities have been destroyed, 50 percent of the population have been displaced, inside or outside of the country. That has never happened before. A little bit more than half of 23 million, a lot of people are responsible for this. When and how the issue of justice will be discussed realistically, all you can say is it's not going to happen today or tomorrow, later maybe. I think we will be talking most probably of national reconciliation and at least some accountability. Like what the South Africans did.

**H.A:** Mr. Ambassador, let's move on to our region, the Maghreb. You being Algerian and me Moroccan, we could not fail to discuss the Maghreb union and its failure. The deconstruction of Libya and how that affects the stability of Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco; the threat of terrorism in the Sahel in the Maghreb region; the borders issues between Morocco and Algeria. All this has an impact on our countries; we're not immune. So, how can we resolve all these issues?

**Mr. Brahimi:** Well, it all depends on what you're interested in. The Arab world as a whole is in very bad shape. The Arab region is probably in the most worrying situation in the entire world. All other regions have problems, but the Arab world and the Middle East region more generally have more problems, more difficult problems, more intractable problems than any other part of the world. Kissinger said that it was total chaos. If you take that into consideration, what some people call the "Central Maghreb," that is Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, is in better shape than the rest of the Arab world. Mauritania, too is not bad, but Libya is hell.

You cannot look at Libya without talking about foreign military intervention. Foreign military intervention has been catastrophic. Those who intervened (NATO, first led by the French) say that they went there to help the people and protect them from the threats of Qaddafi. But I'm not sure that's the whole truth. And the crude reality today is that, Libya has been utterly destroyed. So Libya is in hell now and I don't see any turn to stability and peace, and that is a very serious threat to Tunisia, to Algeria, to Egypt as well as to Libya's southern neighbors. The huge arsenal of modern weapons Qaddafi had been hoarding, has been plundered and arms are being smuggled into every neighbor of Libya. Libya is like an infected wound which threatens to contaminate the entire region. A rare piece of good news is what we heard a few days ago about Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt getting together to try to help Libyans out of their present chaos.

**H.A:** What about the Maghreb and the Moroccan-Algerian conflict?

**Mr. Brahimi:** The Maghreb was a profound aspiration for the people of the region during the struggle for independence. I strongly believe that the aspiration is still alive in the hearts and minds of the majority. But in actual fact, the Maghreb exists only on paper today. There are 5 sub-regions in Africa. Four are fairly well organized, that is West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa. They work together, they hold summits, they address regional issues, and they cooperate with one another in a structured way. Not the Maghreb.

I refuse to say that there is a *conflict* between Algeria and Morocco. There is a serious difference of views between the two countries concerning the Western Sahara. But surely the two countries can recognize their differences, show mutual respect for each other's attitudes and still work together in scores of other fields. Somehow, we seem to be unable to find creative ways of bypassing our differences or the question of the Sahara. It is so very sad that the border between the two countries has been closed for 22 years.

Look at China and India. The two countries fought a war in 1963. They have a serious border problem. They disagree about Tibet. They compete for influence in many places in Asia. But

they keep an active dialogue between them, they cooperate very actively with one another and their trade has soared to more than 70 billion dollars by 2012 and has probably gone well above the 100 billion by now. China has created a huge international bank to develop infrastructure in Asia. And if I am not mistaken, the CEO of this giant institution is an Indian national. An Indian national. Morocco is at long last back as a member of the African Union. Let us hope that this will offer an opportunity for the Moroccan government and the Polisario to resume discussions on how the question of Western Sahara can be solved.

Resumption of closer, more active cooperation between Morocco and Algeria does not need to wait for a solution to the Western Sahara problem. There is so much that the two countries, together with the other countries of the Maghreb can do together.

**H.A:** Exactly! We have so much in common: history, religion, language, culture etc.

**Mr. Brahimi:** Yes, everything says we should work together.

**H.A:** Who can push political leaders in Morocco and Algeria to work together? The “Elders” for example?

**Mr. Brahimi:** I don’t think so. I think only the Moroccans and Algerians can do this. All in all, the media in both countries and also elsewhere is not playing a positive role. I suppose that civil society does play a more constructive role: teachers, intellectuals etc. - not enough though I am sure that I am not alone in feeling so profoundly unhappy that the borders between our two countries are closed. I am sure I am not alone in thinking that there is no fatality that the relations between Algeria and Morocco should remain as they are today. When I see the warmth expressed in the exchange of messages between King Mohamed VI and President Bouteflika on official occasions I feel hopeful. But we have lost too much time already.

**H.A:** I just want to go back to a very important point “the illusion of stability in the Maghreb countries”. It is true when we compare Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia to other Arab countries, they are of course better than Syria, Yemen or Libya. But when we look at the state of relations between Morocco and Algeria, we see that the social situation of our two peoples is not that much better than what it is in the rest of the Arab World; people are really suffering from unemployment, especially among the youth who are pushed to migration, legal and illegal.

**Mr. Brahimi:** The so-called “Harraga” (those who burn their identity papers and try to move illegally to Europe, often at great risks, for their lives)

**H.A:** Yes. So will the situation in those countries remain the same or will we see a day when people say we’ve had enough?

**Mr. Brahimi:** Stagnation does not exist. Not for ever. Before the so-called Arab Spring happened, a lot of people were fully aware that the situation in the region could not continue the



way it was. My son's wife is Egyptian. I told them in 2009, and 2010 not to go to Egypt because tension was rising and things were certain to blow up; go to Egypt because things were going to blow up. And they did, first in Tunisia, then in Egypt, Libya, Syria. Common wisdom now has it that the Arab Spring has not been positive, that it has now turned into a freezing winter. Indeed, some will tell you it was nothing but a conspiracy. I, for one think that it was a genuine widely popular movement. The demand for change was real and it was justified. People called it a spring and seemed to expect *eternal spring*. But eternal spring does not exist. Change takes time and a revolution will not create paradise on earth overnight.

Let me add that Morocco fared better than other countries in 2011: the King immediately dissolved Parliament, got another constitution drafted and held elections. The Monarchy and the Islamic Party of Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane seem to have established a mutually acceptable working relationship. However, the fact that the Prime Minister has not been able to form a new government for the past several months does raise questions.

**H.A:** Yes and the main question is to what extent those measures' improves people's life and answer their demands of change and social change.

**Mr. Brahimi:** Be that as it may, the entire region - be it the Arab World as a whole or the Maghreb - deserves and needs much better than what it now has. In 2011, I said that "*people in this part of the world demand change and it cannot be only cosmetic. The present political leaders can deliver that change. But those who do not, may well end up being its victims*".

**H.A:** And what it is that we need to become better countries and societies?

**Mr. Brahimi:** To young people who ask me this question, I generally reply by speaking about countries in other parts of the world. I have known Singapore since it was a British colony, back in the 1950s. It is a tiny little island with no resources whatsoever. Their per capita income in those days was not very different from the per capital income in Algeria or Morocco. Today their per capita income is higher than that of the United States. This nation of 5 million inhabitants provides quality medical care to the elites in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Burma and probably other countries in Asia.

So what this little island with no natural resources of any kind can do? How come we cannot do it in Tunisia, Algeria or Morocco, especially if we come together? Then, you have ASEAN -- Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Some ASEAN members are small, like Brunei or Singapore, whereas Indonesia is 250 million inhabitants.

**H.A:** But they found a common interest and they work together well.

**Mr. Brahimi:** They have very little in common. The Vietnamese, the Laotians, the Burmese, Indonesians etc., have a different history, different cultures and religions; they speak different languages they have different religion. Yet they are working together beautifully. The trade

between them has increased steadily and reached impressive levels and continues to grow steadily, year after year.

**H.A:** Whereas we have much more in common.

**Mr. Brahimi:** We have everything in common, the League of Arab States was the first regional organization to be created after World War II - before the United Nations, actually. The Maghreb Union has been the dream of past generations. Its Secretariat was created in 1992, but it is dormant. Surely, we can do as well as ASEAN and even better.

**H.A:** Of course, but this is also a question of political will and courage.

**Mr. Brahimi:** You are right, political will is indispensable. Of course we have political problems and those problems are there to be solved; they are not there to cry about. Those we cannot solve, put them aside and move on. As I told you, the Chinese and Indians have a very big border problem and they acknowledge the fact. A few years ago, they solemnly declared that they will work together to solve the border problem by peaceful means only. I am not sure how much time they spend discussing the border issue. What I do know is that dialogue is very active between them and trade increases steadily. The border problem is not paralyzing them into stagnation. I am sure we can do the same and even better if we put our energy into it.

**H.A:** This is really the beautiful thing about working together.

Thank you very much, Sir for your time.

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