Lakhdar Brahimi

The UN and Arab League’s troubleshooter in Syria tells Alan Philps how the curtain fell on America’s moment in the Middle East

You have been involved in Middle Eastern politics from the Algerian War in the late 1950s, through crises in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and most recently Syria, as the UN and Arab League special envoy. Is the region in the worst state you can recall?

It is certainly the most troubled region in the world today. We’ve always had problems but what is different now is the perception, held by the people of the region themselves, that their problems are difficult, perhaps even impossible to solve. There is a kind of despair that was not there before. This is the impression I have, and I hope I’m wrong.

You played an important role in ending the Lebanese Civil War in 1989. Is that a model for Syria?

Definitely not, because no two situations are alike and there are no ready-made formulas you can take from one place to another. The solution for Syria will have to be invented depending on when people start talking seriously about a solution. If we had talked seriously about a solution in 2012, it would have been one thing. In 2014, when I left, it would have been something else. Now, three years later, it is again different.

When you started your Syrian role for the UN, you said that it was like ‘mission impossible’. Did Kofi Annan – your predecessor in the role – twist your arm?

Not at all. As a matter of fact, Kofi himself hesitated and he called a number of people including myself before taking on the job. I told him: ‘You cannot say no.’ The reason is simple. Having done many difficult jobs for the UN, I know that the UN simply cannot be absent. I don’t know if it’s arrogance or something else, but the UN has to be there.

Has Assad won the war in Syria?

I think so, but the real question is: is it the Assad regime with a little help from its supporters or is it others doing it for Assad?

You mean a victory for Iran and Russia?

Throughout the time I was there I said that the Russians had a huge advantage because they know the place much better than the West does. It turned out that they knew the place even better than the people of the region – Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which were trying to meddle and help. The Russians understood the situation much better than anybody else.

There was a time in 2012 when everyone was convinced that the regime was going to collapse and the opposition was about to take Damascus. How did so many people misjudge the situation?

Unfortunately this happens far too often. The simplest explanation is that people looked at what happened in Tunisia in December 2010 and January 2011 and they were certain that President Ben Ali would survive this storm. He fell in less than a month. Mistake No 1. Then the protests moved to Egypt, and people thought, the Egyptian regime is much stronger, the Egyptian people are more passive, so Mubarak will be all right. Wrong again. Everybody was a bit embarrassed and determined to get it right in Syria. So they said, Ben Ali fell, Mubarak fell, and Assad is going to fall too. Wrong again.

We had a very big problem at the United Nations because we were calling for negotiations and a peaceful solution and people were saying: ‘The man is going to fall next week, why do you want us to negotiate with him?’ The opposition, the Americans and almost everyone else were saying that. I remember in New York in December 2012 while I was talking of negotiations, people were saying: ‘Maybe now, as we are talking, the news is saying that Assad is fleeing Damascus.’ They were misreading the situation, and only the Russians said, it’s not going to happen.

The Russians have turned the course of the war. Do you see a greater role for them in the Middle East?

They were in Syria all the time, while western countries were not. And they were present throughout the Middle East diplomatically. The real issue is that many people had not realized that by 2012 the single-superpower era was already over. Actually it had ended quite some time before. I have always thought that the single-superpower era was just a transition. In 1991, George HW Bush spoke of a new world order and ‘the next American century’, but this talk of the ‘end of history’ should have been looked at more closely. True, the Soviet Union collapsed, but it takes time for a new order to take shape. That new order had not taken shape in 1991 or in 2012.

Let’s look back a bit. In 2001, when American power was almost unchallenged, the Americans saw Al-Qaeda in two countries in the Middle East; in 2015, they saw it in about 20 countries in the region. How did the Pax Americana create all this mess?

Al-Qaeda was really in only one place, in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda expanded a little bit to Sudan for a while and a few people were with Bin Laden when he was there, but active Al-Qaeda, with people armed and ready to make war, that’s a direct consequence of the invasion and the occupation of Iraq. The sad thing is that the Americans were saying that they went to Iraq to fight Al-Qaeda, whereas Al-Qaeda was actually not in Iraq. The Americans brought it to Iraq.

I used to ask my American friends, please tell me why you invaded Iraq? If I knew that Saddam had no weapons, surely the Americans must have known. You may recall Scott Ritter, the American weapons inspector, who said: ‘We want to go and search under the bed of Saddam.’ Ultimately, he said there were no weapons of mass destruction there. I refuse to believe

Lakhdar Brahimi with his two grandsons during a break in a meeting of The Elders, a group of senior statesmen
that anybody in America thought that there were weapons.

**One of the paradoxes is that America has been trying to strangle the Islamic Republic of Iran for decades, yet it only grows stronger.**

It’s not growing stronger. It has been made stronger by the Americans. The Iranians’ big worry was Saddam Hussein. The Americans came and took Saddam Hussein away and then Washington told them: ‘Now bring your best friends into Iraq and let’s see if they can control the country.’ The Iranians used to say, we are one of the important countries in the Middle East. After the invasion of Iraq, Iran has been saying, ‘We are the important country in the Middle East.’ That is true even in oil. They have political control of Iraqi oil. If you add up Iraqi oil and Iranian oil, that’s much more than Saudi. So no matter how you look at it, Iran is the important power in the Middle East and that again was done by the Americans.

**Did the Americans ask you for a view on Iraq?**

Condoleezza Rice [US National Security Advisor 2001-5] asked me, if we invade Iraq, what do you think we should do? I said, ‘Don’t invade Iraq.’ So she laughed and said: ‘Oh, you are absolutely right.’ But if you do invade, I said, here are two things: first, don’t touch the army, it’s the backbone of the country; and second, it’s a one-party system, so the Ba’ath Party is the state. So they go and dissolve the army and they dismiss everybody who had a party card. In 2004, I went to Mosul, which used to be the cultural centre of Iraq, and the people told me, we have no teachers. They had all been dismissed. This de-Ba’athification destroyed the state, the army was dissolved and you see the result.

**We have often heard that the borders in the Levant, inherited from the Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1916, are going to be dissolved, but they’re still there. Are any borders going to be changed?**

I hope not. There are two mantras which we need to stop repeating. One is that Sykes-Picot was horrible. The borders are there, they have stood the test of time and we are comfortable with them. So let’s leave them alone. The second mantra is Arab unity. We believed in it in the past but it does not exist any more. So let’s forget about it and see how we can work together. The Arab

‘The second mantra is Arab unity. We believed in it in the past but it does not exist any more’

League is the weakest regional or sub-regional organization in the world, despite the fact that the members have a common language. Compare it with ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations] — a group of countries that have only geography in common; they are neighbours, that’s all. No shared language, history or religion. They have got together because they believe that unity is strength. So let’s do the same thing. In ASEAN, nobody says that they are brothers.

**The Americans have been working with the Syrian Kurds in Raqqa, against Islamic State. Do you think the Syrian Kurds will be betrayed in the next stage of the conflict, as has happened to their kin in the past?**

You see how complicated the Middle East is. The US is the ally of Turkey, Turkey is the enemy of the Kurds in Syria, America is a friend of the Kurds in Syria. The Russians and the Americans disagree in Syria but both support the Kurds in Syria. Iran and Russia are de facto allied, but Iran doesn’t like the Kurds as much as the Russians do. So it’s a very complicated set of relationships. If you had a diagram, it would look like Spaghetti Junction. So I don’t know what is going to happen there. The Kurds in Syria do not seem to be working for independence, more like some kind of autonomy, unlike the Kurds in Iraq. The aspirations of the Kurds were closer to satisfaction in Iraq than they were anywhere else, so I was very surprised that Massoud Barzani went for an independence referendum against the pleas of his friends, including the Americans, not to do it.

**In Syria, you have spoken to Bashar and you spoke to his father, Hafez. How different are they?**

I’m tempted to say it’s the difference between the self-made man who had to climb the ladder with great difficulty and his son who inherited the top position. If you inherit everything, you are clearly not the same as the man who pulled himself up alone. Hafez-al-Assad knew his country and he knew the region. I don’t think he would have reacted in the same manner [when disturbances broke out] in Deraa in 2011. He would have been more careful. I think he would played that game better than has been the case.

**Bashar’s economic reforms transferred a lot of wealth to his cronies. Is that what destroyed trust in the government?**

That is what happens in any so-called liberalization of the economy. It is not so different from what happened in Russia and others places. What I think is important is that there was huge promise when this young man came back from London and took over. He launched a political reform programme, and after whetting the people’s appetite, the programme stopped. Syria is a highly civilized place. It’s a place of culture where people are educated and creative. They were not allowed to use all their possibilities.

**Was there ever a time when you thought Bashar would step down?**

No. People said a lot of silly things about him leaving to Venezuela or somewhere. I think Al Jazeera once said that the plane was ready, that he was practically on his way to the airport. I think he realizes that he’s not going to die as president, and he accepts that, but he doesn’t want to be thrown out. In all this talk about exile, you have to remember what happened to Charles Taylor in Liberia. Negotiations took place and he was told, if you leave, you’ll be all right, but ultimately he was arrested and he’s in jail in Sierra Leone. So why would anyone feel safe if they left their country?

**You could have had a much easier life than dealing with all of these international crises. Did you think of going into politics in Algeria?**

I was in politics in Algeria. I resigned [as foreign minister] in 1993, I was 59 and I said: ‘This is enough.’ I started very young and had big responsibilities. I represented the FLN [Algerian liberation movement] in Indonesia at the age of 22, was ambassador in Egypt at the age of 27 and, at 37, I came here to be ambassador in London. I think that is long enough. Also we had people waiting behind us to take these responsibilities. In the Arab world, we haven’t been able to move from one generation to the other as easily as we should.