You left the diplomatic service last year after serving as ambassador to Lebanon. What keeps you in the region?
I teach at the NYU Diplomatic Academy in Abu Dhabi but at the moment I have been focusing on getting Syrian children back to school in September. We’re making much more progress than even I’d hoped at the beginning of the year. A lot of people are coming together to recognize that this is a first order challenge. There are one million Syrians out of school at the moment. I think we’re going to get almost every Syrian in Jordan into class next year. We’ll probably reach two-thirds of those in Lebanon and probably half to two-thirds of those in Turkey. Frustratingly, it’s very hard to get education to the displaced communities inside the country.

Doesn’t the United Nations system provide schools?
In the big camps they take the lead. But actually most of the Syrian kids in Jordan are in mainstream Jordanian schools, as they are in mainstream schools in Lebanon. So a big part of the challenge is rehabilitating those schools and running a double-shift system. You can imagine the strain that puts on teachers, buildings and communities. These host communities have shown extraordinary compassion. It’s striking when you look at the refugee debate closer to home, and then you look at the staggering numbers in Lebanon where there are more refugees in the state school system than there are Lebanese. Can you imagine what that would do in Britain?

Donald Trump has called for a big wall to keep migrants out of the US. Isn’t the idea of coexistence dying?
History tends to suggest that big walls don’t last for very long and they’re not very successful as a way of dealing with the world. I think taking on those arguments is important — you can do a lot to promote coexistence in the curriculum. So part of the education effort is to teach new models of coexistence in these schools. As a techn-optimist I believe that the internet will break down a lot of these barriers. The millennial kids from across the region that I teach see over walls in a way that previous generations weren’t able to. They can see that the differences aren’t as great as they’ve always been told.

There are huge numbers in, say, West Africa, who can see over walls that life is better in the north, because economic development isn’t going as fast as it ought to. So isn’t migration going to be a fixture of the future?
I think you’re right. We’re probably only at the beginning of the cusp of a great age of migration that will make the Syrian migration look small. The next wave of climate change-driven migration will dwarf what we’re seeing now. So we’re going to have to get much better not only at getting kids to school but getting school to kids, getting education to populations on the move. We’re going to have to get much better at understanding different cultures and absorbing different cultures. It’s going to be a massive generational challenge and I worry about the ability of our political systems to think strategically enough to weather those huge influxes ahead.

You worked at No 10 as foreign policy adviser under three prime ministers. How much time did you spend on great millennial challenges?
I always expected, moving to Downing Street, that at some point I would find a small room at the centre with a bunch of
wise strategists working out how to deal with the world. And as you get closer and closer to the centre, you realize the room doesn’t exist. All of us are trying to cope day to day with the challenges that are thrown at us. PMs and governments are defined by the judgments they make in response to events, rather than their ability to actually shape those events.

You would struggle to find any government that is spending more time now on long-term strategy than it was a generation ago. The information overload, the difficulty of curating all the data and information that we’re swamped with, and the urgency of now can be overwhelming. It’s much, much harder to step back and take the longer view.

**You were ambassador in Lebanon at a time when western policy was failing in Syria. What would it have taken to produce a different outcome?**

I’d say rather that international policy was failing in Syria. I think that we were all very swept up by the Arab Spring. We probably over-estimated the pace of change in the region, and the coherence of our allies in the Middle East and more widely on Syria. We under-estimated the coherence of the allies of the Assad regime – Russia, Iran and Hezbollah – and the lengths they would go to preserve Assad, and the readiness of Assad himself to set most of Syria on fire to protect his position.

We probably made a mistake back in 2012/2013 in insisting that Assad went as a precondition for a political process. Clearly, Assad cannot be part of the solution – there’s no question to which Assad is the answer. But making that a precondition – or accepting when our allies insisted that it was – made it much harder to get him in for political talks. And there aren’t great examples in history of a political process that has begun with a key player leaving voluntarily.

**A lot of people say that diplomacy is dead, killed by technology. How are you going to force it into the 21st century?**

When Lord Palmerston first saw the telegram, he said: ‘My God, this is the end of diplomacy.’ And there were those who said when the fax machine came along: ‘You can replace the Foreign Office with fax.’ And, of course, we’re still standing and the fax machine now looks pretty obsolete. I don’t think a smartphone is going to replace diplomacy, but it can adapt it hugely. It allows us to reach and influence people on a scale that we’ve never been able to before. But to do that, we have to be much more fleet-footed. I think we have to be much more focused on the outcomes and watch what we actually deliver, rather than the inputs we create, that is analysis and backroom policy-making. I think we have to get much, much better at cultivating our networks and less focused on hierarchy.

**You have just completed a three-month review of the UK Foreign Office. What is going to change?**

I’m very focused on the use of big data, on equipping our people with the right IT and the right mindset to use the IT in an entrepreneurial, swashbuckling way. That’s not always a comforting message for the centre because diplomacy in general has got very risk-averse. The Foreign Office has been among the best, actually, in embracing social media and allowing people to use it. One of the things the review has recommended is putting more authority back out into the field and with our ambassadors, more control over their resources, policy on the ground and recruitment. There are risks to being creative in policy-making, but the biggest risk is to not be doing it.

**The message of your book is that envos should go out and pick fights on Twitter. How does that work with the tradition of knowing when to keep quiet?**

The digital stuff is just a new tool and confidentiality is essential to much of what we do. Talleyrand was right that sometimes it’s better to say nothing than to say too much. So I certainly wouldn’t advocate just turning diplomats into a bunch of narcissists who have a view on everything and charge around picking fights with everyone. One of the things I teach at the NYU Diplomatic Academy is good and proper traditional, pre-smartphone diplomacy, which I think is as important as ever.

**As ambassador in Beirut you sent out 10,000 tweets. Did some Lebanese think your advice to them was patronizing, coming from an old colonial power?**

There was a shock early on and people couldn’t quite believe that His Excellency was replying to everyday people’s messages. The overwhelming majority were very positive, particularly in a country where they felt they didn’t have that kind of access to their leaders. And then there’s 5 per cent who think, ‘What right do you have as a British ambassador to opine on these issues?’ I hope that by the end of four years, people could see I was doing it out of a genuine affection for the country, rather than out of some sort of colonial hangover.

**How do you see the Foreign Office coping with the fast pace of change, at a time of great austerity, when budgets are being cut every year?**

I don’t think that the Foreign Office is Kodak. It’s not going to be completely disrupted by someone with a shiny new piece of kit that can suddenly do the job in a much faster and cheaper way. Of all the people who are challenging the Foreign Office for its space, there’s nobody who wants to put it completely out of business, and I’d include the Treasury in that, whatever some people would claim.

But there is competition; there’s competition from other government departments who want to, and who are able to, do very direct and effective foreign policy. The Home Office has an international policy based on its priorities around migration and counterterrorism. That is a challenge to the Foreign Office but also an opportunity to demonstrate its value through its networks and expertise. If you look at the competition more widely, you see the big tech companies that can roll into town and get better access than the average minister. The media is able to shape a story faster.
than diplomats can. So there’s challenge on all fronts.

You believe in the reform of the UN structures. How much longer do you think Britain will retain its permanent seat on the UN Security Council?

I think as long as we continue adding value. At the hearings for the next UN secretary general it was our ambassador (Matthew Rycroft) who was asking the right questions about the future of UN. He used Twitter to harvest questions from the public to put to the candidates. Look at what we’re doing on the peacekeeping side and on the Syrian crisis, where we are the second largest donor. As long as we bring that political and humanitarian value to the Security Council, we are a genuine asset.

You have written: ‘Diplomacy is easier when you’ve won on the battlefield.’ Isn’t that all there is to be said – if you’ve won, people listen, everything else is decoration?

One of the realities of the democratization of our foreign policy now will be that it’s going to be harder to go to war. Even on issues that ten years ago we’d have felt we have a humanitarian imperative to go to war, it is more difficult to convince our public to do that. So we’ll all have to find different ways to flex our muscles and to exert influence in the world. And the nature of war is shifting. We’ll have more wars within nation states rather than just between them. And more conflict with non-state actors. But then of course, someone like Putin comes along and has a more 19th-century approach to the great power game. So I could be wrong.

It used to be said that a diplomat should play tennis and have a spouse who’s good at packing and following. What are the requirements these days?

One of the things the review is recommending is moving our people into 21st century careers and so no longer expecting a trailing spouse to be practically assessed on the unpaid support that he or she gives to the diplomat. A lot of that is shifting very fast. I think an open mind, creativity, curiosity and courage are absolutely essential. And the ability to think anything and get on with anyone.

Inevitably, one or the other has got to trail, haven’t they?

It is a challenge for us in terms of retention, particularly of talented women. It’s one of the reasons that the Foreign Office is still too male and pale. We don’t yet look sufficiently like the population that we represent. So the career structure has to be defined in a more flexible, modern way. It’s a debate that I have often with my wife who is a psychotherapist, whose speciality is trauma in the spouses of diplomats.

Trauma in the spouse of a diplomat?

Yes, so she’s got real first-world experience of it. I remember a terrible conversation with my wife where I had to say, ‘As your ambassador, I have to tell you to leave.’ And my wife, who is an Irish citizen, made it very clear that my authority had limits.

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