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Interview With Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani

The MJDR-RRDM had the privilege of conducting an interview with Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani, a lifetime diplomat with the United Nations who has extensive experience with mediation and negotiation in post-conflict situations throughout the Middle East. This included extensive work in the League of Arab States as special representative in Iraq in 2006-2007, and head of the UN mission in Damascus to end the conflict in Syria from 2012-2014. In both cases he resigned in protest because of the conflicting agenda he found on the ground. These are his insights on his experience followed by advice to future potential mediators and negotiators looking to resolve issues relating to violent conflict and post-war society.

PART 1: CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN IRAQ, SYRIA, AND RELATING TO ISIL

In 2007, you spent a year in Baghdad, Iraq, as an ambassador of the Arab League charged with the task of assisting Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish, and Christian leaders to make peace. You resigned from your post in February 2007. What motivated you to submit your resignation? What were the principal factors that weighed in the balance when you made your decision? Was this a difficult decision for you to make? Do you have any regrets about the decision you made?

It was definitely a very hard decision to make. I was appointed by a resolution of the Arab Summit, which took place in March 2006 in Khartoum, Sudan. In the resolution, you can see that we were aware of the extreme level of complication at that time on the ground. And it's not only an Arab problem because Iraq has a long border with non-Arab countries such as Turkey and Iran. It's an international problem.

I accepted the position in part because it was a huge mess, so if we could do anything about national reconciliation it would be a massive step for the people of Iraq. The thing that has encouraged me is the Arab league. Prior to that, they were the only group who succeeded to organize, in Cairo, a meeting of national reconciliation that was attended by everybody: those that accepted to be in a political process and occupation, as well as those who were opposing even armed American troops on the ground.

With the resolution it was very clear that, as a special envoy in Iraq by establishing that was my choice, establishing an office in Baghdad, that would be the very first step to build on it and I was very clear and open to it, to talk to anybody locally, regionally, internationally, to explore possibilities to end the drama and the suffering of the Iraqi people. I divided the Iraqis in four major groups: politicians, inside as well as outside the political process, tribes, the sheikh of the tribes, and civil society and religious leaders. I made certain to listen to everybody to understand, so I had no problem of developing a dialogue and I think until now, I was the only one who used to be received by everybody. But what I needed in such position was to move from dialogue to negotiation, and for this, you need a lot of tools and these tools were not in my hands and in a way, the Arab League itself, you know, were very happy to have an ambassador there who was received by everybody you can see on TV like as if it was an objective.

I was making lots of proposals about how to conduct some other negotiations but nobody was listening and it was very dangerous also because I chose, just to have credibility with the Iraqi people, to live in the red zone and, if you remember at that time, they used to find every single

day, thousands of bodies just in Baghdad. I was strongly targeted by some extremists, especially Al Qaeda at the time, so after one year, making all these proposals, things were not moving and I was witnessing that it was going from bad to worse. I did not want to lie to the kids of Iraq over the future, that there was anything positive for the future that would be of honour for me. I was frustrated and I had to leave because I knew there was no difference that I could help make for the country, and you see now after almost 10 years things are getting worse.

While you were in Baghdad, you refused to live outside the Green Zone (International Zone of Baghdad). Why?

Yes, for one thing it was not because I am a hero or Tarzan. It was just because I was holding a project of national reconciliation and I wanted to make it easy for any Iraqi to come to see me, because those Iraqis that were opposing by arms could not come to the Green Zone. So I established myself outside of the Green Zone, which was considered by lots of people to be suicide, but I'm still in one piece.

Syria 2012

In March 2012, you also stepped down from your post as head of the office of the United Nations-Arab League Joint Special Representative in Damascus, Syria. Why?

Firstly, this mission is different as it was mainly in the name of the UN and it came as a second mission, after the mission of Mr. Kofi Annan. But, it was totally different because the mission of Mr. Kofi Annan and the office of the UN was much more in line of office of military observers.

Our mission was much more political and working with Lakhtar Brahimi, who was a very old friend of more than three decades, so I was so happy to work with him because I considered this the last chance to have real peace in Syria if people would like it. And he, a great friend, asked me because the mission has two dimensions, an international one and a local one. He needed someone to trust working there so I immediately accepted. Those are our own people and if we can help them that would be great for me, while at the same time helping Mr. Brahimi inside Syria. This is why I decided to be in Damascus.

In the few first months, I used to travel every Saturday to go meet with the commanders of the Free Syrian Army and others, and in turn the opposition. That was my work during two years while Mr. Brahimi took so long himself to convince both the Americans and Russians to work together with the UN to prepare Geneva.

As you know, conflicting agendas dominated and so after two years' time of stalemate we had to leave with things not moving. I'm not the kind of person to stay just for money or for press or whatever. When you are witnessing the suffering of lots of people you have to take the right decision at the right moment.

So it was a similar decision as in Iraq, the same idea that things were not moving?

No, actually they were only getting worse.

You have also mentioned, in an event with the Middle East Institute in June 2014, that there is a high level of mistrust between Syrians. As a mediator, how did you attempt to build trust

between parties that were in Syria?

Actually, those were common characteristics between both crises when I was in Iraq as well as in Syria.

There are two main things I noticed as the largest problems. The first is the very high level of mistrust of concerned people. They don't even make a distinction between dialogue and negotiation. They don't talk to each other. The second is the fragmentation. Forces are so fragmented, and not only politically. The conflict took a social dimension. So, it would be very easy if you were mediating between two people fighting each other, but if you're a handlers and it keeps changing on a daily basis, all the time, you know when we wanted to have data of the armed groups, what they call brigades and, of course, brigades has no military definition. It can be 5 people, as well as 30,000 people. We counted more than 2,000 groups, so in mediation this fragmentation causes a huge handicap, as well as that very high level of mistrust.

How did you deal with that? How did you approach it?

Well you have to meet and to listen and to try and see everybody to have an idea about the situation on the ground and if you see, even one of the problems that's both the Americans as well as the Russians were came in with strongly held positions, especially the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Secretary of State, as they wanted Geneva to happen as soon as possible.

In my view, dealing that way creates a new situation in which Geneva becomes an objective, instead of a tool, and this is why it was so complicated and it is still very complicated.

When I used to go and meet with the commanders and ask them about the opposition inside, mainly the coalition, you know these people within the coalition themselves, I consider them as victims because I told them in one of the meetings of the Friends of Syria, "you are the only representatives of the Syrian people and you are recognized by 152 countries as the only representatives of the Syrian people" so they trusted that and waited in standby waiting for the American army to take the power. It didn't happen, but when I used to go and see the commanders I had a list of personalities from the coalition as well as from the internal opposition and I used to ask the people "who do you think is representing you?" and you could not imagine that you would have an infinite number of answers. So, no one is representing anyone if you live in Syria.

This is one of the major problems and from the other side you are dealing with one of the most cynical regimes which cannot imagine the possibility of a political solution. Everything is a unilateral approach emphasizing security, security, security, which only seems to cause complications.

Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (2014-Present)

In June 2014, the Islamic State occupied a territory across Syria and Iraq. The United States led a coalition in an air-strike campaign. In an article with the Globe and Mail in May 2015, you stated that the air war against the Islamic State is failing. You recommended that a systemic approach be encouraged, including initiatives like Montreal's multidisciplinary centre for the prevention of radicalization. Why sort of initiatives like these needed?

First of all, we know from history that there was no war that was won from the air. You need troops on the ground, and there are so many complications when you see that the Islamic

State is the same organization both in Syria and Iraq, but the very first thing we must ask ourselves is “why in Iraq are the extreme majority of people in the Islamic State Iraqis, while in Syria they are a minority?” You see, it is because of the specification to each one of these two crises.

More than that, the security solution cannot be because there were so many people coming from all over the world, some of them just for adventure, some of them just the something to be killing or whatever else. In my view, these kinds of radicalization need a different approach.

In the international community we had a summit about AIDS, about climate change, and in others, we had many summits. Why not create a summit about this kind of radicalism in which we put programs for how to deal with it because you need to deal with it in a multidisciplinary way?

When I give the example of a centre or whatever, this is because it was a consequence that there were so many young people that wanted to join ISIS. So, if you tried to convince them and talk to them, the multidisciplinary approach is not the way they are presenting things to you on the net to attract you to go there. There are different approaches, different experiences and some countries choose just the security approach, but with ISIL it was a total failure.

They had lots of young people going there, but some like Denmark opened the door. They had the experience to go there and they were strongly disappointed by their own experience, to bring them and talk to people their own age.

Now, the radicalism we have is Islamic, but we had the same kind of radicalism in the 30s with the Nazis. So, you have kinds of radicalism every time it's happening so it's not specific to an ethnic group or religion, but it's true that some extremists are using it and succeeding. In my view, the approach should be definitely multidisciplinary and you have to go deeply inside all the issues at every level. It doesn't mean that you don't have to have security, but not only security.

Is that why these types of initiatives are so important?

Yes and they must be connected internationally. In my opinion, a summit of the international community is the most effective. We human beings have huge problems and with this question we must ask how to approach it in different ways.

There are so many things to be done like creating a proper education system, but you have to begin the process. What I regret, and I said that in the same article you mentioned, is the fact that the international community when Daesh, the Islamic State, took Mosul and became a real force in the region, the Americans reacted by having the coalition bombing them and having this and look now after more than one year it was a total failure and the fact that we in the international community were just reacting.

We are not proactive and in my view we have to be proactive, not just that the problem is there and we react then. From the beginning until now, the initiative has been in the hands of the Islamic State. It should be the opposite. The initiative to end this kind of problem should be in the hands of the international community.

Do you think that should also be multidisciplinary and multilateral in terms of having many countries involved?

It has to be discussed because if you see the example on the ground now with ISIS from

the beginning the international coalition led by the Americans counted on the Iraqi army and the militia.

I know these militia personally. I was there. And some of them are at least as dangerous as the Islamic State, from the other side. Some are very strongly sectarian. The conflict is an opportunity for them to have the upper hand and if there are so many Iraqis in the Islamic State, maybe those were some from the Iraqi army of Saddam Hussein, because they were left from 2003.

So they had no choice than to change, which is why we have to be very careful why in Syria they didn't want to count on the Syrian army and they're counting on Kurdish militia and it's very weak and very limited. You need to change dramatically the approach and I think this is even why General Allen resigned. It's not working.

PART 2: A PRACTITIONER'S INSIGHT ON MEDIATION OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

You have worked as a mediator in many different international contexts, including the prisoner war exchange between Iraq and Kuwait. How do you factor in cultural differences, like between countries like Iraq and Kuwait, when you are mediating?

In the art of mediation, you learn so many things on the ground and definitely I do strongly believe there's one condition. If you don't have that condition you can't do anything, because when you are mediating, you are just trying to convince people who are talking to bring people together in meetings. The condition that you have to be sure that you have in a conflict is that the people killing each other are tired of doing that. If they are not tired, you are not going to do a lot of things.

I remember, I joined Mr. Brahimi in 1998 in a mission to be part of the Security Council on Afghanistan and we were there and trying to meet the Taliban, the Northern Alliance and everybody to organize a meeting of national reconciliation in Ashgabat. I remember they were not ready because at that time the Afghans themselves because when winter is here everybody was going back to their own villages because it's very cold and preparing themselves for the melting of the ice. So, we went there before the melting of the ice trying to convince people and I remember during our meeting with the Mullah Omar and we said that "we have to have national reconciliation" and "shame on you, look at what's happening to your own people" and he said "no, we would like to have national reconciliation, but after having the whole country". So, if they are not tired and they still have a military solution... it helps you a lot as a mediator.

Then, looking forward, it's not just in front of you. You have to take all things in consideration because there are so many changes on the ground there, so much suffering. You cannot do it from an office in New York and say "okay, those are the points and you have to implement them". You arrive to this situation when you work on the ground and see what is the closest way to your own objective, to have national reconciliation, to have peace and to begin a new state in these kinds of areas. Of course, it's different from one conflict to another conflict, so you have to understand very well the kind of conflict and, from the other side nothing can be done if they don't want it. Sometimes, in some conflicts, you have only two factions killing each other

but sometimes you have hundreds.

Each specific conflict is different from another one, so you have to know it deeply and make proposals accordingly.

What if you have two parties and they are not quite tired of fighting each other? What sort of steps do you take?

It depends. We were talking much more about the experience in Syria and in Iraq, which has another complication. We didn't mention that these conflicts, if you want to deal with them, have three different levels: local, regional and international.

There are other conflicts that are only local, like civil war in a country where you have a Security Council resolution to intervene there which should be much easier.

When you are aware about three levels of a conflict, it means that you have lots of conflicting agendas. You cannot neglect one. You have to be very inclusive and to be sure, for the states that are involved, that there is a real political will to help. Then, you also have to work locally with all of these factions because sometimes they are receiving arms from big countries, so you have to have the goodwill of these big countries to help you to stop feeding the war. With all of these complications sometimes, it's very hard because we need to make a lot of pressure.

What do you find is the most effective pressure, when you do not have two parties tired of fighting?

That also depends. One of the things I had mentioned in Syria was a weapons embargo because if they know that they are going to receive more sophisticated weapons, that will help them to continue, but when they see that they cannot win, they are tired and it took so long, those are some preconditions that can help you in establishing something which is inclusive for everyone.

Of course, when I'm talking about everybody, it does not include those groups that have an agenda going beyond the border of the country, like Al Qaeda, those that do not want any peace and the only thing is to fight.

In your role as a mediator, what techniques do you use to help one party see the conflict from the other side's perspective? Is there a good way to do that or is it different in each situation?

As a mediator you have to be very frank and sincere with the people themselves. You don't have to try to please them because, if that's your aim, they are going to be very happy at first but after 6 months you will have lots of problems.

In the beginning, if you are not very frank, people will immediately accuse you of supporting the other party, but with time, they will realize that you are there in their interest.

This frankness is demonstrated through dialogue as with the experience I had in Iraq, I had lots of these kinds of problems with some groups sometimes or all of them but with time they realize that my objective is to help the civilians of the country: the kids, the women, to have a peaceful country.

Every mother would like to raise her kids in peace. For that, you need to be very frank with them and with your talks with every single group, you have to concentrate on their own mistakes,

not the mistakes of the others. This is the only way.

Some of our readers and members of our editorial board are currently or hopeful to be mediators. What would you recommend to them as they look forward? Are there particular theories they should study? What should they do?

It depends, because mediation can go on for so long sometimes, and there are many different stages.

There is a stage of bringing peace, then reinforcing peace, then after having peace, building the state, which is also very important. It is definitely very important to have everybody on board because you need the help of everybody concerned with the situation. For example, sometimes you need a new constitution, and it's not bringing the most sophisticated articles in the constitution but those that are going to be strongly respected and succeed the transition.

During the talks for peace in Syria, I myself received a lot of requests from local civil society, women's groups, and so on. Everybody was suffering. I was very inclusive and the advice I was giving everybody was to concentrate and to be concentrated on the mistakes of the people to make them closer to each other more so than any theory.

If a student or someone is looking to become a mediator, what steps would you suggest to them to go in that direction as an occupation?

Structure, as I mentioned before we are not priests preaching the good word. It doesn't happen that way. You need structure and the best structure in the world is the UN. You need to have the Security Council behind you because if someone is not respecting the process you will have serious problems and difficulties that cannot be overcome without the structure of the UN.

Look at what was happening in Yemen where the Security Council had the possibility of imposing sanctions or even Chapter 7 interventions. Those are very important tools in your hands. You don't decide to be a mediator and then try to talk to people that are fighting each other.

Of course, some international personalities are doing that. They have their own foundations, like what President Carter was doing, helping with elections. It's very helpful and very important, but the first thing you need is to have structure and, if it's not within the UN then it is these well-founded organizations with expansive resources. To me though, there are so many initiatives and the most beneficial process is to bring them together with the efforts of the UN.

What is the most important quality of an effective mediator and is this specific to international conflicts or all mediators of all types?

You have to be very pragmatic when you are dealing with a conflict, for sure. At the same time, be very firm when it comes to the objectives and to be very clear about the objectives of national reconciliation, about bringing peace, those are the objectives and they are not negotiable. Those are your objectives, and to have in mind what is the closest way to be there.

This depends on the will of the factions that are fighting each other, on the will of the neighbouring countries, of the Security Council, of the international coalitions or whatever. The best way is to be again and again very firm when it comes to your objectives, even when you have convinced the Security Council of those objectives because if you are in the name of the UN, you

will be reporting to them and it will help you with what to ask from the Security Council, what to ask from the international community. All of these should be part, in a very inclusive way, of your image about how to work and succeed, and if it's not working just be frank with them, not just like a civil servant happy to travel home when it's not working.

Do you think the willingness to be pragmatic and firm apply to mediators in other contexts, such as family or labour disputes? Are those the same characteristics or are they different for those other kinds of mediation?

I never did any family mediation, but understanding the problem very well will help you to establish the priorities and how to deal with it.