

Brahimi's Lessons Learnt While Making and Keeping the Peace

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Former Algerian Foreign Minister and Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi examined UN peace-keeping activities in the Middle East and Afghanistan in a wide-ranging lecture delivered at AUB on January 21. Central to his theme was his remark: “Learn by acknowledging mistakes rather than bragging about successes.” Formerly the UN Secretary General’s special envoy and mediator in Afghanistan, South Africa, and Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi shared past experiences from his Afghan mission and his mediation of the Ta’if agreement (1988 to 1990). In his lecture, “Making and Keeping the Peace,” Brahimi said, “Fifty percent of peace made crumbles after some time.”

Referring to the disaster in Haiti, where the United Nations lost 150 people, Brahimi went on to point out difficulties existing in Afghanistan. No matter how prepared you can be, it is impossible to know enough about the “dynamic situations” on the ground—a battle-field, where the reality can change continuously and much can be missed due to wrong initial estimates of crucial numbers. “It is important not to underestimate the other or over-estimate one’s own capacity,” Brahimi added.

Brahimi said the United Nations should not “throw people at problems” but rather “make more efficient use of resources.” Acknowledging that the 130 billion US dollars rich countries spend every year on peace-keeping is commendable, Brahimi said that when he travels to third world countries he does not see corresponding development. “An Oxfam report stated that 40 percent of bilateral aid to Afghanistan returns to donor countries in the form of salaries and consultancy fees, while the remaining does little for the Afghani people targeted for aid.

In addition, bad-timing and over interference result in “more harm than good.”

Although frequently critical of UN methods, Brahimi insisted that “the UN is an indispensable organization that has done better and more cost-effective work in making and keeping peace around the world than any other,” but the unnecessary loss of UN credibility in this region, with the exception of UNRWA, calls for more effective participation by regional governments.

Lakhdar Brahimi, who received an honorary doctorate from AUB in 2003, is currently a member of The Elders, a group of elder statesmen and personalities created in July 2007 on the initiative of Nelson Mandela dedicate to tackling global problems.