

In defence of diplomats and diplomacy

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PAUL HEINBECKER

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It's a free country and Terry Glavin is entitled to rail all he likes against diplomacy, robust and otherwise in his column ("What robust diplomacy gets you," Ottawa Citizen, Sept. 12). But he will not disparage diplomacy and deprecate public servants without challenge. I find offensive his characterizations of Lakhdar Brahimi, Mokhtar Lamani and Paul Dewar, all of whom I know personally.

First, diplomacy. Embassies exist to protect Canadian interests and represent Canadian values, and are integral to Canada's foreign policy. Contrary to Glavin's opinion, they are not gestures of approval by Ottawa of the state in which they are established. Instead, they are the eyes and ears and local voice of the Canadian government.

If anything, their work is becoming more important. With the number and capability of Canadian news bureaus abroad shrinking under the costs and diminishing revenues of publishing in an Internet-connected world, our diplomats are frequently the only Canadian sources of information available. Without them, the government is obliged to base its assessments on information provided by others whose cultural references are different and whose agendas are not ours. In many capitals, diplomatic work is fortunately relatively routine and straightforward, albeit requiring very long hours; in others, it is dangerous and unhealthy, as the recent violence against Americans in Benghazi and elsewhere tragically illustrates. Flak jackets and bulletproof cars have become tools of the diplomatic trade in some dangerous spots.

Our diplomats were not in Iran because they loved the ayatollahs; they were there to observe and report on a dangerous regime's behaviour, and to help Canadians and foreigners go about their increasingly integrated lives in a globalized world. Precisely because of Iran's horrific human rights abuses, its theft of elections, its denials of the Holocaust, its support for the murderous Assad regime, its nuclear program, among its many other sins, and the growing threat of war with Israel, we need first-hand insights into what is going on there and, as a minimum, we need to bear witness to the horrors. Would it have made sense to remove diplomats from Germany in the 1930s? In diplomacy, you hold your friends close and your enemies closer. Sometimes doing so becomes too dangerous and missions do have to be closed, as the Canadian government has done this time. (If only the government had been able to make a more convincing case for why it did so now.) But closing missions is a last resort before the bullets fly and, sometimes, after they fly.

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Glavin deprecates the efforts abroad of Paul Dewar, the veteran NDP parliamentarian with a many years-long, respected record of informing himself about what is going on in the world, from Nicaragua to Iraq, Afghanistan, the Congo and beyond, the better to do his job as foreign affairs critic. He is entirely capable of defending himself, if he feels Glavin's accusations warrant any response.

Mokhtar Lamani and Lakhdar Brahimi are little known to Canadians and less well placed to defend themselves, and so I will speak for them. Lamani, a Canadian of Moroccan origin, has a long career of risk-taking in dangerous assignments in the public interest, perhaps most notably as the Arab League representative in Baghdad in 2006-07. There, living outside the protections of the Green Zone enjoyed by American and many other diplomats, and despite very real threats to his life, he worked with all sects and factions but the terrorist group al-Qaida to try to reconcile differences, and to bring the plight of Iraq's many defenceless minorities to the attention of people in a position to protect them, sometimes successfully, sometimes tragically not. In the subsequent years, he was a frequent witness in Congress on Iraq and adviser to both the Bush and Obama administrations. Now, he has left his family behind in Canada again to brave the dangers of heading the political office of the UN in Damascus, to be ready to help when the day eventually comes that the many warring groups and regional powers decide to end the bloodshed. He is very realistic about the difficulties involved, but unwilling to turn a blind eye to the stakes for ordinary Syrians.

Lakhdar Brahimi, whose distinguished record is also belittled by Glavin, also accepted the Syrian assignment without delusion. An elderly man, in frail health, he might have stayed comfortably retired but could not refuse to try to help when so many people were at risk and the international community had done little more about it than wring its hands raw. He has a long career of troubleshooting — from Algeria, to Haiti to South Africa to Afghanistan; in the last, he oversaw the early positive developments after 9/11 until the Bush administration allowed itself to be distracted by Iraq. In Iraq, after the assassination of his predecessor, Brahimi led the UN effort to bring order to catastrophic postwar Iraqi governance until the U.S. Viceroy Paul Bremer side-swiped his efforts in a series of catastrophic judgments. Earlier, in 2000, Brahimi's recommendations on reforming UN military operations had ended the Security Council's sorry practice of authorizing under-staffed, ill-equipped and programmed-for-failure missions abroad. Largely as a result of Brahimi's advice, UN deployments became more capable and had more realistic mandates. Currently, the UN has more personnel abroad, 119,154 on 17 missions on four continents, than any other entity but the U.S. government.

Brahimi and Lamani have had distinguished careers. They deserve our encouragement and gratitude for taking on difficult and dangerous jobs in Syria when they could instead be playing with their

grandchildren and spending their time with their families. They do not deserve scorn from the very safe distance of the Pacific coast of Canada.

***Paul Heinbecker**, Canada's former ambassador to the UN, is currently with **The Centre for International Governance Innovation** and Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. He is the author of *Getting Back in the Game: A Foreign Policy Playbook for Canada*.*