

## **RAMI MORTADA – INTERVIEW WRITE UP**

Rami Mortada has been the Ambassador of Lebanon to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland since December 2017. He first joined the Foreign Service (Valedictorian) in 1993 and since then has had Embassy roles in Beirut, Muscat, Paris, New York and Damascus, being promoted to the rank of Ambassador in 2012. Previous roles include Ambassador of Lebanon to the Kingdom of Belgium and the European Union (2013-17) and Charge d’Affaires – Embassy of Lebanon in Syria (2009-13). He also opened the Lebanese Embassy in Damascus-Syria after inauguration of diplomatic relations and served as Counsellor/Charge d’Affaires (2009 – 12). Rami has been awarded the Ordre National de Merite – Officer/French Republic and La Grand-Croix de l’Ordre de la Couronne (Belgique)

### **LEADERS ADMIRER**

Margaret Thatcher was the first leader put forward as an effective role model. Leading by example, striving to do the right thing, and having the confidence of the electorate being notable attributes. She was also admired for taking difficult decisions, having outstanding communication skills and the ability to influence others. Winston Churchill was admired for the same reasons, Rami noting that both went through hardships and that their experience of the challenges they faced contributed to their effective leadership skills. Both leaders were acclaimed too for having empathy with the electorate and for influencing others’ emotions in the right way.

Former Tunisian President, Moncef Marzouki was also commended as a leader to be admired, noted for his intellectual acuity and for being someone who went against current thinking. An inspirational leader who influenced a change in culture to benefit the people of Tunisia.

### **EQ THINKING – DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE**

*‘EQ is ‘the elephant in the room’ and is always there. EQ shapes behaviour and interactions with others - an important tool for professional/human relations.’*

EQ’s influencing skills were noted as being crucial for having confidence between interlocutors, Rami’s ‘*elephant in the room*’ quote encapsulating his thoughts and approach towards the importance of EQ. Shaping decision making between cultures was recounted as ‘not being easy’, with subtle differences among cultures being especially difficult to manage. EQ’s significance to achieving productive diplomatic relationships was a key point of emphasis. Diplomatic and project leadership scenarios could be particularly challenging, along with the added pressure of social media influences.

Mastering the art and science of EQ was accentuated as having increasing relevance - Rami declaring that he learnt about emotional intelligence by trial and error rather than formal learning, and that he constantly strives to sharpen his skills. The importance of integrity, doing the right thing, was also stressed. A particular note being that timeframe sustainability is important; how decisions and actions are judged down the line and whether these result in long term benefit being a crucial factor. The issue was emphasised of the tendency towards advocating short term, populist political decisions – an ongoing judgement call for leaders of all national governments.

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### **HIGH STAKES - CREATIVE SOLUTIONS**

*'We cannot stop having emotions any more than we can stop having thoughts. The challenge is learning to stimulate helpful emotions in those with whom we negotiate – and in ourselves.'*

Roger Fisher & Daniel Shapiro

Dealing effectively with high stakes diplomacy incidents is a key element of an ambassador's role and creative solutions are needed when so much depends on the outcome. During EU negotiations in Brussels in what became a heated discussion with high emotions which seemed impossible to control and which threatened cessation of the debate, calmness was restored when consideration was proposed to reassess limits and to reflect on how there could be a shortcut to negotiations. Avoiding compromise of both own and others' principles and positions in terms of everyone's perception of the ultimate outcome was crucial to this approach.

The human factor, viewing others as friends is important to inspire confidence from the beginning. Being liked and trusted and having awareness of each other's boundaries has far reaching effects for successful negotiation. Time can otherwise be lost in tactics, and in both sides trying to discover what these might be. Diplomacy and effective engagement with others are especially important at an international level; it was however noted as unfortunate that some leaders communicating at a global level do not have verbal credibility.

### **THE COMPLEXITY OF LEBANON**

Lebanon as a country has an additional layer of complexity to many others and is sometimes considered to be the 'black sheep' in the neighbourhood. Historic reasons including opting for free speech and democracy have developed a different culture to its neighbouring states which have diametrically opposing approaches. These factors have caused tension and influenced a love/hate relationship across the geographical area. Collective state perception therefore needs to consider that Lebanon is a small country surrounded by regional powers, the nuance of the use of soft power rather than hard power reasoning is consequently reflected in the collective state personality.

Lebanon has tried to use a nuanced approach to distance itself and to help in different ways, with no physical involvement in the current Israeli / Arab conflict. There are however vulnerabilities in the system, especially in the military context. Lebanon has not sought trouble, but it has come to us. Lebanese are stakeholders for peace and would benefit from peaceful solutions.

### **SUEZ - A FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND**

As a result of the joint American and British decision not to finance Egypt's construction of the Aswan High Dam because of Egypt's growing ties with communist Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, the Suez Crisis developed from Egyptian president, Nasser's

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decision to declare martial law, seizing control of the canal zone and the Suez Canal Company in 1956. As a result, President Nasser became a hero for the cause of Arab and Egyptian nationalism and Britain and France lost most of their influence in the Middle East.

The outcome of the Suez Crisis was perceived by Rami as being the shortcomings of British policy, described as underestimating nationalistic feelings, emotions and mood in the Arab world along with international relationships between Western democracies and the Middle East based on geopolitical necessity rather than strong relationships. It was also postulated that there could have been a compromise had help been offered at the time. A key point of emphasis being the need for Western democracies to build relationship bridges with Arab leaders.

### **DIPLOMACY IS MARKETING**

In his experience, the diplomatic role was acclaimed by Rami as being in the business of marketing by requiring study and understanding of consumers then seeking to match their expectations. To appeal to interlocutors and serve their national interests, economics, rather than a country's size or population statistics is the important factor. Diplomacy is represented by interdependent cultural thinking and projecting an image to support this.

### **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS & EQ**

*'Learn from experience and flip from confrontational to rational.'*

Rami stressed that the most striking lesson for building productive international relationships is that these are more about psychology than politics and that there is a direct correlation between foreign policy and EQ. The importance of integrity of sovereign states is represented by its leadership with the need for political leaders to understand their neighbours and to use their influencing skills. Interdependence was noted as being a relevant concept both for Lebanon and internationally, with June 2021's conflict situation in the Middle East also being referenced as recognition of a tragic reminder that the core issue of the Abraham Accords has not yet been addressed.

With reference to the situation in Syria, emphasis was made on the issue that there have been 3-4 generations of teaching about Lebanese history in Syria, as a result there is a rigid local culture affected by these teachings. Rami specified that Lebanon does not have to be against Syria, but unfortunately the war in Syria suspended connection. The most fruitful approach was underlined as having mutual respect which would serve both better by being a zero-sum game, i.e., a situation whereby one side's gain is equivalent to the other side's loss - learning from experience and flipping from confrontational to rational proposed as being the appropriate approach. The European Union (EU) was noted as an effective example of an organisation that while it had many concerns, it has also achieved notable levels of economic and political integration across its member states.

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### **UK OPPORTUNITIES POST BREXIT**

The UK's increasing awareness of post Brexit opportunities was referenced, noting the positive marketing image of the phrase 'Global Britain'. Pre Brexit, there was interest in the Western part of the Arab world including Lebanon, and 50 years ago Britain was important influence on Lebanese history. There was however a gap where Britain lost interest. In an interview with Molly Bolding, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2019, Rami is reported as saying *"I still think we can do better with the UK – the UK has a historical legacy in our region, in the Arab world and particularly in Lebanon. Recently the relations have not been in as broad a scope as they could have been,"* the Ambassador said carefully, *"and that's also our mistake, from our side. So I think the potential is big and now, with the changes in the UK – I'm referring to Brexit – whatever you may think of it, and whatever the outcome will be, I think it's an opportunity for the UK to look around in this world and see what opportunities could exist [outside of Europe], in some parts of the world where until now are under-discovered or are not adequately visited."* Ref: ['A Hero For Some Is Not For Others': In Conversation with H. E. Rami Mortada - The Cambridge Student](#)

### **ADVICE TO YOUNGER SELF**

From an experienced and engaging diplomat who advocates EQ as an essential attribute for building successful international relationships, the advice to younger self is:

- Identify who you are – invest time and dig deep to understand yourself.
- Recognise your strengths and weaknesses - build on your strengths and address your development needs.
- Show empathy to everyone and reset your own life.