



# LAND OF BLUE HELMETS

*The United Nations and  
the Arab World*

*Edited by*  
KARIM MAKDISI

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## *The Role of the UN Secretary-General*

A HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT

*Andrew Gilmour*

EVERY SECRETARY-GENERAL SINCE THE UNITED NATIONS' founding in 1945 has expended considerable energy on the Middle East. Most of the eight men who have held the position have also been significantly frustrated by—and at times unfairly scapegoated for—the unwillingness of the parties to resolve their problems and of other member states to play a truly constructive role in support of peace.

Seven of the eight were confronted with wars that pitted various Arab forces against Israel, four faced wars involving Iraq, and all had to deal with serious violence between Israel and one or more of its neighbors.<sup>1</sup> All eight tried to expand the UN's role in the region, and all were at times rebuffed by the parties and their backers for trying to do too much, while at the same time they were excoriated for not managing to do more. Each was simultaneously accused by some of being pro-Arab and by others of being pro-Israeli.

This chapter surveys the key activities undertaken by each secretary-general in the Middle East and draws some lessons and comparisons.

### TRYGVE LIE (1945–53)

Exhausted by the Second World War and under growing pressure from both Arabs and Jews, as well as their outside backers, the British government—the mandatory power since a 1922 decision by the League of Nations—decided to withdraw from Palestine. In January 1947, the leader of the opposition, Winston Churchill, attacked the government: “It is said we must stay, because if we go there will be a civil war. I think it very likely, but is that a reason we should stay? The responsibility for stopping civil war in Palestine

ought to be borne by the United Nations and not by this overburdened country." Unless the Americans came in to share the "bloodshed, odium, trouble and worry, we will lay our mandate at the feet of the United Nations."<sup>2</sup>

Thus dumped, Palestine became the first major challenge faced by the fledgling world organization. The Norwegian trade unionist who became the first secretary-general of the UN, Trygve Lie, immediately saw the need for an active involvement. As he later put it, if the great powers accepted that the situation in the Middle East could best be settled by leaving the forces concerned to fight it out among themselves, it was clear they would be tacitly admitting that the UN was "a useless instrument in attempting to preserve peace."<sup>3</sup>

Lie became deeply committed to the two-state solution known as the Partition Plan and urged member states to support it even though he was strongly criticized by Arab representatives. So committed did he become that he was outraged when the United States started to have second thoughts about this solution and flirted with the idea of a temporary trusteeship. He described this American reversal as a blow to the UN and stated, "It wounded me deeply."<sup>4</sup> He threatened to resign, though he was dissuaded from it, and in any case the United States reverted to the Partition Plan.

In 1949, Lie also worked behind the scenes to secure votes for Israel's admission to the UN—a policy at odds with that of his successors as secretary-general, who have almost invariably treated UN membership issues (in particular the highly contentious issue of Palestinian membership) as a matter for member states alone, rather than the Secretariat. For the rest of his term in office, and indeed his life, Lie considered the way Palestine was handled a great success for the UN and for himself personally.<sup>5</sup>

As predicted, the UN General Assembly vote for the partition of Palestine in November 1947 led to war, which intensified after Israel's declaration of independence in May 1948. The first UN mediator, Count Bernadotte, was an appointee of the Security Council (rather than the secretary-general, though he worked closely with Secretariat staff, especially Ralph Bunche). Bernadotte's first step was to arrange a truce, following which he put forward proposals for solving the conflict, including for Jerusalem to be declared an international city and for Arab refugees to be allowed to return home. In September 1948, he was assassinated by an extremist group that saw him as the main obstacle both to Israeli annexation of Jerusalem and to Jewish control of the whole of Palestine.<sup>6</sup>

Neither Bernadotte nor his successor, Ralph Bunche, regarded himself as being fully supported by Secretary-General Lie, whose refusal to visit the

region did not engender their respect, and whom they viewed as partial to Israel.<sup>7</sup> The year 1949 saw the conclusion of the armistice talks in Rhodes between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The Israelis, with whom Bunche had argued the most, were especially generous in praising his role. A year later, he was awarded the Nobel Prize. Bunche wrote a letter turning it down, commenting that "peace-making at the UN is not done for prizes," but Secretary-General Lie persuaded him not to send it, since he felt the award should be seen as a tribute to the Secretariat as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

As the first to hold the position, Trygve Lie undoubtedly contributed to the development of the office of the UN secretary-general by his readiness to take an active position on the Palestine conflict. On the other hand, his own role in the issue has not generally received much praise—in contrast to two UN officials of the time who held lower positions. Bernadotte upset both Arabs and Israelis with his various compromise proposals and was assassinated.<sup>9</sup> Bunche had strongly disagreed with all the parties in the negotiations, but he still managed to piece together the complex armistice agreements that brought an end to hostilities and was awarded the Nobel Prize. In contrast, Lie, on two major questions—the Partition Plan and Israel's membership in the UN—actively campaigned in favor of Israel's position against that of the Arabs. He was able to do so because, on both points, he was aligned with the two superpowers, the United States and the USSR.<sup>10</sup> However, the UN's relevance in the Middle East during Lie's period derived less from the secretary-general and more from Bernadotte and Bunche.

#### DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD (1953–61)

The unknown and uncontroversial civil servant from Sweden who was chosen to succeed Lie in 1953, Dag Hammarskjöld, had a different conception of the value and values of the UN than his predecessor, though this was not immediately apparent. In 1956, responding to a Security Council request to involve himself in trying to restore adherence to the armistice between Israel and Egypt, he in effect invented the practice of shuttle diplomacy between Middle Eastern capitals.

Hammarskjöld developed an especially strong respect for and intellectual affinity with Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion. This did not stop him, however, from sending Ben-Gurion a fairly stinging letter over what he considered Israel's disproportionate military responses to provocations from



Egypt and Gaza. "You are convinced that acts of [Israeli] retaliation will stop further incidents. I am convinced they will lead to further incidents. . . . You believe that this way of creating respect for Israel will pave the way for sound co-existence with the Arab peoples. I believe that the policy may postpone indefinitely the time for such co-existence."<sup>11</sup>

In May 1956, Hammarskjöld wrote a private letter to the Swedish foreign minister in which he laid out his views with a frankness that secretaries-general have normally reserved for their postretirement memoirs. In it, he declared that the real situation in the Middle East was very different from what the world had been led to believe. His greatest concern was the Israeli attitude, which, "on the inside, is one of the harshest intransigence but, as presented by Israeli propaganda, one of a nation only wishing to live at peace with its neighbours, although continually harassed by them." Nasser, he stated, "has a very great patience but a lot of the guerilla mentality," whereas Ben-Gurion "is extremely impatient and believes it to be the height of morality" to respond to incidents "by blunt, open strokes, not understanding the complete futility of such retaliation and its exceedingly dangerous psychological consequences. Both have pushed self-righteousness to the point of honestly believing they always are right."<sup>12</sup> Hammarskjöld was convinced that neither of them had any plan to attack the other and that each wished to avoid war. In October, Hammarskjöld visited Ben-Gurion in the Negev but of course was not informed that Israel was planning a land, air, and sea war against Egypt, in collusion with Britain and France.

Like most world leaders, especially President Eisenhower, who declared his admiration for the way the UN secretary-general handled this crisis, Hammarskjöld was disgusted by the actions of the three aggressors and worked hard to reverse them. Had the Sinai and Suez invasion succeeded, he believed it would have been a "major catastrophe in which the death of the United Nations indeed might have been one of the less significant elements."<sup>13</sup> Also like Eisenhower, he felt the occupation of the Suez Canal zone and the overthrow of Nasser had the potential to lead to a nuclear world war. Facing serious pressure from the US president, and with cover from the diplomatic effort spearheaded by the UN secretary-general and Lester Pearson of Canada that led to the deployment of the first-ever UN peacekeeping force (the United Nations Emergency Force), the British, French, and Israeli governments withdrew their forces from Egypt.<sup>14</sup>

Less than two years later, in the summer of 1958, the region was in crisis again, with conflict in Lebanon, a revolution in Iraq, and US and UK mili-

rary interventions in Lebanon and Jordan respectively. Nasser's Egypt—at that point briefly linked with Syria in the “United Arab Republic”—was blamed by the West and its allies in the region for all of these. As in 1956, Hammarskjöld threw himself into trying to solve the problems, flying to Beirut and Cairo, setting in motion the establishment and later expansion of a UN Observation Group in Lebanon, fending off accusations of bias from all sides,<sup>15</sup> and appointing as a political presence on the ground a special representative in Amman with regional responsibilities (the first of scores of such representatives since then). Above all, Hammarskjöld provided the face-saving solution for the various parties that allowed the Americans to withdraw from Lebanon by November their fourteen thousand marines who had landed in July. Though publicly thanked by the United States for his role, he has rarely been credited for this achievement, one that was the result of his sustained and creative personal engagement with Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Washington, London, Moscow, and others.<sup>16</sup>

Hammarskjöld was less successful when in June 1960 he was requested to recommend changes in the handling of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the Palestinian refugees who had fled or been expelled from what became Israel in 1948—a task he embraced with some vigor. His report focused on how to reintegrate the refugee problem into the economic life of the region. While accepting that the long-term solution for the refugees was freedom of choice between repatriation to Palestine or compensation by Israel (in accordance with the General Assembly's decisions), he strongly believed that the Arab states should also do more in the short term to allow them employment—which he argued would be in the interests both of the states concerned and of the refugees themselves. To begin with, some Arab states showed interest. But after publication, to his disappointment, they rejected his emphasis on economic reintegration, presumably because they feared that it would come at the expense of pressure on Israel to allow repatriation.<sup>17</sup>

#### U THANT (1961–71)

The Middle East had led to some of Hammarskjöld's most successful interventions, thanks to his inspired creativity, personal magnetism, and determination. Following his death in a plane crash in Africa in 1961, he was succeeded by the Burmese diplomat U Thant, whose experience in the Middle East

turned out to be very different. Indeed, that region brought about the absolute nadir in his fortunes, although the course he followed was probably almost identical to what Hammarskjöld would have done in the same circumstances.

In May 1967, as tensions between Egypt and Israel mounted, Cairo decided to demand the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF). Those forces were solely on the Egyptian side of the border, as Israel in 1956 (and again in 1967) had refused to consider their stationing on its territory. Egypt had the full legal right to demand their withdrawal, but the actual decision to do so was regarded as nothing short of suicidal by U Thant and his senior advisers, given the virtual inevitability of an Israeli military response.

Member states did very little to help the secretary-general. According to its rules, the General Assembly required a two-thirds majority to agree even to consider the issue, which was inconceivable given the widespread support for Egypt's sovereign right in this regard. Meanwhile, the Security Council could not consider the issue because—as a result of French and British vetoes in 1956—the decision to deploy UNEF in the first place had come from the General Assembly, meaning that a Security Council discussion was simply not possible. Some people advised U Thant to summon the Security Council under Article 99 of the Charter on the grounds that the situation posed a threat to international peace and security, but he refused to do that, as he knew it would descend into an East-West brawl and did not wish to pass the buck in that way.

As U Thant, Bunche, and Sir Brian Urquhart have all written, the key member states of the UN did very little to restrain either Egypt or Israel not only from taking the steps that led to the Six-Day War but also from subsequently engaging in the virulent scapegoating of the secretary-general—even though U Thant was in fact the only person who flew to Cairo in an effort to dissuade Nasser from his blockade of Israel. U Thant strongly protested that policy, warning Nasser that it would make an Israeli attack inevitable, and he did what he could to delay the UNEF withdrawal that he was obligated to carry out (indeed, the vast bulk of the force was still in place when Israel launched its attack). The result of the war was the immediate collapse of almost everything that had been achieved in the region by Bunche and Hammarskjöld. The armistice regime of 1949 lost much of its strength, and the pioneering experiment in peacekeeping ignominiously collapsed. For the UN organization as a whole, UNEF's withdrawal and the subsequent war are generally regarded as one of the biggest setbacks in its history.

After the war, Abba Eban, Israeli's ambassador to the UN, attacked the secretary-general in the General Assembly, asking what the use of a fire brigade was if it vanished from the scene as soon as the first smoke and flames appeared.<sup>18</sup> In the West, much of the reaction was the same—showing complete disregard of the realities that U Thant had to face as well as the fact that he, almost alone among the world's statesmen, had made strenuous efforts to stop the war. One American columnist accused U Thant of having "used his international prestige with the objectivity of a spurned lover and the dynamism of a noodle."<sup>19</sup> With the image of "U Thant's cowardice implanted in their minds," the Israelis' disdain for the UN increased, as did their disinclination to have more to do with it than they had to.<sup>20</sup>

A UN divided by the Cold War, with the two superpowers wishing to avoid a direct military confrontation, yet also encouraging—or at least not discouraging—their respective friends in the region with their mutual provocations, left U Thant to make the big decisions on his own.<sup>21</sup> Three years later, Nasser—insinuating that the UN had been in cahoots with Israel—put forward (with no evidence) the notion that U Thant and Bunche had deliberately enticed Egypt into occupying the Sinai, actually going so far as to say, "We fell into the trap set for us." He implied he had not really meant the UN force to withdraw (conveniently ignoring his belligerent speech to the Egyptian armed forces just before conflict erupted, in which he threatened that Egypt would treat the UN peacekeepers as a hostile force if they refused to withdraw from its territory).

Both Bunche and Urquhart have concluded that there was no alternative course that U Thant could have pursued. Egypt and its Arab allies had "grotesquely underestimated" Israel's capacity, and willingness, to react to a move that it perceived both as a threat to its security and as a "great historical opportunity." Nasser, in the heyday of the concept of the Arab Nation, was unshakable in his determination to "plunge over the precipice." From neither a legal nor a military point of view was U Thant in a position to challenge him. Urquhart concluded that the senior UN staff all labored under a crushing sense of failure and that U Thant suffered irreparable psychological damage as result of the debacle. U Thant could easily have convoked the Security Council to deal with the threat to the peace, thereby letting the blame fall on its members rather than himself. But he decided not to do so. In any case, such a tactic would not have prevented the disaster, but "The scapegoat would have escaped."<sup>22</sup>

On a happier note, but in geopolitical terms insignificant compared to the Six-Day War, was U Thant's handling of Bahrain, from which Britain was

withdrawing in 1969 and which Iran was claiming as its fourteenth province. One year of intensive negotiations conducted in secrecy by Ralph Bunche led to a solution agreeable to all sides, including the Bahrainis, that was approved by the Security Council and that allowed Iran to give up its claim without loss of face. The Soviets complained that U Thant had exceeded his authority, but the episode is recognized as a classic example of genuinely preventive diplomacy: settling a dispute before it degenerated into conflict. U Thant himself believed it was the first time in the history of the UN that the parties to a dispute had entrusted it to the secretary-general's good offices by giving a prior pledge to accept without reservation the findings of the UN representative. He also believed that the perfect good-offices operation is one that nobody has heard of until it is successfully concluded. This was an important advance in the practices and standing of the secretary-general's good-offices function, and a welcome corrective to the otherwise thankless experiences U Thant had undergone elsewhere in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup>

#### KURT WALDHEIM (1971-82)

The former Austrian foreign minister, Kurt Waldheim, who became secretary-general in 1971, neither admired nor sought to emulate his predecessors. His conception of the office he held was very different, and at various times he argued against a morality-based approach, as well as suggestions that the secretary-general should be idealistic, humble, intellectual, or even activist.<sup>24</sup> One Israeli negotiator described Waldheim at a Middle East peace conference, "walking around like a head-waiter in a restaurant," greeting delegations at different tables, with the implication that he was grandly ceremonial but also servile and nonsubstantive.<sup>25</sup>

Waldheim's first visit to the Middle East was in August 1973. Given his wartime service in the German army (although the full grim and damaging details became public only after he left office), it was not surprising that the Israelis would regard him with some suspicion.<sup>26</sup> Though it was only two months before the "Yom Kippur War," the Israeli prime minister Golda Meir dismissed Waldheim's observation that the situation in the region was highly explosive, arguing instead that the Arabs were "getting used to" the status quo (i.e., Israel's retention of the territories captured from the Egyptians, Syrians, and Jordanians six years before) and that apparently there would be peace with them in just a few years.

Two weeks after war erupted on October 6, Waldheim called US secretary of state Kissinger to suggest that a UN peacekeeping force be placed between the Egyptian and Israeli forces. This was agreed to first by the Americans and then by the Security Council, and "blue helmets" were on the ground within twenty-four hours. But agreeing on the terms of reference for what was called UNEF II was harder, given differences between the Soviet Union and the West regarding the proper role of the secretary-general as opposed to the Security Council. Waldheim's report on the matter became the basis for future operations—the secretary-general would manage the force on a day-to-day basis, while the Security Council would keep overall political direction (on such crucial matters as withdrawal, the personal responsibility for which had been so damaging for U Thant with UNEF I).

The two superpowers agreed to hold a Middle East peace conference in December 1973 under UN auspices and convened by Waldheim (bringing Arabs and Israelis together officially for the first time since Rhodes in 1949). The following year, after weeks of shuttle diplomacy between Israel and Syria, Kissinger achieved agreement on a "UN Disengagement Observer Force" on the Golan Heights. The role of the secretary-general in politically bringing about that agreement, as opposed to implementing and supervising it, was very limited, however.<sup>27</sup>

This pattern was repeated in March 1978 when, in response to terrorist attacks, Israel launched a major incursion into southern Lebanon. Against the advice of Waldheim's key advisers, who were clear that conditions for peacekeeping were entirely lacking in the area, the United States and other Western powers pushed for the creation of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). The Israelis carried out part of their withdrawal from Lebanese territory in April, but then in June, instead of handing over the rest of the territory to UNIFIL, gave it to Major Saad Haddad, leader of a local Lebanese militia, and attacked the secretary-general in public. As Urquhart, Waldheim's key official on all matters relating to peace and security, later put it, "Much as I admire the talent of the Israelis for putting up a smokescreen of indignation to cover their own actions by loudly indicting others, this was too much." After all, they were handing over to Haddad, an Israeli proxy regarded by most Lebanese as a traitor, "and at the same time accusing us of all sorts of misdemeanours and demanding self-righteously that we mend our ways." Waldheim hit back in diplomatic but uncharacteristically strong terms.<sup>28</sup>

The situation in UNIFIL's area of operations remained tense, escalating again in July 1981. US negotiator Philip Habib played the key role in putting

an end to the artillery barrages, but the secretary-general was also involved, since it was easier for Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat to respond to Waldheim's call for a cease-fire than to Habib's. When the announcement was made that military action in both directions would cease, Israel declared this had been negotiated by the United States, whereas the PLO was able to claim it had been negotiated by the UN. Allowing ladders to be climbed down and peace to be restored without the loss of too much face for any party has always been one of the most important roles of the UN.

In September 1980, towards the end of Waldheim's second term (and while he was campaigning—unsuccessfully—for a third), Iraq invaded Iran. This led to eight years of carnage, but no government in the region or in the Security Council moved to stop it. Waldheim offered his good offices to both parties and brought the matter to the Security Council, although the result was a resolution that failed to condemn the Iraqi aggression and was rejected by Iran. Waldheim proceeded to appoint Olaf Palme, a former (and future) prime minister of Sweden, as his special representative. It was only under Waldheim's successor that any progress was made. But Waldheim can be credited with trying to end this terrible conflict at an early stage, despite the almost total lack of support from member states.

During his term of office, three important new peacekeeping operations were established (in Sinai, Golan, and southern Lebanon) that served to contain those conflicts and to reestablish international confidence in UN peacekeeping, which had been so seriously damaged in 1967. As a result, Waldheim's record in the Middle East was more positive than the current state of his overall reputation—resulting largely from his wartime service in the SS—would suggest.<sup>29</sup>

#### JAVIER PEREZ DE CUELLAR (1982–1991)

The cautious but consummately professional Peruvian diplomat who succeeded Waldheim, Javier Perez de Cuellar, provided another contrast in style—the hallmarks of which were consensus, discretion, and finesse. Like U Thant (and unlike, in radically different ways, Hammarskjöld, Waldheim, and Boutros Boutros-Ghali), he was considered highly self-effacing—to the extent that the US ambassador to the UN quipped that he would not create a splash if he fell out of a boat.<sup>30</sup>

Even by the standards of the Middle East, Perez de Cuellar's time in office coincided with many major developments, including the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the first Palestinian intifada, efforts to start a Middle East peace process, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the First Gulf War, and most of the Iran-Iraq War. In all these, the UN Secretariat played some role, but usually a heavily circumscribed one. Israel tended to make it clear that the secretary-general may have been preferable to the Security Council (let alone the other UN intergovernmental bodies), but, together with the United States, it ensured that the UN's involvement was marginal: for example, at the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991, the secretary-general's representative was placed so far in the back that he was even out of camera range.<sup>31</sup>

But in one area, the quiet and discreet role of the UN (a result of both the desire of some parties and also the personal style of Perez de Cuellar) paid handsome dividends. This concerned the release of several Western hostages held by groups in Lebanon, such as Hizbullah, in exchange for Lebanese detainees held by Israel, its proxy force in southern Lebanon, as well as economic inducements. It involved high-level exchanges between the secretary-general and presidents Bush and Rafsanjani, as well as countless dealings—including dangerous and secretive ones carried out by Perez de Cuellar's envoy Giandomenico Picco in Lebanon—with the Israelis, the Syrians, the Lebanese, and European powers. The whole episode, most of which took place in Perez de Cuellar's final year in office, was an undeniable success for the secretary-general and his particular brand of private, indeed secret, handling of diplomacy.

As secretary-general, Perez de Cuellar was almost invariably treated with respect. But many of his proposals on both the Lebanon and Palestine files gained little traction. Usually this was because of opposition from the United States and Israel, but he was also regularly frustrated by the Cold War paralysis of the Security Council at that time. For example, his proposal to put UN peacekeepers into Beirut in 1982 was blocked by the United States at Israeli behest; ironically, a year later (by which time the United States and Israelis were regretting that decision), it was the USSR that, at Syrian behest, blocked the deployment of UN observers for a Lebanese cease-fire that the United States and Israel wanted to promote.<sup>32</sup>

But while one of the parties worked to keep the UN out of Arab-Israeli issues, this was not the case with the Iran-Iraq War. Perez de Cuellar came to office conscious of the destructiveness of the conflict, its regional ramifications, and the UN's responsibility to try to end it. It was also clear to him that only



he—and not the Security Council—was regarded as impartial by both sides. He worked away, quietly, for some years until the situation—both regionally (the parties were exhausted) and geopolitically (the Cold War was starting to thaw)—appeared riper for mediation. In 1987, he invited the five permanent members to meet him in private to discuss how to start a process that would lead to a negotiated settlement. Several months of secret negotiations gave rise to a Security Council resolution, and then a cease-fire a year later.

As one of his top officials described it, the secretary-general had taken the lead “cautiously and discreetly, in getting the five permanent members to face up to their responsibilities under the Charter and define the outlines of a settlement.”<sup>33</sup> The underrated Perez de Cuellar himself believed that the UN as a whole, as well as the mediation potential of the secretary-general as an impartial UN organ, was strengthened by the Iran/Iraq experience and even that it marked the beginning of a “new era” in the UN’s history.<sup>34</sup>

#### BOUTROS BOUTROS-GHALI (1992–96)

The “new era” did not last long. In terms of intellect, and also his stress on independence (from the great powers), there were aspects of Boutros Boutros-Ghali—Egypt’s high-born and long-standing minister of state for foreign affairs—that recalled Hammarskjöld. The differences were more in personal style (with some of those great powers regarding him as arrogant) and in the international context, which was less tolerant of any manifestation of such independence by the UN than it had been in the 1950s. As US assistant secretary of state James Rubin, one of the architects of the US veto that prevented Boutros-Ghali’s reelection, later put it, Boutros-Ghali had neglected one of the secretary-general’s core duties: “smooth cooperation with the United States.”<sup>35</sup>

Boutros-Ghali’s stewardship of the UN was marked by three international crises outside the Middle East region: the breakup of Yugoslavia; the famine and anarchy of Somalia; and the genocide in Rwanda. Iraq was an ongoing issue, as was the Israel-Palestine track. This last was dominated by the Oslo agreement and some progress that derived from the peace process. Boutros-Ghali—from a prominent Coptic family in Egypt, with a Jewish wife, and one of the people most involved with Sadat’s peace initiative with Israel—considered himself well placed to bring the UN more deeply into the peace process. He tried to work on what he considered a double crisis of

confidence: to Israel, the UN was a “veritable war machine” made for condemning and undermining the Jewish state; to the Arab world, the UN was an organization “feudally dependent” on the United States in which pro-Arab resolutions in support of the Palestinian cause were never implemented. He informed the Israeli prime minister that, having contributed to the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, he would now like to conclude a peace treaty between the UN and Israel.<sup>36</sup>

The new secretary-general believed that there was much in the UN record in the Middle East to deplore—including the withdrawal of peacekeepers in 1967, the UN refusal to accept the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, and the “Zionism is a form of racism” resolution of 1975 in the General Assembly. Boutros-Ghali moved the headquarters of UNRWA from Vienna to Gaza, appointed a UN coordinator for assistance to the Occupied Territory, and worked to increase aid elsewhere in the region.<sup>37</sup> But despite his intentions, and the mutual respect between Israeli prime minister Rabin and himself, UN relations with Israel did not improve. Instead, there arose a series of events that damaged relations between the secretary-general on the one hand and the United States and Israel on the other.

The first related to Israel’s deportation, in December 1992, of four hundred Palestinian “fundamentalists” from the West Bank and Gaza to South Lebanon. Boutros-Ghali hoped to resolve the issue in the days remaining before the inauguration of President Clinton so that the latter would not come into office facing pressure to cast the first post-Cold War veto—a situation in which the United States would be blamed by the rest of the world for spoiling the new positive atmosphere in the Security Council “and, in turn, would blame the United Nations.” Three UN missions in a month led to no positive response by the Israelis to ensure the immediate return of the deportees, which was unanimously demanded by the Security Council. Boutros-Ghali then reported on the matter (as he was requested to do by the Council), observing that this refusal “challenges the authority of the Security Council.” The incoming Clinton administration was not appreciative, and the secretary-general was accused of being “confrontational.”<sup>38</sup>

The second episode followed the massacre of twenty-nine Palestinian worshippers in Hebron by Baruch Goldstein in February 1994. Boutros-Ghali wrote to Prime Minister Rabin saying the UN was ready to help ease tensions, including with—should all parties agree—a UN presence in Hebron. This led to another negative reaction from the United States, and accusations that the secretary-general was anti-Semitic.<sup>39</sup>

The third—and worst—episode followed a large Israeli attack on South Lebanon in April 1996 aimed at Hizbullah, which had been targeting Israel. Many civilians had taken refuge in a UN compound in Qana, which was then hit by several Israeli artillery shells, leading to the death of one hundred civilians. Boutros-Ghali later wrote that this was “unprecedented. The armed forces of a UN member state had launched an attack on a UN peacekeeping post.” Israel said the shelling was a mistake, but the UN military investigation concluded otherwise and the secretary-general reported to the Security Council accordingly. The reaction from both Israel and the United States was harsh, accusing the secretary-general of “pointing the finger” rather than “creating a climate of peace.”

Boutros-Ghali later believed that the high level of outrage toward the course of action that he was morally bound to follow was connected to US and Israeli fears that it would damage the election campaign of Shimon Peres. Peres then lost, and Boutros-Ghali was blamed. The fact that the findings of the objective UN military report were published weeks before the Israeli election and months before both the US election and the vote on the secretary-general’s reelection was unfortunate timing for Boutros-Ghali,<sup>40</sup> and Urquhart later acknowledged that it took “considerable moral courage” for him to act in the way he did.<sup>41</sup>

Undoubtedly acrimonious though these particular issues were, they are generally not considered to have been central to the US decision to undertake its major campaign to prevent a second term for Boutros-Ghali, the motivations for which, in a presidential election year, were primarily domestic. But few observers deny that there was considerable scapegoating of the secretary-general for the failure (primarily of the Western powers) to move faster and more decisively on the Bosnian war and for the death of US troops in Somalia. The whole affair ended in tremendous bitterness and resentment in many quarters. Revealingly, Boutros-Ghali provided his successor, Kofi Annan, with only one piece of advice: “Watch out for the question of Iraq. It will become very important.”<sup>42</sup>

#### KOFI ANNAN (1997–2006)

Those words were prophetic. Problems relating to Iraq created a major crisis for the UN—and the secretary-general personally. But in Annan’s first term, Iraq was an issue for which he was praised and that contributed to his

award (jointly with the UN organization as a whole) of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001.

The year 1998 saw one of Saddam Hussein's periodic episodes of brinkmanship when he continually obstructed the UN weapons inspections that had been imposed on the country as the price for its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and its defeat by an international coalition the following year. Prospects of another war seemed increasingly likely when Annan decided to fly to Baghdad to make a last-ditch effort to secure a climb-down and avert conflict. Prior to departure he had worked painstakingly with the permanent members of the Security Council to see what he could offer—and threaten—Saddam Hussein. After a three-hour meeting with Hussein, he appeared with a memorandum of understanding whereby Iraq allowed the UN inspectors to resume operations. Although he returned to a rapturous welcome in New York, the triumph was short-lived; within a few months Hussein was renegeing on the deal.

Like many of his predecessors, Annan began his term conscious that the office of the secretary-general had been “largely absent from every significant step of the modern peace process” in the Middle East. He attributed this political sidelining partly to the myriad resolutions passed by the General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights harshly condemning Israel that demonstrated double standards and served usually only to convince the Israelis they would never get a fair hearing in those arenas. On the other hand, Annan felt that in the Security Council the United States wielded its veto “to protect the Israelis even from reasonable international scrutiny and pressure, paralyzing the Council on one of the world's central conflicts.”

Annan was convinced—as he told the Security Council at the end of his tenure—that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was “not simply one unresolved conflict among many”: no other issue carried such a powerful symbolic and emotional charge affecting people far from the conflict and, indeed, the whole standing of the UN in international affairs. Soon after taking office, Annan made progress in changing perceptions in Israel with a speech in the Knesset by supporting Israel's quest for membership in a regional grouping of states (the “Western European and Others Group”) at the UN, and through the appointment of a UN special coordinator, Terje Roed-Larsen, who had worked closely with Israeli—and Palestinian—officials during the Oslo negotiations.<sup>43</sup>

In 2000, Annan was quick to seize the opportunity presented by the decision of Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak to withdraw Israeli forces from

southern Lebanon—an action Annan was convinced was in the common interests of Israel, Lebanon, and the UN. He told Barak that the withdrawal must be total, and the commitment must be in writing, if Israel was to receive UN certification that it was in full compliance with Security Council Resolution 425 (adopted after the 1978 invasion). This insistence helped Annan in his dealings with Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, while he closely coordinated with Israel regarding what UN steps would follow which Israeli actions, until the withdrawal was carried out in May. Israel's complete pull-back to what became known as "the Blue Line," which corresponded to the UN assessment of what was the hitherto undemarcated border between Israel and Lebanon, was regarded as an important success for the UN and as being in the interests of almost all parties (except those Arabs who wanted the Israelis to remain in their Lebanese quagmire).<sup>44</sup>

Annan warned Barak that the Israeli withdrawal under military pressure from Hizbullah (like its later withdrawal from Gaza under pressure from Hamas) sent an unfortunate signal to those Palestinian moderates who were trying to secure a settlement with Israel through peaceful negotiations. Meanwhile the Oslo process was fraying, and then the collapse of the Camp David negotiations in summer 2000 led within two months to the second Palestinian intifada. Recognizing the disastrous effects of the tough Israeli response and escalating Palestinian violence, Annan did what he could to secure a UN role in international efforts to end the intifada. He was partially successful. At the Sharm el-Sheikh summit in November, convened by President Clinton, the UN was invited after having secured Arafat's attendance, prompting the European Union's high commissioner Javier Solana to tell Annan that this was the "first time" in the history of that part of the world that the UN secretary-general had been "allowed to play a role."<sup>45</sup>

Writing afterwards, Annan points to the irony that he was invited to the "peace table just as it was being upended," as the Clinton administration was replaced by the Bush administration. Annan played the key role in setting up the "Quartet," designed to keep the UN at the table by combining its universal legitimacy with the political power of the United States, the financial resources of the EU, and the regional prestige of Russia. The Quartet's "Roadmap" was intended to make clear that both terrorism and settlements had to be stopped and that the goal (missing from Oslo) was a two-state solution. But Annan left office four years later frustrated with what he, and most others, regarded as a lack of serious influence exercised on Israel by the

United States, and the consequent failure of the Quartet to insist on compliance with its own Roadmap.

Annan recognized that his decision to participate in the Quartet's isolation of the newly elected Hamas-led Palestinian Authority government in 2006 was one of the most controversial moves he ever took. It was a prime example of a dilemma routinely faced by secretaries-general. On the one hand, he needed to assert the primacy of the secretary-general's good-offices role, the UN's independence and prerogative to talk to all players in a given situation. On the other hand, he was far from optimistic that dialogue with Hamas would lead anywhere and felt that it carried the risk of excluding the UN from major constituencies in the United States and Israel. He thus went along with the US, EU, and Israeli position and was criticized in various quarters for doing so.<sup>46</sup>

Annan continued to play an active role on Lebanese issues, including events after the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005, the withdrawal of Syrian forces from the country, and efforts to bring about a prisoner swap with Israel. Most significant perhaps was his push for a cease-fire when in the summer of 2006 an attack by Hizbullah provoked a massive and sustained Israeli bombardment of Lebanon.

Annan never concealed his feelings about the long delays—caused mainly by the United States and the United Kingdom, though with behind-the-scenes support from some Arab governments—in getting Security Council agreement to insist on a cease-fire and a halt to the Israeli attack. “I would be remiss,” he informed Council members, “if I did not tell you how profoundly disappointed I am that the Council did not reach this point much, much earlier. . . . [This] inability to act sooner has badly shaken the world's faith in its authority and integrity.”<sup>47</sup> The Council left it to the secretary-general to finalize the actual cessation of hostilities with Israel and Lebanon. Despite Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's assurances to Annan, Israel went on the offensive in the final days, after the cease-fire had been agreed on—dropping hundreds of thousands of cluster munitions on Lebanon. But as Annan commented, “Misleading the Secretary-General was not an Israeli offence alone”: after all, Syria's president Bashar al-Assad had assured him that Syria was giving no supplies to Hizbullah.<sup>48</sup>

The key element of Security Council Resolution 1701 was a beefed-up UNIFIL with a tougher mandate and better-equipped troops, as it had hitherto been perceived as too weak to counter Hizbullah's growing influence in southern Lebanon. Annan then worked hard to get European and other

governments to commit eight thousand new troops, as well as to get Lebanon to deploy its army south of the Litani River in order to trigger Israel's withdrawal behind the Blue Line.

But despite all the tensions involving the Lebanese, the Israelis, and the Palestinians, it was Iraq that provoked the biggest crisis for the UN—as Annan struggled to steer a course between the United States and some of its allies on one hand and most of the rest of the international community on the other. It was not a happy position to be in, and the secretary-general was harshly assailed on all sides.

Annan believed that the question came down to two challenges that simply could not be met at the same time: first, the defiance by a brutal and predatory regime of its country's obligations under international law and the resolutions of the Security Council; and second, the decision of the "sole superpower to ignore the considered judgment of a majority of members of the international community to enter in a war that could not be justified under the Charter."<sup>249</sup>

Having not prevented war (his attempt of which led to criticism from those who wanted war, and his failure in which annoyed those who did not), Annan then positioned the UN to play a role in postinvasion Iraq. This was another controversial decision, objected to by those who felt the UN should keep its distance from the US-led occupation. But Annan felt it was neither realistic nor desirable for the UN to abstain from such a consequential set of issues, which would have had a further negative impact on perceptions of the UN's relevance as well as on the Iraqi people. As Mark Malloch-Brown, later Annan's deputy, put it, perhaps in an unconscious reference to Abba Eban's trenchant criticism of 1967, "If you're the fire brigade, you don't ask who started the fire and if this is a moral fire before you get started."<sup>250</sup>

What made Iraq such a problem for Annan's second term was a devastating combination of three sets of developments. The first was the bombing of the UN offices in Baghdad in August 2003 that led to the death of Annan's representative and friend, the charismatic Sergio Vieira de Mello, along with several others of the UN's "best and brightest." This was a major blow to Annan personally and the UN institutionally. The second came from the secretary-general's initial quiet opposition to the US war effort, culminating in his answer to questioning by a BBC reporter in 2004 that yes, he considered the Iraq war to be indeed "illegal." The fury that this admission created in conservative circles in the United States had a direct impact on the third set of difficulties. These related to the UN's Oil-for-Food humani-

tarian program in Iraq and allegations of corruption that also involved Annan's son.

The result was a vast assault on Annan's integrity and judgment, which soon extended to the entire UN. A large-scale investigation set up by Annan and headed by Paul Volcker followed, the conclusion of which was that the program was an overall success but that the UN and Annan were responsible for poor management, inadequate supervision, and lack of accountability. On the other hand, the overblown claims of systemwide UN corruption appearing in much of the American press were almost entirely dismissed.<sup>51</sup>

Taken together, these developments led to a temporary loss of morale on the part of Annan and questions about whether he would be able to complete his term of office. But he pulled through, and the United States pulled back. As he himself put it afterwards, although the "ideologues of the Bush administration who took their country and the world into a calamitous war wanted to see the UN shattered in the process," ultimately statesmanship on the part of the White House prevailed, and Washington "slowly realized the need for the organization to regain its indispensable role in international security." But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, along with the 1967 war, this was one of the lowest points in the history of the UN and the office of the secretary-general.

#### BAN KI-MOON (2007-16)

The eighth (and current) secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, who was foreign minister of the Republic of Korea, took office in 2007 and immediately found that that Middle East issues would rank among his major preoccupations.<sup>52</sup>

Instability in Lebanon was always a concern for Ban, who pushed the international community to generate funds for Lebanon's reconstruction following the widespread damage caused by the war of 2006. He also supported the efforts of the Special Tribunal to investigate Prime Minister Hariri's assassination, a historic attempt to end impunity that may turn out to be a precedent for elsewhere in the world. Ban continued the UN's push for the disarmament of Hizbullah, as well as the increased effectiveness of UNIFIL; and in 2013 he established an International Support Group to help the country cope with the ever-increasing fragility brought on by the Syrian civil war.

Like his predecessor, Ban reached out to Israel in various ways to try to reduce mistrust. For example, he repeatedly declared his understanding, as a



South Korean whose capital lies close to the border with the North, of how Israelis must feel living under constant threat of rocket attack. The Quartet met periodically, notwithstanding criticism about its effectiveness, as Ban and his envoys, Robert Serry and later Nickolay Mladenov, sought to support various US initiatives by Condoleeza Rice (Annapolis), Hillary Clinton (the Mitchell effort), and John Kerry. All the while, he continued to urge that final status parameters for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, launched through the Quartet and based in Security Council resolutions, were probably the only chance of getting parties with such deep distrust and asymmetrical bargaining power to negotiate a deal they could both live with.

By 2014, he was warning that the Kerry efforts seemed the last chance for a two-state solution, implying that, should they fail (a possibility he feared might happen as a result of Israel's continued settlement activity, which he said was "illegal under international law and runs totally counter to the pursuit of a two-state solution"), what would be left was a one-state possibility that both sides claimed they did not want.<sup>53</sup>

Ban paid particular attention to Gaza—which is not surprising given that major hostilities between Israel and Hamas and other Palestinian groups erupted there on three occasions during his first eight years in office. While retaining Annan's position on Hamas, the UN maintained some necessary contacts with the movement with a view to deescalating violence. Ban regularly condemned the firing of rockets from Gaza into southern Israel, and also the Israeli military response whenever he considered it disproportionate or excessive. He found the human suffering in Gaza deeply troubling and publicly urged Israel to "lift its harsh restrictions in order to ease the plight of civilians and bring an end to the closure. Keeping a large and dense population in unremitting poverty is in nobody's interest except that of the most extreme radicals in the region."<sup>54</sup> Ban used his trips to set up "deliverables," where he would press the Israelis to make some gesture to ease some aspect of the blockade.

When hostilities broke out in 2008, leading to the death of 1,300 Palestinians in Gaza and thirteen Israelis, Ban went to the region in an effort to stop the fighting. He soon concluded that it would be almost impossible for Israel and Hamas to agree to a simultaneous cease-fire. As he later put it, "The only way would be a unilateral ceasefire by Olmert, because the Israelis started this war and they should stop." He held three meetings with the Israeli prime minister and several telephone calls, after which Olmert issued his call for a unilateral cease-fire. The secretary-general then flew to Beirut,

Damascus (where he pressed President Assad to lean on the Hamas leadership), and Cairo. Ban recalled that within twelve hours of Olmert's announcement the Syrians were informing the secretary-general that, because of Assad's intervention, Hamas would also make an announcement, which they proceeded to do.<sup>55</sup>

In both 2012 and 2014, Ban again engaged in shuttle diplomacy—in close coordination with the United States—in an attempt to stop the fighting in Gaza, the victims of which were overwhelmingly Palestinian civilians. While fully accepting Israel's right to self-defense, he made clear in public statements, as well as in meetings with senior Israeli officials, his conviction that punishing the Gazan population so severely was a mistake on both ethical and pragmatic grounds. The Israelis and some of their supporters abroad vocally protested Ban's statements as the crisis went on, but Ban held his ground and continued to insist that the loss of lives and the destruction of Palestinian housing and infrastructure (especially a number of attacks on UN-run schools, where hundreds of civilians were taking refuge) were excessive.<sup>56</sup> He also continued to maintain that addressing the "root causes" of Palestinian desperation—in both Gaza and the West Bank—was a prerequisite for ending what he frustratedly called the build-destroy-build cycle, with the international community repeatedly called upon to pay for the reconstruction of the besieged Gaza Strip after each round of destruction.<sup>57</sup>

Early in 2016, as the situation in the West Bank seemed to deteriorate further and further, Ban informed the Security Council that Palestinian frustration was growing under the weight of occupation and the paralysis of the peace process. "Some have taken me to task for pointing out this indisputable truth. Yet, as oppressed peoples have demonstrated throughout the ages, it is human nature to react to occupation, which often serves as a potent incubator of hate and extremism."<sup>58</sup> The reaction from Israel was fast: within minutes Prime Minister Netanyahu accused him of providing a "tail-wind to terror." Ban became the subject of a campaign which maintained that the lone Palestinian attacks that were terrorizing Israeli civilians at the time were the product of incitement by the Palestinian Authority and had nothing to do with occupation. Strongly disagreeing, Ban then published an article in the *New York Times* where he made his position even clearer. He stated that no one could deny that the everyday reality of occupation provoked anger and despair, which were the major drivers of violence and undermined any hope of a two-state solution. He referred to the expanding illegal settlement construction and the demolition of Palestinian homes, with the result that

Palestinians were “losing hope over what seems a harsh, humiliating and endless occupation.” Ban also called on the Palestinians to make political compromises to bring Gaza and the West Bank together, and to consistently denounce terrorism and take preventive action to end attacks on Israelis.<sup>59</sup>

In Iraq, following requests by the United States and others, Ban expanded the role of the UN Mission, which had never really recovered from the aftershocks of the Canal Hotel bombing. He authorized a greater political involvement from the UN special representative, including in the increasingly vexed relations between the central government in Baghdad, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and local Arab, Christian, Kurdish, and Turkmen communities. The issues concerned disputed areas, oil revenues, local power sharing, restitution of property, demographic shifts, and security arrangements. Following an extensive investigation and report by the UN Mission into the disputed areas, the secretary-general supported his team in efforts to negotiate confidence-building measures.

As political and security conditions deteriorated in Iraq, he increased his efforts to encourage a more inclusive Iraqi government in 2014. When Mosul fell to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Ban rapidly reached out to Prime Minister al-Maliki and Grand Ayatollah Sistani, and then visited them in Baghdad and Najaf respectively, in order to impress on them the paramount importance of combating ISIL, despite the atrocities ISIL was carrying out, in a way that respected human rights. Failure to do so, he told them, and the revenge killing of Sunni civilians by Shiite militias, would only serve as motivation for more recruitment to ISIL.

The secretary-general also worked over several years to improve Iraqi relations with Kuwait, addressing the concerns of the latter related to missing persons and property dating from the 1990 invasion by Iraq, and the removal of Iraq from consideration under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which was largely accomplished by 2013. He pressed the Gulf states—especially King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia—to do more to integrate Iraq into the region. Indeed, by making several visits and staying in contact through phone calls, Ban established closer links to the leaders of the Gulf than any of his predecessors. This enabled him to call on them for important contributions to many causes where the UN was requesting resources—mainly for humanitarian efforts, but also to address terrorism and climate change.

Ban is regarded as having exercised most moral leadership during the Arab Spring. He was among the first world leaders to publicly call for President Mubarak of Egypt and Colonel Qaddafi of Libya to step down from office in

2011. This was despite opposition from China and Russia, two permanent members of the Security Council, to his stance on what they considered were “internal” affairs, just a few months before his reelection to a second term of office.<sup>60</sup> In January 2012, at a high-level conference on democracy in Beirut, Ban told Arab leaders that “the flame ignited in Tunisia will not be dimmed. . . . The old way is crumbling.” He pointed out that the great changes began, not with a call for regime change, but with desire for dignity and an end to corruption. People “want jobs and justice, a fair share of political power. They want their human rights.”<sup>61</sup> In Egypt, he repeatedly urged the new authorities (first under President Morsi, then under President al-Sisi) to respect human rights, and he criticized the harsh military and judicial crackdowns on demonstrators and journalists.

Before the Libyan regime finally collapsed, Ban instructed that plans be drawn up for a UN operation to support postrevolution statebuilding in Libya. Over the next five years, he called on the Western powers, as well as Libya’s neighbors, to be more focused on the country, especially when it began to break down amid rival armed factions, serious human rights violations, competing parliaments, a vast source of illegal migration to Europe across the Mediterranean, and the growing presence of the “Islamic State” in the east.

The signing of the Libyan Peace Agreement in December 2015, after months of negotiations facilitated by the secretary-general and his representatives, was a critical step forward. These efforts continued through the first quarter of 2016, with Ban and UN special envoy Martin Kobler cajoling the parties and their respective backers abroad. When the Presidency Council was finally able to enter Tripoli on March 30, Ban then focused the UN’s efforts on urging all Libyan political actors and public institutions to facilitate an immediate and peaceful handover of power.

In Yemen, Ban consistently worked to bolster the transition to democratic rule after the overthrow of President Saleh. The National Dialogue process, closely supported by the UN through Ban’s envoy, Jamal Benomar, was an innovative attempt to bring Yemeni women, civil society, and previously excluded actors into the political and constitution-making process. But in late 2014, fighting in the country’s north spiraled out of control, leading to the takeover of the capital, Sanaa, by Houthi forces backed by Saleh. Despite weeks of negotiations led by the UN, disputes over the draft constitution led to further conflict between President Hadi and the Houthis. Hadi fled Sanaa and requested a military intervention by Gulf countries in order to dislodge the Houthis and restore his government to power.

A massive Saudi-led military operation was launched in March 2015, with thousands of air strikes following (as well as casualties—one year later, well over six thousand Yemenis had been killed in the fighting, more than half of them civilians). Ban and his new envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, rapidly pushed to convene peace talks to bring the country back to a peaceful political transition. Following unsuccessful talks in Geneva in June, the secretary-general continued to meet with Yemeni and regional leaders to urge a cessation of hostilities. Ban repeatedly pressed for the Saudi-led coalition in particular, as well as the Yemeni belligerents, to make far greater efforts to avoid civilian casualties and stop obstructing desperately needed humanitarian assistance to millions of affected civilians. A cease-fire was announced by Ban in December 2015 at a new round of talks in Biel, Switzerland. While this cessation of hostilities lasted only a few days, the secretary-general's envoy was able to announce a more robust cessation of hostilities and new talks in Kuwait in April 2016.

During Ban's second term, probably no issue affected him so profoundly as the continued fighting in Syria.<sup>62</sup> Shocked by the massive human rights abuses committed by the regime, as well as the uncompromising political stance of the parties, the secretary-general used strong language to convey his condemnation. In a speech to the General Assembly on June 7, 2012, he declared that for many months it had been "evident that President Assad and his Government have lost all legitimacy." He referred to specific acts of slaughter by government forces or allies and declared, "Any regime or leader that tolerates such killing of innocents has lost its fundamental humanity."<sup>63</sup> Peaceful protesters had bravely persisted in calling for dignity and freedom but often had been killed for doing so. The Syrian government, he continued, was not living up to its commitments under the plan endorsed by the Security Council two months before, and many elements of the opposition had also turned to arms.

As time went on, an increasingly radicalized opposition resorted to terrible acts of terrorism and murder, especially ISIL or Da'esh, and Ban strongly criticized their acts. But he continued to condemn the government's use of long-range missiles; "barrel bombs" dropped by helicopters; the imprisonment, torture, and disappearances of tens of thousands of civilians; and siege tactics that were causing severe hunger to two hundred thousand people by 2014. He insisted—despite protestations from Damascus—that terrorism was a consequence, not the cause, of the conflict in Syria.<sup>64</sup>

The problem of Syria was not just the brutality of the protagonists but also the actions of regional countries that fueled the fighting, and finally the

paralysis of the Security Council, where three of the permanent members supported the opposition and two supported the government. Despite the secretary-general's successive appointment of some of the most qualified elder statesmen of the day—Kofi Annan, followed by Lakhdar Brahimi and later Staffan de Mistura—as the UN envoy on Syria, working either jointly or in close cooperation with the Arab League, the conflict had already been under way for a year when the issue finally came to the UN. It was therefore hugely difficult for the UN to overcome the internal, regional, and international divisions that kept the fighting going.

International conferences on Syria were convened in Geneva (2012) and Montreux (2014)—the first designed to secure regional and international commitment to a negotiated transition, and the second to launch Syrian talks to this end. These conferences underscored the convening power of the secretary-general and his senior envoys and could have opened paths for dialogue. However, amid the intransigence of the regime, the fragmentation of the opposition, and the continual pursuit by some regional powers of a military solution to the conflict, they had little impact on the extent of the fighting. The secretary-general, as well as Annan and Brahimi, believed that Iran should be invited to the two conferences, given its strong influence over the course of the war. Despite major pressures to the contrary, Ban decided to invite Iran to the 2014 conference but then felt let down when Iran did not live up to assurances to endorse the communiqué agreed on at the 2012 conference, and he declared that Iran's participation was not possible in these circumstances, despite the loss of face he had to endure as a result.

In 2014 and 2015, Ban strongly supported de Mistura's efforts to bring about a "freeze" in the fighting and positions in Aleppo—not, as he put it, to provide a substitute for a political dialogue (which neither side seemed to want) but to try to create space in which dialogue could be initiated. But UN efforts could not break the impasse created by the clear fact that both the Syrian government and the key backers of the opposition were more interested in fighting each other than in confronting the ISIL threat, let alone reaching a political compromise.

By February 2016, an international Syria support group (ISSG) of seventeen countries, cochaired by the United States and Russia, and including Iran and Saudi Arabia, sponsored a cessation of hostilities to move in parallel with a revitalized process of intra-Syrian negotiations on a political transition process. The cessation aimed at drastically reducing the level of violence throughout the country, while facilitating access of aid in particular to

besieged areas. Meanwhile the Syrian parties were reconvened in proximity talks in Geneva to negotiate on governance and a new constitution, which was supposed to be followed by UN-supervised elections. As the cessation of hostilities threatened to unravel in April 2016, owing in large part to new Syrian government offensives especially around Aleppo, Ban did his utmost to keep the momentum going with continued public, telephone, and face-to-face diplomacy with the members of the ISSG. Following an especially gruesome aerial attack on a makeshift camp for displaced persons who had fled Aleppo near the Turkish border on May 5, 2016, he expressed his outrage over this apparent war crime and urged the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

A major effort was made at the UN in 2013, with Ban playing a prominent role, to secure agreement on decommissioning Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, after conflicting allegations of who had been using them. Eliminating probably the largest—albeit previously undeclared, indeed denied—stocks of chemical weapons in the world was one of the most important and successful disarmament exercises to have been carried out for many years.

The secretary-general was personally instrumental in mobilizing funds for the immense UN humanitarian effort to alleviate the devastating effects of the conflict on the Syrian population and on neighboring countries. As the suffering increased in both extent and intensity, so that an ever-greater proportion of the Syrian population was in dire need of assistance, the humanitarian effort took up more of the secretary-general's energy. For four consecutive years, three in Kuwait and the last in London, the secretary-general cochaired donors' conferences to raise resources for life-saving support to millions of Syrian refugees and to the internally displaced.

During his last year in office (2016), a new problem unexpectedly erupted for Ban—one that probably qualifies as the single greatest crisis in relations between a UN secretary-general and an Arab government. Under Perez de Cuellar, the United Nations had in 1991 brokered a cease-fire between Morocco and the Western Sahara liberation movement known as the Polisario Front in exchange for a referendum on the territory's future. This led to the deployment of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which had the double task of monitoring the cease-fire and making preparations for a referendum that, twenty-five years later, had not occurred.

During Ban's term, several problems with Morocco arose, almost invariably following the publication, each April, of the secretary-general's annual

report to the Security Council on Western Sahara—to varying points of which Morocco took exception. The underlying point of contention derived from Morocco's claim of sovereignty over the massive territory (from which Spanish troops and administrators had departed in 1975). But that claim is not recognized by the International Court of Justice or the United Nations, whose membership continue to regard it as a “non-self-governing territory.”

Never having done so before, Ban had for some time wished to visit Western Sahara, in particular the UN operation based there. In March 2016, prevented by Morocco from visiting Laayoune (the headquarters of MINURSO) in that part of Western Sahara under its control, he nevertheless proceeded with other parts of his regional tour, which included the Sahrawi refugee camps in southwest Algeria. Deeply moved by the desolation and hopelessness of the conditions of these refugees, as well as the outpouring of bitterness they exhibited toward the international community for having seemingly ignored their plight for decades, he referred in passing to their plight after “over forty years of occupation.” The Moroccan government reacted with extreme vehemence to this remark and other alleged “slips” by the secretary-general (one of which was to mention the letter “R” in MINURSO's title, “Referendum”), which it claimed insulted the entire Moroccan people. Volleys of invective were leveled at the secretary-general and his advisers, and the Moroccan government expelled from Western Sahara the vast majority of the UN civilian staff who worked for MINURSO.

The secretary-general warned the Security Council that the removal of staff from the UN mission that the Council had established meant that the mission would soon not be able to function. This, he said, could lead to a “rupture of the cease-fire” and risk escalation into “full-scale war” (between Morocco on one side and the Polisario and Algeria on the other). Ban also pointedly told the members of the Security Council that should they fail to stand up for the UN mission that they themselves had established, then other governments around the world that hosted UN peacekeepers might also unilaterally decide to expel them.

Throughout this crisis with Morocco, which at least had the benefit of shining a spotlight once again on what had long been a forgotten and frozen conflict, Ban tried to keep the focus on what he called the “truly heart-wrenching human suffering” of the Western Saharans. He urged greater humanitarian assistance as well as considerably improved respect for their human rights.<sup>65</sup>



Overall, on the UN's approach to a whole range of questions involving the Arab world—the Palestinian conflict, Darfur and other Sudanese issues, the popular protests that marked the Arab Spring and their aftermath, the Syrian civil war, the Iraqi struggle with ISIL, and the plight of the Sahrawis—Ban consistently laid a greater stress on human rights than any of his predecessors had felt able or inclined to do.

#### SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The secretary-general of the United Nations has no financial or military power of his own. Any leverage he has must be based on his personal powers of diplomatic persuasion backed up by what limited authority is vested in him by the UN Charter or legislative bodies, combined with the universal moral legitimacy of the UN as a whole (a legitimacy that many Arabs as well as Israelis find questionable). One permanent challenge is to maintain a sufficient degree of cooperation with the key member states to be effective, while avoiding giving the impression that he is merely a “head-waiter” or a “letter-carrier.”<sup>66</sup>

This chapter's survey reveals both common features and certain differences in how each secretary-general has handled the Middle East. The most obvious common feature is that this region dominated each one's attention during his time in office,<sup>67</sup> a result of the intensity of the problems there but also the wider international community's strategic interests and the UN's prior involvement in them.

Every secretary-general, understandably, has sought to make the UN more relevant to dispute resolution in the region. This was apparent from Trygve Lie's initial decision to involve the United Nations in the question of Palestine, including by being among the first to promote the “two-state solution” (at a time when the Jews and Israelis were keen on the idea and the Arabs were not—a position that later secretaries-general found was reversed during their own terms). Hammarskjöld introduced a number of practices that every one of his successors followed when dealing with the Middle East: the use of preventive diplomacy (prior to conflict), shuttle diplomacy (to bring conflict to an end), UN peacekeeping forces (placed between conflicting parties), and a UN political presence (to try to resolve the issues that led to the conflict in the first place). Perez de Cuellar, Annan, and Ban all worked hard to create new openings for the UN to make a more constructive contribution on a number of files relating to Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq.<sup>68</sup>

Because of the nature of the job, all secretaries-general have been confronted with ethical dilemmas where the choice is often between the lesser of two evils. Partly as a result, the secretaries-general have been simultaneously criticized by all sides on Middle East questions. The present survey also highlights some of those instances when UN secretaries-general have been blamed by the warring parties themselves (or some in the wider international community) for either not preventing or not resolving the failures of the parties.

Most secretaries-general have made fairly dramatic dashes to the region in attempts either to prevent a war or to end one. Hammarskjöld, Thant, Waldheim, Perez de Cuellar, Annan, and Ban all made such trips. At least two (Thant in 1967 and Perez de Cuellar in 1991) knew that their chances of success were extremely small but considered that they had an obligation, deriving from the office they held, to exert their moral authority and use every possible tactic in a last-ditch attempt to prevent a deeply damaging war. Every secretary-general has used envoys, often solely dedicated to the Middle Eastern task at hand, to work with the parties in the region, usually in a discreet manner.

For reasons of personality and the reigning state of geopolitical relations, secretaries-general have insisted on some of the key aspects of their office in a variety of ways. Impartiality is clearly something all secretaries-general have insisted on. Echoing Hammarskjöld, Annan said that impartiality must never mean neutrality in the face of evil, but rather strict and unbiased adherence to the principles of the Charter.<sup>69</sup>

The concept of independence goes a step beyond impartiality, as it implies not just an independent and impartial position on a given issue but independence of action and a conception of the role and legitimacy of the secretary-general as something distinct from (and implicitly much more than) that of a mere "secretariat" limited to servicing member states. Hammarskjöld and Boutros-Ghali were probably the two who were most insistent on the independence of the office. Indeed, Boutros-Ghali declared, "If one word above all is to characterize the role of the Secretary-General, it is independence";<sup>70</sup> the holder of that office had to never be seen as acting out of fear of, or in an attempt to curry favor with, one state. It is not a coincidence that those who most stressed their independence were also those who ended up having the most stupendous rows with key capitals (Hammarskjöld with Moscow, Boutros-Ghali with Washington). After Hammarskjöld, as one historian of the UN has put it, member states, although they could agree on little else, shared the view that they did not want a secretary-general to be

allowed the capacity to curb their own freedom of action or the idea that the post had a genuinely supranational or moral standing.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps inevitably, tensions have frequently arisen between the UN secretaries-general and the organization's most powerful member state on issues that the latter has often regarded as a major strategic concern. This is especially so given the strong alliance and sympathy that that member state (the United States) has with one of the key parties to the Middle East conflict (Israel) and the strength this gives the latter to withstand the views and pressures of the vast majority of other UN members, who are trying to push the secretary-general in the other direction. Such was less the case under Lie (whose sympathy mirrored that of the United States) or Hammarskjöld (given his and President Eisenhower's shared conviction that Israel and its allies, not Egypt, were to blame for the 1956 war). But from U Thant on, tensions with the United States have at times been evident—reaching a high point in the post-Cold War period, when US preponderance at the UN was at its most unquestioned, during the terms of Boutros-Ghali and Annan. Despite many differences of outlook on several key questions of style and substance, the memoirs of both those men have a common line on the manner in which US influence was exercised with them, not only on the Middle East but also on other issues.<sup>72</sup>

With the exceptions of Lie and Waldheim, other secretaries-general have—either explicitly or more guardedly—indicated that they believed their office has a moral component to it. Annan noted that he had more freedom of action than his predecessors, since the end of the Cold War had “transformed the moral promise of the role of the Secretary-General.” It allowed him, he said, to place the UN at the service of the universal values of the Charter “without the constraints of ideology or particular interests.”<sup>73</sup> However, he said this in 1998, five years before a divisive and what some termed an “ideological” war in Iraq and fourteen years before the UN Security Council demonstrated itself on Syria (and later Ukraine) to be as polarized as it had been during the Cold War.

“Every secretary-general has condemned Arab acts of violence or terrorism against Israel and has unequivocally supported Israel's right to live within secure, recognized borders. Similarly every secretary-general has publicly condemned Israeli actions (responsive or preemptive) against Arab states or civilians when they have considered that excessive force was used or that these actions were in violation of international law. They have all expressed sympathy, in most cases repeatedly, for the predicament of the Palestinian people and have urged regional governments—mainly Israel, but also

others—to adopt a less harsh attitude and to do more to alleviate their plight. But whatever the rights and wrongs—the humiliation and injustice of decades of occupation, the illegality of settlement building, terrorist attacks on civilians, the disproportionality of military actions—every UN secretary-general from Hammarskjöld on has also expressed frustration over what they have considered to be the counterproductive nature of Israeli policies when measured against that country's actual long-term interests.<sup>74</sup>

Since 1947, the Middle East—especially the question of Palestine—has played a defining role in the history of the United Nations. This applies both to the intergovernmental bodies and to the Secretariat, the organ headed by the secretary-general. Every secretary-general has made strenuous efforts to resolve conflicts in the Middle East, or at least to mitigate their more brutal effects. Testifying to the intractability of those issues, none (with the exception of Lie) have left office satisfied with the state of the region or their own record in managing to improve it. Most have been rebuked by one side or the other, or by public opinion, for either doing too much to bring the UN into these issues or not doing enough, and for either showing too much understanding for one side's position or not showing enough.

It has, after all, been demonstrated time and again that it is much easier to blame the United Nations and its most senior official for any perceived failures to bring peace than it is for the parties to show statesmanship themselves. It would be reassuring—though probably not realistic—to think that future secretaries-general may not have to encounter this same problem as they continue to grapple with the problems of the Middle East.

## NOTES

1. The secretaries-general have been Trygve Lie (1945–53), Dag Hammarskjöld (1953–61), U Thant (1961–71), Kurt Waldheim (1971–82), Javier Perez de Cuellar (1982–91), Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992–96), Kofi Annan (1997–2006), and Ban Ki-moon (2007, with his current term ending in 2016). The main wars between Arabs and Israelis have been in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982, as well as, though on a smaller scale, in 1978 and 2006 in Lebanon and in 2006, 2008–9, 2012, and 2014 in Gaza. The wars involving Iraq have been the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88, the First Gulf War of 1991, and the Second Gulf War of 2003. Only Boutros-Ghali did not have a Middle East war during his watch (although up to 170 Lebanese were killed and five hundred thousand were temporarily displaced during Israeli attacks in 1996).

2. Quoted in Brian Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche: An American Life* (New York: Norton, 1993), 139–40.

3. Trygve Lie, *In the Cause of Peace: Seven Years with the United Nations* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 76.

4. Quoted (in translation) in Ellen Jenny Ravndal, “Establishing the Norm of the Secretary-General as a Political Actor: The UN and the Palestine Problem, 1947–49,” paper presented at the British International Studies Association conference, Birmingham, June 2013.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche*, 179. As Kati Marton put it in her book about the killing of Bernadotte, “So muted was the world body’s reaction, so lacking in any real sanctions against the Jewish state for its failure to pursue the murderers of the United Nations’ mediator, that for Israel ‘world opinion’ became an empty phrase.” Kati Marton, *A Death in Jerusalem* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 23.

7. Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche*, 196–97.

8. *Ibid.*, 223, 231. Hammarskjöld later told Bunche that had he been secretary-general at the time, he would indeed have allowed Bunche to send the letter declining the prize.

9. The United Nations did not suffer a high-profile assassination of one of its leaders for fifty-six years, when Sergio Vieira de Mello was blown up, along with several of his colleagues, also in the Middle East, though in Baghdad. However, there is still much uncertainty over the death in a plane crash of Dag Hammarskjöld in 1961 and whether it was accidental or assassination.

10. In 1950, on Korea, his position was with one side and firmly against the other. In the end, faced with almost total noncooperation from the Soviet Union, he was compelled to resign.

11. Roger Lipsey, *Hammarskjöld: A Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 13, 252. Years later, Ben-Gurion told Urquhart that Hammarskjöld was one of the best friends he had ever had. Each of Hammarskjöld’s successors has made similar pronouncements regarding Israeli measures against Gaza.

12. *Ibid.*, 263–64.

13. *Ibid.*, 310.

14. *Ibid.*, 297, 300; Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld* (New York: Knopf, 1972), chaps. 6 and 7.

15. Ben-Gurion wrote to Hammarskjöld accusing him of abandoning Lebanon to Egyptian-Syrian intrigues and asking, “Is not a Middle Eastern Munich in the making?” Hammarskjöld was lambasted in the Lebanese press, and at around the same time Hammarskjöld complained to the British foreign secretary about what he considered an officially inspired press campaign with “grotesque theories” that ever since Suez he had been considered “to be fooled by, if not a stooge of, Nasser.” On the other side, Soviet and Arab nationalist officials and media continued to denounce him for his support of Western imperialism. Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*, 273–74.

16. Lipsey, *Hammarskjöld*, chap. 14; Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*, chaps. 6 and 7.

17. Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*, 300–301; Lipsey, *Hammarskjöld*, 372–73.

18. As Urquhart comments, "For the representative of a country that had refused to accommodate the 'fire-brigade' and had so dramatically initiated the actual fighting, this seemed self-serving indeed." The following day, U Thant responded to Eban in the General Assembly by pointing out that for ten years UNEF's effectiveness had been based on the cooperation of Egypt, whereas, in spite of the General Assembly's intention to have UNEF troops on both sides of the line, "Israel always and firmly refused to accept them on Israeli territory on the valid grounds of national sovereignty. There was, of course, national sovereignty on the other side of the line as well." Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche*, 413-14.

19. C.L. Sulzberger quoted in Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche*, 407. Urquhart also spells out in particular how strikingly little the two superpowers contributed to averting the crisis, which turned out to be a triumph for Israel and a disaster both for the Arab world (to a fairly large extent, but certainly not solely, self-inflicted) and for the UN.

20. Stanley Meisler, *United Nations: The First Fifty Years* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 173-83. It was all a long way from the triumph of U Thant's early years, when President Kennedy declared that with his delicate handling of the Cuban missile crisis of 1963, "U Thant has put the whole world in his debt." After the 1967 war, the secretary-general allowed himself to become a convenient scapegoat for international inaction, accepting this unenviable role with as much Buddhist detachment as could be summoned. So wrote A. Walter Dorn in "U Thant: Buddhism in Action," in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership*, ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 177. See also Brian Urquhart, *A Life in Peace and War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 215.

21. This was also the view of the force commander of UNEF, General Indarjit Rikhye, *The Sinai Blunder: Withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force Leading to the Six-Day War of June 1967* (London: F. Cass, 1980).

22. Urquhart, *Life in Peace*, 215.

23. Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche*, chap. 31; U Thant, *A View from the UN* (London: David and Charles, 1977), 50.

24. For an important discussion of the contrast in the styles, principles, and values between Waldheim and other secretaries-general, see Manuel Frohlich, *Political Ethics and the United Nations* (London: Routledge, 2008), 199-201.

25. Simon Chesterman, introduction to *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, ed. Simon Chesterman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

26. On that trip, he managed to offend both sides with small but (what were considered) inexcusable blunders: the Arabs by referring to Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and the Israelis by waving away the *kippa* that was offered when he visited Yad Vashem.

27. Urquhart, *Life in Peace*, 227-50; Meisler, *United Nations*, 198-99.

28. Urquhart, *Life in Peace*, 295 (for quotes) and chap. 22, "Lebanon 1978."

29. James Cockayne and David M. Malone, "Relations with the Security Council," in Chesterman, *Secretary or General?*, 70.

30. James Traub, "The Secretary-General's Political Space," in Chesterman, *Secretary or General?*, 189.
31. Javier Perez de Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace: A Secretary-General's Memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 80.
32. *Ibid.*, 45.
33. Sir Marrack Goulding, "The UN Secretary-General," in *The UN Security Council: From the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. David Malone (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004), 273.
34. Perez de Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, 178.
35. In Cockayne and Malone, "Relations with the Security Council," 82. Other US diplomats have been even more explicit on this point. See Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Unvanquished: A U.S.-U.N. Saga* (New York: Random House, 1999), 291.
36. Boutros-Ghali, *Unvanquished*, 181.
37. *Ibid.*, 205.
38. *Ibid.*, 195-97.
39. Boutros-Ghali's remark to an ambassador that he had written to (Israeli prime minister) *Rabin* in Jerusalem but had instead gotten a reply from (US spokesman) *Rubin* in New York was attributed to anti-Semitism. *Ibid.*, 204. Conversation between author and James Rubin, New York, 1994.
40. Authored by a Dutch general with a British deputy. Mortimer Zuckerman in *U.S. News and World Report* suggested that even making a report on the killing of civilians in a UN camp was tantamount to anti-Semitism on the secretary-general's part. Cited in Boutros-Ghali, *Unvanquished*, 263-64.
41. Whose overall assessment of Boutros-Ghali is far from uncritical. Brian Urquhart, "The Making of a Scapegoat," *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1999.
42. Kofi Annan, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 319. Although the "Oil-for-Food" program for Iraq was to collapse during Annan's second term, it was a creation of the Boutros-Ghali tenure, with the direct involvement of the secretary-general himself. It took several years of especially frustrating negotiations to persuade Saddam Hussein, who seemed, to Boutros-Ghali, "to care nothing at all for the welfare of the poorest Iraqi people," to accept a closely monitored program that would allow Iraq to sell a certain amount of oil in exchange for food and medicines. Boutros-Ghali, *Unvanquished*, 208-10, 221, 258-61, 266-67.
43. Annan made repeated efforts to improve the UN's troubled relationship with Israel—in a way that sought to avoid compromising UN principles as much as possible. In December 2006, in his important last speech on the Middle East to the Security Council, he questioned the value of many of the UN's activities regarding Israel. "Some may feel satisfaction at repeatedly passing General Assembly resolutions or holding conferences that condemn Israel's behavior. But one should also ask whether such steps bring any tangible relief or benefit to the Palestinians. There have been decades of resolutions. There has been a proliferation of special committees, sessions, and Secretariat divisions and units. Has any of this had an effect on Israel's policies, other than to strengthen the belief in Israel, and among many of its sup-

porters, that this great organization is too one-sided to be allowed a significant role in the Middle East peace process?" See Eve Epstein, "Annan Made the Nations a Little Less United against Israel," *Jewish Daily Forward*, December 22, 2006.

44. Bruce D. Jones, "The Middle East Peace Process," in Malone, *UN Security Council*, 396–98. There was one area, a section of the village of Ghajar, from which the Israelis did not withdraw.

45. Annan, *Interventions*, 270. While not entirely accurate, it nevertheless illustrated the point.

46. Included in the "End of Mission Report" of Annan's personal envoy to the Quartet, Alvaro de Soto, May 2007. De Soto believed that the decision "effectively transformed the Quartet from a negotiation-promoting foursome . . . into a body that was all-but imposing sanctions on a freely elected government of a people under occupation as well as setting unattainable preconditions for dialogue." But pressure on the UN was high. When in 2006 Annan was considering allowing midlevel UN officials to have contact with Hamas to discuss humanitarian issues, he was warned that the individuals concerned might lose their American visas. As Annan's deputy observed, "No wonder groups like Hamas have come to see the United Nations as an arm of their Western enemies," with major implications for the security of UN staff members. Quoted in Mark Malloch-Brown, *The Unfinished Global Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 75.

47. Annan, *Interventions*, 303.

48. *Ibid.*, 305.

49. *Ibid.*, 347–65.

50. Samantha Power, *Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 368, 373.

51. Brian Urquhart, "The Evolution of the Secretary-General," in Chesterman, *Secretary or General?*, 29.

52. This chapter was finished in February 2015. Ban Ki-moon's term of office finishes at the end of 2016.

53. Ban Ki-moon, press statement, September 1, 2014, UN Secretariat website, [www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=7960](http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=7960).

54. Ban Ki-moon, remarks to the Human Rights Council, September 10, 2012, UN News Centre, [www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments\\_full.asp?statID=1643#.Vsajvza4mqQ](http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments_full.asp?statID=1643#.Vsajvza4mqQ).

55. Tom Plate, *Conversations with Ban Ki-moon: The Necessary Man of World Diplomacy* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012), 134.

56. On July 30, 2014, he announced that another UN school sheltering thousands of Palestinian families had been attacked. "All available evidence points to Israeli artillery as the cause. Nothing is more shameful than attacking sleeping children. . . . I condemn this attack in the strongest possible terms. It is outrageous. It is unjustifiable. And it demands accountability and justice." This and similar statements were criticized in some quarters but praised in others. An example of the latter was the *Independent*, which ran an editorial on August 4, 2014, saying that Ban's intervention was "crucial and commendable. For a man of his stature to raise



so openly the question of proportionality . . . was courageous. To refer to Sunday's attack . . . as a 'moral outrage and a criminal act,' while apparently pointing the finger at Israel, was remarkable. But the description was surely unarguable and his words appear to have emboldened the language of the US administration."

57. In his press remarks at the Gaza Reconstruction Conference on October 12, 2014, Ban stressed the need to "understand the level of frustration on the part of the international community, particularly donors. . . . Rebuild and destroy. This is already the third time. To put it simply, for a third grader student in Palestine . . . it is already the third war. Then what do you expect? As Secretary-General, I am also very much angry about this continuing violence. I have been urging that while we are ready to rebuild Gaza, it must be the last time." Ban Ki-moon, "Secretary-General's Press Encounter at Gaza Reconstruction Conference, Cairo, Egypt," October 12, 2014, [www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=3678](http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=3678). Earlier that day, Ban had listed what he believed the "root causes" of the recent hostilities to be: "a restrictive occupation that has lasted almost half a century, the continued denial of Palestinian rights and the lack of tangible progress in peace negotiations." Ban Ki-moon, "Secretary-General's Remarks at the Cairo Conference on Palestine," October 12, 2014, [www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=8099](http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=8099).

58. Ban Ki-moon, "Secretary-General's Remarks to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East," January 26, 2016, [www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=9417](http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=9417).

59. Ban Ki-moon, "Don't Shoot the Messenger, Israel," *New York Times*, January 31, 2016.

60. "Egypt: Chinese, Russian Officials Question UN Secretary-General's Remarks," *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2011.

61. "Secretary-General's Keynote Address at High-Level Meeting on Reform and Transitions to Democracy," Beirut, January 15, 2012, UN Secretariat website, [www.un.org/sg/STATEMENTS/index.asp?nid=5806](http://www.un.org/sg/STATEMENTS/index.asp?nid=5806).

62. When visiting the genocide site at Srebrenica in Bosnia in 2012, both deeply moved by what he was seeing and deeply frustrated by the divisions in the Security Council that seemed to prevent any agreed-upon action on Syria, he called on the international community to unite to prevent further bloodshed "because I do not want to see any of my successors in 20 years visiting Syria and apologizing for what we could have done to protect the civilians which we are not doing now." "UN's Ban Ki-moon Visits Srebrenica Graveyard," Associated Press, July 26, 2012.

63. Ban Ki-moon, "Secretary-General's Remarks to the General Assembly on the Situation in Syria," New York, June 7, 2012, UN Secretariat website, [www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=6109](http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=6109).

64. The Syrian position was not dissimilar to the Israeli position on this point. Diplomats from both countries maintained to the UN that terrorist acts should be condemned without qualification; as a result, the secretary-general was mistaken to insist on the need to address the "root causes" of terrorism (especially insofar as these were interpreted as being policies or tactics of either the Israeli or Syrian governments). The secretary-general did not change his position on either situation.

65. Ban Ki-moon, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation concerning Western Sahara," S/2016/355, April 19, 2016, <http://reliefweb.int/report/western-sahara/report-secretary-general-situation-concerning-western-sahara-s2016355-enar>.

66. Relatively mild terms of abuse used against Waldheim and Perez de Cuellar respectively (one by an Israeli, the other by an Iraqi). Boutros-Ghali—who earned the nickname "the Pharaoh"—had the opposite problem.

67. With the exception of Boutros-Ghali, who had to focus primarily on former Yugoslavia and African issues (including Somalia and Rwanda).

68. See, for example, Power, *Chasing the Flame*, 389.

69. The trouble for the UN (as Brian Urquhart put it) is that "failing a peaceful settlement, an impartial stance is often regarded partially by both sides." Brian Urquhart, "The United Nations in the Middle East: A 50-Year Retrospective," *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 4 (1995): 572–81.

70. Frohlich, *Political Ethics*, 205–11.

71. Traub, "Secretary-General's Political Space," 189.

72. Boutros-Ghali recounts how he once asked the US secretary of state and the UN ambassador if he could be allowed from time to time to differ publicly with US policy, as this would help the UN maintain its own integrity and dispel "the image among Member States that the UN is just the tool of the US." His words appeared to shock his guests, who apparently "looked at each other as though the fish I had served them was rotten. They did not speak" (*Unvanquished*, 198). Kofi Annan, similarly, observed about the then-secretary of state that "she had never quite understood that although the US had supported my candidacy for Secretary-General, I had to maintain an independent dedication to the principles of the Charter and be seen to be responsive to the wishes of all member states of the United Nations" (*Interventions*, 94).

73. Frohlich, *Political Ethics*, 211, cited in Ian Johnstone, "The Role of the UN Secretary-General: Power of Persuasion Based on Law," *Global Governance* 9 (2003): 441.

74. The words of several secretaries-general on this subject have been cited in this chapter, including Hammarskjöld, Annan, and Ban. To take one additional example, Perez de Cuellar expressed his "bewilderment and despair" that such intelligent leaders as Israel's should have been so "misguided" as to extend their "Operation Peace for Galilee" in 1982 into Beirut, thereby inflicting massive damage on Lebanon's capital, the Palestinians, and—ultimately—Israel itself.

**B**orn in 1945, the United Nations has been a constant feature in the Arab world. The UN has served as an important site of geopolitical and legitimacy struggles in key international conflicts throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, most notably in Palestine and Iraq but more recently also in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The Arab world in turn has served as a central location for the shaping and refining of many UN agencies, ideas, and functions, from peace-keeping and humanitarianism to mediation and military interventions. The region has also reflected and exposed the often contradictory layers and roles within the UN itself. Looking at the UN from the standpoint of the Arab world, this landmark volume collects some of the finest writing about the potential and the problems of an “indispensable” UN framed by both the promises of its charter and by the contradictions of its member states.

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