



Kofi Annan and the United Nations

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This is a review of Abiodun Williams' *Kofi Annan and Global Leadership at the United Nations* (2024), consisting of nine chapters, including the conclusion, which explores various aspects of Annan's global leadership as the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN). The book covers many intriguing themes concerning Annan's leadership abilities that cannot be fully explored in a review of this nature. This review focuses on certain significant points.

This very personal book of the 7th Secretary-General of the UN, described by the same author (2019, p.220) in another write-up as '[t]he first Secretary-General in the twenty-first century', is authored by a person who had the privilege of working very closely with the subject of his book.¹ Williams is quick to stress that '[the] book is not a biography,' but rather a 'study of how [Kofi] Annan conceived his role as Secretary-General and exercised global leadership during a turbulent period in world affairs.' (2024, p.2). However, there is a clear link between understanding this great African leader's biography and appreciating how he conceived his remit as Secretary-General and his pragmatic yet compassionate exercise of his privileged global leadership role in a rather complex twenty-first century world (Krasno 2019, p.227). Despite this caveat, the book does acknowledge the link between Annan's African heritage, his biography, and his leadership vision as Secretary-General, such as his perspective on human rights (p.78) and commitment to democracy (pp.80–81).

Taking over as UN Secretary-General in a world marked by the end of the Cold War, Annan had to navigate not only working with State actors but also engaging with a world in which non-State actors were becoming more visible in global affairs. His innovative and astute leadership abilities, discussed in the book, shone

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through when he tackled old concepts such as sovereignty and security, reimagining them in light of the growing relevance of human rights. He advocated and promoted innovative ideas such as the two concepts of sovereignty, (Annan 1999, p.49–50), sovereignty as responsibility and human security, some of which would be further explored in this review.

Although Annan was an innovative and reformist UN Secretary-General, he was also pragmatic enough to accept that states remain the primary actors in international politics generally and the UN. But he stressed the need for Sovereign States to appreciate that they have a duty to better serve their peoples, as well as a responsibility to protect individuals from the chaos of conflict, violations of human rights, and the scourge of poverty. He was eager to broaden the role of non-state actors in global politics and the UN, including civil society, universities, businesses, and individuals (Williams 2024, p.17 and chapter 8). Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Kofi Annan's leadership as UN Secretary-General was his insight in recognising that with changing times in world affairs there was a need to reinvent the UN to engage with issues in a more human-centric manner. Also, there was a need to convince the member states and the international community in general to recognise and 'flow' with the need for change.

The book highlights how Kofi Annan leveraged his experience as an insider in the UN system (Williams 2024, p.145) before he became Secretary-General to engage with burning issues confronting the UN and the international community, which helped him to become one of the most effective UN Secretaries-General. Stewart (2018) pointed out that: '...Annan was an organization man, the first to rise through the U.N.'s own ranks to its highest position. And yet he used his knowledge of the U.N. system, and his dignity, to good effect, becoming an eloquent advocate for a flawed organization and embodying the conscience of what some hopefully call "the international community"'. One example was his experience running UN peacekeeping operations, where the UN failed to prevent the genocide of about 800,000 Rwandans in 1994 and, a year later, the Srebrenica tragedy, in which 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were massacred by Bosnian Serb forces. These serious failures of the UN when he was the head of the Department of Peacekeeping operations led him to reiterate the important UN refrain 'never again' saying on one occasion: 'Both reports—my own on Srebrenica, and that of the independent inquiry on Rwanda—reflect a profound determination to present the truth about these calamities. Of all my aims as Secretary-General, there is none to which I feel more deeply committed than that of enabling the United Nations never again to fail in protecting a civilian population from genocide or mass slaughter'.² This caused him to use his position of Secretary-General as a bully pulpit to advocate the concept of humanitarian intervention which eventually crystallised into the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), his idea of the two

² 'Kofi Annan Emphasizes Commitment to Enabling UN Never Again to Fail In Protecting Civilian Population From Genocide Or Mass Slaughter', Press Release SG/SM/7263 of 16 December 1999, <https://press.un.org/en/1999/19991216.sgsm7263.doc.html>



concepts of sovereignty and his overall reformist agenda for the United Nations that lead to the 2004 High-Level Panel report,³ and the Secretary-General's 2005 In Larger Freedom report,⁴ which eventually led to the adoption of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document. (Williams 2024, p.22).⁵ One of the key issues that ran through all these documents was the issue of R2P (Paras.199 to 203 of HLP 2004; Paras. 7(b), 132 and 135 of A/59/2005 and Paras.138–139 of A/RES/60/1). Williams points out that 'R2P was a significant normative development which reflected the "Annan doctrine" that state sovereignty cannot be used as an excuse to shield atrocity crimes.' (2024, p.22) He adds that Annan regarded R2P 'as one of his "most precious of all" achievements.' (Williams 2024, p.99).

Although, I did not personally know Kofi Annan, from watching him in the media he came across as a soft-spoken global leader with excellent communication skills who was very persuasive in putting across his vision and ideas with great conviction to the states and international community. Selling the concept of R2P to the UN and the international community at large was something he accomplished quite successfully. As Williams points out: '[Annan's] most significant speeches combined Aristotle's three types of "evidence" or "proof" required for effective persuasion: ethos—the character or credibility of the speaker; logos—the logic and reasoning provided by the speaker; and pathos—the sympathetic bond constructed by the speaker with the audience.' (2024, p.23). However, despite Annan's outstanding communication skills, we see limitations to what he could accomplish in an intergovernmental organisation like the United Nations, which has members of varying sizes, concerns, and worries. For example, while all states agreed at the 2005 World Summit that R2P should apply, they limited its application to situations involving genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, with the UN Security Council (UNSC) as the proper authority to act on behalf of the international community if an individual state fails to carry out its responsibility. They were unable to agree on what should be done if inevitably because of the P5 veto power the UNSC is unable to act. (Para.139 of A/RES/60/1).

This could be contrasted with the International Commission for State Sovereignty (ICISS) that considered alternative means of discharging R2P if the UNSC is unable to act, such as the General Assembly, regional organisations or more controversially, ad hoc coalitions (or, more specifically, individual states)

³ A more secure world: Our shared responsibility, Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change (United Nations, 2004)[HLP 2004], https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/hlp_more_secure_world.pdf

⁴ In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all Report of the Secretary-General, A/59/2005 of 21 March 2005, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n05/270/78/pdf/n0527078.pdf>

⁵ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005, A/RES/60/1 of 24 October 2005, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf



intervening without the authority of the Security Council.⁶ Although, it would appear that Kofi Annan was clear on the UNSC being the proper authority to authorise the use of force based on R2P (Williams 2024, pp.98–99) however, this raises the inevitable challenge of what happens if the UNSC is unable to act because of the veto. Would the international community simply fold its arms and do nothing. (Williams 2024, pp. 104–106). The intricacy of the UNSC’s non-action owing to the veto is highlighted in the NATO heavy bombing campaign without UNSC authorization to end the horrendous abuses in Kosovo. Annan is quoted in reference to this response of NATO to have said: ‘...there are times when the use of force may be legitimate in pursuit of peace’ (Williams 2024, p.99). While the NATO bombing may have been justified in the light of the horrific atrocities, the danger of Annan’s ‘implicit approval of the NATO intervention’ (Williams 2024, p.99) is that it opens the door for states and regional organisations to intervene allegedly on humanitarian grounds when in reality they may have ‘mixed motives’ with their narrow national interests serving as the primary motivator. The G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) both reflect the deep-seated concerns of developing states about the possibility of the improper use of R2P by great powers. They worry that the great powers could use R2P as a cover to violate the sovereignty of small and middle power states, particularly developing countries, in order to achieve regime change, plunder their natural resources, or pursue other agendas unrelated to preventing widespread violations of people’s human rights. This is evidenced by the application of double standards in the application of R2P, where some equally heinous violations of human rights are disregarded because they take place in regions of the world where these powerful states have no strategic national interests. (Williams 2024, pp.102–104 and 108; Bellamy 2009). It appears that the worry of these developing countries is not with R2P itself, as everyone appears to agree that this concept should be implemented.⁷

Certain states, however, have expressed concerns, as seen by the Libyan crisis where R2P was authorised by the UNSC (UNSC Res 1973 of 2011), about the possibility that certain developed states acting on behalf of the UNSC would exceed the UNSC mandate by going beyond R2P to carry out regime change. Second, developing states are concerned that if the UNSC is unable to grant such authorization due to the P5 members’ veto power politics, there may be unilateral military interventions, such as the 2003 Iraq invasion by the USA and the so-called coalition of the willing, which will be motivated by less altruistic and more selfish reasons centred on big power states’ national interests. Third, the concern that if the scope of atrocities that would trigger R2P is not limited it may become problematic. Although, the ICISS report (2001, pp.32–35) was rather broad in some respects as regard the ‘just cause’

⁶ The Responsibility to Protect—Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, (the International Development Research Centre, 2001), pp.53–56, <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/the-responsibility-to-protect-report-of-the-international-commission-on-intervention-and-state-sovereignty-2001/>

⁷ For instance, the Constitutive Act of the African Union, in Article 4(h), incorporates R2P by stating ‘the right of the Union to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity’.



for triggering a military intervention based on R2P, the various initiatives of Annan within the UN from the HLP right through to the 2005 World Summit were careful to limit R2P to certain grave and heinous atrocities—genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. (Williams 2024, pp.108–109 and Mazzanti 2013, p.108). Certain Western developed countries could launch ‘democracy-restoring’ military interventions or interventions for human rights violations that do not involve outright killing or ethnic cleansing, or to use military force to rescue their own nationals on foreign territory or in response to a terrorist attack on their territory, but the ICISS report(2001, p.34) was quite clear that, in their view, these did not fall within the remit of R2P. Despite, Annan insistence that there was a moral imperative for the international community to act when there are horrible atrocities being committed within national jurisdictions (Williams 2024, pp.103–104), he was pragmatic enough to recognise the limits of what could be achieved. The author identified such limits when he states: ‘However, there are clear limits to a Secretary-General’s public diplomacy, which is dependent on forces beyond his or her control, such as the geopolitical environment, power politics, and the economic climate.’ (Williams 2024, p.25). Given this, it becomes clear that the UN, as an intergovernmental organisation, cannot advance beyond the goals set forth by the States Parties. As a result, the States Parties actually dictate the direction in which the organisation goes, regardless of how well-intentioned the Secretary-General was or is. The author captures this in his discourse on Annan’s involvement in pushing forward the prominence of human rights through the founding of the Human Rights Council: ‘in an intergovernmental institution such as the UN, the Secretary-General can propose, but it is the member states that dispose.’ (Williams 2024, p.94).

Annan’s initiative to encourage member states to shift from a reactive to a preventive approach to conflict (Williams 2024, p.31) could not be characterised as pioneering. For example, in the 1992 Peace Agenda, his predecessor Boutros Boutros-Ghali advocated for preventative diplomacy and the establishment of early warning measures as a means of preventing conflict rather than reacting to it. Williams acknowledges this by referring to Boutros-Ghali’s Agenda for Peace (Williams 2024, p.47). However, it cannot be denied that Kofi Annan devoted a lot of effort to moving this agenda ahead, notably in terms of scope, inventiveness, and innovation. For instance, in peacekeeping the author points out ‘[w]hen Annan became Secretary of State-General, the UN had fewer than 13,000 blue helmets deployed worldwide, but at the end of his tenure there were 65,500 troops and military observers serving in fifteen peacekeeping operations.’ (Williams 2024, p.46). The book illustrates Kofi Annan’s ingenuity in taking a preventative stance on conflict in a number of ways, but two in particular provide compelling illustrations of this. First, his deft and creative handling of the potentially explosive situation in the Bakassi Peninsula between Cameroon and Nigeria to avoid what would have been a post International Court of Justice Judgement conflict (Williams 2024, pp.36–41). Second, the conception and implementation of the UN ‘Peacebuilding Architecture, comprising the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the Peacebuilding Fund(PBF), and the Peacebuilding Support Office(PBSO) which represented a middle path between optimum policy and political reality,’(Williams 2024, p.46) in reaction to sobering research and data revealing that up to half of countries emerging from violence slipped back



into conflict within 5 years. (Williams 2024, pp.46–47). Williams identifies a particularly interesting aspect of Annan’s approach to Peacebuilding: rather than continuing with the previous traditional approach of seeing Peacebuilding as a post-conflict activity that Annan viewed it as a preventive mechanism. At a 2001 meeting of the Security Council, Annan is quoted as saying: ‘We tend to think of peacebuilding as taking place primarily in post-conflict settings... But I see peacebuilding as a preventive instrument, which can address the underlying causes of conflict and which can also be used before the actual outbreak of war’, and this led the UNSC to define peacebuilding as including a preventive aim. (Williams 2024, p.47).

For a UN Secretary-General appointed by chance (would Annan have become Secretary-General if Boutros-Ghali had been re-elected for a second term?), Annan emerged as one of the most, if not the most successful, UN Secretary-General, with a remarkable variety of achievements over his two terms. Furthermore, as a UN insider prior to his election, he demonstrated that he was not only an international civil servant and bureaucrat, but also an astute leader, political player, diplomat, mediator, great thinker, innovator, and implementer, using effectively his bully pulpit as UN Secretary-General to carry out what has been described as ‘the most difficult job in the world’ with style and dignity, with humanity at the centre of his agenda.

As an incurable optimist in a turbulent and sometimes rather depressing world Annan left the world with insightful words of optimism such as:

‘Let us all recognise, from now on - in each capital, in every nation, large and small, that the global interest is our national interest.’⁸

‘More than ever before in human history, we share a common destiny. We can master it only if we face it together. And that, my friends, is why we have the United Nations.’⁹

‘War is not politics by other means, but represents a catastrophic failure of political skill and imagination.’¹⁰

Annan’s ability to mix idealism and pragmatism is, in my opinion, the most appealing aspect of his leadership qualities.

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⁸ Kofi Annan’s speech to the General Assembly, Guardian Newspaper UK, 13 September 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/sep/13/iraq.unitednations1>

⁹ Secretary-General Emphasizes Important Role of the United Nations for New Millennium, Press Release, SG/SM/7262 of 15 December 2009, <https://press.un.org/en/1999/19991215.sgsm7262.doc.html>

¹⁰ Security Council Calls for End to Hostilities Between Hizbollah, Israel, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1701(2006), Press Release Security Council, SC/8808 of 11 August 2006.



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