

Review

Kofi Annan and Global Leadership at the United Nations, Abiodun Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 208 pp., cloth \$100, eBook \$99.99.

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There are few figures in the history of the United Nations who have cast as big a shadow on the international organization as Kofi Annan. *Kofi Annan and Global Leadership at the United Nations* by Abiodun Williams is not a biography of the late Annan, but rather a comprehensive study of the leader's approach as UN secretary-general, a position he held from 1997 to 2006. Williams draws on a compilation of Annan's speeches and official documents, as well as his own insights from working as Annan's director of strategic planning from 2001 to 2006, to unpack how Annan envisioned his role as secretary-general and implemented that vision.

To guide the reader through a decade of leadership, the book is divided into eight thematic chapters, each offering a clear and focused lens through which to assess Annan's tenure. Individually, each chapter is structured to be accessible yet informative, offering readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of the UN a framework to better understand how Annan's vision of each theme, spanning from international peacekeeping to internal reform, shaped how he sought to fulfill his role as secretary-general. Collectively, the chapters paint a

picture of a global statesman who was both a product of his time and an actor determined to transform the UN into an organization that could better shape that time. In Williams's telling, Annan understood that time to be defined by both globalization—with all its opportunities and challenges—and the emergence of the so-called unipolar moment. In that sense, Annan perceived an international order that required international cooperation to address rising challenges like civil wars, mass atrocities, terrorism, and extreme poverty, among others; but also one that could not afford to ignore the need to bring in meaningful U.S. support and engagement without alienating the rest of the UN member states. The latter proved particularly challenging following the 9/11 attacks, with Annan balancing between advancing the first counterterrorism strategy for the UN, opposing the U.S. invasion of Iraq—a decision taken without the approval of the Security Council—and supporting the UN's role in the postwar phase in Iraq.

Underlying Williams's book is an argument of particular interest to scholars of international organization and decision-makers: leaders matter, as do their personal

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characteristics, and have significant agency in influencing the respective entities they lead. Over the course of eight chapters, Annan comes through as a diplomatic, pragmatic, consensus-driven leader; or, as Williams dubs him, an “Internationalist Icon” (p. 182). Whether one agrees or disagrees with Annan’s vision on critical themes, it becomes clear reading Williams’s book that while Annan was working within the margins of his mandate and the constraints this imposed, he was also able to shape how he approached his role. The secretary-general, as Williams highlights, although head of the UN, is bound to serve the member states that make up the international organization and primarily works within the contours of the decisions taken by the organization’s deliberative organs; namely, the Security Council and General Assembly. But recognizing these limitations does not mean eliding the power and influence held by such an esteemed office. For Williams, Annan strived to instrumentalize a somewhat unappreciated tool of influence and power that comes with serving at the helm of the “indispensable organization”: its voice on the world’s most important diplomatic stage. Williams emphasizes the moral authority wielded by the secretary-general, showing that Annan viewed it as essential to steer the UN’s member states away from narrow and self-defeating unilateralism and toward working collectively on global challenges—even if at the expense of individual short-term interests. At his core, Annan believed that an active and moral voice on the most global stage was key to safeguarding international peace and security and preserving the relevance and vitality of the United Nations.

Of particular interest to this reader is how Williams bridges Annan’s understanding of international organization

with his internationalist approach as secretary-general. Annan’s conceptualization of international organization revolved around three beliefs. First, Annan believed that the very concept of international organization marked a “construct of reason” designed to confront the threats of “unreason” (p. 17), like mass atrocities that threatened to derail human progress. Annan’s approach to morality in international relations is framed as principled and rational, with an understanding that what is morally bad is inherently unreasonable and thus moral leadership is not just ethical but also a form of reason prevailing through the madness. The UN was, for Annan, thus a necessary moral authority in a world needing its darkest impulses restrained. Second, the UN was a living institution and an exercise in international cooperation rather than a final product. For this experiment in global cooperation to succeed and to continue to exemplify what is possible when multilateralism overcomes unilateralism, the UN had to evolve, learning from both its mistakes and successes, rather than descending into bureaucratic irrelevance. The “most precious achievement” (p. 97) of Annan’s effort to help the UN correct its past mistakes was his leadership in helping to press the Security Council and resistant states to adopt the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) doctrine in response to international failures to stop mass atrocities in Rwanda and Bosnia. Third, Annan believed in the universality of certain truths: respect for human dignity, peace, equality, the environment, and a shared international community. Annan found a balance between recognizing that states were still the primary actors in international relations—largely driven by their interests—and the need for states, especially major powers, to cooperate in order to respond to collective

challenges rather than go at it alone or against one another. Annan's universalism pushed the UN to be more than just a forum that brought states together and to be one that challenged states to cooperate in meeting their collective responsibility to uphold those universal truths. In some cases, as with the establishment of the RtoP doctrine, Annan's vision came to fruition. In others, as with the inability to prevent the U.S. invasion of Iraq, that vision failed to materialize.

For Williams, Annan's decade at the helm of the UN was marked by a consistent effort to shield the organization from the existential threats that undermined its future: unilateralism, neglect, and indifference. In this sense, Annan perceived his role to be that of an active guardian, serving as a voice of reason to counter these more pernicious features of international relations that threatened not just the credibility of the UN but also this larger experiment in international cooperation.

Annan's critics and supporters alike will agree when reading Williams's book that the former secretary-general had a significant input in shaping his post. In response to global poverty, underdevelopment, and global health crises, Annan led the way to establish the Millennium Development Goals and established the UN Millennium Campaign to rally international cooperation toward achieving those goals, helping pave the way to the current Sustainable Development Goals. Under his tenure, the UN saw significant resources and attention directed to strengthening the efficacy and impact of its peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding operations. And in response to the 9/11 attacks, Annan played a key role in shaping the UN's first counterterrorism strategy. But perhaps what best captures how Annan

wielded the power of his platform and voice are his efforts to ensure the success of the RtoP doctrine. Williams depicts how Annan was willing to use his platform to challenge traditional proponents of sovereignty, including the Security Council, to insist that they had a responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocities: genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

In addition to pushing the UN's member states to work together toward the shared struggles that came with globalization, Annan also believed he had to tackle the challenge of persuading the United States to pursue international cooperation over unilateralism at a time of U.S. global leadership, while ensuring the UN did not morph into a mere tool for the global superpower, when convenient. This challenge proved particularly difficult in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Williams details how Annan recognized global terrorism as a rising threat that required international cooperation and a sound UN strategy. But the particular decision by the United States to go to war in Iraq without approval from the Security Council and Annan's opposition demonstrated not just the limitations of his role and his voice but those of the organization. Williams traces how Annan aimed to find a balance between the need to work with the United States as the global superpower and maintaining a respect for international public opinion, with him eventually concluding that the UN could not stop the war but should instead try and influence its aftermath. For Williams, Annan was both a pragmatist and a visionary: understanding the limits of his role and the complexities shaping the behavior of the organization's member states, while also committing to securing the UN's position as a dynamic

forum for international cooperation and global governance that could improve the future.

By analyzing how Annan approached the structural tensions within the UN, exercised the formal responsibilities of his office, and tackled major international challenges like conflict resolution, international development, human rights, and terrorism, while also driving institutional reform and expanding the partners of the UN beyond the state level, Williams presents in *Kofi Annan and*

Global Leadership at the United Nations a comprehensive record of Annan's legacy and his agency in shaping it.

—FADI NICHOLAS NASSAR
LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY,
BEIRUT, LEBANON
fadi.nassar02@lau.edu.lb

Fadi Nicholas Nassar is assistant professor of political science and international affairs at Lebanese American University and director of the Institute for Social Justice and Conflict Resolution at Lebanese American University.