

**Book Review** of Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *Unvanquished: A U.S.-U.N. Saga* (New York: Random House, 1999), *The Arab World Geographer/Le Géographe du monde arabe* 2(3):254-257, 1999.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, an Arab scholar and diplomat and a member of an influential Egyptian Christian family, wrote the book *Unvanquished: A U.S.-U.N. Saga* as a bitter memoir of his service at the United Nations after becoming the first Arab to lead a major international organization and the only UN secretary-general to be denied a second term despite unanimous support from almost all nations, especially those of the so-called Third World. Throughout the book, he seems extremely puzzled by the fact that the United States abstained in the vote that elected him the sixth secretary-general of the United Nations in 1991 and vetoed his reelection in 1996. He thought he had once spoken honestly and off the record to the United States about his plan to serve both U.S. and UN interests: “please allow me from time to time to differ publicly from U.S. policy. This would help the UN reinforce its own personality and maintain its integrity. It would help dispel the image among many member states that the UN is just the tool of the U.S.” (page 198). He even went to remind the United States of “the many Americans” he “had appointed to UN jobs at Washington’s request over the objections of other UN member states” (page 6). Boutros-Ghali has a long political career going back to the days when the Nasserists labeled him “pro-American” after the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. He is proud of his numerous diplomatic and intellectual contributions to pro-Western policies in the Middle East when he was Egypt’s minister of state for foreign affairs during Sadat’s rapprochement with Israel and when he authored the book *Egypt's Road to Jerusalem*. Reflecting upon all of this, Boutros-Ghali, 77, could not hide his feeling of disappointment, bitterness and betrayal when he wrote: “It was often said during my UN years that I was ‘pro-third world,’ and this was often taken to mean ‘anti-West.’ I am of the third world, without doubt, but I am also pro-West; my education, my publications, my official positions over the decades should demonstrate this clearly. But I continue to believe that any secretary-general, from whatever region of the world, must advocate the cause of the developing countries” (page 337).

At first the book seems a personal account of personal bitterness about the treatment Boutros-Ghali received from the United States government, the Clinton administration, Senator Bob Dole, and especially Secretary of State Madeleine Albright whose name was mentioned in 138 pages of the book’s 352 pages. Boutros-Ghali has obviously a lot to say about Madeleine Albright, his non-chosen interlocutor and his only real contact with the Clinton administration and the Congress. “Her uncivil tongue had won praise in Washington from both political parties. Thus her worst characteristic, when it came to diplomacy, was reinforced by her domestic American audience. The more she spoke rudely to other countries’ representatives, the more political approbation she received from her own countrymen. As I reflected on all this, I realized that I was the stupid one. I had foolishly disregarded her increasing political influence in Washington. She must also have believed that I did not appreciate her as an intellectual or diplomatic equal. She had said nothing, but she had laid her plans well” (page 303). “She had carried out her campaign

with determination, letting pass no opportunity to demolish my authority and tarnish my image, all the while showing a serene face, wearing a friendly smile, and repeating expressions of friendship and admiration. I recalled what a Hindu scholar once said to me: “there is no difference between diplomacy and deception” (page 334).

But a closer look at *Unvanquished* reveals a vivid and engaging description of some of the major international events that marked the end of the Cold War. First, the book presents the United Nations as an essentially political tool of the major powers, especially the United States. Boutros-Ghali attempted to change or alter this power relationship and to be an independent secretary-general. His efforts were unacceptable to the United States and ultimately led to his diplomatic assassination by the U.S. veto power in the UN Security Council. This is what many believe Madeleine Albright has always made clear in her unsophisticated and unseasoned diplomatic style: “The UN can only do what the U.S. lets it do” (page 321). Though the word “veto” is missing in the book index, Boutros-Ghali had strongly denounced the non-democratic and non-diplomatic character of the U.S. effort to oust him and use the UN as a convenient rubber stamp for its foreign policy. He admitted his own disillusionment after a long career in international law and diplomacy. “It would be some time before I fully realized that the United States sees little need for diplomacy; power is enough. Only the weak rely on diplomacy. This is why the weak is so concerned with the democratic principle of the sovereign equality of states, as a means of providing some small measure of equality for that which is not equal in fact. Coming from a developing country, I was trained extensively in international law and diplomacy and mistakenly assumed that the great powers, especially the United States, also trained their representatives in diplomacy and accepted the value of it. But the Roman Empire had no need for diplomacy. Nor does the United States” (page 198). He later went on “When the United Nations was allowed to do its job without substantial U.S. involvement, as in Mozambique, the operation succeeded. When the United States felt a political need for the United Nations, as in Haiti, the operation also fulfilled its main objective. But when the United States wanted to appear actively involved while in reality avoiding hard decisions, as in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda, the United Nations was misused, abused, or blamed by the United States, and the operations failed, tragically and horribly” (p. 337). Since the end of the Cold War the UN General Assembly has been marginalized and consequently developing countries lost much of their ability to influence the international order. Meanwhile the UN Security Council has increased its power within the UN system through the undemocratic veto power. The increasing marginalization of developing countries is exemplified by their inability to influence the election of the UN secretary-general despite their overwhelming majority and their strong support for Boutros-Ghali, a candidate from Egypt, the Arab World, and Africa.

Second, while *Unvanquished* presents a great deal of details on the political context surrounding the U.S. veto in 1996, it did not include any lengthy discussion of why the U.S. decided to abstain rather than cast a veto against Boutros-Ghali in 1991. The two decisions seem more linked than they appear at first. In the year 1991 the United States inflicted a heavy military and diplomatic defeat upon the Arab World. First, it destroyed

the Iraqi army during the Gulf War and imposed unprecedented sanctions against the strongest Arab state. This defeat weakened the idea of Pan-Arabism, perceived as a long time adversary of Washington in the Middle East. Second, the United States has lobbied and pressured many developing countries in order to repeal the 1975 UN resolution equating Zionism with racism. This was a major diplomatic victory for Israel and the United States against the Arab World and the UN General Assembly. Third, the United States has initiated a U.S.-led peace process between the Arabs and Israel in Madrid without allowing the UN to be involved in any meaningful way. The euphoria of these military, economic and diplomatic victories made the United States turn a blind eye to Boutros-Ghali appointment as a diplomatic gesture that takes into consideration his strong academic and diplomatic credentials, the backing he received as an Egyptian from most UN member states, and his supportive public opinion in the Arab World and Africa. Clearly the United States did not want Boutros Ghali in 1991. Otherwise they could have voted for him instead of abstaining. Once appointed, Boutros Ghali was either confident that he does not need to beg the U.S. for a second term from the outset or simply did not know that this was actually one of the unwritten rules of the game. When Boutros-Ghali asked Madeleine Albright to explain to him why the U.S. was “so hysterically opposed” to his reelection, her answer was simple: “You didn’t ask [the U.S.] at the outset for more than a single mandate” (page 332). This explanation (ridiculed by Boutros-Ghali himself) shows how little was the UN secretary-general in the eye of the U.S. Secretary of State, a central argument of the book.

Third, *Unvanquished* reveals how difficult it is for an Arab secretary-general to work successfully amidst the overwhelmingly pro-Zionist political environment in both Washington and New York, even when he is pro-American, Christian and nominated by a U.S.-friendly government. Boutros-Ghali was very careful not to write anything that would lead anyone to anti-Semitic or conspiracy-theory charges against him. But he also managed to show Madeleine Albright one article from the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* denouncing her campaign against an Arab secretary-general and claiming that the Clinton administration “is dominated by Jews” (page 333). Obviously Boutros-Ghali could not miss or omit how much power Israel has over U.S. Middle East policy. The Israelis, he was once told by State Department officials, were convinced that they had “the U.S. veto in their pocket” (page 194). He even noted that when he sent a letter to Israel he got a reply from the United States (page 203). Washington’s animosity toward “pro-American” Boutros-Ghali has a lot to do with the overall U.S. policy of keeping the UN at arms’ length from the Arab-Israeli conflict because the UN Security Council resolution 242 requires Israel to withdraw from all the territories it occupied in 1967. The U.S. forced Iraq to comply with UN resolutions whereas it supported and continues to support Israel in its defiance of many UN resolutions. Washington believes that a non-Arab secretary-general would be less interested in confronting the U.S. on this flagrant violation of international law. The U.S. has also confronted Boutros Ghali on other issues touching on U.S. Middle East policy. First, on one occasion the U.S. insisted on reading Boutros-Ghali’s memorandum of understanding with Iraq on “Oil-for-Food” before he presents it to the Security Council (page 260). Second, the U.S. was opposed to Boutros-Ghali’s publication

of a UN report blaming Israel for shelling scores of Lebanese civilians who took refuge in a UN observation post at Qana in Southern Lebanon in 1996. At least one hundred refugees were slaughtered in the attack (page 261). Third, Boutros-Ghali was even blamed in the media for his inability to prevent Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan from marking the first anniversary of his Million Man March on Washington with a "day of atonement" at the United Nations (310). Last but not least, in 1994 Boutros-Ghali was asked by the Governor of Vienna to assist Kurt Waldheim (a former UN secretary-general and the head of the state of Austria) "in being able to travel to the United States" to attend the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations. The U.S. had barred Waldheim since 1987 on the basis of his service as an officer in the German Army in World War II. Though Boutros-Ghali did not invite Waldheim, he carefully examined the request through his Legal Affairs advisor Hans Corell who told him that the U.S. should not violate its own commitment not to impede invitees of the United Nations in their transit to and from the UN headquarters in New York and to issue the necessary visa promptly (page 225). Boutros-Ghali stood up to all of this, did not give up the fight, and showed a great deal of professionalism, integrity and dignity throughout what is actually an Arab-Israeli saga at the UN in the U.S.

In a nutshell, *Unvanquished* reflects a profound disillusionment on the part of a great scholar and diplomat who was labeled "pro-West" when he was in Cairo and "pro-Third World" when he was in New York. Boutros-Ghali was clearly disillusioned about the U.S., the UN, diplomacy, democracy, international law, and above all, Arab-Israeli issues. This should be a good reason for him to revisit the old political neighborhood of his early critiques and perhaps come to term with some of them. Given Boutros-Ghali's international stature, the book could even spark a *global postmodern movement of disillusionment* badly needed in the Arab World, Africa, and the Third World. One Arab proverb says: "*Al-Rujoo' Ela Al-Haqi, Haqoon*" (back to right is right).

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