



مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الإنساني
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

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Event Report

A Year at the Helm of the United Nations in Mediation and Peacebuilding

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1.0 Synopsis

On 22nd of February, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) hosted His Excellency Mr. Nassir bin Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, President of the United Nations General Assembly at its sixty-sixth session and former United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, in a lecture entitled, "A Year at the Helm of the United Nations in Mediation and Peacebuilding". The lecture, moderated by Professor Sultan Barakat, Founding Director of CHS, comes at a time of continued regional involvement in conflict and a broader need for peaceful conflict resolution - and new ways to conceptualize pathways for peace.

The lecture contributes to CHS' goals to bridge the worlds of theory and practice in order to develop effective policies to resolving conflicts and crises. It also advances CHS' commitment to collaboration by engaging the expertise of the CHS team, diplomats and local civil servants, students, scholars, and other interested individuals.

The evening commenced with opening remarks by Professor Barakat in which he introduced the distinguished speaker and elucidated on the motivations behind hosting this event. He described H.E. Al-Nasser - who entered Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1972 and served as a Qatari ambassador to 23 countries, including Jordan, Lebanon, Canada, and Argentina - as one of the most important personalities in Qatar's diplomatic history. H.E. served as Qatar's permanent representative to the United Nations from 1998 to 2011, during which he was the Vice President of the U.N. General Assembly in 2002, President of the U.N. Security Council in 2006 during Qatar's non-permanent membership to the Council, and President of the U.N. General Assembly in 2011. His decorated career at the U.N. also includes serving as Chairman of the Group of 77 and China in 2004 and as a High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations from 2013 to 2019. Professor Barakat underlined H.E.'s extensive experiences in regional mediation efforts and his commitments to reforming the U.N. that, through the lecture, would inevitably inspire key learnings for peacebuilding today.

2.0 Public Lecture by H.E. Nassir Al-Nasser

Following opening remarks by Professor Barakat, H.E. Al-Nasser began by providing a background on the conditions that led to the establishment of the U.N. in 1946, wherein its predecessor, the League of Nations, failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War. Since its inception, the U.N. has worked to preserve international peace and security and boost international cooperation to achieve prosperity and realize the provision of fundamental freedoms around the world – including the right to self-determination – without discrimination to race, language, or religion.

H.E. Al-Nasser expressed his gratitude to the His Highness the Father Amir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and His Highness the Amir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, for supporting his career at the U.N., especially in H.E.'s acquisition of the presidency of the U.N. General Assembly in 2011. He noted that Qatar played an important role in the U.N.'s response to various regional and international conflicts, including in Sudan, Yemen, and Lebanon.

H.E. then moved to discussing his time as the President of the U.N. General Assembly's sixty-sixth session in 2011. He expressed that he felt a deep sense of responsibility to show a good example of Qatar at the U.N. He remarked that the General Assembly was greatly tested in 2011, particularly with the Arab Spring uprisings and concomitant instability in the region, along with the pressing nature of other issues around the world. These extraordinary circumstances also challenged him as a leader. He described the holding of multiple sessions to discuss ways to solve these crises with other representatives at the General Assembly. H.E. explained that because of his belief in Qatar's foreign policy principles of preventative diplomacy and soft power, he pushed mediation often as a tool for settling disputes, particularly in contexts that present dire humanitarian conditions.

H.E. elucidated four pillars that undergirded his presidency of the U.N. General Assembly's sixty-sixth session. The first pillar was the principle of the peaceful settlement of disputes. To that end, two special discussions on mediation took place in July and September 2011, in addition to a number of meetings and symposia that were held throughout the year across all U.N. organs, even outside New York, on mediation. The second pillar that H.E. relied on was reforming the U.N. in response to developments in the 21st century. He relayed his work with two representatives at the U.N., from the West and from Asia, to lead a task force that would stimulate discussion within the General Assembly to enhance its effectiveness, a vision that required taking a balanced approach to reform. These efforts culminated in the passing and

implementation of a resolution, which entailed the allocation of a budget for its implementation by the Secretary General in 2014 and 2015. The third pillar behind H.E.'s leadership was to focus on adopting a preventative approach to natural and man-made crises in light of ongoing climate change, deforestation, the rising of sea levels, and other afflictions that have forced many nations to reconsider their reliance on fossil fuels and move towards renewable energy. The final pillar concerned advancing the international agenda for sustainable development and global prosperity, for which there had been renewed political will. H.E. noted that he received great assistance from H.E. Maria Luiza Viotti, then the Permanent Representative of Brazil to the U.N., in forming a task force and in meeting this pillar. He mentioned the convening of an international conference on the global financial and economic system, which included the I.M.F., who then issued recommendations to the U.N.

H.E. Al-Nasser proceeded to outline key accomplishments of the General Assembly that took place under his leadership, which included accrediting the Libyan opposition as the new Libyan mission to the U.N. in September 2011 and condemning the Syrian government for its grave human rights violations towards its civilians. During Colonel Gaddafi's reign of Libya, Libyan representatives to the U.N. were unable to enter the U.S., and a rift had emerged within the Libyan delegation at the U.N. In the outbreak of the Libyan civil war, the former foreign minister and leading member of the Libyan opposition, Abdelrahman Shughlam, approached H.E. to intercede on his behalf and push for a new Libyan mission that better represented the Libyan people, whose interests had clearly diverged from the sitting government. H.E. Al-Nasser called for an unofficial meeting with the Security Council to cancel the accreditation of the sitting Libyan mission and give the seat instead to Shughlam and his associates from the Libyan opposition, a proposal that was accepted. The General Assembly also adopted a resolution in 2011 that condemned the blatant human rights violations of the Syrian government according to international law. Ban Ki-moon, then the Secretary General, appointed the late Kofi Annan (and former Secretary General) as the U.N-Arab League Special Envoy for Syria. H.E. also noted that he observed noticeable progress in working group discussions for Syria in this time.

Al-Nasser then relayed the role he played in keeping Somalia on the agenda of the Security Council during the time of Qatar's non-permanent membership. He described how the security situation in Somalia had deteriorated to the point that there was no central government to establish law and order, leaving the country divided under multiple jurisdictions, and terrorist groups had been engaging in acts of piracy against commercial shipping routes to Asia and the Red Sea - which concerned major global powers. Considered a brotherly Arab country that had been neglected by other Arab

nations and the international community, the situation in Somalia was of deep concern to Qatar. Thus, Al-Nasser and his Qatari colleagues were concerned when they saw that the issue of Somalia had been removed from the Security Council's agenda, despite the Council's focus on issues pertaining to international peace and security. During Al-Nasser's visit to the U.S. for a customary dinner in Washington D.C., he visited the U.S. Department of State to push for keeping Somalia on the Council's agenda. He expressed that whilst Qatar needed to adopt a flexible approach in its diplomacy, especially with countries like the U.S., they were able to successfully push on this single demand.

Upon returning to the Security Council, H.E. relayed that Qatar sought to acquire the presidency of the committee on Somalia. Whilst the U.K. initially handed over the presidency of the Somalia committee to Peru, and the Liberia committee to Qatar, Al-Nasser was able to convince the Peruvian representative to switch their assigned roles. Whilst the presidency of the Somalia committee was handed over to South Africa, an influential power in Africa, the following year, Al-Nasser maintained that Qatar made important contributions during its leadership of the committee.

H.E. also relayed an anecdote in which he encouraged the Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, to accompany him in a visit to Somalia, along with the obstacles they faced on the road. Though Ban Ki-moon was initially hesitant to visit Somalia, H.E. convinced him by appealing to his sense of duty, particularly given that it would be 'embarrassing' should a General Assembly President make the dangerous visit to Somalia, which had been enveloped in active conflict in 2011, whilst the Secretary General stayed behind in New York. Since there were no flights to Somalia at the time, H.E. sought the assistance of the Qatari Prime Minister, who provided them with a private jet. A few hours before the two officials flew out to Mogadishu from Kenya, the Head of Security at the U.N. came with news (from the American base in Djibouti who intercepted Al-Shabaab's communications) that the Somalia-based Al-Shabaab militant group had received news of their visit to Somalia and planned to shoot down their aircraft. Avoiding this attempt would be difficult since the private jet, a Boeing 737, was too large relative to the small size of the runway at Mogadishu's airport. Despite Ban Ki-moon's inclinations to cancel the visit because of the risk this posed to both of their lives, Al-Nasser insisted that they proceed with the visit - by going earlier and using a smaller aircraft - because of the duty they had to serve Somalia. Al-Nasser described the scene of their arrival in Somalia: landing on the sea, then moving to armed personnel carriers and having to wear bullet proof vests, and witnessing horrific scenes of destruction. The officials headed to the Somali president's villa, along with the U.N. Headquarters in the country. They also spent several hours interviewing at refugee

camps along the Somali-Kenyan border that housed 600,000 refugees, witnessing sights that “would bring tears to your eyes”. Al-Nasser noted that after their visit to Somalia, the officials headed back to New York to draft a successful resolution that “helped move things to the right direction”. He added that whilst the conditions in Somalia today are still concerning, the presence of a functioning government and army and diplomatic missions around the world puts them in a better position.

H.E. concluded his address by detailing the activities he pursued at the end of his presidency, which included drafting a successful resolution on celebrating the ‘International Day of Happiness’ and in replacing ‘Mother’s Day’ and ‘Father’s Day’ at the U.N. with a joint ‘Parents’ Day’.

3.0 Q&A between Professor Sultan Barakat and H.E. Nassir Al-Nasser

After H.E. Al-Nasser concluded his public lecture, he engaged with Professor Barakat in an in-depth discussion on the U.N.’s inability to reform itself, H.E.’s retrospective views on the U.N. Security Council’s 2011 decisions in Libya, the Arab world’s responsibility towards refugees, and the importance of maintaining open channels of communication.

Issues of U.N. Reform

Professor Barakat commenced by asking H.E. whether he believed there were any real intentions at the executive level of the U.N. to implement reform that ensure better and more inclusive representation. H.E. Al-Nasser began by contextualizing the structure of the U.N., citing how the 15-member Security Council consists of five permanent members with veto power – China, the U.S., the U.K., Russia, and France – and ten non-permanent members who do not hold veto powers and are elected for two-year terms. He continued by stating that this structure does not represent the realities of today’s world. Thus H.E. reframed the issue from a need for reform to a need to expand the charter and allow for inclusive representation, particularly in the Security Council, that is more suitable for global collaboration. Real reform, according to H.E. Al-Nasser, requires the increased capacity and effectiveness of the U.N. in its response to global challenges, such as the current political turmoil in Ukraine. He stated that should the situation in Ukraine escalate, the Security Council will not be able to take substantial action due to likely Chinese and Russian veto that would stunt any efforts from the U.S. and the West. This demonstrates why the U.N. structure needs major amendment and restructuring.

The U.N. Security Council's 2011 Decision in Libya

Moving on to specific U.N. decisions during H.E.'s presidency of the General Assembly, Professor Barakat asked whether he thought the intervention in Libya to prevent further massacre was taken too hastily or if the intervention should have been different. H.E. Al-Nasser began by framing the broader situation of the Arab Spring that was at its apex in 2011. He stated that the Arab Spring's swift beginning and end was due to the intervention of international actors. Contrastingly, he noted that the success of these Arab nations depended on the support they received from external powers who became parties to conflicts. H.E. Al-Nasser called on the role of regional organizations who should have shouldered the brunt of the responsibilities when mitigating the Arab Spring revolutions - including Libya. Within the Arab world, the Arab League is the one regional international actor that was established to promote the stability, peace, and unity of the Arab nations. H.E. stated that the Arab League failed to meet these overarching objectives within Libya and other Arab states due to their inability to successfully transform the conflicts to peace and maintain sustainable governance structures. He went on to question the benefit of the Arab League and urged the Arab community to take responsibility for the strife of its peoples. H.E. Al-Nasser concluded that Arab countries should have emulated the protocol of the EU when the crisis surfaced by taking direct actions to mitigate the rising threats and by collectively intervening to deescalate conflicts.

Role of Arab World to Mitigate Man-Made Catastrophes

Because 80% of the world's refugees are located within the Arab world, Professor Barakat asked whether an Islamic or Arab institution should shoulder the responsibility of addressing and supporting man-made catastrophes that dominate the region, such as the refugee crisis. In response, H.E. Al-Nasser shared his vision for the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to live up to that role, however, due to their internal differences between the Islamic countries, he is not hopeful they will be able to sustain such a responsibility without experiencing deep polarization.

Importance of Dialogue

H.E. Al-Nasser offered his perspectives on the importance of dialogue, which he connected with His Highness the Father Amir of Qatar's emphasis on dialogue in his politics. A specific case he referenced took place during the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, whereby the Father Amir was one of the first heads of states that engaged in interstate and interfaith dialogue by visiting burn victims at hospitals and Ground Zero. The visit to Ground Zero was influential because H.E. the Father Amir chose to visit the grounds in his traditional kandura/thobe. This symbolic image represented Arab sympathy towards the suffering of a Western nation. H.E. Al-Nasser proceeded to describe the Father Amir's speech in which he expressed the tragedy of the 9/11 attacks and referred to the attacks as an act of terrorism deemed unacceptable by Islam and the Arab world. In response to this visit, American media reported the State of Qatar as "a small country with a big heart". Ultimately, H.E. Al-Nasser alluded to the influence of dialogue and sympathetic exchange in fostering acceptance and understanding. This anecdote was shared to demonstrate what H.E. Al-Nasser believed to be an unprecedented action that illustrated how conflicts and tensions can be minimized through genuine mediation and respect. He stressed the importance of shouldering the collective responsibility of solving humanitarian crises that must not be left solely to government entities.

4.0 Audience Q&A

Following the productive conversation between H.E. Al-Nasser and Professor Barakat, H.E. entertained several questions and comments from a media consultant, the Ambassador of Spain, and the Ambassador of Ukraine.

The first comment was offered by a Doha-based media consultant, who expressed his respect and admiration for H.E. Al-Nasser as the former head of the Qatari delegation to the U.N. He shared his history in covering H.E. Al-Nasser's professional career since the beginning and conveyed the positive imprints and great legacy that he believes H.E. left on the international and Qatari communities. The media consultant specifically referenced Al-Nasser's farewell speech, which he described as touching and powerful.

The Ambassador of Spain also commended H.E. Al-Nasser on his extraordinary job during his time in the U.N. She referenced his important work for the Alliance of Civilizations that was novel in its incorporation of intercultural and interreligious dialogue and mediation. H.E. Al-Nasser elaborated on this initiative by accentuating the significance of inclusive dialogue. He stated that the world's perpetual rise and fall

of military wars which cause widespread destruction, but ultimately end. In contrast, he said he feared the rise of hate and bigotry wars that prevail well after military wars end. He attributed this rise in hate to the social media dilemma, which plays a crucial and negative role in disseminating hatred and bigotry within societies. Thus, he recommended the international community to employ soft power tactics that attach extra emphasis to the tolerance and inclusion of the youth and future generations.

The final comment from the evening came from the Ambassador of Ukraine, who shared his agreement with Al-Nasser's views on the U.N.'s inability to meet international requirements and expectations to end protracted conflicts, such as the Syrian and Georgian conflicts. He also expressed agreement with H.E. on the need for U.N. reform for greater inclusivity. H.E. Al-Nasser responded by thanking the ambassador for his sentiments and restated his commitment to enforcing dialogue and soft power to usher in sustainable peace.

5.0 Key Messages

In Professor Barakat's closing remarks, he thanked H.E. Al-Nasser for his insightful contributions, and expressed appreciation for the insider knowledge he shared into the U.N. system and international diplomacy from his experience as President of the U.N. General Assembly. Professor Barakat specifically reiterated the importance of soft power and dialogue as a tool, particularly in light of Qatar's role as an emerging mediator and diplomatic arbitrator the region and the world.