Introduction

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For many years now, the United Nations has been a big part of my life and work. I have sought to further understanding of this institution through my insights and analysis, through sharing my experiences of it, and by letting my work reflect as fully as possible the collective endeavor of the women and men I have had the honor to meet there – not only the last five Secretaries-General, but also many senior officials throughout the UN's history –, illuminating their efforts and achievements, but also their failures and shortcomings.

A decade and a half ago my adventure began, motivated by an idealistic hope and faith in this institution, a faith I assumed, in my youthful naïveté, to be shared by all.

That was back in 2003 in the Middle East, on the Blue Line, the border between Lebanon and Israel. I was filming a documentary with the late Jean Lacouture, the famous French journalist and a close friend to whom I dedicated my latest book, *The UN in the New World Disorder*. While there we interviewed Staffan de Mistura, who was at the time the Personal Representative of the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

While shooting, Jean and I had the idea for a new literary and media project that would paint a vast portrait of the UN, past to present. We wanted to tell the story of this microcosm of the world, with all its ambiguities, inabilities, inconsistencies, and weaknesses, as well as its history, life, challenges, and accomplishments. Most importantly, we wanted to narrate this 'plantation of peace,' as Staffan de Mistura called it in our film, because in the final analysis, peace like friendship is made through small acts. And at the time, we said to ourselves, that is exactly what the

UN does: thousands of small acts around the world that we really could not do without. An invisible hand planting the seeds for a more prosperous future.

It wasn't long before I was introduced to UN circles by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a friend of Jean Lacouture, and then to Kofi Annan by Staffan de Mistura. A new chapter had begun in my life, a long human and intellectual adventure that would come to mark my existence.

One can only imagine what it must have meant for me, an aspiring young writer at the time, just turned 30, to be granted unlimited access, both literally and figuratively, to explore the 'Glass House.' This rare opportunity was obtained in large part thanks to Shashi Tharor, who was at the time Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information and who has since become a dear friend.

And so it happened that I set out to film a four-part television series in which the story of the UN is told by its Secretaries-General, Kurt Waldheim, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and Kofi Annan. My goal was to shine light on this giant as had never before been done, to make it accessible to all.

The TV series was broadcast in over 20 countries. Naturally, I felt a certain sense of responsibility and knew that my job was not yet finished. I had so much more to say! It was impossible to fit everything into the documentary, so I decided to publish a book on the history of the UN, *At the Glass House*, prefaced by then French president Jacques Chirac. When the UN co-published my book, I knew that I was on the right path and that the vision I sought to convey was seemingly the right one: my work had met a real need.

But I wanted to go further still. And so I made another film, *Planet UN*, with the Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, as well as a homonymous book, co-authored with Annick Stevenson, focusing on the present-day UN at the turn of this century. I engaged with these subjects publicly by organizing numerous conferences and debates in Europe and North America with the participation of former Secretaries-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar and Boutros Boutros-Ghali, UN representatives, as well as famous intellectuals and academic figures from Columbia University, Harvard, etc. Shorter publications under my supervision then followed, along with supplements in *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

All this to say that after having compiled an oeuvre on the UN, the conclusions I have come to do not live up to my youthful hopes, those born of the ideal to which I held the institution back when it all began in the Middle East.

For a quarter of a century now, the international community has suffered from a growing deficit of global governance. At the end of the Cold War, the globalization of politics, security, economics, climate, and immigration created an unprecedented demand for effective global governance. Paradoxically, this model now appears to be gravely endangered.

This is due among other reasons to the historical error not to have organized at the start of the 1990s an international consultation on the new state of the world, a post-Cold War summit of the same scale and scope of that which took place after the World Wars. The American administration of the time, during President Clinton's first term, is partly to blame.

Today, within states and among their populations, this growing deficit in global governance feeds the perception – and perhaps engenders the reality – of a world in mayhem, spinning out of control, without any leadership, state, or other competent institution at the helm to chart a new course. This situation is aggravated by the crisis of the nation state. Accordingly, we find ourselves in a no man's land between national institutions and supra-national ones that are too weak to resolve the current challenges. All of this only adds to the growing polarization and political alienation that is increasingly evident in many states throughout the world.

For over 70 years, the international order has been anchored in the multilateral system of the UN. However, the UN is at present in the throes of a long-term structural crisis. It is no doubt impolite and not terribly tactful to say so openly, especially given the recent (and relative) success of the COP21 conference on climate held in Paris at the close of 2015, but we must face the facts: the UN failed to handle the Ukrainian crisis, the UN has not set forth a clear strategy to stop global terrorism, the UN was sorely absent from negotiations with Iran on nuclear capabilities, the UN did not intervene in the Syrian conflict and

'allowed' the state to disintegrate and its population to be massacred or forced into exile, the UN showed itself incapable of handling the refugee crisis that weighed heavily on Europe and left millions without refuge. Lastly, the UN clearly failed in its efforts to contain the Ebola epidemic in Africa.

Concerning the future of the UN, we cannot afford to pretend that all is well. Obviously the UN is not in danger of collapsing overnight. Rather, it is more likely to slowly fade away: drifting into political inconsequentiality, becoming nothing more than 'a NGO' among others, a hollow shell of sorts, which would reroute decision-making diplomacy toward other actors. Today there is no shortage of examples of governments circumventing the UN altogether, not only as concerns vital questions of peace and security, but also for matters of finance, infrastructure, development, health, and education.

And let there be no illusion: the G20 is an attempt to supersede the UN. Even if we should recognize that the G20 can do good work and that it is no doubt easier to reach consensus among twenty members than among more than 190, the G20 does not answer and will never answer to a democratic need and represents a privileged directorate of rich countries.

We should also recognize the urgency to bring the UN back to center stage from the margins to which it has been relegated in global governance. This is a critical matter that will require strong political will from leaders, a mandate from the Security Council, and the support of member states. It will require an activist UN, always one step ahead, one that does not merely react to crises once they have degenerated into wars. Accordingly, this will require a new political orientation and a culture of prevention across all areas of expertise of the UN: peace and security, sustainable development, and humanitarian intervention. It will require a fundamental reform of the migratory regime, which is ailing under the weight of the refugee crisis.

To reach this outcome, it will be necessary to reaffirm and reinvent the convening power specific to the UN to oversee the creation of a new decision-making model wherein the procedural bodies and international and regional institutions – such as Bretton Woods, NGOs, and the private sector – will work *with* the organization rather than compete with it. And lastly, a new method of financing for the UN must be found, with the participation of all member states. Otherwise, any agenda for reform will not have the means for implementation.

This being said, I don't want to appear fatalistic. We should bear in mind all that the UN has accomplished over the past 70 years. Our strength can be found there.

We cannot forget international law and the diplomatic rules and norms that have been established and promoted. In 1948, the organization inaugurated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, in 2002, the International

Criminal Court. It can be credited with many successes and has concluded countless conventions in the name of peace, attempting to limit the procedural hurdles that dominate the maze of state law. It pressed for nuclear non-proliferation through The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the IAEA.

Peacekeeping missions have been deployed in conflict zones that were otherwise overlooked. Since 1948, almost four thousand military personnel, police officers, and civilians have lost their lives upholding peace following acts of violence, disasters, and pandemics.

An international framework was drawn up to perfect sustainable development and channel investment to underdeveloped countries.

As explained in the chapter of my book *The UN in the New World Disorder* devoted to energy access in Africa, the UN is deeply involved in the fight against the inequalities that loom large in the sub-Saharan region. Throughout both of his terms, Ban Ki-Moon helped to build a vast network that brings together efforts promoting the enormous potential of Africa and aims to generate economic growth and social well-being through access to energy.

The humanitarian agencies of the UN have rescued millions of victims from natural and man-made disasters. Taken together, while all of these actions have not been able to solve the world's problems, they have certainly helped to avoid some of the worst outcomes.

For all of these reasons, I am convinced that the UN can have a promising future. But this is not the only possibility nor can it be guaranteed. In order to fill the void in global governance, the first step is to recognize the breadth of challenges that the UN must face, rather than turn a blind eye to them. Critics of the UN would perhaps like to see it fail; some of them believe that this is already the case. They are wrong. The Charter of UN and its International Norms and Standards – and the hope they represent – are just as vital today as they were 73 years ago. Our present duty is to adapt the institutions of the UN to the realities of our century, a moment in time that by many estimates will be the most challenging yet. We cannot fail. A world without the UN would be an infinitely more dangerous place.

Together we all make up the UN, and in the globalized world of today, we are all both accountable for and affected by the same threats. Because we cannot accept to live passively in a world left to its own devices, a world where hate and personal gain never cease to encroach at the risk of total annihilation, because we cannot look on helplessly

as all that was built with such hope sinks slowly into oblivion, we cannot and should not cease to believe in the UN, which reflects the Enlightenment values and promotes free society.

As for myself, with my last two books, *The UN in the New World Disorder* and *Who Want to Kill the UN?*, an essay co-authored with Anne-Cécile Robert that will be published in the fall of 2018, I hope to help to renew debate through a series of reflections on the effective role that the UN should play, on a viable path for the institution that would place it at the forefront of global governance, in a position to tackle the challenges of our time, be they climate, energy, peace, development, or culture.

I must admit that, a bit discouraged, I have strayed from the UN the last past years, turning my focus instead to international relations and to analysis of US foreign policy. I made a documentary movie about and with Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, in partnership with *Foreign Affairs* I hosted a conference series on transatlantic issues, and from 2011 to 2016 I directed a Washington, D.C.-based think-tank, the French-American Global Forum.

And yet here I am back again to pay tribute to the UN, because in spite of myself, in spite of everything really, I still believe in this institution. I still want to believe.

So, it goes without saying that I can only express praise for this special section of the *International Politics Reviews* on the United Nations.

The first part of the issue is the long version of an essay I wrote with Anne-Cécile Robert originally published in French by the renowned monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Dedicated to the UN General Assembly, it shines new light on this lesser-known organ. The second part is a compilation, published here for the first time in English, of all the interviews that Jean Lacouture and I conducted with the last five UN Secretaries-General for the book and series *At the Glass House*, as well as for my book *Planet UN*, spanning from the early 1970s to 2016.

It is my great hope that our generation and the next, those young people who are currently studying at university today, will be strong enough, and determined enough, to impose themselves, persisting in the fight for peace, sustainable global governance, and a brighter future for all. We will never achieve this by retreating into our shell. And we will certainly not achieve it alone. We need the UN, and the UN needs us. For all of these reasons, we are called to adapt the UN to the demands of the twenty-first century, to this new world disorder.