"Mission Impossible?"
Kofi Annan, “Interventions: A Life in War and Peace”,
Allen Lane, London, 2012

Kofi Annan’s memoir concludes in May 2012, shortly before the brutal violence against civilians in the Syrian town of Hama marked the beginning of the end of his mediation mission there. In the book (p369) he acknowledges that from the start many people saw his mission as impossible, given the level of violence that had already occurred and the intransigence of the key players both in Syria, among the regional powers, and in the UN Security Council. Yet his account of his career in the UN, culminating in 10 years as its Secretary-General from 1997 to 2006, suggests that ‘mission impossible’ could be a description of the job of SG itself. Annan’s story is of his struggle to maintain the principles, the integrity, indeed the sovereignty, of the United Nations in the face of the self-interested actions of its members, in both North and South. His account shows that if not quite impossible, this is indeed a herculean task.

All this begs the question: what exactly is the United Nations? Most obviously, it is more than the Secretary-General and his staff; it has to be the member states that have agreed to act collectively, and of whom the SG is the servant. Yet, as Annan insists throughout his book, it exists to serve not states but – as per the first words of the UN Charter - “We The Peoples of the United Nations” in whose name it was founded. His story is of a battle to uphold the rights and to promote the interests of the most deprived and vulnerable people of the world in the face of poor and often corrupt leadership in the South and poor and often short-sighted leadership in the North.

In this context, the title Annan has chosen for his memoir is significant. "Intervention" usually connotes coercive, military, intervention albeit with a declared humanitarian intent. And indeed Annan does trace the familiar path of so-called "humanitarian intervention", through the catastrophic failures of the 1990s to the emergence of the concept of "The Responsibility to Protect" (R2P), which he successfully nurtured and steered through the UN General Assembly in 2005, describing it as “a universal principle of protecting fundamental human rights, not as a licence to make war in the name of peace” (p xi). But it is clear that he views as equally important the adoption by the UN in 2000 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the establishment in 2001 of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. In other words, his view of intervention is a broad one; a wide range of policy instruments is needed if states are to achieve the purposes for which they founded the UN. The “three pillars of security, development, rule of law and human rights” are all equally important and interdependent. (p370). Sometimes one feels Annan has leant too far backwards in his attempt to build a global consensus, for example in arguing that we should view
HIV/AIDS as a security issue (p237) or that "failed development and poverty creates inequalities that underpins many of the grievances that drive terrorism" (p234) - Annan himself gives a more nuanced view when describing the essentially political grievances at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute (p253). Nevertheless the scope of his ambition is impressive.

Annan's tenure as UN SG was split down the middle by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq. In his early years he was successful in building a global consensus at the UN to tackle the problems of global poverty and in particular the deprivations faced by people on his own continent of Africa. But the UN had already suffered ignominy in failing to address mass atrocity crimes in Somalia, Rwanda, and (initially) Bosnia, and it was clear that the challenge of how to justify and regulate coercive intervention would have to be addressed. There were ominous signs when NATO decided to intervene in Kosovo in 1999 without a UN mandate, but the real disaster occurred with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and from that point on Annan was fighting a defensive battle to preserve the sovereignty of the UN and the wider focus he had established for it - and in the end, with the Oil for Food scandal, his own personal reputation too. Annan was excoriated by US politicians when he said, in September 2004, that he believed the invasion of Iraq without a second UN SC resolution was illegal. He only just weathered the subsequent storm but in his book he delivers a caustic criticism, describing the intervention as "a unilateral war that replaced tyranny with anarchy" (p363) and, from the perspective of the United States' standing in the international community, as "a self-inflicted wound of historic proportions" (p366).

Unsurprisingly, Annan's memoir contains many fascinating accounts of his involvement as a mediator, both as SG and subsequently when he successfully brokered an agreement between the parties in Kenya in the violent crisis following the 2007 elections. Perhaps most striking is his insistence on talking to anyone with the power to end conflict and violence, regardless of how complicit they are in it. As he puts it: "The stakes are so high that you do not have the luxury of saying 'I'm not going to talk to this guy. I'm not going to shake his hand.' By doing that you may be condemning thousands and millions to their deaths or further persecution." (p329) This principled neutrality – which the SG is required to uphold and represent - is one of the main reasons why we need the UN.

This memoir is a valuable contribution to the vital debate about how much states are willing to act in concert, if necessary pooling some of their sovereignty, in pursuit of a greater good. In other words, how much they see the UN and its principles as creating a set of commitments to be honoured, and how much as "a useful means toward ends that may or may not be legal and legitimate in the eyes of the world" (p365). The former view is clearly the one that has guided Annan all his life and yet as a realist he has always had to keep an eye out for the second. However, the book ends with the defiant call:
"A United Nations that serves not only states but peoples - and becomes the forum where governments are held accountable for their behaviour to their own citizens - will earn its place in the 21st-century."

That is a challenge for us all; not just Kofi Annan’s successors.

Mike Aaronson
14 January 2013