



***INSS Insight*** No. 866, November 2, 2016

## **The New UN Secretary-General**

**Michal Hatuel Radoshitzky**

On October 13, 2016, the nomination of António Guterres as the new United Nations Secretary-General (UN SG) was approved at the General Assembly by the organization's 193 members. Guterres's five-year term will begin in January 2017, and can be renewed for an additional five years. While the UN SG serves as the organization's top diplomat and chief administrative officer, the UN Charter says very little about the position and the requirements for the individual holding it. In addition, given the inherent limitations of power of the SG in light of the structural dominance of the Security Council in the UN, the role of the UN's top diplomat is ultimately shaped by the person who fills it.

A former Prime Minister of Portugal (1995-2002), Guterres, 67, was until recently, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2005-2015). In that capacity, he succeeded in persuading governments of Western nations to accept refugees in the largest refugee crisis since World War II. This has been acclaimed as a considerable achievement, particularly against the backdrop of a nationalist backlash in Europe and the United States. Moreover, Guterres was the only candidate who gained a sufficient number of votes when in a rare show of unity, all 15 ambassadors from the Security Council voted for him. In comparison, the first runner up, Miroslav Lajčák (Slovakia) received six "discourage" votes in a straw poll – two of them from permanent members.

The announcement of Guterres's nomination by the Security Council came as a surprise to many who expected to see the major powers struggle to promote their favored candidate. Moreover, the current elections saw a surge in both the number of women and the number of Eastern European candidates who applied for the position: seven out of 13 candidates in each category. The statistic stands out given that since the establishment of the UN, no woman and no candidate from Eastern Europe has ever filled the UN SG post. Although neither of the two characteristics automatically affords the UN's top diplomat with better capabilities to perform the task, the extensive global debate stirred around these two issues is interesting on three accounts. First, it reflects the strong underlying public call for diversity. Second, it points to the ability of the global citizenry to shape the elections process – as demonstrated by the influx of candidates with traits the public hoped to see at the UN's highest echelon. Third, and perhaps most poignantly, it

demonstrates the blunt limitations of the same global citizenry to effectively shape the outcome of the process.

The fact that during the process Guterres publicly proclaimed himself an activist on humanitarian issues made his victory all the more surprising, as both Russia and China have been particularly resistant to vocal activists in top UN posts. This has led some to speculate what concessions he may have offered Russia and China (in the form of high level political posts at UN headquarters) to secure their vote. Indeed, the potential vetoes of the five permanent members in the election process are perceived as bargaining chips in backroom deals pursuant to rivalries and disputes, particularly in Syria and Ukraine. Similarly, a factor that may have contributed to Russia's approval of Guterres is its presidency of the Security Council during October, and the positive effect that such an achievement would have on Russia's image as facilitating the important decision on its watch. It is also possible that the permanent five actively strove to bury their differences so as to protect their shared privilege of nominating the SG, as a Security Council deadlock could potentially open the door to increased involvement of the wider UN membership in the General Assembly.

A different perspective is that Guterres benefited from a selection process that was unprecedentedly open by UN standards. As opposed to the highly secretive process in the past, when even knowledge of potential candidates was limited, in the current process contenders submitted vision statements that were uploaded to a website created by the Office of the President of the General Assembly for the selection process. Furthermore, candidates answered questions from diplomats and the public at large in the first-ever globally televised and webcast town hall-style debate held in the UN building. To this end more than 1500 questions were submitted online from over 70 countries, and candidates were given the opportunity to answer a selection of the top ten questions; to speak to the media following their sessions, and to participate in discussions organized by civil society groups. The current election process was also the first to be closely followed on social media.

Overall Guterres's candidacy was well received, as expressed for example in a *New York Times* editorial that asserted that Guterres "is an excellent choice to replace Ban Ki-moon." Among congratulators were critics of Ban Ki-moon, who fault the incumbent SG for shaping the role as a humble diplomatic servant, as opposed to the more proactive and independent approach practiced by his predecessor Kofi Annan. Other supporters included advocates of the open process who attribute Guterres's election to the reforms in the election process, which they believe enabled him to win points for his humor, charisma, and professional posture.

Guterres's personal manifesto notes challenges such as extreme inequality and the changing nature of conflict and terrorism. He emphasizes that "there is no peace and sustainable development without respect for human rights," and that the solution for humanitarian problems

is "never humanitarian" but rather "always political." He advocates reforming the UN Development System; is minded toward "implementation, implementation, implementation"; and urges continuing the process that is said to have paved the road to his victory, i.e., UN utilization of modern digital platforms to reach out to common citizens. He also hammers out a five-point plan for UN engagement in a "culture of prevention" of crises rather than the current culture of managing them. Notably the fifth point of his plan relates to "fostering inclusion, solidarity and multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious societies" as the best antidote to racism and anti-Semitism.

Upon Guterres's nomination, Israeli Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon stated that hopefully under Guterres's leadership hostilities toward Israel in the UN will cease; the initiative to appoint a special UN Envoy for the Struggle against Global anti-Semitism will be promoted, and the UN will assume responsibility for the return of the bodies of Israel's two fallen soldiers held by Hamas since Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014). While the first goal is less likely to materialize, the latter two issues can potentially generate new attitudes that match Guterres's personal beliefs and promote his aspirations as the world's new top diplomat.

