INTRODUCTION

Ambassador Al-Nasser brought to the presidency of the 66th UN General Assembly the rich store of diplomatic experience that he had accrued as a representative of his country in different state capitals, notably in the Middle East and Asia. As he took on the complex and demanding responsibilities of the UNGA presidency, and the multifaceted tasks of the United Nations, he will have reflected on the usefulness of his experience in the Qatari representation in New York from 1986 to 1993 and his return to the United Nations as ambassador and permanent representative in 1998.

Ambassador Al-Nasser’s intimate knowledge and long experience of the workings of international diplomacy served him well during what proved to be an exceptionally busy and challenging year for the Assembly and indeed for the international system as a whole. The UN, like any international body, is only as effective as its members will allow; decision-making can be tortuous and slow. Ambassador Al-Nasser brought to the presidency of the 66th UNGA genuine enthusiasm and persistence in the face of bureaucratic obstacles, as well as expertise, especially in the areas of peace and security, South-South relations, and sustainable development.

It was a particularly apt circumstance that, in a year in which many of the world’s priority political challenges arose from the wave of change sweeping the Arab World, the General Assembly had at its head a natural interpreter of these events, with an intimate understanding of Arab history and culture. The need for immediate responses to upheaval in
Syria, but also North Africa, is an important theme running through the year and through this volume. Outcomes often fell below Ambassador Al-Nasser’s hopes and expectations, and he puts them in the context of the multiplicity of other issues and challenges with which the UN must grapple each session.

Ambassador Al-Nasser was ambitious for his presidency and wanted the 66th UNGA not only to focus on the emergencies and ongoing crises in this turbulent world but also to identify, and keep energies trained on, the priorities that he termed his “Four Pillars.” These were

- the peaceful settlement of disputes;
- reform and revitalization of the UN system;
- disaster prevention and response; and
- sustainable development and prosperity.

He approached these major concerns and goals at two levels: by contributing to ongoing efforts to improve UN systems to deliver improved responses in the future and by working to maximize the impact of current interventions. For example, in the area of United Nations reform, while arguing for the modernization of membership of the Security Council, he also set out to attempt to make the interplay between institutions within the UN more effective and responsive: a bold task indeed.

This volume will, I believe, be a resource for future scholars. It will undoubtedly attract the interest also of others who focus on international affairs, in particular the role of the United Nations and of its most representative body, the General Assembly. The UNGA is, after all, the only forum in the world where all the world’s nations can take part, in principle equally, in the running of our planet’s affairs. It is at the same time essential but unwieldy and difficult to manage—legitimate but not always decisive or authoritative—even with an experienced president at the helm. The book also usefully reminds us of the huge number of issues that face the international community and the forbidding and intractable nature of some of them.
Ambassador Al-Nasser brings to this range of issues his skill and expertise and an engaging conviction in the vital necessity of international cooperation in our increasingly interdependent world. He advocates a positive, optimistic approach to the promotion of the fundamental human values that are, albeit expressed in local idioms, common to all faiths and cultures. This book can only scratch the surface of a busy and eventful year. The reader can only imagine the continuous, intricate, and relentless toil that promoting this agenda must have entailed—even to organize the meetings and orient them, one day at a time, toward the establishment of a consensus.

In this book, Ambassador Al-Nasser has provided us with a host of insights into the work of the United Nations and his role in it. Given the man’s energy and commitment, it is no surprise that, following his presidency of the UNGA, he was appointed further high international responsibilities, which he carries with distinction today, as UN high representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. This post is well suited to his diplomatic talents and will enable him to continue to play an influential role in championing the noble values he sets out with such clarity and conviction in this memoir.

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