

Dag Hammarskjöld : Lessons for the future

Ambassador Dr. El Sayed A. Shalabi

As a student of diplomacy and international relations and a lifelong diplomat, I have always been attracted by the life and thoughts of Dag Hammarskjöld, by the honesty and integrity with which he practiced his job.

He firmly defended the authority of the UN and represented the world community. His tenure coincided with the emergence of the newly independent countries and he channeled his energies to dealing with their thorny political, economic and social issues. No wonder he was dubbed “the man of the middle and young countries.” In this context, his years witnessed two major regional crises with international dimensions in the Middle East and Congo. In the Suez crisis, Dag Hammarskjöld together with Canadian colleague Lester B. Pearson introduced the UN peacekeeping forces, which developed the main and most important responsibility of the UN.

In the Congolese crisis, Dag Hammarskjöld sacrificed his life for the independence and territorial integrity of this African country. Hammarskjöld is widely known as a diplomat, but is less known as a thinker.

One might ask why we are commemorating Hammarskjöld today when international relations have changed so drastically. In the coming few minutes, I will try to answer this basic question and indicate why his legacy is still alive.

Upon his nomination as Secretary General of the United Nations in March 1953, Dag Hammarskjöld delivered a brief speech at the General Assembly, which concluded with a line from a Swedish poem, which says, “The greatest prayer a person can make is for peace and not for victory.” Directly after his appointment, he saluted Count Bernadote with the following words, “We bow to an ideal of life and of firm belief in people’s dignity, mind and awareness of goodness. Without this ideal and this belief who would follow the path of patient negotiation and unending strive for reconciliation, settling disputes and urging people to reach a settlement.”

Hammarskjöld’s words at the start of his tenure reflected his personality, thoughts and vision of international relations. Hammarskjöld’s vision and principles guided his work as Secretary General and his approach to the crises that he and the UN faced, which made him one of the great men in history that devoted themselves to peace.

What also makes Hammarskjöld stand out are the methods he used and developed to work for peace, his reasoning, as well as his dedication to his work, especially during times of crisis. In fact, Hammarskjöld considered not sacrificing

time and effort to be irresponsible. And that's how he worked during the Suez and Congo crises where he personally played a role by combining the principles of the charter and the decisions of the UN and his perspective and assessment of the time element. Hammarskjöld had a dynamic interpretation of what the charter authorized him to do, especially article 99, which gave the Secretary General the right to take the initiative in matters he viewed as a threat to international peace and security. The former Secretary General used this innovative manner to create the new formulas used by the UN in dealing with crises and disputes, including personal diplomacy, observer groups, UN presence, preventive diplomacy, as well as United Nations Emergency Forces, which were created for the first time during the Suez crisis in 1956.

Hammarskjöld is credited with these practical contributions as well as firm stances in several directions and on several occasions related to the UN's principles and relations, especially with the superpowers. This gave a special dimension to the role and responsibilities of the Secretary General and the UN apparatus.

From day one, Hammarskjöld insisted on the UN's independence and on a strong international organization and not one that merely carries out an administrative role with limited political importance. In this context, he said that if the UN was truly what the member countries made of it, much of what it had to offer relied on the actions of the Secretariat. He stressed that the Secretary General should put his position and the UN apparatus to full use according to the circumstances in each period. Hammarskjöld outlined this role in line with the philosophy of the charter. He explained that the Secretary General should take action in the absence of a recommendation from the UN if he deems this necessary to fill a possible vacuum. Dag Hammarskjöld saw the UN's role and its decisions as tools to negotiate and settle disputes in a manner that supersedes a mere discussion of issues. Hammarskjöld confronted the international community with regards to the role of the UN and its responsibilities with two choices or concepts. Either the UN is a dormant body merely for holding conferences or a dynamic body that is effective in preventing or settling disputes.

He defended the authority and independence of the UN and its employees as stipulated by the charter on a number of occasions and through practical stances, especially with the major powers. Hammarskjöld did this in the first battle he entered with the U.S. on the loyalty of UN employees in light of the McCarthy trend at the time. He also defended the UN's position with England and France during the Suez crisis, and then with the Soviet Union in the Congo crisis.

We can safely say that Dag Hammarskjöld was the man of small and medium-sized countries in the UN and the international community. He firmly believed that the UN is more beneficial for small and middle-sized nations than it is for the major powers. This concept became clear to Hammarskjöld with the increasing number of independent nations that joined the UN and their need for political

support and technical aid from the international body. Dag Hammarskjöld saw the UN as the most capable body to offer this aid. He was also aware that this UN role would protect the new nations from falling hostage to the cold war between the two superpowers.

In addition to these political considerations, Hammarskjöld's position towards the new developing nations was driven by his sense of justice and his awareness of the gap between advanced countries and the newly independent ones and that this divide could be a source of international tension and conflict.

Hammarskjöld aroused controversy about his life and personality. Everyone who knew and worked closely with him was unanimous that he was reserved in his personal relations. Hammarskjöld was keen on keeping a distance between him and others and bluntly refused any exploitation of his friendship.

These traits painted the picture of a very strict man, but his close friends and staff discovered the sunny side to his personality and found his company a pleasure, as did he. Hammarskjöld summed up his feelings about his friends when he said: "You don't ask for anything and you get a lot."

Hammarskjöld was also very interested in literature, art and music. He was of the view that literature and diplomacy mix, and thus his speeches; press conferences and diplomatic talks were full of poetry and sayings from all cultures. He didn't just read and absorb literature but also had contributions in poetry and translations that qualified him to be a member of the Swedish Literature Academy, specifically in the Nobel Committee for Literature.

We can discover this aspect of this personality in his markings, in which he wrote poetically what he described as "The only true personal image of himself, his life, and his negotiations with himself and with God." He alone knew this aspect of his life, which was the source of his suffering and his strength.

Decades have passed since the passing of Dag Hammarskjöld, so why are we remembering his life and example today although he lived in an age that differs in its circumstances, relations and in the size of the UN than the age that we and the UN live in today.

This question may at first appear to be a legitimate one but upon reflection we'll find that despite these differences, the principles, values and aims that Hammarskjöld adopted and defended are still pertinent for the UN today in terms of the UN's role amidst changing relations between powers and a new world order.