

Guterres faces Herculean task of rescuing UN

Sami Moubayed

Beirut

When the United Nations' first secretary-general, Trygve Lie of Norway, stepped down in 1952, he told his Swedish successor, Dag Hammarskjöld: "You're about to take over the most impossible job on Earth." Now, more than ever in the United Nations' 71-year history, this applies to the new secretary-general, Antonio Guterres of Portugal, who assumed office for a five-year term on January 1st.

Guterres's agenda is already packed with high priorities – wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, North Korea's nuclear weapons, the Islamic State (ISIS) and the world's swelling refugee crisis. His previous post as UN high commissioner for human rights gave him plenty of experience to deal with the refugee crisis but to do that he first needs to bring the Syrian war to an end.

That will not be easy due to crippling deadlock in the UN Security Council with France and Britain lobbying for regime change in Damascus against the will of Russia and China. A recent breakthrough was made thanks to serious cooperation between Turkey and Russia, acting independently of the United Nations, that resulted in a ceasefire in late December.

■ Whether Guterres will succeed in ending the Middle Eastern bloodbath remains to be seen.

For any deal to pass, however, it needs the support of the United States. US President-elect Donald Trump has been highly critical of the United Nations, unlike Barack Obama who had an excellent

working relationship with former secretary-general Ban Ki-moon of South Korea.

Obama operated through the UN framework to tighten sanctions against Iran and North Korea and to legitimise the 2011 intervention in Libya, blocking attempts by the US Congress to restrict UN funding.

If Trump lives up to his campaign promises and turns a new page with the Kremlin, a *détente* will likely emerge at the Security Council, because everybody in the new US administration will likely be on the good side of Russian President Vladimir Putin, including Trump and his picks for secretary of State – Rex Tillerson – and for UN ambassador – Nikki Haley.

Haley, twice elected governor of South Carolina but a newcomer to the United Nations, is expected to adopt a compromising attitude towards Russia in the world body, unlike her hawkish predecessor, Samantha Powers.

None of this bodes well for the United Nations, increasingly seen as ineffective in international diplomacy.

Trump has hinted he would reduce UN funding, saying: "We get nothing out of the United Nations. They don't respect us. They don't do what we want and yet we fund them disproportionately."

If he puts his money where his mouth is, this could be devastating for Guterres, because the United States provides no less than 22% of the UN annual budget.

At first glance, a US-Russian honeymoon seems a prospect to be desired but if these two powers start getting along, their arrogant and flamboyant leaders might take unilateral action on global issues, without seeking approval – or even advice – from the United Nations.

This would jeopardise UN peacekeeping efforts, along with protections for civilians and human rights. A Trump-Putin alliance might dwarf and belittle the Unit-

ed Nations, rather than empower it.

Guterres, a former Portuguese prime minister, has inherited a paralysed Security Council and a world left in shambles by six years of fearsome violence in the Middle East. The United Nations has been effectively sidelined. Russian vetoes in the Security Council have impeded UN efforts towards a political solution and aid for Syria's millions of displaced.

■ Guterres, a former Portuguese prime minister, has inherited a paralysed Security Council and a world left in shambles.

On Syria, a Russia-brokered conference – to which UN officials have not been invited – is to take place in Kazakhstan in mid-January. The Russians are discussing a replacement to the hapless UN-mandated Geneva process, which was launched in late 2015 only to be suspended in April after failing to make any progress towards ending the fighting in Syria.

Moscow is lobbying to replace UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, alleging that he has not only failed to make progress but has sided with the Syrian opposition.

If he is asked to step down, de Mistura would be the third UN envoy pushed aside since 2011 – after former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and the veteran Arab negotiator Lakhdar Brahimi, two of the United Nations' most accomplished diplomats – and would be yet more dust in the eyes for a global organisation, whose reputation has sunk precipitously, especially over the carnage in Syria.

Ban, who served two terms as secretary-general, has been widely blamed for much of the United Nations' stasis. He assumed office



A December 12th, 2016, file photo shows UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (L) clasping hands with then-UN Secretary-General designate Antonio Guterres after Guterres was sworn in at UN headquarters. (AP)

just two days after the execution of Saddam Hussein on December 30th, 2006, an act that triggered a vicious sectarian war in Iraq, one that the United Nations failed to prevent or curtail after UN special envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello was killed, along with 22 of his staff, when their Baghdad hotel was bombed in August 2003.

The terrorists succeeded in scaring Ban away and limiting the United Nations' role in Iraq, prompting the secretary-general to focus on other pressing issues on

which he could better deliver, such as climate change, combating HIV/AIDS, and the humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

At the start of his second term, the "Arab spring" erupted, taking the entire region down a path of uncontrollable violence that Ban was unable to stop – or even impede.

Whether Guterres will succeed in ending the Middle Eastern bloodbath remains to be seen but it will not be easy with Trump in the White House.

For Riyadh and GCC, Trump era heralds period of uncertainty

Viewpoint



Jareer Ellass

The US-Saudi relationship became noticeably cooler during the eight years of the Obama administration and Riyadh is concerned about how its ties with Washington will evolve under a Trump presidency.

The relationship could become downright chilly should US-Russian relations become cosier. Not only could Saudi Arabia find itself without the familiar security safety net it has relied on for 70 years but it may face tougher competition from one of its chief oil rivals if Western sanctions on Moscow are lifted.

The Saudis and the Obama administration have struggled over their differing views on a host of significant issues, including the civil war in Syria and how to deal with Iran. After reaching an international nuclear agreement with Tehran, President Barack Obama raised concerns by counselling Riyadh and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies to "share" the neighbourhood with Iran.

The Saudis' long-held assumption that Washington would continue to be its military protector should it face a serious external or internal threat eroded during the Obama years. This was particularly so following the

Obama administration's support of the 2011 "Arab spring" protests and its alarming failure in Saudi eyes to intervene in the fall of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.

Now the Saudis must deal with Donald Trump, who suggested on the campaign trail that the kingdom has not "paid enough" for US military protection. He also threatened a potential US ban on Saudi oil imports. It is unclear whether Trump was just spouting campaign rhetoric or if he will expect Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries to pay a version of protection money, which would certainly be an affront to Saudi sensibilities.

A Saudi regime weakened by uncertainty over US military protection and forced to take a back seat in regional politics benefits Moscow as it seeks to gain on its chief rival in oil markets and extend its political influence in the Middle East.

Trump's nomination of Exxon-Mobil Chairman Rex Tillerson to be secretary of State signals his determination to develop closer ties with Moscow. With Tillerson at its head, ExxonMobil forged several lucrative joint ventures with Rosneft, Russia's largest state-owned energy firm, through a 2011 strategic cooperation agreement. Tillerson has been a vocal critic of US and European sanctions on Russia's energy sector that put a stop to ExxonMobil's ability to go forward with its joint ventures in Russia.

Much has been made of Tillerson's personal relationship

with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his having been awarded Russia's Order of Friendship in 2013. Tillerson's company also has close ties to Saudi Arabia that date back nearly 70 years to when the precursor companies of Exxon and Mobil were partners in Aramco. ExxonMobil operates refinery and petrochemical joint ventures in Saudi Arabia that were established 30 years ago, an indication of strong ties Tillerson has with Gulf Arab states – a point not lost on Israel.

It is not that Saudi Arabia has not looked elsewhere for military protection. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, when relations between Washington and Riyadh were particularly frayed, the Saudi leadership sought to strengthen political and commercial ties with China, which was fast becoming one of the largest importers of Saudi oil. Beijing, though, has been loath to commit to supplying naval or air power to the Gulf region and assuming responsibilities for protecting others when it has disputes in its own back yard to sort out.

The Saudis flirted with strengthening political and military ties with Moscow. Then-Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud met with Putin in Moscow in September 2003 and Putin reciprocated by visiting King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in Riyadh in February 2007, becoming the first Russian leader to visit the kingdom.

However, a sizeable arms contract being negotiated in early 2008 between the two countries was derailed by Riyadh's insist-

The relationship could become downright chilly should US-Russian relations become cosier.

ence that the deal would only go forward if Moscow ceased military cooperation with Tehran, something Russia was unwilling to consider.

Ultimately, stark ideological differences coupled with mutual mistrust and Moscow's political heavy-handedness make it unlikely that Riyadh would welcome a Russian umbrella of military protection. As two of the largest oil producers in the world, Saudi Arabia and Russia are highly competitive in key markets.

The prospect of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies no longer under US military protection and having to fend for themselves against external or internal threats seems implausible, particularly when so much of the world's oil would be at risk. Trump would quickly learn that a disruption to Gulf oil supplies would have a global financial impact that would not spare the United States.

The reality though is that it is impossible to anticipate whether a Trump presidency will indeed closely ally itself with Russia and place demands on Saudi Arabia that Riyadh would find objectionable and refuse. What certainly is disconcerting to Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies is that the incoming US president has made erratic and at times contradictory policy pronouncements about US relations with the region. The days of assurance and predictability seem over.

Jareer Ellass reports on energy issues for The Arab Weekly. He is based in Washington.

The incoming US president has made erratic pronouncements about US relations with the region.