

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/07/10/the-limitations-and-capabilities-of-the-united-nations-in-modern-conflict/>

NINA KALANTAR, JUL 10 2019

Following the Second World War, the international community was reinvigorated to design an international body with the capability to limit the onset of another world war. Enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Charter was the vision for the organization to be “a guardian of international peace and security, as a promoter of human rights, as a protector of international law, and as an engineer of socioeconomic advancement”.^[1] The intergovernmental organization has risen as an essential platform for the promotion of global governance in which states “can elaborate and extend international law in areas such as human rights, international trade, the sea, and the fight against terrorism”.^[2] Mindful of the failures of its predecessor, the League of Nations, the founders of the redesigned body established the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and awarded it “almost limitless power when it came to dealing with violations of peace”.^[3] Vested with the authority to enact international sanctions and authorize military action through UNSC resolutions, the principal organ of the UN has become an essential enabler in advancing the UN’s primary objectives. While geopolitics have shifted significantly since the creation of the UN, its original structure and the necessity of the body as a vital mechanism of diplomacy remains unchanged. Evidently, transitions in power dynamics have ultimately impacted the way in which war is fought, with civil unrest and internalized strife growing increasingly common in the twenty-first century. Given increases in regionalized conflict, the primary threat to the United Nation’s intended goal of universal peace and security is “the denial of human security to the citizens in one or more states as a result of civil conflict and strife”.^[4] As the international community attempts to address the growth in unrest, the question remains: “who responds when basic rights are threatened and citizens are subjected to further privations in their daily lives”?^[5] Is the UN and its principle organs capable of responding to and mitigating modern, multi-faceted conflict? This paper will examine the extent to which the present structure of the UNSC and tenets of international law can enable intervention and mediation when responding to civil unrest and internal conflict.

The UN and its contemporary challenges

In an era of interconnectedness and with the rising need for international regulation, the UNSC was established to facilitate efforts in determining threats to the maintenance of peace in the global realm. The UNSC is vested with the authority to impose “sanctions or even authorize the use of force”, making it the most powerful entity of the United Nations.^[6] The Council’s five permanent members (P-5) – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China – and ten elected, rotating members “meet regularly to assess threats to international security, addressing issues that include civil wars, natural disasters, arms control and terrorism”.^[7]

A plethora of contemporary challenges have exposed the UN to criticism in its ability to evolve with changes in geopolitics, most notably the organization’s responsive rather than reactive approach to confronting international crises and the rise in nations disinterested in international consensus building. “The protection of civilians, the threat of violent extremism... and the dilemmas of state building” have presented obstacles that have forced both the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the UNSC to reevaluate their ability to comprehensively address today’s global challenges.^[8] However, the primary obstacle threatening the capacity of the UN remains “how to deal with conflicts – be they between or within states – without offending the national sovereignty of its member states”.^[9] Additionally, the UNSC remains controversial for its lack of global representation amongst the P-5 members with the ability to veto vital resolutions brought before the body. Given that the organization “remains largely unchanged since its founding

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

in 1946”, debate regarding “its efficacy and authority as a mediator on matters of international security” is ongoing and increasingly prevalent in light of presently deteriorating modern conflicts.[10] With the determination of the P-5 having been structured in the aftermath of World War II, critics note that the current authority of the body disproportionately favors the positions of the permanent members, thus hindering the UNSC’s ability to distance itself from the sovereign interests of states when attempting to combat international security risks. Respective geopolitical aims of hegemony are evident in the present stalemate in the UNSC between Russia and the United States, with the veto power granted to permanent members constraining “the Council from engaging in the resolution of civil wars within their borders and in areas of perceived vital interest”. [11] Evidently, there is a disconnect between present threats to international security and the capacity for entities such as the UNSC to effectively mediate and mitigate conflict. The archaic structure of the UN and its entities makes it unable to address transitions in conflict that have complicated the need for resolution vis-à-vis mediation between nation states.

Changes in conflict have led to increased calls for reforms to the present structure of intergovernmental organizations as they attempt to intervene in mitigating civil unrest. Major changes in modern warfare and increased state engagement in proxy strategies have impacted the capacity for UN intervention. Given that “four out of five wars in the first half of the twentieth century were fought between states, the expectation was clearly that the Security Council’s primary task would be the prevention and resolution of interstate wars”. [12] However, increases in proxy wars “in which a third party intervenes indirectly in order to influence the strategic outcome in favor of its preferred faction” has complicated war and prolonged the mediation process. [13] While interventionism is not a new strategic method of hegemony, the manipulation of civil unrest has been used “as a means for securing particular conflict outcomes” in areas where “the augmentation of national interests or ideological gains can still be achieved”. [14] With many of the states engaged indirectly or directly in proxy wars being permanent members of the Security Council, the UNSC’s ability to intervene in such multi-faceted conflicts is all the more unlikely. It is apparent that the conventional conflicts between developed countries the UN was intended to prevent has diminished “as a result of the changing nature of the system of statehood and the international order in the mid-to-late twentieth century”. [15]

In the past decade, civil unrest has grown increasingly prevalent throughout the world and has subsequently challenged the international community in pressuring non-state and state actors to comply by the demands of the Security Council. [16] Since 1945, there has been “a remarkable reduction in the number of wars between states to settle a clash of interests or to enlarge territory” due to aforementioned transitions in conflict. [17] As a result of the decrease in conventional war and rise in civil unrest, the international community has struggled to hold non-state actors and autocrats accountable for violating standards established in customary international law. The present challenges have shifted the aim of UNSC resolutions, with “demands to civil war parties [becoming] more numerous and increasingly oriented toward post-conflict peace building between 1989 and 2006”. [18] However, the likelihood of such declarations enabling significant changes in the behavior of authoritarian regimes and actors not privy to the regulations of international law pose a detrimental threat to the UN’s ability to mediate and mitigate modern conflict.

With an extraordinary depletion in conventional war following 1945, non-state actors have enabled a transition in which “deadly conflict is much less likely than in the past to involve states waging war against each other”. [19] The lack of international mechanisms with the jurisdiction and capacity to hold non-state actors accountable has limited the UN’s success in intervening in civil unrest. With “unprecedented growth in the number of international actors and dramatic changes in the scope of international connectivity”, multi-faceted proxy wars have further complicated the ability for one-dimensional mediation strategies to appropriately and effectively resolve modern conflicts. [20] Consequently, the international community has been faced with the dilemma of addressing the legality of intervening in internalized conflict, with national sovereignty being “weighed and balanced against individual sovereignty, as recognized in the international human rights instruments”. [21] As this paper will later address, nations have established norms that would legalize the ability for external countries to intervene in some civil wars deemed to be a threat to international security and peace. The fundamental challenge lies in regulating the conduct of non-state actors and holding them accountable for violating international law. “Between 1989 and 2006, the Council issued [d] resolutions containing 1,988 specific demands to warring factions”, calling for their increased adherence to the customary norms of behavior. [22] With transitions in modern conflict, an increase in civil wars, and a rise in non-state actors, it is evident that the United Nations and its principle organs face prevalent obstacles in mediating the international security risks posed by modern conflict.

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

The Syrian gridlock

Following the initial 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, Syria emerged at the center of what has now deteriorated into nearly a decade of complex civil unrest that has challenged the international community and its ability to intervene in the war. As a nation plagued with multi-faceted proxy wars and incessant violations of international human rights norms, Syria and international actors involved in the conflict have struggled to reach a consensus on how to conclude the ongoing bloodshed. As more than four competing networks vie to achieve their respective geopolitical objectives in the country, the fundamental humanitarian necessity of protecting civilian lives from heinous atrocities has become diluted as a result of the struggles presented by the ever-intensifying war. Two primary proxy conflicts have further compounded the complexity of the Syrian Civil War. The involvement of external states in the conflict has led to a religious proxy war between Shiite-backed troops of President Bashar al-Assad and the predominantly Sunni Gulf states. Additionally, “antigovernment rebel groups backed by the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others in the region” have been involved in combatting the ongoing regional threat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (Daesh), a jihadist militant group whose terror has stretched far beyond Syria’s borders and has further compounded the duration of the ongoing civil war.[23] Terrorism coordinated or inspired by Daesh has led to increased military involvement by Western nations that deem the deteriorating situation in Syria to be a threat to their national security. Furthermore, terrorism has significantly contributed to not only compounding the complexity of the overall conflict, but has also limited the extent to which the United Nations and the Security Council can facilitate a ceasefire and an ultimate peace agreement in the war. Eight years of brutal war has resulted in over “half a million Syrians [being] killed, most by pro-regime forces, and more than half of the country’s prewar population of some twenty-two million [being] displaced”.[24] Evidently, the full engagement of the international community is vital if a conclusion to the conflict is to be reached.

With the Secretary General of the United Nations António Guterres calling the Syrian Civil War “the most serious threat to international peace and security” today, it is apparent that the conflict presents detrimental consequences for the global community.[25] As aforementioned, proxy wars “involving several national armies, a number of armed opposition groups, many national and international militia, foreign fighters from everywhere in the world, and various terrorist organizations” have led to failed attempts to reach a peace agreement in Syria.[26] With reliance on the UNSC as a platform for the maintenance of international security, it is evident that the present gridlock amongst the P-5 members is the fundamental cause for a lack of action by the body.

While international respect for the UNSC carries significant weight when resolutions are agreed upon in response to international security threats, recent “heightened tensions between the United States and Russia have manifested anew in the Council, leading to concerns that the body may be less able to defuse crises”.[27] In what has been seen as a new iteration of the Cold War, both Russian and American agendas in Syria have been scrutinized as sheer promotions of self-interest.[28] The adversaries’ inability to effectively cooperate with one another has led to a stalemate in the international community’s ability to utilize the UNSC as an effective platform for responding to the crisis. Similarly to the Cold War of the 20th Century, “positive diplomatic engagement between Russia and the US has been reduced to communication and coordination to avoid direct military confrontation”.[29] The lack of diplomatic relations between the two powerful hegemony furthers the reality that a military solution is potentially a more likely solution in Syria than the use of non-violent political channels. While attempts have been made to address the deteriorating crisis, “Geneva peace talks on Syria – a UN-backed conference for facilitating a political transition led by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura – have thus far not been successful in coming up with a political solution”, as factions in the conflict disagree over who should be responsible for governing Syria in the aftermath of the war.[30] It is evident that the intervention of global powers in the country’s internal conflict has furthered the duration and destruction caused by the Syrian Civil War.

The UNSC has consequently been hindered in its ability to pass resolutions that decisively favor a side of the conflict given ongoing divisions between Russia and the United States. Draft resolutions produced by the body illustrate Russia’s strong commitment to limiting international intervention in Syria, as seen in UNSC Resolution 2165, which reaffirms the Council’s “strong commitment to the sovereignty... of Syria”.[31] While state sovereignty is a fundamental component of the United Nations Charter, its strict adherence places limitations on the UNSC’s ability to respond to potential atrocities committed by the Assad regime. While Russia and China have expressed their

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

“growing discomfort with UN involvement in the internal struggles of Arab countries”, the sheer magnitude of the conflict and dire humanitarian crisis has furthered state interest in aiding resolution efforts.[32]

Growing resentment towards the current regime of Bashar al-Assad, accused of overseeing “a campaign of carnage, turning an enormous cache of deadly weapons against the very people they were presumably stockpiled to protect”, has furthered calls from the United States and its allies for regime change in the country.[33] While the Syrian Archive has documented roughly 212 likely chemical weapons attacks during the war, “the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact-Finding Mission has only been able to confirm sixteen cases as of June 2018”. [34] The severity of the aforementioned human rights abuses and the Assad regime’s apparent use of chemical weapons is in direct violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which Syria is a party of. The CWC “has put in place a comprehensive prohibition on chemical weapons development, production and deployment, and mandates the destruction of legacy chemical weapons”. [35] Such clear violations of international law by the Assad regime have been used as justification for the international community’s military involvement in the conflict, since the Syrian government has been found to have violated *jus in bello* norms – laws governing the conduct of armed conflicts.[36] Debate in the UNSC has centered on the legality for countries to intervene militarily in Syria, with Western allies declaring justification in using force without a clear mandate following the April 7, 2018 suspected chemical attack in the Damascus suburb of Douma.[37] However, unified support for intervention by the UNSC has been strategically and consistently blocked by both Russia and China.

While the Security Council has attempted to unanimously condemn the use of chemical weapons in Syria and to strategize ways to hold the Assad regime accountable for its ongoing human rights abuses, actions have been ineffective and have resulted in gridlock in the body. Russia, as of now, has vetoed ten resolutions pertaining to Syria in furtherance of its support for the Assad regime.[38] Both China and Russia have also vetoed resolutions “which would have sanctioned entities involved in the production of chemical weapons” used in Syria.[39] Additionally, the most recent veto by Russia “prevented the adoption of a US-drafted resolution to investigate chemical weapons use in Syria” which was “aimed at identifying the perpetrators” of the attacks.[40] As it pertains to the UNSC’s ability to comprehensively and unanimously respond to the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons, it is apparent that action is unable to be taken in the Council. The China-Russia bloc has effectively hindered any firm measures taken to condemn the Assad regime and has most likely solidified Assad’s continued rule following a conflict resolution. With the international community now hoping to hold the regime accountable for human rights violations in a court of law, China and Russia have continued to reject any UNSC originated resolutions that would refer “belligerents in the Syrian Civil War, including the individuals in the Bashar al-Assad regime, to the International Criminal Court (ICC)”. [41] Therefore, if Assad remains in power following the conclusion of the war, there is a strong likelihood that Russia and China could hinder the ability for the UNSC to bring charges against members of the regime. Such deadlock has ultimately rendered the body ineffective in preventing the continued use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syria and further contributes to criticisms of the UNSC’s ability to mitigate modern conflict. Russia’s relationship with the Assad regime, as well as increased hostilities with the United States, have paralyzed the UNSC and have made the prospect of agreement over Syria all the more unlikely.

Time for organizational reform?

The jurisdictional limitations of international law are inherent in situations where internal conflict and human rights violations coincide, such as in the Syrian Civil War, mainly due to national self-determination and state sovereignty demonstrating barriers in enabling intervention. Evidently, both Russia and the United States have based their respective engagement in the war on the policy objectives they prioritize. Russia is determined “to crush what it sees as a Western crusade to use the United Nations to topple unfriendly regimes”, as the US had done during the first iteration of the Cold War.[42] Contrastingly, Western governments and human rights organizations have encouraged the enforcement of the responsibility to protect (R2P) concept aimed at intervening in government-inflicted scenarios of dire human rights abuses.[43] Unfortunately, the United States and Russia will continue to support actors and “carry out attacks that advance their national interests”, a trend that will further hinder prospective peace building efforts.[44] UN and international support for the current approach to the Syrian conflict will evidently result in “continued descent to the lowest common denominator until international signoff is secured on meaningless reforms and an entirely hollow election process”. [45] The impact this will have on the ability for civilians to safely return to

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

their homes following the conclusion of the war and the possibility for the current regime to continue its authoritarian tendencies demonstrate a significant failure for both the international community and the UNSC.

The Syrian Civil War exemplifies shortfalls in the ability for the present structure of the United Nations to adequately tackle the complexities presented in modern, multi-faceted conflict. Since “enthusiasm for United Nations engagement in civil wars was abruptly curtailed by experiences in Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia”, the intergovernmental organization is commonly blamed for failures to restore peace and to mitigate conflict.[46] However, this criticism ignores the reality that the UN is simply a vessel through which nations are able to engage diplomatically with one another. Inaction is ultimately the fault of states that choose to prioritize realist policies over universal human security. By failing to preemptively respond to ongoing problems, the international community ignores the ultimate spillover effect state degradation can have on neighboring countries. Before the conflict in Syria deteriorated into a nearly decade long war, “states did little to alleviate the escalating humanitarian crisis, which was a result of several droughts between 2006 and 2011”. [47] Additionally, Syria was consistently one of the lowest recipients of official development assistance (ODA) in the Middle East prior to 2011.[48] For example, from 2002 to 2008 “Egypt received \$11.2 in ODA per capita while Syria received \$0.90 in ODA per capita”. [49] This shows a lack of preemptive attention to societal deterioration that commenced long before the Arab Spring. As seen in present disagreement amongst hegemony engaged in the conflict, “providing assistance to Syria has [also] been highly politicized” with the European Union’s inaction in terms of humanitarian intervention also being the result of “political tensions and varying interests of individual member states”. [50] The severity of the Syrian crisis as seen today is therefore the result of a failure by nations to address issues prior to their decline into civil unrest.

Similarly to how the Cold War propagated proxy wars throughout the world and ignored the self-determination of the public, the self-interest driven tactics of states engaged in Syria is similarly “likely to deny the Syrian people the right to choose their own destiny”. [51] While the UN’s founders had envisioned the sanction and military authority of the UNSC would better enable a tangible response to global conflict, the veto power of the P-5 has led to deadlock in the body when enacting peacemaking decisions. Unfortunately, the cyclic nature of fluctuating waves in international cooperation have yet again reached a newfound low, as Cold War tensions are still evident in the disagreements between the United States and Russia on the Security Council. The UN Charter does empower the UNSC with the authority to engage in the management of internal wars, primarily when they constitute a threat to the maintenance of international peace and security.[52] The lack of action on the part of the UNSC in the case of Syria is not, therefore, due to the body’s inability to legally take action, but rather due to “Cold War antagonisms” that have prevented members from unanimously addressing humanitarian concerns posed by the conflict.[53] The continued intervention of foreign powers in Syria is perhaps the most significant factor prolonging the ever-intensifying stalemate. Interventionist policies “do not just remove mechanisms for peace”, but also contribute to the uncertainty of what lies beyond the stalemate (Fisher 2016: 1). State self-interest plays a significant role in impeding the UNSC’s involvement in mitigating civil wars and represents an area of international security that the UN is currently unable to properly tackle.

While the UN has well-functioning mechanisms and entities in place to assist with the aftermath of conflict, the present functioning of its central organ renders it unable to prevent or react immediately to modern war, demonstrating the need for organizational reform to carry out its mandate as a preserver of international peace and security. As the UNSC fails to pass language aimed at preventing further human rights violations from occurring in the country, the international community is forced to assess other outlets in which mutual agreement can be reached to bring the long-standing war to an end. Member states, including the United Kingdom, have made strides in further solidifying the legality of the R2P mandate. For example, during a UNSC emergency session following the April 2018 chemical weapons attacks in Syria, the potential for a third justification for a country to use force against another was noted.[54] The United States and its allies have argued against using the necessity for humanitarian intervention as a justification for intervention in Syria given that it carries the potential of being easily abused and used “as a pretext for a land grab or regime change”. [55] And while the US has consistently been an advocate for intervention to uphold fundamental human rights, their involvement in the conflict is similarly driven by a desire to advance their policy agenda. Based on the central problems in the Syrian Civil War, it is apparent that intergovernmental organizations are essentially “paralyzed or hamstrung by conflicts of interest among their most powerful, typically state, members”. [56] With “financial and other resourcing problems” combined with states suffering from the “corrosive

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

logic of collective-action problems”, the lack of institutional remedies thwarts the capacity for the UN “to provide public goods in the realm of human security”.^[57] As the vessel and not the captain of humanitarian intervention, the inaction of the UN is fundamentally a failure on the part of the international community. Therefore, it is the responsibility of member states to address the prevalent threats that prevent the UN from fulfilling its mandate of preserving international peace and security. Given the ongoing stalemate between Russia and the US on the Security Council, it is unlikely significant reforms will be made at this time to address the lapses in the body’s ability to respond to modern conflict.

Analyzing the Syrian conflict reveals the dire need for institutional reforms in the United Nations to improve its capacity to respond to multi-faceted civil wars that risk violating international human rights laws. R2P can be solidified as a norm in customary international law, which “results from a general and consistent practices of states that they follow from a sense of legal obligation”.^[58] However, the development of customary norms takes a considerable degree of time and is often prescribed following a case of war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing, or crimes against humanity. Based on the aforementioned analysis, it is apparent that the development of preemptive mechanisms in addressing modern conflict is necessary, but that the current politics in the UNSC mean that immediate reforms may need to be spearheaded in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). The evident tension between “upholding Articles 2(4) and 2(7) of the Charter protecting state sovereignty and the Charter’s human rights and collective security provisions” fluctuates based on periods of increased isolationism and affirmations of state commitments to global governance.^[59] The international community should therefore support actions “which may exert pressure on protagonists to halt hostilities and not renew warfare at some time in the future”.^[60] Given that states are only bound to international obligations when they choose to adhere to its tenets, world leaders must work to establish legitimacy for practices that reaffirm the prioritization of human security. By prioritizing peace building and state building efforts, the international community can “seek to instill and internalize cultures of human rights” in states.^[61] Such human security development would both preemptively mitigate conflict and would help states transitioning from civil wars. As the primary enablers of international peace and security, member states have the ability to spearhead efforts geared towards pressuring non-compliant actors from abusing human rights norms.

In addition to the action states can take to engage in human security development, it is evident that the UNSC’s present structure is unsuitable for addressing modern conflicts. The five permanent members with veto authority have the power to block any intervention efforts that contradict their respective policy objectives. Given the lack of appropriate representation amongst the P-5 members, “regional powers, such as Brazil, Germany, India, Japan, Nigeria and South Africa, have sought to enlarge the council or secure permanent seats of their own”.^[62] Although criticisms of expansion note the impact increased permanent membership could have on consensus building, the present lack of agreement amongst the P-5 renders the body ineffective and unrepresentative. As the UNSC has not been reformed since its founding, expansion of the body’s permanent membership could enable better representation amongst modern regional superpowers. Evidently, if the United Nations is intended to be an inclusive platform for global cooperation, its primary organ must include equal power wielding participation from representatives of each region.

Methods of comprehensive reform for the UNSC have been varying and would be difficult to enact, but could potentially enable the continued effectiveness of the body given constant transitions in global governance. Another example of UNSC reform could involve placing limitations on the use of the veto power, since “over the past ten years, Russia has used its veto on [multiple] occasions, largely to avoid scrutiny over its actions in Syria”.^[63] Present gridlock amongst the P-5, as previously analyzed, has led to inaction in combatting detrimental threats to international security. Revisions to the veto authority of the P-5 would be challenging to enact, but could further ensure equity in the UNSC’s decision-making process. “France and others argue an immediate fix would be for permanent members to waive their veto rights in cases of mass atrocities”, but Russia has been firm to oppose relinquishing their authority in any scenario.^[64] By “abolishing the permanent membership’s use of veto power to overrule the adoption of draft resolutions”, the UNSC could effectively take swift and immediate action in cases where human rights atrocities are being perpetrated in civil conflicts, such as in Syria.^[65]

Two additional models for reform proposed in 2004 during the Secretary General’s High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change included “adding six new permanent seats, with no veto, and three new two-year term

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

elected seats” or creating “a new category of eight seats, renewable every four years, and one new two-year non-renewable seat”.^[66] All proposed reforms were differing iterations of methods to expand permanent membership or veto authority in the body. It is apparent that reasons for a lack of immediate reform to the body are the result of refusal from P-5 members to reduce the authority they currently have in the UNSC. As previously discussed, the most realistic enabler for reform may need to originate in the General Assembly, with states reaffirming their commitment to human security and the need for inclusive representation in the UN. Evidently, the United Nations cannot be expected to uphold its commitment as a defender of international peace and security without acknowledging the dire need for institutional reform that better enables it to respond to modern conflict.

Conclusion

In conclusion, long term changes to the UNSC and its ability to engage in civil wars could stem from strengthening the responsibility to protect mandate, which has been used in the past “to justify the use of force outside Security Council authorization by qualifying the principle of noninterference in sovereign affairs”.^[67] Intervention, including the use of force, has been sanctioned because “human security is privileged over international order as a basic public good”.^[68] While concern over the parameters in which nations should intervene in a state’s sovereign affairs remains up for debate, it is apparent that transitions must be made in order for the international community to mitigate human rights atrocities from occurring. Revising the structure of the UNSC and reaffirming the global commitment to human security could incrementally better equip the United Nations with the mechanisms to approach modern conflict preemptively and prior to further deterioration. Ultimately, critics of the UNSC have consolidated reform into seven demands – “that the Council be: more representative, more accountable, more legitimate, more democratic, more transparent, more effective, and more fair and even-handed”.^[69] Such transformations should strive to enable the UN to become preemptive in its action rather than reactive. With such revisions, the UNSC carries the potential to remain an acclaimed body capable of maintaining international peace and security.

While the United Nations arguably is in dire need of redress, the organization has been incredibly successful in increasing the willingness of states to come to a consensus on global goals and has enabled the development of international law and customary norms for state behavior. The social ramifications of violating expectations of state policy act as a deterrent against the majority of infractions, and the UN is a vital platform for providing states with a forum to voice their opposition to a nation’s behavior. As “a forum where sovereign states can come together to share burdens, address common problems, and seize common opportunities”, the resolutions put forth by the UNSC carry “a legitimacy that is respected by the world’s governments” and their citizens.^[70] The need for transnational dialogue and humanitarian engagement, as well as the UN being the “only truly global organization in the history of mankind”, makes its existence vital to the continued progression of society.^[71]

However, the aforementioned flaws of the UNSC have emphasized the need for comprehensive reforms to better improve its ability to carry forth its mandate. Hostilities and disagreement amongst the United States and Russia exemplify a reduction in each state’s commitment to human security and the betterment of the world. For that reason, member states must utilize the UN to vocalize and reaffirm their commitment to global governance and to reduce the impact conflict has on societal welfare. Given the interconnectedness of states following waves of globalization, it is evident that the degradation of structures in one state consequently impacts the international community as a whole. The rise in refugee flows, increase in global terrorism, and environmental changes that have occurred as a result of the ongoing Syrian Civil War exemplify the need for UN intervention prior to conflicts deteriorating into prolonged civil unrest. By “adapting UN and other international procedures to allow a more effective response to political and humanitarian abuses”, the organization can be better equipped to tackle the challenges presented by multi-faceted modern conflict.^[72] While the strongest members of the United Nations refuse “to subordinate their vital national interests to collective international judgment, even though they loudly support the rule of law”, pressure from the global community can surely help influence P-5 states to reaffirm their commitment to human security.^[73] By reforming the structure of the United Nations Security Council and reassessing state promotion of their humanitarian objectives, the international community can have the capacity and capability to respond to the complex threats modern conflict poses to international peace and security.

Notes

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

- [1] Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *The United Nations: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 1.
- [2] UNSC, "About the United Nations Security Council," accessed May 11, 2018, <http://www.un.org/en/sc/about/>, pp. 9.
- [3] Hanhimäki, *The United Nations*, pp. 2.
- [4] Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, eds., *International Organization and Global Governance*, 2nd edition (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), pp. 578.
- [5] Weiss and Wilkinson, pp. 576.
- [6] UNSC, "United Nations Security Council," accessed May 11, 2018, <http://www.un.org/en/sc/>, pp. 1.
- [7] CFR, "The UN Security Council," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/background/un-security-council>, pp. 1.
- [8] Simon Chesterman, Ian Johnstone, and David M. Malone, *Law and Practice of the United Nations*, 2nd edition (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 357.
- [9] Hanhimäki, *The United Nations*, pp. 3.
- [10] "The UN Security Council", pp. 3.
- [11] James Cockayne, Christoph Mikulaschek, and Chris Perry, "The United Nations Security Council and Civil War: First Insights from a New Dataset" (*International Peace Institute*, September 2010), https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi_rpt_unsc_and_civil_war_epub.pdf, pp. 17.
- [12] Cockayne, Mikulaschek, and Perry, pp. 6.
- [13] Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 40-46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733>, pp. 40.
- [14] Mumford, pp. 40-41.
- [15] Bruno Tertrais, "The Demise of Ares: The End of War as We Know It?," *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (August 2012): 7-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.703521>, pp. 8.
- [16] Cockayne, Mikulaschek, and Perry, "The United Nations Security Council and Civil War: First Insights from a New Dataset", pp. 13-14.
- [17] Vaughan Lowe, ed., *The United Nations Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice since 1945*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), pp. 249.
- [18] Cockayne, Mikulaschek, and Perry, "The United Nations Security Council and Civil War: First Insights from a New Dataset", pp. 14.
- [19] Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), pp. 35.
- [20] Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, eds., *International Organization and Global Governance*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013) , pp. 4.

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

[21] Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect*, pp. 37.

[22] Cockayne, Mikulaschek, and Perry, "The United Nations Security Council and Civil War: First Insights from a New Dataset", pp. 14.

[23] Robert S. Ford, "Keeping Out of Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-16/keeping-out-syria>, pp. 2.

[24] Zachary Laub, "Syria's War: The Descent Into Horror," 2017, <https://on.cfr.org/1PetboM>, pp. 1.

[25] United Nations, "At Security Council, UN Chief Pushes for Creation of Body to Determine Perpetrators of Chemical Attacks in Syria," *UN News*, April 13, 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/04/1007261>, pp. 1.

[26] United Nations, pp. 1-2.

[27] "The UN Security Council", pp. 1-2.

[28] James Nixey and Xenia Wickett, "Russia, Syria and the West: Mutually Assured Frustration," *Chatham House*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-syria-and-west-mutually-assured-frustration>, pp. 1-4.

[29] Yury Barmin, "Syria and the Beginning of a New Cold War," *Al Jazeera*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/syria-beginning-cold-war-180422075430047.html>, pp. 1.

[30] Ford, "Keeping Out of Syria", pp. 1.

[31] Chesterman, Johnstone, and Malone, *Law and Practice of the United Nations*, pp. 357.

[32] Chesterman, Johnstone, and Malone, pp. 56.

[33] Russell Goldman, "Assad's History of Chemical Attacks, and Other Atrocities," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2017, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/world/middleeast/syria-bashar-al-assad-atrocities-civilian-deaths-gas-attack.html>, pp. 1-2.

[34] Alicia Sanders-Zakre, "What You Need to Know About Chemical Weapons Use in Syria," *Arms Control Association*, September 23, 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2018-09-23/what-you-need-know-about-chemical-weapons-use-syria>, pp. 1.

[35] Sanders-Zakre, pp. 2.

[36] Juan Carlos Portilla, "The Syrian Conflict Through The Lens Of International Law," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 2018, <http://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2016/9/7/the-syrian-conflict-through-the-lens-of-international-law>, pp. 1.

[37] Sewell Chan, "U.N. Security Council Rejects Russian Resolution Condemning Syrian Strikes," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/world/middleeast/un-security-council-syria-airstrikes.html>, pp. 1.

[38] Julian Borger et al., "Vetoed! What's Wrong with the UN Security Council – and How It Could Do Better," *The Guardian*, accessed May 11, 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/sep/23/un-security-council-failing-70-years>, pp. 1.

[39] "The UN Security Council", pp. 1.

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

- [40] Raidió Teilifís Éireann, "Russia's 12 UN Vetoes on Syria," *RTE*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2018/0411/953637-russia-syria-un-veto/>, pp. 1.
- [41] Laub, "Syria's War", pp. 1.
- [42] Louis Charbonneau, "Russia U.N. Veto on Syria Aimed at Crushing West's Crusade," *Reuters*, February 8, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-russia-idUSTRE8170BK20120208>, pp. 1.
- [43] Charbonneau, pp. 3.
- [44] Weiss and Wilkinson, *International Organization and Global Governance*, 2013, pp. 582.
- [45] Julien Barnes-Dacey, "The New U.N. Envoy to Syria Should Kill the Political Process to Save It," *Foreign Policy* (blog), November 9, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/09/the-new-u-n-envoy-to-syria-should-kill-the-political-process-to-save-it-conflict-civil-war-united-nations-russia-assad-pedersen/>, pp. 1.
- [46] Cockayne, Mikulaschek, and Perry, "The United Nations Security Council and Civil War: First Insights from a New Dataset", pp. 8.
- [47] Weiss and Wilkinson, *International Organization and Global Governance*, 2018, pp. 581.
- [48] Weiss and Wilkinson, pp. 581.
- [49] *UNDP*, "UNDP Human Development Reports: Syrian Arab Republic," accessed November 26, 2017, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SYR>, pp. 17.
- [50] Weiss and Wilkinson, *International Organization and Global Governance*, 2018, pp. 581.
- [51] Barmin, "Syria and the Beginning of a New Cold War", pp. 1.
- [52] United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*, Limited Cherry edition (New York: United Nations, 2015), pp. 1.
- [53] Cockayne, Mikulaschek, and Perry, "The United Nations Security Council and Civil War: First Insights from a New Dataset", pp. 6.
- [54] Michael Scharf, "Syria May Be Using Chemical Weapons against Its Citizens Again — Here's How International Law Has Changed to Help Countries Intervene," *Public Radio International*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-12-06/syria-may-be-using-chemical-weapons-against-its-citizens-again-here-s-how>, pp. 1.
- [55] Scharf, pp. 1.
- [56] Weiss and Wilkinson, *International Organization and Global Governance*, 2018, pp. 582.
- [57] Weiss and Wilkinson, pp. 582.
- [58] Boris Mamlyuk, "Customary International Law," *LII / Legal Information Institute*, October 23, 2009, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/customary_international_law, pp. 2.
- [59] Vaughan Lowe, Adam Roberts, and Jennifer Welsh, eds., *The United Nations Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice since 1945*, 1 edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), pp. 250-251.

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

[60] Paul F. Diehl, Jennifer Reifschneider, and Paul R. Hensel, "United Nations Intervention and Recurring Conflict," *International Organization* 50, no. 4 (1996): 683–700, pp. 688.

[61] Weiss and Wilkinson, *International Organization and Global Governance*, 2018, pp. 5.

[62] "The UN Security Council", pp. 1.

[63] Borger et al., "Vetoed! What's Wrong with the UN Security Council – and How It Could Do Better", pp. 1.

[64] Borger et al, pp. 1.

[65] Nations, "At Security Council, UN Chief Pushes for Creation of Body to Determine Perpetrators of Chemical Attacks in Syria", pp. 1.

[66] *Global Policy Forum*, "Security Council Reform," 2019, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/security-council/security-council-reform.html>, pp. 1.

[67] "The UN Security Council", pp. 1.

[68] Weiss and Wilkinson, *International Organization and Global Governance*, 2018, pp. 579.

[69] Céline Nahory and James Paul, "Theses Towards a Democratic Reform of the UN Security Council," *Global Policy*, July 13, 2005, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/security-council/security-council-reform/41131.html?itemid=917>, pp. 1.

[70] Shashi Tharoor, "Why America Still Needs the United Nations," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 5 (2003): 67–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033683>, pp. 1.

[71] Hanhimäki, *The United Nations*, pp. 5.

[72] Lowe, Roberts, and Welsh, *The United Nations Security Council and War*, pp. 249.

[73] Lowe, Roberts, and Welsh, pp. 249.

References

Barmin, Yury. "Syria and the Beginning of a New Cold War," April 22, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/syria-beginning-cold-war-180422075430047.html>.

Barnes-Dacey, Julien. "The New U.N. Envoy to Syria Should Kill the Political Process to Save It." *Foreign Policy* (blog), November 9, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/09/the-new-u-n-envoy-to-syria-should-kill-the-political-process-to-save-it-conflict-civil-war-united-nations-russia-assad-pedersen/>.

Borger, Julian, Bastien Inzaurrealde, Cath Levett, Chris Newell, Finbarr Sheehy, and Phil Maynard. "Vetoed! What's Wrong with the UN Security Council – and How It Could Do Better." *The Guardian*. Accessed May 11, 2018. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/sep/23/un-security-council-failing-70-years>.

CFR. "The UN Security Council." Council on Foreign Relations, September 7, 2017. <https://www.cfr.org/background/un-security-council>.

Chan, Sewell. "U.N. Security Council Rejects Russian Resolution Condemning Syrian Strikes – The New York Times," April 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/world/middleeast/un-security-council-syria-airstrikes.html>.

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

- Charbonneau, Louis. "Russia U.N. Veto on Syria Aimed at Crushing West's Crusade." *Reuters*, February 8, 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-russia-idUSTRE8170BK20120208>.
- Chesterman, Simon, Ian Johnstone, and David M. Malone. *Law and Practice of the United Nations*. 2 edition. Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Cockayne, James, Christoph Mikulaschek, and Chris Perry. "The United Nations Security Council and Civil War: First Insights from a New Dataset." International Peace Institute, September 2010. https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi_rpt_unsc_and_civil_war_epub.pdf.
- Diehl, Paul F., Jennifer Reifschneider, and Paul R. Hensel. "United Nations Intervention and Recurring Conflict." *International Organization* 50, no. 4 (1996): 683–700.
- Evans, Gareth. *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2009.
- Ford, Robert S. "Keeping Out of Syria," November 28, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-16/keeping-out-syria>.
- Global Policy Forum. "Security Council Reform," 2019. <https://www.globalpolicy.org/security-council/security-council-reform.html>.
- Goldman, Russell. "Assad's History of Chemical Attacks, and Other Atrocities." *The New York Times*, April 5, 2017, sec. Middle East. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/world/middleeast/syria-bashar-al-assad-atrocities-civilian-deaths-gas-attack.html>.
- Hanhimäki, Jussi M. *The United Nations: A Very Short Introduction*. 2 edition. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Laub, Zachary. "Syria's War: The Descent Into Horror," 2017. <https://on.cfr.org/1PetboM>.
- Lowe, Vaughan, ed. *The United Nations Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice since 1945*. 1 edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010.
- Lowe, Vaughan, Adam Roberts, and Jennifer Welsh, eds. *The United Nations Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice since 1945*. 1 edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010.
- Mamlyuk, Boris. "Customary International Law." LII / Legal Information Institute, October 23, 2009. https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/customary_international_law.
- Mumford, Andrew. "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict." *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 40–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733>.
- Nahory, Céline, and James Paul. "Theses Towards a Democratic Reform of the UN Security Council," July 13, 2005. <https://www.globalpolicy.org/security-council/security-council-reform/41131.html?itemid=917>.
- Nations, United. "At Security Council, UN Chief Pushes for Creation of Body to Determine Perpetrators of Chemical Attacks in Syria." UN News, April 13, 2018. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/04/1007261>.
- . *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*. Limited Cherry edition. New York: United Nations, 2015.
- Nixey, James, and Xenia Wickett. "Russia, Syria and the West: Mutually Assured Frustration." Chatham House,

The Limitations and Capabilities of the United Nations in Modern Conflict

Written by Nina Kalantar

October 2, 2015. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-syria-and-west-mutually-assured-frustration>.

Portilla, Juan Carlos. "The Syrian Conflict Through The Lens Of International Law." THE FLETCHER FORUM OF WORLD AFFAIRS, 2018. <http://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2016/9/7/the-syrian-conflict-through-the-lens-of-international-law>.

Raidió Teilifís Éireann. "Russia's 12 UN Vetoes on Syria," April 11, 2018. <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2018/0411/953637-russia-syria-un-veto/>.

Sanders-Zakre, Alicia. "What You Need to Know About Chemical Weapons Use in Syria | Arms Control Association," September 23, 2018. <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2018-09-23/what-you-need-know-about-chemical-weapons-use-syria>.

Scharf, Michael. "Syria May Be Using Chemical Weapons against Its Citizens Again — Here's How International Law Has Changed to Help Countries Intervene." Public Radio International, December 6, 2018. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-12-06/syria-may-be-using-chemical-weapons-against-its-citizens-again-here-s-how>.

Tertrais, Bruno. "The Demise of Ares: The End of War as We Know It?" *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (August 2012): 7-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.703521>.

Tharoor, Shashi. "Why America Still Needs the United Nations." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 5 (2003): 67-80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033683>.

"UNDP Human Development Reports: Syrian Arab Republic." Accessed November 26, 2017. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SYR>.

UNSC. "About the United Nations Security Council." Accessed May 11, 2018. <http://www.un.org/en/sc/about/>.

———. "United Nations Security Council." Accessed May 11, 2018. <http://www.un.org/en/sc/>.

Weiss, Thomas G., and Rorden Wilkinson, eds. *International Organization and Global Governance*. 1 edition. London ; New York: Routledge, 2013.

———, eds. *International Organization and Global Governance*. 2 edition. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

Written by: Nina Kalantar
Written at: Northeastern University
Written for: Dr Anthony Jones
Date written: April 2019