

In 2020, we need to think of a #UN for the 21st century

[Guest contributor](#) | December 20, 2019



In recent years, it has become commonplace to criticize the United Nations for failing to do enough to safeguard human rights or secure global peace – writes Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan. The UN has not been effective in resolving major intractable issues whether Israel-Palestine, or more recent conflicts, like Syria, or the treatment of the Rohingya and Uighur peoples.

The failure of the most important international institution has become particularly frustrating in recent years because many of the most significant issues of the day, whether it be the regulation of technology, violent extremism, or the growing weaponization of space, are issues that cannot be adequately addressed unilaterally.

No single nation on its own has the authority, reach, or capability of addressing issues that will determine the future of the entire planet. These issues require cooperation, and regulation that spans continents and frequently nations with fundamentally different constitutions. Given the issues we face today, if a UN did not exist, it would be necessary to create one.

Yet despite the UN seeming to be the only available answer to the world's issues, it is rarely looked on as a viable route to concrete solutions.

Since its creation, the UN has been riven with entrenched biases, routinely favouring its more powerful members, and limiting the ability of other nations to gain redress or secure help. Lest we forget, it was founded at a time when certain member states were colonial empires, and members were no better able to correct their behaviour than the smaller nations are against the dominant countries today.

Despite the democratic nature of its assembly, the Security Council, where much of the major decision-making takes place, remains dominated by the permanent members, who use the veto system to ride roughshod over the wishes of the assembly.

It is worth remembering that the [intention of the original victors](#) after WW2 in formulating the structure of the security council was to seek and maintain “stability”, *not necessarily security or Justice*, and that major and serious shortcoming is [still there today](#).

Nevertheless, the past two decades showed that the organisation is capable of real and promising reform.

In 2002, the democratic consensus in the General Assembly overcame strong resistance from the permanent members of the Security Council to see the establishment of an International Criminal Court. In 2006 the UN enshrined the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), shifting its focus on the concerns of states to a duty to protect victims within member states. At the time it appeared the UN might be capable of addressing issues at a global level.

Fast forward to 2019 however, and the hope and promise has somewhat disappeared. The disregard with which members of the Security Council have treated the UN, and the body’s inability to protect victims in various conflict zones, suggests the UN is as far away from finding a solution to conflicts than it has ever been.

Today many international leaders denounce globalism and call for greater ‘patriotism’, rejecting the notion that nations have shared responsibilities or obligations to each other. There is nothing wrong with patriotism but loving one’s own country does not mean standing by while others suffer. Yet this is the attitude now taken by many, and the major decision-making body of the UN, the UN Security Council, has [adopted this attitude far too often](#).

As the security council neglects its responsibility to the rest of the world, UN institutions like the ICC have also become vulnerable to those in positions of power and its goals and focus have disproportionately become focused on less powerful states, as highlighted by African Union calls for a collective African withdrawal from the ICC.

The solution to the current gridlock, and the dominance of the Security Council ultimately has to be more democratic reform. Member states have to find a way to re-orient power back from the Security Council to the General Assembly, and work with permanent members who support their interests to help eliminate or limit the effect of Security Council veto rights.

At the very least, there needs to be a commitment from Security Council members to waive their veto rights when it comes to situations of deliberate mass atrocities, persistent injustices, or where states are disregarding international laws and norms. If it cannot do that, then these issues will never be addressed, and member states would be better off walking away from the institution than remaining committed to a body enabling moral disasters.

While it is deeply unlikely that we will see prevention of the actions of Security Council members, more has to be done to address the wider issues affecting the planet.

If this can’t be achieved through the UN, then another international institution will have to be created instead. We do not have time to wait for the UN to reform, these issues need addressing now, and they need an international body fit to carry out the task.

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