



SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF THE UN

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Since the start of the conflict in Syria in 2011, the international community, as well as the United Nations has time and again expressed their outrage and strongly condemned the atrocities taking place in Syria. However, the powerlessness and redundancy of the United Nations in this regard has been a very important factor which cannot be overlooked. The collective failures of the United States, Russia, France and other regional players involved, as well as the ineptitude of the UN have all been instrumental in exacerbating the situation.

The story of the United Nations' connection with the Syrian conflict is a very significant one. Despite the Geneva peace talks on Syria which started in 2017 between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition under the auspices of the UN, the organization has failed to stop the bloodshed in the war-torn country. Moreover, the Syrian conflict in which some 400,000 people have died, five million have become refugees and 13.5 million people are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, deserves thorough analysis and attention by the world body.

The crisis in Syria also holds lessons for how the UN responds to such crises, and it is important that these lessons are learned, both to bring the suffering in Syria to an end and to empower the UN to prevent, manage and resolve conflict in the future.¹ Furthermore, the recent Security Council meetings with regard to the response undertaken by the US, UK and France to the alleged chemical weapon attack by Assad Government is proof of the inadequacy of the UN in taking decision in this

¹ Peter Nadin, How the UN Security Council Failed Syria, *The Interpreter*, August 30, 2017. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-un-security-council-failed-syria>

crisis. With the US and its allies vetoing Russian decisions and vice versa, the UNSC meetings have become grounds for a *Ping-Pong* match rather than a platform for serious discussion.

A deeper understanding is desirable of why the UN fails, and at times succeeds. The UN is no more than the sum of its parts - its member states - and can do no more than what those members - especially the most powerful ones - will allow it to do. The UN remains a crucial institution, but one that only has a limited number of tools at its disposal to prevent conflict. In Syria, the ceasefire mechanism at the UN's disposal would have been sufficient to secure peace, but only if the sides involved had been willing to compromise. Unfortunately, they were not. Secretary-General António Guterres said on February 18, 2017 at the Munich Security Conference:

"I think that peace is only possible when none of the parties to the conflict think they can win. I am not sure we are there yet in Syria. I am afraid that some might still think - and I think that is a total illusion - that they might win that war, so I am not optimistic about the short term solution for the Syrian crisis."²

Syria has suffered from the shallow, distorted analysis that almost everyone made of its crisis. The UN Secretary-General and his envoys alone said, from day one, there was no military solution to the conflict. After around three years of costly war, the UN view seemed most sustainable, but that was mostly lip service: they did say that there was no military solution, but continued to work for war, not for peace. There can be no denying the fact that the UN is irreplaceable when entire communities are in need of urgent humanitarian help. In Syria, the UN played a vital role as a deliverer of humanitarian aid to allay the suffering felt by the people. But it did only as much as the big powers allowed it to do. Eastern Ghouta is the most recent example of this. Despite the fact that a humanitarian corridor was negotiated by Russia and the rebel groups, it was not adhered to. If anything, the bombing intensified. Far too often, the Syrian Government prevented UN convoys from reaching large numbers of people in desperate need of help. Previously Aleppo and recently Eastern Ghouta are examples of such cities.

The terrible nightmare the Syrian people have lived these past six years is a strong reminder that the UN needs to be given the tools which will allow it to succeed in bringing existing conflicts to an end and preventing future wars. Secretary-General Guterres has been elected under new rules of procedure that allowed a larger participation of the General Assembly and much more transparency than ever before. The Secretary-General is determined to work for more reform, but his reform

² Lakhdar Brahimi, Did the UN fail Syria? April 4, 2017 <https://theelders.org/article/did-un-fail-syria>

agenda cannot be implemented without strong cooperation and support from the membership of the Organization. The reform of the Security Council is particularly important. A good beginning would be an agreement on the restraint of the use of the veto when preventing or resolving a conflict is concerned. The question of the vetoed resolutions is also an important one and the fact that the adoption of these resolutions is dependent on great power obstructionism is something which cannot be ignored while taking the failure of the UN Security Council, regarding the Syrian crises.