



# Imagining new ways to respond to violent conflicts

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## SPEEDREAD

### MAIN MESSAGE

The world has greatly changed since the creation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 and the Westphalian state-based system of international relations in 1648, but we still primarily look to the UN and nation-states to resolve violent large-scale conflicts. When a situation does spiral out of control, politicians, diplomats and policy-makers tend to liberally call for the use of force to put an end to the conflict. However, responding to violence with violence is a short-term and highly destructive strategy that can be augmented or replaced with a focus on creating new structures, dynamics and processes better suited to addressing today's wide-scale conflicts.

### AUDIENCE

Professionals engaged in research, policy and interventions in the areas of conflict prevention, management and resolution.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

This policy brief provides three recommendations to help move beyond the status quo and to create better ways to address violent conflicts:

- Imagining a worldwide conflict resolution system beyond the UN Security Council, if meaningful reform of this body cannot be achieved.
  - Open-mindedness to increasing self-determination for conflict-affected communities.
  - Fostering the creation of cooperative and secure international and domestic relationship dynamics.
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## **About the Platform**

The Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law brings together a network of relevant communities of practice comprising experts, policymakers, practitioners, researchers and the business sector on the topic of security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It provides for a meeting space - offline as well as online - and intellectual stimulus grounded in practice for its network to share experiences, exchange lessons learned and discuss novel insights. This way, it strives to contribute to the evidence base of current policies, and the effectiveness of collaboration and programming while simultaneously facilitating the generation of new knowledge. The Secretariat of the Platform is run jointly by the Hague Institute for Global Justice and the Conflict Research Unit of Clingendael Institute.

## Introduction

There is a sense that we, collectively as global citizens, could do a better job at helping to quickly resolve the various large-scale conflicts around the world. Whether regarding the seemingly intractable fighting in Syria, the continued lack of a coherent political settlement in Libya, or the still-missing girls taken by Boko Haram, there is frustration in seeing the monumental efforts made thus far fail to bear the expected fruit. This policy brief finds that responding to violence with violence is a short-term strategy that could be augmented or replaced with a focus on creating new structures, dynamics and processes better suited to addressing today's large-scale conflicts.

## Where we find ourselves today

Undeniably, the world has changed a great deal since the United Nations (UN) was established in 1945, and even more since the birth of the Westphalian state-based system of international relations in 1648. Yet the world still primarily looks to the UN and nation-states to resolve global conflicts, even as the UN is criticized for its “bleak record in solving the wars of today,”<sup>1</sup> and states are seen as equally if not more a part of the problem rather than the solution.<sup>2</sup> Further, responding to violent crises with what is euphemistically termed the use of force is often still seen as the ultimate solution,<sup>3</sup> even though when confronted with it, most are also against the ensuing destruction. However, the seeming expectation that a conflict should be able to be resolved quickly and neatly through a peace process or a definitive victory of good over evil is misleading. This result has become more elusive since the end of the Cold War, when the binary view of international relations transformed into the multipolar world we live in today, which is better understood in terms of shades of gray.

For today's current crisis zones, it would be a time consuming task to catalogue the actions the international community has taken thus far, and one would likely find that there was not

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<sup>1</sup> Somini Sengupta, “Geneva, a City of Diplomacy, Brims with Totems of Peace and War,” *New York Times*, 7 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/08/world/europe/geneva-a-city-of-diplomacy-brims-with-totems-of-peace-and-war.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Jean-Marie Guehenno, former head of the UN's Department of Peacekeeping, highlighted that beyond being criticized for “failing to do good, the department was accused of doing real harm,” in particular “through [peacekeepers] abusing women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” *The Fog of Peace: A Memoir of International Peacekeeping in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Anthony Dworkin, “European Countries Edge Towards War on Terror,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 September 2005; Stephen Walt, “Is America Addicted to War?” *Foreign Policy*, April 2011.

necessarily a correlation between taking more action and success. The natural outgrowth of pessimism borne from this stagnation was on display recently in the first round of Syrian peace talks in 2016, with a simple scan of the news showing that another failure was largely expected,<sup>4</sup> and indeed, the talks were suspended almost as they began.<sup>5</sup> The ceasefire agreement that followed was also met with great skepticism, and since it has taken hold has been plagued by complaints that it is not being fully adhered to.<sup>6</sup> Current crises at the top of the news cycle have been ongoing, in some cases for more than a decade, despite extensive news coverage and international engagement.

The lengthening of conflicts and the inability to end them is reflected in diplomatic circles. UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson recently warned that many of today's present conflicts—including Syria, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic (CAR)—make it clear that international efforts to protect people from atrocities are still “lagging and elusive.”<sup>7</sup> Three successive UN envoys for Syria, Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Steffan de Mistura, have attempted to bring the parties together to find a solution, so far without success. And Samantha Power, the US Ambassador to the UN, recently commented that what keeps her up at night is “the need to find political solutions not only to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the Yemen conflict, to the Syrian conflict. All across Africa the same dynamics exist. So we have our work cut out for us...”<sup>8</sup>

When attempts at diplomacy fail and conflicts start to spiral out of control, politicians and policymakers tend to begin calling loudly for forceful reactions such as bombing, ground invasions, or the arming and training of local fighters. In the United States presidential election campaign, for example, Ted Cruz and Donald Trump both promised to carpet bomb

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<sup>4</sup> BBC News, “Former NATO Commander: ‘Syria talks unlikely to succeed’,” 29 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35446741>; Jared Malsin, “Syrian Peace Talks Are at a Stalemate and They Haven’t Even Started,” *Time*, 28 January 2016, <http://time.com/4198315/syrian-peace-talks/>; James Traub, “There Is No Plan B If the Syria Peace Talks Fail. And, Trust Me, They Will. So What Comes Next?,” *Foreign Policy*, 1 February 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/01/the-syria-peace-talks-in-geneva-will-fail-russia-iran-united-states/>.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Cumming-Brunce and Somini Sengupta, “Syria Talks Are Suspended,” *New York Times*, 3 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/04/world/middleeast/syria-peace-talks-geneva-de-mistura.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Patrick Wintour and Mark Tran, “First Test for Syrian truce after breaches reported on both sides,” *Guardian*, 29 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/29/thousands-may-have-died-in-syria-sieges-un-human-rights-chief-says>; Aljazeera, “Syria ceasefire: ‘135 killed’ in first week of truce,” 5 March 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-ceasefire-135-killed-week-truce-160305152413740.html>; Mohammed Kourdi and Tim Hume, “Kerry expresses outrage after 50 killed in strike on Syrian hospital,” CNN, 30 April 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/28/middleeast/syria-aleppo-hospital-airstrike/>.

<sup>7</sup> UN News Centre, “Rwandan genocide: Security Council told failure of political will led to ‘cascade of human tragedy,’” 16 April 2014.

<sup>8</sup> “A Conversation with Ambassador Samantha Power on American Leadership in a Changing World,” Humanrights.gov, 13 January 2016, <http://www.humanrights.gov/dyn/2016/01/a-conversation-with-ambassador-samantha-power-on-american-leadership-in-a-changing-world/>.

the Islamic State, and American scholars and policy analysts repeatedly called for the US to use force to push Syria and Russia to negotiate.<sup>9</sup>

Force is sometimes necessary to end the perpetration of violence. US Ambassador Richard Holbrooke found this to be the case in his negotiations with the former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, about whom he declared: “I regret to say, but it is obvious that Milosevic only responds to force or the absolute incredible threat of the use of force. This was clear in Bosnia, and it was clear in Kosovo.”<sup>10</sup>

However, although the use of force can be effective in destroying the will of parties to continue fighting, it can also be incredibly blunt and entail a high risk of death and injury to noncombatants in the conflict zone. The National Transitional Council of Libya estimates that thirty thousand people died and fifty thousand were injured as a result of the 2011 NATO intervention, which was criticized for not protecting civilians, but rather multiplying “the number of their deaths, while losing not a single [NATO] soldier of their own.”<sup>11</sup> Although there were strong worldwide calls to bomb Syria to end the violence, we now know that airstrikes from virtually all parties have led to numerous civilian casualties, including 336 attacks on medical sites,<sup>12</sup> leading many Syrians to ask for an end to the campaigns.<sup>13</sup> Further, although weapons technology to minimize the civilian impact exists, those waging war or carrying out so-called humanitarian interventions still use unguided weapons, something that was suspected of the Russian air campaign in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Michael Ignatieff and Leon Wieseltier, “Enough is Enough – U.S. abdication on Syria must come to an End,” *Washington Post*, 9 February 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-era-of-us-abdication-on-syria-must-end/2016/02/09/55226716-ce96-11e5-88cd-753e80cd29ad\\_story.html?postshare=201455049874924&tid=ss\\_tw](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-era-of-us-abdication-on-syria-must-end/2016/02/09/55226716-ce96-11e5-88cd-753e80cd29ad_story.html?postshare=201455049874924&tid=ss_tw).

<sup>10</sup> Frontline Interviews, “Richard Holbrooke,” (undated), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/holbrooke.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Seumas Milne, “If the Libyan war was about saving lives, it was a catastrophic failure,” *Guardian*, 26 October 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/26/libya-war-saving-lives-catastrophic-failure>.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Barnard, “Syrian Hospitals Hit as Battlefield Grows More Chaotic,” *New York Times*, 15 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/16/world/middleeast/syria-hospital-airstrike-doctors-without-borders.html>.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Mazan Darwish during the Four Freedoms award ceremony at the event Roosevelt in The Hague, Peace Palace Library, The Hague, 22 April 2016; Sophia Jones and Akbar Ahmed, “U.S. Airstrikes in Syria ‘Have Killed So Many People. We Want Them To Stop,’” *Huffington Post*, 22 May 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/22/airstrikes-syria-deaths\\_n\\_7422884.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/22/airstrikes-syria-deaths_n_7422884.html); Tom Batchelor, “Syrians plead with UK to halt airstrikes amid fears civilians will be killed by RAF bombs,” *Sunday Express*, 3 December 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/623982/Syria-airstrikes-Britain-stop-RAF-bombing-missions-protect-civilians>; Norma Costello, “Syrians Explain How They Feel About the West Bombing Their Country,” *Vice*, 4 December 2015, <http://www.vice.com/read/asking-syrians-about-bombing-syria-800>.

<sup>14</sup> Malsin, “Russian Airstrikes in Syria Seem to Be Hurting Civilians More Than ISIS,” *Time*, 30 November 2015, <http://time.com/4129222/russia-airstrikes-syria-civilian-casualties-isis/>.

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*The Yemeni-requested air strikes by an international coalition led by Saudi Arabia have injured or killed civilians 93 percent of the time, and during the first seven months of 2015, explosive weapons killed or injured more civilians in Yemen than anywhere else in the world.*<sup>15</sup>

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A resulting compromise that some world leaders make is to forgo attacking in favor of training or equipping fighters. But this strategy, while possibly more palatable for the public, can create even more damage than the direct use of force because it puts weapons and training into a circulation that cannot be easily controlled. Examples of this phenomenon are not hard to find. In 2010 the United States lost track of 43 percent of the 465,000 small arms it had supplied to security forces in Afghanistan. A 2013-2014 audit found that the US had given Afghans a large surplus of weapons that was likely to end up in the hands of insurgents or in neighboring conflicts, including 80,000 AK-47s, 5,800 grenade launchers, and 2,500 Russian PKM machine guns.<sup>16</sup> A more recent case is the failed \$500 million US program to train and equip moderate Syrian rebels. It has been reported that one of the trained fighters gave American weapons and vehicles to the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Nusra Front, and in general, the moderate rebels trained also fought alongside and shared weapons with anti-American groups.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the Islamic State has been found to be using arms and ammunition sourced from at least twenty-five countries, including the United States, Russia, Turkey, Austria, Russia, Belgium, the Gulf States, and China, a substantial portion of which were taken or illicitly traded out of the Iraqi military supply.<sup>18</sup>

Stories like this are prevalent, and inadequate controls on the arms trade generally have led to the 2014 ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) by seventy-eight state parties, including The Netherlands. It set uniform standards in place to reduce the illicit arms trade by, for example, requiring state parties to prohibit their national weapons suppliers from selling arms when there is substantial risk that they might be used to commit war crimes or human rights violations. Many already question the ATT's effectiveness, however, because it

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<sup>15</sup> Nigel Fisher "93% of deaths and injuries in Yemen are civilian – this must change," *Guardian*, 27 October 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/oct/27/yemen-deaths-93-civilian-this-must-change>.

<sup>16</sup> Dana Liebelson, "The US Has Given Over 465,000 Small Arms to Afghanistan. Where the Hell Are They?," *Mother Jones*, 28 July 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/07/sigar-afghanistan-us-weapons-wind-up-insurgents>.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Pizzi, "US abandons failed \$500M program to train and equip Syrian rebels," *Aljazeera America*, 9 October 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/10/9/us-to-abandon-failed-syria-train-and-equip-program.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International, "Taking Stock: The Arming of the Islamic State," December 2015, [https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/taking\\_stock\\_the\\_arming\\_of\\_is.pdf](https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/taking_stock_the_arming_of_is.pdf).

does not limit the amount or kind of weapons that can be traded. Further, without ratification by Russia, the world's second largest arms exporter after the United States, the market for parties who want to buy unregulated arms is still large. Additionally and notably, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently admonished the UK, a member of the ATT, for approving £3 billion worth of arms export licenses for Saudi Arabia, which is widely known to be carrying out an indiscriminate bombing campaign over Yemen.<sup>19</sup> The world is so awash in weapons now, especially in places where there is a vacuum of governance and regulation, that we cannot be surprised at the number of ongoing conflicts, the same way that it is difficult to be surprised that the United States, which provides comparatively easy access to weapons, had thirty times the number of gun deaths in 2012 than the UK, and in the first fourteen weeks of 2016 already had sixty-two mass shootings.<sup>20</sup>

The ATT lines up with certain developments in international criminal law jurisprudence, which is a strong tool in curbing the irresponsible provision of arms to fighters in foreign conflicts because it also covers the actions of non-state actors. Specifically, international criminal tribunals can find individuals guilty of aiding and abetting crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity if they provided military or other kinds of support to the actors who carried them out. A conviction for a crime of aiding and abetting could easily result in a prison sentence of more than a decade, and in theory should influence world leaders to exercise caution in providing weapons and training to fighters of foreign conflicts. However, while the jurisprudence is too scattered to reliably guide world leaders and should therefore add to their sense of caution, those from powerful states still seem shielded from criminal accountability in this regard.

Further, although bombing and flooding conflict zones with arms and military training can have obvious destructive implications for distant locations, the states staging these interventions are also affected. Specifically, we now know that conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder are common among war veterans, and can be even more pervasive among drone operators.<sup>21</sup> War veterans also often have great difficulties returning home, whether because of physical or mental ailments. If states do not make a significant investment in providing them with the appropriate support, they can become a danger to themselves or others and generally struggle to become productive members of society.

The motives of politicians to bomb or arm fighters in foreign conflicts is also easily called into question when oftentimes the leading war hawks have business relationships with weapons distributors and/or companies that would profit from the control of the resources or the reconstruction efforts in the conflict affected states. Former US Vice President Dick Cheney,

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<sup>19</sup> Patrick Wintour, "Ban Ki-moon adds pressure on UK to stop arms sales to Saudis," *Guardian*, 5 February 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/05/ban-ki-moon-yemen-war-uk-arms-sales-saudi-arabia>

<sup>20</sup> BBC News, "Guns in the US: The statistics behind the violence," 5 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34996604>; Gun Violence Archive, "Mass Shootings – 2016," (undated), Washington D.C., <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Hawkes, "Post-traumatic stress disorder is higher in drone operators," *Telegraph*, 30 May 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/11639746/Post-traumatic-stress-disorder-is-higher-in-drone-operators.html>.



for example, is widely believed to have steered and profited from the awarding of a \$7 billion noncompetitive contract to Halliburton, a company he led as CEO prior to joining the Bush administration, and which viewed war as a “growth opportunity.” This was heavily criticized, including by US Representative Henry Waxman, who claimed in 2004 that Halliburton got special treatment and that he was “appalled that the war is being used by people close to the Bush administration to make money for themselves.”<sup>22</sup> War protestors and whistleblowers often advance a theory of an ongoing “wartime paradigm” in which arms dealers and their profiteers have numerous incentives to drive conflict and create weak states explicitly to support the continuance of the highly profitable arms trade at the expense of peace.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond all of these problems, the resulting peace that the use of force achieves tends to be effective only on a short-term basis unless it is accompanied by a corresponding strategy to address the root causes of the violence.<sup>24</sup> Reticence to rock the boat of the current world power structures means that despite our best attempts, without breaking through some of the bottlenecks we have created that prevent change, we may find that these sorts of intractable violent conflicts can continue without end.

## Can we create any new ways to respond to violent conflicts?

Ultimately, putting some energy into moving beyond the status quo and creating better ways to address violent conflicts is worthwhile. And in doing so, it is also worth remembering the advice of R. Buckminster Fuller that, “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” Three recommendations in that vein to spark the imagination follow:

The first recommendation is to make a fresh attempt at addressing the inability of the UN Security Council to fulfill its mandate of maintaining peace and security, including by taking action to create a new mechanism to replace it if its five permanent members (the P5) continue to block the needed reforms. The Security Council’s glaring inadequacies in this regard have led Giandomenico Picco, a former UN negotiator and UN assistant secretary-general, to argue in 2015 that the UN is outdated in terms of conflict resolution because it “has not resolved one conflict since 1992.” Picco also observed that, “What we have to deal with is leaders who have the courage of writing a new page, and those who do not—and that

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<sup>22</sup> Jane Mayer, “Contract Sport: What Did the Vice-President Do for Halliburton,” *New Yorker*, 16 February 2004, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/02/16/contract-sport>.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Van Buren, “Once Again, American Weapons-Makers Are Making a Killing in Iraq,” *Mother Jones*, 16 January 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/iraq-military-win-business-not-war>.

<sup>24</sup> Kofi Annan, “Africa and the Global Security Architecture, Barir Dar, Ethiopia, Tana High Level Forum on Security in Africa,” 16 April 2016, <http://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/speeches/africa-global-security-architecture/>.

is, in practical terms, what is happening.”<sup>25</sup>

An increasing number of former high-level actors from the UN system are also questioning its continuing relevance. In March 2016, Carne Ross, a former member of the British delegation to the UN, and Anthony Banberry, a former UN assistant secretary-general, published separate op-eds declaring their belief that the UN is failing.<sup>26</sup> Picco, Ross, and Banberry’s blunt designations of the UN as a failing institution represent a sea change in the discourse surrounding it, which up until now has for the most part focused on reform.

Creating a new institution that would better fit current day realities would in some way be in line with history, as the UN replaced the League of Nations in 1939 due to its failure to prevent World War II. In 1935, when it was clear that the League was failing, John Foster Dulles, an early supporter of the League and later an architect of the UN, opined that international peace would require a recognition for “the need for change and provide peaceful mechanisms to obtain it.” He believed that the leading nations of the League “conceived the League primarily as an instrumentality for perpetuating the status quo” and therefore fed the desires of the emerging powers of Germany, Japan, and Italy to ultimately resort to violence to effect change.<sup>27</sup> In thinking about the creation of a body to replace it, Dulles believed that the entity would need to be “a central authority which owes and feels a duty to a group as a whole and to all of its constituent parts,” and which “must create a condition of flexibility, which will give qualified and balanced satisfaction to both dynamic and static” nations.<sup>28</sup> This vision did not win out, however, as due to agreements made by the victorious powers at the end of World War II, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia (then the Soviet Union), China and France became the five permanent members of the Security Council and were given the power to veto.<sup>29</sup>

Strikingly, the same lack of flexibility of the world powers to accommodate change and growth through the League could also apply to the UN today, the resistance of the P5 to allow meaningful Security Council reform being one of the main bones of contention among member states. Some creative measures such as the creation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm and the French proposal to limit the use of the Security Council veto have been put forth as possible palatable ways for the P5 to cede some of their control. It is unlikely, however, that any of the P5 powers will agree to meaningful reform. Therefore, in light of the Security Council’s obvious failure to manage or resolve today’s violent conflicts, a call for

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<sup>25</sup> SophieCo, “Veteran UN negotiator: World body outdated, hasn’t solved a single conflict since 1992,” *RT*, 19 January 2015, <https://www.rt.com/shows/sophieco/223935-terrorist-attacks-threat-diplomacy/>.

<sup>26</sup> Carne Ross, “The UN is failing. Is it heading the way of the League of Nations?,” *Guardian*, 10 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/10/un-failing-league-of-nations-isis-boko-haram>; Anthony Bradbury, “I Love the U.N., but It Is Failing,” *New York Times*, 18 March 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/opinion/sunday/i-love-the-un-but-it-is-failing.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/opinion/sunday/i-love-the-un-but-it-is-failing.html?_r=0).

<sup>27</sup> James Srodes, *On Dupont Circle* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2012); Mark Toulouse, *The Transformation of John Foster Dulles: From Prophet of Realism to Priest of Nationalism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> Srodes, *On Dupont Circle*.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Schlesinger, *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003).

discussion of what a new worldwide conflict management body could look like begins to appear as a rational option for the excluded states, especially those whose individual or collective power now eclipses or equals the states that make up the P5.

A second recommendation is for intervening powers to be more open-minded about allowing the redrawing of the world's map, rather than insisting (a few exceptions aside) that communities of conflict-affected states find a way to work out their problems within their existing borders. This approach would be particularly relevant in the Levant, Eastern Europe, and postcolonial Africa, where in many cases the borders were drawn not by the will of the affected populations, but instead by foreign or corrupted governments, or by multinational corporations seeking a foothold for resource extraction.<sup>30</sup> Arguably, the multiple violent conflicts today are in significant part a result of such misguided policies, and will continue to fester until nations are willing to address decisions that have ultimately been proven to be grave mistakes. Admittedly, simply redrawing the borders will not necessarily end conflicts or prove to be a simple solution to what are now complex problems. However, given that the people of these states did not have the opportunity to weigh for themselves where the borders would best lie, it is worth supporting them in that process now. And if they ultimately settle on the existing borders, the buy-in by the local populations would mean that these states and communities would be set on firmer foundations for the long term.

A third recommendation is to attempt to shift the mind-set of insecurity and competition in conflict-affected states to one of greater security and cooperation by creating new relationship dynamics between the international and local NGOs, and between the leadership and the civilian populations. The first shift can be achieved by ensuring that work done in the development space does not further weaken the affected communities or make them dependent on foreign aid or institutions, which could ultimately breed new violent conflict. A constructive goal for NGOs and UN agencies would be to focus on opening the political space for the local actors to have a stronger voice, or on training them to take on development tasks themselves.<sup>31</sup>

This approach also entails having a better understanding of the psychology of empowerment and of what it means to support communities in the difficult task of confronting inequitable power structures. It is not enough for persons in positions of relative power to encourage those in relatively weak positions to boldly and constructively confront those keeping them in a subservient position. Most likely, the skills for constructive confrontation are lacking, and if those in weaker positions do not come together in large numbers or have political and possibly armed backing from powerful third parties, it is unrealistic to expect them to change their circumstances without resorting to violence. This is precisely what leads to the asymmetrical warfare employed by extremists, who respond to conditions of hopelessness and

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<sup>30</sup> Srodes, *On Dupont Circle*; George Mitchell, *The Negotiator* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Yaroslav Trofimov, "Would New Borders Mean Less Conflict in the Middle East?," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/would-new-borders-mean-less-conflict-in-the-middle-east-1428680793>.

<sup>31</sup> Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Linda Polman, *The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?* (New York: Metropolitan Books and Henry Holt, 2010).

desperation.<sup>32</sup> The work done by Carne Ross' Independent Diplomat consulting firm is notable in this regard, as the organization not only encourages its marginalized client base to be assertive, but also backs them up with expert support in navigating the diplomatic space.<sup>33</sup>

On the flip side, it is also important to alleviate the insecurity of those in a position of power but who feel too threatened to cede control. This is especially the case where colonial powers intentionally put minority communities in privileged leadership positions, which in the postcolonial era has resulted in many instances of dictatorship governments led by those who are now either afraid or unwilling to cede any power.<sup>34</sup> For example, President Bashar Assad of Syria could arguably be considered to be an archetype of an insecure personality from a minority-led government, who likely believes that if he were to allow reforms or step down from power he would be unsafe. Therefore it can be expected that the empowerment or success of others would be threatening to him and lead him to react in a hyper-defensive and destructive way.<sup>35</sup>

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*“Africa’s democratic progress is at also at risk from leaders who refuse to step aside when their terms end.... When a leader tries to change the game just to stay in office, it risks instability and strife, as we’ve seen in Burundi. And this is just a first step down the perilous path. But if a leader thinks they’re the only person who can hold a nation together - if that’s true then the leader has failed to truly build their nation.” - President Obama’s remarks during his 2015 address to the African Union.*

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What can be done to put more focus on leaders such as these, whether at the international or local level, whose desire for excessive personal security lead to violent crackdowns and suppression of dissent? Can the development community also introduce this kind of programming alongside popular human rights and gender-focused agendas to help world leaders govern in a way that allows for all sectors of the population to be empowered, which would likely also lead to the more peaceful societies sought after by the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 16? These goals seem to go hand and hand, because it is the leaders of societies of elite dominance and exclusion who dig their own graves by angering those they govern.

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<sup>32</sup> Gabrielle Rifkind and Giandomenico Picco, *The Fog of Peace: The Human Face of Conflict Resolution* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Carne Ross, *Independent Diplomat* (London: C. Hurst, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Trofimov, “Would New Borders Mean Less Conflict.”

<sup>35</sup> Lars Hauch, “Syria’s Assad: Sometimes moody, other times rational, but mostly desperate,” *Middle East Eye*, 15 April 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/syrias-assad-moody-rational-and-overall-desperate-1101353869>.

Some others are attuned to this challenge, including Gabrielle Rifkind and Giandomenico Picco, who argue that, “human motivation and psychology need to be a part of the strategic calculations of decision makers... [and] to try to understand the root causes of conflict... without also understanding human behavior and what exacerbates the fight over resources, undermines our effectiveness in preventing war and making peace.”<sup>36</sup> The Mo Ibrahim Foundation has also established a fellowship initiative to provide mentoring from leaders of multilateral institutions to selected future African leaders.<sup>37</sup> Although potentially unpalatable to many, it would ultimately be worthwhile to create more psychologically or change-management focused programs for the leadership and elites of conflict-affected states, such as guidance into how to constructively continue public service after stepping down from power.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

The world is an ever-increasingly complicated place, and with so many different people with different preferences and priorities, it is to be expected that conflicts will continue to abound. Given that violence is so effective in getting one’s way, it is also not hard to see why both those who wish to maintain and those who wish to change the status quo use it so liberally. And in cases of gross human rights violations, it may also be the best way to alleviate human suffering on net in the short term. However, it is essential to think creatively beyond the use of force for humanity to evolve away from the dynamics that keep conflicts in stagnation. The recommendations provided here are designed to spark thinking on how to move beyond the world’s current bottlenecks in addressing violent conflicts, and how to better enable large-scale changes and improved relationship dynamics that could lead to more peaceful societies.

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<sup>36</sup> Rifkind and Picco, *Fog of Peace*.

<sup>37</sup> Mo Ibrahim Foundation, “The Ibrahim Leadership Fellowships,” (undated), <http://mo.ibrahim.foundation/fellowships/>.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Brian Ligomeka, “Malawi: Of dictators and change management,” Brisa Media Services, 16 September 2011, <http://brisamediamw.blogspot.nl/2011/09/malawi-of-dictators-and-change.html>.



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