



Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022

Crisis Group Special Briefing N°6

New York/Brussels, 13 September 2021

What's new? World leaders are participating in the UN General Assembly's annual high-level session after a year in which the world organisation has failed to respond decisively to a series of crises and wars from Haiti to Myanmar. The UN looks ever more marginal to international crisis management.

Why does it matter? For all its flaws, the UN system retains unique crisis response tools. UN relief agencies remain essential to mitigating conflicts like those in Afghanistan and Ethiopia. The organisation is also the only mediator available in cases ranging from the decades-long division of Cyprus to the Yemen war.

What should be done? This briefing sets out ten areas where the Security Council and secretary-general can take initiatives to mitigate conflict, ranging from urgent humanitarian crises to steps to address long-term challenges including the security implications of climate change.

I. Overview

World leaders participating in the annual high-level session of the UN General Assembly in September have no shortage of challenges to discuss. Many conversations will focus on climate change and COVID-19. But it will be hard to ignore a series of security crises that have demonstrated the UN's political and operational limitations over the last year, ranging from the Nagorno-Karabakh war and the conflict in Ethiopia to Myanmar's coup, May's upsurge of Israeli-Palestinian violence and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. In dealing with these situations, the Security Council has appeared risk-averse and often divided; Secretary-General António Guterres has generally avoided taking politically bold positions; and the UN's main conflict management tools – such as mediation and peacekeeping – have appeared largely irrelevant to the problems at hand. All too often, the best the UN can hope to achieve is to keep lifesaving aid flowing to vulnerable populations, mitigating the effects of violence but doing little to address its causes. Yet the UN still has an important role to play.

The UN is often the only organisation with the mechanisms necessary for dealing with dangerous and deteriorating situations. In cases such as Afghanistan and Ethiopia, where war threatens to create regional humanitarian crises, UN agencies such as the World Food Programme are essential for managing the fallout. Elsewhere, as in Libya and Yemen, UN mediators remain the international actors best positioned

to secure sustainable peace deals. The UN has long helped keep a lid on recurrent tensions in places such as Cyprus and Haiti, where new political dynamics could sow instability. In each of these cases, the Security Council, secretary-general and UN officials on the ground can realistically take steps to protect suffering people, take advantage of openings for peacemaking and stop bad circumstances from getting worse.

The UN also has considerable scope for long-term thinking on the future of conflict. Salient issues include countering disinformation and misinformation that can exacerbate conflicts, addressing linkages between climate change and political violence, and helping blunt the impact of COVID-19 in volatile areas. Despite the UN's struggle to address conflicts, many of its members are keen to use it as a platform to debate future risks. The organisation, which has seen its role in peace and security wax and wane many times before, is not entirely irrelevant yet.

II. The UN and Crisis Management in 2021

The year 2021 has been a time of new beginnings at the UN. The Biden administration has brought a new, constructive tone to multilateral diplomacy after the dramas of the Trump years.¹ Secretary-General Guterres, who has taken an exceedingly cautious approach to crises since assuming office in 2017, won a second term in June. Western diplomats hope that he will be a little more enterprising now that his renewal is no longer in doubt. Yet despite these new starts, deep challenges to the UN's work persist. The U.S. continues to have an uneasy relationship with China and Russia in the Security Council, and the secretary-general still has to navigate treacherous geopolitical conditions from one emergency to the next.

A. The Security Council

If the Security Council seems to be in a parlous state, it could be worse. In his final year in office, former U.S. President Donald Trump took an increasingly disruptive approach to the organisation, looking in particular for opportunities to embarrass China. The Chinese and Russian delegations in New York responded to these provocations – and a broader sense of U.S. diplomatic disarray – by growing increasingly assertive in the Security Council. Since January, the Biden administration has taken a more civil approach to multilateral diplomacy, re-engaging with UN agencies that Trump had boycotted, adopting a more measured though still competitive approach to China and looking for opportunities to address crises through the Council. This approach has borne some fruit, including a hard-won deal with Russia to keep essential aid flowing into non-government-controlled areas of north-western Syria in July.

But clearly there are limits to the Biden administration's commitment to multilateral problem solving, as well as to its main geopolitical rivals' willingness to accede to U.S. initiatives. Washington stopped the Security Council from making even a pro

¹ For more on the Biden administration's early efforts to restore U.S. credibility at the UN, see Richard Gowan, "Learning to Live with a Limited Security Council", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 July 2021; and Richard Gowan, "Repairing the Damage to U.S. Diplomacy in the UN Security Council", Crisis Group Commentary, 18 December 2020.

forma call for a ceasefire during the Israeli-Palestinian fighting in May, arguing that this step could alienate Israel.² At first, the U.S. also opposed the Council making more than a token statement of concern when the Afghan government collapsed in August, worrying about causing friction with the Taliban during the Kabul airlift. As tends to be the case even under UN-friendly administrations, the U.S. approach to the UN appears to be pragmatic and case-driven, rather than based on deep faith in multilateralism.

China and Russia, meanwhile, have hedged their bets in dealing with the U.S. since January, in some cases accommodating Washington's needs (as over Syria) but often offering only meagre concessions. The two powers, for example, ensured that the Council did no more than make symbolic protests over the 1 February coup in Myanmar and the conflict in Tigray. Beijing and Moscow seem to want to avoid head-on clashes with the U.S. and its friends in New York, but they are also keen to gain influence with potential allies in Addis Ababa and Naypyitaw. A higher-stakes version of these tensions may now play out over Afghanistan, as the Chinese and Russians have signalled a pragmatic approach to dealing with the Taliban – reflecting regional security concerns – that could alienate other Council members determined to flag issues like human rights.³

The net result of the major powers' modest re-engagement in the Council has been that the body has become more civil, but not vastly more effective in most crisis situations. Neither the U.S. nor its geopolitical rivals have seemed eager to move beyond diplomatic balancing toward taking substantive steps to deal with new crises, such as authorising new sanctions regimes or peace operations (China and Russia continue to make a point of criticising Western sanctions policies at every turn). France and the United Kingdom have at times been frustrated by the Biden administration's apparent unwillingness to treat the Council seriously as a crisis management mechanism for issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Afghan collapse. Paris has also been vexed by Washington's refusal to support new UN initiatives to stabilise the Sahel, such as funding regional counter-terror operations, which Trump's team also rejected out of a mixture of cost concerns and scepticism about their military value.⁴

For other Council members, the permanent five's (P5) lack of cohesion is variously a source of irritation and relief. Elected members note that, absent any real impetus from the main powers to address crises politically, the body ends up devoting more time to debating the terms of humanitarian aid. While this task is worthwhile, it may be a distraction from the Council's primary security role – and an alibi for more serious political engagement in many situations. But elected Council members also tend to argue against the Council becoming too active in their own backyards. Until mid-2021, the African members of the Council (Kenya, Niger and Tunisia) advocated for a softly-softly approach to Ethiopia over the crisis in Tigray, although they have hard-

² For more, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°225, *Beyond Business as Usual in Israel-Palestine*, 10 August 2021.

³ For more on how China, Russia and Afghanistan's other neighbours are responding to the Taliban's takeover, see Crisis Group Commentary, "With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait", 26 August 2021.

⁴ Both administrations have shared broad doubts about whether UN-assessed contributions should be used to finance a counter-terrorism force and in particular about the operational efficacy of the Sahelian states' efforts to combat jihadists. For more, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°299, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, 1 February 2021.

ened their stance as the conflict has spread dramatically. The elected Asian members (India and Vietnam) have likewise urged a light touch with Myanmar, supporting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) rather than the UN's taking a lead in talking to the post-coup authorities about political solutions.

Whatever the diplomatic advantages of the Council's unambitious approach, it has failed to stop a number of crises – most obviously that in Ethiopia – from escalating on its watch. Having let these conflicts grow, Council members will have greater difficulty finding common strategies for containing them. The Council still has opportunities to reverse course in some cases and help ease crises through political means as well as aid. But all too often the body is left chasing events, without a clear picture of what it wants to achieve.

B. *The Secretary-General*

The Security Council's fractures place significant constraints on what the secretary-general can feasibly hope to achieve in terms of crisis management. Apparently unconvinced that he can do much to reconcile the P5, Guterres has adopted a cautious approach to engaging in active conflicts, often arguing that actors other than the UN – such as the African Union – should take the lead in mediation efforts.⁵ A former UN high commissioner for refugees, Guterres has also tended to focus on the humanitarian dimensions of crises on his agenda, arguing for quiet engagement with conflict parties to get aid to the suffering rather than riskier political efforts. The U.S. and other Western members of the Security Council have been especially critical of the secretary-general's insistence on a low-key approach to the Tigray crisis for much of 2021 (discussed below) as Guterres attempted to maintain a channel for quiet dialogue with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia.

Guterres is nonetheless popular with ambassadors in New York, not least because of his efforts to maintain functioning relations with the Trump administration, and he won a second term easily in June. Western diplomats in particular have urged him to invest more in conflict management, and risk being more outspoken, from here on. The secretary-general has made strong comments about the coup in Myanmar and threats to women's rights in Afghanistan, although in both cases he may have seen few political alternatives. (UN diplomats note that he has been pessimistic about the chances of influencing Myanmar in private.) Overall, Guterres is likely to remain circumspect in dealing with most crises, especially those involving P5 interests.

It is still possible, however, for UN mediators and other officials on the ground to take political initiatives when the Security Council and secretary-general are disengaged. In 2020, UN officials in Libya succeeded in hammering out an unexpected ceasefire at a time when Council members were divided over the country and Guterres was not focusing on the file (see details below). Some of those involved say the lack of top-level oversight from New York may have been an advantage, allowing them to work without too much interference.

Guterres, meanwhile, enjoys thinking about long-term global trends and can take credit for pushing the UN Secretariat to think more about new technologies, such as

⁵ Richard Gowan, "Explaining the UN Secretary-General's Cautious Crisis Diplomacy", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 May 2021.

the digital revolution, and new factors affecting conflict, such as climate change. Many UN member states, including those on the Security Council, are also keen to focus more on such non-traditional threats. On 10 September, Guterres released a report (“Our Common Agenda”) exploring long-term prospects for international cooperation.⁶ Although the report has relatively little to say about peace and security – calling for further work by states to agree on a “New Agenda for Peace” in the coming years – it does emphasise the need for the UN to adapt its conflict management strategies and tools. This recommendation may engender more useful debate about how the body handles non-traditional threats.

III. Ten Challenges for the UN

Given the limits of UN crisis management, what problems can it hope to address in the remainder of 2021 and 2022? The following list of ten challenges is far from comprehensive (excluding, for example, Myanmar) but aims to cover four broad categories of priorities. First, it highlights urgent conflict threats with major humanitarian consequences: Afghanistan and Ethiopia. It then zeroes in on one Middle Eastern case where the UN needs to follow up on successful mediation (Libya) and another where a new UN mediation approach could bear fruit (Yemen). Lastly, it covers three situations where the UN should be alert to shifting political and humanitarian dynamics – Haiti, Cyprus and the treatment of Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated detainees in north-eastern Syria – and three thematic areas where the UN can do more to plan ahead – dealing with disinformation and misinformation in conflict, climate security and getting COVID-19 vaccines to conflict-affected places. The recommendations here are meant to be pragmatic rather than aspirational, and the results are uncertain. Yet if it wishes to remain credible and relevant, these are the sorts of crises and themes it cannot ignore.

1. Minimising suffering in Afghanistan

The Taliban’s rapid takeover of Afghanistan presents immense political and operational challenges for the UN.⁷ UN officials had expected to play a difficult role managing humanitarian assistance to the country after U.S. troops departed. The Afghan government’s collapse has raised questions about whether UN agencies can continue to function safely, despite the Taliban’s promises of cooperation. It seems clear the P5 will be divided over how to deal with the Taliban, with China and Russia already adopting a more accommodating approach to the new authorities in Kabul.⁸

The UN’s immediate reaction to the Taliban advance was a mixture of confusion and rapid improvisation. Some international staff of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), which worked with successive governments since 2001, evacuated to Kazakhstan. Taliban fighters harassed Afghan UN staff. Nonetheless, by the end of August, the UN was able to set up an air bridge for delivering aid to the

⁶ “Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General”, United Nations, 10 September 2021.

⁷ For more, see Laurel Miller and Andrew Watkins, “Are the Taliban on a Path to Victory?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 14 August 2021.

⁸ For more, see “With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait”, op. cit.

northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, with an expectation that the flights would expand to other airports. The Security Council's initial response to the chaos was muted, partly because the U.S. wanted to avoid UN debates causing frictions with the Taliban during the airlift from Kabul.

On 30 August, as the last U.S. forces left Afghanistan, the Council agreed on a resolution – floated by Britain and France but finished after considerable input from the U.S. – calling on the Taliban to maintain humanitarian agencies' access to the country, respect the rights and political role of women, and allow those Afghans wishing to leave the country to do so. China and Russia abstained from the text partly because it did not address their concerns about the adverse effects of maintaining international freezes on Afghan financial assets. After the vote, China also called on the international community to engage with the Taliban.

The primary task for UN members and the secretary-general is to work out how to get enough aid to Afghanistan to avoid economic catastrophe and worsening food shortages exacerbated by severe drought.⁹ By necessity, this task will involve a narrow humanitarian focus, in contrast to UNAMA's previous engagement in governance support, human rights monitoring and other undertakings that the Taliban may reject. In the immediate term, it should entail setting up more UN air bridges to funnel supplies to Kabul and other cities. While the Council should not wind up UNAMA prematurely, it will in due course have to either reconfigure the mission or replace it with a new UN aid coordination mechanism accepted by the Taliban. The Council should ensure that UN and member state sanctions on the Taliban do not stop UN staff and contractors from talking to the new authorities and supplying vital aid to Afghanistan, issuing waivers or exemptions as necessary. It may make sense for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Women to keep up reporting on human rights and the situation of women independently of UN humanitarian efforts, to avoid clashing priorities.

The UN is very unlikely to have any role in mediating between the Taliban and other Afghan factional leaders, but it might be able to help coordinate regional states' responses to the crisis. Prior to the August collapse, Jean Arnault, a personal envoy of the secretary-general appointed at Washington's behest, was working on regional coordination. It is not clear that the UN will continue in this role, but it could act as a convener for governments to discuss issues such as refugee flows and terrorism risks (as it tried to do during the last period of Taliban rule in the 1990s). The Security Council could expand the small but generally well-regarded UN Regional Conflict Prevention Office for Central Asia to contribute to these efforts.

The other major item on the Council's agenda is what to do with the Taliban sanctions regime, which dates back to 1999, beyond the immediate question of avoiding potential restrictions on humanitarian relief. The new Afghan cabinet, announced on 7 September, includes fourteen individuals under UN sanctions.¹⁰ Some governments have hinted at a willingness to rethink the existing sanctions framework in light of

⁹ See Crisis Group Briefing Note, "Afghanistan's Growing Humanitarian Crisis", 2 September 2021.

¹⁰ "Not only PM; at least 14 members of Taliban govt are blacklisted by UN: report", *Hindustan Times*, 8 September 2021.

the Taliban's actions, potentially easing measures if the new rulers are cooperative.¹¹ For the time being, Security Council members should approach these questions with enormous caution. It will be hard for the Council to agree on terms of any concessions to the Taliban, and there are already signs of the P5 splitting on this topic.¹² Although the Council will eventually have to hammer out a new stance on sanctions, its members – and the UN system in general – should focus on the baseline problems of maintaining sufficient assistance to Afghanistan for now.¹³

2. Working toward a ceasefire in Ethiopia

The conflict centred around Ethiopia's Tigray region between the federal government and Tigray forces has already created a severe humanitarian crisis, which is likely to worsen with the fighting in a dangerous new phase.¹⁴ The UN has been active in engaging with Ethiopian stakeholders but needs to do more to urge all parties – including Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Tigray's leadership – to back off from the battlefield, where an expanding war could easily cause massive casualties.

Since the conflict started in November 2020, neither the federal government nor Tigray's forces have exhibited willingness to unconditionally pause hostilities and pursue dialogue.¹⁵ The consequence has been a dire humanitarian emergency where, according to the UN, over five million people in the region are in need of assistance. Some 400,000 of them are acutely food-insecure.¹⁶ The fighting has also interrupted the planting season, with harvests estimated at only about 25-50 per cent of average levels. After withdrawing from most of the region in late June, federal authorities have blockaded Tigray, in effect, cutting off telecommunications, electricity and banking services.

On the battlefield, the Tigray forces have been buoyed by forcing federal Ethiopian troops to depart Tigray region and have made incursions since mid-July into the neighbouring Afar region to the east and Amhara region to the south.¹⁷ These manoeuvres – which could cut off a critical trade route to Djibouti – are partly aimed at pressuring Addis Ababa into accepting the Tigray forces' terms for a deal, including formation of a transitional government. The Tigrayans have nonetheless met stiff

¹¹ For more on uncertainties around sanctions and several other key issues, see Crisis Group Briefing Note, "Taliban Rule Begins in Afghanistan", 24 August 2021.

¹² See for example, Colum Lynch, "China, Russia look to outflank U.S. in Afghanistan", *Foreign Policy*, 2 September 2021. For more on how P5 tensions can undermine the Security Council's sanctions regimes, see Colum Lynch, "At U.N., Russia and U.S. wage quiet war over appointments to advance broader agendas", *Foreign Policy*, 12 June 2018.

¹³ An additional question for UN diplomats is whether the Taliban can fill Afghanistan's seat in the General Assembly, although the UN Credentials Committee may defer a decision on this matter. See Rebecca Barber, "Will the Taliban represent Afghanistan in the UN General Assembly?", *EJIL: TALK!*, 1 September 2021.

¹⁴ For more, see William Davison, "The Dangerous Expansion of Ethiopia's Tigray War", Crisis Group Commentary, 30 July 2021.

¹⁵ See, for example, Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°167, *Finding a Path to Peace in Ethiopia's Tigray Region*, 11 February 2021; and N°171, *Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate*, 2 April 2021.

¹⁶ For more on needs on the ground, see Crisis Group Statement, "As Ethiopian Troops Exit Tigray, Time to Focus on Relief", 9 July 2021.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

resistance and have not achieved all their military objectives. The federal government, meanwhile, has responded to its military setbacks and the Tigray offensive by enlisting paramilitaries from other regions, launching a mass mobilisation campaign and calling on “all eligible civilians” to sign up for the national army. Since November, Eritrea’s military has lined up alongside Ethiopia’s, while Amhara regional forces are still occupying territory in western Tigray.

The unwavering commitment by all sides to pursuing a military solution threatens not just many more deaths but also the Ethiopian state itself. Addis Ababa has employed dangerous rhetoric antagonising Tigrayans while calling on civilians to join the fighting. This fervour, combined with decades-long resentment of Tigrayan leaders for their part in a period of authoritarian rule, could lead to further serious fractures in Ethiopia. Meanwhile, a continuing advance by the Tigray forces could lead to thousands more deaths, bring a widening humanitarian crisis and ratchet up domestic pressure on Abiy, which – while still unlikely in the short term – could lead to an alarming implosion in Addis Ababa and an ensuing power struggle with serious risks of a broader breakdown. These factors warrant a commensurate response from international actors, including the UN, which needs to impress on all parties the need to quickly de-escalate before the situation deteriorates further.

Building on his 26 August statement to the Security Council emphasising that “the unity of Ethiopia and the stability of the region are at stake”, Secretary-General Guterres should adopt an increasingly assertive approach to the crisis. He should use his channels in Addis Ababa, especially his direct contacts with Abiy, to underscore the urgent risks of a wider conflict that could have consequences far outside Tigray. The secretary-general should counsel Abiy to drop his resistance to negotiating with Tigray’s leaders and urge both sides to cast their military plans aside in favour of a deal. Diplomats from the U.S., the European Union (EU), Germany, France and the UK should back up the UN initiative with outreach to, primarily, Foreign Minister Demeke Mekonnen, a key interlocutor for international actors, to convey the same messages about the need for a pact.

Such an agreement could have several elements. The secretary-general should call on the federal government to lift its de facto blockade of Tigray and restore basic services while granting humanitarian agencies access to Tigray – if Tigrayan leaders freeze their military operations and soften their negotiating positions. A core Tigray demand is the withdrawal from western Tigray of all Amhara forces and administrators who moved in at the outset of fighting in November as well as the exit of all federal and Eritrean forces from the region. Guterres should urge the Tigrayan side to give federal, Amhara and Eritrean leaders time to complete these steps rather than trying to achieve them via military means. In exchange for a withdrawal, Tigray’s leaders could commit to politically addressing the territorial dispute over western Tigray with the Amhara region in the future and also dropping their demands for a transitional government involving Abiy’s departure.

The Tigray conflict has expanded to a worrying scale. Leaders in both Addis Ababa and Mekelle have so far been unresponsive to external diplomatic initiatives. This is all the more reason for the UN to step up its efforts, conscious of the considerable risks ahead if the conflict continues along its present trajectory.

3. Keeping Libya's peace process on track

Libya was one of the UN's few conflict resolution success stories in the past year.¹⁸ UN mediators helped the country's warring military coalitions sign a ceasefire agreement in October 2020.¹⁹ They also helped forge a political agreement between rival factions that in March 2021 brought to power an interim unity government led by Abdelhamid Dabaiba and a three-man Presidency Council which unified the country, divided since 2014.²⁰

Yet the future of this transition is uncertain. The country's new authorities and Libya's multiple political blocs have not followed the UN-backed transition roadmap, which envisages elections in December 2021. Provisions of the ceasefire agreement that called for unifying the two military coalitions and expelling foreign fighters recruited by both sides have also gone unheeded. To prevent the transition from derailing, the UN and international stakeholders need to redouble their efforts to move the peace process forward along its interlocking political, military and financial tracks.

On the political front, the UN should help break the deadlock on the electoral roadmap. Libyan politicians continue to disagree over what type of elections to hold at the end of the year: both parliamentary and presidential (as the UN roadmap says), or parliamentary alone. They also argue over whether to hold a referendum on a draft constitution before any national poll. A third thorny issue is whether all Libyans should be allowed to run or whether, as some factions request, military personnel should be barred. The Libyan negotiators who hammered out the unity government deal under UN auspices have failed to resolve these questions. The president of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives signed off on a presidential election law without putting it to a plenary vote, a divisive move that his opponents inside parliament and across Libya are likely to challenge. No law for parliamentary elections has yet been issued. Another complicating factor is that government officials with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo are lobbying to postpone the elections, thus encouraging discord.

On the military front, the ceasefire agreement brokered in October 2020 is holding, but the UN and Libyan authorities have made no progress in unifying the military coalitions, which still operate as two entities, largely independent of one another and with little mutual trust. The forces based in Tripoli fall under the command of the new government authorities and the Presidency Council, whereas the other coalition still answers to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, despite being financially dependent on Tripoli.

Foreign forces also remain.²¹ Turkey, which intervened in January 2020 to support the Tripoli-based coalition, has cemented its military presence in western Libya. Kremlin-linked private military contractors are still on the ground with Haftar-led units in central and southern Libya. Pro-Ankara and pro-Moscow Syrian mercenaries as well as fighters from Sudan and Chad also remain in place. France has advanced

¹⁸ For more on the UN's role in sponsoring political talks among Libyan factions, see Crisis Group Briefing Note, "Libya Update #3", 21 January 2021.

¹⁹ For more on the ceasefire agreement, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°80, *Fleshing Out the Libya Ceasefire Agreement*, 4 November 2020.

²⁰ For more, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°222, *Libya Turns the Page*, 21 May 2021.

²¹ For more on the ceasefire agreement's unfulfilled terms, see Crisis Group Briefing Note, "Libya Update #2", 24 December 2020.

proposals for the sequenced withdrawal of foreign fighters, but this initiative has made no progress to date.

On the financial front, the complete and proper unification of the Central Bank of Libya – crucial to the unified state’s functioning – has yet to take place. The bank was divided into two parallel branches as a result of the conflict. A UN Security Council-mandated financial review of the Bank, which had been two years in the making, was completed in June, but as yet no one has acted upon its recommendations for reform.

The Security Council needs to throw its weight behind further UN mediation to resolve these issues, especially the immediate problems of the electoral roadmap and control of the armed forces. Council members have a history of bad blood over Libya, but they share an interest in avoiding a return to hostilities. For this purpose, they should urge an intensification of UN mediation efforts and make available greater resources to ensure adequate staffing and expertise at the UN Support Mission in Libya.²²

To help end the impasse over the political and military issues, Council members should now encourage Special Envoy Ján Kubiš to lay out UN-drafted bridging proposals and rally domestic and foreign support for solutions. On the political front, parliamentary and presidential elections should remain at centre stage in the proposal, but the latter should also include additional provisions clearly defining the respective powers of the future elected officials to reduce the risk of abuse of power and adequate legal safeguards. On the military front, the UN should lay out an updated implementation plan for security sector unification and the sequenced departure of foreign fighters. The Council should also request that the envoy double down on his efforts to pursue unification of the country’s financial institutions.

4. Rethinking peacemaking in Yemen

The UN has made repeated efforts to mediate an end to the civil war in Yemen since 2015. The war does not engender the same tensions among the P5 that other Middle Eastern conflicts do. But nor, except briefly in 2018, have the P5 treated it as a matter of urgent priority. On taking office, President Joe Biden promised that the U.S. would again put its shoulder behind UN peacemaking efforts. Yet these efforts have fizzled out.²³

The appointment of a new UN special envoy for Yemen, Sweden’s Hans Grundberg, offers a chance to refresh the organisation’s approach.²⁴ To date, UN mediation efforts have rested on the assumption that this regionalised civil war – in which Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates have all backed rival factions – can be ended through a two-party agreement between the Huthi rebels who hold the capital, Sanaa, and the internationally recognised government of President Abed Rabbo

²² The Security Council should also plan to adjust the mission’s leadership structure. Since 2020, Special Envoy Ján Kubiš has been based in Geneva, with a mission coordinator and another deputy stationed in Tripoli. The Council should envisage reverting to the mission’s previous configuration, with a special representative flanked by two deputies, all based inside Libya, to make engaging with national political actors more straightforward.

²³ For more, see Michael Wahid Hanna and Peter Salisbury, “The Shattering of Yemen”, *Foreign Affairs*, 19 August 2021.

²⁴ For more on the UN envoy appointment, see Peter Salisbury, “A New UN Envoy is an Opportunity for a New Approach in Yemen”, Crisis Group Commentary, 18 June 2021.

Mansour Hadi, provided that Riyadh blesses the deal. This framework is out of date and has become a barrier to political progress.

The first problem with the UN approach is that it does not reflect realities on the ground. After six years of territorial fragmentation and proliferation of armed groups and sub-conflicts, the Huthis and the Hadi government are by no means the only political actors that matter. The Huthis are dominant in the northern highlands, the country's main population centre, but the government and its allies are active only in pockets of territory. Elsewhere, local groups like the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC), which ousted the government from its temporary capital in Aden in 2019, rule the roost.²⁵ These groups do not share many goals, but they are largely united in saying they will reject a political settlement they had no part in fashioning. For this reason, even if the UN were to broker a settlement under its current binary framework, the war would likely continue.

Such a settlement seems a long way off anyway. The Huthis believe they are winning and see little reason to negotiate a compromise when they can seize more territory by force. For its part, the government, probably rightly, fears that a compromise of any kind will spell the beginning of the end for its camp, given its institutional and military weakness.

Crisis Group has long recommended a rethink of the UN approach, to shift the incentives from fighting to dealmaking.²⁶ Most importantly, it is necessary to switch from two-party mediation to a more inclusive UN process that brings more parties into negotiations.²⁷ This shift would indicate to Hadi and the Huthis that they cannot stall political talks indefinitely and nudge actors like the STC to engage in talks rather than act as spoilers of a potential settlement.

The Council should give Grundberg, the new envoy, the time and space needed to update the UN's approach to mediating the conflict and signal its backing for a more inclusive political process. To strengthen the message, the Council could also give its imprimatur to an international working group on Yemen that includes but is not limited to the P5. This group would offer diplomatic support to the UN in its revamp of the process and coordinate efforts to move the local and regional parties toward a settlement.

5. Stopping a return to chaos in Haiti

While the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July, along with the prospect of further disorder prior to forthcoming national elections, has made Security Council diplomats and UN officials increasingly anxious about Haiti, they are still reluctant to act.²⁸ The UN has dispatched more peace operations to Haiti than any other nation but failed to establish lasting stability. As a result, most Security Council members are wary of authorising any further significant security presence. Since closing down

²⁵ For more on the STC, see Peter Salisbury, "Yemen's Southern Transitional Council: A Delicate Balancing Act", Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale, 29 March 2021.

²⁶ For more, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°216, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen*, 2 July 2021.

²⁷ For more on this, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°221, *The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen*, 18 March 2021.

²⁸ For more on the killing's implications, see Mariano de Alba, "Handling the Aftermath of Haiti's Presidential Assassination", Crisis Group Commentary, 23 July 2021.

the last large-scale blue helmet operation in 2017, the UN has aimed to disengage gradually from Haitian affairs, although a small political mission remains on the ground.

Nonetheless, the UN cannot ignore Haiti's turbulence, especially if violence threatens to spark a refugee crisis. Even before Moïse's murder – which has yet to be fully explained – the political and security situation was worsening. Dire economic straits and fury at endemic corruption, including among the police, fuelled protests. Contested reports that both Moïse and his predecessor embezzled large sums from social programs associated with PetroCaribe, an oil deal with Venezuela meant to free up funds for domestic spending, were particularly explosive. Moïse further stirred up political troubles by holding onto power beyond the end of his term in February and ruling by presidential decree.

For much of the year, the U.S. and UN urged the Haitian authorities to hold national elections (already delayed twice due to COVID-19) in late September to help resolve the country's interlocking problems, despite the risks that disputed polls would make them worse. In the wake of Moïse's death, the electoral council decided to move the first round of voting to November. It is likely to be further postponed after the devastating 14 August earthquake.

Delay has bought the UN a short window to decide how best to help Haiti. While the acting prime minister requested a UN military deployment to stem disorder, Council members showed little interest in this option. Beijing, irritated by the fact that Port-au-Prince maintains diplomatic relations with Taipei, was especially dismissive. Washington, which has pushed for UN forces in Haiti in the past, remained noncommittal.

While the Council should consider a military mission only in extreme circumstances, it can pursue non-military options. In the short term, these could include enhancing electoral support during the forthcoming polls and establishing a UN-Haitian investigative mechanism to probe the PetroCaribe scandal. The UN should coordinate closely with Haitian civil society, which has viewed past UN missions with suspicion, on how to ease tensions. Looking ahead, the Council and UN development agencies should consider setting up a long-term police and rule of law advisory presence in Haiti, in order to address corruption in the sector and other recurring challenges such as the country's notoriously overcrowded jails, which past UN missions failed to fix. The UN could also consider reestablishing the post of UN independent expert or special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Haiti, terminated at Moïse's insistence in 2017, which would help connect Haitian civil society to specialised expertise in the UN system and strengthen monitoring of human rights violations.

6. Keeping dialogue alive in Cyprus

The Security Council has dealt with Cyprus for nearly six decades, but the political situation on the divided island is creating new challenges for the UN. Since 1964, a peacekeeping operation has been deployed between the Greek Cypriot majority and the Turkish Cypriots. Turkey invaded the north in 1974 to protect the Turkish Cypriots, who declared a republic in 1983 that is recognised by Ankara alone. The UN Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General has facilitated numerous rounds of talks about a settlement, based on a bizonal, bicomunal federation, but all have ended in failure.

After the last round of talks broke down in 2017, the Turkish side became ever more convinced that the Greek Cypriots will never agree to political equality for two communities in one state. Both Ankara and the Turkish Cypriot leadership elected in October 2020 now call for negotiations for a two-state solution based on sovereignty for both north and south, while the internationally recognised Greek Cypriot Republic of Cyprus expresses a desire to continue reunification talks from where they left off.

Greek Cypriots, meanwhile, have become wary of Ankara's growing influence in the north and its hard power projection in the eastern Mediterranean.²⁹ Oil and gas drilling by international majors off the island's southern coast on licences issued by the Republic of Cyprus has reignited decades-old arguments between Greek and Turkish Cypriots over competing maritime sovereignty claims. In response to their exclusion from regional energy designs, Ankara and the de facto Turkish Cypriot administration raised the stakes by conducting their own hydrocarbon exploration in Republic of Cyprus-claimed waters between 2018 and 2020, at times obstructing the majors' drilling efforts. In response, the Republic of Cyprus has invested in defence and diplomatic ties with countries such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which also have difficult relations with Turkey, in addition to appealing to EU institutions and fellow member states.

These offshore tensions have spilled over into incidents on the island itself. The Turkish Cypriot leadership's unilateral opening in June of parts of the ghost resort town of Varosha/Maraş, which had been under Turkish military control since Ankara's 1974 intervention when the town's Greek Cypriot majority was displaced, alarmed Greek Cypriots. Despite international condemnation of the partial reopening of Varosha/Maraş (including a series of Security Council statements) and small-scale EU sanctions in late 2019 directed at Turkey's energy exploration moves, Ankara and the Turkish Cypriot leadership appear determined to stay a hardline course.³⁰

The UN, as the only credible facilitator between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot sides, should keep trying to resolve their differences. Until formal talks restart, the UN should pass messages between the two sides, exploring deals that could offer benefits to both. Security Council members should press Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders to reinvigorate the dormant work of UN-facilitated technical committees where the sides can discuss cooperation on issues such as culture, education and the environment.³¹ In parallel, the UN could invest more in unofficial channels, such as among women's groups, to challenge the decoupling of the two communities. As one inducement, the UN could propose talks about gas revenue sharing that might assuage energy-related grievances on the Turkish side. In the past, the Greek Cypriots have signalled openness to such arrangements, while the Turkish Cypriots have argued that beyond a

²⁹ For more, see Crisis Group Statement, "How to Defuse Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean", 22 September 2020; and Nigar Göksel, "Turkey Recalibrates Its Hard Power", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 August 2021.

³⁰ For more, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°263, *Turkey-Greece: From Maritime Brinkmanship to Dialogue*, 31 May 2021.

³¹ While renewing the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus mandate in July, the Security Council called on leaders of the two Cypriot communities to "free" these technical committees "from obstructions in their work" and "to empower them to ... enhance intercommunal contacts". Resolution 2587 (2021), UNSC/S/RES/2587, 29 July 2021.

fair share of revenue, they should also have a say in managing the island's natural resources. Exploring room for convergence on this matter could lessen tensions.

7. Helping repatriate ISIS-affiliated detainees from Syria

The UN faces a humanitarian crisis in north-eastern Syria, where 60,000-70,000 individuals, including women and children, associated with ISIS are detained in squalid conditions at the al-Hol detention camp and other sites.³² The detainees face rampant disease and endemic violence.³³ While the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) oversee the camps, ISIS cells maintain a presence in al-Hol, terrorising fellow detainees and kidnapping youngsters to train as fighters. While the SDF and the U.S.-led coalition did crack down on violence in al-Hol with a series of raids in the first half of 2021, the sites quieted down only briefly and attacks – including on women – have ticked back up in recent months.

While roughly a third of the detainees are Syrians, the majority are from Iraq and other countries. Some UN members – notably Russia and Central Asian states – have repatriated many of their citizens from al-Hol. Others, including Canada, the UK, Australia and many members of the European Union, have largely refused to do so. While Iraq cleared 500 families for repatriation in early 2021, the process was reportedly bumpy, with little real planning for reintegrating the first set of returnees, who were moved to camps in Iraq that lacked sufficient food and shelter.³⁴

A cluster of UN agencies and offices are working together on prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration issues for the detainees. This process involves the UN Children's Fund and the High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as counter-terrorism agencies, but cooperation on the ground is spotty. Human rights officers feel marginalised and worry that the UN is supporting detainees' return to countries where they may face further persecution. In the meantime, those controlling the camps should share more detailed information on issues such as the exact numbers and whereabouts of detainees and the location and administration of smaller detention sites, in particular those where adolescents are held in reportedly horrific conditions, separate from their parents.

Without steady repatriations, al-Hol and neighbouring detention sites are liable to remain a security and humanitarian challenge and an ISIS recruiting ground.³⁵ This issue is divisive in the Security Council. When Indonesia tabled a generic resolution on "foreign terrorist fighters" in 2020, European members of the Council refused to accept any reference to repatriation in the text. The U.S., insisting on keeping this reference, vetoed the final version.³⁶

Despite these tensions, Council members and UN agencies can take steps to better manage the treatment and return of detainees, especially women and children. These

³² For more, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°208, *Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS*, 18 November 2019.

³³ On the tenuous health situation in al-Hol, see Crisis Group Commentary, "Virus Fears Spread at Camps for ISIS Families in Syria's North East", 7 April 2020.

³⁴ For more, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°79, *Exiles in Their Own Country: Dealing with Displacement in Post-ISIS Iraq*, 19 October 2020.

³⁵ For more on the risks of ISIS recovering from its defeat, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°207, *Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria*, 11 October 2019.

³⁶ "U.S. isolated as it vetoes U.N. resolution on foreign militants", Reuters, 1 September 2020.

could start with pushing to ensure that human rights officials are able to reach all detention sites and working with the local authorities to get a better head count of detainees and map smaller camps. The Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee and UN counter-terrorist specialists would be wise to increase transparency in repatriation procedures – for example, by involving the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism – to counter claims that returnees will face rough treatment on reaching home and to make clearer whether blockages arise from reluctance on the part of countries of origin or the SDF. Given the particularly large numbers of Iraqi detainees (perhaps 30,000 in total), UN agencies also need to focus on how to strengthen Iraq’s mechanisms for handling their return and reintegration.

This topic is invidious for many UN member states, and few see much political advantage in investing time and effort in it. But the alternative of leaving al-Hol and other detention sites for ISIS to exploit in trying to destabilise north-eastern Syria and neighbouring regions is likely to lead to worse outcomes.

8. Discrediting disinformation and misinformation in conflict areas

Secretary-General Guterres has made reducing the spread of disinformation and misinformation on online platforms a priority during his term to date.³⁷ The UN has been especially active in combating disinformation (ie, intentionally false or misleading information) during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸ It could take a similar role in dealing with forms of harmful content and hate speech that fuel conflicts. As Crisis Group has shown in past reports, online provocateurs have undermined political trust and stirred up violence in conflicts from Cameroon to Myanmar.³⁹ Dealing with these threats could open up a new space for the UN in conflict management at a time when its more traditional tools such as peacekeeping appear to be on the wane.

The UN’s reaction to false reports about COVID-19, like rumours of useless and sometimes dangerous “cures” or anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, offers a blueprint for a global approach to countering disinformation. The UN was particularly well positioned to act: the pandemic was a global challenge; the World Health Organization (WHO) had access to the most recent factual information; it has the capacity to reach across languages and regions; and it is generally trusted. Partnerships with social media platforms – including Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber – allowed direct communication with the public.⁴⁰ The WHO established networks of technical and social media experts, as well as regional “information centres”, that facilitated rapid

³⁷ See, for example, the “Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and the UN Strategy”, United Nations, June 2020; and “United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech”, United Nations, May 2019.

³⁸ Both misinformation and disinformation refer to false or misleading content, but the term disinformation additionally connotes an intent to harm.

³⁹ See, for example, Crisis Group Africa Report N°295, *Easing Cameroon’s Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline*, 3 December 2020; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°314, *Myanmar’s Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield*, 18 May 2021.

⁴⁰ “WHO and Rakuten Viber fight COVID-19 misinformation with interactive chatbot”, World Health Organization, 31 March 2020; “5 ways the UN is fighting ‘infodemic’ of misinformation”, UN Department of Global Communications, 30 April 2020.

response to disinformation in a variety of languages.⁴¹ A UN-led initiative known as Verified flooded the online space with accurate information, through partnerships with civil society, social media influencers and private companies.⁴² Independent studies suggest several of these programs reduced sharing of misinformation, although it remains a challenge.⁴³

Many of these programs can be directly mapped to crisis zones: partnerships with the private sector, collaboration with local civil society and influencers, improved monitoring of online content across regions and proactive efforts to offer factual messaging can blunt the impact of misinformation. Crises, however, present additional challenges. Detecting disinformation at such times often requires in-depth understanding of conditions where the crisis is occurring. Content may originate with conflict parties or governments themselves, making rapid and unbiased fact checking difficult.

Sharing field experiences among political and peacekeeping missions can help improve responses to disinformation in conflict. The UN often has eyes and ears on the ground to detect misleading reports or prevent them from spreading in the first place. For example, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic countered disinformation, directed at its staff, through its own social media platforms, mass text messages, press releases and radio spots. The UN Support Mission in Libya established a set of principles governing social media use among a prominent set of journalists, activists and influencers during the country's peace process in consultation with journalists, influencers and civil society actors.⁴⁴

At present, however, no single point of contact is monitoring or coordinating initiatives designed to reduce disinformation. As with COVID-19, the UN has generally organised its responses to harmful online content around specific topics – such as its Tech Against Terrorism program – even though it can often apply certain principles more widely.⁴⁵ The secretary-general should call on member states to fund creation of a dedicated cell – situated in the UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, possibly in partnership with its Department of Global Communications – to backstop efforts to track and respond to the manipulation and distortion of information in conflict areas. This new office should draw on a roster of experts to advise mediators and peacekeepers on how to analyse the threats.

9. Guiding a climate security resolution through the Security Council

The UN Security Council has a good opportunity in the remainder of 2021 to address the consequences of climate change for conflict. As the 9 August Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report notes, the most realistic greenhouse gas emission scenario will likely lead, already by 2040, to an average global temperature increase

⁴¹ “5 ways the UN is fighting ‘infodemic’ of misinformation”, op. cit.

⁴² “Verified with the United Nations Secretary General”, Purpose, 2021.

⁴³ For example, see “New MIT Study Says United Nations Pause Campaign Slows Spread of Life-Threatening Misinformation”, United Nations, 1 July 2021; Emily K. Vraga and Leticia Bode, “Addressing COVID-10 Misinformation on Social Media Preemptively and Responsively”, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, vol. 27, no. 2 (February 2021); and Malaka Gharib, “WHO is fighting false COVID info on social media. How's that going?”, NPR, 9 February 2021.

⁴⁴ “Social Media in Peace Mediation: A Practical Framework”, UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Swisspeace, June 2021.

⁴⁵ See the Tech Against Terrorism website.

of more than 1.5°C, the level at which the 2015 Paris Agreement aimed to cap global warming. The faster warming will result in increasingly frequent and severe extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts and floods. Already, competition over land and water, climate-related displacement and transboundary water disputes are exacerbating deadly conflict in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East – dynamics likely to worsen in the future.

While the Security Council has discussed climate security since 2007, and it has included references to the issue in many peace operation mandates, the UN's mechanisms for tracking and analysing the effects of climate change on conflict are still quite limited. A Council resolution directing the secretary-general and UN system to devote more resources and attention to the topic could help fill this gap. A signal of this type from the Council is also likely to inspire more work on climate security in other forums, much as Resolution 1325 promoted more widespread interest in Women, Peace and Security.

In 2020, Germany spearheaded an attempt to secure a Security Council resolution that would have created a new high-level position at headquarters to coordinate the UN's efforts on climate security, the appointment of field-based climate security advisers in some peacekeeping missions, and increased reporting from the Secretariat on the links between climate change and security.⁴⁶ This initiative, however, met with rejection by China, Russia and the U.S., with the Trump administration threatening to wield its veto.

In 2021, however, the Biden administration's firm commitment to addressing climate change – underscored by Washington's rejoining the Paris Agreement in February – has shifted Council dynamics considerably. A group of twelve members in favour of increased engagement on climate security now includes the U.S., with Ireland and Niger – which also co-chair a new Council Informal Expert Group on Climate and Security – playing a leading role. These members plan to use their respective Council presidencies in September and December, plus that of Kenya in October, to reignite discussions on climate security and build support for a version of Germany's draft resolution. The UK has suggested that a resolution could also add momentum to efforts to address climate change linked to a major UN conference on the issue in Glasgow in early November.

China and Russia have so far remained sceptical of assertions that the Council should do more to tackle the links between climate and conflict, arguing that the UN's development bodies should handle this issue. India, which is an elected Council member in 2021-2022, has voiced concerns about the securitisation of climate change and the possibility that the Council will use coercive measures to enforce its decisions on the matter. Nonetheless, China and India have hinted at willingness to compromise on a resolution, while diplomats hope that Russia would abstain rather than block a text that all other Council members support.

There is still a good case for tabling a resolution in 2021, as at least one more significant climate sceptic – Brazil – will join the Council in 2022. Over the coming months, backers of a resolution will need to assemble a body of evidence for the im-

⁴⁶ For more on this initiative, see Richard Gowan, "Germany on the Security Council – The Score at Halftime", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 19 December 2019.

fact of climate change on conflict that the Chinese and Indians can accept.⁴⁷ They will also probably need to trade away some proposals, perhaps including appointment of a climate security envoy, to get consensus on a core set of priorities – such as improving UN reporting on climate security to the Council – that can act as the basis for future policy initiatives in this field. Washington will need to make clear to Beijing, Moscow and New Delhi that it considers this matter a genuine priority. Any resolution will mark only a small step toward improving the Security Council’s engagement with climate security, but it will at least provide a foundation for more systematic UN efforts to address this rapidly growing challenge.

10. Planning for COVID vaccinations in conflict-affected regions

The UN has struggled to craft a coherent response to the security consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. While Secretary-General Guterres called for a global humanitarian ceasefire during the first outbreak in March 2020, the Security Council took months to endorse the worthy if quixotic initiative, mainly due to bickering between U.S. and Chinese diplomats over the disease’s origins.⁴⁸ In February 2021, the Council discussed how it could support vaccination campaigns in conflict zones. While it was able to pass a resolution calling on conflict parties to facilitate such campaigns, this initiative has made little impact due to broader shortages and the uneven distribution of vaccines.⁴⁹

According to current projections, most countries suffering significant conflicts are unlikely to achieve widespread vaccination until 2023.⁵⁰ The pandemic’s impact on political disorder and violent conflict has been mixed. Public discontent partly informed by the authorities’ handling of the pandemic in countries including Colombia and Tunisia has certainly fuelled disorder – culminating in a political crisis in the Tunisian case – but in cases of active conflict, fighting has either continued or fluctuated for reasons seemingly unrelated to the coronavirus.⁵¹

The evidence is clearer that political violence can be an obstacle to public health efforts to control COVID-19. Infection rates spiked in Myanmar in 2021, risking spillover into neighbouring countries, at least in part because the health-care system broke down after February’s coup. Many medics have participated in civil disobedience campaigns, while the military has harassed health workers and seized their equipment. The Security Council discussed the links between the coronavirus and conflict

⁴⁷ For more on the links between climate and conflict, see Robert Malley, “Climate Change is Shaping the Future of Conflict”, speech to UN Security Council Arria Formula meeting on climate and security risks, 22 April 2020; and Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°154, *The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?*, 24 April 2020.

⁴⁸ For more, see Richard Gowan, “What’s Happened to the UN Secretary-General’s COVID-19 Cease-fire Call?”, speech to Mitvim – the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies and the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 16 June 2020; and Richard Gowan and Ashish Pradhan, “Salvaging the Security Council’s Coronavirus Response”, Crisis Group Commentary, 4 August 2020.

⁴⁹ For more on this resolution, see Richard Gowan, “A Fresh Chance for the Security Council to Tackle COVID-19”, Crisis Group Commentary, 6 April 2021.

⁵⁰ “How much will vaccine inequity cost?”, Economist Intelligence Unit, 25 August 2021.

⁵¹ For more, see Richard Atwood, “A Year of COVID and Conflict: What the Pandemic Did and Didn’t Do”, Crisis Group Commentary, 2 April 2021.

in Myanmar in August, and UN Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener has tried to use the disease as an entry point for talks with the junta.⁵² The military authorities have not yet responded to these overtures.

Looking ahead, even if the global supply of vaccines improves, there is a risk that the World Health Organization and national health authorities will struggle to distribute them in conflict zones. New variants could very well emerge in these areas as a result. While the Security Council's discussion in February may have been premature, Council members and the Secretariat should continue planning to support vaccination campaigns in volatile areas in 2022. The UN could adjust peace operation mandates to back up such efforts (as peacekeepers have done in response to ebola) or deploy mediation advisers to assist health workers.

While waiting for vaccine supplies to improve, the Security Council could appoint a temporary informal expert group to discuss these options, and the Secretary-General might appoint a personal envoy to drive cross-UN planning on the challenges ahead. Overall, such specific initiatives are a very small part of the greater global effort to contain COVID-19, but the Security Council still has space to help ease the pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations.

IV. Conclusion

Even if the UN's members can find common ground on the challenges listed here, multilateral security diplomacy is likely to remain difficult in the year ahead. The geopolitical tensions complicating UN action will persist, and even if the U.S., China and Russia can cooperate on some matters, the overall trajectory of their relations is likely to remain negative. Yet the UN is valuable in this turbulent period precisely because it still offers a vehicle for divided powers to contain conflicts and mitigate the suffering they create despite their strategic differences. Despite its apparent irrelevance in many crises, the UN system still plays a crucial part in managing an unstable international environment.

New York/Brussels, 13 September 2021

⁵² For more on COVID-19's impact in Myanmar, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°167, *The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse*, 1 April 2021.



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