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The UN Needs to be Salvaged

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Yemeni children walk in front of buildings that were damaged by Saudi airstrikes in the capital Sana'a (AFP)

“All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination,” reads the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), one of the foundational documents of the United Nations (UN). The formation of the UN at the end of Second World War is deemed a defining milestone in the course of human civilization – a moment of powerful cross-continental solidarity. Its aims of maintaining world peace and preserving human dignity devoid of racial, ethno-sectarian, political or gender affiliations were unheard of; so was its commitment to the devolution of colonial structures. The UN established itself as an institution of bravery, prestige and most crucial of all, trustworthiness.

The United Nations, particularly its specialized institutions, have worked tirelessly in the fields of human rights, education, healthcare, refugee protection, environmental preservation, prevention of drug and human trafficking, preservation of common human architectural and natural heritage, prosecution of crimes against humanity, and eradication of epidemics, poverty, famine and so on. On the political front, the UN has negotiated [172](#) inter-state settlements, and hundreds of multilateral treaties on disarmament, oceans, outer-space and nuclear non-proliferation.

Despite these important successes, the UN remains hostage to the myriad interests of its most powerful members especially the [P5](#); it also operates with a range of internal bureaucratic [hurdles](#), [corruption](#) scandals, allegations of [sexual abuse](#) of minors and [sex-trafficking](#), and the deadly [incompetence](#) influences of major funders. This translates into a serious loss of esteem and, thereby, authority.

For an institution that expects states to cede a part of one of their most inviolable elements – sovereignty – to it, this is nothing less than suicidal. The same is the case with non-state actors; if the UN cannot handle and penalize the subversive conduct of its own members with impartiality, non-state groups like terrorist organizations and individuals acting in contravention of international norms will not only trample the decisions taken by the organization but will also use the complicity of the UN as propaganda to garner support for their own ends.

Importantly, the UN's principle of impartiality remains in serious doubt, especially after a host of recent developments. The organization not only failed to put an end to the gruesome civil war in Yemen but also failed to effectively sanction the primary perpetrators – Saudi Arabian-led coalition forces and Houthi rebels – for their indiscriminate use of cluster bombs, besiegement and bombardment of civilian areas, as well as for using civilians as human shields and recruiting child soldiers. Additionally, after persistent [“blackmail”](#) by Saudi Arabia and its gulf allies, the UN removed Saudi-led coalition fighters in Yemen from the annual blacklist of groups committing [abuses](#) against children. The UN's own reports conclude that the coalition [killed](#) at least 510 children in Yemen last year and [wounded](#) another 667. The coalition also bombed schools, marketplaces and hospitals. Incredibly, Saudi Arabia also chairs the panel of independent experts on the UN Human Rights Council. However, this is not the first time that the UN has removed a perpetrator of child abuse from this list. Ban Ki-Moon's office caved in to pressure from Israel to remove their name from last year's version of the same damning report. Israel was on

the list following [Operation Protective Edge](#) (2014), in which the Israeli military [killed](#) at least 501 Palestinian children in Gaza. Furthermore, 3,374 children were [injured](#), of which 1,000 are expected to suffer lifelong [disability](#).

In the Central African Republic (CAR) (which has been marred by a renewed period of civil war since 2012), the UN's mission – [BINUCA](#) – which was already operating at the advent of crisis has virtually become dysfunctional. Moreover, the proximity of BINUCA officials to one of the warring parties rendered the body ineffective as a mediator. In informal circles, a UN placement in the CAR is thought to amount to a [“punishment posting”](#) for the underperforming staff – a [“prison”](#) and [“a parking lot of the UN”](#).

The international peacekeepers deployed at CAR have also been accused of raping and forcing children to engage in acts of [bestiality](#) in IDP camps in exchange for food, water and money. An independent investigation headed by Marie Deschamps, a former justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, released a [report](#) in January accusing the UN of “gross institutional failure” to investigate the abuses by peacekeepers. Close to 600 cases of sexual exploitation and abuse – involving UN and other peacekeepers – have been reported in CAR since 2008. As a result, many underage girls have been [left pregnant](#) and are now dealing with severe trauma.

The UN not only failed to properly investigate and prosecute this criminal conduct but also hounded the whistleblower Andres Kompass who eventually [resigned](#) from the organization. Mr. Kompass cited [“absolute impunity”](#) enjoyed by the abusive peacekeepers as one of the reasons for his resignation.

More recently, in Syria, drawing on both the UN's internal reports and interviews of the UN's personnel, the Syria Campaign, a pro-regime advocacy group released a [report](#) accusing various agencies operating in Syria of shunning the basic humanitarian principle of impartiality and working in tandem with the Assad regime. According to the report, most of the aid delivered by the UN in Syria has been commandeered to regime-controlled areas. The aid convoys have driven through starving towns held by the opposition groups to offload food and medical supplies in areas controlled by the regime. The report clearly lays out how Assad has manipulated the multiple agencies of the UN operating in Syria into becoming the tools of his besiegement, starvation and surrender [strategy](#); a strategy that may amount to war crimes. [1]

According to the Syria Campaign Group's report, to avoid angering the Assad government, the UN gave up its power. Since then, “the Government has sought to impose itself on all aspects of the (humanitarian) response, refusing to acknowledge OCHA's role as coordinator of humanitarian assistance,” according to an [evaluation](#) by the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA).

Surrendering its neutrality and thus credibility to a belligerent that has engaged in acts of mass-murder, gruesome human rights abuses, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture is another low for the UN. This culture of trade-offs and compromises has plagued the UN from Bosnia to Sri Lanka, for example, and now Syria.

The UN, at its best, is too important and sacrosanct to be lost to Kafkaesque bureaucracy, cowering diplomats and, most importantly, unblushing bullies. It has, at least in principle, given a chance for everybody to be heard. Hugo Chavez and George Bush, Che Guevara and Eisenhower, Ariel Sharon and Yasir Arafat, Noam Chomsky and Henry Kissinger, all have spoken from the same pulpit. But if it continues to act as the arena of might rather than uncompromising justice, the bravest experiment in human history risks being reduced to a laughing stock rather than a benchmark of fairness and motivator of the finest human conduct. It is high time that the UN starts cleaning the 42nd street.

[1] Current international humanitarian law – the law of armed conflict -prohibits deliberate starvation of the civilian population as a tactic of war and deems it as a prosecutable war crime. This prohibition finds expression in Article 54 (1) of [Additional Protocol I](#) of 1949 Geneva Conventions, which states that besieging forces may not starve civilians “as a method of warfare.”

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