United Nations Security Council
Background Guide

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Created in 1945 by the United Nations Charter, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations focusing on ensuring international peace and security. The Security Council has 15 member states, with China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States serving as permanent members (the P5). The other ten are elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms.¹ The primary responsibility of the UNSC is to determine the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression, and call upon parties to settle disputes peacefully. In some cases, the Security Council can impose sanctions or even authorize the use of force in the name of international peace and security. All members agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council.²

I. Providing Effective Humanitarian Assistance in Conflicts (Case Study: Yemen)

Statement of the Issue:

In remarks to the UNSC, the UN Secretary-General stated that “protecting citizens must be a joint effort by Governments, civil society, and international organizations.” While the framework on this issue has strengthened since the Security Council officially adopted the protection of civilians as an agenda item over twenty years ago, compliance has deteriorated. The Council has expressed its deep concern at the erosion of respect for international and humanitarian law, and global progress has been slowed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Secretary General called upon states to rethink their approach to urban welfare, reassert their authority over armed drones, address the various implications posed by the development of lethal autonomous weapons, and tackle the malicious use of digital technology to conduct cyberattacks on civilian infrastructure.³
Humanitarian access has been hindered by violence, insecurity, and bureaucratic impediments. In Yemen, there were nearly 400 incidents of violence against humanitarian personnel, and National Staff accounted for more than 90 percent of those injured or killed. In June of 2020, members of the Security Council reiterated their endorsement of the Secretary-General’s call to immediately cease hostilities in Yemen, while condemning the unmanned aerial vehicle and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia. UNSC stands behind Special Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths in his continued effort to reach an agreement on a nationwide ceasefire and a resumption of an inclusive Yemeni-led and Yemeni-owned political process.4

History:

One of the main purposes of the United Nations, as stated in its charter, is “to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character.” The UN is now relied upon by the international community to coordinate humanitarian relief operations. Established in 2005, the UN Emergency Response Fund (CERF) is one of the fastest and most effective ways to support rapid humanitarian response to those affected by armed conflict.5

While conflict in Yemen is present throughout its history, the threat of terrorism and increased violence started at the dawn of the 21st Century when the USS Cole was bombed, killing 17 U.S. personnel and focusing attention on a rapidly expanding terrorist threat in the form of an offshoot of Al Qaida. As the United States began to pressure former President Saleh to focus on counter-terrorism efforts, Saleh, backed by Saudi Arabia, launched a series of attacks on northern Yemeni fighters known as Houthis in 2004. Saleh accused the Houthis of separatism and trying to impose their religious orthodoxy on the state.6

Yemen was one of the first countries to engage in pro-democracy protests during the Arab Spring in 2011. The protests in Yemen differed from those in Tunisia and Egypt because they appeared to have been organized by a coalition of Yemeni opposition groups and featured strong centralized leadership. Despite then president Saleh making several economic concessions to appease his citizens, the protests continued, resulting in an increased security presence in Sana’a- the capital. The outlying provinces of the country were left exposed, giving rise to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), an Islamist militant group. An eventual transfer of presidential power and the subsequent disapproval of the new administration helped mobilize the Houthi rebels.7 In response, under Resolution 2201, the Security Council demanded that Houthi rebels in Yemen “immediately and unconditionally” withdraw from Government institutions and engage with the United Nations’ negotiations to keep Yemen on a
steady path toward democratic transition. The Council strongly disapproved of actions taken by
the Houthis to dissolve parliament and seize control over the government.

Five years of military stalemate have followed. Yemen’s war consists of several parts:
Houthis vs. a Saudi-led coalition, Houthis against Yemeni Sunnis, a southern independence
insurgency, and a Saudi-Iranian proxy war. While the victors have yet to be decided, the
victims have been and continue to be the Yemeni people. During a Security Council meeting in
2019, UN officials urged parties to adhere to specific agreements designed to end the
humanitarian crisis, while condemning any action that blocked humanitarian aid.

Analysis:

Yemen is currently (June 2020) home to the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Over 21
million people require urgent humanitarian assistance, 9.9 million of whom are children.
Malnutrition and disease are rampant, as a child dies every 10 minutes. During the first weeks
of 2020, Yemen experienced the “quietest” week in its five-year-long war. However, high-level
United Nations officials made it clear to the Security Council that millions of people still required
urgent aid and emphasized the difficulty of safe access to reach millions of Yemeni citizens.
Weeks of quiet in the midst of war often leads the media to shift focus away, which can cause
the public to consider the area in question in less need when that is often the opposite.

Martin Griffiths, UN Special Envoy to Yemen, developed a three-pronged draft proposal
in March of 2020 to the Houthis focused on a nationwide ceasefire, humanitarian and economic
measures, and resumption of the peace process. While significant progress has been made
towards the most urgent component, a ceasefire, disagreement remains between government
parties over specific humanitarian and economic measures. Griffiths stated that despite the
relative reduction in violence, the military situation remains extremely concerning. There is a
“perfect storm brewing” in southern Yemen due to the rise in civilian deaths, heavy flooding
following the April rains, and daily power outages.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the conflict in Yemen. The humanitarian and
economic measures yet to be agreed upon are crucial in fighting the spread of the virus and
protecting Yemeni citizens. The full impact of the virus is unknown because testing is extremely
low, as the health system remains unequipped to handle the rising number of cases. The
delivery of humanitarian assistance faces new challenges and restrictions on movement along
with an increase of harassment against United Nations workers.

Despite the current environment, the United Nations is reaching millions of people each
month with food, water, health care, and other services that help combat the effects of COVID-
Rapid-response teams have been deployed and health care workers have been trained and provided with the necessary supplies and equipment. The UN is trying to ensure that Yemen is the highest priority in COVID-19 global supply chains, but this is proving difficult due to the number of programs that are closing down. The World Health Organization recently informed Yemeni authorities of plans to reduce the agency’s activities and terminate UN programs unless they are able to secure additional funds.

Yemen’s economy has been under fire from the pandemic as well. Commercial food imports have been falling and fuel imports have taken off, most likely from the fall in oil prices. The Yemeni currency, the Rial, has weakened significantly which means fewer people can afford basic goods. Already exhausted from years of conflict pre-COVID-19, bold action is required to try and stabilize the economy. Regular injections of foreign aid and affordable food are the first steps to improving the economy and beginning the process of peace.

**Conclusion:**

If action is not taken quickly and decisively from the international community, there could be a complete economic and humanitarian collapse in Yemen. The pandemic hits hardest among already marginalized populations and has further complicated the path towards peace and democracy in this state. The repercussions of increased instability in Yemen will be felt globally. A coordinated effort among the UN and NGOs to provide health care and access to essential resources while developing policies to help save the economy is needed. Further efforts towards ending the violence during the civil war must be taken as well. As stated by Ramesh Rajasingham, Acting Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, peace is “the best chance Yemen has to contain COVID-19.¹⁰”

**Questions:**

1. What role should the Security Council have in Yemen and other conflicts involving mass humanitarian disasters?
2. How can the international community most effectively distribute humanitarian resources in Yemen?
3. Can the pandemic serve as a potential catalyst for peace and bring about an end to the civil war?
4. Is a coordinated effort by border states in the Middle East a better solution to better aid the Yemeni people?
Resources

nations/security-council.


3“Secretary-General’s Remarks to the Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of 
Civilians in Armed Conflict [as Delivered] Secretary-General.” *United Nations*, United 
generals-remarks-the-security-council-open-debate-the-protection-of-civilians-armed-
conflict-delivered.
II. Improving Effectiveness in Peacekeeping Missions

Statement of the Issue:

Peacekeeping missions are one of the United Nations’ most potent tools for maintaining peace and security around the world. Peacekeeping is guided by three basic principles -- consent of the parties; impartiality; non-use of force -- which are foremost in the UN’s mission to help countries make the transition from conflict to peace. In the over 50 years of operation, United Nations Peacekeeping operations have seen mixed outcomes. On the one hand, peacekeeping operations have been shown to limit the amount of violence in the short run and to assist in de-escalating conflict. On the other hand, ineffective peacekeeping operations can often result from lack of adequate resources, micro-management by governing bodies, and trust deficit with Member States. Deficiencies in management and cooperation among Member...
States can result in Peacekeeping missions falling short of their mandates; a failure to protect citizens against violence can be one of the many devastating consequences, as was the case in South Sudan.4

The United Nations has taken a number of steps to reform peacekeeping, in accordance with the issues that have been made evident through unsuccessful missions. Despite the advent of more complex, multidimensional missions, mandates often lack focus and clear priorities. In addition, peacekeeping missions have seen a rise in fatalities and injuries of peacekeepers due to the complex threats in certain environments, often accompanied by lack of personnel and resources to meet the threats. The UN Secretary General has spearheaded reforms intended to rejuvenate political commitment to peacekeeping operations.

**History:**

United Nations Peacekeeping officially began in 1948 when the UN Security Council authorized the deployment of UN military observers to the Middle East, with the mission of monitoring the Armistice Agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbors. This operation, known as the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), commenced at a time when Cold War rivalries characterized the agenda of the Security Council. In addition to UNTSO, the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) was one of the first two peacekeeping operations; these missions exemplified the observation and monitoring type of peacekeeping operations. The earliest armed peacekeeping operation was deployed in 1956 for purposes of addressing the Suez Crisis.

The focus of UN Peacekeeping missions shifted considerably in the post-Cold War period. The missions shifted from those involving observational tasks to more complex ‘multidimensional’ enterprises involving the implementation of comprehensive peace agreements and laying the foundation for sustainable peace. Peacekeepers were increasingly expected to shoulder a wide variety of tasks, yet the Security Council was running into situations in which they were not able to authorize sufficiently comprehensive mandates or provide adequate resources. A number of reforms were introduced to strengthen capacity to manage and sustain the field operations.

Classic peacekeeping is accompanied by a number of issues, one being that operations can drag on infinitely and without any kind of formal timeline. United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) and United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) are two original Peacekeeping operations that have no end in sight; ending a conflict can be impossible when the two sides do not come to agreement on borders.
Peacekeeping operations are also unable to be successful when soldiers are sent into a conflict zone expecting to maintain peace, when in fact, there was no peace to begin.\(^5\)

Despite the shortcomings of peacekeeping operations, they have also seen states along the path to stability and peace. For instance, the United Nations Mission in Liberia supported the state in its recovery from the civil war that lasted from 1989 to 2003. The mission succeeded in disarming combatants, securing weapons, enabling refugees and displaced persons to return home, and assisted in the holding of peaceful elections.\(^6\) Peacekeeping has also supported a number of states, including Sierra Leone, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Timor-Leste, Liberia, Haiti and Kosovo.\(^7\)

**Analysis:**

The expectations for peacekeeping missions have surpassed the reality of what is feasible in many situations. It is often the case that Security Council mandates are too ambitious, while lacking necessary resources. The post-Cold War shift to ‘multidimensional’ missions involved addressing the roots of conflict, which are often too comprehensive for peacekeepers to be equipped to deal with. Lack of a strong mandate, inadequate funding, micromanagement by governing bodies, lack of transparency and accountability limit the success of peacekeeping missions. Recognizing the importance of peacekeeping missions, a number of reforms, comprehensively known as the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative, were introduced by the Secretary General. The initiative calls on Member states to recommit to a mutually-agreed upon set of principles for future peacekeeping missions.

Burden sharing among member states can be a cost effective approach to conflict intervention. The cost of conventional war can easily reach tens of billions of dollars.\(^2\) As opposed to armed confrontation, peacekeeping operations also have the potential to avert a massive number of direct and indirect deaths. The missions also promote the use of the international community’s collective resources, in working toward anti-extremism goals that are of concern for most members of the international community.\(^8\)

UN Peacekeeping can be made more effective through strengthening partnerships with the many stakeholders across different areas of peacekeeping. In focusing on the performance pillar of A4P, Member States will prioritize matching mandates with uniformed capabilities. A number of high level summits with member states and the secretaries-general resulted in member states pledging to contribute new personnel and enablers to mandates, as well as improving peacekeeping training. There has also been an effort to improve operational readiness of military and police units prior to deployment. Furthermore, increasing civilian
capacity within peacekeeping missions is an important component of success in peacekeeping missions. Member states must be careful to match the tasks given to peacekeeping operations with the requisite civilian capabilities.

**Conclusion:**

The United Nations has an important role to play in conflict management for the international community. Peacekeeping operations have the potential for guiding states along the path to peace, yet Security Council mandates are not always destined for success, given the volatile and often dangerous situations in states and the resources allocated by Member States. Throughout the history of United Nations peacekeeping, reforms have been undertaken in response to weaknesses evident in mandates, management, and operational efficiency, among other factors. In order for peacekeeping to be the powerful force for peace that it can be, Member States must commit to matching mission mandates with adequate uniformed, civilian, and financial capacity and giving the Secretary-General the political support needed to ensure effective monitoring and evaluation of missions. The international community will need to assess the progress of reforms to peacekeeping, in order to evaluate the feasibility of achieving the missions of future peacekeeping operations.

**Questions:**

1. How can the Security Council work to make peacekeeping missions more effective and in line with their designated purpose?
2. Is it fair for countries of which the conflict is not involved to bear the costs of peacekeeping operations?
3. At what point should peacekeeping forces be withdrawn?
4. Which international actors should bear the financial costs of peacekeeping?
Resources


