The United Nations & Civil Wars

Jean-Marie Guéhenno

Abstract: The UN engagement in civil wars was almost nonexistent until the end of the Cold War, but recent experience brings some important lessons: the traditional principles of peacekeeping are ill-suited for civil war, as demands on peacekeepers, in particular the protection of civilians, are expanding. But military force is there to support a political strategy. The UN must focus on politics, using its comparative advantage – its independence – to win the confidence of the parties, while preserving its access to big powers to put pressure on them. However, it is challenged by the growing divisions in the Security Council, the changing nature of conflict, and a crisis of states that reflects long-term trends. This is not a reason for the UN to abandon its role in ending civil wars, but it needs to recalibrate its ambitions and adapt its approach: be less state-centric and more inclusive; more robust militarily; and more disciplined in its priorities.

JEAN-MARIE GUÉHENNO is a member of the high-level advisory board on mediation recently created by the United Nations Secretary-General. He served as the United Nations Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000 to 2008. He is the author of *The Fog of Peace: A Memoir of Peacekeeping in the 21st Century* (2015).

The United Nations was not designed to deal with civil wars. It is an organization of sovereign states that decided, at the end of World War II, that their relations should be governed by a set of binding rules, enshrined in a charter, and policed by a select group of nations in the form of the Security Council. The international order that the charter of the United Nations organized is based on the assumption that sovereign states, as the building blocks of the international system, are the benevolent custodians of their people; and the main purpose of the charter is to regulate relations between sovereign states while refraining from interfering with their domestic affairs, including civil wars.

Paragraph 7 of article 2 of the charter explicitly states:

> Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter; but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII.

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This paragraph was the result of difficult discussions in San Francisco. France had initially argued that violations of human rights could be a basis for intervention, but this view was strongly rejected by the American delegation, and a few years later, when the Algerian War of Independence started, a preparatory report of John Foster Dulles that had been the basis for that rejection would be quoted in a French periodical to justify the French position.[1] France had come to agree with the United States that there should be no exception to the principle set in paragraph 7 of article 2 of the charter. That is why, until the end of the Cold War, the United Nations did not concern itself with civil wars, with the two exceptions of the Congo, where its role was to protect the integrity of a state emerging from decolonization, and Cyprus, which involved a confrontation between two states (Turkey and Greece).

The end of the Cold War opened a new chapter: there have been fewer interstate wars and more civil wars; and the less-divided Security Council has authorized twice as many operations in the last twenty-six years as it authorized in its first forty-four years, and most of the new missions have been deployed to accompany peace processes aimed at ending civil wars. Based on the assumption that the stabilization of a postconflict country requires a "comprehensive approach,"[2] they have been increasingly multidimensional, often including political, military, development, and humanitarian components.[3]

As a response to that assumption, the UN has developed several new capacities during the last fifteen years. In 2005, a new intergovernmental advisory body, the Peacebuilding Commission, was inaugurated, and it presently has six countries on its agenda, four of which have been hosts to peacekeeping operations.[4] In addition, a peace-building support office was created in the United Nations Secretariat, with a peace-building fund established under its responsibility. UN Secretary-General António Guterres, recognizing the political nature of peace-building, plans to integrate the peace-building support office in the department of political affairs. Outside the Secretariat, the United Nations Development Programme's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) was for many years the centralized repository of expertise dedicated to the needs of countries teetering on the brink of civil war or recovering from one. It has now been disbanded and replaced by a leaner Crisis Response Unit; expertise previously housed in the BCPR has been largely decentralized, with the aim of bringing it closer to the areas where it might be deployed, but also with the risk that the critical mass of expertise that was assembled will be diluted, and the specificity of postconflict challenges may be lost.

Twenty-six years after the end of the Cold War, it is time to reflect on this new engagement of the UN in civil wars, all the more so because that experience is bookended by tragedies: in the nineties, the horrors of Yugoslavia and Rwanda and the debacle of Somalia; now the massive failure of Syria. This gives a particular urgency to the issue, which I will address in three steps. First, there are enough case studies to draw some lessons from the experiences of recent years; second, one must consider that the "international system" is rapidly changing, and so are conflicts, raising questions on the applicability of recent experience; and third, there is therefore a need to redefine what the UN can contribute in the resolution of civil wars, and what it should not do. What is a reasonable level of ambition?

How can a third party help to end a civil war and bring stability to a country emerging from conflict? What is the right balance between political engagement and use of force? Which capacities are most needed after the devastation of war? What should

be the priorities: Demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration? Security sector reform? Transitional justice? Rule of law? Effective governance structures? Provision of basic services (such as education and health care)? Job creation? What is the right timing and sequence for elections? There are probably no definitive answers to any of those questions, and certainly no single answer. They have generated an abundant literature, usually focused on one issue at a time rather than the overall balance and prioritization of numerous, often contradictory goals. And yet I will argue that intelligent orchestration is the most important strategic variable, and that isolated policies, even well-executed ones, are unlikely to produce lasting results unless they are part of an overall coherent and consistent strategy.

The first and most sensitive issue is the balance between politics and force, and the United Nations, like the United States in its own state-building efforts over the last fifteen years, has had great difficulty finding the right answer.[5] Military deployments, because they are concrete, have obvious appeal that messy and inconclusive political processes do not. Gradually, the military component has taken a more central role, which has led to a profound change in what is expected from UN troops. The principle of "no peacekeepers where there is no peace to keep," advocated by a panel on peacekeeping chaired by the experienced UN official Lakhdar Brahimi, has in practice been abandoned. More and more, UN forces are deployed in situations where there is not yet full peace, even if the most intense phase of a civil war has ended. The traditional principles guiding the conduct of UN blue helmets are ill-suited for that gray zone: consent of the parties, impartiality, and nonuse of force except in self-defense. These propositions were established at a time when UN deployments had a largely symbolic value, separating state parties along a cease-fire line and allowing them to save face by ceding ground to a third, neutral party rather than to an enemy. The situation is completely different in the context of a civil war.

Nonstate actors have much less to lose if they break their commitment, because the international community does not have the legal leverage that it holds over a state party. Their chain of command is also weaker, and an agreement reached at the top level does not ensure implementation at lower levels. The notion of consent, both on the government and rebel sides, has also become much less clear; parties to a conflict now tolerate, rather than request, a UN presence, meaning that the UN peacekeepers have to negotiate the continuation of consent. The government of Sudan was always deeply suspicious of an international deployment in Darfur, and would only agree to a hybrid mission combining the UN and the African Union (AU), knowing that its influence on the AU would help constrain the UN.

Meanwhile, the demands on UN forces have increased considerably. In civil wars, civilian populations are often the target, rather than collateral, and the tragedies of Yugoslavia and Rwanda have led the Security Council to include in most UN mandates the protection of civilians, at least in areas where UN forces are deployed and where they have the means to provide protection. This in turn has led to an evolution of the doctrine of peacekeeping, which no longer limits the use of force to self-defense, but includes "defense of the mandate." This evolution has not been formally endorsed, because many of the troop-contributing countries are aware of the much higher level of risk that this new posture entails, and of the great imbalance between the needs and the resources, which can raise undue expectations and set up troops for failure.[6]

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UN blue helmets have repeatedly been accused of standing by as civilians are massacred. In South Sudan, the UN force opened the gates of its bases to terrorized

Nuer fleeing government forces, de facto transforming parts of the mission into gigantic camps for internally displaced persons, but was unable to stop government forces from raiding a camp in Malakal. If preelectoral violence flares up in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and government forces use excessive force against demonstrators, the UN will be unable to protect civilians: UN blue helmets are not ready, politically and operationally, to shoot at government forces. Politically, impartiality becomes impossible if its logical conclusion is to pit a UN force against a government force. Operationally, even after a peace agreement has been signed, a UN force quickly finds it limits. In most peacekeeping missions, the ratio of troops deployed to the population that needs protection is woefully inadequate, and the problem is compounded by the unwillingness of most troop contributors to take the risks that effective physical protection would require. They are generally reluctant to conduct night patrols and establish mobile forward bases, and they often lack the equipment, training, and capacities that would mitigate risks for troops and compensate for insufficient numbers, such as good intelligence to preempt violence and mobility assets to redeploy rapidly.

And yet effective protection of civilians, apart from its obvious humanitarian value, can become a key dimension of a political strategy; it gives credibility and leverage to a UN mission trying to move a political process forward. This raises fundamental questions for peacekeeping in a context of civil war. The symbolism of blue helmets, which is the basis of peacekeeping between states, is not enough in a situation in which parties have not decisively ruled out the use of force. This consideration becomes a major challenge when criminal armed groups have no negotiable political goal and actually benefit from a continuation of conflict: the UN, if it has a force on the ground, must have the capacity to make effective use of it, otherwise the presence of troops, far from enhancing its role, may actually undermine it. The gap that opens between the expectations of the population when blue helmets deploy and what the troops can actually achieve can destroy the authority of the UN.[7]

Politics, and not force – unless it is overwhelming force, something that the UN never has the capacity to wield – brings peace. Because it is easier for the Security Council to agree on the number of troops or police than on a political strategy, the excessive reliance on peacekeepers – which has reached record levels, but also an implicit ceiling, with a budget of $8.5 billion – can become a distraction. Troop deployments have to be integrated in a political strategy, and they create expectations that should make the Security Council think twice before including a military component in a peace operation. In the end, military deployments achieve little if they are not supporting a well-thought-through political strategy, as the United States, with forces infinitely superior to what the UN could ever mobilize, discovered in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The United Nations should, in principle, have some comparative advantage there: parties to a conflict are more likely to make lasting compromises if they are encouraged by a neutral organization than if they are responding to the pressure of a powerful state, and external advice is more likely to be accepted if it is not suspected of serving the interests of a particular country. But for that to happen, the United Nations must be given the space to operate with sufficient independence. If it is seen to be just the agent of big powers, it loses its credibility, while if big powers make clear that they will not support the UN effort, it will also fail. In the last decade and a half, experience shows that the UN has had difficulty finding its way along that very narrow

path. The UN by itself has little power, and its leverage to achieve that transition from war to peace depends largely on its capacity to harness the power of its member states, especially the most powerful ones. It must conduct a delicate balancing act, using its independence to win the trust of the conflicting parties and using its access to power to put pressure on them.[8]

The situations in which the UN has most been able to make a difference are those where there was sufficient interest of a major power for the UN to have leverage, but where the UN was given enough space to pursue its own strategy. In Sierra Leone, the United Kingdom had a strong interest, but sometimes disagreed with the strategy pursued by the UN: it wanted more forceful and immediate action against the Revolutionary United Front, while the special representative of the secretary-general, Ambassador Oluyemi Adeniji, preferred to gradually consolidate the authority of the government. But because it was not a vital interest of the United Kingdom, then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan was able to push back, and eventually the UN strategy proved to be the right one. In Afghanistan, the Bonn process was relatively successful because Lakhdar Brahimi, the special representative of the secretary-general, was able to shape an autonomous political strategy while maintaining close and positive relations with the United States. He managed to create an evolutionary process that moved from what was largely a peace of the winners in Bonn to a more inclusive process in the constitutional Loya Jirga two years later. But that was not enough to achieve real success: the UN was unable to influence the military strategy of the U.S.-led coalition, failed in convincing successive administrations to engage with the Taliban before they had recovered from their defeat in 2001, and had almost no say in the massive bilateral aid efforts that often undermined the state of Afghanistan, rather than helped build it (more on that below).

In Iraq, the United Nations was not given any significant space, and the process was largely driven by the United States. Apart from Washington's well-documented mistakes, this secondary role has deeply damaged the image of the UN in the Middle East, which is now often seen as an adjunct of U.S. power and has therefore a limited capacity to play a constructive role in the region.

When the UN is given enough space to develop a political strategy, how should one define success? What is a successful political strategy to end a civil war? The end goal has the appearance of clarity: to consolidate a center of power that is perceived as legitimate enough not to rely on coercion to maintain its authority. That statement raises many more questions: Is perceived legitimacy distinct from legitimacy? Or should we accept that the definition of legitimacy is circular, that legitimacy is what is perceived as legitimate? And what is "legitimate enough"? Every state relies on some measure of coercion, and the balance between coercion and voluntary adherence varies considerably around the world. And in a country in which the state has lost its monopoly on the legitimate use of force, coercion may have a greater role than in a well-established regime. That monopoly is not reinstated all at once, and a political strategy should carefully map the different power centers and make appropriate judgments on the appropriate mix of political incentives, use of force, and other means that can gradually move a country from open war to peace, even wary peace.

The role of the United Nations in civil wars is further complicated by the growing role of regional and subregional organizations.[9] In Africa, the UN has had to adjust to the increased relevance of the African Union and subregional organizations. In

the 1990s and early 2000s, the UN was usually the lead actor, for instance in Mozambique or Namibia. But in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi, the Organization of African Unity tried to define its own strategy, to be implemented by the UN; although in these cases, the Security Council intervened and redefined the role of the UN. Moreover, the UN peacekeeping operation and the UN envoy for the Great Lakes have seen their political role gradually reduced, and a pattern has emerged whereby the UN plays a civil-humanitarian-military role, while the African Union or subregional organizations like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development or the East African Community are expected to play the lead political role. This division of labor has not worked well: it raises excessive expectations on the operational role of the UN, and hands over political responsibilities to organizations that are deeply divided, institutionally weak, and therefore often incapable of playing a strong political role.

And yet the emergence of regional and subregional organizations is a welcome evolution that should in time strengthen the capacity of the international community to deal with civil wars; but only if the relationship with the UN is clarified first. Such clarification depends on a shared political understanding that needs to be reached between the UN and African institutions and leaders. The fact that the African Union and Secretary-General António Guterres have agreed to have regular consultations at the head-of-state level is an important first step. Chapter VIII of the UN charter envisaged an important role for regional organizations. In coming years, the diffusion of power should in principle give increased relevance to regional organizations.

The UN is, however, often hesitant to play an active political role: the members of the Security Council are deeply divided on what the ultimate goal of a political strategy should be. They all want to restore stability, but their understanding of stability varies widely. Is stability based on inclusive government and robust institutions that can manage differences and allow for free and fair elections that do not lead to confrontation? Or is stability based on the capacity of a government to suppress dissent? The balance between coercion and adherence is seen differently by different countries, and the Security Council is unable to give a unified answer to that question. In itself, that ambiguity is not fatal to a UN role, and can actually give more political space to a UN envoy who is not bound by detailed prescriptions of the Security Council. But it requires envoys who are prepared to take the initiative without the cover of a Security Council mandate, and it frequently leaves open the role of elections in a political strategy: too often, the Security Council has found dubious unity in pushing for elections as an exit strategy, even if the context of elections makes it unlikely that they will provide a solid foundation for stability. More recently, various electoral crises in Africa have confronted the Security Council with real dilemmas: an election can trigger violence if its results are contested, but the postponement of an election, as seen in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, can also be a source of violence and instability. This raises new questions for countries like China that do not prioritize elections as the foundation of stability but are worried about instability. The liberal agenda that dominated the first twenty years of the post–Cold War period may be under attack and fading, but the question of how to stabilize countries emerging from conflict remains, and there is no genuine agreement in the Security Council on what the answer should be.

That ambivalent attitude of the Security Council with respect to the centrality of a political strategy largely explains why the Security Council tends to focus more on the

military part of a mandate and on a technical approach to peace-building. This technical bias suits development agencies well, since they have traditionally stressed the nonpolitical nature of their work and their technical expertise to gain access to governments. But this focus jeopardizes a credible UN role in dealing with civil wars. Not only does it provide a convenient alibi for not addressing the most difficult political issues, but it exposes the limits of state-building strategies.[10] Over the last fifteen years, the state-building record of the UN and of the international community more generally has been mixed at best: a lack of prioritization, an absence of effective orchestration, and a supply-driven approach that often ignores locally identified needs and accountability have resulted in considerable waste. In the worst cases, like South Sudan, the state-building focus entirely missed the fact that the political foundations of the state were missing, leading to a devastating resumption of war.

The lessons of a decade and a half offer a cautionary tale on the limits of what the UN can achieve militarily, politically, and from a state-building standpoint. However, they should not lead to abandoning the effort altogether. And there is considerable risk today that it might happen, as skepticism on what can actually be done grows and as many countries that once supported a global agenda are confronted with pressing domestic issues. Adopting an "isolationist" posture and dealing only with emergencies has increasing appeal when conflict resolution and peace-building are found to be protracted enterprises with uncertain results.

The doubts about what the international community and, more specifically, the UN can do to prevent or end civil strife are reinforced by the rapid deterioration of the international system and by the changing nature of conflict.[11]

At the global level, the impotence of the international community to bring the Syrian tragedy to an end casts a long shadow on the potential role of the United Nations in ending civil wars. The divisions of the Security Council were always there, as noted above. The repeated vetoes that have prevented any sustained joint effort in Syria are an illustration of the zero-sum game that often guides Security Council decision-making. Security Council intervention in Libya in 2011, which led to the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, appears to have served as a warning to permanent members China and Russia, who abstained from the Libya vote but have more proactively vetoed such proposals for action since. For a while, advocates of a more active Security Council hoped that the escalating tension between Russia and the United States would affect only those conflicts in which Russia has a direct and pressing interest, like in Syria and Ukraine. But it is now clear that, even if the Security Council is still capable of reaching consensus on a number of peace operations, the confrontation is spilling over to other conflicts. The principles of sovereignty and noninterference in domestic affairs have provided a rallying point to countries suspicious that a regime-change agenda might hide behind demands for a more proactive posture of the Council. Thus, in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the risk of large-scale violence has not been enough to mobilize the Security Council.

At the regional level, preexisting divides are also deepening, and are given increased salience by paralysis at the global level, allowing regional powers to fill the vacuum and play a greater role. The Syrian crisis is a case in point: Regional powers such as Iran or Saudi Arabia cannot be considered as proxies of Russia and the United States, even if they receive support from them. They have their own distinct agendas, which add a layer of complexity to the res-

olution of the conflict. This can create situations in which allies are on opposite sides. For example, because it has been among the most effective fighting forces against the Islamic State, the United States has provided military support to the YPG (People's Protection Units, a Kurdish militia in Syria). However, the YPG is affiliated with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which is designated a terrorist organization by both the United States and Turkey, and which Turkey considers the greatest regional threat to its security! This has been a bitter point of contention between allies Turkey and the United States. Too often, conflicting priorities mean that regional actors can manipulate global actors for their own purposes, prolonging conflict without having to bear the consequences.

In theory, the shared threat of global terrorism should bring together the international community and facilitate joint efforts. In reality, the agenda of "countering violent extremism" complicates rather than facilitates cooperation. Different countries have different views on who is a terrorist, and the "terrorist" label, generously applied to a multitude of groups, considerably shrinks the political space needed to conduct effective negotiations. Many "terrorists" have joined terrorist organizations for opportunistic reasons, ranging from military prowess to criminal gains. Their motives, even when they join organizations with a global agenda like Al Qaeda or the Islamic State, can be very local, related to tribal affiliations more than to a religious program. Lumping together individuals and groups with very different agendas makes it more difficult to support inclusive processes and peel off those who could be co-opted.[12] The dominance of the "countering violent extremism" agenda thus contributes to the diminishing political role of the United Nations in resolving civil wars, and puts the UN in the awkward position of accompanying overly militarized strategies of powerful member states over which it has no influence.

While a better effort should be made to engage terrorists and even terrorist organizations, contemporary terrorism presents a specific challenge for the international community and the United Nations. At the operational level, successful peacekeeping requires peacekeepers to create a sense of proximity with the population; it is an important part of the psychological reassurance they provide. And the civilian component of a mission needs to engage as intensely and continuously as possible with the people of the host country. But when security concerns limit such contacts, and even armed peacekeepers have to patrol in convoys, that proximity is lost, and most UN troops are poorly equipped and prepared for that environment. In many situations, irreconcilable agendas suggest that, on the military side, peace enforcement rather than peacekeeping is required. On the political side, if the radical nature of many of the demands of terrorist groups was not enough to make any negotiation very difficult, their transnational and diffuse character can destroy the possibility of a credible political process. Moreover, uncoordinated parallel military operations conducted by non-UN troops, aimed at destroying the chain of command of groups labeled as terrorist, can make any engagement impossible.

Another evolution that contributes to making the termination of a conflict more difficult is the blurring of the distinction between political and criminal agendas, or maybe more accurately, the criminalization of politics. There are a number of situations around the world – from Central America to the Great Lakes region in Africa – in which powerful groups have an interest in having neither full war nor full peace. Full war is bad for business, and full peace is bad for their business, which can thrive only in a situation of semilawless-

ness that allows for all sort of illicit traffics.[13] The United Nations is ill-equipped for that kind of low-intensity, protracted conflict, which knows no borders and is often shaped by transnational relationships. Ending these conflicts would require forensic capacities to track money flows that the UN does not have. And criminal agendas, like terrorist agendas, cannot be accommodated in the same way a political agenda can through an inclusive process.

The civil wars of the twenty-first century are not a passing phenomenon, but are symptoms of evolutions that go beyond the birth pangs of decolonization or the unraveling of former empires. We sometimes read the crises affecting countries in Africa or the Middle East as a sign of their backwardness, as they catch up with other regions where the state has found its definitive form; we describe such countries in crisis as "failed states."[14] But that is ignoring the crisis that is creeping into some of the most advanced countries of the world, where indeed no civil war has broken out, but where the polity is at risk of fracturing.[15] Its causes go beyond the scope of this essay, but flow in large part from a combination of the atomization of society and globalization that have unraveled geographically defined communities. States are suffering from a dual crisis of legitimacy: they reflect the fragmentation of the polities of which they are the expression, as well as their own declining effectiveness, while they confront challenges that are beyond their capacities. And this crisis of politics – observed worldwide – also affects conflicts: they are less about the control of power in a given polity than about the polity itself and what defines it. And that transformation of conflict in turn affects the United Nations, whose main comparative advantage remains its unparalleled capacity to broker political compromises precisely because it does not itself have a political agenda. But that assumes that the framework in which the conflict is to be resolved – a functioning state – is not questioned. Confronted with actors who are beyond political compromise, either because of the radical nature of their goals, or because of their nonpolitical character, the UN will often find itself powerless.

What then can be done? An organization of states like the United Nations cannot be expected to be more effective than its component parts. In the absence of a global polity, a global organization needs the legitimacy of its member states to be legitimate, and legitimacy is a condition of its effectiveness: precisely because they are in crisis, states will deflect the challenges against their authority by passing the blame to more global institutions, as we see today with the European Union.

This crisis, as noted above, is not going to go away. An old order of nation-states – which found its modern form in Europe with the treaties of Westphalia that ended a century of religious wars – is slowly beginning to unravel, and the United Nations is part of that order. In the flatter and less-territorial world produced by the Internet, human communities will invent new political structures to organize themselves, and it is impossible to predict them. But the transition is likely to take time, just as during the Renaissance, it took time for Europe to overcome the crisis of legitimacy that was opened by religious war. In an age of nuclear weapons, making that transition as peaceful as possible should be an absolute priority, and the United Nations, with its limitations, can nevertheless help manage that transition while not abandoning its role in ending civil wars.

The UN should, however, define its role with the utmost humility, acknowledging that it cannot be the solution to the challenges that states face, nor can it limit itself to shoring up nation-states in their most traditional form.[16] Global government is

not a realistic response to globalization, nor is a return to self-contained fully autonomous states. What the United Nations can do is help fractured communities, through negotiations, find new compromises that eventually will help human communities redefine themselves. To take the example of Syria and Iraq, the solution is probably not in redrawing the borders drawn by Messieurs Sykes and Picot, but in redefining the exercise of power within those borders.

To remain relevant, the UN should evolve in the way it approaches conflict resolution, taking into account the changes in the strategic as well as the operational environment. At the strategic level, it should have a less state-centric approach, and broaden its focus. On the one hand, it should have a greater regional focus: most conflicts now spill over borders, and while defining them as proxy wars between regional powers is excessive, it is unrealistic to expect to resolve them in isolation from their regional context. And in many situations, hard borders are part of the problem.[17] Managed movements of a population are part of the solution. On the other hand, many issues need to be resolved at a smaller level than the state, and a political deal in the capital is not sufficient to address problems of peripheries or of megacities. "National" politics are increasingly irrelevant not only for minorities who do not identify with the group controlling power at the central level – a problem that could be solved through more inclusive government – but for groups who do not expect a distant power structure to solve their specific problems. Paradoxically, in a connected and mobile world, physical proximity is seen as a key ingredient of effectiveness, accountability, and legitimacy. That means that more and more, any national peace process will need to be complemented by more locally driven efforts.[18]

The UN should also acknowledge that a traditional diplomatic approach will not be sufficient to manage the multiple layers of contemporary conflict. The representativeness of traditional political organizations is weakening, and it is often not enough to bring them into a negotiation to achieve implementable results. As noted above, the distinction between criminal and political agendas is eroding. There are also many new nontraditional actors who can play a critical role in restoring the fabric of society. Women's associations are a case in point. The United Nations needs an inclusive approach that makes room for such political actors. It must also recognize that elections, which make no distinctions – and should not! – between individuals, except through quotas, cannot be the only foundation of political legitimacy, all the more so because the legitimacy provided by numbers competes with other sources of legitimacy. Depending on the circumstances, other nonelected bodies can acquire a greater role. The UN must be at the forefront of such new forms of political organizations.

At the operational level, the United Nations should accept that, in a period of profound transformation, it might be an illusion to aim for an end state. Peacefully managing a process of transformation is already an ambitious goal, and it may be preferable to build into peace agreements enough flexibility for them to evolve and be revisited as circumstances change. In that respect, the Dayton Peace Accords, which were not negotiated by the UN, are a good example of what not to do, since they freeze into the unwieldy constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina the specific circumstances that presided over the termination of war in the former Yugoslavia.

The UN should also adapt its peace operations to the changing situation. Its military posture has already evolved. To avoid failure, it must not only lower expectations, but deploy stronger capacities, which will not turn UN blue helmets into a war-fighting machine, but should allow them to raise the

threshold for spoilers intent on derailing a peace process. And in theaters in which irreconcilable groups operate, peace enforcement needs to coexist with peacekeeping. That requires a much greater engagement from the best-equipped armies of the world. In some cases of peace enforcement, they may operate in parallel with a UN force, which creates considerable operational complications. In other situations, they should operate within the UN mission, providing it with the mobility, firepower, and intelligence that will allow UN peacekeepers to act early and decisively: effective quick-reaction forces should be a component of any peacekeeping operation deployed in an unsettled environment. But military force cannot be the centerpiece of a strategy, and the separation, enshrined in the budgetary arrangements of the UN between peacekeeping operations and political missions, should disappear. The path to peace is not linear, and the military component may fluctuate, from significant to zero.

In the end, the UN must recalibrate its ambitions: it should not abandon multidimensional operations, recognizing that, in complex situations, only a comprehensive approach has a chance of succeeding. But it should not be supply-driven; instead it should be more disciplined and focused in its agenda, limiting its role to those areas that are key to the sustainability of a state apparatus: governance, the security sector, legal framework, and revenue collection. And to be effective in its delivery, it should become a much more open architecture, ready to partner with organizations, governmental and nongovernmental, that may be better equipped to deal with specific issues.

The United Nations therefore needs to be both very ambitious in the methods it is prepared to adopt, revisiting long held practices and testing new approaches, and very humble in the results it expects to achieve. In the best of circumstances, bringing to an end a civil war has always been a daunting task. Throughout history – from the Greek wars of Antiquity to the French Wars of Religion, the war of secession in the United States to the devastating war in Syria today – civil wars have been the most vicious wars *because* they challenge identities. And that challenge is even greater for foreigners, whose future is not at stake and can only nudge warring parties toward peace. Only those who have made war can make peace. When the end goal is elusive because the concept of the state itself is going through a radical evolution, the task of a third party becomes even more difficult. But it is not a reason to give up: the alternative would be a protracted period of spreading chaos. The UN has an important role to play in accompanying the evolution toward an unknown future.

ENDNOTES

[1] See John Foster Dulles, "The General Assembly," *Foreign Affairs* (October 1945); and Georges Fischer, "Quelques réflexions sur la position de la France à l'ONU," *Politique étrangère* 20 (6) (1955).

[2] The European Union has made the "comprehensive approach" an important component of its strategy. See European Union Global Strategy, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (Brussels: European Union Global Strategy, June 2016).

[3] Richard Gowan and Stephen John Stedman, "The International Regime for Treating Civil War, 1988 – 2017," *Dædalus* 147 (1) (2018).

[4] These are Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Central African Republic.

[5] James D. Fearon, "Civil War & the Current International System," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (2017).

[6] The standard language, "within its capabilities and areas of deployments," gives legal cover but exposes troop-contributing countries politically. See also Gowan and Stedman, "The International Regime for Treating Civil War."

[7] "In the absence of a larger political process to end wars, peacekeeping missions to protect civilians become lengthy, protracted, dangerous assignments. It is worth asking how committed troop contributing countries will be to open-ended missions in ongoing civil wars." Gowan and Stedman, "The International Regime for Treating Civil War."

[8] Charles T. Call and Susanna P. Campbell, "Is Prevention the Answer?" *Dædalus* 147 (1) (2018).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Fearon, "Civil War & the Current International System."

[11] Nancy E. Lindborg and J. Joseph Hewitt, "In Defense of Ambition: Building Peaceful & Inclusive Societies in a World on Fire," *Dædalus* 147 (1) (2018); Barry R. Posen, "Civil Wars & the Structure of World Power," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (2017); and Hendrik Spruyt, "Civil Wars as Challenges to the Modern International System," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (2017).

[12] Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels in Civil War," *Dædalus* 147 (1) (2018).

[13] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Organized Crime, Illicit Economies, Civil Violence & International Order: More Complex Than You Think," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (2017).

[14] William Reno, "Fictional States & Atomized Public Spheres: A Non-Western Approach to Fragility," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (2017).

[15] Bruce D. Jones and Stephen John Stedman, "Civil Wars & the Post–Cold War International Order," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (2017).

[16] The timeframe of the UN, and of political actors, is inevitably much shorter than the timeframe of history. See Francis Fukuyama, "The Last English Civil War," *Dædalus* 147 (1) (2018). That is a reason for humility.

[17] Spruyt, "Civil Wars as Challenges to the Modern International System."

[18] Clare Lockhart, "Restoring Core Governance Functions as a Postconflict & Conflict-Prevention Measure," *Dædalus* 147 (1) (2018).