



## Enhance the UN Capacity to Support Conflict Prevention

**RECOMMENDATION:** Give the UN’s recently consolidated Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs a central role in coordinating and compiling UN knowledge and analysis in conflict prevention, with special attention to averting mass atrocities, focusing on the Responsibility to Prevent principle.

**Global Challenges Update:** Since 2014, conflict and fragility have been on the rise. Fifty-two active state-based armed conflicts were recorded in 2018—the highest number since 1991—driven by eighteen “internationalized intrastate” conflicts, those with “troops from external states supporting one or both sides in the conflict.”<sup>1</sup>

While the fast-spreading COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged big and small, rich and poor countries alike, fragile and conflict-affected countries have come under particularly acute strain. On March 23, 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire in all corners of the world to better focus on “the true fight of our lives.”<sup>2</sup> The Security Council failed to support the call immediately and only after three

months of negotiations did it adopt a resolution (resolution 2532) demanding a cessation of hostilities worldwide.<sup>3</sup> The pandemic has further burdened the lives of people in countries such as Syria, Yemen, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where ongoing political violence already inhibits the delivery of life-saving assistance and rises to the level of mass atrocities with numbing regularity.<sup>4</sup>

Fifteen years ago, Member States collectively endorsed the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, when those populations’ governments manifestly fail to do so, and committed to “assisting those which are under stress before crises and conflicts break out.”<sup>5</sup>

Preventing violent conflict saves

lives and creates space for building effective and equitable service delivery capacity and the accompanying inclusive governance culture that fragile states tend to sorely lack.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations’ current toolkit for conflict prevention and response has proved effective at times, but many challenges persist. Current prevention efforts, though a high priority for UN Secretary-General António Guterres, are modest in scale relative to need and insufficient to address the complex, asymmetric nature of contemporary conflicts.<sup>7</sup> Building the capacity of states to prevent atrocities requires far closer attention to the political, social, and institutional factors known to generate political extremism and violence. And to do that, the UN system needs greater capacity for integrated conflict preventive action,

underpinned by greater institutional “situational awareness.”<sup>8</sup>

**Innovation Proposal:** The UN needs to better link up its widely distributed conflict analysis and crisis warning capabilities. There are UN elements to build on, such as the 2014 *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes*,<sup>9</sup> to help assess and to avert future mass atrocity events. A responsibility center—logically located within the UN’s recently consolidated Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)—could both strengthen DPPA’s efforts at prevention and support the Office of the Special Advisers for Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect by coordinating information and analysis to enable quicker decision-making and early action. Using as a point of departure the Responsibility to Prevent dimension of R2P—as envisaged by the 2001 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty—all major UN agencies and programs with the interest and ability to support conflict prevention efforts within their particular purviews should, in turn, contribute to a coordinated plan of

action, led by the new responsibility center, for UN system-wide sharing of prevention-relevant data and analysis. This effort, in turn, could be used for signaling violent conflict, including atrocities and violent extremism.

The UN’s prevention toolbox should draw lessons from the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process to facilitate national reflection on the risks of atrocity crimes. It should build an assessment of risk factors for atrocity crimes into the basic structure of UPRs, as recommended by the Secretary-General.<sup>10</sup> Regional organizations—given that many conflicts have regional implications—as well as governments, local peacebuilders, and civil society representatives should also be regularly consulted by the conflict prevention responsibility center. Similarly, UN Country Teams should be equipped to play a key role in collecting and communicating data to the headquarters.

**Strategy for Reform on the Road to 2020 (UN75):** The UNSC cannot be the only organ relevant to R2P if

preventing conflicts and atrocities is to be undertaken seriously. We now have fifteen years of experience and a growing body of serious work to draw upon in developing a coordinated knowledge-building initiative on the part of the UN system, in consultation with regional organizations and a growing number of non-governmental networks.<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately, the draft UN75 Declaration lends high-level political support to the Secretary-General’s call for a global cease-fire and requests him, in turn, to enhance “the diplomatic toolbox of the Charter” so as to better “prevent the outbreak, escalation and recurrence of hostilities.”<sup>12</sup> This, along with the Secretary-General’s emphasis on prevention and sustaining peace, and the progressive shift in the UN’s operationalization of conflict prevention, could present opportune moments to steer political attention and resources toward developing an integrated UN platform to align system-wide efforts for early assessment, analysis, and action to prevent future atrocity crimes and violent conflict.<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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