

Middle Eastern Perspectives on Taking Forward the UN75 Declaration: From Reflection to Innovation & Action

Hosted on 8 June 2021

Synthesis of Major Insights & Recommendations

On 8 June 2021, the Doha Institute's Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, the West Asia-North Africa Institute, the American University of Beirut, and the Stimson Center convened select experts from the Middle East and North Africa for a webinar discussion on the overarching question: *"In marking 75 years of the United Nations, how can the results of last year's intense reflection now be turned into action and contribute to innovation and strengthening of the world body?"* The ideas shared at the event represent an independent, multi-stakeholder contribution to the consultations and substantive preparations for the UN Secretary-General's forthcoming [Our Common Agenda](#) report for strengthening global collective action to realize the UN75 Declaration's full potential.

The discussion was focused on the Greater Middle East's role in supporting progressive change across borders and identified pathways and international actors chiefly responsible for taking forward the UN75 Declaration's vision and individual commitments, detailing the region's unique capabilities, ideas, and networks to advance the Declaration against the backdrop of COVID-19. Further, the webinar helped to spur and inform debate, as well as raise timely questions about the challenges and opportunities ahead for improved global governance, giving particular attention to the Greater Middle East's unique perspectives and decades-long engagement in efforts to build more effective multilateral cooperation and a rules-based international order.

The lead-off speakers for the event included **Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif Al Thani**, Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations and **H.E. Mahmoud Daifallah Hmoud**, Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the Republic of Singapore. The event panelists also included **Mohamed Abdulfatah**, Senior Research Fellow at the Doha Institute's Centre for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, **Shereen Shaheen**, Director of Program, West Asia-North Asia Institute, **Karim Makdisi**, Director of the Program in Public Policy and International Affairs, and Associate Professor, American University of Beirut, **Mohammed Al-Jefairi**, Chairman, Creativity Makers Center, and **Richard Ponzio**, Senior Fellow and Director, Global Governance, Justice & Security, The Stimson Center. The session was moderated by **Maryam Nemazee**, Newshour Anchor, Aljazeera.

Key Speaker Quotes

“We need new tools, ideas, initiatives and partnerships. We have seen over the past year the enormous solidarity among people worldwide and how innovative kinds of public-private partnerships have managed to respond to the virus’ socio-economic impact and develop vaccines, among so many other contributions. Moving forward, such partnerships can spur innovation through new technologies and by promoting decent job and wealth creation opportunities.” – **Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif Al Thani**

“The loopholes and gaps that are in the international system in dealing with the pandemic have been very apparent. The problem is access to preventative equipment, testing, and that the vaccine has not been equitably distributed. I hope we learn from the pandemic in working to strengthen the UN system and the global, multilateral system. We need to have a more equitable system that puts burden-sharing at the forefront.” – **H.E. Mahmoud Daifallah Hmoud**

“With the youth, we were impressed with their role recently in Palestine. We know that the youth have not forgotten. ... I encourage all youth to continue what they are doing, continue learning and being exposed to what is happening in the world around them, and to not look inward but look outward to learn what’s happening in the world around them to add to the peace and safety of others.” – **Shereen Shaheen**

“I will say that sticking to the core ideas of the UN and the main resolutions [regarding the region] and insisting that the UN resolutions and international humanitarian law would apply in these conflicts, is different from saying ‘I’m going to take sides and ignore one of the sides that may be more powerful than the other or is committing war crimes’ in the name of impartiality. It’s not how I see it ... impartiality applies to the core mission and the fundamental mandates in the way in which the UN operates.” – **Karim Makdisi**

“The UN can empower youth by facilitating their access to global labor markets. This could entail international mobility to travel, immigrate, and study abroad. Youth should be able to explore the world and see how other people are living today.” – **Mohammed Al-Jefairi**

“Donors [are] experiencing fatigue. Donors started to lessen their financial commitments even before COVID-19, but the pandemic has only exacerbated donor fatigue on nearly all multilateral issues. There is a need to really support UN operations on the ground, and UN humanitarian financing needs to come back at a higher-level post-pandemic.” – **Mouhamed Abdulfatah**

Major Points Voiced by Participants

- The pandemic has shown the world that global solidarity and cooperation are necessary in order to face the various crises at hand. It has also highlighted stark inequalities, including on access to protective equipment, testing, and vaccine distribution.
- COVID-19 has also provided the global community with several learning opportunities for when the next pandemic, which scientists have dubbed Pandemic X, arrives. We must learn

from the gaps in dealing with this pandemic, so that we can be better prepared for future pandemics or similar kinds of crises.

- More cooperation is needed between the UN and the private sector. The private sector is currently undervalued in the UN system, as is civil society. They played an important role in the creation and distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines, which reinforces their valuable contribution to addressing global challenges.
- Reinforcing the capabilities and mandates of various UN bodies, such as its Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), must be a priority in order to achieve the UN's mission and to help countries meet the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Security Council reform continues to be debated, especially with regards to increased regional representation and the use of the Permanent Five (P5) countries' veto power.
- The main problem with the Security Council is the power of veto with the P5. There are ways for the international community and UN membership to express their views on UNSC reform, and to make the veto's usage within the council a rarity; the veto will not disappear but will rather continue. It is unfortunate that the vetoes' use has increased in the last five years, in connection with Syria and Ukraine in particular.
- The UN is a dynamic body, and we should not get caught up only in discussions around the Security Council, as the humanitarian arm of the UN does a lot of valuable work.
- Conflict between Israel and Palestine has been the impetus for major United Nations missions and humanitarian mandates, chief among them the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). The conflict's blowback on the broader MENA region - characterized by shifting borders and massive population displacements - has historically informed the UN's development as an international agent of peacekeeping, conflict mediation, and refugee protection.
- Several participants noted that Israel's settlement expansion and attendant eviction of Palestinians violate the body of resolutions passed by the UN since 1967. While the international community has sustained long-standing support for a two-state solution - championed through the Oslo Accords international framework - some speakers indicated that its practical appeal has waned in the face of persistent Israeli efforts to change "facts on the grounds." These realities have made it difficult for the United Nations to take meaningful action beyond insisting on a two-state solution.
- The UN's complicated relationship with the Middle East and North Africa region is due, in part, to its relative inactivity on the conflict between Israel and Palestine.
- This idea of human security focuses on individual rather than communal security needs. Individual security includes, for example, economic, political, and other dimensions.
- Challenges for women remain in the MENA region, including economic, social, and political disadvantages. Many women have been further affected by the "fourth industrial revolution" (the transition to technology and green economies). On the one hand, this is because many women work in the informal economy. On the other, it is because women do not always receive education and training that match the demands of modern jobs.

- Youth in the Middle East and North Africa often do not have the same opportunities and resources that can be found in other regions. There is a lack of investment in the youth's future.
- The UN is, more often than not, expected to play the third-party role in various peace processes. This was seen in Afghanistan and Sudan. This role should be expanded across the Middle East and North Africa as well.
- The UN must be firm in following its mandate and core principles, rather than bending to the will of various countries that wield the power within the UN.
- There is great potential in the Middle East and North Africa to make the transition away from oil towards renewable energy, particularly in Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine.
- Global-regional connections will increase in the MENA region, particularly surrounding issues of the environment, sustainable development, energy, and conflict resolution.

Major Recommendations: Policy, institutional, legal, normative, and operational reforms

- We must close any loopholes and gaps to ensure greater equity and efficiency in responding to future pandemics.
- The collaboration between ECOSOC, civil society, and the private sector should be enhanced. Additionally, ECOSOC should improve its UN system coordination function.
- We must “decolonize” development funds that go to the Middle East and North Africa. Development funding should be unconditional and support the most vulnerable.
- The UN should employ the concept of human security throughout its work and place an emphasis on the individual.
- The UN and wider international community should increase access to technologies and financial services, including banking, for youth in the Middle East and North Africa.
- There needs to be more cooperation between the UN and regional organizations for improved conflict resolution and resource dissemination to disadvantaged groups. Regional organizations are also better placed to support regional, national, and local efforts in addressing common challenges faced by a particular region.
- The UN and wider international community need to come together to support negotiations toward a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine. The clashes between them did not start with Gaza. It began with the eviction and displacement of civilians, which is an international crime. The international community must take a stand, otherwise violence and human rights abuses will continue unabated. This conflict cannot be solved through local agreements alone; there must be an international solution that acknowledges rather than disregards the rights of the Palestinians.

- The withdrawal of UN peacekeepers in Sudan and COVID-19 together triggered violence between certain tribes. The UN must continue to support conflict prevention and local level engagement with civil society, as well as the country's transition to democratic rule.
- The UN is expected to play a third-party role in the Afghan peace process. The UN Secretary-General has appointed a new Peace Envoy for Afghanistan, yet it is unclear how the UN will be able to help shepherd such a complex peace agreement. Continued support from regional partners, such as China, Russia, Turkey, Pakistan, and Qatar, is essential.