

Notes for a Presentation

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to the CIC Branch Ottawa ,

Is the UN Saving Us from Hell?

Ottawa,

September 20, 2012

Check Against Delivery

With your permission and time permitting, I will discuss three questions tonight with respect to the ongoing Syrian crisis:

- Is the UN Failing?
- Is the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine Hollow?
- What should Canada do about it?

I will try to respond to all three questions as briefly as I can.

It is true that hardly a day goes by that you don't hear someone decrying the failure of the United Nations.

From members of parliament, for example, Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound

MP Larry Miller —

who wanted to “review” Canadian membership,
to cabinet ministers, political staff and officials,
neither the Canadian government
nor its allies in the press

have been shy with their criticisms.

There is much disappointment with the UN in the air,

some of it fabricated,

some of it misplaced

and some of it legitimate

The frequency of Ottawa's condemnations accelerated dramatically

after Canada lost the 2010 Security Council election,

which suggests sour grapes as a motivation, as well as

dissatisfaction.

But others are complaining, too.

Amnesty International,

as the advertisement of this event mentions,

has said that Kofi Annan's resignation as Joint Special Envoy on

Syria was as a result of UN Security Council failure,

which showed that the UN is "tired, out of step and

increasingly unfit for purpose"

Not a judgment shared by Kofi Annan, among others, according to an interview he gave to the Globe and Mail that appeared today.

The Syrian National Council, for its part, has been withering in its criticism of the UN and its efforts to broker a transition to a new system of government there.

So why isn't the UN doing something effective about Syria?

Is the UN Failing ?

The short answer is, no

The longer answer is, no, but it is failing the citizens of Syria.

There is an understandable but nevertheless unhelpful tendency to judge the utility of the UN by however it handles the latest crisis.

It is in our interests to recognize that there is more to the UN than that.

I think it is worth taking a few minutes to refresh all of our memories of what has been accomplished under the UN banner,

of what needs to be valued

and what is worth preserving.

Otherwise, as Joni Mitchell once sang in another context, we won't know what we've got till its gone.

What we've got is a lot,

and it shouldn't be casually deprecated.

By and large, the UN has succeeded in meeting all the goals set for it in San Francisco,:

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war;
- to protect human rights;
- to foster universal justice; and
- to promote social progress and better standards of living.

Driven by the memory of the 60 million dead in the second world war,

nation states have progressively brought the practice of war under the disciplines of international humanitarian law,

which seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict

and restricts the means and methods of warfare.

Aggression has been stigmatized,

and there has not been a war between major powers since

Korea.

According to the Human Security Report of 2010, over the preceding 30 years, the number of armed conflicts around the world had dropped by 80%.

Battle deaths had also decreased dramatically, as had overall lethality.

As for human rights, a whole corpus of conventions has been concluded, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic and Social Rights, the Convention against Genocide, the Convention against Torture, the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on Children's Rights, to name some of the most significant.

These conventions are respected unevenly around the world but over time are being progressively assimilated into state practice.

To “foster universal justice”, the international community has created an extensive criminal justice system,

which has seen some of the worst human rights abusers face justice in the Hague and elsewhere.

And last but not least, as regards economic and social progress,

for hundreds of millions of people, including in Africa,

poverty is down,

education is up,

and health is improved,

although the plight of the bottom billion remains to be

effectively addressed.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Program (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO) have all done major service to the world’s poorest and dispossessed.

By 2015, 90 percent of the world's children will be immunized against the six major vaccine-preventable diseases—

pertussis, childhood tuberculosis, tetanus, polio, measles and diphtheria.

The UN or its constituent bodies have concluded 45 treaties on the environment

from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change
to the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion
to treaties on migratory species and endangered species and
beyond.

The UN has passed 13 counter-terrorism treaties.

All told, over 500 multilateral treaties have been concluded under UN auspices.

The member countries of the UN have, thus, spawned an extensive body of international law, treaties, norms, practices and institutions that govern most facets of interstate relations.

With these “apps”, the UN Charter has become the world’s central operating system,

the motherboard of global governance, making it possible for ideas such as the Millennium Development Goals to become policy drivers,

and for other organizations, notably NATO and the G-8 and the G-20,

as well as civil society,

to function more effectively.

All of this brings greater order, predictability and progress to global affairs,

and greater modernity, security and dignity to peoples' lives.

To quote Kofi Annan again from today's Globe,

The UN is not a perfect organization, but we need it....

It is the organization that has the power to convene the whole world under one roof, to come and discuss common issues. It is the one organization that tries to sustain the norms that allow us to live in a peaceful way. Recently, we came up with a responsibility to protect. It is only the UN that could have come up with that sort of a norm. Who else?

So, to put it bluntly, it would be short-sighted and worse to just write off what our parents and grandparents have achieved,

as if this generation had the wit and will to start from scratch
and do better.

But if the UN is not failing across the board, it is not succeeding
across the board either.

Understanding why it succeeds and fails starts with the conception
people have of the UN,

There is an assumption that it is almost a world government
And expectations of it are very high.

People in this room understand that the UN is far from being world
government.

One of the hardest ideas to get across is that the UN is,
to paraphrase the old Pogo cartoon character,
us,

all of us.

The UN belongs to progressives and regressives, democrats and authoritarians, because that is the world we live in.

When we all agree, there is little we cannot do under the UN banner.

When we disagree, there is little we can do.

In any case, the UN is not some independent entity, run by a CEO , with a mandate and a capacity to act in the common interest as it sees fit.

Nor is the UN a recalcitrant and indolent secretariat isolated from the world in its iconic tower on First Avenue in New York.

The UN is the member countries, and is dependent on their common purpose and will,

when those can be mustered,
to act.

It is like a parliament without a prime minister, presided over by the speaker.

If anyone is failing, it is the five permanent members of the Security Council,

who are so devoted to preserving their own veto powers that they are prepared to respect the vetoes of their peers, no matter how tragic the consequences.

The P5 are failing to find sufficient common ground to resolve the issues of the 21st Century.

To be fair, doing so is more difficult than it looks.

The disagreements are over big issues, some of them new, some not, but all undermining the peace in the 21st Century.

Transnational organized crime is threatening the security of people everywhere, but especially in Central America, the Caribbean and Mexico.

Africa, increasingly used as a transit way by South American gangs selling drugs to Europe, risks becoming a narco-continent.

Iran continues to test the limits of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

An effective response to climate change remains elusive.

And the next pandemic never seems more than a plane-ride away.

Meanwhile Afghanistan struggles,

Pakistan seethes

tensions rise in the South China Sea,

and North Korea remains unstable.

In sum, the problem the UN has is that not only are some of its

members intransigent,

many of the issues it confronts are intractable.

Members have incompatible visions of the future and disagree on the

appropriate role of the organization and the grounds for collective

action.

Perhaps most fundamental is the issue of philosophy.

Does the state exist to serve and protect the people, or is it the job of people to serve and protect the state?

If you believe that the state exists to serve and protect the people, your sympathy must be with people trying to overthrow a despotic government.

If, like the Russians and Chinese apparently do, you believe that the people serve the state, you endow any government with legitimacy, including those built on secret police, torture, militias and coercion.

Whoever gets to the top in a state, however he (it's always "he") gets there, or stays there, that person is the legitimate leader and should not be interfered with by outsiders.

The UN Charter, with its proscription of interference in the internal affairs of states, tends to accept the latter philosophy.

It is not the case that,

as the notice for this event says,

that Russia and China “have interests that diverge from UN principles”.

The positions that China and Russia are taking on Syria are legally, perhaps more accurately, legalistically, in line with Article 2 of the Charter.

A Middle East variant of the philosophical question is whether democracy is compatible with the Muslim conception of theocracy.

In the Muslim world, is the state the theocratic instrument of God, which the people can question only at the pain of heresy?

International practice in recent years,

which has seen outside intervention in several states

and the bringing of justice to major human rights abusers,

has tended to accept that the state exists to serve and protect
the people.

Hence the adoption of the Responsibility to Protect,

which may be why the Russians and Chinese appear to have
decided to make a stand on Syria.

But the philosophic question of who serves whom, the state or the people, is a major one.

And it is at the heart of divisions over Syria and the Responsibility to Protect.

That, and some residual buyer's remorse on the part of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Has the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine Run Its Course? Was It Hollow?

Hard cases make bad law, and Syria is an especially hard case.

It has sectarian divisions among Alewite and Sunni Muslims and it has minority populations

—Christians, Druze, Assyrians, Kurds and others—

who fear they could be worse off if the Sunni majority assumes power.

Many seem to prefer the devil they know.

The opposition is not, after 18 months of fighting, even moderately united under one command.

There are the extremist sectarian fighters, promoting religious rule, Sharia law and Salafism.

There is Al Qaeda.

The opposition to Assad among Syrians outside of Syria and the opposition inside remain disunited, as well.

From a military intervention perspective, Syria is not in the middle of nowhere as Libya was.

To its east, Iraq remains unsettled and unstable.

To its West, the Lebanese dread seeing their own civil war re-ignited.

The Israelis have been noticeably circumspect in their comments about a situation of such far-reaching consequences for them.

But in the midst of this cauldron, Israel's top leadership continues to talk of attacking Iran

and try to jam the US into attacking Iran,

presumably calculating that the consequences for Israel of not

acting are worse than those of acting,

a judgment not shared by Israel's security establishment and by most of the rest of the world

beyond the neo-con wing of the American Republican Party, which is zombie-like back from the political grave.

To the North is Turkey, with its own Alevi (Alewite) and Kurdish minorities,

host to 100,000 refugees

and loathe to intervene in Syria militarily except as part of a multinational force with the full backing of the international community, or at least of NATO.

Reports on Syrian plans and training for the use of chemical weapons,

of concern to us all,

are particularly worrying to the Turks.

Russia's is trying to preserve its client relationship with Syria, their last in the Middle East, maintain its base in Tartus, said to be the only base the Russians have abroad, harvest the economics of arms sales and the demonstration effects of standing by an ally, however malevolent that ally is.

The US administration, for its part, does not want to contemplate a military intervention, beyond covert work with the Turks and Saudis and Qataris.

Certainly not during an election campaign and perhaps not ever.

After the attack on the US Ambassador in Benghazi and the riots throughout the Muslim world stirred up by the provocative film on the prophet Muhammed,

and in light of their own fiscal and economic challenges,

many Americans would welcome a smaller US foreign policy

Little wonder that neither Kofi Annan nor Lakhdar Brahimi, his successor, are brimming with optimism on Syria.

The international community has wrung its hands over Syria,

and done little more than offer to hold the Turks' coats if they take on Assad militarily.

The entire thesaurus of condemnations has been exhausted, including by Ottawa.

Annan has warned again of the prospect of a major international conflict.

The only potential bright spot is the Group of Four, created by Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

They are trying to put together a transition that the protagonists can support.

What Should Canada do in These Circumstances?

Here are five things the Canadian government could do in these very difficult circumstances, beyond the declaratory statements and aid it is already providing.

First, and most basically, Ottawa should recognize the ongoing value of the UN to Canada.

It should stop sitting in judgment and start taking some responsibility for improving and reforming the organization.

Among other things, it should tackle the UN's governance issues,

especially Security Council membership, the veto and the

process for selecting the Secretary General

which is less transparent than the selection of a pope

Second, Ottawa should recognize the UN's limits and promote minilateralism.

In an age of "messy multilateralism",

universal entities like the UN need "minilateral" groups of key

countries

who can work together across regional boundaries to achieve results

that can be commended to the membership at large.

The G-20 is one such minilateralist invention.

The government could push its partners to broaden the mandate of the G20 to discuss security issues.

The government could also create new like-minded groups and promote the development of coalitions of the policy willing among the second tier countries of the G20

– Australia, Korea, Turkey Mexico and others-

to bring emerging security issues to the top tables.

Third, with specific reference to Syria, the government could encourage the Quad of Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran to work on a transition scenario acceptable to the majority of the protagonists

Fourth, the government should keep the issue of intervention in Syria on the NATO agenda against the day that intervention would meet R2P's precautionary principles,

above all the R2P enjoiner to do more good than harm.

The government could make clear its willingness to participate in such an intervention if NATO decided to do so.

As in Kosovo, Canada should make clear to the Russians that it considers the Russian veto invalid in cases of major human rights abuses

In the meantime, Canada could promote legal action in the International Criminal Court or elsewhere against the perpetrators in Syria,

including Assad,

and assist by gathering evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity for use in a trial.

And fifth, the government should use its oft claimed special relationship with Israel to discourage an attack on Iran in the current volatile circumstances.

Conclusion

All of this is admittedly a tall order.

But we are facing potentially cataclysmic developments in the Middle East.

Such dangerous times demand leadership—from the front, side and behind—and its in Canadians' interests that Ottawa contribute.

Thank You