



# Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020

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**Crisis Group Special Briefing N°2**

New York/Brussels, 12 September 2019

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**What's new?** World leaders meet for the new UN General Assembly session this month after a year in which the UN has responded ineffectually to crises from Venezuela to Myanmar.

**Why does it matter?** A divided Security Council and disruptive regional powers place significant constraints on the UN's mediators and peacekeepers in countries like Libya and the Sudans.

**What should be done?** States can still look to the UN to de-escalate crises where they have common interests. This briefing identifies seven such opportunities for creative diplomacy at the UN.

## I. Overview

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In a period of increasing international tensions, the role of the UN in resolving major crises is shrinking. World leaders attending the UN General Assembly this month will talk about conflicts from Latin America to Asia. The chances of diplomatic breakthroughs have appeared low, even if this week's departure of Iran hawk John Bolton from the Trump administration increased speculation about the possibility of a meeting in New York between U.S. President Donald Trump and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. Looking beyond the General Assembly, opportunities for the Security Council to resolve pressing conflicts – or for Secretary-General António Guterres and other UN officials to do so without Council mandates – seem few. But some nevertheless exist. In cases where the permanent five members of the council (P5) have a shared interest in de-escalating crises, or regional powers collaborate with UN agencies to address conflicts, the organisation can still provide a framework for successful peacemaking.

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## II. A Lacklustre Year

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It has been a lacklustre year for the Security Council, which has debated events from Venezuela and Sudan to Kashmir in 2019, but accomplished little.<sup>1</sup> It has managed to produce mild statements of concern in some cases, and remained divided and silent in others. The Council's discussion of the year's most dangerous situation – the U.S.-Iranian standoff in the Persian Gulf – has been sporadic and unproductive, reflecting splits between the U.S. and other members over Washington's 2018 withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal and its effect on Iran's behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

UN peacemakers and peacekeepers working in many crisis spots have also struggled through much of the year. Apparently promising efforts for a UN-led process to reunify Libya – with strong personal backing from Secretary-General Guterres – fell apart in the face of General Khalifa Haftar's assault on Tripoli this April.<sup>3</sup> UN mediation in Yemen, which appeared to have a little momentum in late 2018, so far appears to have faltered.<sup>4</sup> The organisation's stabilisation force in Mali is unable to contain jihadist and inter-ethnic violence, especially in the centre of the country.<sup>5</sup>

While the problems facing the UN vary crisis by crisis, the main challenges it confronts are clear enough. The most obvious is the way in which competition for influence among the P5 – and particularly the U.S., China and Russia – has manifested itself in New York. China has ensured that the Security Council does not penalise Myanmar for its military's atrocities against the Rohingya, for example, leaving it to focus on easing the plight of refugees in Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup> Russia has largely ignored other Council members' criticisms of its military operations in Syria.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. blocked British efforts to table a call for a ceasefire in Libya, apparently because some members of the Trump administration see General Haftar as the best available ally against jihadists in the region. France has tried to keep the Security Council out of crisis management in two Francophone African countries – Cameroon and Burkina Faso – despite serious violence in both.

The P5 members' manipulation of the Council to protect partners and clients, and to keep the UN out of situations where they wish to have freedom of action, is not new. The UN has always been, in the words of two experts on multilateralism, a "selective security" body that big powers use and ignore depending on their interests.<sup>8</sup> But the current deterioration in P5 relations has created opportunities for regional powers to sideline UN envoys and peace processes that a more unified

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the year up to the mid-spring, see Crisis Group Special Briefing N°1, *Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, 30 April 2019.

<sup>2</sup> For more on tensions in the Persian Gulf, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°205, *Averting the Middle East's 1914 Moment*, 1 August 2019.

<sup>3</sup> See Crisis Group North Africa Briefing N°69, *Stopping the War for Tripoli*, 23 May 2019.

<sup>4</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°203, *Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen*, 18 July 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°276, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*, 28 May 2019.

<sup>6</sup> For more see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°155, *Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, 25 April 2019.

<sup>7</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°197, *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, 14 March 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Roberts and Dominik Zaum, *Selective Security: War and the United Nations Security Council since 1945* (London, 2014).

Council might have stuck by. Egypt appears to have misled Secretary-General Guterres about the prospects for peace in Libya before the Haftar offensive. Saudi Arabia has pressed its Security Council allies to ensure that the body's statements on Yemen create no legal or political obstacles to its campaign against the Huthis.

The UN is far from paralysed, however. The Security Council continues to oversee nearly 100,000 peacekeepers worldwide and collaborates on counter-terrorism issues – including sanctions against terrorist groups – fairly smoothly. In the last nine months, Secretary-General Guterres has overseen the implementation of a series of reforms – including freeing up senior development officials to play more political roles in countries at risk of conflict and partially merging the UN secretariat's political and peacekeeping departments – that he negotiated over the last two years. These reforms are a work in progress. They have made no dramatic difference in the UN's effectiveness so far, but could make the organisation better at analysing and responding to future conflicts, provided that the Council lends it sufficient support.

### III. **Seven Opportunities**

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In the same spirit, and in advance of the 2019 General Assembly session, a number of opportunities for UN action are apparent. Crisis Group has identified a mix of seven crisis-specific and regional opportunities. These generally involve highly sensitive issues for P5 members, and in most cases there are major obstacles to successful multilateral engagement. But they also tend to involve situations in which it is becoming clear that the P5 have more to gain by compromising on national political settlements than bulldozing ahead in pursuit of maximalist objectives. If the P5 themselves start to believe this, the year ahead at the UN could be a little more productive than the one gone by.

**1. Developing new ways to stabilise the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and its neighbourhood.** It is nearly twenty years since the Security Council dispatched observers to monitor the end of the Congolese civil war. There is now an opportunity to draw down the large and expensive peace operation in the DRC (the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known by its French acronym MONUSCO) and look for less military-focused, primarily political, mechanisms to promote stability in central Africa.

The UN has 18,000 troops and police in the DRC, mostly deployed to counter armed groups in the east. Despite continued episodes of local violence – and an Ebola outbreak – UN officials and Security Council members broadly agree that it is time to rethink the UN presence. National elections in 2018 did not lead to large-scale conflict, as many observers had feared, though serious irregularities and security problems marred the process.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the controversially elected new president, Félix Tshisekedi, has made it a priority to improve security in the east by ameliorating relations with neighbours – including Rwanda and

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<sup>9</sup> See Crisis Group Statement, "DR Congo: A Recount and Talks to Find a Way Out of the Crisis", 19 January 2019.

Uganda – that have supported some of the militias in the region, and pursued long-running feuds with others, turning it into a theatre for proxy conflicts.

If Tshisekedi's initiative, which has included leader-to-leader contacts with his neighbours and discussions among their intelligence services on the eastern DRC, succeeds, it may lay the groundwork for regional security cooperation, in turn reducing the need for MONUSCO.

Tshisekedi's domestic political position is fragile.<sup>10</sup> His predecessor Joseph Kabila, whose relations with the UN worsened significantly over time and who threatened to expel MONUSCO more than once, still wields considerable power. Though conscious that tensions between the two leaders could complicate the president's regional agenda, the Security Council – which rarely suffers major splits on the DRC – asked the Secretary-General for an independent review of the UN's role in the DRC this spring. The review will be ready in October. Diplomats in New York foresee a gradual drawdown of MONUSCO, lasting perhaps three years. To maximise the chances of sustaining stability in the DRC, the UN should pursue three priorities.

First, the UN should offer political – and possibly financial – assistance to regional reconciliation efforts involving the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and other neighbours. Earlier this year, Guterres appointed a new special envoy for the Great Lakes, Huang Xia of China, who may be able to help Tshisekedi and his fellow leaders work together on stabilising the eastern DRC. In order to build trust among the regional players, it may be necessary to link agreements on ending external assistance to armed groups to new cross-border security arrangements and steps toward economic integration.

Secondly, while incrementally reducing the overall UN presence, the Security Council should ensure that a small but credible force remains in the east to deal with new threats from armed groups, at least for the duration of the drawdown and possibly longer. While the Council has maintained a 3,000-strong Force Intervention Brigade in the area since 2013, some units have lacked the capabilities and intelligence to be effective. The Council should bolster this brigade as the rest of the UN force shrinks. Longer-term, the UN and international donors will need to collaborate to turn the Congolese armed forces into an effective military.

Finally, the UN should invest more in local mediation efforts in the eastern DRC to address the grievances that often motivate armed groups and their supporters. In addition to the role that regional powers play in fuelling conflict, clan and communal tensions often spark outbursts of fighting that MONUSCO has struggled to understand, let alone halt. To stop such local flare-ups creating wider instability, the UN should maintain a civilian political presence to advise and support local peacemaking initiatives, even as most peacekeepers depart.

- 2. Reinforcing and expanding peacemaking efforts in Yemen.** There was a brief moment of optimism over the conflict in Yemen at the end of 2018, when the country's warring factions agreed on steps to prevent a battle for the port city of Hodeida that would have cut off desperately needed aid. This agreement

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<sup>10</sup> For more, see Nelleke van de Walle, "Moïse Katumbi's Return Portends Shifting Alliances in Congolese Politics", Crisis Group Commentary, 23 May 2019.

has not lived up to its full promise to date, but the UN may still be able to play a key role in striking a peace deal among Yemeni factions, if regional powers give it space to do so.<sup>11</sup>

It will be a daunting task. UN-led efforts to resolve the conflict between the internationally recognised government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the Huthi rebels who drove him out of Sanaa in 2015 have been constrained from the start by Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015). This resolution effectively demands a Huthi surrender to the government and has been widely interpreted to limit negotiations to the two opposing groups. Some progress was made during UN-led talks in Kuwait in 2016, but these faltered. The current UN envoy, Martin Griffiths, hoped to revive the peace process in 2018 but needed first to help ward off a battle for Hodeida. Last December, the Houthis and Hadi government agreed to demilitarise the city to prevent stoppages of humanitarian supplies into Yemen. But while diplomacy has averted the worst – a battle for the port that could have triggered a famine – neither side has implemented the agreement in full and fighting continues on other fronts. There has been little progress toward broader peace talks.

To complicate matters further, this August, the anti-Huthi coalition openly splintered. The Southern Transitional Council (STC), a self-styled southern government-in-waiting that is closely tied to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and nominally part of Hadi's coalition, seized control of Aden from forces aligned with the president. The takeover raised the spectre of a war within a war and placed the Emiratis and Saudis – leaders of the Arab coalition supporting Hadi on the battlefield – on opposing sides of an intra-Yemeni conflict.<sup>12</sup>

The fighting in the south has also made clear the importance of moving beyond the current approach of narrowly defining the peace process as between Hadi and the Huthis. The fragmentation of Hadi's coalition underscores that the war cannot be resolved through Hadi-Huthi bargaining alone. The STC and other groups have interests and grievances that need to be addressed, including the STC's claim to govern the south. In this sense, and despite the language in Resolution 2216 that could be read to limit the UN's ability to involve actors other than Hadi and the Huthis, the current crisis could open up a path to more inclusive national peace negotiations.

There are signs that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are prepared to resolve splits in the anti-Huthi camp, which they see as distracting its members from the main struggle and therefore weakening their hand. That would entail prodding Hadi and the STC to form a new, broader government that includes the STC, among others, and then to name a delegation to UN-led peace talks with representation from all parties in the reconfigured government. To facilitate this development, UN officials and Security Council members could affirm to the parties that they read Resolution 2216 flexibly enough to permit the UN to pursue negotiations in this format.

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<sup>11</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen*, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°71, *After Aden: Navigating Yemen's New Political Landscape*, 30 August 2019.

If the P5 do not want to see their cooperation over Yemen end in failure – reinforcing already-present scepticism about the UN’s relevance in the Middle East – they will need to persuade the Hadi government and Huthis, as well as their respective regional allies, to accept less than comprehensive implementation of the Hodeida deal, and then quickly pivot from the focus on that port city to negotiations over a nationwide settlement.

**3. Facilitating reconciliation in Venezuela.** The struggle for control of Venezuela created drama in the Security Council in the first half of this year, as U.S. officials including Vice President Mike Pence came to New York to press for President Nicolás Maduro’s ouster. Maduro’s allies, notably Russia, responded with strident statements in his defence. Yet the UN could still have a role in helping both sides find a way out of an impasse that is contributing to a humanitarian catastrophe and massive refugee flows and could have regional spillover effects.

By the middle of the year – with neither Maduro nor his rival for the presidency, Juan Guaidó, able to secure victory – UN debates over the crisis lost energy. The foreign backers of both sides appear to have concluded that there was little to gain from public disputes in New York. Some Guaidó supporters, including European governments, also hope that Secretary-General Guterres could play a more impartial role in resolving the crisis if the Security Council can avoid further fights on the issue.

So far, Guterres and UN officials in Venezuela have been wary about engaging in the crisis too publicly. The Secretary-General has held back from any effort to assist in Caracas until both sides clearly want him to do so, and has taken a back seat to the on-again, off-again negotiations between the government and opposition currently being facilitated by Norway; the Trump administration’s view that the UN should not be involved certainly has played a role.<sup>13</sup>

While some commentators and human rights organisations have called for the Secretary-General to approach the situation less cautiously, the UN has not been entirely silent or absent.<sup>14</sup> After her visit to Caracas in June, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet released a damning report listing major violations by the Maduro government. UN agencies in Venezuela have also prepared a plan for greatly increased humanitarian aid to the country, with the aim of supporting 2.6 million people in urgent need.

The conditions for further substantive UN engagement in Venezuela could at some point ripen. Though a counterproductive round of new U.S. sanctions soured the mood in August, Crisis Group discussions with elements in both the Maduro and Guaidó camps suggest a compromise around early, credible, internationally monitored elections could be possible – with the caveat that the pro-government electoral commission will need to be changed, National Assembly powers restored, some U.S. sanctions lifted and institutional guarantees introduced to escape the winner-take-all dynamic of past polls.

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<sup>13</sup> On the Norwegian initiative, see Crisis Group Latin America and Caribbean Report N°75, *A Glimmer of Light in Venezuela’s Gloom*, 15 July 2019.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Andres Oppenheimer, “UN Secretary-General has finally found his voice on Venezuela. Now he must find the backbone to get aid to its suffering people”, *The Miami Herald*, 12 April 2019.

If the two sides reach a compromise along the lines under discussion, the UN may be well placed to observe elections and assist in building the institutions required for good governance. It may also be able to help make a political settlement stick. A special representative of the Secretary-General, backed by a political mission, could manage these roles. Either the Security Council or UN General Assembly could give a mandate for this work, though a Security Council resolution backed by all the P5 would carry the most weight. Coming together behind a Security Council resolution would also be an elegant way for the U.S. and Russia, in particular, to step back from their earlier clashes over Venezuela, lest the situation hurt their relations further.

- 4. Supporting the next stage of peace talks in Afghanistan.** For much of the year, diplomats and UN officials in New York and Kabul have been waiting for news on the outcome of talks between the U.S. and the Taliban that could lead to withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> Hopes for an agreement were at least temporarily dashed when President Trump announced this month that he had cancelled secret talks with the Taliban and President Ghani at Camp David that purportedly were designed to seal the deal. Despite this apparently significant setback, the conditions that led the U.S. and Taliban to the brink of a deal still exist, and some sort of bargain may yet emerge.

The UN could have an important role to play in following up on such a putative bargain. UN officials have had contacts with the Taliban since the 1990s, and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan maintains political, humanitarian and human rights dialogues with the group. It has had no substantive part in the U.S.-Taliban talks to date, however, though it has facilitated interaction between U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and ambassadors in Kabul.

But if the U.S. and Taliban eventually reach an agreement, it will be necessary for a wider range of Afghan parties – including the Taliban, government representatives, other political factions and civil society – to engage among themselves on a political settlement. That stage, if it materialises, will be the real peace process, aimed at producing a political settlement that all significant power brokers can buy into. Given the number of actors and variety of interests involved, the peace process is likely to be chaotic. The U.S., as a party to the conflict, would not be well placed to manage this next stage impartially. Instead, the UN could play a lead role, in coordination with other external actors, in managing the process. The UN also should be prepared, if asked by the conflict parties, to name a facilitator for the talks.

Issues for discussion in the intra-Afghan talks would include brokering a general ceasefire, shaping a modified system of governance, devising forms of political and security power sharing, amending the constitution, reforming the security forces, specifying the role of Islam in the state and crafting protections for the rights of women, girls and minorities. If the Taliban and other Afghan actors accept the UN as a facilitator, members of the P5 – including China and

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<sup>15</sup> Laurel Miller, “The U.S. Shouldn’t Stumble Out of Afghanistan”, *Foreign Policy*, 16 August 2019. See also Borhan Osman, “Afghanistan Diplomacy Gathers Steam Even as Attacks Increase”, Crisis Group Commentary, 9 July 2019.

Russia – that have security concerns about Afghanistan’s future might also feel more confident that any final settlement will meet their basic interests.

5. **Backstopping African Union (AU) support for Sudan’s transition.** The Security Council’s response to President Omar al-Bashir’s fall in April and ensuing debates over Sudan’s future has been confused. Security Council members with ties to the Sudanese military, including China and Russia, have opposed even mild joint statements of support for a transition to civilian rule. African members of the council – Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea and South Africa – were frustrated by the body’s failure to back AU-Ethiopian efforts to resolve the crisis this summer.<sup>16</sup> Security Council diplomacy was further complicated by arguments over what developments in Khartoum meant for the future of the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), which is drawing down. The Council agreed to pause the drawdown process in June, but only until October.

By contrast, Secretary-General Guterres has strongly supported the AU’s crisis management efforts, appointing an envoy with an explicit mandate to assist the AU rather than lead an independent UN initiative. The AU-Ethiopian effort eventually led to a transitional military-civilian power-sharing agreement this August.<sup>17</sup> Though the Security Council may still struggle to find consensus, and the envoy has played a limited role to date, there is more both he and the UN agencies can do now that an agreement is in place.

While the AU will be the new Khartoum authority’s main institutional partner, the UN can offer technical support to the AU’s liaison office in Khartoum, in place since 2008, to facilitate the transition. This mandate could cover files including mediation between authorities in Khartoum and rebel groups in Sudan’s peripheries, preparation for elections and help to the government in shoring up an economy in dire shape.

The economic challenge arguably is the most daunting. An urgent and carefully directed injection of external financial support, including debt forgiveness, will be critical. Donors need to pool their resources to revive economic activity and ensure that the country’s power brokers do not simply funnel assistance into the patronage networks that Bashir developed to buy loyalty. Speed is of the essence. The new prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok, and his cabinet have to show quick results in stabilising the economy if they wish to consolidate public support. The cabinet is riding a wave of public good-will but if they do not swiftly ease Sudan’s deep economic crisis, this backing could ebb, a development that likely would favour the generals seeking to thwart progress toward full civilian rule. The UN Development Programme (UNDP), possibly in conjunction with the World Bank or African Development Bank, could help this effort by acting as coordinator of new funding efforts. As the UNDP does not answer to the Security Council, P5 divisions would not affect its work.

In the meantime, Council members should proceed cautiously with the draw-down of UNAMID, keeping an eye out for circumstances that might cause them to reconsider the timetable. Some rebels in Sudan refused to sign onto the tran-

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<sup>16</sup> For more see Crisis Group Africa Report N°279, *A Tale of Two Councils: Strengthening AU-UN Cooperation*, 24 June 2019.

<sup>17</sup> See Crisis Group Statement, “Nurturing Sudan’s Fledgling Power-sharing Accord”, 20 August 2019.

sitional agreement, saying the opposition and junta ignored their demands for a formal role in transitional institutions. These groups may cause trouble. Elements of the Sudanese security forces (including former perpetrators of atrocities in Darfur) may hope that the new government can persuade the UN to expedite UNAMID's exit, giving them a free hand to mount new operations in the area.

**6. Boosting AU-UN institutional cooperation.** Though the Security Council devotes half its time to African issues, the AU and other regional and sub-regional groups have increasingly taken the lead in mediating crises on the continent. There is plenty of room for New York and Addis Ababa to cooperate productively, even as the latter takes a greater role on regional peace and security issues, but the two institutions are still working to figure out the particulars.<sup>18</sup>

For example, the AU has called for creation of a mechanism that would allow the UN to use assessed contributions to fund African-led operations as an alternative to UN forces. Tempers flared in the Security Council in late 2018 when the U.S. threatened to veto an AU-backed resolution endorsing this concept. Unless friction around this issue is resolved it has the potential to complicate future AU and UN-led conflict prevention and peacemaking efforts on the continent.<sup>19</sup>

South Africa, in its first of two years as an elected member of the Council, hopes to make progress on the funding issue this year. In addition to cost concerns, some Council members are also uncertain that African-led missions – which typically have mandates for peace enforcement, often involving operations in high-risk theatres and against jihadist groups, rather than peacekeeping – measure up to UN standards of discipline and accountability, and financial management.<sup>20</sup> AU officials and African diplomats should take these charges seriously and build up a clear case for UN funding, tied to demonstrable qualitative improvements to operations.

The Security Council should also prioritise upgrading cooperation with the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC). Even though the two bodies hold annual consultations, the relationship between them is not well developed, and PSC members complain that their Security Council counterparts frequently ignore their positions, as in the Sudan case. (By contrast, Secretary-General Guterres has close ties to many African leaders and senior AU officials, and has encouraged the UN secretariat to support the AU's efforts to expand its conflict management role as a strategic priority.)

As Crisis Group has previously recommended, the two councils could usefully work on easing the tensions in their relationship through procedural innovations. These could include joint visits by members of the Security Council and PSC to crisis-affected areas – an option that they have considered before but have not pursued due to disputes over protocol. AU PSC members could also improve their engagement with the Security Council by expanding the organisa-

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<sup>18</sup> For more see Crisis Group Report, *A Tale of Two Councils: Strengthening AU-UN Cooperation*, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Similar arguments were made during Council discussions on the G5 Sahel Joint Force – a regionally led effort aimed at tackling jihadist groups in the Sahel – in 2017. For more, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°258, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, 12 December 2017.

tion's under-resourced liaison office in New York and easing information flow between the PSC and the three rotating African members of the Council.<sup>21</sup>

**7. Rethinking multilateral security arrangements in the Middle East.**

In parallel with efforts to reframe their engagement with African affairs, the Security Council and UN secretariat need to address recurrent flaws in the organisation's approach to the Middle East. It is clear that regional competitions for power – including the Saudi-Iranian standoff and tensions between Qatar and its neighbours – have cross-cutting implications for the individual conflicts on which UN mediators are working. Yet coordination among UN envoys in the region is often limited.

Secretary-General Guterres, who has altered the UN secretariat structure in New York to promote a more regional (and less country-specific) approach to conflict resolution strategies, should push his representatives in the Middle East to work more closely as a team, especially vis-à-vis their individual diplomacy with the principal capitals in the region, as well as Europe, Russia and the U.S.

Looking beyond UN coordination issues, the crisis in the Gulf has encouraged some UN members to think more broadly about regional security arrangements.<sup>22</sup> Iran has encouraged Guterres to launch discussions of a new regional confidence-building architecture and Russia has tabled “proposals for collective security for the Persian Gulf region” echoing the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) process, through which the Western and Soviet blocs negotiated a package of agreements on borders, security confidence-building measures and humanitarian issues in the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> This summer, Iraq called for a regional security conference as tensions worsened in the Gulf. The EU endorsed the Iraqi proposal, and a number of European governments are pursuing similar ideas.

Outside powers cannot impose a new security architecture on the Middle East. But if a number of Arab states seen as relatively neutral in regional disputes – such as Jordan, Kuwait and Oman – were willing to initiate discussions on security issues, external actors might support the process. At least in the first instance, such a discussion could focus on hard security confidence-building measures – such as channels for communication among capitals during periods of crisis or arrangements to bolster maritime security – in addition to concerns such as water scarcity.

The UN is probably not the right place to generate momentum behind these ideas. The Security Council is too bitterly divided over too many Middle Eastern issues. Secretary-General Guterres, having to navigate tensions among the P5 on a day-to-day basis, is bound to face difficulties if he champions a “CSCE for the Middle East” too loudly.

Nonetheless, the UN system would have something to contribute to the conversation. It contains built-in expertise on multilateral mechanisms – and UN

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<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group Report, *A Tale of Two Councils: Strengthening AU-UN Cooperation*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> For more, see Joost Hiltermann, “Tackling the MENA Region’s Intersecting Conflicts”, Crisis Group Commentary, 13 February 2018.

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton, 2019).

officials have Middle Eastern networks – that could help Guterres contribute practical advice on security arrangements. The Secretary-General could appoint a personal envoy for general Middle Eastern security issues to liaise among various governments concerned. To the extent that discussions touch on technical matters – such as water issues – the UN can also make its experts available. At a moment when the UN’s approach to peacemaking in the Middle East is in severe trouble, its leaders should be willing to experiment with new ideas for conflict resolution.

**New York/Brussels, 12 September 2019**



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