

Lockdowns Have Killed What's Left of the United Nations' Credibility

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Distrust of the United Nations is a feeling that transcends political ideologies. Even many who view the UN as an essential institution gripe about the composition of its councils and its mounting listlessness over the last few decades. From charges of appeasement to accusations of moral relativism and beyond, the UN is regularly decried as an ineffectual circus of multinational bureaucrats, purposely or unwittingly promoting the interests of a global elite and undermining the sovereignty of nations. Conspiracy theorists, rarely inclined to subtlety, see it as a Trojan horse for a New World Order, paving the way for a supranational world government.

Nevertheless, many of those complaints (and some of those suspicions, at least circumstantially) are justified. Despite its foundational goal of “maintain[ing] international peace and security” the U.N. has clung to an increasingly desultory role since its formation after World War II, adding [mostly ineffective](#) missions along the way.

Although the monitoring of human rights has been a part of the U.S. mission since its founding, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up in 1948; during the 1980s it began picking up steam. With the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action at the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, that focus was formalized and infrastructure (a High Commissioner, with an office and staff) added.

Yet the U.N. has never failed to the extent that it has throughout 2020. This year, the United Nations has effectively stood as a bystander and partial accomplice amid the most widespread violations of human rights at any time in its seven-decade history.

A Pantheon of Dysfunction

Proponents of the UN often cite the relative stability, despite smaller regional conflicts, which prevailed between its 1945 founding and the early 1990s. Yet the ineffectiveness of the UN seems to have increased since the end of the Cold War, strongly suggesting that the (again, relative) interim calm has more to do with a clearly demarcated, two-power world than anything the UN can lay claim to.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the organization has proven [unable](#) to stop bloody conflicts in Syria, Myanmar, Yemen, Libya, and Eastern Ukraine, to name a few, while mounting [ineffective](#) responses to atrocities in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and elsewhere.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was called “illegal” by the UN, bringing to mind an [old](#)

[Robin Williams bit](#). And where peacekeeping missions have been effective, they tend to develop the character of foreign policy ‘heirlooms:’ the average age of the 14 active United Nations missions is 26 years. Accounts of [abuse](#) and [corruption](#) have further tarnished its idealistic facade, as have legendary stories of [diplomatic abuse](#) in New York City, where the UN Headquarters occupies 18 acres of priceless Manhattan real estate. [Incompetence](#) and [retaliatory](#) policies are part of the mix as well.

There are [plenty](#) of reasons [not to take](#) the United Nations [seriously](#). But those should be set aside for the most recent abdication of its charter. It claims to “protect human rights through legal instruments and on-the-ground activities;” the latter permitting U.N. officials to “examine, monitor, publicly-report, and advise on human rights from a thematic or country-specific perspective.”

And yet despite a handful of vacuous comments, the United Nations has stayed virtually silent during global lockdowns by its member states.

Looking the Other Way

In 1984, the Forty-first session of the Commission on Human Rights met at a high-level conference in Siracusa, Italy. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the situations under which the observation of human rights by governments can be either reduced or suspended as contemplated by “professors, practitioners, and other experts in human rights from all regions of the world.” The official deliverable of that meeting is entitled “The Siracusa Principles on the Limitation and Derogation Provisions in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” and can be found [here](#).

The participants included

[a] group of 31 distinguished experts in international law ... from Brazil, Canada, Chile, Egypt, France, Greece, Hungary, India, Ireland, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, the United Nations Center for Human Rights, the International Labor Organization, and the sponsoring organizations ... agreed ... upon the need for a close examination of the conditions and groups for permissible limitations and derogations [of civil and political rights].

UN guidelines stipulate that in the event that the integrity of a member state is threatened, meaning if a disease outbreak or other health emergency arises that poses the risk of state collapse, the suspension of certain human rights can be limited or removed, temporarily. Any such moratorium is, per the Siracusa Principles, proscribed in the following ways:

1. It must be based upon scientific evidence;
2. It must exist for a finite, predetermined amount of time;
3. It must be proportional to the effort;
4. It must be subject to review;
5. It must respect human dignity

Let’s set aside that a group of international attorneys drew up guidelines for when human rights can be suspended in the interest of preserving governments – which in terms of U.N. membership runs from democratically-elected officials to totalitarian regimes. During the

novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020, other than a handful of mealy-mouthed, sanctimonious press releases and speeches, the leadership of the UN stood by – not even deploying their classically impotent, symbolic measures.

There were no legal actions, no threats of sanction, no requests for additional information, and no deployment of observation teams. Open-ended lockdowns, threats against civilians, and a wide range of other human rights violations were undertaken the world over. Many endure to this day, all but neglected by the appointed global watchdog for “peace” and “dignity.”

Expert Dithering

Comments from the Office of the Secretary General (SecGen) of the UN predictably wove a noncommittal, contradictory path as brutal policy responses to the pandemic drew on from weeks to months:

- On Feb 28, 2020, the SecGen said in a [press conference](#): “Now is the time for all governments to step up and do everything possible to contain the disease – and to do so without stigmatization, and respecting human rights. We know containment is possible, but the window of opportunity is narrowing.”
- One week later on March 6, 2020, a spokesperson for the Rights Chief at the UN Office of the High Commissioner [warned](#) that “people who are already barely surviving economically, may all too easily be pushed over the edge by the measures being adopted to contain the virus.”

By [April 2020](#), roughly half of Earth’s population – 3.9billion people in no less than 90 countries or territories – were ordered to stay at home.

- On April 20, 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros urged caution in [lifting lockdowns](#): “So-called lockdowns can help to take the heat out of a country’s epidemic, but they cannot do it alone,” adding that other methods including test and trace should be initiated as well. (The WHO is the directing and coordinating authority for health matters within the United Nations system.)
- On April 27, 2020 – well over a month after many of the lockdowns went into effect – came a [statement](#) from the UN Human Rights Office: Countries must “not use the COVID crisis as a pretext for repressive measures[.]”
- On May 14, 2020, the UN Human Rights Commissioner again urged governments to be cautious when [lifting lockdowns](#), adding that allowing “politics or economics” to drive decisions is unwise. Unsurprisingly, in mid-July UNICEF announced that the food security of some [132 million people](#) could be in jeopardy by the end of 2020.

And on it went, until on September 24th the SecGen [blamed](#) the failure to control the virus on a “lack of global preparedness, cooperation, unity, and solidarity.” And less than a week later with no shame or [irony](#), he [commented](#) that “[t]he economic and social consequences [of the pandemic] are as bad as we feared, and in some cases, worse.”

It's [not news](#) that for the United Nations, economics are a [distant](#) consideration of any discussion, not least of which is human rights. But in light of this year's colossal failings, the time is right for an U.N.-free world; at the very least, a U.S.-free U.N.

Enough Is Enough

Defenders of the United Nations have a number of parries at the ready against the standard array of criticisms. They argue that in a world where so much instability is created by nonstate entities – terror networks, for example – the impactfulness of a multi-state organization is blunted. Those excuses don't apply here: this wasn't a global terror group or a regional threat. The political response to the pandemic took the wholly undisguised form of governments threatening, imprisoning, and in some cases attacking their own citizens.

If, as politicians are fond of saying, the battle against the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is a “war,” UN member firms have been engaged in war crimes on a scale not seen since World War II. Now: no one would (or should) make the argument that the scope of death camps, forced labor, and summary executions in the first half of the 1940s matches that of tyrannical, widespread disease mitigation policies. Yet the depraved indifference with which the global scale of lockdowns, and in particular the wholesale economic destruction of communities has been received by the named invigilator warrants comparison. Add in the likelihood of widespread hunger and such inevitable costs as worldwide increases in stress disorders, spikes in suicides, and widespread substance abuse and the comparison becomes even more reasonable.

Of the U.N.'s “myriad [failings](#) and...glaring inadequacies” – and whether explained by cowardice, corruption, or indecision – the failure to speak clearly in favor of human rights (with science and history squarely on the side of standing up for human rights) is low from which the United Nations should not be permitted to recover. That is to say, not in its present or any other form.

It's bad enough that the United States government has a history of supporting brutal regimes with taxpayer dollars. American taxpayers financing an estimated 22% of the U.N. operating budget and just south of 30% of the so-called peacekeeping budget for an organization that won't stand up for our human rights, let alone that of billions of others, has never more clearly been indefensible.

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