



# »LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND« - WHAT ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST?

**Recent UN discussions reaffirmed the importance of “leave no one behind,” particularly regarding the Middle East’s conflicts. Ongoing humanitarian crises in Syria, Yemen, and Iran highlight the challenges to achieving Sustainable Development Goals. A unified international response is essential to address civilian suffering and promote collaboration.**

On September 29, 2024, the 79th session of the General Assembly concluded, featuring a wide-ranging discussion of pressing global issues. A particularly resonant theme emerged throughout the proceedings: the commitment to “leave no one behind.” This powerful phrase encapsulated the core promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, underscoring our shared responsibility to ensure inclusive progress for all.

However, a critical question emerges: can we truly uphold this promise for every member of the United Nations? At present, there are legitimate concerns that this commitment may be perceived as an ideal rather than a reality, especially in regions like the Middle East, where conflicts have intensified.

## **The Historical and Ongoing Dynamics of the Middle East Conflict**

The Middle East conflict has deep historical roots, stemming from a complex interplay of religious, ethnic, and political factors. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire post-World War I, conflicting promises made to both Arab leaders and Jewish communities led to tensions over land in what is now Israel and Palestine. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 triggered a series of wars and ongoing disputes, leading to significant displacement and a struggle for sovereignty. Today, the situation is increasingly dire, with escalating violence affecting multiple regions. Israel’s military actions have extended beyond Palestine, impacting Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, contributing to a growing humanitarian crisis.

News outlets around the world are reporting extensively on the recent developments surrounding the killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah by Israel and the potential



implications for the broader region. In response, Hezbollah's deputy chief, Naim Qassem, has indicated that the group is prepared for any Israeli ground invasion, signalling their determination to stand firm. Additionally, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson has emphasized that Israel's actions will not go unanswered, asserting that any threats to Iran's national security will be met with a robust response.

Determining who is right or wrong, and assessing compliance with international law versus the defence of sovereignty, are critical and complex questions. However, these topics are too expansive to address comprehensively within this text. It is essential that such matters be examined and resolved through appropriate international legal frameworks, such as the International Court of Justice and the international Criminal Court, to ensure a fair and informed deliberation.

It is widely recognized that the international community holds a critical view of the Middle East, shaped by the region's complex history. Factors such as political instability, human rights concerns, terrorism, and cultural misunderstandings contribute to this perspective. However, as we witness the tragic loss of tens of thousands of civilian lives, it is crucial that we prioritize compassion and support for those affected, rather than passing judgment.

We cannot overlook the question of double standards when discussing these critical issues.

While all human lives are equal, the stark contrast between the international response to civilian casualties in Gaza compared to those in Ukraine highlights disparities in attention and action. This calls for a renewed commitment to ensuring that all lives are valued equally and that we respond to humanitarian crises with urgency and care, regardless of geography and political bias.

### **What is the UN doing for the Middle East?**

The United Nations has had a longstanding presence in the Middle East, and while it has made notable strides in the humanitarian field, it appears that achieving political progress has proven to be more challenging. The United Nations collaborates with regional and international partners to alleviate tensions, promote on-the-ground improvements, and facilitate political negotiations aimed at achieving a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This work is part of a broader commitment to fostering a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in the Middle East, grounded in relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 242, 338 and 1515, as well as the Madrid principles.

It is important to acknowledge that the situation in the Middle East is highly complex due to various factors, including political instability within certain countries. For instance, the challenges posed by the Houthis in Yemen complicate the UN's efforts to provide assistance



and stabilize the country, as well as the broader region. Ensuring that civilians have access to essential living conditions and that their fundamental human rights are upheld is a priority for the international community. However, this goal is complicated by the fact that the Houthis often accuse the UN of undermining the country's sovereignty and sabotaging its efforts, making cooperation and effective assistance more challenging.

On the October 1, 2024, The United Nations has once again demonstrated its commitment to assisting civilians and innocent individuals by launching an appeal for over \$400 million to address the urgent needs of those affected by the escalating conflict in Lebanon. This initiative reflects the UN's ongoing dedication to providing support during times of crisis.

### **The current status of the SDGs and the progress in the Middle East**

The 2024 report on Sustainable Development Goals indicates that progress towards the 2030 SDGs is significantly behind schedule. Currently, only 17 % of the established goals are on track or have been met, while 30 % show marginal progress and 17 % are experiencing regression.

The situation in the Middle East reflects a mixed landscape of progress, with some goals showing improvement while others remain stagnant. Many countries in the region are actively working to diversify their economies beyond oil dependency.

For instance, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 seeks to promote growth in sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and technology. Additionally, there is an increasing emphasis on renewable energy, with nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE making significant investments in solar and wind projects to address future energy needs and tackle climate change. But what about Syria, Iran, Yemen?



Human Rights Watch reports that, for the first time since the onset of the conflict, Syrians across all sub-districts of the country are experiencing varying degrees of »humanitarian stress.« The recent devastating earthquakes have exacerbated already critical conditions, particularly in rebel-held areas of the northwest, where millions were deprived of essential search-and-rescue support and lifesaving aid for over a week. Despite widespread calls for a nationwide ceasefire, hostilities have continued, leading to a civilian casualties and further displacement. By mid-2023, over 90 percent of the Syrian population was living below the poverty line, with at least 12 million individuals – more than half of the total



population – lacking access to or the means to obtain adequate quality food. Furthermore, around 15 million people were in need of some level of humanitarian assistance for survival, while over 600,000 children were suffering from chronic malnutrition.

Violations of human rights and humanitarian law persist in Yemen, encompassing unlawful attacks that have resulted in civilian casualties, restrictions on freedom of movement and humanitarian access, arbitrary detentions, and forced internal displacement. Yemen is facing one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with over 21 million people in need of assistance and struggling with inadequate food, healthcare, and infrastructure. Among them, 11 million children require humanitarian support, and more than 3.1 million are internally displaced. In the first quarter of 2023 alone, unexploded ordnance led to 121 civilian casualties.

Iran has been grappling with gender-related protests since the tragic death of Mahsa Jina Amini, an Iranian-Kurdish woman who was detained by the police. In response, authorities have intensified their enforcement of compulsory hijab laws, and security agencies have targeted the families of those who lost their lives during the protests. Human right organizations are currently investigating the reported deaths of approximately 500 protesters, including at least 68 children. Iran continues to be one of the

world's leading practitioners of the death penalty, applying it to individuals convicted of crimes committed as minors, as well as under vague national security charges. The death penalty is sometimes even imposed for non-violent offenses. According to a report from the Iran Human Rights Organization, more than 700 executions were carried out in Iran from January to November 2023, representing a significant increase compared to the same period in 2022. Furthermore, Iranian authorities have imposed severe restrictions on freedoms of assembly and expression, leading to the arrest of hundreds of activists, lawyers, journalists, students, and artists.

Given the current circumstances, the progress toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals appears to be severely lacking. Human rights violations are pervasive, with individuals facing arbitrary detention and loss of life. The rights of women are largely overlooked, and children are going to bed hungry, waking up each day with hopes for a better future. In light of these challenges, one must ask: is a six-year timeline sufficient to address the deep-rooted injustices they are experiencing? The ongoing conflict will surely make the progress even harder.

### **The future of the Middle East and international response to the ongoing conflicts**

As time progresses, media reports increasingly highlight the dire situation faced by innocent



civilians in several countries, including Israel, Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. The historically strained relationships among these nations appear to have reached a new low. The uncertainty surrounding the future for millions of individuals caught in the midst of these conflicts is profound, and we must recognize that the potential for a regional war remains a significant concern. Hundreds of thousands have already been forced to flee their homes, contributing to a refugee population nearing 45 million and an internally displaced population of approximately 65 million.

And what do the world leaders have to say about this? In his address at the 79th Session of the General Assembly, U.S. President Joe Biden expressed optimism, suggesting that even in the face of the horrors of war, a path forward exists. However, this perspective may be at odds with the reality faced by the 42,000 civilians who have tragically lost their lives due to Israeli airstrikes, supported by U.S. funding.

French President Emmanuel Macron highlighted the issue of double standards, asserting that »one life is equal to another,« and emphasized that civilian protection must remain a paramount norm guiding international action. He urged the global community to seek peace, universally and to reject any distinctions that might hinder that pursuit.

Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob criticized

the permanent members of the UN Security Council, stating that their misuse of the veto power has hindered the Council's ability to effectively address global issues, thereby failing humanity. Echoing Macron's sentiments, Golob noted that concern for civilian suffering should not be dictated by geographical or political factors, underscoring that the United Nations encompasses more than just the Security Council.

Germany's Minister for Foreign Affairs reiterated Germany's commitment to Israel's security and its right to self-defence, while also expressing a desire to alleviate the suffering of children in Gaza. But what about the children of West Bank, Yemen or Syria? All of them being bombed, injured and orphaned by Israel, who is, by her Excellency's words, just defending itself.



### **Call to Action**

There have been several initiatives and calls to action recently. For instance, on June 28, 2024, during the Humanitarian Affairs Segment of ECOSOC, the Missions of Jordan and Belgium, along with the European Union Delegation to the United Nations jointly launched a “Call to Action for Palestinian Children in the West Bank and





Gaza,” grounded in the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Additionally, numerous NGOs and similar organizations have urged their governments to halt arms sales to Israel, advocate for an immediate ceasefire, and ensure access to humanitarian aid. Furthermore, there have been widespread protests around the globe, involving university students, professors, and employees from pro-Israel companies. Unfortunately, many of these demonstrations have seen instances of police intervention, resulting in injuries and detentions. It is difficult to acknowledge, but protests often represent one of the few avenues available to citizens for expressing their concerns. When a government does not align with the views of the majority, it can lead to tensions and challenges to various institutions within the country. Consequently, it is essential for leaders to navigate their support thoughtfully, ensuring they consider the diverse perspectives of their constituents.

Numerous calls to action were voiced during the recent Session of the General Assembly, advocating for humanitarian aid, diplomatic dialogue, and a two-state solution that would

ensure the sovereignty of both the State of Palestine and Israel. However, in light of the escalating conflict, which has now extended to at least three additional countries, the situation has become increasingly complex. As a result, it is clear that a two-state solution alone may not be sufficient to achieve lasting peace in the region.

### **Conclusion**

In light of recent developments, the “leave no one behind” slogan, while well-intentioned, appears increasingly challenging to realize in the Middle East. The region continues to struggle to meet even basic needs, with civilians facing dire circumstances, including loss of life and children who are deprived of their childhood experiences.

It is imperative that the international community, including the United Nations and various NGOs, offers robust support and guidance to address these pressing issues. Moreover, this situation extends beyond the Middle East; nations such as the US, China, and the UAE, while not directly involved, may also face repercussions. Collaborative efforts are essential to mitigate the risks that could arise not just for the region, but for the global community as a whole.

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