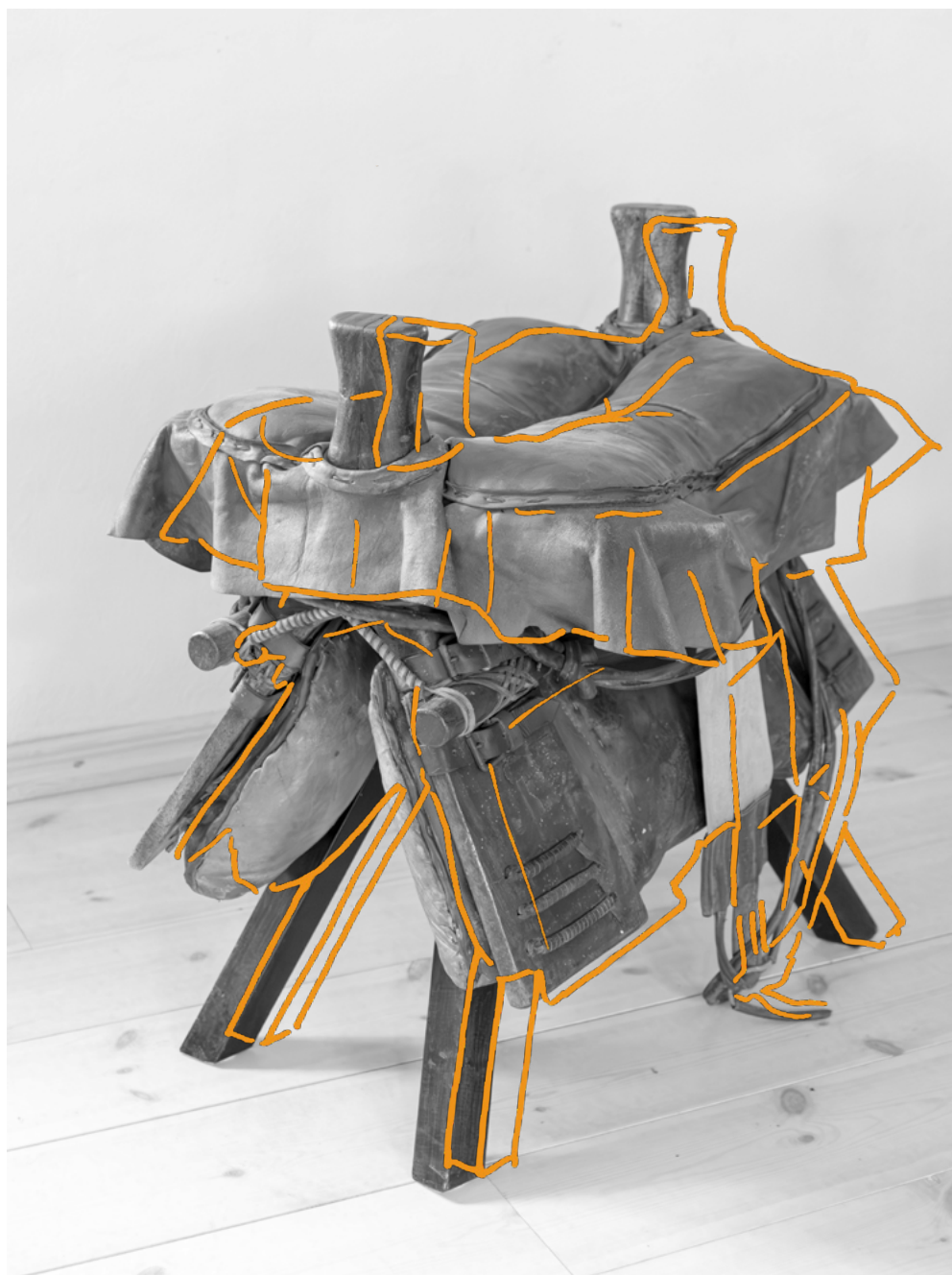


Is the UN prepared for the leadership challenges of today?

Ameerah Haq



The camel saddle. Just as a skilled rider adjusts the saddle to ensure stability on the camel's back, effective UN leadership requires adaptability and resilience in the face of evolving complexities. In this article, Ameerah Haq stresses the importance of navigating diverse terrains of conflict, highlighting the need to remain steady amidst geopolitical tensions and technological advancements. Moreover, Haq underscores the critical role of institutional support and training in empowering UN leaders, urging for a shift in leadership preparation to better equip leaders for the uncertainties of today's world.

Ameerah Haq is the former United Nations Under-Secretary-General for the Department of Field Support with more than 40 years of experience in the international civil service. She continues to engage in national and multilateral development work and recently served as the Vice-Chair of the UN High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations. Previous assignments include serving as Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) in the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste, Deputy SRSG and UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan, as well as Deputy SRSG and UN Resident Coordinator in Afghanistan. Other senior positions were at the UN Development Programme (UNDP) as UN Coordinator in Malaysia and Laos. Ameerah Haq currently serves on the Board of The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), the Peace Operations Training Institutes (POTI), the International Peace Institute (IPI) Advisory Board, the BRAC Global Board and as UN Foundation Senior Adviser.

The challenges facing leaders of the United Nations (UN) today are vastly different compared to just a few years ago. They are more demanding both in terms of complexity, scale and nature. The constantly shifting sands of the context facing leaders today, and perhaps especially those working in fragile settings, requires a different kind of leadership. It demands an understanding that the way present day leaders are educated and equipped cannot be based on yesterday's challenges but on the risks and opportunities of an uncertain and constantly changing future.

It is fair to say that the world of today is one of greater volatility and filled with a whole new set of tensions and challenges. This is evident, not least, within the context of conflict. In the late 1990s and early in the twenty-first century, conflicts were typically intrastate and often relating to tensions along ethnic or religious lines. There were often connections to poverty, the uneven distribution of resources and a sense of exclusion, sometimes stemming from legacies of colonisation. Many conflicts erupted in lower income countries with weak governance creating vacuums for non-state actors to fill.

While those types of conflicts remain, new developments are changing not only the dynamics of conflict but also the way in which we can respond to conflict and work with preventing, building, and sustaining peace. For example, there is a greater frequency of interstate conflict increasingly involving middle income countries. Higher income countries are no longer impervious to the risk of conflict and we see powers like the United States, China and Russia in, or drawing nearer to, conflict scenes.

The digitalisation of the world, including conflict, also presents a host of new issues that need to be understood,

such as the menace and dangers of disinformation, cyber warfare, and other new non-violent means of conflict.

The room for manoeuvre for the UN, not least in dealing with conflict, has also been affected by a diminishing respect for the meaning and sanctity of the blue flag and the values that it symbolises.¹ The once fairly widespread respect for the mandate of the UN – even in situations where the host country was not overly excited about its presence – is no longer a given. Today, that flag doesn't carry the same respect or meaning for many parts of the world due to perceptions of eroding neutrality of the UN. Similarly, the unity in which the UN Security Council often acted is now rare – especially with the recent paralysis on many issues as well as having permanent members bypass the Council and being aggressors individually or through the formation of coalitions, engaged in war on sovereign states.

The diminishing respect can also be witnessed when it comes to the UN's *raison d'être* as a normative force, a role that is under great strain with the shifting balance of power in the world. What once used to be a UN comparative advantage, having the unique potential to codify normative baselines for basic human dignity, does not seem to carry the same worth.

The UN is increasingly seen as a Western instrument seeking to impose Western values such as human rights and democracy. The invasion of Ukraine and the violations of international humanitarian law both there and in Israel/Gaza, to mention two current conflicts, are grave violations of the UN Charter. The current widespread disregard of its founding principles, and the divisions within the Security Council makes it that much more imperative for the UN to insist on the sanctity and implementation of normative frameworks.

This presents a gloomy backdrop for those who are tasked to stand up the blue flag and lead the work of the UN in these settings. Is the leadership toolbox sufficient in terms of addressing both the changing nature and mechanisms of conflict and crisis *and* the diminishing trust and respect for the UN and its normative frameworks?

Dag Hammarskjöld once commented on the dangers of trade-offs by saying that *'Any result bought at the price of a compromise with the principles and ideals of the Organization ... is bought at too high a price ... It weakens the Organization in a way representing a definite loss for the future that cannot be balanced by any immediate advantage achieved.'*² How do we create the conditions in which leaders can cope with the multiplicity of demands and dilemmas facing them? And without having to think about trade-offs to help and protect innocent civilians? The UN must analyse what the increasingly complex and demanding playing field requires from its leaders and how it can provide support, training and mentoring to respond in a principled and pragmatic manner – both at the systemic and individual level.

There is no set manual for successful methods or leadership qualities for leaders within the UN. Of course, there may be individual traits that are more conducive to being a good leader in these contexts, such as integrity and the ability to listen. The strength to be able to endure constant criticism and not be applauded for one's work, the ability to stay calm under pressure and the capacity and skill to convey empathy, for example, to both Israel for the attack by Hamas and to Palestine for the untenable humanitarian situation of civilians in Gaza in a credible way, are other important characteristics.

Inclusive and receptive

But in addition to these personal characteristics, my experience has taught me a few other useful lessons on valuable leadership practices, especially when working in the field. For example, leadership needs to be inclusive and

receptive of the context it works in and engage accordingly. There are groups and actors who may control neither government nor territory but still wield a lot of influence. During the UN's mission in Afghanistan in the early 2000's, there was a general sentiment in the international community that the Taliban were a pariah group of the past, that no one engaged with. In retrospect, it was a huge miscalculation not to invite them to the table, something that the respected UN Special Representative in Afghanistan Brahimi himself acknowledged as a great misjudgement seeing the power they had to sway the population.³

This is true in many conflict settings also today, where leaders must acknowledge the power of actors whom we may not approve of but must be prepared to engage with in order to get to the core of the conflict.

Remain principled and neutral

Further, the pressures on individual leaders on the ground are often diverse and potentially overwhelming but still demand from these individuals to remain principled, neutral and to assess all sides of an issue. Although there were voices being raised against the UN reporting *all* civilian casualties in Afghanistan, whether they were caused by the Taliban, by rebel groups, by warlords or by NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation), this was the mandate - to report neutrally on all civilian casualties, based on the strong foundation of neutrality on which the UN rests. It takes grit to do this, to stand firm on neutrality, even more so today when the forces against agreed norms are gaining leverage.

This demands of leaders the acceptance of constantly being criticised when exercising their mandates. Leaders must also recognise and manage the marginalisation of the UN and the fact that the organisation may no longer be the go-to actor that it used to be, facing competition from regional and local actors in, for example, mediation. Although regional solutions are something that the UN itself promotes and encourages, this new reality of having to establish its role may still be difficult to negotiate.

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In this new reality, where the role of the UN is much more in question, and where the complexity of decisions that need to be made on the ground, the level of uncertainty and confusion felt, and the magnitude of criticism that individual leaders have to endure are on a completely different scale, leaders in the field need to be able to count on the solid and continuous support of headquarters and other relevant stake-holders. The institutional framework and system wide support must be strong, predictable and dependable. It also needs to fulfil its critical role of forging the alliances and creating the conditions needed to bolster the UN's role in the field and uphold its basic principles. This cannot be only on the shoulders of individual leaders on the ground.

It is unfeasible, and unacceptable, for leaders in complex settings to both have to grapple with the crisis or conflict *and* to doubt whether they have the backing of their headquarters. In addition, with new tensions, new technology, new root causes, budget insecurities, and a waning belief in multilateral solutions and basic normative principles, leaders need to be prepared, trained and supported in new ways, accordingly. This may be in the form of strong mentoring, solid preparation, training in new technology, being armed with good communication skills, reliable and dependable personnel, and a fully staffed office. It should never be left to the individual leader on the ground to carry the responsibility that should rest with the organisation as a whole.

So, to reflect once again on the question I raise – is it possible to prepare for leadership challenges of today? Can we even imagine the world we are living in today? Can we fathom the seismic shifts in global behaviour, policy, perceptions? What once seemed predictable is now ‘unknown’. As for preparing future leaders – we must start earlier and pivot completely from the scenarios, simulations and tabletop exercises of yesteryears to prepare them for the new realities of leadership. Under these circumstances, the UN leaders who are on the ground deserve our full support, concerted backstopping and admiration. ■

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-emblem-and-flag>.

² Quoted from Kaj Falkman (ed.), ‘To Speak for the World. Speeches and Statements by Dag Hammarskjöld’, (Stockholm, Atlantis, 2005), p. 71.

³ Lakdhar Brahimi is a former Algerian freedom fighter, Foreign Minister, conflict mediator and veteran UN diplomat who served as the UN Special Representative in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2004.