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War and Peace

Disunity and Impotence at the United Nations

1/12/2017

The mandate of the United Nations is to preserve peace in the world, but when it comes to the Syrian crisis, the global body has failed badly. Will the UN's new secretary-general be able to finally introduce necessary reforms? By SPIEGEL Staff

The UN was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell. Dag Hammarskjöld, UN secretary-general, during a May 1954 speech.

The man who, by simply raising his hand, prevented all efforts to end the war in Syria is sitting in a bunker-like room on 67th Street in Manhattan. Chandeliers are hanging above his head, a pendulum clock is keeping the time behind him and the furniture recalls Soviet-era filmography. "We have had this problem with Syria, of course, and ... I (have) thought a lot about it," says Vitaly Ivanovich Churkin, Russia's ambassador to the United Nations. An ironic expression on his face, the white-haired diplomat leans back in his leather chair.

Churkin is one of the men charged with saving the world. As absurd as it might sound, that is his job. The 15 members of the UN Security Council, in particular the five permanent members -- China, France, Great Britain, Russia and the United States -- bear "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security," according to Article 24 of the Charter of the United Nations.

It is a heroic task, an idealistic notion that was born out of the ruins of World War II: The peoples of the Earth joining together to protect the only planet we have. Uniting their strength, the world's countries hoped to create a better world, a place where all people can live in dignity. And the prerequisite for doing so is peace.

In 2001, the United Nations and its then-secretary-general, Kofi Annan, received the Nobel Peace Prize "for their work for a better organized and more peaceful world." It is also thanks to the UN that nuclear war has thus far been prevented, that war criminals from former Yugoslavia were forced to stand trial and that we now have a Paris Climate Agreement, which is aimed at preventing the destruction of the world.

But what has been happening in Syria for the last five years is the opposite of peace: a proxy world war being fought on Syrian territory. It has called everything into question for which the UN stands. The images and the calls for help that innocent men, women and children have been sending out to the world via Facebook and Twitter are unbearable. And yet the world stands by, watching as though it were all merely part of a particularly long horror movie.

The five permanent members of the Security Council carry a significant degree of the responsibility for what is happening in Syria because they are able, with a single veto, to block all efforts at peace. All it takes is for one of their representatives to raise their hand. If they do, then there will be no no-fly zone, no political solution and no UN-prompted intervention.

Since 2011, Russian UN Ambassador Churkin has raised his hand six times in opposition to resolutions pertaining to Syria. On five of those occasions, he was joined by China, most recently in opposition to a cease-fire in Aleppo. Weeks later, when the last hospital in the rebel-held eastern part of the city was destroyed by bombs, the Security Council agreed to send observers. But thus far, not a single one has arrived in eastern Aleppo.

At the end of December, Russia and Turkey negotiated a fragile cease-fire for Syria without the participation of the UN or Western countries. The Security Council was left no other option than to welcome this cease-fire. The body's Western members were only able to make improvements to some of the formulations, meaning that ultimately, national powers essentially usurped the responsibility of the global organization. And the Security Council once again didn't just look inept, but even worse: irrelevant.

Turkey and Russia, of course, insisted that their efforts were merely intended to support UN efforts and not supersede them. The UN, after all, is important for the Russians in particular: The Security Council is the place where Russia can interact with the West at eye level -- thanks to its veto.

Vitaly Churkin, meanwhile, finds himself in the absurd position of being responsible for ending a war in which his country is an important player. Since 2015, Russia has been fighting side-by-side with Syrian dictator Bashar Assad, a despot who has attacked his own citizens with chemical weapons.

When asked about the tremendous responsibility facing him, Churkin demurs. Assad's use of chemical weapons hasn't been proven, he says, at least not from Russia's perspective. On the contrary, he has a simple explanation for his country's obstinacy on the Security Council: "Our Western colleagues were not making a secret of the fact that their intention is to use the council to topple the regime."

Churkin raises his eyebrows derisively. "We were telling them, sorry, if you want to topple the regime, please go ahead, but the council has nothing to do with it. It's not the responsibility of the council to topple regimes."

That is true, of course, but it has been the council's job to end wars since 1945. "We the peoples of the United Nations, to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind" -- that is how the Charter of the United Nations, the body's founding document, begins.

The war in Syria is the darkest chapter of our times. It was sparked by Bashar Assad, the Syrian president, when he unleashed his henchmen on peacefully protesting citizens in 2011. According to estimates, more than 400,000 people have since lost their lives in Syria, with over half of the country's population having been forced to flee.

When severe human rights violations occur, the UN has the responsibility to protect, with the Security Council allowed to interfere in a country's internal affairs in such cases. Who then, if not the UN, could put a stop to the horrors in Syria? And, if the UN fails, as it did in Rwanda, Bosnia and Chechnya, what is the point?

It is an auspicious time to ask such questions. Since Jan. 1, the United Nations has had a new secretary-general, António Guterres of Portugal. It marks a new beginning after 10 years under the leadership of the South Korean Ban Ki-moon. It is also a good time to take inventory: What has become of the UN, this bureaucratic colossus where pretense and reality are so far apart? What role does the global organization play in this era of autocrats and populists who glorify the nation-state and have nothing but disdain for international institutions? In these times of Assad, Putin and Trump?

The Appeal of the German President

Fall was in full swing in Hamburg when Ban Ki-moon stopped by for a visit last October. The light varied between a sickly gray and dark gray as a cold drizzle fell from low-hanging clouds. Inside, though, in the great banquet hall of Hamburg City Hall, the chandeliers glowed bright and a string ensemble was playing. The staid audience, dressed in appropriately dark tones, listened quietly. The event was the 20th anniversary of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, an institution established on the banks of the Elbe River in Hamburg under the auspices of the UN.

The court, like many UN initiatives, is theoretically a fantastic idea. Equipped with 21 judges from 21 different countries, the tribunal is charged with peacefully resolving differences at sea. The problem, though, is the fact that only 30 countries have thus far recognized the court. The

rest of the world apparently prefers to resolve their maritime conflicts in a different manner, with the result that the tribunal has only adjudicated 25 cases since its 1996 founding.

Nevertheless, its anniversary was celebrated and the German president made an appearance to hold a speech. The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, said Joachim Gauck, is a "great asset." But he then turned to Ban Ki-moon and didn't mince words: "The Security Council is now just as polarized as it was before the Wall came down," Gauck said. "Millions of people are paying the price for this paralysis of the Security Council."

In such surroundings, Gauck's words seemed like the shrill screeching of a violin's bow. The German president brought the ghastly present inside the banquet hall, speaking of war and of the "belief that the nation-state is the sole instance able to solve problems." He also spoke of the noble goals contained in the UN Charter. When he finished, applause filled the room -- and continued for longer than was strictly necessary.

And Ban Ki-moon, who had been the face of the UN for the previous 10 years? He listened motionlessly to Gauck's speech, his posture slightly bent. When it was his turn to speak, he invoked the 14th UN Sustainable Development Goal, which focuses on the protection of the world's oceans, and he noted the importance of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which forms the foundation for the tribunal, and the significance of the 21st case addressed by the tribunal.

But it was difficult to listen. Here was the man whose duty was actually that of reminding the governments of the world of their responsibility to peace. The UN secretary-general has very little actual power, but he can demand attention as the voice of the world's conscience, as a kind of worldly pope. Ban, though, simply read out his speech, stoically and with a quiet voice. He didn't respond at all to the passionate speech he had just heard from German President Gauck.

The Birth of a Grand Idea

The UN is actually well situated to exert a positive influence on the world. With 193 members, almost every country in the world belongs. It is the only international organization with an almost incontrovertible legitimacy.

The League of Nations, formed in 1920 following the destruction of World War I, was the first attempt to form a global, political organization. But it was unsuccessful because the United States never joined and other countries soon left. But during World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and later Josef Stalin revisited the idea. It wasn't out of idealism: The Allies wanted to create a postwar organization that could help protect their interests.

The result was that the U.S., Great Britain, China, the Soviet Union and France received permanent seats on the Security Council. China at the time was far away from being a great power, but among the world's leading powers, it was seen as a welcome counterbalance to Japan, which hadn't yet capitulated at the time.

Today, the world order looks completely different, with the Western view no longer the only one with significant influence. Russia and China carry an equal weight on the geo-political stage and emerging nations are demanding their own seat at the table of power and influence. The trauma of World War II is fading into the past.

It is now possible to see the veto rights given to the five permanent members as a fatal design flaw, one that has paralyzed the Security Council and prolonged Syria's tragedy -- or, in a more sober formulation, as a reflection of postwar power relations that is no longer appropriate for today's multipolar world. Because despite all of its noble goals, the UN is not divorced from reality.

In the almost 72 years since its founding, the UN has seen some notable achievements: During the Cold War, it was the forum where the superpowers could speak with one another; it has helped give birth to a number of nation states; and in 1948, the body agreed on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. More recently, it was instrumental in the formation of the Paris Climate Agreement and also issued the Sustainable Development Goals, which aim at eliminating war, hunger and poverty.

Such plans are a feather in the UN's cap, but the higher the aims, the more frustrating is the reality. UN peacekeeping troops, which are charged with establishing security in war zones, have often failed or, worse, even abused those who need protection. For decades, there have been repeated accusations of UN troops engaging in sexual abuse, trafficking in women or forced prostitution -- in Sarajevo, Liberia, Haiti and most recently in the Central African Republic. Investigations into such scandals often leave plenty to be desired.

Perhaps the UN simply has too much on its plate. Over the years, it has grown to become a monstrous apparatus. Its most important organizations are the Security Council (SC), the General Assembly (GA), the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the Secretariat, headed by the secretary-general. Beyond that are dozens of suborganizations, funds and programs. Some 44,000 people work for the UN and its annual budget of 2.7 billion dollars is, when measured against its mandate, absurdly tiny.

A Visit to the Secretary-General

The UN headquarters building in New York rises above the shores of the East River, a looming skyscraper paired with a low building next door. The building was designed in 1947 by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer and symbolic works of art decorate the forecourt, including a bronze globe donated by Italy and a sculpture of a pistol with a knotted barrel from Luxembourg. Inside there are splendid halls along with a reproduction of Picasso's "Guernica," but there are also plenty of places where the plaster is peeling off the walls and many of the offices are badly in need of renovation.

We visited Ban Ki-moon for an interview just a few weeks before he handed control of the UN to his successor. The building's entrance hall includes portraits of all eight of the secretary-generals who have thus far led the UN, all of them men. On the 37th floor, the door opens to the secretary-general's office and Ban Ki-moon rises from his desk. "Guten Tag," he says quietly in

German, offering a weak handshake. The man at the head of the United Nations seems reserved, almost fragile.

When Ban looks back at the past several years, he is able to identify several things of which he is proud: the climate agreement, the sustainability goals and the share of women in management, for example. But he doesn't find it nearly as easy to talk about the failures. "Syria," Ban says, "is a tragedy." The defining tragedy of his tenure. When Ban became secretary-general in 2007, Damascus was seen as a hip city in the Middle East while Aleppo and Palmyra were among humanity's antique treasures. The international community should have spoken with a united voice, he says, sounding resigned.

Could not Ban have forced them to do so with the moral authority of the office he holds? He says he has always spoken from his heart, as is his style. Sometimes, he says, he struck a more forceful and explicit tone while in other instances he preferred quiet diplomacy. Sitting across from him, it is difficult to imagine Ban being forceful and explicit.

On the other hand, what good are passionate words when they don't change anything anyway? Following the debates in the Security Council is to experience the kind of frustration that many who take part in those debates feel.

Shortly before the fall of eastern Aleppo, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power turned to her Russian counterpart Churkin. "Is there literally nothing that can shame you?" she asked. "Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin?" Churkin jeered back, saying that Power, an American, was acting "as though she were Mother Teresa herself."

Stephen O'Brien, the UN's emergency relief coordinator, has repeatedly reported to the Security Council about the hardships facing the Syrians. In one such presentation at the end of October, he said: "These are people just like you and me -- not sitting around a table in New York but forced into desperate, pitiless suffering, their future wiped out."

One month later, he said: "I am more or less at my wit's end as a human being."

When diplomacy fails, all that's left is the area for which O'Brien is responsible: emergency relief. But not even that has been sufficiently effective in Syria.

On the Syrian Border

It's the Thursday before Christmas and an icy wind is blowing through the Turkish border city of Reyhanli. Tanks are rolling through the streets and soldiers are patrolling between the checkpoints.

Bediako Buahene tromps through the mud as sleet blows into his face. A Canadian asylum attorney in an elegant winter coat and white scarf, Buahene organizes aid convoys for Syria on behalf of the United Nations. On this pre-Christmas Thursday morning, 24 trucks full of diapers, washing powder, tooth brushes and heating coal are to be sent across the border. In November

and December, up to 30 such vehicles departed for Syria from Reyhanli every day and Buahene estimates that the UN has provided for around 5 million Syrians.

Such aid is particularly urgent now. The conquering of Aleppo by Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime has left tens of thousands of people without a roof over their heads and many don't know where to look for shelter. The refugee camps in Syria's rebel-controlled north are overflowing and the border to Turkey has been sealed off.

Some 200 kilometers away in Gaziantep, UN humanitarian aid organizer Trond Jensen sits in an office that looks more like a fortress. A metal wall protects it from the street and security personnel pat down visitors as they search for weapons. Previously, Jensen worked for the UN in Sudan, Yemen and Liberia, but none of them, he says, are comparable to Syria. "People wonder why we don't just bulldoze our way in. But it's not as simple as that," he says.

In the early years of the war, UN emergency relief workers couldn't do much. It was only in July 2014 that the Security Council managed to pass a resolution allowing the humanitarian arm of the UN to transport aid supplies across four additional border crossings into Syria.

Jensen and his team investigate which items people need the most and they ensure that they are then transported into the country with the help of their local partner organizations. Before a convoy can depart for Syria, Jensen sends an overview of the freight to UN workers in Damascus who then inform the Syrian government.

It is relatively easy to reach areas that are under regime control, but it is extremely difficult to assist those who live in rebel-held locations. Aid workers are often blocked or are prevented from doing anything due to security concerns. In September, a UN convoy came under fire as it was heading toward rebel territory, presumably from Russian warplanes. Around 20 people died in the attack. Some within the UN believe that the organization should show more self-confidence in its dealings with Assad -- and maintain a greater distance.

Starting in August 2015, Britain's *Guardian* newspaper began publishing a series of reports calling the UN's neutrality into question. The paper alleged that the UN had paid dozens of millions of dollars to Syrian aid organizations that have close ties to the Assad clan, including \$8.5 million to one organization that stands under the patronage of Assad's wife.

But Assad's regime doesn't just profit from the aid, it also interferes in the work of the aid workers themselves by way of blockades, by confiscating medicines or by preventing evacuations.

UN Emergency Relief Coordinator O'Brien says demands that his aid workers should refrain from contact with the Syrian regime result from a "misunderstanding of the role and the constitution of the UN." The humanitarian arm of the UN, he says, is impartial, independent and neutral, which means that it must reach out to all parties in a conflict in order to reach people in need.

O'Brien and his team face extremely difficult conditions in their effort to reduce the suffering of Syrians. But they cannot resolve the conflict. That can only happen if the Security Council takes the initiative.

Parallel Realities in New York

We asked Vitaly Churkin, the Russian ambassador to the UN, what would have to happen for his country to relinquish its veto in the Security Council. He smiles smugly. "In the future perfect world, I am sure this is going to happen," he says. "But the composition of the current political world is such that the U.S. and its allies almost always have nine votes in the Security Council, which is what they need in order to adopt a resolution. So if we didn't have the veto power, each week or twice a week someone from Washington would send a draft resolution, Russia votes no, nobody cares, the resolution is adopted." Churkin's speech becomes more rapid and biting. "The U.S. wouldn't even care to talk to anybody. The Security Council could just move to Washington."

But what's the point of a Security Council that is just as polarized as it was during the Cold War? "No, no, no," Churkin says. "This is an overdramatization." Many years ago, he says, an older diplomat told him about the Cold War days. "If the U.S. was voting for a resolution, the Soviet Union was supposed to abstain or vote against. ... This is not the attitude today at all. We are trying our best."

Even Churkin, though, doesn't deny that the mood has become frigid. He has represented his country at the United Nations since 2006, making him the longest-serving ambassador on the Security Council. "I arrived here at what might seem an innocent time," he says. "The only big problem at the UN was climate change."

But then the Arab Spring began. In 2011, the Security Council passed a resolution on Libya on which Churkin abstained -- and which was, from the Russian perspective, then abused to overthrow the regime of Moammar Gadhafi. Now, Russia is seeking to protect a Syrian government with which it has enjoyed good relations for decades.

If Russia hadn't come to Assad's aid, his government would have been "toppled by terrorists," Churkin says, adding that the West is to blame. "It was the U.S. and U.K. intervention in Iraq that created the whole problem" in the Middle East, Churkin says. When Western counterparts attack him over his votes on the Syria conflict, "I remind them they should look into the mirror more often."

Twenty blocks from the Russian mission to the UN, in a sun-drenched corner office with a breathtaking view of Manhattan, the East River and UN headquarters, sits Churkin's British counterpart Matthew Rycroft, 48, shaking his head vigorously. "The Russians have a policy ... to distract attention away from the truth, create what they call facts, but what we call fantasy," he says. The U.K.'s top UN diplomat finds it difficult to hide his frustration. "Russia's vetoes are paralyzing the Security Council," Rycroft says. "They're killing the reputation of the council."

Rycroft continues: "Our goal in Syria is peace" and "a transition away from Assad" -- which, he says, is basically the same thing. "There will only be peace when Assad leaves." Syria's president, he says, lost his legitimacy when he used chemical weapons on his own people. By supporting Assad, he continues, Russia is merely prolonging the conflict.

Churkin and Rycroft often find themselves sitting in the same room with the same mandate: that of ending the war in Syria. But an abyss has opened up between the West and the East, one which gets deeper with each passing day. China, the fifth veto power, usually sides with Russia, primarily because it is opposed on principle to the UN interfering in countries' internal affairs.

The UN hesitated for a long time, too long, when the Syrians rose up in peaceful protests against the Assad regime. Ban Ki-moon took a wait-and-see approach and the Arab League proposed possible solutions that went nowhere. UN officials met with Assad and reached understandings with him, but the dictator merely broke them and unleashed the war. In spring 2012, the UN and the Arab League named Kofi Annan as special envoy to Syria whereupon Annan presented a six-point plan calling for a dialogue between the regime and the opposition. But the plan failed: Russia remained loyal to Assad and the opposition defended itself. Annan gave up.

The next special envoy, Ladakh Brahimi, was forced to stand by and watch in 2013 when Assad transgressed the American "red line" and deployed chemical weapons, whereupon US President Barack Obama quietly disregarded the line he had drawn. Brahimi's successor, Staffan de Mistura, has been enduring his position's impotence since 2014. He is hoping that peace talks might once again take place in Geneva in February.

But Russia and the West find themselves living in parallel realities. With the Syrian crisis, the UN too has entered the post-fact era.

British UN Ambassador Rycroft mentions the results of an independent commission that was charged by the Security Council with investigating the report of chemical weapons use in Syria. The commission came to the conclusion that such weapons had been deployed against civilians on at least three occasions. Churkin, however, accuses his Western counterparts of having exerted pressure on the commission.

Even more absurd is the dispute over a bomb attack on a school in Idlib, in which 22 children and six teachers were killed at the end of October. There are indications that the Russian air force was involved in the attack and Rycroft has condemned the bombing. Churkin, though, maintains that the school was never even attacked in the first place.

And whereas Churkin insists that his country is fighting terrorism in Syria, Rycroft counters: "There are terrorists in Syria. There is also a coalition of 60 countries that is fighting against IS in Syria and elsewhere. Unfortunately, Russia isn't part of that coalition."

What Will Become of the UN?

The council whose purpose is to make the world a safer place works about as well as a windmill with broken blades. There have been numerous efforts to reform it, to forcibly shape it into a body that can fulfill its mandate.

The Security Council has an arsenal of means at its disposal to put a stop to fighting: cease-fires, peacekeeping missions, military observers, economic sanctions, weapons embargoes, travel moratoriums, the freezing of diplomatic relations or collective intervention. But none of these means is employed if one of the veto powers vote against it.

The UN, though, must often pitch in once war has come to an end, no matter what the result. In the case of Syria, that could mean that Vladimir Putin and future U.S. President Donald Trump will strike a deal to keep Assad in power. That would result in the UN having to work on behalf of Assad in an official capacity. Were that to happen, the United Nations, whose job it is to limit the lust for power among its members, would find itself stuck deep in the muck of realpolitik.

What, then, can be done to limit the power of those countries with too much of it?

Germany and other countries have long insisted that the number of permanent Security Council members be increased. Doing so, however, could result in even more complicated stasis. Another concept foresees the creation of a new category of nonpermanent members who would remain in the council for longer than the current two-year term. France and Britain, meanwhile, are in favor of permanent members renouncing their veto rights in instances where crimes against humanity have occurred. But who would have the last word on whether a crime against humanity has taken place? The West? Russia?

Michael Moller, director-general of the UN office in Geneva, has a vision for how the Security Council could look in the future. The council, he says, "has to be more representative." He proposes five regional councils that would address crises in their geographical areas. "They will have knowledge of the regions." Each regional council would have 15 members and three members of each regional council would have a seat on the global council.

Moller, though, also believes it will be impossible to abolish the vetoes currently held by the five permanent members. He is hoping that the pressure to reform will come from civil society. Some UN achievements would never have come about without public pressure, he said, and mentioned the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as an example. He adds that a global movement focusing on the UN is necessary.

It is a nice idea. But despite all of the images from Syria, there have been no mass protests against the Security Council and no demonstrations in front of UN offices. There have only been myriad impotent expressions of dismay.

Guide to Saving the World

Is it unfair to expect the UN to be grander and better than its member states? The organization itself raises this expectation by way of its declarations of purpose and avowals. At UN

headquarters in New York, a poster even hangs in front of the basement restrooms proclaiming "Guide to Saving the World."

But the organization's central body, the Security Council, is only as strong as the willingness to compromise shown by its five permanent members. These five countries alone can bring wars to an end -- if it's in their interests.

The General Assembly, which represents all 193 UN member states, could become the forum of a true global democracy -- if it had control over such a development. But in order to strengthen the General Assembly to the point that it might become relevant in crises such as the one ongoing in Syria, it would need -- surprise, surprise -- the agreement of the Security Council.

The UN fails to live up to its own, self-proclaimed mission: It neither unites the nations nor does it save the world. Indeed, it can't do so because the world doesn't allow it. But we need it nonetheless in these uneasy times. Perhaps now more than ever before.

The UN, after all, holds up a mirror to humanity and reminds us that things could be different. And perhaps that is the UN's greatest merit, that it shows us what could be possible -- living together in peace, stopping the catastrophic warming of our planet and ending hunger. More than anything, the UN is an inspiration, an incentive. Therein lays its authority, but also its failure.

A December morning in New York serves to demonstrate how grotesque and cumbersome it can be. Hundreds of diplomats are streaming into the General Assembly Hall for the swearing-in of António Guterres. The day's agenda includes the document A/71/L.40 and Agenda Item 113 -- and all of the items are faithfully fulfilled: the adoption of the resolution paying tribute to the outgoing secretary-general, a 90 minute speech praising Ban Ki-moon and a farewell speech from Ban, all accompanied by standing ovations.

Then, the 67-year-old Guterres takes his oath of office. He hugs everyone on the stage, one after the other, and receives kisses from many of them.

The expectations of the new UN secretary-general are immense. It is hoped that he will provide stronger leadership than Ban Ki-moon and that he will be listened to by those in power. As a former head of the UN Refugee Agency and an ex-prime minister of Portugal, he knows both the UN and the ins-and-outs of politics. Guterres is considered an intellectual, as someone who can lose himself for hours in a book store. He grew up as a leftist Christian in a dictatorship. As a politician, he proved to have a knack for forging consensus.

Even without the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, Guterres would not have been faced with an easy task. Now, many at the UN are concerned that the incoming U.S. administration will seek to further weaken the global body. If Trump continues to deny climate change, to express contempt for multilateralism and to denigrate the UN on Twitter, it will be a difficult test for the efficacy of Guterres' reason and pragmatism.

Elements of his inaugural speech in December sound promising. "The United Nations must be ready to change," he said in his 20-minute address. He speaks of his reform ideas, talks about

sexual abuse committed by UN peacekeepers, demands less bureaucracy and insists on the need for improved legal protection for whistleblowers.

It is conspicuous that he only briefly mentions Syria in his inaugural address -- and the fact that the crisis hardly got a mention in his new year's address either. After his swearing-in, however, reporters in the foyer ask him about the ongoing conflict. "This is a war in which everybody is losing," he says before promising that he would "engage personally" in efforts to stem the violence. Even though, he adds, he knows that "the secretary-general is not the leader of the world The primacy of the work comes to member states."