



The Role of the UN Secretary-General in Maintaining International Peace and Security: Focusing on António Guterres' Performance

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Abstract

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, as one of the principal organs of the Organization, plays an important role in maintaining international peace and security. This role is defined on the basis of the express and implied powers of the United Nations Charter, as well as the functions entrusted to the Secretary-General by the Security Council and the General Assembly. Accordingly, the performance of Secretaries-General in different periods has taken diverse forms, influenced by prevailing international conditions and their individual personal characteristics. This research, conducted through a descriptive-analytical approach, examines the action capacities of the Secretary-General in the field of international peace and security and, by reviewing the initiatives of previous Secretaries-General, analyses the performance of António Guterres. In this context, thirteen major crises during his term of office were identified and examined. The findings indicate that Guterres's approach has largely been confined to diplomatic measures and political statements. His positions have often been characterized by unjustified delays, a cautious, conservative posture, the absence of clear identification of the aggressor and the defending party, and mere calls for the parties to exercise restraint, which, in certain instances, have resulted in partial and inequitable responses. Overall, in light of the multiplicity of international crises during Guterres's tenure and the growing expectations of the international community for the United Nations to play an active and impartial role, his performance, in comparison with his predecessors, may be assessed as placing him among the weaker Secretaries-General.

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Introduction

The United Nations, as the most significant international institution entrusted with the maintenance of international peace and security, has established specific tools and mechanisms in its Charter for responding to international threats and crises. This responsibility is pursued through the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the Secretary-General. Owing to his unique position and presence in all meetings of the General Assembly, the Security Council, and other UN organs, the Secretary-General is able—personally and through mandates entrusted to him by the Council or the General Assembly—to assist States involved in crises and conflicts in finding equitable solutions through means such as good offices and mediation. The Secretary-General is not only the Head of the Secretariat of the Organization but also a symbol of impartiality and the voice of international law within the international system. According to Article 97 of the Charter, the Secretary-General is the chief administrative officer of the Organization, yet, beyond administrative duties, he possesses significant legal and political roles that enable him to act in international crises. Under Article 97, the Secretary-General is appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.

The role of the Secretary-General as a prominent peace-making actor has evolved through extensive activity. Article 99 of the Charter grants him special authority to bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter that, in his opinion, may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security. As is evident, Article 99 uses the broad term “any matter” rather than the narrower terms “situation” or “dispute.” Accordingly, the Secretary-General may refer to the Security Council any matter he considers to endanger international peace and security—not merely an ongoing dispute.

This legal authority has underpinned many actions undertaken by successive Secretaries-General in global crises.

The Secretary-General plays a sensitive and dual role in the peaceful settlement of international disputes. On the one hand, he seeks to implement the recommendations, decisions, and views of the Security Council and the General Assembly in this regard; and on the other hand, as an independent and internationally trusted figure, he may, by virtue of his position, effectively contribute to the settlement of disputes—an effectiveness that largely depends on the cooperation of the disputing parties as well as the views of the permanent members of the Security Council¹.

António Guterres, a Portuguese statesman, assumed office as Secretary-General on 1 January 2017. His tenure has been among the most turbulent periods of contemporary history, spanning the civil war in Syria, the crisis in Yemen, the conflict in Ukraine, armed confrontations in Libya, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the Tigray war in Ethiopia, escalations in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Gaza crisis (2023–2025), and the direct confrontation between Iran and Israel (2025). Given the responsibilities and authorities vested in the Secretary-General as one of the principal organs of the United Nations in ensuring international peace

¹ Mohammadi, Ehsan, ‘Evaluation of the Performance of the Special Representatives of the United Nations Secretary-General as International Mediators in the Yemeni Civil War (2011-2021) (2022), *Foreign Policy Quarterly*, 36(3): 122.

and security, an analysis of his performance allows for an assessment of the Organization's approaches, challenges, and orientations toward contemporary global crises through the lens of his actions and positions.

1. The Role of the UN Secretary-General in Maintaining International Peace and Security

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, as the Head of the Secretariat of the Organization, plays a central role in safeguarding international peace and security. This role is grounded in the UN Charter (particularly Articles 97 to 101) and in the practices developed over decades.

In effect, the Secretary-General's diverse responses to matters related to the Charter serve as the starting point for rational policy orientations adopted by States and international organizations in addressing challenges faced by the international community. Various studies indicate that the presence of a capable Secretary-General can significantly influence the effectiveness of this international institution, especially in maintaining international peace and security.¹ Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, former UN Secretary-General, reminds us that although peace may sometimes seem "a general enchantment devoid of practical meaning," in the face of continuous conflict and struggle, it remains the duty of the United Nations—and particularly its Secretary-General—to strive for the realization of peace for all².

As noted, in the context of safeguarding international peace and security, the Secretary-General is one of the most influential organs of the United Nations. His authority in this realm derives from both explicit and implicit powers under the Charter, as well as from responsibilities delegated to him by the Security Council and the General Assembly.

The present research first examines the powers of the UN Secretary-General in matters of international peace and security. In the second part of this article, the performance of the current Secretary-General, António Guterres, in crises related to international peace and security will be analyzed in order to determine the extent to which his actions and decisions align with the duties and authorities defined for the Secretary-General as one of the principal organs of the United Nations.

1.1. The Legal Framework of the Actions of the UN Secretary-General in Ensuring International Peace and Security

Paragraph 1 of Article 1 of the Charter, in setting out the purposes of the United Nations, enumerates the maintenance of international peace and security and, to this end, the taking of effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace; and the adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace by peaceful means and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law. Paragraph 1 of Article 1 clearly identifies three categories of actions the United Nations must undertake to

1 Sezavar, Ahmad, 'Explanation of the Role of the United Nations Secretary-General in Consolidating World Peace' (2019), Third National Conference and Second International Conference on Law and Political Science. Tehran: 2.

2 Javier Perez de Cuellar, The Nobel Peace Prize 1988, accessed 3 June 2020, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1988/un/lecture/> (1988).

maintain international peace and security: first, it must engage in preventive measures aimed at eliminating factors of tension and preventing the emergence of disputes; second, it must assist the parties to a conflict in achieving a peaceful settlement consistent with the principles of justice and law; and finally, it must take enforcement measures to confront conflicts¹. On this basis, given that the UN Secretary-General is one of the principal organs of the Organization, each Secretary-General, depending on the temporal conditions of the international community in which they have served, has acted in a particular manner to establish peace.

Regarding the preventive actions of the Secretary-General, Article 99 of the Charter provides that the “Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.” Successive UN Secretaries-General have rarely and only in exceptional circumstances invoked Article 99 to draw the Council’s attention to situations constituting threats to or breaches of international peace and security. In this regard, one may refer to the 1979 seizure of the United States Embassy in Iran and the detention of diplomatic personnel by Iranian students, a situation which Waldheim, the Secretary-General at the time, determined—on the basis of Article 99—to constitute a threat to the peace and subsequently referred to the Security Council². The Security Council convened a meeting to consider the matter; however, due to the Soviet veto, no binding resolution was adopted. Ultimately, the case was settled by the International Court of Justice. Another example is Guterres’s action during the Operation Al-Aqsa Storm conflict, in which, invoking Article 99 of the UN Charter, he called upon the Security Council to act “to avert a humanitarian catastrophe” in Gaza and urged agreement on a full humanitarian ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian armed groups³.

The second stage—assisting the parties to a dispute to achieve a peaceful solution in accordance with the principles of justice and law—can be observed in the Secretaries-General’s mediatory efforts, in which they have urged the parties to negotiate and comply with the principles enshrined in the Charter. One of the most significant examples of mediation was U Thant’s role during the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which he served as a neutral intermediary trusted by both superpowers. Acting as a conduit between the two sides, he proposed that the United States commit to non-aggression toward Cuba in exchange for the Soviet withdrawal of missiles from the island.

This mediation contributed to de-escalation and created space for negotiation⁴.

The Secretary-General’s involvement in UN peacekeeping operations is one of the most significant enforcement-related measures in response to conflicts. Since the establishment of the United Nations, and amid the constantly evolving circumstances of the international community, there have been persistent calls among UN Member States for strengthening the political role of the Secretary-General. The expansion of the scope and functions of

1 Nafaa Hassan ‘The United Nations in Half a Century: A Study of the Evolution of International Organization Since 1945’ (1995). *Kuwait: The National Council for Culture*, 77: 78.

2 Rosenne, S. ‘The Iran Hostage Crisis and the International Court of Justice’ (1981) *American Journal of International Law*, 75(2): 421

3 UN News ‘Gaza: Guterres invokes ‘most powerful tool’ Article 99, in bid for humanitarian ceasefire’ (2023), <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144447>> accessed 30 September 2025.

4 Walter Dorn and Robert Pauk, ‘Unsung Mediator: U Thant and the Cuban Missile Crisis’ (2009) 33 *Diplomatic History* 261.

the Secretary-General's role over time—including his activities in peacekeeping missions, despite the Charter's limited reference to such operations—reflects this trend¹.

Although the UN Charter contains no explicit provisions on peacekeeping operations, their legal foundation derives from UN practice, as reflected in numerous Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, which have given rise to customary rules. Furthermore, a progressive interpretation of the Charter—particularly Chapter I (Articles 1 and 2), Chapter VI (especially Articles 33, 34, 36, and 37), and Chapter VII (notably Article 40)—clarifies the legal basis for peacekeeping operations.

According to Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, peacekeeping operations fall under Chapter Six and a Half of the Charter. On this basis, the Security Council is the authority responsible for peacekeeping operations, since pursuant to Article 24(1) of the Charter, the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security rests with the Security Council. In this context, the role of the Secretary-General in peacekeeping operations is of particular importance, for, under Article 99 of the UN Charter, the Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council situations that threaten international peace and security. This becomes especially significant in circumstances requiring the urgent deployment of peacekeeping forces. If the Secretary-General remains proactive in this regard and identifies, in a timely and accurate manner, situations that necessitate the presence of peacekeepers, the Security Council may take effective action in due course. Various Secretaries-General have taken action in this field. For example, Kofi Annan facilitated the independence process of East Timor through the establishment of multiple UN missions.²

1.2. The Impact of Time as a Variable on the Role of Secretaries-General in Ensuring International Peace and Security

In the early years of the United Nations, an atmosphere of intense enthusiasm prevailed. Representatives were convinced they had adopted a system of collective security that would forever prohibit all wars—an outlook shared by Trygve Lie, who served as the first Secretary-General from 1946 to 1952. Mr. Hammarskjöld assumed office in 1953. By that time, the international situation had begun to deteriorate, and the earlier optimism had given way to severe East–West tensions. Because the Security Council was nearly paralyzed by the Soviet Union's frequent vetoes, Mr. Hammarskjöld often relied on quiet diplomacy and served as a cautious mediator.³

The next Secretary-General, U Thant, advanced the themes of decolonization, disarmament, and development. He frequently relied on quiet diplomacy to defuse deadly tensions during the difficult years of the Cold War. Mr. Pérez de Cuéllar made substantial contributions to resolving conflicts in Central America and to neutralizing the war between Iran and Iraq. During his ten-

1 Troy, Jodok 'The United Nations Secretary-General as an International Civil Servant' (2020). *The International History Review*, 42, 1: 14.

2 'unsw.edu.au' The Howard Library Case Study: Peacekeeping in Timor-Leste (2021) <<https://www.howardlibrary.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/2021-01/Case%20Study%20Peacekeeping%20in%20Timor-Leste.pdf>> accessed 30 September 2025.

3 Gazarian, Jean, 'The Role of the Secretary-General: A Personal History', (2007) <<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/role-secretary-general-personal-history>> accessed 17 October 2024.

year term as Secretary-General, from 1982 to 1991, a number of Cold War–related tensions were gradually eased. Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt served from 1992 to 1996. Prior to his appointment as Secretary-General, he had held several significant posts, including Minister of Foreign Affairs and negotiator of the 1979 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel¹. In 2000, Kofi Annan of Ghana issued the report that served as the basis for the Millennium Declaration. Mr. Ban Ki-moon’s policy focused on strengthening the three pillars of the United Nations—security, development, and human rights. According to him, “my first priority will be to restore trust in the United Nations².”

1.3. The Perception of Secretaries-General of Their Role in Ensuring International Peace and Security

The history of UN activity demonstrates that although the UN Charter emphasizes the political duties of the Secretary-General—referring explicitly only in Article 99 to his political responsibility to bring to the Security Council’s attention any matter that may threaten or breach international peace and security—Secretaries-General have shown strong interest in undertaking initiatives to advance international peace and security. In practice, they have not operated merely in line with the interests of the major powers of the United Nations but have devoted significant attention to matters related to peace and development.³

Nevertheless, the differing social, political, and economic conditions, as well as the distinct personalities of each Secretary-General, have resulted in varied approaches and actions.

To understand Secretaries-General’s perception of their role, one may refer to their inaugural speeches before the UN General Assembly. Taken together, these speeches show that their primary aim upon assuming office has been to serve the peoples of the world by acting for peace through the United Nations.⁴

Furthermore, a quantitative review of the key terms and word combinations employed in their inaugural addresses shows that among the 25 most frequent terms in their speeches, the five most common are “nation” (186 occurrences), “united” (176), “general” (129), “organization” (98), and “Secretary-General” (87). The study further revealed that once these explicit and neutral institutional terms are set aside, the words “world” (83 occurrences) and “peace” (81 occurrences) are the most frequently used. Additionally, the words associated with and combined alongside “world” include “people,” “problems,” “work,” and “economic.”

And the terms combined with “peace” include “security,” “nations,” “united,” “development,” and “justice.” This directly reflects the objectives to which the Secretaries-General of the United Nations have, over time, considered themselves committed.⁵

In fact, in the post–Cold War era, changes in global policies and priorities—particularly the prioritization of human security and development—led to increased expectations of the United Nations. Accordingly, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, as the first Secretary-General after the

1 Ibid.

2 Ibid.

3 Troy, Jodok (n 9) 14.

4 Weiss and Carayannis, 2017: 312.

5 Troy, Jodok (n 9) 6.

Cold War, was mandated to act with respect to UN peacekeeping operations, thereby paving the way for subsequent Secretaries-General to take further action in this field. Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan introduced substantial reforms to the functions of the Secretariat, particularly the role of the Secretary-General, in 1992, 1997, and 2002. Boutros-Ghali devoted much of his final years in office to countering the excessive ambitions of the United States in global affairs, and Kofi Annan, after the conclusion of his first term and the beginning of his second (which coincided with the fifty-fifth anniversary of the United Nations), implemented structural reforms to enhance the effectiveness of the UN's actions in maintaining international peace and security.

However, Ban Ki-moon's tenure is considered a missed opportunity to sustain this renewed approach within the United Nations, particularly within the Secretariat. In fact, he could have used the legacy established by his three predecessors to pursue new initiatives and reforms aimed at safeguarding international peace and security, but it appears that the Organization required a Secretary-General bolder than he was.¹ Nevertheless, the international community's environment during a Secretary-General's tenure is also crucial to his capacity to act, to the extent that it is often said that UN Secretaries-General are products of their time.

In continuation, considering that this article was written in the final years of António Guterres's tenure, and given that nine years have passed since he assumed office and his term is approaching its end, his performance in ensuring international peace and security during these nine years will be examined. By analyzing his conduct, it will be determined to what extent the international community between 2016 and 2025 was affected by his action or inaction.

The present study, therefore, proceeds by focusing on the nine-year tenure of António Guterres (2016–2025), which, at the time of drafting this article, is nearing completion, and seeks to examine his performance in ensuring international peace and security. The main objective is to analyze the extent to which his actions—or failures to act—have influenced international peace and security during this period.

2. António Guterres's Performance in Ensuring International Peace and Security

2.1. The Syrian Crisis

At the beginning of Guterres's tenure in 2017, the Syrian civil war entered a highly complex phase. At this stage, the involvement of external actors in the Syrian government—including the United States and Turkey in various parts of the country—transformed the nature of the conflict from an internal armed conflict into an internationalized one.

António Guterres issued warnings regarding violations of international obligations, including the repeated use of chemical weapons in various parts of Syria. In response to chemical attacks—including the attack on Khan Shaykhun in Idlib Province in 2017—he declared the use of such weapons unacceptable and called for an immediate and transparent

¹ T.G. Weiss and Carayannis, 325_326.

investigation.¹ Despite these expressions of concern, no effective enforcement measures were adopted to address violations of international humanitarian law.²

Furthermore, the United States' extensive support for opposition groups and the transfer of assistance and weapons to them significantly complicated the crisis. An official report by the U.S. Department of State indicates that the United States provided nearly USD 260 million in assistance to Syrian opposition groups—an action that indirectly influenced the military and political dimensions of the crisis³. This may illustrate the logistical and financial role of the United States in supporting armed groups opposing the Syrian government—an issue in which Mr. Guterres did not intervene.

Regarding transitional justice, the Syrian National Transitional Justice Commission, established under the supervision of the Secretary-General in 2025, has focused exclusively on the crimes of the former regime and has not exercised effective oversight over the accountability of all parties to the conflict. According to a Human Rights Watch report dated 19 May 2025, limitations within the mandate of the Syrian National Transitional Justice Commission were noted. The report states that the Commission's mandate is worryingly narrow and fails to address a broad segment of victims.⁴

These limitations have posed significant challenges to the transitional justice process in Syria. Moreover, humanitarian access to the northwestern regions of Syria, which are under the control of opposition groups, has been unsuccessful on the part of the United Nations, and no effective mechanisms guaranteeing the delivery of assistance have been established.

2.2. The Yemen Crisis

With the attack on Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition in 2016, the political, social, and economic crises—particularly the most severe humanitarian crisis—began in the country. Accordingly, the United Nations undertook measures to peacefully resolve the disputes, mitigate the humanitarian catastrophe, and protect civilians⁵.

Guterres repeatedly referred to the situation in Yemen as “the world's worst humanitarian crisis,” urging the parties to cease hostilities, comply with international law, and ensure unimpeded humanitarian access. He criticized violations such as the complete blockade and the denial of food, medicine, and water to civilians in Yemen.⁶

On 16 February 2018, Guterres appointed Martin Griffiths of the United Kingdom as his Special Envoy for Yemen. The Special Envoy conducted four rounds of consultations between

1 UN News ‘UN Security Council and the Syrian conflict’ (2022) <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1112002>> accessed 30 October 2024

2 Human Rights Watch ‘Syria's transitional justice commission: A missed opportunity for victim-led justice’ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/19/syrias-transitional-justice-commission-missed-opportunity-victim-led-justice> accessed 19 May 2025

3 U.S. Department of State. (2014), ‘The Syrian crisis: U.S. assistance and support for the transition’ <<https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/220029.htm?utm>> accessed 20 June 2025

4 Human Rights Watch ‘HRW Syria's transitional justice commission undermined by narrow mandate’ <<https://npasyria.com/en/125869/>> accessed 20 May 2025.

5 Gholami, Saba, Sadat Akhavi, Seyed Ali, “The Performance of the United Nations on the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen” (2019), *Nations Research*, 57(7): 13.

6 United Nations (2018 November 2), ‘Remarks of the Secretary General at the press encounter on Yemen: “We must do all we can now to end human suffering and avoid the worst humanitarian crisis in the world from getting even worse’’ <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2018-11-02/secretary-generals-remarks-press-encounter-yemen>> accessed 22 July 2025

the parties to the conflict. As a result of the efforts of the Secretary-General's Special Envoy in Stockholm, the parties reached agreements on several issues, including the Agreement on the City of Hodeidah and the Ports of Hodeidah, an implementation mechanism for the exchange of prisoners, and a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the city of Taiz.¹

Moreover, in his annual report on children and armed conflict, Guterres added the Saudi-led coalition to the "list of shame" for violations against children; the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for 2016–2017 indicates that the coalition was responsible for killing or injuring at least 683 children and for 38 attacks on schools and hospitals².

However, one criticism directed at Guterres concerning the Yemen crisis is the "removal or delay in listing the Saudi-led coalition on the list of shame." Despite credible and documented evidence of child casualties caused by the coalition, the Secretary-General again removed the coalition from the list. This reflects passivity or excessive caution in dealing with major powers, undermining the credibility of the Secretary-General and the United Nations' ability to enforce international norms.

2.3. The Libya Crisis

In Libya, following the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, civil war continued between the Government of National Accord and the forces of Khalifa Haftar (the Libyan National Army). In 2019, Guterres personally traveled to Libya in an attempt to mediate and improve the situation.

To stabilize the situation, the Secretary-General, together with the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, led the peace mission and provided regular reports to the Security Council on developments (UNSMIL, 2024). During the escalation of military operations in April 2019, Guterres called on the parties to exercise restraint and emphasized the implementation of relevant resolutions concerning arms embargoes and monitoring mechanisms (United Nations, 2019).

However, despite the fact that conditions in Libya were highly influenced by external interventions—including the provision of weapons and foreign fighters—Guterres took no explicit position or practical measure in relation to these violations.³

2.4. The Myanmar (Rohingya) Crisis

The genocide of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar constitutes one of the most catastrophic humanitarian crises in recent decades, marked by systematic persecution, mass displacement, and severe human rights violations. In 2017, this crisis became one of the most pressing challenges facing Guterres. Through large-scale military operations and mass killings, the Myanmar army expelled hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims to Bangladesh.

On 11 September 2017, the United Nations' top human rights official, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, in a session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, stated that the Myanmar

1 Gholami, Saba, Sadat Akhavi, Seyed Ali, "The Performance of the United Nations on the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen" (2019), *Nations Research*, 57(7): 13.

2 United Nations 'Addressing Dire Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen, Secretary-General António Guterres says vital aid access must be maintained and strengthened' (2018) <<https://press.un.org/en/2018/sgsm18869.doc.htm>> accessed 30 September 2025.

3 Atlantic Council 'The UN should take a bolder stance in Libya' (2024) <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-nations-in-libya-the-sisyphian-transition/>> accessed 30 June 2025

military's operations against the Muslim Rohingya minority in Rakhine State constitute a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing." He reported that security forces and local militias burned Rohingya villages, carried out extrajudicial killings, and displaced civilians — forcing hundreds of thousands to flee to Bangladesh. These statements were based on multiple reports and satellite imagery documenting the violence against the Rohingya¹.

Following the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, the Secretary-General adopted explicit legal positions. In his statement of 14 February 2021, he reaffirmed the United Nations' support for the restoration of the democratic process, the immediate release of elected leaders, and respect for human rights². In March of the same year, the Secretary-General called on the Myanmar military to refrain from violence against civilians and to hold perpetrators of serious human rights violations accountable.³

However, the Secretary-General did not take effective steps to exert diplomatic pressure on States supporting Myanmar's military regime—such as China and Russia—and was unable to prevent the continued support of these permanent members of the Security Council for the junta⁴. Critics further argue that in the humanitarian dimension, the Secretary-General's general condemnations and statements did not sufficiently address the plight of minorities, particularly in Rakhine and Shan States, and therefore the ongoing human rights violations in these regions persisted.⁵

As a result, despite the Secretary-General's effective role in condemning the coup and violations of international humanitarian law, several factors—such as political pressures and the failure to activate leverage mechanisms, including Article 99 of the Charter—weakened the practical impact of these measures. This situation constitutes a clear example of the long-standing dilemma between the neutrality and effectiveness of the United Nations Secretary-General in addressing international crises.

2.5. The Tigray Crisis (Ethiopia)

The Ethiopian federal government's military operations against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) began in early November 2020; the government declared that the operation was in response to the TPLF's attack on military bases. This marked the beginning of a large-scale conflict that resulted in extensive humanitarian consequences.⁶ Throughout 2021 and 2022, the United Nations and the relevant international institutions stated that parts of Tigray were

1 Reuters 'U.N. brands Myanmar violence a "textbook" example of ethnic cleansing' (2017) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/un-brands-myanmar-violence-a-textbook-example-of-ethnic-cleansing-idUSKCN1BM0Q6/>> retrieved 5 may 2025

2 Zia Akhtar. "Rohingya Muslims and IHL: Expanding the Basis for Responsibility to Protect in a NIAC with a Proactive Mechanism". *Iranian Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 1, 2, 2023, 17-37. DOI: 10.22091/ijicl.2024.9945.1076.

3 United Nations. 'Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General – Myanmar' (2021b, March 27) <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-03-27/statement%C2%A0attributable-the-spokesperson-for-the-secretary-general-myanmar>> accessed 30 September 2025.

4 Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (2023), 'Rethinking humanitarian assistance for Myanmar' <Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rethinking-humanitarian-assistance-myanmar>> accessed 12 July 2025: 3.

5 Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (2023), 'Rethinking humanitarian assistance for Myanmar' <Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rethinking-humanitarian-assistance-myanmar>> accessed 12 July 2025: 5.

6 Human Rights Watch 'UN Security Council: End inaction on Ethiopia' (2021) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/02/un-security-council-end-inaction-ethiopia>>

on the brink of famine or in famine-like conditions, issuing warnings regarding restrictions on access to food, medicine, and essential services.¹

The Office of the Secretary-General made efforts during this crisis to facilitate humanitarian access and to encourage a ceasefire and dialogue² However, when the joint report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2021 presented evidence of widespread killings, abuses, and a humanitarian blockade, legal observers and human rights bodies described the Secretary-General's response as "insufficient and delayed."³ Improper delays, or limiting action to merely declaratory steps when there is substantial evidence of the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity, can undermine the guarantees of protection owed to victims of such crimes. Subsequent reports issued by the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia⁴ and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights likewise indicated continued violations and a risk of further atrocities⁵, which required that, beyond mediation and verbal actions, the Secretary-General employ stronger legal and political instruments to exert pressure on the parties involved.

2.6. The Afghanistan Crisis

With the sudden and rapid advance of the Taliban in the summer of 2021, the Kabul government collapsed on 15 August and the regime change was effectively completed. This development immediately provoked widespread international concern and led to the convening of an emergency meeting of the Security Council (SC/14603). In response to this crisis in August 2021, António Guterres adopted several diplomatic and legal measures. In the 16 August 2021 emergency session of the Security Council, he called on all parties—particularly the Taliban—to refrain from violence and respect the fundamental principles of human rights. He emphasized the necessity of unhindered access to humanitarian assistance and urged the international community to speak with one voice in defending the rights of the Afghan people⁶

However, reports by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan indicate that, following the Taliban's takeover, serious human rights violations—including extrajudicial executions, torture, arbitrary detentions, and severe restrictions on the rights of women and girls—have increased⁷, demonstrating weaknesses in the monitoring and effective actions of the United Nations, including the Secretary-General.

1 UN PRESS 'At Least 400,000 'Living in Famine-Like Conditions' in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, Secretary-General Tells Security Council, Calling for End to Hostilities' (2021), <<https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14614.doc.htm>>

2 United Nations 'UN chief welcomes Tigray humanitarian ceasefire. UN Sustainable Development Group' (2022) <<https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/ethiopia-un-chief-welcomes-tigray-humanitarian-ceasefire>> retrieved 12 March 2024

3 Ethiopian Human Rights Commission & Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2021). 'Report of the joint investigation into alleged violations of human rights in the Tigray region of Ethiopia' (2021) <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/OHCHR-EHRC-Tigray-Report.pdf>> accessed 18 May 2025

4 International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia 'Comprehensive investigative findings and legal determinations' (2023) (A/HRC/54/CRP.3). <<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/report/comprehensive-investigative-findings-and-legal-determinations-international-commission-of-human-rights-experts-on-ethiopia/a-hrc-54-crp-3.pdf>>

5 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2023) 'A/HRC/54/55 — Report on the human rights situation in Ethiopia' <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/chreethiopia/A_HRC_54_55_AUV.pdf> accessed 30 May 2025

6 United Nations. 'Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council on Afghanistan' (2021 a) <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-08-16/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-afghanistan-delivered>> Retrieved 30 August 2024: 2

7 UNAMA 'Human Rights in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021 – 15 June 2022' (2022) <https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_human_rights_in_afghanistan_report_-_june_2022_english.pdf> Retrieved 30 August 2024: 2

Regarding Afghanistan's economic crisis, on 11 October 2021 the Secretary-General called on the international community to provide financial resources to prevent Afghanistan's economic collapse.¹

Nevertheless, the Secretary-General's efforts to compel UN Member States to provide adequate and immediate financial assistance did not produce effective results. Therefore, it may be concluded that the Secretary-General's performance in the Afghanistan crisis did not go beyond verbal actions and failed to yield tangible outcomes.

2.7. The Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has historical roots dating back to the late 1980s (1991–1994). The conflict re-emerged in the autumn of 2020 between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenian/Artsakh forces, and ended with the 9 November 2020 ceasefire brokered by Russia. Under the terms of the ceasefire, Russian peacekeepers were deployed to the region, and parts of the surrounding areas were returned to Azerbaijan.²

In the post-war period (2022–2023), the prolonged blockade of the Lachin Corridor—the sole land route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia—created a severe humanitarian crisis.³

International institutions described this situation as “severe” and “dangerous” and issued reports concerning shortages of food, medicine, and fuel in the region (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In September 2023, tensions escalated following Azerbaijan's large-scale military operation, which resulted in the displacement of many ethnic Armenian residents and led Armenia to file an application before the International Court of Justice.⁴

During this crisis, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, undertook several diplomatic and legal actions. On 27 September 2020, he expressed deep concern regarding the resumption of hostilities along the line of contact in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and called for an immediate cessation of fighting and a return to negotiations⁵. On 5 October 2020, the Secretary-General condemned the continued escalation of violence and emphasized the need to respect human rights and international humanitarian law⁶. On 18 October 2020, the Secretary-General condemned attacks against civilian areas and demanded their immediate cessation⁷. Subsequently, he welcomed the announcement of a ceasefire and urged both parties to uphold their commitments and resume negotiations⁸. He also expressed

1 United Nations. (2021c, October 11). Highlight 11 October 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/highlight/2021-10-11.html>

2 Reuters 'Russian peacekeepers deploy to Nagorno-Karabakh after ceasefire deal' (2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/russian-peacekeepers-deploy-to-nagorno-karabakh-after-ceasefire-deal-idUSKBN27Q06O/>> accessed 30 October 2024

3 Human Rights Watch 'Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabakh lifeline road blocked' (2022) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/21/azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-lifeline-road-blocked>> 30 October 2024

4 FPRI 'A Frozen Conflict Boils Over: Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 and Future Implications' (2024). <<https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/01/a-frozen-conflict-boils-over-nagorno-karabakh-in-2023-and-future-implications/>> retrieved 4 May 2025

5 United Nations 'Statement attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict' (2020a, September 27) <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-09-27/statement-attributable-the-spokesman-for-the-secretary-general-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict>> accessed 12 May 2025

6 United Nations 'UN Secretary-General's Spokesman on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict' (2020b, October 5). <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-10-05/un-secretary-generals-spokesman-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict>> accessed 30 October 2024.

7 United Nations. 'Civilian deaths 'totally unacceptable', Secretary-General says' (2020c, October 18) <<https://press.un.org/en/2020/sgsm20347.doc.htm>> accessed 12 October 2024

8 United Nations. 'Welcoming Continuing Ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, Secretary-General Urges Armenia and Azerbaijan to Resume Dialogue' (2020e, December 4). <<https://press.un.org/en/2020/sgsm20473.doc.htm>> accessed 17 October 2024

deep concern over the dire humanitarian situation in Nagorno-Karabakh following the closure of the Lachin Corridor and called for urgent measures to resolve the crisis¹.

As can be observed, the Secretary-General's performance in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis was likewise limited to declaratory actions, which failed to prevent the continuation of the humanitarian crisis in the region.

2.8. The Sudan Crisis

Armed violence between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces escalated suddenly on 15 April 2023, leading to large-scale fighting in Khartoum, Darfur, and other states. The conflict resulted in significant casualties, destruction of infrastructure, and a massive wave of internal displacement and refugee outflows²

António Guterres, the United Nations Secretary-General, repeatedly called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to political negotiations in response to the Sudan crisis³. On 25 April 2023, the Secretary-General, in a letter addressed to the President of the Security Council (at that time the representative of the United Arab Emirates), urged the Council to take urgent actions to halt the violence and protect the people of Sudan⁴. Notably, Guterres did not invoke Article 99 of the Charter in this crisis, which may reflect his cautious approach. It was speculated that, should the Secretary-General trigger Article 99 and the Security Council fail to take decisive action due to internal divisions, the authority and credibility of his office could be undermined.

Despite the Secretary-General's limited efforts, widespread violations of human rights by the parties to the conflict in Sudan persisted. The report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission released in September 2024 demonstrates that the parties systematically violated international humanitarian law⁵. In October 2024, Guterres reported that conditions were not conducive to deploying a peacekeeping force in Sudan⁶. This assessment itself reflects the gravity of the situation in Sudan, a context in which the deployment of a peacekeeping operation appears necessary. Under such circumstances, the Secretary-General could have invoked Article 99 and requested the Security Council to take action.

2.9. The Mali Crisis

The insurgencies of extremist groups and armed movements (including jihadi elements) in northern Mali have intensified since 2012, following the collapse of the local government,

1 United Nations 'A/78/335-S/2023/642 General Assembly Security Council' (2023). <<https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/335>> accessed 2 October 2024

2 Human Rights Watch 'Fighting erupts between armed forces in Sudan' (2023). <<https://www.hrw.org/breaking-news/2023/04/15/sudan-fighting-erupts-between-armed-forces>> Retrieved 2 April 2025

3 United Nations 'Secretary-General's remarks on Sudan' (2023a) <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-04-17/secretary-generals-remarks-sudan>> Retrieved 1 March 2024

4 United Nations 'Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council' (2023b) <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-04-25/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-sudan-delivered>> Retrieved 1 May 2024

5 UN Human Rights Office 'Sudan: UN Fact-Finding Mission outlines extensive human rights violations' (2024) <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/sudan-un-fact-finding-mission-outlines-extensive-human-rights-violatio>> accessed 12 February 2025

6 Reuters 'Sudanese need protection, but conditions not right for UN force, says Guterres' (2024) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-need-protection-conditions-not-right-un-force-says-guterres-2024-10-28/>> accessed 30 October 2024

rendering the central government vulnerable. This situation led to the United Nations' intervention and the establishment of a peacekeeping operation in Mali in 2013.

Despite the extension of the peacekeeping mandate and the periodic reports submitted by the Secretary-General, the continuation of hostilities and the realities on the ground demonstrate the ineffectiveness of his actions¹. Critics identify political bias in the Secretary-General's engagement with the transitional government and external actors as a principal reason for the United Nations' limited effectiveness, arguing that it has undermined the United Nations' neutrality. Moreover, inadequate responses to misconduct by peacekeepers and delays in disciplinary procedures by the Secretariat have resulted in diminished legitimacy of the mission².

2.10. The Congo Crisis

The crisis in eastern Congo has deep and complex roots. A combination of ethnic rivalries, the presence of armed groups remaining from past conflicts, and intricate militia networks has led to ongoing violence against civilians, plundering of natural resources, and the intensification of regional tensions, thereby perpetuating the cycle of crisis³.

In recent years, the renewed activity of armed rebel groups between 2022 and 2024 and their advances to seize territories have triggered waves of displacement and violence against civilians, expanding the scope of the conflict to the regional level⁴.

In the Congo crisis, Guterres issued statements, conducted diplomatic contacts, and extended the peacekeeping operation⁵. However, field assessments and United Nations documentation indicate that his actions, despite the continued presence of peacekeepers in the Congo, suffered from shortcomings in terms of effectiveness⁶. The heavy human casualties in eastern Congo and the fall of cities such as Goma demonstrate that the warnings and mandate extensions of the peacekeeping operation produced no practical results, leading to widespread protests against the peacekeeping mission forces⁷, revealing a deep rift between the population and the Organization.

Another issue of concern is the misconduct of peacekeeping personnel, particularly instances of sexual exploitation and abuse. In this respect, one criticism directed at Guterres is that he merely ordered internal administrative and oversight-based inquiries, measures

¹ IFRI 'The UN mission in Mali: Presence without peace?' (2024) <<https://www.ifri.org/en>> accessed 16 May 2024

² Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) (2021), 'Internal audit division report 2021/055. United Nations. <<https://oios.un.org>> accessed 16 May 2025

³ Copeland, T. F. 'Civilian protection in the eastern RC: Evaluation of MONUSCO's effectiveness' (2024) (Master's thesis). Naval Postgraduate School / Calhoun repository. retrieved 16 May 2025

⁴ The Guardian, 'France seeks UN resolution naming Rwanda as backer of M23 rebels in DRC' (2025) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/27/france-seeks-un-resolution-naming-rwanda-as-backer-of-m23-rebels-in-drc>> accessed 12 August 2025

⁵ United Nations 'Report of the Secretary-General on MONUSCO (S/2024/482). United Nations Security Council documents' (2024). <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>>

⁶ Global Observatory 'The effectiveness of the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo ' (2019) <<https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/12/effectiveness-un-mission-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>> 14 August 2025

⁷ Reuters 'UN chief speaks with DRC, Rwanda leaders over eastern Congo violence. Reuters' (2025) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-chief-speaks-with-drc-rwanda-leaders-over-eastern-congo-violence-2025-01-28/>>

that were predominantly administrative and disciplinary in nature and lacked any judicial or international legal dimension.

Another criticism relates to his implicit political bias in dealing with the regional government, which undermined the principle of neutrality required of United Nations missions¹.

2.11. The Ukraine Crisis

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of the territory of Ukraine. This action was justified by Russia on various grounds (including “protection of specific populations” or “security measures”), yet from the standpoint of international law, it constitutes an “unlawful use of force”². In this crisis, despite the occurrence of an act of aggression and grave violations of international humanitarian law by both parties, Guterres refrained from acting under Article 99 for the purpose of drawing the attention of the Security Council, limiting himself instead to issuing statements and condemning attacks against civilians. Even these statements drew strong criticism due to his failure to condemn the occupation of the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, leading to accusations of a lack of neutrality.

In this case, it may be stated that the Secretary-General cannot overlook acts of aggression by States in an attempt to maintain political balance; rather, he must reinforce the principles of the United Nations Charter through clear and decisive positions.

2.12. The Gaza Crisis

The “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation, launched by Hamas forces against the Israeli regime in response to the regime’s atrocities, the killing of Palestinians, and violations of the sanctity of Al-Aqsa Mosque, began on 7 October 2023 along the border between Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories and continued for several days. This event triggered Israel’s extensive and widespread military attacks on the Gaza Strip and marked the beginning of a severe humanitarian crisis there. In the subsequent months, military operations, the crippling blockade, and the obstruction of fuel, food, and medicine supplies led to the destruction of vital infrastructure and the mass killing of civilians. Human rights bodies and the United Nations issued multiple reports on violations of international humanitarian law, forced displacement, the malnutrition crisis, and the use of starvation as a weapon during the hostilities³.

On 7 December 2023, two months after the onset of Israel’s war against Gaza, Guterres invoked Article 99 of the United Nations Charter to accelerate Security Council action. The Secretary-General’s reliance on Article 99 reflected the urgent necessity to respond to escalating concerns regarding the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza.

In his letter, the Secretary-General warned of the risk of the outbreak of epidemics, the

1 The New Humanitarian ‘The changing face of peacekeeping: What’s gone wrong’ (2024) <<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org>> accessed 18 February 2025

2 Asada, M. ‘The War in Ukraine under International Law: Its Use of Force and Armed Conflict Aspects’ (2024), *International Community Law Review*, 26(1-2).

3 OHCHR ‘Palestinians in Gaza continue to be killed by starvation or by bullets from the Israeli military while trying to access food’ (2025a), <<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/ohchr-palestinians-in-gaza-continue-to-be-killed-by-starvation-or-by-bullets-from-the-israeli-military/>> accessed 16 August 2025

collapse of health facilities in Gaza, and the displacement of more than 80 percent of the population¹

Throughout the conflict, Guterres repeatedly referred in his statements to the blockade of the Gaza Strip, underscoring the need to ensure humanitarian assistance to its population, and urged the international community to use its influence to de-escalate the situation.² Nevertheless, given the exceptional circumstances in Gaza, these actions produced limited impact. At the time of writing this article, repeated violations of ceasefire agreements by Israel and ongoing apocalyptic human suffering continue to be observed. It is therefore argued that invoking Article 99 was insufficient and that the Secretary-General should have undertaken greater efforts to invigorate United Nations action in this case, including pressing for the expulsion of Israel from the Organization.

3. Armed Conflict between Iran and the United States–Israel (First War)

In the early hours of 13 June 2025, the Israeli regime, with the assistance of the United States, initiated a war and committed an act of aggression against the territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic of Iran by assassinating senior Iranian military officials and carrying out military attacks against Iranian military and arms facilities. Subsequently, through actions conducted by internal and infiltrated agents, Israel committed war crimes; the intensity of operations and the scope of targets, including military bases and a significant number of civilian sites, caused serious regional and international concern.

During this conflict, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and independent international bodies issued reports indicating violations of fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, including the principle of distinction between civilians and combatants and the prohibition of attacks on residential areas, schools, relief centers, and critical facilities such as the Fordow nuclear site. The bombing of civilian facilities, including medical centers and residential areas, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians, including women and children, constitutes a clear violation of Article 51 of the First Additional Protocol of 1977 to the Geneva Conventions and may be evaluated as a war crime³. Attacks by Israel and the United States on urban fuel depots and nuclear facilities, causing extensive environmental pollution and threats to public health, constitute an “environmental war crime.”

Under these circumstances, Guterres’ actions were limited solely to issuing public statements calling for “restraint by the parties.”⁴ In such a situation, it would have been

1 UN News ‘Gaza: Guterres invokes ‘most powerful tool’ Article 99, in bid for humanitarian ceasefire’ (2023), <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144447>> accessed 30 September 2025

2 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ‘Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)’ (1977).

3 Human Rights Watch ‘Israel: Airstrikes on Iranian civilians may constitute war crimes’ (2025, June 25) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/25/israel-airstrikes-iranian-civilians-may-constitute-war-crimes>> accessed 12 February 2025

4 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025b, August 10), ‘Statement by the UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory on the developments in Gaza’ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/ohchr-press-release-15aug25/>> accessed 16 August 2025

expected that the Secretary-General, instead of limiting his statements to calling for “restraint,” would invoke his authority under Article 99 to formally bring the matter to the Security Council and request an investigation. Additionally, Guterres could have proposed, through the capacities of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights Council, the establishment of an international fact-finding commission to document the violations; however, the Secretary-General took no formal action in this regard.

The silence of Guterres in the face of the killing of Iranian women and children during missile attacks, while he had previously issued more explicit responses in similar humanitarian crises, has drawn criticism regarding a “duality in human sensitivity.” Such negligence undermines the credibility of the international responsibility system, and the continuation of such stances compromises the neutrality of the most important international organization, reinforcing perceptions of political bias and weakening the principle of United Nations impartiality.

4. Armed Conflict between Iran and the United States–Israel (Second War)

The military crisis between Iran and the United States entered a new phase on 28 February 2026 with the commencement of large-scale aerial and missile attacks against Iranian territory. In addition to military and nuclear facilities, these attacks also targeted civilian infrastructure. According to Reuters, the first wave of the offensive occurred simultaneously with a meeting attended by Iran’s Supreme Leader and senior state officials, resulting in the death of the Leader and a number of high-ranking officials¹. The United Nations, referring to damage inflicted upon schools and healthcare facilities, also expressed concern regarding violations of the principles of international humanitarian law, particularly the principle of distinction between military and civilian objects². Reports indicate that between 28 February and early April 2026, thousands of individuals lost their lives, while extensive portions of urban infrastructure, including residential areas and water and electricity networks, were destroyed. One of the most tragic incidents during this period was the attack on the Shajareh Tayyebah Girls’ School in Minab. According to Human Rights Watch, the attack resulted in the mass killing of schoolgirls, and based on Iran’s allegations as well as preliminary investigations conducted by the United States military, responsibility for the incident was attributed to U.S. forces (Human Rights Watch, 2026). According to official statistics released by the Iranian government, 168 of the victims of this attack were predominantly children. The armed conflict continued until a ceasefire agreement was reached in April 2026.

At the time of writing, despite certain tensions and isolated incidents, the ceasefire remains in force. The first statement issued by António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, was released on 28 February 2026, concurrently with the Israeli and U.S. attacks against Iran. He declared: “I condemn today’s military aggression in the Middle East.

1 Reuters. (2026, February 28). Israel and U.S. launch strikes on Iran. Reuters. <<https://www.reuters.com>> accessed 1 June 2026

2 Council on Foreign Relations. (2026, February 28). Gauging the impact of massive U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran.< <https://www.cfr.org/articles/gauging-the-impact-of-massive-u-s-israeli-strikes-on-iran/>> accessed 1 June 2026

The use of force by the United States and Israel against Iran, and the subsequent retaliation by Iran in the region, undermine international peace and security. All States must respect their obligations under international law, including the Charter of the United Nations. In this statement, the Secretary-General, without expressly identifying the aggressor, also voiced concern regarding Iran's exercise of self-defense in a manner that appeared non-neutral.¹

Three weeks after the outbreak of the war, Guterres stated: "My message to the United States and Israel is that the time has come to end this war, because the human suffering is deepening, civilian casualties are increasing, and the devastating global economic consequences are mounting. "He warned that the conflict carried the risk of triggering an uncontrollable chain reaction and had already exceeded foreseeable limits. He further stressed that the world was on the brink of a broader war, greater human suffering, and a deeper economic shock, and that the time had come to pursue the path of diplomacy. He also appointed Jean Arnault as Special Envoy to address the conflict. In these statements as well, the Secretary-General refrained from identifying the aggressor and the responsible party. With regard to the claims advanced by the United States and Israel concerning anticipatory self-defense or threats allegedly posed by Iran's nuclear programme, Guterres did not adopt a clear legal position. This is despite the fact that a substantial body of international legal scholarship considers the legality of anticipatory self-defense to be highly restricted and, to a certain extent, incompatible with the Charter of the United Nations.²

Overall, although Guterres condemned the attacks against Iran and emphasized the necessity of respecting the Charter, it may be argued from a legal perspective that his approach was focused primarily on the political management of the crisis and the prevention of further escalation, rather than on the active defense of the fundamental principles of international law, including the prohibition of the use of force, State responsibility, and accountability for violations of international humanitarian law. This situation reflects the enduring tension between the Secretary-General's political role as a mediator and his legal responsibility as the guardian of the Charter.³

Finally, with regard to the formulation of the Secretary-General's positions, it may be argued that placing the initiating actions of the United States and Israel alongside Iran's defensive response, without clearly distinguishing between the legal status of the initiating party and that of the target State, is inconsistent with the principles of justice and impartiality and constitutes a form of political balancing.

Conclusion

The Secretary-General of the United Nations is one of the Organization's most effective bodies in the field of maintaining international peace and security. His powers in this domain

1 United Nations. (2026, February 28). Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council meeting on the situation in the Middle East [as delivered]. <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-02-28/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-meeting-the-situation-the-middle-east-delivered>> accessed 1 June 2026.

2 Geopolitical Brief. (2026, April 11). The 2026 Iran–United States–Israel confrontation: Objective analysis of causes, justifications, legal issues, likely endgames and economic consequences. <https://geopoliticalbrief.org/2026/04/the-2026-iran-united-states-israel-confrontation-objective-analysis-of-causes-justifications-legal-issues-likely-endgames-and-economic-consequences.html> accessed 1 June 2026

3 Ibid

derive from both explicit and implicit authorities under the Charter, as well as powers and duties delegated by the Security Council and the General Assembly. The most significant legal capacity of the Secretary-General within the Charter framework is articulated in Article 99, which permits the Secretary-General to bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which, in his opinion, may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security. The most important delegated responsibilities from the Security Council and the General Assembly include the deployment and direction of peacekeeping forces in such situations.

An examination of the performance of United Nations Secretaries-General in various international crises indicates that despite possessing significant legal capacities, the Secretariat faces multiple challenges in effectively maintaining international peace and security.

The approach of Secretaries-General throughout history has been shaped by the prevailing conditions within the international system and by their personal and diplomatic characteristics, resulting in varying levels of activism or caution.

An analysis of Antonio Guterres' nine-year tenure as Secretary-General demonstrates that he has predominantly relied on diplomatic tools, such as statements, ceasefire appeals, and mediation. His performance in major crises, including Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, and Gaza, shows that verbal actions alone, without substantive follow-up, have not produced tangible or sustainable results. A major weakness has been the failure to invoke Article 99 in a timely and decisive manner in many crises, coupled with caution in confronting the major permanent powers of the Security Council. This has not only weakened the authority of the Secretary-General's office but also cast doubt on the Organization's impartiality and effectiveness in the public perception.

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