

Can António Guterres Save the World?

by [Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

Jan 19, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/hl-bws-antwnyw-ghwtyrys-ynqdh-alam\)](/ar/policy-analysis/hl-bws-antwnyw-ghwtyrys-ynqdh-alam)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.



Brief Analysis

António Guterres assumes his position in a world that seems not to trust in the organization or the values that it fosters. Yet his personal record and ideological outlook may rescue his mission from failure

January 19, 2017

It is a tall order that António Guterres himself has tried to caution against by warning not to expect miracles. Indeed, the United Nations as a system of organizations has not acquired the executive might which would allow its Secretary-General to shape and implement policies. Nor should it have such a role, despite the fact that in much of the world it is viewed as a world government, with the General Assembly as its parliament. The desperate calls of the besieged residents of Aleppo facing the onslaught of regime forces, aided and abetted by Russian air power and the infantry forces of Iran and its proxies, demanding that the United Nations intervenes, were based on such a conviction. The hard fact, however, is that the United Nations is a mere framework for managing the international consensus, when it is present, and to mitigate the effects of its absence, when it is not. Yet it is not merely a social club, but is a platform for the expression of universal values and global concerns. It is in this role that António Guterres may shine, and indeed save the world. No pressure.

What the many conflicts in the Middle East have demonstrated is that the assumption —ignited with the collapse of the Soviet empire, and leading to the proclamation of the end of history — that the values of freedom, fairness, and enlightenment decisively triumphed in the battlefield of ideas was a premature and overly optimistic reading of international events. Since that brief moment of enthusiasm the global community has shattered and the confidence in shared values has dissipated. It is clear that has any universal principles have been lost. With decreasing agreement on basic concepts such as fairness and the value of human life, factional introversion — highlighted through nationalism, patriotism, or religious loyalty — rises in culture, society, and politics.

This is not restricted to the depravity blatantly and proudly practiced by the so-called Islamic State, the structural inability of the Islamic religious establishment to refute it at a fundamental level, or the confusion, fear, and

reluctance in many Muslim communities in condemning it. Nor is it limited to the genuine pain and empathy that President Obama feels and offers to the unintended Western victims of US drone attacks in Yemen, for example, while the scores of Yemeni civilians killed by the same attacks are not even accorded a proper tally. Or the outrage at the fate of the Yezidis, and the vigils held on their behalf, while the fate of the Rohingyas in Myanmar — murdered and raped in a country headed by a Nobel Peace Prize winner — is effectively ignored. Nor is it exclusive to the UNSC condemning Israel for material actions in the West Bank, while condoning through passivity the mass slaughter committed by Russia in neighboring Syria. Quantifying this claim may be challenging, but the indications are overwhelming there is plummeting trust in the international system, while there is bitter acceptance that brute force is the governing force in history. Vladimir Putin, a strongman who has maneuvered Russia's flawed transition out of communism to become a new tsar, is no longer a world pariah but, even in some now-influential quarters in Washington, DC, a model of strength,.

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States may be viewed as a symptom, rather than a cause, of the international trend. Trump is nativist in his self-presentation, cynical and skeptical about global engagement except at a transactional level. His many tweets and impromptu public statements reveal little, if any, concern about human rights and universal values. Trump's profile, however, matches one new archetype for both the leader and the citizen of the twenty-first century: a backlash against marginalizing globalization expressed through a prioritization of self and nation.

António Guterres assumes his position in a world that seems not to trust in the organization or the values that it fosters. Yet his personal record and ideological outlook may rescue his mission from failure. His predecessor was a conscientious and efficient manager, a principled and fair administrator. What Guterres may be able to add is a proactive approach informed by his socialist and Catholic background and his experience with refugees and other international issues. Guterres will face the task of reforming an outdated structure addressing challenges driven by considerations of economics, policy, and egos. His ability to deliver will be tested in the months and years to come. More importantly, however, Guterres will have to live up to the promise of the United Nations, not as a world government but as the world's custodian of universal values. For this mission, Guterres is very well equipped.

In Guterres and in Pope Francis, who has re-injected into the Vatican compassionate morality and spirituality, the global defense front against the excesses of nativism has two natural and principled allies. Both stem from the West. It would serve the cause well for the world to witness the emergence of powerful advocates of rights and values from outside the West. However, it is necessary to hear assertive, deliberate voices from the Arab and Islamic worlds as well, stressing the unequivocal application of such rights and values to all — Muslim, Christian, Jewish, atheist; Sunni, Shi'i; Salafi, Sufi; believer, infidel; men, women; Arab, Israeli; straight, gay; rich, poor; urban, rural.

Only then can António Guterres save the world. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)