



On Multilateralism and Diplomacy

Azza Karam¹

There is a saying that a good diplomat is someone who can tell someone else to ‘get lost’ in such a way, that the person being told this, asks, avidly, as to which direction to take. Tony Benn is once noted to have said that “all war is a failure of diplomacy”. While academics and the UN may – and do - differ on the precise count of how many wars there are in our world, the reality is that even just the one war, especially in the context where the United Nations system has existed for over 70 years, is more than a failure. It is a catastrophic indictment of our present multilateral system.

But what is this multilateral system? For many students and teachers of international relations, and according to the Oxford Dictionary, multilateralism is “the principle of participation by three or more parties, especially by the governments of different countries”. The United Nations system was meant to be the basic infrastructure which serves to convene the world’s nations and works to serve the multiple needs of these nations – all, ostensibly, to also prevent the reasons for war. Just across from the main Secretariat of the United Nations building on First Avenue in New York, the following quote is inscribed on the wall, presumably underlining the very rationale for the edifice and enterprise thereof: “and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4)”.

If the quote from religious scripture offends or surprises some, it really should not. Because the United Nations system is built to also serve as the main bulwark which upholds and defends the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR itself was possible thanks, in large measure, to the common values derived from all faiths (and the cultures they inspired and informed) over many a century of human existence. In other words, if we did not have common religious values, it would have been rather challenging to find agreed common values based exclusively on the realities of a world emerging from colonial domination and constantly changing world orders resulting in two world wars.

I will get back to religions towards the end. For now, let us revert to the (secular) journeys of diplomacy and multilateralism. While the United Nations system remains a major feature of multilateral presence and efforts, the last three decades have witnessed what

¹ Azza Karam (PhD) is the Secretary General of [Religions for Peace](#), a Professor of Religion and Development at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) van Amsterdam (The Netherlands), and a member of the UN Secretary General’s High Level Advisory Board (HLAB) on Effective Multilateralism. The opinions expressed in this piece belong entirely to the author alone, and are not representative of *Religions for Peace*, the VU, or HLAB.

has emerged, effectively, as competing instruments of multi-party engagement. The World Economic Forum, for instance, is today a space where many corporations, diverse organisations, individuals, governments, academics, scientists, artists, among others, meet regularly, and even launch/carry out joint efforts.

The actions of regional governmental entities (such as the African Union, European Union, ASEAN, among others), as well as specialised multilateral bodies such as OPEC, NATO, the OECD, and such, are today claiming more successes on the economic, political, military and scientific fronts, than some of the UN bodies created for similar purposes. What is more, International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) are today amongst the top humanitarian actors around the world (with at least two UN entities struggling to coordinate their activities and streamline their own partnerships with them) as many of these INGOs have become indispensable to the work needed. This does not consider foundations, and other specialised groupings (especially in the arena of health e.g., the Global Fund, GAVI), in every corner of the world, which are convening or serving – or both – millions.

All this, as the UN decision-making body, the Security Council, retains only five permanent members with a right to veto (including veto morally and ethically correct courses of action); and the leadership of both this Council and the Human Rights Council is, at times, led by the greatest abusers of human rights.

Would it be, perhaps, too simplistic to observe that the more the number of international multi-party structures have proliferated, the more multilateralism of and by government members of the United Nations system, appears to have failed to fulfil some basic aspirations of peace? And could this observation mark a simple coincidence? I contend that this is not a coincidence. Our traditional multilateral system, as in the United Nations, is, in fact, only as strong as two of its basic tenets or foundations: a strong (representative, legitimate, efficient) state, **and** the ability of these states to work together to protect and serve our common public goods (such as security, education, knowledge, infrastructure, environment and health).

The reality, however, is that many states are not delivering on basic social contracts and represent a declining minority of their increasingly polarised populations. And it is hard not to see the glaring facts of the UN failing in its basic mandate to stave off so many wars. It is telling that in 2023, as in the 1970s and through the 1980s and 1990s, nuclear war, and the fear thereof, is very much part of the political, military and even financial landscape. It says even more that today that there are multiple tracks where non state actors, and their intertwined interests around weapons, arms, drugs, gang wars, trafficking and related ills, are our new normal. And the rest of the kaleidoscope of our life is the background of a planet we are, collectively, hurting so badly, that it took a young woman activist (Greta Thunberg) to say to the world leaders, at the UN, “shame on you”. And nothing much changed anyway.

As we understand that our common values come from religious traditions, we should have realised that when religious institutions -- who are conservatively estimated to provide a quarter of all basic social services (education, health, nutrition, etc.), remain

deeply vested in public power spaces ranging from legislatures to investment banking - still refuse to, indeed can see no value to, working together, then our world anyway has major underlying and deeply rooted challenges. Religious institutions are the original development and social providers, the original actors, or backers, in politics, finance, trade, militaries, and many of the original power brokers of empires. They are the original prototypes of our governance, financial and social institutions and realms. They are the original diplomats. And they did not bring world peace. Far from it.

So, if ‘the originals’ fail to work together to serve the peace, even though their common values informed the modern-day structural and legal entities of multilateralism, how did our collective arrogance lead us to imagine that the formula for peace would be the UN, and (now) all the various and wild mushrooms of secular networks? Perhaps a more self-critical formula for redefined diplomacy and multilateralism should be the UN plus all the religious institutions working together – and holding one another accountable. Where is the harm in at least assessing, if not trying, that direction for accountability for our global commons?

After all, can our world get more ‘lost’ than it is? Or should we simply continue our arrogant state-led march, perhaps mixed in with more similar, like-minded ‘networks’? Or perhaps, we should allow some states to instrumentalise (or is it ‘partner’?) with select religious institutions and actors, many of whom set the tone for unilateralism long ago, some of whom have no inclination to even see one another as equals, all of whom sing from the same choir sheet (of peace/children/climate/poverty/etc.) – on their own terms, using their own logos, creating their own new initiatives, and the rest of those who have the experience and wisdom of learning from genuine collective service to all (barring none), be damned?

Religious institutions, ‘the originals’ of institutions, have a history with war and profiteering - while serving as ‘angels of mercy to the most poor and destitute’ - as their secular counterparts. Religious actors proliferated in shape, destination, format, purpose, and reinvention of themselves, long before their supposedly secular counterparts did. None of either set of institutions or actors can claim the moral high ground. All of them owe our planet and all peoples, some serious reparations. Time to hold each other accountable for serving and protecting the global commons.