

UK Labour supports a United Nations Emergency Peace Service

'What's radical one year may be accepted the next.'

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Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address, 1961. Wikicommons screengrab. Some rights reserved.

'We the people' share a problem – one that's defied solution since the United Nations was founded – how to 'save succeeding generations from the scourge of war'? The worst wars may be elsewhere for now, but they are not going away.

Over the past decade, the incidence of armed conflict tripled. Last year, UN officials warned of the worst humanitarian crisis since 1945. Then, the world also simply watched as nearly a million Rohingya people were ethnically cleansed from Myanmar.

Now, sixty-nine million people are desperately fleeing war, violence and persecution. In June, the [International Crisis Group](#) reported deteriorated situations in: Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Somalia, Somaliland, Mali, Niger, Taiwan Strait, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Israel/Palestine, Syria, Iran and Yemen. More recently, the [Global Peace Index 2018](#) estimated the annual cost of war and violent conflict at a staggering \$14.7 trillion (US). Even children recognise that's unsustainable.

UN peace operations definitely help, but they're now relegated to post-conflict stabilization – putting a lid on a crisis – once the fighting slows to allow the start of a peace process. For every operation, the UN faces an arduous process of renting the highly-valued resources of its member states, negotiating around their terms and accepting their conditions. Instead of [UN rapid deployment](#) to prevent worse, routine delays allow worse. Now, it usually takes six-to-twelve months to deploy. As a result, conflicts tend to escalate and spread, setting back the prospects for development and disarmament for decades. Then, they also require larger, longer UN operations at far higher costs.

The UN confronts a crisis. With the Trump administration pushing for unprecedented military spending while making deeper cuts to the UN budget, there will be even less chance to stem violent conflict. The '[SIPRI Yearbook 2018](#)' reports, "the number of personnel deployed with peace operations worldwide continues to fall while the demand is increasing."

Sadly, on the issue of UN reform, the official preference is for austerity 'do more with less' and, for more of the pragmatic, incremental approach (the tippy-toe steps), which haven't worked for twenty years and won't work to inspire more. But can't we step up to do better?

There is no magic wand. But Labour's Manifesto, *For the Many, Not the Few* suggests a very promising step: "Labour will commit to effective UN peacekeeping, including support for a UN Emergency Peace Service."

Labour's Manifesto proposal

A [United Nations Emergency Peace Service](#) (UNEPS) is one step towards meeting these serious, recurring challenges.

With this one development – effectively a standing 'UN 999' first responder for complex emergencies – the UN would finally have a rapid, reliable capacity to help fulfil four of its tougher assigned tasks. A UNEPS is designed to help prevent armed conflict and

mass atrocity crimes, to protect civilians at extreme risk, to ensure prompt start-up for peace operations, and to address human needs where others either can't or won't.

Ten core principles are central to the proposal. A UNEPS is to be:

1. a permanent standing, integrated UN formation;
2. highly trained and well-equipped;
3. ready for immediate deployment upon authorization of the UN Security Council;
4. multidimensional (civilians, police and military);
5. multifunctional (capable of diverse assignments with specialized skills for security, humanitarian, health and environmental crises);
6. composed of 13,500 dedicated personnel (recruited professionals who volunteer for service and are then screened, selected, trained and employed by the UN);
7. developed to ensure regional and gender equitable representation;
8. co-located at a designated UN base under an operational headquarters and two mobile mission headquarters;
9. at sufficient strength to operate in high-threat environments; and,
10. a service to complement existing UN and regional arrangements, with a first responder to cover the initial six months until Member States can deploy.

Aside from sufficient police to restore law and order, a UNEPS includes a military formation to deter aggression and maintain security, as well as an array of civilian teams to provide essential services for conflict resolution, human rights, health, disaster assistance and peacebuilding quick impact projects.

Arguably, its most distinctive feature is that it would be a standing UN formation, prepared and ready to serve in diverse UN operations, immediately available upon authorization of the UN Security Council. With advanced doctrine, training and equipment, UN operations could get off to a good start quickly at the outset of a crisis. A UNEPS could also serve as a vanguard, strategic reserve and a modest security guarantor, both to deter violent crime and respond, when necessary, to prevent and protect. Clearly, it would also help to develop higher standards system-wide.

Unlike previous proposals, a UNEPS is to complement existing UN arrangements, with a service that's gender-equitable. It is likely to be both a life-saver and a cost-saver.

A cooperative process

The proposal for a United Nations Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) largely stemmed from a former Canadian government study on UN rapid deployment in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. That was a cooperative process carried out in close

consultation with multinational partners, military advisors and the advice of UN officials. It was followed by a multinational initiative of twenty-eight UN member states in the Friends of UN Rapid Deployment. On a routine basis, the plans are updated to ensure it corresponds to the more recent developments in UN peace operations.

The inspiration for the earlier option and ongoing efforts was wider, but often from Sir Brian Urquhart, the study's co-chair and former UN Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs. In his words:

This venture is of the greatest importance both to the UN as a responsible institution and to the millions as of yet unknown, innocent victims who might, in the future, be saved by this essential addition to the UN's capacity to act on their behalf. There is one overwhelming argument for the United Nations Emergency Peace Service. It is desperately needed, and it is needed as soon as possible.

Among the useful insights from the earlier process and similar experience are the following:

- First, when the need is most evident, the prior preparation isn't. To succeed, there would be a need for a viable, widely appealing plan, with a global constituency of support. The UNEPS proposal covers both.
- Second, any new UN service would have to complement existing UN and regional arrangements and correspond to the requirements of complex emergencies. A multidimensional 'first-responder' of civilians, police and military in a coherent UN formation does both.
- Third, to be cost-effective, a new service would have to be multifunctional and capable of various assignments in security, humanitarian, health and environmental crises. There is little tolerance within the UN system for any post or service that is idle, under-utilized and expensive. With a modular formation, UNEPS' deployments can be tailored for a wider array of mission-specific requirements.
- Fourth, official consultations world-wide revealed near-unanimous opposition to the term, 'UN Standing Force'. Yet that concept might be reframed and redesigned to do better and do more. As a result, the focus shifted to a standing emergency group/service composed of individuals volunteering to serve who would be screened, selected, trained appropriately and compensated with status similar to UN civil servants. The UNEPS option ensures that the UN would have dedicated personnel within a dedicated service.

People and politicians tend to be more receptive to legitimate emergency services. They're easier to defend; another armed force is far tougher. But there's no agreement on this either.

A UN 'Standing Force'

To cite one example, [Paul Rogers and the Oxford Research Group](#) now suggest a UN 'Standing Force' that draws from national militaries, with UK forces in a lead role. While perhaps more convenient, this option leaves national governments and military establishments in control to decide if, when and how they may contribute. As with the UN standby arrangement system and the earlier SHIRBRIG, governments and militaries tend to wait, watch, assess the risks and usually decline participation. In short, with a few exceptions, northern militaries proved to be far better at standing by than standing up to help.

Do we really want a United Nations where national military establishments have even more influence? A militarized UN is neither needed nor a coherent plan for military transformation. Isn't that [liddismon](#) a new level? Are national militaries likely to support participation in a UN Standing Force? No! They would neuter any prospect of it working. And, a UNEPS offers a more promising alternative. As the official [Canadian study](#) on rapid deployment highlighted:

UN volunteers offer the best prospect of a completely reliable, well-trained rapid reaction capability. Without the need to consult national authorities, the UN could cut response times significantly, and volunteers could be deployed within hours of a Security Council decision... Ultimately, a UN rapid reaction capability can be truly reliable only if it no longer depends on Member States of the UN for the supply of personnel for peace operations.

Clearly, a UNEPS would help to offset the political pressure many contributing governments face when confronted with awkward decisions about whether to deploy their people into potentially high-risk operations.

Understandably, many now ask what might be able to intervene and stop the brutal wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen? But perhaps the key question is why those conflicts had to escalate into larger, longer wars? A rapid and reliable UN 'first responder', arriving at the outset, with an array of useful services, might have had a far better chance of preventing each from ever becoming a war. No, a UNEPS isn't designed for war-fighting or large-scale enforcement action. But it's sufficiently robust to work within armed conflict in either a civilian protection role or in preventing escalation and spread.

Finally, if there is one lesson that should have been learned over the past decade, it's that security in the future is likely to depend on our capacity to help others, not on building more capacity to fight more wars.

Costs and cost-effectiveness

Obviously, a UNEPS would be costly to develop; \$3 billion in start-up costs, with annual recurring costs of \$1.5 billion, shared proportionally among 193 Member States. Yet it should help to prevent the escalation of volatile conflicts; to deter groups from violence; and, to cut the size, length and frequency of UN operations. Even with success in just one of those areas, it would provide a substantive return on the investment.

In the UK and elsewhere, the 'costs' tend to be assessed against preferred priorities and interests. Developing a UNEPS is roughly equivalent to the cost of building four naval frigates, similar to the cost of refitting four diesel submarines, close to the base purchase price of thirty-five F-35 multi-role fighter jets and almost one quarter the cost of the sale of LAV6 (light armoured fighting vehicles) to Saudi Arabia. Officials often berate the cost of UN peace operations yet seldom question whether the more expensive war-fighting systems are needed or useful in wars that threatens our species.

In making the case for UNEPS advocacy [Robin Collins](#) astutely notes, "if political will is the central issue – and it is – that roadblock is not being held up by the costing formula." Understanding the wider potential here may help to explain a lot, including the current lack of political will.

Wider benefits

As early as 1961, officials in the US State Department [identified](#) a UN Peace Force as the key to disarmament. In their words,

There is an inseparable relationship between the scaling down of national armaments on the one hand and the building up of international peacekeeping machinery and institutions on the other. Nations are unlikely to shed their means of self-protection in the absence of alternative ways to safeguard their legitimate interests. This can only be achieved through the progressive strengthening of international institutions under the United Nations and by creating a United Nations Peace Force to enforce the peace as the disarmament process proceeds.

These are intimately related, overdue processes with the potential to free up substantive resources for addressing other pressing global challenges.

A more effective UN, which can actually prevent armed conflict, protect civilians and begin to 'save succeeding generations from the scourge of war' would encourage a progressive, overdue shift. A big joint project might help to revitalize cooperation among the more powerful states on the UN Security Council.

The impediments

So, why haven't governments supported such an option? Political realism – the pursuit of power – dominates and incurs a deep dependency, while stifling vision and idealism. Most of the UN's 193 member states maintain independent national armed forces to deter perceived aggression either from neighboring countries or intervention from abroad, as well as to maintain sovereign control over citizens. In the absence of a rapid and reliable security guarantor, governments assume the international level is marked by more anarchy than cooperation. Many see 'self-help' with traditional military approaches as the only available option to secure their interests.

Occasionally, a fraction of these military resources are used progressively in support of a UN peace process. But, most are constantly engaged in preparing for more war. As Dwight Eisenhower's [farewell address](#) warned in 1961, this dependency has deepened:

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government...In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

With globalization, the military-industrial complex has expanded worldwide into finance, banking and insurance sectors, big oil and gas, logistics and telecommunications, media, academe and high-tech. The military-industrial complex sets the global agenda by harmonizing interests and building bridges to ensure their constituents get a piece of the pie. For those with the resources, investing in protracted violent conflict remains a pretty safe bet, with substantive profits and few risks, especially when aligned to overwhelming political, economic and military power.

For now, the net effect is that people and governments have a small, underfunded, semi-dysfunctional peace system dominated by an extravagantly funded war system.

So, one critical question is what might start to take the profit out of war? In his 2015 [address](#) to the US Congress, Pope Francis tried a combination of persuasion and guilt:

Being at the service of dialogue and peace also means being truly determined to minimize and, in the long term, to end the many armed conflicts throughout our world. Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood. In the face of this shameful silence, it is our duty to confront the problem and stop the arms trade.

Yes, it's our shared duty to confront the problem. But how? Recently, the UN managed a wonderful Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, but the awkward question for many parties is 'how and with what' might the shift be effected without a very expensive build-up of conventional forces? An unarmed, [nonviolent civilian peace force](#) may merit consideration as a nice step, doing wonderful work, but is it sufficient to provide the security guarantor that many countries need before dismantling the offensive capacity of their armed forces? As [John Burroughs](#) writes, "the abolition of nuclear weapons will not be possible so long as nuclear deterrence holds sway as an alleged means of defense and ensuring peace and security." Yet governments sustain nuclear deterrence, the arms trade and the war system at enormous expense, not only because it serves powerful interests and profits, but also from perceived insecurity due to the lack of a viable UN system to deter aggression and maintain security.

What's next?

Writing in prompt response to the mention in the Labour Manifesto, the head of the [Oxford Research Group](#) greeted UNEPS as a "supranational standing army" as "the most radical of the ideas" within its pages. Another astute [source](#) of 'strategic purpose' in UN affairs followed up, lamenting the leadership of Corbyn, then ridiculing Labour's support of a UNEPS as, "... the sort of concept that you only promise to back if you write a manifesto believing you have no chance of victory". Yet just last month, the same source concluded his [column](#) conceding, "right now, agonizing caution is not going to save the global system. Big ideas just might."

Yes, heavier opposition and unwarranted influence are also inevitable from those dependent on or profiting from the prevailing approach, particularly the expert gatekeepers within the security sector. But Labour could encourage a better, more inclusive approach.

Labour's Manifesto remains popular as does the proposed UN Emergency Peace Service, although more could be done if simply to explain the idea and its potential. A UNEPS is no panacea, just one step toward sustainable common security. The wider enthusiasm for progressive options is unlikely to fade. With a modest boost enabling prior preparation and outreach, a UNEPS might be ready and worthy of a serious push around and abroad.

In his seminal study of A United Nations peace force, William R. Frye provided a useful observation:

Establishment of a small, permanent peace force, or the machinery for one, could be the first step on the long road toward order and stability. Progress cannot be forced, but it can be helped to evolve. That which is radical one year can become conservative and accepted the next.

Who knows? In the recent words of Jeremy Corbyn, "when we unite together with common objectives, we can all win."