

THE NORDIC CENTER FOR CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Center for Applied Research in Conflict Transformation

ACADEMIC ARTICLE / WORKING PAPER SERIES

The Middle East: A New Laboratory for Old Lessons?

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Publication date: 30th October 2026 • Series: No. 004/2026

Abstract

The current situation in the Middle East has reignited debates about what lessons we learned about external security guarantees, the scope of violence, and the selective application of international law. But what is genuinely new about these lessons? History, from the two World Wars to Afghanistan, Iraq, Rwanda, Bosnia and conflicts across Africa, has repeatedly demonstrated these realities. This article questions why the Middle East has become a laboratory for rediscovering old lessons, while other historical experiences and narratives of peace and conflict remain overlooked. It argues that the real challenge is not our inability to learn from war, but our persistent failure to remember and act upon what history has already taught us.

Keywords: Middle East; International Security; Historical Memory; International Law; Crisis Narratives; Conflict Transformation; Peace and Conflict Studies.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of what is today called the Iran war, I have attended and been following several international conferences and expert panels where distinguished scholars, diplomats and security experts have presented, with authority, the supposed to be lessons from the Middle East. These lessons revolved around the limits of external security guarantees, the uncontrollable scope of violence, and the selective application of international law.

I had my own question about what is genuinely new about these lessons. Have two world wars, Afghanistan, Iraq, Rwanda, Bosnia and decades of conflict across Africa not already demonstrated these realities?

This article challenges the tendency to present the Middle East as a privileged source of new insights into war and peace. It highlights how we tend to overlook the historical experiences and intellectual

contributions of other regions. The article questions the selective construction of international knowledge and calls for a recovery of the forgotten narratives of peace and conflict.

The article concludes that the real challenge is not our inability to draw lessons from wars, such as the war in the Middle East, but our persistent short memory to remember, confront and act upon what world history has already taught us.

Lesson 1: Has the Middle East Really Taught Us Anything New About the Limits of External Security Guarantees?

This is the proposition that dominated the discourse of several talks and conferences. Their formulations implied the exclusivity of these limitations to the Middle East but history suggests otherwise. External security has always been conditional. What is often described as a security guarantee is, in fact, a political arrangement whose durability remains subject to changing strategic calculations and interests.

The First World War provides an early illustration of this configuration. Europe's alliance systems were intended to reinforce deterrence and preserve a balance of power. However, the July Crisis of 1914 demonstrated how alliances could contribute to escalation rather than prevent it. Austria-Hungary's reliance on German support and the mobilization dynamics involving Russia, France and Germany contributed, in a way, to transforming a regional confrontation into a continental war. The narratives transformed from security and deterrence to those of winning the war and dying for the "*patrie*".

The problem was not simply that security guarantees failed. What really failed was the assumption, at that time, that a system of competing guarantees would be able to produce collective security. The Second World War exposed another dimension of the same illusion. The guarantees extended by Britain and France to Poland in 1939 did not prevent German aggression. Although these commitments contributed to the declarations of war against Germany, they could not provide Poland with effective immediate protection against invasion and occupation. A lesson from the two wars is that we need to make a distinction between a promise of external security protection and the capacity to deliver it.

The fate of Czechoslovakia following the Munich Agreement of 1938 had already demonstrated how the security of smaller states could be subordinated to the calculations of greater powers. The interests of the protected were not necessarily the interests of the protectors.

These experiences reveal a structural characteristic of international security arrangements, that their credibility is never independent of political interests, military capabilities, geographical constraints and the willingness of external actors to assume costs.

The experience of postcolonial Africa offers further evidence. During the Cold War, external military assistance frequently strengthened governments without necessarily strengthening the political foundations of the states they governed. As an example, for decades, the regime Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire benefited from Western support because of the perceived "strategic" importance of the country. The external military support did not resolve the deterioration of state institutions, the erosion of political legitimacy or the vulnerabilities that eventually contributed to the regime's collapse in 1997.

Somalia offers a different illustration. Its strategic alignments shifted during the Cold War, but foreign military assistance could not compensate for deepening domestic fragmentation. The collapse of the

Somali state in 1991 demonstrated the limitations of security relationships that prioritized strategic positioning over institutional strengthening and resilience.

More recently, the Sahel has shown how external security assistance can coexist with deteriorating domestic security and declining public confidence in political institutions. Neither Western military partnerships nor their subsequent replacement by alternative external arrangements were capable, by themselves, of resolving the political and institutional conditions sustaining violence.

Venezuela adds a contemporary dimension. The government's longstanding relationships with Russia and China provided diplomatic, economic and military cooperation, but did not amount to an unconditional collective-defence guarantee. The United States' special operation of January 2026, which resulted in the swift capture of Nicolás Maduro, illustrated the limits of expecting strategic partners to provide direct protection against a military special operation, even against a Head of State. These cases differ significantly in their historical circumstances, legal obligations and strategic environments. They should not be treated as interchangeable. However, they illuminate a recurring political misconception that governments may confuse external support with effective guarantees for protection.

The theoretical foundation for understanding this misconception can be found in realist international relations scholarship, particularly the work of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. Their approaches, despite important differences, emphasize the centrality of power, interests and the absence of an overarching authority capable of guaranteeing state security. Glenn Snyder's work on alliance politics offers an even more precise analytical framework. He distinguishes between the risks of abandonment and entrapment, which reveals that alliances generate insecurity as well as protection. The insecurity may result from the abandonment of the State partner due to security assistance that becomes costly, or when the conflicts are generated by those same allies.

For regimes whose domestic legitimacy is fragile, external security relationships may become a substitute for institutional reform. Foreign security assistance can prolong political survival while reducing incentives to address grievances, strengthen accountability or develop a more legitimate relationship with society. My proposition here does not mean that all security alliances are fictitious or ineffective. Some have provided credible deterrence for decades. Rather, the fiction emerges when conditional commitments are interpreted as unconditional guarantees, or when external protection is mistaken for a substitute for domestic legitimacy. The lesson here is that the Middle East did not reveal this contradiction. It has merely provided another setting in which an old illusion has become visible.

Lesson 2: The Illusion of Contained Violence

Violence has never been entirely controllable. War is not a mechanical instrument whose consequences remain confined to the intentions of those who initiate it. It is a dynamic political, security and social process involving adversaries, populations, institutions and unpredictable environments and interactions.

Clausewitz understood this long before the emergence of contemporary asymmetric warfare. His concepts of friction, uncertainty and the reciprocal nature of military confrontation undermine the assumption that political leaders can exercise violence while retaining full control over its consequences. War generates reactions. Those reactions transform the circumstances in which the original decision to use force was taken. Political objectives evolve, adversaries adapt, alliances shift and the costs of confrontation expand.

In Europe, the First World War began amid expectations among some decision-makers that military mobilization and rapid offensive operations could produce decisive outcomes. Instead, it developed into a prolonged, heavily armed conflict that destroyed empires, destabilized societies and transformed the European political order. The Second World War demonstrated the same problem on an even more devastating scale. Nazi Germany's expansionist project ultimately produced the destruction of the regime itself, the occupation and division of Germany, and a fundamental reconfiguration of international relations. These examples demonstrate that violence can transform the political environment so profoundly that the original objectives of those who initiated it become unattainable.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 offers another illustration. Intended to preserve a strategically aligned government, the intervention developed into a prolonged war that imposed considerable military, economic and political costs on the Soviet Union. The conflict contributed to pressures on an already strained Soviet system, which partly, though not alone, explains the Soviet Union's collapse.

The subsequent United States-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 reveals a related configuration. An operation initially directed against al-Qaeda and the Taliban government evolved, despite the announcement of "mission accomplished", into a two-decade military engagement. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 demonstrated the gap between the ability to overthrow a government militarily and the capacity to construct a sustainable political alternative. Iraq offers an equally significant example. The 2003 invasion removed Saddam Hussein's regime, but the dismantling of state structures, the subsequent insurgency, sectarian violence and the emergence of the Islamic State (Daesh) demonstrated how military intervention could generate consequences far beyond its original strategic assumptions. The effects were not confined to Iraq. Regional political balances shifted, transnational armed networks expanded, and the intervention produced long-term consequences for the credibility of the states that had undertaken it.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 provides a contemporary European example. Rather than securing a rapid political settlement on Moscow's terms, the invasion produced sustained Ukrainian resistance, extensive Western military support for Ukraine, far-reaching economic sanctions and the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO.

The so-called Iran war offers another illustration of this historical pattern. What may begin as a calculated military operation to weaken an adversary or restore deterrence can rapidly threaten one of the world's most strategically important maritime corridors, disrupting energy markets, international shipping and economies far removed from the battlefield. The Strait of Hormuz demonstrates how a geographically concentrated confrontation can acquire global consequences, exposing even those who initiated military action to economic and strategic repercussions beyond their control.

However, for intellectual precision purposes, an important distinction must be taken into consideration; not every unintended consequence constitutes a strategic reversal, and not every actor that initiates violence necessarily suffers more than its adversary. The argument is not that violence invariably punishes its initiator. It is that the initiator cannot unilaterally determine the trajectory or ultimate distribution of its consequences.

The above phenomenon can be understood through Robert Jervis's analysis of the security dilemma and the unintended consequences of international political action. Measures adopted by one state to strengthen its security may be interpreted by others as threatening, provoking countermeasures that ultimately reduce the security of the original actor.

Charles Tilly's historical sociology of coercion also reminds us that violence and state formation have long been interconnected, but that coercion generates institutional and social consequences that extend beyond immediate military objectives.

The proposition that violence inevitably produces further violence would nevertheless be too deterministic. Military force can sometimes deter aggression, prevent atrocities, or at least reduce it, or create conditions for negotiation. This has become a consensus political commitment and an emerging normative framework of international law, specifically on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). What history rejects is the presumption that the use of force allows its initiator to dictate the subsequent political process.

The lesson of this section is that violence has not suddenly escaped political control in the Middle East. Political actors around the world have repeatedly overestimated the degree of control they possessed over violence. The Middle East should therefore not be presented as the region that has demonstrated the lesson learned of the uncontrollability of war. Rather, its experience should be situated within a context of a much longer history of political authorities and conflicts.

Lesson 3: International Law's Selective Application: Is this really a lesson from the Middle East?

The third proposition concerns the authority of international law and the consequences of its selective application. The argument that the Middle East has exposed a crisis of international law is understandable. However, it risks overlooking the fact that selectivity, unequal enforcement and the political construction of legal crises have been central concerns of international legal scholarship for decades.

Hilary Charlesworth's 2002 article, *International Law: A Discipline of Crisis*, provides a particularly compelling starting point. Charlesworth challenges the tendency of international lawyers to organize their understanding of the discipline around exceptional events. Crises become privileged moments of legal attention, interpretation and institutional mobilization, while the structural conditions that precede them receive comparatively little scrutiny.

Her critique is particularly important because it moves beyond the conventional question of whether international law succeeds or fails in responding to emergencies. It asks how crises are identified, why certain events become central to legal discourse, and what forms of injustice remain invisible when international law is understood primarily through spectacular moments of international confrontation.

The 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, which Charlesworth examines, illustrates this problem. The intervention generated intense debate about humanitarian necessity, sovereignty and the legality of using force without explicit Security Council authorization. The legal controversy surrounding interventions may also overshadow longer-term questions concerning the political structures, historical grievances and institutional failures that preceded the crisis.

Charlesworth's argument invites a fundamental methodological reconsideration; that international law should not be understood exclusively through exceptional moments of violence, but also through the everyday political and social arrangements that produce vulnerability, exclusion and insecurity. The failure to protect civilian populations is neither a recent development nor a phenomenon confined to the Middle East.

The Holocaust demonstrated the catastrophic consequences of state-organized persecution and mass violence. The international legal response contributed to the emergence of the Genocide Convention of 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the development of international criminal accountability. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 remains one of the clearest examples. Despite warnings and the presence of a United Nations peacekeeping mission, the international response failed to prevent the mass killing of Tutsi civilians and moderate Hutu opponents. The massacre at Srebrenica in 1995, where Bosnian Serb forces murdered more than 8,000 Bosniaks, exposed the inability of a United Nations-designated safe area to provide effective protection.

These events challenged the credibility of international institutions long before the current wars in the Middle East. The development of the R2P, endorsed by United Nations member states at the 2005 World Summit, represented an attempt to confront this historical failure. Its central premise was that sovereignty entails state responsibility to bear the primary obligation to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The States also have responsibilities to assist and, where appropriate, act collectively through the United Nations framework.

The 2011 intervention in Libya, authorized by Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect civilians, became a defining controversy. Critics argued that the military operation moved beyond civilian protection towards regime change, weakening trust in the doctrine and intensifying concerns about the political use of humanitarian mandates.

The plight of Palestinian civilians in the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly Gaza, brings these longstanding contradictions into sharp focus. The scale of civilian suffering, the destruction of essential infrastructure, repeated displacement and restrictions on humanitarian assistance have raised fundamental questions about the so-called international community's willingness and capacity to uphold its obligations under international humanitarian law. In September 2025, the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry concluded that Israeli authorities and security forces had committed genocide, identifying acts prohibited under the 1948 Genocide Convention and the requisite genocidal intent. The International Court of Justice, in proceedings initiated by South Africa, ordered provisional measures to protect Palestinians and prevent prohibited acts, although it has not yet delivered a final judgment on whether genocide occurred.

The failure to secure effective collective action in Syria, despite extensive atrocities against civilians, further demonstrated the limitations imposed by geopolitical divisions and Security Council politics. These examples from Libya, the occupied Palestinian territories and Syria of the inability to ensure effective protection, even amid extensive documentation, international judicial proceedings and repeated humanitarian warnings, recall the failures witnessed in the Holocaust, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and others. They also expose the limitations of the R2P when collective action remains hostage to geopolitical calculations. The question is no longer whether international law provides the necessary norms to protect civilians, but why those norms so often fail to generate effective protection when powerful political interests are at stake.

The mass violence committed against civilians during colonial rule, the atrocities of the Algiers War (*la Guerre d'Alger*), the Vietnam War, the repression of civilians under apartheid in South Africa, and the consequences of conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo all raise questions about the uneven visibility of civilian suffering in international political and legal discourse.

The issue is not that these experiences were entirely ignored. Some generated major international legal developments and political mobilization. Rather, they were not always granted comparable significance within dominant narratives about the evolution of international law.

The problem is not only selective enforcement. It is also selective recognition; meaning the process through which certain experiences of violence become defining crises of the international order while others remain peripheral to its intellectual history.

More recently, Ntina Tzouvala's article, *International Law as a Discipline in Crisis*, revisits Charlesworth's argument in the context of Gaza. Tzouvala observes that disagreements are no longer confined to the appropriate legal response to a recognized crisis; they extend to the very identification and interpretation of the crisis itself.

It is crucial to examine how international law's priorities are established, whose experiences shape its intellectual development, and why the suffering of certain populations becomes central to international legal consciousness while comparable suffering elsewhere struggles to command sustained attention.

The Middle East has not created the crisis of international law. It has exposed, once again, a crisis of historical memory, institutional consistency and the selective recognition of human suffering. A more credible international legal order requires moving beyond reactive legal debates generated by exceptional crises towards sustained attention to everyday structural conditions through which violations become possible. This is the challenge Charlesworth identified more than two decades ago, and one that remains insufficiently addressed.

Conclusion: The Forgotten Narratives of Peace and Conflict

The tendency to extract universal lessons from the Middle East raises a question that is more important than the lessons themselves: who decides which wars become sources of international knowledge, and which wars are relegated to the margins of historical memory?

The Middle East is neither an exception to the history of international conflict nor the privileged laboratory in which the limitations of contemporary security policy have suddenly been discovered. Europe experienced the catastrophic consequences of competing security guarantees and uncontrolled military escalation during two world wars. Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated the limitations of external intervention and the unpredictability of military force. African societies have repeatedly experienced the consequences of externally sustained political regimes, institutional fragility and selective international engagement. Rwanda and Bosnia exposed the failure of international institutions to protect civilian populations long before the Responsibility to Protect entered the diplomatic vocabulary.

These experiences are too often treated as separate historical episodes rather than as parts of a cumulative intellectual history of conflict. The result is a peculiar form of collective amnesia. Each new war becomes an opportunity to rediscover the limitations of military power, the fragility of security guarantees and the selectivity in the application of international law, as though previous generations had neither experienced nor analyzed these phenomena.

The problem is not simply that international institutions respond selectively to crises. It is that the intellectual frameworks through which we understand international security are themselves organized around selective moments of visibility or crisis. A crisis attracts attention, produces legal debate, generates policy recommendations and eventually recedes from international consciousness. When the wars of powerful states are treated as the “events” that transform international theory through “lessons learned”, while conflicts elsewhere are approached primarily as

“humanitarian emergencies” or “regional security problems”, the knowledge about peace and conflict itself becomes hierarchical.

The intent of this article is not to replace a Middle East-centered narrative with a Europe-centered or Africa-centered or Asia-centered one. It is to reject the assumption that any single region possesses a disconnected claim to the universal lessons of war.

It is essential to recover the connections between historical experiences, identify the recurring structures of insecurity and examine why established knowledge so rarely produces corresponding changes in political behaviour. The history of international relations is frequently narrated through wars, interventions, treaties and geopolitical settlements. Far less attention is devoted to the institutions, relationships and everyday political practices through which societies have prevented violence, negotiated coexistence and sustained peace. These are among the forgotten narratives of international security.

Perhaps the most important lesson from the Middle East, therefore, is not a lesson about the Middle East at all. It is a lesson about the way we remember war, construct crises and forget peace.

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