

Open Letter to H.E. António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations



By Roudi Baroudi

Dear Secretary-General Guterres,

I write to thank you for your efforts to bring about a ceasefire in the current conflict pitting the United States and Israel against Iran, to applaud your calls for civilians to be protected, and to urge you in the strongest possible terms to expand and intensify these efforts with all of the tools at your disposal.

People are already dying in countries that have little or nothing to do with the conflict, devastating socioeconomic consequences are spreading around the globe, and conditions can only get worse if current trends continue.

It was inevitable that any prolonged hostilities so close to the Strait of Hormuz would cause energy prices to go up, at least temporarily, because insurance rates would rise at the increased risk of an errant missile or two hitting a supertanker. But that is not what has happened here. Instead, just three weeks into the fighting, the strait is effectively closed to shipping, and global markets for oil and gas are undergoing the worst supply disruption in history. Prices are up sharply, and it will be months or even years before they return to previous levels.

The rapid escalation of the situation has not been due to chance; rather, it is because Iran threatened to directly target shipping in the strait, and several vessels have come under deliberate fire from its forces. These are risks to which most shipping companies will not subject their crews and hulls under any circumstances, not least when the cargo is something as volatile as oil or liquified natural gas (LNG).

Ergo, the strait is closed, meaning that roughly one-fifth of the world's oil and LNG can no longer reach market, and therefore that two pillars of global economic stability – affordable transport and affordable electricity – are becoming increasingly brittle. In addition, significant percentages of the global trade in other key commodities, including fertilizers, aluminum, helium, polymers, and various forms of chemical feedstock. These are essential to myriad industries everywhere, and to the jobs they provide, everything from agriculture, construction, pharmaceuticals, and food processing to clothing, footwear, heavy industry, and the latest digital technologies.

Even these obstacles could have been overcome, provided the disruption did not persist for too long. And indeed, early releases of strategic oil reserves by the United States (172 million barrels) and members of the International Energy

Agency (400 million barrels) initially helped to calm markets when they were announced. This effect soon began to wear off, however, when markets realized that those releases amount to only about a month of usual Hormuz traffic. The United States then found two other cards to play by temporarily “de-sanctioning” Russian oil and an estimated 140 million barrels of Iranian crude currently held in floating storage, helping to alleviate the supply gap and reducing upward pressure on prices.

Sadly, we are beyond that point as well. After Israel attacked Iranian infrastructure associated with the latter’s South Pars gasfield (part of the world’s single largest field and shared with Qatar), Iran’s response was not just to attack Israel’s largest refinery: it also lashed out at energy production and export facilities in several of its Arab neighbors. Refineries, LNG plants, and other assets have now been damaged or destroyed in all six member-states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which groups Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

I stress here that each of the GCC states is also a full member of the United Nations, and several of them count among the world’s most prolific providers of relief and development assistance, both via UN bodies and through their respective overseas development agencies.

This loss of production capacity constitutes an exponential worsening of the situation, for even if Hormuz were to reopen tomorrow, there is no way to fully compensate for the oil, gas, and other products that have been taken off the market. Delay alone is costly and disruptive, but the destruction of production capacity constitutes a massive step-change because

much of it simply cannot be replaced any time soon.

In some cases, repairs may take weeks or months, but others entail more lasting impacts. QatarEnergy says the damage at Ras Laffan, for example, has taken 17% of Qatar's national LNG capacity offline – and that it will take two or three years to repair. Qatar is the world's leading exporter of that product, so a long period of elevated gas prices is unavoidable. Of course, several countries have new LNG capacity at various stages of design or construction, including Qatar itself, plus the US, Australia, and Canada. These will help, of course, but not with the current price surge, and even when they do come online, much of their output will already be accounted for.

Mr. Secretary-General,

As catastrophic as these setbacks are, they pale in comparison to what awaits billions of people if current trends continue.

First, consider the GCC countries themselves. They did not ask for this war, several of them expended considerable diplomatic effort trying to prevent it, and yet they are incurring enormous physical and economic damage, not to mention the lives and livelihoods lost. Much of the focus has been on what is no longer coming out of the Gulf, but the GCC states also have to worry what is no longer coming in: this includes most of their food and other essential products, and virtually all of their cars, computers, televisions, and industrial machinery. Of course they can arrange alternative delivery routes, but that will impose significantly higher costs for virtually everything – a burden that will be particularly

onerous for the millions of migrant laborers who live in the GCC countries.

These same countries have shown remarkable restraint (thus far) by not retaliating for Iranian missile and drone strikes, but the recent meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Riyadh signaled that this patience is not infinite. These countries cannot be expected to remain on the receiving end of so much underserved devastation without responding in kind, and if and when that happens, the global supply crisis is liable to get even worse.

I stress here that the vast majority of all countries also are members of the United Nations, and many of them are likewise generous contributors to the UN and the developing world. Even many of the poorer ones have made enormous sacrifices in the name of international peace and security, often by sending their troops to act as peacekeepers in some of the world's most dangerous hotspots.

The interests of all 193 UN member-states are at stake in this war, and most them are looking to the UN for help, guidance, and leadership.

Mr. Secretary-General,

The United Nations is the most important institution in the world today, even and perhaps especially because it has become so fashionable to denigrate it, and because some governments seek to undermine it at every turn. Above all else, the UN was

established to prevent war when it can, and to alleviate the resulting human suffering when it cannot. Its ability to do either of these things is being sorely tested these days, particularly since many governments view the rules of the international system as hindrances to be bulldozed or ignored.

Like all supporters of a rules-based order, I recognize that the realities of great-power politics sometimes make it impossible for the UN to impose solutions consistent with both international law and the often nebulous but always noble notion of collective security. But now is no time to accept failure, not when we know that the effects of the current war are going to reach into so many homes around the world, and that this will take place by design.

The United Nations still has options because its remit includes the day-to-day handling of incidents, joint activities, and other interactions that take place between member-states. As such, it is the custodian of several specialized agencies and treaties relating to various aspects of maritime law in peace- and wartime alike, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO) established in 1948, the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, and the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

These agencies regulate and otherwise provide a level playing field for all manner of international interactions, and their responsibilities are not suspended during wartime. On the contrary, the UN's work is never more vital than after the shooting starts, especially when the intended targets of the war's negative impacts include everyone, everywhere.

The duty to protect civilians during armed conflict is a universal and overriding one, and while many belligerents harm civilians and their interests by accident, Iran's actions deliberately target the welfare of civilians around the world. The United Nations is the ultimate forum for the resolution of disputes great and small, and even when governments choose to ignore it, the UN remains bound by its Charter to seek peace and security.

Most importantly, never stop reminding the belligerents of their obligations under the UN Charter, particularly when they fail to live up to them. Call out Iran for inter alia, having illegally interfered in the innocent transit of civilian shipping, which is specifically protected within straits, even in wartime, by IMO & UNCLOS – and therefore for weaponizing energy and turning it on the whole world.

Diplomacy takes place on multiple levels, from public statements and backchannel communications to purely procedural exchanges and informal trust-building exercises. In the current circumstances, given how many people are being affected, no stone can be left unturned in convincing Iran to stop choking out the global economy, or in convincing its opponents to cease fire.

Finally, I would note that when the belligerents are unwilling to consider dialogue or other alternatives to conflict, that is precisely when the good offices and moral authority of the United Nations are needed most. Now is no time to let them fight it out, not when the welfare of billions of people is at stake.

Sincerely,

Roudi Baroudi