



Address to University of Glasgow MSc Program in Human Rights and International Politics students during a study visit to Geneva

John Knox International Center,
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Lecture extract

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was established during a period of relative geopolitical stability and broad consensus on the importance of human rights as a foundation for peace and international cooperation. Today, however, it operates in an increasingly polarised environment that presents significant structural and political challenges. As a state-led body, its effectiveness is constrained by the interests of member states, including those accused of serious human rights violations, while political bloc dynamics, selectivity, and double standards continue to affect its credibility. Nevertheless, the UNHRC retains considerable legitimacy and influence, as demonstrated by the sensitivity of some governments to its scrutiny and their efforts to limit civil society participation, underscoring the continuing normative and reputational power of the international human rights system.

At a time when grave human rights violations, war crimes, mass displacement, and humanitarian crises persist across the globe, respect for the rule of law and international human rights and humanitarian law is more critical than ever. Yet widening justice gaps leave an estimated 1.5 billion people with unmet justice needs, while legal disempowerment continues to deny many

women, victims, and vulnerable groups effective access to rights and remedies. In this context, lawyers and judges play a vital role in promoting human rights, ensuring accountability, combating impunity, and securing justice for victims, serving as the architects of legal frameworks that translate universal human rights principles into practical and enforceable realities at the national, regional, and international levels.