
The Atkin Paper Series

Converging for Peace –
The United Nations and
the Israel-Palestine
Peace Process

Odelia Englander

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About Odelia Englander

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Summary

This paper assesses the United Nations' role and potential in resolving the Israeli Palestinian conflict. In its charter, conceived in 1945, the United Nations set high standards and espoused lofty principles which enshrine its primary responsibility: to maintain peace and security. Since then the geopolitical situation has changed enormously. Yet, its performance since its inception has been weak, and the UN has rarely been able to enforce its Charter's principles into desired actions.

This has been most obvious with respect to the conflict in the Middle East. The United Nations played a decisive role in the establishment of the state of Israel and has always had an indirect mediation involvement especially as some of its Resolutions are the basis for any plausible accord.

To become a credible third party mediator, the United Nations has to amend parts of its conduct regarding the situation in the Middle East. Israel has long argued that the United Nations is inherently biased with an anti-Israeli agenda within its corridors and organs structure. Palestinians however believe that the dominance of the United States prevents the decision process from being utterly compelling.

Notwithstanding this paper argues that having exhausted previous alternatives at third party mediation (US, EU, Quartet) the United Nations should undertake a sincere leading mediation effort by granting Israel incentives such as normalisation and indisputable international recognitions and to the Palestinians viable statehood endorsed by the international community, not just as means of politicisation but as a vivid nation.

Converging for Peace – The United Nations and the Israel-Palestine Peace Process

By Odelia Englander

Introduction

In its Charter, conceived and written in 1945, the United Nations set high standards and espoused lofty principles, attempting to ensure that imperialistic intentions would not re-occur and that the use of force between states would become unnecessary. Its primary responsibility, according to the Charter, was to maintain peace and security.

Since 1945, of course, the geopolitical situation has changed enormously. Yet there seems to be a consensus that the United Nations has been weak, and sometimes completely incapable, in enforcing the Charter's principles. At times, observers have noted a lack of desire within the United Nations and its member states to reinforce and execute its own adopted resolutions.

It was hoped that when the Berlin Wall came down and the Cold War stalemate subsided, the United Nations might at last be able to act as originally intended when the Charter was signed.¹ But the inescapable truth is that the United Nations has not met the expectations and high values it established following the end of World War II.

This has been most obvious with respect to the conflict in the Middle East. The United Nations played a decisive role in the establishment of Israel, and managed to mediate an intermediate resolution to the revolts and riots which accompanied it, but has since failed in bringing about a comprehensive solution to the conflict that would accommodate the legitimate desires of Israelis, Palestinians, and the neighbouring Arab states.

Given this less than impressive record, what hope is there for the United Nations to play a leading role in the search for peaceful settlement? Can the United Nations become a leading actor, third party, or mediator of high credibility, and – in doing so – fulfil its primary role as champion of international peace? What efforts have been undertaken by the organisation, and why have they failed? How is the United

¹ Maitland, Donald. 'International Order in the Twenty-First Century: The Role of the United Nations', *International Relations*, v. 14, no. 6 (1999), p. 56.

Nations and its role perceived by the Israelis and Palestinians themselves? What institutional and political obstacles stand in the way of making progress, and can they be overcome?

This paper assesses the United Nations' role and potential in resolving the conflict in the Middle East. Its objective is to determine whether the United Nations can become a credible, impartial mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, especially in light of the failure of other initiatives in recent years and the United Nations Secretary-General's recently expressed desire to strengthen the organisation's role in conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace-building.²

My conclusions are twofold. First, there is no alternative to the United Nations. The organisation may have failed in bringing peace to the region, but so have all other actors engaged in the effort. Only the United Nations brings international legitimacy and the ability to construct broad-based coalitions. It may be perceived as biased by the various parties to the conflict, but it is perhaps less so than, say, the United States or the European Union. Given the United Nations' recent investments in mediation capabilities and its extensive presence on the ground, it is well positioned to play a more important role in furthering the search for peace if it is empowered to do so by its leading member states.

Second, it is time for deeds. Too long have the United Nations and the parties to the conflict engaged in rhetorical battles and used the United Nations as a political battleground in which to fight 'phony wars'. None of this has improved the lives of people in the region, least of all those of the Palestinians who have struggled to make a decent living. If the international community is serious about finding a peaceful solution to the conflict, it needs to stop using the conflict as a 'political football' and engage in serious efforts to bring about a viable solution. With the Arab peace initiative and people in the region exhausted by confrontation, the conflict may be 'ripe' for resolution, and the United Nations is better positioned than other actors to capitalise on this mood.

The paper is structured as follows. It will look at both Israeli and Palestinian perceptions of the United Nations and its weaknesses. This will be followed by an exploration of possible alternatives to the United Nations as a lead actor in the region, including the United States, the European Union, and the so-called Quartet. It will then make a case for the United Nations, detailing what it brings to the table, and concluding that both the United Nations and the parties to the conflict must engage in serious efforts to capitalise on the potential for a peaceful settlement. It will begin, however, by outlining earlier attempts at United Nations mediation and an analysis of their shortcomings.

2 http://www.un.org/reform/peace_security.shtml

United Nations Mediation Efforts

Within the context of the United Nations, the *act of mediation* describes the 'political skills utilised in efforts carried out by the Secretary-General or his Representatives, through the Secretary-General's Good Offices'.³ These efforts are carried out in keeping with the principles of the Charter 'when those in conflict either seek or accept the assistance of the United Nations with the aim to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict'.

In addition to mediation, the United Nations has been involved in various diplomatic efforts to bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an end, promoting comprehensive regional peace since its inception. Until the establishment of the so-called Quartet earlier this decade, the United Nations had been involved in every negotiation attempt in an indirect way, because negotiations always revolved around a possible settlement based on United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

Early United Nations mediation efforts included the following:

- In 1947, the British Government requested that the United Nations form a committee to discuss the future of Mandatory Palestine. The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) was established in 1947. Among the Committee's recommendations were two proposals: the majority of the Committee agreed on the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state; the minority recommended an independent Federal Structure consisting of Arab and Jewish entities with Jerusalem as its capital.
- On 29 November 1947, the General Assembly passed Resolution 181 – the Partition Plan. The Jewish Agency, then the representative of the Jewish population, accepted the plan despite major discontent, while the Arabs rejected it. The British Mandate came to an end on 14 May 1948.
- On 15 July 1948, the Security Council passed Resolution 54, which ordered all parties to call a cease-fire in the strongest possible terms, stating that any violation of this cease-fire would qualify as a 'breach of the peace' under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter and trigger further action. However, no such action was taken.
- In April 1949, the United Nations Truce Consular Commission for Palestine (UNTCC) hosted a conference in Lausanne, failing to achieve a consensus on the partition boundaries or the question of refugees. Nevertheless, Israel became a permanent member of the United Nations on 11 May 1949.

3 <http://peacemaker.unlb.org/glossary.php?f=M&d=184#d184>

- A mediation proposal arrived with Security Council Resolution 242, dated 22 October 1967, following the Six-Day-War. The text refers to a withdrawal from territories, termination of all claims and the independence of all states involved. Israel accepted it but insisted on addressing the withdrawal from occupied territories through direct negotiations, thus excluding the United Nations. Egypt and Jordan accepted this proposal, whereas Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) strongly rejected it, saying that the resolution had, in essence, concluded that the Palestinian issue was merely a refugee issue. The resolution was not enforced and is still controversial to this day.

As this overview shows, even in the first years and decades of the conflict, the United Nations was often sidelined in peacemaking efforts in the region. Although the Security Council has 'primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security' according to the Charter, it has not been able to address the Israel-Palestine conflict. Some states, especially the United States, have used their influence to keep the issue off the Council's agenda. The General Assembly, on the other hand, has taken a more active role in the conflict, repeatedly calling on parties to respect human rights. Although in theory it is possible for the General Assembly to 'overrule' the Security Council under the so-called Uniting for Peace Resolution, this rarely happens. The Assembly is unable to compel the parties to work towards peace since its resolutions only have moral and symbolic weight and are not legally binding.

The United Nations' practical role in recent decades, therefore, has been restricted to the activities of the Secretary-General and his envoys, supported by the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), which was established in 1992 and has come to play a central role in conflict prevention. The DPA is responsible for policy toward the Middle East peace process and provides support and guidance to the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO), based in Gaza, Jerusalem and Ramallah. UNSCO was created in 1994, immediately after the Oslo Accords were concluded, and serves as the political focal point for United Nations' activities in support of the peace process. Its Special Coordinator is in permanent contact with the parties to the conflict, exchanging views and making available the 'good offices' of the Secretary-General. He also promotes effective coordination between the Palestinian Authority, the Government of Israel and the international community, including the United Nations.

More recently, the Secretary-General has been supported by DPA in his participation in the so-called Quartet for Middle East Peace, which works for a resolution of the conflict based on Security Council resolutions and the two-state vision laid out in the so-called Road Map of 2003. The Quartet consists of the four principal international actors engaged in the peace process – the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Russia.

The DPA has always played a role in providing 'good offices' and mediation, but the staff that were allocated for these tasks were assigned on an ad hoc basis. They were lacking mediation experience as well as the needed political, cultural and

historical background in order to perform their tasks successfully. As a result, the Secretary General found it difficult to deal with armed conflicts and disputes in an appropriate manner. Recently, it was decided to professionalize the DPA's mediation efforts and give it greater capacity to help prevent conflict, as a way of strengthening the United Nations and making it more efficient. In November 2007, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon initiated a process which led to the creation of Mediation Support Offices in March 2008; this was followed by the creation of a 'standby' mediation force ready to be called upon if required. This team comprises members with expertise in preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and monitoring, and is hoped to improve the United Nations capacity in this area significantly.

This – very short – history of United Nations involvement in mediation with respect to the conflict in the Middle East provides a glimpse of the real difficulties and challenges for the organisation. Instead of seeking to improve its capacity for negotiation, mediation and conciliation, the United Nations has been stumbling, without much conviction, from one contrivance to the next, and has rarely gained command of events or capitalized on its potential for bringing peace and reconciliation to the region. Indeed, as will be shown in the following sections, the lack of action, bias, and political rancour marks both Palestinian and Israeli perceptions of the United Nations.

Israel's Perception of the United Nations

Israel has found it hard to accept the United Nations claim to be a neutral mediator. Successive Israeli governments (as well as much of the Israeli public) have regarded the institution as inherently biased.

Over the course of several decades, a multitude of United Nations committees and agencies devoted exclusively to what is known as the 'Palestinian Question' has come into existence. This includes the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Human Rights Practices Affecting the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories (SCIIHRP), the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP), and even a website dedicated to Palestinian issues, the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL). In addition, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) has been active in the Palestinian Territories since 2000. One of the United Nations Secretariat's regional divisions – the Special Division for Palestinians' Rights (DPR) – is concerned only with Palestinians.

Much of Israel's ill-feeling towards the United Nations relates to the activities of the General Assembly, which – Israel argues – has singled out Israel for condemnation and provides no fair representation and opportunity to speak for those wishing to promote Israel's case. During the 2007-08 session of the General Assembly, for example, 19 of the 80 resolutions that were voted on related to Israel

and – according to the Israeli government – either condemned the country or were one-sided in their approach.

In Israel's view, the lack of even-handedness is a result of the Assembly's set-up and processes, which make any notion of equality and impartiality impossible. Indeed, most of the resolutions dealing with Israel are initiated by members of the Arab Group and passed by a wide margin, because Arab Group states belong to the two largest blocs in the Assembly – the Non-Aligned Movement (113 members) and the Group of 77 (130 members) – which are both composed of a majority of member states and offer automatic support for resolutions presented by their members.

By contrast, Israel, until recently, was the only member of the United Nations which had been excluded from any regional group. As a result, Israel could not sit on any United Nations body where membership in a regional group was required, including the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council. This situation – which Israel claimed violated the principles of equality enshrined in the Charter – changed only in May 2000, when Israel was accepted as a temporary member of the Western Europe and Other States Group. Still, Israel continues to be excluded from regional group sessions taking place outside New York, and it has no status in the Consultative Group for Human Rights.

As early as 1977, the General Assembly called on members to observe an Annual Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People on 29 November – the very same day on which Israelis celebrate their country's coming into existence. In fact, it was only in 2005 that a special session of the Assembly commemorated the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in Europe. It took the Assembly another year to establish 27 January as the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust.

It may be understandable, therefore, that Israel feels victimised by the United Nations and its institutions. No other people, region or conflict has ever received as much attention from the United Nations as the Palestinian people. This, in Israel's view, creates a false sense of progress and leads to a discourse in which the Palestinians have only rights but no responsibilities. Indeed, Israel argues that, while spending millions of dollars, few of the processes that were established at the United Nations to deal with the conflict serve the interests of the Palestinians or peace with Israel. Rather, by supporting a one-sided narrative, the organisation has become a 'tool of Arab states'. According to Israel's Permanent Mission to the United Nations, these states 'profit twice over: once, because the General Assembly provides them with an excuse to avoid dealing with other conflicts within the Arab and Muslim world; and second, because it enables them to pay lip service to the Palestinians through United Nations action that cost[s them] little but brings considerable political benefit'.

Moses Moskovitz eloquently summed up the Israeli sense of disillusionment with the United Nations. 'Israel always stood condemned by the very resolution which ordered the inquiry; the issues were almost always prejudged, the allegations set

forth as proven facts, and the members of the fact-finding bodies blithely appointed even though their bias was universal knowledge'.

Palestinian Perceptions

Like the Israelis, Palestinians too consider the United Nations to be biased and inefficient, albeit for entirely different reasons. Their sense of grievance revolves not around the General Assembly but the Security Council, which they say is dominated by the United States and responsible for the non-implementation of many of the resolutions that have been passed in favour of the Palestinians.

The PLO was granted observer status at the United Nations in 1974. As an observer, the PLO has been invited to participate in all the sessions and work of the General Assembly, and attend all international conferences convened under the auspices of the General Assembly or any other organ of the United Nations.⁴ In addition, from 1988, the PLO's designation was changed to 'Palestine'.

Despite their inclusion in the international body, Palestinians feel that the institutional structures of the United Nations are outdated. In their view, the United Nations reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945 and should have been modernised and reformed long ago. This is especially true for the Security Council. The Palestinians' view is that many of the resolutions that have been passed in the General Assembly and the Security Council are never enforced by the United Nations because of the composition of the Security Council, which includes the United States and other Western powers as permanent members with the right to veto any motion that is brought to the Council's attention. Indeed, the Palestinians believe that the United States is exercising its veto power unevenly in Israel's favour by vetoing any initiative that could be seen to be impacting Israel's interests in a negative way.

According to Palestinian diplomats, the threat or anticipation of an American veto tends to be sufficient in preventing resolutions from being tabled in the first place. Likewise, General Assembly resolutions often fail to include any enforcement mechanisms, knowing that these would be struck down if they ever came to be debated by the Security Council.

The Palestinian Delegate to the United Kingdom, Manuel Hassassian, argues that the current set-up of the United Nations makes it 'quite impossible' to have fair and symmetric negotiations. It has led to a situation in which the United Nations – which, in theory, is committed to the principle of equality – favours the stronger party over the weaker one. In practice, Israel – through its special relationship with the United States – has consistently been the 'top dog' and could prevent the United Nations from doing anything it considered to be against its interests. The Palestinians, on the other hand, have only had international goodwill to operate with. Though supported by the Arab and Muslim states, Hassassian maintains that the Palestinians have never had the power or strategic depth to match Israel's support from the United States. As a result, while Palestinians agree that the United Nations

4 <http://www.un.int/palestine/status.shtml>

has supported the Palestinian cause in terms of rhetoric, there is a sense that no firm actions have ever been taken to match the General Assembly's 'fine words'.

According to Hassassian, in an ideal world, the United Nations would set a timeline for implementing the most important Security Council resolutions relating to the conflict. This would be followed by a series of international conferences to include all stakeholders who – in turn – would be asked to agree on the best way forward. These conferences would be hosted by a truly independent United Nations, capable of mediating between Israel and the Palestinians and brokering a peace based on a symmetrical relationship rather than one-sided power politics.

Alternatives to the United Nations?

Given the alienation and, in some cases, hostility towards the United Nations felt by both Palestinians and Israelis, the call for alternatives is perfectly understandable. Yet, when looking at some of the supposed alternatives in greater detail, it quickly becomes clear that – despite the United Nations' many flaws and imperfections – it remains an indispensable ingredient in any negotiated settlement. Indeed, as will be shown in this section, neither the European Union (EU) nor the United States, nor the so-called Quartet, will by themselves be in a position to capitalise on the 'ripeness' of both sides and transform it into sustainable negotiations.

First, the European Union is perceived by both Israelis and Palestinians as a secondary player that does not have a coherent agenda of its own. For the Palestinians, in fact, the EU stance on many policy issues is often seen as equivalent to that of the United States, and therefore not acceptable. As much as they appreciate some European countries' pro-Palestinian sympathies and rhetoric, they do not expect a real breakthrough from the European Union.⁵

The Israeli stance towards the EU is marked by two perceptions. On the one hand, Israel perceives the EU to be potentially biased because of its significant financial contributions to the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian society more widely. Although European support for Palestinian institutions – which includes the building of governmental and trade institutions as well as civil society – is largely understood and welcomed as an important contribution to stability in the Palestinian Territories, it continues to be perceived by some as a sign of bias and lack of even-handedness.

In addition, there appears to be a lack of unity in EU policy towards Israel. EU member states' declarations on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often contradict each other or run contrary to what is thought to be the official EU line. Sometimes they are merely seen as confusing and help blur the overall EU rationale. The new Netanyahu government in Israel, for example, was responded to entirely differently by various

5 Schmid, Dorothee. 'European Views of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Contribution of Member States to Framing EU Policies', in *The Middle East Under Fire: EU-Israel Relations in a Region Between War and Conflict Resolution*, Nathanson, Roby and Stetter, Stephan, eds. Tel Aviv: Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2007).

EU member states. Even if the condemnation of its policies by some governments will not be backed by strong action, this still contributes to the confused and largely negative perception of the EU in Israel.

Europe, of course, is a strong and strategic ally of Israel in terms of commerce, trade, education and tourism, but this does not necessarily translate into political sympathy or leverage. In fact, some of the limitations imposed on the export of goods that originate from within the disputed territories are a cause of resentment.

As for the United States, it is not the country's weakness but, rather, its strength and long-standing commitment to Israel which have made it an unsuitable broker, especially in the eyes of the Palestinians. For Israelis, the United States has been a friendly ally since the 1960s and increasingly so from the late 1970s. The special relationship between the two nations is defined not only by commerce, aid and trade, but also by shared ideologies and values, which are believed to go beyond the politics of any individual American administration. While the new American president may want to change his government's approach, it is not at all clear yet whether this will translate into a new and vigorous commitment to resolving the conflict, nor is it obvious how its multitude of domestic and international commitments will allow the United States to play the role of 'best leading actor' – even if it wanted to.

All this is well understood by the Palestinians, who argue that the United States will be standing with the state of Israel no matter what government is in place, not least because of strong domestic support, the so-called 'Israel lobby', and the perception that America's geostrategic interests are served by its alliance with Israel. Hassassian, for example, does not predict any dramatic change in policy in the short or medium term, stating that the relationship between Israel and the United States is akin to a 'holy marriage'.

For this reason, the appointment of Senator George Mitchell as the US Middle East Envoy is not expected to make a significant difference. Although perceived as highly credible and well respected by the Palestinians, Mitchell – like President Obama – is not seen as sufficiently powerful to overturn what amounts to a settled pro-Israeli doctrine in American policy. Both men can facilitate a process, no doubt, but when it comes to making decisions, Congress, domestic lobbies and national geostrategic interests are believed to assert themselves. Their influence, the Palestinians believe, will be difficult to overcome.

Indeed, Hassassian argues that the inability of supposed brokers such as the European Union and the United States to make any progress has been highly damaging. Because of the current stalemate and the absence of any genuine progress by the stakeholders involved, Palestinians have come to look for alternatives to the 'two-state solution', which will make any breakthrough even more difficult to achieve. In Hassassian's view, talk of a one-state solution – a binational state encompassing Jews and Palestinians – is 'a fantasy as far as I'm concerned, for I know that Israel will never accept a one state solution'.

Against this background, some have argued for a stronger role for the so-called Quartet, which consists of the United States, Russia, the European Union and the

United Nations (thus combining the strengths and weaknesses of the different actors described in this paper). However, the Quartet's record thus far is discouraging. It has backed the so-called Road Map and supported the Annapolis declaration, but never assumed an independent and/or constructive role in peacemaking. Following Tony Blair's appointment as the Quartet's Envoy to the Middle East, a debate about the Quartet's – and therefore Blair's – precise role ensued. There was no clear outcome, but it became obvious that the different actors, especially the United States, had no interest in sharing or ceding their political authority. Rather, they believed that the principal role of the Quartet lay in strengthening Palestinian infrastructure, promoting economic development, and monitoring Israel's policies in the Palestinian territories. The Quartet may be a useful coordinating mechanism, but in terms of taking leadership on peacemaking, it is no more than a sideshow.

The Promise of the United Nations

Having exhausted all possible alternatives, we are ending where we started – that is, with the United Nations. Despite all its flaws and weaknesses – and in spite of Israel's obvious preference for the United States as the leading peacemaker – the United Nations still offers the best chance to lead the conflicting parties in the direction of a negotiated settlement.

There are both political and practical reasons why the United Nations is better positioned now than in the past to perform this role. Politically, only the United Nations includes Arab states and it is therefore the only organisation which can deliver the widest possible support from this important constituency. Indeed, the Arab world – represented by the Arab League – has come a long way since the Khartoum Conference in 1967, where they adopted the so-called 'Three No's' (no peace with Israel; no recognition of Israel; no negotiation with Israel) as their primary policy towards the conflict. In 2002, and again in 2007, Arab states reached out to Israel, offering what Israel had always desired and demanded: recognition, normalisation and legitimacy in the eyes of the Arab world. The Arab Peace Initiative was welcomed by many in Israel, and even those who remained sceptical appreciated its significance as a turning point in Arab states' attitudes towards Israel.

If – other than security – Israel's aspirations are those of legitimacy, recognition and normalisation, then the United Nations offers the best possible channel through which to achieve these aims. No solution to the conflict will be durable unless it is widely supported, and only the United Nations can bring about the breadth and depth of support that is needed in order to make any agreement stick. By bringing along key players that have thus far been on the sidelines of international efforts, such as the Arab states and Turkey, the United Nations can offer incentives which no other country or institution can deliver by themselves.

In practical terms, it is undoubtedly true that political conflicts, interests and agendas will not disappear overnight, and that some of these issues will endure within the United Nations and hinder its ability to move the situation forward. At the

same time, if the United Nations were to be given a serious role in bringing about peace, perhaps many of the actors currently involved in playing 'political games' would re-consider their attitude and think about approaching the United Nations in a more serious way.

In contrast to earlier decades, when Secretaries-General did not have the necessary infrastructure or personnel to carry out the kind of systematic and sustained efforts that are necessary for effective dispute resolution, the United Nations now has a professional mediation support team which can help ensure that each party's interests are represented and mitigate clashes of interests. In addition, the United Nations – perhaps more than any other external actor – has deep knowledge of the region and maintains close connections with all regional and state actors in the Middle East. It has a wide presence through its envoys and agencies, which serve as listening posts but can also be used to facilitate the peace process.

Taken together, therefore, the United Nations offers a highly attractive 'package' without which peacemaking efforts in the Middle East are unlikely to succeed.

What Needs to Happen

The United Nations has received much criticism from states and other actors over its failure to bring solutions to some of the gravest problems in international relations today. This does not, however, make the United Nations unnecessary or obsolete. There are still many problems where a preventive response by the United Nations will be warranted, either because the governments or parties concerned call for it, or because of the magnitude of the problem and the absence of any other effective response.

There remains enormous scope for the United Nations to do better in assisting the resolution of disputes, both those in which it plays a primary role and those where it can assist in a secondary role by quietly providing expert assistance and experience.⁶ The United Nations as a robust international coalition of world powers is the last and only resort for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy. All other possibilities have been exhausted over the years – to no avail. The international community has for too long abdicated its responsibilities with regard to a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace, and has watched helplessly (if not indifferently) what sometimes looked like the collective suicide of the Israelis and Palestinians. It is time, in other words, for the international community to be empowered to resolve the conflict.⁷ As Terje Rød-Larsen, former United Nations Under Secretary General and Special Envoy to the peace process, put it: ‘Tomorrow’s world needs more multilateral capacity not less. It needs a stronger United Nations, capable of adapting and strengthening its capacity to address the realities of the twenty-first century’.⁸

The question remains: how can the gaps between diplomatic rhetoric and institutional reality be bridged?

It seems clear that changes to the United Nations Charter, like all constitutional changes, are desirable but unlikely to happen quickly. Proponents of any Charter-based reform plan will face great difficulty in winning the necessary two-thirds vote in the General Assembly and still more difficulty obtaining ratifications from two-thirds of all member states, including the mandatory endorsement of the five permanent members (P5). In spite of public declarations to the contrary, the P5 are content with the present arrangements and oppose any changes that might dilute or challenge their power or expand their club. According to many critics, the Security Council remains inflexible, oligarchic and out of touch with the world.⁹

Yet there are other mechanisms within the United Nations which can be capitalised upon: for example, the Peace Building Commission, the above-mentioned Mediation Office, and the Peacebuilding Fund – all created in the wake of the 2005 World Summit. Also, no other multinational actor has comparable experience, having deployed thousands of civilian and military personnel abroad and engaging

6 Evans, Gareth. *Cooperating for Peace – The Global Agenda for the 1990s and Beyond*. St. Leonard's, Australia: Allen Unwin (2004) p.63.

7 Ben-Ami, Shlomo. *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli-Arab Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006), p. 327.

8 International Peace Institute Papers (2009).

9 <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/reform/2005/0713theses.htm>

in numerous field operations of high complexity. Despite the US dominance in the Security Council and the Arab bloc policies in the General Assembly, no other actor is more capable of building broad international alliances that can act collectively to advance the resolution of major conflicts.

It is clear, though, that in order for the United Nations to perform this role both Israelis and Palestinians need to address their own shortcomings as well.

For the Palestinians, it is time to choose. For too long, the Palestinian problem was the Arab states’ favourite political ‘blockbuster’. But the hyper-politicisation of the conflict has done little to improve the lives of ordinary Palestinians, who struggle to lead a decent life in the West Bank and Gaza. In Bill Clinton’s words, it is time for the Palestinians to call ‘for a game off of the political football’. The enemies of peace are making substantial gains – and while violence and ‘resistance’ can mobilise the masses, it cannot feed the urge for prosperity and development.

As for Israel, policymakers need to understand that the notion of ‘security first’ can now be enhanced by international enforcement. Israel can finally gain the status of a legitimate state in the eyes of the international community, integrating into international organisations as well as expanding its trade, commerce, tourism and economic and scientific ties.

Israel’s Security Doctrine is based on self-reliance. Circumstances have changed, however, and it may be time to consider whether to integrate the concept of international legitimacy and the good services of the international community in the resolution of its conflicts with the Arab World as an important component of that doctrine. After all, in times when certain nations still call for the annihilation of the ‘Jewish Entity’ and when Israel’s reputation in the eyes of the world is at an all-time low, active participation in United Nations’ mediation efforts is perhaps in the best interest of the state of Israel. In the words of former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami: ‘The state of Israel was born out of an international proclamation of the UN’s General Assembly Resolution of 20 November 1947 – and its borders were decided in the 1949 in Armistice Agreements brokered by the international community represented by the UN’s Deputy Secretary General. What had started out as an international endeavor will now have to be completed as such’.¹⁰

The Arab-Israeli Conflict is now no longer the sole defining conflict in the region. It still remains critical, for its resolution remains a fundamental prerequisite for changing the political and diplomatic dynamics in the region and beyond. Change has to be based on the Arab Initiative and relevant Security Council resolutions.

The United Nations has chosen to become a party to the dispute between the Arabs and the Israelis and has thus taken a role in a desperate play divorced from clear principle or belief, and in total disregard of the Charter and the international values for which it stands.¹¹ The vitality and effectiveness of the United Nations

10 Ben-Ami, Shlomo. *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli-Arab Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006), p. 377

11 Moskovitz, Moses. *The Roots and Reaches of United Nations Actions and Decisions*. Maryland: Sijthoff & Noordhoff (1980), p. 115.

depends not so much upon changing its basic structure and rewriting its Charter as upon the resolve of its member states to come to terms with a reality that offers a choice between cooperation in areas of mutual interest or confrontation in areas of divergent interest. Therein lies the opportunity for bringing about benevolent change in the world organisation.

The United Nations cannot hope to thrive and to fulfil its purpose until it confronts its own motivations and is able to extract itself from the passions which surround it. Either it develops a spirit of fairness and objectivity and fosters an atmosphere of intellectual honesty or integrity, in which all governments and all peoples may place their trust or it cannot hope to achieve public acceptance as a serious actor in shaping the future.

About ICSR

ICSR is a unique partnership of King's College London, the University of Pennsylvania, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (Israel), and the Regional Centre for Conflict Prevention Amman (Jordan). Its aim is to counter the growth of radicalisation and political violence by bringing together knowledge and leadership. For more information, see [**www.icsr.info**](http://www.icsr.info)

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