

# United nations in the israel-palestine conflict



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What was the role that the United Nations (UN) played in the conflict between Palestine and Israel since the 1940s, up until the beginning of the 21st century? This is a topic that particularly interests me as an IB student because of its origins and its current development. On a personal level, I am interested in the topic because of my childhood and adolescence in the United Arab Emirates, where I came across a number of interpretations regarding the subject. I feel that it is an important topic as, growing up, I made subconscious links between world issues and this symbolic conflict. These links are strengthened by world politics today.

I will make use of a number of primary and secondary sources to research the question, including a variety of internet sources and books to back support my claims. One particular book caught my attention during my studies of the topic. It is Noam Chomsky's "What We Say Goes". It is a collection of interviews with different journalists at different times, in which they ask him about his thoughts on the current political and military situation in the USA and other countries around the world. He gives educated insight on dilemmas that the world faces today, with particular reference to the Palestine-Israel conflict.

The conclusion I reached when writing this essay is that this conflict cannot possibly be resolved by simple observers of the situation. I feel that quick UN intervention could have been helpful to the people but due to outside factors, this was not possible. The wounds endured by both Palestine and Israel would take years to heal if, hypothetically speaking, the conflict were to be resolved now. Unfortunately, these wounds are constantly reopened and lead to more pain.

## **Introduction**

This topic is particularly important in modern day society, as I feel that it is a potential disaster zone. The history behind the Israel-Palestinian conflict is truly fascinating as it relates a message of passion and honor to people's faiths and beliefs. The fact that this conflict has turned Jerusalem, the place that historically has the most religious significance, into one of the most dangerous cities in the world is one that I deplore. How can something so precious in humanity's entire heritage be used as a message of violence and seemingly irresolvable conflict? I have decided to study the UN's take on the situation and how the organization has attempted to deal with the problems at hand. I find that the decisions made by the UN are generally viable alternatives to the conflicts that cause it to intervene in different countries. My question; 'What was the role that the United Nations played in the conflict between Palestine and Israel since the 1940s, up until the beginning of the 21st century?' is focused at finding out why, with all the UN's decision making, a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine has not yet been reached. Having grown up in a young Arab state, the United Arab Emirates, I feel I can see the point of view of the Israelis, while on the other hand, having listened to the Arab point cause, I understand the anger that the Palestinians and other Arab states must feel towards the Jewish state. The conflict is not only over land, but over faith as well, which is extremely dangerous, for there is nothing worse than a holy war in my opinion.

## **Origin of UN Intervention**

After the Second World War, the creation of the state of Israel was followed by numerous cases of aggression towards this state as a protest against its

existence in the area. Palestinian refugees wanted to return to their homeland after the 1947-48 war between Arab and Jewish communities in the area, six months before the separation of the British mandate of Palestine. The UN passed Resolution 194[1], which gave Palestinian refugees the right to return, in addition to them receiving compensations for their losses. The UN Partition Plan was drawn up under Resolution 181[2] in November 1947, giving recommending the separation of the region into an Arab state of Palestine, a Jewish state of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. The establishment of the state of Israel was declared on the 14th of May 1948, which was followed by an all out attack by surrounding Arab countries in support of their Palestinian counterparts. This was the start of a long and painful struggle for both Israel and Palestine, a conflict which has yet to be resolved, with its violence and extremism only increasing in later years.

### **UN involvement Pre-Six Day War**

It seems that, after the partition plan and the creation of Israel, the UN was not heavily involved in the conflict, nor was it particularly concerned with it in terms of political and humanitarian aid to the region. The concern was that war would occur between Egypt and Israel, as Egypt opposed Israel's foreign policies. The UN placed peacekeepers on the border between both countries and the UN Refugee Works Agency (UNRWA) took care of refugees until they could return home. These were the same refugees that had been mentioned in Resolution 194. This can be explained by the dominant European and American powers' interests in the region after the Second World War. These powers were leading the Security Council and had the power to prevent extra UN involvement in solving the conflict. These powers supported the

Israeli state and would not openly admit to supporting their cause because of the huge number of refugees fleeing Palestine. Noam Chomsky says in his book "What We Say Goes" that the USA saw, and still sees, a potential US powerbase in Israel.[3] From here, we can argue that the Security Council's leading powers did not allow for the UN to take a more significant action.

As tensions increased between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries, the US supplied the Jewish state with advanced military equipment in 1966, [4] for it felt that in order to keep its ally in the Middle East, it should at least be able to defend itself against possible and likely invasion from neighboring countries. James Feron referred to Israel as "a first line to stave off America's direct involvement".[5] He implied that the USA realized that the situation would be hard to handle and that the local Middle Eastern countries would not take kindly to another foreign power intervening in their affairs after the mandates had been given self-determination. The tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors culminated to the point where Nasser demanded the removal of UN troops from Egypt and closed the Straits of Tiran to Israel, leading to the latter bombing the Egyptian air force in Cairo, sparking the Six Day War in 1967. By the end of this war, Israel had taken over the rest of the Palestinian land, including the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, including the Golan Heights in Syria and Sinai in Egypt.[6] Over a million more Palestinians found themselves under Israeli authority while US-Israeli relations eased greatly.

### **UN Involvement Post-Six Day War**

The UN reacted to this by passing Resolution 242 which condemned the actions taken by Israel. It called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces in the <https://assignbuster.com/united-nations-in-the-israel-palestine-conflict/>

occupied territories, yet made little reference to the Palestinian refugees. Years later, this would cause more tensions between the two states, as allowing that Palestinian refugees back in to their former lands would mean relocating thousands of Israelis who had made their homes there. In the case of Egyptian Sinai, eleven years after the invasion, it was given back to Egypt and thousands of Israelis had to move to make way for the Egyptians to return to their lands. The emergence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) encouraged the UN to repeatedly vote for a peace conference between the conflicting countries under its supervision. The PLO was included for it was a viable organization and had some potential in aiding the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The constant US VETO meant that this conference did not take place. In the midst of the Cold War, the UN was, technically speaking, controlled by the USA and USSR, always at odds as to what to do next.[7]

In 1970, Nasser's successor, al-Sadat, began reconciliation with the USA, for he strongly believed that it was the only power which was able to convince Israel to return Sinai to Egypt. As a sign of good faith to the American power, he demanded the withdrawal of all Soviet troops from Egypt. This was not enough to get the USA's support however, as American diplomats did not take kindly to the Egyptians, who began to believe that war was the only solution. The US was starting to feel that it would lose its Arab supporters in the region, which was troubling as it had a steady relation with OPEC. Saudi Arabia in May 1973 signaled that this could not continue as long as USA so obviously backed Israel as local Arab powers would not be willing to support their enemy's friend. This was agreed with American oil companies, who

recognized the huge financial benefits of having a good relation with a country rich in oil. The economic superiority that the USA would gain over Europe would be huge and would allow for massive American interests development in Arab countries. All of a sudden, Israel found itself being pressured by its long time ally to leave the occupied territories. Soon after that, on 6th October 1973, Egypt and Syria worked in a coalition against Israel to take back their lost territories. OPEC soon decided to cut oil production by 25% and put a prohibition on US oil shipments.

### **UN actions after 1973**

The UN Security Council called for peace talks between USA and the USSR as tensions were rising over USSR's determination of protecting Egypt against Israeli aggression. The oil embargo set on the USA by OPEC was a big stressor for the US, so it worked with the USSR to call for a ceasefire between Israel and the other warring countries. All were invited to the conferences. The USSR had not stopped its communication with Egypt, even after the expulsion of its troops, for it felt that it was a country that could counter the US's advances in the region through Israel. Naturally, the peace talks achieved little due to differed interests between each country and the US sponsored peace agreements between Israel and the Arab nations without the aid of the UN.

Once again, these talks did not include Palestine, which resulted in huge international support for the PLO, led by Yasser Arafat. He appealed to the UN General Assembly and called for a recognition of the right of Palestinian right to self-determination. This, in addition to giving the PLO an observer's status within the UN, was granted in a vote with an overwhelming for the <https://assignbuster.com/united-nations-in-the-israel-palestine-conflict/>

Palestinian cause. Only USA and Israel, as well as two other countries voted against the recognition. It was a good move on Arafat's part to go to the General Assembly, as, had he gone to the Security Council, the USA would have surely vetoed his initiative.

The peace talks sponsored by the USA between Israel and Egypt ended very well, with Sinai being returned to Egypt and the later signing a non-aggression pact in 1975. The installments, however, were slowed until 1977, when al-Sadat travelled to Jerusalem to finalize the evacuation of Israeli residents from Sinai. The UN was not needed in the agreements, which the US took advantage of by moving quickly to take control of the diplomatic situation. It hoped that other countries would follow suit and move to make peace negotiations with Israel after Egypt and Israel had signed the Camp David Accords, but this did not happen, for the Arab nations would only negotiate peace terms under UN auspices.

In June 1980, the European common market supported Israeli security but this time included the Palestinian cause in their discussions. They stressed that Palestine had the right to self-determination and called for the PLO's involvement in a peace talk. This was issued in the Venice Declaration, to which the USA retaliated by stressing on its opposition of the PLO, causing Europe to pull out of Middle Eastern diplomatic maneuvers. The UN reacted quickly to Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1978, passing Resolution 425 which called for an immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces from the country. This was done, however Israel ignored that Resolution in 1982, when it invaded again, under anti-PLO pretences. It withdrew eighteen years later.



## **UN and the Oslo Process**

UN exclusion continued throughout the 80s and 90s in Israel-Palestine peace talks. It participated in a few minor international conflicts but could do nothing against the Israeli occupation of the Gaza strip and West Bank. The Oslo Declaration of Principles was signed in 1994, after which the General Assembly discovered that the Resolutions made by the UN regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict were to be made obsolete by the US as negotiations were taking place. Israel bombed a UN refugee camp in Lebanon, wounding and killing many. The report issued to the General Assembly caused a lot of anger towards Israel from other countries, as it showed Israel's non-commitment to the United Nations. Western European powers were invited to spend billions on its infrastructure. They were still kept out of any political or military decisions regarding the opposed peoples.

## **UN and Camp David Summit**

By 2000, no progress had been made regarding the most important problems facing Israel and Palestine during the Oslo interim period. Problems such as the Palestinian border and state, what to do about Jerusalem, Israeli settlers and Palestinian refugees had yet to be resolved and smaller issues had yet to be resolved, despite the promise of a quick solution. Gaza still had problems with its air and seaports as well as security arrangements.

American president Clinton, taking the initiative for a resolution to the problem, invited both parties once again to Camp David to discuss the issues at hand and possible answers to the existing problems. Discussion failed and the situation worsened when Ariel Sharon declared Temple Mount to be under complete Israeli control. Temple Mount is the third holiest site for

Muslims and first holiest for the Jews. This infuriated Palestinians, who protested and were shot down by Israeli forces during a march the following day.

This was a signal to the UN and other countries in the region that the USA's control of Israel had grown weaker over the past years. If Israel dared to shoot down protesters, it was a sign that it was confident enough without the USA's backing, even with their disapproval, to decide on its own actions without first consulting its closest ally. Outside powers suddenly came into play, once again opening diplomatic relations with Israel.

The second Intifada[8]escalated and the Arab League converged in Cairo in October 2000. This was a huge change, as the League wanted to prove that the Palestinian cause was more important than the Gulf War. This was a cry against US dominance in the area, as Saddam Hussein, Iraqi president at the time, was invited to the summit. Anti-USA/Israel protests broke out in Middle Eastern capitals, although their governments still relied on American aid for financial or military reasons. Egypt and Jordan, being the only two Arab countries bound to Israel by non-aggression or peace treaties, were the only stable countries in the region. Jordan signed a new trade agreement with the US in mid-crisis.

The summit's statement was not revolutionary as it did not bring any particularly new solutions to the crisis, albeit the language used. It announced full support for the Palestinians and wanted to ask the UN Security Council to put Israel in front of a war crimes tribunal for the killings it had initiated. Efforts of peace-making with Israel were stopped by Arab

nations, although leaving Egypt and Jordan out of this call, as they were the countries with the most ties to Israel. The most impressive achievement of the summit was the accumulation of \$2 billion to donate to the Palestinians to support families of Intifada casualties and to protect the Arab and Muslim quarters of Jerusalem.

## **Outside Intervention**

Outside protests in favor of a change in the Israeli-Palestinian situation began to appear. Where the USA had previously dominated diplomatic maneuvers in the area, the world was seeing a sudden influx of previously unseen intervention, such as a large number of foreign power leaders in the region; the most noticeable of these being the renewed foreign interests in the region. Jacques Chirac (French president and chief of the European Union), Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov, Janvier Solena (EU envoy) were all hurrying to get to the scene as fast as possible. Even the UN Secretary General himself, Kofi Annan, was involved in negotiations leading to the Sharm al-Sheikh summit. The USA was still the leading power in the negotiations, with President Clinton often checking up on the situation as regularly as possible. Kofi Annan, as well as other outside parties were looked down upon by the USA as they were seen as nuisances in the American attempt to regain control over Israel as it once had. That is not to say that the control was absolute, however it did assure many US interests in the Middle East, with Palestine being the least of their worries. The newcomers had to gain Israel's acceptance in order to be considered for peace talks or other conferences regarding the problem in Palestine and with other countries in the region.

Annan certainly was partly responsible for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon, which meant that this new openness towards other nations was genuine on Israel's part. He also convinced UN members to accept Israel as a member of the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) in the General Assembly. Membership of this group, or one similar, is required to gain consideration from the Security Council as well as in the obtaining of other UN perks. Israel appreciated Annan's efforts in his aid of giving it such help as a mediator.

### **Growing UN Involvement within the Conflict**

USA's diminished control over Israel's actions and over the Middle East is a crucial factor for the growing intervention of outside powers, as a result of a lessening amount of options as to what to do about the crisis. Protests in Arab countries led to worsening relations with the US as they showed clear signs of defiance; the most obvious of those being the landing of planes in and out of Baghdad, despite the sanctions imposed on Iraq by the USA. Palestine refused to stop the second Intifada and the propagation of pro-Palestinian media, namely Al-Jazeera, gave people another insight on the power struggle between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East. This limited the potential of the USA to intervene as effectively as it had in the past. Kofi Annan appeared with a solution after three Israeli soldiers were kidnapped on the Lebanese border.

Annan led UN efforts to achieve peace in the region for the Arab countries, urging all governments to follow the plans drawn up by the UN. He hoped for lasting peace and understanding, urging the Palestinians to accept the Israeli ceasefire terms, which include the demand for an international commission

of inquiry, allowing for the UN to gather information on the general affairs of Palestine. The UN recently recognized Palestine as an official state, making it much easier for Palestinian economy to develop.

### **Diminutive UN Involvement in the Conflict**

In order to maintain control over the diplomatic situation in Israel, it was essential for the US to disregard established international understandings. The UN attempted to solve the crisis numerous times by calling for international peace conferences, based on existing UN Resolutions dealing with Israel and Palestine, such as Resolutions 194 and 242 amongst others. Israel refused to take part and the US backed its decision.

The US referred to Resolution 242 when speaking of a peace process and a viable option to a unanimous agreement in the region, all the while keeping Israel-Palestine interaction and diplomacy under its control. It assured that it was a medium for communication between the two peoples, while at the same time backing Israel's major moves on Arab countries. Requirements in international law such as the agreements made at the Geneva Conventions, which required Israel to protect civilians of the occupied territory and illegalize the settling of Israeli nationals into occupied land, as well as pre-existing UN Resolutions were largely ignored to accommodate for the American sponsored equal opportunity peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians to come to an agreement as to how to resolve the conflict. Naturally, neither power would come to an agreement by themselves, even with the USA as a mediator[9] in the talks, for their aims were too different. The main disagreements were over what do with about the refugees and how to deal with Jerusalem, both cultures regarding the city as a place of

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piousness and sanctity. Neither side would agree to stop the bombings as long as an agreement in favor of themselves was not reached.

The US-Israeli coalition stated in 1991 at the Madrid talks that it would not allow the UN to take part in the crisis. The UN was ignored again at the Oslo Process. The USA also informed the General Assembly that Madeleine Albright, who had warned the UN that the US planned on ignoring the Resolutions passed concerning Israel-Palestine, that the dismantlement of a consensus regarding Palestine was her primary objective. At the same time, final status issues were simply disregarded for at least seven years.

Signatories of the Geneva Conventions came together in 1999 to examine Israel's dedication and following of the Conventions. It was an inconclusive meeting, for it lasted ten minutes to avoid angering the new Israeli government at the time. The list goes on.

The necessity of returning the crisis to UN supervision was growing essential, as there were rising numbers of casualties caused by the conflict, a strict ongoing siege and serious military occupation of Palestine. The UN Resolutions remained largely ignored and people called for a new, UN-led peace process. The US interests in the region, by this point were mainly focused on oil and coming to terms with governments in the Arabian Gulf, turning its attention away from the Israel-Palestine crisis for a time.

## **Conclusion**

UN involvement has not been consistent since the intensification of the crisis in 1948. It has been faced with numerous difficult situations, to which it could do little or nothing. The reason for this would be the already heavy

involvement of the United States, due to its interests in Israel and securing a powerful ally in a region rich in oil and other resources. However limited the United Nations' physical intervention was, the resolutions passed regarding the crisis seemed reasonable and would certainly have helped to deal with the situation, had they been adhered to by the countries concerned. The recent recognition of the State of Palestine by the UN is a huge step forward in the struggle for peace in the region. It gives the Palestinian cause more weight when appealing to the United Nations and will surely give it more international support. The problem for the UN when getting involved in this conflict is that it is such a long lasting struggle, with horrors caused by one side towards the other still fresh in people's minds, as is the case for many long standing conflicts. The UN has made several accusations regarding Israel, claiming a "grave and massive violations of human rights of the Palestinian people by Israel".

Victimizing the Palestinians will not help them in their fight against occupation. " Hamas, which has long been calling for a two-state settlement in accord with the international consensus"[10]yet it has never been understood, it seems, by Israel or the USA. If I had a say in the situation, I would draw up a new partition plan giving Israel access to the northern part of the region, given to Palestine in the original partition plan, giving it access to the sea. The countries should then be split more or less diagonally while still leaving a corridor for the Palestinians to access Jerusalem. Unlike the original plan, I believe that a country is stronger if it is not split into different regions as presented by the UN. Jerusalem should have been made a dual-state capital, forcing Muslims and Jews to work together for the benefit of the

city, while keeping its religious importance intact. Had the plan been drawn better, I believe that the conflict could have been easily solved. Persuading other Arab states to recognize Israel would have only been a matter of time, for they would have followed the Palestinian example and accepted its right to exist.