

## The Involvement of UN in Palestine and the Possibility of a Global Protection Force

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### Introduction

The United Nations peacekeeping missions are mandated to help nations torn by conflict and create conditions for sustainable peace. These peacekeeping operations not only hold legitimacy under the international law but also possess the ability to deploy troops to advance multidimensional domains. Peacekeeping operations are called upon to maintain peace and security, promote human rights, assist in restoring the rule of law, and help conflict-prone areas create conditions for sustainable peace (United Nations, n.d.-a). These missions are formed and mandated according to individual cases. The evolution of the global security environment and the developing situations in conflict-ridden areas require these missions to accordingly transform from ‘traditional’ to ‘robust’ to ‘hybrid’ (e.g., Ishaque, 2021). So why is it that no such model can be seen in restoring peace and protecting the Palestinian civilians in one of the most protracted and deadliest conflicts in history?

The series of Israel’s expansion on Palestinian land and oppression of the natives began as a result of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 that led to Israel’s unilateral declaration of independence in 1948. In the decades-long conflict between the Israeli Occupation Forces and the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian civilians were provided with no reprieve. As a part of systemic violence against the Palestinians by the Israeli authorities, they have faced discriminatory restrictions on movement and worshipping and have been subjected to fundamental human rights violations, including but not limited to the right to life, safety, and property. In the last twenty years, the Protection of Civilians (POC) in Palestine became a separate humanitarian issue from the Palestinian cause which has its ground in the territorial and religious realm. Many different proposals, concerned with the deployment of a neutral international force in the region, were presented to protect the civilians. It is widely believed that the U.N. involvement and creating a global protection force could mitigate the Palestine conflict (see e.g., Blanche, 2003; Kifner, 2002; Spinant, 2002; United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2001). However, the uniqueness of

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the Palestine conflict — due to strong ties between Israel and the United States and the Veto Power in UNSC — poses a major challenge to achieving peace and protecting civilians through the involvement of the United Nations and its peacekeeping missions. Nonetheless, the changing dynamics after the recent episode of violence (in May 2021) and the prototype available in the U.N. peacekeeping history because of the ‘Uniting for Peace Resolution’ may provide a way to overcome this problem.

### **Background and Recent Developments**

As per the U.N. partition plan of 1947, the Palestinian land was divided between Jews and Palestinians while Jerusalem was given the status of an ‘international city’ due to its religious significance for Jews and Muslims alike. When the British rulers could not handle the Arab opposition to the partition plan, they left the region in chaos. As a result, a catastrophe occurred — leaving thousands of Palestinian natives homeless. In addition, Jerusalem was divided between Israeli forces in the West and Jordanian forces in the East. After the war of 1967, Israel violated the U.N. resolution on which it claimed its independence and annexed the whole of Jerusalem (BBC, 2021). For the last 50 years, Israel has been building illegal settlements in Jerusalem to increase Jewish presence in the city. Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood of East Jerusalem, is one such contested land where the right-wing Israeli settlers — supported by the Israeli Government — have evicted many Palestinian families from their homes (see e.g., Alsaafin, 2021). In May 2021, in response to the verdict of the Israeli court on the eviction of six families, Palestinians initiated peaceful protests to save their homes.

This led to confrontations between the Palestinians and Israeli Police. The situation soon escalated when the Israeli Occupation Force attacked the worshippers inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque (the third holiest site in Islam) with rubber-coated steel bullets, teargas, and stun grenades during the Holy month of the Muslims — Ramadan. Meanwhile, the Jewish settlers, in Sheikh Jarrah, attempted to forcefully evict and confiscate the properties of the families against whom the court had given the decision even when the ruling on evictions was delayed for 30 days. This was followed by an exchange of heavy bombings, firing and arrests from the Israeli side and rockets from Hamas. The clashes resulted in the death of 256 Palestinians, including 66 children and 40 women (OCHA, 2021).

### **The U.N. Involvement in Palestine**

These developments drew international condemnation, especially from the Muslim world. Along with criticizing the Israeli occupation forces and their atrocities, the Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, during a conversation with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, proposed the creation of an international force to protect the Palestinians. In addition, the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, in an emergency meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), said that an international protection force should be formed with military and financial

contributions of willing countries (Middle East Monitor, 2021). This idea was also promoted by the Pakistani Foreign Minister while speaking during the special meeting on Palestine at the U.N. General Assembly,

The General Assembly should call for concrete steps to protect the Palestinians. We should deploy an international protection force, as was called for in General Assembly Resolution ES-10/20 and as demanded by the Islamic Summit Conference on 18 May 2018 (Sajid, 2021, para. 3).

The involvement of the United Nations in the Palestine conflict is not a new idea. It dates back to the very creation of Israel, in 1947, when a U.N. resolution proposed a partition plan for the Palestinian land under the British Mandate. The efforts of the United Nations for peacekeeping can be seen from 1948 onwards, in the form of different U.N. missions deployed because of five Arab-Israeli wars. The U.N. Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) was deployed in the West Bank & Gaza in 1948, and it has played the role of a supervisor and observer ever since.<sup>2</sup> Each with a different mandate, the U.N. Disengagement Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights (since 1974) and the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in the south of Lebanon (since 1978) are also operational.<sup>3</sup> It is important to state here that peacekeeping missions in Palestine have not been limited to a body under the U.N. umbrella. As a result of a bilateral agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, a civilian observer mission, The Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), was stationed in Hebron.<sup>4</sup> Many other civilian-led international bodies — including International Solidarity Movement, Christian Peacemakers Team (CPT), and the General International Presence in Palestine (GIPP) — have also had their presence on the ground at some point during all this time (Stephan, 2004). However, none of these diverse arrays of peacekeeping forces incorporated the protection of civilians in their mandates. These missions might have occasionally benefitted the Palestinians, but the genuine involvement of the United Nations to restore sustainable peace in the region is yet to be seen.

With the increasing socio-political unrest in Palestine over the past two decades, many calls were made to create a global protection force for the Palestinian civilians. In 2000, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)<sup>5</sup> put a draft resolution before UNSC which was vetoed by the United States, calling for the deployment of an international force to protect Palestinian civilians and prevent future deaths of innocents in the occupied territories (UNSC, 2001). In 2002, UNSC, following the reinvasion of the (occupied) Palestinian territories by Israel, adopted Resolution 1402

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<sup>2</sup> For further information on UNTSO, please visit <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/untso>

<sup>3</sup> For more information on UNDOF & UNIFIL, please visit <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/undof>  
<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/unifil>

<sup>4</sup> For further information on TIPH, please visit <https://peacemaker.un.org/israelopt-cityhebronII97>

<sup>5</sup> For more information on NAM, please visit <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-203924/>

to stop the violence and assure the withdrawal of Israel from Palestinian cities. Shortly after the adoption of the resolution, Kofi Annan described the casualties on both sides as an “affront to the conscience of mankind” (as cited in Stephan, 2004, p. 256). He called upon UNSC to take proactive measures and send a ‘robust’ peacekeeping force to the region to “halt the tragic and terrifying descent into bloodletting” (Kifner, 2002, para. 1).

Following these developments, the European Parliament, in April 2002, also voted for an international peacekeeping force to be sent to the region under a U.N. mandate (Spinant, 2002). A few months later, the then French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin echoed the words of Annan and said that since all international bodies seemed to be in favor of such a force, it needed to be studied and analyzed to see its potential contribution on the ground. This was followed by the then U.S. Senator John Warner writing to the then U.S. President George Bush, in March 2003, proposing a NATO force for the West Bank and Gaza — modelled on the force deployed in the Balkans — with a slightly different aim of protecting Israeli civilians (Blanche, 2003). Another attempt to bring the plight of the Palestinians to the forefront was made in the Seventh Extraordinary Islamic Summit Conference of OIC held in Istanbul in 2018 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018a). It called for international attempts for protecting the Palestinian population, including dispatching international protection forces (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018b). A U.N. attempt to directly address the civilians in Palestine also came in 2018 when a resolution, titled ‘Protection of the Palestinian civilian population’, was passed in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) with 120 votes in favor, eight against, and 45 abstentions. This resolution was sponsored by Algeria, Turkey, and the State of Palestine; it requested an International Protection Mechanism while recalling the relevant UNGA resolutions on the protection of civilians (UNGA, 2018). However, no further action was taken in this regard.

### **Deploying U.N.-mandated Global Protection Force in the Region?**

Despite a history of proposals favoring the creation of a global force and the recent resurgence of the same demand, there are several challenges in deploying any such ‘force’ in Palestine. The first principle for deploying any peacekeeping mission under the U.N. mandate is the “consent of the parties involved” (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d., para. 4). Israel has been evident in not allowing any such force on the land that it claims to own. During a UNSC debate in 2000, the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, Yehuda Lancy, argued that international intervention was unnecessary and that the presence of an international force could escalate the level of violence and instability (UNSC, 2001).

The former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had categorically opposed the idea of an international force for the reason that these forces were “unnecessary, potentially dangerous and counter-productive” (Blanche, 2003, para. 21; see also Kifner, 2002). Due to this unwillingness of Israel, one of its strongest allies and a member of the U.N. ‘Big 5’ — the United States — prove to be a great hurdle in

allowing the U.N. involvement in the region. Since the *Article 24* of the U.N. Charter gives UNSC the “primary responsibility of the maintenance of international peace and security” (United Nations, 1945, para. 1), any attempts to restore peace in a region require the veto players to be on the same page. In the case of Palestine, at least 53 UNSC resolutions that were critical of Israel have been vetoed by the United States in the last 50 years (United Nations, n.d.-b). Shared national interests and a similar vision for a ‘reformed’ Middle East have strengthened the U.S.-Israel alliance, making Israel one of the largest recipients of the U.S. economic and military assistance (Hubbard, 2021). In 2020 alone, the United States gave Israel \$3.8 billion in aid (Hubbard, 2021; Congressional Research Service, 2020). This unequivocal support extends beyond financial assistance. In the May 2021 clashes between Palestinian civilians (who used small rocks to defend themselves) and the Israeli forces (who were equipped with advanced weaponry), the U.S. President Biden reaffirmed “strong support for Israel’s right to defend itself” (ANI, 2021, para. 1). This blanket support from the United States is a major hurdle in internationalizing the efforts of peacebuilding in Palestine and deploying any such force for which Israel does not consent. This also encourages the disproportionate use of force by Israel against the Palestinians.

If the same pattern continues, UNGA — instead of UNSC — can step up to restore peace and stability in the region. Despite Chapters VI-XII of the U.N. Charter giving the powers of action with respect to peace to the Security Council, a *Resolution* titled ‘Uniting for Peace’<sup>6</sup> was adopted in 1950 to improve the U.N. machinery. This resolution allows the General Assembly to take collective measures, including the use of *force*, if the Security Council fails to act because of a lack of unanimity among its five permanent members. This alternative avenue for action was used at occasions such as the Suez Canal Crisis when UNGA deployed the U.N. Emergency Forces and later, in 1964, in the form of U.N. Operation in the Congo (Aksu, 2018; Andrassy, 1956). This resolution has also attracted much opposition, with some entities regarding it as inconsistent with the U.N. charter that limits the UNGA mandate to making recommendations to UNSC. Yet, the above-mentioned prototypes can be used to formulate a future course of action for Palestine. UNGA can play its role; it can gather support from the countries and organizations which have, over the years, condemned Israeli actions in Palestine. This can ultimately facilitate in overcoming the veto problem at UNSC.

As a result of the recent episode of oppression and unjustified evictions of the Palestinians, the dynamics are changing considerably — clearing the path for UNGA to initiate and lead the peace process in Palestine. Some international bodies have recently taken some compelling stances against Israel. For instance, the U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said, “This eviction violates international law [...] these Palestinian refugees are experiencing the second displacement in living memory” (Al Jazeera, 2021, para. 2).

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<sup>6</sup> For further information, please visit [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/377\(V\)](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/377(V))

In addition, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor announced that they would be monitoring the conflict for possible war crime charges (Deutsch & Berg, 2021). Another statement came from the U.N. human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, who called for a “genuine and inclusive peace process” to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine (UN News, 2021, para. 1). Where Human Rights Watch (2021) called Israel an apartheid regime, the U.N. Human Rights Council (2021) proposed to set up a commission to inquire into the violations of law by Israel.

On the other hand, it seems that the global public opinion is also shifting in favor of Palestine. Even though there are no reliable statistics available to document this transformation, the mass protests held in some prominent Western cities (such as Washington, London, and New York) against the Israeli actions and to stop military aid to Israel indicate this shift (Slawson, 2021). Principled activism among the youth worldwide appears to be reviving humanitarianism and human rights advocacy to protect Palestinian civilians from the Israeli military force.

### Concluding Remarks

The deployment of an international protection force for the Palestinian civilians against the oppressive Israeli forces through the involvement of UNGA may appear as an unattainable dream due to the unwillingness of Israel to involve any international body to resolve the conflict and the U.S. efforts to side-line law for its benefit. However, a new peace process based on *UNGA Resolution 377* (Uniting for Peace) — backed by other international organizations, willing countries, and public support — can be initiated to restore peace and security in Palestine and protect the Palestinian civilian population. This optimistic possibility is, in no way, a simple path to be followed; instead, it requires enhanced diplomatic tactics and strategies.

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