The UN's Dilemma and Response to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Xunjie Zhang

School of Administrative Law, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing, China
Zhuangxunjie12138@icloud.com

Abstract. The United Nations has deep roots in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, having evolved alongside its emergence and development. More than merely acting as an "external" mediator, it has become a key architect of the conflict's historical narrative, legal framework, and proposed two-state solution. This study examines its multifaceted challenges—including "power politics" (the U.S. routinely using veto power to protect Israel in the Security Council), "weak implementation of resolutions" (as seen with Resolution 242), and "bilateral confrontational stances"—all unfolding within this complex historical and institutional context. This study examines the United Nations' mediation efforts in the prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a case-based analysis of its multiple challenges and response strategies. Utilizing case studies and textual analysis, it dissects relevant UN resolutions, declarations, and practical interventions. Key research questions include: Why has the UN struggled to effectively advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process? What pathways could overcome these obstacles? The analysis unfolds in four parts: Part I traces the historical roots of the conflict, evaluates the UN's evolving role and challenges, and proposes solutions. This study concludes that the UN's difficulties stem from power politics, weak resolution enforcement, and opposing stances. Nevertheless, it remains indispensable by fostering international consensus, advancing the "two-state solution," and innovating peace mechanisms—serving as the cornerstone for achieving a just and lasting peace.

Keywords: United Nations, Israel-Palestine conflict, regional conflicts

1. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands as one of the world's most enduring and complex regional hotspot issues, with its roots deeply embedded in historical, religious, ethnic, and territorial conflicts. Since the UN adopted Resolution 181 on partition in 1947, it has been actively involved in mediating the conflict, providing humanitarian assistance, and upholding international law [1]. Over decades, the UN has passed hundreds of resolutions and established specialized agencies like the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), making tremendous efforts to promote peace and protect civilians. However, in recent years— particularly since the renewed conflict erupted in October 2023—UN actions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue have faced unprecedented challenges. This makes a systematic analysis of the UN's

predicaments and response strategies in the current conflict an urgent research task. This study aims to comprehensively examine the multidimensional challenges the UN faces in the new round of Israeli-Palestinian conflict and evaluate the effectiveness of its existing measures, including analysis of predicaments, assessment of responses, and exploration of solutions [2]. The research carries both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it helps validate and deepen discussions on core international relations theories such as multilateralism, global governance, Security Council reform, and the implementation of international law, revealing the complex interplay between idealist institutional design and realist power politics. Practically, the conclusions offer direct reference value for the international community. First, clearly identifying the UN's predicaments helps the global community view its role more rationally, avoiding unrealistic expectations or simplistic accusations. Secondly, distinguishing between effective and ineffective response strategies can provide decision-making foundations for the United Nations and its member states to adjust policies and optimize actions in the future. Finally, as the "two-state solution" faces severe challenges, exploring how to activate and strengthen the role of the UN—the most crucial multilateral platform—is of vital importance. This effort plays a pivotal role in consolidating international consensus, steering the Israeli-Palestinian issue back onto the path of political resolution, and safeguarding regional and global peace and stability [3].

2. The historical development and present situation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Regarding the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this study believes it originates from cultural clashes between Palestinians and Jews. The ancient Hebrews, ancestors of the Jewish people, established kingdoms in the region known as "Canaan" or "the Land of Israel," with Jerusalem serving as their religious and political center. After being expelled by the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD, the Jews dispersed worldwide. During this period, Arab communities—both converted Muslims and native Arabs—lived on this land for over a millennium, gradually forming a dominant ethnic group. The exiled Jews regarded Judaism as their spiritual foundation, firmly believing that God would grant them the right to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their kingdom, as expressed in the Old Testament: "O Jerusalem, if I forget you, my right hand is numb; if I cease to hold you as my highest joy, if I forget you, let my tongue stick to my palate." Their most frequent prayer goes like this: "Return to Jerusalem next year [4]. Thus, Jerusalem held a high status in the hearts of the Jews, and for the Palestinian Arabs, with the defeat of the Byzantine Empire by the Arab Empire in 636, and the capture of Jerusalem, Palestine also began the Islamic era [5]. As Arab settlers migrated into the region, the diverse ethnic groups in Palestine gradually merged, ultimately forming the Palestinian Arab community. Jerusalem became the third holy site of Islam. Like the Jewish people, Palestinians are a religiously deeply rooted nation where Islam has been ingrained in their very bones. Both communities consider this land their natural homeland and claim inalienable historical rights. These shared beliefs have sown the seeds of conflict within their cultural traditions. Subsequently, a series of events inevitably led to tangible confrontations between the two groups [6].

Currently, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains on the brink of escalation. Israel may escalate military operations further: to demonstrate its uncompromising stance, it could expand its offensive in Gaza and accelerate settlement expansion in the West Bank. However, this would intensify its international isolation and potentially spark new regional conflicts. Meanwhile, global pressure will continue to mount: if Israel does not adjust its strategy, more countries are expected to recognize a Palestinian state, with potential increased economic and diplomatic sanctions against Israel [7].

3. The need for a United Nations role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

3.1. There is a serious humanitarian crisis caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The humanitarian crisis triggered by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Gaza Strip has reached alarming proportions, with both scale and severity reaching staggering levels. Key indicators include casualty statistics showing over 65,000 deaths (mostly women and children), widespread famine affecting more than 500,000 people in the region, and humanitarian aid being blocked by military strikes. This catastrophe has escalated due to multiple factors, primarily the prolonged conflict and blockade. The Israeli military continues escalating operations in Gaza City, while the strict blockade has severely disrupted access to essential supplies like food, water, fuel, and medicines—directly causing the famine and collapse of healthcare systems [8].

Secondly, obstacles and attacks on aid delivery: Even when relief supplies reach Gaza, distribution remains perilous. Israeli forces fire on civilians waiting to collect aid, turning aid stations into "death traps". Furthermore, aid convoys face delays, risks, and even robberies during transit, making it difficult to deliver supplies directly to those most in need. The systematic destruction and the international community's inadequate response: The UN report highlights that Israeli military operations demonstrate characteristics of systematic destruction, including the destruction of civilian infrastructure. These actions are alleged to potentially constitute war crimes or even genocide. Meanwhile, the United States has repeatedly used its veto power in the UN Security Council to block resolutions calling for a ceasefire, resulting in repeated setbacks for efforts to apply international pressure and halt the violence through established mechanisms.

3.2. The nature and purpose of the United Nations

The nature and objectives of the United Nations determine that it must play an active role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In its nature, the United Nations is essentially a multilateral cooperation platform composed of sovereign states, and its core principles are the equality of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs [9]. This indicates that the United Nations is not a "world government," but rather derives its authority from the authorization and consensus of its member states. Its resolutions (particularly Security Council resolutions) are binding on member states, though implementation still requires international cooperation. Simultaneously, the UN operates as a vast and complex system comprising the General Assembly, Security Council, Secretariat, and various specialized agencies, playing a central coordinating role in global affairs spanning security, economy, society, and human rights. Its fundamental objectives are explicitly stated in Article 1 of the Charter: maintaining international peace and security as the primary goal; resolving disputes through peaceful means, including collective security measures against aggression; fostering friendly relations between nations; promoting international cooperation in addressing economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian issues; and enhancing respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Therefore, mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes an inescapable responsibility for the UN.

4. The status quo and dilemma of the United Nations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

4.1. The measures currently being taken by the United Nations to resolve the issue

The United Nations has played a multidimensional role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on humanitarian relief, political mediation, upholding international law and exerting public opinion

pressure, aiming to ease the current crisis and promote a political settlement.

4.1.1. Humanitarian assistance and coordination

This constitutes the United Nations' most immediate and urgent response. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) serves as the primary humanitarian pillar in Gaza, delivering vital lifelines, including food supplies and medical shelters, to millions of displaced Palestinians. UN agencies have repeatedly issued urgent appeals for establishing safe humanitarian corridors while strongly condemning attacks on aid distribution points and civilian infrastructure. Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter, urging the Security Council to address the conflict's threat to international peace and security while calling on all parties to comply with international humanitarian law and protect civilians [10].

4.1.2. Political platform and diplomatic mediation

As the Security Council frequently becomes paralyzed by the veto power of major powers, the UN General Assembly has emerged as a crucial platform for expressing international consensus. The Assembly adopted a series of resolutions that, while not legally binding, carry substantial political and moral weight. Key provisions include demanding immediate implementation of a humanitarian ceasefire to facilitate aid delivery and hostage release, explicitly opposing the forced displacement of Palestinian civilians, and condemning military operations that cause civilian casualties.

Reaffirming that the two-State solution is the only viable way out of the conflict, and supporting the right of self-determination and statehood of the Palestinian people. These resolutions isolated opponents and laid the legal foundation for a future political settlement under international law.

4.2. Problems and causes facing the United Nations in the settlement of conflicts

In resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the United Nations has been constrained by structural limitations, with the most critical being the "failure" of its collective security mechanism. The fundamental issue lies in the Council's inability to function effectively—its core instrument for maintaining peace and security. This directly results in operational paralysis, where permanent members' veto power often blocks legally binding resolutions (such as those demanding a full ceasefire or sanctioning violators). Consequently, the UN lacks the authority to enforce actions against violence or implement resolutions. Simultaneously, this undermines its credibility. When the Council becomes paralyzed by internal divisions, its authority and reputation suffer severe damage, reducing it to a mere "talk shop" rather than an effective actor capable of taking concrete measures.

The root causes of these issues stem from several deep-seated structural contradictions. First and foremost is the conflict between politics and multilateralism (the primary cause), with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict being a focal point of geopolitical strategic interests. The permanent members of the UN Security Council (particularly the United States) maintain profound alliances and strategic considerations in the region. The use of veto power often serves national or allied interests rather than upholding international justice. This has reduced the UN's collective security mechanism to a pawn in great power competition [11].

The second challenge stems from the inherent contradiction between the enforcement of resolutions and the principle of sovereign equality. Although the UN Security Council adopts resolutions, they lack teeth: with no standing army, enforcement hinges on the goodwill—and

geopolitical will—of member states, especially the major powers. When dealing with powerful allies, such cooperation often proves absent. In practice, the principles of "sovereign equality" and "non-interference in internal affairs" have become shields for dominant powers to resist international pressure [12].

Finally, there exists a critical mismatch between means and ends. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has deep-rooted and complex causes, while the United Nations' available tools remain relatively limited—primarily diplomatic mediation, humanitarian assistance, and non-binding resolutions. When confronting asymmetric resistance from non-state armed groups against one side's overwhelming military superiority, the UN's "soft power" often appears inadequate in the face of "hard power" [13].

In summary, the UN's current predicament exposes a fundamental clash between the idealistic international rule of law and the realities of power politics. Its institutional framework—particularly the Security Council's veto power—leaves it powerless to resolve highly politicized conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While determined to act, it lacks the authority to enforce resolutions, ultimately trapped in the paradoxical situation where "there is the will to act, but no means to do so".

5. Possible solution paths and prospects

5.1. Actively pursue the peace process by all means within its power

First, sustained diplomatic pressure should be exerted. The United Nations can utilize diplomatic mediation and multilateral mechanisms such as Security Council resolutions and emergency meetings to call for ceasefires, condemn violence, and emphasize that the "two-state solution" remains the only viable path [14]. For instance, Resolution 2334 (2016) explicitly demanded Israel halt settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territories. Regular emergency meetings could be convened to intervene in conflict situations and apply international public opinion pressure on both sides. The UN General Assembly and special sessions also serve as viable options. Through resolutions (though non-binding but politically influential), international consensus can be consolidated, such as annual resolutions supporting Palestinian rights. Granting Palestine Observer State Status (2012) further elevated its global standing. Exerting pressure through economic and developmental measures. For instance, humanitarian aid and development programs provide education, healthcare, and food assistance to Palestinian refugees via the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), thereby alleviating humanitarian crises and reducing the risk of conflict escalation. The Palestinian National Development Plan is being promoted to support infrastructure development and governance capacity-building, laying the groundwork for future statehood.

Promoting the implementation of the Two States Solution is also a necessary approach. First, establishing norms and building consensus at the political and legal framework level is crucial. For instance, UN Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) serve as the legal foundation of the "Two States Solution," establishing the principle of "land for peace." These resolutions demand Israel's withdrawal from territories occupied during the 1967 war and respect for the sovereignty and right to survival of countries in the region. Meanwhile, the UN has consistently reaffirmed that the "Two States Solution" remains the only viable path to resolving conflicts. This provides an internationally recognized framework and ultimate goal for any peace negotiations.

5.2. Improve the mechanisms and means by which the United Nations maintains regional peace

The first step is to reform the Security Council and enhance its legitimacy and efficiency. The core bottleneck in the current mechanism lies with the Council, particularly the "veto power" held by permanent members. By restricting the use of veto rights, we can encourage permanent members to exercise restraint in resolutions concerning large-scale atrocities such as genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing, or establish voluntary guidelines for abstaining from the veto. France and Mexico have previously proposed such initiatives [15]. At the same time, we should expand the representativeness and inclusiveness of the Security Council. For example, we should promote the reform of the Security Council and increase the number of permanent or non-permanent members from regions with insufficient representation, such as Africa, Latin America and Asia, so that the decision-making can better reflect the global pattern of the 21st century rather than the post-World War II power distribution, thus enhancing the legitimacy of its resolutions.

Secondly, reforms should be implemented to enhance the United Nations' peacekeeping mechanisms. While peacekeeping operations remain one of the organization's most powerful instruments, they must evolve with the times. The author proposes establishing clear, realistic, and actionable mandates for peacekeeping missions, ensuring Security Council-approved Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) maintain well-defined objectives aligned with local realities, supported by adequate resources and personnel. This approach prevents critical mismatches between mission goals and operational capabilities. Concurrently, rapid deployment protocols and specialized training should be prioritized to establish robust standby arrangements that enable swift mobilization of troops, police, and civilian personnel. Additionally, enhanced professional training for contingents is crucial to strengthen their capacity in protecting civilians, addressing complex terrorist threats, and maintaining cybersecurity [16].

Finally, partnerships with regional organizations should be strengthened: Regional bodies such as the African Union and European Union often demonstrate stronger political commitment, local expertise, and rapid response capabilities in conflict management. The United Nations should support these organizations through institutionalized approaches like joint planning, co-financing, and authorized operations, thereby establishing a collaborative peacekeeping model characterized by "division of labor and cooperation" [17].

6. Conclusion

This paper systematically analyzes the role of the United Nations in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the multiple dilemmas it faces and its countermeasures. The study draws the following core conclusions: the United Nations plays an indispensable yet limited dual role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As the most universal and legitimate multilateral platform, it provides crucial support for mitigating humanitarian crises, building international consensus, and maintaining political resolution prospects through humanitarian assistance (e.g., UNRWA), political mediation (e.g., General Assembly resolutions), legal framework establishment (e.g., Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338), and sustained promotion of the "two-state solution." Without the UN's presence, the Israeli-Palestinian situation might have spiraled into even greater chaos.

However, on the other hand, the United Nations' operational effectiveness remains mired in structural challenges. The most fundamental issue stems from the "failure" of its collective security mechanism, particularly as permanent members frequently use their veto power to protect national or allied geopolitical interests. This prevents the Security Council from passing binding resolutions

and implementing enforcement measures during critical moments—such as demanding ceasefires. Add to this the Council's toothless mandates, lingering doubts over its neutrality, and the glaring gap between its meagre diplomatic-moral toolkit and the scale and ferocity of modern conflicts, and the UN is left in the awkward position of "wanting to act but lacking the muscle to do so."

Ultimately, this paper argues that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains tied to the "two-state solution," with the United Nations serving as its central platform. Despite facing significant challenges, the UN can enhance its effectiveness through internal reforms (such as limiting veto power, improving Security Council representation, and optimizing peacekeeping operations) and external strategy optimization (including strengthening partnerships with regional organizations and innovating diplomatic pressure tactics). The key to achieving lasting peace lies in whether the international community can muster sufficient political will to support the UN in breaking through the constraints of great-power politics and facilitate both sides' return to the negotiating table.

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