

**ODUMUNC 2009 Issue Brief**  
**General Assembly Plenary Session:**  
**The Situation in the**  
**Occupied Palestinian Territories**  
*Andrew Townsend*



The United Nations has been involved in the Arab-Israeli dispute since the establishment of the international body through the present day. After the Second World War, Great Britain, which had administered Mandatory Palestine; modern day Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip; since the end of the First World War, turned the question of what to do with the territory over to the UN. In May of 1947 the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) was established by UN General Assembly Resolution 181 to study the question of how to reconcile the claims of Arabs and Jews living in Palestine and produce a practical political settlement. While UNSCOP produced a plan to politically divide the territory into two separate states, there was no attempt to actually implement it before the Israeli War of Independence broke out. The post-War borders of Israel roughly conformed to those put forward in the UNSCOP plan for a Jewish state, reflecting the relative population densities on the ground in the territory. However, no Palestinian state was established as a consequence of the conflict, and the territory of Mandatory Palestine not within the borders of the state of Israel, and the Palestinian drive for an Arab state of their own has been a driving force in the Arab-Israeli dispute ever since.

### **Peacekeeping**

The aftermath of the Israeli War of Independence was a critical event that shaped what would become one of the UN's major functions through the present day: peace keeping operations. In May of 1948, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) was established to monitor and supervise cease-fire agreements and armistices between Israel and its Arab neighbors, and deploying United Nations peacekeepers for the first time in history. After the 1956 Suez Crisis, the peacekeeping mission was expanded with the establishment of the United Nations Expeditionary Force (UNEF). This altered the role of the peacekeepers from that of strictly observing events to that of a more credible military force that was to act as a physical barrier to conflict by patrolling demilitarized zones (DMZs) between the combatants. While the UN peacekeepers were withdrawn from the Sinai Peninsula in the aftermath of the Camp David Accords peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1979, UN peacekeepers remain an important part of the landscape of the conflict to the present day. The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), established in 1974 to patrol the border between Syria and the Israeli occupied Golan Heights, and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), formed in 1978 to monitor the border between Israel and Lebanon, both remain in place and active in their peacekeeping mission today. The experience of peacekeepers in the Middle East developed an important capability for the UN and has had a lasting influence on operations around the world.

### **Shortcomings**

However, while the Middle East conflict has had a huge impact on the UN, with the shaping of its peacekeeping function, the effect of the UN on the larger Arab-Israeli conflict has been far less consequential. While the UN has had a hand in the situation for virtually its entire history, and several UN resolutions form the starting point for any negotiations between Israel

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and its neighbors, there has yet to be a comprehensive settlement of the situation, and nearly every significant advance of the process has been the result of state to state rather than UN interaction. In large part this reflects the reality that the UN General Assembly has no power to demand action and can only to recommend a course, and even the Security Council has relatively little ability to enforce its resolutions without the compliance of the states concerned. This inability to enact real change has not kept the UN from issuing a multitude of resolutions on the conflict. Since 1949 over 130 Security Council resolutions have been issued concerning Israel and its neighbors, with at least forty others that did not pass solely due to a United States veto.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the United Nations to the Arab-Israeli conflict is United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 242. This resolution was issued in the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War that saw Israel capture the territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. The resolution calls on Israel to return the territories it captured in the conflict in return for normalized relations and a state of peace with its Arab neighbors, a concept known as “land for peace”, and this has been the basis of all subsequent peace talks. While influential, UNSCR 242 also illustrates the shortcomings of the United Nations and its efforts to resolve the conflict. In order to be passed by the Security Council, the language of the resolution had to be vague on many of the most important points, allowing the different sides of the dispute to interpret the text of the resolution very differently to support their particular position. Also, the resolution itself does not call for peace, but rather encourages the belligerent nations to come to a negotiated peace on their own. These positions were reiterated in UNSCR 338, issued after the 1973 October, or Yom Kippur, War, and in many subsequent resolutions. Perhaps the largest failing of these resolutions is that they are addressed solely to the states in conflict at the time, and they do not address the status of the Palestinian people.

### **Perception of Bias**

A significant problem for the UN and its quest to play a significant role in the Arab-Israeli peace process is the perception that it has a pro-Arab, or anti-Israeli, bias and this undermines its credibility to Israel and the United States. The vast majority of General Assembly and Security Council resolutions addressing the conflict condemn the actions of Israel, without reciprocal condemnation of Arab or Palestinian actions. One such resolution was the General Assembly Resolution 3379 of 1975 which equated Zionism, the ideology that supports the establishment and maintenance of a Jewish state, with racism. Another example is that in 2003 the General Assembly asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to rule on the legality of a barrier that Israel was building in the West Bank. Israel claims that the fence was being constructed for security purposes to defend its population from Palestinian suicide bombers, but both the General Assembly and the ICJ rejected this argument and declared that the fence was purely an attempt by Israel to seize land that should rightfully constitute a future Palestinian state. The perception of bias has kept the UN from being able to play a more significant role in the resolution of the conflict.

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**The Quartet**

In addition to its peacekeeping activities, the UN's most important role in the Arab-Israeli conflict today is its membership; along with the United States, the European Union, and Russia; in the Quartet on the Middle East. This group is meant to facilitate peace between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as Israel's Arab neighbors. This is done by hosting peace conferences and offering economic incentives to underwrite the cause of peace. However, the Quartet has yet to have success in promoting a final peace agreement in the region. It has been undermined by disagreement between its members and the continued inability of the Israelis and the Palestinians to agree to a mutually acceptable set of conditions. While the UN will continue to be an important player in the quest for peace in the Middle East; its peacekeeping operations, willingness to initiate peaceful dialogue, and coordination of humanitarian aid in the Palestinian territories; being particularly important, it is unable to enact a solution to the conflict on its own, and must necessarily cooperate and coordinate with the states of the region and the other members of the Quartet.

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