

RESEARCH ARTICLE

*Evaluating the Effectiveness and Limits of United Nations
Peacebuilding: An Analysis of Persistent Conflicts and Institutional
Legitimacy in the 21st Century.*

“Peace, dignity and equality
on a healthy planet”

United Nations

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“We, the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person...”

Preamble to the United Nations Charter (1945)

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Abstract

“Peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet”: this motto, which encapsulates the founding spirit of the United Nations, now collides with profound contradictions. Created in the aftermath of the Second World War to avert the return of tragedy and secure collective peace, the UN today faces a crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness. This article highlights the paradox: indispensable as the embodiment of international law, the UN is at the same time trapped by political and structural deadlocks that constrain its action.

The analysis underscores that the UN retains a central normative function: its Charter, its resolutions, and its multiple agencies provide a universal framework of reference. It also remains a unique platform for civil society voices and humanitarian assistance. Yet this universal vocation is persistently undermined by political realities: the Security Council veto, monopolized by a handful of great powers, too often reduces the UN to the role of spectator in the very crises it is meant to regulate.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict epitomizes this impotence. Despite more than 70 years of resolutions, the political process remains stalled, while the humanitarian situation has dramatically worsened especially since 2023, with tens of thousands of civilian casualties and the large-scale destruction of infrastructure. The UN, present through its humanitarian agencies, proves unable to enforce a political solution, its role reduced to that of witness and emergency administrator.

This diagnosis does not, however, condemn the Organization outright. The article emphasizes pathways for reinventing multilateralism: limiting the use of the veto, broadening representation within the Security Council, strengthening financial autonomy, and more fully integrating transnational actors such as NGOs, civic movements, and diasporas. The UN’s future will depend on its ability to adapt to a multipolar world, marked by global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and migration challenges that demand collective responses. Ultimately, the UN emerges as both fragile and indispensable: fragile because it is constrained by power struggles among states; indispensable, because no other institution so powerfully embodies the ideal of a world order founded on law and cooperation. More than technical reform, a genuine political and moral awakening will be required if the Organization is to continue carrying the hope it represented in 1945.

Introduction

“We are not witnessing a deficit of diplomacy, but a depoliticization of peace.” Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *Le premier XXI^e siècle* (2021).

“Peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet”: these founding principles of the United Nations Charter resonate today with particular urgency. In March 2024, the UN Security Council once again failed to adopt a resolution calling for a permanent ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. The veto cast by the United States against a text supported by the majority of members reignited a persistent question: what is the purpose of the United Nations when conflicts drag on and its decisions remain ineffective? While the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is emblematic, it is far from unique. In Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Sudan, and the Sahel, UN mechanisms struggle to prevent, resolve, or even contain violence. This widening gap between proclaimed principles and observed results feeds a deep crisis of confidence surrounding the organization founded in 1945 to avert the return of global chaos.

The central issue, therefore, is not merely operational effectiveness, but the political legitimacy of the UN in a world where multipolarity, rival sovereignties, and protracted conflicts blur the boundaries of international governance. The question is the real place of the UN in building peace not as an abstract ideal or moral authority, but as an institutional actor constrained by geopolitical, legal, and symbolic limits. Peace, far from being a stable and universal state, is a political construct: contingent, strategic, and often instrumentalized (Richmond, 2008).

It is important here to define the terms framing this reflection. “Sustainable peace” refers to a condition in which structural violence is eliminated and political, economic, and social arrangements allow societies to prevent the recurrence of war (Galtung, 1969). The UN is understood not only as a set of institutions, but also as an idea that of global governance founded on law, multilateralism, and interstate cooperation. Finally, legitimacy refers to the recognition granted to an institution to act on behalf of the international community, a recognition that rests both on its founding principles and on its capacity to resolve crises (Hurd, 1999).

Criticism of the UN is not new. As early as the 1970s, Security Council deadlocks were denounced as evidence of unequal governance (Claude, 1962). Bertrand Badie (2004, 2018)

highlights the structural impotence of an organization built on a post-war model that fails to incorporate the dynamics of the Global South. Thomas G. Weiss (2016) stresses the internal contradictions between the UN's humanitarian aspirations and the political realities of power relations that paralyze its mechanisms. The doctrine of the "responsibility to protect," intended to reconcile sovereignty and the duty of intervention, has likewise revealed its practical limits (Luck, 2006). The Palestinian question, since 1947, has crystallized tensions between international law, power politics, and diplomatic paralysis.

This tension between the symbolism of peace and the depoliticization of action lies at the heart of contemporary debates on the reform of multilateral institutions. Several think tanks and observatories, such as the Global Governance Institute and the Stimson Center, have proposed avenues for transformation, but few challenge the foundational balance of the Charter. In a world marked by fragmented norms, the rise of new transnational actors, and the contestation of Western mechanisms of international order, the UN faces a decisive challenge: maintain its role as a legitimate platform or risk being gradually bypassed.

This article therefore examines the UN's actual capacity to act as a peacemaker in a context of protracted conflicts and political blockages. The goal is less to deliver an indictment than to understand the conditions, limits, and paradoxes of multilateral action confronted with a reconfigured world. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict serves here as a guiding thread, not as an isolated case, but as an acute symptom of a systemic crisis of international peace. Put differently, the central question is: **to what extent can the UN still contribute to the construction of sustainable peace, and what are its political, legal, and structural limits when confronted with persistent conflicts?**

I – The UN and its Founding Mission: Between Normative Foundations and the Aspiration to Sustainable Peace

1.1. A Historical Mandate Built on Peace, Security, and the Sovereignty of Peoples

Since its creation in 1945, the United Nations has rested on a universal ambition: to guarantee peace, safeguard human dignity, and defend equality among peoples on a healthy planet. These founding principles are enshrined in the Preamble of the UN Charter, which affirms the determination of Member States, “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights,” and “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom” (United Nations, 1945). This normative foundation is essential, as it grants the UN a unique moral legitimacy in the history of modern international relations. As Ramesh Thakur (2006) underlines, the UN embodies an “ethical architecture” for the world, in which notions of peace, justice, and multilateral cooperation are meant to replace the logic of power politics. The system rests on a delicate balance between state sovereignty and the imperatives of collective security.

Yet this normative vocation quickly runs into structural tensions. Article 2(7) of the Charter restricts interference in the domestic affairs of states, except in cases of threats to peace (United Nations, 1945). Conceived as a safeguard against unilateralism and domination by great powers, the principle of non-interference was vital for newly independent states during decolonization. It enabled them to enter the international order without fearing that their fragile sovereignty would be undermined by dominant states (Claude, 1962). However, in practice this safeguard has often turned into a legal and political straitjacket, preventing decisive action in cases of prolonged internal conflicts or mass violations of human rights.

The genocides in Rwanda (1994) and Srebrenica (1995) are frequently cited as paradigmatic tragedies of this limitation: in both cases, the UN was accused of inaction, constrained by a narrow reading of its mandate, and paralyzed by the obsession not to “interfere” in sovereign affairs (Barnett, 2002). The doctrine of the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P), adopted in 2005, was intended precisely to overcome this impasse by affirming that sovereignty could no longer serve as a shield against intervention in cases of mass atrocities (Luck, 2006). Yet its application remains selective and contested. The 2011 Libyan case, for instance, authorized by the Security Council, later sparked controversy as NATO was accused of exceeding its mandate, fueling long-term mistrust among many states of the Global South (Bellamy, 2015). Jean-Marie Guéhenno (2021) aptly observed that “the UN system has

institutionalized impotence out of fear of arbitrary intervention.” This impotence has now taken on a structural dimension: the UN is the official guardian of international law, but increasingly struggles to enforce it where it is most contested.

The paradox is even more striking given that, since the end of the Cold War, the number of internal conflicts has surged. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP, 2023), 55 armed conflicts were active worldwide in 2022, the majority occurring within state borders. And it is precisely in such contexts that the UN proves most powerless.

This contradiction between formal legitimacy and actual effectiveness lies at the heart of the contemporary malaise of global governance. Bertrand Badie (2018) stresses that the UN remains trapped within a Westphalian architecture, centered on states and their sovereignties, while today’s violence is increasingly transnational and sub-state in nature. In other words, the Organization was designed to regulate interstate conflicts, as in 1945, but it struggles to adapt to a world where civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, and hybrid crises dominate the security agenda.

This gap is also evident in the UN’s handling of certain protracted conflicts. In Syria, despite more than 400,000 deaths and millions of displaced persons since 2011 (UNHCR, 2022), the Security Council has failed to adopt a coherent strategy due to Russian and Chinese vetoes. Similarly, in Yemen, a war described by the UN itself as “the world’s worst humanitarian crisis” has generated only limited resolutions without effective enforcement mechanisms (OCHA, 2021). In such cases, the principle of non-interference and political blockages combine to neutralize the Organization’s action.

1.2. Preventive Diplomacy and Peacekeeping: A Model in Transition

The second pillar of UN action lies in peacekeeping. Since 1948, more than 70 peacekeeping operations have been deployed worldwide, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of military personnel, police officers, and civilians. Today, 12 missions remain active, employing nearly 70,000 people with an annual budget of about \$6.1 billion (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024). This mechanism, though praised for its flexibility, is now reaching its limits. The cases of Mali (MINUSMA), the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) highlight missions facing local hostility, the withdrawal of contributing countries, or sheer inability to counter armed groups. As noted in the report *The Future of UN Peacekeeping Operations* by the Stimson Center (2023), traditional peacekeeping

missions are increasingly ill-suited to contemporary conflicts, marked by non-state actors, asymmetric strategies, and prolonged wars without clear frontlines.

More broadly, preventive diplomacy struggles to find an operational role. Thomas G. Weiss (2016) explains that while the UN possesses an institutional “toolbox” (special envoys, mediators, negotiators, etc.), it is often undermined by the lack of political will among great powers or by conflicting internal agendas. Secretary General António Guterres has tried to reorient doctrine towards the idea of “sustaining peace,” embedded in the 2030 Agenda. This vision links conflict prevention with social justice, human rights, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, this cross-cutting approach largely remains theoretical: synergies between the “peace” and “development” pillars rarely translate into effective results on the ground (Global Governance Institute, 2023). The “triple ambition” of peace, dignity, equality, though firmly embedded in institutional rhetoric, too often remains an empty formula when confronted with geopolitical deadlock.

Nevertheless, preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping have been central instruments of the UN system, and their effectiveness remains deeply ambivalent. On one hand, they demonstrate the UN’s ability to invent unprecedented practices of international regulation that had no equivalent in classical international law. On the other, they expose the limits of an approach entirely dependent on member state consensus and voluntary funding, making it a fragile and contingent tool (Thakur, 2006). Failures in Rwanda, Bosnia, and more recently Mali do not only reflect operational shortcomings: they reveal a deeper contradiction between the UN’s normative ambitions and the harsh reality of power politics. The multiplication of so-called “impossible mandates” where peacekeepers are deployed without adequate means or political backing illustrates how the organization is often instrumentalized by great powers (Weiss, 2016). In this sense, the peacekeeping model, far from being obsolete, remains a major yet unfinished innovation, constantly torn between the ideals of peace, dignity, and equality, and the structural blockages of an international order marked by asymmetry and mistrust.

1.3. The Symbolic and Normative Power of the UN: A Fragile Lever

Despite its operational limits, the UN still holds significant symbolic authority. It embodies a shared normative framework in which conflicts can be negotiated through peaceful means. The General Assembly, although lacking binding power, provides an egalitarian space

for states to express themselves. In recent years, it has hosted major debates on issues such as Palestine, nuclear disarmament, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change.

As Edward Luck (2006) argues, the UN's main strength lies not in its ability to *impose* peace, but in its capacity to “build consensus around a shared language of human security.” This function, sometimes dismissed as merely performative, is in fact crucial in a fragmented world. The very act of states gathering around the same table to discuss common concerns remains a valuable political achievement. However, this moral authority is increasingly eroded. The Security Council, paralyzed by vetoes particularly from the United States, Russia, and China faces mounting criticism. Between 2011 and 2022, more than 25 major resolutions were blocked by vetoes (Security Council Report, 2023), notably on Syria, Palestine, and Ukraine. This recurring deadlock undermines the UN's credibility as an impartial and universal actor.

Civil society participation has somewhat rebalanced this dynamic, but it remains fragile. On one hand, the involvement of NGOs strengthens the UN's moral legitimacy and helps foster a global normative space. On the other hand, it encounters persistent resistance from member states. Several permanent members of the Security Council, eager to preserve sovereignty and political room for maneuver, regularly restrict NGO access to strategic forums. Critical voices—especially those highlighting crimes committed in the occupied Palestinian territories or in Yemen—are often marginalized by asymmetric power relations that reflect the hierarchies of the international system (Chomsky, 2003).

II – Political Blockages and Structural Weaknesses of the UN

2.1. The Right of Veto and the Politicization of the Security Council: A Political Deadlock

The right of veto, granted to the five permanent members of the Security Council (China, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Russia), was originally designed in 1945 to secure the participation of the great powers in the multilateral system. The idea was straightforward: without their agreement, no collective action could be undertaken, thus avoiding the fate of the League of Nations, which had collapsed due to the withdrawal of major powers (Luck, 2006). In other words, the veto was meant to act as an “insurance policy” against the disengagement of the powerful. Yet what was once perceived as a safeguard of stability has become one of the greatest obstacles to contemporary multilateralism.

Since 1946, more than 300 vetoes have been cast in the Security Council. The Soviet Union, and later Russia, account for more than half of these, followed by the United States, which has used its veto over 80 times, mainly to block resolutions concerning the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Dag Hammarskjöld Library, 2024). China has increasingly resorted to the veto in recent decades, often in alignment with Russia, while the United Kingdom and France have used it only marginally. Behind these figures lies a clear logic: the veto is not an exceptional measure, but a strategic diplomatic instrument designed to protect alliances and the vital interests of the P5. Paralysis arises not only from formal vetoes. Diplomats often speak of a “silent veto”: when a draft resolution is never put to a vote because a P5 member has signaled its opposition behind closed doors. This means that many discussions never even reach the public stage, thereby reducing transparency and limiting the UN’s ability to serve as a global platform for debate (Security Council Report, 2023). The veto thus operates at two levels: it blocks official decisions and filters debates themselves.

Recent cases are telling. Since 2011, Russia and China have blocked more than 15 draft resolutions on Syria, paralyzing any collective response to documented war crimes (Bellamy, 2019). Conversely, the United States has repeatedly used its veto to prevent condemnations of Israeli policies in the occupied Palestinian territories, even in cases of clear violations of international humanitarian law (Lynch, 2021). This dual usage feeds the perception of “double standards”: some crises are addressed with vigor (Libya in 2011, Mali in 2013), while others are stifled by geopolitical interests. The result is a steady erosion of the UN’s credibility as an impartial arbiter.

In response to these blockages, several initiatives have emerged. In 2015, France proposed a “code of conduct” urging the P5 to refrain from using their veto in situations involving mass atrocities (genocide, crimes against humanity). More than 100 states supported the idea, but no binding mechanism exists to enforce such restraint (Permanent Mission of France to the UN, 2015). The ACT initiative (Accountability, Coherence and Transparency), launched by a group of states, points in the same direction. Yet these measures depend on the goodwill of the very same P5 members who benefit from the status quo.

The problem of the veto therefore goes beyond occasional misuse: it reflects a deeper contradiction. The Security Council is meant to safeguard international peace and security, yet it operates according to a logic in which the national interests of the five permanent members systematically prevail over the collective interest. As Thomas Weiss (2020) observes, “the veto

is not merely a procedural tool; it is the embodiment of the global hierarchy built into the core of multilateralism.” As long as this privilege remains intact, the UN will remain structurally incapable of acting in crises where the P5 are directly involved, or where their allies are at stake.

2.2. Imbalances of Representation and Financial Dependence: The Structural Weakness of UN Multilateralism

The Security Council is the central body responsible for maintaining international peace and security, yet its composition has remained unchanged since the creation of the UN. The five permanent members (P5) the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom each hold the right of veto, while ten other seats are allocated on a rotating basis for two-year terms. This model, which reflected the world order of 1945, no longer corresponds to today’s distribution of economic and demographic power. States such as India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan members of the G4 group have for decades demanded a permanent seat in order to better represent major regions of the world (Permanent Missions of the G4, 2023). Likewise, the African Union, through the Ezulwini Consensus, has called for at least two permanent seats and five additional non-permanent seats, to correct what it considers a “historical injustice” (African Union, 2017).

Despite these widely shared demands, any reform faces a major obstacle: the UN Charter requires that any change in the Council’s composition be adopted by a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly and then ratified by all five permanent members. Yet the P5 have little interest in reducing their own influence by expanding the circle of permanent members (Luck, 2006). This rigidity explains why, despite a growing consensus on the need for reform, the Council remains unchanged, reinforcing the perception of a gap between the UN and today’s multipolar reality.

Financing is another structural weakness of the system. The UN’s regular budget relies on a scale of assessed contributions, calculated according to the relative wealth of member states. The United States, as the largest contributor, is assessed at 22% of the regular budget and about 26% of the peacekeeping budget. However, Washington imposes a domestic cap of 25%, which has often resulted in payment arrears (Congressional Research Service, 2024). These delays complicate budget planning and weaken the Organization’s cash flow.

The financing of peacekeeping operations illustrates this vulnerability. For the 2024–2025 fiscal year, the approved budget amounts to about \$5.6 billion (United Nations

Peacekeeping, 2025). While this may seem significant, it represents less than 0.5% of global military expenditures, highlighting the limited ability of UN peacekeepers to respond to multiple and complex crises. The system's dependence on a small number of major donors also makes it vulnerable to political pressure and fluctuations in national budgets.

In addition, a large share of UN activities particularly humanitarian and development programs depend on voluntary contributions. These funds are often earmarked according to the priorities of donors. In 2023, nearly half of the \$37.4 billion raised by OCHA came from the top three contributors, and a quarter of those funds were concentrated on just three crises (OCHA, 2023). This concentration creates imbalances: some emergencies are funded quickly, while others remain chronically underfunded, despite equally urgent needs.

These political and financial imbalances do not call into question the very existence of the UN, but they do limit its capacity for action and weigh heavily on its legitimacy. Politically, the absence of reform fuels a perception of disconnection between the Organization and the multipolar reality of the modern world. Operationally, financial dependence weakens the continuity and effectiveness of programs, as budgets are subject both to payment delays and to the political preferences of major donors. As Weiss (2020) notes, the UN finds itself in a paradoxical situation: universally recognized as an indispensable forum, yet structurally constrained by imbalances that prevent it from acting with full impartiality and effectiveness.

2.3. Legal and Operational Constraints: Between Mandate and Reality

The UN system is not only constrained by political and financial blockages; it is also limited by a set of legal rules and operational realities that shape its effectiveness. The mandates entrusted to the Organization often carry high ambitions protecting populations, maintaining peace, ensuring respect for international law but their implementation faces significant limitations, highlighting the gap between the principles enshrined in the Charter and the realities on the ground.

The UN operates under the Charter adopted in 1945, whose provisions strictly define its scope of action. Article 2(7), in particular, prohibits interference in the domestic affairs of states, except in cases of threats to international peace and security (United Nations, 1945). Originally conceived as a guarantee of sovereignty, this principle has effectively restricted the UN's capacity to intervene in cases of massive human rights violations. The genocides in Rwanda

(1994) and Srebrenica (1995) illustrate the Organization's difficulty in acting quickly and effectively in internal crises, despite the existence of a protective normative framework (Barnett, 2002).

The emergence of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) principle, adopted at the 2005 World Summit, represented an attempt to overcome these blockages by recognizing that sovereignty also entails the responsibility to protect one's population (Luck, 2008). However, its application remains selective and dependent on power dynamics within the Security Council: while Libya in 2011 saw a resolution adopted in this sense, Syria demonstrated the persistent paralysis caused by veto use.

Even when a mandate is approved, the UN faces operational constraints. Peacekeeping operations are emblematic: they rely on three principles consent of the parties, impartiality, and the non-use of force except in self-defense (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2023). In asymmetric conflicts where parties do not respect these rules, these principles become difficult to apply. For example, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), deployed in 2013, suffered from a lack of appropriate resources in the face of growing armed and jihadist groups. Over ten years, it cost more than \$7.5 billion and recorded over 300 peacekeeper fatalities, without achieving lasting stabilization (UN Peacekeeping, 2023). This relative failure underscores the vulnerability of operations when deployed in contexts where the state is absent, and threats are unconventional.

These legal and operational constraints contribute to a growing gap between public expectations and the concrete results of UN action. In humanitarian crises, the UN plays a crucial coordination role: in 2023, OCHA mobilized nearly \$37.4 billion to assist 250 million people (OCHA, 2023). Yet, impressive as these figures are, they do not fully address criticisms regarding bureaucratic delays, dependency on external financing, and inability to prevent crises proactively. Furthermore, the proliferation of actors on the ground NGOs, regional coalitions, national or multinational armed forces dilutes the UN's visibility and, at times, its authority. As Thakur (2006) notes, the Organization "is no longer the sole architect of collective security, but one of many actors in a fragmented landscape".

III – The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Mirror of UN Contradictions

3.1. A Foundational Conflict in UN History

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict holds a unique place in the history of the United Nations, as it was both one of the first issues addressed by the Organization and one that best symbolizes its structural contradictions. In 1947, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 181, which proposed the partition of Mandatory Palestine into two states and established a special international regime for Jerusalem (United Nations, 1947). This decision, intended to pave the way for peaceful coexistence, marked the beginning of the UN's direct and long-lasting involvement in the region. However, the 1948 war, the mass exodus of Palestinians, and the emergence of a protracted conflict immediately revealed the limits of international governance based on compromise without coercive means (Khalidi, 2020).

Over the decades, the Security Council has adopted more than 100 resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including some of the most emblematic, such as Resolution 242 (1967), calling for the withdrawal from occupied territories, and Resolution 338 (1973), demanding an immediate ceasefire (United Nations, 1967; 1973). Yet most of these resolutions have remained unimplemented, highlighting the gap between the UN's normative role and its inability to ensure enforcement. As Chomsky (2003) notes, the absence of coercive mechanisms, combined with the systematic use of the U.S. veto to shield Israel, gradually turned the UN into a “record-keeping chamber” of international frustrations, without real enforcement power.

This incapacity has had a double effect. Institutionally, it has weakened the credibility of the Security Council, often accused of bias and ineffectiveness. Politically, it has reinforced the perception particularly in the Arab world and among Palestinian civil societies of a “two-tier system of international justice” (Lynk, 2017). This perception is exacerbated by the gap between repeated General Assembly condemnations of Israeli settlement expansion and the absence of concrete action on the ground.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict thus serves as a magnifying glass for the UN's contradictions: an organization capable of setting universal norms and coordinating vital humanitarian assistance, yet unable to enforce its own decisions in the face of geopolitical blockages. As Thakur (2006) writes, “The UN is both indispensable and powerless:

indispensable for stating principles, powerless in applying them.” This reality makes the conflict a privileged testing ground to question the UN’s future capacity to build lasting peace.

The current crisis in Palestine lays bare the deepest contradictions of the multilateral system. It demonstrates that a normative framework, however sophisticated, is not sufficient to contain violence when neutralized by geopolitical calculations. More importantly, it reminds us that inaction in the face of mass atrocities undermines the UN’s own credibility and raises a fundamental question: how much longer can the international community tolerate that such an old and deadly conflict continues, in plain sight, without a sustainable political solution?

3.2. The Deadlock of Resolutions and the Ritual of Condemnations: Normative Paralysis

Since 1947, the UN has adopted a series of resolutions aimed at framing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Resolution 181 on the partition plan, Resolution 194 on the right of return for refugees, Resolution 242 calling for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories, and Resolution 338 imposing a ceasefire after the Yom Kippur War (United Nations, 1947; 1948; 1967; 1973). These texts laid down important legal foundations that still shape diplomatic discussions today. Yet their implementation has remained largely incomplete. The contrast between the abundance of adopted norms and their lack of effective enforcement fuels what several scholars describe as a “normative paralysis” (Thakur, 2006).

This situation is explained in large part by the UN’s institutional functioning. In the Security Council, resolutions require the approval of all five permanent members. Since 1972, however, the United States has cast more than 50 vetoes on texts concerning Palestine, often to shield Israel from sanctions or binding measures (UN Security Council, 2022). This mechanism, originally designed to balance great power interests, has effectively blocked decisions despite broad international consensus. In the General Assembly, where resolutions are adopted by majority vote, texts carry political weight but no binding force. This imbalance between the decision-making power of the Council and the limited impact of the Assembly sustains the impression of a “ritual”: debates, condemnations, and symbolic votes, without concrete translation on the ground.

Normative paralysis is not only a symptom of failure; it also raises the question of possible ways to move beyond the deadlock. Several options are regularly discussed. The first is to strengthen the role of international judicial bodies, such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which in 2004 issued an advisory opinion declaring Israel’s construction of the separation

wall illegal (ICJ, 2004). While not binding, such opinions add legal weight to existing norms. A second option would be to enhance monitoring and reporting mechanisms, such as those of the Human Rights Council's special rapporteurs, in order to maintain steady and well-documented pressure on the parties in conflict.

Finally, some scholars and diplomats advocate a more pragmatic approach: rather than aiming immediately for a comprehensive settlement, the UN could encourage sectoral agreements on humanitarian access, civilian protection, or the limitation of settlement expansion. Taken together, these incremental measures could improve conditions on the ground (Weiss, 2016). Although modest, this step-by-step logic could help avoid the deadlock of major resolutions left unimplemented and restore some operational credibility to the Organization.

Ultimately, the deadlock of resolutions illustrates a structural tension: the UN remains the central forum for defining a shared normative framework, but its effectiveness depends on the will of its member states, especially those with veto power. Turning this paradox into an opportunity requires strengthening complementary tools judicial, humanitarian, and sectoral to move beyond the sterile cycle of symbolic condemnations and open tangible prospects for durable de-escalation.

3.3. What Future for the UN in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict... and Beyond?

The future of the UN in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, the Organization retains a unique legitimizing role: no other institution has the same ability to articulate universal norms, to document violations of humanitarian law, and to preserve an institutional memory of more than seventy years of mediation (Luck, 2006). On the other hand, its repeated inability to curb escalating violence, ongoing settlement expansion, and persistent breaches of international law fuels deep skepticism, particularly among the populations directly affected. This paradox raises a pressing question: can the UN still embody a credible hope for peace for Palestinians and Israelis, or will it remain trapped in the role of symbolic arbiter more spectator than actor in the conflict?

In the short term, the UN seems confined to an essentially humanitarian role. Agencies such as UNRWA, OCHA, or the World Food Programme remain indispensable for the survival of millions of Palestinians. Yet this role, though vital, cannot replace a political solution. The most realistic perspective may be for the UN to reposition itself as guarantor of partial agreements ceasefires, civilian protection, management of humanitarian corridors rather than

as the architect of a comprehensive settlement, whose political parameters now lie beyond its control (Guéhenno, 2021).

In the longer term, the UN's future is not limited to Palestine. It depends on its capacity to reform and to address systemic challenges: the rise of nationalism, Sino-American rivalry, climate and health crises, and the proliferation of transnational actors. The report *Our Common Agenda*, presented by António Guterres in 2021, stresses the need to reaffirm the Organization's founding values around three principles: peace, dignity, and equality on a healthy planet (United Nations, 2021). But this vision requires bold institutional reforms: expansion of the Security Council, limits on the use of the veto in cases of mass atrocities, stronger reliance on mandatory rather than voluntary contributions, and a more systematic recognition of the role of NGOs and civil societies in decision-making (Weiss, 2016; Badie, 2018).

In this sense, the UN faces a historic choice. It can either remain a weakened normative forum, trapped by structural deadlocks, and risk seeing its legitimacy erode in favor of other regional forums or ad hoc coalitions. Or it can turn its weaknesses into opportunities, by embracing its role as an inclusive platform open to civil societies, transnational movements, and global issues such as climate change or inequality. The UN's future in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is therefore a revealing test case: it shows that the Organization can no longer afford to be a passive witness to crises. It must once again become an actor able to propose, to accompany, and when political conditions allow to enforce.

Ultimately, the question goes beyond the Middle East. It touches on the survival of multilateralism itself. The UN was born to prevent a repetition of the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Its future will depend on its capacity to demonstrate, in a fragmented twenty-first century, that peace, dignity, and equality on a healthy planet are not only ideals proclaimed but principles put into practice.

General Conclusion

“Peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet”: this motto, reaffirmed by António Guterres in 2021, sums up the founding ambition of the United Nations. Yet between the ideals proclaimed and the reality observed, the gap today seems immense. The UN, created in 1945 to prevent a return to chaos, now faces persistent conflicts, massive humanitarian crises, and a growing questioning of its effectiveness. The example of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tragically embodies this impotence: dozens of unenforced resolutions, repeated vetoes blocking collective action, and a civilian population trapped in systemic violence that the institution is unable to stop.

But reducing the UN to its failures would mean overlooking its essential function. It remains the only universal stage where all voices can, at least in theory, be heard. It is also one of the last spaces where international law is legitimized, humanitarian violations are denounced, and vital aid is coordinated in times of crisis. Its agencies, from UNRWA to OCHA embody this concrete role, often invisible but decisive, that preserves a measure of humanity in the face of today’s worst tragedies.

The dilemma is clear: the UN is both indispensable and insufficient. Indispensable, because no other organization can claim the same universality. Insufficient, because its political and structural deadlocks too often condemn it to paralysis. The veto power, imbalances in representation, and dependence on voluntary funding reflect a global order shaped by inequality and the dominance of the most powerful. This contradiction undermines its credibility and fuels growing skepticism, particularly among populations who directly suffer the consequences of its paralysis.

The future of the UN will depend on its ability to turn this fragility into strength. This requires rethinking the Security Council, limiting the use of the veto in cases of mass atrocities, strengthening its financial autonomy, and above all, opening its doors more widely to civil societies, NGOs, and transnational actors. The UN of the 21st century can no longer be conceived as a hierarchical institution of states, but as an inclusive platform capable of reflecting the plurality of voices and the urgent needs of our time.

Ultimately, the UN is a mirror of our world: its deadlocks are those of the states that compose it, but its very existence remains a minimal safeguard against chaos. It will be judged not by its proclamations, but by its capacity to act. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows this with particular brutality: where the UN fails, lives are lost, and the very promise of multilateralism begins to crumble. In an era of global fractures and planetary emergencies, the question is no longer whether the UN is perfect it never has been but whether we are ready to give it the means to be something more than a powerless witness to the tragedies of this century.

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