The United Nations, Israel and Anti-Semitism

History

The United Nations (UN) played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Jewish State by passing UN Resolution 181 in 1947, which called for the partition of British Mandate Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. Following Israel's independence in 1948, the Jewish State became an official member-state of the international body.

At the same time, the international body has a continuing history of a one-sided, hostile approach to Israel. After decades of bias and marginalization, recent years have brought some positive developments for Israel to the UN. Nonetheless, the UN's record and culture continue to demonstrate a predisposition against Israel. Successive Secretary Generals have acknowledged this an issue for the institution. Indeed, in a meeting in April 2007, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon acknowledged to ADL leaders that Israel has been treated poorly at the UN and that, while some progress has been made, this bias still remains an issue. Secretary Ban stated this view publicly during his visit to Israel in August 2013. “Unfortunately, because of the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict, Israel's been weighed down by criticism and suffered from bias — and sometimes even discrimination,” Ban said in response to a question about discrimination against Israel at the UN. “It’s an unfortunate situation,” Ban said, adding that Israel should be treated equal to all the other 192 member states. In his first public address to a Jewish group, Secretary General Antonio Guterres told the World Jewish Congress in April 2017: “As secretary general of the United Nations I consider that the State of Israel
needs to be treated as any other state.” And in August 2017, he stated that calls for Israel's destruction are a form of modern-day anti-Semitism.

UN actions continue to play an important role in the conflict. Resolutions 242 and 338, which were passed following the 1967 Six Day War and during 1973 Yom Kippur, call for Israel to withdraw from territories occupied in 1967, and for peace talks between Israel and her Arab neighbors based on the land-for-peace premise. These resolutions continue to play a role in the ongoing debate at the UN over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and are often cited to criticize Israel’s presence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Most recently, in December 2016, the Security Council passed Resolution 2334 which condemned Israeli settlement building, and labeled settlements a “major obstacle” to peace. The resolution passed 14-0, with the US abstaining. It was the first Security Council resolution to deal specifically with settlements in over 35 years.

Israel rejected the resolution, and Israel’s Ambassador to the U.N., Danny Danon called said it “set us back in pursuit of peace” and “rewarded” the Palestinians “to continue down a dangerous path they have chosen” of avoiding direct negotiations with Israel.

In December 2017, the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling on President Trump to reverse the US decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. In June 2018, the US vetoed a resolution condemning Israel for using excessive forwards Palestinian protesters along the Gaza border. There was no mention of Hamas in the resolution. A second resolution that did reference Hamas's role failed to pass.

**Israel’s Isolation**

Since Israel's establishment, Arab member states of the UN have used the General Assembly (GA) as a forum for isolating and chastising Israel. With support from
third-world nations, particularly the Non-Aligned Movement, and others, the Arab states have had little difficulty passing harsh anti-Israel resolutions through the GA. Even today, the strength of these groups in the world body allows them to continue rebuking Israel. While anti-Israel resolutions are easily passed in the GA, this is not the case in the Security Council, where resolutions are binding in nature, as the United States has used its veto power to prevent the passage of such resolutions.

In the 1970s, the Arab bloc used its power to establish and authorize funding for several UN committees and divisions of the Secretariat which primarily carry out the anti-Israel agenda. Among these are: The Division for Palestinian Rights of the Secretariat, The Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices in the Territories, and The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. Today, these bodies continue to be deeply engaged in promoting programs and initiatives that are harshly critical of Israel.

A low point at the UN was the passage of the Arab and Soviet-sponsored United Nations resolution of November 10, 1975 which declared Zionism a “form of racism and racial discrimination.” The highly politicized resolution was aimed at denying Israel its political legitimacy by attacking its moral basis for existence. The resolution was finally repealed on December 16, 1991.

For decades, Israel was the only member state consistently denied admission into a regional group, the organizational structure by which member states can participate on UN bodies and committees. The Arab states continue to prevent Israeli membership in the Asian Regional Group, Israel’s natural geopolitical grouping. As a result, Israel long sought entry into the Western and Others Group (WEOG) and in May 2000 was granted admission in New York. In 2013, Israel was invited to join WEOG in Geneva, the seat of several UN bodies and subsidiary organizations.

The Human Rights Council
The UN Human Rights Council (HRC), which replaced the Commission on Human Rights in March 2006, has continued its predecessor's extreme focus on and biased treatment of issues relating to Israel, particularly in comparison with its mild action on pressing international human rights crises. The permanent agenda of the HRC includes a specific item targeting Israel - Agenda Item #7 – which is titled: "Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories: Human rights violations and implications of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and other occupied Arab territories and the Right to self-determination of the Palestinian people. Israel is the only country to appear on the HRC's permanent agenda, while other countries such as Iran and Sudan, notorious for their human rights abuses, are included as part of the general debate.

The HRC has appointed a few "Special Rapporteurs" on "the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967," whose biased mandate has been evident in their one-sided reports on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Two of the most problematic Special Rapporteurs have been John Dugard – who in 2008 justified Palestinian terrorism as an "inevitable consequence" of Israel's actions – and Richard Falk – who has made a number of outrageous comments about Israel, including endorsing the anti-Israel BDS movement and comparing Israel's treatment of Palestinians to Nazi activity during the Holocaust.

The HRC has also initiated a number of "investigations" of Israeli military action following recent conflicts between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. In 2009, it published the so-called "Goldstone Report" (named for the investigation's head Justice Richard Goldstone of South Africa) which accused Israel of committing war crimes in Gaza during its military operations in December 2008 - January 2009 (Operation Cast Lead), including the deliberate and premeditated targeting of civilians. While the report contained some discussion of Palestinian actions, including charges that Hamas violated international law, the focus of the report and its recommendations were on Israel, causing Israel, the United States, some European countries and others in the international community to reject the report's validity. In 2011, Justice Goldstone published an op-ed where he withdrew
the report’s claim that Israel deliberately targeted civilians, and commended Israel’s independent investigations into charges of abuse.

In 2015, the HRC published a report on Israel’s 2014 military operation against Hamas in Gaza (Operation Protective Edge), which accused both Israel and Hamas of violations in international law which could amount to war crimes. The report accused Israel of using disproportionate force in Gaza, and not doing enough to prevent civilian casualties. Israel and US rejected the report.

In 2016, the HRC ratcheted up its hostility to Israel by passing a resolution calling for the creation of a “blacklist” of companies operating in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Golan Heights. The resolution condemned Israeli settlements, and called on companies not to do business with them. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said he planned to publish the list by the end of 2017, despite objections from Israel and the US. As of 2018, the UN has only published a list of countries where the companies are based, but not the names of the companies themselves.

In June 2018, the US announced that it was formally withdrawing from the HRC, citing anti-Israel bias and the body’s inclusion of human rights-violating countries as motivating the decision. The UK also announced that it would withdraw if the Council continued its anti-Israel bias.

**United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**

In October 2011, UNESCO granted the Palestinians full admission into the organization, the first UN body to do so. In the past few years, a number of problematic resolutions relating to Israel have been adopted by the body, which have include harsh criticism of Israel’s handling of holy sites in Jerusalem.

In April 2016, the UNESCO Executive Board adopted a resolution on “Occupied Palestine” which was harshly critical of Israel and which only refers to the Muslim name for the Temple Mount – Al-Aqsa Mosque/Al-Haram al-Sharif –
without using the Jewish “Temple Mount”, effectively ignoring the Jewish connection to the site.

In October 2016, the Executive Board passed a resolution on Jerusalem which referred to the Temple Mount / Holy Sanctuary solely by its Muslim name and to the Western Wall Plaza in quotation marks, effectively diminishing the 3,000 year Jewish connection to the city.

In July 2017, UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee voted to designate the old city of Hebron, including the Tomb of the Patriarchs, as a “World Heritage Site in Danger” and listed the site as part of the State of Palestine.

In 2018, a toned-down compromise UNESCO resolution was reached on an Israel-focused resolution, which Israel welcomed as a positive step.

**Palestinian Statehood Activities**

The UN has also become a vehicle for the Palestinians to take unilateral action to gain statehood recognition.

In September 2011, the Palestinians began the process of securing UN admission by submitting an application to the UN Security Council. The Palestinians ultimately decided to “postpone” a vote on their admission after it became clear that they lacked sufficient support for approval.

On October 31, 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) granted “Palestine” membership, marking the first time the Palestinians had gained full admittance into a UN organization.

In 2012, the UNGA voted overwhelmingly to upgrade the Palestinians to non-member observer status, effectively recognizing the State of Palestine, a move that was rejected by Israel and the US as a ploy to circumvent direct negotiations with Israel.
Since January 2019, the Palestinians have chaired the Group of 77 bloc (G77), the largest bloc of developing countries making up over 80% of the world’s population.

**Positive Developments on Israel**

There have been some recent positive developments at the UN with Israel accomplishing a major first when the UN’s Second Committee (Economic and Financial) adopted an Israeli-initiated draft resolution dealing with agricultural technology for development in 2009.

In June 2016, Israeli UN Ambassador Danny Danon was elected chairman of the UN General Assembly's Sixth Committee (which deals with legal issues, including matters related to terrorism and the Geneva Conventions), marking the first time Israel has been elected to head a permanent UN committee.

In 2018, Israeli law professor Yuval Shany was chosen to head the UN Human Rights Committee, a body of independent experts that monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Shany is the first Israeli to hold the position.

In 2019, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) issued a report criticizing Palestinian authorities and calling on Palestinian leaders to act against “racist hate speech and hate crimes,” including incitement to violence against Israelis and Jews. The report marked the first time CERD had ever criticized Palestinian officials for incitement.

**Anti-Semitism**

In recent years, the UN has begun to address other issues of concern to the Jewish community, particularly anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, in a highly visible way. In January 2015, the UNGA held its first ever special session on the rise of anti-Semitic violence worldwide. The event was cosponsored by the US, Israel, the
28 EU members and other countries, and featured a statements and speeches by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and a number of government officials.

In June 2019, the UN General Assembly held an informal session on combating anti-Semitism and other forms of racism. The meeting was organized at the initiative of the Israeli UN Mission, was over 90 countries participated, including representatives from Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Morocco. Secretary General Antonio Guterres opened the session, saying “I guarantee you that I will continue to call out Anti-Semitic racism and other forms of hatred loudly and unapologetically.”

Hundreds of guests also participated, including Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, who was injured in the April 27 shooting attack at the Poway synagogue in San Diego, as well as the daughter and sister of Lori Gilbert Kaye, who was killed in the attack.