

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW
MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES
[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 9 | Issue 4

2026

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Structural Constraints and Strategic Necessity: A Comparative Analysis of the UN's Relevancy in Twenty-First-Century Armed Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of the United Nations in maintaining peace and harmony in the world and in protecting the right of every individual to live in a peaceful society. It explores the efforts made by the United Nations and the significant responses it has given in relation to more influential and less influential countries as they exercise their sovereignty and deal with other nations in the world. It considers the various peace operations conducted and performed by the United Nations and what the world has gained from them, the law governing those operations and the approach the United Nations takes to it, and the barriers that obstruct their conduct. It further considers the instruments available other than peace operations and the extent to which they are used, together with the effects of those instruments in matters involving influential countries.

Keywords: *United Nations, Peacekeeping, Influential, Relevancy, Contemporary, Challenges*

I. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations emerged from the determination that remained after a devastating world war. Global peace cannot be permitted to be put at risk, for doing so would undermine democratic values and intrude on the sovereignty of independent nations. Humanity is currently undergoing a profound period of change. Advances in modern technology are reshaping life in ways that would have been unimaginable when the Charter of the United Nations was signed. As the United Nations crosses its eightieth-year milestone, debates about its relevance in a fast-changing world have become more urgent than ever. Established in 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War, the organisation was created to promote global peace, collective action and

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the protection of human rights.¹ Today, with 193 nations represented² and an extensive international presence, it has been central to peacekeeping missions, disaster relief efforts and the development of worldwide standards.

In 2026, however, the United Nations is confronting a growing list of obstacles. Severe budget shortages, constant deadlock among the major powers in the Security Council, and widespread criticism of its delayed reactions to crises in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan have raised serious doubts about its effectiveness. Many question whether the organisation can still fulfil its long-standing mission as a global mediator, and the demand for meaningful reform is becoming increasingly urgent.³ Efforts such as the UN80 initiative are pushing to modernise the institution, sharpen its focus and reinforce its role in a world struggling with climate threats, rapid technological change and a surge in nationalist politics.⁴ The Secretary-General has warned that conflicts are spreading, that civilians are bearing the brunt and that violations of human rights and international law are creating tragedies that shame humanity as a whole.⁵

The relevance of the United Nations in addressing contemporary war-like situations remains a topic of considerable scholarly debate. Established in 1945 with the primary objective of preventing large-scale conflict and maintaining international peace and security, the organisation continues to play a central, though sometimes constrained, role in global conflict management. While critics often highlight its structural and political limitations, particularly the veto power within the Security Council, it nonetheless retains significant relevance through its normative authority, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian interventions and conflict-resolution mechanisms. First, the United Nations continues to provide an indispensable normative framework for international peace and security. Its Charter, conventions and resolutions serve as the backbone of modern international law on conflict, the protection of civilians and post-conflict reconstruction. Even when major powers act unilaterally or outside United Nations frameworks, international legitimacy is often still measured against United Nations standards. This normative influence helps shape state behaviour and constrains the extent to which actors can justify the use of force.

¹ U.N. Charter pmb., art. 1; *see also* SENALOR K. YAWLUI, *THE EVOLVING ECOWAS NORMATIVE ARCHITECTURE AND CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL LAW: A CASE STUDY OF PRO-DEMOCRACY INTERVENTION IN THE GAMBIA* 4 (White Falcon Publishing 2023).

² U.N., *Member States*, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/member-states> (last visited Feb. 11, 2026).

³ INT'L CRISIS GRP., *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025-2026*, Special Briefing No. 13 (Sept. 17, 2025), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sbr/global/sb13-ten-challenges-un-2025-2026>.

⁴ U.N., *UN80 Initiative: Building a Stronger, More Effective UN*, <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en> (last visited July 20, 2025).

⁵ Secretary-General, *Peace Doesn't Happen by Accident: It Must Be Forged*, U.N. Meetings Coverage & Press Releases, U.N. Doc. SG/SM/22800 (Sept. 25, 2025), <https://press.un.org/en/2025/sgsm22800.doc.htm>.

Second, United Nations peacekeeping operations remain one of the most visible and practical instruments for managing war-like situations. Although peacekeeping missions often operate under challenging conditions, such as ambiguous mandates, limited resources or host-state resistance, they have been shown to reduce the likelihood of conflict recurrence and of civilian casualties. Their multidimensional nature, encompassing disarmament, election monitoring, institution-building and humanitarian support, demonstrates the adaptive capacity of the organisation in responding to contemporary forms of conflict, which increasingly involve non-state actors, asymmetric warfare and fragile governance structures. Third, the humanitarian agencies of the United Nations, particularly UNHCR,⁶ the World Food Programme⁷ and UNICEF,⁸ play a crucial role in mitigating the human costs of war-like situations.

II. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This paper examines the role of the United Nations in maintaining peace in the world. The protection of every individual's right to live in a peaceful society constitutes a fundamental obligation of states and of the international community, grounded in universal human rights principles, and it is essential to the promotion of justice, security and human dignity worldwide. The paper explores the efforts made by the United Nations and the significant responses it has given in relation to influential and non-influential countries as they exercise their sovereignty and deal with other nations. It examines the various peace operations conducted by the United Nations and the major gains the world has drawn from them, together with the law governing those operations. It also explores instruments other than peace operations and the progress made in implementing them. Finally, it considers the visible effects of these methods as between influential and non-influential nations.

III. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study, descriptive and interpretive in nature. It draws only on secondary data available in different forms, such as journal articles, books, reports on United Nations peacekeeping operations and material published by other United Nations agencies.

⁶ U.N. HIGH COMM'R FOR REFUGEES, *UNHCR Helps to Save Lives and Build Better Futures for the Millions of People Forced to Flee Their Homes* (last visited Feb. 11, 2026).

⁷ WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME, *How Does Conflict Cause Hunger?*, <https://www.wfp.org/conflict-and-hunger> (last visited Feb. 11, 2026).

⁸ U.N. CHILDREN'S FUND, *UNICEF Launches Appeal to Meet Unprecedented Humanitarian Needs*, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/unicef-launches-appeal-meet-unprecedented-humanitarian-needs> (last visited Feb. 11, 2026).

IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Though the League of Nations still existed, the world was edging dangerously close to the outbreak of the Second World War. Tension and conflict were spreading across continents, and in this atmosphere of global instability several nations began to feel that a new international body was needed, one capable of ensuring lasting peace.⁹ This idea led to a series of important meetings, beginning with the Declaration of St. James's Palace and continuing through the Atlantic Charter, the Declaration by United Nations, the Moscow and Tehran Conferences, the Dumbarton Oaks discussions, the Yalta Conference and finally the San Francisco Conference.¹⁰ Representatives from 50 countries assembled in San Francisco with a shared goal: to create an organisation that could prevent future wars and support the development of a more secure and just world. After weeks of deliberation, on 25 June 1945 the delegates gathered at the San Francisco Opera House for the final plenary meeting, where the Charter of the United Nations was unanimously approved. The following day, in the Veterans' Memorial Hall, the formal signing took place. China, recognised as the first nation to fall victim to Axis aggression, was granted the honour of signing before all others.¹¹

The United Nations did not, however, become active immediately after this historic signing. Each participating nation first had to ratify the Charter in accordance with its own constitutional procedures. It was agreed that the Charter would come into force only once the five permanent members and a majority of the other signatories had completed ratification.¹² That requirement was met on 24 October 1945, marking the official birth of the United Nations.¹³ After years of planning and long-held aspiration, a global organisation committed to preventing war and to promoting peace, justice and human welfare finally became a reality.

V. THE UNITED NATIONS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The United Nations is a global organisation founded in 1945 on three primary pillars: international peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development.¹⁴ It uses its authority under its founding Charter and its unique international character to act on a wide array of global issues.

⁹ STEPHEN C. SCHLESINGER, *ACT OF CREATION: THE FOUNDING OF THE UNITED NATIONS 1-45* (2003).

¹⁰ PAUL KENNEDY, *THE PARLIAMENT OF MAN: THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE UNITED NATIONS 1-20* (Random House 2006).

¹¹ Schlesinger, *supra* note 9, at 1-45.

¹² U.N. Charter art. 110.

¹³ U.N. Charter art. 110(3).

¹⁴ U.N. Charter pmbl., arts. 1, 55-56.

A. Peace and Security

The United Nations was created after the Second World War to save succeeding generations from war.¹⁵ To fulfil this mission, it engages in the following:

- Conflict prevention and diplomacy: the United Nations uses mediation and preventive diplomacy to help resolve disputes peacefully before they escalate.
- Peacekeeping: the organisation deploys troops and police, contributed by member states, to maintain peace and security in post-conflict zones.
- Security Council action: the Security Council can investigate threats to peace, call upon parties to settle disputes, issue cease-fire directives, and impose sanctions or authorise military action.

i. Thwarting Wars and Practising Diplomacy

The United Nations plays a crucial role in promoting conflict prevention and diplomacy on the global stage. One of the primary methods employed is mediation, which aims to resolve disputes peacefully before they escalate into significant conflicts.¹⁶ The organisation recognises that early engagement is essential in addressing underlying tensions, and the Secretary-General is often at the forefront of these efforts.¹⁷ Through the good offices of that post, the Secretary-General leverages influence and connections to facilitate dialogue among conflicting parties.¹⁸ By prioritising diplomacy and open communication, the United Nations seeks to create a more stable and peaceful world, allowing countries to resolve their differences without resorting to violence. Ultimately, these efforts are rooted in the belief that collaboration and dialogue can lead to sustainable solutions and prevent the suffering that often accompanies conflict.¹⁹

ii. Peacekeeping for Peace and Security

It is necessary to understand the nature and decision-making process of the United Nations in order to appreciate the issues involved in today's United Nations peacekeeping operations.²⁰ The United Nations is a political institution and an inter-governmental organisation composed of 193 sovereign states, and its competence is governed by the Charter. The Security Council is principally responsible for carrying out the fundamental objective of the Organization, the

¹⁵ U.N. Charter pmb. (resolving "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war").

¹⁶ U.N. Charter art. 33.

¹⁷ U.N. Charter art. 99.

¹⁸ U.N. OFF. OF LEGAL AFFS., CODIFICATION DIV., HANDBOOK ON THE PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT OF DISPUTES BETWEEN STATES, U.N. Doc. OLA/COD/2394, U.N. Sales No. E.92.V.7 (1992).

¹⁹ THOMAS M. FRANCK, THE POWER OF LEGITIMACY AMONG NATIONS 174-81 (1990).

²⁰ Rep. of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, *Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, U.N. Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446 (June 17, 2015).

maintenance of international peace and security.²¹ Neither the Security Council nor any other organ, however, has the power to impose its decisions on the member states.²² The only exception occurs when the Council decides to act under Chapter VII of the Charter, in which case the decisions are binding and enforceable in the territories of member states.²³

The United Nations itself describes the purpose and the record of its peacekeeping in the following terms:

UN peacekeeping helps host countries to become more resilient to conflict, laying the groundwork to sustain long-term peace, including by addressing root causes of conflict. A strong and effective partnership between the UN Secretariat, the Security Council and the countries that contribute uniformed personnel, has made possible for 55 peacekeeping operations around the world to have, through the years, successfully completed their mandate. This partnership is essential as we continue to evolve, striving every day to become more agile and adapt to the volatile environments we operate in. All of this allows our peacekeepers to prevent conflicts, protect civilians, build rule of law and security institutions, promote human rights, empower women and deliver field support.²⁴

iii. Security Council Action

The Charter envisioned an arrangement whereby states would make their forces available by concluding agreements with the Security Council. Thus far, however, such arrangements have not taken place. Decisions under Chapter VII are substantive in nature, requiring a majority of at least nine votes out of a total of fifteen, and that majority must include the concurring votes of the five permanent members. Under the Provisional Rules of Procedure of the Council, although absence and abstention are not regarded as voting, a negative vote from any of the five permanent members can still block the Council's decision. During the Cold War, which emerged almost immediately after the birth of the United Nations, the lack of agreement among members of the Security Council, and particularly among its permanent members, made it impossible for the Council to carry out its functions fully in the manner originally contemplated under Chapter VII.²⁵

²¹ U.N. Charter arts. 2(1), 10-12, 24, 25, 39-42.

²² NIGEL D. WHITE, *KEEPING THE PEACE: THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE MAINTENANCE OF INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY* 27-45, 78-92 (2d ed. 1997).

²³ *THE CHARTER OF THE UNITED NATIONS: A COMMENTARY* 442-60, 701-15, 1235-60 (Bruno Simma et al. eds., 3d ed. 2012).

²⁴ U.N. Peacekeeping, *Our Work*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/our-work> (last visited Feb. 11, 2026).

²⁵ U.N. Charter art. 27(3); White, *supra* note 22, at 27-45.

Chapter VII of the Charter provides for a collective security system under which the Security Council is empowered to take a range of measures when international peace and security are endangered.²⁶ For example, the Council may call upon the parties concerned to comply with such provisional measures as it deems necessary, and may order the complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations.²⁷ Chapter VIII encourages cooperation with regional organisations such as the African Union, allowing local bodies to manage crises with United Nations oversight. In addition, the Council has the power to apply air, sea or land forces, which ideally would act under the direction of the Military Staff Committee, composed of the Chiefs of Staff of the permanent members of the Council.²⁸

B. Protection of Human Rights

The promotion and protection of human rights is a key purpose of the United Nations, mentioned seven times in its Charter.²⁹ Its work includes the following:

- Establishing international law: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the first international instrument to set out fundamental human rights to be universally protected.³⁰ Since then, the United Nations has created a comprehensive body of international human rights law through numerous treaties and conventions.
- Monitoring and oversight: the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights Council are key bodies that monitor human rights situations globally and investigate violations.³¹
- Empowering people: through research, education and advocacy, the United Nations empowers people to claim their rights.³² Human rights are also integrated into peacekeeping and development activities.³³

C. Sustainable Development Efforts

Sustainable development is promoted by the United Nations to improve living standards and to foster a more equitable, healthy and prosperous future for all. Key aspects include the following:

²⁶ U.N. Charter arts. 39-42.

²⁷ U.N. Charter arts. 40-41.

²⁸ U.N. Charter arts. 42, 45-47.

²⁹ U.N. Charter arts. 55-56.

³⁰ G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Dec. 10, 1948).

³¹ OFF. OF THE U.N. HIGH COMM'R FOR HUM. RTS., *About Us*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us> (last visited Feb. 11, 2026).

³² G.A. Res. 60/251, Human Rights Council (Mar. 15, 2006).

³³ U.N. Peacekeeping, *supra* note 24.

- Sustainable Development Goals: in 2015, all member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 interconnected goals. The Goals provide a universal blueprint for action on issues such as poverty, hunger, education, climate change and gender equality.³⁴
- Addressing global challenges: the United Nations tackles a range of social, economic and environmental issues through its agencies, funds and programmes. These efforts aim to protect the planet while reducing inequalities and fostering economic growth.
- Promoting cooperation: the United Nations encourages global partnerships among governments, civil society and the private sector to mobilise resources, technology and expertise to achieve the Goals.³⁵

Through these roles, the United Nations strives to mitigate the impact of conflicts between states and thereby to foster peace and security on a global scale.³⁶

VI. THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN NON-INFLUENTIAL NATIONS

The United Nations plays a crucial role in addressing conflicts that involve non-influential states, which are often characterised by limited political, military or economic power. Such conflicts may arise from various factors, including territorial disputes, ethnic tensions and resource scarcity. Non-influential or small states often lack the military, economic and diplomatic leverage to resolve internal or cross-border conflicts on their own. The United Nations provides these states with mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution, collective security and international support, and it levels the playing field when power asymmetries threaten peace and stability. Through this collective approach, the organisation helps fragile nations navigate crises that might otherwise spiral into protracted violence.³⁷ Cases such as Sierra Leone,³⁸ Timor-Leste³⁹ and Cambodia⁴⁰ illustrate how United Nations engagement can stabilise conflict zones, rebuild institutions and restore hope in countries with limited leverage. For non-influential states grappling with conflict, the United Nations remains an indispensable forum for legal guidance, peacekeeping, mediation and humanitarian aid, and a voice on the

³⁴ G.A. Res. 70/1, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sept. 25, 2015).

³⁵ U.N., *Global Partnerships*, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/globalpartnerships/> (last visited Oct. 24, 2025).

³⁶ U.N. Peacekeeping, *What Is Peacekeeping*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/what-is-peacekeeping> (last visited Feb. 11, 2026).

³⁷ U.N. Charter arts. 1-2, 33-38.

³⁸ S.C. Res. 1270, para. 1 (Oct. 22, 1999).

³⁹ S.C. Res. 1272, para. 1 (Oct. 25, 1999).

⁴⁰ S.C. Res. 745, para. 1 (Feb. 28, 1992).

world stage. The experiences of Sierra Leone,⁴¹ Timor-Leste⁴² and Cambodia⁴³ attest to its capacity to help transform war-torn societies into functioning democracies.

VII. SIGNIFICANT PEACEKEEPING MISSIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The primary reason for the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 was the maintenance of peace and security in the world. Peacekeeping is one of the major ways in which the organisation helps to maintain international peace and security. Although the word peacekeeping was not anticipated in the Charter, there are many provisions concerning the peaceful settlement of disputes, the use of force to end conflict and the maintenance of international peace and security.⁴⁴ The basic principles of United Nations peacekeeping were defined by the Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, and by the Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs and former President of the General Assembly, Lester B. Pearson, in response to the Suez Crisis of 1956. Accordingly, the United Nations defines peacekeeping as “an operation involving military personnel, but without enforcement powers, established by the United Nations to help maintain or restore international peace and security in areas of conflict”.⁴⁵ It is a technique designed to preserve peace, however fragile, where fighting has been halted, and to assist in implementing agreements achieved by peacemakers.

The first United Nations peacekeeping operations were established in 1948, in relation to the Middle East, and in 1949, in relation to the India-Pakistan border.⁴⁶ Over the years, peacekeeping has evolved from a primarily military model of observing ceasefires and the separation of forces after inter-state wars into a complex model of many elements, military, police and civilian, working together to help lay the foundations for sustainable peace.⁴⁷ To give peacekeepers greater recognition, the United Nations has declared 29 May the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers.⁴⁸

The first United Nations peacekeeping operation, in the Middle East in 1948, best illustrates the circumstances in which this instrument was created.⁴⁹ In 1947, Palestine was a territory administered by the United Kingdom under mandate from the League of Nations. It had a

⁴¹ S.C. Res. 1270, *supra* note 38.

⁴² S.C. Res. 1272, *supra* note 39.

⁴³ S.C. Res. 745, *supra* note 40.

⁴⁴ Athambawa Sarjoon & Mohammed Agus Yusoff, *The United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Challenges*, 8 ACAD. J. INTERDISC. STUD., no. 3, 2019, at 202, 203.

⁴⁵ Sarjoon & Yusoff, *supra* note 44, at 203.

⁴⁶ U.N. DEP'T OF PUB. INFO., *THE BLUE HELMETS: A REVIEW OF UNITED NATIONS PEACE-KEEPING*, U.N. Sales No. E.90.I.18 (2d ed. 1990).

⁴⁷ White, *supra* note 22, at 78-92.

⁴⁸ Sarjoon & Yusoff, *supra* note 44, at 202.

⁴⁹ *THE BLUE HELMETS*, *supra* note 46.

population of approximately two million, two-thirds of whom were Arabs and one-third of whom were Jews. Both communities claimed control of the entire territory. Unable to find a solution acceptable to both communities, the British Government presented the matter to the General Assembly in April 1947.⁵⁰ The Assembly adopted a partition plan in November, which divided the territory into an Arab State and a Jewish State, with an international regime for Jerusalem. The plan, however, was not acceptable to the Palestinian Arabs or to the Arab States, and violent fighting broke out in Palestine. When Jewish leaders proclaimed the State of Israel, hostilities intensified.⁵¹

Eventually, the Security Council called for a cease-fire, which was accepted by both parties. Although the superpowers saw the need to contain the fighting, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was willing to allow the other to intervene.⁵² When it became evident that a third party was needed to supervise the implementation of the cease-fire, the first United Nations peacekeeping operation was created: the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization, a group of unarmed military observers.⁵³ Following the wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973, the United Nations expanded the original functions of the military observers.⁵⁴

A. Preventive Diplomacy and Mediation

When conflicts are still in their nascent stages, the United Nations can deploy envoys and leverage good offices⁵⁵ to prevent escalation.⁵⁶

- Guatemala: the peace process sponsored by the United Nations brought the government and guerrilla forces to the negotiating table. Technical support for ceasefire monitoring and confidence-building measures culminated in the 1996 Peace Accords, ending 36 years of civil war.⁵⁷
- Bougainville: tensions over mining revenues in the Bougainville province of Papua New Guinea led to an armed uprising. The United Nations Political Office in

⁵⁰ RAMESH THAKUR, *THE UNITED NATIONS, PEACE AND SECURITY: FROM COLLECTIVE SECURITY TO THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT* 45-50 (2006).

⁵¹ THE BLUE HELMETS, *supra* note 46.

⁵² SIMON CHESTERMAN, *YOU, THE PEOPLE: THE UNITED NATIONS, TRANSITIONAL ADMINISTRATION, AND STATE-BUILDING* 18-22 (2004).

⁵³ THE BLUE HELMETS, *supra* note 46.

⁵⁴ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-Keeping*, 11 INT'L REL. 201 (1992).

⁵⁵ Boutros-Ghali, *supra* note 54, at 201-05.

⁵⁶ Thakur, *supra* note 50, at 45-50.

⁵⁷ WILLIAM STANLEY, *ENABLING PEACE IN GUATEMALA: THE STORY OF MINUGUA* (2013).

Bougainville facilitated dialogue, monitored ceasefires and helped draft the peace agreement of 30 August 2001, which granted the region autonomy.⁵⁸

- Cyprus: while Cyprus is not a small nation, its protracted bi-communal conflict demonstrates the difficulty of mediation without unanimity among the great powers.⁵⁹

B. Equal Voice in Global Forums

One of the unique strengths of the United Nations is the principle of sovereign equality: every member state, regardless of size, holds one vote in the General Assembly.⁶⁰ This ensures that less influential countries can place items on the international agenda, support or oppose resolutions, and be heard on the same formal footing as the most powerful states.

C. Peacekeeping Missions in Fragile Contexts

United Nations peacekeeping operations are central to stabilising conflicts where host governments cannot guarantee security. In many of these missions, the host state is less influential on the world stage.

- Sierra Leone: after a brutal civil war marked by atrocities and blood diamonds, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone deployed over 17,000 troops and police. Through disarmament programmes and support for elections, UNAMSIL helped disband rebel forces and restore governmental authority.⁶¹
- Timor-Leste: following a referendum on independence from Indonesia, widespread violence erupted. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor combined civil governance, security enforcement and institution-building.⁶² By the end of the mission, Timor-Leste had held multiple elections and drafted a constitution.

In each of these cases, United Nations peacekeepers filled critical security vacuums, providing impartial protection that local forces, often weakened by conflict, could not deliver. All components of a peacekeeping operation should also respect international law and the customs of the indigenous people of the host country in implementing peacekeeping mandates. One of the major challenges in United Nations peacekeeping is the absence of a permanent peacekeeping force. A distinct, full-fledged United Nations peacekeeping force should therefore be formed, with adequately trained and specialised units and personnel and with the resources to match.

⁵⁸ Kylie McKenna, *Status and Implementation of the Bougainville Peace Agreement and Implications for Referendum*, Research Report No. 6 (NAT'L RESEARCH INST. PAPUA NEW GUINEA, Jan. 2019).

⁵⁹ JAMES KER-LINDSAY, *THE CYPRUS PROBLEM: WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW* (2011).

⁶⁰ U.N. Charter arts. 2(1), 18(1).

⁶¹ S.C. Res. 1270, *supra* note 38.

⁶² Chesterman, *supra* note 52, at 18-22.

D. Application of Humanitarian Law

Protection has become an important function of the more recent peacekeeping operations. Operations in Somalia, the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda have been called upon to safeguard protected areas or to protect humanitarian supplies and refugee relief. At the same time, they must try to stabilise the situation and work with the concerned parties towards a negotiated settlement.⁶³ In some cases, the Security Council has authorised United Nations forces to take “all necessary measures” to ensure the implementation of their mandates.⁶⁴

E. Humanitarian Assistance and Reconstruction

Conflicts in non-influential states frequently produce humanitarian emergencies that outstrip national capacities. United Nations agencies coordinate relief and long-term recovery.

- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: in contexts such as Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste, UNHCR managed large-scale repatriation of refugees, working with host countries to facilitate safe returns.
- United Nations Development Programme: it leads post-conflict institution-building, training police, reforming judicial systems and starting economic projects. In Cambodia, support from UNDP helped rebuild schools and health clinics destroyed during decades of war.

By integrating immediate relief with long-term development, the United Nations prevents humanitarian crises from igniting renewed conflict. International humanitarian law nevertheless remains state-centred. The obligation to observe humanitarian instruments is imposed on the parties to the Conventions, and it is they who are responsible for taking the measures necessary to ensure implementation.

VIII. THE UNITED NATIONS AND GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES INVOLVING INFLUENTIAL STATES: RUSSIA AND ISRAEL

The relevance of the United Nations in addressing issues that involve influential states such as Russia and Israel is a topic of considerable scholarly examination. The United Nations, as an international organisation established to promote peace, security and cooperation among nations, faces significant challenges when dealing with influential states that possess considerable political, military and economic leverage. In the case of Russia, its position as a permanent member of the Security Council affords it substantial authority in shaping

⁶³ Michael W. Doyle & Nicholas Sambanis, *International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis*, 94 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 779 (2000).

⁶⁴ S.C. Res. 794 (Dec. 3, 1992); S.C. Res. 836 (June 4, 1993).

international discourse and decision-making. That status complicates the capacity of the United Nations to intervene effectively in conflicts where Russian interests are at stake, as in Syria or Ukraine. The exercise of the veto by Russia often stifles collective action, raising questions about the efficacy of the United Nations as a mediator in international disputes.⁶⁵ The relationship between Israel and the United Nations is similarly characterised by a complex interplay of geopolitical dynamics, particularly concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A. The Israel-Palestine Conflict and the United Nations

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most enduring and complex disputes in modern history, marked by deep-seated historical grievances, cultural narratives and geopolitical ramifications. At the heart of this multifaceted conflict is the role of the United Nations, whose involvement has been pivotal since the mid-twentieth century.⁶⁶ The attacks of 7 October 2023 by Hamas on Israel made the conflict more complex still and reignited it.⁶⁷ From the 1947 Partition Plan to various subsequent resolutions, the engagement of the United Nations has been characterised by attempts to mediate peace and to facilitate coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians. That involvement can be traced back to the aftermath of the Second World War, which saw a significant shift in global attitudes towards colonialism and minority rights. Amid growing Jewish migration to Palestine and escalating tensions between Jewish and Arab communities, the United Nations took it upon itself to address the burgeoning conflict. In 1947, the General Assembly passed Resolution 181,⁶⁸ commonly referred to as the Partition Plan, which proposed the division of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem designated as an international city.

The Partition Plan was a landmark decision, aimed at providing a solution to the conflicting national aspirations of Jews and Arabs in Palestine. The resolution garnered considerable support from Jewish representatives, who saw it as an opportunity for statehood following centuries of persecution, particularly during the Holocaust. The Arab leadership, by contrast, rejected the plan, arguing that it violated the rights of the majority Arab population residing in Palestine. This dichotomy laid the groundwork for the ensuing conflict, as the declaration of the State of Israel in May 1948 led to the first Arab-Israeli war and to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, an event referred to as the Nakba, or catastrophe.⁶⁹ In the years

⁶⁵ U.N. Charter art. 27(3).

⁶⁶ RASHID KHALIDI, *THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR ON PALESTINE: A HISTORY OF SETTLER COLONIALISM AND RESISTANCE*, 1917-2017, at 3-25 (2020).

⁶⁷ Assaf Moghadam & Anthony C. Marco, *The October 7, 2023 Attacks and the Maturation of Terrorism Studies*, *STUD. CONFLICT & TERRORISM* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2528318>.

⁶⁸ G.A. Res. 181 (II), *Future Government of Palestine* (Nov. 29, 1947).

⁶⁹ Khalidi, *supra* note 66, at 3-25.

following the initial conflict, the United Nations continued to play a crucial role by adopting numerous resolutions aimed at addressing the unfolding situation. Resolution 194,⁷⁰ passed in December 1948, called for the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes and articulated the principle of a right of return. The United Nations also established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East to assist the displaced population, and that agency has continued to function to the present day.⁷¹

Throughout the decades, the United Nations has issued numerous resolutions addressing various aspects of the conflict. Each expressed concerns regarding territory, rights and security, and attempted to outline a framework for peace. Notably, Resolution 242,⁷² passed in November 1967, called for the “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict” and emphasised the right of every state in the area “to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries”. That resolution has become a cornerstone of peace initiatives and negotiations, underpinning the principle of land for peace. The period also saw the rise of various peace processes and attempts to mediate negotiations between the parties. The Oslo Accords of the 1990s,⁷³ facilitated by Norway and concluded under United States auspices outside the United Nations framework, marked a watershed moment, establishing a framework for resolving key issues such as borders, security and the status of Jerusalem. The subsequent stagnation of the peace process and the failure to reach a comprehensive agreement have, however, highlighted the limits of United Nations influence amid complex geopolitical dynamics.⁷⁴ In recent years, the role of the United Nations has continued to evolve, navigating challenges posed by changing regional conditions, shifts in international support and the increasing political fragmentation of the Palestinian leadership. Resolutions condemning settlement expansion in the West Bank, affirming the rights of Palestinians and reiterating the need for a two-state solution have marked its ongoing commitment to resolving the conflict, despite significant opposition from various countries, including Israel and its allies.

The historical involvement of the United Nations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has thus been marked by significant initiatives, including the 1947 Partition Plan and the subsequent resolutions aimed at promoting peace and justice.⁷⁵ While the organisation has contributed to

⁷⁰ G.A. Res. 194 (III), Palestine: Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator, para. 11 (Dec. 11, 1948).

⁷¹ G.A. Res. 302 (IV), Assistance to Palestine Refugees (Dec. 8, 1949).

⁷² S.C. Res. 242 (Nov. 22, 1967).

⁷³ Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, Isr.-PLO, Sept. 13, 1993, U.N. Doc. A/48/486-S/26560 (1993).

⁷⁴ WILLIAM B. QUANDT, *PEACE PROCESS: AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT SINCE 1967*, at 250-65 (3d ed. 2005).

⁷⁵ G.A. Res. 181 (II), *supra* note 68.

raising awareness and to international dialogue on the issue, the complexities of the conflict, compounded by shifting political realities, continue to challenge its ability to achieve a lasting resolution. As the world looks to the future, its role remains critical in advocating a negotiated solution.

i. Current Efforts by the United Nations

The present Israel-Hamas conflict began on 7 October 2023, when Hamas launched deadly attacks on Israel, causing significant casualties and taking hostages.⁷⁶ In response, Israel carried out a large-scale military operation in the Gaza Strip, leading to widespread civilian suffering and destruction. The United Nations has repeatedly called for restraint and adherence to international law, and several General Assembly and Security Council resolutions have emphasised the protection of civilians, the provision of humanitarian aid and the avoidance of actions that could escalate the conflict.⁷⁷ These resolutions reaffirm the need for a negotiated solution, uphold the principles of human rights and international humanitarian law, and urge all parties to prevent further violence, although enforcement and compliance remain difficult amid ongoing hostilities. One resolution called on Hamas to accept a proposed ceasefire and hostage release agreement that included steps towards a lasting cessation of hostilities.⁷⁸ On 18 September 2024, the General Assembly adopted a resolution linked to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on Israel's actions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The vote passed with 124 countries in favour, 14 against and 43 abstentions. The resolution calls on Israel to end its unlawful presence without delay, withdraw its forces, stop all settlement activity, remove settlers and dismantle parts of the separation wall in the occupied West Bank. It also demands the return of seized land, property and cultural assets taken since 1967, calls for displaced Palestinians to be allowed to return to their homes, and requires reparation for the damage caused by the occupation.⁷⁹

More recently, Security Council Resolution 2803 was adopted on 17 November 2025, welcoming a comprehensive Gaza peace plan and authorising measures including a stabilisation force aimed at sustaining a ceasefire and supporting reconstruction.⁸⁰ United Nations human rights bodies have raised concerns about the extensive use by Israel of administrative detention, that is, detention without trial, of thousands of Palestinians. A United Nations commission of inquiry has found a “de facto State policy” of organised and widespread torture of Palestinian

⁷⁶ Moghadam & Marco, *supra* note 67.

⁷⁷ S.C. Res. 2728 (Mar. 25, 2024).

⁷⁸ S.C. Res. 2735 (June 10, 2024).

⁷⁹ G.A. Res. ES-10/24 (Sept. 18, 2024).

⁸⁰ S.C. Res. 2803 (Nov. 17, 2025).

detainees in Israeli facilities.⁸¹ The United Nations has also condemned the apparent summary execution of two Palestinian men by Israeli soldiers in Jenin after they had surrendered.⁸² Situations of this kind make a mockery of the rule of law in the West Bank. This is a major challenge to the rule of law, which the United Nations is trying to meet, and its work on the Israel-Palestine conflict has seemingly not been sufficient.

The General Assembly has condemned Israel for violating international law, the Charter and previous resolutions, warning that such actions threaten regional and global peace. It stressed that Israel must be held accountable, including by making reparation for the damage caused. The Assembly called for an international mechanism and register to document losses, and for an international conference to advance a two-State solution. It also requested the Secretary-General to propose a system to monitor Israel's compliance with Article 3 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which addresses apartheid and racial segregation.⁸³ The Assembly urged member states to comply with international law and to avoid recognising or supporting the presence of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. It called for halting imports from settlements, restricting arms transfers and imposing sanctions on individuals or entities involved in maintaining the occupation. The resolution also emphasised accountability for settler violence and for other actions that reinforce Israeli control.⁸⁴

B. The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and the United Nations

The Russia-Ukraine war, initiated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, has evolved into a protracted and multifaceted conflict, profoundly affecting the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe and the broader international community.⁸⁵ This analysis examines the progression of the war, its key developments and the state of affairs as of September 2025. The conflict traces its origins to the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, which led to the establishment of pro-Russian separatist regions in eastern Ukraine. The full-scale invasion in 2022 marked a significant escalation, with Russian forces advancing from multiple directions and targeting major Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv and Kharkiv. The initial objective appeared

⁸¹ Bethan McKernan, *Israel Has 'De Facto State Policy' of Organised Torture, Says UN Report*, THE GUARDIAN (Nov. 29, 2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/29/israel-has-de-facto-state-policy-of-organised-torture-says-un-report>.

⁸² *UN Rights Office Condemns 'Apparent Summary Execution' of Two Men in the West Bank*, U.N. News (Nov. 28, 2025), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/11/1166469>.

⁸³ *India Abstains in UNGA on Resolution Demanding Israel Leave Occupied Palestinian Territory Within 12 Months*, INDIAN EXPRESS (Sept. 19, 2024), at 7.

⁸⁴ G.A. Res. ES-10/24, *supra* note 79, paras. 8-10.

⁸⁵ Pierre Bocquillon, Suzanne Doyle, Toby S. James, Ra Mason, Soul Park & Matilde Rosina, *The Effects of Wars: Lessons from the War in Ukraine*, 45 POL'Y STUD. 261 (2024).

to be a rapid decapitation of the Ukrainian government and the installation of a pro-Russian regime.⁸⁶ Ukrainian forces, bolstered by civilian support, mounted a robust defence, leading to significant Russian casualties and logistical difficulties. The Center for Strategic and International Studies reported in February 2023 that more Russian soldiers had died in the first year of the war in Ukraine than in all other Russian and Soviet wars since the Second World War combined.⁸⁷ Internationally, the General Assembly passed resolutions demanding Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territory, and numerous countries imposed sanctions on Russia.⁸⁸

i. The 1997 Treaty

The Ukraine-Russia Treaty, signed on 31 May 1997, aimed to establish cooperation and friendly relations between the two nations after Ukrainian independence. It recognised territorial integrity, promoted economic ties and addressed human rights and minority rights. Tensions nevertheless persisted, and the treaty did not prevent conflict, including the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. The treaty was a crucial moment in the relationship, driven by Ukrainian concerns about NATO expansion. It allowed Ukraine to maintain sovereignty over Sevastopol while permitting Russia to maintain a naval base there for about two decades. This compromise satisfied both sides, preventing the separation of Crimea from Ukraine and averting a NATO presence on the Black Sea coast. An economic cooperation agreement followed in 1998, focusing on harmonising economic policies and gas relations. These events illustrate the complex and often contentious nature of Ukrainian-Russian relations, driven by geopolitics and economic interests.⁸⁹

ii. Responses of the United Nations

From a structural realism perspective, the war serves as a critical case study for understanding the interplay between power, interests and norms in the contemporary international system. The conflict has highlighted the limitations of existing international legal and security frameworks and underscored the relevance of structural realism in explaining state behaviour and international outcomes. In March 2014, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 68/262, reaffirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine and declaring the 2014 Crimea referendum

⁸⁶ Bocquillon et al., *supra* note 85, at 261-81.

⁸⁷ Seth G. Jones, Riley McCabe & Alexander Palmer, *Russia's Battlefield Woes in Ukraine*, CTR. FOR STRATEGIC & INT'L STUD. (Feb. 27, 2023).

⁸⁸ Sayed Qudrat Hashimy, *Exploring the Complexities of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: A Close Look from the Lens of International Law and Global Responses*, 57 INDIAN J. POL., nos. 3-4, 2023, at 91.

⁸⁹ Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership Between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, Ukr.-Russ., May 31, 1997.

invalid, rejecting the annexation by Russia as unlawful. This set the foundation of the legal position of the United Nations on Ukraine's borders long before the 2022 invasion.⁹⁰

iii. Response to the Full-Scale Invasion

After Russia launched a full-scale invasion in February 2022, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2623 on 27 February, convening an Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly after Russia had vetoed a draft resolution on 25 February 2022.⁹¹ At that Eleventh Emergency Special Session, the General Assembly repeatedly condemned the invasion and called on Russia to withdraw its forces, uphold international law, respect sovereignty and address humanitarian suffering, through multiple resolutions in 2022 and 2023.⁹² In November 2022, Resolution ES-11/5 urged the creation of an international mechanism for war reparations to compensate Ukraine for losses caused by the aggression.⁹³ Over 2023 and 2024, the General Assembly continued to adopt resolutions calling for a ceasefire, troop withdrawal and respect for Ukrainian sovereignty, reaffirming international law, though such texts are politically persuasive rather than legally binding. On 24 February 2025, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2774, its first substantive text on the war since the invasion. It urged an end to hostilities and a peaceful settlement, and passed with 10 votes in favour and 5 abstentions, but drew criticism for not explicitly condemning Russian aggression.⁹⁴ The General Assembly also adopted Resolution ES-11/8, *The Path to Peace*, urging a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in line with the Charter.⁹⁵ Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, told the Security Council at its meeting on the maintenance of peace and security in Ukraine that “the international community must use every diplomatic tool to bring an end to the war in Ukraine”, as the full-scale invasion by Russia entered a fifth year.⁹⁶

IX. CHALLENGES AND REFORM IMPERATIVES

Despite its tools, the United Nations faces structural obstacles in addressing conflicts in small states:

⁹⁰ G.A. Res. 68/262, *Territorial Integrity of Ukraine* (Mar. 27, 2014).

⁹¹ S.C. Res. 2623 (Feb. 27, 2022).

⁹² G.A. Res. ES-11/1 (Mar. 2, 2022); G.A. Res. ES-11/2 (Mar. 24, 2022); G.A. Res. ES-11/4 (Oct. 12, 2022); G.A. Res. ES-11/6 (Feb. 23, 2023).

⁹³ G.A. Res. ES-11/5, *Furtherance of Remedy and Reparation for Aggression Against Ukraine* (Nov. 14, 2022).

⁹⁴ S.C. Res. 2774 (Feb. 24, 2025).

⁹⁵ G.A. Res. ES-11/8, *The Path to Peace* (Feb. 24, 2025).

⁹⁶ *Ukraine: ‘Use Every Diplomatic Tool to End This War’*, *Top UN Official Tells Security Council*, U.N. News (Feb. 24, 2026), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/02/1167032>.

- Veto power: any of the five permanent members of the Security Council can block enforcement action, even where the block undermines peace in less influential countries.⁹⁷
- Resource shortfalls: mandates often exceed budgets and personnel allocations, limiting mission effectiveness on the ground.
- Bureaucratic complexity: coordination across dozens of United Nations bodies can lead to delays, diluting the impact of timely intervention.

Thus, we face the challenge of how to impose a legal obligation on combatants who are free from legal constraints. The Security Council has established two war crimes tribunals, for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda respectively.⁹⁸ These courts are intended for the prosecution and punishment of persons who have committed serious crimes, such as crimes against humanity, genocide and grave breaches. Individual criminal responsibility is imposed on persons who have committed such crimes. While these efforts are intended to deter the commission of war crimes by the threat of severe punishment, the effect of such deterrence remains to be seen. The critical issue remains how to make the law applicable to the actual combatants who are in the midst of an armed conflict.⁹⁹ Yet persistent challenges, namely veto politics, budgeting gaps and bureaucratic inertia, underscore the need for institutional reform. Addressing these shortcomings will determine whether the United Nations can fulfil its founding promise of collective security for all member states, regardless of their power or prestige. The organisation faces its most severe challenges where influential states are involved, because those states command both resources and the support of many other countries.

X. CONCLUSION

The world is, after all, not as civilised as the Charter of 1945 supposed. It faces serious catastrophes: war, terrorism, extremism, trade war, environmental crisis, including deforestation, global warming, desertification, earthquakes and their later consequences, the melting of glaciers, flood and drought, as well as pandemics and hunger. These misfortunes now appear unavoidable, but they must still be tackled, and the United Nations has played a crucial role in keeping the damage to a minimum. This article has focused on the present wars between Russia and Ukraine and between Israel and Palestine, which have made millions of lives miserable. Since the attack by Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023,¹⁰⁰ a war has begun

⁹⁷ U.N. Charter art. 27(3).

⁹⁸ S.C. Res. 827 (May 25, 1993); S.C. Res. 955 (Nov. 8, 1994).

⁹⁹ Roy S. Lee, *United Nations Peacekeeping: Development and Prospects*, 28 CORNELL INT'L L.J. 619, 620-27 (1995).

¹⁰⁰ Moghadam & Marco, *supra* note 67.

whose end seems nowhere in sight. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian military began a new tragedy in Europe. The United Nations has played a crucial role in addressing these conflicts through diplomatic efforts and humanitarian aid, but its effectiveness has been limited by political complexity and by the veto. There is a pervasive fear among the members of the United Nations that the organisation has become a captive of its strongest members, namely the United States of America, Russia, the United Kingdom, China and France. To enhance its role, the United Nations must pursue reforms that include Security Council expansion, predictable financing mechanisms and streamlined decision-making protocols.

The efforts of the United Nations to address human rights issues and territorial disputes surrounding Israel have frequently met with resistance, both from Israel and from its allies, leading to accusations of bias and ineffectiveness. This highlights the challenges the organisation faces in maintaining its impartiality and fulfilling its mandate amid the divergent interests of sovereign states. Ultimately, its relevance in matters involving influential nations such as Russia and Israel is contingent upon its ability to adapt to a shifting geopolitical landscape and to navigate the intricate balance of power. Scholars continue to debate its effectiveness in fostering compliance with international norms and in facilitating conflict resolution in an increasingly multipolar world. Understanding these dynamics is therefore essential for assessing the role and legitimacy of the United Nations in contemporary global governance. Its relevance is undermined by persistent structural challenges. The veto power of the five permanent members of the Security Council continues to impede decisive action in conflicts where major powers have competing strategic interests. This has been especially evident in conflicts such as those in Syria, Yemen, Palestine and Ukraine, where geopolitical rivalries limit the ability of the Council to authorise robust intervention or to enforce accountability.

Moreover, the rise of multipolarity and the increasing assertiveness of regional organisations sometimes dilute the centrality of the United Nations in crisis response. These limitations do not, however, negate its broader relevance. Rather, they highlight the need for institutional reform and stronger multilateral cooperation. In sum, while the United Nations faces notable obstacles in responding effectively to war-like situations in the contemporary world, it remains a crucial actor whose normative authority, peacekeeping capacity, diplomatic negotiation, humanitarian functions and capacity to mobilise global opinion contribute significantly to global stability. Its relevance lies not in an ability to prevent all conflicts, but in its enduring role as the most comprehensive and internationally legitimate framework for managing and mitigating the consequences of war. Even with its flaws, it continues to serve as a crucial support

system for millions of people through its peacekeeping forces, refugee assistance and development efforts. While its relevance is often questioned, its ability to influence a more hopeful global future remains very much alive.
