

Opinion – The Performance of UN Transitional Authorities

Written by Martin Duffy

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Opinion – The Performance of UN Transitional Authorities

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/08/25/opinion-the-performance-of-un-transitional-authorities/>

MARTIN DUFFY, AUG 25 2025

John Moore and Jerry Pubantz's recent insightful opinion piece on a potential UN solution to the Gaza quandary, is both optimistic and thought-provoking. It also reminded me of a paper on this subject by Rob McLaughlin. I had the privilege of serving in virtually all of the UN's recent efforts of transitional authority (UNTA). That does not by any means afford me encompassing analysis, or still-less a crystal ball on whether such an authority would be effective in the case of Gaza. It has (however) given me some treasured insights into what UN officials thought on the ground when they were conducting these UNTA experiments. One needs to distinguish between strategic realism and political sound-bites. UNTAs were a big hope, not only for the UN, but for the international community, more generally.

To start with, I would mention an example we often forget about, namely the UN's efforts in West Papua. Reviewing what happened there, you may realise why it is optimistic to assume that things would go smoothly for the UN in Gaza. In 1962, the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) was established to briefly administer West Papua, facilitating the transfer of sovereignty from the Netherlands to Indonesia. The election process was criticized for being manipulated by Indonesia. So, despite the UN's involvement and the incorporation of West Papua into Indonesia, the struggle for self-determination continues. When I first set foot on a "successor example" of UNTEA – namely Eastern Slavonia, I could but remember the mixed contribution these UN authorities had previously made. For various reasons, particularly more "buy in" from regional actors, Eastern Slavonia is still largely regarded more positively.

Before I say a little more about the UN's subsequent efforts to apply the concept in places as diverse as Namibia, Cambodia, Bosnia, Timor Leste, Somalia and Kosovo, I would suggest that a number of factors are necessary. These are generally about status-determination, and political and strategic "buy in". Palestinians have a legacy of misplaced trust in UN ordinances. A UNTA in Gaza would need genuinely to aspire to a two-state solution. Obstacles abound. First, the entire issue of Palestine still remains unresolved (and remains, some might suggest) currently unresolvable. Second, neither the USA or Israel have been exemplary participants in the UN. Thirdly, Gaza's immediate neighbours – who might assist a UN authority – lack realistic capacity to deliver. Finally, having allowed such tragedy to blight the region for so long, I am not persuaded that the so-called "international community" have either will or moral compass to carry off such a grand-scale task. UNTA's cannot be regarded as a magic wand, and their past performance has depended upon a favourable regional climate.

I am using compressed words to describe a situation which deserves extensive reportage, so forgive my brevity in a statement of opinion, not in-depth analysis. I would however, add my circumspection as to whether a UNTA would work with the corollary question, would they at least make it better? The UN, despite the most adverse of political and strategic circumstances; and through its specialised agencies (not least UNRWA and UNICEF) have enormously ameliorated the human tragedy which is Gaza. Moreover, a common feature of UNTA's is that they have commanded such enormous budgets, they have never been morally or politically afforded the possibility of being outright failures.

Genuine belief in the potential of the UN requires momentarily suspending one's rational belief. One of the

Opinion – The Performance of UN Transitional Authorities

Written by Martin Duffy

elementary lessons we learn in “evaluation school” is that past performance is not even a guarantee of future delivery. However, I would put it to the reader that even past performance in the record of such authorities had been patchy and successful delivery in this specific climate, is challenging. Taking Gaza specifically, with crises raging, the USA again vetoed Palestine’s latest bid for full acceptance as a UN member State. Official USA policy is that the only way for a stable future between Israel and Palestine is through direct, bilateral negotiations, although President Trump’s stance is enigmatic. Currently, Palestine maintains the status of non-Member Observer State in the UN General Assembly, as granted in 2012.

Although both parts of Palestine stand under actual or technical occupation by Israel, as a result of the Oslo Accords the current Palestinian government of President Mahmoud Abbas exercises authority in the (Fatah) West Bank portion of Palestine, as opposed to the remainder (partially) under Hamas control. If Palestine were to be admitted to the UN, given Hamas’s influence within Palestine’s political system; it cannot be ruled out that Palestine would put forward a representative sympathetic to Hamas. Accordingly, even if Palestine is admitted to the UN as a member State, it is theoretically possible that its chosen representatives might be excluded. I would here cite the expertise of Yale’s Professor Peter Dutton

For a UNTA to work in Gaza, the involvement of the USA is essential. The US has a complex relationship with the UN reflecting concerns about national sovereignty and perceived limitations on freedom of action. A significant portion of the American public skepticize about the UN’s effectiveness and its impact on US interests. Israel’s relationship with the UN is even more complex, marked by both membership and ongoing tensions. As for the neighbouring countries, I would suggest that there is no obvious regional backer that might be suitable to perform the sort of involute role which made some previous UNTA’s at least a qualified success.

Let us also ponder what a transitional authority in Gaza would entail? In UN vocabulary, UNTA refers to a UN administration established to govern a territory during a transitional period, with the goal of preparing it for self-governance or a stable future. Some examples of UN transitional authorities include UNTAET established in 1999 which had full authority to administer East Timor (now Timor-Leste) following the violence and upheaval after the territory’s independence vote. Then we have UNMIK also established in 1999, tasked with providing transitional administration in Kosovo.

Before that, UNTAC, was established in 1992 to supervise Cambodia’s peace process and organize elections after years of conflict. On Cambodia I am indebted to Trevor Findlay. As a comprehensive ‘second-generation’ UN peace operation, Cambodia demonstrated the imperative a negotiated settlement followed by swift deployment of peacekeepers. UNTAC’s late deployment and lack of experience was one of the biggest flaws of the Cambodia mission. Before that (as mentioned) UNTAES, established in 1996 largely accomplished its key objective of peacefully reintegrating Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium into Croatia within the prescribed time frame of two years. For more information I would cite excellent work by Beth Di Felice.

I would also note other comparators to UNTA’s. I mentioned West Papua, but we might also stretch the concept to include Namibia (1989–1990), and the substantial if ill-defined past responsibilities of the UN in Afghanistan (and in Iraq. Arguably too, in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the UN’s Conor Cruise O’Brien experimented with a form of improvised UNTA in early 1960s Katanga. Other (invariably multilateral) UN missions, while not strictly “transitional authorities” assisted transitions. One thinks of UNOSOM II, established in 1993, which aimed to establish a secure environment through disarmament and reconciliation in Somalia. UNPROFOR had mandates that involved protecting humanitarian operations and ensuring the demilitarization of ex-Yugoslavia. We might also note MINUSMA in Mali, MONUSCO in DR Congo, UNITAMS in South Sudan UNMISS and MINUSCA in Central African Republic. There have also been several Special Political Missions (SPMs) over the years. About all these operations “success” would have to be defined with circumspection.

Gaza’s history tends to suggest that achieving a preconditional ceasefire, and agreement to a meaningful UN transitional, is elusive. Much the same has been observed in the UN’s recent efforts in Libya; where, despite the UN announcing a new transitional government, stability has been sparse. Ultimately, this is an opinion piece and most people welcome unredacted views. Above, I have fleshed out what I see as the diverse problems. Although terrifically

Opinion – The Performance of UN Transitional Authorities

Written by Martin Duffy

expensive, transitional authorities have generally improved the lives of the ordinary people where they have operated. As Cambodia has perhaps shown, they do not necessarily produce political transition. UN missions may also bring their own negative legacies. From Cambodia to Haiti not all memories of the UN are nostalgic. Result- these major missions often resemble a curate's egg.

In Gaza, neither the USA, Israel, Palestinian political or aspirational entities, or the neighbouring states- look like favourable players. I shy from a typology about the pre-conditions which might make UNTA's work. Each case is different. I deeply suspect this is bleak ground. Indeed Timor Leste itself is a shaky exemplar. When President Trump spoke of Gazan resorts, I could only contemplate dark tourism. Illegal settlements threaten what is left of a viable Palestinian entity. Moreover, overall, for the high expenditure and political expectations, one would have to conclude that the UN has only a mixed track-record on UNTA's or indeed large-scale multi-pronged missions. The grim facts suggest that money alone does not solve a "Gazan-size" imbroglio. That aside, the entire subject merits particularized research and conversation.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning and holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.