

The Arab-Israeli Case: National Interests and the Limits of UN Capabilities

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CARLOS GARCIA CUEVA, NOV 18 2012

After World War Two (WWII), the United Nations (UN) was created in order to preserve international peace and security. This organization operates through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to address matters related to international security. However, the UNSC has had certain aspects since its creation that limit the extent to which the Council can operate. One of the most important restrictions of the UNSC is the veto power, which stands for the automatic rejection of any resolution that is voted against by one or more than one of the Permanent Members. The countries with veto power are Russia, France, Great Britain, China and the United States (US) (UN, 2012).

Although there may be several examples throughout history in which veto power has not contributed to a peaceful settlement of an international security issue (e.g. the Soviet veto of resolutions related to the invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, see Cassidy, 2003), the Palestinian-Israeli situation is a clear example of conflict escalation as a result of veto in the UNSC (Sarsbar, 2004). In this matter, the US has vetoed the recognition of a Palestinian State in order to preserve the strategic alliance with Israel as a priority of its foreign policy, limiting the capabilities of the UNSC to solve the conflict. In order to demonstrate the previous statement, this essay, after initially providing an historical framework on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, will evaluate the limitations of the diplomatic actions and the situation within the UN. Afterwards, the current American foreign policy defined after the terrorist attacks in 2001, which prioritize the strategic alliance with Israel, will be proposed as the main factor for the current incapability of the UN to solve this issue.

It is considered that the actual Arab-Israeli conflict started as a consequence of the proposal to create a Jewish State on Palestinian territories, which was stated in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 181 at the end of 1947 (Quigley, 2005). However, the origins of the current issue can be traced further back to 1917 when the British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour made a similar declaration. The Balfour Declaration was supported by the League of Nations in 1922. Therefore, Britain obtained mandate over Palestine in order to prepare the creation of a Jewish homeland (Yale Law School, 2008). Despite the fact that WWII interrupted the original plan, neighbouring Arab States and the local Palestinian population continuously stated their disagreement and committed to prevent the partition of the territories ever since 1917. This early controversy at a certain extent forecasted the sensitive nature of this matter.

The consequences of Resolution 181 and the partition have not been necessarily positive. Meital (2006) points out that since 1948 Israel and Palestine have been involved in constant hostilities, such as rocket barrages against Israeli settlements or air raids over Palestinian cities to mention just a few. Likewise, the author considers that the conflict has not been exclusive of two States, but it has also resulted in regional and global consequences that have affected other countries.

Bearing in mind the previous argument, it is worth noting that after 1948 an alliance formed by Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria declared war against Israel. As well in 1956 and 1967, Egypt and Israel fought for the Sinai Peninsula, which currently remains under Israeli control after the Egyptian defeat in the Six-day War. In 1973, Egypt and Syria attempted to invade Israel in what is known as the Yom Kippur war. Furthermore in 1982 as well as in

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2006 Israel conducted military offensives against Lebanon (BBC, 2012).

Hunter and Jones (2004) point out that there have also been political and social factors that had contributed to the current tense situation in the Middle East. For example, the Israeli population has built settlements in lands originally designated as Palestinian territories to gradually assume control over greater portions of the territory. On the other hand, it must also be noted that there have been popular uprisings or *Intifadas*, some of them violent, organized against the Jewish population by Palestinians (Meital, 2006). Whilst it is generally agreed that Palestine has a legitimate claim towards Israel, some Palestinian contingents such as Hamas have been labelled as terrorists by some members of the International community as a result of the constant attacks against Israel (Hussain et al, 2004).

With regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the UN as the main organization responsible for international peace and security is entitled to act to solve this issue. At a certain extent, the UN should have implemented solutions in order to avoid the conflict from escalating to its current situation. "The UN Security Council bears responsibility, under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, for the international peace. Yet it did little to affect the situation in Palestine (...)" (Quigley, 2005, p.237).

As Sarsbar (2004) states, the non-recognition of the Palestinian State within the UN has blocked a successful diplomatic resolution of the issue. Advocates of the Palestinian Cause (Hussain et al, 2004) argue that the admission of Palestine to the UN would latter propose international law as a common agreement platform between belligerents. Thus, other measures to contain the conflict, such as an economic embargo for non-compliance or alternately intervention in the conflict zone could force violence between States to cease. Under this perspective, the Palestinian adhesion to the UN could also be positive for Israel. Turning to the question of the actions within the UNSC, it is important to consider that the current lack of international status of Palestine has been determined by the veto of the United States in the UNSC.

"The US set precedent for (...) US-Israeli collaboration on most international fronts and for American voting behaviour in the UN. (...) This was followed by 23 other vetoes of UNSC resolutions on Palestine, particularly the condition sin the Occupied Territories" (Sarsbar, 2004, p.463)

It is worth noting that the previous situation is a consequence of the close links between Israel and the US. Some authors claim that despite similar yet unclear sociocultural attributes between both countries, these links are evident in strategic terms (Sarsbar, 2004; Schoenbaum, 1993).

Israel and the US have defined their foreign policies on a similar platform that consists in countering and containing terrorist threats. With regard to the previous situation, Mearsheimer & Walt (2008) emphasize that this definition of American foreign policy is a consequence of the terrorist attacks in New York on September 2001. According to the authors, the Bush administration implemented policies that aimed to neutralize potential or existing terrorist threats both within and outside America. These strategies even included the Second Persian Gulf war in Iraq and the invasion of Afghanistan, as well as the Patriot Act (Foerstel, 2008).

It could be argued that due to the fact that the US intelligence services relate most of the terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda with the Middle East, the region has become critical in maintaining American security (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2008). Consequently, the traditional American-Israeli cooperation that exists since 1948 acquired a fundamental strategic role for the United States after 2001. Whether as a safe zone for rapid American military deployment or as a direct source of intelligence and even as a base for long-range ballistic missiles, Israel's location in the Middle East is paramount for the American ability to supress as well as counter terrorist threats (Zimmerman & Wenger, 2007). This was even acknowledged by the former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who stated that "America [is] in a war against terror. We in Israel are in a war against terror. It's the same war" (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2008, p.205).

In the previously described context of the confrontation against terrorism, the Bush administration decided to maintain strong ties with Israel and block the possibility of a Palestinian State. The justification used by the US at the UNSC was that the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), which could be considered the appointed government of Palestine, had no sufficient capability to control the Palestinian territories and therefore was unable to deter or

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counter terrorism. Especially after the difficulty to deal with Hamas in the Gaza strip (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2008).

American foreign policy has closely followed its strategic principles in the Middle East despite the changes in administration or even rhetoric. When President Obama was elected in 2008, there were several factors to consider that the US would support an independent Palestinian State. For instance, in September 2010 Obama delivered a speech to the UNGA in which he stated that the US would support “a new agreement [which] could lead to a sovereign Palestinian State being welcomed into the United Nations” (Lynch, 2011). This possibility later was discarded when the US vetoed UNSC resolution 2028 that recognized Palestine in 2011, which in this case had over 120 supporters, among them traditional American allies such as the United Kingdom and France including most of the Arab nations (Lynch, 2011).

As it has been mentioned throughout this essay, it is possible to observe that the US has sufficient strategic reasons to block the creation of a Palestinian State. The US would not jeopardize its security strategies that could result in losing the support of Israel and as a consequence losing their current assets in the Middle East. This previous situation emphasizes the dependence that the UN and the UNSC have from their member States, especially from the Permanent Members, in terms of solving international conflicts. Similar situations such as the one illustrated throughout this analysis still occur nowadays, for instance, the issue in Syria that has been developing since 2011 has been stagnated at the UNSC due to the Russian and Chinese veto on the matter (BBC, 2012a). Considering the previous points, for the UN the task has always been and most likely will continue to be challenging. The preservation of international security and peace could significantly threaten the interests of its members, however it is important to consider that the UN exists to solve international issues that threaten international peace and not only to solve those that counter the interests of its members.

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