

**Best of Times, Worst of Times: The Fortunes of the United Nations in the Middle  
East**

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The overabundance of crises that radiate continually from the Middle East confront the United Nations with its most enduring challenge. Kofi Annan is not the first secretary-general to grapple with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—along with the interrelated clashes of the Gulf region, the more distant but no less ominous civil wars in Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia, the Pakistan-India tensions, the growth of radical Islamic-inspired terrorism, and the instabilities reaching from North Africa to the Himalayas. The Middle East problem is, after all, the longest running conundrum facing the United Nations.

The British government first handed the crisis to the fledgling United Nations when it announced in 1947 that it would withdraw from its mandate responsibilities in Palestine the following year. With strong encouragement from Washington, the United Nations, its first secretary-general, Trygve Lie, and his successors sought to end ensuing wars, provide humanitarian assistance, and draft permanent peace plans for the area. In 1948 the United Nations passed Resolution 181 proposing partition of the British mandate between Palestinians and Zionists.<sup>1</sup> Following war in 1948 (when Israel declared its independence), in 1956 during the Suez crisis, and in 1967 at the time of the Six-Day War, the United Nations served as the locus

of negotiations for repeated ceasefires, and for the provision of peacekeeping forces to separate combatants.<sup>2</sup> Today it faces a new crisis engendered by the US-Iraq war, a crisis that may endanger the institution's global influence as well.

In much of this post World War II history the United States supported a strong UN role, and thus kept the institution at the center of Middle East politics. Yet, in the spiraling events since September 11, 2001 that have brought the world fresh Middle East warfare, charges of the UN's potential "irrelevance" in the region have emanated regularly from Washington. As the Bush administration, during the fall of 2002 and the winter of 2003, pressed and cajoled the Security Council to approve an American invasion of Iraq, it faced unexpected deadlock that threatened not only UN Middle East policy, but also the world institution's own efficacy. President Bush, US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, and other officials in the administration argued that the world body even faced the danger of following the League of Nations into oblivion. If so, the global community was on the brink of an ugly international collapse unparalleled since the late 1930s, when, indeed, the League became irrelevant.

The UN's efforts to manage the myriad crises of the Middle East have been matched in diplomatic intensity by those of successive American presidents. The United States eclipsed the United Nations as the "honest broker" and central international actor in the region during the Nixon administration (1969-1974). Neither Richard Nixon nor his national security adviser and later secretary of state Henry Kissinger had much use for the United Nations. They saw the world body as largely an anti-American and anti-Israeli institution. They believed a UN role in the Middle East only provided an avenue for unwanted Soviet involvement in the region. The 1970s provided some evidence to support their contentions. Probably the low point in American

support for the United Nations came in 1975 when the General Assembly passed the so-called “Zionism is Racism” resolution.<sup>3</sup>

The Nixon/Kissinger team, in the context of the 1973 Mideast War, managed to make Washington, not UN Headquarters or Moscow, the center of all Arab-Israeli negotiations. Jimmy Carter’s magnificent 1978 Camp David Accords, the American resolution of the 1982 Lebanese war with the direct insertion of US peacekeepers in Beirut, and the Bush administration’s 1991 Madrid Summit were all undertaken with little regard for UN involvement. In the case of the Madrid talks, which the first George Bush convened in the wake of victory over Saddam Hussein in Kuwait—a UN authorized operation—the United Nations was allowed only “observer” status.

For the most part, these two histories of Middle East engagement—UN and American—have been quite distinct, separate threads based on divergent analyses, sometimes moving in tandem, often at cross purposes. Particularly as the United Nations majority came to encompass mostly non-aligned states, and as the United States increasingly was perceived as Israel’s sole supporter, the US-UN relationship on Middle East issues became an antagonistic one.

With the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of the first Gulf War, however, the two strands merged by common consent of administrations in Washington and the Security Council in New York. The marriage opened tantalizing prospects for a comprehensive peace in the region, but it also put the United Nations in the high-risk position of being perceived as little more than an instrument of American foreign policy. On the other hand, this convergence raised the prospect that any future divergent UN policy would produce an American backlash and unilateral US actions in the Middle East. That circumstance emerged as the debate over disarming Iraq heated up in the fall of 2002, and culminated in the American and British invasion of Iraq without UN sanction the following March.

## **United Nations Middle East Policy Since 1990**

The Cold War's demise had an early positive impact on UN effectiveness in the Middle East. In July 1987, for the first time, the United States and the Soviet Union sponsored a joint Security Council resolution related to the region. Using the most powerful provisions of the UN Charter's Chapter VII enforcement measures (Articles 39 and 40) the superpowers demanded a ceasefire in the seven-year old Iran-Iraq War,<sup>4</sup> and threatened unspecified action against either combatant if it did not accept the provisions of the resolution.<sup>5</sup> Even the outbreak of the *intifada* in the occupied territories in December of that year did not diminish optimism that the end of confrontational American and Soviet Middle East policies coupled with an energized United Nations might finally produce meaningful progress both in the Gulf region and in the Arab-Israeli dispute. For their parts, US secretary of state George Shultz and then his successor, James Baker undertook a concerted diplomatic effort to achieve a comprehensive Middle East peace.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the sense of inevitable progress was shattered. Nonetheless, the UN Security Council, vigorously encouraged by the United States, passed tough resolutions demanding the withdrawal of Iraqi forces and the reestablishment of the sovereignty of Kuwait.<sup>6</sup> In president Bush's estimation, the crisis provided an opportunity to forge a partnership of the "P5" (the permanent members of the Security Council) and to use the United Nations in the service of his announced "New World Order." The UN could provide the architecture through which legitimacy for US actions and "burden-sharing" could be achieved. The world body could also provide post-conflict management of the

near-trusteeship status destined to be imposed on Iraq.<sup>7</sup> The United States pushed through 12 Security Council resolutions, avoiding a veto by any permanent member.<sup>8</sup>

By early 1991, with UN authorization, an extraordinarily large coalition, including most Arab states, drove Iraq out and restored Kuwait's government. In subsequent resolutions the Security Council imposed on Iraq a debilitating control regime, as arms inspectors roamed the country, and "no-fly" zones in the north and south removed large portions of the country from Baghdad's political control. Pursuant to Security Council resolution 687, a compensation fund was established to pay claims out of Iraqi oil revenues, a Council sanctions committee imposed a trade embargo that only allowed the import of humanitarian supplies, and two operations—the UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM) and the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM)—were created to monitor and enforce all postwar resolutions.

As allied and UN efforts continued in tandem following the war, the United Nations took up the provisioning and defense of domestic minority groups in Iraq. The defeat of Saddam Hussein's armies in the field led to a revolt by Shia communities in the southern reaches of the country and Kurds in the north. A massive Iraqi military effort to crush the revolts produced more than 700,000 refugees. It also produced the declaration of "no-fly" zones in both regions by the United States and three of its wartime allies—Turkey, the United Kingdom and France. The four powers also launched Operation Provide Comfort, carrying out humanitarian air-drops and creating "enclaves" for Kurds inside Iraq. Almost immediately, however, the United States urged the United Nations to take over administration of the refugee camps. On April 18, 1991, secretary-general Javier Pérez de Cuéllar negotiated an agreement with Baghdad to take control of the enclaves. The United Nations was hardly "irrelevant" in these years.

Bill Clinton's days (1993-2001) in the White House followed the same course. Employing "assertive multilateralism,"<sup>9</sup> the administration sought to contain Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to defend minority communities, to encourage the collapse of the regime, and to limit Saddam's influence in the region through UN mechanisms. To give credence to UN resolutions and to back demands by UNSCOM inspectors, Washington regularly carried out air strikes against Iraqi military and radar installations. A critical moment, however, came in 1998, when president Clinton ordered four days of bombing in retaliation for Iraqi unwillingness to allow inspectors into requested sites. The UN withdrew the inspectors for the duration, citing safety considerations. Baghdad subsequently announced that it would not allow the return of UNSCOM, calling it an espionage vehicle for the United States. While both Washington and the United Nations condemned the Iraqi decision, no forceful means were employed to re-insert the inspection teams. At the time president Clinton faced impeachment proceedings that politically undercut any contemplated military action to enforce UN resolutions.

While unrecognized at the time, the 1998 events set in motion a slow erosion of US-UN unanimity on Iraq. UNSCOM was soon replaced by the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC),<sup>10</sup> an agency thought more acceptable in its personnel and leadership to Baghdad. The Swedish diplomat, Dr. Hans Blix, was appointed executive secretary, and only one of UNMOVIC's 16 commissioners was an American.<sup>11</sup> The Clinton administration, while it supported the creation of UNMOVIC and encouraged an expansion of programs to use Iraqi oil sale proceeds for humanitarian assistance, increasingly operated without reference to the UN Security Council to keep the Iraqi regime "in its box." In part, US reticence was in response to growing criticism from UN members that the effort to isolate Saddam and penalize his government was imposing unacceptable pain on the Iraqi population.

Having failed to topple Saddam Hussein, many UN members criticized US policy as at least ineffective if not counterproductive.

The first years of the 1990s were the heyday of UN-US partnership on Middle East affairs in the Gulf region. But they gave way to acrimony and diverging policies by the end of the decade. This was not the case in the other regional hotspot, Palestine. The dynamic of international events and foreign policy interests that tied the Gulf and Palestine together produced countervailing trends in US and UN Middle East policies. In contrast to Gulf issues, the United States increasingly accepted UN leadership on the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio.

The UN victory in the Gulf produced a concerted effort by the first Bush administration to reach a comprehensive peace in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Still in the mode of the Nixon strategy, the Madrid talks were undertaken under American sponsorship without substantive participation of the United Nations. President Bush's defeat at the polls in November 1992 did not alter this approach. Before the Clinton administration was nine months old it presided over the signing on the White House lawn of the Oslo Accords, which held at the time the greatest hope for a permanent settlement between Israelis and Palestinians. The famous handshakes among Yasser Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin, and Clinton were undertaken without the slightest verbal or ceremonial nod to the United Nations. After 1992, however, faced with pressures from conservative Republicans on Capitol Hill, failing trust in American leadership among moderate Arab governments, and extended commitments in Yugoslavia and other crises, all coupled with growing confidence in the skills of secretary-general Kofi Annan, the administration courted a new UN involvement in Israeli-Palestinian affairs.

The singular leadership by the United States of the Middle East peace process that commenced with a war on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, in 1973 probably

came to an end when one of Israel's most controversial politicians ascended the steps of the holiest site in Jerusalem, the Temple Mount or Haram al Sharif ("noble sanctuary"), on September 28, 2000. Ariel Sharon's inflammatory remarks touched off a cycle of violence that threatened to bring the region to a bloody religious war, more vicious than any seen since 1948. Fully understanding how unpromising, indeed gloomy, the situation was, the world might have expected a new American diplomatic effort, and indeed there was one. What was truly new, however, was the re-assertion of UN efforts in the person of Kofi Annan, and this time with US support. In fact, given Annan's key presence in the crisis, along with the exhaustive, and complementary activities of president Clinton, the world witnessed, fleetingly, a model of cooperation between New York and Washington that could represent a possible future for UN effectiveness, and for Middle East peace.

As hostilities grew in the streets of the West Bank in October of 2000, US secretary of state Madeleine Albright hurried to Paris, trying to convince assembled leaders to do something to salvage the faltering peace process. On October 5, Arafat, angry, stormed out of that meeting and only came back when Albright yelled for the guards at the US embassy, where the meeting was being held, to keep his limousine from leaving the compound. In the days after, Arafat and Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak simply would not speak with one another. American-brokered diplomacy seemed to have come to a dead end.

Then Kofi Annan, who had been quietly shuttling between Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Gaza City, and traveling elsewhere in the area, in a seemingly hopeless quest to ease tensions, stepped into the US/Israeli/Palestinian standoff. Here was the secretary-general, who had apparently been chosen by Washington in late 1996 to replace the tarnished Boutros Boutros-Ghali, armed only with a cell phone, relentlessly calling president Clinton, French president



Jacques Chirac, Russian foreign minister Igor S. Ivanov, King Abdullah of Jordan, European Union foreign affairs chief Javier Solana, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and Lebanese president Emile Lahoud. With a calm persistence that became his trademark, Annan brokered an agreement for the principals to meet. Annan, on Saturday, October 14, 2000, announced the high-stakes Sharm El-Sheik meeting. This was achieved against the expressed initial wishes of the Arab world, including Mubarak, who did not want to move until after the Arab Summit which took place just days later, on October 21, in Cairo; against the apparent wishes of the vast majority of Palestinians, by now represented by the crowds in the streets; and in the face of a growingly cynical Israel, a country with an almost genetic hostility to the United Nations as an interloper in the Middle East dispute. But the Israel government, and the Palestine Authority had come to trust Annan. According to Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Yehuda Lanery, Annan had "opened the door to Israel. He (was) perceived by Israel as a man of reason, displaying the greatest moral authority possible. That is why his role ... (was) so precious."<sup>12</sup> The United Nations had repealed the 1975 "Zionism is Racism" resolution in 1991, but it was Annan's visit to Jerusalem early in his term, where he emphasized his regret at the past tone of UN decisions towards Israel, that began a subtle and interesting transformation in Israeli opinion.

What needs underscoring here, however, was the tandem connection of the secretary-general with both Israel **and** the United States. Even today, in the midst of heartbreaking failure in the crisis, many sides concede that Washington remains the key player in the Middle East. At the very end of his term, Clinton, after all, had been best able to bring Barak, politically battered at home, to the table. Annan could help when the United States ran into trouble fulfilling its traditional role. As Phyllis Bennis, a UN and Middle East expert at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, said just a few days before the Sharm El-Sheik meeting: "The United

States is running the show; but over the past week, it's been the secretary-general who has been orchestrating the international diplomacy on the ground, not the United States.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, according to *New York Times* reporter Deborah Sontag, Western diplomats at Sharm El-Sheik were convinced that Annan played the pivotal role in bringing off the meeting.<sup>14</sup>

President Clinton became the summit chairman, at the center of the horseshoe-shaped table inside the Jolie Ville golf resort, with four participants separated 10 feet apart. On the ground for only 28 hours, he was, for 24 of those hours, fully engaged in more than 20 meetings. Notwithstanding the energetic, and telegenic presence of the president, however, it was the effect of Annan's and Clinton's handiwork *together* at Sharm El-Sheik that was impressive, if transitory: both Arafat and Barak agreed, orally—not in signed form—to call for a halt to the violence. Barak agreed to withdraw Israeli military forces to positions held before the beginning of the unrest, to lift a closure of the West Bank and Gaza, and to reopen the Gaza airport. Security forces from both sides agreed to resume a dialogue that had been interrupted by the crisis. According to off-record remarks by Israeli participants, a secret side memorandum detailed a range of security measures to be overseen by US Central Intelligence Agency director George J. Tenet. The Palestine Authority began re-arresting some Hamas activists recently released from incarceration. And, Clinton announced the creation of a US-controlled fact-finding committee to investigate the causes of the crisis. Clinton was to appoint the members of the commission after consulting with the parties and with Annan.

By early November, the president had designated George Mitchell, former US Senator and negotiator of the “Good Friday” agreement in Northern Ireland, as head of the fact-finding commission, an appointment that, serendipitously, seemed to please everyone. The text of the report, then, was to be shown to Annan and UN officials before being published, and the final

decision on the wording of the report was to be made by the United States. A new triangulation had emerged among the White House, UN Headquarters, and Middle East leaders.

Despite the new triumvirate's efforts, the violence continued, punctuated by periodic pauses called by either side. Nothing seemed capable of stopping the "popular diplomacy" of street violence and retaliatory Israeli security measures. Faced with opposition from within Palestinian ranks, and with no evidence his commitments at Sharm El-Sheik on their own could halt protests in the streets, Arafat demonstrated his political sense by proposing a UN peacekeeping presence in the territories. Tel Aviv immediately rejected the idea. The proposal, clearly a non-starter in earlier times, now, however, took on the image of sensibility given the new legitimacy American policy had given the United Nations.

Just before Christmas and the Jewish Holy Days of 2000 the UN Security Council took one of its most dramatic actions on the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation in more than two decades. On December 18, the Council came within one vote of a majority approving a force of military and police observers for the occupied territories, an action that would have simultaneously handed Palestine Authority president Arafat a huge diplomatic success and triggered an American veto on behalf of the embattled government of Ehud Barak.<sup>15</sup> The vote was the culmination of Arafat's world-wide shuttle since the brief calm following the October 2000 Sharm El-Sheik Summit. He had sought 2,000 UN peacekeepers to separate the parties on the West Bank and particularly in Gaza, and to limit police actions by the Israeli occupation forces. That he found general support for the proposal not only in the usual places, such as hard line Arab capitals, but also in Paris, London, and Moscow demonstrated the new interest in a UN role among many governments that had largely deferred to American leadership of the peace

effort to this point. Only the threat of a veto by US Ambassador Richard Holbrooke held Britain, France, and Russia to a mere abstention on the final resolution.

The real irony of the Security Council events in December, 2000 was that their outcome, which the Clinton administration stood ready to thwart, was itself the product of a new American policy that encouraged renewed activism by the United Nations, and a particular effort by president Clinton to involve secretary-general Annan in the peace process. Following the failure of Clinton's Camp David Summit earlier in that year, and the subsequent renewal of violence in the territories, the American administration, for the first time since Lyndon Johnson occupied the White House, promoted UN leadership in finding a way out of the Middle East muddle.

It proved to be an offer of UN involvement that secretary-general Annan enthusiastically embraced. As the "Second *Intifada*" took hold in the fall of 2000, it was the UN secretary-general, not the American president (although with Clinton's blessing), who led the effort to break the spiraling violence. Annan's new credibility on Middle East matters made his central role to the peace process possible. This came not only because of his extraordinary personal skills, but also because of Clinton's commitment to him. A crucial foreign policy challenge for the United States was being addressed with an unusual complementarity by the secretary-general and the president. Each played off the other to address the most difficult of international problems. In the process the United Nations momentarily "returned" to the Middle East, and in particular to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it first addressed 53 years earlier, and the United States gave up its solo performance in the region. Even president Clinton's Christmas initiative to achieve an agreement on basic principles before the end of his term required Annan's subsequent support.

Annan's cooperation with US efforts, and vice versa, continued into the early days of President George W. Bush's new administration. The Mitchell Commission issued its report, calling for an end to the violence and a halt to the Israeli construction of settlements in the territories. Both UN and US officials endorsed the Commission's recommendations. President Bush sent secretary of state Colin Powell to the region. On June 28, he announced a change in American policy, endorsing the placement of an observer mission to monitor a cooling-off period until peace negotiations could resume. The creation of such a monitoring force would likely mean a new level of UN involvement in the Middle East crisis. Powell's announcement seemed to foretell a continuation of the new model of cooperation between New York and Washington in trying to end the Arab-Israeli dispute, a model that had distinguished the last months of the previous administration.

But despite concerted UN and US efforts, violence escalated during the summer of 2001. A series of deadly suicide bombings orchestrated by Palestinian groups and reprisal military assassinations by the Sharon government of Palestinian leaders on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip ended the possibility of an early resumption of peace talks. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, and the strong American response against terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, encouraged the Israeli government to move military forces into territories controlled by the Palestine Authority. Prime Minister Sharon claimed that president Arafat was responsible for terrorism against Israeli civilians and could no longer be a partner in the peace process. His contention was re-enforced in January 2002 by the interception of a large arms shipment to the Palestinians ostensibly supplied from Iran. Israeli forces surrounded Arafat's headquarters on the West Bank, barring his free movement in the territories and abroad. Israeli policies, however, did not stem the violence. In late February,

Sharon announced that the government would attempt to create “buffer zones” between Palestinian and Israeli communities, effectively segregating the warring sides.

Arab nations, in support of the Palestinian cause, introduced in the UN Security Council a resolution condemning Israeli actions, but the Council instead passed Resolution 1397 on March 12, 2002, calling for an end to the violence and the creation of two states side by side. Palestinian claims of genocide by Israeli forces in Jenin led to efforts by secretary-general Annan to send a fact-finding commission. He made his proposal without consulting the Bush administration, undertaking an independent effort based on his new prestige in the region. Interestingly, while the United States did not veto Security Council resolution 1405, which encouraged Annan’s initiative,<sup>16</sup> it did not press the Israeli government to accept the investigation. Instead it launched a campaign of criticism against the leadership of president Arafat, indicating that no peace was possible while he remained in power. Washington urged Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian communities, but it pointedly saw little wisdom in including the secretary-general’s initiative as part of a return to the peace process. Annan’s authority on Middle East matters, which had reached a zenith at Sharm El-Sheik, largely due to American support, now was diminished dramatically by his inability to send a commission to Jenin.

Secretary-General Annan had miscalculated the level of support in Washington, which had declined precipitously during the early phase of the new Bush administration. He learned quickly that the partnership he had struck with Washington during the Clinton years carried the risk of limiting UN influence in the region if an American administration decided to ignore, much less disparage, the value of UN Middle East efforts. Unfortunately for Annan, it soon became clear that the Bush administration was in the process of reversing the delicate policy toward UN-US convergent involvement in the Middle East.

At first the president had decided to back away from the Israeli-Palestinian struggle altogether, insisting that the parties come to Washington, not vice versa. However, the crises caused by accelerating suicide bombings in Israel, the forceful Israeli response, and, finally, the various by-products of 9/11, drew Washington's attention back to the conflict. But an American government apparently committed to unilateral, not multilateral, actions worldwide, including preemptive war when Washington deemed it necessary, retreated to an American-centered Middle East approach which ignored the UN, while evincing a much more supportive policy toward Israel, and prime minister Sharon, rather than the more "even-handed" style of previous administrations.

While Arab members of the UN encouraged the administration to include the Palestine Authority in renewed peace talks, Washington sent special representative Anthony Zinni to the region to declare Arafat no longer acceptable as a peace partner. Administration officials linked the Palestinian leader to terrorist organizations, thus tying him to the enemy camp in the "war on terrorism." In December the United States cast a lone veto in the Security Council,<sup>17</sup> defeating a resolution sponsored by Egypt and Tunisia that would have condemned Israeli occupation of Palestinian towns and the excessive use of force, and would have established a UN "monitoring mechanism" in the territories in accordance with the Mitchell Report recommendations.<sup>18</sup> US Ambassador John Negroponte said the resolution made no "meaningful contribution"<sup>19</sup> to the peace process, and ignored president Arafat's failure to arrest those responsible for terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians. The era of close UN-US cooperation on the matter symbolically ended with that veto. President Bush intended to go his own way on this and other Middle East issues, even as other states used the United Nations as a mechanism to slow or even change the direction of US policy.

## **Conclusion**

At the Security Council meeting of February 14, 2003, after UNMOVIC executive-secretary Hans Blix and IAEA director-general Mohamed ElBaradei issued their largely negative reports on Iraqi compliance with Security Council resolution 1441, which had been passed the previous November, and had required immediate and complete WMD disarmament, each member of the Security Council responded, on live television, with careful, studied remarks. As the drama unfolded it became apparent that a majority of the Council, most of the world's population, and even the plurality of the American people—at least according to virtually all the public opinion polls at the time—favored military action against Iraq only with full UN sanction.<sup>20</sup> This outcome resulted despite the efforts of a popular American president over the previous 10 months to paint Iraq as a member of the “Axis of Evil.” Bush had also asserted a new foreign policy of preemption in June 2002, coupling fundamental US security concerns with the need for “regime change” in Baghdad.

The inability, however, to generate broad public and coalition support for preemptive attack on Iraq had led the president back to the rostrum of the UN General Assembly in September, 2002, where he announced a subtle change in US Iraqi policy. Asserting that it was essential to keep the United Nations from going the way of the League of Nations, he argued that the United States would seek to fulfill UN resolutions dating back to the 1991 Gulf War that demanded Baghdad divest itself of all weapons of mass destruction. Regime change, for the moment, was a remnant policy of the recent past.



To see president Bush, no apparent friend of the United Nations during his first 18 months in office, stand before the General Assembly and make his case for authorization to act in Iraq, and to call the world to honor and enforce previous UN resolutions was an extraordinary assent to legitimizing the United Nations' role in Middle East affairs. Whatever his administration's short-term purposes or self-interested motivations, the appeal by the United States, the world's pre-eminent power, for UN enforcement of past Security Council resolutions encouraged the emergent global acceptance of the UN in Middle Eastern disputes. It also placed constraints even on the United States, that is, on actions that Washington otherwise would not sense—constraints taking the form of time limits, definition of goals in Iraq, continuing consultation with both allies and other Security Council members, and rising world antipathy for perceived violations of UN mandates. Having begun down this road, president Bush was forced into lengthy negotiations on the terms of resolution 1441, delays brought on by the renewed inspection process, and effective restraint led by France and Germany. By the spring of 2003, the United States even faced the distasteful prospect of launching military action against Iraq in the face of formal rejection of its proposed authorizing resolution.

Security Council resolution 1441 had warned Iraq of “serious consequences” if it did not meet UN demands for immediate disarmament. Since this directive was not as clear in its meaning as the authorization to member states in the UN resolutions preceding the first Gulf War to use “all necessary means” to force Iraq out of Kuwait, many Security Council members interpreted resolution 1441 as committing the world community and Iraq to an invasive disarmament inspection regime. The United States on the other hand understood the resolution's language to be an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein—disarm or face military intervention. Faced with a veto threat from France to a subsequent resolution, and even unable to achieve the

requisite nine votes for passage in the Council, the administration withdrew a draft resolution declaring Iraq in material breach, and decided on independent military action in cooperation with the United Kingdom. On March 20, the United States launched military operations. Even so, the Bush administration implied that it would be critical to have UN support for post-conflict management of Iraq, and for humanitarian assistance. “Burden-sharing” seemed to remain an important necessity for US foreign policy, with the United Nations the only logical international organization capable of generating sufficient world support. Still, as the war for Baghdad wound down, there was some hesitation regarding the full commitment of Washington to cooperating with the United Nations in Iraq. Press reports revealed that the administration’s postwar plan called for a US “Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Aid” to play the lead role in reconstruction. President Bush had established this Pentagon-based military administration months before conflict broke out, by signing National Security Directive 24. When secretary of state Powell met in Brussels with anxious European allies in early April, he insisted that the United States—not the United Nations—would be reconstructing Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, Great Britain’s prime minister Tony Blair intensified the pressure on president Bush to include UN participation at the earliest moment after the end of hostilities. Shortly after initial coalition attacks Blair met with European Union leaders and joined in a unanimous EU statement that a post-Saddam Iraq should be under UN administration. While US secretary of state Powell immediately rejected the proposal, the administration quickly endorsed the resumption of the UN oil-for-food program in Iraq. Blair and Bush, meeting in Belfast on April 8, 2003, also outlined humanitarian tasks that the UN could undertake. The president said the allies would give the United Nations a “vital role” in postwar Iraq without spelling out exactly what that role would be. The two leaders said they would seek an authorizing resolution

from the Security Council for the Interim Iraqi Authority they proposed to put in place until a permanent democratic government could be elected by the Iraqi people. Washington was under pressure to meet the political needs of its British ally, and, thus, move more quickly than it might wish toward UN involvement.

One day before the president and the prime minister met in Northern Ireland, UN secretary-general Annan convened the Security Council to consider the conflict in Iraq. Excluded from the war summit negotiations, he reminded world leaders that the United Nations could provide critical legitimacy for coalition policies after the fighting stopped. His remarks, however, were an admission of diminished UN and personal influence over events in the Gulf. Annan's inability to maintain a strong personal bond of mutual trust and confidence with the American president—in contrast to his relationship with president Clinton—had undercut the UN role in the Middle East.

The logic of international affairs at the turn of the millennium and of Middle East policy in particular forced an uneasy pact between the United States and the United Nations. Much like the strands of DNA in all living things that run in parallel yet twisting lines to each other, and are tied irrevocably together by the essential proteins of life, US policy and UN efforts in the Middle East have been tied together since 1946. When the two strands have coursed in the same direction it has been the best of times for UN influence in the region, and when they have worked at cross-purposes, it has been the worst of times for both. The particular relationship between the US president and the UN secretary-general also has been critical to the success of each. The election to the Oval Office in 2000 of a self-avowed realist, and apparent unilateralist, coupled with Annan's unsuccessful efforts to sustain the working relationship first established

with Clinton, did not break that critical US-UN tie. It only strained it to the point of ineffectiveness.

The UN-US Middle East connection continues visible in virtually all the categories of diplomatic activity. This was particularly the case with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli clash. While Iraq consumed the attention of the world by late winter, 2003, the news from Britain's former Palestine Mandate was a story of revenge and reprisal. Under the radar of world attention were the efforts of the so-called "Quartet," the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the UN, to compose a definitive solution to the Arab-Israeli conundrum by coming up with a plan for a Palestinian state, living peacefully next to Israel. This new attempt at resolution of the deep-rooted problem represented an interesting movement beyond failed attempts of the 1990s.

It remained unclear, however, whether the Israeli elections of late January, 2003, providing a convincing plurality in the Knesset for Ariel Sharon's right-wing Likud Party, would thwart, or incongruously, further the efforts of the Quartet. The second option depended on a scenario of unlikely promise. Initially, the Israeli Labor Party, suffering voter decline from disillusionment with the Oslo Accords, refused to join a national unity government, leading to the prospect of a far right, and thus confrontational, coalition government. Sharon, and his foreign minister Benjamin Netanyahu, showed little interest in any solution offered up by the Quartet, given that two of its members—the EU and the UN—were viewed with considerable distrust from Tel Aviv. Israel and Washington seemed at odds with Palestinians, Arab states, and the members of the Quartet. On the eve of war with Iraq, president Bush insisted that a "road map" from the Quartet would soon be published, and that it would impose requirements on both sides leading to the resolution of the 55 year old dispute.

Israel proved to be the most supportive nation for the US invasion of Iraq, possibly believing that a US-Israeli condominium in the region, by removing a key military threat, could finally deny Palestinians any hope of resisting Israel. Still, glimmers of other options flickered. Following his election, Sharon met with Palestinian legislative leaders associated with Arafat, indicating that he might be willing to re-enter some kind of negotiations. In March, Palestinians chose moderate Mahmoud Abbas prime minister, partially meeting a US insistence. Earlier in the year, Sharon quietly had entertained Abbas at his private ranch, and his new foreign minister Silvan Shalom (replacing the hard-line Netanyahu), told the Knesset that the Abbas election was a “positive step.”<sup>22</sup> What however, would be the role of the Quartet, of the United Nations? Or to put it another way, could the UN prove “relevant” in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Uncertainty as to its role in Iraq made the question problematic by spring 2003.

The “relevance” of the United Nations in Middle East matters has turned historically on its relationship with the United States, and on the level of US confidence in the leadership of the secretary-general. And American freedom of action in the region has depended since 1990 on UN legitimation. Even the present US government that may wish it were not so, has found it necessary to go “the UN route.” Bush himself said when pressed about his Iraq policy: “I was the guy that [*sic*] went to the United Nations in the first place.” (Referring to Security Council Resolution 1441.)<sup>23</sup> Is it possible that events could conspire to drag the administration back to the moment of novel UN-US cooperation on the Israeli-Palestinian situation as well?

The actions of the Security Council in the Iraq crisis up to mid March 2003, and the vote in the Security Council in late 2000 regarding UN involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute suggest that it will not be easy to exclude the United Nations from Middle East affairs for the foreseeable future, particularly given the apparent legitimacy the Iraq crisis has given—and well

may more prominently give—it, and the focus Kofi Annan and Bill Clinton gave it in late 2000. Nor is it possible to see an easy route back to the peace process that does not include a careful tending of the *critical* UN-US relationship.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A/Res/181 (II), 29 November 1947.

<sup>2</sup> For general histories of UN involvement in the Arab-Israeli dispute and other important Middle East crises, see Sydney D. Bailey, *Four Arab-Israeli Wars and the Peace Process* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Eytan Bentsur, *Making Peace. A First-Hand Account of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001); Ian Bickerton and Carla Klausner, *A Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995); Richard Butler, *Iraq. Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Growing Crisis of Global Security* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000); Warren Christopher, et al., *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Paul Conlon, *United Nations Sanctions Management: A Case Study of the Iraq Sanctions Committee, 1990-1994* (Ardsley, NY: Transnational Publishers, 2000); Arthur Lall, *The UN and the Middle East Crisis, 1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Graham S. Pearson, *The UNSCOM Saga: Chemical and Biological Weapons Non-Proliferation* (Basinstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Edward Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969-1994* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Avi Shlaim, *The Iron*

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Wall; *Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Geoff Simons, *The United Nations: A Chronology of Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> A/Res/3379 (XXX), 10 November 1975.

<sup>4</sup> S/Res/598, 20 July 1987.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the negotiations that produced Resolution 598 see George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner, 1993), 931-932.

<sup>6</sup> For a general discussion of the war and the chronology of events see Dilip Hiro, *Desert Shield to Desert Storm: The Second Gulf War* (London: Paladin, 1992); Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions* (New York: Times Books, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of President Bush's use of the United Nations in the construction of the New World Order, see Jarrod Wiener, "Leadership, the United Nations, and the New World Order," *The United Nations and the New World Order*, edited by Demitris Bourantonis and Jarrod Weiner (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 44-50.

<sup>8</sup> S/Res/660, 2 August 1990; S/Res/661, 6 August 1990; S/Res/662, 9 August 1990; S/Res/664, 18 August 1990; S/Res/665, 25 August 1990; S/Res/666, 13 September 1990; S/Res/667, 16 September 1990; S/Res/669, 24 September 1990; S/res/670, 25 September 1990; S/Res/677, 28 November 1990; S/Res/678, 29 November 1990; S/Res/674, 29 November 1990.

<sup>9</sup> This was the description given to the overall approach of the new administration in 1993 by Madeleine Albright, president Clinton's first permanent representative to the United Nations and later secretary of state.

<sup>10</sup> S/Res/1284, 17 December 1999.

<sup>11</sup> A full description of UNMOVIC's work can be found at its website: <<http://www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/index.htm>>

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Maggie Farley, "Crisis in the Mideast; UN Chief's Efforts to Earn Israeli Trust Helped Bring About the Summit," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> "Mideast Parties Agree to Meeting to Discuss Truce," October 15, 2000, and "Two Sides in Mideast Promise to Work to Stop Violence," October 18, 2000, *New York Times*.

<sup>15</sup> S/Res/6976, 18 December 2000, no action.

<sup>16</sup> For Annan's description of his fact-finding proposal, see his press conference on April 22, 2002. <<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/sgsm8207.doc.htm>>.

<sup>17</sup> 12 nations voted in favor, Norway and the United Kingdom abstained.

<sup>18</sup> Press Release SC/7242, 14 December 2001.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> At the height of the war in Iraq, American public opinion gravitated toward considerable support for US unilateral military action. But 50% of Americans favored the UN leading reconstruction efforts, while 29% believed the US should be responsible alone. See the *Los Angeles Times* Poll in Ronald Brownstein, "Support Grows for Military Actions," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Karen DeYoung and Dan Morgan, "U.S. Plan for Iraq's Future is Challenged," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2003; "Powell Says U.S. Will Lead Postwar Effort in Iraq," Associated Press wire story, New York

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*Times*, April 3, 2003; Elizabeth Becker, "U.S. is Assembling a Civilian Team to Run Iraq," *New York Times*, March 25, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> M. J. Rosenberg, "A Firm 'Road Map,'" *Los Angeles Times*, Section M, April 6, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Robert Wright, "George Bush, Multilateralist?" *New York Times*, February 4, 2003.