

Saving Israel and Palestine Through the United Nations

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The nations of the world, operating under the UN Charter and defending the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, must move urgently to help save both Israel and Palestine.

Following Hamas's heinous attack on innocent Israeli civilians, senior Israeli military strategists are threatening the ethnic cleansing of Gaza. This would be another Nakba (Arabic for catastrophe), akin to the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and land in 1948. If Israel continues to commit massive war crimes in Gaza in the face of global calls for restraint, Israel puts its fundamental national security at risk.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has spoken clearly, persuasively, and eloquently about the need for a cease-fire, the release of hostages, the protection of the civilians of Gaza, support for Israel's security, and the decisive move to a Palestinian state in line with previous UN agreements. In this, he speaks for the great preponderance of humanity and the vast majority of UN member states, seeking peace and justice for Israelis and Palestinians.

All five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council—the U.S., U.K., France, Russia, and China—have a common interest in a cease-fire followed by a comprehensive agreement including Palestinian statehood. All the P5 nations desire good relations with both Israel and the Arab world. All have a strong national interest in peace, including security for Israel and statehood for Palestine.

This is true even of the United States. If the U.S. backs ethnic cleansing in Gaza, American influence in the Muslim world, already in decline in recent years, will irrevocably collapse.

Guterres has charted the framework for peace:

“We have approached a moment of calamitous escalation, and find ourselves at a critical crossroads. It is imperative that all parties—and those with influence over them—do everything possible to avoid fresh violence or spillover of the conflict to the West Bank and the wider region...”

“All hostages in Gaza must be released. Civilians must not be used as human shields. International humanitarian law—including the Geneva Conventions—must be respected and upheld. Civilians on both sides must be protected at all times. Hospitals, schools, clinics and United Nations premises must never be targeted...”

“But any solution to this tragic, decades-long ordeal of death and destruction requires full recognition of the circumstances of both Israelis and Palestinians, of both their realities and both their perspectives...”

“Israel must see its legitimate needs for security materialized, and Palestinians must see a clear perspective for the establishment of their own state realized, in line with United Nations resolutions, international law and previous agreements. If the international community truly believes in these two objectives, we need to find a way to work together to find real, lasting solutions—solutions that

are based on our common humanity and that recognize the need for people to live together, despite histories and circumstances that tear them apart.”

There should be no geopolitical divide among the major powers with regard to this crisis. Russia has very strong ties with Israel, not least because of the hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews living in Israel. The U.K., E.U., and U.S. also have strong economic, technological, cultural, and historical ties with Israel. China too has long and solid relations with Israel, albeit with fewer cultural and historical ties.

Yet none of these major powers want to alienate the Arab and Muslim worlds. Every major power has a significant Muslim population: 1-2% in the U.S. and China, around 7% in the U.K. and E.U., and approximately 10% in Russia. Moreover, all have significant economic, security, and cultural ties with the Arab and Muslim worlds.

The P5 should work urgently together towards a UN Security Council resolution charting the path to peace and a Palestinian state (or even to one state based on equality and democracy, if the Israelis and Palestinians prefer that to a division of the land). Russia is reportedly on the verge of submitting a peace resolution. The U.S. should resist a knee-jerk reaction of opposing a Russian initiative, and work with Russia and other P5 members in the common cause of peace.

Israelis and Palestinians, alas, are each deeply divided into three camps, which might be called the peacemakers, the skeptics, and the fundamentalists. The peacemakers believe that peace is possible through negotiation. The skeptics are so deeply distrustful of the other side that they do not believe in peace. The fundamentalists, a decided minority on both sides, believe that God granted them the land—whether to the Jews or the Muslims—so the other side has no rights at all.

The peacemakers are ready for peace. The skeptics can be won over with sufficient respect, diplomacy, and realism in the negotiations, and UN Security Council backing for a negotiated peace (including peacekeepers, financing, and other instruments of enforceability). Fundamentalists on both sides will be disappointed. Yet they should be reminded that human rights and dignity for all are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and backed by the UN Charter.

From time to time, brave leaders have arisen who have convinced the skeptics to try for peace, and who have told the fundamentalists that both sides deserve respect and justice. Egypt’s Anwar Sadat was such a remarkable figure. So too was Israel’s Yitzhak Rabin. Both were assassinated by fundamentalists of their own nation, martyred like other great peacemakers of our time, including Mahatma Gandhi, John and Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.

As Jesus, himself martyred, taught, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.”

The Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, before the current “unity” government, was the most right-wing in its history. Several extreme right-wingers are in the current cabinet. The Israeli media carry calls to make Gaza a place where “no human being can live.” There must be no place in the affairs of nations, least of all at the United Nations, for ideologies of hate.

The nations of the world, operating under the UN Charter and defending the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, must move urgently to help save both Israel and Palestine. If Israel attempts another Nakba, it would suffer horrendous deaths of its own young men and women in the fighting, kill thousands and displace hundreds of thousands of innocent Palestinians, and stain the name of Israel for future generations. The UN Security Council should head off this calamity by giving urgent and timely support to the millions of Israeli and Palestinian people who yearn for a lasting peace with security and justice for all.

The full article was first published on Common Dreams.