

Equal Voices, Shared Futures: Reforming the UN at a Critical Crossroads

Written by Mazlum Özkan

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MAZLUM ÖZKAN, OCT 28 2024

The United Nations (UN), a beacon of hope and unity after World War II, was founded with the noble aim of preventing another global conflict and maintaining international peace and security. In 1945, representatives from 50 nations gathered in San Francisco to draft and sign the UN Charter, officially establishing the organization in the hopes of ensuring a more peaceful future. Today, the UN finds itself at a critical juncture. Despite its many achievements, including its humanitarian efforts and sustainable development goals, the organization's ability to fulfill its original mission is increasingly questioned due to structural shortcomings, particularly the disproportionate influence of the five permanent members of the Security Council. To address these challenges, a fairer global order—one where every state has an equal voice in decision-making—could provide a much-needed solution. A system based on equality and collective cooperation would allow for more effective global governance, preventing the dominance and hegemony of a few powerful nations and ensuring that international peace and security are pursued for the benefit of all.

The Security Council, one of the six main organs of the United Nations, was entrusted with the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security as outlined in the UN Charter. Its mandate empowers it to take decisive action in times of conflict, including investigating disputes, mediating peace agreements, and, if necessary, imposing sanctions or authorizing military interventions. However, despite this significant authority, the veto power held by its five permanent members—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—has led to frequent deadlock, preventing effective responses to global crises.

As António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, noted during the 2024 Summit of the Future, “The United Nations Security Council is outdated, and its authority is eroding.” He stressed that without reforming its composition and working methods, the Security Council “will eventually lose all credibility.” This highlights the urgent need to address the veto power of the permanent members and ensure that the Security Council reflects the realities of today's global challenges. While the veto was originally intended to prevent unilateral actions by any single nation, it has often paralyzed the Security Council, stalling progress on critical issues. This dysfunction is particularly evident in conflicts like Syria and Gaza, where repeated vetoes have thwarted efforts to broker peace. More recently, the attacks on UN peacekeepers in Lebanon in October 2024 further highlighted the compromised state of peacekeeping operations, as political gridlock within the Council limits its ability to respond decisively to emerging threats.

The Gaza conflict highlights the United Nations' inability to enforce peace agreements or broker lasting solutions, particularly due to the use of vetoes by permanent members of the Security Council. As President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Türkiye emphasized during the 2024 General Assembly: “The world is bigger than five,” a statement underscoring the unbalanced influence held by these permanent members, particularly when global crises such as Gaza remain unresolved. Erdoğan's criticism of the Security Council's inability to prevent “genocide” in Gaza further emphasizes the urgency of reforming this structure.

The recent attacks on UN peacekeepers in Lebanon, particularly in mid-October 2024, highlight the severe risks and limitations of peacekeeping missions in politically charged regions. UN personnel stationed along the Israeli-

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Lebanese border were subjected to direct fire from Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), including the deliberate targeting of a UNIFIL position near Kafer Kela. Despite Israel's assurances of cooperation, the ongoing hostilities have resulted in damaged infrastructure, injuries to peacekeepers, and heightened threats to their safety. UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized the urgent need for ensuring the safety and security of UN personnel, stressing that these actions violate international law and could constitute war crimes. These incidents underscore the vulnerability of peacekeepers caught between hostile actors like Israel and Hezbollah, and raise serious concerns about the future efficacy of UN peacekeeping missions in such highly politicized and militarized zones unless substantial reforms are enacted.

What makes this concentration of power in the hands of the Security Council's permanent members even more problematic is that many of these countries have their own questionable histories of human rights violations and military aggression. For instance, the United States remains the only country in history to have used atomic bombs on civilian populations, causing mass devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. Meanwhile, Russia and China have long been criticized for their own human rights abuses, from Russia's aggressive military campaigns in Ukraine and its suppression of domestic dissent to China's treatment of ethnic minorities such as the Uyghurs. The irony of these nations, each with significant internal and external controversies, having the final say in global peacekeeping efforts is not lost on the international community.

It raises an important question: How can we trust a system in which the very nations responsible for some of the gravest violations are the ones expected to broker peace? Placing the future of world peace in the hands of a few powers, many of which have vested geopolitical interests, seems contradictory. Expecting peace from these powers, given their histories and current actions, often leads to disappointment and failure. This, in turn, leaves the broader global community—especially smaller nations and vulnerable populations—at the mercy of hegemonic powers, whose interests do not always align with the need for justice or humanitarian resolution.

The lack of diverse representation within the Security Council has made it increasingly difficult for the UN to function as a truly global institution. Its decisions are often shaped by the political and economic interests of the few, while the voices of the many are marginalized. As a result, conflict zones like Syria, Gaza, and Lebanon continue to suffer as the UN fails to act decisively, caught between the conflicting interests of the Great Powers.

The ability of states to work together is essential for resolving international conflicts. The challenges we face, including terrorism, climate change, and mass migration, transcend national borders and require a coordinated response from the global community. The United Nations Security Council's failure to act as a united body has delayed solutions to many crises and has triggered destabilizing effects across regions. Instead of addressing the root causes of conflicts—such as political instability, economic inequality, and governance failures—states have been slow to act, leading to the worsening of global issues.

This fragmentation of power, coupled with the UN Security Council's inability to act as a united body, has not only delayed solutions to crises but has also triggered a ripple effect of destabilization. By failing to address root causes, such as political instability and economic inequality, the Council has indirectly contributed to the rise of terrorism and mass displacement. Migration waves, particularly from conflict zones in the Middle East—such as Syria, Gaza, and Lebanon—have resulted in millions of refugees seeking asylum in Europe and neighboring regions, partly due to the Council's inaction.

To tackle these challenges, the UN must reform its Security Council, ensuring that it becomes more representative of the global community and less dominated by a few powers. Reforming the veto system, expanding representation, and ensuring that all voices are heard is critical to enabling collaborative decision-making that can effectively address today's complex security threats. The current world order is dominated by the five permanent members, each wielding the power of veto. This hegemonic structure has often become a tool to protect the interests of these powers, leaving the rest of the global community at a disadvantage. To counter this hegemony, a new counter-hegemony must be built—one that includes countries from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. These regions must unite in supporting reforms that will democratize global governance and challenge the dominance of a few.

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If we fail to raise our voices today, we risk being drawn into another global war, orchestrated by these major powers. The question is not just about reform but about mobilizing global awareness and action. The people of these nations must be motivated to pressure their governments to demand changes at the international level. Social movements and protests should be organized to create awareness and push for reform. By creating this momentum, governments could be forced to reconsider their stance on reforming the UNSC.

Alternatively, if certain countries continue to block necessary reforms, the time may come for the rest of the world to show that it is indeed bigger than five and create a new system that excludes these so-called great powers (for they are not greater than the world itself). This new system must be based on true equality, where every state, no matter its size or geopolitical influence, has an equal say in global decision-making. In a world where fairness governs international relations, a global order could work very well, fostering cooperation and preventing the dominance of any one group of powers. We stand at a critical juncture. Either we demand and achieve meaningful change today, or we risk being drawn into another catastrophic conflict fueled by the unchecked ambitions of a few hegemonic powers. Global solidarity across regions and countries is crucial to building a future where international cooperation is no longer controlled by a small elite but shared by all in the pursuit of true peace and justice.

Overall, The United Nations stands at a crossroads. With global peace and justice hanging in the balance, the time for reform is now. It is imperative that the international community rise to the occasion and take bold steps to modernize the Security Council and make the UN a truly representative and effective institution. The examples of Syria, Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond are clear indicators that a system dominated by historically controversial powers is no longer capable of delivering the peace and security the world so desperately needs. Reforming the veto power, expanding the membership of the Security Council, and ensuring that smaller and emerging nations have a voice in global governance are vital steps in creating a more just and secure international order. The world cannot afford to wait any longer.

About the author:

Mazlum Özkan is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Groningen, part of the SCOOP program and the Interuniversity Center for Social Science Theory and Methodology. His research focusses on Iranian social movements, and his broader interests include Middle East politics and the influence of great powers. You can find him on Twitter and LinkedIn.