



# The Role and Limitations of the United Nations in Middle East Security

## A Case Study of United Nations Truce Supervision Organization

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**Abstract.** The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization(UNTSO), established by the United Nations in Palestine, plays a crucial role in monitoring and maintaining the implementation of ceasefire agreements, contributing to security in the Middle East. However, due to the protracted and complex nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the limited functions of ceasefire monitoring organizations, they face challenges in effectively responding to the complex security challenges in the region and playing a fundamental political and diplomatic role in conflicts. To strengthen their role, it is necessary to enhance their effectiveness through multilateral cooperation and innovative conflict resolution models within the framework of the United Nations. This article examines relevant literature to analyze the functions of the United Nations and UNTSO, such as monitoring ceasefires and promoting dialogue and negotiations among conflicting parties, as well as the challenges and limitations they face. It particularly focuses on the complexity and adversarial nature of conflicts, limitations imposed by the conflicting parties, resource constraints, and geopolitical dynamics that restrict their effectiveness in the region. The aim is to provide recommendations and reflections on the contributions, challenges, and improvement paths of these organizations in maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** United Nations; UNTSO; Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## 1 Introduction

The United Nations, as an international organization with the primary objective of maintaining international peace and security, bears significant responsibility in regional security worldwide. It plays a crucial political and diplomatic role in mediation, coordination, and humanitarian assistance. The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization(UNTSO), established by the United Nations in Palestine, aims to supervise and maintain the implementation of ceasefire agreements, playing a pivotal role in security in the Middle East region. However, the protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the complexity of the regional situation, and the limited func-

tions of the ceasefire monitoring organization hinder its ability to play a fundamental political and diplomatic role in conflicts.

The Middle East has long been a hotspot of international security concern, characterized by complex security dynamics, geopolitical disputes, and ethnic conflicts, particularly the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine. The international community, with the United Nations at its core, strives to find effective methods for peaceful resolution of these conflicts. This article focuses specifically on an institution that receives relatively less attention internationally, the United Nations' subsidiary UNTSO, and its role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By analyzing literature and reports in Arabic, this article aims to comprehensively examine the historical involvement of the United Nations in resolving regional conflicts, strategic responses, and their effectiveness, providing in-depth insights and references for future policy formulation and implementation.

The article begins by contextualizing UNTSO's significance and functions in the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Subsequently, it evaluates the organization's effectiveness in reducing violent conflicts and promoting sustainable peace while examining the challenges and limitations the United Nations faces in resolving regional conflicts globally. Finally, starting from the specific situation in the Middle East, the article explores key factors influencing the effectiveness of the United Nations and its subsidiary institutions and provides recommendations for future work.

## **2 The United Nations' Solution for the "Centry Issue"**

Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations has been actively involved in global regional security affairs under the guidance of the United Nations Security Council. Its engagement spans a range of significant international events, from the Korean War to the Balkans crisis. In the pursuit of conflict resolution and the establishment of peace, the United Nations often deploys peacekeeping forces, establishes special representatives and missions, and establishes special tribunals, all aimed at reducing conflicts and promoting regional security and long-term peace.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East is deeply influenced by multiple factors, including religious disputes, historical displacement, and territorial disputes. These intertwined factors have intensified tensions between the two parties, making the peace process highly challenging. Since the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948 and the establishment of Israel, the protracted nature of the conflict has been a prominent feature. The failure of numerous peace negotiations has further exacerbated the tense situation. The international community, represented by the United Nations, has long been committed to finding a solution. For example, the Helsinki Accords adopted by the United Nations Security Council in 1975 aimed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through peaceful negotiations. The Oslo Accords, reached in secret talks in Oslo, Norway, in 1993 between Israeli and Palestinian representatives, laid the foundation for Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. In 2003, the United States, European Union, Russia, and the United Nations jointly proposed the Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East, aiming to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace. At the same time, the United Na-

tions, along with other countries, has sought to maintain peace and stability in the Israeli-Palestinian region through the deployment of United Nations peacekeeping forces and EU-Palestinian police actions.

In 1948, the United Nations established its earliest peacekeeping organization, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO). This organization marked the beginning of the United Nations' peacekeeping efforts and was specifically tasked with monitoring ceasefire agreements between Israel and Palestine to ensure compliance with peace agreements. The establishment of UNTSO not only represented the United Nations' first attempt to resolve conflicts in specific regions but also provided a template for subsequent peacekeeping and monitoring missions globally. Scholars have focused on UNTSO's efforts in ceasefire monitoring, dispute resolution, the establishment of temporary safe zones to protect civilian safety, and the promotion of peace in the Middle East conflict. They have conducted comprehensive assessments of its functions, limited authorization, challenges, and achievements in reducing large-scale conflicts. Over time, UNTSO has gradually expanded its mandate to include monitoring ceasefire agreements in other regions as well.

However, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process remains fragile, and multiple attempts have failed to fully resolve the core issues of territorial disputes, security, and the return of refugees between the two parties. These ongoing disputes hinder the establishment of trust, deepen the difficulties in negotiations, and introduce uncertainty into the security situation, creating additional challenges for peace talks. As time passes and the international security environment evolves, the United Nations' tasks in the Middle East have become more complex. Political competition among Middle Eastern countries, the interests of major international powers in the region, and alliances and conflicts between different regional actors have made the reconciliation process exceptionally challenging. Additionally, the geopolitical risks in the Middle East present significant obstacles, involving complex relationships and conflicting interests among multiple countries and regions. This increases the complexity and sensitivity of United Nations mediation efforts, making consensus-building and progress towards a solution more difficult. Furthermore, the United Nations' work in the Middle East is significantly influenced by relations between major powers. Political and military interventions, opposing positions, and conflicting interests among these powers may hinder the United Nations' mediation efforts.

The continued Israeli-Palestinian conflict not only exacerbates regional tensions but also provides fertile ground for terrorism and extremism, while hindering economic development and the well-being of the people in the region. This situation underscores the need for a long-term institution to play an active role in the region, aiming to address root conflicts and recurring cycles of violence, and laying the foundation for Israeli-Palestinian peace and long-term stability in the Middle East. Given this context, this study focuses on the role of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), analyzes its challenges and limitations, and explores feasible improvement strategies.

### **3 Functions and Effectiveness of Untso**

#### **3.1 Mediation and Facilitation**

The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) plays a crucial role in mediating and facilitating negotiations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following the United Nations Security Council's resolutions, UNTSO strives to promote dialogue among the various parties involved.

During the 1967 Six-Day War, the Security Council passed four independent resolutions calling for a ceasefire. In the aftermath of the war, the United Nations General Assembly called for an end to Israel's occupation and subsequent annexation of Jerusalem. The Security Council Resolution 242 deemed the acquisition of territory by force as unacceptable and called for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories and land swaps for peace. UNTSO's team of experts engaged with Palestinian and Israeli representatives during the Six-Day War, aiming to address border disputes and determine the demarcation lines. Through neutral investigation and research, taking into account historical records, geographical features, international law, security factors, and concerns of all parties involved, UNTSO presented feasible proposals for border delineation. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Security Council Resolution 338 called for a ceasefire in the ongoing conflict and the full implementation of Resolution 242. In 1978, when Israel invaded southern Lebanon, the Security Council passed Resolution 425 calling for the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces. UNTSO received indefinite authorization through these series of actions, working in coordination with other United Nations entities such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), established in 1978, to monitor and mediate conflicts together.[1]

Furthermore, UNTSO has put forth a series of recommendations regarding border management and security provisions. These include establishing border patrols, mechanisms for security cooperation, border checkpoints, as well as conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, aimed at ensuring stability and security in border regions. UNTSO maintains contact with both parties and facilitates dialogue on key issues by organizing meetings and consultations, seeking common interests and solutions. Additionally, UNTSO collaborates with governments, academic institutions, research centers, and professional organizations of United Nations member states. It invites experts to participate in meetings, working groups, or conducts field visits to provide professional advice on disputed issues, guiding the parties towards consensus in resolving conflicts.

#### **3.2 Monitoring Ceasefire Agreements**

After the outbreak of the first Arab-Israeli war, the Israeli and Palestinian sides signed a non-militarization agreement in July 1948, creating a "no-man's land" on Mount Scopus. This agreement prohibited the entry of all military personnel into the area, strictly regulated the number of allowed personnel, and placed it under the control of

the United Nations. UNTSO monitored the Mount Scopus Agreement and the ceasefire agreements between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Under the control of the Chief of Staff appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the UNTSO chairman is responsible for handling complaints raised by the parties, which are investigated by military observers from the mixed ceasefire committees established for each agreement.[2]

In Palestine, observers utilize advanced technologies such as satellite imagery and drones to carry out patrols, monitor, and document activities in conflict areas. By directly communicating with the conflicting parties, they record military dynamics near the ceasefire lines and any violations of the ceasefire agreements, ensuring the effective implementation of the agreements. The reports provided by these observers offer objective evidence regarding compliance with the ceasefire agreements, including detailed information on military activities, deployment of armed forces, and instances of non-compliance. This timely reporting mechanism is highly effective in deterring violations, promoting agreement compliance, and reducing the risk of conflict escalation and spread.

### **3.3 Humanitarian Assistance**

UNTSO establishes temporary safe areas in conflict zones to provide a secure refuge for civilians, particularly Palestinian refugees. These areas are typically located near the conflict lines and are patrolled and protected by UNTSO personnel. Building upon this, UNTSO addresses the urgent needs of individuals affected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by organizing relief operations and providing essential supplies such as food, medical assistance, and shelter.

UNTSO's observers utilize modern technologies such as satellite imagery and drones to monitor activities in conflict areas, documenting and reporting military actions and violations of ceasefire agreements. Observers, particularly in specific teams in Lebanon (OGL) and the Golan Heights (OGG), fill the gaps in coverage not addressed by UNIFIL and UNDOF observers. By recording human rights violations, they provide evidence for accountability and justice.[3]

UNTSO supports community recovery and infrastructure reconstruction, such as roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals, to provide essential services to communities. Additionally, by offering training and technical support, UNTSO assists the conflicting parties in achieving reform and reconstruction of their security forces, enhancing the professional capabilities of military and police personnel, and promoting human rights compliance.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) collaborates with UNTSO, focusing on education, healthcare, and social assistance, as well as infrastructure reconstruction to meet the basic needs of refugees. Through education, UNRWA strengthens Palestinian national identity, supports the concept of "returnees," and promotes political education and independence.[4]

Through monitoring, humanitarian assistance, and support for peace building, UNTSO facilitates the secure transition of conflict-affected areas, fostering peace,

stability, and sustainable development. Additionally, UNTSO safeguards human rights and social stability, laying the foundation for long-term peace between the conflicting parties.

## **4 Untso'S Challenges**

### **4.1 Limitations of UNTSO's Mandate**

The primary function of UNTSO is to monitor the implementation of ceasefire agreements, but it lacks the direct capacity to address the root causes of conflicts. In other words, UNTSO typically exercises limited powers and responsibilities, with its mandate subject to constraints imposed by the United Nations Security Council. UNTSO serves as a check to maintain a manageable situation and acts as a neutral forum for mediation, without strong sanctioning powers.[2]

Specifically, in the military realm, as per its mandate, UNTSO can only observe and report on conflict situations and can engage in military action only in self-defense during an actual conflict, with limited actual military intervention capabilities.[5] UNTSO's mission is confined to "observing, reporting, and investigating" violations of ceasefire agreements and other border incidents during the process of monitoring the implementation of the comprehensive 1948 ceasefire agreements. It exists as a neutral observer force without the use of force or executive authority to resolve these violations.[6] Its military personnel do not carry weapons to ensure their status as neutral observers, and they have minimal military equipment or staff.

Apart from its ability to rapidly respond to and report on violations, UNTSO has virtually no military assets on the ground. However, many voices in the international community argue that organizations like UNTSO should not possess strong military capabilities.[6] This means that UNTSO was not initially authorized to have robust military intervention capabilities. In practice, conflicting parties often hope that UNTSO will play a more forceful military role in peacekeeping, ceasefire enforcement, and conflict resolution, reflecting their own positions. While UNTSO strives for impartiality to maintain peace, it cannot cater exclusively to the desires of one side in the conflict or possess sufficient authorization for strong military intervention and mediation through the use of force. This inevitably leads to dissatisfaction and mistrust among the conflicting parties.

Due to UNTSO's limited capacity to advocate for its own interests, the conflicting parties may engage in uncooperative actions, resulting in a lack of sufficient political will in implementing peace agreements. They may be unwilling to accept UN mediation or the peace process, thereby hindering UNTSO's performance and conflict resolution efforts.

### **4.2 Financial Challenges of UNTSO**

The United Nations faces difficulties in reaching consensus among member states regarding the apportionment of costs in executing peacekeeping missions. While some countries accept cost-sharing, others insist that the expenses should be borne by

the beneficiary countries of the military operations themselves. This dispute is not new and dates back to the financial issues encountered during the United Nations' military action in the Congo in 1960 when the Soviet Union and France refused to contribute to the costs, and the United States threatened to withhold voting rights from delinquent countries. By 2010, the disagreements between contributing countries and financial supporters had intensified, putting pressure on the implementation of peacekeeping policies.

To address this challenge, the United Nations General Assembly's Fifth Committee adopted a compromise solution and established a Senior Advisory Group through Resolution 65/289. This group aimed to explore reimbursement rates and related financial issues. Despite these measures, the financial challenges continue to impact the organization's operations and have sparked discussions on the role and functions of peacekeeping implementing bodies.[6]

In November 2020, according to a United Nations news report, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) faced a severe funding shortfall in providing assistance and support to 5.6 million Palestinian refugees in the Middle East region. Philippe Lazzarini, the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, stated during an online meeting of the UNRWA Advisory Commission that the agency faced a funding gap of \$115 million this year. The financial crisis stems from the United States, the largest donor to UNRWA, deciding to discontinue its contributions in 2018, and donations from some countries, including Gulf states, declining in 2019 and further reducing in 2020.

With the widening gap in financial contributions between donor countries, there has been a significant divergence in influence and decision-making power. If major donor countries like the United States reduce their contributions or encounter significant disagreements, UNRWA and other UN-affiliated relief organizations will face a severe funding shortage. Since 2012, conflicts and social crises have escalated while available resources have failed to meet the increasing demands. Palestinian refugees rely on these UN organizations for basic education and healthcare services, as well as life-saving measures such as food and cash assistance.[7]Insufficient funding will result in numerous refugees living in poverty, illness, and hunger, further hindering UNRWA's ability to fulfill its mandate and potentially exacerbating conflicts between the parties involved, thus undermining efforts for peaceful resolution.

### **4.3 Geopolitical Threats**

In fact, the internal political regimes in the Middle East are not built on democratic foundations, and people's opinions are not taken into consideration.[9]Geopolitical threats in the Middle East primarily stem from the strategic significance of the region, which attracts the attention of numerous major powers seeking to maintain their global influence and regional interests through intervention in Middle Eastern politics, economy, and military affairs. This external interference not only exacerbates instability within the region but also significantly impacts the role of the United Nations in maintaining regional peace. Due to political divisions among the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5), the UN Security Council often fails to reach

consensus on peacekeeping actions, weakening the UN's role in the Middle East peace process.[8]

The United States and Russia, as the major external actors in the Middle East, engage in interventions that carry significant geopolitical implications. The United States holds extensive political, economic, and military interests in the region and plays a decisive role in many conflicts and crises. While there is no formal security treaty, Washington has reiterated its fundamental commitment to Israel, which resonates with every American.[10]The United States supports Israel's security and national interests and provides political support for Israel on the international stage, primarily through the United Nations. For example, the United States has voted against resolutions investigating Israeli actions, with only the United States and Israel opposing.[1]In response to this, the Palestinian ambassador, Kidwai, once stated that while the United States ensures "the United Nations will play a certain role, it will not be allowed to become a major player—the major events of Middle East diplomacy will not take place at the United Nations" .[1]The United States aims to maintain its interests and influence in the region, particularly in competition with Russia, by actively engaging in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It seeks to prevent Russia, or previously the Soviet Union, from aligning with Palestine as a means to achieve their own geopolitical interests.[11]After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the U.S.-led efforts to mediate between Israel and Arab states laid the foundation for what Bruce Riedel refers to as "American Peace," primarily aiming to disentangle Egypt from Soviet influence. Following the First Gulf War, the United States expanded its military presence in the Middle East, deploying a significant number of troops in the region to safeguard U.S. national interests.[12]

Russia, on the other hand, seeks to enhance its reputation by addressing conflicts in the Middle East and gain an advantage in its competition with the United States for influence over key areas in the region. By engaging in dialogue with various parties, Russia aims to assert its influence in the Middle East discourse.[13] Russia considers the Middle East as one of its important geopolitical interest areas and seeks regional stability and balance to ensure its own interests in the region. Russia's objective is to establish stability and balance in the Middle East while mitigating the impact of Western sanctions through economic cooperation and military assistance. Additionally, it aims to reduce the risk of dependence on the Chinese economy.[13]. Furthermore, Russia's activities in the counter-terrorism field, particularly its focus on the Israeli-Palestinian region, highlight the importance of geopolitical threats to its national security.

The complex regional dynamics and ever-changing political environment in the Middle East pose additional challenges to the work of UNTSO. The region is characterized by multiple intricate conflicts and disputes involving various stakeholders. These conflicts often encompass complex factors such as history, religion, ethnicity, and geopolitics. Deep-seated disagreements and contradictions exist among the parties involved, and the path to conflict resolution is not clear. UNTSO's neutrality, authority, and effectiveness are frequently questioned by forces dissatisfied with the outcomes of conflict resolution, and the execution and compliance of peace agreements also face challenges.



The competition of interests and geopolitical rivalries among major powers further complicate the Middle East issue, posing challenges and setbacks to the peace process. As exemplified by the recent United Nations General Assembly session in 2023, in the face of further escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian situation, resolutions proposed by countries like Russia, the United States, and Brazil were vetoed, while at the same time, resolutions passed by the General Assembly were supported. This, to some extent, reflects the international community's division in terms of justice judgments and highlights the limitations and dilemmas faced by the United Nations.

## 5 Conclusion

Based on the long-term and complex nature of conflicts in the Middle East, as well as the limited capacity and external influences on UNTSO, UNTSO has played a certain positive role in the administrative and technical aspects of security in the Middle East. However, its limitations lie in the fact that a single organization cannot effectively address the complex regional security challenges and cannot play a political and diplomatic role in fundamentally resolving Middle East security issues. It needs to further strengthen its role through multilateral cooperation, coordination among major powers, innovative conflict resolution models, and coordination with regional powers within the framework of the United Nations.

Research attempts to expand the perspective of international security studies, explore the role of the United Nations in Middle East security, and promote research on conflict resolution methods and paths. The innovation lies in recognizing the long-term and complex nature of security in the Middle East and seeking new solutions, enriching the paths and means of the United Nations in addressing Middle East security, and enhancing the effectiveness of UNTSO.

However, the research still has some shortcomings. The study is not sufficiently in-depth regarding the role of the United Nations in different periods in the Middle East. Other disputes in the Middle East are not fully covered in the research, and there are issues with the comprehensiveness of the research objects. Similarly, the study lacks comparative and detailed analysis of the multi-level and stage-specific differences in the role of the United Nations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, there is a lack of quantitative criteria for assessing the role of UNTSO in Middle East security. The research involves the constraints of resources and political functions in the United Nations' conflict resolution, which may have significant impact on its decision-making and actions, but there is a lack of clear criteria for measuring the extent of its role and the degree of its limitations.

The study suggests that the United Nations and UNTSO should transition from administrative roles to political and diplomatic roles. In order to better fulfill its role, the United Nations should integrate its institutions and resources in the Middle East and gradually transform its presence in the region from administrative to more political and diplomatic. The United Nations and UNTSO should transform, upgrade, and coordinate to form comprehensive, diverse, and efficient means, strengthen linkage

and synergy with other peace mechanisms, and create new paths for conflict resolution in the Middle East.

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