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Global Perspectives

The UN Turns Seventy-Five. Here's How to Make it Relevant Again

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Global Memos are briefs by the Council of Councils that gather opinions from global experts on major international developments.

The United Nations, founded in the aftermath of World War II's devastation, is marking its seventy-fifth year in 2020. The anniversary comes at a time of unprecedented strain on the framework of international institutions created to peacefully manage conflict and foster global cooperation within multilateral forums. In this time of upheaval, amid a pandemic and facing the specter of climate change, the debate over how to reform and strengthen the United Nations is more relevant than ever.

In this Council of Councils global perspectives roundup, members of seventeen leading global think tanks reflect on what reform or initiative is the most important for the United Nations as it looks toward its next seventy-five years.

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Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky

Research Fellow, **Institute for National Security Studies** (Israel)

Address the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In looking ahead, the United Nations should strive to play a more conducive role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To do so, two important UN bodies need reforms: the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA).

The UNHRC is already the product of reforms introduced to the UN Commission on Human Rights. Although some of the ailments of the Council have been cured, its (many) constructive contributions are overshadowed by its political bias against Israel. One reason is the UNHRC's agenda item 7: the only country-based situation to feature

as a permanent item on the Council's order of the day in its three annual sessions. This status guarantees that Israel will be the focus of scrutiny in every such session, leading to oversized condemnations relative to states such as Iran, North Korea, and Syria.

The UN's important work with Palestinian refugees also appears compromised by different standards adopted toward them—in care provided by UNRWA—and toward refugees from all other conflicts in the world, collectively cared for by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Differences pertain to the mandate, definitions of a refugee, conditions under which refugee status is revoked, the budgetary and staff allocation per refugee, and procedural functioning. For example, should UNRWA follow UNHCR's definition, 80 percent of its beneficiaries (living in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and as citizens of Jordan) would not be eligible for refugee status—freeing up funds for those who need assistance most and reducing the political obstacle encapsulated in the demand to enable 5.6 million Palestinian refugees to live in Israel.

These biases have deterred Israel from cooperating and contributing to the work of relevant UN bodies, sidelined the United Nation's ability to contribute to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and antagonized Israeli public opinion, which largely perceives the United Nations as a hostile monolithic bloc. One result is the strengthening of hard-line Israeli stances against compromises given the perception that the UN system cannot be trusted to safeguard Israel's interests.

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