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Reflections on the United Nations at 75

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In recent weeks, the UN has marked the 75th anniversary of its founding. In addition to the 75th annual General Assembly in late September, many discussions and conferences have been devoted to the organization's purpose, future activity, and legitimacy in the current world order, which differs substantially from the order that prevailed after the Second World War when the UN Charter was drafted. The discussions and presentations at the various events provide food for thought about the UN and the international system, including Israel's place in the organization. Israel would do well to pursue a proactive and strategic policy in the UN that takes into account the changes in the international arena in general and the UN in particular, led by the signing of the Abraham Accords, which can weaken the traditional anti-Israel coalition in the UN. This could be an important step in the long road toward moderating the anti-Israel bias typical of some UN bodies, and improve Israel's international standing.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders and peoples in the free world began to attribute greater importance to the particular interests of their respective countries, at the expense of international cooperation needed to promote collective action on challenges facing humanity. This development, which continues to erode the very idea of multilateralism, has been attributed not only to growing support for anti-establishment, nationalist, and/or populist ideologies, but also to another phenomenon in the current international order – competition between the major powers, primarily the United States and China. Debates on these issues dotted the many conferences and events surrounding the UN's 75th anniversary, especially in light of increasing criticism regarding poor UN-led action dealing with wars, and ensuing violence, and humanitarian disasters; environmental and climate change; economic gaps between developing and developed countries, and pandemics that have no regard for geographic borders.

In response to criticism, UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized that the UN's capabilities are a product of the commitment of its member states to the idea of multilateralism on which the UN was established, and to each other. In the sub-text is criticism of the isolationist policy pursued by the United States in recent years, both in the international arena at large and specifically in the UN. Indeed, irrespective of the

merit, or lack thereof, of specific measures, US foreign policy under President Trump's leadership has challenged the principle of multilateralism on three accounts. One is a US withdrawal from international agreements, among them the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran and the Paris Climate Accord. Another is US withdrawal from key UN bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). A third is the termination of financial support for UN agencies, among them the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), to which the United States has been by far the most important donor for many years. Another recent example is President Trump's announcement of the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), to which the United States has also been the largest donor. This policy demonstrates a lack of confidence not only in the performance of the agencies working in the UN framework, but also in their ability to learn from mistakes and revise their policies.

Also on the agenda was China's policy in the international arena. Whether due to China's independent policy of increasing intervention in the international arena according to the vision and goals of President Xi Jinping's regime, or simply in response to a vacuum that the United States has left, China is working to place Chinese officials in senior positions in international organizations. This strategy contravenes the unwritten agreement whereby the P5 countries – the United States, UK, China, France, and Russia – generally refrain from such measures because of their disproportionate power in the UN Security Council, and in order to enable other states to share in the leadership in the international theater. Another contention is that in contrast to the United States, a democracy where professional officeholders work to uphold the interests of the international organization in which they operate, Chinese officeholders regard themselves primarily as representatives of China. It is thus alleged that China's growing power in international organizations aims to promote specifically Chinese interests, for example, by preventing the acceptance of Taiwan as a member in these organizations and preventing condemnations of systematic human rights violations committed by China itself.

Directly related to the negative dynamic developing between important countries in the UN leadership, a third issue that surfaced in the multiple 75th anniversary forums is the UN's acute need for cooperation with non-state entities – NGOs, local governments, and the corporate sector. In the current context of the decentralization of diplomacy, the ability to utilize digital tools for intercontinental communications and organization, the growing power of civilian actors, and the complexity of the challenges confronting humanity, the opening words of the UN Charter, "We the peoples," were echoed repeatedly. By working together with research institutes and civil society organizations to address events on the ground, develop methods of measurement and assessment, devise

strategic processes, and plan long-term policy goals based on credible data, the UN can enhance the legitimacy and recognition it needs to rally member states to deepen cooperation. UN Secretary-General Guterres's voice was loud and clear on this issue, not only in his call to include civil society in UN activity, but also in the resources that he has committed to UN research of unprecedented scope designed to achieve a better understanding of the views of people around the world on urgent issues on the one hand, and the current and future role of the UN on the other.

Likewise important are the findings of this study – based on the answers of over one million respondents residing in the UN's 193 member states (2000 of whom are from Israel). These were presented vividly and graphically in ten central categories, stretching over 94 colorful pages. Noteworthy is that although the health crisis is currently perceived as the most urgent topic in need of addressing, looking ahead, a majority of the world's population are worried about environmental and climate problems, and would like to see the UN more active in this sphere. Another significant finding for future UN activity concerns the differences between the developed and developing countries on what constitute urgent issues. In the developed world, which provides the UN with most of the resources for its activity, people are worried primarily about terrorist activity, cyberattacks, and nuclear arms proliferation. In the developing world, on the other hand, people are worried about poverty, corruption, and community violence. The ability to bridge this gap is directly affected by the commitment of the developed countries to the principle of multilateralism, which will challenge the UN in the coming years. The very exposure of this gap, however, can enable the UN to address its implications by engaging in long-term strategic planning.

Finally, Israel's place in the organization and its ability to leverage developments in the UN to further its goals should be considered. For example, the UN seeks greater US engagement. Simultaneously, established data indicates an inverse correlation between US presence in international bodies and an obsessively critical attitude toward Israel in those bodies. This opens the door for Israeli action based on excellent bilateral relations with the United States, to encourage the superpower to play a greater role in UN institutions. One example is UNRWA: a joint thinking process, embarked upon by Israel and the United States led by the next President can develop a model for returning US funding to UNRWA based on clear benchmarks of the agency's ability to permanently resettle Palestinian refugees in their place of residence, and introduce reforms to address functional deficiencies. This provides an opportunity to rehabilitate the United States' standing vis-à-vis the Palestinians, thereby contributing to its ability to resume the role of mediator between the parties. The United States would gain influence, Israel would profit from concrete progress toward resolving one of the core issues in the conflict, and the Palestinian refugees would substantially improve their situation by receiving permanent

citizenship and relief of the harsh stigma attached to their status. For its part, the UN would receive a boost to the multilateral principle on which it is based.

Given the importance ascribed by the UN to the inclusion of civil society in future action, Israeli organizations should be encouraged to participate in UN activity. This can occur along several channels, including submitting data on developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to relevant UN agencies, which receive information almost exclusively from Palestinian organizations; engaging in systematic critical reading of UN reports about multiple developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while highlighting inaccuracies and absence of data that can serve to balance the portrayal of the situation; increasing appearances by Israeli experts and NGO representatives before relevant UN bodies, among them the Security Council and the UNHRC; and striving to increase the number of Israelis working in professional capacities in UN bodies. These measures, together with a proactive Israeli establishment approach in the UN, especially following the Abraham Accords, can help erode the traditional anti-Israel bloc in the UN. Such an approach is the first step on the long road to reduce the anti-Israel bias that characterizes some of the UN's activity, and can serve to improve Israel's international standing.