



Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Danny Danon, June 13, 2018. Photo: United Nations Gallery

The UN and Israel: From Confrontation to Participation

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Over the years Israel-UN relations have been mixed. On the one hand, the decisions condemning Israel within the different institutions of the UN reflects the hostile attitude toward Israel. On the other hand, Israel's acceptance as a member of the Western European and Others Group and the gradual change in the voting patterns of developing countries indicate an expanding positive orientation toward Israel. The purpose of this article is to survey the primary trends in Israel-UN relations, with a focus on the change in Israeli policy over the past two decades, its catalysts, and its manifestation. The review reveals a shift from Israel's traditional policy of "the UN is nothing" to the adoption of a proactive approach and an expanded attempt to work from within the ranks of the UN in order to influence its decisions through three principal modes of action: taking part in meeting the global Millennium Development Goals; filling key positions within various UN institutions; and attempting to influence voting processes within the General Assembly.

Keywords: UN arena, Israel-UN relations, General Assembly

Introduction

Israel-UN relations over the years have been characterized by mixed trends. On the one hand, the decisions condemning Israel within the different UN institutions reflect a hostile attitude toward Israel. On the other hand, Israel's acceptance as a member of the Western European and Others Group (WEOG), Danny Danon's election in 2017 as Vice President of the UN General Assembly, and a gradual change in the voting patterns of developing countries in Israel's favor exemplify the expanding positive orientation toward Israel in this institution. The aim of this article is to survey the primary trends in Israel-UN relations, with a focus on the change in Israeli policy vis-à-vis the UN toward proactive policy measures over the past two decades, an analysis of its causes, and the manner of its manifestation.

The main claim of this article is that recent decades have witnessed a gradual change in Israel's policy toward the UN. This has been manifested in a shift from Israel's traditional policy of writing the UN off ("*Umm shmum*"—"the UN is nothing") to the adoption of a proactive approach and an expanded attempt to work from within the ranks of the UN in order to influence its decisions. This approach runs counter to the passivity characteristic of Israeli policy in the past, which stemmed from the contention that the General Assembly harbored an automatic anti-Israel orientation.

The contribution of this article lies in its systematic chronological analysis of Israel-UN relations over a number of decades in order to build the argument that Israel is currently implementing a proactive policy toward the UN. This claim will be grounded in a general analysis, with a focus on three modes of action that reflect the transition from a policy of isolationism and lack of interest to a proactive approach. In other words, whereas the academic literature has focused on a historical survey of Israel-UN relations (Ben-Meir, 2011; Beker, 1998) or recognized a change in Israel's conduct toward the UN (Hatuel-Radoshitzky, 2016;

2017), the present article proposes a broad and comprehensive view of these relations, beginning with a chronological presentation of the reason for their decline, moving to an analysis of the reasons for the change in Israeli policy toward the UN that began in the early 2000s, and concluding with a systematic examination of the three channels through which the change was implemented in practice.

This article uses qualitative methodology by means of content analysis and chronological analysis. It begins with a chronological analysis of Israel's participation in the humanitarian development projects of the UN in an attempt to show its consistent increased activity in this realm. Israel's participation in these projects started at the outset of the 2000s, with the beginning of promotion of humanitarian development in Third World countries, led by then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. During previous periods, and certainly during the Cold War, the significant furthering of humanitarian initiatives by the UN was not possible in light of the UN's secondary status as a global actor eclipsed by the ideological struggle between the superpowers. It is therefore impossible to compare Israeli participation in these initiatives between the two periods (before and after the 2000s), and the analysis was based on the systematic chronological presentation of the increasing Israeli participation over the past two decades. A chronological analysis was also conducted in order to highlight the appointment processes and the service of Israeli officials in various key institutions, in an attempt to underline the consistent increase in this trend over the past two decades. Finally, empirical research was employed, including content analysis of the 95 resolutions approved by the General Assembly from the UN database and UN Watch, with the aim of examining Israel's attempt to influence voting patterns in the General Assembly.

The article consists of three parts. The first section presents the goals and the methodology of the article, a survey of the primary trends in

Israel-UN relations, and a review of the relevant literature, with an emphasis on the presentation of three main factors underlying the change in policy that occurred early in the 2000s. An empirical section examines the article's major argument through an analysis of the three major channels of Israel's activity within the various UN institutions, and a third section includes an analysis and discussion of the findings.

The Main Trends in Israel-UN Relations over the Decades

An overview of the subject indicates that Israel-UN relations over the years have been characterized by ups and down, but especially downs. The United Nations was established in 1945 with the aim of maintaining peace and security in the global arena and preventing future wars like World War II, which had just ended. The State of Israel was established soon thereafter, in 1948, and became the 59th country accepted into the United Nations. Initially, Israel-UN relations were characterized by positive trends (Beker, 1988), and Israel adopted the UN Charter and the principles of equality, universal rights, and social justice that are included in its own declaration of independence. In addition, in the early 1950s, Israel sought to consolidate its status and further its connections in the global arena, including the UN's diplomatic realm, in part given the importance to this ascribed by then-Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett. Israel was accepted, inter alia given its contribution to the family of nations and the generous assistance it granted to the developing countries of Africa when they became independent at the end of the colonial era (Oded, 2011; Decter, 1977; Chazan, 2006; Beker, 2006).

Nonetheless, the beginning of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union witnessed a gradual deterioration in the UN's attitude toward Israel, partially against the background of the Berlin crisis (1948-1949), the partition of the Korean Peninsula and the Korean War, and especially the paralysis of the UN Security Council in light of the

Soviets' frequent use of their veto to remove from the agenda resolutions that ran counter to their interests (see UN website, Security Council—Quick links). These developments in the global arena, which also led to tension between the two superpowers in the various UN institutions, had a negative impact on Israel, as they precluded cooperation between them in a manner that would promote Israeli interests in the UN arena.

Israel-UN relations continued to decline over the years as the Arab-Israeli conflict intensified, and the more the UN dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, in 1956, the UN's weakness was prominent when Egypt violated the armistice agreement with its ongoing military provocations, proclamations regarding the destruction of Israel, and the use of *fedayeen* (armed groups that carried out attacks in Israel under Egyptian auspices). In 1967, the weakness was highlighted again in the UN's dealing with international crises, when the Security Council failed to take action to change the decision of Secretary-General U Thant regarding the withdrawal of UN forces from the Sinai Peninsula. Moreover, the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty (1979) was not received in a positive light in the broad UN arena, and certainly not in the General Assembly, where the bloc of non-aligned and Arab states enjoyed a majority,¹ as it was perceived as a separate agreement and not part of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement. The UN's approach to the peace agreement was difficult to understand, considering its goals and aspirations to stabilize peace and security in the global arena through diplomacy and negotiation. In other words, instead of welcoming the achievement in the spirit of the goals of the UN, voices in the General Assembly were actually critical of it (Kahana, 2002; Blum, 2002; 2008).

From the early 1950s onward, Israel became a regular object of criticism within UN institutions for a number of primary reasons: the formation of Israeli policy toward the UN in the early 1950s; the Cold War and the changing composition

of the UN; the adoption of the Palestinian narrative; and the politicization of the UN arena.

The Formation of Israeli Policy toward the UN in the Early 1950s

In the early 1950s, two diametrically opposing schools of statesmanship debated the shaping of Israeli foreign policy and modes of action vis-à-vis the UN, the superpowers, and the Arab world. The difference in approaches was reflected primarily in the attitude toward Israel's activity vis-à-vis the positions of the international community on core issues relating to Israel. The diplomatic school promoted by Moshe Sharett, one of the founders and designers of Israeli foreign relations, recognized the importance of the international arena and of the United Nations. Sharett maintained that Israel should not adopt a policy that would intensify criticism against it within UN institutions. He understood the importance of diplomacy and recognized the impact of Israel's actions on world public opinion—an expression of his adherence to the principle of dialogue and negotiations in order to resolve conflicts. Against this background, Sharett called for diplomacy in the relations of the *yishuv* with the British Mandate, and subsequently in the State of Israel's relations with the United States, the West, South America, and Asia, and especially the Arab countries and the Palestinians. In addition, Sharett's recognition of the critical importance of the UN in 1948 led him to refrain as much as possible from measures that might have been detrimental to Israel-UN relations. His devotion to diplomatic successes in 1947-1948, which culminated in Israel's acceptance as a member state of the UN, and his faith in the UN, reinforced his tendency early in the 1950s to demarcate a cautious foreign policy, to be reluctant about the use of violence, and to oppose cross-border reprisal raids and operations, in part out of concern regarding their negative impact on the UN's attitude toward Israel.

David Ben-Gurion espoused a different view. Ben-Gurion, like Sharett, was concerned about

the actions of the international community and the UN, and held positions similar to those of Sharett regarding the fundamental issues facing Israel. In contrast, however, he advocated different courses of action, which prompted him to adopt a different policy toward the UN. Unlike Sharett, Ben-Gurion attributed little importance to diplomacy and followed an activist approach. As a result, conflicts arose between the two men, primarily following the 1948 war, As explained by Ilan Pappé (1991):

In the days preceding the establishment of the state, the cooperation between the two figures outweighed the divisions. Nonetheless, they had different ways of life, occupations, and routes of advancement...and in the future they would influence the perspectives of those who, more than any other personality, would determine Israel's policy in the initial years of statehood.

A prominent example of the differences between Ben-Gurion and Sharett was reflected in their approach to the General Assembly's initiative to internationalize Jerusalem. Whereas Ben-Gurion proposed taking clear and rapid measures such as moving the offices of government ministries to Jerusalem, Sharett, the only opponent to the transfer of government ministries, believed that a diplomatic approach would enable them to change the position of the UN. The Israeli delegation to the General Assembly, he maintained, could change the UN position on the internationalization of Jerusalem using political means. The clash between the views of these two figures was reflected in Ben-Gurion's response to Sharett: "The State of Israel will not agree to any form of foreign rule in Jewish Jerusalem or its being torn from the state. And if we are faced with the choice of leaving Jerusalem or leaving the UN, we would prefer to leave the UN" (quoted from a telegram from Ben-Gurion to Sharett, in Bialer, 1985).

Bialer himself makes use of the term “clash” (*imut*) to describe the different approaches of the two figures with regard to their ways of contending with the UN on fundamental issues pertaining to the Israeli interest, and leaves no room for doubt regarding the differences in their approach: “There is no doubt that his [Ben-Gurion’s] general approach ran counter to that of the foreign minister” (Bialer, 1985). Nonetheless, Sharett, for his part, expressed determined opposition to the course of action proposed by Ben-Gurion, and particularly to the idea of withdrawing from the UN, which he believed would “create an unfortunate impression” (quoted from a telegram from Sharett to Ben-Gurion, in Bialer, 1985). The gaps were likewise reflected in the letter of resignation that Sharett submitted to Ben-Gurion in light of the General Assembly’s decision pertaining to the internationalization of Jerusalem, in which he explained his resignation in part as follows: “In the weighty campaign that lies ahead of us, I fear I will not be able to effectively and wholeheartedly defend the policy that is set” (quoted in Shalom, 1993). That is to say, Sharett would not be able to defend a decision that ran counter to his views. Elsewhere, Sharett said: “The talk of war in the world as a whole... is unfounded and completely detrimental... This entire method, of creating facts in foreign policy through direct declarations by the Prime Minister, in complete contrast to my style, makes my situation unbearable, and I am requesting your help. Prevent additional deterioration” (quoted from a telegram from Sharett to Eitan, in Shalom, 1993).

Ben-Gurion clearly pursued an activist policy, whereas Sharett pursued a more tempered policy focused on diplomacy. Beginning in 1954, the more Israel’s border security was destabilized, the more the collision between the two approaches intensified, especially in light of Sharett’s thwarting of reprisal operations. Against this background, in 1956, Ben-Gurion concluded that Sharett had become an obstacle to fortifying Israel’s essential interests, and

he dismissed him. Thus, from the mid-1950s onward, the activist component of Israeli policy grew stronger, in parallel to a reduction in the importance attributed to diplomacy and to the UN. This, perhaps, was best reflected in Ben-Gurion’s expression “the nothing UN” (*Umm shmum*), which articulates the derisive approach to the UN among Israeli leaders (Sharett, 1955; Limor, 1967).²

The Cold War and the Changing Composition of the UN

Today there are 193 UN member states, including more than 100 states that are “liberated,” non-democratic, African members of the Arab League, Muslim, and non-aligned that have joined the ranks of the organization over the years. These are circles that automatically support anti-Israel votes in the General Assembly. The composition of the UN today differs from its composition in 1945, when democratic member states from Europe and North America were predominant. At the end of the 1950s, the UN already had more than 100 members, and in addition to the numerical increase, the attributes of the states represented in the General Assembly also changed: the dominance of democratic states evolved into a structure characterized by a large number of new countries in Africa and Asia that had lived under colonial rule and were non-democratic, autocratic, and unaligned. Thus, a dynamic evolved whereby states that violated human rights began to denounce democratic states in the General Assembly. In its new structure, the UN also changed for the worse from Israel’s perspective, in light of the considerable and prominent influence of the Arab and Muslim countries within the bloc of the non-aligned states.

This dynamic created an uncomfortable situation from Israel’s perspective for two reasons, first, in light of the minority of the democratic countries in the General Assembly, and second, in light of Israel’s intensified isolation stemming from decades³ of non-membership in any regional group within the

UN. In the Asian Group, the Arab states did not accept Israel, nor did the European bloc, as from a geographical perspective it was located in Asia. This had implications for Israel's status in the UN arena, as states in all blocs submit recommendations together, and if Israel is not a member of any bloc, the chances of its pursuing its interests in the UN arena are limited.

Every year the General Assembly consistently approves unilateral anti-Israel resolutions. For example, in 2018, it approved 21 resolutions of condemnation against Israel and one resolution against each of the following countries: Iran, Syria, North Korea, Crimea, Myanmar, and the United States.

Adoption of the Palestinian Narrative

The deeper the UN delved into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the more the tendency to adopt the Palestinian narrative increased in all UN institutions. For example, in December 1970, the General Assembly recognized in Resolution 2535 “the inalienable rights of the people of Palestine” and their right to self-determination. Resolution 3210 of October 1974 invited Yasir Arafat to attend, address, and take part in the discussions of the General Assembly, and General Assembly Resolution 3237 (November 1974) granted the PLO observer status in all UN institutions. In addition, constituting a major turning point in the deterioration of Israel-UN relations, General Assembly Resolution 3379 of November 1975 determined “that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination,” and appears to best exemplify the adoption of the Palestinian narrative.

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against Israel were approved, as opposed to only six resolutions of condemnation against other countries of the world (UN Watch, 2018). In 2019, the General Assembly approved 18 resolutions of condemnation against Israel and one resolution each against Syria, Iran, North Korea, the United States, Myanmar, and two resolutions against Crimea, for a ratio of 18 resolutions against Israel to only seven against the other countries of the world (UN Watch, 2019). In the context of this dynamic, Muravchik (2013) has argued that Israel is the state most discriminated against in the international organizations within the UN arena and its various agencies.

A number of prominent examples from recent years also testify to the adoption of the Palestinian narrative, for example, through the promotion of a policy of condemning Israel in the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO (the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). In this context, two resolutions of UNESCO have been most prominent: one, approved in October 2016, which expresses doubt regarding the ties between Judaism and the Western Wall, and another, approved in May 2017, which negates Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem (Resnik, 2018; Salman, 2019b). These two resolutions demonstrate the ongoing trend of adopting the Palestinian narrative during the recent period. However, in contrast to past decades in which Israel chose a passive policy, over the past two decades, despite the continued acceptance of the Palestinian narrative by the UN institutions, and certainly by UNESCO, the policy is changing, as reflected in a more active approach on Israel's part.

Adoption of the Palestinian narrative has also been pronounced in the Security Council. Between 2001 and 2018, with its veto power, the United States blocked 13 proposed resolutions against Israel (Salman, 2019a; 2019b). In the General Assembly, this trend was manifested primarily during a special session held every year in which some 20 pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli resolutions were approved by an

automatic majority. This event, referred to as the International Day for Solidarity with the Palestinian People, has taken place in November on an annual basis since 1977, with the aim of expressing solidarity with the Palestinians. For example, between 2015 and 2018, 76 anti-Israeli resolutions were approved by an automatic majority (Salman, 2019a) during these special sessions. Although the resolutions in question were not operative in nature because General Assembly resolutions are decided by virtue of Chapter 6 of the United Nations Charter, symbolic resolutions hold value, certainly in the long term: in the era of mass media and the creation of virtual spaces and social media, which wield great influence on global public opinion, such resolutions can help create cognitive pressure that makes it possible to leave the issue on the global agenda with the aim of bringing about political change. In addition to the tendency within the various UN institutions to adopt the Palestinian narrative, the other reasons for the majority vote against Israel in many cases actually stemmed from General Assembly member states' expression of their dissatisfaction with the ability of the superpowers—in this case, the United States—to block Security Council resolutions in a manner that enabled them to continue pursuing a policy that is perceived by others as a deviation from the accepted international norms.

Politicization of the UN Arena

One of the reasons for the anti-Israeli orientation in the UN institutions is the dissatisfaction of UN member countries with US policy, given that one of the tools available for promoting measures against US policy is the adoption of an anti-Israeli position. Such actions are symbolic political measures that also serve geopolitical interests, as well as interests related to the global balance of power and regional arenas. For example, the Russian support for General Assembly Resolution A.ES-10/L.22 of December 2017, which denounced the

relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, may have stemmed in part from global political considerations and from the attempt to cope with the measures taken against it by the United States and the Western countries following its invasion of Ukraine in 2014. In this context, the General Assembly, like the Security Council, constitutes another arena for struggle between the superpowers, so that every discussion that concludes with a decision opposing US policy may be perceived as an achievement of Russian diplomacy, and vice-versa.

A prominent arena for the impact of politicized, biased, and discriminatory treatment of Israel in the UN is the UN Human Rights Council, which is responsible “for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe and for addressing situations of human rights violations” and for making recommendations on them. To achieve its goals, it has approved resolutions on issues of human rights in the global arena since 2006, and since its inception its actions have been characterized by systematic discriminatory treatment of Israel. This is especially notable in item 7 of the Council’s agenda, which bears the title “The Human Rights Situation in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories,” and where every meeting focuses in order to voice criticism and condemnation specifically of Israel. Item 7 has had considerable influence on the effects of the Council’s modes of actions against Israel, as it allows for open and consistent critical discussion, but only against Israel (Navoth, 2014). One prominent example of this was the Council’s 2012 investigation of “the implications of the Israeli settlements,” while it simultaneously refrained from investigating the Pakistani government’s war against the Islamist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (2007-2017), which caused the deaths of some 30,000 people (Resnik, 2018). Support for this assessment can be found in testimony that leaves no doubt regarding the bias against Israel in the UN Human Rights Council, articulated by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan:

Whether their meetings coincided with the Lebanese war, or not, they have tended to focus on the Palestinian issue, and of course when you focus on the Palestinian-Israeli issue, without even discussing Darfur and other issues, some wonder what is this Council doing? Do they not have a sense of fair play? Why should they ignore other situations and focus on one area? (Schlein, 2006)

Thus, when the countries that are members of the Council, including autocratic states that themselves are not scrupulous about maintaining human rights within their own borders, are given the authority to make decisions regarding human rights, the results from Israel's perspective are unavoidable, and the decisions are meant to achieve politicization and consistent bias against Israel (Resnik, 2018; Navoth, 2014). The Council's prejudicial treatment of Israel manifested in its many critical decisions, follow-up reports, and discrimination against Israel has on more than one occasion been the subject of criticism, especially in light of the fact that its very establishment stemmed from the need to replace the UN Human Rights Commission, which operated until 2006, due to substantial criticism of its composition and its actions (Navoth, 2006, 2014; Ghanea, 2006; Bayefsky, 2011; Baker, 2013; Cotler, 2013).

Politicization has also been manifested in the agreements between the different blocs in terms of voting patterns. Israel must cope with the bloc of Islamic states that enjoy an automatic majority in voting in the UN arena, which sometimes compels Western countries to assign it greater importance due to political and economic considerations. For example, during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, countries of the Arab bloc supported the condemnation of apartheid, and countries of the African bloc supported the decisions denouncing Israel (Blum, 2008). Moreover, the international community's demonstrated

loathing of the apartheid regime in South Africa today makes it easier for Palestinians and Israel-delegitimization activists to argue that the Israeli-Palestinian case reflects the violation of the right to self-determination. In this way, Israel has been perceived, in the UN arena and elsewhere, as oppressing the Palestinians in a manner similar to the regime that oppressed blacks in South Africa, making the Palestinian case an example of injustice perpetrated by Israel. This dynamic has also had implications for the UN arena, which has become a focal point of augmented politicization that is currently exploited by various parties, including the Palestinian Authority and proponents of delegitimization (Michael, 2017).

Voting in the General Assembly reflects bloc voting, and given the attempt to promote interests, this is one reason, for example, for the complexity that currently characterizes Israel's attempt to garner the political support of African states in the UN, in light of its attempt to demonstrate neutrality and to enjoy the best of both worlds. On the one hand, their membership in the Organization of African Unity obligates them to show solidarity and not deviate from the anti-Israel approach led by the Organization's African Muslim states, and on the other hand, they recognize the importance of their civil and security relations with Israel. Another example is the voting patterns of India, which while it has pursued warm relations and cooperative security efforts with Israel in recent years, has continued supporting anti-Israel decisions in the UN arena (Birvadker, 2016; Kumar, 2017). Ron Prosor, formerly Israel's ambassador to the UN, commented on this dynamic:

When I heard ambassadors...praising Israel and complimenting it on its decision to be proactive, it reinforced my sense that the UN arena has substantial appreciation and respect for Israel...under the radar. After votes, I am approached by ambassadors who explain that they voted against

because they had no choice. (Prozor, in an interview in Shamir, 2014)

Ambassador Danny Danon gave additional evidence of the politicization of voting in UN institutions in an interview in *Yediot Ahronot*:

The former ambassadors with whom I spoke told me about the dual worlds—that of public relations and that of relations beneath the surface. However, it is amazing to see it really occur. The ambassador of a friendly country told me one thing before a discussion and ten minutes later took out his speech and said exactly the opposite. (Shmilovitz, 2015)

Thus from a chronological perspective and over a period of decades, a combination of the four factors discussed here led to tension in Israel-UN relations and created a situation in which Israel has, on more than one occasion, been compelled to defend itself against attacks and condemnations in UN bodies. Nonetheless, the past two decades have witnessed changes in this dynamic that may herald a change in trend. The literature review in the following discussion addresses the factors underlying the change in Israel's policy toward the UN.

Literature Review: The Reasons for the Change in Israeli Policy toward the UN

This article contends that over the past two decades, a change has occurred in Israeli activity in the UN arena, characterized by the adoption of a proactive approach manifested in increased attempts to influence the UN from within its ranks. This section will present the factors noted in the literature that played a role in the development of Israel-UN relations in the 1990s, with a focus on three additional factors: the increased importance of the UN in the global arena, Israel's acceptance into the UN's Western European and Others Group, and

Palestinian activism in the UN arena. These three factors explain the turning point in Israeli policy that began in the year 2000.

In the 1990s, a number of shifts occurred in the global arena that aided the positive development of Israel-UN relations, including, for example, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the United States as the only superpower, the Madrid Conference and the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the expansion of globalization (Ben-Meir, 2011; Bein, 2002; Blum, 2002). These factors indeed helped promote Israel-UN relations, but a turning point in Israeli policy was only facilitated in 2000, which is why, beyond the reasons discussed in the literature, the additional factors presented here may explain the expansion of Israel's proactive stance and constitute basic elements attesting to a change in policy.

First, it is important to note the recognition around the world and in Israel beginning in the 1990s of the increased importance of the UN as an actor in the international arena, particularly in light of its weakness during the Cold War when it operated in the shadow of the ideological struggle between the two superpowers regarding its role in the international community. For example, from 1989 onward, the attempt to contend with the civic and humanitarian issues in developing countries, such as environmental quality and challenges, civic development, population growth, humanitarian crises, droughts, water sources, hunger, and desertification rose in importance (Mingst & Karns, 2000). Moreover, from the 1990s onward, the UN has played a central role in dealing with the internal conflicts that pose challenges to the stability of regional order and peace and security in the international arena, in light of their proliferation and the human suffering they involve. At the same time, the number of conflicts in the global arena is on the decline (Pettersson & Eck, 2018; Pettersson et al., 2019), primarily due to peacekeeping missions under UN auspices at the focal points of conflicts

around the world (Salman, 2018).⁴ Amos Yadlin has attested to the status and importance of the UN: “There is currently no country in the world that does not wish to be a member of the UN and to belong to this important international institution” (Yadlin, 2019).

Second, the changing trend began to gain significant momentum with Israel’s acceptance into the Western European and Others Group in 2000, due in large degree to the efforts of the United States and its ambassador to the UN at the time, Richard Holbrooke. Although there is no concrete evidence, it is possible that the US efforts to facilitate Israel’s acceptance into the WEOG were made against the background of the Israeli-Palestinian political process, which was then led by President Bill Clinton and culminated in the Camp David summit of July 2000. In any event, it was a major turning point, as Israel’s acceptance to the group enabled it, for the first time, to take part in the activity of the UN and its various institutions, and to elect and be elected to positions in UN bodies, despite the opposition of the bloc of Arab states. For example, this enabled Israel, for the first time, to submit its candidacy for non-permanent membership in the Security Council. This position provides member states with substantial benefits, including the ability to support votes pertaining to the positions of superpowers and increase the state’s presence and prestige in the international arena. This is even more important in the Israeli context, as in international institutions, Israel is compelled to contend *inter alia* with efforts at delegitimization on the part of the Palestinians and their supporters. Hatuel-Radoshitzky (2016) sheds light on the importance of non-permanent Security Council membership, as non-permanent Security Council membership for a longstanding UN member state is comparable to membership in the General Assembly for new UN members. Although Israel finally withdrew its candidacy in light of its slim chance of election, this was nonetheless indicative of the changing orientation of Israel’s policy toward the UN.

A third cause of change in Israeli policy toward the UN has stemmed from the Palestinians’ activity and their increasing use over the past two decades of voting processes within UN institutions to pursue their political goals in a manner that has led Israel to take more concerted actions in the UN to thwart them. In 2000, following the failure of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, a new round of violence erupted, culminating in Operation Defensive Shield in March 2002. Following the lack of success in the realm of terrorism and the end of the Arafat era, the Palestinians appear to have adopted an alternative in the form of diplomatic activity in the UN arena via two primary channels. The first is a negative campaign revolving largely around the delegitimization of Israel, and the second is a positive struggle revolving around an attempt to win recognition of the establishment of a Palestinian state (Hatuel-Radoshitzky, 2015). Particularly notable in the context of the Palestinians’ positive struggle was use of the mechanism of the Uniting for Peace resolution in the UN General Assembly.

The General Assembly serves as a forum for discussion of a host of global issues among the 193 UN member states. Its institutional structure is egalitarian in that each state has one vote, regardless of its size or power in the international arena, and no state has the right of veto. From this perspective, the United States and Togo, for example, have equal voting rights within the General Assembly. Based on an initiative of the United States from the 1950s, the Uniting for Peace resolution (Resolution 377) was approved in an attempt to deal with the paralysis that gripped the Security Council during the Korean War, when the Soviet Union made repeated use of its veto power in order to prevent the imposition of sanctions against North Korea; hence the paralysis of Security Council activity. The Uniting for Peace resolution facilitates the proposal of draft resolutions to the General Assembly even if they were previously not accepted for discussion before

the Security Council, as long as the initiative for discussion has the support of a two-thirds majority of members of the General Assembly. Since the end of the Cold War, this mechanism has served to leave issues on the agenda after they were torpedoed in the Security Council, and from 1997 onward, it has been used solely to promote Palestinian goals in an attempt to condemn Israel in light of the anti-Israel majority in the General Assembly. Therefore, in order to contend with the Palestinians in the UN arena and in parallel to US support, Israel works to expand its circle of political support from other UN states as well (Salman, 2018; 2019a). The following discussion analyzes Israel's three primary channels of operation, which demonstrate how the change in Israeli policy is made in practice.

Israeli Activity in the UN Arena: Empirical Analysis and Discussion

Although the fluctuations in the global arena in the 1990s aided in the development of Israel-UN relations, they are not a turning point in policy. Rather, there are three primary channels through which Israel's proactive approach has been implemented since the year 2000: participation in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); attainment of key positions within UN institutions; and an effort to influence voting patterns in the General Assembly.

Millennium Development Goals

In addition to traditional UN goals, Israel has taken part in meeting the UN's Millennium Development Goals, such as civil, social, and economic development; the reduction of poverty; the provision of humanitarian aid; the promotion of human rights; the challenge of climate change and its effects, including phenomena related to desertification and drought; and improvement of the health situation in the Third World. In 2015, at the end of the 15-year period that was designated to meet the Millennium Development Goals of 2000, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon

expanded the goals to include 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, attesting to the importance the UN ascribes to these issues (UN website, 2015). With its technological abilities in the fields of drip irrigation systems, water conservation, water purification and reuse, solar energy development, and economic and efficient resource management, Israel has worked in the UN arena in recent years to initiate resolutions to promote civic and humanitarian development in Third World countries. These initiatives have increased Israel's presence among the family of nations, highlighted Israel's contribution to the UN attempt to promote its millennium goals, and helped create a positive image, beyond and contrasting with what is associated with its conflict with the Palestinians.

A chronological analysis beginning in 2000 demonstrates how Israel's humanitarian initiatives have surfaced. For example, Israel's initiative within the General Assembly regarding innovation in development in the Third World received the support of 129 countries (UN Resolution A/RES/202/67). In another draft resolution that was submitted at Israel's initiative—which dealt with making technological-agricultural abilities accessible and more effective for developing countries, particularly in poor regions suffering from drought and hunger, and was supported by a majority of 133 countries in December 2011—Israel's contributions to meeting the UN's millennium goals were recognized. Prozor assessed that “the resolution constitutes international recognition of Israel's excellence and its contribution to the world” (Shamir, 2011).

In 2013, Israel organized an event at the UN building on the subject of innovation and development, which was attended by the President of the General Assembly (Foreign Ministry website, 2013), and in May 2015 Ambassador Prozor presented the Israeli vision of renewable energy and ways of actualizing it within the framework of the UN forum on issues of sustainable energy at the initiative of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. Prozor

emphasized that Israel was developing technologies meant to harness solar energy for everyday use, and that it was committed to the development of alternative energy sources. As an expression of actualization of this vision, Prosor noted that the Knesset building is a model of efficient energy use because the building's roof is covered with solar panels, which reduces the building's energy needs by one-third and saves half a million dollars each year. The ambassador also noted that Israel is a center with a global international reputation for research and development for renewable energy, and that it is committed to share this innovation and expertise with developing countries (Dagoni, 2015).

Where Israel makes use of its technological abilities for humanitarian development needs, it is likely to win not only the support of the developing countries but also the support of the various UN institutions.

These examples reflect how Israeli envoys have been able to present the state from angles that transcend the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, highlighting its contribution to the family of nations. Nikolay Mladenov, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, has cited the productive cooperation between Israel and the UN in the realm of humanitarian development (Mladenov, 2019). In conclusion, where Israel makes use of its technological abilities for humanitarian development needs, it is likely to win not only the support of the developing countries but also the support of the various UN institutions (Salman, 2019a).

Israeli Representatives in Key Positions in UN Institutions

Today, 103 Israelis serve in the UN in a variety of positions, including sensitive and senior positions (Eichner, 2019a). In addition to the fact that its acceptance to the WEOG has enabled Israel to elect and be elected for key positions

in UN institutions, it also marked the onset of improvement in the country's status in the UN arena (Mladenov, 2019), which has been manifested in a number of appointments of Israeli representatives within UN institutions. For example, in 2016, Danny Danon, Israel's ambassador to the UN, was selected to serve as Vice President of the General Assembly, despite efforts by the Arab bloc to thwart his appointment. Danon's appointment to this position should be considered along with two previous appointments of Israeli ambassadors to this position in recent years: Dan Gillerman, who was appointed in 2005 as a representative of the WEOG, and Ron Prosor in 2012.⁵

Moreover, in May 2017, the UN withdrew its support for a Palestinian women's center named after a female terrorist who took part in the 1978 attack on an Israeli bus (known as the Coastal Road Massacre) and Norway followed suit. Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that the measure was taken after Israel appealed to UN Secretary-General António Guterres and emphasized that the appeal itself testified to a new Israeli policy toward the United Nations (Shalev, 2017). In addition, in January 2019, Israel was selected for the first time to represent the Western Group as deputy chair of the UN Committee on Non-Government Organizations (UN Watch, 2019), and in July Yaron Vaks was selected as deputy chair of the Fifth Committee, which deals with UN budget and administration, as the representative of the Western countries on the committee. Israel's prominent activity on issues of development and the provision of medical aid to the UN peacekeeping forces deployed to conflict areas is prominent, and Ambassador Danon noted: "Yaron's election to this senior position... is an expression of confidence in Israel on the part of tens of countries around the world" (Kahana, 2019).

These appointments exemplify a different aspect of Israel's proactive policy in the UN arena. This understanding is supported by Ambassador Gillerman, who maintained that from Israel's perspective, initiative within the

UN found expression inter alia in the dispatch of Israelis to serve in key positions within UN institutions in a variety of areas, including law and security (Gillerman, 2019).

Influencing Voting Patterns

There has been an attempt in recent years to win the political support of developing countries in UN institutions by promoting pro-Israel voting. The past decade has witnessed a notable trend of closer Israeli foreign relations with developing countries, especially on the African continent. One explicit goal of the improvement of relations has been to change the voting patterns of African countries in the UN to reflect support for Israel (Ravid, 2017). This is attested to by the remarks of Foreign Ministry officials. For example, in a February 2017 meeting with Israeli representatives on the African continent, the Prime Minister said:

In the pyramid of our interests in foreign policy, Africa occupies a very high position...I would like to say what this interest is. The first interest is to dramatically change the situation of Africa's votes in the UN and international bodies from opposition to support...That is the first aim, and I am intentionally defining it. There are also many other aims, but this aim surpasses them all. (Prime Minister's Office, 2017)

Additional evidence lies in Netanyahu's remarks at a briefing for the delegation of ambassadors to the UN that arrived in Israel for a visit in February 2018: "This year alone... the General Assembly approved 20 resolutions against Israel and only 6 against the rest of the world...It is a ridiculous situation...We want you to change your voting patterns" (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). Against the background of a visit by Netanyahu to Africa in 2016, Arie Oded, a former Israeli ambassador to a number of countries in Africa, maintained: "One of the

goals of the visit is to change the situation, so that they don't automatically vote against us... so that they will at least abstain from the votes" (Cohen, 2016). That is to say, in Israel's view, a positive change in voting patterns in the UN arena can also be manifested in abstentions or absence from votes. Instructive support for this understanding is conveyed by Prozor, who describes a conversation with a state representative from South Africa: "And how will you vote?...The Arabs are putting serious pressure [on us], he responded...And you think that by tomorrow you'll be able to get over the bad case of the flu that you've contracted? Marco broke into a cough and was absent from the vote the next day" (Haimovitz, 2017).

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Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely leaves no room for doubt regarding Israel's activity in the UN arena to change the voting patterns:

The major change on the world map regarding Israel and the strengthening of diplomatic relationships...with countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America is beginning to produce a change in the voting patterns...We are asking that all countries that still vote according to the voting patterns of the old world cease taking part in this Palestinian theater of the absurd... Many countries have changed their voting policy in the UN in light of their stronger relations with Israel. (Hotovely, 2017)

This trend is indeed reflected in the UN arena, albeit in a limited manner. On the one

hand, there has been a visible increase in the rate of support of Israel in the UN institutions, manifested in positive votes in the General Assembly. On the other hand, this increase has taken the form of abstentions and absences from anti-Israel votes. For example, an empirical examination of the voting patterns of four countries in central and eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, and Rwanda), based on content analysis of 95 resolutions approved by the General Assembly between 2014 and 2018 in the context of Israel found a connection between Israel's efforts and the trend in some countries' UN voting patterns in favor of Israel.⁶ As noted, this trend has not been manifested in clear voting in favor of Israel; however, the consistent tendency to abstain and be absent from anti-Israel votes demonstrates the positive trend in the voting of South Sudan (47 abstentions and 39 absences, in a total of 86 out of 95 votes) and Rwanda (29 abstentions and 52 absences, for a total of 81 votes).

Moreover, the attempt to influence voting was reflected, for example, in the obstruction of the Palestinians' initiative to upgrade their status in the UN in early 2019 from that of a non-member observer state to full membership. In order to be accepted as a UN member state, a state must receive at least nine votes of support in the Security Council, followed by a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly. Thus, Israel's efforts in the Security Council led the Palestinians to recognize its slim chances of winning a majority and having the United States not veto the proposed resolution (Eichner, 2019b). This measure is consistent with Hotovely's remarks pertaining to Israel's activity to bring about a change in the voting patterns in the UN arena.

Conclusion

Against the background of the 70th anniversary of Israel-UN relations, this article has sought to examine the developments in Israel-UN relations over time, while analyzing the reasons for the deterioration of relations that began in

the early 1950s and attempting to highlight the changes that have occurred in Israel's approach in the past two decades. The changes have been manifested in a shift from a policy of "the nothing UN" to a proactive policy aimed at influencing UN resolutions and improving Israel's status among the family of nations.

The analysis shows that a practical proactive approach in the UN arena was launched primarily with Israel's acceptance into the WEOG in 2000 and has been manifested largely in activity undertaken through three channels, which are both political and apolitical: participating in efforts to achieve the world Millennium Development Goals; holding key positions in UN bodies and institutions; and attempting to influence the voting patterns in the General Assembly and the Security Council.

The analysis showed that in the apolitical channels—in which Israel demonstrates initiative and works to promote diverse issues in the various UN bodies that are consistent with the MDGs—the cooperation between Israel and the UN has been positive, and Israel has won recognition of its abilities and its contribution to the international community. This cooperation has helped portray Israel beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has contributed to Israel's increased status in the UN arena and the international arena; it also reflects that many countries do not hesitate to cooperate with Israel and have made use of its abilities in different areas. At the same time, regarding political issues related largely to the conflict, Israel still finds it difficult to balance the situation. The consistent engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major cause of Israel's mixed relations with the UN. This has found expression mainly in voting patterns regarding political issues, in which UN member states still vote in accordance with the traditional pattern. As a result, more than one instance exhibits a difference between the official anti-Israel voting patterns of specific countries and their positive bilateral relations with Israel when not in the limelight.

In conclusion, Israel-UN relations are complex and characterized by mixed trends. On the one hand, the advancement of resolutions condemning Israel in the Security Council, and the continued trend of anti-Israel resolutions in the Human Rights Council, have reflected the hostile approach to Israel within the UN. On the other hand, in January 2019, Israel was elected, for the first time, to represent the Western Group and to serve as vice-chair of the UN committee that supervises non-government human rights groups, and a gradual change in voting patterns in Israel's favor illustrates an expansion of the positive trend in the UN arena. This trend should be intensified, in part through ongoing, active, and consistent diplomatic activity vis-à-vis the UN and other international institutions.

Furthermore, the more Israel's foreign policy persists in making use of its technological and scientific abilities in the broader UN arena and offering technological solutions to the global humanitarian problems related to phenomena such as desertification, drought, hunger, agricultural development, and civic-humanitarian development, the more its ability to influence the different bodies of the UN will expand beyond the General Assembly and the Security Council. It therefore appears that Israel could benefit from continuing to adhere to what, despite it all, seems like an approach that enables it to take part in UN activity in an attempt to influence its decisions from within, as Israel's membership in the UN endows it with standing in the organization and strengthens its standing in the international community.

This claim echoes remarks by Dan Gillerman: The UN "is an important arena: [it is] the parliament of the world and an opportunity to show the real Israel...and a place in which to forge relationships with the countries of the world" (Gillerman, 2019). In addition, a conscious decision by Israel to not be part of the organization and its various bodies would serve those who oppose it, who sooner or later would fill the vacuum left by Israel. From this perspective, Israel's withdrawal from UNESCO

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following a similar American measure would not necessarily serve Israeli policy, precisely because it would allow its adversaries to operate more freely.

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Notes

- 1 The Non Aligned Movement (NAM), established in 1961, numbers 120 states (approximately two-thirds of the UN membership) that do not see themselves as in the domain of any particular superpower. See [Profile: Non-Aligned Movement](#).
- 2 The sentence “The state was established only by the daring of Jews and not by the resolutions of the nothing UN” was spoken during a debate in late March 1955 between Ben-Gurion and Sharett regarding the nature of Israel's response to acts of terrorism. See Sharett (1955). Nonetheless, in a newspaper interview in 1967, Ben-Gurion spoke of the UN in a more moderate manner, and in response to the interviewer's question concerning his earlier use of the phrase “*Umm Shmum*” said: “The same is true today. But a nothing UN is better than nothing.” See Limor (1967).
- 3 The division into regional groups was established in 1961, and the Arab states, which constituted a majority of the Asian Group, blocked Israel from joining. Thus, in addition to its isolation, Israel was unable to take part in UN activities in a meaningful manner.
- 4 There are currently 14 peacekeeping missions underway around the world. See <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/where-we-operate>.
- 5 In 1952, Abba Eban was the first Israeli ambassador to the United Nations to be appointed Vice President of the General Assembly.
- 6 See the databases of the UN, <http://www.un.org/en/ga/documents/voting.asp>; the US State Department, <https://www.state.gov/p/io/rls/rpt/2017/practices/index.htm>; and UN Watch, <https://unwatch.org/2018-un-general-assembly-resolutions-singling-israel-texts-votes-analysis>.