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WHO WILL GOVERN GAZA? LESSONS FROM 1957

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As negotiations toward a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas [stall yet again](#), a key question looms: who will govern Gaza “the day after” the fighting stops? This question, of paramount strategic and humanitarian importance, has been [debated](#) with increasing [frequency](#) since Israel’s invasion in the wake of the horrific attacks of October 7. While it cannot be ruled out that Israel may again attempt to govern Gaza – Israel was in control for decades after the [Six Day War](#) in 1967, before ceding administration over most of the strip to the Palestinian Authority as part of the [Oslo Accords](#) in the early 1990s – its appetite for such a task appears to be low.

On *Meet the Press* in November, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [called for](#) a “different administration” to rule Gaza. Pressed on who that would be, Netanyahu insisted it was too soon to say. But the clear implication was it would neither be Israel nor Hamas. Regardless of Israeli preferences, it is unclear who the people of Gaza, or other States in the region, would support. In short, who could effectively govern the densely-populated coastal territory of over 2 million people, especially in the wake of such a brutal and destructive conflict, remains a vexing question.

The United States has proposed the Palestinian Authority play a key postwar role. But others have called for a more multilateral approach. The German government, for instance, [suggested](#) last fall that the United Nations take , proposing an “internationalization of Gaza under the umbrella of the United Nations,” with possible

assistance from regional partners. Along similar lines, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [floated the idea](#) of “an international peace force under U.N. mandate.”

Could the much-[maligned](#) U.N. effectively govern Gaza? In evaluating this idea, the first order of business is to recognize something that is generally forgotten today: the U.N. already *has* governed Gaza. In 1957, in the wake of what was known as the “[Suez Crisis](#),” the first large-scale U.N. peacekeeping force was deployed to the Middle East. That U.N. force briefly administered Gaza, until Egypt reclaimed control of civilian governance, but even then it continued to play a major role in keeping the peace and aiding the sick and the hungry.

The situations in 1957 and 2024 are quite different, and the regional politics – as well as politics of the U.N. itself – have changed dramatically. Still, some reflection on the U.N.’s largely forgotten experience as governor of Gaza may prove useful for today’s much more severe crisis.

The U.N.’s post-Suez peacekeeping experience in Gaza was innovative and generally successful. But peacekeeping is not the same as governance. While peace is a prerequisite to effective humanitarian assistance as well as to any new governance approach, the U.N.’s first experiment in actually ruling Gaza illustrates that substantial thought about their interaction is required. Ultimately any mode of governance, unless very temporary, goes directly to core questions of self-determination. And while the international community can and ought to assist in developing a sound and stable government for the people of Gaza, these questions must be decided locally.

Peacekeeping in the Wake of the Suez Crisis

The U.N.’s brief midcentury administration of Gaza grew out of the invasion of Egypt in October of 1956 by Britain, France, and Israel. A few months earlier, Egypt’s leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who saw continuing European control of the Canal as a blot on Egyptian sovereignty, had surprised the [world](#) with a dramatic nighttime seizure of the Suez Canal. . France and Britain, who had long ties to the Suez Canal and relied heavily on it for commerce, panicked. Badly misreading the new politics of postwar decolonization, the two conspired with Israel to invade and retake control. (In an interesting echo of contemporary politics, the Israeli Ambassador to the U.N., was

fearful of repercussions in the Security Council over the invasion, but was swiftly [assured](#) by his French counterpart not to worry – “there will be a veto.”)

The tripartite invasion took the United States, and most of the world, by surprise. Adding to American displeasure was the fact that the conflict took place at a key moment in the Cold War: at almost exactly the same time, Soviet tanks were rolling into Hungary to put down a nascent rebellion. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles [vented](#) his frustration to reporters outside the Security Council chamber, proclaiming that the United States was on the edge of a “victory over Soviet colonialism in Eastern Europe,” and yet this was the “very moment” chosen by Britain and France “to make the United States declare herself for or against Western colonialism.”

With this larger Cold War context in mind, the Eisenhower administration refused to back its erstwhile allies. Indeed, it chose to teach them a lesson. Stymied in the Security Council by the French and British vetoes, the United States and the rest of the international community turned to the U.N. General Assembly instead. In a novel and fateful move, the General Assembly called its first ever emergency special session under the 1950 “[Uniting for Peace](#)” resolution. This [resolution](#) stated that if the Security Council, due to “lack of unanimity of the permanent members, fails to exercise its primary responsibility for maintenance of international peace and security...the General Assembly shall consider the matter immediately with a view to making appropriate recommendations” – including, when necessary, “the use of armed force.” Just as in 1956, the *Uniting for Peace* process has been [invoked](#) in the current Gaza crisis, including [late last year](#) by Egypt after the United States vetoed a Security Council resolution condemning the Israeli incursion.

At the emergency special session in 1956 the General Assembly authorized the creation of another U.N. innovation, a multilateral “U.N. Emergency Force.” Largely organized by the Black American diplomat Ralph Bunche, what became known as UNEF comprised troops from a diverse array of States, including Brazil, Indonesia, Finland, and India. (Indeed, in a marked contrast to contemporary peacekeeping, Bunche later said UNEF was so popular he couldn’t use “half the troops [that were offered](#).”) The rapid introduction of UNEF into Egypt added to the immense political pressure on the U.K., France, and Israel, quickly forcing a withdrawal.

The Exceptional Status of Gaza

The exception was Gaza. While Egypt permitted UNEF into the Sinai Peninsula, Israel refused to leave Gaza or allow U.N. troops to be stationed there. The narrow and contested strip of coastal territory, which has a nearly 40 mile long border with Israel, appeared to be hanging up a great U.N. success story. In January of 1957, Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., [cabled](#) the State Department that Israeli intransigence over Gaza was “dangerous to world peace, to the UN and to the US.” Under intense pressure, including from President Eisenhower himself, the Israelis eventually relented. But a key question remained. Who would govern Gaza once Israeli troops left the strip?

Canada’s Ambassador to the U.N., Lester Pearson, had an idea. Speaking in the General Assembly, Pearson [suggested](#) the U.N. itself take over Gaza – temporarily – to maintain “effective civil administration” and ensure “law and order.” A similar idea had been floated by the British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, in the House of Commons just before the UN vote that created UNEF. As British foreign policy--and its putative “special relationship” with the US--appeared to be in meltdown and the opposition clamored for Eden’s head, Parliament erupted in chaos. Seeking to calm the chamber, Eden insisted that Britain did not actually *want* to use force in Egypt. In fact, [he proclaimed](#), “If the UN were then willing to take over the physical task of maintaining peace in that area, no one would be better pleased than we.”

The British Prime Minister’s call for U.N. intervention was likely made in desperation. But it had a certain logic. In 1956 the U.N. still had substantial legitimacy and, in Dag Hammarskjöld, the organization’s Secretary General, a leader who had the trust of many around the world. (A common refrain of the era, emblematic of Hammarskjöld’s aura of success, was “Let Dag Do It.”) Anthony Eden, it appeared, largely agreed with this sentiment, and with Lester Pearson’s later efforts, the idea of not only U.N. peacekeeping but even U.N. governance over Gaza gained traction.

The proposal to Internationalize Gaza was nonetheless highly unpopular in Egypt. Under the armistice accords that Bunche had negotiated in 1949 between Israel and Egypt, Egypt had claim over Gaza. (Indeed, Bunche’s armistice negotiations, which determined the lines dividing the protagonist’s military forces, effectively created the “Gaza Strip” as we know it today.) U.N. officials in Cairo told headquarters that Nasser would never allow the U.N. to become an occupation force there. But for the moment Nasser assented to the plan, leaving Israel as the main obstacle to U.N. rule.

As with the situation today, Israeli leaders were unsure who they preferred to govern Gaza, though they knew that *they* did not want to. “If our enemies were clever,” David Ben Gurion, Israel’s Prime Minister, [wrote](#) in his diary in February of 1957, “they would surrender Gaza to us and withdraw all of the UN agencies.”

In short, U.N. governance of Gaza struck many in and out of the region as sound – or perhaps merely the least bad option – and, as some argued, it could even function as a steppingstone to an independent Palestinian state. Indeed, some observers at the time already saw the disposition of the territory, which at this point had a population of approximately 300,000, as a very serious geopolitical issue. For example, the editor in chief of *Foreign Affairs* [described](#) Gaza in 1957 as “an open wound that obviously demanded radical treatment.” In this context, having the U.N. assume temporary administration of the strip and its largely refugee population had obvious appeal.

Taking Control

On March 1, 1957, Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir [announced](#) in the General Assembly that Israel would finally withdraw its forces from Gaza. Meir’s decision had been worked out with the White House and was predicated on U.N. governance in Gaza; as Meir explained in her remarks, Israel expected that the takeover from Israeli control would be “exclusively by UNEF.” U.N. administration would continue, she argued, until there was a peace settlement, or at least a “definitive agreement on the future of the Gaza Strip.”

Behind the scenes, the United States had been pushing Israel to recognize that having the UN take charge of Gaza was a favorable result. Perhaps most importantly, it was essential for good relations with the United States. As Abba Eban described a conversation between himself and John Foster Dulles just before Meir’s announcement, Dulles [told](#) him:

“I hope you are aware of the magnitude of the political victory which your government is achieving today...In Gaza the period of unilateral Egyptian rule is completely finished, and from now on control will be ... in UN hands, and in all of this you have achieved something even more important, and that is a strengthening of the friendship between America and Israel.”

Consistent with this understanding, as Israeli General Moshe Dayan finally moved his troops out in the days that followed, UNEF forces moved in. UNEF was now in control of Gaza. On March 8, Dag Hammarskjold [reported](#) to the General Assembly that the day before the UN had successfully “assumed responsibility for civil affairs in the Gaza Strip.”

With that, the U.N.’s experiment in governance commenced. The U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), [created](#) in 1949 in the wake of the first Arab-Israeli war, would provide food and shelter; UNEF would provide law and order. At first all seemed well; as one account from the time [put it](#), there “was no vacuum of authority and hence no murdering or looting.” (The “rioting,” however, “came later.”)

Behind the scenes, U.N. officials continued to debate how it would all work. Lester Pearson – who would later win the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to UNEF – argued that U.N. administration of the territory, while unprecedented, remained the best option available. In a 38th floor meeting among Hammarskjold’s inner circle, he at one point [asked](#), “since when have the people of Gaza governed themselves?” The U.N. was better than the alternatives, Pearson suggested, because it “was not an imperial power.” I know, replied Arthur Lall, India’s ambassador, but “we mustn’t become one.”

The relatively swift process of assuming governance of Gaza meant that the U.N. had little time to put together a temporary government. UNEF personnel as well as U.N. staff from Cairo were hastily recruited for the job. Concerned that he needed a trusted ally on the ground who knew the key players, Hammarskjold [sent](#) Bunche, his righthand man, to supervise the new administration. (Marking the rising tide of decolonization that swirled around the era, Bunche stopped on the way in Ghana, where, alongside Martin Luther King, Jr, he attended Ghana’s independence ceremony from Britain.)

But trouble was already brewing in Gaza. By March 8, just one day after the U.N. took power, protesters had taken to the streets calling for the return of Egyptian control. Two days later a group of close to 300 surrounded the temporary U.N. headquarters in the police headquarters – the primary center of power since the British Mandate – and, pressing inward, tried to raise the Egyptian flag over the building. UNEF troops, taken by surprise, were unsure how to respond. Some fired tear gas and shot into the air to disperse the crowd; a bullet, ricocheting, killed a demonstrator. UNEF commanders

were at first unaware of this death, and as Bunche arrived in Gaza on March 11, they [told](#) him the situation was “well in hand.”

Egypt Returns

Recognizing the political tinder that the killing of a civilian represented, Bunche rushed to Cairo to meet with and apologize to Nasser personally. To Hammarskjold, he cabled that the situation in Gaza needed reappraisal. He had seen, with his own eyes, substantial and growing “anti-UN feeling.” Bunche worried that the U.N. simply lacked the authority on the ground, whatever might have been decided back in New York. Speaking to reporters after the meeting with Nasser, he explained – somewhat contradicting prior announcements of the organization – that the U.N. had no intention of internationalizing Gaza. On March 13, news outlets reported that “after a 90-minute conference with Nasser,” Hammarskjold [confirmed](#) that “UN forces would turn over Gaza civilian rule to Egypt.” That same day Ben-Gurion had declared that Israel would fight any return of Gaza to Egypt. But there was little Israel could do with UNEF forces still in place.

With his heightened concern that Gaza was becoming violent, Bunche, perhaps thinking this change would be merely symbolic – and likely well aware that his armistice negotiations eight years earlier had placed Gaza on the Egyptian side of the line – acquiesced when Nasser proposed appointing an Egyptian governor for the territory. But the governor chosen, Egyptian General Abdel Latif, did not make his arrival in Gaza seem all that symbolic. Just a week after the U.N. assumed control, he crossed the border from Egypt to cheering crowds of thousands, with a coterie of 150 military police in bright red hats wielding [machine guns](#).

Back in Washington, the Israelis immediately complained to the Eisenhower administration: on whose authority had this happened? Israel’s delegation at the U.N. likewise denounced the [“infiltrators”](#) and [“marauders”](#) entering Gaza from Egypt. Yet it was soon clear that the U.N.’s authority over Gaza – to the degree it ever existed – was swiftly eroding in the face of popular pressure. In the days that followed, and without extensive debate, the U.N. caved to Egypt’s reassertion of power. To the U.S. Ambassador in Egypt, Nasser [explained](#) that he had never in fact promised to relinquish his claim to Egyptian control of the strip.

The initial decision to place the U.N. in charge of the territory showed perhaps admirable improvisation on the part of Hammarskjold and his team. Yet given that under the armistice accords of 1949 Gaza remained on the Egyptian side of the line, the experiment rested on a thin reed. Absent a Security Council authorization, as a matter of international law as well as political reality the deployment of UNEF required the assent of Egypt. Israel never permitted UNEF troops on its soil. Egypt did, and as a result Egypt could – and, in 1967, eventually did – withdraw that consent. That basic fact weighed on the U.N. team and made it difficult to operate in the face of mounting Egyptian pressure to reassert control.

Faced with a lack of Egyptian consent for its continued presence, the U.N. backed down. As the *New York Times* put it, “Nasser’s dramatic reassertion of Egypt’s legal rights in Gaza obliged the United Nations to capitulate.” This [in turn](#) “ripped away any Western illusions” that Hammarskjold could delay Egypt from returning.

Israeli leadership was deeply upset at this turn of events, and pressed Washington to fix it. But it was simply too late for the U.N. to regain control of governance in Gaza; the facts on the ground had changed. Most fundamentally, the U.N. lacked popular support among the people of Gaza. With Israelis and Egyptians verbally attacking one another in New York and in the press, Bunche – who had extensive experience in the region – [felt](#) it was “like a bad dream returning to haunt” him. The U.N. backed down.

As U.N. forces withdrew from the police station and other centers of power and returned to more basic peacekeeping, the situation in Gaza in the spring of 1957 quickly calmed. UNEF troops remained in the territory in the weeks and months that followed General Latif’s assumption of power, providing a buffer with Israel. They even helped prop up the local economy with [large purchases](#), such as citrus fruits and other supplies. But it was clear that while the U.N. could sustain the population through its refugee relief agency and effectively keep the peace between Israel and Egypt, the Egyptians were now – once again – the civil authority in Gaza.

On March 19, less than two weeks after the U.N. assumed control, Bunche again cabled Hammarskjold. The territory “is completely peaceful... There are no demonstrations, no Egyptian troops, no inciting against Israel of which UNEF is aware.” The U.N.’s brief experiment in governing Gaza, however, was over.

Lessons from 1957

For another decade, until the outbreak of the Six Day War in 1967, UNEF would keep the peace – or perhaps simply freeze the conflict – in Gaza and the surrounding region. Peace is an important prerequisite to governance. To actually administer territory effectively, however, the Gaza experience of 1957 suggests that the U.N. must have a strong and enforceable political mandate, substantial clarity on roles and responsibilities, and – crucially -- some degree of acceptance by local actors. The speed with which the U.N. stepped in to administer Gaza in the wake of the Suez Crisis was a product of a different time – and a different Middle East. (There is of course today a Palestinian Authority with a plausible claim to represent the people of Gaza, something which did not exist in 1957.) The historical record strongly suggests that much more thought and planning will be needed if renewed U.N. administration of Gaza is to have any chance of succeeding.

Still, the U.N.'s history shows that while a tall order, this can be done. Beyond the brief episode in Gaza, the U.N. has assumed a temporary governance role several times. A few years after the Suez Crisis, the U.N. Temporary Executive Authority briefly [ruled](#) West Irian/West New Guinea. In 1991, the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia was [empowered](#) to direct “all administrative agencies, bodies, and offices acting in the field of foreign affairs, national defence, finance, public security and information.” In 1999 the Security Council [established](#) a U.N. Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, with authority over “all legislative and executive powers and administration of the judiciary.” That same year, the U.N. also assumed [control](#) over East Timor via the U.N. Transitional Administration in East Timor. Even deeper in the past, cities such as [Tangier](#) in Morocco and the former Prussian territory of [Danzig](#) (now Gdańsk, Poland) had been ruled by the international community in the interwar period and beyond.

These examples of U.N. governance vary widely in their details. But at a minimum they demonstrate that the concept is viable. To be sure, the most prominent recent cases, East Timor and Kosovo, feature some marked differences with Gaza today as well as Gaza in 1957. Both the East Timor and Kosovo missions enjoyed substantial political support at the very highest levels and, critically, Security Council authorization. Both efforts were inaugurated 25 years ago. Much has changed within the U.N. in the intervening years, not least a growing chill between the United States and Russia and China, a more vocal General Assembly, and more widespread skepticism of the organization's legitimacy. Neither the East Timor nor the Kosovo mission was free from controversy. (Indeed, some have referred, not enthusiastically, to the “[U.N. Kingdom of East Timor](#).”) The

political heat around Gaza today nonetheless surpasses these examples substantially. And the humanitarian needs in the Gaza Strip – so much of which, unlike in the territory in 1957, has largely been [reduced to rubble](#) – are staggering.

In short, as the international community begins to consider the day after fighting in Gaza ends, temporary U.N. administration is one plausible option. But absent a very wide base of support, including from key Arab States, and much more serious and collaborative processes of peacebuilding and administrative planning than occurred in 1957, it is difficult to imagine the U.N. assuming any meaningful governance role in the months or years to come. Yet perhaps there is one key commonality between the U.N.'s brief experiment governing Gaza and any possible effort today. As in 1957, in 2024 the notion of U.N. rule can seem fanciful, indeed perhaps impossible – until one considers the alternatives.