

**SECURITY COUNCIL PARALYSIS AND THE LIMIT OF
UNITED NATIONS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: A REALIST
ANALYSIS OF THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CRISIS (2023-2025)**

**Gilbert Chukwu Aro^{1*}, Margaret-Mary Ijeoma Obia², Charity Ndidiamka Nwigwe³,
Anslem Onyekachi Okolie⁴, Faith Ngozi Onyekere⁵ & Kenneth Chiemeka Igwe⁶**

¹⁻⁶Department of Political Science, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

*gillyrosey@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: This paper examines how the United Nations handled the Israel-Palestine conflict between 2023 and 2025, focusing on the Security Council's inaction in the wake of the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent military action. Anchored on the Realist International Relations theory, this study offers descriptive explanations of institutional weakness and thus views the Security Council's paralysis as a strategic result of great-power interest alignment rather than a multilateralist procedural failure. The study illustrates how conflicting geopolitical interests among permanent members systematically limited ceasefire initiatives, humanitarian protection, and accountability mechanisms through qualitative analysis of Security Council resolutions, veto patterns, official debates, and policy reports. To connect theory to current practice, the paper empirically traces how realist power politics functioned within the Security Council during a conflict. The study highlights the structural limitations of UN peace efforts in highly polarised conflicts and challenges normative assumptions about collective security by placing UN conflict management within an emerging multipolar context. It concludes that reforms intended to improve UN effectiveness in conflict management are unlikely to produce significant results unless veto-driven strategic behaviour is confronted.

Keywords: UN Security Council, Israel-Palestine, Veto power, Realist theory, Conflict management

INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has occupied a central position in global conflict management and peacebuilding. Notwithstanding its expansive mandate and normative authority, the persistence and escalation of violent conflicts continue to expose significant limitations in the organisation's capacity to deliver effective peace outcomes. Few cases illustrate these constraints more clearly than the Israel-Palestine conflict, one of the most protracted disputes in the international system, which has repeatedly resisted diplomatic intervention and multilateral mediation.

Recent scholars have opined that the conflict is sustained not only by historical grievances but also by contemporary geopolitical alignments and entrenched national interests. Yusuf et al. (2024) argue that Israel's expanding strategic and economic relations with regional and global actors have

coincided with the further marginalisation of Palestinian interests, reducing external incentives for a negotiated settlement. This dynamic reaffirms the realist interpretations of international politics, which view state behaviour as driven primarily by survival, power, and strategic advantage rather than normative commitments (Mearsheimer, 2021). According to this framework, the involvement of external actors in the conflict reflects calculated interest-based positioning rather than objective conflict resolution.

A crucial stage in the conflict was the escalation that followed the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent military campaign in Gaza. UN organisations reported widespread civilian casualties, widespread displacement, and the collapse of vital infrastructure in Gaza by the end of 2024 (OCHA, 2024; WHO, 2024). Despite the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis, international responses were sharply divided, particularly within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The repeated use of the veto by permanent members, especially the United States, to block a binding ceasefire resolution further deepened the perception of institutional paralysis (Gowan, 2024; Weiss & Daws, 2021).

Although UN humanitarian agencies and the General Assembly maintained their operations, their effectiveness was undermined by weak enforcement authority and resistance from powerful member states (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004).

The conflict between legal standards and political enforcement in a divisive international setting was further brought to light by the International Court of Justice's intervention, which included temporary remedies addressing claimed violations of international humanitarian law (ICJ, 2024). A growing body of scholarship suggests that the UN's emphasis on consensus-building limits its capacity to manage conflicts effectively, a dynamic that is evident where the core interests of major global powers directly collide (Chesterman, 2021; Singhal, 2024).

This study therefore claims that the best way to understand the UN's limited success in handling the Israel-Palestine conflict between 2023 and 2025 remains through the lens of the Realist perspective. Security Council paralysis is a predictable result of great-power politics, where national interests and strategic alignments take precedence over collective security and limit meaningful conflict resolution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on the United Nations (UN) and international peace and security has long debated the organization's capacity to manage conflicts in a system structured by power asymmetries. The UN was seen by traditional liberal institutionalist viewpoints as a tool for reducing conflict through multilateral cooperation, international law, and collective security (Claude, 1966). However, realist scholars have continuously contested these presumptions, contending that rather than limiting existing power relations, international organisations primarily reflect them (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). In modern analyses of UN conflict management, this realist criticism is still crucial, especially in highly politicised conflicts involving major powers.

More recent scholarship has moved beyond this binary by examining how institutional design, bureaucratic behaviour, and external political support condition UN effectiveness. The bureaucratic politics approach developed by Barnett and Finnemore (2004) emphasises how internal norms and procedures influence the UN's action, sometimes allowing humanitarian engagement while limiting political enforcement. Empirical studies of peacekeeping suggest that the UN's operations are most effective where major powers share strategic interests and conflict parties consent to mediation (Fortna, 2008; Diehl & Balas, 2014). These results support realist assertions about the importance of power and consensus by highlighting the fact that UN effectiveness is conditional rather than universal.

The UN's recurring failure to enforce its resolutions, despite its deep historical involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict, establishes it as a key case-study in the academic discourse on international organization. The legal underpinnings of the conflict were shaped by early UN actions like Resolution 181, but later resolutions have had difficulty converting normative commitments into political outcomes. Most scholars now unanimously agree that the UN's role has been reduced to norm articulation rather than conflict resolution due to power imbalances and alternative diplomatic frameworks dominated by the United States and its allies.

The two-state solution's structural deterioration, Israeli settlement growth, the protracted blockade of Gaza, and the disintegration of Palestinian political authority have all received more attention in recent scholarship (Thrall, 2024). Scholars suggest that these developments have further diminished the prospects for UN-mediated solutions.

These structural issues worsened after October 7, 2023, and the UN's role came under fresh scrutiny. Early policy analyses by the International Crisis Group (2023; 2024) identify strategic failures by both Hamas and the Israeli government while emphasising the absence of credible international mediation mechanisms capable of halting escalation.

The paralysis of the Security Council during the Gaza War and its consequences for international order are the focus of an expanding corpus of 2024–2025 literature. According to Gowan (2024), the limitations of the post-1945 collective security framework in a fractured multipolar system have been revealed by repeated vetoes, especially by the United States. Although rhetorically critical of Western double standards, China and Russia's stance has likewise failed to result in coordinated action, strengthening the impasse rather than finding a solution (Weiss, 2024). This scholarship reframes paralysis not as exceptional but as a structural feature of contemporary great-power competition.

One of the most active and contentious areas of UN involvement is humanitarian governance. In the face of severe access restrictions, infrastructure destruction, and budget shortages, UN agencies—including UNRWA, OCHA, WHO, and UNICEF have been instrumental in providing humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2024; UNRWA, 2024). While acknowledging that UN humanitarian efforts prevented complete collapse, recent peer-reviewed and policy studies emphasise that state actors have systematically politicised, limited, and instrumentalised aid delivery (Hoffman, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). These results draw attention to a paradox:

whereas humanitarian efforts continue to be the UN's most visible contribution, they also depoliticise the crisis by replacing resolution with relief.

Legal accountability has also gained prominence in recent literature, particularly following the involvement of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Scholars highlight the lack of enforcement tools as a crucial restriction, despite the fact that the ICJ's 2024 provisional measures in response to genocide charges have been widely analysed as a significant normative step (Akande, 2024; ICJ, 2024). The discrepancy between international legal authority and political compliance in conflicts involving protected allies is further highlighted by discussions about ICC jurisdiction and arrest warrants (Kersten, 2025).

A growing body of research on veto restraint and Security Council reform is occurring concurrently with these discussions. Proposals such as the French-Mexican initiative and the Accountability, Coherence, and Transparency (ACT) group's Code of Conduct have gained renewed attention during the Gaza crisis, though scholars remain sceptical about their practical impact absent binding commitments from permanent members (Pogoson, 2022; Chesterman, 2024). Recent analyses imply that veto restraint disputes reveal more about normative unhappiness with the existing order than actual prospects for institutional transformation (Singhal, 2024).

By combining realist theory with a real-time empirical examination of Security Council actions during the 2023–2025 Gaza War, this study contributes to the body of literature. It views veto gridlock as an active outcome of modern power politics in a fractured international system rather than a static institutional failing. The study bridges discussions on UN efficacy, veto politics, and conflict management in a multipolar order by combining Security Council voting behaviour, humanitarian access restrictions, and legal-institutional interventions. It provides a dynamic, realist explanation of why multilateral conflict resolution fails where great-power interests collide.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Realist International Relations theory articulated by Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz (1979). Realism posits that the international system is anarchic, states are the primary actors, and power, particularly military power, is the central currency of international politics. Realism, in its various forms, offers powerful explanatory tools for analysing why international organisations operate as they do within the broader structure of international politics. Realist theory rests on several foundational assumptions about international politics.

First, the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no overarching authority capable of enforcing rules or protecting states from one another. This structural condition compels states to prioritise their own security and survival above all other considerations.

Second, states are the primary actors in international relations, and they behave as rational, unitary actors pursuing their national interests.

Third, power, particularly military power, is the fundamental currency of international politics, and states constantly assess their relative power positions vis-à-vis potential threats.

From these assumptions flows the realist understanding of international organisations. Rather than viewing the UN as an autonomous actor capable of transcending state interests and enforcing collective will, realists see it as an arena in which states pursue their interests through diplomatic means and as an institution whose effectiveness is entirely contingent on the extent to which powerful states find it useful (Mearsheimer, 2021). When the interests of major powers align, international organisations can appear effective; when those interests diverge, organisations become paralysed or irrelevant.

The Israel-Palestine conflict provides an ideal case for testing realist propositions about international organisations' effectiveness. Israel possesses significant military capabilities and, crucially, enjoys consistent diplomatic, military, and economic support from the United States, the world's preeminent military and economic power. This patronage relationship fundamentally shapes what the UN can and cannot do. The United States has used its veto power in the Security Council more than thirty times to block resolutions critical of Israel, reflecting the calculation that supporting Israel serves American strategic interests in the Middle East and responds to domestic political pressures.

From a realist perspective, the UN's inability to effectively constrain Israeli military operations in Gaza during 2022-2025, despite widespread international condemnation and documentation of massive civilian casualties, is entirely predictable. The UN lacks independent military capabilities and relies entirely on member states, particularly the most powerful, to implement its decisions. When the most powerful state in the system opposes UN action, the organisation is structurally incapable of effective intervention.

Similarly, realist theory explains why other major powers have responded to the crisis as they have. China and Russia, while critical of Israeli actions in international forums, have limited direct interests in the region and view the conflict primarily through the lens of great power competition with the United States. Their support for UN resolutions critical of Israel serves to highlight American double standards and challenge the United States' claims to moral leadership, rather than reflecting a deep commitment to Palestinian rights. Regional powers such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia make calculations based on their own stability concerns, economic interests, and relationships with both the United States and their own populations.

Realist theory's concept of the security dilemma helps explain why the Israel-Palestine conflict has proven so intractable. Each side's efforts to enhance its security are perceived by the other as threatening, creating spirals of mistrust and violence. Israel's military superiority and control over territory create what it views as necessary security buffers and deterrence capabilities. However, these same actions intensify Palestinian grievances, fuel resistance movements, and perpetuate the cycle of violence. The absence of a trusted third party capable of providing security guarantees means that neither side can credibly commit to concessions without fearing exploitation.

The UN, in principle, could serve as this trusted third party, providing monitoring, peacekeeping forces, and verification mechanisms that might enable mutual concessions. However, realist analysis suggests that this role requires not just UN willingness but consistent support from major powers and a genuine desire for compromise from the parties themselves. When these conditions

are absent, as they have been during 2023-2025, the UN cannot manufacture peace through moral suasion or procedural mechanisms.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilises a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis to evaluate United Nations Security Council paralysis and its implications for UN conflict management in the Israel–Palestine conflict over the 2023-2025 period. The research is framed as a single-case study, selected because the Gaza war presents a relevant and contemporary illustration of how great-power politics hinder collective security. The study uses process tracing to determine the causal processes that link the UN's limited ability to enforce ceasefires, protect civilians, and influence conflict outcomes to Security Council decision-making, namely veto use, agenda-setting, and diplomatic deadlock (George & Bennett, 2005). In order to evaluate the emergence and persistence of paralysis, process tracing is employed by methodically examining sequences of Security Council deliberations, draft resolutions, vetoes, and subsequent humanitarian and legal developments.

Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources selected for credibility, relevance, and analytical rigour. These include:

Official United Nations Documents: Security Council resolutions, veto records, meeting transcripts, presidential statements, General Assembly resolutions, Secretary-General reports, and documentation from UN agencies (OCHA, WHO, UNRWA), as well as relevant International Court of Justice rulings and provisional measures.

Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books published primarily between 2021 and 2025, focusing on Security Council politics, veto power, realist theory, UN conflict management, and the Israel–Palestine conflict.

Policy and Think-Tank Analyses: Reports from established international research institutions addressing Gaza, multilateral diplomacy, humanitarian access, and Security Council reform debates.

Human Rights and Media Reports: Publications from internationally recognized human rights organisations and confirmed reporting from major global media outlets to establish factual timelines and humanitarian impacts.

Sources were assessed based on institutional authority, methodological transparency, consistency across independent reports, and relevance to Security Council decision-making, with triangulation used to reduce bias and enhance reliability.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in four stages. First, a detailed chronology of events between 2023 and 2025 was constructed, capturing key conflict escalations, Security Council actions, veto decisions, humanitarian developments, and legal interventions. Second, UN responses were categorized, with particular emphasis on Security Council behavior, alongside General Assembly initiatives, humanitarian operations, and judicial actions. Third, the effectiveness of these interventions was evaluated using criteria such as impact on violence levels, civilian protection, humanitarian access, legal accountability, and diplomatic outcomes. Finally, findings were synthesized through a realist theoretical framework, interpreting Security Council paralysis as a structural outcome of power politics, national interests, and great-power competition rather than as a mere institutional failure.

DATA PRESENTATION

This section presents empirical data drawn from secondary sources, including United Nations resolutions, Security Council and General Assembly records, Secretary-General briefings, UN agency reports, policy analyses, and peer-reviewed studies. The data are organized thematically to reflect the study's focus on Security Council paralysis during the 2023-2025 Israel-Palestine escalation.

Conflict management is organised around collective security, operational tools, and humanitarian engagement, according to UN records. Security Council transcripts from 2023-2025 indicate almost 30 emergency meetings on Gaza, however, only one limited resolution focused on humanitarian corridors was issued in early 2025. At least six draft resolutions pertaining to the ceasefire were vetoed, mostly by the United States. Due to ongoing disagreements among permanent members, no UN peacekeeping or observer mission was sent.

General Assembly voting records suggest two major ceasefire resolutions enacted in 2023 and 2024 with backing from over 140 member states, albeit these remained non-binding. According to humanitarian estimates from UNRWA, OCHA, WHO, and UNICEF, there would be more than 1.7 million displaced people, more than 30,000 civilian casualties by the end of 2024, damage to more than 140 UN sites, and severe limits on assistance access.

While diplomatic records demonstrate that regional actors, especially Egypt and Qatar, increasingly spearheaded mediation attempts, legal records validate the ICJ's 2024 temporary measures and the ICC's start of investigations.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Interpreted through a realist paradigm, the findings suggest that UN restrictions during the 2023-2025 escalation were structural rather than incidental. Security Council paralysis arose as a direct consequence of great-power objectives, with veto use especially by the United States, prioritising strategic relationships over collective security. Unlike earlier periods of the conflict, the 2023-2025 escalation was defined by frequent, public, and prolonged veto deployment amid immense humanitarian destruction, rendering the Council mostly symbolic.

Realist claims that institutions lack autonomy when big power interests are involved are reinforced by the UN's persistent normative commitment to civilian protection and international humanitarian law, which contrasts strongly with its inadequate enforcement capacity. The asymmetric nature of the conflict, combining non-state armed groups, dense urban fighting, and hostage dynamics, further exposed the gap between classic UN institutions and contemporary conflict realities.

Humanitarian intervention became the UN's major functional mission, showing institutional adaptation rather than political influence. However, severe operational vulnerability and outside political manipulation were exposed by funding withdrawals, attacks on UN buildings, and humanitarian restrictions. Meanwhile, significant mediation shifted to bilateral and regional channels, marginalising multilateral diplomacy.

All things considered, the escalation between 2023 and 2025 marks a pivotal moment where the Security Council's inaction, the use of humanitarian aid in place of political action, and regionalised mediation validated the realist theory that UN conflict management is inherently limited in situations where great-power interests collide.

Conclusion

Using a realist analytical framework, this paper investigated the paralysis of the UN Security Council and the limitations of UN conflict management during the Israel-Palestine escalation between 2023 and 2025. The results show that veto-driven power politics within the Security Council severely limited the UN's effectiveness in this conflict, even though it still exerts considerable moral and normative influence as the world's most legitimate international organisation. The recurring inability to implement ceasefires, guarantee prolonged humanitarian access, or establish accountability reveals a persistent gap between the UN's normative obligations and its operational competence in conflicts involving large countries or their allies.

The study also concludes that UN humanitarian organisations, especially UNRWA, OCHA, WHO, and UNICEF, were crucial in preventing the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. Despite the UN's diminished political and enforcement capabilities, its work highlights the organisation's ongoing significance. The General Assembly's overwhelming approval of ceasefire resolutions further revealed a wide international consensus, while the non-binding character of these resolutions limited their practical significance. All things considered, the escalation between 2023 and 2025 marks a significant turning point as regional actors gradually replaced multilateral mediation, humanitarian intervention took the place of political enforcement, and Security Council paralysis grew more overt.

Recommendations

1. Urgent reform is essential to alleviate veto-induced paralysis. In addition to increasing Council membership to better represent current global power distributions, especially from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, member states should enact legally binding restrictions on the use of veto power in situations of mass atrocities and severe humanitarian disasters.

2. When the Security Council is at a standstill, the General Assembly's moral power should be operationalised through an Emergency Peace Mechanism that permits concerted humanitarian action. In order to improve implementation capability, UNGA resolutions should specifically permit cooperation with regional organisations.
3. UN peace operations must adapt to contemporary conflict circumstances by establishing specialised training for urban warfare, hostage scenarios, and involvement with non-state armed
4. Groups. Situational awareness would be strengthened by increased use of drones, satellite monitoring, and data-driven conflict mapping.
5. A Global Humanitarian Fund funded by evaluated donations should be created in order to lessen political manipulation and provide a steady and reliable income for organisations like UNRWA and OCHA.
6. The UN should institutionalise ties with regional actors, including the African Union, Arab League, and important Middle Eastern states, to facilitate collaborative mediation, sharing information, and coordinated humanitarian delivery.

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