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زبانهای اروپایی

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19.09.2024



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The World's Chance to Confront US-Israeli Genocide

As nations come together in the U.N. General Assembly on Wednesday, they face both a serious challenge and an unprecedented opportunity, write Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies.



Flags of member nations flying at U.N. headquarters. (UN Photo/Joao Araujo, Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

On Wednesday, the General Assembly is scheduled to debate and vote on a resolution calling on Israel to end “its unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory” within six months.

Given that the General Assembly, unlike the exclusive 15-member Security Council, allows all members to vote and there is no veto in the General Assembly, this is an opportunity for the world community to clearly express its opposition to Israel's brutal occupation of Palestine.

If Israel predictably fails to heed a General Assembly resolution calling on it to withdraw its occupation forces and settlers from Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the United States then vetoes or threatens to veto a Security Council resolution to enforce the ICJ ruling, then the General Assembly could go a step further.

It could convene an emergency session to take up what is called a Uniting For Peace resolution, which could call for an arms embargo, an economic boycott or other sanctions against Israel — or even call for actions against the United States.

Uniting for Peace resolutions have only been passed by the General Assembly five times since the procedure was first adopted in 1950.

The Sept. 18 resolution comes in response to an historic ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on July 19, which found that “Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the regime associated with them, have been established and are being maintained in violation of international law.”

The court ruled that Israel's obligations under international law include “the evacuation of all settlers from existing settlements” and the payment of restitution to all who have been harmed by its illegal occupation.

The passage of the General Assembly resolution by a large majority of members would demonstrate that countries all over the world support the ICJ ruling, and would be a small but important first step toward ensuring that Israel must live up to those obligations.

Israel's President Benjamin Netanyahu cavalierly dismissed the court ruling with a claim that, “The Jewish nation cannot be an occupier in its own land.”

This is exactly the position that the court had rejected, ruling that Israel's 1967 military invasion and occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories did not give it the right to settle its own people there, annex those territories, or make them part of Israel.



Members of the International Court of Justice on July 19 when they delivered their opinion on the illegality of Israel's occupation of Palestinian Territories. (ICJ)

Settler Violence

While Israel used its hotly disputed account of the Oct. 7 events as a pretext to declare open season for the mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza, Israeli forces in the West Bank and East Jerusalem used it as a pretext to distribute assault rifles and other military-grade weapons to illegal Israeli settlers and unleash a new wave of violence there, too.

Armed settlers immediately started seizing more Palestinian land and shooting Palestinians. Israeli occupation forces either stood by and watched or joined in the violence, but did not intervene to defend Palestinians or hold their Israeli attackers accountable.

Since last October, occupation forces and armed settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem have now killed at least 700 people, including 159 children.

The escalation of violence and land seizures has been so flagrant that even the U.S. and European governments have felt obligated to impose sanctions on a small number of violent settlers and their organizations.

In Gaza, the Israeli military has been murdering Palestinians day after day for the past 11 months. The Palestinian Health Ministry has counted over 41,000 Palestinians killed in Gaza, but with the destruction of the hospitals that it relies on to identify and count the dead, this is now only a partial death toll.

Medical researchers estimate that the total number of deaths in Gaza from the direct and indirect results of Israeli actions will be in the hundreds of thousands, even if the massacre were to end soon.



March on Washington for Gaza, Jan. 13. (Diane Krauthamer, Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Israel and the United States are undoubtedly more and more isolated as a result of their roles in this genocide. Whether the United States can still coerce or browbeat a few of its traditional allies into rejecting or abstaining from the General Assembly resolution on Sept. 18 will be a test of its residual “soft power.”

President Joe Biden can claim to be exercising a certain kind of international leadership, but it is not the kind of leadership that any American can be proud of. The United States has muscled its way into a pivotal role in the ceasefire negotiations begun by Qatar and Egypt, and it has used that position to skillfully and repeatedly undermine any chance of a ceasefire, the release of hostages or an end to the genocide.

By failing to use any of its substantial leverage to pressure Israel, and disingenuously blaming Hamas for every failure in the negotiations, U.S. officials are ensuring that the genocide will continue for as long as they and their Israeli allies want, while many Americans remain confused about their own government’s responsibility for the continuing bloodshed.

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This is a continuation of the strategy by which the United States has stymied and prevented peace since 1967, falsely posing as an honest broker, while in fact remaining Israel’s staunchest ally and the critical diplomatic obstacle to a free Palestine.

In addition to cynically undermining any chance of a ceasefire, the United States has injected itself into debates over the future of Gaza, promoting the idea that a post-war government could be led by the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority, which many Palestinians view as hopelessly corrupt and compromised by subservience to Israel and the United States.

China’s ‘National Unity’ Plan

China has taken a more constructive approach to resolving differences between Palestinian political groupings. It invited Hamas, Fatah and 12 other Palestinian groups to a three-day meeting in Beijing in July, where they all agreed to a “national unity” plan to form a post-war “interim national reconciliation government,” which would oversee relief and rebuilding in Gaza and organize a national Palestinian election to seat a new elected government.

Mustafa Barghouti, the secretary-general of the political movement called the Palestinian National Initiative, hailed the Beijing Declaration as going “much further” than previous reconciliation efforts, and said that the plan for a unity government “blocks Israeli efforts to create some kind of collaborative structure against Palestinian interests.” China has also called for an international peace conference to try to end the war.

As the world comes together in the General Assembly tomorrow, it faces both a serious challenge and an unprecedented opportunity.

Each time the General Assembly has met in recent years, a succession of leaders from the Global South has risen to lament the breakdown of the peaceful and just international order that the U.N. is supposed to represent, from the failure to end the war in Ukraine to inaction against the climate crisis and to the persistence of neocolonialism in Africa.

Perhaps no crisis more clearly embodies the failure of the international system than the 57-year-old Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories it invaded in 1967.

At the same time that the United States has armed Israel to the teeth, it has vetoed 46 Security Council resolutions that either required Israel to comply with international law, called for an end to the occupation or for Palestinian statehood, or held Israel accountable for war crimes or illegal settlement building.



U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield voting against Algeria's ceasefire in Gaza resolution on Feb. 20. (UN Photo/Manuel Elías)

The ability of one permanent member of the Security Council to use its veto to block the rule of international law and the will of the rest of the world has always been widely recognized as the fatal flaw in the existing structure of the system.

When this structure was first announced in 1945, French writer Albert Camus wrote in *Combat*, the French Resistance newspaper he edited, that the veto would “effectively put an end to any idea of international democracy... The Five would thus retain forever the freedom of maneuver that would be forever denied the others.”

The General Assembly and the Security Council have debated a series of resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, and each debate has pitted the United States, Israel and occasionally the United Kingdom or another U.S. ally, against the voices of the rest of the world calling in unison for peace in Gaza.

Of the U.N.'s 193 member nations, 145 have now recognized Palestine as a sovereign nation comprising Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and even more countries have voted for resolutions to end the occupation, prohibit Israeli settlements and support Palestinian self-determination and human rights.

For many decades, the United States' unique position of unconditional support for Israel has been a critical factor in enabling Israeli war crimes and prolonging the intolerable plight of the Palestinian people.

US Directly Involved in Genocide

In the crisis in Gaza, the U.S. military alliance with Israel involves the U.S. directly in the crime of genocide, as the United States provides the warplanes and bombs that are killing the largest numbers of Palestinians and literally destroying Gaza.

The United States also deploys military liaison officers to assist Israel in planning its operations, special operations forces to provide intelligence and satellite communications, and trainers and technicians to teach Israeli forces to use and maintain new American weapons, such as F-35 warplanes.

The supply chain for the U.S. arsenal of genocide criss-crosses America, from weapons factories to military bases to procurement offices at the Pentagon and Central Command in Tampa. It feeds plane loads of weapons flying to military bases in Israel, from where these endless tons of steel and high explosives rain down on Gaza to shatter buildings, flesh and bones.

The U.S. role is greater than complicity — it is essential, active participation, without which the Israelis could not conduct this genocide in its present form, any more than the Germans could have run Auschwitz without gas chambers and poison gas.

And it is precisely because of the essential U.S. role in this genocide that the United States has the power to end it, not by pretending to plead with the Israelis to be more “careful” about civilian casualties, but by ending its own instrumental role in the genocide.

Every American of conscience should keep applying all kinds of pressure on our own government, but as long as it keeps ignoring the will of its own people, sending more weapons, vetoing Security Council resolutions and undermining peace negotiations, it is by default up to our neighbors around the world to muster the unity and political will to end the genocide.

It would certainly be unprecedented for the world to unite, in opposition to Israel and the United States, to save Palestine and enforce the ICJ ruling that Israel must withdraw from Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

The world has rarely come together so unanimously since the founding of the United Nations in the aftermath of the Second World War in 1945. Even the catastrophic U.S.-British invasion and destruction of Iraq failed to provoke such united action.

But the lesson of that crisis, indeed the lesson of our time, is that this kind of unity is essential if we are ever to bring sanity, humanity and peace to our world. That can start with a decisive vote in the General Assembly on Wednesday, Sept. 18, 2024.

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Common Dreams

September 17, 2024

This article is from Common Dreams.