



Photo source: Photo



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Reforming the United Nations: A GCC Perspective

Christine Williams
May 2024



Reforming the United Nations: A GCC Perspective

Introduction

The United Nations is a governing body that was designed to be in constant motion—to address the needs of the international community in the context of rising issues and demands. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council have long advocated for its reformation in key areas of focus such as enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of UN bodies, improving transparency and accountability, strengthening conflict prevention and peacekeeping efforts, and promoting greater inclusivity and representation, particularly for developing countries.

Overall, there exists a growing sentiment that the current structure of the UN is increasingly undemocratic and has an imbalance of power since its five permanent states, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, were selected in 1945, at the time of its creation. The main line of argument is that such structure does not represent the current power equation, nor does it favor developing states or all states that are major financial contributors.

As a result, there exists a stark difference between the structure of the UN Security Council specifically, and the global reality. The right of permanent member states to retain veto power, an issue that was brought to the attention of much of the world during the current Israeli-Palestinian crisis, when the US vetoed UN resolutions demanding for ceasefire in Gaza, is seen as outdated. The fact that 13 out of 15 members voted in favor of the ceasefire, with one abstaining, and the US being the only member to vote against it and vetoing the bid, is a testament to the flawed current system within the operational structure of the UNSC. Using veto power to block bids that go against a member's individual interests is a key challenge that the GCC states cite when advocating for reforms to the structure and functionality of the UN, namely the UN Security Council.

GCC Pushes for Change

Given the current and ongoing instability in the Gulf region, the GCC states have centered their advocacy for reform on the UN Security Council (UNSC) specifically. The Permanent Representative of Saudi Arabia to the UN, Ambassador Abdullah bin Yahya Al Mualami stated that the Kingdom is “at the forefront of countries that believe [in] an urgent need to move forward in the process of reforming the Security Council...[demanding] for permanent representation with full powers in the category of permanent seats...and proportional representation by the Arabs in the category of non-permanent seats.” To be sure, the GCC states continue to underline their commitment to working within a multilateral framework, whether it be with the United Nations, in recent cooperation with the European Union vis-a-vis the EU-GCC Joint Communication on a Strategic Partnership with the Gulf that was put forward in May 2022, or the ongoing collaboration with the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).



The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has consistently urged for adapting the UN Security Council's working methods to find mechanisms that allow the Council to better fulfill its mission of maintaining international peace and security. The ineffectiveness of the UNSC has been highlighted by its inability to address major global security issues including the most recent issues of the Israel-Hamas conflict and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A failure to make the UNSC more impactful is seen as eventually contributing to rendering the Council incapable of doing anything at all.

Days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on February 25, 2022, the SC voted on a draft resolution aimed at halting the Russian military offensive. Initially put forward by Albania and the US, the draft was approved by 11 members and abstained by 3. Yet, it was vetoed by the Russian Federation, illustrating again, how the power of veto lying in the hands of five powers is abused when legislation opposes even a singular national interest.

Not only the veto powers, but the greater UNSC's failure to impact outcomes in international crises over the years has contributed to the UN losing legitimacy and support from actors around the world. Whether as a result of indecision, discord among member states, or simply abuse of veto powers, in the words of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in a bold speech on the ineffectiveness of the UN: "The power of the UN Charter must be restored immediately. The UN system must be reformed...so that the right of veto is not a right to kill. So that there is a fair representation of all regions of the world in the Security Council."

The weakness of the UN and all of its agencies, including the International Court of Justice (ICJ), are becoming increasingly clear—the January 2024 ICJ ruling on Israeli actions in Gaza is an example of this. Although the court ruled plausible that Israel could be accused of genocide, in the case brought against Israel by South Africa, the judgment did little to slow down or deter Israeli leadership from pursuing its relentless destruction on the Palestinians in Gaza. On such a path, the fear has risen that there may not remain any legitimacy for the UN as an authoritative governing body in the near term.

Saudi Arabia has both called out the double standards that are at play in the current system, as well as suggest some few key changes that could address them: First, enhancing the role of elected members of the UNSC to more fully participate in drafting and making decisions; second, adopting the "commitment of conduct of action" ensuring that members of the Council do not obstruct resolutions put forward that aim to end genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes; third, strengthening consultation with member countries to the peacekeeping forces and the UN police; and fourth, establishing an ombudsman for the Security Council Committee on key issues."

On November 16, 2023, during the UNSC's 78th session, Jamal Fares Alrowaieji, Bahrain's representative to the UNSC spoke on behalf of the Arab Group, a group that represents over 400 million people, that should a proposed enlargement of the Council happen, there should be more fair representation of Arab countries in the non-permanent category of seats. He stated



that “...the use of the veto in an arbitrary manner has challenged the credibility of the Council” pointing out that in the past three decades, the veto has been used in cases relating to the Arab region.

Other blocs have been pushing for UNSC reform—such as the African Union’s C-10, a council established in 2005 that aims to push for equal representation in the UNSC. The countries of Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia and the Pacific have also banded together to form the L69 group of developing countries, a bloc that is united in the goal of achieving lasting and meaningful change to the operational structure of the UN. The GCC could bolster its multilateral cooperation efforts that have already been underway, by collaborating with these blocs as part of already existing programs and partnerships that they have been developing with these regions of the world. Vocalizing the concern and demanding reform to the UN is not an isolated issue, especially since those who have little to no representation on the UNSC specifically, tend to be the ones who need the protection of a governing body such as the UN the most.

That the process of reforming the UN and the UNSC would be too enormous of a task was refuted by the UAE during an open debate of the UNSC on strengthening the working methods of the body. H.E. Lana Nusseibeh, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the UAE, in reference to the Council’s ability to improve functions in light of COVID-19, stated that “The UN’s founders could not have imagined the Council functioning virtually...the adjustments by the Council to the [COVID-19] circumstances have allowed for fulfilling its primary functions. Let us use this opportunity to demonstrate to the world the ability of the Security Council to be nimble and flexible to fulfill its primary function while at the same time adhering to the principles of efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency.” Applied more broadly, the UAE has called for a balanced division of labor and improved interaction between the Council and countries contributing troops and police to UN peacekeeping missions to ensure a more inclusive and effective Council.

Conclusion

The establishment of the United Nations was aimed at “preventing the recurrence of wars of the first half of the twentieth century which brought great grief to mankind, and to safeguard international peace and security.” That there have been no major reforms to the operational structure of the UN or the UNSC specifically is a worrisome indicator that the Council, as we know it today, has not grown or adapted to the needs of our current geopolitical reality. Nations have evolved, governments have changed, technology and social media have heightened the public’s interest and involvement in areas of conflict and crisis around the world. Yet the UN’s design and operation remain stuck in the past. All of this has been glaringly evident in its inability to contain any aspect of the current crises being witnessed today in Gaza, Ukraine, and even of maritime security. That these major issues are geopolitically relevant to the GCC countries is obvious. Yet, countries in Africa, Latin America, and throughout Asia are making the same argument. It is therefore high time that the United Nations evolved back into the international powerhouse needed by the global community to monitor and subdue arising and expanding conflict. The world and the events that arise are not stagnant—what is required is a governing body that is elastic enough to keep up, if not remain two steps ahead of them.

Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع