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Elad Israeli

Director, Government Relations | Israeli-American Council

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In this blog, we look beyond the headlines to understand how political developments throughout the country affect our Israeli-American community and the issues we all hold dear. Our goal is to provide basic context and foster understanding that encourages greater civic engagement and informs decision-making by our community members.

UN-stuck: an organization between decline and potential major change

As I write this, the second day of the 81st United Nations General Assembly is wrapping up. Per tradition, Brazil and the United States were the first two countries to take the stage, followed by others. For many in America, this is the one week of the year when attention truly shifts to global matters, as heads of state and government from throughout the world gather in New York for a frenzy of speeches and meetings.

The UN as an institution has a well-earned reputation as a hotbed of anti-Israel bias and, in several cases, pure antisemitism. Often, member states which typically have positive bilateral relationships with Israel, will adopt a harsher stance against the Jewish state in the halls of the United Nations, to advance their agendas in fora that depend on the support of Israel's adversaries.

Much has already been written about the faults of the United Nations when it comes to Israel – from the Human Rights Council, to the “work” of Francesca Albanese, the incompetence of UNIFIL, and the never-ending and ever-expanding mandate of UNRWA, a UN agency that played an active role in the October 7th terrorist attacks. However, the organization's problems are much more fundamental in my view, and go well beyond the scope of Israel or the Middle East.

First, the United Nation's only true decision-making body, the Security Council, is built on a power-sharing model that requires a consensus among the five permanent members of the council – the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom. Never mind that this members-list hangs on the outdated notion that the last two hold global influence and importance. In a multipolar and divided world, a consensus between the first three on any matter is virtually impossible. Certainly, on matters that directly involve one of these countries, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, Chinese-Taiwanese tensions or US military actions in the Middle East and the Western Hemisphere. This stalemate has been ongoing roughly since the beginning of this century, and there's no end in sight.

Second, membership in the United Nations itself does not depend on any long-term commitment to peacekeeping from its member countries. Nations continue to be represented as equals on an unconditional basis, and we now have countries that wreak regional and global havoc, such as Iran, which are treated as equal members of the institution while being openly sworn to the destruction of other members.

Countries are already taking notice of the situation. The United States, the most generous financial backer and host country of the institution, has already made major cuts to its funding. China has followed suit, with its skepticism of the environmental policies the organization aims to push for. The Secretary General has warned that the UN is now in a "race towards bankruptcy", with a slim budget that has forced the elimination of thousands of positions and scaling back of missions worldwide.

In the United States, support for the United Nations has become a political issue, not unlike support for Israel. A growing consensus among Republicans in the administration and Congress is behind the recent budget cuts, and calls for abolition of the institution, and a complete American withdrawal from membership, have become more mainstream in recent years.

Now, the UN stands on the cusp of a potential shift. This General Assembly will be the last of Secretary General Antonio Guterres, a former Prime Minister of Portugal, whose decade-long term as the leader of the organization will end in December. Several potential successors are bidding for the position. Two of the leading figures in contention are Rebeca Grynspan and Rafael Grossi.

Grynspan, if elected, would be the first woman and the first Jewish person to serve as Secretary General. Grynspan is a former Vice President of Costa Rica, was born to parents who fled Nazism (her maternal grandparents perished in the Holocaust) and has a sister who lives in Israel. She reportedly has the quiet backing of Guterres.

Rafael Grossi is an Argentinian diplomat who has served as Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 2019. In this role, Grossi has led a particularly tough line on Iranian nuclear activity, and Tehran's continued violations of its non-proliferation commitments.

Both Grynspan and Grossi would likely be an improvement from the current Secretary General, as far as Israel might be concerned. However, the target audience for their positioning at the top would not be Jerusalem, but Washington. The UN has reached a point where growing skepticism of its work and viability by American decision-makers now has a real effect on its budget and puts its future into question. A meaningful change in leadership will be an attempt to reverse this trend that, whether successful or not, may bear fruit for the Jewish state.