

The Role of the US in the UN Conflict Resolution: The Case of 2021 Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Abstract. In today's world where frequent regional conflicts affect global economic, political, and other fields, and trigger humanitarian crises, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is among the most significant conflicts around the world. As the current world hegemony, the United States has an undoubted influence on the global community. Since the founding of the United Nations, to protect its own interests, the United States is enormously influential in various decisions of the United Nations to varying degrees, especially in the process of conflict settling. In the context of the failure of conflict resolution in the United Nations, this study analyzes the United States' role in the mediation of disputes in the United Nations, with the method of case analysis. Guided by the realistic theory, this paper aims to deeply understand the motives of the United States' actions and how it affects conflict resolution, which has important practical significance. In conclusion, the United States has used a variety of strategies to influence conflict resolution of the United Nations, leading to the loss of the UN's peacekeeping power.

Keywords: The United States; The United Nations; International Dispute Settlement Mechanism.

1. Introduction

The Middle East is one of the most unstable regions in modern times, represented by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has since the 1880s and continues today. In the past, United Nations was considered as a mediation agency of international conflict, helping to reconcile conflict, promote international cooperation and achieve peace. However, the mediatory function of the United Nations did not work as expected in the region of Israel and Palestine, although the United Nations has made a number of attempts. For example, it proposed the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (II), suggesting that making the partition in this region so reduces the conflict between the two sides. Nevertheless, the situation did not ease and the conflict has not been resolved substantially. In 2021, the conflict renewed between the two sides.

The role of the United Nations can no longer be considered as a mediator in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for its limited function. Instead, the United States seems to be a crucial role in this process. On one hand, Israel, being one of the United States' major allies in the Middle East, is supported by the United States frequently and has the capability against Palestine or other Arab States as a result. On the other hand, being one of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, the United States has substantive veto power to the United Nations resolution. In fact, the United States has vetoed the resolutions that are unfavorable to Israel. In other words, the United States is the actual influential factor rather than United Nations in the 2021 Israeli-Palestinian conflict, making the US's action highly noticeable in this case.

It is essential to study the United Nations and the United States. For one thing, the United Nations has been the world's largest international institution since World War II. To some extent, thanks to the United Nations, international relations were improved and some of the international issues have been resolved successfully in the last century. For another, the United States dominated the world's politics and became the global hegemon after the end of the Cold War. They both have a huge impact on world politics. This study can provide new ideas for conflict resolution and contribute to the peace process.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research Status

The conflict between Israel and Palestine can date back to the 19th century, and it has always been an issue of great concern to the world. In the context of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, relevant studies on the impact of the United States and the United Nations on the conflict are abundant. Mearsheimer believes that the foreign policy of the United States has always given priority to the national interests of the United States. However, in the past decades, particularly after the Six-Day War in 1967, the Middle East policy of the United States has revealed a recurring feature, which can be said to be the central focus, that is the relationship with Israel. At the same time, he believes that the Israeli lobby has a strong influence on U.S. Middle East policy. Through the lobbying of the American congressional staff and the manipulation of political funds, Israel constantly influences the policies of the United States to Israel and even the Middle East region to achieve its political goals. The lobby makes it extremely difficult to end the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians by preventing American leaders from putting pressure on Israel [1].

According to the existing literature, the academic circle mainly studies this problem from the following aspects, which involves several aspects.

The first aspect is to analyze the UN's role in international conflicts from the perspective that the United Nations is "manipulated" by the United States. After reading the literature, it can be found that scholars generally believe that the United Nations, as an international organization, does not have the actual power in conflict resolution, or that the real power only exists in a small range of countries. Through its foreign policy and financial contributions, the United States manipulates and influences UN agencies [2]. Moreover, the United States also influences the United Nations through voting patterns, such as its behavior on the Palestinian issue. It is found that there was an overwhelming coincidence of U.S. and Israeli votes in the General Assembly, and the free use of the US veto in support of Israel in the UN Security Council [3].

In the second aspect, by analyzing the problems within the UN's political system and the behavior of the United States, and exploring successful experience of dealing with conflicts in the past, so as to understand the reason for its failure in resolving conflicts and look forward to the possible improvement in the future. As for the UN Security Council, mediation in cooperation with other bodies is its responsibility under the UN Charter, and it is also its duty to create the framework conditions in which effective intervention can take place. Yet the Council's inability to act in the face of aggression by one of the P5, the United States, whether in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda or the 2003 invasion of Iraq, shows that the body tasked with preventing crises is failing its responsibilities in favor of the short-term interests of its powerful members. According to the academic community, the UN Security Council has been unable to resolve the conflict [4].

2.2. Brief Summary

To sum up the research on the influence of the United States in the UN conflict resolution, first of all, scholars have summarized how the United States influences and manipulates the United Nations in several aspects, laying a foundation for future studies. Moreover, from a realist perspective, research on the relations between the United States and the states involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been fruitful.

However, there are still limitations from the perspectives of the theoretical foundation. Liberalism is frequently used to interpret the behaviors of the United States and the United Nations, but it has trouble giving explanations in some cases of conflicts, for overemphasizing the role of international institutions, ignoring the states' influence on institutions, etc.

3. Theoretical Foundation

3.1. Realism

3.1.1 Classical Realism

Realism is the most influential theory in the area of international relations and covers four propositions including State-centrism, Anarchy, Egoism, and Power Politics. These are the foundation of Realism theory. After World War II, Hans Morgenthau published *Realism and Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1948), and proposed the Six Principles of Political Realism, which considers human nature as the determinant factor in international relations. His theory is known as Classical Realism, suggesting that the international political system is under the state of anarchy and hence conflict occurs, because state behaviors are not restricted by morality or social ethics. Having roots in human nature, Politics is governed by objective laws [5]. The pursuit of power is considered human nature. These theories developed modern Realism and lead the field of international relations. However, with the international political system changing, the theory of Realism has difficulty explaining the contemporary international system.

3.1.2 Neorealism

In the 1970s, Kenneth Waltz published the *Theory of International Politics*, and mentioned the concept of Neorealism or Structural Realism for the first time, which derived from Classical Realism. Instead of emphasizing human nature as a decisive factor in international relations, Kenneth Waltz tends to focus on the anarchy of the international political system. Under the anarchic system, states try to preserve their power to attain national security. States' primary concern is to maintain their position rather than to pursue their power [6]. Meanwhile, states are assumed at a minimum to want to ensure their own survival as this is a prerequisite to pursuing other goals [7].

3.1.3 Defensive Realism

Mearsheimer distinguished Neorealism and divided it into Offensive Realism and Defensive Realism in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Although both branches admit that the international structure is anarchic but draw different conclusions. Waltz's view is usually known as Defensive Realism, suggesting that states concentrate on maintaining their security by moderate and reserved policies. States have the probability to cooperate with each other. National power is the means to achieve national security but not the states' goal.

3.1.4 Offensive Realism

On the contrary, Mearsheimer believes that the goal of states is national power rather than national security. His theory is known as Offensive Realism. States have offensive military capabilities and intentions [8]. Under anarchy, as states do not possess sufficient information, they are not capable of understanding the intention of other states. Moreover, states are afraid of others threatening their survival. In order to survive, states inevitably have to enhance national power, especially military power, so that they can respond to the fear when other states' intention is unrecognizable. However, there is no end to the pursuit of power and states always wish to gain an advantage in international competition. Thus, states try to achieve hegemony so that states have absolute predominance to respond to the unknown threat [9].

3.2. Theory Advantage

Although Realism was born many years ago, it has continued to refine its theories and explain new issues as society progresses. Classical Realism laid the foundation of realism theory and explained early issues in international relations. Some of the propositions can still be applied to the current international system. Neorealism developed in the 1970s, which added the concept of international structure into Realism, enriching the theory and solving the shortage of its explanatory power. Meanwhile, the distinction between Defensive Realism and Offensive Realism also demonstrates the vitality of Realism theory. Defensive Realism is more concerned with the security of states, while

Offensive Realism is more concerned with states' power. Despite the different views above, the major proposition of Realism maintains. It should not be considered as two different theories. Instead, the two theories should be considered complementary to each other, endowing Realism with more explanatory power.

As is well known, Liberalism is also a major component of international relations. Contrary to the Realism view that states always compete with each other in an anarchic international system, Liberalism believes that states can make international cooperation via international institutions, but it is not always in a confrontational relationship [10]. Liberalism emphasizes that international conflicts can be solved by cooperation between states. Furthermore, the states are no longer major actors. Instead, international institutions and nongovernmental actors play an important role in international relations [11]. Liberal Institutionalism is one of the representatives of modern Liberalism. Robert Keohane believes that institutions facilitate cooperation by the following methods such as reducing transaction costs, providing information, establishing coordination center, etc. [12].

Although Liberalism has its own benefits, Realism still has advantages over Liberalism in explaining international cases today.

Rather than concentrating on arcane academic disputes, realists commit to engage with the real world, which is its strength. It attempts to explain the world as it is, rather than the people wish it to be. Stephen M. Walt said that the US always insist their actions are driven by deep idealistic convictions as the strategy. However, the practical action of the US often conversely matches the idea of realism [13].

When interpreting international conflicts, contrary to Realism, Liberalism usually overemphasizes the role of international institutions, deeming it capable of maintaining stability, and reducing the conflicts between states and even eliminating them. States cooperate with others based on mutual trust. Unfortunately, Liberalism overlooks some facts. Although international institutions exist, states are still determinant, which is the emphasis of Realism. It is impossible that international conflicts occurred between the states and international institutions. Conflicts always occurred between two or more powers. Limited by the reality of anarchy, international institutions hardly have any absolute authority to regulate states' behaviors. This is why Liberalism has trouble explaining the fact that conflicts still exist despite the fact that international institutions such as the UN has been established.

Besides, Liberalism considers the institution as an independent actor but ignores the states' influence on them, typically the great powers. Like the Israeli-Palestinian relationship today, conflicts continue even with the involvement of the UN. Hundreds of resolutions have been proposed, including the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947, also known as the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (II), which rules the area of the Arab State and the Jewish State. This proposal clearly defines the legitimacy of Palestine. Nevertheless, neither did Israel nor Palestine obey this resolution and the conflict was no let-up.

All in all, when answering questions concerning international conflicts, Realism has theoretical advantages for its deep engagement with reality and its concept that states are the most important actors. Hence, the theory of Realism is granted more ability to explain the case.

The Similarity between the Realism branches and the difference of emphasis can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Realism theories

| Theory | Branches | Similarity | Emphasis |
|---------|-------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Realism | Classical Realism | The international system is anarchic. States are the primary actors. | Human nature |
| | Neorealism | | International structure |
| | Defensive Realism | | States pursuit of security |
| | Offensive Realism | | States pursuit of power |

4. Case Study

4.1. Case Description

In the year of 2021, intense fight broke out between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) militant group, making it the heaviest exchange of fire between Israel and Hamas since the 2014 Gaza War. On May 5, 2021, the Supreme Court of Israel is scheduled to rule on the eviction of four Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah district of East Jerusalem, drawing protests from Palestinians, who gathered nightly in Sheikh Jarrah clashing with riot police and far-right Israeli groups [14]. Shortly afterwards, Hamas sent a message to Israel on May 10, demanding Israeli withdrawal by 6 p.m, from the area of the Temple Mount complex and Sheikh Jarrah. When Israel failed to react, Hamas fired shells at Israel, while Israel soon responded with airstrikes in the Gaza Strip. The two sides agreed to a ceasefire on May 21, which was later broken on June 16, and conflict resumed.

The UN, US, EU and Russia expressed 'deep concern' over the escalating violence [15]. On May 14, China, Tunisia and Norway requested a meeting of the Security Council to discuss the rising conflict, while the US refused repeatedly. Compared to other foreign policy issues, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is considered extremely low priority by the US [16]. Israel, at the same time, believed the US and other international members ought to stay away from the Jerusalem crisis and to not pressure Israel, and should put pressure on Palestinian agitators instead. They also claimed that the Biden administration should not intervene the clashes between security forces and Palestinians.

4.2. Case Analysis

The 2021 Israeli-Palestinian Conflict can be seen as a microcosm of the entire Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Obviously, it is clear that the United States has played an active part during the process. Based on the core assumptions of Realism, this study focuses on analyzing the motivations and explaining behaviors of the United States in this typical case of conflict.

4.2.1 US obstruction of the Security Council

In May 2021, as the presidency of the UN Security Council for May, China hosted an emergency open meeting on the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister of China, Wang Yi, said the international community must act urgently to stop the situation from deteriorating. Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of UNSC members spoke with a common voice, all calling for a ceasefire immediately and avoiding a full-scale war and so on. However, as a matter of fact, the US opposed a proposed resolution by the UNSC appealing ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, and contended that this would interfere with the efforts of Biden administration to eliminate hostilities, and even blocked the release of the Chairman's press statement, with the US ambassador to the UN claiming that a ceasefire should be decided primarily by the two sides.

Different from the Liberalism's emphasis on non-state actors, Realism believes that the main idea of international relations is sovereign states' communication, regarding the state as the basic unit of international relations. The authority and function of a sovereign state decide whose dominant position in international relations. The facts corroborate this view by the UNSC members being sovereign countries and the hardship of being disciplined by international authorities, such as the UN, and that's why the US has the power to oppose the UNSC's actions. Realism also defines states as an integrated whole that exceeds individuals and classes and suggests policy formulation conforms to the interests of the state. It is the most beneficial way to accomplish national goals as well. The realist assumption regards states as completely rational actors, who solely protects its own interests. Just like most countries, the US is committed to preserving its own interests of gaining profits. As demonstrated above, the US negatively reacted toward the rising regional conflict, aiming to maintain the tense situation between the two sides, from which the US can profit a lot.

4.2.2 Supports from the US

The US National Security Advisor at the time spoke with Israeli officials and expressed support for the Israeli government to take so-called appropriate actions to ensure Monday's Jerusalem Day observance. Meanwhile, according to the Washington Post on May 17, the sale of \$735 million precision-guided weapons was approved to Israel, by the Biden administration. These actions of support for Israel could be seen as a direct sign permitting the conflict to continue to escalate, and any efforts towards a ceasefire would be in vain, leading to the intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict eventually.

On one hand, the theory of Realism mainly assumes that the international system is in anarchy. Specifically, the international system consists of sovereign states, which are bodies of sovereignty in their respective territories. Therefore no central authority for making laws and enforcing countries exists. Such anarchy results in extremely low trust between states. Hence, relying on growth of strength and continuous conflicts for survival become their main concern. This view can well explain the phenomenon of the continuous outbreak of conflicts and wars in human society for thousands of years. Having participated in numerous regional conflicts, including the 2021 Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, the US has long been an advocate of conflict. On the other hand, another previously mentioned assumption of Realism, that states act based on the rule of protecting self interests, suggests these supportive acts for Israel are solely the rational results of the US.

4.2.3 Worsening US-China relations

As is well known, China-US relations have shown a deteriorating trend in recent years. The Biden administration's strategic positioning of China is basically the same as the Trump administration's late strategic positioning of China, that is, identifying China as a "strategic competitor" of the United States [17]. In this particular case, the US tried to prevent China from reaching a joint statement with other countries in the UN, which led to certain negative effects on the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. At the same time, the US, along with Japan, France and Australia, sent warships to the East China Sea. Analysts say that the U.S. is trying to provoke China by setting up battlefields against it, and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict can be seen as one of its battlefields.

From the perspective of Realism, rights and security are the essential interests of states. In such a crisis-ridden environment, increasing national strength becomes a vital way for all states to ensure security, especially military power. Accordingly, the US is dedicated to protecting its own interests, by considering China, the fastest rising country in today's world, as a big threat to its rights and security, and thus take actions against China. This also supports another previous point of Realism, that states are single and rational factors.

The timeline and main events of the 2021 Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Time and events during the 2021 Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

| Time | Events |
|--------------|---|
| April, 2021 | The Israeli government required Palestinians living in the Sheikh Jerrah district of east Jerusalem to leave. |
| May 5, 2021 | The Supreme Court of Israel is scheduled to rule on the eviction of four Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah district of East Jerusalem. |
| May 10, 2021 | · Rockets were fired at Israeli settlements. · The US rejected the UNSC statement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the first time. · Twelve senior commanders of the Qassam Brigades were killed in heavy Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip. |
| May 12, 2021 | · Hamas fired 15 rockets at Dimona and 50 rockets at Ashdod. · The US rejected the UNSC statement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the second time. |
| May 13, 2021 | The Qassam Brigades fired heavy rockets into Israel. Israeli tanks and warplanes have again shelled and bombed targets in the Gaza Strip. |

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|------------------|--|
| May 14, 2021 | Israel's air force and ground forces began an offensive against the Palestinian Gaza Strip. The Palestinian military carried out air strikes on several targets in the Gaza Strip. |
| May 15, 2021 | An Israeli military airstrike on a building in the Gaza Strip that houses branches of international news media has completely destroyed the building. |
| May 16, 2021 | The US rejected the UNSC statement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the third time. |
| May 17, 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · President Joe Biden spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and encouraged a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. · The sale of \$735 million worth of precision guided weapons was approved by the US. · The residence of the mayor of Gaza City was hit by an Israeli Defense Forces airstrike. |
| May 18, 2021 | · Fierce clashes between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli soldiers have left many dead and injured. |
| May 20, 2021 | Hamas has reached an agreement with Israel for a ceasefire to begin at 2 o'clock local time on 21 May 2021. |
| May 21, 2021 | Israeli police raided the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem at noon, throwing gas and concussion grenades at people heading to Friday services. |
| June 16, 2021 | The Israeli air Force launched airstrikes in the Gaza Strip, and major clashes broke out again after the two countries signed a cease-fire agreement on May 21. |

5. Discussion

In contrast, previous studies have focused on the UN's failure in conflict resolution and how the UN itself should be reformed to improve its peacekeeping capacity. The focus of this study is not only on the United Nations, but mainly on the influence of the United States in the United Nations peacekeeping process. This study analyzes the United States behavior in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in 2021, and aims to reveal the influence of the United States in the United Nations conflict resolution. The case enumerates three aspects of the United States behavior, respectively from the three aspects of the United States' obstruction of the peace process in the Security Council, support for Israel, and opposition to other countries.

However, this does not account for all behaviors in the United States. For instance, the impact of the relations between the Israeli lobby and the United States cannot be ignored. This study only lists three representative behaviors of the US and made a simple classification. In addition, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a conflict with a long history and interwoven influence of various factors such as religion. It is not our intention to demonstrate that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is completely driven by the US. The performance of the US is one of the most important parts of the process, reflecting its attitude toward the UN and even toward other governments in the global community.

The study has some limitations as well. First of all, this study primarily demonstrates the content of US foreign policy and its effect on US behaviors, but does not concern the influence of US domestic politics on its behavior, such as its political parties. Domestic politics is a vital part of state behavior and we should take it into account in future studies. Second, the study still fails to come up with practical solutions to the US's manipulation of the UN. It can be a valuable future research direction worth paying attention to.

Yet there are many conflicts existing in the world and this study provides researchers a new perspective of how we see a conflict with the help of Realism. Take the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 for example. Similarly, the UN has failed to defuse the conflict or make substantial progress again. Particularly one side of the conflict is Russia, being one of the five permanent members of the UNSC. Meanwhile, the US has provided military aid to Ukraine, making it a state's power competition between Russia and the US to some extent. Furthermore, by analyzing how the

US behaves in conflict, we can also generalize that to how other governments around the world behave in the international community in the face of conflict.

6. Conclusion

This study uses Realism to concretely analyze the behavior and performance of the United States in the 2021 Israeli-Palestinian conflict and explain them. The four core assumptions of Realism include that anarchy is the international system status, that sovereign states are the vital actors, that sovereign state is single and rational, and that pursuit of power and security are the essential interests of state. All of this shows up in U.S. behavior in the case of conflict, including the United States obstruction of the Security Council, supportive action towards Israel, and the worsening US-China relationship.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is difficult to be at peace in a short time. In addition to the factor of ethnic conflict in history, the gap between states' power affects the peace process of Israeli-Palestinian. As the realism theory mentions that states pursuit of power, Israel will not stop their step to enhance military power, increasing the instability factor to regional peace. As long as the gap of state' power exists between the two sides, promoting the peace process will be difficult. In the face of such a world with crisis, the theory of Realism will still play an inestimable value in the future.

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