



Structural Realism and Institutional Barriers in the UN Security Council's Failure: Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Abstract

Background: The UN Security Council (UNSC) has repeatedly failed to effectively intervene in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the United States exercising its veto at least 12 times between 2010–2023 to block resolutions critical of Israel. This persistent pattern raises fundamental questions about whether structural power dynamics are the primary driver of UNSC dysfunction.

Objective: This study examines the failure of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in intervening in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict using a structural realism approach and an analysis of institutional barriers.

Methods: A qualitative method with a single-case study design was used to analyze official documents, Security Council resolutions, and related literature through content analysis and the structural realism framework.

Results: Three structural mechanisms were identified: (1) veto-based geopolitical blockade the U.S. blocked 12 resolutions on Palestine (2010–2023), with 85% of the Council's agenda dominated by France, the United Kingdom, and the United States through penholdership; (2) enforcement mechanism failure Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) remain unimplemented due to the absence of coercive compliance mechanisms; (3) structural representational inequality the absence of permanent African, South Asian, and Latin American representation undermines UNSC legitimacy as a global peacekeeping authority.

Conclusion: UNSC failure in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflects not procedural inadequacy but rather a structural alignment of institutional design with great-power hegemony. Effective reform would require limitations on veto power, expanded permanent membership, and binding enforcement mechanisms to restore UNSC credibility.

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INTRODUCTION

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the longest, most complex, and most significant international conflicts in global security and stability. The roots of the conflict can be traced back to the late period of the Ottoman Empire, followed by British Mandate policy in Palestine that incorporated the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which supported the establishment of a “national home” for the Jewish people. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 became a crucial turning point that triggered the first Arab-Israeli war, as well as creating a massive exodus of the Palestinian people (Nakba), which continues to shape the refugee issue to this day. Since then, conflicts have developed in various forms, ranging from interstate wars (1948, 1967, 1973), Israeli occupation of territories, to armed clashes with Palestinian non-state actors. The problem is not only related to territorial disputes but also includes dimensions of identity, religion, politics,

and sovereignty, which makes these conflicts difficult to resolve through traditional negotiation mechanisms (Rich, 2026; Smith, 2007).

The United Nations (UN), an international organization formed after World War II with the primary mandate of maintaining international peace and security, has been trying to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since its inception (Agussalim et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2026). The United Nations has the authority, through Chapters VI and VII of the UN Charter, to issue binding resolutions via the Security Council. Key resolutions include Resolution 181 on the partition of Palestine (1947), Resolution 242 after the Six-Day War (1967), and Resolution 338 after the Yom Kippur War (1973), all of which restated the principles of the withdrawal of Israeli forces from occupied territories and the right of each state in the region to live in peace. However, such resolutions are frequently disregarded in practice or are not implemented in a reliable manner by the relevant actors. This highlights a structural weakness: the UN has no independent enforcement mechanism, meaning that adopted resolutions may still lack effective enforcement or penalties for non-compliance (Degani, 2026; Morris, 2001).

The geopolitical interests of great powers, particularly those of the permanent members of the Security Council (P5), which possess veto power, remain one of the main barriers to UN intervention. For instance, the U.S. has routinely wielded this veto power whenever a resolution perceived as detrimental to Israel or inconsistent with broader U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East is brought to a vote. This reflects the reality that the Security Council is not a neutral institution but a political arena in which major powers pursue their national interests. From the perspective of structural realism, the international system is anarchic, and states especially major powers act primarily based on calculations of power and national interest rather than moral principles or international norms (Waltz). This dynamic is evident in the pattern of U.S. veto use in the Israeli-Palestinian case, where a majority of Security Council members may support Palestine, yet resolutions are frequently blocked due to the U.S. veto (Gowan, 2026).

Apart from geopolitics, the weakness of UN institutions is also a key underlying cause of the failure of UN intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The presence of the five victor states of World War II on the Security Council creates an imbalance in representation and legitimacy. This is why the Security Council is frequently viewed as undemocratic and out of step with the current global distribution of power. In addition, there is no permanent enforcement mechanism for UN resolutions; unlike domestic legal systems with enforcement apparatuses, the UN lacks a standing institutional tool to ensure compliance. This makes resolutions little more than political symbols without real coercive power (Tavares et al., 2026; Weiss, 2016). This situation perpetuates the view that UN failure is not solely due to disagreement among states, but also due to structural institutional limitations.

One of the central theories in International Relations, structural realism (neorealism), postulates that it is the structure of the international system that matters, and that state behavior is largely determined by the material distribution of power and capabilities. This theory argues that there is no central authority above states in the international system; thus, each state must rely on its own capabilities to ensure survival. Kenneth Waltz, a pioneer of neorealism, argued that major states use international institutions to advance their strategic interests, and that the logic of power accumulation is determinative of state behavior in the international system. Within this framework, the UN Security Council is not a neutral institution guaranteeing world peace, but rather a political arena reflecting great-power rivalry. This is evident in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where permanent members of the Security Council, particularly the United States, have repeatedly used their veto power to block resolutions deemed contrary to their geopolitical interests. This pattern aligns with structural realist theory, which holds that states do not sacrifice national interests for international norms or collective goals (Fawcett, 2025).

From an institutional perspective, the failure of Security Council intervention is also closely linked to structural constraints within the UN system. The Council's structure, which privileges five permanent members (P5), creates a representational imbalance that reflects post-World War II geopolitical realities rather than today's multipolar world. The absence of permanent representation from regions such as Africa, South Asia, and Latin America has generated significant criticism regarding the Council's legitimacy as a global peacekeeping body

(Deane, 2025). In addition, reports from the UN General Assembly indicate that the repeated use of veto power to block key resolutions further undermines the credibility of the institution (Jerliu, 2025; Widjaja, 2026). Although reform initiatives such as the Liechtenstein-led initiative through Resolution 76/262 require veto-wielding states to explain their use of vetoes in the General Assembly, this mechanism has not significantly reduced P5 dominance over the Council's agenda (Latino, 2025).

Another institutional obstacle is the weak enforcement mechanism of UN resolutions. Unlike domestic legal systems with enforcement institutions, the Security Council lacks a permanent mechanism to compel member states to comply with its decisions. As a result, many resolutions related to Israel–Palestine, such as Resolutions 242 and 338, have remained largely unimplemented. This situation is further compounded by the fact that approximately 85% of the Council's agenda is influenced by France, Britain, and the United States through the penholdership system, meaning issues deemed inconsistent with their interests are often marginalized (Latino, 2025). Thus, both structural and institutional constraints significantly contribute to the Security Council's inability to fulfill its mandate effectively and equitably.

Therefore, this study positions structural realism theory and UN institutional constraints as two essential foundations for understanding the failure of Security Council intervention in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. From a theoretical perspective, structural realism explains how major states dominate global decision-making through power distribution and geopolitical interests. From an institutional perspective, the weaknesses of the Security Council ranging from veto power and lack of representation to weak enforcement mechanisms demonstrate that this global institution often reflects international inequality rather than the ideal of universal peace (Hösli et al., 2021). This analysis provides a conceptual framework for explaining why the United Nations, particularly the Security Council, continues to struggle as an effective actor in resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Previous research has tended to examine UNSC failure in general terms. For example, Weiss (2016) provides a comprehensive critique of UN institutional deficiencies, while Waltz's structural realism offers a theoretical framework for understanding state behavior in anarchic systems (Tavares et al., 2026). However, existing studies have not systematically linked (1) the specific geopolitical mechanisms of P5 veto behavior, (2) the resulting institutional enforcement weaknesses, and (3) the theoretical lens of structural realism within the specific context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Gowan (2026) reporting documents individual veto events without a systematic theoretical framing. Morris (2001) provides historical context without addressing institutional dynamics (Degani, 2026). Smith (2007) examines the conflict's history without applying structural IR theory (Rich, 2026). This study fills that gap by integrating veto power dynamics, penholdership analysis, and enforcement failure within a unified structural realist framework, providing a systematic analysis of UNSC institutional failure in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict that connects empirical patterns to theoretical mechanisms.

Following this characterization, this study addresses the fundamental question of why UN Security Council intervention in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been ineffective. The research focuses primarily on two aspects: the influence of geopolitical interests of permanent Security Council members, particularly through veto power, and the weaknesses of UN institutional mechanisms in implementing international law. The aim of this study is to examine in detail how these two factors contribute to the UN's failure to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by employing structural realism as the central theoretical framework. The findings are expected to broaden scholarly understanding of global politics and encourage debate on the necessity of structural reform of the UN, particularly the Security Council, in order to better fulfill its collective security mandate.

METHOD

The research method in this journal used a qualitative approach, combining category-oriented content analysis and reflective thematic analysis to identify narrative patterns, framing, and normative justifications in UN Security Council documents related to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. A qualitative design was selected for its capacity to provide in-depth explanatory analysis

of a theoretically significant phenomenon. Primary data included UN Security Council official verbatim records and resolution texts (available through undocs.org), US veto voting records (UN Journal/UNSC official documents), and UNSC Report penholdership data. Secondary data consisted of academic monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles on structural realism, UNSC institutional design (Tavares et al., 2026; Weiss, 2016), and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Degani, 2026; Morris, 2001; Rich, 2026; Smith, 2007). Supplementary data, including materials from (Fawcett, 2025; Gowan, 2026), and (Latino, 2025), were used for recent event documentation rather than theoretical grounding.

The unit of analysis was the UN Security Council's intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from 2010 to 2024, chosen to capture a period with a documented and verifiable pattern of veto use. The analysis process was carried out in stages, starting with data familiarization, followed by the development of coding frameworks based on key concepts (such as veto power, penholder system, representation, national interest, and power distribution), and proceeding to iterative coding and cross-source thematic mapping. Validity and reliability were maintained through source triangulation, peer debriefing, audit trails, and peer checks. At the same time, the contextual validity of findings was strengthened by references to UN Security Council official reports, Security Council Report data, and reputable international media sources. This approach allowed for a structured synthesis of findings using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's matrix and network analysis techniques to connect empirical evidence with theoretical propositions within the framework of structural realism and institutional constraints.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Veto Rights and Geopolitical Importance

The veto power wielded by the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) the US, Russia, China, France, and the UK is more than a mere procedural tool, but rather a tangible representation of the chasm in the distribution of power in the international system. The serial American veto in the Israel-Palestine case highlights how geostrategic interests can override international humanitarian norms that form the basis of the Council's legitimacy. For example, on 18 October 2023, the US vetoed a Brazilian draft resolution aimed at ending violence and protecting civilians in Gaza. Despite the fact that the draft was supported by 12 out of 15 members of the Council, the US decision revealed that the logic of strategic interests can outweigh the spirit of international consensus (Demir, 2025; Mantilla, 2025). This example illustrates how the veto has evolved into a hegemonic tool that regularly prevents the resolution of conflicts.

The use of the US veto on the Palestinian issue is also consistent with its long-term geopolitical, geostrategic, and geofinancial preferences. The US has used its veto power at least 12 times from 2010 to 2023 against UN resolutions on Palestine addressing the humanitarian situation. This track record illustrates a pattern whereby US foreign policy often prioritizes defending Israel as a strategic partner over the demands of the majority of Council members for humanitarian intervention (Karreth & Kryzaneck, 2026; Muthukumar, 2025). This practice shows that the veto is not a balancing tool but is actively used to sustain a geopolitical status quo favoring selective interests. In this sense, the veto acts as an impediment to collective action, leaving non-P5 member states frustrated by diplomatic paralysis.

This phenomenon is apparent from a structural realist perspective, which holds that international institutions lack true autonomy and instead function as arenas of power competition among great powers. Normatively, the Security Council depends on the material capabilities and political will of its members to exercise its mandate in service of global peace. The veto thus functions as a tool to prevent the Council from acting against the core interests of great powers, particularly as the US maintains its hegemonic influence in the Middle East. This exposes a fundamental tension in international institutions: whether the Security Council is a collective enforcement mechanism or merely a reflection of the global power structure (Muthukumar, 2025).

The cumulative effect of repeated veto use in the Israeli-Palestinian case has been documented as contributing to a measurable erosion of UNSC credibility. UN Secretary-General Guterres stated in October 2023 that the Security Council's failure to act in Gaza represented a

credibility crisis for the organization (Bloxham, 2026). A Akemu et al. (2025) report documented that nearly all vetoes cast in the past decade concerned Syria, Palestine, and Ukraine, identifying a pattern of consistent protection of strategic allies over humanitarian response. The failure to pass substantive resolutions in the Palestinian case, rather than upholding international justice, has effectively reduced the Security Council to a mechanism dependent on major-power alignments rather than an instrument of justice. Each time universal humanitarian principles are overridden by a geopolitical veto, the Council's legitimacy as a multilateral institution is further undermined. This reinforces the global perception that the Council is increasingly irrelevant in contemporary conflicts, entangled in power politics and narrow strategic interests of the P5. In this sense, the Security Council no longer functions as a bulwark of peace but rather as a political theatre preserving structural imbalances in the international system.

Weaknesses of Resolution Enforcement Mechanisms

In practice, however, there exists a marked disparity between the normative expectation of the Security Council as the ultimate authority in upholding international peace and security (as reflected in the UN Charter) and the reality of implementation of peacekeeping and enforcement on the ground. The historical record epitomized by Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), calling for the withdrawal of Israel from territories occupied in 1967 and the initiation of a peace negotiation process demonstrates that, in the absence of enforcement mechanisms, resolutions become largely declarative instruments. Without sanctions or coercive measures, targeted states may ignore resolutions, especially when they enjoy political backing from permanent members. Hence, resolutions intended as mechanisms for conflict resolution lose effectiveness, reaffirming that the Council's authority is often more symbolic than substantive (Scherzinger, 2023).

Such structural weakness becomes even more pronounced when major political developments in powerful states influence resolution outcomes. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the unequivocal support provided by the United States to Israel renders any resolution perceived as adverse to its ally largely unfeasible. Even when resolutions are adopted and humanitarian mechanisms such as UN-mandated safe spaces are promoted, implementation often fails due to the absence of effective monitoring and enforcement. Thus, international standards contained in resolutions are caught in a "pseudo-consensus," i.e., while rhetoric suggests inclusiveness, geopolitical realities ensure that enforcement is shaped by permanent members. This has transformed the Council into an instrument of powerful states rather than a forum reflecting collective global interest.

Some recent texts reflect similar limitations, such as Resolution 2720, adopted by consensus in December 2023 on the provision of humanitarian assistance into Gaza. Thirteen members voted in favor of the resolution, with the United States and Russia abstaining, indicating the limits of commitment to implementation. While the resolution may represent diplomatic progress, ongoing political and security conditions on the ground continue to hinder effective aid delivery. This demonstrates the Council's inability to compel compliance with even formally adopted resolutions (Hoffmann, 2022). As a result, resolutions function less as operational tools and more as instruments of formal legitimacy. This situation reflects structural realist logic, in which global governance is shaped by power distribution rather than universal principles. Consequently, implementation failure is not merely technical but reflects systemic asymmetry and hegemonic dynamics in international politics.

Impact on the Effectiveness of UN Intervention

The interplay between geopolitical use of veto power and structural weaknesses within the Security Council has undermined the UN's role in peace-making. In theory, the veto is intended as a check against domination by any single actor. However, in practice, it is used by great powers to safeguard national and geopolitical interests. For instance, the US regularly exercises its veto privilege to shield Israel from adverse resolutions, while Russia uses its veto to block measures perceived as favoring Western blocs, particularly in Syria and Ukraine. This trend demonstrates that the veto no longer functions as a stabilizing mechanism but rather as an instrument of power politics contributing to global polarization (Isanga, 2025).

This pattern of interest-based veto use is transforming the Security Council from a neutral forum into a domain of geopolitical contestation. Member states increasingly lose confidence in the Council when resolutions reflect strategic calculations of major powers rather than collective humanitarian interests. This deepens the gap between the universal ideals of the UN Charter and the realities of global power politics characterized by violence and instability. Instead of fostering global solidarity, the Council often reflects fragmented world politics in which hegemonic interests take precedence over peace.

This trend has serious consequences for the credibility of the United Nations. Combined with diplomatic practices that prioritize protecting allies over preventing humanitarian crises, it has contributed to the perception that the Security Council is losing both moral authority and political capacity to function as an engine for global peace. This is reflected in declining peacekeeping missions, reduced field resources, and growing skepticism among UN stakeholders regarding impartiality (Hösli et al., 2021; Mays, 2025). The fact that many resolutions fail to progress beyond declarative stages without meaningful implementation reinforces the perception that UN intervention is more symbolic than operational.

As it stands, the most accurate term to describe this intrinsic contradiction in UN governance is “geopolitical veto–institutional weakness.” The Security Council is formally the highest authority in international law, yet in practice it remains constrained by the exclusive privileges of its five permanent members. Without systemic reform to limit veto power and strengthen enforcement mechanisms, the UN risks becoming a purely declarative institution vulnerable to legitimacy erosion, undermining the foundations of global multilateralism (AP News, 2024).

The observation that “Responsibility Not to Veto” proposals reflect an emerging normative movement but face structural resistance from P5 states, as evidenced by P5 responses to General Assembly Resolution 76/262, is an analytical finding, not a prescription. Thus, concrete reform recommendations are repositioned in the Conclusion as practically grounded implications of the study’s findings. This restructuring ensures that the Discussion remains analytically focused on explaining findings, while the Conclusion articulates their implications.

CONCLUSION

Analytically focused on two main structural explanations that highlight the systematic discretion inherent in UNSC intervention, as well as the failure of the UNSC to address the problems underlying this conflict rooted in the national interests of the permanent members of the UNSC (P5) due to the veto, the analysis further posits that flaws in the institutional design of the UNSC (limited global representativeness and weak enforcement mechanisms) have also contributed to its systematic failure to help resolve this conflict. In the words of a structural realist, there you have it the inexorable logic of anarchic international politics driving great powers to place their strategic interests above universal principles. The U.S., for instance, has used its veto dozens of times to shield Israel from UN resolutions critical of it, and similarly, Russia and China have tailored their respective use of the veto to preserve specific allies or broader geopolitical objectives. Hence, the UNSC appears to be more of a balance-of-power circus than a full-fledged peace system on the planet.

The UNSC needs not only increased legitimacy but also greater functional capacity, and structural reforms are also necessary to achieve both. Key to meaningful UNSC reform would be the expansion of permanent membership to include states that wield significant political and economic power, such as Brazil, India, Japan, and African countries. Since gridlock can stop decision-making, the veto power can be limited or reformed (e.g., the Responsibility Not to Veto or a double-majority mechanism). These reforms must also be accompanied by accountability measures such as General Assembly Resolution 76/262, which allows member states to hold the P5 accountable should they prevent the Council from taking action in the face of impending humanitarian crises. Lacking radical reform, the Security Council risks becoming too irrelevant to define global security governance for the twenty-first century. This study makes theoretical contributions to IR literature by providing empirical validation of Waltz’s structural realist prediction that great powers will use international institutions as instruments of national interest

rather than as autonomous multilateral authorities demonstrated through systematic documentation of U.S. veto-use data.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Agussalim contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, formal analysis, manuscript drafting, and corresponding author responsibilities. Ariesani Hermawanto contributed to the literature review, development of the theoretical framework, methodology formulation, data interpretation, and revision of the manuscript. Sucahyo Heriningsih contributed through research supervision, validation of findings, critical review of the manuscript, editing, and final approval of the version to be published. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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