



Research Paper

Challenges of the United Nations to Resolve the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Using Liberal Institutionalism (2000-2024)

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Abstract

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the longest running and most unsolvable crises in contemporary international affairs. Despite extensive diplomatic engagement, resolutions, and peace proposals, the United Nations (UN) has failed to resolve the conflict, particularly since 2000. This paper examines the institutional challenges faced by the UN in enabling conflict resolution through the lens of Liberal Institutionalism, a theory that highlights the importance of international organizations in fostering cooperation, building trust, and limiting anarchy among states. This study aims to determine why the UN has failed to find a long-term solution to the conflict despite its resources and international framework. Through qualitative analysis of key UN interventions, peace proposals, and pertinent resolutions, including the Golden Report, UNSC Resolutions 242, 2334, and the Quartet's activities the paper evaluates the effectiveness of the UN within several theoretical framework. These approaches includes the provision of credible information, enforcement of commitments, creation of focal points for coordination, promoting reciprocity, extension of the shadow in the future, and the use of issue-linkage strategies. The analysis reveals significant limitations in each area, stemming from power asymmetries, political fragmentation, and external interference by powerful member states. The findings suggest that although Liberal Institutionalism offers helpful resources for understanding institutional operations, but it falls short in explaining the deeply embedded political, historical, and identity based barriers to cooperation. This emphasizes the necessity of using a more complex framework to evaluate UN peacebuilding initiatives in polarized and asymmetrical conflicts.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Institutional Challenges, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Liberal Institutionalism, United Nations

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I. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains one of the most deeply rooted and internationally resonant conflicts of the modern era. Competing claims to territory, national identity, and statehood are at the heart of the dispute, which dates back to the early 20th century and grew more intense after the State of Israel was established in 1948. The roots of the conflict can be traced to earlier developments such as the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which supported the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and the 1947 UN Partition Plan, which proposed separate Jewish and Arab states but was rejected by Arab states and Palestinian Arabs.¹ The 1948 Arab-Israeli War following Israel's independence displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, creating a refugee crisis that remains unresolved, while the 1967 Six-Day War further altered the territorial balance as Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem.² With little progress made toward a long-term solution, the issue has seen numerous cycles of violence, failed negotiations, and deepening distrust over the last 20 years. A peaceful resolution remains elusive for international institutions, especially the United Nations (UN), despite their persistent involvement.³

The urgency of examining this failure has grown significantly in the post-2000 era. The declining effect of multilateral peace initiatives is illustrated by the ongoing growth of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, the collapse of Palestinian political leadership, and the growing marginalisation of the UN's role by bilateral and regional agreements such as the Abraham Accords. Earlier attempts at peace, such as the Oslo Accords of 1993, established the Palestinian Authority and raised hopes of a two-state solution but failed to resolve core issues such as borders, refugees, and the status of Jerusalem, leading to further disillusionment.⁴ Furthermore, because the UN finds it difficult to enforce its own resolutions or hold parties accountable, the legitimacy of international law and institutions has increasingly been questioned. These developments extend beyond the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, shaping global debates on governance and conflict resolution paradigms.⁵

¹ N Paech, "No Peace in the Middle East. On the Development of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Argument* 59, no. 1 (2017): 91–104, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85020747595&partnerID=40&md5=16ed9b6c370413c008abb6a2faa5f0fc>; Cathy Hartley and Paul Cossali, *Survey of Arab-Israeli Relations, A Survey of Arab-Israeli Relations* (Routledge, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203501429>.

² Sami H. Miaari and Massimiliano Cali, "Introduction to the Special Issue "Political Economic Perspectives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Defence and Peace Economics* 31, no. 8 (November 16, 2020): 887–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2020.1827359>.

³ Tana Johnson and Andrew Heiss, "Liberal Institutionalism," in *International Organization and Global Governance*, ed. Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, 2nd ed. (Second edition. | Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.: Routledge, 2018), 123–34, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315301914-11>.

⁴ S McDowell and M Braniff, "An Intractable Conflict and an Irreconcilable Past: Contesting the 'Other' through Commemoration in Israel/Palestine," in *Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies* (University of Ulster, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 102–24, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314857_7; Deborah J. Gerner, *One Land, Two Peoples: The Conflict over Palestine, One Land, Two Peoples: The Conflict over Palestine* (University of Kansas, United States: Taylor and Francis, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429494918>.

⁵ Andrew Moravcsik, "Liberal Theories of International Law," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on International Law and International Relations* (Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, United States: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 83–118, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139107310.006>; James L Richardson, "The Ethics of Neoliberal Institutionalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Australian National University, Australia: Oxford University Press, 2009), 222–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199219322.003.0012>.

Against this backdrop, institutional theories of international relations offer important analytical tools. Liberal institutionalism, in particular, emphasizes the role of institutions in facilitating cooperation and peace among states. Emerging in the 1970s as a corrective to realism, it argues that even in an anarchic international system, institutions can foster trust by reducing uncertainty, managing interdependence, and providing mechanisms for compliance.⁶ This framework also carries implicit normative commitments, particularly in promoting cooperation and shared values across states.⁷ Although critics point out that it may underestimate power asymmetries, liberal institutionalism remains influential in explaining the persistence and limits of international law and institutions.⁸

To better understand the UN's challenges in this conflict, this paper employs Liberal Institutionalism as a guiding framework. By analyzing the institutional dimension of the UN's role, the paper seeks to evaluate how far international organizations can manage interdependence, promote compliance, and influence state behavior in deeply divided conflicts. This approach is particularly relevant for examining why, despite the presence of institutional structures, negotiations continue to collapse and mistrust between the parties deepens.⁹

In focusing on the UN between 2000 and 2024, this research also investigates the changing institutional environment in which the conflict unfolds. From the weakening authority of Security Council resolutions to the rise of alternative peace mechanisms outside the UN framework, institutional capacity and credibility are at the center of the analysis. In this sense, liberal institutionalism provides a lens through which both the limitations and possibilities of international organizations can be assessed.¹⁰

Previous studies have offered important insights into why the UN has struggled to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Uriya Shavit examined the structural imbalances within the peace process, showing how unequal power dynamics and demographic factors have discouraged compromise and undermined negotiations.¹¹ Alexander V. Krylov analyzed the UN's role in the Middle East settlement, arguing that institutional sluggishness and political constraints have made effective resolution nearly impossible.¹² Colter Louwerse focused on the U.S. veto in the UN Security Council, demonstrating how American influence has consistently blocked international consensus on a two-state solution.¹³ While these studies

⁶ Johnson and Heiss, "Liberal Institutionalism"; Richardson, "The Ethics of Neoliberal Institutionalism."

⁷ R Howse, "Liberal Normative Theories of International Law and the Cognitive Turn," in *International Legal Theory and the Cognitive Turn* (International Law, NYU School of Law, United States: Oxford University Press, 2025), 131–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198909293.003.0007>.

⁸ Jürgen Rüländ, "Deepening ASEAN Cooperation through Democratization? The Indonesian Legislature and Foreign Policymaking," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 9, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 373–402, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcp010>.

⁹ Johnson and Heiss, "Liberal Institutionalism"; Moravcsik, "Liberal Theories of International Law."

¹⁰ Richardson, "The Ethics of Neoliberal Institutionalism"; Howse, "Liberal Normative Theories of International Law and the Cognitive Turn."

¹¹ Uriya Shavit, "The Failures of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: Balance and Imbalance," *The Journal for Interdisciplinary Middle Eastern Studies* 2 (2018): 5–22, <https://doi.org/10.26351/JIMES2-11>.

¹² Alexander V. Krylov, "The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible," in *Turning Points of World Transformation: New Trends, Challenges and Actors* (Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Institute of International Studies (MGIMOUiversity), Moscow, Russian Federation: Springer Nature, 2022), 139–55, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1758-5_9.

¹³ Colter Louwerse, "'Tyranny of the Veto': PLO Diplomacy and the January 1976 United Nations Security Council Resolution," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 33, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 303–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2022.2062127>.

highlight critical factors behind the UN's failures, few have systematically applied a Liberal Institutionalism framework to assess how institutional mechanisms themselves have contributed to the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is the gap this paper addresses.

The novelty of this study lies in applying Liberal Institutionalism to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a case where the UN has invested extensive resources yet failed to achieve resolution. Unlike most applications of the theory, which focus on economic interdependence or regional integration, this paper examines how institutional mechanisms function—or fail—in a protracted and asymmetric conflict. In doing so, it not only adapts Liberal Institutionalism to a different conflict setting but also contributes to theoretical and policy-oriented debates about the effectiveness of multilateral institutions in addressing long-standing disputes.

2. Method

This study applies a qualitative, theory-driven analytical approach to examine the challenges encountered by the United Nations in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between 2000 and 2024. Drawing on Liberal Institutionalism, the research identifies six institutional mechanisms (provision of information, credible commitment, focal points for coordination, shadow of the future, and issue linkage) and assesses how effectively they are applied through UN-led initiatives. Resolutions of the UN Security Council and General Assembly, UN fact-finding reports (such as the Goldstone Report), official statements from the Quartet, and institutional publications from UNRWA and OCHA are among the primary sources that are analysed in this study. These are complemented by peer-reviewed journal articles, expert commentary, and historical case documents. The objective is to evaluate institutional mechanisms existence as well as their effectiveness and limitations in promoting cooperation. The approach emphasizes how structural constraints, power imbalances, and political fragmentation hinder institutional functions, giving contextual interpretation of institutional performance priority over outcome-based evaluation. This approach enables a theoretically grounded yet empirically rich analysis and is suitable for illustrating the conflict's complex, multi-actor nature.

3. Finding and Analysis

3.1. Provision of Information

Liberal Institutionalism places a strong emphasis on how international organizations can help to reduce uncertainty through the provision of reliable and impartial information. It is expected of institutions like the United Nations to collect, verify, and share information that can promote cooperation and trust amongst parties in conflicts. But in the Israeli-Palestinian context, the UN's efforts to provide reliable information have been significantly undermined. For example, from as early as UN Security Council Resolution 242 in 1967, the organization has tried to frame peace through clear information about withdrawal and recognition, yet the resolution's ambiguous language created room for competing interpretations and hindered its effectiveness in reducing uncertainty.¹⁴ Similarly, the International Court of Justice's advisory

¹⁴ Nigel Ashton, "Searching for a Just and Lasting Peace? Anglo-American Relations and the Road to United Nations Security Council Resolution 242," *The International History Review* 38, no. 1 (January 18, 2016): 24–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2015.1018303>; J Dakwar, "People without Borders for Borders without

opinion on the legality of Israel's separation wall provided authoritative information but was largely ignored in practice, illustrating how informational mechanisms often fail without political will.¹⁵

The UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict's 2009 Goldstone Report, which examined alleged violations of international law during the 2008-09 Gaza War, is a prime example. While the report aimed to present a balanced view of abuses by both Israel and Hamas, it was sharply rejected by both sides. Israel rejected the results as politically biased, claiming that the report minimized Hamas involvement in the conflict while disproportionately condemning Israeli military actions. However, the international community's inaction on the report's findings demoralized Palestinian factions and civil society.¹⁶ This was not an isolated incident; historically, UN committees and commissions, such as the Special Committee on Palestine in 1948 and the Palestine Commission of the early 1950s, also struggled to translate fact-finding into actionable outcomes, leaving informational outputs without meaningful enforcement.¹⁷ Moreover, proposals for peacekeeping or monitoring forces tied to UN reports, such as Maria J. Stephan's plan for international peacekeepers, were never realized, limiting the credibility of the UN's informational role.¹⁸

This polarization highlights a major problem for institutional information mechanisms: without trust, information provision is ineffective. The deeply rooted narratives and mistrust between the parties can make the evidence politically ineffective, even in reports which are methodically accurate. Consequently, the UN's informational role is weakened, making it unable to promote understanding between parties or reconciling divergent perspectives. The persistence of this mistrust has been exacerbated by the repeated use of the American veto in the Security Council, which has undermined attempts to transform UN-generated information into credible policy.¹⁹ The veto has reinforced Israeli skepticism about impartiality while fueling Palestinian frustration that even carefully verified UN information cannot lead to meaningful change, deepening the perception that information is politicized rather than neutral.

Additionally, the perception of institutional bias also makes things more difficult. Israel has regularly accused the UN of institutional bias, especially the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. Palestinians are also frustrated over the UN's limited enforcement of

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- People: Land, Demography, and Peacemaking under Security Council Resolution 242," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 37, no. 1 (2007): 62–78, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2007.37.1.62>.
- ¹⁵ M Bebec and C Achimescu, "In the shadow of the Great Wall: is there still hope for Israeli-Palestinian peace?," *Revista Romana de Drept International* 2022, no. 28 (2022): 31–38, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85187477542&partnerID=40&md5=b777e5ce3f09699ee643825541ed38f5>.
- ¹⁶ United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict" (A/HRC/12/48, September 25, 2009), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g09/158/66/pdf/g0915866.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ Abdelhamid Abdejljaber, "The UN and the Palestine Question: Security and Conflict in the Middle East," in *Changing Security Paradigm in West Asia: Regional and International Responses* (Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, United States: Taylor and Francis, 2022), 55–72, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003289807-5>; Jonathan Franco, "The Palestine Commission: The Forgotten Chapter in United Nations Peacemaking and Peacekeeping in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *Middle Eastern Studies* 60, no. 5 (September 2, 2024): 763–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2023.2280232>.
- ¹⁸ Maria J. Stephan, "The Case for Peacekeeping in the Occupied Palestinian Territories," *International Peacekeeping* 11, no. 2 (June 2004): 248–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1353331042000237265>.
- ¹⁹ Krylov, "The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible"; Louwerse, "'Tyranny of the Veto': PLO Diplomacy and the January 1976 United Nations Security Council Resolution."

its own findings, particularly with reference to the growth of Israeli settlements.²⁰ The UN's capacity to mediate the dispute in a credible and impartial manner is hampered by these factors. Scholars note that American dominance in shaping UN action since 1947 has often reinforced perceptions of partiality, making the UN appear less as an impartial information provider and more as a venue where great power politics distort facts for political ends.²¹ This inability to translate impartial reports into effective policies demonstrates the structural weakness of UN information mechanisms when credibility is challenged.

Therefore, even though liberal institutionalism assigns a strong emphasis on institutions ability to reduce information asymmetries, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows how political division and mistrust may undermine the value of even carefully analyzed institutional reports. The evolving geopolitical context, including shifts in U.S. policy under successive administrations and the regional dynamics of Arab-Israeli relations, has further weakened UN credibility as an impartial source of information.²² This confirms that in protracted and asymmetric conflicts, institutional information is not sufficient to reduce uncertainty when enforcement and legitimacy are absent.

3.2. Ensuring Credible Commitments

A core tenet of Liberal Institutionalism is that institution help states uphold agreements by making commitments credible. Institutions like the UN are expected to formalize negotiations through resolutions and follow-up mechanisms that ensure parties comply with agreed terms. In practice, however, the UN has had difficulty enforcing compliance in the Israeli-Palestinian context, making its resolutions essentially symbolic. For example, the 2003 "Roadmap for Peace" lacked institutionalized oversight and implementation mechanisms, which meant that even though it was endorsed by the Security Council, it failed to generate binding commitments from either side.²³ The UN's historical weakness in monitoring compliance highlights that the institution often provides aspirational frameworks without sufficient enforcement capacity.²⁴

Consider UN Security Council Resolutions 2334 (2016), which reaffirmed that Israeli settlements in the West Bank violated international law, and 242 (1967), which demanded Israel's withdrawal from occupied territory following the Six-Day War. Despite these, Israeli settlement expansion has persisted, frequently accelerating following significant international responses. The lack of tangible enforcement mechanisms has meant that these resolutions

²⁰ Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar, "Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer" (Middle East Research and Information Project, 2014), https://merip.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Primer_on_Palestine-IsraelMERIP_February2014final.pdf.

²¹ Danilo Di Mauro, *The UN and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: American Hegemony and UN Intervention since 1947*, *The UN and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: American Hegemony and UN Intervention since 1947* (Taylor and Francis, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203135280>; R P Barnidge, *Self-Determination, Statehood, and the Law of Negotiation: The Case of Palestine* (Department of History, Politics, and International Relations, Webster University, United States: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2016).

²² Fadhila Inas Pratiwi, Grienda Qomara, and M. Aryo R. Syarafi, "Us Involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Solution or Problem?," *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2020): 57–108, [https://doi.org/10.6185/TJIA.V.202007_24\(1\).0002](https://doi.org/10.6185/TJIA.V.202007_24(1).0002); Jim Zanotti, "Israel and the Palestinians: Prospects for a Two-State Solution," in *Palestinian History, Politics and International Relations* (Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2010), 115–53, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84892082358&partnerID=40&md5=b16831aa287b21a93743288c98a392c4>.

²³ Stephan, "The Case for Peacekeeping in the Occupied Palestinian Territories."

²⁴ Krylov, "The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible."

carry limited coercive power.²⁵ This pattern is further reinforced by historical precedent: the UN Partition Plan of 1947 and subsequent resolutions consistently failed to prevent territorial expansion and settlement activity, demonstrating the absence of credible deterrents against non-compliance.²⁶

The internal politics of the UN Security Council, especially the United States frequent use of the veto power to block measures perceived to be unfavorable to Israel, are a major contributing factor to this weakness.²⁷ The UN's capacity to penalize non-compliance or reward cooperation is severely weakened by this fundamental restriction. Without credible consequences, the incentives for either side to adhere to UN resolutions are minimal. Between 1974 and 2014, U.S. dominance of the Middle East peace process effectively sidelined UN-led initiatives, while Washington's repeated abandonment of collective agreements further eroded the credibility of UN resolutions.²⁸

On the Palestinian side, internal fragmentation between Fatah (in the West Bank) and Hamas (in Gaza) present another challenge. The Palestinian Authority (PA), led by Fatah, is formally acknowledged by the UN as the authorized representation. However, the credibility of any promises made by the PA is undermined by Hamas, which rules Gaza and opposes important UN-led talks.²⁹ The UN finds it challenging to obtain united Palestinian compliance as a result of this fragmentation, which further reduces the effectiveness of institutional guarantees. This fragmentation aligns with the False Readiness Theory, which posits that when at least one party is unwilling to genuinely pursue peace, negotiated outcomes collapse; scholars argue that both Israeli settlement expansion and Palestinian factionalism illustrate a lack of readiness to honor institutional commitments.³⁰

Making peace agreements credible and binding is one of the crucial roles that liberal institutionalism identifies as being performed by the UN when there are no enforceable sanctions or unified representation. The failure of the UN to translate its resolutions into enforceable commitments has undermined its institutional credibility over decades, with the Palestinian right to self-determination remaining unfulfilled despite repeated reaffirmation in UN documents.³¹ This demonstrates that without robust enforcement and genuine cooperation from major powers, the UN's role in ensuring credible commitments is severely limited.

²⁵ United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2334" (S/RES/2334, December 23, 2016), <https://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/SRES2334-2016.pdf>.

²⁶ Abdejljaber, "The UN and the Palestine Question: Security and Conflict in the Middle East"; Abdelrahman Alasttal and Abdul Maasba Magassing, "The Role of the United Nations in Realizing the Right of the Palestinian People to Self-Determination," *Human Rights* 17, no. 2 (2022): 173–98, <https://doi.org/10.22096/hr.2023.1983173.1542>.

²⁷ Beinun and Hajjar, "Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer."

²⁸ Krylov, "The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible"; Michael Atallah, "The International Community's Role and Impact on the Middle East Peace Process," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 81–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2020.1855596>.

²⁹ Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Polity, 2010).

³⁰ Adi Schwartz and Eytan Gilboa, "The False Readiness Theory: Explaining Failures to Negotiate Israeli-Palestinian Peace," *International Negotiation* 28, no. 1 (June 9, 2022): 126–54, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10059>; Zanoliti, "Israel and the Palestinians: Prospects for a Two-State Solution," 2010.

³¹ Alasttal and Magassing, "The Role of the United Nations in Realizing the Right of the Palestinian People to Self-Determination"; Abdejljaber, "The UN and the Palestine Question: Security and Conflict in the Middle East."

3.3. Focal Points for Coordination

According to liberal institutionalism, organizations can align expectations, identify cooperative routes, and eliminate ambiguity in negotiation processes by using international institutions as stable as “focal points” that act as coordination platforms. However, both internal asymmetries between the conflicting parties and external divides among important international actors have continuously hampered institutional cooperation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of the UN’s greatest shortcomings as a focal point is its inability to ensure oversight and implementation mechanisms that could transform declarations into coordinated action. The absence of such mechanisms, particularly evident in the failure of the 2003 “Roadmap for Peace,” has demonstrated that symbolic frameworks cannot substitute for enforceable coordination structures.³²

In order to coordinate international efforts for a two-state solution, the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, and Russia formed the Quartet on the Middle East in 2002. It resulted in the 2003 Roadmap for Peace, which outlined a step by step strategy for resolving conflict and creating a Palestinian state. However, the Quartet’s coordinating function was soon undermined by internal conflicts. The EU and UN’s more critical position on settlement activities frequently contrasted with the United States persistent diplomatic support for Israel, especially under successive administrations.³³ Because of these differences, the Quartet found it challenging to communicate as a whole or to give the parties engaged consistent incentives and repercussions. Ambiguity in UN resolutions, such as Resolution 242, further exacerbated coordination challenges by creating loopholes that parties exploited to harden bargaining positions rather than compromise.³⁴

Israel has benefited from these divisions by ignoring larger global frameworks and only interacting with more accommodative actors (primarily the US).³⁵ This strategy undermines the coherence of international diplomacy and the institutional authority of the UN. Scholars note that U.S.-brokered bilateral peace deals with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) bypassed multilateral frameworks, setting a precedent for Israel to prefer selective engagement, which fragmented international coordination.³⁶ This dynamic has left the UN increasingly sidelined in mediation efforts, as Israel leverages divisions among international actors to dilute collective pressure.

³² Stephan, “The Case for Peacekeeping in the Occupied Palestinian Territories”; Krylov, “The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible.”

³³ United Nations, “A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” (S/2003/529, May 7, 2003), <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/il20ps030430performancebasedroadmaptwo-statesolution.pdf>.

³⁴ Omar M. Dajani, “Forty Years without Resolve: Tracing the Influence of Security Council Resolution 242 on the Middle East Peace Process,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 37, no. 1 (2007): 24–38, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2007.37.1.24>; Atallah, “The International Community’s Role and Impact on the Middle East Peace Process.”

³⁵ Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (UPNE, 2008).

³⁶ Krylov, “The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible”; Asaf Siniver, “The EU and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” in *The European Union as a Global Conflict Manager* (Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 80–91, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84906295300&partnerID=40&md5=6c6b3139864c774784ab05f6ea590c44>.

Furthermore, the disparity in authority between Israel and Palestinian Authority made the coordination issues worsen. While the Palestinians, split between Fatah and Hamas, find it difficult to present a united negotiation position, Israel has substantial bargaining strength due to its greater military capabilities, financial influence, and strategic ties.³⁷ Because of this imbalance, coordinating forums like the UN or the Quartet are frequently tilted structurally in Israel's favor, undermining the legitimacy of any multilateral effort. Adding to this, strong U.S.-Israel relations—particularly during the Trump administration—reinforced Israel's bargaining advantage and deepened Palestinian disillusionment with multilateral diplomacy.³⁸ This asymmetry highlights how internal Palestinian divisions and external patron-client ties skew coordination forums away from balanced mediation.

Consequently, great power politics and local asymmetries have severely limited the UN's actual involvement, despite its theoretical capacity to operate as a focal point for negotiations. This highlights a significant practical shortcoming of liberal institutionalism. Instead of serving as a platform that harmonizes competing international interests, the UN has often been reduced to a stage for rhetorical posturing, with limited follow-through in practice. The involvement of emerging powers like China, whose diplomacy in the Middle East prioritizes balanced economic ties over active conflict resolution, further fragments coordination, leaving the UN unable to consolidate a unified front.³⁹

3.4. Facilitation of Reciprocity

Institutions promote cooperation by enabling reciprocal behavior, in which states match each other's concessions with equal efforts, in addition to enforcing the law. Reciprocity is emphasized by liberal institutionalism as a means of fostering trust, deter defection, and strengthening the commitment to peace. However, the UN has failed to establish or sustain a reciprocal framework in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leading to several diplomatic failures. The problem can be traced back to the UN's earliest interventions, including the 1947 Partition Plan, which failed to foster reciprocal compromises and instead entrenched radicalization on both sides, setting a precedent for mistrust and cycles of retaliation.⁴⁰ These historical missteps highlight that the absence of enforceable reciprocity mechanisms has been embedded in the conflict since its inception.

The 2003 Roadmap for Peace, supported by the UN and the Quartet, illustrates this challenge. Israel was intended to stop building settlements and ease restrictions on movement, while Palestinian authorities were supposed to reduce violence and reorganize their security forces. Both sides didn't follow through in reality. While factions like Hamas launched retaliatory rocket attacks, Israel persisted in expanding settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, frequently claiming security concerns.⁴¹ The process was disrupted by the lack of

³⁷ Beinun and Hajjar, "Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer."

³⁸ A. Davydov and L. Samarskaya, "The U.S.-Israel 'Special Relations': Structural Foundations and Trump Factor," *World Economy and International Relations* 64, no. 10 (2020): 40–51, <https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2020-64-10-40-51>; George Giacaman, "Is a Just and Lasting Peace Possible?," *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no. 3 (September 29, 2016): 447–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1126388>.

³⁹ Mordechai Chaziza, "China's Policy on the Middle East Peace Process after the Cold War," *China Report* 49, no. 1 (February 26, 2013): 161–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445513479460>; Siniver, "The EU and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict."

⁴⁰ Abdejljaber, "The UN and the Palestine Question: Security and Conflict in the Middle East"; David Tal, *War in Palestine, 1948: Strategy and Diplomacy*, *War in Palestine, 1948: Strategy and Diplomacy* (Tel Aviv University, Israel: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203499542>.

⁴¹ United Nations, "A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict."

coordinated and trust-building efforts. Even when economic or governance incentives are incorporated into peace initiatives, they frequently represent donor priorities rather than local realities, resulting in dependency rather than reciprocity. The UN's inability to enforce the terms of the Roadmap, or to penalize violations, underscored the absence of credible reciprocity structures. As scholars argue, without enforcement tools, resolutions such as the Roadmap become aspirational documents rather than binding frameworks.⁴² Even when economic aid was included, it often reflected donor-driven priorities rather than mechanisms that incentivized mutual concessions, generating dependency instead of reciprocity.⁴³

The UN was unable to force either party to keep its end of the agreement because it lacked the oversight tools and the power to ensure compliance. There were no repercussions for infractions, even when ceasefire agreements were mediated. The actors were never able to build confidence since there were no reliable institutional means to monitor, reward, or punish reciprocal behavior.⁴⁴ Repeated negotiation failures, from the Oslo Accords to Annapolis, illustrate how promises made under UN or internationally endorsed frameworks were rarely honored in practice.⁴⁵ Moreover, separate peace treaties such as those between Israel and Egypt (1979) and Israel and Jordan (1994) showed how the U.S. could secure reciprocity in bilateral contexts while the UN lacked leverage in the Palestinian track.⁴⁶

Moreover, reciprocity was hindered by the different political incentive schedules. Hardline viewpoints were frequently rewarded in Israeli domestic politics, while Palestinian factions found credibility in resistance narratives. In this context, even minor cooperative actions from one party were often met by suspicion or hostility from the other exactly what reciprocity is supposed to prevent.⁴⁷ Settlement expansion continues to be one of the most visible barriers to reciprocal compromises, as it is seen by Palestinians as a breach of good faith and by Israelis as a security necessity, thereby undermining the cycle of concession-for-concession.⁴⁸ At the same time, internal Palestinian divisions between Fatah and Hamas limit their ability to reciprocate constructively, since gestures toward negotiation are often undermined by competing narratives of resistance and legitimacy.⁴⁹

The disintegration of reciprocal dynamics demonstrates the UN's limitations in establishing long-term cooperation. Negotiations have stopped in the absence of reciprocal compromises or institutional incentives to reward them, revealing yet another weakness in the liberal institutionalist model. Instead of facilitating reciprocity, the UN has largely presided

⁴² Stephan, "The Case for Peacekeeping in the Occupied Palestinian Territories"; Krylov, "The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible."

⁴³ Anne Le More, "Killing with Kindness: Funding the Demise of a Palestinian State," *International Affairs* 81, no. 5 (October 2005): 981–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2005.00498.x>.

⁴⁴ Kenneth A. Oye, "Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies," *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (October 13, 1985): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010349>.

⁴⁵ Barnidge, *Self-Determination, Statehood, and the Law of Negotiation: The Case of Palestine*; Jim Zanotti, "Israel and the Palestinians: Prospects for a Two-State Solution," in *Israeli-Arab Negotiations and Issues* (Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2011), 57–95, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84895277315&partnerID=40&md5=d0a85af6b2d8d356a143a1856807e6e5>.

⁴⁶ Krylov, "The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible."

⁴⁷ Beinon and Hajar, "Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer."

⁴⁸ Galia Golan, "Obstacles and Possibilities for Peace between Israel and Palestine," *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 1 (2020): 33–46, <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2020221.03>; Abdejljaber, "The UN and the Palestine Question: Security and Conflict in the Middle East."

⁴⁹ A Aldeek and J Ding, "The Effective of the Chinese Position Towards the Achievement of Palestinian Political Goals," *An-Najah University Journal for Research - B (Humanities)* 38, no. 4 (2024): 741–72, <https://doi.org/10.35552/0247.38.4.2184>.

over a stagnating process in which each side waits for the other to act first. This has been exacerbated by shifting geopolitical contexts, such as U.S. inconsistency in supporting international agreements and China's more cautious approach to mediation, which together weaken the possibility of a unified external push for reciprocity.⁵⁰

3.5. Extension of the Shadow of the Future

One of the most compelling contributions of Liberal Institutionalism is the concept of the “shadow of the future”, the idea that sustained interactions and long-term incentives can encourage states to cooperate rather than defect. It is anticipated that institutions like the UN would deepen this shadow by involving parties in sustained initiatives like diplomatic engagement, capacity building, and peacebuilding. However, in Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both parties short-term political calculations have continuously weakened the UN's ability to extend the strategic time horizon. This weakness was visible from the UN's earliest involvement, beginning with the 1947–1948 partition efforts, which not only failed but also entrenched cycles of radicalization that still shape attitudes toward long-term engagement today.⁵¹ Moreover, the sluggishness of UN agencies in addressing violations, such as settlement expansion, further undermines its credibility in sustaining long-term peacebuilding frameworks.⁵²

The UN has made significant investments in long-term projects in the Palestinian territories over the years, such as development infrastructure, humanitarian assistance (notably through UNRWA), and governance training. The objectives of these initiatives are to promote stability, enhance living standards, and build the foundation for future statehood. However, the UN's long-term goals have often taken the form of institutional paternalism, which weakens local ownership of peace achievements by imposing governance rather than fostering it. Aid has frequently been deployed as a substitute for genuine political will, reinforcing dependency instead of empowering local leadership.⁵³ This mirrors wider Western policy failures, where donor strategies have been shaped by flawed assumptions that fail to address Palestinian structural needs, thereby limiting capacity building.⁵⁴

Even during peace negotiations, Israeli governments have regularly sought settlement growth as a means of coalition building and electoral mobilization. In the meantime, Palestinian factions like Hamas often intensify hostilities in order to bolster their legitimacy in Gaza, undermining the authority of entities who are more focused on negotiations, such as the Palestinian Authority.⁵⁵ The UN's long-term goal of cooperative peace is disrupted both situations by the need for immediate political benefits. This short-termism has been exacerbated by the absence of institutionalized oversight mechanisms within UN frameworks, such as the failure of the 2003 Roadmap to establish credible enforcement and compliance monitoring.⁵⁶ Additionally, fragmentation within Palestinian political leadership, coupled with

⁵⁰ Ibid.; Krylov, “The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible.”

⁵¹ Abdejljaber, “The UN and the Palestine Question: Security and Conflict in the Middle East.”

⁵² Krylov, “The UN and the Middle East Settlement—Mission: Impossible.”

⁵³ Le More, “Killing with Kindness: Funding the Demise of a Palestinian State.”

⁵⁴ Atallah, “The International Community's Role and Impact on the Middle East Peace Process”; Alastair Livingston, “EU Failures in Economic Relations: The Case of Israel and Palestine,” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 19, no. Issue 4 (December 1, 2014): 503–18, <https://doi.org/10.54648/EERR2014040>.

⁵⁵ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁵⁶ Stephan, “The Case for Peacekeeping in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”

regional spoilers like Iran's influence, has left the UN unable to sustain peacebuilding initiatives beyond episodic mediation attempts.⁵⁷

Liberal Institutionalism assumes that by securing nations in long-term cost benefit frameworks, institutions may foster stability. The shadow of the future, however is still too weak to change strategic conduct in the absence of significant enforcement or reputational repercussions. This leads to a pattern of failed discussions, stalled diplomatic attempts, and broken ceasefires. For example, despite the EU's economic involvement, its inability to align strategies with the political realities on the ground has left little long-term leverage.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, U.S. policy fluctuations, such as withdrawing from international agreements, further reduced the UN's ability to anchor parties in sustained cooperative frameworks.⁵⁹

The UN's peacebuilding mission is essentially aspirational if short-term incentives cannot be aligned with long-term objectives. Although it is a principle, the shadow of the future has not been effectively extended in practice. Civil society engagement through norms like UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security has been fragmented and polarized, preventing it from becoming a unifying long-term initiative in the conflict.⁶⁰ Furthermore, external geopolitical dynamics, including Iran's destabilizing influence and Washington's inconsistent diplomacy, have meant that the UN's peacebuilding strategies remain undercut by forces beyond its control.⁶¹

3.6. Failure of Issue Linkage

Issue linking, the tactic of merging several areas of cooperation (such as political reform, economic aid, and security assurances) to enhance the costs of defection and the benefits of compliance, is the final mechanism highlighted by liberal institutionalism. It is expected that institutions such as the United Nations would operationalize this through comprehensive peace strategies, in which collaboration in one area is encouraged by progress in another. However, because of entrenched mistrust, internal division, and shifting strategic priorities, the UN's attempts to link issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have produced limited results. This failure is evident in the UN's inability to design a comprehensive strategy that merges political negotiations with economic frameworks, such as the Paris Protocol under the Oslo Accords, which ultimately reinforced Palestinian economic dependence on Israel rather than fostering cooperation.⁶² Moreover, aid was often deployed as a substitute for

⁵⁷ Elliott Abrams and Michael Singh, "Spoilers: The End of the Peace Process," *World Affairs* 172, no. 2 (September 1, 2009): 69–76, <https://doi.org/10.3200/WAFS.172.2.69-76>.

⁵⁸ Livingston, "EU Failures in Economic Relations: The Case of Israel and Palestine."

⁵⁹ Steven A. Cook and Shibley Telhami, "Addressing the Arab-Israeli Conflict," in *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President* (Council on Foreign Relations, United States: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 131–58, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84901535817&partnerID=40&md5=c06dc6353f6dac1de2fbfc6a9093e8e5>; Zanolli, "Israel and the Palestinians: Prospects for a Two-State Solution," 2011.

⁶⁰ Elisabeth Marteu, "Local Strategies to Appropriate UNSC Resolution 1325 'Women, Peace and Security' in Israel-Palestine," in *The Globalization of Gender: Knowledge, Mobilizations, Frameworks of Action* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis, 2019), 144–64, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429200045-8>.

⁶¹ Abrams and Singh, "Spoilers: The End of the Peace Process"; Zanolli, "Israel and the Palestinians: Prospects for a Two-State Solution," 2011.

⁶² Robert Mason, "The Price of Peace: A Reevaluation of the Economic Dimension in the Middle East Peace Process," *The Middle East Journal* 67, no. 3 (July 15, 2013): 405–25, <https://doi.org/10.3751/67.3.14>.

genuine political reform, indirectly financing Israeli occupation policies instead of incentivizing compliance.⁶³

In Gaza and the West Bank, the UN and its allies have made repeated attempts to link humanitarian assistance and economic support to political negotiations and security assurances. For instance, aid to Gaza has often been contingent on a decrease in terrorist activity in the hopes that tangible advancements will encourage Hamas and other parties to behave peacefully. This tactic, nevertheless, has mostly failed. Israel's continued blockades and Gaza's economic isolation have neither resulted in a reductions in violence on increased willingness to negotiate. Instead, it may have strengthened Hamas's resistance posture.⁶⁴ Scholars note that international aid has at times been counterproductive, particularly when directed in ways that consolidated Israeli control over East Jerusalem and other contested areas, undermining reconciliation.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the absence of robust oversight mechanisms, such as those missing in the 2003 "road map," prevented the UN from ensuring compliance with agreed-upon peace plans.⁶⁶

At the same time, Israel has distanced itself from the Palestinian problem in regional diplomacy, seeking strategic normalization with Arab states through accords like the Abraham Accords. As major regional actors now choose bilateral frameworks that avoid the Palestinian issues, these patterns lessen the strategic significance of multilateral institutions like the UN. The perceived worth of UN-led international peace initiatives has decreased as result of these changes. The incentives the UN may offer, such as economic packages or international legitimacy, lose their significance as Israel increasingly avoids the UN framework. The shift toward fragmented international strategies has further marginalized the UN, as the European Union (EU) and other global actors have struggled to turn rhetorical commitments into concrete policy actions.⁶⁷ Recent analyses also stress that internal EU divisions and global multipolar competition have weakened international consensus, reducing the UN's ability to coordinate comprehensive issue-linking strategies.⁶⁸

In theory, issue linkage provides effective instruments to balance inequalities and increase the negotiation space. However, because of the parties intransigence and the UN's own limited authority, such measures have not been successfully implemented in practice. Issue linkage's collapse as functional institutional mechanism highlights one of liberal institutionalism's main limitations in situations where existential and ideological differences cannot be overcome by material incentives. Indeed, the inability to address core issues—such as settlements, borders, and Jerusalem's status—has repeatedly undermined attempts to merge political, economic, and security strategies into a single framework.⁶⁹ The result is a

⁶³ Le More, "Killing with Kindness: Funding the Demise of a Palestinian State."

⁶⁴ Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement*.

⁶⁵ As'Ad Ghanem, "The Impact of Incentives for Reconciliation in the Holy City – How International Aid for the Palestinians Contributed to the Expanding of Israeli Control over East Jerusalem," *Defence and Peace Economics* 31, no. 8 (November 16, 2020): 975–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2020.1762315>.

⁶⁶ Stephan, "The Case for Peacekeeping in the Occupied Palestinian Territories."

⁶⁷ Siniver, "The EU and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict."

⁶⁸ Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Soli Özel, "EU Policy towards the Israel-Palestine Conflict: The Limitations of Mitigation Strategies," *The International Spectator* 59, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 59–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2309664>.

⁶⁹ Zanotti, "Israel and the Palestinians: Prospects for a Two-State Solution," 2010; Zanotti, "Israel and the Palestinians: Prospects for a Two-State Solution," 2011.

cycle of stalled negotiations where material incentives cannot outweigh ideological divides, reinforcing the structural weaknesses of UN mediation efforts.⁷⁰

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide an explanation for why the UN has been unable to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 2000, despite its institutional resources and sustained diplomatic engagement. Through the lens of Liberal Institutionalism, the analysis examined six institutional mechanisms typically associated with effective international cooperation: provision of information, focal points, reciprocity, shadow of the future, and issue linkage. The findings demonstrate that although the UN has tried to apply these mechanisms, structural constraints, power asymmetries, political division, and a long-standing mistrust among the parties have caused the consistently fail.

The UN's institutional weaknesses in highly politicized and asymmetric conflicts are demonstrated by incapacity to produce compliance with resolutions, the fragmentation of Palestinian leadership, the dominance of US interests in the Security Council, and the instrumentalization of multilateral platforms by more powerful states. These difficulties show that, despite its analytical value, liberal institutionalism is insufficient to explain institutional inefficiency when short-term domestic, ideological, or geopolitical motivations outweigh long-term cooperation. The theory presume a willingness to work together that just does not exist in situations where power disparity and entrenched identity conflict are present.

As a recommendation, this paper suggests that future peacebuilding tactics shift toward hybrid institutional frameworks that integrate constructivist (identity narratives) and realist (power dynamics) insights with liberal processes. Instead of relying too much on the UN as a single broker, policymakers should fund multi-actor, regionally anchored forums that can collaborate with global institutions. Additionally, in order for the UN to take more decisive action in long-lasting crises where consensus is structurally prevented, more attention should be paid to institutional restructuring, especially with respect to veto power reform.

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⁷⁰ Atallah, "The International Community's Role and Impact on the Middle East Peace Process."

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