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The Role of the UN General Assembly

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Introduction

Since its inception seventy years ago, the United Nations General Assembly has been a forum for lofty declarations, sometimes audacious rhetoric, and rigorous debate over the world's most vexing issues, from poverty and development to peace and security. As the deliberative and representative organ of the United Nations, the assembly holds general debate in the UN's New York headquarters from September to December, with special sessions convened thereafter as required.

The seventieth session of the General Assembly will open on September 15, 2015, with heads of state and government convening for the general debate on September 28. This year marks the target date for the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs), which were established following the General Assembly's fifty-fifth session in 2000. In 2015, member states will look to set a "[transformative](#)" post-2015 development agenda, with a particular focus on sustainable development. In August 2015, ahead of the opening of the seventieth General Assembly, member states [reached final agreement \(PDF\)](#) on a set of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including "eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions."

As in the past, the official agenda is likely to be overshadowed by global crises. This year, the general debate and meetings on the sideline of the debate are likely to address issues like advancements made by the [self-declared Islamic State](#), the [global migration crisis](#), the [conflict in Ukraine](#), the Syrian civil war, and the Iran nuclear deal.

What is the UN General Assembly?

The [UN General Assembly \(UNGA\)](#) is the only universally representative body of the five principal organs of the [United Nations](#). The other major bodies are the [Security Council](#), the [Economic and Social Council](#), the [Secretariat](#), and the [International Court of Justice](#). As delineated in the [Charter](#) of the United Nations, the function of the General Assembly is to discuss, debate, and make recommendations on a range of subjects pertaining to international peace and security—including development, disarmament, human rights, international law, and peaceful arbitration between disputing nations.

It elects the nonpermanent members of the Security Council and other bodies such as the Human Rights Council, and appoints the [secretary-general](#) based on the Security Council's recommendation. It considers reports from the other four organs of the United Nations, assesses

the financial situations of member states, and approves the UN budget—its most concrete role. The assembly also works with the Security Council to elect the judges of the International Court of Justice.

What is the General Assembly's membership?

All 193 UN member states have one vote in the General Assembly. The assembly's president changes with each annual session and is elected by the body itself. The president of the seventieth session is Mogens Lykketoft, speaker of the parliament of Denmark. The presidency follows a pattern of regional rotation and, though not formally delineated in the UN Charter or the assembly's rules of procedure, the president **may not be a national** of any of the veto-wielding permanent five members of the Security Council.

Resolutions need a two-thirds majority to pass, and voting blocs often form around groups of like-minded states such as **the G77**, a loose coalition of member states from the developing world. In addition, the UN's **nonmember observer states**, which include the Vatican and Palestine, have the right to speak at assembly meetings but cannot vote on resolutions.

Membership can at times be a contentious issue. Taiwan has been **denied UN membership** for more than two decades due to objections from China, which holds a permanent seat on the Security Council and considers Taiwan part of its sovereign territory. Palestine's status in the UN has also been controversial. The 2011 General Assembly session was dominated by discord surrounding Palestine's bid to become a member state, which stalled in the Security Council after the United States **vowed to veto**. However, at the 2012 General Assembly, **member states passed a resolution**, 138-9 (41 abstained), to upgrade the Palestinian Authority's status from nonmember observer entity status to nonmember observer *state* status. This change gives the territory, which has disputed statehood, a similar status to that of the Vatican and allows it to serve on various UN bodies.

Is the General Assembly in need of reform?

Yes, say many UN experts and leading donor nations. Efforts toward revitalizing the assembly's work are **focused primarily** (PDF) on increasing its power vis-à-vis the Security Council, as well as improving the quality of debate within the body. But the assembly has continued to resist deep-seated reforms, a reflection of the rift between its many members from the developing world, who want to retain a strong say in its deliberations, and wealthy nations that serve as its main donors. Small improvements do take place, however. In April 2007, the General Assembly, for the first time in sixty years, mandated a **significant overhaul** of the UN Internal Justice System, declaring it "slow, cumbersome, ineffective, and lacking in professionalism." The new system, which became functional in 2009, formally established a mediation division within the UN.

In 2005, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan presented a **report** that criticized the assembly for focusing excessively on consensus and passing resolutions that reflected "the lowest common denominator" of opinions. Michael W. Doyle, an international affairs expert who teaches at Columbia University, says the assembly is "an important institution that has never quite sorted out its role" in terms of being a truly deliberative, functional body, and has "insufficient deliberation and not enough genuine discussion." Doyle, who was an aide to Annan, says that the assembly could enhance its relevance by holding hearings with expert testimony. The assembly has made an effort in recent years to make its work more **substantive and relevant**. Resolution 59/313,

adopted in 2005, established a more influential role for the assembly's president to help achieve this goal.

Have members ever been punished by the assembly?

The General Assembly has the power to censure states for violating UN Charter principles. In the 1960s the assembly suspended the South African delegation because the country was practicing apartheid, in violation of both Security Council resolutions and principles of international law. South Africa was readmitted in 1994, following its democratic transition. In 1992, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, an assembly resolution denied Serbia and Montenegro the automatic inheritance of the former Yugoslavian seat, requiring it to apply for UN membership anew and forgo participation in assembly deliberations.

Israel was barred for many years from serving on UN commissions and panels because the slots were allotted according to geographical membership in one of the UN's five regional groups (Western European and Others, Eastern European, Asia-Pacific, African, and Latin American and Caribbean). Israel was not a member of any of them because the Arab states blocked its membership to the Asia group, which included other Middle Eastern states. This changed in 2000 when it was permitted to become a temporary member of the Western European and Others regional group, helped by the efforts of the United States and a number of European countries.

In August 2012, the General Assembly voted 133–12 to strongly denounce the Syrian government for the atrocities that have occurred since the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011. Thirty-three countries abstained from voting on the resolution, which was overwhelmingly backed by Western countries and their allies.

On March 27, 2014, following Crimea's March 16 referendum to leave Ukraine and join Russia, the General Assembly **adopted** a nonbinding resolution declaring the referendum invalid and the annexation of Crimea illegal. The resolution passed 100–11, with 58 abstentions.

What are some noteworthy assembly actions?

"The General Assembly is not an action body. It is just that—an assembly," says Ambassador Donald McHenry, former U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations. General Assembly resolutions are still significant, however, as indicators of member states' positions on a given issue. They can also prove useful by outlining organizing principles and proposing initiatives for member states, says McHenry. Some assembly actions have had more influence or incited more controversy than others:

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights.** In 1948, two years after the assembly convened its inaugural session, it promulgated the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, which contained thirty articles outlining global standards for human rights. A historic act, it proclaimed the "inherent dignity" and "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." The assembly called for the act to be "disseminated, displayed, read, and expounded" in the schools and educational institutions of all member countries. As the Chair of the UN's Commission on Human Rights, former U.S. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt helped to **draft and pass** the declaration, saying it "may well become the international Magna Carta for all men everywhere." Human rights issues remain contentious, however, and the **UN Human Rights Council** continues to face criticism for, among other

things, including among its members countries with poor human rights standards.

- **"Uniting for Peace" Resolution.** In 1950, the United States initiated another landmark resolution of the General Assembly, [Resolution 377 \(PDF\)](#), known as the "Uniting for Peace" resolution. It states that if the UN Security Council "fails to exercise its primary responsibility" of maintaining international peace and security, the General Assembly can and should take up the matter itself and urge member states to consider collective action. The assembly has enacted this resolution in a handful of instances, including the Suez Crisis of 1956. UN intervention in the crisis ultimately resulted in a cease-fire, troop withdrawal, and the establishment of the first United States Emergency Force (USEF), a peacekeeping force. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq provoked calls from a number of organizations, including the legal advocacy organization the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#), to have the General Assembly take up the issue and override the impasse of the Security Council, but the assembly did not do so.
- **Millennium Declaration.** The General Assembly proclaimed that its fifty-fifth session in 2000 would be designated the Millennium Assembly. At a summit that year, Annan unveiled the UN's [Millennium Declaration](#). It set forth what are known as the [Millennium Development Goals](#), a collection of "time-bound and measurable" targets for, among other things, reducing poverty, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, and improving access to primary education. Other proposals included a security agenda relating to international law, peace operations, and stopping small-arms trafficking; and an environmental agenda that urged "a new ethic of conservation and stewardship." The development goals continue to be invoked by many governments and NGOs as a way to spur more aid toward the developing world. Significant inroads have been made on education, infant mortality, and poverty. Yet as the 2015 deadline looms, the General Assembly will look ahead, setting new post-2015 goals for [sustainable development \(PDF\)](#).
- **'Zionism is Racism' Resolution of 1975.** Also known as [Resolution 3379](#), this is the assembly's most controversial resolution, in which it determined that "Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination." Yet the UN Partition Plan for Palestine approved of and helped create the state of Israel in 1947. In his address to the UN General Assembly on the day the resolution was passed, Israeli ambassador Chaim Herzog stated that, "for us, the Jewish people, this resolution based on hatred, falsehood and arrogance, is **devoid** of any moral or legal value." He then proceeded to tear a copy of the resolution in half. Resolution 3379 was eventually repealed, in 1991. In 2001 during the UN's [world conference on combatting racism](#) in Durban, South Africa, similar language on Zionism was introduced but later dropped. Fourteen countries, [including the United States](#), boycotted the 2011 meeting commemorating the Durban conference and while reasons varied by country, most expressed concerns of anti-Semitism.

Eleanor Albert and Leo Schwartz contributed to this report.

Additional Resources

The [United Nations](#) website publishes speeches, resolutions, and news for each General Assembly session.

CFR.org Editor Robert McMahon and Stewart Patrick, CFR's director of the International Institutions and Global Governance program, preview the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly in [this podcast](#).

This June 2014 [Congressional Research Service report](#) (pdf) takes a look at membership in the United Nations and the role of its agencies.

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