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Citation: Tudor, M. (2026). (Un)Frozen in Time: Temporal Politics, UN Peacekeeping, and the Gaza Exception. *Review of International Studies*, pp. 1-17. doi: 10.1017/s0260210526101740

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210526101740>

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

(UN)frozen in time: Temporal politics, UN peacekeeping, and the Gaza exception

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(Received 13 June 2025; revised 9 December 2025; accepted 16 December 2025)

Abstract

Scholars are increasingly interrogating distinctions between 'war time' and 'peace time', but what happens when time itself becomes a weapon of war or, even, a model of conflict response. Focusing on the case study of the first armed UN mission, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to Sinai and the Gaza Strip during the 1956 Suez Crisis, I examine the mission's attempt to replace the Israeli invasion and establish an open-ended international administration on the Gaza Strip. Using archival documents and photographs, this paper explores how UN operations in Palestine shaped temporal assumptions about the population and the conflict. I argue that the Suez Crisis ruptured an UN-managed temporal paralysis on the Gaza Strip which opened up opportunities for new futures in Gaza, as well as anxiety to return to controlled paralysis. Examining both Palestinian and international reactions to the UN occupation, I show how the 'Gaza exception' policy transformed international perceptions of the region – its past, present, and future. Thus, by focusing on the moment of the brief UN occupation, I argue that this international intervention shifted global perceptions of the strip from a 'frozen' site of past conflict into a space of unfinished ownership and future potentiality.

Keywords: occupation; Palestine; peace; peacekeeping; time; United Nations

‘[...]

Deadline imposed

Tension grows

Deadline goes.

UN repeats

UN repeats

UN repeats.

[...]

- ‘The War Process’ by Benjamin Zephania

Introduction

On 5 February 2025, US President Donald Trump gave a press conference with Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu to announce his plans to ‘take over the Gaza Strip’ as a method of conflict resolution in the Middle East.¹ His offer proposed dismissing the history of protracted displacement and to instead focus on transforming the region into an exclusive resort and beach for super-wealthy tourists. He noted that this plan would require further displacement of Palestinians on the strip, implicitly associating ethnic cleansing with a peaceful – and profitable – future for the region. For Trump, the combination of future capitalist development and the absence of Palestinians in Gaza was the key to ending the violence in the region, an interpretation most often rooted in the imperialism of Zionist ideology and the expansionist settler colonial mindset from the early twentieth century.² As much as his plan affirms Zionist desires for territorial expansion, it is also part of a co-constitutive process of liberal internationalist sense-making and interventionism in Palestine which intensified after the Nakba, the violent displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes in May 1948 by settlers and paramilitary groups to create the Israeli state. This plan has since evolved into UN Resolution 2803 which authorised the creation of an international transitional administration – or ‘Board of Peace’ – in November 2025. The recent popularity of this ‘international administration’ proposal underscores that in order to understand Zionist thought and practice today we must look beyond Israel to other powerful actors, especially those with liberal authority like the UN. Through re-examining past interventions we can better contextualise international imaginaries of the future in the Israel/Palestine context and trace the assumptions of Palestinian temporality (and temporariness) that they are built upon.

In contextualising the temporal politics of contemporary injustice for Palestinians in this longer history, we can look to the immediate post-Suez Crisis for insight in how Zionist logic has been long enabled and legitimised by field-based liberal internationalist actors and agencies. This article focuses on the UN’s short-lived occupation of Gaza following the 1956 Israeli invasion during the Suez Crisis – or the ‘Gaza exception’. By examining this international administration, I argue that the UN’s failed occupation transformed temporal assumptions of the conflict, not only violating the right of return, but also placing blame for the protracted conflict on ‘embittered’ Palestinians. The UN’s ‘Gaza exception’ framed the strip as an unanswered territorial problem for the future rather than an issue of past displacement. The UN’s treatment of the region thus served to remake international conceptions of the territory as ‘up for grabs’; a question *yet to be answered* rather than an injustice that already had a legal solution: the right to return.³ I also show how organisational resentment towards Palestinians spilled out into UN reporting on the conflict which helped to naturalise questions of future territorial ownership, as well as galvanise the erasure of Palestinian life from imagined futures of liberal peace in Gaza. Analysing these temporal assumptions and experiences – of protracted delay, cyclical bureaucratic processes, and palliative relief efforts – speaks to how temporal paralysis in the aftermath of the Nakba affected international staff and their conceptions of different ideas of conflict resolution in the region.

This article uses a historical IR approach to examine how displaced Palestinian protestors sought to capitalise on the temporal rupture of the UN ‘Gaza exception’ to assert their rights and resist the internationalisation of Gaza. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, I combine theoretical and empirical analyses of the contingent decisions that shaped Palestinian politics – and international understandings thereof – thus avoiding collapses decision-making in the past into a linear or teleological narrative. First, I reveal the UN leadership’s efforts to restore post-Nakba temporal paralysis on the strip as a model of conflict response. Secondly, I show how the UN response to Palestinian

¹‘What Donald Trump said about his plans to “take over” Gaza’, *Al Jazeera*, 5 February 2025, available at: {<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/5/what-donald-trump-said-about-his-plans-to-take-over-gaza>}, accessed 3 March 2025.

²Pietro Stefanini, ‘Settler-humanitarianism: Dispossession, “humanitarian transfer” and the 1948 Nakba’, *Millenium*, 53:1 (2024), pp. 136–162.

³UN Doc, A/RES/194 (III), ‘Palestine – Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator’, 11 December 1948.

protests aligned with a Zionist perspective on the protracted nature of the conflict. Thirdly, through details of the Palestinian anti-UN protests, I explore how the displaced population used the 'Gaza exception' as a rare moment of temporal rupture to demand their self-determination. Finally, I argue that the UNEF occupation legitimised Israel's efforts to renegotiate regional borders and associate Palestinians with conflict in the region through its public statements on the protests.

Using time to trace power

The temporal turn in IR has reinvented how we understand political sense- and decision-making, especially in contexts of international intervention or conflict.⁴ Challenging time as a neutral or apolitical concept, many of these works have explored how temporal ideas and assumptions are politically malleable, constructed, and weaponizable, and have important ontological and epistemic implications. Kimberly Hutchings has explored how understandings and judgements of time-shaped political actions, or 'how temporal assumptions (often conveyed via metaphors) made epistemic and ethical judgements about international politics possible'.⁵ In this vein, scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the co-constitutive politics of temporality and governmentality, especially at the intersections of state power, conflict, and colonialism.⁶ Feminist IR scholars, such as Victoria Canning, Monish Bhatia, Louise Ridden, and Emily Clifford, among others, have investigated the lived realities of time and politics of temporality in displacement and/or conflict experiences, focusing on the ways in which civilians have sought to retain power in coercive circumstances and in spite of bureaucratic paralysis.⁷

Building upon this temporal turn, critical IR scholarship has begun to address the temporal politics of displacement and conflict in contemporary Palestine, pushing beyond the academic focus on the *spatial* dimensions of settler colonialism and drawing attention to the perceived 'temporariness' of Palestinian life.⁸ Nasser Abourahme has addressed the temporal politics of the Israeli Zionist project, shedding light on the temporal paradoxes baked into the displacement.⁹ In this way, he frames the settler mindset as 'a project stuck at its foundational moment of conquest' during the Nakba, whilst simultaneously fantasising of 'settler futurity' and a spatial occupation that has succeeded in permanent ethnic cleansing. Abourahme argues that the Palestinian insistence on their right to return – and thus their refusal of 'closure' into settler futurity – has evolved into an 'anti-colonial refusal that draws its power not from any decisive finality, but precisely from irresolution and keeping time open'.¹⁰

⁴See Andrew Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Kimberly Hutchings, *Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present* (Manchester University Press, 2008); Andrew Carr, 'It's about time: Strategy and temporal phenomena', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 44:3 (2021), pp. 303–24; Paulo Chamon, 'Turning temporal: A discourse of time in IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 396–420; Andrew Hom, 'Silent order: The temporal turn in critical international relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 303–30; Rahul Rao, 'One time, many times', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 47:2 (2019), pp. 299–308; Ty Solomon, 'Temporality and insecurity in international practices', in Anna M. Agathangelou, and Kyle D. Killian (eds), *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De)Fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alternatives* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 76–86.

⁵Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*.

⁶John Robertson (ed), *Time, History, and Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); F. Esposito and T. Becker, 'The time of politics, The politics of time, and politicized time: An introduction to chronopolitics', *History and Theory*, 62:4 (2023), pp. 3–23.

⁷Victoria Canning and Monish Bhatia (eds), *Stealing Time: Migration, Temporalities and State Violence* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Louise Ridden, *Nonviolent Encounters: Unarmed Civilian Protection through Bodies, Spaces and Times* (Edinburgh University Press, 2026); Emily Clifford, *The Futurescapes of Human Trafficking Protection in Global Britain* [unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2024].

⁸See Sara Salazar Hughes, 'Unbounded territoriality: Territorial control, settler colonialism, and Israel/Palestine', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 10:2 (2020), pp. 216–33; Sean F. McMahon, 'Temporality, peace initiatives and Palestinian-Israeli politics', *Middle East Critique*, 25:1 (2016), pp. 5–21.

⁹Nasser Abourahme, *The Time beneath the Concrete: Palestine between Camp and Colony* (Duke University Press, 2025).

¹⁰Abourahme, *Time beneath the Concrete*.

But why did Palestinians find the UNEF administration so objectionable if open-endedness was a preferred form of anti-colonial refusal, for Abourahme? This article examines how displaced Palestinian protestors sought to capitalise on the temporal rupture of the Suez Crisis so as to assert their rights and resist the internationalisation of Gaza – a process that Abourahme has phrased ‘Indigenous refusal’.¹¹ Contextualising these concepts of ‘settler futurity’ and ‘anti-colonial refusal’, I show how this dynamic Palestinian ‘open-endedness’ is different and at odds with UN ‘open-endedness’ which seeks stasis and the practice of permanence with the legal responsibilities of temporarily. In my reading, Palestinian ‘open-endedness’ is anti-colonial, a form of ‘indigenous refusal’, actively resisting Israeli efforts to foreclose time into ‘settler futurity’, whereas UN ‘open-endedness’ was perceived as a weakening of this ‘indigenous refusal’; an ‘occupation’ rather than a democratic administration. Informed by Hutchings’ concept of temporal ‘claim-makers’,¹² I suggest that an open-ended UN occupation was perceived by Palestinians as a dilution of the small amount of agency and power they accrued under Egyptian military administration (1948–1967) and, indeed, as part of the same settler colonial instinct that drove Zionist occupation efforts. In this way, for Palestinian protestors, the shared Arab identity and non-aligned politics of the Egyptian government made its administration in Gaza adequately ‘anti-colonial’ to offer a form of ‘indigenous refusal’ that did not violate their anti-colonial values.

In her work on colonial administrations and bureaucratic power, Ann Stoler has reflected on the legalistic instruments that enabled officials to control ‘states of postponement and deferral’ for colonised peoples, unpacking examples of bureaucratic processes that served as ‘promissory notes for sovereignty, autonomy, and services that are issued, suspended, conferred, or curtailed, and reissued again’.¹³ She asserts that ‘International development programs and humanitarian refugee camps rehearse that political deferral again and again’.¹⁴ Stoler explores the governmentality of time using the term ‘duress’, identifying how a loss of control over one’s own time – especially repeatedly – is painful and dehumanising; the banality of procedural violence experienced as a rejection of humanity and individual life. Indeed, Zephania’s poem that opens this article is a reaction to the specific emotional torture of procedural *repetition* and the temporal injustice of feeling stuck in the same position despite taking all available actions. Daniel Haines has similarly explored how individuals’ ideas of personhood were deeply connected to their affective understanding of time and context: ‘Their sense of themselves as individuals, as subjects of experience, was constructed at the intersection between the earthquake’s effects on their environment and the powerful emotions that it triggered’.¹⁵ In this way, uncertainty over one’s control of time or future were core aspects of colonised peoples’ experiences of coercive authority in contexts of liberal colonial governance, shaping their sense of self and personal agency.¹⁶

Fewer scholars have examined time as a weapon of control in cases of historical global governance, in spite of the shared patterns of control and paternalism, and yet it is possible to discern the impact of temporality in literature on the League of Nations Mandate System and the UN Trusteeship Council. For instance, many have examined how these international institutions categorised many colonised populations as ‘not yet ready’ for self-government, perpetuating a model of European supremacy that deferred the question of independence to an unfixed future.¹⁷

¹¹ Abourahme, *Time beneath the Concrete*.

¹² Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*.

¹³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Stoler, *Duress*.

¹⁵ Daniel Haines, ‘Timescapes, subjectivity and emotions after the India–Tibet earthquake, 1950’, *Past and Present*, 265:1 (2024), p. 27.

¹⁶ For more on imperial rule and time, see: Giordano Nanni, *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire* (Manchester University Press, 2013); Rikita Prasad, ‘“Time-sense”: Railways and temporality in colonial India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 47:4 (2013), pp. 1252–1282.

¹⁷ Neta Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Julius Heise, *Securitising Decolonisation: The Silencing of Ewe and Togoland Unification Under United Nations Trusteeship, 1945–1960* (transcript Verlag, 2024); Aurora Almada e Santos, Jessica Lynne Pearson, and

In conflict contexts, as in the Suez Crisis, this power to defer justice was intensified as emergency powers limited civil liberties, provided the justification of more pressing priorities, and tested the boundaries of international law. In the liminal moment of territorial transitions and international administration, the elasticity of this period does not benefit the colonised population.

The Suez Crisis as temporal rupture

The Suez Crisis was provoked by the invasion of Israeli, British, and French forces into Egyptian territory in late October and November 1956. In the immediate fallout, the UN General Assembly authorised the establishment of an armed peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), the first of its kind, which would be a multinational force tasked with withdrawing the tripartite forces from Suez, Sinai, and the Gaza Strip.¹⁸ Yet rather than restoring the 1948 Armistice Borders (as it had done in Suez and Sinai), the UN mission took over the administration of the Gaza Strip in March 1957, replacing the Israeli occupiers, without legal deadline for withdrawal. By delineating Gaza from other Egyptian territories, the mission (re-)opened an international discussion on the 'Palestinian Question.' This open-endedness meant that UNEF's occupation was not perceived on a traditional, linear timeline, with days, months, and years spaced equally apart. Instead, the conflict provoked a reimagining of time and space in Palestine during the first few months of 1957 as a range of actors made sense of the UN intervention – and its future meaning(s) for the region and the rest of the world – through temporal and spatial metaphors of (political) deferral. The international administration sought to paradoxically hold those living on the strip in a form of *permanent temporariness*, perpetuating the paralysis of the humanitarian operations in the region and the promise of Palestinian displacement only being a 'temporary problem' within the UN.¹⁹ This deferral of justice was accompanied by the implicit promise of future resolution, even if the promise was open-ended or doubted by the colonised population, prompting a cycle of hope and despair, as well as bureaucratic processes.²⁰ It was thus more coercive than delayed justice; by articulating a specific future goal – in this case, the return of the strip to Egyptian control – on the condition of the occupier's perceived approval, the colonised population were compelled to behave as passively as possible to achieve this ill-defined authorisation.

It is thus more accurate to describe peacekeeping as a project of conflict *deferral* rather than conflict *de-escalation*, as normatively understood. In a later UN mission to Cyprus, a British peacekeeper described the UN peacekeeping strategy as putting a conflict 'in the fridge', often through an ethno-nationalist territorial partition, thus weaponizing time against the minority population.²¹ This model of 'deferral as conflict response' was first tested in Palestine, with the attempt to construct an open-ended administration in Gaza in 1957, but was also a method used in Korea, Cyprus, and India, and has shaped ideas of intervention beyond the UN.²² Although initially popular for implementing a ceasefire, this open-ended 'freezing' model perpetuated violence and political injustice for minority populations, from hardening communities into extremes and creating protracted humanitarian crises for those displaced, to decontextualising the conflict and forging ethno-nationalist homogenous territories.²³ UN peacekeeping observer operations and commissions in Israel and Palestine in the decade following the Nakba were a means of pacifying the

Nicole Eggers, *The United Nations and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2020); Miriam Bak McKenna, *Reckoning with Empire: Self-Determination in International Law* (Brill, 2022).

¹⁸ UN Document, General Assembly, 'Resolution 377 (A) Uniting for Peace', 3 November 1956.

¹⁹ Princeton University Special Collections [Princeton henceforth], Henry Labouisse Papers, Box 14, Folder 11, 'Speech for Cosmopolitan Club – Cue Cards', 3 December 1958.

²⁰ Adam Y. Stern, 'On Zionism and the concept of deferral', *Critical Times*, 5:1 (2022), pp. 20–49.

²¹ Bodleian Library, Special Collections United Nations Career Records Project, Papers of Charles Harris concerning his work in Cyprus, Fols. 185–336. Lt-Gen Sir James Wilson 1964–6., 'Memoir: Chapter 17, The U.N. Force Commander', p. 19.

²² Arie M. Dubov and Laura Robson (eds), *Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

²³ [Removed to preserve author's anonymity].

population's behaviour through time and space; both pausing *and* deferring political resolutions into, what Lauren Berlant has termed, the 'cruel optimism' of the unfixed future, situated just beyond a violent present.²⁴ Thus, by 'freezing' a conflict, missions decontextualised it in international debates, provided a context for perpetual international management, and created the conditions for blame to fall upon the group being 'frozen' for not being more active in manifesting peace (rather than pursuing justice) and thus justifications for their resettlement.

However, by the time that the Israeli force transferred control of Gaza to the UNEF mission, Palestinians had already weathered a decade of repeated promises and deferrals from the international community. UNEF's successful takeover would have allowed the organisation to continue to delay a political resolution and defer to Israeli threats of aggression in the region. The population recognised that the territorial transition of power (from Egyptian to Israeli to UNEF) over the past months provided a rare rupture in the past decade of temporal paralysis. This moment of opportunity galvanised the population to reject the protracted future promised by the UNEF international administration, break out of the coercive cycle of deferred justice, and to insist on self-determination – or at least to resist a *new* occupier – right now.

Inspired by Sara Salem's concept of 'anti-colonial time' in a 'haunted present', I explore how the 1948 Nakba 'haunted' the different actors – UN workers and Palestinian protestors – in different ways in Gaza throughout March 1957.²⁵ For the Palestinians this haunting made the threat of further displacement (and thus the need to protest) all the more pressing in 1957; for the UN, the Suez Crisis disrupted the temporal paralysis that had held the strip in stasis since 1948 and threatened their precarious control over the displacement crisis. The spectre of the Nakba thus shaped both Palestinians' urgent approach to the post-Suez protests *and* the UN mission's decision to occupy the region.

Material and methods

This article is built from a mixed visual and documentary source-base, including photographs, newspaper articles, personal papers, and official archival documents. Photographs taken during protests from a variety of sources have helped to discover patterns in dissent in UN peacekeeping that are rarely preserved or addressed in detail in other mission sources, such as UN progress reports. In seeking to understand how the UN interventions in the field shaped international temporal assumptions about the conflict, I was inspired by Ann Stoler's approach of reading 'along the archival grain' in order to be attentive to the organisation's cultures, norms, and biases that are baked into the official archive; from technocratic reports to handwritten cue cards for dinner speeches.²⁶

Un-managed bureaucratic paralysis post-Nakba

In this section, I briefly outline the history of UN involvement in Palestine and examine how the 'right to return' was paralysed by a series of bureaucratic decisions that deprioritised Palestinian rights and instead resulted in the UN deciding to occupy Gaza. As they were present on the ground in Palestine at the time of the Nakba through the first UN observer peacekeeping mission (UNTSO) and other UN specialised relief agencies (such as UNRWA), the international organisation attached great reputational meaning to participating in the resolution of the crisis. However, UN leadership – as well as powerful permanent member-states like Britain and the US – also supported the creation of a state of Israel and thus could not enable the right to return.²⁷ In the following decade, UNRWA provided palliative humanitarian relief – an issue that some states, including Australia,

²⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁵ Sara Salem, 'On anti-colonial time: Encountering archival traces in a haunted present', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 123:2 (2024), pp. 321–341.

²⁶ Ann L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁷ UN Doc, A/RES/194 (III), 'Palestine – Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator', 11 December 1948.

had raised in the General Assembly as a financial burden for UN member-states and an excuse for states (Arab and Israeli) to not do their 'duty' to resolve the refugee crisis – whilst the organisation established commissions of investigation to consider resolutions to the displacement crisis, but little meaningful progress in terms of a plan to return Palestinians to their homes.²⁸

The Gaza Strip had been marked by temporal injustices since the Nakba – or 'catastrophe' – in 1948 when approximately a million Palestinians were violently displaced from their homes to facilitate the creation of an ethno-nationalist state for the resettlement of displaced European Jews.²⁹ The creation of Israel was undertaken by military coup on 15 May 1948 with the aims of 'Zionist population, Palestinian depopulation'.³⁰ Ongoing violence and displacement prompted the creation of the first observer mission, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), a humanitarian agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), and a UN mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte.³¹ In the aftermath of the Nakba, Bernadotte (who was later assassinated by Israeli militants) believed that the Palestinian refugees should have a right to return to their homes. This 'right to return' – itself a temporal deferral – was later confirmed by UN Resolution 194 which provided that: 'compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property'.³² However, in the context of a rapidly intensifying Cold War, the displacement crisis presented concerns for Western powers. UN official Ralph Bunche negotiated regional borders with Israel and Arab neighbouring states. Egypt was authorised to occupy the Gaza Strip under a military administration and to set up the territory as a client state: the All-Palestine Government. As a result of these agreements, the Gaza Strip became *sui generis* in the international community from 1949, until the Suez Crisis in 1956.³³

In the decade after the Nakba and the creation of Israel, no Arab states or the UN had offered a practical solution to return the 'remnants', using Edward Said's term, to their homes.³⁴ Instead, the large-scale population density on the strip prompted Egypt to dedicate a large concentration of troops as part of its military administration over the territory. This military presence, however, was perceived by Israel as a threat. By the mid-1950s, the strip held 'at least two refugees for every one local resident', making up around 200,000 people displaced in the strip and relying on UNRWA relief to survive.³⁵ Similarly, it was estimated that over 400,000 displaced Palestinians had been temporarily settled in UN camps in Amman, representing almost a third of the Jordanian population. In their experience of the past decade, their lives had been held in UN-managed temporal paralysis; entirely shaped by decisions made by international officials either in New York or in inaccessible corridors of power in the Middle East.³⁶

Bureaucratic paralysis and promises of deferred justice were ruptured by the Suez Crisis. This invasion destabilised the temporal paralysis of the strip and killed a number of Egyptian citizens and Palestinian refugees.³⁷ UNEF had been heralded by the international community as an early success following the first tentative months of deployment.³⁸ However, the mission's temporary success of firefighting the Suez crisis was tempered by officials' knowledge that the political conflict

²⁸ UN Doc, A/SPC/SR.28, 'General Assembly, 11th Session, Official Records, Special Political Committee, 28th Meeting', 19 February 1957, p. 127.

²⁹ Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (Columbia University Press, 1997).

³⁰ Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (Vintage Books, 1980).

³¹ Anne Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

³² UN Doc, A/RES/194 (III), 'Palestine – Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator', 11 December 1948.

³³ James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

³⁴ Said, *Question of Palestine*.

³⁵ UNARMS, S-0164-0002-08-01, 'PM/3369 Statement of Henry R. Labouisse, Director, UNRWA for Palestine Refugees before the Special Political Committee', 11 February 1957.

³⁶ Anne Irfan, 'Petitioning for Palestine: Refugee appeals to international authorities', *Contemporary Levant*, 5:2 (2020), pp. 79–96.

³⁷ UN reports on the Gaza Strip: 275 refugees may have died in fighting', *The Manchester Guardian*, 15 January 1957.

³⁸ UN Archive (henceforth, UNARMS), S-0316-0010-01, 'UN Press Release: Dr Bunche Leaves Gaza for Jerusalem, EMF/289', 29 April 1959.

in the region, provoked by the poorly planned withdrawal of the British Mandate for Palestine and the beginning of 'Nakba' on 15 May 1948, remained unresolved and would likely reignite due to Israeli expansionist ambitions.³⁹ It had also destabilised a decade of UN humanitarian operations and undermined the organisation's work in the field as well as diplomatically. In early 1957, the Israeli government, the Knesset, voted to confirm their refusal to return Gaza to Egypt.⁴⁰

Similarly, there were 'nation-wide rallies' in Israel by settler groups against the UN returning Egyptian control to Sinai and Gaza or the establishment of a UNEF administration. UNEF was perceived as a threat to the Israeli occupation of the strip and those who had occupied houses on the border with Gaza, reigniting settler anxieties and prompting securitised reactions, such as installing barbed wire on the border and digging trenches from one kibbutz to another.⁴¹ As late as 14 February, Israel was still expelling Egyptians who were employed by the UNRWA 'at half an hours [sic] notice' and 'firm in their insistence that they are to remain' even if some sensed 'a little nervous anxiety'.⁴² Thus, whilst hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians waited for their 'promised future' in order to return to their homes, Israeli settlers protested their rights over the strip and their shipping sanctions by Egypt from those same homes.⁴³ This symmetry – of the settler colonial context and the displacement of Palestinians from those same homes – reveals to stark effect the ways in which spatial and temporal injustices became entangled for Palestinians in the liminal context of the Gaza Strip.

Presented with Israel's threat that they would only transfer territorial power – if at all – to the UN, as well as organisational concerns about losing prestige in the region, the UN made plans to takeover Gaza. President Eisenhower also stepped in to put pressure on the Israeli government to comply and withdraw from Gaza.⁴⁴ On 1 March 1957, Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir transferred Gaza Strip and Sharm El Sheikh Territories to UNEF, following direct orders from Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in Jerusalem.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the Egyptian government, as well as many Palestinians, sought to restore Egyptian control over the territory after the post-Suez Crisis withdrawal of invading forces. Indeed, Egyptian Foreign Minister, Dr Mahmoud Fawzi, stated in an television interview with *United Nations Review* (broadcast in the United States and Canada) that Egypt only supported a UNEF mission in Gaza for 'as short a time as possible' in order to avoid destabilisation.⁴⁶

However, in response to the announcement of the 'Gaza exception' in the UN General Assembly on 4 March, a number of other member-states refused to celebrate Israel's decision as a conclusion to the conflict; instead it was framed as a restoring of temporal paralysis that was constantly imperilled by Israel's expansionist plans. As the Ceylon representative commented, 'We are only at the beginning of things. We must travel a long and tedious road before we reach the final goal of a peaceful solution of the problem. But a start has to be made, and made immediately'.⁴⁷ US representative, Ambassador Lodge, applauded the move towards an open-ended transitional mission in the strip: 'We have made a wonderful beginning. We have nursed the patient through several crises. Now let us give him a chance to put some flesh on his bones, and build up an immunity to future

³⁹R. Eghbariah, 'Toward Nakba as a legal concept', *Columbia Law Review*, 124:4 (2024), pp. 887–992.

⁴⁰'United Nations inquiry on Gaza: Mr Ben-Gurion's hint', *The Manchester Guardian*, 26 February 1957.

⁴¹'A general view of the Kibbutz Einhashlosha', 15 March 1957, Alamy Image ID: 2NGBF0J.

⁴²UNARMS, S-0164-0002-08-01, 'Egyptian-Israeli Mixed Armistice Commission Letter from Brown and Regt to Col. Leary', 14 February 1957.

⁴³UNARMS, S-0164-0002-08, 'Leary Cable to Cordier, Jerusalem, UNSCO 220', 10 February 1957.

⁴⁴UNARMS, S-0164-0002-08-01, 'Egyptian-Israeli Mixed Armistice Commission Letter from Brown to Col. Leary', 21 February 1957.

⁴⁵UN Doc, A/PV.667, 4 March 1957.

⁴⁶UNARMS, S-0313-0004-05, 'Note No. 1479, Note to Correspondents, United Nations Review Interview with Fawzi', 30 November 1956, p. 2.

⁴⁷UN Doc, A/PV.667, 4 March 1957, para. 28.

illness.⁴⁸ Lodge's words implied that the US accepted that the conflict in Palestine was protracted; frozen for now, but ultimately unresolved.

Moreover, with the decision to transfer control to UNEF, rather than immediately return the territory to Egypt, as agreed in the 1948 Armistice Agreements, the international community functionally (re-)opened the question of future sovereignty over the Gaza Strip. The takeover – although loosely implied by Hammarskjöld as a transitional phase before returning the strip to Egyptian control –⁴⁹ communicated to the Palestinians that the organisation had accepted Israel's framing of the strip as credibly up-for-debate, in contrast to other occupied regions, like Suez and Sinai. Instead, the UNEF administration extended this period of militarised international occupation with only the promise to withdraw eventually and a return to the 'norm' of repeating the same bureaucratic cycle of palliative aid and political liminality. Echoing the UN Trusteeship Council's mandate to provide oversight for colonised states that were 'not yet ready' for self-government, UNEF's open-ended plan for governance in Gaza trapped the population in a temporal agreement with unclear terms that they had not negotiated. Many civilians perceived it as a capitulation to the Israeli government's threats and another example of the UN's deference to a belligerent member-state, at the cost of a peoples' self-determination.

The 'UN family' and anti-Palestinian rhetoric

For the Palestinian population, most struggled to trust that their interests – and rights – would be protected by the UN as a stateless community beyond the delivery of their basic humanitarian needs by UNWRA and exerting control over their daily movements by UNTSO. Despite a lack of trust in the organisation, most Palestinians defended 'the choice provided for them in General Assembly resolution 194 – that is, repatriation [pre-Nakba homes] or compensation'.⁵⁰ This awareness of their rights frustrated some UN officials working in Gaza, especially as the years ticked by. Director of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Palestine, Henry Labouisse, noted, 'Even illiterates know it by heart and insist on it – to the refugees this resolution is their bill of rights'.⁵¹ Pushing back on UN magical thinking that the displacement crisis would somehow resolve in this period of paralysis, he insisted 'time would not heal wounds', warning that he worried about the protracted context entrenching 'fanaticism' and irrationality in the displacement camps.⁵² Endlessly supplying palliative relief would not solve the basic political problem, it served to just 'keep the lid on'.⁵³ Although frustrated that Israeli officials were not willing to negotiate the practicalities of compensation, he insisted that the Palestinians should take responsibility for their lot and accept resettlement: 'their very existence is one of [the] profound causes of tensions in [the] area'.⁵⁴ As much as the UNEF mission was a project to restore temporal paralysis to the territory, its sister-agency's field-based international staff warned that this protraction policy offered more security risks than opportunities for peace.

In organisational documents, it was common for 'UN family'⁵⁵ officials to refer to Palestinian refugees pejoratively as 'embittered' among themselves, suggesting that it was a symmetric conflict

⁴⁸United States Delegation to the General Assembly, press release 2640, 8 March 1957.

⁴⁹UN Doc, A/PV.659, 22 February 1957.

⁵⁰UNARMS, S-0164-0002-08, 'PM/3369 Statement of Henry R. Labouisse, Director, UNRWA for Palestine Refugees before the Special Political Committee', 11 February 1957.

⁵¹Princeton, Henry Labouisse Papers, Box 14, Folder 11, 'Speech for Service Bureau for Women's Organization, Hartford – 'Cue Cards' [emphasis as in source].

⁵²Princeton, Labouisse Papers, Box 15, Folder 5, 'Speech for Council of Foreign Affairs – Cue Cards', 17 November 1955.

⁵³Princeton, Labouisse Papers, Box 14, Folder 11, 'Speech for Cosmopolitan Club – Cue Cards', 3 December 1958.

⁵⁴Princeton, 'Speech for Cosmopolitan Club'.

⁵⁵The 'UN family' refers to the multiple agencies in the field in the Middle East during this period: UNTSO, UNRWA, and UNEF I (as well as UNOGIL in 1958). Many of the same field staff that had been present in Gaza pre-Suez were employed in the UNEF mission occupation (several UNRWA international officials joined the peacekeeping mission when it was established and UNTSO was absorbed into the armed agency to limit organisational waste).

and that the refugees were ‘psychologically’ obstructive to peace in the region; in short, that they were making the job of the UN workers harder because they refused to be pragmatic.⁵⁶ Labouisse noted to the UN Special Political Committee that, ‘In the absence of that choice, [Palestinians] bitterly oppose anything which has even the semblance of permanent settlement elsewhere’, intimating that some UNRWA leadership saw ethnic cleansing (or the deferred continuation of the Nakba) as the most obvious solution to conflict in Gaza.⁵⁷ Indeed, by the outbreak of the Suez crisis, Labouisse had made multiple references in private that, although he acknowledged their position, he believed that Palestinians should accept resettlement elsewhere, preferably by being absorbed into one or more neighbouring Arab states (although in public he continued to insist that he had no political opinion on the solution to the crisis). In an off-the-record speech, Labouisse commented that although ‘UNRWA [is] non-political ... [the] political situation conditions our work and [I] must be frank about it’.⁵⁸ He stated that it was ‘hard to over-emphasise [the] strength of [the] Arab attitude’ and that ‘Refugees and Arab Governments’ were ‘bitterly critical of [the] fact that resolution on repatriation and compensation has never been enforced’.⁵⁹ He went on to warn his Western audience that Palestinians were ‘Not always rational – often stirred up by agitators’ and warned that there was ‘real fanaticism on this issue’.⁶⁰ Labouisse perpetuated colonial and Islamophobic tropes of Arabs as obstinate (but also easily swayed), violent, and ‘fanatically’ unreasonable in their expectations of the UN (and Western powers like the US).⁶¹ ‘It is late’, he finished, ‘but not too late – for the interested powers to seek a humane solution of problems of refugees from Palestine’, after detailing potential resettlement plans in Syria and Iraq. His opinion on Palestinian permanent resettlement in Gaza? ‘Nil’.⁶²

Among the ‘UN family’ in Gaza, he was far from alone in anti-Palestinian opinions. During the Israeli occupation during the Suez crisis, an UNTSO observer peacekeeper, Major Alan W. Cooper, received complaints from Palestinian refugees and was reported for ‘cooperating’ with Israelis by confiscating weapons from Palestinians and handing them over to Israeli officials.⁶³ Cooper, who had previously been employed as part of the British Mandate in Palestine, was also heard ‘making derogatory references’ to the Egyptian Government, especially Nasser, during the occupation.⁶⁴ Despite these accusations and his known ‘unfriendly’ relationship with local civilians in Gaza (as well as his collaboration with Israelis during an occupation that the UN would be soon mandated to withdraw), Cooper was later employed by UNEF, until Egypt put him on a blacklist in November 1964 and he was reappointed to the new UN mission to Cyprus instead.

These anti-Palestinian opinions among UN field officials held even more significance in the run up to the UNEF takeover of Gaza. In February, UNEF Headquarters prepared intelligence reports on the population and region to prime officials for the occupation. One UNEF report specifically sought to prepare the mission leadership to maintain control in the face of the same ‘irrationality’ and ‘fanaticism’ that Labouisse mentioned:

The inhabitants are excitable and irrational and local feeling rises suddenly. Demonstrations of an ugly nature can be spontaneous and it is said that, when it comes to throwing rocks,

⁵⁶ Of 9000 UNRWA personnel, 150 were ‘non-Arabs’ and mostly in leadership positions.

⁵⁷ UNARMS, S-0164-0002-08, ‘PM/3369 Statement of Henry R. Labouisse’, 11 February 1957.

⁵⁸ Princeton, Labouisse Papers, Box 15, Folder 5, ‘Speech before Council on Foreign Relations’, 17 November 1955 [emphasis in original text].

⁵⁹ Princeton, ‘Speech before Council’.

⁶⁰ Princeton, ‘Speech before Council’.

⁶¹ For more on the racist and colonial history of the term ‘fanatic’, see: Mark Condos, ‘“Fanaticism” and the politics of resistance along the north-west frontier of British India’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 58:3 (2016), pp. 717–45.

⁶² Princeton, ‘Speech before Council’ [emphasis in original text].

⁶³ UNARMS, S-0316-0003-24, ‘Incoming Code Cable from Burns to Bunche’, 1 June 1959.

⁶⁴ UNARMS, S-0316-0003-24, ‘Handwritten Note from Ralph Bunch’, undated.

the inhabitants are accurately impartial and everyone is a target. Even demonstrations of enthusiastic welcome can carry an element of risk.⁶⁵

This report referred to past demonstrations in Gaza which had been organised to protest plans to resettle Palestinians in Sinai rather than facilitate their return home.⁶⁶ It relied on many of the same colonial tropes that Labouisse had used but added the additional racialised imaginary of the ‘trickster’ indigenous group that cunningly uses a performance of innocence to destabilise the colonial power. As the mission staff prepared to take over administration of the strip, their operational reports were warning officials to be vigilant, not let their guard down, and prepare for ‘impartial’ violence: ‘everyone is a target’. In this context of the Israeli withdrawal, this framing of the Palestinians as inherently violent served to naturalise their oppression and justify their continued violation; for the UN field officials, it seemed if the ‘irrational’ Palestinians had not found conflict with the Israeli, then they would have found it elsewhere.

These documents provide fragmentary insights into the deeply entrenched culture of anti-Palestinian politics within the field-based UN agencies in the run up to the UNEF takeover, even as the agencies were simultaneously struggling against an Israeli invasion. Many of these racialised and Islamophobic assumptions about Palestinians were shaped by temporal judgements, framing them a ‘backwards’ group who would not ‘move on’ from the past and – apparently frustratingly – forget their legal rights. Thus, although the UN leadership in the New York HQ sought to restore control over the region, for many UN leadership in the field the preferred future for liberal peace in Gaza was one without the ‘fanaticism’ Palestinians. By associating peace with ethnic cleansing, the dilemma for these officials was how to most ‘humanely’ (and legally) resettle the Palestinians away from the Gaza Strip. These racialised temporal perceptions shaped the ways in which UNEF officials and troops approached Palestinians and perceived their mandate in Gaza once they took over the strip in March 1957.

It was in this context of institutional dismissal, palliative relief, and protracted injustice that Palestinians and other Gazans sought to use the opportunity of UNEF’s takeover to communicate their displeasure directly with organisation representatives and troops. On 1 March, UNEF assumed civil control of the strip from Israel, with UNEF Force Commander Burns confirming that troops were in position on 6 March. Israeli forces fully withdrew from their last unit at Rafah camp on 8 March.⁶⁷ The UNEF force moved in at night while a curfew was in force for the civilians, reinforcing the mission efforts to disconnect the population from this significant political transformation, waking to the *post hoc* notification of a regime change.⁶⁸

Rupture as opportunity

Immediately after waking up to the takeover, large protests convened outside the UN HQ in the city of Gaza to challenge the exceptional decision to install UN administration over the region instead of returning the territory to its previous authority, Egypt. More so than for the observer UNTSO peacekeepers or UNRWA relief workers, who insisted on their apolitical, humanitarian character,⁶⁹ the UNEF personnel represented a direct link to the political negotiations over their lives and the militarisation of the civilian’s political sovereignty. For some Palestinians, UNEF’s takeover felt suspicious, transitory, and a step towards undoing the – already controversial – armistice agreements and a permanent Israeli control.⁷⁰ Israel had gained confidence during the tripartite invasion and

⁶⁵UNARMS, S-0313-0005-04, ‘UNEF HQ – Periodic Intelligence Report No. 3, OPS/INT 3–3, Appendix A’, 7 February 1957.

⁶⁶‘Troops quell Arab rioting in Gaza; U.N. takes up Egypt’s charges Friday’, *The Hartford Courant*, 3 March 1955.

⁶⁷UN Doc, A/3508, 8 March 1957.

⁶⁸British Pathe, ‘Israel/Egypt: U.N. troops enter Gaza’, 14 March 1957, Reuters, available at: <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/139819/>.

⁶⁹UNARMS, S-0164-0002-08, ‘PM/3369 Statement of Henry R. Labouisse, Director, UNRWA for Palestine Refugees before the Special Political Committee’, 11 February 1957, p. 11.

⁷⁰*Al-Ittihad*, 12 March 1957.

had quickly grown into a formidable military power in the region.⁷¹ For others, UNEF administration could represent a step towards Gazan self-determination and the question of Palestinian statehood. Seeking to galvanise this critical moment of transition, Palestinian protestors mobilised quickly and demanded a return to Egyptian authority; it would not be a solution to their displacement, but it would return them to the liminal norm that had been precariously preserved since 1949 and many already felt aligned with Nasser's anti-colonial politics.⁷²

On 10 March, hundreds of Palestinians mobilised to protest around the new UNEF HQ, which had taken over the Gaza police station.⁷³ *Al HaMishmar*, 'On the Watch', a Zionist Socialist daily newspaper, described the protests as led by a ' Hamas-led coalition' that 'threatened to destroy the Gaza Strip', exaggerating the number to protestors to a 3,000-strong violent 'mob'.⁷⁴ Although there had been protests since 5 March, the 10 March demonstration had escalated due to Force Commander Burns's announcement of Col Carl Engholm, a Danish UN official, as Military Governor for Gaza, prompting fears of a prolonged UN administration. Western press footage of the protests focussed on all-men groups in close-up shots, such as in a Reuters newsreel clip of the takeover.⁷⁵ The media and government coverage framed the demonstrations as led by an exceptional group of 'disturbing ... agitators' and 'Egyptian-inspired ... riots', but photos from the protests show families marching peacefully together outside the UNEF HQ and a large number of children involved in the protests.⁷⁶

Shortly after some of the protestors attempted to gain access to the building, UNEF General Burns authorised the use of tear gas and grenades, instructing the Danish and Norwegian – or DANOR – peacekeeping troops to shoot 'over the heads of nearly 300 Arab demonstrators'.⁷⁷ Protesters had thrown stones at some UN white vehicles as part of this and several activists were arrested. The increased emotional intensity and size of the crowds in this protest from the smaller marches since UNEF had taken over were decontextualised and provocatively framed by Force Commander Burns who suggested that 'this mob had evidently been incited to violence' and that he 'detected a Communist tinge'.⁷⁸ Instead of valuing the political demands and history of the conflict, UNEF leadership dismissed these crowds as a critical form of democratic engagement and a signal to reflect on the UN Advisory Board's current 'wait and see' attitude about the future of Gaza's sovereignty.⁷⁹ Approximately 10 protestors were arrested and detained by the UN mission.

Over the next week, Palestinians in Gaza used this rupture during the transition to communicate their Arab identity and seek pan-Arab solidarity with the Egyptian government, rejecting the UNEF administration and efforts to make Gaza 'international'. Despite the controversy of the first protest, large crowds continued to gather outside the UNEF HQ and to hold signs that made their demands clear. In these images, protestors brought along signs in English to communicate with the UN staff: 'Never forget Palestine', and 'Gaza Greats, Arab Leaders' were popular slogans, alongside large images of Nasser and the Egyptian flag. Protestors also wrote large signs in Arabic to target the Arab press and Egyptian audience with ethno-nationalist language. One cloth sign read, 'Gaza is Arab and not international' and 'In the name of the Arab'.

⁷¹ Camille Mansour and Leila Fawaz, *Transformed Landscapes: Essays on Palestine and the Middle East in Honor of Walid Khalidi* (Cairo, 2009), p. 273–298.

⁷² Mansour and Fawaz, *Transformed Landscapes*, pp. 175–196.

⁷³ More than 100 Palestinians remained detained in the prison behind the new UNEF HQs after the UN took over control of the building on 5 March: Homer Bigart, 'UN troops halt rioters in Gaza asking Cairo link', *The New York Times* (11 March 1957).

⁷⁴ *Al HaMishmar*, 11 March 1957; *Al HaMishmar*, 12 March 1957.

⁷⁵ British Pathe, 'Israel/Egypt: U.N. troops enter Gaza', 14 March 1957, Reuters, available at: <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/139819/>.

⁷⁶ Hansard HC Deb, 14 March 1957, vol 566, col 1322; 'Nasser challenges UN', *The New York Times* (12 March 1957).

⁷⁷ Homer Bigart, 'UN troops halt rioters in Gaza asking Cairo link', *The New York Times* (11 March 1957).

⁷⁸ Homer Bigart, 'UN troops halt rioters in Gaza asking Cairo link', *The New York Times* (11 March 1957).

⁷⁹ Thomas J. Hamilton, 'UN chief suggests move aims to placate Egyptians', *The New York Times* (12 March 1957).

Although many Palestinians felt betrayed by Arab states during the signing of the 1949 Armistice Agreements, their recent occupation by Israeli forces had prompted a resurgence of Egyptian support in the strip and a distrust of 'internationalization' under an open-ended UN administration. One statement published in a piece for the Middle East Press Agency reported that, 'Internationalization has become the newest form of imperialism'.⁸⁰ Similar front-page headlines in *Al-Ittihad*, 'The Union', a Communist Arabic newspaper based in occupied Palestine territory during UNEF, read 'No colonialism, no internationalization, Gaza is Arab and will remain Arab' and 'The uproar over the Gaza Strip is a colonial conspiracy'.⁸¹ Protestors demanded the right to return and a resolution to the refugee crisis in Gaza, perceiving this moment as an opportunity to restore Palestine beyond Gaza and rejecting segregation or racial apartheid: 'Nazareth will not be the new South Africa'.⁸² Palestinian allegiance with Egypt and Nasser was, therefore, a pragmatic decision, grounded in support of Nasser's anti-colonial politics but also shrewdly aware of how vulnerable those displaced in the strip were not only to future occupation by Israel, but to permanent deferred justice by becoming an international territory or a permanent mission. A return to Egyptian occupation offered the greatest security for a population that had already experienced the sharp end of the Zionist project and perceived colonial continuities in the practices of the UNEF occupation.

The future of Gaza

The UN's occupation in March 1957 thus severed international ideas of the conflict as the result of a protracted displacement crisis and instead opened up an exceptional view of the strip as a desirable territory that could achieve peace in the future if the 'right' owners were put in power and the Palestinians were removed. As temporal 'claims-makers', the UN officials held power to recommend resettlement (implicitly, ethnic cleansing) as technocrats in conflict resolution *and* due to their perceived wisdom as field-based officials. As representatives of the UN, the world's largest international organisation empowered with protecting peace and security, they held the power to imagine and narrate time (especially the future of liberal peace in Gaza), even if they were unable to militarily defend their hold on the territory against a member-state. In the aftermath of the protests and the mission response, the future of the territory was seen in the West as being held back by a population that was stuck in the past that refused to move on: the *territory* was framed as a desirable space for future development and the *population* racialised as a violent, grievance-ridden community (a narrative that perfectly suited the settler colonial agenda of Israel). Indeed, even once UNEF transferred administrative control back to Egypt Gaza, the continued peacekeeping presence – and the question of the mission's permanence – was a fraught issue between the UN and Nasser's government.⁸³

Instead of valuing the political demands of the host population and their request to be returned to their previous administrative power just as Sinai had been, UNEF leadership dismissed these demonstrations as a critical form of democratic engagement and a signal to reflect on the UN Advisory Board's current 'wait and see' attitude about the future of Gaza's sovereignty.⁸⁴ Palestinians' political objection to Engholm's appointment and their lack of consultation in the UNEF takeover were thus decontextualised and dismissed in the aftermath of the protest. This false symmetry between protestors throwing rocks at UN vehicles and the militarised response by the uniformed force in power of the territory was reinforced by the UNEF leader, Force Commander Burns, who homogenised the protestors and suggested that 'this mob had evidently been incited to violence' and that he 'detected a Communist tinge', in search of support from Western audiences.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Homer Bigart, 'Burns and Bunche prepare Gaza guard compromise', *The New York Times* (18 March 1957).

⁸¹ *Al-Ittihad*, 12 March 1957; *Al-Ittihad*, 15 March 1957; *Al-Ittihad*, 19 March 1957 [available on Jrayed].

⁸² 'What comes after withdrawal?', *Al-Ittihad*, 12 March 1957; *Al-Ittihad*, 22 March 1957.

⁸³ UNARMS, S-0316-0003-27, 'Handwritten note from Bunche to Hammarskjöld', 26 February 1959.

⁸⁴ Thomas J. Hamilton, 'UN chief suggests move aims to placate Egyptians', *The New York Times* (12 March 1957).

⁸⁵ Homer Bigart, 'UN troops halt rioters in Gaza asking Cairo link', *The New York Times* (11 March 1957).

As much as the protests had galvanised the Palestinian population to seek self-determination and reject Israeli and UN occupation, it had also brought international attention to the region, provoking the idea of Palestinians as the source of protracted conflict. Many UN member-states, mirroring Labouisse's comments, perceived the Palestinian demands for the right to return as a nuisance, an obstacle to the future of Israel and liberal peace in the Middle East, and an elongated financial burden for the UN members.⁸⁶ Having allied with Israel during the Suez Crisis, France demanded that a swift solution be found for the Gaza Strip protests before it threatens Israeli sovereignty. Australia, although censuring Israel for its rejection of all Palestinian refugees, argued that the resettlement of Palestinians offered the clearest solution to the displacement in Gaza, even if it required waiting longer: 'Time had not proved a healing agent but it might have an effect in the long run if the parties concerned would allow it to do its work.'⁸⁷ This active interpretation of time – as a generative process rather than as a 'freezing' or passive concept – suggests that a solution might be easier to reach the more time is extended after the initial displacement. In this framing, the parties may be less 'hardened' to their position and more flexible due to the deferral. With recognition of how the Palestinians were most often described as hardened or 'embittered' by holding onto their original position, Australia's statement implies that time is an active process that will weaken Palestinians' political position and thus make them more conciliatory to liberal peace in the region through resettlement.

This perceived linear pathway to liberal peace justified continued UN efforts to guide the region towards its 'inevitable' civilisational progress or future – a temporal colonial trope whose imaginaries of the future led towards a Western developmental model that was deemed incompatible with the continued presence of 'backwards'-focused (or 'haunted') Palestinians. Other member states, including Pakistan, were abstract in their engagement with the conflict, noting that there needed to be a solution to the 'refugee problem' but refraining from suggesting what this might look like. Only Morocco's representative explicitly stated that 'the only solution to the problem would be to allow the refugees to return to their homes'.⁸⁸

Western journalists also popularised racialised imaginaries of the protestors as 'mobs' and naturalised the idea of the strip (and its population) as inherently unstable and permanently in conflict in March 1957, thus blaming Palestinians for their own suppression and normalising violent suppression as a peacekeeping strategy; for these commentators, Palestinians, by nature, required taming or controlling through a paternalistic authority, mirroring a colonial trope. The *New York Times* published an image of a UN refugee camp in Gaza on 10 March 1957, with the caption 'REFUGEES: Arabs in a U.N. camp in Gaza remain a basis source of tensions and threat to peace in Mideast', suggesting that the displaced Palestinians were somehow the most responsible party for perpetuating the ongoing violence in the region.⁸⁹ As Hamilton Fish Armstrong, the editor of *Foreign Affairs* wrote, 'For years the United Nations had been debating this complex of problems and passing resolutions about them; for years some of its members had been giving unselfish service and large sums of money to mitigate the human misery involved.'⁹⁰ Armstrong decontextualised the crisis, framing it – and the displaced population – as a natural state of being, always having been displaced, instead of as a political conflict that had affected individuals lived reality for almost a decade. These media reports illustrated how liberal commentators in the West, in the aftermath of the UNEF takeover, increasingly blamed Palestinians for continued instability in Gaza and legitimised the Zionist framing of the displaced population as a pathologized group that had *chosen* to remain frozen in time.

This infantilising and criminalising imaginary of the population was rooted in colonial tropes of racialised populations, 'othering' their behaviour, therefore delegitimising their political demands

⁸⁶ UN Doc, A/SPC/SR.28, p. 127.

⁸⁷ UN Doc, A/SPC/SR.28, p. 127.

⁸⁸ UN Doc, A/SPC/SR.28, p. 131.

⁸⁹ 'New phase for Mideast: U.N. take-over and a major problem', *The New York Times* (10 March 1957).

⁹⁰ Hamilton Fish Armstrong, 'The U. N. Experience in Gaza', *Foreign Affairs*, 1 July 1957.

and their actions as recognisably part of a democratic movement. As a perceived 'problem' for the UN, Palestinian protestors were paternalistically framed as ungrateful (for not uncritically welcoming the intervening force), violent (for throwing stones), and infantile (for failing to understand 'their place' in the regional conflict). Positioned against the self-sacrificial rhetoric describing the UN peacekeepers,⁹¹ Palestinians – and their refusal to accept the decision-making of the international community – were perceived as not sufficiently deferential or submissive to the UN intervention and broader geopolitical regional concerns, provoking resentment from the force.

But the protests were, in the short-term, successful in restoring Palestinian's demands. In response to the protests and the public swell of support for Egyptian control from Palestinians in the strip, Nasser announced his intention of taking over Gaza from UNEF and named General Hassan Abdel Latif as Governor of Gaza on 13 March. Although Gaza had been under Egyptian governance from 1948 until the Israeli occupation in 1956, displaced Palestinians focused on a resolution to their displacement, a right to return home, rather than dreamed of Egyptian permanent annexation. However, Bunche continued to negotiate with the Israeli and Egyptian governments, both seeking to acquire oil import rights from the strip, and UNEF remained in power until the end of the month. Focused on how the Gaza takeover could serve as a blueprint for future UN interventions, the UN was caught unawares by Nasser: 'Before they could get their bearings, while they were still searching for beds and desks, Egypt had stepped in again.'⁹²

The protests were integral to the timing of this capitulation from the UN, although the Western media repeatedly sought to depoliticise the protestors demands and instead focus on the violence of one march: 'Demonstrating once again his acute sense of timing, President Nasser waited until Gaza mobs had provoked a shooting incident before demanding the immediate restoration of Egyptian rule. The United Nations force seems to have had no alternative but to yield to the Egyptian demand.'⁹³ The UNEF mission was now limited to monitoring the demarcation lines, yielding its responsibilities to General Latif and the Egyptian Army at the end of March 1957. Although UNEF remained in Gaza to monitor borders and police the population, they no longer had administrative control over the strip.

However, lingering questions about the UN's responsibility for the conflict and its confused approach to the Armistice Agreements perpetuated instability in the strip, even after Egypt had restored its authority in Gaza: 'The aggregate of self-justified infringements by both sides led to war and the restoration of the armistice looks like leading to war again.'⁹⁴ UN decision-making in the aftermath of the creation of Israel continued to threaten future conflict in the region. In Britain, *The Times* published on 12 March,

The United Nations – fumbling, divided, fearful of responsibility – left the gates to Gaza open, and Egypt has driven a horse and cart through ... a great opportunity has been missed. For years Gaza was the hot-bed of disturbances ... Its 200,000 refugees were already a United Nations' responsibility. If it could have been administered as a whole by the United Nations for *some time ahead*, there would have been far greater security against raids and counter-raids between Israel and Egypt.⁹⁵

In citing this quote and the loss of the 'solution' of an open-ended UN administration, Selwyn Lloyd, British Secretary of Foreign Affairs, lamented 'So much for Gaza.'⁹⁶ For many member-states

⁹¹For years the United Nations had been debating this complex of problems and passing resolutions about them; for years some of its members had been giving unselfish service and large sums of money to mitigate the human misery involved': Fish Armstrong, 'U. N. experience in Gaza'.

⁹²Fish Armstrong, 'U. N. Experience in Gaza'.

⁹³Homer Bigart, 'Nasser Moving to take over Gaza', *The New York Times*, 12 March 1957.

⁹⁴'Gaza at flash point', *The Economist*, 16 March 1957.

⁹⁵*The Times*, 12 March 1957.

⁹⁶Hansard HC Deb, 14 March 1957, vol 566, col 1323 [italics are author's own].

who saw the solution to the Palestinian ‘problem’ as the resettlement – or ethnic cleansing – of the strip and a ‘liberal’ state in ownership, the Palestinians were perceived to have obstructed the liberal potential of the territory for not, but that the future of the territory was far from decided.

Conclusion

As some scholars of settler colonialism have argued, the Nakba should be understood as an ongoing, repeating process of violent dispossession, rather than a static, discrete event: ‘the Nakba is not a singular event but is manifested today in the continuing subjection of Palestinians by Israelis.’⁹⁷ However, by focusing liberationist approaches solely to the settler colonial practices of Israel, we miss the ways in which other powerful actors and liberal agents naturalised Zionist logic and/or behaved in settler colonial ways themselves towards Palestinians. In order to fully trace the development and naturalisation of Zionist temporal logic within liberal international understandings of Palestine, we must look beyond Israel and towards the oft-neglected moment in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis to disentangle how the ‘Gaza exception’ became popularised beyond Israel.

This article has shown how Palestinian protestors ruptured the temporal control and decade-long stagnation over their displacement on the Gaza Strip. I have shown how the first armed peacekeeping mission, UNEF, was designed to weaponise time directly on the ground for an indefinite period in order to ‘stabilise’ and control decolonising populations, preventing them from escalating and engulfing geopolitical powers. But this ‘freezing’ approach was also deeply harmful for host populations, obstructing them from justice and paralysing them in a bureaucratic stasis. Although freezing a conflict via a peacekeeping mission may appear to resolve tensions, the moment that this political norm is destabilised – often following an intensification of intra-group antagonism – the thawing and reignition of conflict for the oppressed community is inevitable as nothing has been resolved. Peacekeeping as a method of protracted peace is thus a temporal Faustian bargain: an acceptance of surface-level ‘stability’ and territorial dominance now in exchange for deferred violence.

In the current context of ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, escalating settler violence in the West Bank, and UN Resolutions on a new international administration in Palestine, the relevance of the post-Suez moment of rupture is stark. As scholars of Palestine well know, the Zionist project was seeking territorial expansion far before the 1967 conflict. In the aftermath of the Suez crisis, the Israeli state defended its occupation of Egyptian land and sought to retain as much as possible. But the complicity and involvement of UN leadership and operations, and the colonial logics of liberal peace more broadly, should also factor into our histories of injustice in Palestine. Today, delays to food aid, medical support, and – indeed – the articulation of the word ‘genocide’ in the past year have, once again, drawn public attention to the ways in which time – its elongation, its inaction, its open-endedness – can be mobilised in the name of ‘peace’ to harm marginalised communities in Gaza.⁹⁸ Just as in March 1957, we witness Palestinian civilians resisting passivity or assimilation, demanding attention to the violation of their rights, both past and present, and the continued deferral of justice. On 24 September 2024, Mohammed El-Kurd, a Palestinian writer and activist, posted on Twitter (now X), ‘Justice ... you are taking too long’.⁹⁹ Yet, as liberal audiences continue to promote bothsideism and focus on the strip as a territorial dispute over ownership, a political resolution and the likelihood of restitution for rights violations continue to slip further over the horizon, into the future.

⁹⁷ Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie, and Sobhi Samou, ‘Past is present: Settler colonialism in Palestine’, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2:1 (2012), p. 2.

⁹⁸ Jessica Whyte, ‘A “tragic humanitarian crisis”: Israel’s weaponization of starvation and the question of intent’, *Journal of Genocide Research* (2024), pp. 1–15, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623528.2024.2339637>.

⁹⁹ @m7mdkurd, (2024), 24 September, available at: <https://x.com/m7mdkurd/status/1838436072851693994>, accessed 3 March 2025.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Moustafa Mahgoub for his Arabic translations. I also acknowledge Louise Ridden, Myfanwy James, and Matilda Greig, as well as the *RIS* Editors and three generous reviewers for their invaluable advice and support. I presented an early draft of this paper at a seminar hosted by the Department of International Development, LSE, on 13 November 2024 which greatly helped to sharpen my argument.

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