

United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNSTO)

Middle East (1948-present)

The UN has maintained some form of presence in the Middle East since 1948, undertaking overlapping missions in different conditions and with varying degrees of success. UNTSO is often cited as the organization's first peacekeeping operation (Goulding 1993: 452). Over the years, it has proved to be a valuable training ground for UN personnel who often go on to participate in other, more complex, missions. For instance, UNTSO provided five Force Commanders for new operations elsewhere during the Cold War. However, whilst it has maintained a presence in the Middle East through all the years of turmoil there, UNTSO has rarely been able to fulfil its mandate due to variable levels of cooperation from the belligerents and its own limited capabilities.

The impetus for a UN operation in the Middle East was provided by the events leading up to the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948. In April 1947, Britain's decision to terminate its Palestine mandate the following year and hand the problem of deciding the region's future over to the UN led to a year of frantic diplomatic manoeuvring, culminating in the unilateral declaration of the independent state of Israel on 15 May 1948. The UN's attempts to find a solution amenable to both Palestine's Jewish and Arab communities failed to halt the escalating violence during the winter of 1947-8. By the spring of 1948, the UN Palestine Commission, tasked with implementing a plan put forward by its predecessor, the UN Special Committee on Palestine, concluded that UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of 29 November 1947, which envisaged the partition of Palestine into separate Arab and Israeli states, was now unworkable. Britain's abdication of responsibility and Israel's simultaneous declaration of statehood altered the nature of the conflict from an intrastate power

struggle to an interstate war. Palestine's Arab neighbours launched attacks to overwhelm the fledgling state and the first Arab-Israeli war began.

UNTSO had effectively come into existence three weeks earlier when the Security Council created the Truce Commission for Palestine and attached observers to it in an attempt to halt the inter-communal violence (Higgins 1969: 16). The same resolution threatened more forceful action under Chapter VII if the combatants continued to ignore UN demands for an immediate ceasefire. However, disagreement within the Security Council reduced the credibility of the threat and left the UN unable to impose a diplomatic solution. In June, the UN Mediator for Palestine, Count Folke Bernadotte, negotiated a truce but it lasted less than one month. Bernadotte blamed both the combatants and the UN's inability to act decisively when its interests did not coincide with those of the great powers (Wainhouse 1973: 27).

UNTSO's initial deployment during the June 1948 ceasefire included the first 36 of an envisaged 63 military observers but then rose to 93 and finally to 572 after Bernadotte was assassinated by Jewish extremists (the Stern Gang) in September. This number was reduced after Israel and the other combatants signed the bilateral General Armistice Agreements between February and July 1949, which resulted in a more stable ceasefire (Ghali 1994: 94). Since then, its size has fluctuated between 30 and a few hundred personnel. UNTSO's mandate changed substantially after the General Armistice from truce supervision to overseeing compliance with the terms of each of the agreements. However, at no stage did it possess the mandate or the capability to enforce compliance. Instead, small teams of observers were stationed along the armistice demarcation lines, patrolled the demilitarized zones and investigated allegations of transgressions by Israel, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. The Suez Crisis of 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and

persistent conflict between Israel and Palestinian forces operating from Lebanon all complicated UNTSO's task. These events led directly to the establishment of five new peacekeeping missions in the region: UNEF I after Suez, UNEF II and UNDOF after the Yom Kippur War, and both UNOGIL (1958) and UNIFIL (1978-) to address Israeli-Lebanese issues.

Over 60 years later, UNTSO is still in place but has been unable to encourage conditions conducive to long-term peace or fulfil the terms of its own mandate. UNTSO's significance thus largely resides in its ability to support other peacekeeping efforts in the Middle East and elsewhere. As Ghali (1994: 100) suggested, UNTSO has benefited 'from a kind of political benign neglect' that has allowed it to remain in place throughout all of the region's conflicts and offer other peacekeeping efforts the benefits of its considerable knowledge and experience. For instance, UNTSO personnel have been seconded to the various observer groups and peacekeeping operations in the Middle East as well as other UN field activities across the globe (UN 1990: 41-42). In this sense, UNTSO's primary limitation (its reliance upon consent) is also the source of its main strength (its durability). Had UNTSO enjoyed greater coercive powers it is unlikely that the parties to the conflict would have tolerated its presence. In addition, its loose mandate gave the mission a degree of flexibility, which reinforced the idea that each operation should be initiated on an *ad hoc* basis. The formation and experience of UNTSO thus had important repercussions for the conceptual development of peacekeeping more generally. In particular, it suggested that peacekeeping did not need a conceptual blueprint. This premise generally worked well during the Cold War but left the UN conceptually and bureaucratically unable to deal with the new tasks entrusted to it in the 1990s.

References

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