

# The UN and Gaza: In History and Today

*This is a very lightly edited transcript of a conversation that JWE President held October 2 with Ian Williams, a veteran press correspondent at the United Nations and president of the Foreign Press Association in New York. You can watch the whole 30-minute conversation [here](#).*

**[Helena Cobban]**

Hi, everyone.

I'm Helena Cobban. I'm the president of Just World Educational. And I'm really delighted today to be able to share a little conversation that I had on October 2nd with Ian Williams, who is a veteran foreign correspondent at the UN.

He's worked there for the *Guardian* and many other outlets. Currently, he's the correspondent for the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. He is also the president of the Foreign Press Association.

So he sounds terribly august. And I'm terrifically honored that he's agreed to speak with me today. He is also, oh, as it happens, the author of a fine little book that my company published called *UNTold, the Real Story of the United Nations in Peace and War*, which is still available now from [pmpress.org](http://pmpress.org).

So anyway, Ian, there's actually a lot to talk about because on Tuesday, I think it was on Tuesday that Secretary General Guterres came out in fairly warm support of the Trump plan for Gaza. Could you maybe tell us a bit more about Antonio Guterres? He's been a figure on the international scene for quite a long time.

He was a Portuguese socialist. But tell us what brings Guterres to this place where he is apparently so supportive of the Trump plan.

**[Ian Williams]**

Well, he's been fairly consistently supportive of Israel in a soft way, like many social democrats of his generation were. And it's also to be remembered that Portugal, even before it recognized Israel, I believe, in 1973, was the only country in Europe that provided a springboard for American planes resupplying Israel during the Yom Kippur War, which has left Portugal in sort of a good place with the US and Israel for many years. But the particular case here is that Guterres is non-confrontational.

I mean, it reminds me of what a friend once said about Perez de Cuellar, if he fell in the lake, it wouldn't cause a ripple. He is so sort of non-confrontational. He does occasionally make questions, you know, state issues of principle, like about the Middle East and about Israel, but he doesn't assert them by any means.

And, you know, it's like the tree falling in the forest. Who hears? Who does?

And that moves on to the question of what is the role of the UN? Well, what is the role of the US and Israel about the UN? And their role is to keep the UN out of it as much as possible, because the UN embodies the international law on the question of Palestine, from the partition plan onwards, and every peace plan that's been sort of negotiated and put in, they've sought UN validation.

They know they can't get a sort of outright annexation past the United Nations, so they try to bypass it. You remember one of the things, they were so desperate to keep the UN out of it that Buttress-Garley and co. invented the Quartet.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Oh, gosh. Does anyone remember the Quartet?

**[Ian Williams]**

Later headed by Tony Blair. But at the time, it was a means of the US thanking Boutros-Ghali for support in the [Iraq War] and giving the UN a nominal role, a walk on part. But the Quartet was a means of avoiding UN involvement, because it meant the UN was tied in with the other, with Britain and with Israel and with the US, and Russia as an ancillary.

The Russians knew they were being played for suckers at the time, but they went along anyway, because they were a bit desperate for prestige and power and wanted to show they had a hand on the tiller. So, you know, the Quartet still meanders on, I think. It has a sort of shadowy half-life.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Hang on, let's just back up. The Quartet is the US, the UN, Britain and Russia?

**[Ian Williams]**

No, the EU.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Oh, the EU and Russia.

**[Ian Williams]**

Yes.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So Blair's role is, you know, kind of late British mandate.

**[Ian Williams]**

Blair was brought in as a sort of consolation prize for him being America's toe rag during [the Iraq War.] And after he lost his election. Yes. And he was paid a handsome salary, which my friend Mark Seddon demonstrated was actually coming from the US State Department via the Quartet.

And this enabled him to make lots of connections and lots of contracts. Because he beat Donald Trump on making diplomacy a paying business. So I've got to be careful. We don't want libel suits. But I think that's a fair assessment.

So, look, the actual role [of the UN] is quite clear. The Israel-- the peace treaties that came, [Resolutions] 242 and 338, etc, validated legally, if not morally, the '67 boundaries and said there would be a peace based on the '67 boundaries.

**[Helena Cobban]**

That's an important point you're making actually, Ian, because, you know, when everybody talks about resolution 242 or resolution 338 (which, you know, builds on 242) they're talking about only "territories occupied in the recent war," and not even all the territories, which is another issue. So in other words, the boundaries that were there from the 1949 armistice agreements until 1967, were just kind of, okay, Israel can have them.

**[Ian Williams]**

They amounted to that, but it did say there would be territorial adjustments, which have always been just been one way. But I mean, there's a whole body of UN resolutions and international law about Israeli behaviour. And that's what the US and Israel have consistently tried to keep things away from the UN.

It's why they don't want the item even on the agenda, because they know it cuts their feet off diplomatically, if they do it.

**[Helena Cobban]**

You know, if you look at Donald Trump and the outrageous things that he said about the UN, when he was at the UN, or if you look at Netanyahu, the same: the way they just trash the institution, and their diplomats do the same.

**[Ian Williams]**

I must say, I long nostalgically for Boutros-Ghali, because I think whatever his disagreements, he would have not tolerated that. He would have come back with some pretty fairly acidic remarks on Trump and Netanyahu. He knew who he was dealing with and he was he was a very sharp cookie on these matters. You know, I once texted him about Camp David and he said, well, they promised that they would withdraw. And of course, they've broken every promise since then.

I mean, we're talking about the two state solution now. And there's a country which is occupying not just the territories in defiance of Oslo and the agreements they made, under

which they remember they got recognition from the most of the Arab world that had hitherto.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And most of the Muslim world.

**[Ian Williams]**

So they got their recognition based on, not a false premise, but on a lie that they would honour their promises hitherto. And they didn't. And they still haven't.

And now they're actually busily, despite loads of U.N. resolutions, expanding the settlements in defiance of U.N. resolutions and making any two-state solution a complete nonsense. And it disturbs me that I can see why diplomats of their very nature clutch at straws. The two state solution is the straw that they keep clutching at.

And the two straw state, the two-state straw, I think we call it that, it is almost, it's a pipe dream. It's a figment because they've made it so. Unless Israel is prepared to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza, which it shows no signs of doing, it's not going to happen.

And unless Israel is forced by force majeure, by international sanctions, by boycotts-- You know, I shudder to think of military action. I cannot see the United States invading Israel to enforce U.N. resolutions or anybody else allowing anybody else to, despite all the talk of peacekeepers. And this is where Guterres' statement was so disappointing.

It's completely devoid of reality. And as always, it sort of inches towards the side. I mean, it's quite clear that Netanyahu will do whatever he's always done.

He'll agree to anything and then break his word. So he will take whatever the rest of the world gives, what the policy. He's not even talking to the Palestine Authority now.

It really is a monologue. He's having a peace negotiations with himself, as is the U.S., basically. Trump is conferring with Netanyahu about what they want and then going to the Palestinians and the rest of the world and saying, well, this is the peace deal. I've negotiated it.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Well, they call it a peace deal, but it's more like a colonial diktat. I mean, from a colonial viceroy.

**[Ian Williams]**

Of any Palestinian voice in this. They're not accepting any Palestinian voices in the post, in the settlement. And they're not even consulting Palestinians about how that settlement should go, which is why I wouldn't be surprised if the Quartet sort of gets dragged from the grave in all its maggoty splendor to fulfill a role.

I mean, it has, in a sense, because Tony Blair, as the last sort of spokesperson of the Quartet, failed, is going to be dragged out of his grave to run this one as well. And he'll take the money and run, but he won't do anything.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So there's a huge amount here to talk about, actually. We can talk about the total failure of the UN resolutions that have decreed a ceasefire in Lebanon, for example, or which the Israelis, with full U.S. support, have been breaching on a daily basis, actually, since 1978, if you want to go back that far, but certainly over the past year. And then, of course, there's Syria and a lot to talk about there, as well as the West Bank.

So we need to look at this Israeli expansionist aggression as being omnidirectional by land, sea, and air, really, as much as they can.

**[Ian Williams]**

I think Netanyahu has a dual role. One is to keep everyone talking so he stays in office and doesn't go to jail, which is pretty much the same thing, because if he leaves office, he'll go to jail once he's lost the benefits. But the other part is, which is where he's backed by the Israeli hardliners, is if you keep talking, then at some point, somehow, you're going to get rid of the Palestinians.

They don't know how.

**[Helena Cobban]**

They kind of are, you know. They know how. They're doing it.

**[Ian Williams]**

Yes, you kill them. You shoot them. You bomb them.

And there's even been, I don't know whether you saw...

**[Helena Cobban]**

You starve them, yeah.

**[Ian Williams]**

There's a double, sort of, there's been a few floaters now about shifting the people from Gaza to the Western Sahara, which will be flouting another UN resolution.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Or Uganda, or Somaliland, or...

**[Ian Williams]**

Yeah, but Western Sahara, they're talking about shipping them to a territory that is in dispute, because the United Nations says it's got the right of self-determination. So, no one's asking the Saharans whether they want a couple of million Gazans dropped on them. But the Moroccans want it, because they think it would be very useful, and they could rely on their loyalty.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So, you're there near the UN headquarters in New York. Is that something that's seriously discussed amongst the diplomats there?

**[Ian Williams]**

Not yet. No, but I mean, you know, over these years, it's been, as you pointed out, 35 years or something like that I've been following, and you begin to get a nose for, well, it's feathers in the wind, straws in the wind. If something is floating, you think, this is, that can't float, can it?

And then they can. I mean, what they've been doing is...

**[Helena Cobban]**

So, Ian, you and I both grew up in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s, which was a kind of, a key era of decolonization. It was notable to me, it's been notable to me for a long time, that the British brought in the UN to create this colonial settler state in Palestine.

**[Ian Williams]**

It brought in the UN to wash their hands of it.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Yes, first of all, but knowing that it would end up with at least the creation of this Jewish...

**[Ian Williams]**

To be precise, I think the British actually voted against the partition plan.

**[Helena Cobban]**

I'm not sure, I think maybe they abstained. They certainly did not vote for it.

**[Ian Williams]**

Yeah.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Because, of course, you know, they'd had all the Irgun terror and everything. But that happened four months after the Indians and Pakistanis got their independence. So, you know, the historical trend in those early years of the UN was already for decolonization.

And here comes the UN saying, oh, we're going to have a colonial settler state.

**[Ian Williams]**

No, they didn't say that. They said that we're going to support... The Russians, remember, also supported the Israeli national liberation struggle against the British colonialists.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Well, right.

**[Ian Williams]**

They inverted the terms of it because, you know, the first countries to recognize Israel were Russia and Czechoslovakia, which armed the Irgun and the others.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And actually, you know, the Russians are still playing a very weird role today. But I just want to go back through those decades since the founding of the UN, eight decades now. And, you know, it had certain principles and the charter and this and that.

**[Ian Williams]**

The non-acquisition of territory by force.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Oh, yes, I remember that one. Yeah, yeah.

**[Ian Williams]**

Very few other people seem to nowadays.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So, so. Actually, it's it's I would say it's on the ropes. It's on the skids right now.

I was actually for all of that, you know, I've OK, I confess I've been kind of fond of the idea of the UN since the very beginning because I thought it was better than, you know, outright colonialism. And, you know, I thought I kind of believed what they said in the charter and this and that. And now it's clear that this UN is not what I grew up believing in.

So I was actually even those in spite of my existing disillusionment, somewhat surprised when Chas Freeman suggested to me recently, you know, the UN is not going to last forever. And of course, as soon as he said that, I'm like, yeah, of course, it's not going to last forever. You know, nothing--

**[Ian Williams]**

What I've always said in all the years is that it took World War Two to reform the League of Nations. And do we really want World War Three? But what I've been tracking now for the last 40 years almost is the continual war of attrition on the concepts by the US and Israel.

Above all, it's the Israeli issue. Once you make an exception, basically murder is all right unless it's Israel that does it. Aggression against other countries is wrong unless Israel does it.

So, you know, they pile up all of the Israeli exceptions and there's a lot more come under since then. Well, if Israel, then why not Russia? What's wrong with Ukraine?

Why are we boycotting Russia over Ukraine? When you have flagrant breaches, so you stretch the principle over and over and you get more people in and, you know, it really builds up until there's huge holes and it's very difficult to enforce.

One of the things we forget, for example, is that the sanctions on Iraq were not so much ended by a UN resolution. It was simply because most of the members said that they weren't going to apply them anymore. They realized that, you know, apart from this US threat, that the air sanctions and the sanctions were killing children. You remember Madeleine Albright?

**[Helena Cobban]**

Yeah, it's OK if it's 500,000 children, that's OK.

**[Ian Williams]**

It was a price worth paying. Well, the rest of the world decided it wasn't true. And so they started busting the sanctions and breaking it, which shows the sort of both strengths and weaknesses of the United Nations.

Because the fact that the US did this in the name of the United Nations and people who excoriated the organization for decades suddenly decided, oh, we must apply UN resolutions until the UN resolutions were revealed to be not quite as binding as they first thought. So it is complex in that sense. I mean, I think the United Nations has a life, as Kofi Annan used to say, it was a legitimizing principle.

It has to come back there, but you need the members to stand up for it. And as long as they allow the United States, thereby Israel, to dictate what happens there, you know, the time is for the politeness to stop. Guterres should say, hey, you've killed hundreds and hundreds of my staff in Gaza.

You're killing them in the West Bank. You've driven our people from UNRWA out of their work that they're doing there. We're not going to be nice to you.

Why should we be nice to you?



**[Helena Cobban]**

And genocide. I mean, you know, genocide.

**[Ian Williams]**

Mere technical details. Yes. The ICC, the courts, et cetera, et cetera.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Yeah.

**[Ian Williams]**

And, you know, always this Israeli exception, which other people have built on. I mean, because it's almost, you can almost forgive them because say, hey, you know, they're committing genocide. Why can't we?

You know, he's got one. Why can't I have one?

**[Helena Cobban]**

So I guess, you know, what Chas Freeman was talking about was that, you know, there are a lot of not global institutions, but networked institutions now growing up around kind of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and that they're playing an increasing role in international society, which I obviously have been noticing a lot and noticing, you know, how, you know, they have problems, but they have been growing.

**[Ian Williams]**

Their major problem is that they are sort of anti-organizations. You know, they don't, it's not that they have common ideals or common purposes, except to erode the overweening power of the United States.

**[Helena Cobban]**

I wouldn't say that. I would say, you know, if you look in particular at the kind of the infrastructure that China and its partners have been building around the world.

**[Ian Williams]**

China's a separate issue.

**[Helena Cobban]**

It is a new economic order growing up globally, and economics, hopefully, will, you know, have its day.

**[Ian Williams]**

This is why Trump and, well, I don't think Trump has a thought on these matters, but certainly his advisors are people who were involved in the Project for the New American Century, which foresaw the economic and military decline of the US and said, you know, basically they wanted to cement in American supremacy while they still could. That was the policy under George Bush, and I think it's the unstated but active policy now. I mean, his Nuremberg rally in front of all of the generals this week was a case in point.

I noticed they were a little less enthusiastic, since it's them and their men who have to die in the course of these things, especially when he says they have to go into Chicago and start a riot.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And they have to go there to train. I mean, you know, it was very, very scary at one level, but I mean, I think the whole MAGA thing, you know, and the tariffs, the idea that we need to restore US manufacturing, you can see where it's coming from, but they don't have a clue how to do it, because one would actually restore manufacturing by strengthening the education system in the country, for example.

**[Ian Williams]**

By paying workers proper wages in line with... joining unions. There's all sorts of unforeseen. And not pandering to billionaires who are draining the country dry and offshoring all of their work.

There's loads of ways to do it. But I mean, this is the point. I don't believe that Donald Trump himself has a coherent political philosophy.

He's a sociopath.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Oh, I think he does. It's make money. Make money for myself and my family.

**[Ian Williams]**

Yes, I know. But there are people behind him, like Miller and Bannon and others who do the Heritage Foundation. They do have a political philosophy and they know which buttons to push with him.

So one of the buttons here is that Israel, I sometimes hoped against hope that Netanyahu would do something, would push Trump's nose enough out that he'll do something about it regardless of the lobby. But, you know, he's had a very good try. And Trump's nose seemed to have bounced back when it's been pushed out by Netanyahu.

But, you know, he's gone close. And I think that blow to his pride will be the one. But they don't seem to realize.

Look, the Israelis have been playing this political *coitus interruptus* for many years now. They always pull out at the last minute. So they, you know, they push everything as far as they can and then say, oh, well, we'll pull back a bit until they relax and then we'll push in again.

And that's been the diplomatic procedure. They say things and they lie over and over. They lie over and over things and they don't deliver.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So if we bring this back to the Gaza so-called peace plan, is there actually a role that the United Nations might play in spite of Guterres' shortcomings, you know, that they could help? Because obviously, you know, Hamas and the resistance movements in Gaza and the people of Gaza desperately want to, you know, save something in Gaza.

**[Ian Williams]**

Well, look, we have an example to a point. When the UN somewhat reluctantly agreed to go into Iraq. After Saddam was ousted and to try to facilitate it.

And it wasn't because they approved of the invasion. It was to try and ameliorate the effects for the people.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Mitigate the bad effects.

**[Ian Williams]**

Yes. And, you know, the people who were behind that were pushing it was certainly not pro-American per se, but they realized that something must be done. And they were the only ones that could do it.

So-- and they paid a price for it as well, of course, because there's, you know, seeming association with the occupation got them all blown up. So that's what you could almost conceive of a role in Gaza with the UN bringing UNRWA back and the other agencies. But they would have to be much firmer and say, no, we're not going to do it on your terms.

You either let us in there with neutral peacekeepers who we will pick protecting us or we won't go. And they have to present it in stark terms instead of doing the traditional UN thing of slicing and dicing and synoptically pulling closer to the Israeli position. Because this is, of course, the position if you have a party that knows what they want and is immovable and everybody else keeps making successive, you know, successive concessions.

It's a bit like one of those Greek philosophical things about that the tortoise and the hare and how they advance. You're always going to lose. You're always going to end up close to the position and not because each time you have the distance instead of just saying, no, we're not going to do it.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So do you think there are forces in the UN that can provide that kind of spine and that kind of sturdiness?

**[Ian Williams]**

Well, it depends on the members. And I'm sorry, the UN is an association of member states and the major powers aren't the ones that are idealistic about this. You know, the sort of Scandinavians and the Jamaicans and the Moroccans, not the Moroccans, the others who were sort of staunch against, you know, the Iraq war and the others who stood out and said, no, this is illegal. This is wrong. They are small powers. You know, I don't think the Jamaican Defense Force is about to go and take going to Gaza.

I don't think Liechtenstein has played a very good role. I don't think Liechtenstein is going to do much in the way of peacekeeping in Gaza. So what are they going to do?

They can't do it without Russia and China and the Europeans. And, you know, they are very expedient. They want to keep each other out.

The Chinese are played very sort of chary. They've spoken quite firmly about what Israel is doing and international law and, you know, a sort of residual support for the Palestinians from the old days of the revolution. But they're long gone now.

If Israel offered major contracts to a Chinese company to sort of run a canal to the Dead Sea, I think the Chinese would say, oh, well, OK, now you're talking.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Oh, gosh, that's all very depressing--

**[Ian Williams]**

Cynical, but accurate--

**[Helena Cobban]**

But let's get back together and talk about this later in a couple of weeks, maybe. I mean, there's the Hague Group. There's all kinds of things that could happen. So you know--

**[Ian Williams]**

The European Union could be if it was there. But I mean, that was one of the reasons the European Union was in the Quartet, because basically it was an instant internal veto. They couldn't agree on the time of day.

All they need is one Hungarian dictator to say, no, it's Friday. And they wouldn't agree that it was Thursday. And the British, you know: toe-rags is the colloquial British term.

But, you know, one of the things we should remember and praise her for. There's not many things I praise her for. Margaret Thatcher used to vote against the Americans quite often on the Security Council.

When the Americans vetoed, the British opposed. They went along with the resolutions. It took Tony Blair to start abstaining.

And I think it took Keir Starmer to actually vote with the Americans on these issues over and over again. Britain steered, you know, it was fairly punctilious. It often evaded international law, but it didn't actually sort of defy it.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Or trash it.

**[Ian Williams]**

Or trash it, which is what's been happening lately with their support for the Americans. And I think that's, you know, that's a shame because the British did have a role there, you know, residual patriotism on my part.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Oh, I don't know, I don't know. Anyway, let's talk about it again another time. And I really want to thank you for giving up your afternoon to discuss this with me today-- and onward to a better future!