

The UN at 80: When juvenile idealism meets civilizational conflict

Contributed to *thinc.* by Eli Kenin

The United Nations, which is celebrating the 80th anniversary of its founding this year, is showing signs of its youth. Its modern, rules-based international system has proven woefully inadequate to deal with the conflict between Iran and Israel—a clash between two ancient peoples. When Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei stated that "Israel must disappear," quoting the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—he was dead serious.¹ When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed "Never again," declaring that Israel must ensure Iran is not allowed to produce nuclear weapons, it was an almost biblical oath.²

A year and eight months after Iran's proxies initiated a war against the Jewish state— Hamas with its massacre of 1,200 civilians and hostage-taking, Hezbollah with relentless rocket fire that emptied entire towns in northern Israel, and the Houthis with strikes on shipping and cities—Israel finally hit back at the source, targeting Iran's nuclear and missile infrastructure. The familiar outcry over alleged Israeli violations of international law quickly followed.

France 24 warned that "preemptive" violence threatens to erode legal norms and usher in a "law of the jungle."³ *The Guardian* asked whether we are witnessing the death of international law, noting with irony: "It is either a sign that something is deeply wrong with the international system, or a sign that it is working as it should, that a state like North Korea took the trouble to accuse Israel of committing an 'unpardonable crime against humanity.'"⁴ A leading Latin American daily condemned the impotence of multilateral institutions for failing to address its "multiple violations of international law."⁵

Most notably, UN experts declared the strikes a flagrant breach of international law, calling them a violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force against territorial integrity or political independence of any state—even under claims of preventive self-defense.⁶

Ancient origins: The Persian-Jewish relationship

Iran and Israel are two ancient nations with fractured and often interwoven pasts that are clashing in the 21st century. Long before the rise of the European empires that colonized the world and the birth of the United States—the powers that created the United Nations—the two peoples were among the foundational cultures laying a path for what was to come.

The German philosopher Hegel saw the Persian Empire as the first modern, multinational state—unifying vast, diverse peoples while allowing them to preserve their local laws,

customs, and identities. He even called it “the beginning of world history.”⁷ Persia’s influence on Western civilization runs deeper than often acknowledged: many customs of Europe’s royal courts began there, passed through Greece. Persians pioneered irrigation, astronomy, and chemistry, and later founded the world’s first teaching hospital.

The decline of Persia’s last empire in the 7th century opened the way for the Islamic conquest and, many centuries later, the rise of *Twelver Shiism*—the foundation of today’s Islamic Republic. Modern Iranians grapple with identities that often clash: heirs of an ancient empire, followers of messianic Islam, and citizens of a modern state.

The Jewish scripture, among the most influential in human history, begins with creation and continues to the exile in Persia, after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. When King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return and rebuild their Temple, a bond of respect began to be formed between the two peoples. The book of Esther recounts how Haman, a non-Persian advisor to King Achashverosh (Xerxes), temporarily broke that bond. If Hegel saw the Persian Empire as the dawn of modernity, Haman was the first modern antisemite—a forerunner of Adolf Hitler—who persuaded the monarch to decree the Jews’ annihilation:

There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples throughout your realm. Their laws differ from every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws; therefore, it is not befitting the king to tolerate them.⁸

The edict set a fixed date for the annihilation of the Jews. It would clearly constitute genocidal intent under the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, which defines the crime as the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”⁹ The decree was unambiguous: “Letters were sent... to all the king’s provinces, to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, little children and women—in a single day... and to plunder their possessions.”¹⁰

When Haman falls from power, the Jews are spared. They prosper under Persian rule with Esther—the Jewish queen—at court, while others return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple.

The Jews’ salvation from attempted genocide is commemorated today during the festival of Purim. Some 2,400 years later, a third of the Jewish people perished in the Nazi Holocaust. When Netanyahu vowed “never again,” it must be understood in the context of these two events—and the long history of exile and persecution in between.

Israel reborn: When UN idealism worked

After World War II and the Holocaust, the newly established United Nations authorized the creation of the State of Israel and anchored the rules-based international order. Like Iran, modern Israel grapples with a fractured political culture—but for very different reasons. Iran’s identity was splintered by conquest and imposed faith; Israel’s by the ingathering of

exiles—Jews from every corner of the globe, each bringing distinct experiences, languages, and visions. Yet unlike Iran — its far larger adversary in both population and territory — Israelis are capable of unity and shared purpose, particularly in times of crisis, as the latest war has shown.

For nearly a thousand years, the Jews who remained under successive Iranian dynasties enjoyed long stretches of stability and autonomy—despite occasional hardships—compared with most other Jewish diasporas. Altogether, including today’s small community, Jews have lived in the region for more than 2,500 years in relative harmony with their Iranian neighbors—even after the creation of Israel—until the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

From Persian tolerance to Iranian revolutionary fanaticism

About 850 years after the Arab conquest, Iran endured another forced religious shift, as Turkic rulers violently imposed Twelver Shiism on the largely Sunni population.¹¹ Today, *Shiism* constitutes about 10 percent of the global Muslim population—of which the vast majority are *Twelvers*. It is a more messianic version of Islam, centered on the belief that the Mahdi, the hidden twelfth imam, will return at the end of days.¹² For centuries, Shiites remained a subdued minority in the broader Muslim world, both because of their numbers and because their theology emphasized waiting quietly for the Mahdi’s reappearance.

That changed with the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when Ayatollah Khomeini argued that the Mahdi’s return required human action—not passive patience. The new regime began laying the groundwork for his reappearance. Within this apocalyptic vision, the destruction of Israel became central. The most important obstacle “to the emergence of the Mahdi,” declared a senior Iranian intelligence official in 2015, “is the existence of the usurper regime of Israel.”¹³

The fanaticism of Iran’s regime was evident in its willingness to confront the entire world—defying the United States as the “Great Satan,” taking American hostages, bombing Western targets, and opposing both the capitalist West and the Soviet bloc. Ayatollah Khomeini sought to turn centuries of Shia isolation into a revolutionary, pan-Islamic movement—challenging regional regimes and the status quo of the Sunni-majority Muslim world. “We must strive to export our Revolution throughout the world,” the supreme leader avowed at Iranian new year celebrations in 1980.¹⁴

When ‘good neighbors’ call for genocide

The UN Charter calls for “tolerance” and peace between “good neighbors.”¹⁵ Yet since the founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini exhorted “We must all rise to destroy Israel,”¹⁶ Iranian leaders have continued to call for the annihilation of Israel while denying Jewish history in the region with no more than a slap on the wrist from the organization’s authorities. In 2012, then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, before

ascending the podium for his last official antisemitic speech, overstated his country's history in the Middle East while completely negating Israel's: "Iran has been around for the last seven, 10 thousand years. They (the Israelis) have been occupying those territories for the last 60 to 70 years. They have no roots there in history."¹⁷

A spokesperson for then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he was "dismayed" and reminded Iran that "in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, all members must refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."¹⁸

Today, Iran crushes domestic dissent while financing terror networks targeting Jewish communities and Israeli interests worldwide. It spent billions arming Shia militias to form a ring of terror around Israel, systematically bankrupting its own people. From the 1990s bombings of the Israeli embassy and Jewish community center in Argentina¹⁹ to ongoing surveillance operations and terror plots targeting Jewish institutions globally, Iran's reach extends far beyond the Middle East.

The Islamic Republic's ballistic missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, are emblazoned with the words "Israel must be wiped out" in Hebrew.²⁰ During the recent conflict, they struck a major hospital and one of the world's foremost research institutes, obliterating years of invaluable cancer research. While democratic Israel builds its future contributing to humanity, Iran's clerical regime offers a bleak, repressive future to their own youthful citizens and the world.

The UN Charter: When good intentions meet hard realities

The UN Charter was a response to two devastating world wars largely instigated by Western powers. Drafted by politicians rather than lawyers in multiple languages that invite endless interpretation²¹, the Charter reflects over idealistic post-war trauma more than the timeless wisdom needed to solve civilizational disputes. Eleanor Roosevelt, who continued her late husband's foundational work on the United Nations, captured that prevailing optimism when she wrote, "Once you begin a war there is nothing to do but to fight it to the end; so the effort for peace must be made while the nations are at peace."²²

As decolonization accelerated in the mid-20th century, membership expanded to include newly independent countries whose borders were often arbitrarily drawn by Western powers, contributing to weak internal cohesion. Seeking national identity and economic aid, many gravitated toward the Soviet or Arab blocs, both of which promoted anti-Western and anti-Israel agendas.

The UN's founding document is outdated. Article 2(4) is broadly read as a blanket ban on the use of force, while Article 51's wording—"if an armed attack occurs"—assumes violence is

already underway. The Charter was never meant to contend with the realities of 21st-century warfare: non-state terror, asymmetric tactics, and proxy wars, exemplified today by Iran's unprecedented encirclement strategy against Israel.²³

Despite Iran's documented threats and its proxy war, *the European Journal of International Law* argued in a preliminary analysis that Israel's "preventive" strike on Iranian nuclear and missile sites fails to meet the UN Charter's threshold for self-defense.²⁴ It claims there is "little evidence" that Iran intends to use a nuclear weapon once acquired, dismissing "some Iranian officials" genocidal threats as insufficient to prove intent by those "who actually make the relevant decisions." Yet many of those issuing such threats—like Khamenei—are the decision-makers. Still, the article concludes that Israel's "aggression" violates Article 2(4) and is therefore unlawful.

Israel at the UN: Up against a wall of antisemitism

When Israel was compelled to build a security barrier to prevent suicide bombers from entering its cities, the UN's International Court of Justice, acting within the mandate established by the Charter, appealed to the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law to rule²⁵, in effect, that Palestinian rights to free movement were more important than innocent Israelis being blown up in buses and restaurants.

Whether it's Iran's "wall of fire"—its proxy encirclement strategy—or Israel's defensive wall, the Jewish state consistently faces a wall of antisemitism at the United Nations. That, it seems, is also civilizational—from Haman to Ayatollah Khamenei, who like many, doesn't hesitate to appeal to international law when it suits his cause. Following Israel's killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024, the supreme leader cited "Islamic defense laws and international laws" to justify a massive retaliatory missile barrage on Israel. In that same sermon he admitted to Iran's proxy strategy by declaring Hamas's October 7 attack a "completely a right decision," adding that "any harm to Israel will serve humanity."²⁶

Beyond the United Nations: Hope for the future

The ayatollah's regime offers its citizens only a somber slice of Iran's rich history—a daily existence marked by repression, limited freedoms, economic uncertainty, and an apocalyptic future vision that promotes global terrorism and the destruction of Israel—a fellow UN member and a nation with which it shares ancient history. They have robbed Iran's youthful population of their future by investing the country's riches in pursuit of an atomic bomb.

Ironically, Iran shares significant demographic similarities with Israel. Both nations have young, highly educated societies.^{27 28} Most Iranians are forward-looking and increasingly disillusioned with the ruling regime.²⁹ Unlike much of the Arab world, there is little inherent animosity between ordinary Israelis and Iranians. The regime's obsessive hatred is a radical

Islamic import, not a reflection of the people. Modern, high-tech Israel, which offers its citizens a choice of tradition, modernity, or a dynamic mix of both, stands as a natural model for a post-ayatollah Iran.

During the 12-day war, Ayatollah Khamenei evoked the battle of Khaybar³⁰, where at the dawn of Islam, Mohammed slaughtered and exiled the Jewish tribes of Arabia—long before the Arab conquest—there were no Persians present.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took a longer historical view, telling the Iranian people: “Iran and Israel have been true friends since Cyrus the Great. The time has come to unite around your historic legacy by standing up for freedom from this evil, oppressive regime.”³¹ The implication: The Jewish people can now return Cyrus's kindness to his descendants by helping them remove their shared oppressor.

If peace does come, it will come despite the United Nations—not because of it. For decades, the oft-invoked rules-based order has stood idly by while one member openly threatens to annihilate another. At 80, the organization founded with soaring hopes remains immature and morally inconsistent, yet increasingly sclerotic. Peace, when it comes, will be forged, as it always has been throughout history—by peoples themselves.

The United Nations, like empires drunk on their own grandiosity, has succumbed to its own inherent contradictions. Without radical reform, it faces the same destiny as those fallen civilizations: irrelevance, and ultimately, the dustbin of history.

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² Never again means halting nuclear Iran, Netanyahu says at Holocaust ceremony, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-739499>.

³ Israel-Iran conflict ‘drives the final nail into the coffin’ of postwar world order, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250619-israel-iran-war-drives-final-nail-coffin-postwar-world-order-netanyahu-international-law>.

⁴ Are we witnessing the death of international law?, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2025/jun/26/are-we-witnessing-the-death-of-international-law>.

⁵ Israel viola el derecho internacional contra Irán, <https://www.elspectador.com/opinion/editorial/israel-viola-el-derecho-internacional-contra-iran/>.

⁶ UN experts condemn Israeli attack on Iran and urge end to hostilities, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/un-experts-condemn-israeli-attack-iran-and-urge-end-hostilities>.

⁷ Hegel's "Philosophy of History": The Oriental World, <https://www.willmorriseyreviews.com/hegels-philosophy-of-history-the-oriental-world/>.

⁸ Book of Esther, 3:8.

⁹ Definitions of Genocide and Related Crimes, <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/definition>.

¹⁰ Book of Esther, 3:13.

¹¹ World History Volume 2, from 1400 4.3 The Safavid Empire, <https://openstax.org/books/world-history-volume-2/pages/4-3-the-safavid-empire>.

¹² Islam in Iran v. Messianic Islam in Iran, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/islam-in-iran-v-messianic-islam-in-iran/>.

¹³ Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the Rising Cult of Mahdism: Missiles and Militias for the Apocalypse, <https://mei.edu/publications/irans-revolutionary-guard-and-rising-cult-mahdism-missiles-and-militias-apocalypse>.

¹⁴ Recent trends and future prospects of Iranian-sponsored international terrorism, Rand Corporation, 1990, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R3783.pdf>.

¹⁵ United Nations Charter (full text), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

¹⁶ The Regime in Its Own Words, <https://cufi.org/issue/the-regime-in-its-own-words/>.

¹⁷ In New York, defiant Ahmadinejad says Israel will be "eliminated", <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/in-new-york-defiant-ahmadinejad-says-israel-will-be-eliminated-idUSBRE88N0HG/>.

¹⁸ Ban 'dismayed' over reported anti-Israel comments from Iranian leaders, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/08/417822>.

¹⁹ Argentine judge orders 10 accused in 1994 Jewish community centre bombing tried in absentia, <https://www.france24.com/en/americas/20250627-argentina-to-put-10-accused-in-1994-bombing-on-trial-in-absentia>.

²⁰ Iran fires 2 missiles marked with 'Israel must be wiped out', <https://apnews.com/general-news-c9e2945ea3ef4dd9972f23cf663ac99e>.

²¹ P. A. Akehurst, *A Modern Introduction to International Law*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 1984), 164,

²² The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Digital Edition > My Day, <https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm? y=1945& f=md000060>.

²³ Adil Ahmad Haque, "The United Nations Charter at 75: Between Force and Self-Defense – Part Two," *Just Security*, June 29 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/70987/the-united-nations-charter-at-75-between-force-and-self-defense-part-two/>.

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²⁵ “International Court of Justice finds Israeli barrier in Palestinian territory is illegal,” *UN News*, July 9, 2004, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2004/07/108912>.

²⁶ Leader: Iran's military action against Israel legal and legitimate, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/504501/Every-nation-has-right-to-fight-aggressors-Leader-says-of-Palestinians?>.

²⁷ *Israel Population 2025*, <https://www.populationof.net/israel/>; *Iran Population 2025*, <https://www.populationof.net/iran/>.

²⁸ *UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), Educational Attainment Data*, <https://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/educational-attainment>.

²⁹ Youth Protests or Protest Generations? Conceptualizing Differences between Iran’s Contentious Ruptures in the Context of the December 2017 to November 2019 Protests, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Youth-Protests-or-Protest-Generations-Differences-Sydiq/ab5b841c6fd8a41b210bd6247248946ea04defba>.

³⁰ “Khamenei Announces the Start of the ‘Khaybar Battle’,” *8am Daily*, <https://8am.media/eng/khamenei-announces-the-start-of-the-khaybar-battle/>.

³¹ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Addresses the Iranian People, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fO8WlACdCB8>.