



# Implications of UN Security Council Ceasefire Vote

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London | Washington

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# Understanding the UN Security Council



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## 01

# Understanding the UN Security Council

The United Nations Charter established six main organs of the United Nations, including the Security Council. It gives primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security to the Security Council, which may meet whenever peace is threatened.<sup>1</sup>

**According to the Charter, the United Nations has four purposes:**

- To maintain international peace and security
- To develop friendly relations among nations
- To cooperate in solving international problems and in promoting respect for human rights
- And to be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations.<sup>2</sup>

All members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council.<sup>3</sup> While other organs of the United Nations make recommendations to member states, only the Security Council has the power to make decisions that member states are then obligated to implement under the Charter.<sup>4</sup>

**When a dispute leads to hostilities, the Council may:**

- Issue ceasefire directives that can help prevent an escalation of the conflict
- Send military observers or a peacekeeping force to help reduce tensions, separate opposing forces, and establish calm in which peaceful settlements may be sought.<sup>5</sup>

**Beyond this, the Council may opt for enforcement measures, including:**

- Economic sanctions, arms embargoes, financial penalties and restrictions, and travel bans
- Severance of diplomatic relations
- Blockade
- Collective military action.<sup>6</sup>

A chief concern is to focus action on those responsible for the policies or practices condemned by the international community, while minimising the impact of the measures taken on other parts of the population and economy.<sup>7</sup>

The United Nations Security Council has 15 members, and each member has one vote.<sup>8</sup> The Security Council has five permanent members (P5) – the United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Any of P5 can veto a resolution.<sup>10</sup> The Security Council's 10 elected members, which serve two-year, non-consecutive terms, are not afforded veto power.<sup>11</sup>

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# UN Security Council Ceasefire Votes Since 7 October 2023



02

# UN Security Council Ceasefire Votes Since 7 October 2023

## Timeline

### 16 October 2023

A Russian-drafted UN Security Council resolution that called for a humanitarian ceasefire in the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza failed to pass.<sup>12</sup> The resolution called for an immediate, durable, and full ceasefire, and to stop attacks against civilians.<sup>13</sup>

The draft resolution received five votes in favour and four votes against, along with six abstentions.<sup>14</sup>

The US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, explained the reason behind the US' veto: "by failing to condemn Hamas, Russia is giving cover to a terrorist group that brutalises innocent civilians".<sup>15</sup>

### 18 October 2023

The US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution, proposed by Brasil, that would have called for "humanitarian pauses" to deliver lifesaving aid to millions in Gaza. Russia and the UK abstained.<sup>16</sup>

US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield explained her country's veto in the Council chamber saying: "this resolution did not mention Israel's right of self-defence".<sup>17</sup>

### 8 December 2023

The United States vetoed a Security Council resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.<sup>18</sup>

Thirteen other members voted in favour of a brief draft resolution, put forward by the United Arab Emirates, while Britain abstained.<sup>19</sup>

### 20 February 2024

The United States vetoed another United Nations Security Council draft resolution on Israel's war on Gaza, proposed by Algeria, blocking a demand for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.<sup>20</sup>

The US was the only country to vote against the draft text while the United Kingdom abstained.<sup>21</sup> The UN Security Council's 13 other member countries voted in favour.<sup>22</sup>

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US ambassador to the UN, said her country was vetoing the resolution over concerns it would jeopardise talks between the US, Egypt, Israel, and Qatar that seek to broker a pause in the war and the release of hostages held by Hamas.<sup>23</sup>

## UN Security Council Ceasefire Votes Since 7 October 2023

### Timeline continued...

#### 22 March 2024

On 22 March 2024, a US resolution urging a ceasefire in Gaza linked to a hostage deal was vetoed by Russia and China in the UN security council.<sup>24</sup> Algeria also voted against the resolution and Guyana abstained.<sup>25</sup>

Explaining his country's vote against the US resolution, the Algerian ambassador to the UN, Amar Bendjama, pointed to the absence of a direct demand for an immediate ceasefire.<sup>26</sup>

#### 25 March 2024

The UN Security Council finally adopted a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.<sup>27</sup> The resolution, tabled by its 10 non-permanent members, only demands a ceasefire in Gaza for the duration of Ramadan.<sup>28</sup> The vote passed by a vote of 14 in favour to none against, with one abstention by the United States.<sup>29</sup>

The resolution also calls for the immediate release of hostages and for ensuring humanitarian access to Gaza.<sup>30</sup>

The Council rejected a Russia-proposed amendment that would have called for a permanent ceasefire.<sup>31</sup>

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# Why the US has Abstained



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03

# Why the US has Abstained

The US ambassador said her delegation “fully supports” the critical objectives of the draft.<sup>32</sup> However, “we did not agree with everything with the resolution,” which she said was the reason why the US abstained.<sup>33</sup> “Certain key edits were ignored, including our request to add a condemnation of Hamas,” Thomas-Greenfield said.<sup>34</sup>

She stressed that the release of Israeli captives would lead to an increase in humanitarian aid supplies going into the besieged coastal enclave.<sup>35</sup>

“Our vote does not, and I repeat that does not represent a shift in our policy,” White House spokesperson John Kirby told reporters: “Nothing has changed about our policy. Nothing.”<sup>36</sup> The US’ shift from vetoing previous resolutions to abstention should therefore be seen as largely a superficial move.

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# Implications of the Ceasefire Vote



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## 04

# Implications of the Ceasefire Vote

## For US policy

According to Chris Hedges, the US’ decision to abstain on the ceasefire vote is more about optics than a meaningful shift in political position.<sup>37</sup> US President Biden’s loss of support from pro-Palestinian Americans and precarious electoral support can be seen as a reason for this optics shift.<sup>38</sup>

Ultimately, President Biden’s decision to send more weapons to Israel – despite the caveat that they were to be used discriminately – demonstrates the continuity in US policy towards Israel, despite this potentially violating multiple US domestic laws including the US War Laws Act, Foreign Assistance Act, Genocide Convention Act, and Arms Export Control Act.<sup>39</sup>

## For US-Israel relations

In the aftermath of the US’ abstention, Netanyahu decided not to send a high-level delegation to Washington, DC.<sup>40</sup> US President Joe Biden had requested to meet Israeli officials to discuss Israel’s plans for a ground invasion of Rafah in southern Gaza.<sup>41</sup>

White House spokesperson John Kirby said the US was “disappointed” by Netanyahu’s decision.<sup>42</sup> Netanyahu promised to defy US appeals and expand Israel’s military campaign to Rafah even without its ally’s support.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the ceasefire vote and diplomatic tensions, the US greenlighted the transfer of a new \$2.5 billion weapons package comprising bombs and fighter jets to Israel – signalling the unchanged continuation of US-Israeli relations irrespective of the ceasefire vote.<sup>44</sup>

## For Gaza

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller repeatedly said during a news conference that the resolution is non-binding, essentially giving Israel permission to continue its bombardment of Gaza – before conceding that the technical details of are for international lawyers to determine.<sup>45</sup>

The US “argues that without the use of the word ‘decides’ or evocation of Chapter VII within the text, the resolution is non-binding,” said Maya Ungar, an analyst monitoring UN Security Council developments at the International Crisis Group, “other member states and international legal scholars are arguing that there is legal precedence to the idea that a demand is implicitly a decision of the council.”<sup>46</sup>

Regardless of whether the resolution is *de jure* binding, unless the international community enforces a ceasefire it will not occur, as Israeli officials have rejected the resolution, stating that they have no intention of ceasing fire.<sup>47</sup>

Israel has already demonstrated that it will not abide by the ceasefire resolution without the intervention of the international community by continuing their sieges, attacks, and bombing of al-Shifa medical complex in the days after the vote.<sup>48</sup>

# Footnotes

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