

# A UNITED FAMILY OF NATIONS?

## Iraq, Syria and the response of the UN

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In the wake of the humanitarian crisis which has been sparked in Iraq and Syria following the actions of radical Islamist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), President Barack Obama announced his country's intention to 'degrade and ultimately destroy' ISIS [www](#). Obama's threat of military action was upheld by the implementation of US airstrikes targeting Iraq and Syria, and has provoked other leading powers such as Britain, France, Canada and Australia to join the US in their military intervention [www](#). Yet reaching this consensus was no easy path; there was much political debate surrounding the response of the Western world to events in the Middle East. Should European countries provide a united front and back US airstrikes? Is military intervention the correct method to adopt over efforts at deeper, long-term, political reform in the Middle East [www](#)?

**By searching the Chatham House Online Archive, the level of concern surrounding the effectiveness of the UN is revealed.**

This recent debate over the response of the Western world to the radical actions of ISIS in Iraq and Syria can be viewed as part of a wider discussion on the role of the United Nations (UN) – and its Security Council in particular – in dealing with these types of crises. By searching the Chatham House Online Archive, the level of concern surrounding the effectiveness of the UN is revealed.

What is particularly striking is how early such concerns seemed to emerge. Having only formed



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in October 1945 following the break-up of the League of Nations, the UN was designed to promote international cooperation and prevent future conflict on the scale the world had just experienced during the Second World War. Yet as early as March 1946, members of the UN's Security Council were expressing their dissatisfaction with the approach of the organisation.

One of the principle concerns of the council during this time was the presence of Soviet troops in Persia and its surrounding territories, which was causing considerable consternation amongst Persian officials. As the *Chronology of International Events and Documents* series exposes in its reports of the meetings of the Security Council, there was some confusion surrounding whether Soviet troops had evacuated the country. Questionable evidence led to much clamour among the member nations as to how best to resolve the situation, with no clear policy line adopted by the council [IPG](#). US member James F. Byrnes therefore called for unity from the council members, lest the organisation 'die in its infancy because of its inefficiency and ineffectiveness' [IPG](#). The time it took for the council to establish what was actually happening in Azerbaijan led Polish representative Dr Oscar Lange to complain of 'the way the council had handled the whole case' [IPG](#). One reason for this may have been, as Egyptian representative Hafiz Afifi



Pasha commented, that the UN was failing to act as 'a united family of nations' [IPG](#).

In fact, one persistent theme emerging from these documents is the difficulty the larger nations seem to have in balancing self-interest with the needs of smaller nations. Much like the present crisis in Iraq and Syria, where for the UK balancing their own foreign policy initiatives with those of the US have been seen by some as their primary concern, the evidence suggests that it was often the 'lesser' nation which lost out [www](#).

This concern was voiced by international relations scholar Professor Geoffrey Goodwin in a Chatham House speech and accompanying paper on the role of the UN in international affairs. He drew attention to the difficulty faced by the UN in achieving agreements

which met the needs of the smaller nations, leading many member nations to question whether the organisation was doing 'more harm than good' [IPG](#). Questions of effectiveness were evidently not confined to the formative stages of the UN.

Strikingly, this debate shows no sign of receding. As recently as the last decade, renowned international figures have continued to offer their thoughts on the organisation's role in international affairs. Former Under-Secretary General of the UN Dame Margaret Anstee spoke in favour of the organisation in her 2003 speech, yet the need for such a debate is in itself indicative of the controversy surrounding its utility [IPG](#). This was touched upon once again by former US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton, who, speaking at Chatham House in 2005, called for greater overall unity between the disparate councils and factions of the UN [IPG](#).

Ultimately, a survey of the *Chatham House Online Archive* suggests that questions of effectiveness in their response to international crises have never left the agenda of the UN. In light of today's ongoing humanitarian crisis in Iraq and Syria, this offers a fascinating, if not somewhat worrying, insight into the function of the leading body for international conflict. It may help to explain why the debate continues to flourish, suggesting that some of the issues which plagued its very foundation have never truly been resolved. Until this occurs, it remains to be seen whether the UN can yet be termed 'a united family of nations'. [GALE](#)

## Read and view extracts from referenced *Chatham House Online Archive* articles

"The Security Council Meeting." *Chronology of International Events and Documents* 2.7 (December 20, 1945 - December 22 1946) [PDF](#)

"The Security Council Meeting." *Chronology of International Events and Documents* 2.10 (December 20, 1945 - December 22 1946) [PDF](#)

Goodwin, Geoffrey. "The Role of the United Nations in World Affairs." *International Affairs* 34.1 (1958) [PDF](#)

Boothby, Robert, and Geoffrey Goodwin. "The Role of the United Nations in World Affairs." RIIA/8/2497. Chatham House, London. 02 Apr. 1957 [PDF](#)

Anstee, Margaret. "The United Nations: Does it Still Matter?." RIIA/8/6467. Chatham House, London. 30 Apr. 2003 [PDF](#)

Bolton, John. "The Long Road ahead for United Nations Reform." RIIA/8/6749. Chatham House, London. 14 Oct. 2005 [PDF](#)

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