International Law Under Siege: How Power Politics Is Undermining the UN's Credibility

From Gaza's devastation to attacks on Iran's nuclear sites and repeated violations in Lebanon, the past year has revealed how power politics can bend institutions meant to uphold law. When vetoes, pressure and sanctions replace accountability, the UN system's neutrality—and global security—erode.

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The past year has exposed a hard truth about the international order: the gap between the language of rules and the practice of power is widening, and the damage is no longer abstract. It is visible in the ruins of Gaza, in repeated violations of Lebanon's sovereignty, and in the precedent set when nuclear facilities in Iran became targets of open military attack. These developments do not merely represent separate crises; taken together, they constitute a stress test for the post-1945 legal architecture itself, and a warning that institutional neutrality is being hollowed out under political pressure.

The United Nations was created to prevent precisely this kind of slide into "might makes right". Its Charter centres on the prohibition of the use of force (except in self-defence against an armed attack, or when authorised by the Security Council) and on the peaceful settlement of disputes. Yet in 2025 we have seen powerful states interpret these constraints elastically when it suits their strategic objectives, while demanding strict compliance from others. The result is a corrosive message to the world: law applies primarily to the weak, while the strong treat it as optional.

The most alarming example is the direct military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities during the June escalation. The United States struck sites at Fordo, Natanz and Isfahan, an act that immediately raised questions not only about regional stability but about the integrity of the global legal order. UN human rights experts described the strikes as violating the core prohibition on aggressive force and warned that normalising "preventive" or "anticipatory" self-defence would usher in a catastrophic era of "might is right". They further underlined that self-defence is limited to responses to an actual or imminent armed attack and warned that stretching the concept to cover speculative threats undermines the Charter framework.

This matters because precedents are the real currency of international politics. If a permanent member of the Security Council can carry out such strikes without Security Council authorisation and without facing meaningful consequences, the barrier against unilateral war is lowered for everyone. The Secretary-General warned of escalation and

called for diplomacy, but the wider institutional response remained constrained by the same political realities that have paralysed the Council on other crises.

The case also illuminates a deeper problem: even when the UN system speaks, it often does so in fragmented, inconsistent ways that reflect the pressure exerted on different bodies. Human rights experts issued a forthright condemnation. But other institutions—especially technical or security-related agencies—are often pushed towards cautious language that avoids direct attribution of responsibility, even where the legal principles at stake are clear. This is precisely how neutrality is quietly transformed from impartiality into silence.

Nowhere is this institutional crisis more visible than in the ongoing tragedy of Gaza. Here, the challenge is not a lack of law; it is a lack of enforcement. The Security Council adopted resolutions demanding a ceasefire and addressing the humanitarian catastrophe, including Resolution 2728 (March 2024) and Resolution 2735 (June 2024). Yet the political reality has been that pressure on Israel has remained weak and inconsistent, while calls for accountability are frequently deflected or diluted.

The veto has been central to this paralysis. In June 2025, the United States vetoed a draft Security Council resolution calling for an "immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire" in Gaza, even though the other fourteen Council members supported it. One can debate diplomatic tactics, sequencing, and language. But the practical effect of repeated vetoes is unmistakable: the Council's credibility collapses when it cannot act to stop mass suffering, and when its inaction is seen as politically motivated rather than legally grounded.

Meanwhile, the judicial branch of the UN system has moved in the opposite direction. The International Court of Justice, in the South Africa v. Israel case, indicated provisional measures in 2024, repeatedly emphasising obligations to prevent irreparable harm and to ensure humanitarian assistance. The Court also delivered, in July 2024, an advisory opinion on the legal consequences of Israel's policies and practices in the occupied Palestinian territory, reaffirming foundational principles relating to occupation, self-determination and unlawful acquisition of territory.

The contrast is telling international law is being articulated with increasing clarity by judicial and human rights mechanisms, while political organs—above all the Security Council—remain constrained by power politics. For the global public, especially in the Global South, this looks less like a rules-based order and more like selective legality.

Lebanon provides a further illustration of how the credibility of UN institutions is being eroded in real time. The cross-border conflict may be shaped by many actors, but the pattern of Israeli violations and the treatment of UN peacekeepers have become a direct challenge to the authority of the UN itself. UNIFIL has reported incidents in which Israeli actions

endangered its personnel, including an October 2025 incident where an Israeli drone dropped a grenade near a UNIFIL patrol and an Israeli tank fired towards peacekeepers—actions UNIFIL said violated Security Council Resolution 1701 and Lebanon's sovereignty.

Even more recently, UNIFIL stated that peacekeepers patrolling the Blue Line were fired upon by IDF soldiers in a tank, noting that "attacks on or near peacekeepers are serious violations" of Resolution 1701 and calling on the IDF to cease aggressive behaviour. The UN human rights system has also warned that repeated strikes on civilians and civilian objects in Lebanon constitute war crimes and a violation of the UN Charter.

When a UN peacekeeping mission can be harassed or endangered with apparent impunity, and when a member state's sovereignty can be repeatedly violated without decisive collective action, the UN's deterrent function withers. The institution appears not as an impartial guardian of peace, but as a stage where powerful states set the boundaries of what can be said and done.

This brings us to the heart of the theme: political pressure and lobbying are not external irritants; they are shaping the operating environment of UN bodies and affiliated institutions. The campaign against UNRWA is a prime example. In January 2024, UNRWA warned that donor funding suspensions threatened its lifesaving operations. Since then, disputes over allegations, investigations, and conditionalities have become a vehicle through which a core humanitarian agency is pressured and delegitimised—at a time when civilians most need protection. UNRWA itself has published detailed responses to accusations, underlining the reputational warfare being waged against it.

The same dynamic is visible in the attack on international criminal justice. In February 2025, the White House issued an executive order imposing sanctions related to the International Criminal Court, explicitly framing ICC actions as "illegitimate" when they touch US and Israeli officials. In December 2025, the US State Department announced sanctions against ICC judges, again in connection with what it called the "illegitimate targeting" of Israel. Legal scholars have warned that such measures invert the meaning of accountability: instead of deterring violations, they punish the institutions tasked with investigating them.

These actions signal to the world that accountability mechanisms will be tolerated only when they target adversaries, not allies. That is not neutrality; it is political conditionality imposed on law itself.

Against this backdrop, the IAEA case is especially consequential—because it goes beyond immediate battlefield politics and touches the long-term credibility of the non-proliferation regime. The IAEA has repeatedly stressed the principle that armed attacks on nuclear facilities should never take place, due to the grave risks of radioactive release and broader

catastrophe. Yet, as Mr Naderi notes, many observers were struck by the absence of a clear institutional condemnation when Iran's nuclear facilities came under attack.

One can understand the pressures on a technical agency that relies on cooperation from powerful states and must preserve access for inspections. But the political optics are devastating. When safeguarded nuclear facilities can be attacked and the world's principal nuclear watchdog responds primarily with safety warnings, calls for restraint, and procedural language—without an unequivocal denunciation—neutrality begins to look like accommodation. And accommodation, in this domain, has far-reaching implications.

First, it weakens deterrence against future attacks. Second, it undermines the confidence of non-Western states in the impartiality of global governance. Third, it risks accelerating proliferation incentives: if states conclude that compliance with safeguards does not protect them from military assault, they may seek security through deterrence rather than through law. In other words, the very "rules" of non-proliferation are eroded when rule-breakers face no consequences and institutions appear unable—or unwilling—to draw bright lines.

Taken together, Gaza, Lebanon, and the attack on Iran reveal a single pattern: powerful states, particularly the United States and Israel, are shaping the operational boundaries of international institutions through veto power, political pressure, reputational warfare, and sanctions—often while claiming to defend a "rules-based order". But a rules-based order that cannot constrain the strong is not an order of law; it is an order of hierarchy.

What, then, should be done? First, there must be renewed insistence on the UN Charter's core principles, especially the prohibition on the aggressive use of force and the duty to settle disputes peacefully. Second, the Security Council must confront the reality that repeated vetoes on mass atrocity situations are destroying its legitimacy. Without formal Charter reform—which remains difficult—meaningful steps could include stronger political commitments to veto restraint in atrocity contexts and greater reliance on the General Assembly when the Council is paralysed.

Third, UN bodies and affiliated agencies need protection from coercive political retaliation. Humanitarian agencies cannot function if their funding becomes a political weapon. Peacekeeping cannot succeed if peacekeepers are treated as expendable. Judicial and accountability mechanisms cannot be credible if they are punished for investigating the powerful.

Finally, and most importantly, international law must be applied consistently. If the world wants peace, it cannot accept a system where legality is enforced against some and suspended for others. The credibility of the United Nations is not an abstract institutional concern; it is a question of life and death for millions. Restoring that credibility requires

courage from member states: the courage to defend law even when it is inconvenient, and to resist the normalisation of aggression as a tool of statecraft.