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United Nations Membership: In Brief

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Overview of the Membership Process

Since the United Nations (UN) was established in 1945, U.S. policymakers, including some Members of Congress, have maintained an ongoing interest in the criteria and process for membership in the United Nations and its specialized agencies. The United Nations has 193 member states; the most recently admitted member was South Sudan in 2011. In April 2024, a renewed Palestinian membership application was vetoed by the United States in the Security Council (the Council).

Pursuant to the UN Charter, the first UN members included the original 51 contracting states that either signed the UN Declaration in 1942, participated in the founding UN Conference in San Francisco in 1945, or signed or ratified the UN Charter at its adoption in 1945. UN membership is “open to all other peace-loving states which accept the obligations contained in the present Charter” and, in the judgment of the Organization, are “able and willing to carry out these obligations.”¹

A state seeking membership submits an application to the UN Secretary-General accepting the obligations under the Charter. The Secretary-General informs the UN Security Council, which then considers the application and votes on whether to recommend admission of the state to the UN General Assembly.² Recommendation from the Security Council requires a minimum of nine affirmative votes, with none of the five permanent Council members (“P-5”: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States) voting against recommendation.³ Recommendation from the Council is then considered in the Assembly, which must vote in favor of admission by a two-thirds majority of the members present and voting. Membership applications that are not considered by the Council, or are not withdrawn by a member state, may remain pending before the Council.

Deciding UN Membership

Most UN member states were accepted for membership under the aforementioned criteria and processes outlined in the Charter requiring approval from both the Security Council and the General Assembly. While the Charter seems to be designed to achieve eventual universal membership among the world’s states, the two-step voting process creates the opportunity for UN members to deny a membership application, or to delay it indefinitely. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in 1948 that the finding that an applicant is a “peace-loving” state capable of carrying out the Charter’s obligations is the only permissible criterion for consideration, and that political interests should not have an effect on UN membership decisions.⁴ Nevertheless, some

¹ Charter of the United Nations, Article 4. The UN Charter was adopted and opened for signature at the San Francisco Conference in June 1945. Participants in the Conference were those countries that had declared war on Germany and Japan and had subscribed by January 1, 1942, to the United Nations Declaration.

² The 193-member General Assembly is the organization’s primary deliberative body. The 15-member Security Council, which includes five permanent and 10 nonpermanent members, is charged with maintaining international peace and security. For information on UN system structure and issues, see CRS Report R47715, *The United Nations System: Frequently Asked Questions*.

³ When applying for UN membership, an applicant states that “it accepts the obligations contained in the Charter,” in accordance with Rules 58 through 60 of the Provisional Rules of Procedure of the Security Council. The Council President, in most instances, refers the application to the Council’s Committee on the Admission of New Members for its consideration. The committee then completes its review and submits its recommendation to the Council. In a formal meeting, the Council considers applications recommended by the committee.

⁴ Conditions of Admission of a State to Membership in the United Nations (Article 4 of the Charter), Advisory Opinion, 1948 I.C.J. Rep. 57, 64 (May 28).

membership decisions have seemed to reflect and perhaps been driven by broader political relationships and disagreements among states. From the earliest years of the United Nations, Security Council members have voted to deny UN membership applications and have accused other members of misusing the membership recommendation power.⁵

Concerns about state capacity may have also been a consideration in vetoed membership applications, as members took into account whether states emerging from wartime devastation, changing their government and governance, or winning independence from colonial rule were sufficiently “able and willing to carry out” the obligations of UN membership.

UN Specialized Agency Membership

There are currently 15 specialized agencies in the UN system, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Labor Organization (ILO), and World Health Organization (WHO), among others.⁶ Each of these entities is a legally independent intergovernmental organization with its own constitution, rules, membership, organs, and financial resources. As such, the process and criteria for admitting new members varies depending on the organization. In some specialized agencies, UN membership gives a state access to membership in the agency without requiring its admission to be approved by the agency membership. Other specialized agencies require a separate voting process to admit new members.⁷ The United States is a member of all specialized agencies except for two: the UN Industrial Development Organization and the World Tourism Organization. In 2011, the United States withheld funding and in 2018 ultimately withdrew from the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in response to the organization’s decision to admit the Palestinians as a UNESCO member. The United States rejoined the organization in 2023. (See the “U.S. Role and Policy” section for more information.)

Paths to UN Membership

The circumstances under which a state obtains UN membership can vary.⁸ Some nations invited to be original UN members, owing to their status as Allies during World War II, were not fully

⁵ See, for example, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946*, Position of the United States Concerning the Recommendations of the Security Council on the Admission of New Members to the United Nations, October 4, 1946, p. 444 (expressing U.S. disagreement with the Soviet Union’s decision to block membership applications due to its lack of diplomatic relations with the applicants); UN document, S/PV/985, Meeting of the UN Security Council, November 30, 1961, pp. 2-4, (expressing U.K. disagreement with Soviet Union’s decision to block membership of Kuwait due to, inter alia, U.K.-Kuwaiti cooperative defense arrangements); and UN document, S/PV/9609, Meeting of the UN Security Council, April 18, 2024 (showing disagreement between the United States and the other members of the Council that the State of Palestine meets Article 4 requirements for membership).

⁶ Other specialized agencies include the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO); International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD); International Maritime Organization (IMO); International Monetary Fund (IMF); International Telecommunication Union (ITU); UN Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization (UNESCO); UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO); UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO); Universal Postal Union (UPU); World Bank Group; World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO); and World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

⁷ In 11 specialized agencies, membership in the United Nations gives a state access to membership in the agency without having to have its admission approved by the membership of the agency (ICAO, IFAD, ILO, IMO, ITU, UNIDO, UPU, WHO, WIPO, WMO, and UNESCO). Of these 11 agencies, three also provide membership, without a vote, to member nations of any specialized agency (IFAD, UNIDO, and WIPO). Two agencies require some process of voting for admission (FAO and UNWTO).

⁸ The circumstances of UN membership described in this section are drawn in part from *The Charter of the United* (continued...)

independent states. India and the Philippines, for example, were original members but had not yet gained independence. Byelorussia (now Belarus) and Ukraine were admitted as separate members despite being constituent republics of the Soviet Union. With these exceptions, only fully sovereign independent states that have met the aforementioned conditions for statehood have obtained membership.

Some members have been admitted after the secession or partition of a state that was already a UN member. In such cases, the new constituent entities applied for separate membership. Pakistan, for example, became a member after splitting from India, and later Bangladesh achieved membership after dividing from Pakistan. Most former Soviet Union republics, and all the partitioned nations of the former Yugoslavia, were also granted membership.

A number of states were divided at the end of World War II. In General Assembly resolutions, a stated policy of reunification of divided states delayed membership decisions for such states. North and South Korea, despite enduring hopes for reunification, were both admitted as separate member states in 1991. During the period after Vietnam's partition in 1954, both North and South Vietnam applied for membership, but neither was successful; instead, a reunified Vietnam became a member in 1977. West and East Germany became members in 1973, after concluding a treaty recognizing two German states.

In some cases, such as the reunification of Germany in 1991, two existing member states have merged, becoming one member state without having to reapply for membership. In 1958, members Egypt and Syria merged to become the United Arab Republic, but in 1961 Syria became independent again and resumed its separate membership. The United Arab Republic continued as a member, changing its name back to Egypt in 1971.

Some UN members are “continuing states.” Most notably, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation, or Russia, assumed the Soviet Union's UN membership as a continuing state, meaning that Russia was treated as the same member state with a name change. In 1991, the Soviet republics, including Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, agreed that Russia would continue in place of the Soviet Union in the United Nations. They also supported membership for each of the other former Soviet republics that had not already become UN member states. The Soviet Union subsequently presented a letter from the Russian President to the Secretary-General, stating that the Russia was continuing the Soviet Union's membership. The Secretary-General communicated the letter to UN member states, and according to the official UN record, “The position of the Russian Federation was not challenged.”⁹

Some membership questions have arisen in the context of competing government representation in UN bodies. For example, in 1950 the representatives of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which had gained control of mainland China in a civil war, submitted their credentials to the General Assembly alongside those of the Republic of China (ROC, its government operating from Taiwan).¹⁰ The United States supported the ROC delegation, whereas the Soviet Union supported

Nations: A Commentary, ed. Bruno Simma et al., 3rd ed., vol. I (London: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. 185-187; and United Nations, *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council*, under “Procedural Issues, Membership in the United Nations,” at <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/repertoire/membership-united-nations>.

⁹ UN document, A/47/2, Report of the Security Council, 16 June 1991-15 June 1992, 1995.

¹⁰ The credentials process, which determines government representation in UN bodies, is distinct from the process for obtaining UN membership. At the start of each General Assembly session, representatives of each member state are required to submit their credentials to the nine-member UN Credentials Committee, which examines credentials and makes a recommendation to the Assembly as to whether they should be accepted. The vast majority of credential submissions are not controversial, but over the years, some submissions have led to disagreements among governments over representation in both the Credentials Committee and the General Assembly. For a discussion of credential issues, (continued...)

the PRC. The ROC delegation continued to represent China in the United Nations, causing much controversy, until 1971, when the Assembly adopted a resolution recognizing the PRC's representatives as the "only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations." The resolution therefore expelled the ROC but did not change the membership status of "China."

One member, Indonesia, *withdrew* from the United Nations in 1965, and then rejoined in 1966.¹¹ The General Assembly and Security Council treated the withdrawal as if it were a "temporary 'inactive' membership," allowing Indonesia to "reactivate" its membership rather than reapply.

Suspension or Loss of Membership

Under the UN Charter, members can be suspended or expelled. Like membership decisions, both actions require recommendation by the Security Council and two-thirds support in the General Assembly. The Charter states that members subject to the Council's "preventative or enforcement action" can be suspended from the "exercise of rights and privileges" of membership. A state that is suspended remains a member and continues to be bound by the Charter's obligations. A member that has "persistently violated" the principles of the Charter may be expelled from the organization. Expulsion is permanent. To date, no member has been suspended or expelled.

Non-member Observer States

Over time, UN members developed the practice of inviting entities and "non-member states" to observe the work of the General Assembly. This practice is not outlined in the UN Charter; rather, it has evolved in practice over many years, originating with Switzerland's application for permanent observer status in 1946.¹² There are currently two non-member observer states: the Holy See (Vatican), which gained permanent observer status in 1964, and the "State of Palestine," which gained observer "entity" status in 1964 as "Palestine," and observer "non-member state" status in 2012 as "State of Palestine." (See the **text box** for information on Palestinian membership efforts.) In May 2024, the Assembly voted to recommend that the Security Council reconsider Palestinian membership and provided the Palestinians with new observer status privileges.¹³

see, for instance, Catherine Amirfar, Romain Zamour, and Duncan Pickard, "Representation of Member States at the United Nations: Recent Challenges," *American Society of International Law*, vol. 26, issue 6, August 10, 2022.

¹¹ Indonesia provided notice of its withdrawal from the United Nations to Secretary-General U Thant on January 20, 1965, explaining that the seating of Malaysia, as an elected member of the Security Council, made Indonesia's continued membership untenable. (UN document, S/6157, January 20, 1965). Indonesia and Malaysia at the time were involved in a dispute that had resulted in limited armed conflict. Indonesia's withdrawal came amid its efforts to establish a new international organization of developing states as a counterweight to the United Nations, known as the Conference of the New Emerging Forces (CONEFO). After Indonesia's President Sukarno was deposed in a coup in 1966, Indonesia's new government notified the Secretary-General of its intention to rejoin the United Nations, and on September 28, 1966, the General Assembly invited Indonesia to take its seat in the General Assembly (UN document, S/7498, September 19, 1966).

¹² Many states that were once UN observers, such as Austria, Bangladesh, Japan, Switzerland, and Vietnam, eventually applied for and obtained UN membership.

¹³ See UN document, A/RES/ES-10/23, May 10, 2024. Privileges outlined in the resolution include seating among member states in alphabetical order; making statements on behalf of a group; submitting proposals and amendments; the right to be elected as officers in the plenary and the main committees of the General Assembly; and full and effective participation in UN conferences and international conferences and meetings convened under the auspices of the General Assembly or, as appropriate, of other UN organs. The resolution also states that the "State of Palestine," in its capacity as an observer state, "does not have the right to vote in the General Assembly or to put forward its candidature to United Nations organs."

Palestinian Membership Efforts

Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has sought to achieve international recognition for Palestinian statehood by applying for UN membership. In 2011, the Palestinians submitted an application for membership to the UN Secretary-General. The Secretary-General subsequently submitted it to the Security Council, but the Council did not consider the application and it remained pending.¹⁴ (Then-President Obama stated that he would veto any resolution related to Palestinian membership.) Over a decade later, in April 2024, the Palestinians requested that the Security Council renew consideration of the 2011 application. The United States vetoed a draft Security Council resolution proposed by Algeria on April 24 that would have recommended to the General Assembly that the State of Palestine be admitted as a UN member. The Palestinians have also sought to join other UN entities; for example, in 2011 the State of Palestine became a member of the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a UN specialized agency. The United States has broadly opposed Palestinian membership efforts, maintaining that the most “expeditious path” toward Palestinian statehood and UN membership should be through direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, with the support of the United States and other partners.¹⁵ (See “U.S. Role and Policy” below.)

U.S. Role and Policy

Decisions on UN membership are subject to veto by any of the permanent five members of the Security Council; thus, the United States plays a significant role in determining UN membership. The United States has a more limited role in UN specialized agencies (such as UNESCO) because decisions to admit new members to these bodies are generally made by the entire membership and each member has one vote.

U.S. membership decisions in both the United Nations and its specialized agencies lie primarily with the executive branch, which represents the United States in UN and other multilateral fora. Although Congress often does not play a large role in determining UN membership, over the years some Members have sought to influence U.S. policy on the issue through legislation advocating or opposing the membership of various countries and entities. In the mid-1990s, Congress enacted two separate laws that prohibit funding to UN entities that admit the PLO as a member or grant full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood (see Section 410 of P.L. 103-236 and Section 414 of P.L. 101-246). The United States withheld funding to UNESCO under these provisions from 2011 until it withdrew from the organization in 2018. The United States rejoined UNESCO in 2023 after Congress enacted a funding waiver.¹⁶

Congress has considered additional legislation addressing U.S. policy toward UN membership. For example, the TAIPEI Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-135) states that it should be U.S. policy “to advocate, as appropriate ... for Taiwan’s membership in all international organizations in which

¹⁴ In 2011, the Council’s Committee on the Status of New Members “was unable to make a unanimous recommendation to the Security Council” on Palestinian membership due to lack of consensus among members, including opposition from the United States. (See U.N. document, S/2011/705, November 11, 2011.)

¹⁵ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, “Explanation of Vote Delivered at the UN General Assembly Emergency Special Session on the Palestinian UN Membership Resolution,” May 10, 2024.

¹⁶ The Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2023 (Division K of P.L. 117-328), waived the above restrictions for UNESCO if the Administration reported to Congress that doing so “would enable the United States to counter Chinese influence or to promote other national interests of the United States.” The waiver sunsets in September 2025 and would cease to exist if the Palestinians “obtain the same standing as member states or full membership as a state in the [UN] or any specialized agency” through means “outside an agreement negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians.”

statehood is not a requirement and in which the United States is also a participant.” Additionally, since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, some Members of Congress have proposed legislation

that would encourage and support U.S. and international efforts to constrain Russia's role in the United Nations, including the Security Council, and congressional committees have asked the executive branch to report to Congress on steps the United States can take to promote Russia's expulsion from the United Nations.¹⁷

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¹⁷ See, for example, the Poland Over Russia Act (H.R. 7169 [117th Cong.]), which would have prohibited U.S. assessed and voluntary contributions to the United Nations until Russia is removed from the Security Council and Poland is made a permanent Security Council member; the Withdrawing Russian Support to Peacekeeping Act of 2022 (S. 3841 [117th Cong.]), which would have required the Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs to use the voice and vote of the United States to terminate Russian government and other entities participation in UN peacekeeping operations; the Russian Federation Suspension Act of 2022 (S. 4001 [117th Cong.]), which would have required the Secretary of State to use the voice and vote of the United States to suspend Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council and other international organizations; S.Con.Res. 30 (117th Cong.) and H.Con.Res. 75 (117th Cong.), each of which would have expressed the sense of Congress that the United Nations should take action necessary to amend the UN Charter to remove the Russian Federation as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council; H.Res. 959 (117th Cong.), which would have expressed the sense of the House of Representatives that Congress does not recognize the Russian Federation as legitimately occupying the Soviet Union's seat as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council; H.Res. 1517 (117th Cong.) and H.Res. 267 (118th Cong.), each of which would have urged the President to direct U.S. officials to pursue action to limit, suspend, or terminate Russia's rights and privileges in the Security Council and other UN organs and specialized agencies; H.Res. 909 (118th Cong.), which would have expressed the sense of the House of Representatives that Russia should be removed from the Security Council and replaced by India.