

# The United Nations: Challenges and Change



## THE CHOICES PROGRAM

*Explore the Past... Shape the Future*

*History and Current Issues for the Classroom*

WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
BROWN UNIVERSITY [WWW.CHOICES.EDU](http://WWW.CHOICES.EDU)

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## The CHOICES Program

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The Choices Program is a program of the Watson Institute for International Studies and the Office of Continuing Education at Brown University.

The Choices Program develops curricula on current and historical international issues and offers workshops, institutes, and in-service programs for high school teachers. Course materials place special emphasis on the importance of educating students in their participatory role as citizens.

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*The United Nations: Challenges and Change* is part of a continuing series on international public policy issues. New units are published each academic year and all units are updated regularly.

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The Watson Institute for International Studies was established at Brown University in 1986 to serve as a forum for students, faculty, visiting scholars, and policy practitioners who are committed to analyzing contemporary global problems and developing initiatives to address them.

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## Introduction: The UN Today

The United States played an important role in the founding of the United Nations in 1945. After the terrible destruction of World War II, people in the United States believed the United Nations could provide the foundation for maintaining international peace and security. They were proud of their leadership and vision and hoped that it would establish the basis for a more peaceful world. Yet today, the U.S. commitment to the UN is uncertain.

Within the United States, the role of the UN is part of a larger debate about U.S. foreign policy. The role of the UN raises an important question about how the United States should address its security concerns. Should the United States protect its security by cooperating and seeking consensus with other countries at the UN? Many people in the United States wonder if the UN helps or hinders U.S. foreign policy. Many others remain committed to the organization.

Internationally, much discussion about the UN's future involves the question of U.S. cooperation with the organization. The debate is about the role of the UN, its effectiveness, and its fairness. Some have called the UN a place for humanity to unite for peace and security, while others have deemed it naïve and idealistic. While upholding faith in the aims of the UN, some criticize the way the organization operates. Some critics accuse the UN of serving only the interests of powerful states, while others regard it as an inefficient and meddling institution.

Today, the world faces threats that no one foresaw at the time of the UN's founding in 1945. AIDS, terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons, and global climate change were not international concerns when the UN was

formed. Some wonder if the UN has the capacity to face the challenges of a changing world. Others note that the UN's success, above all, depends on the commitment its members have to working together to solve problems. They argue that the UN itself does not fail or succeed, the countries that make up its membership do.

***“The United Nations is only as good as its members, especially its primary members, want it to be.”***

—Brent Scowcroft, former U.S. national security advisor

Today, the UN provides a forum where diplomats can address some of the world's immediate and long-term problems. The UN has programs spanning the globe in numerous areas: for example, peacekeeping and preventing conflict, caring for refugees, and reducing poverty, to name a few. It has more than fifty thousand employees around the world performing a wide variety of tasks.

In the following days, you will have the opportunity to immerse yourself in the history of the UN and the debates about its role. Part I will introduce the history and charter of the UN. Part II will examine the role of the United Nations in the world. After completing the readings, you will be asked to consider the U.S. role in the UN and how the organization should be reformed, if at all. These issues connect to other, more fundamental questions about international relations. What role should the UN play in the world? What should be the role of the United States in world affairs?

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## Power and Representation in the United Nations

### Objectives:

**Students will:** Analyze data on UN membership and representation on the Security Council.

Discuss the structure and distribution of power on the Security Council.

Work collaboratively with classmates.

### Required Reading:

Before beginning the lesson, students should have read the Introduction and Part I of the student text and completed “Study Guide—Introduction and Part I” (TRB 5-6) or “Advanced Study Guide—Introduction and Part I” (TRB-7).

### Handouts:

“UN Membership and the Security Council” (TRB 9-10)

“Rejecting a Seat on the Security Council” (TRB 11-12)

### In the Classroom:

**1. Setting the Stage**—Ask students to recall their reading. What is the Security Council? What are its primary responsibilities? Who sits on the council? What is the United States’ role on the council? What are some of the criticisms of the Security Council? (You might choose to list these criticisms on the board, as they can help inform the class discussion that will take place after students have worked through the handouts).

**2. Working in Groups**—Divide the class into groups of three to four students and distribute the handouts to each group. Groups should work through and discuss the questions and activities.

**3. Looking at UN Membership and the Security Council**—Ask groups to share their answers and findings from the handout “UN Membership and the Security Council.” How has UN membership changed since 1945? What changes have been made to the struc-

ture of the Security Council? Which regions do not hold permanent seats? Are any regions underrepresented in terms of the number of permanent and/or nonpermanent seats they hold? Are any regions over-represented? (Encourage students to draw upon the data in Figure 2 and Table 1 to support their answers.)

Now turn to the handout “Rejecting a Seat on the Security Council.” Were students surprised to read that Saudi Arabia rejected a nonpermanent seat? Why or why not? Why has Saudi Arabia taken issue with the ways in which the Security Council has responded to the situation in the Middle East?

**Note:** Part of the Day Five Lesson, “Coping with Crisis” deals with the civil war in Syria. You may find it useful to focus more on the section of Saudi Arabia’s statement that deals with Syria as a way to introduce the topic to students.

**4. Reforming the Security Council**—Ask groups to share their suggestions for the structure of the Security Council. Which students propose changing the council’s structure? How so? Do any students believe that the current structure is ideal and should not be altered? If yes, why? What principles—for example, the idea of fairness and equality, the importance of experience, or the necessity of preserving the power of those who currently hold it—guided the recommendations that students came up with? How might the permanent members of the Security Council, including the United States, respond to these suggestions? Why might significant change to the number and/or distribution of permanent and nonpermanent seats stir controversy? Can students imagine the structure of the Security Council changing in the next decade?

### Homework:

Students should read Part II in the student text and complete “Study Guide—Part II” (TRB 17-18) or “Advanced Study Guide—Part II” (TRB-19).



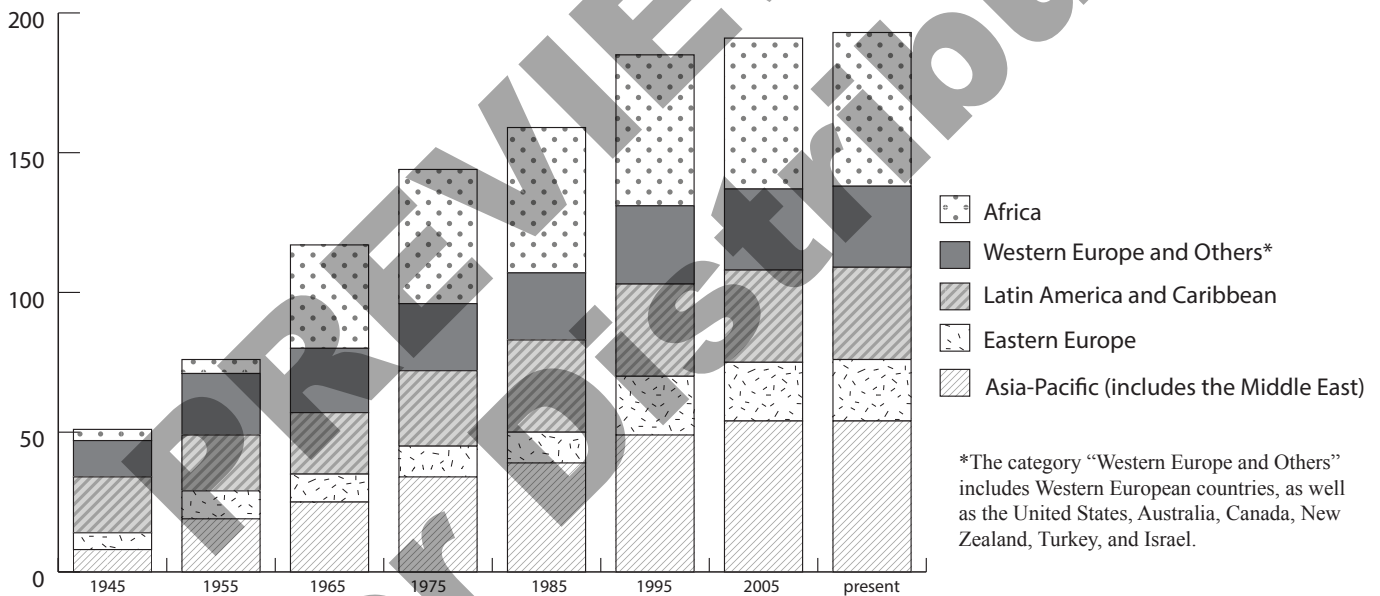
## UN Membership and the Security Council

*Introduction:* The number of UN members has expanded greatly over the years—starting with 51 in 1945 and totaling 193 today. Meanwhile, the Security Council has undergone little change.

Examine the data below and then answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.

### Total UN Membership: 1945-Present

Figure 1

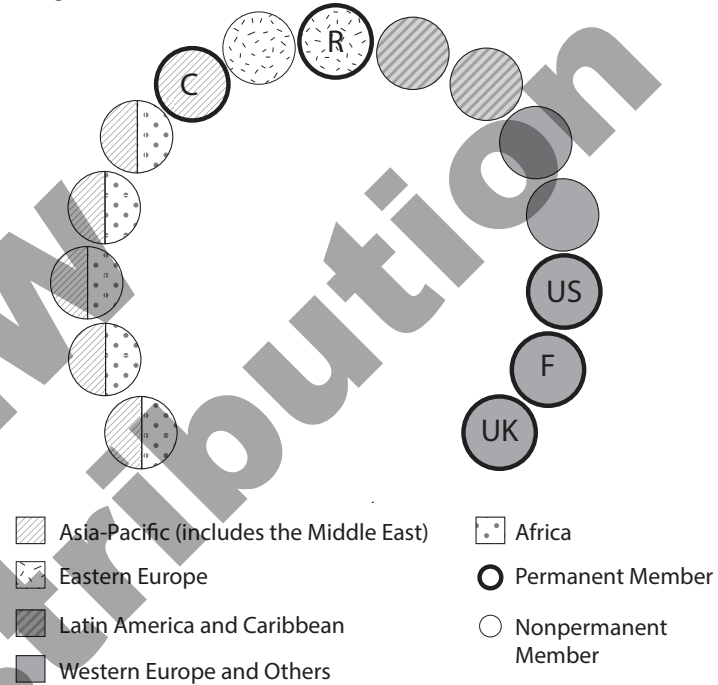


- Which geographic region had the least number of UN members in 1945 and 1955?
- In which decade was there the largest increase in UN membership?
  - Based on your reading, what might have led to this increase?
- Which two geographic regions have the greatest number of member states today?
  - Which geographic region has the fewest member states today?

## The Security Council

In 1945, the original UN Charter established the victors of World War II—the United States, the Soviet Union, China, France, and the United Kingdom as the five permanent members of the Security Council with the exclusive right to veto resolutions. The charter also stipulated that the Security Council include six nonpermanent members elected by the General Assembly to serve two-year terms. Mounting awareness and criticism of the Security Council as unbalanced and inequitable led to the expansion of nonpermanent members from six to ten in 1965. A new election pattern based on geographical distribution—five African and Asian-Pacific states, one Eastern European state, two Latin American and Caribbean states, and two Western European and “Other” states—was adopted for nonpermanent seats. The structure of the Security Council has remained unaltered since 1965 despite the appeals by UN members for more comprehensive reform.

Figure 2



4. a. List the five permanent members of the Security Council and the geographic region that they represent in parentheses—e.g. *country name* (region).
- b. Which geographic regions do not have a permanent seat on the Security Council?

5. Table 1

Region	Seats in the General Assembly	Permanent Seats on the Security Council	All Seats on the Security Council
Asia-Pacific	28%	20%	20%*
Eastern Europe	12%	20%	13%
Latin America and Caribbean	17%	0%	13%
Western Europe and Others	15%	60%	33%
Africa	28%	0%	20%*

\* The UN Charter allocates five of the nonpermanent seats to Asia-Pacific and Africa jointly. In practice, two are given to Asian-Pacific states and three to African states.

- a. Which regions have a higher percentage of seats in the General Assembly than on the Security Council? (Hint: compare the percentages in column 2 and 4.)
- b. What is the percentage of Western Europe and Others' seats in the General Assembly? How does this percentage compare to the group's percentage of permanent seats on the Security Council?

## Rejecting a Seat on the Security Council

*Introduction:* In October 2013, Saudi Arabia rejected a seat on the UN Security Council after being elected by the UN General Assembly to serve a two-year term. (Saudi Arabia would have filled one of the five seats reserved for Asian-Pacific and African states on the council.) The decision to turn down one of the ten coveted nonpermanent seats stunned diplomats worldwide. Typically, competition over the nonpermanent seats is fierce and countries lobby for years to improve their chances of being elected by the General Assembly.

The Saudi Foreign Ministry issued a statement on October 18, 2013 detailing the decision to turn down the seat. Read the statement below and then answer the questions that follow.

“First of all, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is pleased to extend its sincere thanks and deep gratitude to all countries that have given their confidence to elect it as a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the next two years. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a founding member of the United Nations, is proud of its full and permanent commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, believing that commitment of all Member States, honestly, truthfully and accurately, as agreed upon and stipulated in the Charter is the real guarantee for world security and peace.

“If the Member States of the United Nations consider winning the membership of UN Security Council, which is, according to the Charter of the Organization, the sole agency responsible for preserving world peace and security, as a high honor and a great responsibility for participating directly and effectively in the service of international issues, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia believes that the manner, the mechanisms of action and double standards existing in the Security Council prevent it from performing its duties and assuming its responsibilities towards preserving international peace and security as required, leading to the continued disruption of peace and security, the expansion of the injustices against the peoples, the violation of rights and the spread of conflicts and wars around the world. In this regard, it is unfortunate that all international efforts that have been exerted in recent years, and in which Saudi Arabia participated very effectively, did not result in reaching reforms required to be made to enable the Security Council to regain its desired role in the serve [sic] of the issues of peace and security in the world.

“With the current continuation of the Palestinian cause without a just and lasting solution for 65 years, which resulted in several wars, threatened international peace and security is irrefutable evidence and proof of the Security Council’s inability to carry out its duties and assume its responsibilities. The failure of the Security Council to make the Middle East a free zone of all weapons of mass destruction, whether because of its inability to subdue the nuclear programs of all countries in the region, without exception, to the international control and inspection or to prevent any country in the region from possessing nuclear weapons, is another irrefutable evidence and proof of its inability to carry out its duties and hold its responsibilities.

“Allowing the ruling regime in Syria to kill and burn its people by the chemical weapons, while the world stands idly, without applying deterrent sanctions against the Damascus regime, is also irrefutable evidence and proof of the inability of the Security Council to carry out its duties and responsibilities. Accordingly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, based on its historical responsibilities towards its people, Arab and Islamic nations as well as towards the peoples aspiring for peace and stability all over the world, announces its apology for not accepting membership of the Security Council until the Council is reformed and enabled, effectively and practically, to carry out its duties and responsibilities in maintaining international peace and security.”



## Questions

1. When did Saudi Arabia become a member of the United Nations?
2. Why does Saudi Arabia criticize the Security Council for having a double standard?
3. Which three issues does Saudi Arabia identify as examples of the limitations and/or missteps of the Security Council?
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
4. Do you think Saudi Arabia's rejection of the nonpermanent seat is an effective method of protest? Why or why not?
5. If you had the opportunity to change the distribution of permanent and nonpermanent seats on the Security Council, what would you alter, if anything? Explain the reasons behind your answer.