

A C O M P R E H E N S I V E S T U D Y G U I D E



THE UNITED NATIONS

Structure and Functions — A Complete Explanation

CHARTER OF 1945 • SIX PRINCIPAL ORGANS • 193 MEMBER STATES

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SECTION 01

Introduction & Historical Background

The United Nations (UN) is the world's largest and most influential intergovernmental organization, created to prevent future wars, protect human rights, and foster cooperation among nations on the great challenges of peace, development, and justice.

The United Nations was established on **24 October 1945**, at the end of the Second World War, by fifty-one founding member states committed to maintaining international peace and security. Its headquarters is located in **New York City, United States**, with major regional offices in Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi. Today the UN comprises **193 member states**, making it a nearly universal organization representing almost every sovereign nation on Earth.

The Predecessor: The League of Nations

Before the United Nations, the world had attempted a similar experiment in collective security through the **League of Nations**, founded in 1920 after the First World War under the Treaty of Versailles. The League aimed to prevent future wars through collective security, disarmament, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. However, it suffered from serious structural weaknesses:

- It lacked its own armed force and depended on member states to enforce its decisions.
- Major powers, including the United States, never joined or later withdrew (Germany, Japan, Italy, and the USSR all left or were expelled at various points).
- Its principle of unanimous voting made decisive action nearly impossible.
- It ultimately failed to prevent the aggressions of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan, leading to the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

The catastrophic failure of the League convinced Allied leaders that a stronger, more effective organization was needed — one with real enforcement power and broader participation.

DID YOU KNOW?

The term "United Nations" was first coined by U.S. President **Franklin D. Roosevelt** and was used in the "Declaration by United Nations" of 1 January 1942, when representatives of 26 Allied nations pledged to continue fighting together against the Axis Powers.

Key Wartime Conferences Leading to the UN

1941

The Atlantic Charter — Signed by Roosevelt and Churchill, outlining post-war goals including self-determination and disarmament of aggressor states.

1942	Declaration by United Nations — 26 Allied nations formally adopted the name "United Nations" and committed to the Allied war effort.
1943	Moscow & Tehran Conferences — The Allied powers (US, UK, USSR, China) agreed in principle on the need for a post-war international organization.
1944	Dumbarton Oaks Conference (Washington D.C.) — Representatives of the US, UK, USSR, and China drafted the basic blueprint for the UN's structure, including the idea of a Security Council.
Feb 1945	Yalta Conference — Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin finalized the voting procedure for the Security Council, including the veto power for permanent members.
Apr–Jun 1945	United Nations Conference on International Organization (San Francisco) — Delegates from 50 nations drafted and signed the UN Charter.
24 Oct 1945	UN Charter comes into force after ratification by the majority of signatories, including all five permanent Security Council members. This date is now celebrated annually as United Nations Day .

SECTION 02

Formation of the United Nations

The San Francisco Conference

The United Nations Conference on International Organization opened in **San Francisco on 25 April 1945** and continued for two months. Representatives of **50 countries** participated, along with a number of non-governmental organizations that took part in drafting the Charter. Poland, though not present at the conference, later signed the Charter and became one of the original 51 founding members.

On **26 June 1945**, delegates signed the **Charter of the United Nations**, a founding treaty that lays out the rights and obligations of member states and establishes the organization's organs and procedures. The Charter entered into force on **24 October 1945**, once it had been ratified by China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, and a majority of other signatory states.

51

FOUNDING MEMBERS
(1945)

193

MEMBERS TODAY

6

PRINCIPAL ORGANS

6

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

The UN Charter — Structure of the Document

The Charter of the United Nations is often described as a "constitution" for the international community. It consists of a **Preamble** and **19 chapters divided into 111 Articles**, along with the annexed **Statute of the International Court of Justice**. Key chapters include:

Chapter	Subject Matter
Chapter I	Purposes and Principles of the Organization
Chapter II	Membership — conditions for admission, suspension, and expulsion
Chapter III–XV	The six principal organs — composition, functions, and powers
Chapter VI	Pacific Settlement of Disputes
Chapter VII	Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression (the basis for sanctions and military enforcement)
Chapter VIII	Regional Arrangements
Chapter XVIII	Amendment procedures for the Charter

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES OF THE UN

Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish are the six official languages used in UN meetings and documents. English and French are additionally designated as the working languages of the Secretariat.

SECTION 03

Purposes and Principles

Chapter I of the Charter (Articles 1 and 2) sets out the fundamental purposes the UN exists to serve, and the principles by which the Organization and its members must act.

The Four Purposes (Article 1)

1. Maintain International Peace and Security

To take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to peace, to suppress acts of aggression, and to bring about the peaceful settlement of international disputes through just means and international law.

2. Develop Friendly Relations Among Nations

Based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.

3. Achieve International Cooperation

In solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

4. Serve as a Centre for Harmonizing Nations' Actions

To be a hub where nations coordinate their efforts in the attainment of these common ends.

The Seven Guiding Principles (Article 2)

- **Sovereign Equality** — The Organization is based on the equality of all its member states, regardless of size or power.

- ▶ **Good Faith Fulfillment of Obligations** — Members must fulfill in good faith the obligations they have assumed under the Charter.

- ▶ **Peaceful Settlement of Disputes** — Members must settle disputes by peaceful means so as not to endanger international peace, security, and justice.

- ▶ **Prohibition of the Use of Force** — Members must refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.

- ▶ **Assistance to the UN** — Members must give the UN every assistance in any action it takes under the Charter.

- ▶ **Ensuring Non-Member Compliance** — The UN ensures that even non-member states act in accordance with these principles so far as necessary for peace and security.

- ▶ **Non-Interference in Domestic Affairs** — Nothing authorizes the UN to intervene in matters essentially within a state's domestic jurisdiction (except when enforcement measures under Chapter VII are involved).

SECTION 04

Membership of the United Nations

Conditions for Admission

Under Article 4 of the Charter, membership is open to all "peace-loving states" that accept the obligations of the Charter and, in the judgment of the Organization, are able and willing to carry out these obligations. The admission procedure is as follows:

1. The applicant state submits an application to the Secretary-General with a declaration accepting Charter obligations.
2. The **Security Council** must recommend admission — this requires the affirmative vote of nine of its fifteen members, including the concurring votes of all five permanent members (i.e., no veto).
3. The **General Assembly** must then approve admission by a **two-thirds majority** of members present and voting.

Growth of UN Membership

Membership has grown dramatically since 1945, largely as a result of decolonization in Africa and Asia during the 1950s-1970s, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The most recent member to join was **South Sudan** in 2011, bringing total membership to 193 states. Notably, the **Holy See** and the **State of Palestine** hold Permanent Observer status but are not full members.

Suspension & Expulsion

The Charter also provides mechanisms for disciplining members. Under **Article 5**, a member against which preventive or enforcement action has been taken by the Security Council may be suspended from the exercise of rights and privileges by the General Assembly on Security Council recommendation. Under **Article 6**, a member that persistently violates Charter principles may be expelled altogether, though this provision has never been formally used.

NOTE ON WITHDRAWAL

Unlike many treaties, the UN Charter contains no explicit clause allowing member states to withdraw. Indonesia briefly announced its "withdrawal" in 1965 in protest but rejoined in 1966; this remains the only such case in UN history.

SECTION 05

Organizational Structure — Overview

The UN Charter establishes six principal organs, each with distinct composition, functions, and powers, working together (along with a vast family of specialized agencies, funds, and programmes) to carry out the Organization's mission.

The Six Principal Organs

Organ	Primary Role	Location
General Assembly	Main deliberative & policy-making body	New York
Security Council	Primary responsibility for peace & security	New York
Economic and Social Council	Coordinates economic, social & related work	New York
Trusteeship Council	Supervised trust territories (inactive since 1994)	New York
International Court of Justice	Principal judicial organ	The Hague, Netherlands
Secretariat	Administrative & executive machinery	New York (with global offices)

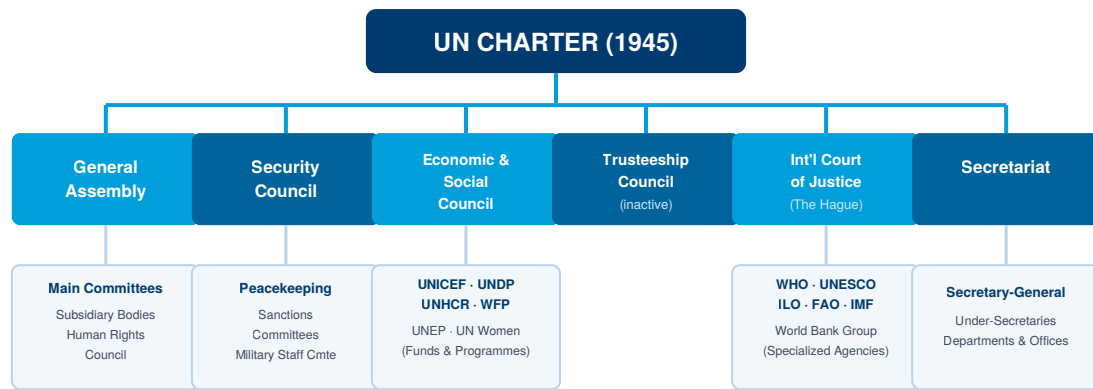


Figure: Simplified organizational chart of the United Nations System

THE WIDER "UN SYSTEM" / "UN FAMILY"

Beyond the six principal organs, the term "United Nations System" also includes 15 **specialized agencies** (e.g., WHO, UNESCO, ILO), numerous **funds and programmes** (e.g., UNICEF, UNDP, UNHCR), and several **related organizations** — all linked to the UN through cooperative agreements but operating with their own membership, budgets, and governing structures.

SECTION 06

The General Assembly (UNGA)

The General Assembly is the main deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the UN — often described as the closest thing the world has to a "parliament of nations."

Composition

All **193 member states** are represented in the General Assembly, making it the only UN organ with universal membership. Each member state, regardless of size, population, or power, holds **exactly one vote**, embodying the principle of sovereign equality. Each delegation may consist of up to five representatives, but casts a single vote.

Sessions

- ▶ **Regular Sessions** — Convene annually, beginning on the third Tuesday of September, and typically running through most of the year. The session opens with the General Debate, where heads of state and government address the Assembly.
- ▶ **Special Sessions** — May be called at the request of the Security Council, a majority of member states, or one member state with the concurrence of a majority.
- ▶ **Emergency Special Sessions** — Convened within 24 hours under the "Uniting for Peace" resolution (1950) when the Security Council fails to act due to a veto, on any matter threatening peace.

Functions and Powers

Function	Details
Deliberation	Discusses any matter within the scope of the Charter, including questions of peace, security, and development.
Budgetary Control	Approves the UN's regular budget and determines the scale of financial contributions (assessments) of member states.
Elections	Elects non-permanent members of the Security Council, members of ECOSOC, and (jointly with the Security Council) judges of the ICJ; appoints the Secretary-General on Security Council recommendation.
Standard-Setting	Adopts declarations and conventions (e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) that shape international law and norms.

Admission of Members	Approves new member states upon Security Council recommendation.
Subsidiary Bodies	Establishes committees, commissions, and programmes (e.g., UNCTAD, UNEP, UN Women) to carry out its work.
Oversight	Receives and considers reports from other UN organs, including the Security Council.

Voting Procedure

Decisions on "**important questions**" — such as recommendations on peace and security, election of members to organs, admission/suspension/expulsion of members, and budgetary matters — require a **two-thirds majority** of members present and voting. All other decisions, including on additional categories to be decided by simple majority, require only a **simple majority**.

IMPORTANT — NATURE OF RESOLUTIONS

Unlike Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions are generally **not legally binding** on member states; they carry the weight of world opinion and moral/political authority rather than enforceable law. Exceptions exist for matters internal to the UN itself, such as budget approval.

The Six Main Committees

Much of the Assembly's detailed work is conducted through six Main Committees, each open to all member states:

No.	Committee	Focus Area
1st	Disarmament and International Security Committee	Disarmament, arms control, threats to peace
2nd	Economic and Financial Committee	Economic growth and development issues
3rd	Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee	Human rights, social and humanitarian affairs
4th	Special Political and Decolonization Committee	Political questions not covered elsewhere, decolonization
5th	Administrative and Budgetary Committee	UN administration and budget
6th	Legal Committee	International legal questions

SECTION 07

The Security Council (UNSC)

The Security Council carries the primary responsibility, under the Charter, for the maintenance of international peace and security — and is the only UN organ whose decisions member states are legally obligated to implement.

Composition

The Security Council has **15 members**:

Category	Details
5 Permanent Members (P5)	China, France, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, United States — each holding veto power
10 Non-Permanent Members	Elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms (five replaced each year), on the basis of equitable geographical distribution and contribution to peace and security; not eligible for immediate re-election

The Veto Power

Under Article 27 of the Charter, decisions on substantive (non-procedural) matters require the affirmative vote of **nine of the fifteen members**, including the **concurring votes of all five permanent members**. This means that a single "no" vote from any P5 member — China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, or the United States — blocks the resolution, regardless of how the other fourteen members vote. This is known as the **veto power**.

Type of Decision	Votes Required	Veto Applicable?
Procedural matters	Any 9 of 15 members	NO
Substantive matters (e.g., sanctions, peacekeeping authorization)	9 of 15, including all P5	YES
Abstention by a P5 member	Does not block passage (by convention)	NO (not a veto)

Functions and Powers

- ▶ **Investigate** any dispute or situation that might lead to international friction.
- ▶ **Recommend methods** for adjusting disputes or the terms of settlement.
- ▶ **Determine the existence of a threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression**, and recommend action under Chapter VII.
- ▶ **Call on members** to apply economic sanctions and other non-military measures to prevent or stop aggression (Article 41).
- ▶ **Authorize military action** against an aggressor when necessary (Article 42).
- ▶ **Establish and direct UN peacekeeping operations** and special political missions.
- ▶ **Recommend admission of new members** and the appointment of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly.
- ▶ **Elect judges** to the International Court of Justice jointly with the General Assembly.
- ▶ **Refer cases** to the International Criminal Court under certain circumstances.

Chapters VI and VII — The Two Tracks of Action

CHAPTER VI — PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT

Encourages parties to a dispute to seek solutions through negotiation, mediation, arbitration, judicial settlement, or resort to regional agencies. Recommendations under Chapter VI are generally non-binding.

CHAPTER VII — ENFORCEMENT ACTION

Empowers the Council to take binding measures — from diplomatic and economic sanctions to authorized use of military force — to restore international peace and security.

Presidency

The presidency of the Security Council rotates monthly among its 15 members in English alphabetical order of country names. The President sets the agenda, presides over meetings, and represents the Council.

Note: Reform of the Security Council — particularly expansion of permanent membership to include countries such as Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil (the "G4") — remains a long-debated but unresolved issue in international diplomacy.

SECTION 08

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

ECOSOC is the principal UN organ for coordinating economic, social, and related work across the entire UN System, serving as a central platform for discussion of international economic and social issues.

Composition

ECOSOC consists of **54 member states**, elected by the General Assembly for staggered **three-year terms**, with eighteen members elected each year. Seats are allocated according to geographic representation among Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe/other states.

Functions and Powers

- ▶ Serves as the central forum for discussing international economic, social, and environmental issues, and for formulating policy recommendations.
- ▶ Coordinates the activities of the UN's specialized agencies, functional commissions, and regional commissions.
- ▶ Conducts and commissions studies, reports, and recommendations on international economic, social, cultural, educational, health, and related matters.
- ▶ Consults with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), maintaining a formal consultative status system that allows civil society to participate in UN discussions.
- ▶ Organizes the annual **High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development**, which reviews progress on the **2030 Agenda** and the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.
- ▶ Oversees subsidiary bodies including the Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission on Population and Development, and the Statistical Commission.

Key Subsidiary & Related Bodies

Body	Function
Functional Commissions	E.g., Commission on the Status of Women, Statistical Commission, Commission on Narcotic Drugs

Regional Commissions	E.g., ECA (Africa), ECE (Europe), ECLAC (Latin America), ESCAP (Asia-Pacific), ESCWA (Western Asia)
Standing Committees & Expert Bodies	Provide technical guidance on specialized issues such as public administration and NGOs

SECTION 09

The Trusteeship Council

The Trusteeship Council was established to provide international supervision for eleven Trust Territories placed under the administration of seven member states, and to ensure that adequate steps were taken to prepare them for self-government or independence.

Historical Role

Originally composed of member states administering trust territories, permanent Security Council members not administering territories, and additional members elected by the General Assembly to balance administering and non-administering states, the Council supervised the transition of former colonies and League of Nations mandates toward independence.

Suspension of Operations

By **1994**, all eleven original trust territories had achieved self-government or independence, either as separate states or by joining neighboring independent countries. The last to do so was **Palau**, which gained independence in 1994. Consequently, the Trusteeship Council formally **suspended operations on 1 November 1994**. It technically continues to exist under the Charter and could theoretically reconvene, though this is considered highly unlikely; periodic proposals have been made to formally repurpose or abolish it through Charter amendment.

EXAM TIP

This is one of the most commonly tested facts about the UN's structure: the Trusteeship Council is the **only principal organ that is currently inactive**, having fulfilled its original mandate.

SECTION 10

The International Court of Justice (ICJ)

The ICJ, also known as the "World Court," is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, seated at the Peace Palace in The Hague, Netherlands — the only principal organ not located in New York.

Composition

The Court consists of **15 judges**, elected for **nine-year terms** by simultaneous, independent voting in both the General Assembly and the Security Council (with no veto applicable to this vote). Judges may be re-elected, and one-third of the bench is renewed every three years to ensure continuity. No two judges may be nationals of the same state.

Two Core Functions

Function	Explanation
Contentious Cases	Settles legal disputes submitted to it by states only (not individuals or organizations) in accordance with international law. Judgments are final, binding, and without appeal — though the Court has no power to enforce them directly; enforcement rests with the Security Council under Article 94.
Advisory Opinions	Provides non-binding legal opinions on questions referred by authorized UN organs and specialized agencies, such as the General Assembly or Security Council.

Jurisdiction

The Court's jurisdiction is based on the **consent of states**. Only states that are parties to the case may appear before the Court, and jurisdiction can be established through special agreement, treaty clauses, or declarations accepting compulsory jurisdiction. The ICJ should not be confused with the **International Criminal Court (ICC)**, a separate and independent institution (not a UN organ) that prosecutes individuals for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

ICJ VS. ICC — COMMON CONFUSION

ICJ: UN principal organ; settles disputes *between states*; located in The Hague.

ICC: Independent treaty-based institution (Rome Statute, 1998); prosecutes *individuals* for international crimes; also located in The Hague, but is **not part of the UN System**.

SECTION 11

The Secretariat & the Secretary-General

The Secretariat is the administrative and executive backbone of the United Nations, carrying out the substantive and day-to-day work of the Organization as directed by the other principal organs.

Structure of the Secretariat

The Secretariat comprises tens of thousands of international civil servants working at UN Headquarters in New York and at offices around the world, including Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi, organized into departments and offices covering political affairs, peacekeeping, humanitarian affairs, human rights, legal affairs, economic and social development, public information, and management.

The Secretary-General

The Secretary-General is the **chief administrative officer** of the UN, appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council (subject to veto) for a **five-year, renewable term**. The role is often described using the phrase from Article 100 of the Charter: the Secretary-General must not seek or receive instructions from any government, acting only in the interest of the Organization.

Key Roles of the Secretary-General

- ▶ Chief administrative officer, overseeing the Secretariat's staff and operations.
- ▶ Diplomatic troubleshooter and mediator ("good offices") in international conflicts.
- ▶ May bring to the Security Council's attention any matter that, in his opinion, threatens international peace and security (Article 99).
- ▶ Prepares the UN's budget and annual reports on the work of the Organization.
- ▶ Serves as the public face and moral voice of the UN on global issues such as climate change, human rights, and humanitarian crises.

List of Secretaries-General

No.	Name	Country	Term
1	Trygve Lie	Norway	1946–1952

2	Dag Hammarskjöld	Sweden	1953–1961
3	U Thant	Burma (Myanmar)	1961–1971
4	Kurt Waldheim	Austria	1972–1981
5	Javier Pérez de Cuéllar	Peru	1982–1991
6	Boutros Boutros-Ghali	Egypt	1992–1996
7	Kofi Annan	Ghana	1997–2006
8	Ban Ki-moon	South Korea	2007–2016
9	António Guterres	Portugal	2017–present

SECTION 12

Specialized Agencies & Related Bodies

Beyond the six principal organs, a large family of specialized agencies, funds, and programmes carry out the practical work of the UN System in specific fields, each with its own membership, leadership, and budget, linked to the UN through cooperative agreements under Article 57 and 63 of the Charter.

Major Specialized Agencies

Acronym	Full Name	Area of Work
WHO	World Health Organization	Global public health
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	Education, science, culture, heritage
ILO	International Labour Organization	Labor standards and workers' rights
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization	Food security and agriculture
IMF	International Monetary Fund	Monetary cooperation, financial stability
World Bank Group	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, et al.	Development financing, poverty reduction
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization	Civil aviation standards
IMO	International Maritime Organization	Shipping safety and marine pollution
ITU	International Telecommunication Union	Telecommunications and ICT
UPU	Universal Postal Union	International postal cooperation
WMO	World Meteorological Organization	Weather, climate, water resources
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization	Intellectual property protection
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development	Rural development financing
UNIDO	UN Industrial Development Organization	Industrial development
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization	Sustainable tourism

Key Funds & Programmes (Subsidiary Bodies)

Acronym	Full Name	Area of Work
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund	Child welfare, health, and education
UNDP	UN Development Programme	Sustainable development, poverty reduction
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees	Refugee protection and assistance
WFP	World Food Programme	Emergency food assistance
UNEP	UN Environment Programme	Environmental protection and sustainability
UN Women	UN Entity for Gender Equality	Women's rights and empowerment
UNFPA	UN Population Fund	Reproductive health and population issues
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime	Combating drugs, crime, and terrorism

RELATED ORGANIZATION (NOT PART OF THE UN)

The **World Trade Organization (WTO)**, though it cooperates closely with the UN System, is **not** a UN specialized agency — it is an entirely independent international organization.

SECTION 13

Core Functions of the United Nations

The functions of the United Nations flow directly from the purposes outlined in the Charter, and can be grouped into several broad categories of activity carried out across the Organization.

1. Maintaining International Peace and Security

- ▶ Preventive diplomacy and mediation to defuse tensions before conflict erupts.
- ▶ Peacekeeping operations — deploying military, police, and civilian personnel to conflict zones to monitor ceasefires and protect civilians.
- ▶ Peace enforcement and authorized use of force under Chapter VII where necessary.
- ▶ Disarmament initiatives, including nuclear non-proliferation and arms control treaties.
- ▶ Sanctions regimes targeting states, entities, or individuals that threaten peace.

2. Protecting and Promoting Human Rights

- ▶ Adoption of foundational instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).
- ▶ Operation of the Human Rights Council and treaty-monitoring bodies.
- ▶ Investigation and reporting on human rights violations worldwide.
- ▶ Support for transitional justice, rule of law, and accountability mechanisms.

3. Delivering Humanitarian Assistance

- ▶ Emergency response to natural disasters, famines, and conflicts through agencies like WFP, UNHCR, and OCHA.
- ▶ Protection and resettlement support for refugees and internally displaced persons.
- ▶ Coordination of international humanitarian relief efforts.

4. Fostering Sustainable Development

- ▶ Promotion of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- ▶ Technical and financial assistance to developing countries through UNDP, World Bank, and IMF.
- ▶ Efforts to combat poverty, hunger, and inequality; promote education and public health.
- ▶ Environmental protection and climate action, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement.

5. Upholding International Law

- ▶ Codification and progressive development of international law through the International Law Commission.
- ▶ Adjudication of inter-state disputes via the ICJ.
- ▶ Negotiation of major international treaties and conventions across all fields of international relations.

6. Serving as a Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation

Perhaps most fundamentally, the UN provides a permanent, near-universal forum where states — large and small, rich and poor — can engage in dialogue, negotiate agreements, and pursue collective solutions to shared problems, functioning as what the Charter calls "a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations."

SECTION 14

Achievements of the United Nations

"To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war." — Opening words of the UN Charter Preamble

- ▶ **Decolonization** — Facilitated the peaceful transition of dozens of former colonies to independence, dramatically reshaping the world map in the mid-20th century.
- ▶ **Human Rights Framework** — Established the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a broad body of international human rights law and treaty mechanisms.
- ▶ **Peacekeeping** — Deployed peacekeeping missions to dozens of conflict zones since 1948, helping stabilize post-conflict societies (the UN Peacekeeping Forces were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988).
- ▶ **Public Health** — Coordinated global health efforts including the eradication of smallpox and major progress against polio through the WHO.
- ▶ **Environmental Cooperation** — Brokered landmark agreements such as the Montreal Protocol (ozone layer) and the Paris Agreement (climate change).
- ▶ **Development Progress** — Contributed to significant declines in extreme poverty and child mortality worldwide through the Millennium Development Goals and now the Sustainable Development Goals.
- ▶ **Humanitarian Relief** — Provided food, shelter, and protection to hundreds of millions of refugees and disaster-affected people through UNHCR and WFP.
- ▶ **Legal Order** — Negotiated hundreds of multilateral treaties governing everything from the law of the sea to outer space and nuclear non-proliferation.

SECTION 15

Criticism & Challenges Facing the UN

Despite its achievements, the United Nations faces persistent structural and political criticism that shapes ongoing debates about reform.

Criticism	Explanation
Veto Power Deadlock	A single P5 veto can block Security Council action even amid grave humanitarian crises, often paralyzing collective response.
Unrepresentative Security Council	Permanent membership still reflects the power structure of 1945, excluding large, influential states such as India, Germany, Japan, and Brazil from permanent seats.
Funding Dependence	Heavy reliance on assessed and voluntary contributions from a small number of wealthy states gives disproportionate influence to major donors and creates budget crises when payments are withheld.
Bureaucracy & Inefficiency	Critics point to slow decision-making, overlapping mandates among agencies, and administrative inefficiency.
Limited Enforcement Power	The UN has no standing army of its own and depends entirely on member states to contribute troops and resources, limiting decisive action.
Sovereignty Constraints	Article 2(7)'s non-interference principle can hinder timely action on internal conflicts and human rights abuses.
Perceived Failures	The UN has faced criticism for failing to prevent tragedies such as the Rwandan Genocide (1994) and the Srebrenica massacre (1995).

Ongoing Reform Debates

Proposals for reform include expanding permanent and non-permanent Security Council membership, restricting or abolishing the veto in cases of mass atrocities, improving the transparency and efficiency of the Secretariat, and securing more predictable, equitable financing. These debates remain unresolved, as any Charter amendment requires ratification by two-thirds of member states, including all five permanent Security Council members — giving the P5 an effective veto over reform itself.

SECTION 16

Summary & Key Facts for Revision

1945

YEAR FOUNDED

193

MEMBER STATES

15

SECURITY COUNCIL
SEATS

15

ICJ JUDGES

Fact	Detail
Founding date	24 October 1945 (celebrated as UN Day)
Charter signed	26 June 1945, San Francisco
Founding members	51 states
Headquarters	New York City, USA (international territory)
Official languages	Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish
Working languages (Secretariat)	English and French
Principal organs	General Assembly, Security Council, ECOSOC, Trusteeship Council (inactive), ICJ, Secretariat
Permanent Security Council members (P5)	China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States
Current Secretary-General	António Guterres (Portugal), since 2017
Nobel Peace Prize	UN itself (2001, with Kofi Annan); UN Peacekeeping Forces (1988)
Most recent member admitted	South Sudan (2011)

"We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war... have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims." — Preamble, UN Charter



End of Document

Prepared as a complete exam-oriented study guide on the
Structure and Functions of the United Nations.

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