The United Nations: What It Is and Does

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Session: Fall 2018 - Session I
Dates: Wednesdays, September 12th - October 17th
Time: 1:30 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.
Location: Room 124, Leeds House Building

Lecture series description:
The United Nations (UN) touches the lives of people everywhere. In the seventy-plus years since its establishment in 1945, the Organization has been central to international relations in such areas as peace, development, human rights, humanitarian assistance, disarmament and international law. The UN is the latest and most ambitious attempt to build an organization that would harmonize the conflicting interests of our global community.
The United Nations depends on informed public opinion. This lecture series introduces six principal organs of the United Nations to promote better understanding about the UN and its presence in our lives.

Schedule of topics:
Week 1
General Assembly (GA)
The “World’s Parliament”
The Assembly at Work
The Assembly’s Authority
Changing Majorities, Changing Priorities

The General Assembly (GA) is the only principal organ of the United Nations in which all member states are represented with equal votes. The Assembly functions as a standing international conference in which any UN member state can raise any international issue it regards as deserving global attention. Its membership grew from 51 in 1945 to 193 members and two observers (the Holy See and Palestine) in

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2018. As long as the United Nations exists in some form, the General Assembly will continue to perform its tasks of global deliberation.

**Week 2**

**Security Council (SC)**

Functions and Powers

Some History

The United States and the Council

Reform

The United Nations’ most powerful principal organ, which is responsible for determining what constitutes a threat to international peace and security, and often what international responses will result. The Security Council still functions as a club of great powers. It has 15 members, 5 permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and 10 elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms. All five permanent members have the “veto” power. Cumulatively the Council’s decisions have proved immensely influential, indeed transformative, crystallizing a view that a seat in the Security Council can be a proxy for global influence.

**Week 3**

**Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)**

History and Development

Main Subsidiary Bodies

Strengths and Weaknesses

Current and Emerging Issues

Although most people associate the United Nations with the issues of peace and security, most of its resources are in fact devoted to advancing economic and social development. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is the principal organ to coordinate the economic, social, and related work of the United Nations. The current fifty-four-member ECOSOC has been criticized for its inability to pull together or a perceived lack of effectiveness. In spite of the abundant criticism, many of ECOSOC’s activities over the years have been reasonably effective. The United Nations, in part through its Economic and Social Council, has had succeeded in promoting the development debate.
Week 4

The Trusteeship Council (TC)

The Mandates and Trusteeship

Territories Covered

Decolonization

“Failed States” Management

Colonial administration came to be repudiated by self-determination entitlement that emerged in international law after the creation of the UN. The Trusteeship Council (TC) was established in 1945 to provide international supervision for Trust Territories placed under the administration of member states to prepare them for self-government or independence. By 1994, all Trust Territories had attained self-government or independence. The last to do so was the Trust territory of the Pacific Islands (Palau).

Week 5

International Court of Justice (ICJ)

Origins and Development

Advisory Opinion

Composition of the Court

Contentious Cases

Located at The Hague, the Netherlands, the International Court of Justice is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. It settles legal disputes between states and gives advisory opinions to the United Nations. The Court is not open to private persons or international organizations, only states may be parties in cases before it. The General Assembly and the Security Council can ask the Court for an advisory opinion on any legal question. Despite the difficulties, the Court has made a considerable contribution to the development of international law and to the resolution of disputes over seventy years.

Week 6

The Secretariat

International Civil Service

Geographical Distribution
The Secretary-General

Selection of the Secretary-General

The Secretariat – an international staff working in duty stations around the world – carries out the diverse day-to-day work of the United Nations. At its head is the Secretary-General, who is appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council for a five-year, renewable term. The current Secretary-General is Antonio Guterres of Portugal, who took office on 1 January 2017. The Secretariat’s duties range from administering peacekeeping operations to mediating international disputes, from surveying economic and social trends to preparing studies on human rights. The UN, headquartered in New York, maintains a significant presence in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Geneva, Nairobi, Santiago and Vienna.

Recommended readings for continued learning:


Other interesting resources:


International Court of Justice - http://www.icj-cij.org/en


Biography:

Dr. Marcel Jesenský is a specialist on the United Nations, international relations, diplomacy and European history. He holds a Ph.D. in History (University of Ottawa). His book *The Slovak-Polish border, 1918-1947* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) chronicles the legacy of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. He is teaching at the University of Ottawa and Carleton University, and his current research focuses on the Presidency of the United Nations General Assembly.