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Build the Wall -- Move the UN HQ?

United Nations principles are not consistent with "America First"

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Revisiting the argument previously presented in *Merits of Moving the UN HQ to Baghdad* (April 2003), subsequently further developed in *Symbolic Relocation of United Nations HQ to Jerusalem Vicinity* (December 2017)

Introduction

Much has been made by the newly elected President of the United States of America regarding the absolute necessity of construction of a wall along the border between the USA and Mexico. This is a campaign promise made to those who voted for Donald Trump. The diplomatic controversy is already resulting in protests to the United Nations.

A presidential executive order has already been signed restricting travel from certain Muslim countries to the USA. Irrespective of how such restrictions may not be held to be applicable to diplomats and UN personnel from those countries, the question is how appropriate it is for the Headquarters of the United Nations to continue to be located in New York.

In the earlier argument, made prior to the full implications of the UN-sanctioned intervention in Iraq, it was speculatively suggested that the HQ of the UN should be moved to the Green Zone in Baghdad (*Merits of Moving the UN HQ to Baghdad* (April 2003)). The text of that argument has been included below, since some of the associated arguments remain of relevance.

With the new policy position being taken by the USA, it can now be asked whether the strongly made declaration of "America First" is consistent with the continued location of the UN HQ in New York. It is appropriate to recall that "America First", was a slogan used by President Woodrow Wilson during the [United States presidential election, 1916](#). The possibility of reorienting the UN to better reflect the interests of the USA has been raised (*Time to Get the U.N. Back in Line With U.S. Interests, Restore American Glory*, 5 January 2017)

The possibility of cutting back funding of the UN and other multilateral agencies is currently under consideration (*New whistleblower policy could give move to defund the UN a boost*, *Fox News*, 6 January 2017; *Republicans make a move on U.N. funding*, *SperoNews*, 6 January 2017; *Concerned About Anti-Israel Bias, Republicans Introduce Another Bill Targeting U.N. Funding*, *CNSNews*, 19 January 2017; *Donald Trump's new Congress looks to STOP funding UN in 'herculean' leap*, *eHeadlines*, 6 January 2017). This extends to proposals to withdraw from membership of the UN (*Trump's Plan to Kill UN Begins with Withdrawal Bill*, *Veterans Today*, 23 January 2017; *Will the US leave the United Nations?* *New Statesman*, 26 January 2017).

Where might the UN HQ be more appropriately located -- given that the Green Zone argument is no longer relevant? Should it be reintegrated with the HQ of its predecessor in Geneva -- the [Palace of Nations](#) of the [League of Nations](#)? It has served as the home of the [United Nations Office at Geneva](#) since 1946. The UN continues to hold meetings there and has a range of secretariat functions there. In 2012 alone, the Palace of Nations hosted more than 10,000 intergovernmental meetings .

Another possibility is to make use of the facilities of the [European Parliament](#) in Strasbourg, as a means of resolving the highly controversial waste of resources in holding its assemblies in Brussels and Strasbourg alternatively. Should the UN HQ be located in another region entirely? Or should consideration be given to the more outrageous possibility of using a cruise ship or an aircraft carrier -- with the flexibility which either would imply?

Whilst any suggestion to move the UN HQ is in many respects "outrageous", it should not be forgotten that the current period is one of outrage -- whether as articulated by Donald Trump, by those who oppose him. Thus for *Time Magazine*: *The Old Washington adage of "Watch what we do, not what we say" is hard to apply to someone as serially outrageous as Donald Trump* (6 February 2017).

Similar concerns have been articulated by the [Occupy Movement](#) -- as an international socio-political movement against social inequality and lack of "real democracy" around the world, with the primary goal being to advance social and economic justice and new forms of democracy. Its preoccupations were remarkably framed by [Stéphane Hessel](#) (*Time for Outrage!* 2010).

It could be said that Donald Trump has succeeded to date through being "outrageous". The Occupy Movement could be accused of "not being outrageous enough" -- as with the massive "movement of resistance" in opposition to the policies he has articulated. Moving the UN could be one example of appropriate initiatives in response to those in process of implementation by the USA. Others could be considered, as discussed separately (*Responding outrageously to the outrageous*, 2017).

Arguments for movement to other locations

Wikipedia offers an extensively referenced summary of [UN relocation proposals](#). This notes that due to the significance of the organization, proposals have occasionally been discussed to relocate its headquarters. Complaints about its current location include diplomats who find it difficult to obtain visas from the United States and local residents complaining of inconveniences whenever the surrounding roads are closed due to visiting dignitaries as well as the high costs to the city. A telephone survey in 2001 found that 67% of respondents favor moving the United Nations headquarters out of the country.

Countries critical to the USA, such as Iran and Russia, are especially important in questioning the current location of the United Nations. Arguing that the United States government could manipulate the work of the General Assembly through selective access to politicians from other countries, with the aim of having an advantage over rival countries.

Among the cities that have been proposed to house the headquarters of the United Nations are:

- Saint Petersburg: *Russia may call for moving U.N. from New York to St Petersburg* (*Johnson's Russia List*, 14 May 2001).
- Montreal: *Will the UN move to Montreal - and how will it affect the waterfront?* (*Spacing Montreal*, 25 October 2007)
- Dubai: *UN Is Invited to Relocate to Dubai, Government Says* (*Bloomberg News*, 14 January 2010; *Move The U.N. To Dubai*, *Forbes*, 12 January 2010; *Debt-laden Dubai offers to host U.N. headquarters*, *Reuters*, 15 January 2010)
- Jerusalem: *The UN can bring peace to Jerusalem by moving its headquarters there* (*Mondoweiss*, 3 November 2014); *A Modest Proposal: Move the UN from NY to Jerusalem* (*Writersreps*).
- Nairobi: *New York and the United Nations: time for a divorce* (*New York Daily News*, 23 September 2013)
- Iceland: *Move the UN to Iceland, says presidential candidate* (*Iceland Monitor*, 26 January 2016)
- Bangkok: *Tracking Global Feng Shui: Move the UN HQ from New York to Bangkok* (*Travel Impact Newswire*, 2 October 2005)
- Kigali: *Move The U.N. To Kigali* (*New Republic*, 27 September 2007)
- Gibraltar: *Move the UN to Gibraltar -- where it might have a better chance of doing good* (*City of Words*, 28 July 1997)

Critics of the relocation say that the idea, while not unfeasible, would be expensive and useless and would also involve the withdrawal of the United States from the organization, and with it much of the agency's funding. Likewise, they affirm that the proposals have never gone from being mere declarations.

Arguments have been advanced that a move is required to a more neutral country:

- *'NYC far and expensive': Russian MP says UN headquarters must be moved from America* (*RT*, 21 Oct, 2015)
- *Move UN HQ to neutral country, says Russian MP* (*RT*, 31 August 2015)
- *Should we move the UN?* (*The Hill*, 7 June 2016)
- *Kazakhstan Wants to Move the UN to Asia* (*The Diplomat*, 29 September 2015)

Clearly discussion of any move to a Middle Eastern location has become increasingly credible in the light of the new executive order of Donald Trump banning the travel of people to the USA from a select list of Muslim countries.

An argument which could appeal to Trump has been provocatively made (*Krauthammer Says Trump Should Turn UN Into Condos With His Name On It*, *The Political Insider*, 27 December 2016). This follows an earlier argument in that regard (*Developer Wants U.N. for His Proposed Tower*, *The New York Times*, 6 March 2008). There is even the strange prospect of the site being purchased from the current owner by Trump business interests.

Moving the UN HQ to Baghdad

The following argument is reproduced from *Merits of Moving the UN HQ to Baghdad* (April 2003).

A very strong case has been made by Simon Jenkins to *Keep the UN well away from Iraq - for now* (*The Times*, 9 April 2003). That argument focuses on **immediate** humanitarian intervention and nation-building programmes. There is however a **medium-term** argument with respect to the relocation of the UN Secretariat itself -- an operation that extends far beyond the time horizon addressed by Simon Jenkins and is relevant to current issues of renovating the existing UN Secretariat building already constrained for space.

The following points would appear to strongly justify active planning for such a move to Baghdad at this time:

- It would constitute a concrete manifestation of the vital role that the UN could in future perform in relation to the Iraqi economy, if only through the external resources associated with maintaining the Secretariat and the benefits to the local economy from visiting delegates
- In a time of great stress, suspicion and uncertainty, it would constitute a visible manifestation of the concrete commitment to the challenges of the Middle East and the regional peace process

- It would shift the centre of gravity of the international community from the North and help to provide a bridging function to the impoverished populations of Africa and Asia
- For the most representative body of "We the Peoples...", Baghdad and the Tigris-Euphrates region is a natural symbolic location, embodying a deep cultural heritage as the cradle of human civilization
- It would help focus the reconstruction of Iraq and prevent the conflict from becoming a long-lasting symbol of the failures of the international community and the UN itself
- It would creatively position the UN in relation to nation-building in the post-Saddam era in Iraq and offer a stabilizing focus for the Middle East
- It would provide a catalytic role for new thinking in the Arab world
- It would reduce the infrastructure costs of a UN administration already faced with budgetary challenges at its current location in New York
- The many costly public buildings and complexes constructed by the Saddam regime in Baghdad should offer many possibilities for a UN Secretariat, which might even benefit significantly from a lateral rather than vertical disposition of offices, especially when interspersed by gardens; their use by the UN would help to justify the resources devoted to such sumptuous buildings
- It would shift the UN from a country whose government has publicly expressed little regard for it, and has no need of it, to a region where its potential can be more effectively explored through other cultural frameworks
- The possibilities of participation in UN processes from the South, and from transition countries, would be increased by the shift in geographic location, which would also reduce the travel expenses for many
- It would require the UN to adopt a more networked organizational style, more in keeping with the requirements of the 21st century
- It would constitute a real challenge to those Secretariat personnel who may have become overly habituated to the comforts of the Manhattan setting and a "developed-world" mindset
- It would increase the representativity at UN meetings, notably of civil society bodies from the South, especially by reducing the air travel security constraints requiring invasive body searching of suspects on entry to the USA
- It would reduce the strain on the security systems of the USA currently faced with the challenge of so many dubious visitors from countries acknowledged to be hotbeds of terrorist sympathizers
- It would offer a construction opportunity to multinational corporations desiring to contribute prestigiously to participation in the Iraqi nation-building process, and perhaps frustrated by the priority given to contractors from countries more closely associated with the USA
- At a time when the reputation and role of the UN is being called into question, such a move would position the UN more centrally and visibly in relation to the challenges of a developing world that still looks to it for hope
- It would reduce the security threat to UN delegates and personnel, given the authoritative indications of US intelligence agencies, that the USA (and New York in particular) is under increasing threat of terrorist attack
- The Secretariat building is in need of major renovation and is severely constrained for space, notably to house civil society bodies (see below). It is also a major cause of traffic problems in New York City. The UN's *Capital Master Plan* could usefully envisage construction of a new complex in Baghdad rather than having to envisage alternative space whilst renovation takes place.

Earlier proposals for relocation

Earlier proposals have been most recently brought to a focus by the state of the UN Secretariat building and the traffic issues that the presence of that building creates in Manhattan. Other proposals have been put forward as a result of the negligence of the USA with respect to its membership arrears. Clearly there are wider concerns with respect to the questionable degree of association with the USA as it takes on its role of sole superpower and sets aside major international treaty provisions that the UN has struggled so hard to articulate.

Recent items relating to such proposals include:

2002: Under the co-chairmanship of Lawrence C. Moss, the Association of the Bar of the City of New York produced an excellent, multi-faceted and well-documented report discussing the challenges of the UN Secretariat building in relation to the **UN's Capital Master Plan** (*New York City and the United Nations: Towards a Renewed Relationship*: A Report by the Special Committee on the

United Nations of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York). The report notes:

- A team of architects and engineers thoroughly examined the condition of the UN headquarters complex in 1998-99. The study concluded that despite the high quality of the original construction, many building elements had deteriorated due to age, or do not meet current standards for safety and energy efficiency. The study concluded "the current condition of the Headquarters complex renders it unacceptable for continued use over the long term."
- The Secretariat further considered demolishing and rebuilding the headquarters complex. Using the present site, this would cost several hundred million dollars more than renovation, and would be highly disruptive to the UN. Reconstruction of the UN on Governor's Island has also been suggested, bringing considerable security and traffic advantages,
- In summary, the UN General Assembly is likely to choose, and the City should support, a plan for the UN to thoroughly renovate its present headquarters complex over a number of years. The primary consequences for the City will be the need to accommodate the UN's need for "swing space" to relocate meetings and staff during renovation work, to make improvements to nearby roads, and to assist with financing the renovation.
- One space need not considered by the UN's Capital Master Plan is for additional office space to house nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Consultative status for NGO's is provided for in Article 71 of the United Nations Charter, and the number of accredited NGOs has steadily increased. Currently there are 2091 NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), some 400 NGOs accredited to the Commission on Sustainable Development, a subsidiary body of ECOSOC, and 1,672 NGO's are registered with the UN Department of Public Information. [55] The City may want to encourage the growth of NGO's, both for economic development purposes, and to enrich the processes of the UN, and a new facility would help. A building constructed by UNDC as swing space for the UN during renovation might later be leased to NGO's. Another imaginative idea to explore is construction of a new conference hall for meetings and conferences during renovation of the UN headquarters, and later using the space as a cultural venue and/or as a location for the fall general debate if the new location affords easier high-security access for Heads of State. [\[more\]](#)

2001: St Petersburg: Dmitrii Rogozin, the chairman of the Duma International Relations Committee, told Interfax on 14 May that Moscow may propose moving the headquarters of the United Nations from New York to St. Petersburg because of America's failure to pay its dues. "If the position of the Americans does not change and if as a result the international civil servants working in New York feel ever more uncomfortable, I think we will raise the question of moving the central UN headquarters to the 'Venice of the North,' St. Petersburg," Rogozin said. [\[more\]](#)

2001: A US telephone poll concluded that 67% of callers were in favour of moving the UN out of the USA.

1997: Continuing friction between the United Nations and New York City has focused on the issue of parking. Tough enforcement programmes in relation to the many abuses of diplomatic privilege over parking resulted in one French legal expert recommending that the Secretariat be moved out of New York.

Moving the United Nations to cyberspace and into virtual reality

Denial of the relevance of cyberspace? Consideration of any movement of the HQ of the UN to another physical location on the globe may now be seen as a denial of the global nature of that organization -- given the remarkable developments in information technology fundamental to a knowledge-based civilization.

There is clearly a case for a new approach to the issues of physical location in relation to the issues of physical access -- especially in the light of controversial issues of travel bans, visas, security, and the associated costs. In addition to those considerations there is a strong case for a review of the efficiencies and inefficiencies of assembly for both statutory purposes and for debate on substantive issues -- especially those relating to communication between representatives of large numbers of countries. At what stage do the inefficiencies outweigh the value of such events -- as is frequently asked with respect to UN and other "summits"?

Necessity of face-to-face interaction? Of further concern are the highly sensitive issues associated with protocol, precedence and status, and the value variously attached to face-to-face contact -- especially by some cultures and as an essential feature of diplomacy. These issues are compounded by those of participation by those recognized as observers, of non-UN bodies, or by representatives of civil society bodies (or their exclusion). The situation and the possibilities have been extensively reframed by the role of social media in bypassing procedures previously required by the United Nations.

Reform of the UN reframed by developments in information technology: Clearly there is a case for exploring the feasibility of relocating many UN functions into cyberspace, since many already depend to a high degree on internet communication and [web conferencing](#), notably as a means of reducing the cost of access and increasing the feasibility of participation of remote parties. It is far from clear how assiduously such possibilities have been explored in relation to the decades-long, fruitless debate on [reform of the United Nations](#) (*General Analysis on UN Reform: key documents, articles, Global Policy Forum; Security Council Reform, Center for UN Reform Education; The United States Doesn't Want to Reform the U.N. Security Council, Foreign Policy*, 29 September 2015).

Over that period the use of information technology within meetings, including statutory meetings, has increased to the point at which it would be unusual for participants not to be making use of such facilities -- if only for voting.

With respect to the problematic issue of statutory meetings, many aspects were previously highlighted ([The Challenge of Cyber-Parliaments and Statutory Virtual Assemblies](#), 1998). Curiously the central issue relates to the perceived need for physical co-presence, however this is rationalised. The question is how to balance that need -- to see and be seen -- against the highly problematic inefficiencies of such gatherings in an increasingly problematic socio-political environment.

Clearly the technology enabling virtual gatherings in cyberspace has developed considerably over the past decade with respect to:

- **virtual worlds**, most notably as massively multiplayer online world (MMOW), namely as computer-based simulated environment populated by many users variously able to develop it individually or collectively
- **command centres** and situation rooms, most notably to centralize communications for complex strategic decision-making (especially for military purposes as "war rooms")
- **web conferencing** (as mentioned above), most notably as web casting and **webinars**.
- immersive **virtual reality**, and its increasingly widespread availability
- transformation from text-based (and spreadsheet) social and knowledge organization to forms increasingly oriented to visual effects and **sonification**

Transformation: The last of these suggests that "reform" of the UN might be better explored as a "transformation" with implications for variable geometry involving alternation between a variety of variously comprehensible forms. Indications of possibilities include:

- *Alternation between Variable Geometries: a brokership style for the United Nations as a guarantee of its requisite variety* (1985)
- *A Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?* (2006)
- *Spherical Accounting: using geometry to embody developmental integrity* (2004)
- *Towards Polyhedral Global Governance: complexifying oversimplistic strategic metaphors* (2008)
- *Dynamic Transformation of Static Reporting of Global Processes: suggestions for process-oriented titles of global issue reports* (2013)

However these are enabled in cyberspace and virtual reality, they constitute a transition from the planar thinking associated with architecture on 2D real estate to an embodiment of multidimensionality consistent with global thinking, as may be variously argued (*Irresponsible Dependence on a Flat Earth Mentality -- in response to global governance challenges*, 2008; *Adhering to God's Plan in a Global Society*, 2014). Arguably it is such a transformation which would enable the UN to engage meaningfully and comprehensively with the complexities and paradoxes of increasingly surreality epitomized by the strategic changes heralded by Donald Trump.

Key issues: Given such developments, the questions are:

- which UN functions could be more appropriately relocated to cyberspace, in order to be more fruitfully enabled in that environment
- how any need for face-to-face plenary assembly by UN bodies could be considered on an ad hoc basis, given the extensive conference environments in cities around the world. Use of multiple locations could address criticism of bias relating to assembly at a single location (as at present with respect to New York).
- how UN plenary communications could achieve wider appreciation through web casting
- how UN secretariat functions could be appropriately dispersed, given the possibility of using multiple locations for distinctive purposes, however communications between them are enabled and integrated by internet communications and web conferencing

Lack of critical self-reference: In considering such possibilities, it is appropriate to note how they are **neglected** in relation to the active involvement of the UN in discussions of **cybersecurity** (most notably under pressure from the USA):

- *The UN, Cyberspace and International Peace and Security* (UNIDIR, 5 October 2016)
- *Cyber Security and the Coming Failure of the UN's Group of Governmental Experts* (*RelationsInternational: global politics, security*, 31 August 2016)
- *The UN and Cyberspace Governance* (*Observer Research Foundation*, 1 February 2014)
- *U.S. makes new push for global rules in cyberspace* (*Politico*, 5 May 2015)
- *U.N. body agrees to U.S. norms in cyberspace* (*Politico*, 7 September 2015)
- *The 2015 GGE Report: What Next for Norms in Cyberspace?* (*Lawfare*, 23 September 2015)
- *The United Nations and Cyberwarfare* (*Global Risk Advisors*, 28 September 2016)

There would seem to be an extensive effort to apply modalities of the past to cyberspace governance, without considering how global governance might itself be informed by the technologies in question (*Vigorous Application of Derivative Thinking to Derivative Problems*, 2013). Such failure may be central to the process whereby the UN renders itself irrelevant to the future. Other possibilities are implied by such as:

- *UN chief takes to cyberspace for global conversation with public* (*UN News Center*, 13 September 2011)
- *How Cyberspace Is at the Leading Edge of Global Change: what can cyberspace teach us about managing the world's political crises?* (*The Diplomat*, 25 February 2016)
- *The United Nations -- ripe for reform under Antonio Guterres* (*Euronews*, 13 October 2016)
- *Net Politics: can UN peacekeeping enter the Digital Age?* (*Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 July 2015)
- *Law of War 2.0: Cyberwar and the Limits of the UN Charter* (*Global Policy*, 4 October 2011)
- Jan-Frederik Kremer and Benedikt Müller: *Cyberspace and International Relations: theory, prospects and challenges* (Springer, 2013)

The latter notes:

That politics have been moved from closed rooms and assemblies to social media is a challenge not just for states but also for the UN and other multilateral organizations (p. 155)

By contrast no mention is made of the enabling possibilities of cyberspace for the UN in the argument of Jeffrey Sachs (*3 reforms the UN needs as it turns 70*, *World Economic Forum*, 24 August 2015).

Relocating the UN to Jerusalem? The cyberspace possibilities of United Nations "relocation" acquire considerable relevance following the recent executive order of Donald Trump banning the travel of citizens of some Muslim countries to the USA and his declared intention to transfer the US embassy to Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem -- a holy city for Muslims. Both measures are recognized as likely to provoke a mobilization of Arab countries (Pinhas Inbari, *Can the Palestinians Mobilize the Arab World on the U.S. Embassy Issue? Jerusalem Issue Brief*, 1 February 2017; *Muslim-majority countries show anger at Trump travel ban*, *The Guardian*, 30 January 2017).

Given the nature of the controversy and the associated symbolism, there is then a case for a cyberspace reframing of the proposals for the relocation of the United Nations HQ to Jerusalem, as indicated above (Eugene Bird, *The UN can bring peace to Jerusalem by moving its headquarters there* *Mondoweiss*, 3 November 2014; Paco Underhill, *A Modest Proposal: Move the UN from NY to Jerusalem*, *WritersReps*; *Americans Thrilled as United Nations Headquarters to be Moved to Israel*, *The MidEast Beast*, 2017).

Clearly any such "relocation" in cyberspace terms would be quite distinct from that which might be imagined with respect to physical architecture and real estate. There are however multiple possibilities to be explored in terms of distributed institutional, communication and knowledge "architectures" -- irrespective of the physical implications which could well be of a purely symbolic nature.

There is the further possibility that the structural dynamics and flexibility rendered possible would offer new ways of reframing the constrained territorial thinking with regard to the complex Israel-Palestine issue, most notably from space-time rather than purely space perspectives (*And When the Bombing Stops? Territorial conflict as a challenge to mathematicians*, 2000; *Strategic Embodiment of Time*, 2010).

Transcending the limitations of binary thinking, how might UN location be understood within a [timesharing](#) framework given its fundamental role in the organization of cyberspace and distributed computing? Time for the UN to be relocated "[into the cloud](#)" ?



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