



SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Mixing Religion and Politics: Explaining the South Pacific Countries Stance on the Israeli-Gaza Conflict

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ABSTRACT

On October 26, 2023, United Nations member states cast their votes to adopt a resolution to place an immediate cease-fire between Israel forces and Hamas militants. This call was taken considering that the conflict between the two has caused a significant number of fatalities and has impacted all aspects of life in the Gaza region. Of the 175 countries that voted then, 120 UN member states approved the draft resolution, 45 members abstained, and 14 others were against it. Six of the countries that rejected the resolution were South Pacific countries: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Micronesia, Nauru, Tonga, and the Marshall Islands. This stance was interesting, considering that one of the rhetorics raised in the concept of the Melanesian Way is anti-colonialism. The purpose of this article is to analyze the position of the South Pacific countries in viewing Gaza based on their UN General Assembly voting behaviors. This paper argues that the position of South Pacific countries regarding the conflict in Gaza is not only influenced by their relations with the United States and Israel but also by the influence of religion in their foreign policymaking.

KEYWORDS

Foreign Policy; Israel-Palestine Conflict; Melanesian Way; Religion; South Pacific

INTRODUCTION

Since Hamas carried out systematic attacks on 7 October 2023, which killed more than a thousand Israelis and took hundreds of them as hostages, the Israeli government has responded by carrying out repeated counterattacks throughout the Gaza Strip ([Reuters, 2024](#)). Under the pretext of self-defense, Israel attacked places it suspected were hiding places for the Hamas group, including places where civilians seek refuge, such as hospitals, schools, and refugee camps (see [Al-Mughrabi, 2024](#); [McArthur, 2024](#)). The Israeli army attack has had a significant impact on the Palestinian people living in Gaza. A year since the Hamas attack, the casualties have reached more than 40,000 Palestinians ([Shurafa & Frankel, 2024](#)). Life for the rest of the people in Gaza, which was already difficult before the war due to the blockade from Israel and Egypt, became even more chaotic due to the destruction of most of the infrastructure in Gaza. According to the United Nations, ninety percent of Palestinians have been displaced as Israel bombarded Gaza ([UN Web TV, 2024](#)).

The international community's response to Israel's conflict with Hamas has been very diverse. On the one hand, there is a group of Western countries that tend to side with Israel's right to self-defense in pursuing Hamas group members ([Agencies, 2023](#)). On the other hand, some countries have voiced strong criticism of Israel's military operations, which are considered to have violated international law ([Quell, 2024](#)). Several countries have even taken further steps such as severing diplomatic ties with Israel or complaining about Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (see [Al Jazeera, 2024](#); [Saric & Mukherjee, 2023](#)). While the ICJ ruled out that Israel's occupation in Gaza and West Bank is 'unlawful' in July 2024 ([UN News, 2024](#)), the International Criminal Court, issued an arrest warrant against Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on charges of committing war crimes ([van den Berg & Al-Mughrabi, 2024](#)).

The position of countries in the world regarding the ongoing conflict in the Middle East is evident in the voting held by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). This UN body has met several times to discuss the Hamas and Israel conflict due to the gridlock at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). UNSC, whose primary responsibility is to respond to crises that threaten international peace and security, was unsurprisingly paralyzed as the United States would veto any resolution draft to condemn the violence against civilians and to call for a ceasefire to let humanitarian aid into Gaza ([Al Arabiya, 2023](#)). Although the results of the General Assembly resolution are not legally binding, at least the UNGA resolution sends a signal about the consensus of countries on global issues.

This article focuses on the South Pacific countries that, on several occasions, have tended to choose to reject or abstain from the General Assembly resolution draft on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict (see Table 1). Their positions are thought-provoking because South Pacific countries, especially members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), often use anti-colonialism rhetoric under the principles of the Melanesian Way. This sub-regional group in the South Pacific had also openly invited other countries to support the self determination of the West Papuan people and to condemn all violence committed by the

Indonesian government toward the people in West Papua (see [Doherty, 2017](#); [Lawson, 2016a](#); [MSG Secretariat, 2024](#)). This paper argues that there are multiple explanations for the voting behavior of South Pacific countries. They are influenced by several things, starting from the relations between countries in the region and the great powers that have been their patrons. The relationship between South Pacific countries and Israel and the influence of religion on their foreign policy are also considered contributing factors.

Table 1. How South Pacific Countries Voted on the Issue of Hamas-Israel Conflict

South Pacific Countries	United Nations General Assembly Resolutions ¹			
	A/78/421 DR I 12/7/2023	A/ES-10/L.25 10/27/2023	A/ES-10/L.27 12/12/2023	A/ES-10/L.31/Rev.1 9/18/2024
Fiji	-	Against	In Favour	Against
Kiribati	Abstain	Abstain	-	Abstain
Marshall Islands	-	Against	Abstain	In Favour
Micronesia	Against	Against	Against	Against
Nauru	Against	Against	Against	Against
Palau	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Against
Papua New Guinea	Against	Against	Against	Against
Samoa	-	-	In Favour	Abstain
Solomon Islands	-	In Favour	In Favour	In Favour
Tonga	Abstain	Against	Abstain	Against
Tuvalu	Abstain	Abstain	In Favour	Against
Vanuatu	Abstain	Abstain	In Favour	Abstain

Source: Drawn from [United Nations, \(2023a\)](#); [United Nations \(2023b\)](#); [United Nations \(2023c\)](#); [United Nations, \(2024\)](#)

To explore the topic further, this article will be organized into several parts. The discussion begins with the literature review on states' voting behaviors at the United Nations and then follows with a brief explanation of methods used in this study. In the discussion section, this paper will start with the discussion of factors that influence the position of South Pacific countries in viewing the conflict between Hamas and Israel. It will be followed by a reflective analysis on Melanesian Way.

¹ A/78/421 DR 1 Work of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories; A/ES-10/L.25 Protections of Civilians and Upholding Legal and Humanitarian Obligations; A/ES-10/L.27 Protections of Civilians and Upholding Legal and Humanitarian Obligations; A/ES-10/L.31/Rev.1 Advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Legal Consequences

LITERATURE REVIEW

While some argue that a state's votes at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) do not help analyze its foreign policy position, others claim the importance of UNGA votes. To quote [Mattes et al. \(2015\)](#) the UNGA votes give us insight into "how the state wants to be seen by others, the international norms it finds acceptable, and the position it is willing to take publicly on a wide variety of issues" (p.283). Academics such as [Hayward Alker \(1964\)](#) and [Bruce Russett \(1966\)](#) were considered as pioneers in the study of the state's voting behaviors at the UNGA. Influenced by the behavioral revolution, they believed world politics could be studied by how states vote. The Cold War context at that time showed that the political contestation between the United States and the Soviet Union influenced how other states voted. Voting at the UNGA was divided into blocs, dominated by the Western and Communist blocs ([Voeten, 2013](#)). After the Cold War ended, the voting patterns became more diverse, along with the emergence of new powers, from China to Brazil, and regional groups, from Non-Aligned Movement to the European Union, which influenced the agenda setting at the UNGA.

One consistent finding about states' voting in the General Assembly is the influence of great countries on smaller ones, especially in the context of economic relationships. Some studies show a strong correlation between US foreign aid and countries' preference in UNGA roll-call voting ([Dreher et al., 2008](#); [Obydenkova & Rodrigues Vieira, 2020](#)). The research of [Kuziemko and Werker \(2006\)](#) also share similar result when they studied the votes at the UN Security Council. According to their study, there has been an increase in foreign aid flow to non-permanent members from the United States. It is apparent that economic dependence is an essential factor that influences how a country votes, not only in the context of vote buying but also in a situation where powerful countries use the economy to pressure other states. [Lektzian and Biglaiser \(2023\)](#) justified this finding in their study of the voting choices of countries economically sanctioned by the US.

The influence of great countries on small ones is not the only study that dominates the studies of the voting behavior of countries in international organizations. Another popular topic is studies on groups of countries seeking to challenge international organizations' status quo. [Lees \(2023\)](#), for example, examines the Group of 77 (G77), whose voting choices in the UNGA are based on dissatisfaction with the order made by the United States and its allies. According to Lees, the choices made by these countries are not because of their undemocratic and illiberal characteristics but because of the shared South-South ideology, which is rooted in the experience of colonialism and their marginalization in world politics. [Binder and Payton \(2022\)](#) also draw a similar conclusion: non-Western countries, especially the rising powers, are dissatisfied with the current international order. However, Binder and Payton argue that what motivates these rising powers is their intention to achieve their status as influential countries in world politics.

Not to be missed is the intersection between domestic politics and international relations. International relations, to quote [Bueno de Mesquita and Smith \(2012, p. 177\)](#), is not 'high politics'. The choice that states made in the international environment is shaped by domestic aspects. Factors such as changes in heads of state and the influence of elites also affect how countries vote in the UNGA. According to [Mattes et al. \(2015\)](#), changes in heads of state, for example, affect a country's voting, especially for countries under a non-democratic system. Meanwhile, [Brazys and Panke \(2017\)](#), who see changes in countries' choices in the UNGA, are caused by the country's financial limitations and the limited number of decision-makers. They also suspect vote buying for poor countries highly dependent on economic aid from other countries.

Indeed, the interplay between domestic and international factors offers a more comprehensive understanding of countries' voting patterns. As discussed later, the decisions made by South Pacific nations at UNGA meetings cannot be attributed to a single factor. Instead, multiple influences shape their voting behavior, including patron-client relationships with major powers and close ties with Israel, often driven by economic assistance. Additionally, Christianity plays a significant role in aligning many South Pacific countries with Israel.

METHODS

This article is case study research that aims to seek an explanation of the position of South Pacific countries, which tend to vote in favor of Israel in UNGA meetings despite their rhetoric on anti-colonialism and self-determination. Case study research, to quote [Lamont \(2022\)](#), aims "to trace the sequence of events that brought about the outcome". The case selection criteria for this research are the South Pacific countries, excluding Australia and New Zealand, that cast their votes in UNGA meetings. The hypothesis raised is their voting behaviors are the accumulation of several contributing factors, from the proximity of countries in the South Pacific to Israel, relations between the countries that are their patrons, and the influence of religion/ideology in foreign policy. Primary data is obtained from official documents issued by government agencies or non-government organizations. This article also relies on digital sources from online media and social media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Relationship between South Pacific Countries with Great Powers

The South Pacific region consists of island nations and the Australian continent. Only Australia and New Zealand are categorized as developed countries, while the rest fall into the developing and less developed categories. The relationship between the South Pacific island nations and large countries is complex. It originates from past experiences where countries such as England, the United States, France, and Germany were nations that occupied the region. France and the United States even still have several islands in the area.

Relations with the colonizers did not stop when the South Pacific island nations gained independence. Firstly, the South Pacific is a strategic location and great powers still maintain their strategic interests in the region. The United States, for example, keeps its military presence in the Pacific region, from air and naval bases in Guam, Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site in the Marshall Islands, to establishing high-frequency radar system in Palau. As part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the U.S. military also builds military ties with its counterpart in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga, where it conducted joint military exercises or providing capacity building aid to the South Pacific countries ([Lum & Tupuola, 2024](#)). As China grows its influence in the South Pacific region, the US has increased its military cooperation with countries like Papua New Guinea, which in 2023 signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), which “allows the U.S. military to develop and operate out of bases in PNG” ([Lum & Tupuola, 2024](#)).

The second reason the island nations in the South Pacific cannot escape from the countries that once colonized them is their limitations as small countries. Most of the small countries in the South Pacific region have limited natural resources, and their remote location becomes an obstacle in accessing the global market. Furthermore, some of these countries are also located in the Ring of Fire area, which is prone to volcanic eruption. The challenges come from volcanic eruptions and climate change, which impacts rising sea levels. Thus, the South Pacific island nations consider climate change an imminent threat. These geographical challenges are what make some of the South Pacific countries very dependent on foreign aid. Data from the Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map shows that in 2022, the South Pacific island nations received foreign aid from Australia (\$1.5B); Asian Development Bank (\$820M); World Bank (\$368M); China (\$256M) and the US (\$249M) ([Lowy Institute, n.d.](#)). Donors provided foreign aid to the region, ranging from infrastructure development to change mitigation and adaptation programs.

This dependence on foreign aid has more or less affected the relations between island nations and great countries, especially since the region has become a battleground for great powers to compete for influence. For example, China's growing presence in the region has worried traditional partner countries of the Pacific island countries ([O'Keefe, 2020](#); [Zhang, 2020](#)). China's foreign aid scheme is considered more accessible and more attractive to some Pacific island countries, although there are indications that these countries are having difficulty paying their debts ([Dingwall, 2024](#)). It can be concluded that the South Pacific region is a region that has long been the sphere of influence of large countries that used to colonize island countries. The co-dependent relationship between island countries and large countries is not impossible to influence their voting behavior in the UNGA.

Bilateral Relationship between South Pacific Countries and Israel

While Israel faces condemnation from most of the countries around the world, it finds allies in the South Pacific, a region geographically distant from the Middle East. One crucial aspect

that one cannot ignore in analyzing the partisanship of South Pacific countries in the Israel-Palestine conflict is the relationship between South Pacific countries and Israel. Israel has maintained diplomatic relations with South Pacific countries for quite a long time. In fact, Israel was among the first countries to recognize the sovereignty of Micronesia, Palau, and the Marshall Islands. This closeness to Israel is also influenced by the relations of the South Pacific island countries with great countries such as Australia and the United States, which are allied with Israel.

The second factor that influences Israel's good relations with the island countries in the Pacific is that they need Israel's help to cope with the impacts of climate change. During his visit to Israel in 2016, the Prime Minister of Fiji, Frank Bainimarama, said that Fiji needed Israeli technology and innovation in medicine and agriculture to adapt to climate change ([Levin, 2017](#)). In his meetings with several South Pacific nations on the side-lines of the UN annual meeting in 2023, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also pledged to help the island nations anticipate the impacts of climate change ([Wecker, 2023](#)). Netanyahu planned a return visit to Fiji to strengthen relations between the two countries ([Ahren, 2016](#)). The visit plan eventually failed to materialize due to logistical reasons. However, an interesting thing that Netanyahu conveyed when receiving Bainimarama was that he saw the support coming from the South Pacific as something very valuable for Israel:

Why am I going to Fiji? Because fifteen countries, fifteen islands that each one has a vote in the UN are coming to that meeting. I'm telling you that it will be no more than a decade, and possibly a lot sooner, that the automatic majority against Israel in the UN will collapse, and Israel will actually find a fair hearing there. Now it's not going to happen tomorrow. But it'll happen, and sooner rather than later. ([Ahren, 2016](#))

Another critical factor in the relationship of South Pacific countries to Israel is the religious factor. The influence of religion in foreign policy is not a new phenomenon. Religious considerations can enter into foreign policy formulation through interest groups' lobbies or campaigns that influence public opinion. So, even though a country is not based on a particular religious system, religious followers can affect the country's foreign policy. India and the United States are examples of secular countries whose foreign policies are also influenced by the teachings of Hinduism and Christianity, respectively ([Haynes, 2009](#)). In this regard, Christianity is important in the relationship between Israel and the South Pacific countries. The majority of the population in the South Pacific region is Christian ([Zurlo, 2021](#)). For adherents of this religion, Israel has an essential place in Christian teachings, especially from the Old Testament, which says that Israel is the chosen people. Therefore, it is not surprising that Papua New Guinea became one of the countries that moved its diplomatic representation from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in September 2023. At the

inauguration of the Papua New Guinea embassy, Prime Minister James Marape said that the choice to move the embassy was influenced by his status as a Christian:

Today is a milestone moment for my country Papua New Guinea. We are here to give respect to the people of Israel to the fullest...because of our shared heritage, acknowledging the creator God, the Yahweh God of Israel, the Yahweh God of Isaac and Abraham. Many nations choose not to open their embassies in Jerusalem, but we have made a conscious choice...For us to call ourselves Christian, paying respect to God will not be complete without recognising the Jerusalem is the universal capital of the people and the nation of Israel. ([Berman, 2023](#))

After Papua New Guinea, the Pacific island nation that plans to open an embassy in Jerusalem is Fiji. Fiji actually planned to move its capital in early 2024, but as of this writing, the plan has not been realized.

Reflection on the Melanesian Way Principles

The Melanesian Way originated from the thoughts of Bernard Narokobi, a politician, lawyer, and statesman from Papua New Guinea. When Narokobi's views were first disseminated outside of Papua New Guinea, the Melanesian Way inspired nationalist figures in other Melanesian countries to fight for independence. The principles of the Melanesian Way began in the 1970s when Narokobi wrote several articles published in the Post-Courier daily. Narokobi's writings were later published in a book entitled *The Melanesian Way* ([Lawson, 2016a](#)). In short, the Melanesian Way contains the philosophy of life of the Melanesian people, who should be proud of their collective identity in the form of culture, language, and customs. Narokobi stated that the Melanesian nation must become an independent nation and not depend on other countries:

Melanesia has been invaded by a huge tidal wave from the West in the form of colonization and Christianization. Like any tidal wave, the West came mercilessly, with all the force and power, topping over our earth, destroying our treasures, depositing some rich soil, but also leaving behind much rubbish...Over the centuries, Melanesians have come to see themselves as they are understood and written up by foreigners...Unless we succeeded in establishing a philosophical base, founded on our ancient virtues, we stand to perish as a people of unique quality, character and dynamism...It is my hope that we would not blindly follow the West, nor be victims of technology and scientific knowledge... No foreigner must control our resources, intellectual, human, material or cultural, no matter how charitable he is. Melanesians, we must always be. ([Narokobi, 1983](#))

While Narokobi showed his anti colonial stance and acknowledged the harmful element of Western influences, he envisioned the blend of Melanesian and Western ideals in the Melanesian Way: "With the freedom we have, we can make conscious decisions to opt for what is best in both worlds" ([Narokobi, 1983](#)). True to his word, he sought ways to combine traditional Melanesian values with Christianity. One of his significant works, in which the merge of Melanesia and Western principles came to realization, was drafting of Papua New Guinea's Constitution. Not only does the preamble state the coexistence of traditional and Christian values to show how influential Christianity is in Papua New Guinea, but it also asserts the theology of human liberation as part of the country's goals "to be for every person to be dynamically involved in the process of freeing himself or herself from every form of domination or oppression."

Narokobi's ideas of the Melanesian Way extended beyond Melanesia, influencing other South Pacific islands seeking independence and a distinct regional identity. Before its emergence, the Pacific Way dominated the region's identity, largely shaped by Polynesian countries that played a leading role in the Pacific Islands Forum. Unlinked Melanesian nations, Polynesian countries were generally seen as more conservative and aligned with Australia and New Zealand. However, the rise of Melanesian consciousness in countries such as Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, led to the establishment of MSG in 1986, challenging Polynesian dominance in regional affairs. The MSG has since become a platform for Melanesian nations to assert their distinct political positions and priorities, differentiating themselves from their Polynesian counterparts (see [Lawson, 2016b; 2024](#)).

In international forum, for example, MSG countries often discuss self-determination, human rights, and decolonization issues. The spirit of supporting the independence of the Melanesian people is even written as the goal of the MSG organization: "...backed by a strong and shared political desire, for the entire decolonization and freedom of Melanesian countries and territories which were still under colonial rule in the South Pacific, thereby developing a stronger cultural, political, social and economic identity and link between the people and communities of Melanesia." Anti-colonialism sentiment was openly expressed, for example, by Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai when he spoke before the members of the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2017.

My Government is concerned about the fact that the United Nations has lost much of its ability and willingness to implement Security Council resolution 1514 (1960), of December 14, 1960, which called for a swift and unconditional end to colonialism in all its forms and manifestations. Decolonization must return to the agenda of the United Nations, and all efforts must be free from the pressures of international politics. We all have a collective responsibility to guarantee the self-determination of peoples under the colonial yoke. ([United Nations, 2017, p. 19](#))

He also invited other countries to support the West Papuan people to be given the opportunity to determine their own destiny and to demand Indonesia to stop all forms of violence in West Papua.

For half a century, the international community has witnessed several instances of torture, murder, exploitation, sexual violence and arbitrary arrest that the people of West Papua have suffered at the hands of the Indonesians, and it has ignored their voices and calls for help. We urge the Human Rights Council to investigate those abuses. We also call on our leading partners around the world to support the legal right to self-determination of West Papua. We call on them, along with Indonesia, to end all forms of violence and find common ground with the citizens of West Papua in order to facilitate a process that will enable them to freely express their will. ([United Nations, 2017, p. 19](#))

What does the pro-Israel position of the South Pacific countries mean for the Melanesian Way? One could argue that the South Pacific island countries display hypocrisy and inconsistency when it comes to human rights and self-determination. Narokobi's philosophy of the Melanesian Way, which advocates for independence and indigenous values, appears compromised by their alignment with Israel despite the Israel-Palestine conflict being rooted in colonialism (see [Dana, 2024](#); [Veracini, 2013](#); [Zureik, 2016](#)). Reports of ongoing Israeli atrocities against Palestinians continues to mount (see [Amnesty International, 2024](#); [Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)), raising questions about whether the concerns voiced by leaders like PM Salwai should also extend to Palestinian struggles. However, it is important to acknowledge that foreign policy is shaped by multiple factors, often driven by pragmatism. In this case, the strategic interests of the South Pacific countries, where they have to maintain their relationship with great powers and Israel, have overshadowed the Melanesian Way rhetoric. Additionally, the deep influence of Christianity in the region has significantly shaped local perspectives on international issues.

CONCLUSION

This article has outlined the contributing factors to the voting patterns of South Pacific countries, especially members of MSG, on the issue of the Israel-Hamas conflict in the Gaza Strip. By employing the theoretical framework regarding the countries' voting patterns in the UNGA, this article has explained the economic dependence of South Pacific countries on great powers such as the United States. Another thing that we must recognize is the relationship between South Pacific countries and Israel. Israel, in this case, is a country that provides the assistance needed by South Pacific countries, especially in their efforts to combat the impacts of climate change. The closeness of South Pacific countries with Israel is also influenced by the belief that Israel's position is critical in Christian theology, especially

in the Old Testament. The position of South Pacific countries on the issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict certainly makes us question the Melanesian Way principles. One of the things that Narokobi aspires to is how the Melanesian people do not only follow the will of the West but live their lives according to their traditional values. However, what Narokobi might not expect was for the South Pacific societies have developed over the years.

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