

What's behind Israel's ban on the UN chief?: Explained

Has a UN chief ever been banned by a member state? What has been the response to the move?

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File photo of United Nations Secretary General António Guterres. | Photo Credit: AP

The story so far: On October 2, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz announced that Israel had banned United Nations Secretary- General (UNSG) António Guterres from entering the country, accusing him of “backing” Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran.

Why did Israel ban the UN chief?

According to Mr. Katz, the decision to declare Mr. Guterres “PNG” (persona non grata) was taken because he hadn't “unequivocally condemned” Iran's missile strikes on Israel earlier

in the week, and thus the UNSG does not “deserve to set foot on Israeli soil”. Mr. Katz also claimed that the UNSG had not denounced the terror attack by Hamas on October 7 last year, which left about 1,200 Israelis dead, and 250 taken hostage. The UNSG and UN bodies have, in fact, condemned the attack a number of times. In a statement in April, Mr. Guterres had condemned the use of “sexual violence, torture and kidnapping of civilians”, calling the “horror unleashed by Hamas” unjustifiable. In the context of the latest escalation, which included Israel’s strikes on Lebanon that killed hundreds and took out the top leadership of Hezbollah, as well as Iran’s launch of 200 missiles targeting Israeli bases, Mr. Guterres named neither country, saying in a statement that he “condemned” the broadening of the West Asia conflict, calling for a ceasefire. A day after the Israeli ban was announced, the UNSG issued a clarification, saying that he “strongly condemned” the “massive missile attack by Iran on Israel.” However, Israel has not withdrawn the ban.

Is there a history to Israel-UN tensions?

The ban on Mr. Guterres is part of a larger Israeli argument against the UN, which it claims is run by the “anti-Israel” bloc of Arab and Islamic countries and affiliated organisations like UNRWA that it alleges are involved with Hamas. At the UN General Assembly last week, angry at a number of UN resolutions backed by a big majority of countries that called for a ceasefire and criticised Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the UN an “anti-Semitic swamp”. Israel has in the past banned UN Special Rapporteurs and other senior officials accusing them of “bias” against Israel and in favour of the Palestinian side. Last year, outraged at Mr. Guterres’ remarks to the UNSC that the October 7 attacks had not occurred “in a vacuum” and that they followed “56 years of suffocating occupation” of Palestinian areas, Israel banned then-UN Under-Secretary General Martin Griffiths. Alongside his comments on Hamas, Mr. Guterres has also been consistently critical of Israeli bombardment of Gaza. More than 40,000 Palestinians have been killed thus far, including 15,000 minors, and a record number of 135 UN personnel working with Palestinian refugees, which the UNSG called a “moral stain”, referring to Gaza as a “graveyard for children.”

Has such a ban happened before?

According to former Indian Permanent Representative to the UN, Asoke Mukerji, the ban on the UNSG is “unprecedented”, recalling that the closest a country came to such an action was in 1950, when the then-USSR accused UNSG Trygve Lie of bias on the Korean

crisis and threatened to veto his re-election. Citing the UN charter (Article 100, para 2), which says “each Member of the United Nations undertakes to respect the exclusively international character of the responsibilities of the Secretary-General and the staff and not to seek to influence them in the discharge of their responsibilities,” Mr. Mukerji told The Hindu, “we all need the Secretary-General for substantive and logistical reasons.” In 1987, the U.S. had banned Kurt Waldheim who had earlier been UNSG (1972-1981) and Austrian President (1986-1992), when it emerged that he had been complicit in Nazi war crimes during his time in the Austrian Army in the Second World War.

How has the world reacted to Israel's ban?

A day after the ban was announced, the UN Security Council issued a statement, which is only possible with the concurrence of all P-5 members, that said “any decision not to engage with the UN Secretary-General or the United Nations is counterproductive, especially in the context of escalating tensions in the Middle East.” The U.S. State Department called it “not productive to improving [Israel's] standing in the world.” Even the Ministry of External Affairs, that has taken care not to be over-critical of Israel, was dismissive. “Mr. Guterres is the UNSG for us. What somebody else says about it, what third person says is not our area of outlook or a matter to comment on,” said spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal on Friday.

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