



The origins of the UN Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL)

Information note

[UNISPAL](#) is the world's largest online repository of documents on the question of Palestine. The unique UN-run information system collects and makes available UN and external documents on the issue to a range of stakeholders from diplomats to scholars and students and is considered one of the largest focused repositories on the internet.

Origins

By 1990, there were increasing demands on the UN Secretariat to monitor political and other relevant developments, conduct research, and prepare studies and on the question of Palestine.

On 11 December 1991, acting on the recommendation of its Palestinian Rights Committee, and following a feasibility study, the General Assembly passed resolution 46/74 B¹ which specifically requested that the Secretary-General provide the Division for Palestinian Rights (DPR) of the Secretariat with necessary resources, including a computer-based information system.

On 11 December 1992, in resolution 47/64 the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to provide DPR with resources to strengthen its programme of research, studies and publications, through the establishment of an adequately staffed and equipped computer-based information system². The UNISPAL system was operational by 1994.

Political context

UNISPAL's origins are simultaneous to the increased international interest in the question of Palestine starting in 1991. In the wake of the Gulf War and the first *Intifada*, changing regional dynamics spurred momentum in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process leading to the 1991 Madrid conference and culminating in the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Technical decisions and evolution

UNISPAL was envisaged as an all-encompassing system with multiple functions: acting as a repository of documents on the question of Palestine, managing expert bios for conferences organized by the Palestinian Rights Committee, acting as an NGOs database and as a source of information for the Division of Palestinian Rights' publications. By 1994, documents were posted onto "bulletin boards"³ for easy retrieval.

In 1995, a UNISPAL task force in DPR decided that minimum coverage for the database would entail all Palestinian Rights Committee documents. Given the burden of scanning and uploading historical

¹ [A/RES/46/74\(A-C\)](#)

² <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N93/234/29/pdf/N9323429.pdf?OpenElement>

³ Online message boards popular in the 90s. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_board_system

documents in addition to new ones, the UN Dag Hammarskjold Library assisted with the digitization of most of the historical documents.

In 1995, UNISPAL was made available to all UN staff and Permanent Missions to the UN via the UN's Local Area Network. By 1997, UNISPAL was accessible to users worldwide via a web browser. The URL for the UNISPAL website became <http://unispal.un.org>. Once online access was complete, DPR focused on making the site bilingual (in English and French). Some documents were converted into PDFs prior to upload, creating for the first time "Attachments" to online entries and thus improving not only readability but also users' ability to download the documents.

How UNISPAL changed UN work on the question of Palestine

Over the two and half decades of its existence, UNISPAL effectively streamlined and simplified the labour-intensive information monitoring and cataloguing functions for the voluminous documentation on the question of Palestine. UNISPAL and other related databases also served to revitalize other aspects of the Committee's mandate, such as outreach to NGOs and promotion of its international meetings. The system has allowed processing of large amount of information from NGO profiles, newsletters, programmes and reports. Even at its inception in 1992, UNISPAL enabled the speedy update and easy retrieval of the Committee's extensive records including a mailing list of about 1,000 NGOs and 500 biographical notes. UNISPAL's storage of updated bios, and of conclusions and recommendations of each seminar proved valuable for meetings and international conferences organized by the Committee.

Today, UNISPAL has become the go-to site both internally in the UN as well as externally for all documents related to the question of Palestine.

UNISPAL: Looking ahead

UNISPAL was envisioned as an all-encompassing Information Management System. Over the years, several of UNISPAL's original components – the database of expert bios, the NGOs database, the mailing lists for international meetings, the Publications programme, and the repository of documents have developed independently but remain part of a comprehensive whole.

Since October 2018, work has continued to make the system as efficient as possible. As of April 2019, data from the old system has been fully migrated into a more technologically upgraded database. Since March 2019, efforts are being made to ensure full multilingualism of the website. While the website's static content is already multilingual, the ongoing efforts would ensure that dynamic content - such as meeting announcements - would also be available hereafter in all six official languages of the UN (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish). This would revitalize the original vision of UNISPAL and keep it an indispensable tool for all that are interested in the question of Palestine.

UNISPAL is now accessible at www.un.org/unispal.

**Division for Palestinian Rights
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