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The U.N. is Obsolete

Guests:

For the Motion: Rajan Menon, Nile Gardiner
Against the Motion: Angela Kane, Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou
Moderator: John Donovan

FINAL VOTING RESULTS AVAILABLE FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 24th 2021

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[music playing]

Rajan Menon:

Without question, there are global problems that will require collective action. And you need an organization to evoke collective action. But the U.N. hasn't done that.

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

I certainly see that the United Nations is not obsolete. I see that its promise is very much relevant.

Angela Kane:

When you look at the vetoes, when you look at the voting behavior of China and the Security Council, it's actually changed.

Nile Gardiner:

China hasn't changed. If anything, the Chinese Communist Party has become more aggressive and more dangerous. China is a massive threat. And China seeks to use the United Nations as a vehicle, of course, for advancing its own power on the international stage.

John Donovan:

The year was 1945, the deadliest war in human history was coming to an end. The world wanted peace. Out of that, the United Nations was born—a global organization devoted to peace, security, and human rights.

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Yet three quarters of a century later, questions are emerging about whether the U.N. still matters. Critics say the organization is bloated, outdated, and a growing source of controversy. Advocates tout its efforts in humanitarian aid, climate change, and its commitment to human rights in an ever more fractured political landscape. And so, in the context of this emerging divide, we ask the question, is the United Nations obsolete?

Hi, everybody. And that is the question we're taking on today. Born of idealism and built by the winners of the now distant World War, the United Nations has racked up a mixed record of some wonderful successes and some spectacular failures in its 76 years. But we're looking at the present moment. Given the several truly global crises and challenges of our time, from trade wars, to cyberattacks, to climate change, it seems to make sense that we would have a truly global body to organize and manage a truly global response.

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Is the United Nations that organization right now ready and adaptable to the moment? Or is the U.N. of today obsolete? That's our debate. I'm John Donvan. This is Intelligence Squared.

[music playing]

You are going to decide who wins this debate. And we're going to have you do that by voting two times, once before you've heard the arguments, and once again after you've heard the arguments. And the team whose numbers go up the most between the first and the second vote will be declared our winner.

So, let's do the first vote right now. And here's how we're going to ask you to do that. You're going to go to iq2us.org.

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That's iq2us.org. I'll give you a second to pull that up on your web browser or on your cellphone, iq2us.org. Okay. When you're there, you will be able to tell us where you stand on today's resolution, which, again, is the U.N. is obsolete, by voting for, against, or undecided on that resolution. Again, it's iq2us.org. I'll give you one more second to get your first vote in.

Okay. And now, it's time to meet our debaters.

[music playing]

Arguing for the motion, the U.N. is obsolete, is Rajan Menon, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, political scientist, and professor at the City College of New York. His partner is Nile Gardiner of The Heritage Foundation and a former foreign policy aide to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Opposing them, Angela Kane, former German diplomat and former U.N. High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, as well as undersecretary general at the United Nations.

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Her partner, Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, former minister of Foreign Affairs of Mauritania, and a scholar of history and politics.

This debate, of course, done in partnership with Foreign Affairs, a leading magazine for in-depth analysis and debate of foreign policy, geopolitics, and global affairs.

All right. And now, here we all are. I happened to be at the moment in New York City, just a few blocks from United Nations headquarters, but we have people from far-flung corners of the world. So, I want to welcome all of you. Thanks for joining us at Intelligence Squared.

[talking simultaneously]

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:
Hello there.

John Donovan:
And let me just ask you where you all are. Mahmoud, where are you located right now?

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:
I'm in Geneva, right next to the U.N. office.

John Donovan:
And Angela?

Angela Kane:
I'm in Washington, D.C.

John Donovan:
And Rajan?

Rajan Menon:
Well, John, as you know, I live in New York City. But at the moment, I'm in a tiny village in New Hampshire.

John Donovan:
Okay. And Nile?

Nile Gardiner:
John, I'm in Washington, D.C. at the moment.

John Donovan:
All right. Well, as I say, it's great that at least in this pandemic period, it enables us all to stay in touch from far distant points of view -- places.

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Though we can't be on a real stage, we can all share the screen together and make this debate happen. So, let's go and do that right now. Let's move on to our first of three rounds. Round one will be opening statements from each debater in turn. Those statements will be four minutes each. Our resolution, again, is the U.N. is obsolete. And first up, to speak in support of the motion, here is Rajan Menon. Rajan, the screen is all yours.

Rajan Menon:

Thank you, John. And thank you to Intelligence Squared. Ladies and gentlemen, the U.N. evokes considerable admiration, so allow me to begin by clarifying some points. Nile Gardiner and I are not here to argue that the U.N. does nothing of value. That would be untrue, and hence, unpersuasive. Nor are we here to argue that the U.N. should be abolished. We don't believe it should be. No state would want it.

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Why would states want it abolished? The U.N. lacks the power to get states to do anything they don't want to do, and yet states routinely use the U.N. to further their interest. What a lovely arrangement. Why spoil that? I want to make in the time that I have a twofold argument for your consideration. First, United Nations no longer represents the world as it is. It has a representational problem. The world has changed, but the U.N. has not changed to match it. Second, the U.N. has an efficacy problem. That is on the major issues of the day in terms of moving the needle, it has been either irrelevant or peripheral.

Let's begin with the representational problem, a part of the reason why the U.N. is in danger of becoming obsolete.

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If you look at the Security Council, it has been frozen in time, ladies and gentlemen, for 76 years, except for the admission of the People's Republic of China in 1971. Frozen in time, but the world surely hasn't been frozen in time. Over 100 new countries emerged as a result of decolonization in Africa and Asia. Japan and Germany rose from the ashes of World War II and have long since become economic powers of great consequence. India, soon to surpass China in population, has been in democracy for 75 years and has the seventh largest GDP in the world. Indonesia, long since liberated from Dutch colonialism, has about 216 million people, the largest Islamic country in the world.

Now, look at the U.N. No India, no Indonesia, no Germany, no Japan. Not a single country from Latin America, notwithstanding the fact that Brazil has the ninth largest GDP in the world.

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Not a single African country, even though Africa has 1.2 billion people. ASEAN, the great economic powerhouse of Southeast Asia, absent. So, in this sense, the U.N. has the representational problem. It is called the parliament of humankind, but it no longer represents the world that we see before us.

Now, let me move to the efficacy problem. And I'll be brief, because Nile will pick up on this and have much more to say. If you made a short list of the world's critical problems, they would probably include mass atrocities, arms control, pandemics, and climate change. On these issues, our point is not that the U.N. has done nothing of value. That would not be true. It is that it has either been irrelevant or peripheral or had catastrophic failures.

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Catastrophic failures such as peacekeeping, for example, where mass atrocities were allowed to recur in places like Rwanda, Bosnia, and elsewhere. And most recently, in the South Sudan. As for being irrelevant, if you look at pandemics and climate change, I would submit to you that the prime movers have been states. When there are global problems such as these and states are required to act in the collective interest and set their short-term interest aside, the U.N. has not been able to orchestrate collective action. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

John Donvan:

Rajan, I'm sorry, that is time. Thank you very much. And thank you for your opening statement. Our next statement will be against the resolution. It comes from Angela Kane. And Angela, the screen is yours.

Angela Kane:

Thank you very much, John. And you've already mentioned that the world has changed a lot in the 76 years since the U.N. was founded by just about a quarter of the member states that it has today.

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And it has a lot of conflict, so it's a totally different world that we're confronted with. And I wonder, can all of these solve these issues that we are confronting today? Can they actually be solved by one nation? Or can they be solved by, let's say, a community of nations? Can they be solved by multinational corporations?

The conflicts do not carry passports. They do not respect borders, but our challenges are all interlinked. And it is only by way of working together multilaterally that we can work together as a global family to actually solve our common problems. And the only platform that can solve this is actually the U.N., because they can search -- they can support the search for global solutions. They can monitor the implementation, because it is one institution, but it has a lot of funds and programs and agencies. And they can really be put all at the service of the peoples of this world. Politicians very often think short term. It's usually at the duration of their term and time in office.

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The U.N., however, looks at the long-term issues. They sort of say, "What can we do today to actually improve the lives of the peoples 20 years from now?" And when you think about the sustainable development goals, this is a blueprint with 17 goals. There are many targets. There are many actions for peace and prosperity. And that really does sound pretty grandiose, but the goals are very simple -- what is a good health, education, gender equality, climate change, justice, and strong institutions. Those are just a couple of the very all-encompassing goals of the U.N. and the member states. Not the U.N., but the member states have set for themselves. And what is important is that these goals are not only outlined, but they are also measured. And they're also monitored in their implementation. And even if the pandemic has set us back a bit, I think that the global goal of reaching these goals is still there. And then another issue is, think of Afghanistan.

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Who else, but the United Nations, will stay to feed the population, to monitor human rights, to monitor women's rights, and also to report on the situation in effectual and impartial manner to the member states and to the world? Today, there are 235 million people in the world who need humanitarian assistance and protection. And that's -- when you think about it, it's one in 33. And last year, the U.N. raised over \$19 billion in voluntary funds to basically feed the population to help them into a system. And again, how is that going to be possible if by one member state or by a number of member states? So, who could orchestrate even appeals for voluntary contributions?

But I also want to think about peace negotiations. When you think about the investigation in Syria, for example, you found that as a result of that investigation and the proofs that came up with, it was that Syria joined the Chemical Weapons Convention and destroyed their nuclear -- their chemical materials.

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And yes, questions still remain eight years later, but every month progress is scrutinized in the Security Council. Every month. And that will continue until everything is cleared up. And let's talk also about the peacekeeping operations. Yes, they do stay for long periods of time, but so do national military engagements. Again, think of Afghanistan. And several U.S. studies have, for example, concluded that the U.N. peacekeeping is twice as cost effective as national engagements. Plus, the cost is shared among member states, and there's a wider international acceptance of these operations. And yes, there is a lot of function -- talk about dysfunction in the Security Council and that's been an important negative. But this lies with individual states. It does not lie with the U.N. as a role. And I think that during the Cold War, we also faced a long trail of dysfunction.

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And that was followed by a very productive session of peaceful and productive cooperation. And I'm the eternal optimist, and I think this is going to continue and come back well. Thank you.

John Donovan:

Angela, thank you. Your time is just up at that point. So, you've heard the first two opening remarks. And now, up on the screen with an opening statement in support of the resolution that the U.N. is obsolete, here is Nile Gardiner. Nile, the screen is yours.

Nile Gardiner:

John, thanks very much for hosting us today. And this is an extremely important and very timely issue for debate, actually, is the United Nations obsolete. And certainly, it's the view of Rajan and myself that the U.N. is, in fact, obsolete. And that's based on looking at the evidence and the facts that we have available. Everyone wants the United Nations to succeed. And that includes, of course, the U.S., a taxpayer that puts in several billion dollars a year into the United Nations system.

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The United Nations -- the whole of the free world wants the U.N. to succeed at every level. Unfortunately, I think the founding vision of those who set up the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II, the greatest war in our history, that founding vision, I think, has largely evaporated. And I think what we have today with the United Nations is tremendous disillusionment with the U.N. system. And that I think is certainly felt across the free world.

And the United Nations has failed on so many fronts. And I'm going to address in particular the U.N.'s failure with regard to human rights, with its failure to stand up to acts of genocide, its failure to stand up to the most dictatorial regimes in the world. And at the heart of that failure, really, is the fact that the United Nations contains within it so many authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, who actually use the U.N. as a shield to protect their own nefarious activities.

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And one only has to look at the U.N. Human Rights Council as the perfect example of that. Let's see who sits on that council today. That includes the likes of China, Russia, Cuba. Some of the world's worst human rights violators sit on the U.N. Human Rights Council. And that is at the very heart, I think, of the problems that we face with regard to the United Nations.

The U.N. simply does not stand up for the values of its original United Nations Charter. It has let down many of the most vulnerable people in the world. And, you know, if we look back again at the terrible Rwanda genocide in mid-90s, the terrible mass killing and genocide, Srebrenica, carried out by the Serbs, the United Nations failed some of the most weak and vulnerable people in the world who look to the U.N. for protection.

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U.N. peacekeeping operations across the world, many of them have been spectacular failures. If you look at the Congo peacekeeping mission, MONUC, there were over 150 instances of major human rights violations carried out by U.N. peacekeepers and U.N. officials. This is a staggering failure.

Where is the United Nations today standing up to China with its genocide against the Uyghurs? Where is the United Nations in terms of standing up to the likes of the Assad regime in Syria, which has used chemical weapons? Time and time again, the United Nations has failed on so many fronts. It has been a massive disappointment. And the reality is, at this time, the United Nations certainly is a broken institution. It has lost the faith of so many across the free world. It has become the plaything of some of the most brutal dictatorships on Earth. This has to change.

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And it's certainly our view that the United Nations in its present form is obsolete. This is an institution that we want to succeed. But as it stands at the moment, it just has been a massive failure on so many fronts. Thank you very much.

John Donvan:

Thank you, Nile. And our final opening statement will be against the resolution that the U.N. is obsolete. In other words, it's an endorsement of the U.N. It comes from Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou. And Mohammad-Mahmoud, the floor and the screen is yours.

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

Thank you very much, John. Hello, ladies and gentlemen. We've just heard quite an indictment for -- of the United Nations. In fact, we can add to this. The United Nations is certainly not the most efficient of organizations. We can look at its heavy bureaucracy. We can look at its convoluted nature. But that is not the issue. And I'm not here to wave the flag of an institution that needs a lot of fixing and is in need of soul-searching.

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The issue is whether an organization that was set up less than 100 years ago, 76 years ago, which is not a lot of time in matters of history and governance and international organizations in the current era, whether such an organization is obsolete. Well, the definition of obsolescence is that something that's no longer needed, because something better has been invented instead of it. Well, that is not the case. There is no other organization inside that could do the kind of issue that you just heard my colleague mentioning that has a comprehensive mission.

And let us for a moment set aside the cynicism that is so prevalent these days and look at the mission and the mandate, the very letter of bringing peace and prosperity to all around the world. Well, if we look at this in terms of those, then I think two key issues are fundamental. First of all, in terms of how this came about, in terms of the very notion of the concept of inefficiency that we heard our colleagues from. Well, evidence of inefficiency is not evidence of obsolescence. What matters, as I said, is the mandate, the mission. And there is no other organization that could do this.

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If the problem is the Security Council, as it certainly is, then reform it, as many have been trying to do for many years. If the problem is the funding, then well, let's make it steady and resourceful and plenty of this. If it's the staffing, then let's have a proper merit system. If the issue is sexism or racism, then let's deal with this seriously. Well, none of this is reason enough to cancel out the one organization that has this comprehensive mission at its heart and which has not been failed when it comes to the letter of what was designed many decades ago.

Secondly and most importantly, every time the world came out of major trauma, it ran to this very place of putting together such an institution. After the brutality of World War I, the League of Nations was set up. After the horrors of World War II, the United Nations was created. After decolonization, this -- the new young states of the Middle East Africa, Asia are now to that very organization for their place in the world.

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At the end of the Cold War, the whole concept of human security and peacebuilding was reinvented, the Agenda for Peace. That whole language that we practice today was designed during that decade with the United Nations' front and center. Certainly, they're not doing so successfully, but that is not evidence of obsolescence. After 9/11, the conversation on security began right then and there. Time and again, we went to that very place that wants us to develop cooperation, and manners of working together.

Finally, if you look at the world today and see all of the ills that are around us, from the pandemic, to racism, to injustice, to poverty, to poor education, to systemic inequities, to gender inequities, to youth unemployment, there is no other organization that it has in its mandate and a place for all including, indeed, the bad students in this world as were mentioned. There is one entity that is with design to deal with this. And the United Nations, in that sense, is absolutely not obsolete.

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So, I would say that the argument for the obsolescence of the United Nations is, in fact, shortsighted. It doesn't do justice to the very concept that stands at the heart of this organization which remains universal. And so, for that reason and for the reason that my colleague mentioned earlier, I invite you to vote against the motion that the United Nations is obsolete for it certainly is not.

John Donovan:

Thank you very much, Mahmoud. And that concludes our first round of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate, where our resolution is the U.N. is obsolete. And now, we move on to round two. And round two is where the debaters will have a conversation and address one another directly. They can ask each other questions and also will be taking questions from me.

My observation on the opening statements is that the side that's arguing that the United Nations is obsolete, not calling for the abolition of the United Nations as it exists, conceding that it does some things well, but points out its shortcomings, some of which have been described as catastrophic. On the other side, the team that's arguing in support of the United Nations is not saying that the organization is perfect, concedes that it does some things poorly, but fundamentally says that it has done more good than harm and has an indispensable role in the world.

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And it's that indispensable role question I want to take first as a question to you, Rajan. We heard Mahmoud made the case. Basically, he's saying that if there were not a United Nations, we would have to invent one that the -- and Angela made the same point that individual states, even clusters of states cannot -- are incapable of bringing the sort of force and power an organization to certain kinds of challenges that face the world today. And so, I want you to respond to that sort of more philosophical part of the discussion before we get into the details of the organization as it exists now. Do you agree with them that we do need a global U.N.-like type of organization?

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Rajan Menon:

Well, John, that's an interesting argument that's been developed by our esteemed opponents, which is to say that all the faults of the U.N. are due to its member states, and all the good things are due to the U.N. Well, that's not the realistic way of looking at the U.N. The U.N. is embedded in the world as it is, and it has to be taken or like or dislike based on how its function in the world as it is. As for well if you do away with it, we would all be in terrible shape, I mean, those are not the alternatives before us. The alternatives before us is to ask the question, "How well is it doing the job that it's set out to do?"

Let me give you some examples of glaring failures. In 2018, there was an internal audit by the U.N. of the U.N. peacekeeping operation. Fraud increased over the previous year of 40 percent. Sexual abuse increased by about 70 percent. In South Sudan today, U.N. peacekeepers are being investigated for giving arms to the contending parties ratcheting up a war that has killed 385 million people.

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So, the question is not, "Oh, we don't have anything else." The real question is, "How well is what we have doing and manifestly it is not doing?"

Angela Kane:

I think that that is a very one-sided negative view, to be honest with you, John. And excuse me, Rajan. We know each other well. So, I don't agree with you. But let me just talk a little bit about the peacekeeping aspect, because this is something that the U.N. is like the big achievement that was created after the Charter was concluded. I mean, it didn't exist in the

Charter, so that was really very important and has been important. And yes, not all peacekeeping operations have been very successful. In fact, some of them have not, as you have outlined. But I think it is rather overdrawn.

Let me come to the fact about the former Yugoslavia. I think it was Nile that mentioned Srebrenica. And Srebrenica, as we all know, was a terrible debaucher. There are two problems with this whole [unintelligible] --

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John Donovan:

Can you take a moment to remind people what happened in Srebrenica?

Angela Kane:

Oh, in Srebrenica, basically, the people, the civilians came. Basically, they expected protection by the United Nations soldiers. At that time, it was the Dutch contingent who were absolutely traumatized. There were a number of investigations afterwards of how it happened. But on the other hand, they basically were massacred by the Serbs. And so, this was a tremendously traumatic incident that actually --

John Donovan:

Because the Dutch contingent did not defend them?

Angela Kane:

The Dutch contingent was not able to protect them.

John Donovan:

Yeah.

Angela Kane:

And this is one of the problems, and that's what I'm coming to. And the same issue was true in Rwanda. The Boutros-Ghali at that time was the secretary general. And he was of the opinion that you need to tell the member states what is needed. You need to tell the member states what I can do and what I need to do the mandate that you are giving me from the Security Council. And that was never fulfilled. He didn't have the troops. He didn't have the people. He didn't have the equipment.

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I was sitting in the Security Council a lot at that time, and I followed all of these debates in the Security Council in closed consultations which are not public. And I can tell you that in Rwanda, for example, you were not allowed to use the G word. The G word was the word genocide. But everyone knew what was going on. And to say that that was not the case, as it has been said repeatedly afterwards, is simply not true. It is simply not true.

In Srebrenica, you will recall, there was also NATO involvement. And then, again, the NATO involvement, it was supposed to be this dual key. It was a very complicated experiment. And it didn't really work very well. But when it comes to after Srebrenica, and when it comes to after what happened is, the U.N. did not get troops from NATO countries. NATO have their own eye for, they have their own peacekeeping operation that they set up that was independent of the United Nations. And so, therefore, when there is complaints about abuse, when there's complaints about lack of equipment, then you have to basically say, why aren't there a more expanded version of a truly multinational force from other member states?

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And that simply is not happening. And the mandates are overloaded. The mandates, protection, and everything, they are truly overloaded.

John Donovan:

Let me -- let Nile jump in there. I think you were coming in.

Nile Gardiner:

Yeah. Thanks, John. I would like to respond to some of those points. And Angela mentioned, I mean, two of the biggest, most spectacular U.N. failures in this history, the peacekeeping missions in Rwanda and also at Srebrenica. And in the case of Rwanda, a million people were killed. This was an act of genocide, of course, by the Hutus against the Tutsis under the very noses of the United Nations. And this was a spectacular failure on the part of the U.N. At Srebrenica, 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were killed by the Serbs under the very noses of Dutch U.N. peacekeepers.

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This was a great U.N. failure, but also a failure on the part of the Dutch peacekeepers as well. And these are examples of, you know, a staggering, you know, mismanagement at the heart of the United Nations, an unwillingness actually to step in and prevent acts of genocide and mass killing. And absolutely shameful, really. I mean, this is -- you know, this is -- you know, these are two of the most shameful incidents that we have seen in modern times, frankly. And, you know, you look at the Srebrenica genocide, the biggest act of mass killing since World War II under the auspices of the United Nations. Eventually, of course, NATO went in to take out the Serbs. And NATO, I have to say, overall is a highly effective, multilateral institution. The United Nations is not a very effective world body.

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And you have on so many levels, I mean, deep-seated problems with the U.N. And I've referenced the -- you know, the Congo peacekeeping mission in the mid -- or the first decade of the 2000s. And in fact, I testified for Congress on this particular mission. And not only did you have U.N. peacekeepers basically preying on refugees, but also U.N. officials as well. It's not just the peacekeepers. It's the U.N. officials involved in criminal activity here. And --

John Donovan:

Well, let me jump in, Nile, because you and Rajan have both been making the point at these spectacular failures, which I think your opponent has conceded happened and were failures and were spectacular are damaging to the organization's reputation. But I want to bring Mahmoud into the conversation as well to respond to some of what you're hearing and what would your pushback be.

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Because I heard you in your opening, Mahmoud, saying that what the organization needs is reform, and that in which would imply that you believe that it is reformable, so that you do not see these failures as fatal to the operation of the organization's mission or reputation.

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

Exactly, not at all. I mean, I think precision and nuance is very important here. The notion of something irrelevant and obsolete, as we said, which is the heart of the motion, and we need to keep coming back to this because that is the question that is being asked, is really something that does not apply to the United Nations when we look at the mandate, as we said, and we look at the history. If we go with this notion that something is not working because someone is getting in the way, again, the Security Council, yes, it's been going on for even more than 20, 25 years. But so what? That's because there is political pressure on this. And the elephant in the room at the United Nations, which everyone knows about, is that great power in politics, which by the way would be coming back even more sort of strongly if we remove the United Nations, as we've seen already though sort of the trend taking place since the mid-2010s, with the Trump administration, the Putin administration.

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And we've seen this around the world as well. Now, in any one of these cases, it's because some of these missions were prevented from working in that way. And in fact, interestingly, Rwanda is not so obviously a failure of the U.N. as it is. The evidence is there that it was the Clinton administration and then some of the European powers and some of the African nations that were not interested in going there at the time. The people on the ground have written extensively about this. The Canadian head of the mission, his Ghanaian deputy, the Senegalese fellow that died there, evidence is that these people actually went there, because there was the United Nation that there was this mission. And then yes, politics, bureaucracy, as I said, all of these prevented this.

The question of the genocide is also a little bit too easy. The two biggest genocides of the 20th century took place before the United Nations, the Holocaust and Armenia. So, if it's simply the question of genocides, yes, they could happen, but they could also happen outside of this.

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And I want to go back to this notion of something obsolete for the third time. If we say that something is not working and then we need to so quickly get rid of it, well, this would apply to

all of the problems that we have with statehoods. How many states in the world are not functioning so easily? Corporations, bad civil society that would have politics, the school system that is not working. So, the concept here is that we have the one organization that is certainly not doing so well. I grant that, and I highlight that, because it's a matter of intellectual honesty, and because it's -- we can all see it. But the one organization that has been designed that countries could go to as they are -- and let us remember how in the '60s that we mentioned the history here, how these young nations -- look, the Algerians took their case to the U.N. against colonial friends as there is, in the hope that that one organization would solve it as it is.

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And so, this notion of having a space, of forum where these issues need to be addressed, and a forum, yes, that is in need of reform, absolutely count me on that, including on the Security Council, is I think the important point in this conversation.

John Donovan:
So, Rajan, are you --

Rajan Menon:
John, could I jump in very quickly?

John Donovan:
Please do.

Rajan Menon:
Because it's Angela who said I had one-sided and pessimistic view, ouch. Well, let me say this. If you go to Srebrenica, you will see acres of Muslim graves. What happened there? The U.N. declared a series of safe areas to which Bosnians came in search of refuge thinking they will be protected. Eight thousand Bosnian boys and men were given over by the commander of the U.N. Forces General Karremans of the Netherlands. And then we have a video in Srebrenica -- go there and see it -- of him drinking slivovitz, plum brandy, with none other than Ratko Mladić. Two other points very quickly. I do and accept the definition here. It's very convenient that has been put forward about obsolescence.

00:35:02

That is obsolescence means you have to get rid of it. That is not the argument that Nile and I are making. In Rwanda, if you [unintelligible] --

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:
Well, that's the motion --

Rajan Menon:
-- was of General Dallaire, it is impossible to conclude that it was solely the fault of the states and not of the U.N. So, here, again, we have an interesting argument. All the credit goes to the

U.N. Whenever there are failures that are pointed out, all of those at the member states. Well, that's a dodge. It doesn't work.

Angela Kane:

I really must say that I think there's so much commingling of what the U.N. "is doing" and what the U.N. "is not doing." But on the other hand, the situation in Afghanistan is a very dire one. And I don't see that the United Nations can actually contain, or whatever you want to call the word, the Taliban. But on the other hand, what the U.N. -- and this is what I said in my opening statement, what the U.N. is doing is it's on the ground. It is feeding people.

00:36:00

It is helping report on the situation of the women and what is actually happening in the country. Most of the embassies, the Western embassies in particular, have closed. There are very few embassies are actually open right now. So, who is going to do that? And when you look at the situation on the ground for the people looking to basically help them with their basic needs, that is actually the United Nations. And that's what we are doing. Is there going to be any desire to have a "peacekeeping" or even a military peacekeeping operation at the U.N. put together? No, there won't be. So, I would not really go and expect that. But on the other hand, there are things that the U.N. is doing very, very effectively.

And the other issue that I wanted to say, because you criticized the fact that a senior official was going over to talk to the Taliban, I have worked for the United Nations for a long time. And basically, it is a matter of, do you keep people out of the tent? Or do you put them into the tent? That is a very important question. I have dealt with and I've negotiated with those autocrats or those, you know, despots that you were talking about.

00:37:00

And you have to talk to people who have blood on their hands, because basically what you want to do is you want them to come into the tent. And you want them actually to be effective, but you cannot do so by isolating them and saying, "I'm not going to talk about them."

And the same is true for when you speak about the Human Rights Council, which you heavily criticized. I think the Human Rights Council, it is not perfect. It was tried or it was trying to reform. They made the Human Rights Council as a peer review. Has it been more effective? Well, there are doubts about that. But on the other hand, you want people inside the tent, so they actually have to listen to you. You want people inside the tent, so they hear the opinion, they hear the criticism, and it is very much there. And you have all of these human rights repertoires who come out with reports. If you bother to read them, they are very, very critical. That is also part of the U.N. And to my mind, it's a part of a very effective U.N., because it stands up to injustice. It stands up for human rights. It stands up for women's rights. And those are very, very important features that don't get reported on the press.

00:38:02

John Donvan:

So, let me take that to --

Rajan Menon:

John, may I make a few points very quickly? With all due respect to Angela --

John Donovan:

Well, I was going to go to you, Rajan, actually. And --

Rajan Menon:

With all due respect to Angela, it is certainly true that the U.N. may deliver food and so on to Afghanistan. And so, Nile and I are not saying it doesn't do anything valuable. But let's be clear. What the Taliban allows the U.N. to do or not do will not be decided by the U.N. It will be decided by, in no particular order, Russia, China, and Pakistan, who are the prime movers there. The U.N. can't do anything without that diplomacy by individual states. That's one thing.

Second, on the climate change. Would it be useful to have a coordinating body that move the world forward on climate change? Yes, it would be. But I submit to you that the main momentum toward addressing climate change will be the result of a very robust E.U. policy to reduce carbon emissions. And the so-called more recent China 30-60 policy, it will not be as a result of the U.N.

00:39:01

Final point, let us look at the pandemic. The U.N. had a wonderful program, which I liked, and I supported it, called COVAX. It would bargain with the drug companies. It would get drugs cheaply, the vaccines, and it would distribute it worldwide. What have we seen? A division between haves and have-nots. The wealthy countries vacuumed up the vaccine. Look around the world, and look at the Global South, and look the vaccination rates, they're abysmally small. Now, you can say, well, that's not the U.N.'s fault. It's the member states'. Well, we come back to this familiar dodge. Everything that is good is done by the U.N. Everything that's been bad is by the big bad wolf, the member countries. The U.N. has got to be judged on how well it works in a world of sovereign willful states. And that is its biggest problem—it is hamstrung time and time again.

John Donovan:

I want to move forward on a -- to look at some of the things that I want to look at.

00:40:00

They are not theoretical problems, but they are the problems of the present day. And to ask certain kinds of challenges that exist today that did not exist certainly 76 years ago when the organization was set up and when France, for example, was established as a member -- a permanent member of the Security Council, and India was not, which shows the passage of time. But cyber war has -- was not even on the radar at that time. And I'll throw this question out generally, whoever wants to take it first, but is the United Nations an organization that is well-suited to helping the world deal with and control the dangers of cyber warfare?

Nile Gardiner:

So, who are the two of the key players, actually, in terms of, you know, carrying out nefarious acts of cyber warfare? Russia and China. They're both on the U.N. Security Council. They're both at the heart of the U.N. Human Rights Council. So, if we expect the United Nations playing a serious role in terms of dealing with, you know, cyber warfare, you know, we have to hold two of the U.N.'s key, you know, national Security Council members to account, namely Beijing and Moscow.

00:41:09

The reality is the United Nations is not going to lift a finger, the United Nations is not going to condemn anything that Russia does or China does. And we're seeing that in a huge way with the Uyghur genocide at the moment. There's no condemnation within the United Nations of what China is doing, because, of course, China sits on the committees of most of the powerful committees within the United Nations. So, there we have -- I mean, you know, you're not going to see the United Nations realistically taking any kind of active role in terms of combating cyber warfare, because a lot of its chief players are the key conductors of cyber warfare.

John Donovan:

So, in a way, you're saying the well is poisoned completely on that one? And I want to let Angela take on that question.

Angela Kane:

I think it's a very interesting question, particularly with the way you're phrasing it in terms of cyber warfare.

00:42:00

This is an issue that goes back many, many years. And actually, it was the Russian Federation at the time who put the issue of cyber onto the agenda of the United Nations. And it did so in the Office for Disarmament Affairs, which is very interesting, because it was also talking about actually military implications of that.

Now, how does "the U.N." deal with this? And this is very interesting, because there are two ways of handling this. Normally, what happens is you have sort of open-ended working groups. And that being said, it's like any member state who is interested in the topic can join this. And this is usually the first step.

But with regard to the cyber issue, there have been a number of what they call "group of governmental experts." And that means that member states can volunteer or they can be invited to be part of this group of governmental experts. And yes, the P5 are usually members of them. And in the case of the cyber issue, there was recently the last group of governmental experts. There have been about four of them, I believe. The last one was 2014, and then this was one.

00:43:00

And this group came up with something that maybe does not sound very revolutionary but to my mind is a consensus forming and is the first step to make further progress. And that is that whatever is dealt with on land or on the world also applies to cyberspace. And that means that there is a certain accountability for actions. That doesn't mean that they say or that the group says or that the U.N. later on says is that you cannot commit a -- we have to make cybercrime accountable. Yes, there is accountability. But on the other hand, the recognition and the acceptance of the fact that there are laws that exist that also apply to cyberspace is really, really important. And maybe it doesn't sound like much, but have you read anything about this in the papers? No. But it is something that will be worked on again. It will come forward in October during the committee -- during the, you know, General Assembly First Committee when it meets, and it is supported by member states.

00:44:00

And yes, the P5, Russia, China, were in that working group, in that group of governmental experts.

John Donovan:

Finally, there is one more point that I wanted to bring up that actually Nile you brought up. It's the fact that China sits on the Security Council as a permanent member with the veto. And, you know, we're in a period of time when China is, you know, so to speak, getting kind of hegemonic these days. Its ambitions are growing, and it's acting on those ambitions. And it's causing concern among some of its neighbors. It certainly is causing concern in Washington. If China became a threat of any kind, and one might also argue that it's already a threat to certain members of its own population, is the United Nations in a position to do anything about that? Is the United Nations, in fact, doing anything about that given the fact that China is a member with enormous influence? I'd like to throw that to whoever would like to take that on.

Rajan Menon:

I'll take it, John. The main entity in the U.N. for enforcing threats to the peace is the Security Council.

00:45:03

Any discussion that brings up China as a threat to world peace is dead on arrival. The Security Council does not discuss anything that any member of the P5 does not want discussed. And if there's a resolution that somehow manages to be framed, it'll be vetoed. So, if you postulate -- and we can have a debate on how big a threat China is -- that it's a threat, it's going to be taken care of by old-fashioned balance of our politics. The U.N. will at best be a peripheral player. We're not saying irrelevant. We're not saying abolished. We're saying peripheral. That is not where the main action is going. Can you see a resolution condemning China as a threat to peace asking the Security Council --

John Donovan:

But Rajan, would you have said in the 1950s -- that the U.N. was obsolete in the 1950s because the Soviet Union had a seat on the Security Council?

00:45:58

Rajan Menon:

No. But your question to me was the Chinese may become a threat. Let's stipulate that that's true for a moment. It's a more complicated issue. And what would the Security Council do about it? And I am saying exactly what happened back in the Cold War would do it -- would happen. When either superpower found a resolution objectionable, it vetoed it. I submit to you that whether it's China's internal behavior or external behavior or hotspot like the South China Sea, the U.N. will have no role. Look at what happened when the International Tribunal found in favor of the Philippines in the South China Sea. The Chinese said, "Well, we just don't accept it."

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

Can I have -- I want to say something on this. I think on this, actually, Professor Menon is correct. But that is not the issue. Any country today or in the future could be a threat to peace and security.

00:46:57

So, the notion of the Security Council in its current configuration not being in sync with how the power structure of the world is why France and Germany, if you're looking at the power of Europe, for instance, is actually something that is a different problem than the question of the whole forum being no longer relevant and irrelevant. Obsolete, I would say, actually, I'll up that one. We can get rid of the Security Council. And probably so, why don't we have kind of a reformed U.N. in which you have the General Assembly which would be much more democratic for that matter? The Security Council had -- the conversation about it is about the configuration being problematic. This is not about the forum of the United Nation generally in its democratic ethos of representing the whole world and trying to find solution to those issues.

Rajan Menon:

But Mahmoud, how likely do you think it is --

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

And if you take on China, it's not going to solve it. I agree with that.

Rajan Menon:

Yeah. But Mahmoud, just a minute. How likely do you think it is that the P5 will allow the Security Council in this outline --

00:48:00

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

Unlikely. Totally unlikely.

Rajan Menon:

-- and for the General Assembly to --

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

Unlikely.

Rajan Menon:

Look, I'm with you. Maybe [unintelligible] --

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

Yes. And so I am with you. But that's not the obsolescence issue.

Rajan Menon:

-- but it's not going to happen, you know that.

Angela Kane:

But let's come to something else. And that is basically like, why would any country be labeled a threat? It really depends on what vantage point you're coming from. I mean, maybe the U.S. is seen as a threat, because it is, you know, wanting to be all powerful policemen of the world, et cetera, even though we've moved beyond that. So this I find very interesting. I mean, think about the Cold War. I think you, John, just asked about 1950. Well, what about the Cold War? Was Russia considered a threat then? I mean, the U.N. still continued to exist. And even after the Cold War, you had a very productive period. And so, this is something that I don't understand. You will not have "the United Nations" labeled a country as a threat, but you can criticize.

And the other point I wanted to make is that countries do change. And I'm thinking particularly of China, because we've talked a lot about China. When you think about the early time, for example, with Syria, Syria and -- was -- basically, China and Russia very often vetoed resolutions that went against Syria.

00:49:04

That is no longer the case. I think when you look at the vetoes, when you look at the voting behavior of China and the Security Council, it's actually changed. And so that to me means that yes, there is a change possible, and it does happen. And it is very rare that we can influence or the United Nations can influence that something that happens on a national determination basis.

John Donovan:

We have 30 seconds left to this section, and I want to give it to Nile. Nile, you get the last word in this section.

Nile Gardiner:

Yeah, thanks, John. Firstly, the United States is not a threat to the world. The United States defends the free world. And that's the difference between the U.S. and China and Russia. And

yes, China is a massive threat. And China hasn't changed. If anything, the Chinese Communist Party has become more aggressive and more dangerous, as we're seeing with the genocide against the Uyghurs, its treatment of Hong Kong, and so on. China is a massive threat. And China seeks to use the United Nations as a vehicle, of course, for advancing its own power on the international stage.

00:50:02

And that's what the U.N. is to China. It's nothing more than a vehicle for its own interest as a totalitarian regime. And we have to treat China as an adversary and as a threat to the free world.

John Donovan:

Okay. I have to break in there. The lines of division are clear in this conversation. But that concludes round two of this debate. And here's where we are. We're about to hear brief closing statements from each debater. These statements will be two minutes each. It's their last chance to try to change your minds, because remember, right after this round, we will ask you to vote for a second time. And your votes will decide which team has been the most persuasive and therefore our winner.

So, let's move on to round three, closing statements. And first making his closing statement in support of the resolution that the U.N. is obsolete, here is, one more time, Rajan Menon.

Rajan Menon:

Thank you, John. And thank you again to IQ. And thank you to my interlocutors, Angela and Mahmoud, and to my partner Nile, my able partner Nile.

00:51:02

I come from a family of diplomats. And I was raised to revere the U.N., people like U Thant, Dag Hammarskjöld, the second secretary general of the U.N. were lionized in my family. I remember a faded book on my grandfather's study called "How the U.N. operates." And I was a 12-year-old boy who took it down and read it. And it was by David Cushman Coyle. I was curious whether the book is still on like Google or Amazon. And it's not around now. It's out of print. So taken was I by that book that I thought I would one day like to join the U.N. But ladies and gentlemen, sentiment and boyhood ambitions are one thing. But a careful study and reflection obliges me, obliges you, obliges all of us to take sentiment and put it aside and ask the question, has the U.N. been able to lead on the issues that matter?

00:52:00

What is its degree of efficacy? What is its degree of representativeness? How well does it mirror the world of today? How likely are the reforms that every one of us agree should happen or likely to happen? I think that they will not happen. I urge you, ladies and gentlemen, to support the motion and give your vote to Nile and me. Thank you for listening.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Rajan Menon. And the next closing statement, against the resolution that the U.N. is obsolete, here is Angela Kane.

Angela Kane:

We've talked a lot about the big issues and what the U.N. can and cannot do. I have been privileged to work for the United Nations for over 35 years. I do believe in its mission. And I think that it does a very good work on many issues. And every one of us can contribute to that. And I'm just thinking about one of the issues that I've worked on, and that was the peace negotiations in El Salvador. And that was between the government and the guerrillas at the time, the FMLN.

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This was the 12-year war that had seen 75,000 people killed. And the -- when the peace negotiations were being negotiated, basically the guerrillas wanted jobs after the war. They had missed years of schooling, because of the fighting in the jungles. And the government sort of did not see any avenues to give them jobs, because they didn't have the requisite year of schooling that they needed. And they also wanted to enter the police force, for example. They wanted to do good for the people. And when we had finished the negotiations, we actually managed to get jobs for women. And we managed also to relax the educational requirements. And that was really something that was tremendously important for the people of El Salvador, for these people who had fought against the government. And I'm really very proud of it. And such achievements, they never made the press. They never get acknowledged. Therefore, it is very difficult. But they were very important victories for the countries of the people.

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And what was also important, and that's another avenue that the U.N. does very good work is, for example, there was a commission on the truth on El Salvador that was established in the peace negotiations. And that meant that there was an eight months' work. And it came out with a factual report. It said that there were atrocities committed on both sides. And it tremendously helped in the healing of a divided society. Because we all want to live in a peaceful society, we want to fight for justice, I have seen it in the disadvantaged eyes of the -- in the eyes of the disadvantaged peoples that I have worked with over the years. And I think that's really all that people want to live in peace and help make a better life. And that's why I want you to vote against the notion that I want the U.N. to continue its good work. Thank you.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Angela Kane. And our next speaker will be, again, arguing in support of the motion that the U.N. is obsolete. Here is Nile Gardiner.

Nile Gardiner:

Thanks very much, John.

00:54:59

And thank you to our debating colleagues and to my debate partner, Rajan. It's been a tremendous debate on an extremely important issue. And I had the honor of serving as an expert actually on the congressionally-mandated task force on reform of the United Nations back in 2005. I also testified before Congress several times on U.N.-related issues, including the U.N. Oil-for-Food scandal and the U.N. peacekeeping scandal in the Congo. And I had the opportunity as well to travel to the United Nations and to meet with many U.N. officials. And I came away with the conclusion that the United Nations, despite the fact that there are many very good people working at the U.N. who are dedicated to their mission, but the reality is the U.N. as it currently stands is broken. It is obsolete. It is an institution that has failed on so many fronts.

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And it's heartbreaking to see that on so many levels. It is extremely heartbreaking especially to see the large numbers of people who have looked to the United Nations for their protection, for their safety in the face of monstrous evil, from the killing fields of Rwanda, to the concentration camps of Xinjiang Province in China today. Millions have looked to the U.N. for their safety and their protection, but the U.N. has consistently let them down. And that is a massive failure on the part of the United Nations. And I urge all of you listening today to put aside just, you know, sentimentality about the United Nations, but to really look at the evidence that is in place. And I urge you to support the motion that the United Nations is indeed obsolete.

00:57:00

John Donovan:

Thank you, Nile Gardiner. And getting literally the last word in the debate itself, making his argument against the resolution that the U.N. is obsolete, here once again is Mahmoud Mohamedou.

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

Thank you very much, John. And thank you to the colleagues. It's been a very spirited and very nuanced and intelligent conversation.

I want to call you, ladies and gentlemen, to the importance of experience and self-reflection. A few years ago, you might have found me on the other side of this motion. At the age of 22, I had the privilege of sitting in the Security Council when it met in November 1990 ahead of the Gulf War, and followed these discussions, and was struck by the level of real politic. I then went on in a post-doctoral degree in trying to look at the intricacies of these organizations and came to see their limitations. I then served as foreign minister and was able to put this theory in practice. And now, in my critical scholarship, I teach these issues to my graduate students.

00:58:01

And we have conversations on them all the time. What I have learned from this is that it's too easy to criticize the United Nations in this fashion -- in this radical fashion that it is obsolete and needs to be get rid of in that sense. I see that this is an organization that has much to improve, that has many faults. But the United Nations I could say so easily to you is what we make of it. Not only the states, but all of us. It is the world we inhabit. It doesn't sit out there in outer space

removed from the ills of this world that were there before and will certainly be there after it's gone. What I've seen is the promise to the elderly in the Global South of what the United Nations could give it. I could see with my graduate students here privileged youth in the Global North sort of the inspiration that it gives them to do conduct such work. And so, with that, I certainly see that the United Nations is not obsolete.

00:59:03

I see that its promise is very much relevant in its mission that I think remains in its nobility and the way that historically it came to be. And for that reason, and for everything we have discussed in evidence, certainly not sentimentality, I would like to invite you to vote against the motion that the United Nations is obsolete. And I thank you for your attention.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Mahmoud Mohamedou. And thank you to all of our debaters, as that concludes the final round of our Intelligence Squared debate.

And it's time now for our second and final vote. Remember, it's the side that sways the most minds between the first and the second vote that will be declared our winner. It works the same way as before, go back to iq2us.org. You have the same choices as before, for, against, or undecided. And as I mentioned earlier, we're going to be keeping this vote open for seven days and inviting the general public to watch and vote also. And at the end of those seven days, we will announce the winner on our website, iq2us.org.

01:00:03

The competition is over. I just wanted to thank our debaters, Angela, Rajan, Mahmoud, and Nile, for a really excellent debate. And also, I want to thank you for the way that you conducted it. You obviously all feel very passionately about this issue. There's really I could send significant overlap in a lot of your world views, you just happen to disagree on this motion, as we phrased it, but you argued it with respect for one another and with respect for the audience and with respect for this process of dialogue. So, I want to thank you all for the way that you took part in this. Thanks to all of you for living up to the spirit of Intelligence Squared.

Angela Kane:

Thank you for hosting this event.

Nile Gardiner:

Thank you very much.

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:

Thank you very much.

Rajan Menon:

Thank you, John.

John Donovan:

And I also want to thank our audience for being an audience for something like this, for joining this, because this is what we do.

01:00:57

We try to bring to you and to millions of listeners around the world real debate through our podcasts and our television and public radio, and we do it all for free. It's something we care about a lot here at Intelligence Squared. As I've said many times before, we are a nonprofit. We do -- you know, we turn to you for support. And if you want to support us or just want to learn more about what we do or to watch one of the more than 200 debates we've produced to debate -- to date, you go to, again, our website iq2us.org or to our app through the Google and Apple stores.

As for this one, I encourage you to check out our website at iq2us.org to cast your votes. And then check back in in seven days to see which team won. Thank you again to our partners at Foreign Affairs. I'm John Donovan. I'll see you next time.

[end of transcript]

This is a rough transcript. Please excuse any errors.