

**Forum: Human Rights Council****Student Officer(s): Ina Choe, Parami MacArthur, Minh Hoi Tran Khuat****TOPIC (3): The question of the right to self-determination**[Link to UNISMUN Libguide](#)**I. Introduction to the Topic**

The right to self-determination is a political principle that allows individuals and groups the ability to form their own state and choose their own government. It involves one's right to determine their fate and make their own decisions without outside interference. This ensures that citizens have opportunities to participate in decision-making of the state and are able to exercise their control over governmental affairs to preserve cultural identity, political unity, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of a country.

The concept of self-determination was first coined in the French and American revolutions in the eighteenth century and continued to be developed after World War I. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States included self-determination in his Fourteen Points of Principles of Peace and was mentioned in the League of Nations, the predecessor of the UN. The UN Charter states that one of the main purposes of the UN is for multilateral diplomacy that respects the "principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples." Recently, the term self-determination has been expanded to be associated with groups advocating for greater autonomy or independence and struggles with oppression or authoritarianism. However, self-determination has also been responsible for the collapse of large empires and small states as changes in existing sovereignty advocating for autonomy and independence have come at the expense of existing states. Cases such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire, disintegration of Yugoslavia, and more serve as examples of instances when self-determination comes at a cost. Nonetheless, the dissolution of many of these communities has been to introduce more democratic and autonomous states. Delegates should aim to explore these sides of the topic to consider nuanced perspectives.

**II. Definition of Key Terms & Concepts****Self-determination (Internal and External)**

Delegates should be aware of the two different aspects of self-determination: internal and external. Internal self-determination refers to the right of the people to govern themselves and choose their own political, economic, and social system without outside interference. External self-determination refers to the right of the people to constitute themselves or integrate into an independent state.

**Individual Autonomy**

Individual autonomy refers to how the behaviour and actions of individuals are voluntary and authentic without coercion or pressure from external forces. Pursuing individual autonomy is a major factor in

self-determination. Different levels of autonomy such as personal, regional, or national autonomy can be considered.

### Statehood

Statehood refers to the status of being an independent nation. Understanding the concept of statehood is imperative when discussing the question of self-determination as it involves the right of people to constitute themselves into independent states.

### Territorial Integrity

Territorial integrity refers to the principle that independent states have the right to defend their borders and other external forces should not violate the state's territory. Territorial integrity is often involved in tensions during arguments of self-determination that may result in changing existing borders.

### National Sovereignty

National Sovereignty refers to the power and legitimacy that a country has over affairs within its territory. A sovereign state has the highest authority over its territory and other actors cannot interfere. The supreme authority resides in the sovereign (king/queen) in a monarchy while the sovereign power resides in the people and is executed through representatives in a democracy.

### Secession

Secession refers to the act of withdrawing from a political entity such as no longer being part of a country or organisation, often to form a new independent state. Secessionist movements are often attempts to pursue self-determination and should be explored to understand the motives, legitimacy, and impacts of self-determination.

## III. Key Stakeholders

### United Nations

The [UN](#) is an intergovernmental organisation that addresses issues of self-determination through committees, agendas, and resolutions. Their own UN Charter emphasises sovereignty and its connection to self-determination. This mention of self-determination in the Charter is often referred to when defining the concept in different arguments and research. The UN often holds discussions on the status of legitimate self-determination of a country, aiming to resolve any conflicts and disagreements surrounding the independence and rights of individuals and groups. As self-determination is considered a fundamental human right, many UN bodies, especially the Human Rights Council protect and advocate for the right to self-determination. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is also involved in many cases related to territorial disputes as they provide legal opinions and decisions regarding the statehood of a nation. For example, the ICJ has reviewed cases regarding the independence of Kosovo, Abkhazia, East Timor, and more.

## Amnesty International

[Amnesty International](#) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that advocates for the protection of fundamental human rights, which includes the right to self-determination. Their monitoring, researching, and campaigning work to support their fight against the abuse of human rights worldwide, “bring torturers to justice”, “change oppressive laws”, and “free people jailed just for voicing their opinion.” Amnesty International’s advocacy to governments and international bodies and their participation in forums have impacted many’s right to self-determination. For example, their efforts to protect the rights of Indigenous people were recognized in 2021 as they sent an open letter supporting the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. In the letter, they advocate for the declaration to be adopted by the UN, a fight that had been going on for more than two decades. They state that “[the] purpose of the UN Declaration was always to hold governments accountable for recognizing, respecting and upholding our inherent rights as Indigenous peoples. This includes the right to self-determination.” They also hold campaigns and publish research papers on news such as Palestine’s bids for UN membership and statehood recognition, the release of a Papuan pro-independence activist from jail, and the secession of the Crimea region in Ukraine. Amnesty International’s mission and actions not only inform the public of transparent information, but also promote legal change to bring justice in cases of human rights abuse.

## Palestine

Palestine’s fight for statehood and self-determination has been a long-standing struggle since the 20th century and is a prominent issue today. The origins of this agenda comes from when the Ottoman Empire ruled Palestine until the end of World War I, where the League of Nations administered the United Kingdom in Palestine under a mandate in 1922. The eventual termination of the British Mandate and the events that followed had ensued the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Due to many conflicts, war, and oppressive laws, Palestinians are scattered, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries and regions. Their movements and protests for independence and self-determination were brought up by the President of the Palestinian National Authority in 2011, where he requested the UN recognize Palestine as an independent state. UNESCO admitted Palestine as a member while the UN granted a non-member observer state status.

## IV. Key Issues including Background Information

### Conflict with Sovereignty

Self-determination is a major principle in the UN and it competes with another central UN tenet: sovereignty. While sovereignty (or territorial integrity) provides domestic authority to a government, self-determination demands that some of that power be shared with citizens. Self-determination can also be seen to undermine the authority of the sovereign state by taking territory and people away. In addition, access to self-determination may result in more internally divided territories, which can cause more conflict and chaos politically, socially, and economically. These reasons make the UN and governments hesitant to support excess self-determination in a nation.

## Instability after states gain independence

Although self-determination is a key democratic feature, sometimes it can lead to unstable nations and violent uprisings. The fight for independence comes from a divided nation where violent methods and ideologies can arise. Even after states gain independence, the sudden transition can create vulnerabilities in governance structures and the economy. New states may struggle to arrive at a consensus regarding policy changes and the election of leaders, in addition to lacking economic resources and recovering from the aftermath of domestic conflict. Regardless of their independence, conflict still exists in the newly developed state and there are few instances where the legacy of violence can pose significant challenges. Countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and more can be seen as examples of countries that face challenges in the aftermath of gaining independence.

## Minority rights and discrimination

The drive for self-determination often comes from a clash of perspectives, often the conflict between the promotion of the rights of minority populations and a larger political entity. In the process of achieving independence, there are often cases of human rights violations such as political repression and displacement. Minority populations are usually the victims of these aggressions. Preserving and promoting indigenous people's culture is also a form of self-determination, and most states are against this.

## V. Timeline of Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

Date	Description of event
1789	The French Revolution replaces the monarchy and replaces it with a republic based on concepts of liberalism. Self-determination grows, despite the failure of the French Revolution and the Spanish colonies of the Americas establish democracies and sovereign based on the principle of self-determination
1918	After World War I, the United States President, Woodrow Wilson, creates a list of Fourteen Points that he believes should be used to pioneer for a new order and peaceful world. In his Fourteen Points, he promoted self-determination and it became an important concept in the newly created League of Nations.
1945	The promotion of self-determination becomes a key topic in the UN as the UN Charter clearly defines the term and ensures its implementation in discussions to maintain peace.
1940s-1960s	The Decolonization Movement of Africa and Asia created many significantly changed the map of the world and instilled a new respect for self-determination. It changed foreign policy, global politics, and attempted to address economic, political, cultural, and ethnic issues around the globe.

- 1966            The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is signed and adopted into the United Nations. Article 1 states that “[all] peoples have the right of self-determination” and they have the right to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”
- 1992            Yugoslavia broke away from the Soviet Union and their sphere of influence due to their disagreements in economic, cultural, and religious values in addition to different foreign policy objectives and ethnic communities.
- 1999            The United Nations intervened on whether East Timorese people were given their own autonomous region within Indonesia or not. With this, East Timor became separated from Indonesia.
- 2011            The International Community supports South Sudan’s aspirations to become an independent country from Sudan. This later led to South Sudan’s separation from the region.
- 2023            The Hawaiians have ultimately been seeking their right to self-determination, this touches on the cause of the fire and affects Hawaii’s sovereignty. The state has allowed corporations to expand and dry out the land in Lahaina, the town most severely devastated by the wildfires in the state.
- 2023            The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel has released its paper, stating that Israel has been violating Palestinian people’s right to self-determination through its prolonged occupation, settlement activities, and annexation of Palestinian territory long since 1967.

## VI. Possible Challenges & Solutions

### Balance of autonomy and unity

The conflict between sovereignty and self-determination partly comes from the government’s hesitation as further disagreements, chaos, and violence may break out among citizens with different beliefs and values of self-determination. If states easily allowed their citizens to freely choose their sovereignty or easily recognize communities as independent states, the decentralisation of power would become too extreme and nations would become even more divided. Therefore, the concept of self-determination and autonomy should have focused on factors such as governance structures that encourage unity and conflict prevention.

### Institution Building and Regional cooperation

In times of transition in people’s political beliefs and statehood, nations and governments are the most vulnerable and unstable. After seceding from a nation, this is when the political conflict escalates, as

issues are exposed due to a lack of economic and natural resources, security concerns, and other vulnerabilities. This can be addressed through a strong development of key institutions, legal systems, and governance structures to foster transparency, public trust, and consensus among citizens. In addition, states should encourage regional cooperation and diplomacy to address issues of borders and promote economic development.

### **Minority rights and discrimination**

As many self-determination movements involve minority populations seeking recognition and autonomy, states should aim to foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity. For example, allowing minorities such as the Indigenous population to participate in political decision-making processes and have representation in politics to be heard is a key aspect of protecting minority rights. In addition, the preservation of cultural identity and promoting their cultural practices, language rights, and traditions can address this issue as well. More legislative and legal frameworks should be established as well to prevent discrimination, conflict, and segregation.

## **VII. Recommendations for Resolution Writing including Research**

Delegates should first build their knowledge on the topic of self-determination by reading chair reports, accessing the LibGuide, and researching case studies to fully understand the importance of self-determination and the impact that follows. Each delegate must research their country's past history with self-determination and any current legal frameworks regarding citizens' self-determination to understand the issue at hand. This will be important in accurately representing the country's stance during lobbying and debate. It is also valuable to have a general understanding of other countries' perspectives to know who to lobby and create a resolution with. As the question of self-determination is an extremely nuanced and multifaceted topic, it is important to look at past examples of countries aiming for autonomy. Delegates should aim to find out why and how groups and individuals were struggling for self-determination (determining origin and cause), the impact of the movement (whether the outcome led to democracy or more instability), and how they succeeded or what prevented them from achieving autonomy. Delegates should be able to apply the concept of self-determination to current events as well, especially regarding the recent Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Non-governed countries tend to face a lot of these issues from other countries continuously having claimed the possession of the country to be theirs, and this measure often violates the concept of self-determination.

When drafting resolutions, it is most important to be faithful to the ideologies of the delegate's country. Then, delegates should form convincing clauses based on their country's stance, considering the feasibility of solutions and having supporting research ready to strengthen their arguments. Delegates should be reminded of the 2024 UNISMUN Conference Theme, "How can we use multilateral diplomacy to surmount the challenges of rapid societal change?" when writing their resolutions as well.

The head chair looks forward to a fruitful debate!

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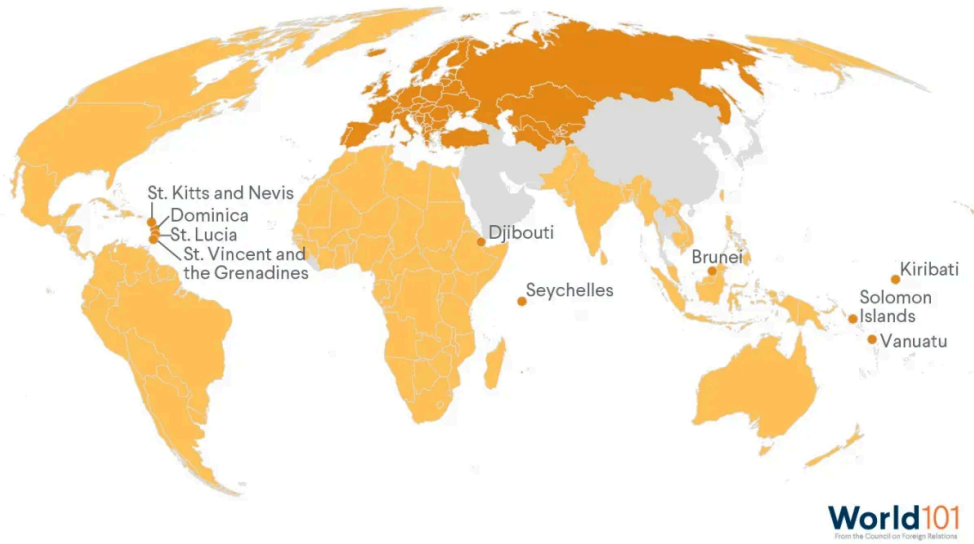
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## IX: Additional Resources

### 1975: European Control Limited

- Controlled by European countries in 1975
- Previously controlled by European countries
- Never formally colonized by European countries



A map of the world in 1975 showing countries controlled and colonised by European countries (World 101)