

## MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #277

# Bulldozing Diplomacy: The Truth About UNRWA and Embassies

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## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

When the bulldozers moved into the UNRWA headquarters in Jerusalem, it sparked a global debate: Can a host country legally demolish a United Nations building? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn dive into the intense legal battle between Israel and the UN, dissecting the controversial laws that led to this moment. They debunk the persistent myth that embassies are "foreign soil" and explain the critical difference between diplomatic immunity and the inviolability of premises. Tune in for a deep dive into the complex world of international law and what this unprecedented demolition means for the future of global diplomacy.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

### Daniel

Israel recently began demolishing the UNRWA headquarters in Jerusalem, citing documented ties between its employees and the Hamas attacks on October 7th. UNRWA claims this violates Israel's obligations to protect diplomatic facilities of international organizations. This raises questions about the concept of diplomatic immunity and the common belief that embassies are like "mini countries" on foreign soil. How does the principle of diplomatic immunity actually play out today, and what is the legal status of official diplomatic properties when international agreements are challenged?

# TRANSCRIPT

## Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and honestly, I am still cleaning the dust off my shoes from earlier today. It is a strange time to be living in Jerusalem, especially this week.

## Herman

Herman Poppleberry here, and you are not kidding, Corn. The air has been thick with more than just the usual winter chill. We have been hearing the rumble of heavy machinery for a few days now, and it is all centered around a story that is currently blowing up international headlines.

## Corn

It really is. Our housemate Daniel actually sent us a voice note about this earlier. He was watching the news coverage of the bulldozers moving into the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood and he had some really sharp questions about what this means for the whole concept of international law. He specifically wanted to know about the demolition of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency headquarters here in Jerusalem.

## Herman

It is a massive story. For those who might not be following the local Jerusalem news cycle as closely as we do, the Israeli government officially began dismantling the United Nations Relief and Works Agency compound on Tuesday, January twentieth, twenty-twenty-six. This has been a long time coming if you look at the legislative path, but seeing the actual physical demolition start is a whole different level of intensity.

## Corn

Right, and it raises this huge question that Daniel brought up. If a building belongs to an international organization like the United Nations, or if it is an embassy, is it not supposed to be untouchable? We always hear this idea that embassies are like little pieces of foreign soil, almost like mini countries. But here we have a major facility being torn down by the host country.

### Herman

Exactly. And that is exactly what we are going to dig into today. We are going to look at the specific case of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency headquarters, why Israel says it has the right to do this, why the United Nations says it is a violation of international law, and then we will zoom out to bust some of those myths about diplomatic immunity and the status of these buildings.

### Corn

I think a good place to start is just the facts on the ground. This site in North Jerusalem, near Sheikh Jarrah and Maalot Dafna, has been the nerve center for the agency's operations for decades. But the relationship between the agency and the Israeli government basically hit a point of no return after the October seventh attacks in twenty-twenty-three.

### Herman

That is the core of the justification being cited. Israel has produced documentation and intelligence reports alleging that several employees of the agency were directly involved in the massacres on October seventh. They have also made broader claims about the agency's facilities being used by Hamas for military purposes. Now, the agency has denied systemic involvement, but for the Israeli Knesset, the findings were enough to trigger a massive legal shift.

### Corn

Yeah, and we saw that shift start back in late twenty-twenty-four, right? There were those two major laws passed that essentially banned the agency from operating within what Israel considers its sovereign territory.

### Herman

Right. On October twenty-eighth, twenty-twenty-four, the Knesset passed legislation that prohibited the agency from providing any services or conducting any activities in Israel. It also terminated the nineteen-sixty-seven agreement that allowed them to operate. And then, just last month, in December twenty-twenty-five, they stepped it up even further.

### Corn

I remember that. They passed additional laws specifically targeting the logistics. They authorized the cutting of water and electricity to these buildings and gave the state the power to reclaim the land.

### Herman

And that brings us to this week. The agency staff had already mostly cleared out about a year ago, back in January twenty-twenty-five, because the security situation and the legal pressure made it impossible for them to work. But the buildings remained. Now, the Israel Land Authority has moved in with the bulldozers.

### Corn

It is a striking image. You have the United Nations flag still visible in some of the footage while the outer walls are being brought down. Philippe Lazzarini, the Commissioner General of the agency, called it an unprecedented attack on the United Nations. He is arguing that these premises are protected under international law, specifically the nineteen-forty-six Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations.

### Herman

And that is where the legal friction gets really fascinating. Israel's position is that they own the land. They view the agency as having lost its status because of the alleged ties to terrorism. From their perspective, once the legal status is revoked by the host country's parliament, the building is just a building on Israeli soil.

### Corn

But wait, Herman, this is where I get confused, and I think this is what Daniel was getting at. Is there not a universal rule that says you cannot just storm a United Nations office? Even if you have a disagreement, does the property not have a special kind of shield around it?

### Herman

You are touching on the difference between diplomatic immunity and the inviolability of premises. Most people use those terms interchangeably, but they are distinct concepts in international law. Diplomatic immunity usually refers to the people, the diplomats themselves, being protected from local prosecution. But what we are talking about with the buildings is called inviolability.

### Corn

Okay, so define that for us. What does inviolability actually mean in practice?

### Herman

Under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which covers embassies, and the nineteen-forty-six Convention that covers the United Nations, the premises are supposed to be off limits to the host country's authorities. The police or the army are not allowed to enter without the consent of the head of the mission. They are also immune from search, requisition, or attachment.

### Corn

So if that is the rule, how is Israel justifying sending in bulldozers? Are they just ignoring the rule, or is there a loophole?

### Herman

Well, the argument coming from the Israeli Foreign Ministry is twofold. First, they argue that the agency is no longer a legitimate diplomatic mission because its mandate has been effectively cancelled within their borders by law. Second, they are asserting sovereign ownership of the land itself. They are basically saying, this is our property, the lease or the agreement is dead, and since there are no personnel currently active there, the shield of inviolability has essentially evaporated.

### Corn

That sounds like a very controversial legal interpretation. I mean, if every country could just decide that a United Nations office is no longer a United Nations office, then the whole system of international protections would fall apart, right?

### Herman

That is exactly the point the United Nations is making. They argue that inviolability is not something a host country can just switch off unilaterally whenever they are unhappy with the organization. It is supposed to be an absolute protection to allow these bodies to function even in hostile environments. In fact, if you look at the history of the Vienna Convention, it was specifically designed to prevent host countries from using local laws to harass or shut down foreign missions.

### Corn

I want to go back to that mini country myth that Daniel mentioned. I have heard so many people say that if you step inside the American Embassy in Jerusalem, you are technically on American soil. Is that actually true?

### Herman

No. That is one of the most persistent myths in all of international relations. It is absolutely false. An embassy is not foreign soil. The land under the embassy belongs to the host country. If you are in the United States Embassy in London, you are still in the United Kingdom. If you are in the French Embassy in Tokyo, you are in Japan.

### Corn

So why do we all think it is a different country?

### Herman

It is because of the legal fiction called extraterritoriality. It is a concept that was popular in the nineteenth century, where we pretended the land was foreign soil to explain why the local police could not go in. But modern international law moved away from that. Instead of saying the land is foreign, we say the land is sovereign host territory, but the host country has voluntarily agreed to waive its right to exercise authority there.

### Corn

That is a subtle but really important distinction. It is like saying, this is my house, but I promise I will never walk into this one specific room without your permission.

### Herman

Exactly. And because it is still host country soil, the host country's laws technically still apply. If you commit a crime inside an embassy, you have still broken the law of the host country. The problem is just one of enforcement. The local police cannot enter to arrest you without permission. This is why you see people like Julian Assange seeking refuge in an embassy; it is not that he is in a different country, it is just that the local police are legally barred from crossing the threshold.

### Corn

That is fascinating. So, what about the plugs? You know Daniel mentioned his son Ezra getting a passport photo at the consulate and wondering if the wall outlets would be American.

### Herman

Right. That is a great example of how the myth manifests. Sometimes embassies will install their own infrastructure, like using their home country's power outlets or even their own postal system, just for convenience or security. But they do not have to. Most of the time, they use the local grid. If you go into a consulate here in Jerusalem, you are probably going to see the same three pin plugs we have in our house.

### Corn

So if the land is not foreign soil, what happens if the embassy stops paying its bills? Could the city just turn off the water?

### Herman

That is actually a really timely question because that is exactly what the new Israeli legislation is doing to the agency. Normally, there is a lot of diplomatic pressure not to do that. But legally, if an organization is not paying its property taxes or its utility bills, the host country can technically cut off services. They just cannot enter the building to physically enforce a lien or an eviction notice without violating that principle of inviolability.

### Corn

Okay, so let us apply this to the current situation. Israel has passed laws saying the agency can no longer operate. They have cut off the water and power. And now they are tearing the buildings down. Does the fact that the buildings were empty make a difference legally?

### Herman

It is a major factor in the debate. Israel is arguing that since the buildings were vacated by staff in early twenty-twenty-five, they were no longer being used for the purposes of a United Nations mission. In their view, inviolability is tied to the function. If the function has ceased, the protection should cease.

### Corn

But the United Nations is saying the protection is tied to the property itself, regardless of whether someone is sitting at a desk that day.

### Herman

Right. And this is where we see a real clash of legal philosophies. If you look at Article twenty-two of the Vienna Convention, it says the premises of the mission shall be inviolable. It does not say they are only inviolable between nine and five, or only when the ambassador is in the room.

### Corn

It feels like a very dangerous precedent. I mean, we have seen this kind of thing happen in other parts of the world, right? Where embassies are stormed or demolished?

### Herman

We have. Think back to the Iranian Hostage Crisis in nineteen-seventy-nine. That was the ultimate violation of inviolability. The host country's government essentially sanctioned the takeover of a foreign mission. Or more recently, we have seen cases where countries have ordered the closure of consulates during diplomatic spats, like when the United States ordered the Chinese consulate in Houston to close in twenty-twenty.

### Corn

But in the Houston case, they did not bulldoze the building. They just told the staff they had to leave and then they locked the doors.

### Herman

Exactly. And that is the normal diplomatic procedure. You declare someone persona non grata, you close the mission, but you usually respect the property. What is happening here in Jerusalem is much more final. It is the physical destruction of the infrastructure.

### Corn

And the justification Israel is using, the ties to the October seventh attacks, how does that play into the legal framework? Is there an unless you are helping terrorists clause in the Vienna Convention?

### Herman

Not explicitly. But there is a general principle in international law that diplomatic premises must not be used in any manner incompatible with the functions of the mission. If a building is being used to store weapons or coordinate attacks, the host country can argue that the mission has breached its side of the contract. However, even then, the remedy is usually to expel the diplomats, not to level the building with a bulldozer while the United Nations flag is still flying.

### Corn

It seems like a very fine line they are walking. And the international response has been pretty overwhelmingly negative, hasn't it?

### Herman

Oh, absolutely. We have seen condemnation from the United Nations Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, and from various European governments. Even the United States, which has been very critical of the agency in the past, has expressed concern about the precedent of unilaterally dismantling United Nations facilities.

### Corn

It makes me wonder what this means for other international organizations. If this can happen to the agency, could it happen to the World Health Organization or the Red Cross if a government decides they do not like them anymore?

### Herman

That is the big fear. Philippe Lazzarini explicitly said that what happens today to the agency will happen tomorrow to any other international organization or diplomatic mission. It is a challenge to the entire rules based order that was set up after World War Two.

### Corn

It is also interesting to think about the domestic political angle here in Jerusalem. We saw Minister Itamar Ben Gvir at the site this week, celebrating the demolition. He called it a historic day for governance in Jerusalem. It feels like this is as much about asserting sovereignty over East Jerusalem as it is about the specific allegations against the agency.

### Herman

You hit the nail on the head, Corn. This location in Sheikh Jarrah is extremely sensitive. Israel annexed East Jerusalem in nineteen-eighty, a move that most of the international community does not recognize. By reclaiming this specific plot of land and tearing down the United Nations buildings, the government is making a very loud statement that they are the sole authority in this city.

### Corn

And they are planning to build housing there, right? I read that there are plans for over a thousand housing units on that site once the debris is cleared.

### Herman

Yes, the Israel Land Authority has announced plans for one thousand four hundred and forty housing units. It is part of a broader strategy to increase the Jewish presence in East Jerusalem. So you have this collision of three different things: national security concerns over the agency's staff, a deep ideological opposition to the agency's role in the refugee issue, and a territorial dispute over the city of Jerusalem.

### **Corn**

It is a perfect storm. But let's go back to the technical side for a second. If the United Nations wanted to fight this, where would they even go? Is there a court that handles my building got bulldozed?

### **Herman**

Well, the International Court of Justice actually issued a ruling back in October of last year, twenty-twenty-five, in the context of the ongoing cases regarding the region. They restated that Israel is obliged under international law to facilitate the agency's operations, not hinder them. They also stressed that Israel does not have legal jurisdiction over East Jerusalem under international law, following up on the Advisory Opinion from July twenty-twenty-four.

### **Corn**

But that ruling clearly did not stop the bulldozers.

### **Herman**

No. And that is the perennial problem with international law. It relies on the consent of sovereign states and the pressure of the international community. There is no global police force that can go to Sheikh Jarrah and pull the keys out of those bulldozers.

### **Corn**

It is a sobering thought. It makes you realize that these diplomatic protections we take for granted are actually quite fragile. They depend on everyone agreeing to play by the rules.

### **Herman**

Exactly. And once one major player decides the rules no longer apply to them because of a specific grievance, the whole system starts to look a lot more like a gentleman's agreement than a hard law.

### Corn

You know, it reminds me of some of the themes we touched on back in episode two hundred and sixty-nine. Remember when we were talking about accountability and international property? We were looking at it through the lens of intellectual property and AI, but the principle is the same. Who has the right to enforce the rules when the parties involved do not agree on who owns what?

### Herman

That is a great callback. It is all about the breakdown of consensus. In the case of the agency, the consensus that they are a necessary humanitarian body has completely shattered within Israel. And when that consensus goes, the legal protections that were built on top of it start to crumble too.

### Corn

So, for our listeners who are trying to make sense of this, what are the practical takeaways? If they see a headline saying an embassy was attacked or a United Nations office was closed, how should they interpret that?

### Herman

The first thing is to remember that the foreign soil thing is a myth. These buildings are on host country land. The second thing is that inviolability is the key word. It is a special status that is supposed to be absolute, but it is currently under immense pressure globally. And the third thing is that the legal status of an organization like the United Nations is different from a foreign country. They rely on specific treaties like the nineteen-forty-six Convention, which are even more reliant on the host country's continued cooperation.

### Corn

And I think another takeaway is just how much the events of October seventh are still reshaping the entire landscape of this region, even two years later. It is not just about the military conflict in Gaza; it is about a fundamental re-evaluation of every institution that has been part of the status quo for the last seventy years.

### Herman

Absolutely. We are seeing a period of massive institutional disruption. The agency has been the backbone of Palestinian society in many ways since nineteen-forty-nine. Seeing its headquarters in Jerusalem being turned into a construction site for apartments is a symbolic shift that you really cannot overstate.

### Corn

It also makes me wonder about the people who were using those services. I mean, the agency ran schools and health centers. If those buildings are gone, where do those people go?

### Herman

That is the million dollar question, and it is the one the international community is most worried about. Israel says that other organizations or the government itself can provide those services, but the agency has a massive infrastructure that is not easily replaced overnight. We are already seeing reports of tear gas being used near vocational schools and clinics being shut down. It is a humanitarian challenge on top of a legal one.

### Corn

It really is a mess. And I think it highlights why these boring legal concepts like diplomatic immunity actually matter. They are not just for rich people in fancy cars to get out of parking tickets. They are the friction reducers that allow aid to be delivered and diplomacy to happen in the middle of a conflict.

### Herman

Exactly. Without those protections, every aid worker and every diplomat is just a target for whoever is in power at the moment. It is the difference between a world governed by rules and a world governed by raw power.

### Corn

Well, on that heavy note, I think we have given people a lot to chew on. It is certainly going to be a strange few weeks here in the neighborhood as the rest of those buildings come down.

### Herman

Definitely. And I am sure we will be hearing more about the legal fallout in the months to come. This is not going to be settled with just a few bulldozers.

### Corn

No, I suspect the lawyers will be busy long after the construction crews are finished. But hey, if you are listening and you have thoughts on this, or if you have a weird prompt of your own you want us to tackle, we would love to hear from you. You can find us at [myweirdprompts.com](https://myweirdprompts.com). There is a contact form there, and you can also find the RSS feed if you want to subscribe.

### Herman

And if you are enjoying the show, we would really appreciate a quick review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other curious people find us. We are approaching episode three hundred soon, and it is the support from the listeners that keeps us going deep into these rabbit holes.

### Corn

It really does. Thanks for joining us today for episode two hundred and seventy-three of My Weird Prompts. A big thanks to our housemate Daniel for sending in this prompt and getting us thinking about the dust outside our door.

### Herman

Until next time, stay curious and keep asking those weird questions.

### Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. We will see you next week.