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The United Nations Human Rights Council

Created in March 2006 to replace the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the new U.N. Human Rights Council nonetheless maintains the numerous flaws of its predecessor, which had been marred by an endemic hostility to Israel and had consisted of some of the most notorious human rights abusers in the world. Of the 40 resolutions and decisions passed by the Council to date, 8 condemn Israel, while actual human rights abusers like Cuba and China remain ignored. Unless the Council experiences systemic changes in its membership and topical focus, it is unlikely to serve a positive role in reducing the scourge of human rights violations among the international community.

A Failure to Reform

The former Commission on Human Rights had promoted anything but human rights. Serial human rights-abusers China, Russia, Sudan and Algeria all served as members of the Commission, and Libya was elected to chair it in 2003. The body was dismantled following U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's assertion that the Commission "casts a shadow on the reputation of the United Nations system as a whole," and "the time has come for real reform."

On March 15, 2006, the U.N. General Assembly voted to establish the U.N. Human Rights Council, a smaller committee, with tighter membership requirements and greater oversight. Despite these measures, several nations with poor human rights records, including China, Cuba, Russia and Saudi Arabia, were elected to the 47-member body. Then-U.S. Ambassador John Bolton cautioned that the results signaled "the deficiencies from the previous commission may well now still be carried over."

An Endemic Hostility to Israel

Those warnings proved well-founded, as the new Council's first session culminated with only one country-specific decision – a call for reports and consideration of "Israeli human rights violations" in Palestinian and "other occupied Arab territories." Less than one week later, the Council convened an emergency session devoted to "Israeli military operations against Palestinian civilians." As the IDF sought to rescue Corporal Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier kidnapped by Hamas days earlier, the Council passed a resolution condemning Israeli actions and dispatched an "urgent fact-finding mission" to the region to report back on Israeli human rights abuses. The resolution ignored Hamas' kidnapping and the daily barrage of Qassam rockets falling on Israeli cities.

In August, an emergency session was called to monitor "gross human rights violations by Israel in Lebanon." Another special session was convened in November to investigate the Israeli "assault on Beit Hanoun." Both meetings dispatched monitoring commissions to the region with one-sided mandates – to investigate Israeli abuses. And both sessions ended with Israel's censure, failing, yet again, to mention indiscriminate targeting of Israeli civilians and the unprovoked kidnapping and killing of Israeli soldiers by Hamas and Hezbollah terrorists.

An Ineffective Body

Kofi Annan has already criticized the Council's "disproportionate focus on violations by Israel." In the aftermath of the terrorist group Hizballah's war against Israel in July and August of 2006, monitors in Lebanon tasked with investigating the war expressed dissatisfaction with the limited scope of its mandate, which ignored Hizballah's role in causing the crisis, and declared that "any independent, impartial and objective investigation... must of necessity be with reference to all the belligerents involved."

But any change in the Council's behavior is unlikely at this point, as reports on the situation in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories are already on the agenda for the Council's next regular session in March 2007.