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The United Nations Human Rights Council

Created in March 2006 to replace the discredited United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the new U.N. Human Rights Council has sadly continued the flawed practices of its predecessor. It has focused inordinate attention on Israel while ignoring severe human rights violations elsewhere. Unless the Council members introduce systemic changes in its leadership, activities, and topical focus, the UNHRC is unlikely to play any positive role in reducing the scourge of human rights violations across the world.

A Failure to Reform

The UNHRC's predecessor organization, the Commission on Human Rights, was a dismal performer. Serial human rights-abusers like China, Russia, Sudan and Algeria all served as members of the Commission, while Libya was actually elected to chair it in 2003. The body was dismantled following then-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."



U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has denounced the Human Rights Council's excessive criticism of Israel.

On March 15, 2006, the U.N. General Assembly voted to establish the U.N. Human Rights Council, a smaller committee purportedly with tighter membership requirements and greater oversight. Despite these measures, several nations with infamous 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 that "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." Of the six emergency sessions that the Council has convened to deal with pressing human rights concerns, four have dealt with Israel. The greater flexibility provided by the U.N. to the UNHRC to call emergency sessions was touted as a much needed reform to address human rights crises throughout the world. Unfortunately, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), whose members hold 17 out of 47 seats on the Council, have used these sessions to condemn Israel rather than to address actual human rights disasters across the globe.

The Human Rights Council devotes time at each of its regular 10-week sessions to discuss alleged Israeli abuses of Palestinian human rights. Israel is the only country listed on the Council's permanent agenda (the Council actually eliminated the Special Rapporteurs for Cuba and Belarus, two countries listed by Freedom House as among the "worst of the worst" human rights violators). In its most recent session, which began in March 2008, the Council passed three resolutions condemning Israel for human rights violations in the Golan Heights, for constructing its security fence, and for violating Palestinian human rights.

At this session, the Council also elected two activists known for their anti-Israel views to serve in key U.N. human rights positions. The Council elected former Princeton Professor Richard Falk to replace John Dugard as the Special Rapporteur on Israeli human rights violations in the Palestinian territories. Dugard himself recently stated that Palestinian terrorism is an "inevitable" consequence of Israeli "apartheid" and called for U.N. engagement with Hamas in direct contradiction of the Quartet's current policy. Falk himself has repeatedly accused Israel of "genocidal tendencies" and of committing a "holocaust" against the Palestinians.

The Council also appointed Jean Ziegler, a former professor of sociology at the University of Geneva, to its 18-member advisory body. In 2005, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour publicly denounced Ziegler for comparing Israeli soldiers to Nazi guards and for calling Gaza an "immense concentration camp." At the time, Ziegler was serving as the U.N. expert on the right to food. He is the only U.N. expert to have been reprimanded in such a way.

An Ineffective Forum

The U.N. Human Rights Council has neglected pressing human rights concerns throughout the world. In January 2008, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon scolded the Council for its lack of discussion of other human rights concerns. "I would also appreciate it if the Council will be looking with the same level of attention and urgency at all other matters around the world," he said. "There are still many areas where human rights are abused and not properly protected." After nine months of strong urging from Western nations and NGOs, the Council finally held an emergency session on the situation in Darfur at the end of 2006 – after previously finding the time to schedule three "emergency" sessions to condemn Israel.

The Human Rights Council not only fails to protect human rights victims but also threatens to roll back freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Organization of the Islamic Conference and other non-aligned countries have warped the U.N. human rights structures in order to attack Western nations and to divert attention from their own dismal human rights records. While Israel is singled out for condemnation, such attacks are part of larger efforts to challenge democratic societies. These attempts have undermined the credibility of the United Nations and undermine efforts to realize universal human rights.