Planned UN ‘Hub’ in Washington Aims to Influence US Counterterrorism Strategy

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The chief United Nations human rights agency, with the Obama administration’s apparent blessing, is creating a new “regional hub” for itself in Washington, to use as a center for organizing against the death penalty, among other things, and for affecting the legal frameworks, policies, and strategies of American counterterrorism.

In a management plan covering its activities through 2017, the agency, known as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, or OHCHR, puts the U.S. in the same category for that counterterrorism “alignment” effort as countries like Iraq and Uganda.

The fast-tracked human rights “hub” also has a number of more nebulous “thematic” objectives for the U.S., which include, according to an OHCHR information document, “the establishment of national participatory bodies for reporting and implementing recommendations of human rights mechanisms” and the aim of “widening the democratic space” with the aid of undefined “National Human Rights Institutions.”

It may also involve, as OHCHR notes in its management plan, “increasing advocacy for ratification of human rights treaties and withdrawal of treaty reservations” -- meaning exceptional carve-outs that nations -- including those like the U.S., with a federal division of power -- can make to limit their acceptance of international agreements.

In the case of the death penalty, for example, U.S. refusal to join in a U.N- sponsored global moratorium is based on the fact that such criminal justice measures also are the responsibilities of individual states.

Nonetheless, as OHCHR’s management plan notes, “in addition to global efforts to abolish the death penalty by 2017, OHCHR expects to have contributed to a moratorium on the application of the death penalty or pending a moratorium, increased compliance with relevant international human rights obligations in countries such as Iraq, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Somalia, South Sudan, the United States of America and other countries in Asia and the Americas.”

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All of those themes, along with OHCHR’s view of itself as  “the principal advocate for human rights within the U.N. system,” seem likely to bring the U.S. into closer proximity to the U.N.’s tangled, proliferating and often sweepingly contradictory notions of international human rights law -- and also, perhaps, to the notoriously dictatorship-riddled, 47-member U.N. Human Rights Council.

Among other things, the Council, which has been far more enthusiastic about condemning alleged human rights transgressions in Israel than in any other nation, creates mandates for OHCHR, which also serves as the Council’s bureaucratic support.

The Obama administration reversed the policies of George W. Bush to join the Council in 2009, and served consecutive three-year terms that ended last month, claiming victories during that time in focusing the Council on gay rights and criticism of human rights practices in North Korea and Iran.

While no longer on the Council, the administration now seems comfortable with bringing the U.N.’s human rights approach into closer contact with U.S. legislators, lobbyists, human rights activists and, perhaps most importantly, financial appropriators, before it leaves office at the end of next year.

Indeed, the OHCHR “hub” -- which will cover not just the U.S. but “North America and the English-speaking Caribbean” -- already has a warm advance welcome from the administration that also seems aimed at letting the new U.N. outpost arrive smoothly under Washington’s political radar.

Last month U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. in Geneva, Pamela Hamamoto, wrote to tell the aggressively expanding human rights body that it didn’t need any additional legal agreement to establish the Washington hub, complete with full legal privileges and immunities, since it already is covered by legal agreements for the U.N. headquarters in New York, where OHCHR maintains a strong presence.

If OHCHR felt otherwise, Hamamoto said on behalf of the administration, “we would be happy to discuss alternative ways in which we might accommodate OHCHR’s specific requests.”

On the surface, the hub is part of a sweeping “Change Initiative” being promoted by the U.N. High Commissioner, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, which aims at decentralizing the Geneva-based organization, extending its outreach and human rights monitoring capability, and ostensibly improving its efficiency through, among other things, concentration on eight global hubs as focuses of activity.

As it happens, the initiative is not that much of a change: six of the hubs already exist, including one in Panama City for Latin America. The only new ones are intended for Washington and Istanbul.

According to Zeid, the initiative would mostly involve the reshuffling of existing personnel -- shipping them away from Geneva headquarters, where more than half of the agency’s roughly 1,100 staff is located. Zeid says that exercise, including the establishment of the new Washington venue, would be “revenue neutral.”

That assumption, however, was received skeptically by the U.N.’s chief financial oversight committee, which called the calculation “preliminary,” and recommended against approving the restructuring until Zeid came back with a “clear and detailed proposal” with a lot more detail.

Recommendations of the committee are usually adopted uncritically by the U.N. General Assembly’s Fifth Committee, which approves financial measures.

But Zeid has been lobbying the Fifth Committee energetically to break that tradition in his case -- in part because, as OHCHR’s fact sheet observes, the 2016-2017 budget that the advisory committee was assessing “will cover the majority of the remainder of the High Commissioner’s [four-year] term of appointment.” (Zeid was appointed in 2014.)

The issue came up in so-called “informal” -- meaning closed -- discussions of the Fifth Committee earlier this week. Questions from Fox News to Zeid’s spokesman about the discussions went unanswered.

Questions to the State Department from Fox News about the issue were referred to the U.S. Mission to the U.N., headed by Ambassador Samantha Power.

Questions from Fox News to the Mission about the discussion, and the overall U.S. government view of the hub, were not answered.

Beyond the fact that his career clock is ticking,  another reason for Zeid’s gung-ho approach to the hub could be the possibility that no future U.S. President will be as enthusiastically multilateral as Barack Obama, giving a now-or-never urgency to the chance to bring the U.S. further under the U.N. human rights umbrella.

And yet another reason might be that the reorganization could coincidentally help to bring down the curtain on a sensitive political problem for Zeid.

As part of the Change Initiative, he has announced that one of OHCHR’s important units, the Field Operations and Technical Cooperation Division, which deals with human rights issues at the country level and also incorporates human rights observation of U.N. peacekeeping operations, will be disbanded in Geneva and pieced off to the hubs.

That division is headed by Anders Kompass, the senior human rights officer who kicked up a firestorm when he passed on an unredacted human rights report about alleged sexual abuse of children by non-U.N. peacekeepers in the Central African Republic to French authorities.

Kompass’ avowed aim was to bring an immediate end to the alleged sex abuse and he quickly informed his superiors of his actions. After an eight-month hiatus, Zeid demanded his resignation, and U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon subsequently chimed in, declaring the revelations to the French to be a “serious violation of protocol.”

In the ensuing uproar at what appeared to be U.N. preference for process [over bringing a halt to sex crimes against children,](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/06/04/exclusive-un-sex-abuse-scandal-secretary-general-ban-ki-moon-announces-new/) Ban hastily backtracked, and appointed an “external independent review” to look into the issues involved.

The three-person review panel is currently expected to report in December.

Kompass, meanwhile, is still under a U.N. internal investigation for his actions.

The entire incident has already proved to be a major embarrassment to Zeid and the U.N. generally—one that might be diminished if Kompass’ department, and perhaps his job, quietly dwindled away in the Change Initiative.

Whatever the circumstances behind the new U.N. human rights beachhead in Washington, the whole idea is viewed skeptically by critics who see the move as additional bureaucratic bloat and redundancy on the part of a world organization already famous for both.

“The Change Initiative seems rushed and makeshift, and it’s not clear why the U.S. is supporting it,” observed Bea Edwards, international director of the Government Accountability Project, a whistle-blower protection organization that has supported Kompass. “Assurances that the change will be cost-neutral are wishful thinking.”

“Nothing says ‘human rights’ more than bureaucrats sitting in a new office,” said Brett Schaefer, an expert on U.N. organization and finance at the conservative Heritage Foundation. “At a time when video and electronic communication has become cheaper and faster than ever, OHCHR claims to see the need for a greater face-to-face presence here.”

“If anything, they should be cutting back their regional hubs.”

“The justifications given by OHCHR are unconvincing,” Schaefer added,” The entire purpose is not to address human rights but to shift policy and perspectives in the U.S.”