**UNHRC abuses human rights**

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By DANNY AYALON

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Unsurprisingly, a United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) report has once again slammed Israel’s acts of self-defense. The recently released report ostensibly investigating the events that surrounded the interception of the Gaza-bound Mavi Marmara in May is a modern blood-libel, and another nail in the coffin of the council’s credibility. The full report is scheduled to be officially presented to the council on Monday.

While its name would seem to indicate a worthy body, the UNHRC has two sole functions: to defend serial human-rights abusing nations from reproach, and to revile and attack Israel.

The UNHRC, created in 2006, is the successor to the thoroughly discredited United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). When the mandate for the new council was debated, certain basic reforms and standards were proposed to ensure the commission’s failures were not repeated. Unfortunately, few of the reforms received substantial support in the UN General Assembly, which refused to adopt them.

Those that were adopted have been abused.

The General Assembly resolution that created the council merely required member states to “take into account” a candidate’s human-rights record when applying to the UNHRC. Not even a nation under sanction from the UN Security Council for human-rights abuses need refrain from seeking election.

During the application process, candidate nations make pledges of adherence to human rights standards by way of justifying their candidacy. These statements have been described as Kafkaesque in their deviance from reality and historical record. One glaring example is that of Saudi Arabia, which claimed a “confirmed commitment to the defense, protection and promotion of human rights.”

The reality of course, is very different.

The US State Department’s annual human rights reports consistently criticize Saudi Arabia for its serious human rights failings, including arbitrary arrest, discrimination against women, restriction of worker rights and lack of religious freedom.

However, Saudi Arabia is hardly alone, as only 20 of the 47 nations on the UNHRC are considered “free” by Freedom House, an independent NGO which monitors human rights and political freedoms. This means the majority of nations currently represented on the UNHRC do not allow basic freedoms for their own people, let alone concern themselves with global human rights.

Another example of this farce was the recent election of Libya to the UNHRC.

Libya received support from 155 of the General Assembly’s 192 member states in a secret ballot, angering a coalition of 37 human rights organizations which described Libya as one of the most repressive societies in the world.

ONE OF the root problems is the influence of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) within the UNHRC.

The UNHRC heavily weights membership on its council to nations from Africa and Asia – two continents where the OIC has considerable influence. The OIC controls the lion’s share of the world’s energy resources, including oil, gas and uranium.

The OIC and its allies have an automatic majority on the UNHRC, and this is represented in the council’s workload.

Human Rights Watch claims that the OIC has “fought doggedly” and successfully within the UN Human Rights Council to shield states from criticism, except when it comes to criticism of Israel. The OIC’s mantra has been that the council should work cooperatively with abusive governments rather than condemn them.

This has led to the absurd situation in which Israel is condemned 33 times by the UNHRC out of a total of 40 countryspecific condemnations, while the UNHRC expresses only “deep concern” over Sudan and praises its cooperation.

In addition, the UNHRC adopted a unique decision to discuss human rights violations committed by Israel in all of the council’s meetings. It has also been criticized for redirecting attention to the fate of Muslim minorities within non- Muslim countries, but diverting attention from the treatment of ethnic minorities in Muslim-majority countries, such as the oppression of the Kurds in Syria, the Ahwaz in Iran, the Al-Akhdam in Yemen or the Berbers in Algeria.

Furthermore, the OIC has been at the forefront of silencing freedom of expression.

An amendment to the duties of the special rapporteur on freedom of expression, passed by the Human Rights Council on March 28, 2008, has acted against this very freedom. The OIC and its allies have sought to ban anything they deem as criticism of Islam. Some nations were outraged by this amendment, which they claimed “turns the special rapporteur’s mandate on its head.”

Nevertheless, it is on the subject of Israel that the OIC appears to have unique influence. When the UNHRC discussed issues relating to the Second Lebanon War in 2006, four of the council’s independent experts reported the findings of their visit to Lebanon and Israel. State after state from the OIC took the floor to denounce the experts for daring to look beyond Israeli violations to discuss Hizbullah’s as well.

This sent a very clear message that experts filing reports for the UNHRC involving Israel should never look at the conduct of any other party. Justice Richard Goldstone understood this very well, as was reflected in the report he gave the UNHRC. In an interview given to Al Jazeera in 2009, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, secretary-general of the OIC, explained how his organization not only initiated, but drove the Goldstone process from start to finish.

THE PANEL of experts compiling the report on events surrounding the flotilla has clearly understood its mandate well. Once again, a report has singularly blamed an event almost solely on Israel while refusing to assign responsibility or even suitably investigate any other actor. What makes the report so absurd is the recent release of many first-hand accounts by people on the Mavi Marmara.

These accounts, written by some hostile to Israel in the first place, depict very different scenes to those described in the report.

In his recently released book, Turkish journalist Sefik Dinç, while sympathetic to the militant IHH, writes that the crisis was “calculated” by those on board, and reportedly describes how the IDF soldiers did not open fire until after other soldiers were taken hostage. Dinç describes in his book, with the aid of photographs, how preparations for confronting the Israelis on the Mavi Marmara were “not going to be that passive.”

Our internal investigations indicate that not only did the soldiers only open fire when their lives were threatened, but that the first shots were fired by those on the boat; there are reports that one soldier suffered a knee injury from a non-IDF weapon as soon as he came on board.

This biased, libelous report indicates that the OIC has once again achieved its aim of condemning Israel through its proxies in the UNHRC. One again, it has proven UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and former high commissioner for human rights Mary Robinson’s criticisms that the council acts according to political considerations as opposed to human rights. In fact, the report stands as an affront to the secretary- general’s own panel of inquiry, with which Israel is fully cooperating.

General Assembly President Joseph Deisss warned recently against the marginalization of the UN itself by stating the need for urgent reforms, like reviewing the UNHRC. At stake is the plight of millions of victims of human-rights violations around the world.

It is high time for democracies to reassess their participation in a council that places political calculations over the protection of human rights while providing cover to some of the world’s most brutal regimes.

We must give a voice to the oppressed, justice to the abused and equity for all of humanity. None of this will be achieved by always attacking and condemning Israel while allowing totalitarian nations to hijack the international human-rights agenda.

*The writer is the deputy foreign minister.*