US withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council is the right decision

June 19, 2018

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<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2018/06/19/us-withdrawal-from-un-human-rights-council-is-right-decision.html>

The [Trump administration’s announcement](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2018/06/19/trump-administration-withdrawing-from-un-human-rights-council.html) Tuesday that the U.S. is leaving the notorious United Nations Human Rights Council has been [characterized](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/when-not-if-us-poised-to-quit-uns-human-rights-council/2018/06/15/d5f88374-70ca-11e8-b4d8-eaf78d4c544c_story.html?utm_term=.3d7a6013b079) as an example of administration’s deep-seated hostility to the international community. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, the U.S. seems to be the only government that seriously worked to get the U.N. Human Rights Council to promote universal respect and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in a fair and equal manner.

The 12-year-old council is deeply flawed, inconsistent, heavily biased against Israel, and plagued by a membership list that includes some of the world’s worst human rights violators and dictatorships. None of these facts are in dispute.

Over the past year, the U.S. has tried again and again to make the Human Rights Council work. Led by U.S. [Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley](https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7828) – and strongly supported by U.S. diplomats in Geneva, New York, Washington and around the world – America has engaged bilaterally and multilaterally to promote reforms to address anti-Israel bias, membership quality, and other reforms to [streamline the work and improve the efficiency of the Human Rights Council](https://www.universal-rights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/HRC37-Bureau-proposals.pdf).

These American efforts have been met with disinterest and hostility. Even [European governments and human rights groups](http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/30/u-s-thwarted-in-bid-to-change-u-n-rights-councils-approach-to-israel/) have opposed the U.S. reform effort out of fear that countries hostile to human rights would seize the opportunity to weaken the Human Rights Council further – if that was even possible.

This is a self-fulfilling prophesy that condemns the Human Rights Council to its gravely disappointing, biased and inefficient status quo. Worse, as long as this fear exists, any future reform effort will be stillborn.

From the beginning, the Human Rights Council exhibited blatant bias against Israel, included human rights abusers among its membership, and was unable to confront serious human rights abuses in powerful or influential states – the very same flaws that discredited its predecessor, the U.N. Human Rights Commission.

The George W. Bush administration refused to join the Human Rights Council in 2006. But despite the council’s record, the Obama administration joined it in 2009, arguing that the U.S. could improve the council by working from within.

Admittedly, there was a [reduction](https://www.cfr.org/report/bolstering-un-human-rights-councils-effectiveness) in the ratio of Human Rights Council resolutions focused on Israel after 2009. But did this make a difference for Israel? New countries were condemned, but the annual ritual of Israel condemnations continued unabated.

According to the watchdog group U.N. Watch, as of the end of last month the Human Rights Council had adopted 80 condemnatory resolutions against Israel out of 169 overall against countries deemed human rights abusers – 47 percent of the total.

The Human Rights Council also has convened 28 special sessions devoted to human rights and other abuses, with eight (29 percent) focused on Israel. Next was Syria, the focus of five special sessions. Then came Burma, with two.

That Israel should be the focus of nearly half of the Human Rights Council’s condemnatory resolutions is absurd. That the council spends exponentially more time on Israel than on North Korea or Syria only underscores how its agenda has fallen victim to politicization and bias.

Indeed, alone among the world’s countries, Israel is subject to a separate human rights item, known as Agenda Item 7, titled “Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories.” Every other country is examined under Item 4, “Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention.”

In addition, the non-Israel condemnations tend toward the low-hanging fruit. A widely lauded Human Rights Council resolution establishing a Commission of Inquiry for North Korea passed without a vote in 2013. Likewise, Syria has few friends willing to vote for it in the Human Rights Council these days. These resolutions are welcome, but the presence of the U.S. is not necessary for their adoption.

By contrast, Human Rights Council is notably unable to condemn human rights violations in powerful or influential countries like China, Cuba, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Zimbabwe despite, respectively, terrible records of [religious persecution](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/religion-china), [punishment of political dissent](https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/26/cuba-fidel-castros-record-repression), [hostility to freedom of the press](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/russia), [unequal rights for women](http://www.theweek.co.uk/60339/things-women-cant-do-in-saudi-arabia), and [use of force against civil society and government opponents](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/zimbabwe).

In fact, China and Cuba are among the 14 current [members of the Human Rights Council](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/CurrentMembers.aspx) ranked “[not free](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018)” by Freedom House.

Unfortunately, most governments either prefer a weak, biased Human Rights Council or are unwilling to undertake the effort necessary to reform it. This is not a recent development in response to the Trump administration. The Obama administration met similar resistance when it proposed reforms at a mandatory [2011 review](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/HRCReview.aspx) of the council.

The Trump administration was right to question why the U.S. should expend so much time, effort, and influence in trying to make U.N. Human Rights Council resolutions and actions slightly less harmful and biased – oftentimes unsuccessfully – when the other member states are unwilling to invest similar time and effort in actually improving the council itself.

Leaving the Human Rights Council does not mean that the U.S. is abandoning its support for human rights. The U.S. could focus its efforts on passing stronger resolutions in another committee of the U.N. General Assembly that annually [condemns a handful of states](https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/gashc4220.doc.htm) and adopts resolutions on [other human rights issues](https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/gashc4223.doc.htm).

Ambassador Haley has called for the U.S. to use its [foreign assistance to support priorities](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/foreign-aid-cuts-expected-except-for-friends/2018/02/09/10bf1482-0dbb-11e8-8890-372e2047c935_story.html) at the United Nations. Promoting human rights resolutions could be among them.

Indeed, the U.S. could more prominently support human rights in its overall foreign aid programs. According to the [Congressional Research Service](https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40213.pdf), America allocated four times as much assistance to environmental issues as to issues involving the rule of law and human rights in the 2016 fiscal year.

Likewise, the U.S. could expand its engagement and support for international bodies like Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and domestic institutions like the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, and the National Democratic Institute that monitor elections and promote human rights.

Those dismissing the decision to withdraw from the Human Rights Council as an [example of the Trump administration’s rejection of multilateral engagement](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-rights-usa/u-s-expected-to-retreat-from-main-u-n-rights-forum-activists-diplomats-idUSKBN1JA2ZA) miss the target.

The Trump administration recognized, rightly, that staying in the Human Rights Council would at best ensure continued bias, selectivity and disappointment. Worse, it would implicitly endorse those outcomes.

Those condemning the U.S. for leaving should instead target their ire at the governments that refused to support U.S. efforts to fix the U.N. Human Rights Council’s manifest flaws that, like the U.N. Commission on Human Rights before it, cast an ugly shadow on the reputation of the United Nations.