Why We’re Leaving the So-Called Human Rights Council

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There is an international organization whose members include the repressive regimes of Cuba, Venezuela and China.

This organization recently added the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is obstructing an investigation into the murder within its borders of two United Nations human-rights experts.

In the past decade, this organization has passed more resolutions to condemn Israel specifically than to condemn Syria, Iran and North Korea combined.

Most people would not imagine that such an organization would be dedicated to protecting human rights. Yet all of these details describe the misnamed U.N. Human Rights Council. In truth, the council provides cover for governments with awful human-rights records, and it refuses to eliminate its Agenda Item 7, which targets Israel unfairly by mandating that each session include a discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

After more than a year of unsuccessful efforts to fix these fundamental defects, the U.S. delegation announced Tuesday our withdrawal from the council. Our country will no longer be party to this deeply flawed institution, which harms the cause of human rights more than it helps it.

There are two major reasons that so many countries have resisted U.S.-led reform efforts. The first is baked into the council’s composition. One look at this rogue’s gallery explains why the organization has such appalling disrespect for the rights Americans take for granted. A credible human-rights council would pose a threat to these countries, so they oppose the steps needed to create one. Instead they obstruct investigations and reports, while interfering with the council’s ability to name and shame the perpetrators of the world’s worst atrocities.

The second reason for resistance to reform is even more frustrating. Many countries agree with the U.S. about shunning human-rights violators and supporting Israel—but only behind closed doors. Despite numerous overtures, these countries were unwilling to join the U.S. in a public stand. Some even told us they were fine with the council’s flaws, as long as it let them address their pet issues. This is not a moral compromise we are willing to make. The U.K. has promised to oppose any resolution targeting Israel under Agenda Item 7, and we support that stance. We wish other countries would do the same.

In the end, our allies’ case for the U.S. to stay on the council was actually the most compelling argument to leave. They said American participation was the last shred of credibility left in the organization. But a stamp of legitimacy on the current Human Rights Council is precisely what the U.S. should not provide.

Our withdrawal from the council will not end America’s own steadfast commitment to human rights. The U.S. delegation remains proud of American leadership in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Our country has always championed freedom, individual dignity, human rights and the rule of law, and that will never change. The U.S. will continue to lead on human rights outside the council, even as we push for institutional reform with like-minded partners.

Last year when the U.S. presided over the U.N. Security Council, we initiated the first-ever Security Council session dedicated to the connection between human rights and peace and security. The same year, when the Venezuelan regime blocked a Human Rights Council discussion of the massive violations it had committed, the U.S. organized an event outside the council’s chambers with Venezuelan human-rights leaders. When several countries objected to holding a Security Council session on the Iranian people’s human-rights struggles, the U.S. succeeded in initiating one anyway.

I have traveled to U.N. camps for refugees and internally displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Turkey and Jordan, and met with the victims of atrocities in those troubled regions.

America uses its voice and vote every day at the U.N. to defend human rights. We will continue to be a champion for the abused peoples of Burma, China, Russia, Syria, Iran, South Sudan, Cuba, Venezuela and countless other places. We will continue to push the Human Rights Council for reforms that would make it worthy of our involvement. Any country willing to work with us to reshape the council need only ask.

We believe in the sovereignty of all U.N. member states, but no country should use that sovereignty as a shield when it proliferates weapons of mass destruction, promotes terrorism or commits mass atrocities. The U.S. does not seek to impose its system on anyone else. But we do support the universal values of freedom and human rights. And we will speak out for those values at every opportunity.

That is why we are withdrawing from the U.N. Human Rights Council, an organization that is unworthy of its name. But even as we depart, our commitment to human rights will remain steady as ever, and our voice will only get louder.