Jeremy Hunt: The UN Human Rights Council ignored our concerns on its Israel approach. Now we must act

March 21, 2019

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The Jewish Chronicle

<https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/jeremy-hunt-un-human-rights-council-ignored-our-concerns-on-its-israel-approach-now-we-must-act-1.481829>

In some countries in the Middle East, the result of the next election is a foregone conclusion. Yet on April 9, millions of voters in Israel will decide the fate of their leaders – and no-one can predict the outcome.

A fair-minded observer would find it curious that, of all the situations in the world, only Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories are permanently on the agenda of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC).

The horrors of Syria’s civil war, the brutal detention camps in North Korea, the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma – all these human tragedies have been the subject of important HRC Resolutions, passed with Britain’s full support.

But amid such catastrophes, a dedicated place on the HRC agenda - known as Item 7 – is reserved solely for Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This means no session can take place without a specific discussion of this subject.

By any standard of fairness or proportion, elevating this dispute above all others cannot be sensible; indeed it is an unhelpful illusion to suppose that Israel’s conduct deserves special scrutiny.

When Item 7 was first introduced, Ban Ki-Moon, then UN Secretary General, voiced his disappointment “given the range and scope of allegations of human rights violations throughout the world”.

Far from serving any useful purpose, I fear that this dedicated place obstructs the quest for peace in the Middle East.

To understand why, remember the verse of the late Israeli poet and peace campaigner, Yehuda Amichai: “From the places where we are right, flowers will never grow in the spring. The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a road.”

Instead of promoting reconciliation and compromise, Item 7 strengthens the hard and trampled road of self righteousness, a narrative that one side alone holds a monopoly of fault. A lasting peace would require the parties to acknowledge the wrong and harm committed by every side, requiring painful compromise by all.

Two years ago, the United Kingdom said that unless the situation changed, we would vote against all texts proposed under Item 7.

Sadly, our concerns have not been heeded. So I have decided that we will do exactly what we said: Britain will now oppose every Item 7 resolution. On Friday we will vote against all four texts proposed in this way.

None of this means that we will hold back from voicing concern about Israel’s actions. On the contrary, the British Government has frequently expressed our views about the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, particularly the bloodshed in Gaza and the illegal expansion of settlements.

One of my first acts as Foreign Secretary was to write to the Israeli Government to condemn the impending demolition of the Palestinian village of Khan Al-Ahmar, which has since been deferred, though we will press Israel to abandon its plans entirely.

In the last year, thousands of Palestinians have been killed or injured during protests near Gaza’s boundary fence, including women, children, medical personnel and journalists. Britain has longstanding concerns about the use of live ammunition and excessive force by the Israel Defence Forces. We are also clear that Israel has a right to self defence – and Hamas operatives have cynically exploited the protests.

The UN has every right to address these grave matters in a measured and proportionate way. In future, Britain will continue to support scrutiny of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the HRC, so long as it is justified and not proposed under Item 7.

We will vote for balanced resolutions in the Security Council, as we have done in the past. Last November, I instructed our mission in New York to support 13 UN General Assembly Resolutions that were critical of Israeli policy.

The Foreign Office’s annual Human Rights report, overseen by my colleague Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, sets out in meticulous and balanced fashion the human rights violations of both the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority.

But the UK will not indulge illusions. We will continue to press for the abolition of Item 7, which only undermines the credibility of the world’s leading human rights forum.

And the British Government will not entertain the illusion that Hizballah can be cleanly divided into political and military wings, with it somehow making sense only to proscribe the latter.

Hizballah’s leadership does not recognise this artificial distinction. Their intervention in Syria’s civil war exposes the emptiness of the argument that their ambitions are confined to Lebanon.

So I was glad to support the Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, to change the British Government’s position and proscribe Hizballah in full.

Britain is committed to good relations with Lebanon and a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians, according to the two-state solution, with Jerusalem as a shared capital. The best way of serving those aims is to deal in realities rather than illusions.