Why fund the United Nations Human Rights Council?

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By Francis Rooney

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Now is the time to re-evaluate United States support for the U.N. Human Rights Council.

Claiming to be a champion of human rights, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) continues to act in complete contradiction of its mandate to protect human rights and reflects the cronyism and corruption of many of its member governments. The Council devotes far too much time attacking Israel, one of its top agenda items, while ignoring serious and pervasive human rights violations around the world. Worse, the UNHRC routinely attracts as its members many of the world’s most notorious human rights abusers and authoritarian regimes, including Venezuela.

Given these circumstances, it is unfathomable why the United States would continue to participate in the Council, and even more disconcerting that we have donated, under former President Obama, $17.5 million to it in “voluntary” contributions which go above and beyond its direct UN funding. In President Trump’s 2018 budget, incredibly enough, there is an additional $10 million for the UNHRC.

The hostile, anti-Israel bias of the UNHRC is unwarranted and undermines a staunch ally of the United States. Israel has been the most frequent subject of reports during past council sessions and is the only nation in the world routinely singled out for specific criticism. In fact, Israel is the only country targeted by the UNHRC with a permanent agenda item.

Additionally, this overarching focus on Israel distracts the UNHRC from investigating serious human rights violations in the Middle East, and elsewhere around the world. In the UNHRC’s first decade of existence, over half of the country-oriented resolutions it passed were targeted at Israel. To date, the UNHRC has adopted over 70 resolutions condemning Israel and only seven condemning human rights violations by the autocratic theocracy in Iran. In March, the UNHRC passed five anti-Israel resolutions, while it has failed to condemn any of the actions of the Venezuelan government, whose rampant corruption, pervasive human rights abuses and numerous kidnappings and acts of extortion have been repeatedly brought to the world’s attention.

In a consummate oxymoron, the UNHRC consistently allows serious human rights violators to serve on the Council. Right now China, Cuba and Venezuela are among its 47 members. How can countries like these credibly investigate and judge other nations’ human rights records? In fact, this lack of intellectual honesty undermines the credibility of the United Nations in general.

The flawed membership selection of the UNHRC was the main reason that President George W. Bush, in 2006, opted against seeking election to the body. In 2008, the anti-Israel bias led the Bush administration to cut U.N. funding by the amount that would have been appropriated to the UNHRC.

United States policy changed in 2009 under President Obama, who sought election of the United States to sit on the UNHRC. In just another of the many failed strategies and defective deals the Obama administration saddled us with, they had hoped United States participation would change the UNHRC from within. Instead, our membership granted some cloak of legitimacy to the body and added impetus to its anti-American and anti-Israel bent and has enabled the UNHRC to continue to protect and defend authoritarian regimes around the world.

While there are times when the “keep our nose in the tent” argument is persuasive, this situation is not one of them. The UNHRC is destructive to the efforts of free and transparent governments that focus on protecting human rights and maintaining human dignity in the world.

Serious reforms are necessary for the UNHRC to live up to its mission of promoting and protecting human rights, and the Trump administration, under the leadership of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, appears to understand this.

At a June 14 House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing with Tillerson, I asked him to reconsider State’s proposed $10 million appropriation to the UNHRC in its 2018 budget and was encouraged by Tillerson’s response. He said the State Department is seriously looking into numerous concerns and criticisms about the UNHRC and the United States would seek other avenues to promote human rights if the body is not serious about reforms.

Haley has repeatedly delivered the same strong message. In a recent op-ed, she rightfully called out the UNHRC for being a “haven for dictators.” And during remarks to the UNHRC, she mentioned the United States is “looking carefully” into continued participation in the body. She also pointed out the hypocrisy of Venezuela’s membership and called on the UNHRC to reconsider the Bolivarian Republic’s membership status.

Haley has demanded two reforms from the council:  First, the UNHRC must change the way member states are elected in order to prevent notorious human rights abusers from winning seats. Second, it must eliminate its anti-Israel bias and focus honestly on serious human rights violations around the world. These changes would allow the UNHRC to gain legitimacy it lacks right now and position it to serve as an objective champion of human rights in the world.

Unless the UNHRC undertakes the reforms, the United States should withdraw its membership and its funding, and seek other more legitimate avenues to defend human rights. Tillerson floated the idea of replacing our participation in the UNHRC with our promoting human rights on a multilateral basis, working with like-minded partners. This idea presents a meritorious alternative in the absence of serious reform to legitimize the UNHRC.