Tillerson To U.N. Rights Council: Reform or We’re Leaving

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The Trump administration is threatening a withdrawal from the U.N. Human Rights Council if it does not undertake “considerable reform,” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned a group of nine non-profit organizations in a letter this week.

The correspondence, obtained by Foreign Policy, explains the Trump administration’s rationale for considering a departure from the 47-member organization. An immediate withdrawal from the Council, however, is not imminent, multiple State Department aides told FP. The Council has a small window of time to redeem itself in the eyes of Washington.

“If they don’t make these reforms, we’re going to question the value of our membership,” said a senior aide to Tillerson. “We’re not taking withdrawal off the table.”

A move to pull out of the Council is strongly opposed by humanitarian advocates and activists, who are concerned that it would diminish the U.S. role on human rights in the Trump era.

Tillerson, in his letter to the U.N. advocates and human rights groups, said that while the United States “continues to evaluate the effectiveness” of the Council, it remains skeptical about the virtues of membership in a human rights organization that includes states with troubled human rights records such as China, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

“We may not share a common view on this, given the makeup of the membership,” Tillerson told the organizations, who have urged continued U.S. membership. “While it may be the only such organization devoted to human rights, the Human Rights Council requires considerable reform in order for us to continue to participate.”

If the United States ultimately were to withdraw from the Council, that would mark a victory for one of two factions within the Trump administration debating the future of U.S. policy at the United Nations.

“Many who despise the Council want the U.S. to stay in and undermine efforts by others to obsesses over Israel—and put the spotlight back on human rights abusers the Council regularly ignores,” said a GOP congressional aide. “But there are others who see that as fruitless and wasted diplomatic effort.”

The nine groups advocating continued U.S. membership — which include the Better World Campaign, Freedom House, the Committee For Human Rights in North Korea, and the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights — argued in a February 9 letter to Tillerson that the United States can more easily shield Israel from unfair attacks if it has a seat at the table. The Council, they say, has also provided a venue for holding the world’s worst rights abusers, including Syria and North Korea, accountable for their crimes.

The George W. Bush administration refused to join the Council in 2006, the year it was created, due to concerns about the treatment of Israel. The Obama administration reversed that decision in 2009, viewing membership as a way of reforming the organization from the inside and not letting the Israel issue diminish U.S. influence in a range of other areas.

“American leadership in the Council over the last seven years has helped shift that dynamic,” the group wrote. “Since 2009, the Council has increasingly trained a spotlight on rogue regimes and terrorists, commissioning independent investigations that have exposed serious human rights abuses in North Korea, Iran, Syria, ISIS, and Boko Haram.”

For the time being, Tillerson wrote, the U.S. will participate in the ongoing session of the Human Rights Council, to “reiterate our strong principled objection to the Human Rights Council’s biased agenda against Israel.”

“Our aim is to fix the organization,” the Tillerson aide told FP.

Tillerson said U.S. priorities including renewing the mandate of a U.N. Commission of inquiry into atrocities in Syria, and underscoring U.S. support for U.N. special rapporteurs for Iran, North Korea, and Burma. He also said Washington would seek to renew the mandates of special rapporteurs investigating the use of torture and promoting freedom of expression.

UN advocates said it was unclear whether the administration is really mulling a withdrawal, or simply putting more pressure on for reform.

“I’m afraid this seems to signal that they want to pull out,” Felice Gaer, of the Jacob Blaustein Institute, told FP. “If you want to change the Council’s disproportionate focus on Israel it is by being present that it will happen, not by being absent.”

Peter Yeo, the President of the Better World Campaign, said he is not convinced the U.S. is ready to pull the plug. “I think the administration is signaling its intention to pursue far reaching reforms of the Human Rights Council, including reducing the disproportionate focus on Israel,” he said.

 The move comes as a time when the U.N. is facing the prospect of a new confrontation from Israel and the United States.

In March, 2016, the U.N. Human Rights Council adopted a [resolution](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/082/57/PDF/G1608257.pdf?OpenElement) requiring the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince Zeid al Raad, to compile a database of companies that are doing business in Israeli settlements.

Israel denounced the move at the time as another example of hostility by the Council that could aid the anti-Israeli boycott movement. It warned the U.N. High Commissioner’s office that it could jeopardize its ability to carry out its work in Palestinian territories.

Under the terms of the resolution, Zeid was scheduled to provide a report, including the list of companies, in Geneva next week. But he secured an agreement to kick the issue down the road until September.

“This is a major crisis and we don’t know how to handle it,” said one U.N. official.