With Nikki Haley, Israel Sees the Light at End of the Tunnel on UN Bias

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Despite partly owing its existence to the United Nations, Israel has experienced decades of bias from an institution whose stated mission includes trying to ensure international goodwill and world peace. But the nascent Trump administration, under the leadership of Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, is trying to chart a new course for the world body when it comes to Israel.

During her speech at the recent AIPAC policy conference, Haley described herself as the UN’s “new sheriff in town,” and declared “the days of Israel-bashing are over.”

“I wear heels. It’s not for a fashion statement. It’s because if I see something wrong, we’re going to kick ’em every single time,” Haley said, earning loud applause.

The new envoy’s bold comments might be more than talk. The Israeli government claims that it is already witnessing Haley’s positive influence in the international arena.

“Ambassador Haley and the Trump administration have changed the rules of the game at the UN, and the results have reverberated throughout the organization,” Israeli Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon told JNS.org. “We intend to implement real and palpable change together with our friends at the American Mission.”

**Bias at the Human Rights Council**

While the UN is littered with bureaucratic bodies and commissions that routinely single out Israel for criticism, one of the most egregious examples of this bias is the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and its permanent “Agenda Item Seven,” which requires the council to discuss alleged Israeli human rights abuses against the Palestinians at every session.

“Agenda Item Seven is undoubtedly the most poignant, straightforward illustration of the UNHRC’s bias towards Israel,” Michal Hatuel, a research associate at the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies, told JNS.org. “As a result of Agenda Item Seven, Israel is the only country [among 193 UN member states] that has a permanent place on the council’s agenda — an absurdity which substantially taints the HRC’s credibility and which serves to undermine the entire UN organization.”

At this year’s UNHRC session in late March, the council passed several resolutions condemning Israeli policy on the Palestinians, and calling on the Jewish state to return control of the Golan Heights to Syria.

These resolutions prompted the UK to put the UNHRC [“on notice”](http://www.jns.org/news-briefs/2017/3/24/uk-puts-un-human-rights-council-on-notice-for-anti-israel-bias-1) that if “things do not change,” the British would start voting against all resolutions concerning Israel’s conduct in the disputed territories. The British warning followed the Trump administration’s threat to [pull the US out](http://www.jns.org/news-briefs/2017/2/27/us-reportedly-considering-withdrawing-from-un-human-rights-body#.WOUzlTsrLRY=) of the council.

Hatuel believes that the UK’s “on notice” policy might be a more constructive approach than threats to leave the human rights body.

“Such a policy creates an incentive for changing the HRC’s conduct. Should the change stall, an automatic UK vote against anti-Israel resolutions is far more meaningful and helpful to Israel than a complete absence,” she said.

As a result of the anti-Israel resolutions at the UNHRC, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently instructed his Foreign Ministry to [withhold](http://www.jns.org/news-briefs/2017/3/30/israel-slashes-un-payments-by-2-million-after-anti-israel-votes#.WOU92DsrLRY=) $2 million from its annual UN dues.

“The UN Human Rights Council has turned harming Israel into its raison d’etre,” Ambassador Danon said. “The time has come to end to this shameful, and even embarrassing, chapter in the history of the UN; members of the council must put an end to the bias in this absurd body.”

**Pro-Israel leadership at the UN?**

Atop the UN hierarchy, there are signs of more Israel-sympathetic leadership. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who assumed the position from Ban Ki-moon at the start of 2017, has spoken out in support of Israel, and has taken action against attempts by some UN bodies to single out the Jewish state.

In March, Guterres forced the withdrawal of a report — commissioned by the UN’s Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) — that accused Israel of being an apartheid state. Guterres’ move prompted the head of ESCWA, Rima Khalaf, to resign.

Guterres also [reaffirmed](http://www.jns.org/news-briefs/2017/3/27/un-chief-reaffirms-jewish-ties-to-temple-mount-vows-to-curb-bias-on-israel) his recognition of Jewish ties to Jerusalem during a recent meeting with World Jewish Congress President Ronald Lauder.

While it is “still early to form a coherent take on Guterres,” his approach so far indicates that he is “committed to a more balanced UN on issues relating to Israel,” Hatuel said.

**New sheriff at the Security Council**

Haley, who this month assumed the UN Security Council’s presidency — a role that rotates monthly — has promised to refocus the council away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“So much has been put towards Israel and the Palestinian Authority and not enough has been put towards some of the other issues,” Haley said, noting that she will focus an upcoming April 20 Security Council debate around issues such as Iran’s support for terrorism, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas.

“That is our goal for the Middle East — open debate,” she said.

Last December, the Security Council passed a resolution condemning Israel’s settlement policies, as well as describing eastern Jerusalem and its Jewish holy sites as “occupied Palestinian territory.” The measure passed after the Obama administration refused to exercise its veto power, breaking with decades of US policy on one-sided resolutions targeting Israel.

Haley said that she has warned the Palestinian Authority’s UN representative, Riyad Mansour, that the US will block any Arab-sponsored motions targeting Israel.

“We don’t want to see any additional measures brought at the UN that would bash Israel or lift up the Palestinian Authority until we can get these negotiations to happen,” she said, referring to a possible future round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. “And I do think that the discussions that have happened at the UN have been more of a hindrance towards the peace process than it’s … a help, because it’s caused defensiveness to happen.”