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# The United Nations Human Rights Council: Issues for Congress

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## Summary

On March 15, 2006, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution replacing the Commission on Human Rights with a new Human Rights Council (the Council). The Council was designed to be an improvement over the Commission, which was widely criticized for the composition of its membership when perceived human rights abusers were elected as members. The General Assembly resolution creating the Council modified voting procedures, increased the number of meetings per year, and introduced a “Universal Periodic Review” process to assess each member state’s fulfillment of its human rights obligations, among other things.

The United States, under the George W. Bush Administration, was one of four countries to vote against the resolution. The Administration maintained that the Council structure was no better than the Commission and that it lacked mechanisms for maintaining credible membership. During the Council’s first two years, the Bush Administration expressed concern with the Council’s disproportionate focus on Israel and lack of attention to other human rights situations. In mid-2008, it announced that the United States would withhold a portion of its contributions to the 2008 U.N. regular budget equivalent to the U.S. share of the Human Rights Council budget. The Administration further stated that the United States would engage with the Council only in matters of deep national interest.

In March 2009, the Obama Administration announced that the United States would run for a seat on the Council. The United States was elected as a Council member by the U.N. General Assembly in May 2009, and its term began in June. The Administration argues that it furthers the United States’ interest “if we are part of the conversation and present at the Council’s proceedings.” At the same time, however, it calls the Council’s trajectory “disturbing,” especially its “repeated and unbalanced” criticisms of Israel. In particular, Administration officials are concerned about the Council’s decision to include the “human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories” as a permanent part of the Council’s agenda. On November 5, 2010, the United States underwent the Council’s universal periodic review process for the first time. It was elected to the Council for a second consecutive term in November 2012; its current term will expire at the end of 2015.

Since its establishment, the Council has held 29 regular sessions and 23 special sessions. The regular sessions addressed a combination of specific human rights abuses and procedural and structural issues. Seven of the 23 special sessions addressed the human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian territories and in Lebanon. Four of the special sessions focused on Syria, while others addressed Burma (Myanmar), the Central African Republic, Cote d’Ivoire, Darfur, Haiti, Libya, Sri Lanka, and Boko Haram. The Council held a five-year review of its work in March 2011. Some participants, including the United States, felt the review did not sufficiently address the Council’s weaknesses, particularly its focus on Israel and lack of mechanisms for ensuring credible membership.

Congress maintains an ongoing interest in the credibility and effectiveness of the Council in the context of both human rights and broader U.N. reform. Most recently, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2015 (Division J, the Department of State Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2015; P.L. 113-235) required that funds appropriated by the act may be made available only if the Secretary of State reports to the Committees on Appropriations that participating in the Council is in the national interest of the United States. In addition, the Secretary of State shall report to Congress on resolutions adopted by the Council and steps taken to remove Israel as a permanent agenda item. This report will be updated as events warrant.

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## Introduction

Members of 114<sup>th</sup> Congress may consider the role and effectiveness of the United Nations (U.N.) Human Rights Council (the Council) in promoting U.S. foreign policy and combating international human rights violations. Specifically, the following questions may be examined:

- What role should the Council play in international human rights policy?
- Can the Council be an effective mechanism for addressing human rights situations worldwide?
- Should the United States be a member of the Council, and what are the implications for U.S. membership?

The Council was established by the U.N. General Assembly in 2006 to replace the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which was criticized for its lack of attention to human rights abuses and for the number of widely perceived human rights abusers that served as its members. Since then, many governments and policymakers—including the United States—have expressed serious concern with the Council’s apparent focus on Israel and lack of attention to other pressing human rights situations. Seven of the Council’s 23 special sessions have focused on Israel, and in mid-2007, Council members agreed to make the “human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories” a permanent part of the Council’s agenda. No other country-specific human rights situation is part of the permanent agenda. In March 2011, U.N. member states conducted a five-year review of the Council’s work and functioning. Many governments and human rights organizations were disappointed with the review’s outcome because in their view it did not sufficiently address the Council’s continued focus on Israel and its perceived inability to ensure credible membership.

At the same time, supporters argue that the Council is an improvement over the previous Commission. They contend that the new Universal Periodic Review process, which aims to evaluate each member state’s fulfillment of its human rights obligations, is a potentially effective means for addressing human rights issues in various countries. Many Council proponents are also encouraged by the Council’s increased attention to human rights situations in countries such as Cote d’Ivoire and Syria, as well as the General Assembly’s March 2011 decision to suspend Libya’s Council membership based on its human rights record.<sup>1</sup> Some governments and human rights organizations have also applauded the Council’s decisions to establish special rapporteurs or commissions of inquiry on human rights situations in Iran, North Korea, and Syria.

U.S. policymakers have disagreed as to whether the United States should be a member of or provide funding for the Council. The George W. Bush Administration voted against the U.N. resolution creating the Council and decided not to run as a Council member. In mid-2008, the Bush Administration announced that it would disengage from the Council and withhold a portion of its contributions to the 2008 U.N. regular budget equal to the U.S. share of the Council budget. The Obama Administration expressed its disappointment with the Council’s focus on Israel but concluded that it was better for the United States to be involved in the Council’s work. It announced it would run for a Council seat in March 2009 and was elected in May of the same year. In November 2012, the United States was elected to the Council for a second consecutive term, which will expire at the end of 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> On November 18, 2011, the U.N. General Assembly voted to reinstate Libya as a Council member.

Some Members of Congress have demonstrated a continued interest in the Council. In FY2008 and FY2009, for example, Congress enacted legislation in foreign operations appropriations limiting U.S. contributions to the Council subject to certain conditions. Most recently, in FY2015 foreign operations appropriations, Congress required that funds shall be appropriated to the Council if the Secretary of State certifies that U.S. participation in the Council is in the national interest of the United States. Moreover, it stated that the Secretary of State shall report to Congress on resolutions adopted by the Council and steps the Administration has taken to remove Israel as a permanent item on the Council's agenda. Members have also introduced legislation calling for U.S. withdrawal from the Council and criticizing its focus on Israel. Others have enacted or introduced legislation calling on the Human Rights Council to address specific human rights situations.

This report provides historical background on the Council, including the role of the previous Commission. It discusses the Council's current mandate and structure, as well as U.S. policy and congressional actions. Finally, it highlights possible policy issues for the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, including the overall effectiveness of the Council in addressing human rights situations, implications for U.S. membership, and U.S. financial contributions to the Council.

## Background

The U.N. Human Rights Commission (the Commission) was the primary intergovernmental policymaking body for human rights issues before it was replaced by the U.N. Human Rights Council (the Council) in 2006. Created in 1946 as a subsidiary body of the U.N. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC),<sup>2</sup> the Commission's initial mandate was to establish international human rights standards and develop an international bill of rights. One of the Commission's notable successes was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on December 10, 1948.<sup>3</sup> During its tenure, the Commission played a key role in developing a comprehensive body of human rights treaties and declarations.<sup>4</sup> Over time, its work evolved to address specific human rights violations and complaints as well as broader human rights issues. It developed a system of special procedures to monitor, analyze and report on human rights violations. The procedures addressed country-specific human rights violations, as well as thematic cross-cutting human rights abuses such as racial discrimination, religious intolerance, and denial of freedom of expression.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, controversy developed over the human rights records of some Commission members. Countries widely perceived as systematic abusers of human rights were elected as members. In 2001, Sudan, a country broadly criticized by governments and human rights groups for ethnic cleansing in its Darfur region, was elected. Sudan was reelected in 2004, prompting outrage from human rights organizations and causing the United States to walk out of

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<sup>2</sup> ECOSOC is a principal organ of the United Nations that serves as the central forum for discussing and making recommendations related to international economic and social issues. It is comprised of 54 member governments elected to three-year terms by the U.N. General Assembly.

<sup>3</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III), December 10, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> This includes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which entered into force on March 23, 1976, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which entered into force on January 3, 1976. The United States signed both treaties on October 5, 1977, and ratified the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on June 8, 1992.

the Commission chamber in protest. These instances significantly affected the Commission's credibility. Critics claimed that countries used their membership to deflect attention from their own human rights violations by questioning the records of others. Some members were accused of bloc voting and excessive procedural manipulation to prevent debate of their human rights abuses. In 2005, the collective impact of these controversies led then-U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan to propose the idea of a new and smaller Council to replace the Commission. On March 15, 2006, the U.N. General Assembly approved a resolution to dissolve the Commission and create the Council in its place.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is a department within the U.N. Secretariat headed by a High Commissioner for Human Rights, currently Navanethem Pillay of South Africa. Its mandate is to promote and protect human rights worldwide through international cooperation, and through the coordination and streamlining of human rights efforts within the U.N. system. OHCHR provided general support to the Commission and continues to do so for the Council, working specifically with Council experts to document human rights violations.

## **The United States and U.N. Human Rights Efforts**

The United States is generally supportive of human rights mechanisms at the United Nations. It played a key role in creating the Commission on Human Rights in 1946, and was a member and active participant of the Commission until it lost its first election in 2001. It was restored to the Commission the following year by election. Congress has demonstrated continued support for U.N. human rights bodies, often using the mechanisms and special procedures of the Commission to call attention to the human rights abuses of specific countries. In addition, Congress receives annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices from the Secretary of State as mandated by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.<sup>5</sup> The Secretary of State is required, among other things, to submit reports on countries that are members of the United Nations.

There have been instances, however, when both Congress and the executive branch were critical of the Commission. In 1997, controversy emerged between the United States and the Commission when the Commission appointed a Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, and Arbitrary Executions who, among other things, analyzed how the death penalty is implemented in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The Rapporteur reported that economic status, ethnicity, and racial discrimination were indicators for death penalty verdicts, reportedly prompting then-Senator Jesse Helms to declare the Special Rapporteur's mission "an absurd U.N. charade."<sup>7</sup>

In 2001, more controversy followed when the United States was not elected to the Commission and widely perceived human rights violators such as Pakistan, Sudan, and Uganda were elected. The Bush Administration and Congress were frustrated and disappointed by the election outcome. The House of Representatives reacted with a Foreign Relations Authorization Act amendment that linked payment of U.S. arrears to the U.N. regular budget with the United States regaining a seat on the Commission. The Administration, however, stated it would not link U.S. payment of

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<sup>5</sup> Country Reports on Human Rights Practices are submitted to Congress in compliance with Sections 116(d) and 502B(b) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended.

<sup>6</sup> Bacre Waly Ndiaye, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions*, U.N. document E/CN.4/1998/68/Add.3, January 22, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Olson, "U.N. Report Criticizes U.S. for 'Racist' Use of Death Penalty," *The New York Times*, April 7, 1998.

U.N. dues and arrears to the outcome of the Commission elections.<sup>8</sup> Given the controversy over the Commission, both Congress and the Administration supported the U.N. Secretary-General's 2005 proposal that the Commission be disbanded and a new Council created.

## The Human Rights Council and U.N. Reform

The establishment of the U.N. Human Rights Council was part of a comprehensive U.N. reform effort by former U.N. Secretary-General Annan and member states. In March 2005, the Secretary-General outlined a plan for U.N. reform in his report, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All*. He presented human rights, along with economic and social development and peace and security, as one of three “pillars” on which to base the work of the United Nations. In September 2005, heads of state and other high-level officials met for the World Summit at U.N. Headquarters in New York to address issues of development, security, human rights, and reform. The Summit Outcome document listed several mandates for strengthening the United Nations, including reform of the U.N. Security Council, management structure, and human rights bodies. In particular, the Outcome document mandated the creation of a new Council as part of broader U.N. reform efforts.

The United States viewed the Council as a critical element of overall U.N. reform. The Bush Administration identified the establishment of a new Council as a key reform priority necessary to achieve a “strong, effective, and accountable organization.”<sup>9</sup> Congress also saw U.N. human rights reform as a significant component of overall U.N. reform. Recent proposed legislation has linked payment of U.N. assessed dues with the fulfillment of specific reforms, including those involving human rights and the Human Rights Council.<sup>10</sup>

## Council Mandate and Procedures

On March 15, 2006, the U.N. General Assembly passed resolution 60/251, which established the Council and outlined its purpose and responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> Under the resolution, the Council is responsible for “promoting universal respect for the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.” The Council addresses human rights violations, including “gross and systematic violations,” and make recommendations thereon. It also works to promote and coordinate the mainstreaming of human rights within the U.N. system. To achieve the above goals, the Council undertakes a universal periodic review of each U.N. member state's fulfillment of its human rights obligations and commitments.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Press Conference of the President, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, May 11, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> “U.S. Priorities for a Stronger, More Effective United Nations,” U.S. Department of State publication, June 17, 2005. Other Administration reform priorities included budget, management, and administrative reform, Democracy initiatives, and the creation of a comprehensive Convention on Terrorism.

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see the “Congressional Actions” section.

<sup>11</sup> One hundred seventy countries voted in favor of the U.N. General Assembly resolution creating the Council; four voted against (Israel, Marshall Islands, Palau, and the United States), and three abstained (Belarus, Iran, and Venezuela).

<sup>12</sup> The resolution also required that the General Assembly review the status of the Council within five years. This review occurred in March 2011. For more information, see the “Five-Year Review: Outcome and Criticism” section.

Like the Commission, the Council collaborates with OHCHR. It also works to maintain and improve the system of special mandates, expert advice, and complaint procedures instituted by the Commission. In addition, the Council

- promotes human rights education, advisory services, technical assistance, and capacity building with relevant member states;
- serves as a forum for dialogue on thematic human rights issues and recommend opportunities for the development of international human rights law to the U.N. General Assembly; and
- promotes the full implementation of human rights obligations by member states, and follow-up on human rights commitments from other U.N. conferences and summits.

On June 18, 2007, the Council adopted a resolution entitled “Institution-Building of the United Nations Human Rights Council” that addressed many critical details related to the work of the Council, including its mechanisms, procedures, framework, and system of Universal Periodic Review.<sup>13</sup> The following sections address key structural elements of the Council. Any differences between the Council and the Commission are noted where relevant.

### Status Within U.N. Framework

The Council is designated a subsidiary body of the General Assembly, whereas the Commission was a subsidiary body of ECOSOC. This change enhances the standing of human rights within the U.N. framework. In its capacity, the Human Rights Council reports directly to the General Assembly’s 193 members instead of to ECOSOC’s 54 members.

### Membership

The Council comprises 47 members apportioned by geographic region as follows: 13 from African states; 13 from Asian states; 6 from Eastern Europe states; 8 from Latin America and the Caribbean states; and 7 from Western European and other states. Members are elected for a period of three years and may not hold a Council seat for more than two consecutive terms. If a Council member commits “gross and systematic violations of human rights,” the General Assembly may suspend membership with a two-thirds vote of members present. (To date, the Assembly has suspended the membership of one country, Libya. The General Assembly voted to reinstate Libya in November 2011.) For comparison, the Commission was composed of 53 member states elected by members of the ECOSOC. Countries served three year terms with no term limits.<sup>14</sup> (See **Appendix A** for a list of current Council members.)

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<sup>13</sup>During its first year, the Council established four working groups (WGs) to address its working methods: (1) WG to Develop the Modalities of Universal Periodic Review; (2) WG on the Review of Mechanisms and Mandates on the Future System of Expert Advice; (3) WG on the Review of Mechanisms and Mandates and Special Procedures; and (4) WG on the Agenda, Annual Program of Work, Working Methods, and Rules of Procedures. WG members met throughout the year to negotiate and recommend Council procedures and mechanisms. Based on the recommendations, then-Council President Luis Alfonso de Alba proposed a draft institution-building text that was subsequently negotiated and adopted by Council members in Human Rights Council resolution 5/1. See U.N. document, A/HRC/5/L.11, *Report to the General Assembly on the Fifth Session of the Human Rights Council*, June 18, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Regional distribution of seats on the Commission was as follows: 15 members from African states; 12 from Asian states; five from Eastern European states; 11 from Latin America and Caribbean states; and 10 from Western Europe (continued...)



## Elections

All U.N. member states are eligible to run for election to the Council. Countries are elected through secret ballot by the General Assembly with an absolute majority (97 out of 193 votes) required. The resolution instructs countries to consider “the contribution of candidates to the promotion and protection of human rights and their voluntary pledges and commitments” when voting for Council members. A country submitting its name for election must affirm its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights with a written pledge.

A key difference between the Council and the Commission is the direct election of Council members by the U.N. General Assembly. Under the Commission, candidates were first nominated by their regional groups and then the nominees were submitted for election by members of ECOSOC.

## Structure

The Council holds an organizational meeting at the beginning of each year. The Council president presides over the election of four vice-presidents representing other regional groups in the Council. The president and vice-presidents form the Council Bureau, which is responsible for all procedural and organizational matters related to the Council. At the meeting, members elect a president from among Bureau members for a one-year term. Under the Commission, the role of president was held by a chairperson.

## Regular and Special Sessions

The Council is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and meets for three or more sessions per year for a total of 10 weeks or more, including a high-level session. It can hold special sessions at the request of any Council member with the support of one-third of the Council membership. By contrast, the Commission on Human Rights met in Geneva once a year for approximately six weeks, and since 1990 special sessions were held on request.<sup>15</sup>

## Reporting and Review

The Council submits annual reports directly to the General Assembly. At the end of its first five years, the Council was also required to review and report to the General Assembly on its work and functioning.<sup>16</sup> The Commission submitted reports primarily to ECOSOC, a limited membership body, which reported Commission activities to the General Assembly.

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(...continued)

and other states.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of Special Sessions under the Commission included Situation of human rights in Rwanda (1994); Situation in East Timor (1999); and “Grave and massive violations” of the human rights of the Palestinian people by Israel (2000).

<sup>16</sup> For more information on the review, see the “Recent Council Activities” section.

## **Rules of Procedure**

The Council follows the rules of procedure created for committees of the General Assembly.<sup>17</sup> Procedures that relate to the participation of observer states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), specialized agencies, and human rights institutions fall under the practices that were observed by the Commission. These rules are meant to encourage consultation and interaction at Council sessions among Council members, observing U.N. member states, NGOs, and other relevant organizations. Countries that are not Council members do not have voting rights.

## **Universal Periodic Review**

All Council members and U.N. member states are required to undergo a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) that examines a state's fulfillment of its human rights obligations and commitments. The review is an intergovernmental process that facilitates an interactive dialogue between the country under review and the UPR working group, which is composed of the 47 Council members and chaired by the Council president. The first UPR cycle lasted four years, with Council members evaluating 48 states per year during three two-week sessions (six weeks total). During the UPR process, observer states may attend and speak at the working group, and relevant stakeholders (such as NGOs) may also attend the meetings and present information that is assembled by OHCHR. All Council members undergo a review during the term of their membership.

UPR is based on the principles of the U.N. Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the human rights instruments to which the state under review is party. Voluntary pledges by states are also taken into account, as is input from the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and relevant stakeholders, such as NGOs and national human rights institutions. During the review cycles, which began in April 2008, the UPR working group makes initial recommendations, with subsequent reviews focusing on the implementation of recommendations from the previous review. The full Council addresses any cases of consistent non-cooperation with the review. The United States underwent its first UPR in November 2010 and its second in May 2015.<sup>18</sup>

## **Special Procedures**

The Council, like the previous Commission, maintains a system of special procedures that includes country and thematic mandates. Country mandates, which can be renewed, allow for special rapporteurs to examine and advise on human rights situations in specific countries. Thematic mandates, which last for three years and can also be renewed, allow special rapporteurs to analyze major human rights phenomena globally. Similar to the Commission, the special rapporteurs serve in an independent, personal capacity and conduct in-depth research and site visits pertaining to their issue area or country. They can be nominated by U.N. member states, regional groups within the U.N. human rights system, international organizations, NGOs, or individuals. A newly established "consultative group" nominates rapporteurs for country and

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<sup>17</sup> The Commission on Human Rights followed ECOSOC rules of procedure.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on the U.S. UPR, see the "U.S. Universal Periodic Review" and "Issues for Congress" sections.

thematic mandates. Based on the consultative group's input, the Council president submits a list of possible candidates to Council members, who then consider each appointment.

## Complaint Procedure

The Council maintains a complaint procedure that allows individuals and groups to report human rights abuses in a confidential setting. The goal of the procedure is to objectively and efficiently facilitate dialogue and cooperation among the accused state, Council members, and the complainant(s). Working groups on communications and on situations evaluate the complaints and bring them to the attention of the Council. The groups hold two five-day meetings per year to consider complaints and replies from concerned states. The full Council determines whether to take action on the complaints based on recommendations from the working groups. The Council's complaint procedure is very similar to the procedure under the Commission on Human Rights, which also allowed for confidential reporting of human rights abuses.

## Human Rights Council Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee replaces the Council's previous Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. Similar to the Sub-Commission, the Advisory Committee is a subsidiary body of the Council and functions as a "think-tank" for Council members. The committee is composed of 18 experts nominated or endorsed by U.N. member states and elected by Council members through a secret ballot. Upon the Council's request, the Committee provides research-based advice that focuses on thematic human rights issues. It meets twice a year for a maximum of 10 days, and can schedule meetings on an ad hoc basis with approval from Council members. Since it was established, some have criticized the composition of Committee membership. Specifically, some contend that Committee members are driven by political or ideological agendas.<sup>19</sup> The previous Sub-Commission came under criticism for duplicating the work of the Council and disregarding the Council's guidance and direction.<sup>20</sup>

## Recent Council Activities

Since it was established in March 2006, the Council has held 29 regular sessions and 23 special sessions. The regular sessions addressed a mixture of procedural and substantive issues, with a focus on improving working methods of the Council. Seven of the Council's 23 special sessions have focused on Israeli human rights violations in the Occupied Palestinian territories, Lebanon, or East Jerusalem. Four special sessions have focused on Syria, while others have addressed the human rights situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Haiti, Burma (Myanmar), and Cote d'Ivoire, as well as the impact of Boko Haram, the world food crisis, and the global economic crisis on human rights. (See **Appendix B** for a full list of special sessions.)

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<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Hillel Neuer, "U.N.'s Human Rights Advisory Panel is UN-fit to Serve," *New York Daily News*, January 21, 2011, and "U.S. Must Reject Bahrain's Nominee for the U.N. Human Rights Council," *Freedom House*, September 6, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> The Sub-Commission consisted of 26 independent experts elected for four-year terms, and held an annual four-week session in Geneva. Additional information on the Sub-Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights can be found at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/subcom/index.htm>.

## Election Results

The Human Rights Council has held nine elections. The most recent were held in October 2014. Fifteen countries were elected, some of which ran unopposed after being nominated by their regional groups. Newly elected members were Albania, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Botswana, Congo, El Salvador, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Latvia, Netherlands, Nigeria, Paraguay, Portugal, and Qatar. Members began their three-year term on January 1, 2015. The next election will be held in the fall of 2015.<sup>21</sup>

## Institution-Building Framework: Controversial Issues

In June 2007, Council members adopted an institution-building resolution to address the Council's working methods. In the resolution, Council members identified the "Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories," as a permanent part of the Council's agenda and framework for its future program of work. The Council also established a mechanism for confidential complaint procedures, as well as rules of procedure. In addition, the text stated the need for "proposers of a country resolution to secure the broadest possible support for their initiatives (preferably 15 members), before action is taken."<sup>22</sup> Council members also terminated the mandates of the special rapporteur for Belarus and Cuba.<sup>23</sup>

Many U.N. member states and Council observers objected to the Council singling out human rights violations by Israel while terminating the Council's country mandates of widely perceived human rights abusers.<sup>24</sup> At the conclusion of the Council's fifth regular session in Geneva in June 2007, a U.N. spokesperson noted Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's "disappointment" with the Council's decision to "single out only one specific regional item, given the range and scope of allegations of human rights violations throughout the world."<sup>25</sup> In response to the Council's decision to terminate the country mandates of Cuba and Belarus, Ban released a statement that emphasized "the need to consider all situations of possible human rights violations equally," and noted that "not having a Special Rapporteur assigned to a particular country does not absolve that country from its obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and every other human rights treaty."<sup>26</sup> Ban, however, welcomed and supported the new procedures for universal periodic review, calling them "strong and meaningful," and observing that they "send a clear

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<sup>21</sup> See **Appendix A** for a full list of Council members broken down by regional group and term. For a discussion of issues related to Council elections, see the "Issues for Congress" section.

<sup>22</sup> U.N. document A/HRC/5/L.11, p. 29. This provision was a point of contention among Council members. During negotiations, China maintained that a two-thirds majority should be required to take action on country-specific resolutions—a position that EU countries did not accept. Multiple credible sources confirm that the European Union (EU) agreed to terminate the Council's Cuba and Belarus mandates if China would agree to the language in the adopted text.

<sup>23</sup> Council members maintained country mandates for countries such as Burma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, North Korea, Somalia, and Sudan.

<sup>24</sup> For a synthesis of U.N. member state views, see U.N. press release, "Human Rights Council Hears Praise and Criticism About Adopted Text on Institution Building of Council," June 19, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, June 21, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> U.N. press release, "Secretary-General Urges Human Rights Council to Take Responsibilities Seriously, Stresses Importance of Considering All Violations Equally," June 20, 2007.

message that all countries will have their human rights record and performance examined at regular intervals.”<sup>27</sup>

## **Five-Year Review: Outcome and Criticism**

On June 17, 2011, the U.N. General Assembly adopted resolution 65/281, which was the result of a review on the work and functioning of the Human Rights Council after five years.<sup>28</sup> It was adopted by a vote of 154 in favor, 4 against (including the United States), and no abstentions. In the resolution, member states agreed to maintain the Council’s status as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly. They also adopted several procedural changes to the Council’s work, such as moving the start of its yearly membership cycle from June to January (thus moving Council elections from the spring to the fall), creating an office of the Council President, modifying UPR speaking procedures, and establishing future review mechanisms.<sup>29</sup> The adoption of the resolution represented the culmination of member states’ year-long effort to review the status of the Council in both Geneva and New York. Review process participants could propose and discuss possible reforms and modifications to the Council’s work and structure through various working groups and informal consultations.

The outcome of the five-year review has been criticized by some human rights groups and governments—particularly the United States—for not sufficiently addressing what many saw as the Council’s lack of effectiveness in addressing human rights issues. During negotiations leading up to the resolution, many proposed changes were rejected by other governments that argued that the Council did not need reform, prompting some review participants to contend that there was a “lack of goodwill [among some states] to address the weaknesses” in the Council’s work.<sup>30</sup> The United States stated that the five-year review did not yield “even minimally positive results,” which forced it to “disassociate” itself from the outcome.<sup>31</sup> U.S. representatives expressed particular concern regarding two key issues: (1) the Council’s focus on Israel, particularly the continued inclusion of a permanent item on the Council’s agenda addressing human rights in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories; and (2) the Council’s inability to address the “critical problem” of Council membership. (Many agree that the membership of widely perceived human rights abusers discredits the Council.)<sup>32</sup>

Canada, which also voted against the resolution, argued that the review process did not address issues important to the Council’s functioning, such as improving the UPR process, enhancing member state cooperation with special procedures, and improving the credibility of Council

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<sup>27</sup> U.N. press release, SG/SM/11053, HRC/8, June 20, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> The adoption of resolution 65/281 fulfilled member states obligations under General Assembly resolution 60/251, adopted in 2006, which established the Council and decided that member states should review the Council’s status after five years. The other three countries that voted against the resolution were Canada, Israel, and Palau.

<sup>29</sup> U.N. document, A/RES/65/281, adopted June 17, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Statement by Human Rights Watch at the second session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Review of the Human Rights Council, “Review of the Human Rights Council: A Deplorable Lack of Progress,” February 9, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Explanation of Vote by John F. Sammis, Deputy Representative to the Economic and Social Council, in the General Assembly on the Human Rights Council Review, U.S. Mission to the United Nations, New York, June 17, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* During negotiations, the United States had proposed that to improve Council membership all regional groups should be required to run competitive slates. Other governments did not support this proposal. The United States was “dismayed” when a more modest recommendation that called on candidate states to hold interactive dialogues on their human rights records with human rights groups was also blocked.

membership. Similar to the United States, it expressed concern regarding the Council's decision to continue the permanent agenda item focusing on human rights in Palestine and other occupied territories.<sup>33</sup>

## **Obama Administration Policy**

In March 2009, the Obama Administration announced that it would run for a seat on the Human Rights Council. The United States was elected as a Council member by the U.N. General Assembly in May of the same year. After the vote, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Susan Rice recognized the Council as a “flawed body that has not lived up to its potential,” but stated that the United States was “looking forward to working from within a broad cross section of member states to strengthen and reform” the Council.<sup>34</sup> The Administration ran for, and was elected to, a second consecutive Council seat in November 2012. U.S. officials stated that although the Administration continued to be disappointed by the Council's focus on Israel, the institution would be stronger with U.S. membership.<sup>35</sup> The United States' current term will expire on December 31, 2015. Under Council rules, it is not eligible to run for a seat after serving two consecutive terms.

## **Actions and Priorities**

According to the Administration, the United States has played a key role in a number of Council actions since it became a member in 2009, including

- the establishment of a special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran;
- a special session on Cote d'Ivoire and the creation of a Commission of Inquiry to investigate human rights abuses by the government;
- a special session on the human rights situation in Syria where the Council unequivocally condemned the use of violence against peaceful protestors by Syrian authorities;
- a special session on Libya in February 2011 that led to the eventual suspension of Libya's Council membership;
- the creation of a special rapporteur for Eritrea, and the recreation of a special rapporteur for Belarus (which had previously been eliminated in 2006); and
- the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which drew increased

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<sup>33</sup> U.N. document, GA/11101, “Five Years After Creation, General Assembly Maintains Human Rights Council as Subsidiary Body, Concluding Review of Work, Functioning,” June 17, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Mission to the United Nations press release #095(09), “Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative, Regarding the Election of the U.S. to the Human Rights Council at the General Assembly Stakeout,” May 12, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Assistant Secretary Esther Brimmer on World Press Freedom, Remarks to the Washington Foreign Press Center, May 3, 2011, and “Fact Sheet: Advancing U.S. Interests at the United Nations,” Department of State, April 6, 2011.

international attention to North Korean human rights abuses and contributed to the addition of DPRK to the Security Council's agenda.<sup>36</sup>

The Administration reports that it also played a lead role in adopting Council resolutions on (1) sexual orientation and gender identity, (2) Internet freedom and human rights, and (3) the right to a nationality. It also strongly supported the establishment of a working group of independent experts on discrimination against women.<sup>40</sup>

### The Human Rights Council and the George W. Bush Administration

**Decision Not to Run for Council Seat (2006 – 2008).** The Bush Administration opposed the Human Rights Council structure agreed to in March 2006, and consequently the United States was one of four countries to vote against the U.N. General Assembly resolution creating the Council. The Administration stated that it did not have confidence that the new Council would be better than its predecessor, but at the same time indicated that it would work with other member states to ensure the Council was strong and operated as effectively and efficiently as possible. In April 2006, the Bush Administration announced that it would not run for a Council seat in the first election.

**Withholding Council Funds (2008).** In July 2007, the Bush Administration stated that it remained committed to supporting human rights in the multilateral system, although it was “deeply skeptical that the U.N.’s Human Rights Council will, in the near future, play a constructive role in our efforts.”<sup>37</sup> The Administration also maintained that despite its concerns, it would continue to support U.S. funding of the Council. In April 2008, however, then-U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Zalmay Khalilzad stated that the United States would withhold a portion of its contributions to the 2008 U.N. regular budget equivalent to the U.S. share of the Human Rights Council budget.<sup>38</sup>

In June 2008, a State Department spokesperson announced that the Bush Administration would engage with the Council “only when we [the United States] believe that there are matters of deep national interest before the Council.” According to the official, instead of focusing on human rights situations around the world, the Council “turned into a forum that seems to be almost solely focused on bashing Israel.”<sup>39</sup> The official added that future U.S. participation would be “ad hoc.” Bush Administration representatives reported that the United States continued to work with other multilateral human rights mechanisms, such as the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the General Assembly’s Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural).

## U.S. Universal Periodic Review

The United States participated in its first Universal Periodic Review (the review) in November 2010. Five years later, United States underwent its second review. In preparation for the reviews, the State Department organized consultations with civil society on human rights issues that were

<sup>36</sup> “Security Council, in Divided Vote, Puts Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s Situation on Agenda following Findings of Unspeakable Human Rights Abuses,” U.N. Press Release SC/11720, December 22, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Remarks by Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs Kristin Silverberg, before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Democracy, and Human Rights, July 26, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Mission to the United Nations press release #075(08), “Statement by Zalmay Khalilzad on the Durban II Conference and the Human Rights Council,” April 8, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Daily Press Briefing, Sean McCormack, Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, June 6, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Drawn from various Administration statements and documents, including “Key U.S. Accomplishments at the U.N. Human Rights Council: Factsheet,” U.S. Department of State (DOS), March 30, 2011; DOS Fact Sheet, “Key U.S. Accomplishments at the U.N. Human Rights Council’s 20<sup>th</sup> Session,” July 7, 2012; DOS Press Statement by Victoria Nuland, “Accomplishments at the Human Rights Council 21<sup>st</sup> Session,” October 3, 2012; Remarks by Ambassador Eileen Donahoe at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, “The Human Rights Council: How Relevant is it and what is the Role of the United States?” January 24, 2013; and DOS fact sheets, “Key U.S. Outcomes at the U.N. Human Rights Council’s 22<sup>nd</sup> Session,” March 25, 2013, “Key U.S. Outcomes at the U.N. Human Rights Council’s 24<sup>th</sup> Session,” October 1, 2013; and “Remarks by John Kerry at the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council,” March 2, 2015.

held in a number of U.S. cities, including Detroit, El Paso, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, DC.<sup>41</sup> Feedback from the consultations was incorporated into the Administration's official reports to the UPR panel.

During both review processes, a number of governments and NGOs asked questions and made statements on the human rights situation in the United States. They also made recommendations to the U.S. delegation regarding specific aspects of the U.S. UPR reports and other related issues. For the 2010 review, governments made 228 recommendations on a range of perceived human rights issues, and the United States accepted in whole or in part 173 of these recommendations.<sup>42</sup> In the United States' initial response to the first review, then-Legal Adviser Harold Koh acknowledged that many of the recommendations "fit well" with Administration policy and could be implemented "in due course." He stated that other recommendations, however, were purely political and could not be taken seriously. Still others warranted "fuller discussions" within the U.S. government and among civil society.<sup>43</sup> For the 2015 review, governments focused on the implementation of the accepted recommendations and the development of human rights situations in the United States.<sup>44</sup> The final outcome of the 2015 review is expected to be adopted by the Council at its 30<sup>th</sup> regular session in September and October of 2015.

## Congressional Actions

Since the Human Rights Council was established in 2006, Members of Congress have enacted or introduced legislation that aims to limit U.S. contributions to the Human Rights Council due to concerns over the Council's effectiveness.<sup>45</sup> For example:

- In FY2008 and FY2009 foreign operations appropriations bills, Congress specified that none of the funds appropriated in either bill would be made available for U.S. contributions to the Council unless (1) the Secretary of State certified to the appropriations committees that funding the Council was "in the national interest of the United States" or (2) the United States was a member of the Council.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> A summary of the consultations in 2010 is available at <http://www.state.gov/drl/upr/summaries/index.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> Examples of recommendations included ratifying human rights treaties that it is not yet a party to; ensuring and raising awareness of the rights of lesbians, gays, and transsexuals; creating policies to promote and ensure the rights of indigenous people; extending a standing invitation to all Council special procedures; instituting a national moratorium on the death penalty; eliminating all forms of torture and ill-treatment of detainees by military or civilian personnel in any territory; closing, without delay, all detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay. These represent a small sample of the recommendations made by governments. A full list is available in U.N. document, A/HRC/WG.6/9/L.9, dated November 10, 2010, *Draft Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: United States of America*, pp. 13-24. Also see State Department, 2015, at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/upr/recommendations/index.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> Remarks by Harold Koh, Legal Advisor, Department of State, "Response of the United States of America to Recommendations of the United Nations Human Rights Council," Geneva, Switzerland, November 9, 2010. Also see *Report of the United States of America, Submitted to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in Conjunction with the Universal Periodic Review Response to the U.N. Human Rights Council Working Group Report*, March 10, 2011, at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/upr/157986.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> More information on the 2015 review is available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/upr/2015/> and <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/USSession22.aspx>.

<sup>45</sup> For information on possible political and budget implications of withholding Council funds, see the "Issues for Congress" section.

<sup>46</sup> Sec. 695 of Division J of P.L. 110-161, the Consolidated Appropriation Act, 2008; and Sec.7052 of Division H of (continued...)



- FY2010 foreign operations appropriations required that the Secretary of State report to the appropriations committees on resolutions adopted in the Human Rights Council not later than 30 days after the enactment of the bill and every 180 days thereafter through the end of the fiscal year.<sup>47</sup>
- Proposed stand-alone bills have called for U.S. withdrawal from the Council or required that the United States withhold assessed contributions to the Council through the U.N. regular budget and any voluntary contributions.<sup>48</sup>

Most recently, in November 2014, Congress adopted the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2015, which required that funds appropriated by the act may be made available in support of the Human Rights Council if the Secretary of States reports to the Committees on Appropriations that participation in the Council is in the national interest of the United States. The Administration is also required to report to the appropriations committees on resolutions adopted by the Human Rights Council, as well as “steps taken to remove Israel as a permanent agenda item.”<sup>49</sup> Similar language was enacted in FY2014 annual foreign operations appropriations legislation.<sup>50</sup>

## Issues for Congress

The 114<sup>th</sup> Congress may remain interested in the work of the Council both as a mechanism for addressing human rights situations worldwide and as an element of broader U.N. reform. Ultimately, future U.S. policy toward the Council will likely depend on whether the United States views the Council’s work as effective and credible.

## U.S. Funding of the Council

Comprehensive U.N. reform is a pressing issue for Congress, and the Human Rights Council is a component of this broader U.N. reform effort. As a result, there is continued congressional interest in U.S. funding of the Council. Specifically, some Members of Congress have proposed that the United States withhold a proportionate share of its assessed contributions, approximately 22%, from the U.N. regular budget, which is used to fund the Council.

The Congressional Budget Office estimated that U.S. contributions to the Human Rights Council for 2008 and 2009 were approximately \$1.5 million per year.<sup>51</sup> Since 1980, the United States has withheld proportionate shares of its contributions to the U.N. regular budget for U.N. programs and activities it has opposed. However, withholding Council funds in this manner would be a largely symbolic policy action because assessed contributions finance the entire U.N. regular budget and not specific parts of it.

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(...continued)

P.L. 111-8, the Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Sec. 7052 of Division F of P.L. 111-117, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> See Title V of H.R. 3155 [113<sup>th</sup>], the United Nations Transparency, Accountability, and Reform Act of 2013; and Title IV of S. 1313 [113<sup>th</sup>], the United Nations, Transparency, Accountability and Reform Act of 2013. The bills have been referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, respectively.

<sup>49</sup> See Sec. 7048(c) of Division J of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2015 (P.L. 113-235).

<sup>50</sup> See Sec. 7048(c) of Division K of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014 (P.L. 113-76).

<sup>51</sup> Congressional Budget Office Cost Estimate for S. 1698 (110<sup>th</sup>), July 16, 2007.

## Overall Effectiveness of the Council

Since its establishment, the Council has faced considerable criticism from governments, NGOs, and other observers who contend that it does not effectively address human rights issues. Many argue that this apparent ineffectiveness stems from a number of political and organizational issues.

### Focus on Specific Countries/Bloc Voting

The Council's focus on Israel during its regular and special sessions, as well as its inclusion as a permanent agenda item—continues to alarm many countries and human rights organizations. After the first elections, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held 17 seats on the Council—accounting for about one-third of the votes needed to call a special session. (Currently, 13 members of the OIC are Council members.) In addition, some experts contend that blocs such as the African Group and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) tend to view economic and security issues as more important than human rights violations. Consequently, some argue, the Council has held more special sessions on Israel than on any other country or human rights situation.

### Credible Membership: Role of Regional Groups in Council Elections

Some Council members and observers worry that the process of elections by regional group does not allow for competition among member states running for Council seats. In the May 2011 election, for example, members from three of the five regional groups—African states, Asian states, and the Western European and Other states—ran unopposed after regional groups nominated the exact number of countries required to fill Council vacancies. In the November 2012 election, all of the regional groups, with the exception of the Western Europe and Other States, have nominated the same number of countries that are required to fill vacant seats.<sup>52</sup> A similar situation occurred in the 2013 and 2014 Council elections.<sup>53</sup> Such actions limit the number of choices and guarantee the election of nominated member states regardless of their human rights records.

On the other hand, Council supporters contend that the composition of Council membership is an improvement over the composition of Commission membership. They emphasize that countries widely viewed as the most egregious human rights abusers—such as Belarus, Sudan and Syria—were pressured not to run or were defeated in Council elections because of the new membership criteria and process. Many also highlight the General Assembly's March 2011 decision to suspend Libya's membership as an example of the Council's improved membership mechanisms.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> For example, the African States and the Asia-Pacific States both nominated five countries for five vacancies; the Eastern Europeans States nominated two countries for two vacancies; and the Latin American & Caribbean States nominated three countries for three vacancies. The Western European and Other States nominated four countries—Germany, Greece, Ireland, and the United States—for three vacant seats.

<sup>53</sup> In the November 2013 elections, two of the five regional groups nominated the same number of countries as there were seats available. In October 2014, three of the groups nominated the same number of countries as seats available.

<sup>54</sup> A/RES/65/265, March 1, 2011. Also see Human Rights Council resolution S-15/1, February 25, 2011. Libya was reinstated as member in November 2011.

## Role of the Universal Period Review Process

Overall, many governments, observers, and policymakers support the Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. They maintain that it provides an important forum for governments, NGOs, and others to discuss and bring attention to human rights situations in specific countries that may not otherwise receive international attention. According to supporters, many governments and human rights activists approach the UPR process with a "seriousness of purpose" that leads to "productive engagement" toward the correction of human right violations. Some countries have reportedly made commitments based on the outcome of the UPR process.<sup>55</sup> In addition, they emphasize that NGOs and human rights groups operating in various countries use UPR recommendations as a political and diplomatic tool for achieving human rights.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, some human rights experts have been critical of UPR. Many are concerned that the UPR submissions and statements of governments widely perceived to be human rights abusers are taken at face value rather than being challenged by other governments. Some also contend that the UPR process gives these same countries a platform to criticize countries that may have positive human rights records. Many experts have also expressed concern regarding member states' response to and participation in the UPR process. For example, North Korea's rejection of the recommendations made by the UPR Working Group in 2009 alarmed many governments and human rights advocates. Moreover, some experts have disagreed with Israel's March 2012 decision to disengage from the Council and refrain from participating in the UPR process. (In response to such criticism, Israel argued that it was unfairly and disproportionately targeted by many Council members.<sup>57</sup>

Some experts and policymakers have also expressed concern regarding the role of NGOs in UPR. They argue that the three-hour review process for each country does not provide NGOs and other speakers with sufficient opportunity to present their cases. During some reviews, for instance, many NGOs were unable to make statements due to lack of time. In addition, some have expressed concern regarding points of order and other procedures being used some countries to possibly intimidate NGOs or to block any statements that do not specifically address the countries' UPR reports.<sup>58</sup> Some governments, including the United States, had hoped that improvements would be made to the UPR process through the Council's five-year review, particularly related to the length of time provided to speakers; however, member states did not act on this issue during the review process.

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<sup>55</sup> Egypt, for example, stated that it would reform its criminal code to include a definition of torture. Jordan agreed to undertake a comprehensive review of the conditions of its prison system. It is unclear whether these commitments have or will be met.

<sup>56</sup> "U.S. Engagement with the U.N. Human Rights System," The Carter Center and Brookings Institution, February 17, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Raphael Ahren, "U.S. Ambassador Empathizes with Israel Cutting Ties to UNHCR," *Times of Israel*, March 26, 2012, and "Jerusalem to Boycott U.N. Human Rights Review," *Times of Israel*, January 27, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Brett D. Schaefer, "U.N. Human Rights Council Whitewash Argues Against U.S. Participation," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 2255, April 2, 2009.

### The “Goldstone Report” on Human Rights in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories

Members of Congress have demonstrated considerable interest in the findings of Council mechanisms that address human rights and Israel, particularly a September 2009 report mandated by the Council, *Human Rights in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories, Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict* (also referred to as the “Goldstone Report” after the main author, Richard Goldstone). The report concluded there is “evidence of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law” by Israel during the Gaza conflict of late 2008-early 2009 and that Israel committed actions amounting to war crimes, and possibly crimes against humanity.<sup>59</sup> The report also found evidence that Palestinian armed groups committed war crimes, as well as possibly crimes against humanity, in their repeated launching of rockets and mortars into southern Israel.<sup>60</sup> In November 2009, the House of Representatives passed a resolution calling on the President and Secretary of State to oppose unequivocally any endorsement or further consideration of the Goldstone Report in multilateral fora.<sup>61</sup>

The report garnered further attention in April 2011, when Richard Goldstone authored an editorial in the *Washington Post* which stated that if he had known during the fact-find mission what he knows now, “the Goldstone Report would have been a different document.” According to Goldstone, the report’s conclusion that Israel committed possible war crimes may have been incorrect.<sup>62</sup>

Members of Congress have expressed concern with these comments. On April 14, 2011, for example, the Senate passed S.Res. 138, which called on the United Nations to rescind the Goldstone Report. Moreover, bills introduced in both the House and Senate call on the United States to withhold contributions to the United Nations until it formally retracts the report.<sup>63</sup>

## Benefits and Drawbacks of U.S. Membership

There is debate among U.S. policymakers regarding whether the United States should serve as a member of the Human Rights Council. Supporters of U.S. participation contend that the United States should work from within to build coalitions with like-minded countries and steer the Council toward a more balanced approach to addressing human rights situations. Council membership, they argue, places the United States in a position to advocate its human rights policies and priorities. Supporters maintain that U.S. leadership in the Council has led to several promising Council developments, including increased attention to country-specific situations (demonstrated by recent resolutions addressing human rights in Cote d’Ivoire and Syria); the

<sup>59</sup> U.N. document A/HRC/12/48, September 25, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> For the Human Rights Council resolution mandating the report, see U.N. document, A/HRC/S-9/L.1, January 12, 2009. United Nations Press Release, “UN Fact Finding Mission finds strong evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the Gaza conflict; calls for end to impunity,” September 15, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> H.Res. 867 [111<sup>th</sup>], introduced on October 23, 2009, by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Goldstone, “Reconsidering the Goldstone Report on Israel and War Crimes,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2011. Goldstone stated: “The allegations of intentionality by Israel were based on the deaths and injuries to civilians in situations where our fact-finding mission had no evidence on which to draw any other reasonable conclusion. While the investigations published by the Israeli military and recognized in the U.N. committee’s report have established the validity of some of the issues that we investigated in cases involving individual soldiers, they also indicate that civilians were not intentionally targeted as a matter of policy ... I regret that our fact-finding mission did not have such evidence explaining the circumstances in which we said civilians in Gaza were targeted, because it probably would have influenced our findings about intentionality and war crimes.”

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, S. 923 [112<sup>th</sup>], “A bill to withhold United States contributions to the United Nations until the United Nations formally retracts the final report of the ‘United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict’;” and Title IV of H.R. 3155 [113<sup>th</sup>], the United Nations Transparency, Accountability, and Reform Act of 2013 (also see Title V of the Senate version of this act, S. 1313 [113<sup>th</sup>].)

creation of a special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus, Eritrea, Iran, and Mali; the Council's renewal of its mandate in Sudan; and its continued engagement on human rights situations in North Korea and Somalia.<sup>64</sup>

Opponents contend that U.S. membership provides the Council with undeserved legitimacy. The United States, they maintain, should not be a part of a body that focuses disproportionately on one country (Israel) while ignoring human rights situations in countries that are widely believed to violate human rights. Moreover, critics maintain that the United States should not serve on a body that would allow possible human rights abusers to serve as members. Some observers were disappointed with the Council's June 2007 decision to eliminate the country mandates of Cuba and Belarus while at the same time making human rights in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories a permanent part of its agenda. Many also suggest that U.S. membership on the Council provides countries such as Iran and North Korea with a platform to criticize the United States. They argue that the Universal Periodic Review process, in particular, may provide "fodder" for governments aiming to divert criticism from their own human rights records.<sup>65</sup> Some critics have also expressed serious concern regarding what they view as the failure of member states to address the Council's weaknesses as part of the five-year review that was agreed to in March 2011.<sup>66</sup>

## **Role of Observer Status**

Under Council rules, members may not serve more than two consecutive terms. The United States' second consecutive term is expected to end on December 31, 2015, after which the United States will be a Council observer. Observer states are not eligible to vote in the Council, but they may participate in the UPR process and attend and participate in regular and special sessions of the Council. The ability of the United States to promote its human rights agenda within the U.N. framework may be significantly affected by its observer status. Many Council members may be interested in U.S. statements and policies, but the United States' inability to vote may diminish its influence on the work of the Council. As a result, the United States may have to rely on close collaboration and cooperation with like-minded countries to further its human rights agenda.

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, the Brookings Institution, Human Rights First, and other NGOs to Chairpersons of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, regarding the "U.S. Role at the Human Rights Council," January 19, 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Some were particularly concerned with the Obama Administration's mention of Arizona immigration law S.B. 1070 in the United States UPR report. See, for instance, Brett D. Schaefer, "U.S. Targeted by Human Rights Abusers at Its Universal Periodic Review," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 3050, November 5, 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Brett Schaefer, *The U.S. Should Pursue an Alternative to the U.N. Human Rights Council*, The Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder No. 2572, June 22, 2011.

## Appendix A. Human Rights Council Membership

**Table A-I. Human Rights Council Membership, by Regional Group**

| <b>African States<br/>(13)</b> | <b>Asian States<br/>(13)</b>   | <b>Latin American<br/>and<br/>Caribbean States<br/>(8)</b> | <b>Eastern<br/>European<br/>States (6)</b>                | <b>Western<br/>European and<br/>Other States (7)</b> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Algeria (2016)                 | Bangladesh (2017)              | Argentina (2015)   | Albania (2017)  | France (2016)  |
| Botswana (2017)                | China (2016)                   | Bolivia (2017)   | Estonia (2015)  | Germany (2015)                                       |
| Congo (2017)                   | India (2017)                   | Brazil (2015)  | Latvia (2017)   | Ireland (2015)                                       |
| Cote d'Ivoire<br>(2015)        | Indonesia (2017)               | Cuba (2016)  | Montenegro<br>(2015)                                      | Netherlands<br>(2017)                                |
| Ethiopia<br>(2015)             | Japan (2015)                   | El Salvador (2017)   | Russian<br>Federation (2016)                              | Portugal (2017)                                      |
| Gabon<br>(2015)                | Kazakhstan (2015)              | Mexico (2016)  | The Former<br>Yugoslav Republic<br>of Macedonia<br>(2016) | United Kingdom<br>(2016)                             |
| Ghana (2017)                   | Maldives (2016)                | Paraguay (2017)  |   | United States<br>(2015)                              |
| Kenya<br>(2015)                | Pakistan (2015)                | Peru (2014)  |   |  |
| Morocco (2016)                 | Qatar (2017)                   | Venezuela (2015)   |   |  |
| Namibia (2016)                 | Republic of Korea<br>(2015)    |  |   |  |
| Nigeria (2017)                 | Saudi Arabia<br>(2016)         |  |   |  |
| Sierra Leone<br>(2015)         | United Arab<br>Emirates (2015) |  |   |  |
| South Africa<br>(2016)         | Vietnam (2016)                 |  |   |  |

**Source:** U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

**Notes:** Council membership is staggered by year. All Council members are eligible for reelection for a full second term. Dates represent year of term end.

# Appendix B. Human Rights Council Special Sessions

**Table B-I. Human Rights Council Special Sessions, by Date and Subject**

| Session/Subject   | Dates            |
|---|------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> /Human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory   | July 5-6, 2006   |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> /Grave situation of Human Rights in Lebanon caused by Israeli Military Operations   | Aug. 10-11, 2006 |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> /Israeli Military Incursions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories  | Nov. 15, 2006    |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> /Human Rights Situation in Darfur   | Dec. 12-13, 2006 |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> /Human Rights Situation in Myanmar (Burma)  | Oct. 2, 2007     |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> /Violations Stemming from Israeli Incursions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory  | Jan. 24, 2008    |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> /Negative Impact on the Realization of the Rights to Food of the Worsening of the World Food Crisis, Caused inter alia by the Soaring Food Prices | May 22, 2008     |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> /Situation of the Human Rights in the East of the DRC   | Nov. 28, 2008    |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> /The Grave Violations of Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory including the recent aggression in the occupied Gaza Strip            | Jan. 9, 2009     |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> /The Impact of the Global Economic and Financial Crises on the Universal Realization and Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights                     | Feb. 20, 2009    |
| 11 <sup>th</sup> /The human rights situation in Sri Lanka   | May 26, 2009     |
| 12 <sup>th</sup> / The human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and East Jerusalem  | Oct. 15-16, 2009 |
| 13 <sup>th</sup> /Support to the recovery process in Haiti: A Human Rights approach   | Jan. 27, 2010    |
| 14 <sup>th</sup> /The situation of human rights in Cote d'Ivoire since the elections on 28 November 2010  | Dec. 23, 2010    |
| 15 <sup>th</sup> /The situation of human rights in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya   | Feb. 25, 2011    |
| 16 <sup>th</sup> /The situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic   | Apr. 29, 2011    |
| 17 <sup>th</sup> /The situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic   | Aug. 22, 2011    |
| 18 <sup>th</sup> /The human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic  | Dec. 2, 2011     |
| 19 <sup>th</sup> /The deteriorating human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic and the recent killings in El-Houleh                                       | June 1, 2012     |
| 20 <sup>th</sup> /Situation of human rights in the Central African Republic and technical assistance in the field of human rights                                 | Jan. 20, 2013    |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> /The human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem  | July 23, 2014    |

| <b>Session/Subject</b>  | <b>Dates</b>  |
|---|---------------|
| 22 <sup>nd</sup> /The human rights situation in Iraq in light of abuses committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups | Sept. 1, 2014 |
| 23 <sup>rd</sup> /The terrorist attacks and human rights abuses and violations committed by the terrorist group Boko Haram                          | April 1, 2015 |

**Source:** U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

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