

Trump Administration Withdraws U.S. From U.N. Human Rights Council



Nikki R. Haley, the American ambassador to the United Nations, speaking to the General Assembly last week in New York. Credit Don Emmert/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

WASHINGTON — The United States withdrew on Tuesday from the world's most important human rights body in protest of its frequent criticism of Israel's treatment of Palestinians. It was the latest effort by the Trump administration to pull away from international organizations and agreements that it finds objectionable.

It was the first time a member has voluntarily left the United Nations Human Rights Council. The United States now joins Iran, North Korea and Eritrea as the only countries that refuse to participate in the council's meetings and deliberations.

“Earlier this year, as it has in previous years, the Human Rights Council passed five resolutions against Israel — more than the number passed against North Korea, Iran and Syria combined,” Nikki R. Haley, the American ambassador to the United Nations, said in a speech on Tuesday. “This disproportionate focus and unending hostility toward Israel is clear proof that the council is motivated by political bias, not by human rights.”

“If the Human Rights Council is going to attack countries that uphold human rights and shield countries that abuse human rights, then America should not provide it with any credibility,” Ms. Haley said.

Human rights advocates denounced the decision.

“All this administration seems to care about when it comes to the council is defending Israel,” said John Sifton, an advocacy director at Human Rights Watch, a nonprofit organization. “If the Trump administration’s complaint is that the council is biased and flawed, they’ve just made it more so.”

In a series of posts on Twitter, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel welcomed the decision. “The U.S. decision to leave this prejudiced body is an unequivocal statement that enough is enough,” he wrote on Tuesday.

But Antonio Guterres, the United Nations secretary general, said through a spokeswoman that he would have preferred that the United States remained in the council. He noted that the United Nations’ human rights “architecture” plays an important role in the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide.

Conservatives have been complaining about the council since its inception in 2006, and the administration of President George W. Bush refused to join the body, citing concerns of bias. Ms. Haley has been a fierce critic of the council since joining the Trump administration and is known to have pushed for a withdrawal.

Elliott Abrams, a former Republican diplomat and now a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, said that the Human Rights Council’s bias against Israel was too much to ignore.

“There is always an argument for staying, which is that the United States will be in a better position to help defend Israel,” Mr. Abrams said. “But this council is

hopelessly compromised, so leaving is the right choice.”

The withdrawal comes as the Trump administration faces condemnation by rights groups and governments worldwide for its decision to separate children from their families at the border. On Monday, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, the United Nations High Commissioner for human rights, called for an immediate end to the practice, describing such a tactic as inflicting “abuse on children” and “unconscionable.”

Mr. Trump has turned decades of American foreign policy on its head by attacking or undermining much of the rules-based order that the United States established after World War II. Previous administrations viewed the interlocking network of alliances, trade rules and international organizations as beneficial to the United States.

But Mr. Trump has ripped up the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal — both of which were negotiated under the strong influence of world powers. He has also imposed tariffs on the United States’ closest allies and left the Group of 7 summit meeting this month in chaos and recriminations after he denounced Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada as “very dishonest & weak.”

The Trump administration has made clear that it will not countenance the level of criticism and what it describes as slanted resolutions by the Human Rights Council that have historically been directed at the United States and Israel. On her first day as ambassador, Ms. Haley warned that “for those who don’t have our back, we’re taking names.”

Rob Berschinski, a senior vice president at Human Rights First, another nonprofit organization, conceded that no one believed the human rights council was perfect. But, he said, leaving it is a mistake.

“Countries like China, Russia and Venezuela will applaud this decision because we are freely giving up leverage over them that we previously had,” Mr. Berschinski said.

Ms. Haley has castigated the 47-member Human Rights Council, calling it a haven for hypocrisy and an outlet for isolating Israel, the United States’ main ally in the Middle East.

A year ago, she addressed the council at its opening session in Geneva with a sharply critical speech, questioning whether it “even supports human rights or is merely a showcase for dictatorships that use their membership to whitewash their brutality.”

At the time, Ms. Haley asserted that the United States did not seek to leave the council but wanted to “re-establish the council’s legitimacy.”

Among her demands was to change the way seats are won on the council so that countries with histories of rights abuses cannot occupy them. But she said on Tuesday that Russia, China, Cuba and Egypt resisted those overhaul efforts, and others were unwilling to challenge the status quo.

In his own brief remarks on Tuesday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called the Human Rights Council an obstacle to the progress of human rights and a threat to the United States.

“When organizations undermine our national interests and our allies, we will not be complicit,” he said. “When they seek to infringe on our national sovereignty, we will not be silent.”

Rick Gladstone contributed reporting from New York.

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