

March 6, 2018

The Honorable Rex Wayne Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to encourage you to redouble the efforts of the United States to reform and strengthen the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), particularly in light of signs from Geneva, the seat of the UNHRC, that U.S. calls for reform have indeed produced new momentum toward change. In particular, we encourage you to recommend that the President expeditiously nominate both a U.S. Ambassador as its lead representative to the Office of the United Nations and International Organizations in Geneva, as well as another person as Ambassador to the UNHRC. Sustained, dedicated and effective U.S. leadership at the Ambassadorial level at the UNHRC is essential to bring about change, especially at this critical time. The presence of senior officials of appropriate diplomatic rank in Geneva on a permanent basis is vital to American success there.

We have written to you in the past regarding the U.S. reform objectives for the Human Rights Council including addressing the Council's disproportionate focus on Israel and improving the quality of its membership. We reiterate our conviction that U.S. engagement with the Council is essential if these and other reforms are to be realized and if other key U.S. interests – such as focusing international attention on the worst human rights violations and violators in the world – are to be advanced effectively.

In recent months, as the U.S. has made its expectations for changes in the Council clear, we have seen the UNHRC respond positively in some areas. Recently, many UNHRC members expressed support for restructuring the Council's meeting schedule in ways that could both increase its efficiency and make progress towards lessening the institution's structural bias against Israel. Unfortunately, narrow opposition to this proposal has prevented its adoption thus far. It seems clear that sustained U.S. diplomatic efforts at a high level in Geneva – such as the kind that dedicated American Ambassadors could provide – would advance this and other key U.S. reform proposals and ensure that pernicious proposals put forward by others are rejected. Moreover, continued U.S. efforts to ensure that the UNHRC adopts resolutions that require in-depth monitoring and reporting on human rights abuses in many countries could even further diminish the proportion of UNHRC resolutions that target Israel.

High-level U.S. diplomatic engagement could also facilitate further efforts to encourage the suspension of Member States from the Council that engage in patterns of serious human rights violations while also ensuring that more States with solid human rights records seek membership on the UNHRC. Such action could prevent those with the worst human rights records from being elected to the body in the future and make the adoption of further reform measures more likely.

Over the course of the last year, the U.S. has seen first-hand some of the benefits of continued engagement at the UNHRC, which adopted resolutions critical of human rights abuses in North Korea, Syria, Iran, Myanmar, South Sudan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, and Belarus. The UNHRC's proven ability to shine attention on a wide range of situations makes it a valuable forum for U.S. efforts to advance human rights and a vital complement to the UN General Assembly and Security Council, which address only a handful of situations on human rights grounds.

Of course, we recognize the UNHRC's ongoing shortcomings. For example, the UNHRC is once again expected to adopt a significantly greater number of resolutions targeting Israel than any other country at the upcoming 37th session, including at least one that will follow up on a preliminary report regarding a UN database on business enterprises operating in Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories. Yet even this development illustrates the importance of U.S. engagement with the UNHRC, which adopted the original resolution mandating the creation of this database in 2016, a year when the U.S. was not a member of the Council (due to limitations on the number of consecutive terms States may serve on the UNHRC).

We agree with the conclusion of a 2017 Council on Foreign Relations report which found that U.S. participation in the Human Rights Council has served to lessen its anti-Israel bias and at the same time has advanced key U.S. goals elsewhere around the world, including by supporting "measures to avert and de-escalate human rights crises, thus reducing the likelihood of costly military interventions." We therefore call for you to redouble U.S. engagement with the UNHRC and to strongly encourage the nomination and appointment of qualified U.S. representatives to both the UNHRC and to the UN in Geneva as expeditiously as possible. Doing otherwise would only cede U.S. influence at an important international forum to States with positions at odds with American values and foreign policy objectives, to the detriment of the U.S., Israel, and victims of human rights violations around the world.

Sincerely,

Felice Gaer, Director, Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights

Rob Berschinski, Senior Vice President for Policy, Human Rights First

Greg Scarlatoiu, Executive Director, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)

Maran Turner, Executive Director, Freedom Now

Peter Yeo, President, Better World Campaign

CC: Ambassador Nikki Haley, Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations