

The Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Understanding the difference between the UN Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is key to knowing how the UN tackles rights abuses worldwide. **Together, they shape the UN's response to injustice worldwide.**

The Council

The UN's Political Body for Human Rights

Think of the Human Rights Council as the political arm of the UN's human rights machinery. It's where Member States come together to debate, negotiate and pass resolutions about human rights issues around the world.

Based in Geneva, Switzerland, the Council was created in 2006 to replace the former Commission on Human Rights. It's comprised of 47 UN Member States, distributed by region and elected by the UN General Assembly for staggered three-year terms. The most recent U.S. term concluded in 2024.

The Council is where states can publicly scrutinize each other's human rights records through tools like the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), adopt resolutions, create commissions of inquiry and give mandates to experts to investigate urgent issues such as atrocities against civilians in Syria or Sudan. Right now, the Council has 11 active country-specific investigative bodies and more than 40 mandates on cross-cutting themes.

The Council is a deliberative body, which means outcomes can be shaped by geopolitics and alliances, which often raises the ire of critics. Nevertheless, the value of the group lies in its visibility, its agenda-setting power and its ability to create mandates for substantive human rights investigations. Its discussions are also streamed live on YouTube.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

The UN's Human Rights Engine

On the other hand, there's the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights – or simply UN Human Rights. UN Human Rights is responsible for promoting and protecting human rights globally, empowering civil society actors, advising governments and integrating a human rights perspective across all UN programs. In effect, it's the operational side of the house.

Made up of human rights professionals, lawyers, economists, statisticians, field monitors, policy experts and more, the Office was established in 1993 to serve as the UN's leading authority on human rights. It's headed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights – currently Volker Türk – with more than 90 field offices worldwide.

The mandate of UN Human Rights is explicit and extensive. It includes monitoring human rights violations in countries; supporting special rapporteurs and experts appointed by the Council (there were more than 60 as of 2024); providing technical assistance to governments through training police, advising on judicial reform and drafting laws; and maintaining the UN's human rights treaty bodies like the Committee Against Torture or the Human Rights Committee, which review compliance with international treaties.

UN Human Rights speaks with independence. The High Commissioner can – and often does – call out powerful countries' abuses, regardless of alliances.

Human Rights Council

The Council

- **Political body of 47 Member States**
- **Adopts resolutions, holds debates**
- **Subject to politics and diplomacy**

The Council gives visibility and legitimacy to international concerns. It can create momentum, shape global narratives and push governments to respond. Without it, human rights issues could fade from the international spotlight.

Office of the High
Commissioner
for Human Rights

UN Human Rights

- **Professional, independent office**
- **Implements mandates, monitors violations**
- **Grounded in evidence and law**

With a global mandate to monitor and promote human rights, UN Human Rights handles the groundwork – documenting abuses, supporting survivors and helping governments build fairer systems.

A close-up of the United Nations flag, showing the blue field with the white UN emblem (a world map surrounded by olive branches) and the words "UNITED NATIONS" in white.

What Investment in Human Rights Achieves

In 2024, UN Human Rights provided the following support worldwide.

48,800

survivors of torture across 93 countries received direct assistance and rehabilitation

10,800

survivors of contemporary forms of slavery across 34 countries received direct assistance and rehabilitation

87

people participated in fellowship programs, including 49 women and 38

369

new urgent actions were registered with the Committee on Enforced Disappearances

4,500

partnerships were established and enhanced with civil society and human rights defenders

2,395

statements were delivered to the Human Rights Council

How Do They Work Together?

Though the Council and UN Human Rights are separate bodies, their work is deeply intertwined.

The Council can request investigations, monitoring or reports from UN Human Rights or create mandates for country-specific or thematic rapporteurs. The Council can also invite the High Commissioner to brief members of the Council or issue updates. UN Human Rights must, then, follow through on those Council requests.

Meanwhile, the High Commissioner acts independently, speaking out on issues not taken up by the Council – a crucial function in politically fraught contexts where consensus can be hard to reach.

Why the Distinction Matters

This distinction isn't just a matter of semantics. Confusing the two can obscure who's accountable – and who isn't. When a UN report is issued on Venezuela, Russia or Xinjiang, it's written by UN Human Rights staff or independent experts, not the Council itself.

Just as important, when politicians say they want to defund the Human Rights Council because of who's sitting on it, what they often end up doing is cutting the UN Human Rights' budget – gutting the very staff investigating violations and training governments to do better.

In 2024, for example, several U.S. proposals to cut UN human rights funding threatened to halt fact-finding missions in Sudan, curtail support to treaty bodies and scale back field operations in dozens of fragile countries. Most of that work was being done not by diplomats at the Council, but by UN Human Rights experts on the ground.

Why the U.S. (and the World) Needs Both

In short, the Council and UN Human Rights together make up much of the backbone of the global human rights system. For the United States, engaging with both is crucial. When the U.S. sits on the Council, it helps shape the agenda, push for action and defend our allies. When it supports UN Human Rights, it helps ensure human rights actions are meaningful, credible and effective.