

SECURITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE

THE QUESTION OF THE USA LEAVING AGREEMENTS OF UNITED NATION'S HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL



1MSKMUN 2019

USEFUL TERMS

United Nation's Human Rights Council	The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is a United Nations body whose mission is to promote and protect human rights around the world
USA leaving agreements	Withdrawing taking no part to negotiations

What is the UN Human Rights Council?

The UN set up the council in 2006 to replace the UN Commission on Human Rights, which faced widespread criticism for letting countries with poor human rights records become members. A group of 47 elected countries from different global regions serve for three-year terms on the council. The UNHRC meets three times a year, and reviews the human rights records of all UN members in a special process the council says gives countries the chance to say what they have done to improve human rights, known as the Universal Periodic Review. The council also sends out independent experts and has set up commissions of inquiry to report on human rights violations in countries including Syria, North Korea, Burundi, Myanmar and South Sudan.

Why has the US decided to quit?

The decision to leave the body follows years of US criticism. The country initially refused to join the council in 2006, arguing that, like the old commission, the UNHRC had admitted nations with questionable human rights records. It only joined in 2009 under President Barack Obama,



and won re-election to the council in 2012. But human rights groups voiced fresh complaints about the body in 2013, after China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Vietnam were elected members. This followed Israel's unprecedented boycott of one of the council's reviews, alleging unfair criticism from the body. Last year, Nikki Haley told the council it was "hard to accept" that resolutions had been passed against Israel yet none had been considered for Venezuela, where dozens of protesters had been killed during political turmoil. Israel is the only country that is subject to a permanent standing agenda item, meaning its treatment of the Palestinians is regularly scrutinised. On Tuesday, despite her harsh words for the UNHRC, Ms Haley said she wanted "to make it crystal clear that this step is not a retreat from our human rights commitments".

What's gone wrong?

Most UN member states would not use such blunt language, but many do share US concerns. The council is the world's top human rights watchdog but its current 47 elected member states include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Venezuela and the Philippines, akin, some critics might say, to the fox guarding the henhouse. This is a problem the UN has struggled with for many years. More than a decade ago, the UN under Kofi Annan undertook a major reform programme and top of the list was the then UN Human Rights Commission, which had been widely criticised as politicised and ineffective. The outcome was the new UN Human Rights Council, with 47 member states elected by their peers in the UN General Assembly. Each candidate was required to demonstrate a good record on human rights. Each elected member can be expelled for transgressions.

"Under this new system," Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, said at the time, "countries with poor human rights records like Saudi Arabia will never have a seat on the council again."

The US name plate reading "Etats-Unis" in French is seen a day after the US announced its withdrawal at a UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, SwitzerlandImage copyrightEPA

Image caption

The US seats are now empty at the Geneva-based organisationClearly that optimism was misplaced.The process of becoming a voting member of the council is more rigorous, but the politicisation in which regional neighbours, or likeminded regimes, support each other continues.Short of allowing certain nations (sure to be the most powerful, as with the permanent members of the UN Security Council) to simply choose which countries are fit to protect human rights, it is hard to see how the system could be improved.

And then there is the Israel factor.Israel has, alone among nations, the dubious honour of regular scrutiny by the council of its activities in Gaza and the Occupied Territories.The US and Israel think this is unfair, so too do some European countries such as the UK.But their voices are outnumbered by countries which firmly believe that Israel must be permanently held to account.

Achievements

All of this wrangling might be academic if the UN Human Rights Council was merely, as some critics allege, a politicised talking shop in which nothing really gets done.But that is not the case.Rohingya migrants on a boat. File photoImage copyrightAFP

Image caption

In 2017, the UN council authorised an urgent fact-finding mission to investigate alleged rights abuses in MyanmarUS diplomats this week suggested the council had ignored violations in

North Korea. In fact, in 2014 the council published a detailed, and searing, report into North Korea, and has kept the spotlight on the country ever since. Year after year, human rights defenders from all over the world come to Geneva, bringing with them carefully documented cases of the persecuted, the abused and the violated. Sometimes their efforts are in vain but sometimes, with the active support of member states, action is taken. In 2017, the council made some significant decisions: among them a fact-finding mission on Myanmar (Burma), an investigation into renewed violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and, after much debate, a team of experts to investigate alleged war crimes in Yemen. The Commission of Inquiry into Syria has forensically investigated the conduct of the conflict since the beginning. Its evidence will very likely lead to prosecutions for war crimes, something those involved in conflict resolution say is vital to create sustainable peace. The council deals with issues as well as countries: it has been instrumental in promoting the rights of those with disabilities, for example, or of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans communities. So although there is widespread regret that the US is leaving, no-one is likely to follow Washington through the exit door. Instead there is expected to be more discussion of reform and of the tricky Israel issue. Meanwhile the council will continue its painstaking investigation, and publication, of human rights situations from South Sudan to Belarus, to Iraq, of the lives of women in Afghanistan, or children living in poverty in some of the world's richest countries. That, as one human rights defender put it, is perhaps the council's biggest strength: it shines a spotlight on some of the world's worst injustices, meaning that "no-one can say they didn't know".

What's been the reaction?

Some countries and diplomats were quick to express disappointment about the US withdrawal.

1. The UNHRC's current president, Slovenian ambassador Vojislav Suc, said the body was the only one "responding to human rights issues and situations worldwide". After the US decision to quit, he said, "it is essential that we uphold a strong and vibrant council".
2. UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said the decision was "regrettable", arguing that while reforms are needed, the UNHRC is "crucial to holding states to account".
3. The US withdrawal follows controversy over President Trump's decision to hold a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un without raising human rights concerns.
4. It also comes amid intense criticism of the Trump administration's policy of separating child migrants from their parents at the US-Mexico border. The UN human rights commissioner, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein called the policy "unconscionable".
5. A number of groups criticised the move, with the American Civil Liberties Union saying the Trump administration was leading a "concerted, aggressive effort to violate basic human rights".



ACLU @ACLU

The Trump administration's withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council, coupled with its abusive use of power at home, only confirms what we've always known — Trump is leading a concerted, aggressive effort to violate basic human rights of those most in need of protection.

The Associated Press @AP
BREAKING: Trump envoy Nikki Haley says US withdrawing from UN Human Rights Council, calling it 'not worthy of its name.'

9:37 PM - Jun 19, 2018
10.1K 6,877 people are talking about this



Benjamin Netanyahu @netanyahu

Israel thanks President Trump, Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador Haley for their courageous decision against the hypocrisy and the lies of the so-called UN Human Rights Council.

9:38 PM - Jun 19, 2018
6,884 3,285 people are talking about this

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