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One Hundred and Twelfth Congress

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

“The U.S. Government Relationship with the United Nations Human Rights Council”

210 Cannon HOB – Tuesday, October 25, 2011 – 2:00–4:00 pm

Good morning. Thank you for attending this important hearing on the relationship between the U.S. government and the United Nations Human Rights Council. I would like to give special thanks to Colleen Costello for coordinating this hearing, and thank all of the Commission staff who helped prepare for this hearing.

I don't want to take much time with my remarks as we are expecting a couple of votes to be called very soon. The U.N. Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body within the U.N. structure with a membership consisting of 47 states, whose representation is made up of countries from every geographic region. The Council is responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe, and addressing human rights violations brought to the body's attention.

The Council was established in March 2006 to replace its predecessor, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The Commission had been widely criticized for being ineffective and biased. Specifically, the Commission lost its credibility by allowing the worst human rights offenders to become members, and by focusing heavily on Israeli human rights abuses while ignoring similar abuses committed by Palestinian groups and other nations.

During the first few years of the Council's existence, the United States remained disengaged from the human rights body. The U.S. harbored doubts about the Council's ability to overcome the obstacles faced by its

predecessor. As such, the U.S. was unable to exercise leadership at a time when we might have had a substantial impact on the development of the new Council. Regrettably, the Council lived up to the low expectations held for it, continuing to focus heavily on Israel while ignoring serious human rights violations in other countries.

Despite the Council's shortcomings, the United States has reversed its policy toward the Council in recent years. In 2009, the U.S. successfully bid for a seat on the Council, and we have been an active participant since then, successfully influencing some very important initiatives undertaken by the Council. I believe it will continue to take sustained, hard work on the part of the United States for the Council to improve and strengthen its human rights mandate.

Today, we look forward to hearing from representatives from the State Department about its efforts to engage and strengthen the U.N. Human Rights Council, and the challenges we face in those efforts. We will also receive testimony from the Brookings Institution and Human Rights Watch on the successes, failures and challenges of the Council. They will also discuss the accomplishments of the State Department in its work on the Council, and areas for improvement for the Department.

Again, on behalf of the Commission, I thank all of our witnesses for being here. We look forward to hearing your testimony.