



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

# **Ten Years Later: The Status of the United Nations Human Rights Council**

**Tuesday, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

**2:00 PM - 4:00 PM**

**2261 Rayburn House Office Building**

### **Opening Statement**

Ladies and gentlemen, witnesses and distinguished guests, I now call this hearing to order. This hearing is entitled “Ten Years Later: The Status of the United Nations Human Rights Council” It will be comprised of two panels.

Recognizing myself for an opening statement –

70 years ago, in the aftermath of the holocaust and the terrors of fascism and National Socialism, much of the international community recognized the desperate need for a renewed commitment to protecting the fundamental human rights of every individual. In 1946, the UN Human Rights Commission was created for this very purpose. This Commission was to reflect a global effort to establish human rights norms across the globe and to encourage their protection in every nation.

Yet over the course of the next 60 years, the Commission lost much, if not all, of its credibility. Its members frequently included nations who were themselves responsible for allowing or perpetrating egregious human rights violations. The Commission condemned issues selectively, often avoiding obvious abuses thanks to the work of members more interested in protecting their own appalling records

than addressing real issues. At the same time, the Commission maintained a persistent bias against Israel, leveling an inordinate amount of time and resources at a single state while other concerns were left unaddressed.

That's why, in 2006, the Commission was retired and replaced by the new, slightly smaller, UN Human Rights Council. In its founding resolution, this new 47-member body was tasked by the General Assembly with "addressing situations of violations of human rights, including gross and systematic violations." The Council was to be "guided by the principles of universality, impartiality, objectivity, and non-selectivity." In addition, the General Assembly stipulated that nations "elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, and shall fully cooperate with the Council."

Ten years later, many questions remain as to how effectively the Council has achieved these ideals and overcome the legacy of its predecessor. At the same time, there can be no question of the need for stronger international action to ensure the protection of fundamental human rights.

According to Freedom House's most recent "Freedom in the World" report, less than half of the world's population enjoys sufficient political rights and civil liberties to be considered "free". Over the last decade, 105 countries have seen a net decline in their scores on this report, while only 61 have experienced a net improvement.

In March, the U.S. House of Representatives and the State Department acknowledged and condemned the genocide currently being perpetrated against religious minorities in the Middle East by the so-called Islamic State. While this is an important and commendable step, it only begins to address the enormous threats to freedom of religion and belief the world faces today. In its most recent report on Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities, the Pew Research Center concluded that 77% of the world's population is living in countries with high or very high levels of restrictions on religion.

We must also not forget the millions of men, women, and children who continue to be trafficked as modern day slaves, both domestically and across international borders. According to the U.S. State Department's most recent Trafficking in Persons Report, 156 countries have yet to fully comply with the

minimum standards of the Victims of Trafficking and Violent Protection Act of 2000, which include, among other things, that “the government of the country should make serious and sustained efforts to eliminate severe forms of trafficking in persons.”

Given these and the many other monumental human rights challenges in existence today, it is only fitting that we examine the status of what is arguably the world’s highest profile mechanism for confronting these challenges. Has the now 10-year-old Council improved upon the lackluster reputation of its predecessor, and is it effectively and impartially addressing the gross and systematic violations of human rights that we see today?

These are not merely questions for intellectual debate. The actions of the Council, or lack thereof, can either promote or hinder the growth of many different freedoms worldwide and have the potential to impact countless lives. What’s more, the United States currently provides more than 1/5<sup>th</sup> of United Nations funding, with contributions allowed to be made available to the Council when the Secretary of State considers our participation to be in the national interest. Those funds, appropriated by Congress, must only be used to support a Council whose work can truly be considered “balanced, credible, and effective.”

One of, if not the greatest, impediment to a credible Council remains its insistence on keeping Israel as a permanent stand-alone item on the Council’s agenda. While every country deserves scrutiny, no other single country in the world has ever been subjected to this level of attention by the Council or made a standing agenda item for the Council, and I would like to use this opportunity to publicly call for the removal of Israel from the Council’s standing agenda.

With that, I look forward to hearing the testimony of our many distinguished witnesses here today as we explore the status of the Council, areas for potential improvement, and our best options for encouraging reform.