

**Opening Statement of Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Chair, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia
Hearing on “The Middle East and the United Nations”
April 20, 2005**

The Committee is currently engaged in a detailed and comprehensive review of the United Nations system.

The goal is to identify areas of reform and develop legislation that will help ensure transparency, accountability, and efficiency in all UN operations.

Within this context, this hearing seeks to address the U.S. agenda and priorities regarding the Middle East at the United Nations and issues surrounding United Nations policies, operations, programs, and assistance relating to the Middle East.

Our witnesses will address:

- UN Security Council activities relating to the region and membership issues;
- the work of UNESCO, UNDP, and UNICEF in the region; Middle East-related resolutions at various UN bodies;
- regional or country-specific commissions, offices, or committees at the UN;
- discrimination of Israel in the UN system;
- membership of countries of proliferation concern in such UN bodies as the Conference on Disarmament and on the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Through a review of UN-Middle East related activities, we hope to gain a better understanding of the overall systemic, programmatic and budgeting reforms needed to improve the UN.

The Commission on Human Rights and its feeder body, the Economic and Social Council, are emblematic of the broader problems in the UN system.

There remains great difficulty in securing support for condemnations of gross human rights violators, when the worst offenders sit on the actual Committee, dictate the agenda and block any meaningful resolutions from being adopted.

While such gross human rights offenders such as Syria, Libya, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, have been members of this UN human rights body, these regimes have not been censured, condemned, or held accountable in any way, for their deplorable human rights record.

Notably, reformist countries in the Middle East such as Jordan, Kuwait, or Bahrain, who have made strides in providing for the rights of their citizens and are making progress toward political and economic liberalization, are not afforded a prominent role in the Commission on Human Rights.

Does this illustrate a need to reform the regional groupings structure? Should the groupings be based on common goals, interests, and agenda, or on geographical considerations? Does the growing strength of the Non-Aligned Movement indicate the growing need for a formal UN Democracy Caucus that includes reforming countries in the Middle East?

Further, should the U.S. take into consideration the voting patterns and activities at the UN of countries in the Middle East, when determining the level of assistance to be provided to these recipients?

There are many other UN bodies and issues that need to be evaluated.

Countries who are in non-compliance of their obligations under international agreements and in violation of the rules that serve as the basis for individual UN bodies, cannot and must not be entrusted with the enforcement of those very rules and obligations.

A few years ago, proliferators such as Iran and Iraq, that was under Security Council sanctions at the time, were scheduled to serve as Chairs of the Conference on Disarmament.

Iran, a nation that continues to be under investigation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) due to its breaches and failures of its safeguards obligations, served on the Board of Governors of the IAEA.

We welcome recommendations from our witnesses on how we can strengthen the IAEA by preventing countries that are in breach or non-compliance to serve on the Board.

In the vein, we look forward to receiving your input on the priorities and expenditures of the Conference on Disarmament and IAEA relating to the Middle East.

Some have argued that U.S. contributions to the IAEA should focus on enhancing safeguards and inspections, and efforts relating to nuclear safety and security, rather than providing technical assistance in the agriculture sector, for example, to countries such as Iran and Syria.

One of the legislative proposals under consideration is to provide this nuclear watchdog agency with separate enforcement mechanisms out of the Secretariat, rather than have it depend solely on referral to the Security Council.

We welcome your views on this matter.

We are particularly interested in programmatic and funding issues at the UN.

For example, in a recent statement, the UN Commission for the Middle East announced its upcoming ministerial session in Damascus to discuss socio-economic policies, peace and security matters in the region, and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

The UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, which includes the countries in the region, will hold its ministerial session in early May to sign a memorandum of understanding on maritime transport cooperation in the Arab Mashreq.

What percentage of UN funding goes to these types of conferences? Would the funds used for these discussions not be put to better use for the implementation of specific, in-country programs?

For such economic development efforts, for example, how much is contributed by the UN and how much are individual countries in the region required to invest in these efforts and their own populations?

The United Nations Children's Fund recently released a report stating that 7.5 million Arab children are still out of school; 13.5 million are working; and several million are affected or threatened by armed conflict or violence.

The report also calls for increased investment in children and refers to the need to strengthen measures in the Arab world to protect against abuse, sexual exploitation, honor killings, etc.

This review conducted by UNICEF was done at the request of the Arab League.

What are UNICEF's current activities in the Middle East and would U.S. goals relating to children's issues-- such as trafficking, torture, child labor, slavery, and child soldiers—be better served by expanding U.S. bilateral assistance to the region, rather than working through the UN?

What is the inter-relationship between UNICEF's activities in the Middle East and the work of the thematic Special Rapporteurs of the UN Commission on Human Rights?

Turning to the UN Development Program, critics charge that the UNDP, like other international donors, provides mostly technical assistance to government ministries.

This serves to strengthen the region's autocratic regimes, which routinely emphasize economic liberalization over political reform.

Although UNDP programs are regularly monitored for their effectiveness and transparency by third party organizations, there is little conditionality on its aid program, particularly in the governance sector.

The Arab Human Development Reports have served as useful blueprints for promoting freedom, good governance, education, and economic liberalization in the Arab world.

However, we remain concerned with the ability and willingness of the UNDP to ensure that governments in the region undertake the needed reforms to tackle the problems identified in the reports and provide for the well-being of their people.

We look forward to the input of our witnesses on the best way to address these issues.

Concerns also exist with respect to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). UNRWA has provided relief and social services to registered Palestine refugees living mostly in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but also in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

UNRWA accounts for 2% of the UN budget for a single refugee group. Yet, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees receives 3% to address the needs of the rest of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons.

Ninety-five percent of the UNRWA budget is funded through voluntary contributions. The U.S. contribution to UNRWA usually covers 22-25% of the UNRWA total budget. For Fiscal Year 2004, U.S. spending for both accounts was \$127 million.

The functions of UNRWA and UNHCR appear duplicative and the funding does not appear to correspond to the needs of these organizations.

Should UNRWA be merged into UNHCR? Is this symptomatic of the need to eliminate or consolidate other UN Committees, Offices, and Commissions related to the region or more broadly?

Furthermore, for years many in Congress have been concerned regarding the possibility that UNRWA assets and facilities are utilized by terrorist organizations.

UNRWA's former Commissioner-General Peter Hansen admitted that members of the terrorist group Hamas were on the UNRWA payroll adding: "I don't see that as a crime."

"Hamas as a political organization does not mean that every member is a militant and we do not do political vetting and exclude people from one persuasion as against another."

This raises questions of oversight and accountability by the UN over its programs and operations. It also raises concerns about the extent to which the U.S. monitors how the UN uses our contributions.

Some would argue that the United Nations is a far cry from the institution its founders envisioned.

Israel is denied the ability to serve or run for leadership positions in multiple UN bodies and affiliated agencies.

While Israel was accepted as a temporary member of the Western European and Others Group, it is not allowed to present candidacies for open seats in any UN body and is not able to compete for major U.N. bodies and excluded from consultations.

Therefore, a critical component of our efforts to promote reform at the United Nations must include measures to ensure that Israel is afforded equal treatment and representation, while addressing the anti-Israel and anti-Semitic component that is pervasive in many UN bodies and affiliated agencies.

In summary, for the UN to fulfill its mandate and become a viable organizations, it must become a leaner, less duplicative, transparent, and most importantly, accountable institution.

Reforming the United Nations is necessary for its survival and it is long overdue.

I want to thank our witnesses for appearing before the Subcommittee today, and I will turn to the Ranking Member of our Subcommittee, Mr. Ackerman, for an opening statement.