

OPINION COMMENTARY

Guess Which Country the U.N. Decries Now

As Zika spreads, the World Health Organization puts Israel under the microscope.

By
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The World Health Organization seems to have its hands full. With the Rio Olympics only two months away, the Zika virus has become an international public-health emergency. Ebola's embers still glow in West Africa, and yellow fever besieges Angola.

Yet the WHO found time at its annual meeting in May to tackle what it must consider a particularly pressing item: Israel, specifically conditions in "the occupied Palestinian territory" and "the occupied Syrian Golan." A resolution, reported by the Geneva-based UN Watch, proposed that a field assessment be conducted to investigate. It passed 107-8, with eight abstentions.

The resolution, sponsored by the Palestinian delegation and the Arab bloc, was the only country-specific one considered. The WHO's session neglected to address the bombing of Syrian hospitals by Syrian and Russian warplanes. It skipped the humanitarian disaster in Yemen, where the Saudi-led bombings and blockade have left millions without food and water.

Israel, like any country, makes mistakes. Its actions should be scrutinized, but it shouldn't be held to an arbitrary, higher standard. Far from being outraged, the WHO should laud the Jewish state for its treatment of Syrians in the Golan. Israeli hospitals have stepped up to provide medical treatment to more than 3,000 refugees from the brutal civil war.

This typifies the Jewish state's humanity. Palestinians regularly go to Israeli hospitals for treatment. Two years ago, the daughter of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh underwent emergency treatment in a Tel Aviv facility shortly after Hamas-Israeli fighting ended.

Health outcomes in the West Bank and Gaza might surprise many readers. Take life expectancy at birth, a classic benchmark. In 2014, the figure for these territories was 73, according to the World Bank. Compare that with Libya (72), Iraq (69), Egypt (71) and Jordan (74).

The WHO's constitution talks of fostering the "highest possible levels of health" by eradicating disease, standardizing diagnostic procedures and even preventing accidental injuries. Taking sides on long-simmering geopolitical issues exceeds its mandate. In singling out Israel, the WHO chooses politics over progress and undermines its own credibility.

Yet the WHO has gone this route before. In 2009, an executive-board resolution called out Israel for its actions during hostilities with Hamas. But the document failed to hold Hamas accountable for launching thousands of rockets at Israel, which had triggered the conflict.

This kind of selective attention to facts is wearily familiar to longtime observers of the U.N. In April, its cultural body, Unesco, adopted a resolution condemning Israel's actions on and around Jerusalem's Temple Mount and nearby Western Wall. Moreover, it ignored the Jews' historical ties to their most sacred sites, while detailing their religious significance for Muslims.

The few countries that opposed the recent WHO resolution—including the U.S., Canada, Australia, Paraguay, Guatemala, Micronesia and Papua New Guinea—deserve applause. It is troubling, however, that France, Germany and the United Kingdom voted "yes"—especially since the last two voted against the Unesco resolution in April.

As a physician, I know the value of the World Health Organization. As a Jew, I also know the danger of being targeted unfairly. The WHO ought to return to its constitutional mission, which is too important to be sidetracked by politics.

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