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Do Not Reward UNESCO for Granting the Palestine Authority Membership

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Late last year, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) granted membership to the Palestinian Authority—despite opposition from the U.S. and with forewarning that such a step would lead the U.S. to suspend funding to UNESCO. After the vote, the Obama Administration condemned the decision¹ and immediately suspended all U.S. financial contributions to the organization. The Administration had little choice in the matter. For two decades, U.S. law has prohibited U.S. funding to the U.N. or any affiliated organization that grants membership to Palestinians.²

Despite the fact that the membership of UNESCO brought this situation upon itself through its ill-conceived decision to grant membership

to the Palestinians, the Obama Administration has been trying for months to convince Congress to change the law to permit the U.S. to renew its contributions to UNESCO. The most blatant example of this effort is expressed in the President’s fiscal year (FY) 2013 budget, which states the Administration’s intent to amend the law to permit funding for UNESCO and requests funding for 2013 and to reimburse it for the funds that are being withheld in accordance with current law.

These efforts are beyond shortsighted. The Palestinians’ bid for membership in the U.N. and its affiliated organizations is a deliberate attempt to isolate Israel by attempting to gain U.N. recognition of Palestinian statehood absent a negotiated agreement with Israel. This would deal a major setback to Israeli–Palestinian peace prospects by undermining all internationally accepted frameworks for peace.

Backward Priorities. The financial implications for UNESCO are significant. The U.S. is its largest contributor, providing 22 percent of its budget, or nearly \$80 million annually. After the U.S. cut funding, UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova announced that UNESCO

would face significant budget cuts: “We are reviewing all activities in all areas, including staff travel, publications, communication costs, meetings, and the rest.”³

Contrary to the claims of UNESCO or the State Department, however, a prohibition of U.S. funding to UNESCO will not cripple or even significantly affect America’s effort to promote its interests in advancing the goals espoused by UNESCO.⁴ For instance, the often mentioned literacy programs for Afghan police and citizens are not funded by U.S. assessed contributions to UNESCO but by Japanese voluntary contributions. UNESCO merely manages the programs in coordination with the Afghan government, particularly the ministries of education and interior. This is also true for many of the other projects and programs cited as evidence of UNESCO’s “critical importance” to U.S. interests.

UNESCO is not the only option—either within the U.N. system or outside it—to perform these activities. The bottom line is that UNESCO’s management responsibilities could be given to the U.S. Agency for International Development, Japan’s International Cooperation Agency,

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or another U.N. organization, such as the U.N. Development Program. Using UNESCO may be convenient, but it is not essential.

Stripped of these feeble excuses, it is hard not to conclude that the Administration is seeking to restore funding for UNESCO principally out of a strong commitment to multilateralism and paying America's U.N. bills in full and on time. The Administration also seems to feel a responsibility to prevent U.N. organizations from adopting embarrassing decisions.⁵ However, even the U.S. cannot stop all of them, as demonstrated by the recent election of Syria to two of UNESCO's human rights committees.

Ultimately, reduced funding is far from a death knell. Indeed, UNESCO survived nearly two decades without U.S. contributions after the U.S. withdrew from the organization in 1984. UNESCO can continue to pursue its activities, albeit with a smaller budget; it will simply have to prioritize. If the programs identified by UNESCO as being of special importance to the U.S. are worth supporting, the organization can choose to

continue them within its smaller budget.

Undermining U.S. Interests.

As President Obama made clear in his May 19 speech on Middle East policy, after it became clear that the Palestinians would seek U.N. membership, the U.S. does not believe that the U.N. is an appropriate venue for addressing the Palestinian statehood issue.⁶ The U.S. believed this position so strongly that it pledged to veto the Palestinian membership effort in the U.N. Security Council. Regrettably, the U.S. had no such veto available to block Palestinian membership in UNESCO.

Nor does it have it available for the 16 other U.N. specialized agencies that the Palestinians could target for membership even if they do not succeed in gaining membership in the U.N. It does, however, have its financial leverage. The Palestinians were prepared to seek membership in these U.N. organizations until the U.S. cut funding to UNESCO. This funding prohibition led these organizations and their member states to tell the Palestinians that their membership is not welcome at this time.

Restoring funding to UNESCO would effectively be a green light encouraging the other organizations to lay out a welcome mat to the Palestinians. Yet this is exactly what the President is proposing. The FY 2013 budget states clearly, "The Department of State intends to work with Congress to seek legislation that would provide authority to waive restrictions on paying the U.S. assessed contributions to UNESCO."⁷ To fulfill this intent, the Administration is asking for \$78.968 million to fully fund UNESCO for FY 2013 and the same amount (\$38.477 million from FY 2012 and \$40.491 million for FY 2013) in "Contingent Requirements" to cover the balance owed to UNESCO resulting from funding restrictions under current law.

The Palestinians may choose to pursue membership in U.N. specialized agencies anyway, but funding UNESCO makes it more likely that they will succeed by showing those organizations that they will face no repercussions. Opening the door to Palestinian membership in this way undermines both American interests

1. U.S. Department of State, "Executive Budget Summary: Function 150 and Other International Programs: Fiscal Year 2013," at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/183755.pdf> (February 15, 2012).
2. Title 22, Section 287e of the U.S. Code prohibits U.S. funding to (1) "the United Nations or any specialized agency thereof which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as member states," and (2) to the U.N. or "to any affiliated organization of the United Nations which grants full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood." They were enacted, respectively, as Public Law 101-246 in 1990 and Public Law 103-236 in 1994.
3. Joseph A. Harriss, "The United Nations' Rogue Agency," *American Spectator*, February 2012, at <http://spectator.org/archives/2012/02/07/the-united-nations-rogue-agenc> (February 15, 2012).
4. See Brett D. Schaefer, "What Palestinian Membership Means for UNESCO and the Rest of the United Nations," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2633, December 12, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/12/what-palestine-membership-means-for-unesco-and-the-rest-of-the-united-nations>.
5. For instance, the U.S. helped elect Director General Irina Bokova to head UNESCO instead of Egyptian Farouk Hosni, who had pledged to burn Israeli books in Egyptian libraries. The U.S. blocked Iran, whose president insists that "Israel must be wiped off the map," from hosting and sponsoring "World Philosophy Day." However, UNESCO's executive board, upon which the U.S., France, the U.K., and other Western democracies sit, unanimously elected Syria to a pair of UNESCO committees last fall. Press release, "UNESCO Elects Syria to Human Rights Committees," UN Watch, November 23, 2011, at http://www.unwatch.org/cms.asp?id=2750557&campaign_id=65378 (February 15, 2012).
6. The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," May 19, 2011, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa> (February 15, 2012).
7. U.S. Department of State, "Executive Budget Summary," pp. 53-54.

and Israeli–Palestinian peace prospects.

Keep the Funding Prohibition.

The UNESCO funding prohibition has little impact on America’s policies and priorities, so it is an excellent vehicle for sending a signal to the rest of the U.N. that the U.S. considers Israel’s peace and security a top priority—one that supersedes the more ambiguous value of U.S. funding of programs and projects overseen by organizations like UNESCO.

The purpose of U.S. membership in international organizations

is to advance American interests. When a U.N. body threatens key U.S. interests, the U.S. should send a clear signal about the ramifications. Ending U.S. financial support to U.N. organizations that grant membership to the Palestinians is an effective signal. If the U.S. eliminates, modifies, or otherwise weakens its own laws to allow U.S. contributions despite Palestinian membership, the U.S. would effectively encourage these organizations to admit the Palestinians as a member. The Obama Administration apparently

has trouble understanding this, but Congress need not enable its irresolution.

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