

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3760 | OCTOBER 19, 2012

The U.S. Should Withdraw from UNESCO

Brett D. Schaefer

Last fall, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) granted membership to the Palestinian Authority. It did so despite clear warnings from Washington that this would necessitate an immediate freeze on all U.S. funding to the agency. Subsequently, President Obama stopped all U.S. financial contributions to the organization as required by U.S. law.

Since then, however, UNESCO and the Obama Administration have been pressing Congress to change the law, arguing that the prohibition threatens programs vital to U.S. interests and that the cut improperly punishes a valuable voice for integrity and moderation.

Neither of these claims is persuasive or sufficient to trump the purpose of the law, which is to dissuade U.N. organizations from granting

membership to the Palestinians before a negotiated peace agreement is concluded with Israel. To avoid an accumulation of arrears and disabuse UNESCO of the idea that U.S. funding will resume, the U.S. should withdraw from UNESCO.

Dubious Claims of Importance. UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova has argued that the loss of funds endangers UNESCO programs that are important to U.S. interests. She joins a long line of UNESCO Directors-Generals who have played on Americans' belief in the importance of education, science, and culture to secure support for their organization.

The truth, however, is that UNESCO is principally a facilitator, not an implementer. UNESCO's 2012–2013 budget devoted 72 percent of all resources to overall staff costs, including temporary assistance and contracted services.¹ Over 82 percent of that budget was dedicated to staff costs, travel, and general operating expenses. That leaves very little for actual physical projects on the ground.

Indeed, a closer look at examples offered by Bokova reveals that UNESCO is often superfluous or merely convenient rather than critical.

- Literacy programs for Afghan police and citizens are funded not by U.S. assessed contributions to UNESCO but by Japan's voluntary contributions.² UNESCO merely manages the programs in coordination with the Afghan government, particularly its ministries of education and interior. UNESCO is not the only option—either within the U.N. system or outside it—to perform these activities.
- UNESCO has only one full-time staff member dedicated to Holocaust education, according to investigative reporter Claudia Rosett. Moreover, his salary is paid “out of a donation from Israel, which also kicked in a large chunk of the \$536,000 collected in recent years for projects related to this program. UNESCO's annual contribution comes to a niggardly \$215,000.”³ By contrast, the U.S. spends millions on Holocaust education annually, including \$50.7 million for the Holocaust Museum in fiscal year (FY) 2012, funding for the State Department Office of the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, and programs in organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3760>

Produced by the
Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

■ Tsunami warning efforts are not a UNESCO monopoly. The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) leads UNESCO's tsunami efforts. It was budgeted at \$10.4 million for the 2012–2013 biennial, of which the U.S. share is \$1.14 million per year. Although not all of the IOC's funds go to its tsunami programs, the total IOC budget is a fraction of the amount spent annually by the U.S. on its own tsunami-related programs, which totaled \$41 million in FY 2010.⁴ This funding goes to support not only the warning systems for the U.S. but also to assist tsunami programs in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. It is worth noting that the Obama Administration proposed cutting U.S. funding for tsunami programs by \$4.6 million in its 2013 budget—roughly the same amount as the annual IOC budget.⁵

Poor Performance. UNESCO performs poorly compared to other international organizations. A 2011 United Kingdom report rated UNESCO's performance as "unsatisfactory," noting that:

UNESCO's significant under-performance in leadership means it is rarely critical in education and development.... It has poor systems and is unable to identify its results.... [It has] performed a useful post-disaster role in education planning and protecting cultural heritage, but needs clearer policies.... [A] dministration costs remain high. Insufficient attention [is] paid to transaction costs.... [There is substantial] room for improved financial resource management, in particular to address poor allocation mechanisms and inadequate management of poorly performing programmes.⁶

The summary of that report concluded that if "measures are not implemented satisfactorily and performance does not improve, then the UK will consider whether it should continue to be a member of UNESCO, or whether there are more effective ways of supporting our objectives on education, culture and heritage."⁷

Immoderation and Judgment

Lapses. In addition to granting membership to the Palestinians, whose territory is used by terrorists to attack Israel, UNESCO and

its executive board have exhibited repeated lapses in judgment. For instance:

- UNESCO elected Syria to the organization's human rights committee in 2011 despite evidence that it was slaughtering its own citizens. When the U.S. sought to reverse that decision, the board voted to maintain Syrian membership.
- UNESCO belatedly ended its financial support for a Palestinian children's magazine in 2011 when news reports revealed its anti-Semitic content and praise of Adolf Hitler.
- UNESCO's board decided in 2012 to approve a prize donated to UNESCO by Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, dictator of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea. Western nations and human rights groups had decried the prize as a publicity stunt that besmirches the reputation of UNESCO.
- This summer, UNESCO approved the Palestinian request to add the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Pilgrimage

1. UNESCO, "Approved Programme and Budget for 2012-2013," Document 36 C/5, p. x, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002152/215286e.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2012).

2. See Brett D. Schaefer, "What Palestinian Membership Means for UNESCO and the Rest of the United Nations," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2633, December 13, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/12/what-palestine-membership-means-for-unesco-and-the-rest-of-the-united-nations>.

3. Claudia Rosett, "UNESCO Funny Business: Annals of a Dishonest PR Campaign," *The Weekly Standard*, April 9, 2012, http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/unesco-funny-business_634900.html (accessed October 19, 2012).

4. Peter Folger, "U.S. Tsunami Programs: A Brief Overview," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, March 18, 2011, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/158601.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2012).

5. Paul Rogers, "White House Budget Targets Tsunami Warning System," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 27, 2012, http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_20058460?IADID=Search-www.mercurynews.com-www.mercurynews.com (accessed October 19, 2012).

6. U.K. Department for International Development, *Multilateral Aid Review: Ensuring Maximum Value for Money for UK Aid Through Multilateral Organizations*, March 2011, p. 194, http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/mar/multilateral_aid_review.pdf (accessed October 19, 2012).

7. U.K. Department for International Development, "Multilateral Aid Review: Taking Forward the Findings of the UK Multilateral Aid Review," March 2011, p. 19, <http://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/Taking-forward-United-Nations.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2012).

Route to its World Heritage List. Both Israel and the U.S. opposed this effort, which they deemed to be part of the Palestinians' campaign for international recognition of statehood without a negotiated peace agreement.

These troubling actions are at odds with UNESCO's claims to be a voice of moderation, ethical standards, and human rights.

Ill-Conceived Attempts to Change the Law. Despite UNESCO's marginal utility, questionable judgment, and poor performance, Bokova and the Obama Administration have continued to urge Congress to change the law to permit resumed funding. The President's FY 2013 budget states the Administration's intent to amend the law and requests funding for 2013 and to reimburse UNESCO for funds withheld in accordance with current law.

Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Brad Sherman (D-CA), ranking member of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, authored a bipartisan letter correctly opposing efforts to waive or amend the law because it is

vital in successfully derailing attempts...to seek de facto recognition of a Palestinian state from the UN via the granting of membership to "Palestine" in UN agencies.... A UN body that acts so irresponsibly—a UN body that admits states that do not exist—renders itself unworthy of U.S. taxpayer dollars.... Weakening U.S. law, on the other hand, would undermine our interests and our ally Israel by providing a green light for other UN bodies to admit "Palestine" as a member.⁸

What the U.S. Should Do. To best advance American interests, the U.S. should:

- **Retain current funding prohibitions.** Supporting UNESCO is far less important than impeding Palestinian efforts to join U.N. organizations, which are designed to delegitimize Israel, bolster false claims of statehood, and circumvent peace negotiations. Weakening or eliminating the law would effectively encourage other U.N. organizations to admit the Palestinians and thereby damage U.S. interests.

- **Withdraw from UNESCO.** It is inappropriate for the U.S. to maintain UNESCO membership while simultaneously refusing to provide any funding. This leads to an accrual of arrears, creates budgetary uncertainty for UNESCO, and inappropriately leads the organization to believe that U.S. funding will be forthcoming.

Not Critical. America's interest in supporting UNESCO is not critical, as President Reagan recognized when he decided in 1984 to withdraw from UNESCO because of its poor management and hostility to the "basic institutions of a free society, especially a free market and a free press." The U.S. rejoined UNESCO in 2003 in recognition of reforms, not because of any perceived damage to U.S. interests. UNESCO's decision to grant membership to the Palestinians trumps this goodwill gesture.

Brett D. Schaefer is Jay Kingham Fellow in International Regulatory Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

8. Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Brad Sherman (D-CA), "Joint Letter to State Dept. Opposing Waiver to Restore Funding to UNESCO," undated, <http://freebeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/UNESCOletter.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2012).