

ISSUE BRIEF

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Congress Should Challenge the Administration's UNESCO and U.N. Peacekeeping Budget Request

By Brett D. Schaefer

Secretary of State John Kerry is testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee this week concerning the President's fiscal year (FY) 2014 request for the international affairs budget.

A number of items deserve scrutiny, but two in particular warrant opposition: (1) a request for changes in law that would allow U.S. contributions to U.N. organizations—such as the U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)—that grant full membership to the Palestinian Authority; and (2) full funding for U.N. peacekeeping.

UNESCO. The President's FY 2014 budget requests \$77.8 million in funding for UNESCO. Current law prohibits U.S. funds from going to international organizations that grant full membership to the Palestinians, and in 2011, UNESCO did just that.¹ The Administration seeks authority to waive this restriction. If such authority is granted, the Administration would also seek an additional \$156 million to cover arrears that accrued in FY 2012 and FY 2013.²

The Administration made a similar request in the FY 2013 budget. After the initial withholding following UNESCO's decision to grant membership to the

Palestinians in 2011, the Administration argued that Congress should change the law to permit funding because UNESCO “actively promotes democratic values around the world, reinforcing U.S. efforts, particularly in politically sensitive environments and conflict zones where it can be difficult for the U.S. to operate.”³

But UNESCO has demonstrated questionable judgment and subpar performance. For example, it appointed Syria to its Committee on Conventions and Recommendations over U.S. objections and despite evidence that Bashar al-Assad's regime was slaughtering its own citizens. A 2011 evaluation of multilateral aid by the United Kingdom rated UNESCO's performance as “unsatisfactory.”⁴

Moreover, UNESCO is principally a facilitator, not an implementer. UNESCO's 2012–2013 budget devotes over 82 percent of all resources to overall staff costs (including temporary assistance and contracted services), travel, and general operating expenses. That leaves very little for actual physical projects on the ground.

Indeed, a closer look at examples offered by UNESCO to substantiate its claimed contributions to U.S. interests reveals that the organization is often superfluous or merely convenient rather than critical.⁵ That conclusion is bolstered by the fact that U.S. interests were not substantially affected in the two decades between President Reagan's 1984 decision to withdraw from UNESCO and President Bush's decision to rejoin in 2003.

The Administration acknowledges that the Palestinians are eager to join other U.N. specialized agencies and correctly regards those ambitions as counterproductive and intended to circumvent

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peace negotiations with Israel. Indeed, the budget proclaims that the U.S. “remains committed to heading off any new efforts by the Palestinians to seek such membership in organizations across the UN system.”⁶ However, the White House apparently anticipates its own failure. The waiver request is rationalized as necessary because, if the Palestinians gain membership in other organizations, the funding restrictions would “prevent the active U.S. engagement necessary to pursue U.S. policy objectives in international organizations.”⁷

This argument is backward. After their success with UNESCO, the Palestinians announced their intent to join other U.N. specialized agencies. It is no coincidence that the Palestinians have not succeeded in this ambition since the U.S. cut funding to UNESCO. Waiving the restriction would reward UNESCO for its imprudent action and remove the most significant incentive for other organizations not to grant membership to the Palestinians.

U.S. Assessments for U.N. Peacekeeping. The FY 2014 budget also includes a request for \$2.1 billion in contributions to international peacekeeping activities—an increase of \$266 million. The surge in part reflects an increase in the amount that the U.N. charges the U.S. for peacekeeping.

Although America’s regular budget assessment held steady at 22 percent in the U.N.’s recently approved “scale of assessments,” its share of the

peacekeeping budget increased from 27.1415 percent in 2012 to 28.3835 percent this year.⁸ That seemingly small hike would cost U.S. taxpayers an additional \$91 million this year under the current \$7.33 billion peacekeeping budget.⁹

The Administration wants Congress to approve this higher funding level even though the U.N. has reneged on its commitment to lower the U.S. peacekeeping assessment to 25 percent. As summarized by Senator Jesse Helms in 2001:

Ambassador [Richard] Holbrooke persuaded U.N. member states to agree to a new scale for assessments for U.N. peacekeeping.... The U.N. put in place a six-year plan to reduce what the U.N. now says the U.S. owes for peacekeeping. Here’s how it will work. The U.S. share of peacekeeping costs will drop: from 31 percent to about 28 percent in the first six months of 2001; and then, Mr. President, to about 27 ½ percent in the second half of 2001; and then, Mr. President, to about 26 ½ percent in 2002; and then, Mr. President, down to approximately the 25 percent benchmark specified in the Helms–Biden law.¹⁰

Even though the U.S. followed through and paid its arrears as agreed, the U.N. never fulfilled its end of the bargain. It reduced the U.S. assessment (albeit slower than agreed) through 2009, then reversed

1. 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>.
2. U.S. Department of State, “Executive Budget Summary: Function 150 & Other International Programs,” Note 2, p. 47, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/207305.pdf> (accessed April 17, 2013). The total is the request for FY 2012, FY 2013, and FY 2014 contingent requirements.
3. U.S. Department of State, “How the Loss of U.S. Funding Will Impact Important Programs at UNESCO,” quoted in Josh Rogin, “State Still Making the Case for UNESCO Funding,” *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2011, http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/14/state_still_making_the_case_for_unesco_funding (accessed April 17, 2013).
4. United Kingdom Department for International Development, *Multilateral Aid Review*, March 2011, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67583/multilateral_aid_review.pdf (accessed April 17, 2013).
5. For specific examples, see Brett D. Schaefer, “The U.S. Should Withdraw from UNESCO,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3760, October 19, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/10/the-us-should-withdraw-from-unesco>.
6. U.S. Department of State, “Executive Budget Summary: Function 150 & Other International Programs,” Note 2, p. 44, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/207305.pdf> (accessed April 17, 2013).
7. *Ibid.*
8. U.N. General Assembly, “Implementation of General Assembly Resolutions 55/235 and 55/236,” December 27, 2012, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/224/Add.%201 (accessed April 17, 2013).
9. U.N. General Assembly, “Approved Resources for Peacekeeping Operations for the Period from 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2013,” June 27, 2012, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/C.5/66/18 (accessed April 17, 2013).
10. *Congressional Record*, February 7, 2001, p. S1110.

course and increased the assessments.¹¹ This broken promise has cost American taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars over the years.

To avoid accumulating arrears, Congress has accommodated this duplicity through repeated, temporary adjustments to a 1994 law that caps U.S. contributions to U.N. peacekeeping at 25 percent. However, this appeasement has only encouraged the U.N. to renege on its commitment.

What Should Be Done. Congress should:

- **Retain current funding prohibitions.** Providing funding to UNESCO is far less important than impeding Palestinian efforts to join U.N. organizations. These efforts 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.
- **Urge the Administration to 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.

- **Maintain and enforce the Clinton-era 25 percent cap on U.S. contributions to peacekeeping.** Adjusting the cap to avoid arrears has only encouraged the U.N. to renege on its commitment to lower the U.S. peacekeeping assessment.

- **Fund only 25 percent of the U.N. peacekeeping budget.** Under the current U.N. budget, this would be \$1.83 billion. If additional expenses arise, such as for new or expanded operations, Congress should appropriate funding only for 25 percent of those expenses. Congress should consider payment of arrears only after the U.N. adjusts its scale of assessments to lower the U.S. payment to 25 percent as agreed.

Challenge the Requests. Congress should restore incentives for the U.N. to lower the U.S. peacekeeping assessment to 25 percent and dissuade other U.N. organizations from granting membership to the Palestinians. This week's hearings present an opportunity to highlight and challenge the Administration's counterproductive budget requests.

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11. See Brett D. Schaefer, "U.S. Must Enforce Peacekeeping Cap to Lower America's U.N. Assessment," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2762, January 25, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/01/us-must-enforce-peacekeeping-cap-to-lower-americas-un-assessment>.