

# U.S. Withdrawal from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

October 17, 2017

On October 12, 2017, the State Department announced that the United States will withdraw from the U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The department [stated](#) that the decision “reflects U.S. concerns with mounting arrears ... the need for fundamental reform in the organization, and continuing anti-Israel bias of UNESCO.” The United States seeks to “remain engaged” as a nonmember observer. Generally, observers have participated in selected UNESCO meetings and activities but are not able to vote in some UNESCO bodies or hold leadership positions. Under the terms of the UNESCO constitution, the U.S. withdrawal is expected to take effect on December 31, 2018.

## Background and Context

UNESCO is a U.N. specialized agency that promotes collaboration among its member countries in the fields of education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, culture, and communications. It also provides a mechanism for the drafting, adoption, and review of several international conventions and commissions in which the United States participates, including the World Heritage Convention and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. UNESCO has an annual budget of about \$333 million, which is funded primarily by assessed contributions from member states. It consists of three key entities: (1) the General Conference, comprising all members, is UNESCO’s primary decisionmaking body; (2) the 58-member Executive Board is responsible for implementing the program adopted by the General Conference; and (3) the Director-General, currently Irina Bokova of Bulgaria, heads the Secretariat.

The United States is currently a UNESCO member and serves on the Executive Board. It engages with the organization through the [U.S. Mission to UNESCO](#), based in Paris, France, which is led by a U.S. ambassador to UNESCO (currently vacant).

## U.S. withdrawal in 1984 and decision to rejoin in 2002

Since UNESCO was established in 1945, the United States has generally supported the organization. At the same time, it has previously withdrawn its membership. In the 1980s, the Reagan Administration and

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some Members of Congress expressed concern with UNESCO's apparent politicization, lack of budget discipline, and antidemocratic leanings. These concerns led to the U.S. decision to withdraw in 1984. In 2002, President George W. Bush [announced](#) that UNESCO had reformed and the United States would rejoin.

## Palestinian membership and focus on Israel

In 2011, the UNESCO General Conference admitted "Palestine" as a member, a decision that was strongly [opposed](#) by the Obama Administration. Since FY2012, the United States has withheld funding to UNESCO under two laws enacted in the 1990s that prohibit funding to

- U.N. entities that admit the Palestine Liberation Organization as a member (Section 414 of [P.L. 101-246](#)), and
- U.N. entities that grant full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood (Section 410 of [P.L. 103-236](#)).

The Obama Administration asked Congress to support legislation that would provide authority to waive the legislative restrictions; Congress did not enact such a waiver. The Obama Administration also continued to oppose and [vote](#) against resolutions that it viewed as disproportionately targeting Israel. In November 2013, as a result of the financial withholding, the United States lost its vote in the UNESCO General Conference. The Obama Administration stated that the United States would remain a member of UNESCO and continue to engage with the organization.

The Trump Administration has continued to criticize UNESCO's focus on Israel. It has been particularly [concerned](#) with UNESCO's decision to inscribe the Old City of Hebron and the Tomb of the Patriarchs as a World Heritage site, and to associate the site with "Palestine." U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley [called](#) the inscription, which was adopted in July 2017, an "affront to history" that "undermines the trust that is needed for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to be successful."

## Accumulation of U.S. arrears

State Department officials have [suggested](#) that the accumulation of arrears also added to the U.S. decision to withdraw from UNESCO. U.S. withholdings since 2012 have included roughly \$80 million per year in assessed contributions to the UNESCO regular budget (of which the United States is assessed 22%), and an average of \$1.2 million annually in voluntary contributions. To date, the United States has accumulated more than \$550 million in unpaid assessments due to these withholdings.

## Issues for Congress

### Drawbacks and benefits of U.S. membership

Congressional views on U.S. participation in UNESCO are mixed. Some critics maintain that UNESCO's activities do not reflect U.S. foreign policy interests; they suggest that the United States should devote its resources to bilateral projects that are more in line with U.S. priorities. Some also emphasize that while the United States contributed nearly one-quarter of the UNESCO budget, it had only one vote in the GC and therefore little influence over how U.S. funds were spent. On the other hand, supporters maintain that UNESCO plays a key role in global issues that the United States has traditionally viewed as strategic priorities, particularly education, science, media freedom, and cultural heritage. Some also contend that the U.S. withdrawal might leave the door open for other countries to influence the scope and direction of UNESCO decisions and programs.

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## Trump Administration review of U.N. Entities

Ambassador Haley [stated](#) that the decision to withdraw from UNESCO is part of a broader Trump Administration effort to review U.S. participation in multilateral organizations, including those that are part of the U.N. system. Members of Congress may consider monitoring the status and outcomes of this review, as well as the Administration's conditions, if any, for the United States rejoining UNESCO in the future.

## Possible impact of U.S. observer status

The impact of the U.S. role as a UNESCO observer remains to be seen. Key questions include the following:

- What will be the terms of U.S. observer status in UNESCO, including access to meetings, speaking rights, and other types of participation?
- To what extent, if any, will observer status affect the United States' ability to pursue its policy priorities in UNESCO fora?
- With which like-minded countries can the United States work to highlight its priorities and move its agenda forward?
- How, if at all, might the U.S. transition to observer status impact the staffing, operations, and overall footprint of the U.S. Mission to UNESCO in Paris?

## Author Information

Luisa Blanchfield  
Specialist in International Relations

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