

# The United States Withdraws from UNESCO

by Michael Curtis



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

I get along without you very well was the message on October 12, 2017 of the United States to the international agency UNESCO. The US announced it will withdraw from the UN's educational, scientific and cultural agency. The rationale for withdrawal was partly the mounting financial arrears at UNESCO, the need to make budget cuts, and for there to be fundamental reform in the organization, but its real reason was disapproval and rejection of its "continuing anti-Israeli bias" Perhaps as a parting gesture, somewhat vacuous, the US will remain engaged as a nonmember observer state in order to contribute "US views, perspectives. and expertise."

The strong action is in line with stated views of candidate and President Donald Trump of the need to review US multilateral commitments, not only in trade pacts, NAFTA, Trans-Pacific Partnership, but also regarding international organizations. Changes in US policy can be expected on a variety of issues: financial contribution to and policy changes in NATO; Paris climate agreement, Iran nuclear deal; and United Nations agencies.

All of the UN agencies, the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, must be examined for highly questionable activity, policies that are hostile to US values, to justice, and common sense, and especially the relentless singling out of the State of Israel for criticism. It is particularly distressing that UNESCO, that was supposed to have positive objectives, has become a discredited agency illustrative of that hostility.

UNESCO was created at an international conference in London on November 16, 1945. Its fundamental purpose was to advance through the "educational, scientific, and cultural relations of the peoples of the world, the objectives of international peace and of the common welfare of mankind." It is worth remembering that it was the distinguished American poet Archibald MacLeish who wrote the opening of the UNESCO Constitution in 1945: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed."

No doubt UNESCO has done some useful work, in its international literacy programs, its effort to improve access to education, its attempt to protect the world's cultural heritages, and its World Heritage program. But unfortunately it has been misused and become a platform for political clashes that have no relation to its stated objectives, making it almost a theater of the absurd, and this has affected not only its stature but also its political and financial resources .

The US is conscious of the UNESCO problem. For a long time the US has been assessed and has contributed 22% of the total regular budget of UNESCO: Japan is second contributor with 9.7%. Since 2011 the US has withheld about \$542 million because of the UNESCO decision to agree to Palestinian membership, an implementation of an old US law to cut off financing to an agency that accepts Palestine as a full member.

The anti-Israeli bias of UNESCO is evident in many ways. In the event in October 2011 that caused the US withholding of funds, Palestine was made a full member of UNESCO. In contrast, the agency cancelled, until it changed its mind, an exhibition at its headquarters in Paris about the connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. President Barack Obama had refused to co-sponsor the exhibition that was termed, *The People, The Book, the Land, 3,000 years of ties*. More important, the Arab Group, 22 member states, in UNESCO had expressed "deep concern" over the exhibition which it argued would "disturb the current," in fact non-existent, Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Israel quickly, within a matter of hours, followed the US decision to withdraw and announced its own withdrawal from UNESCO. It had multiple good reasons to do so. UNESCO has been playing a role in the erasing of Jewish history in the land, as well constantly expounding a biased political position. An early example was a resolution in 1989 condemning Israel's "occupation of Jerusalem."

In October 2015 UNESCO had criticized by vote of 26-6 (including the US in the negative) what it called restrictions of freedom of worship at the al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and had been critical a number of times of Israel's management of holy sites. Israel recalled its ambassador to UNESCO after the negative resolution.

At the same time the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was added by a vote of 13-6 to UNESCO's World Heritage List:

Palestinian leaders regarded this as recognition of their historical and cultural rights in the land. The decision was more offensive for Israel not only because the Church was placed on the List of Sites in Danger, due to alleged Israeli actions, but also because the Church had been used for 39 days by terrorists who had occupied the Church in 2002.

In October 2010 UNESCO called for Israel to monitor archeological projects and excavations in Jerusalem. But its most cutting decision in 2010, and then a number of other resolutions was to hold that two sites, the Tomb (Cave) of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem are not exclusively Jewish sites. There is little excuse for this historical inaccuracy, since Hebron is the place where Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah are buried.

One resolution exclusively uses Arabic names, such as Qubbat Rachel, not Hebrew, for the sites. A later site resolution voted 44-1 with 12 abstentions, affirmed that the Rachel site was an "integral part of the Occupied Palestinian territories." After the July 7, 2017 decisions, 12-3-6, that the old city of Hebron, King David's first capital, was endangered, Israel cut \$1 million in payment to UNESCO, saying the amount would go to a Jewish heritage museum.

Even admitting the desirability of safeguarding the Palestinian cultural heritage and accepting the distinctive character of east Jerusalem, the UNESCO resolutions ignore the historic connection of Judaism to the Temple Mount. Israel suspended cooperation after the agency adopted a draft resolution that denied the historic Jewish connection to holy sites in Jerusalem.

The US had previously shown its displeasure with the agency when President Ronald Reagan's administration withdrew in 1984 because of allegations of corruption and its bias during the Cold War in favor of the Soviet Union. President George W.

Bush rejoined in 2002, prepared to participate in the mission to advance human rights, tolerance, and learning. But these desirable objectives have not been the significant missions of UNESCO in recent years.

The US decision to withdraw coincided with the campaign for election of the director-general by the 58 members of UNESCO's executive board. Candidates were from 7 countries including three from Arab countries, Qatar, Lebanon and Egypt, as well as from China, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, and France. So far no one from an Arab country has been director-general. Interesting as illustrating a change in international politics, a group of Arab intellectuals wrote to French President Emmanuel Macron urging him to withdraw the name of the French candidate, Audrey Azoulay, former French culture minister, and Jack Lang, head of the Arab World Institute in Paris agreed with this request.

The executive board chose otherwise by selecting Mme. Azoulay, and their choice will be presented to the UNESCO general assembly for final approval. She might consider two immediate matters. One is implementing the original objectives of UNESCO and helping it to overcome political divisions. At the same time the US will be pleased if she steers policy in a way acceptable to US values. The second is that, since she will be concerned with educational matters, she might see as a priority the problem of the Palestinian text books used in schools, books that breed hatred and induce indoctrination rather than education. After all UNESCO starts with education.