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Trump Is Right: The U.S. Should Leave UNESCO

By Jared Genser

Last week, the Trump administration announced it would withdraw the United States from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Critics predictably assailed the White House for its decision. But they're wrong. The move is long overdue.

UNESCO has a dismal track record. It has advanced the agendas of numerous dictatorships, indulged in virulent anti-Israel bias and offered textbook lessons in bad management. The United States has repeatedly tried to reform UNESCO and failed. So President Trump's decision was the right call. Founded in 1945, UNESCO's constitution says it was created to "contribute to peace and security" by promoting collaboration in its identified fields with the goal of furthering "universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms." Today, the organization has an annual budget of more than \$520 million. Yet as documented by the watchdog group UN Watch, it has taken countless decisions that contravene its mission.

In one particularly notorious case, UNESCO elected Sudan — led by the dictator Omar al-Bashir, who was indicted by the International Criminal Court on genocide charges — to its governing body. Astonishingly, it has even allowed Syria to serve on its human rights committee.

UNESCO also accepts money from an array of dictatorships, legitimizing their rule in the process. The notoriously brutal dictator of Equatorial Guinea, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema, funded the organization's science prize. And Bahrain finances the King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa Prize for achievements in the use of technology for education, even though Al-Khalifa has overseen a long-running crackdown on human rights.

In 2012, UNESCO added a collection of documents on the "Life and Works of Ernesto Che Guevara," the Argentine revolutionary who fought in the Cuban revolution alongside the Castro brothers, to the organization's "Memory of the World" program, which is designed to safeguard materials of value for future historians. Guevara not only ordered hundreds of extrajudicial executions during his term in the Cuban government, but in 1964 proudly admitted on the floor of the U.N. General Assembly: "Yes, we have executed people; we are executing people and shall continue to execute people as long as

it is necessary.”

The decision to withdraw the United States from UNESCO, however, is most directly tied to the country’s position on the Palestinian territories. Back in 2011, President Obama had no choice but to suspend membership payments to UNESCO after the organization voted to accept Palestine as a full member state. As a result, the U.S. today owes more than \$500 million in outstanding dues. (Under a law passed in 1990, the United States is prohibited from funding any U.N. agency “which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as member states.”)

UNESCO’s anti-Israel bias has been profound; the U.S. withdrawal is about much more than the admission of Palestine as a member. Between 2009 and 2014, UNESCO adopted 46 resolutions criticizing Israel — but only one on Syria, and none on countries such as North Korea, Iran, China, Russia or Sudan. UNESCO stood silent while the military wing of Hamas bulldozed the Anthedon seaport, which the organization had designated a “World Heritage Site,” to build a terrorist training camp.

And UNESCO has repeatedly gone beyond its mandate to neutrally preserve historical memory to instead take sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This past summer, the organization adopted a resolution denying all historical Jewish connections to Jerusalem and referred to the Temple Mount exclusively as a “Muslim holy site of worship,” ignoring Jewish ties to the Western Wall, all that remains of the Second Temple built more than 2,000 years ago.

In 2015, Secretary of State John F. Kerry issued a plea to Congress to restore funding for the organization, commenting that “the U.S. ... greatly values UNESCO as a platform for cooperation.” In taking this position, the Obama administration argued that UNESCO was playing a crucial role in preventing terrorists from profiting from the sale of looted antiquities of Iraq and Syria. But those efforts failed.

Earlier this year, 159 current and former UNESCO staffers demanded that Irina Bokova, the organization’s director general since 2009, resign or be fired. They alleged that she lacked managerial skills, appointed unqualified people for top jobs and had diverted millions in agency funds to pay for her campaign to become the next U.N. secretary general. She has remained in office nonetheless and is serving out the rest of her term. Next month, former French culture minister Audrey Azoulay is set to take over for Bokova. She will have her work cut out for her. In arguing for her election, Azoulay said she intended to “restore” the organization’s credibility and efficiency by focusing on its core missions.

There is no indication that UNESCO is capable of the kind of dramatic reform that is required. But the U.S. withdrawal won’t be effective until the end of 2018. So if its new director general can reverse its course, Trump will have a chance to reconsider. But for now, the burden is on UNESCO to show that it still has value for the United States and the world.

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