As US prepares to leave UNESCO over Israel bias, envoy urges deep reforms

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The chief US envoy at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization (UNESCO) said Saturday that anti-Israel bias and opaque bureaucracy are hobbling the UN cultural agency and urged deep reforms.

Chris Hegadorn made the appeal at the agency’s Paris headquarters in one of the last major American speeches to UNESCO before the US withdraws next year.

Hegadorn said the decision to leave “wasn’t taken lightly” but was necessary because of budget reasons, UNESCO’s inclusion of Palestine as a member and countries using the agency to advance their political agendas.

He urged UNESCO to speed up spending decisions and do more to prevent violent extremism through education, notably on social media.

He added that the US will remain “a determined advocate for the ideals on which UNESCO was founded” and support heritage protection and educational efforts.

This week the US helped Israel foil yet another anti-Israel resolution with a series of delaying tactics. The resolution would have condemned Israel’s handling of education in the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights. Similar resolutions have been passed by the UN’s education agency since 2009.

Voting on the resolution on Thursday was not expected to last more than a few minutes and the Palestinians had the needed majority for it to pass. But Israel, with the help of the US, used every possible means to create a filibuster, including demanding a vote by name from each of the 196 countries which are members of UNESCO.

By the time the vote eventually took place, several of the delegates had left and the Palestinians no longer had their majority.

“We have made it clear that the days are over when anti-Israel resolutions can be passed in five minutes. There will be a price tag for the obsession against Israel,” said Israel’s envoy Carmel Shama-Hacohen.

Among what may be the first results of the filibuster, China, usually an automatic supporter of the Palestinians at the UN, abstained while Mexico, a usually pro-Palestinian country, voted in Israel’s favor. According to Ynet, Mexico voted against its usual inclination in gratitude of the assistance it was given by Israel following a recent earthquake.