

Let the French Pay for UNESCO

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By Claudia Rossett

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Here comes the next chapter in perverse U.S. priorities at the United Nations. While the federal government has been pleading that it is too broke to provide White House tours or pay air-traffic controllers, the State Department is itching to fork over more than \$233 million to a United Nations agency in Paris — despite U.S. laws preventing them from doing so.

The agency in question — the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO — lost its U.S. funding in 2011 after its member states voted overwhelmingly — over U.S. objections — to make UNESCO the first U.N. body to admit the Palestinian Authority to full membership. That vote triggered two longstanding U.S. laws that forbid government funding to any part of the U.N. that tries to confer statehood on the Palestinians before they keep their promises and negotiate a genuine peace with Israel.

For UNESCO, that vote translated into a loss of almost \$80 million per year, cutting into such delights as the business-class air travel widely favored by the well-paid staff. U.S. dues totaled 22 percent of the agency's core budget, with millions in off-budget funding thrown in. This was UNESCO's choice, and there the matter should have ended. The 2011 cutoff was apparently a salutary lesson to

That lesson is now in jeopardy. UNESCO may not like American support for Israel, or care if the Palestinians break their Oslo promises. But UNESCO loves American money. So for more than a year now, UNESCO's director general, Irina Bokova, has been campaigning not for UNESCO's member states to reverse their admission of the Palestinians, but for Americans to scrap their own laws and resume feeding UNESCO's maw.

Last spring, Bokova assigned a full-time UNESCO staffer, former U.S. congressional aide George Papagiannis, to help shake down Washington. Officially, Papagiannis is based at UNESCO's liaison office at U.N. headquarters in New York. But Papagiannis spends much of his time in Washington, fount of the taxpayer dollars UNESCO desires.

In a recent phone interview, he described his job as “external relations.” Bokova herself has visited Washington at least five times since the 2011 funding cutoff, meeting with members of Congress, administration officials, and assorted pro-UNESCO nonprofits and advocacy groups. Her most recent visit came just last week, and included stops at the State Department and, according to Papagiannis, the White House.

In Washington, UNESCO’s biggest backer has been the Obama administration itself. Last year, the State Department penciled into its budget \$79 million for UNESCO, with a footnote that the administration would “work with Congress” to persuade U.S. legislators to waive the relevant laws and release the money. Congress refused.

This year, growing more ambitious, the State Department not only has requested \$77.8 million for UNESCO in fiscal 2014, but in oblique language proposes to pay UNESCO an additional \$156 million in “arrears” — meaning a grand total for UNESCO of \$233.8 million this year. The administration says it is seeking congressional support for the authority to waive the laws that currently forbid UNESCO funding based on the Palestinian issue.

This is a curious position for the Obama administration to take, given its own official policy that the Palestinians must honor their promises to negotiate peace with Israel, as per the Oslo accords — not roll right past that to seek state credentials from the U.N. But that didn’t stop Secretary of State John Kerry, testifying at a recent Senate hearing, from urging legislators to resume lavishing funds on UNESCO. Kerry’s argument was that America should pay its dues and remain in UNESCO in order to “fight for change, and frankly stand up and defend Israel.”

Kerry’s case might be more convincing if the U.S. had succeeded in standing up for Israel at UNESCO in the past. In 2011, after the U.S. had been pouring money into the organization for years, its efforts fell flat. UNESCO’s member states voted 107–14 to admit the Palestinians (52 abstained, and the rest were absent). Israel’s envoy described the vote as a “tragedy.” America’s ambassador to UNESCO, David Killion, limply labeled the vote “counterproductive,” and promptly undercut even that modest criticism by assuring the assembled delegates that President Obama considered engagement with UNESCO a top U.S. priority and that the U.S. would “find ways to support and strengthen the work of this vital organization.”

Since then, the U.S. has remained a member of UNESCO, but if Washington does not resume paying dues by the time UNESCO convenes its general conference this fall, it will lose its vote in the organization. That deadline is provoking a big push by the Obama administration to resume funding the group within the next few months. Bokova is up for reelection this fall, and whether UNESCO's member states vote her a second term may depend on whether she obtains those American tax dollars they want.

These pressures have just spawned what looks like the most cynical move yet: On April 24, UNESCO announced it would be sending a mission of experts to examine the condition of historic sites in the Old City of Jerusalem. UNESCO is advertising this as a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian relations, since both sides had to agree to the arrangement, which was brokered with the help of UNESCO's Bokova. According to the *New York Times*, America's Ambassador Killian hailed it as "a critical step forward toward depoliticizing UNESCO."

Perhaps. But all the signs suggest that UNESCO and the Obama administration orchestrated this deal in order to persuade Congress to resume funding UNESCO. The deal was "a direct result of recent visits to the Middle East by President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry," according to the *Times*, and for Israel, which will be allowing access to potentially unfriendly UNESCO experts, it "represents a concession to the Palestinians." The *Times* adds that the Palestinians, for their part of the deal, "are conceding a six-month pause in their regular condemnation of Israel in resolutions over issues like Gaza, the West Bank and education."

A six-month pause in Palestinian condemnations coincides with a key interval on the UNESCO calendar. It is just long enough for the Obama administration to get a waiver from Congress for the newly silent-on-Israel UNESCO, resume funding the organization, and keep its vote at the general conference this fall — where Bokova, having brought home the U.S. bacon, would be likely to be reelected.

At that stage, the six-month delay in condemnations having expired, the Palestinians and their pals at UNESCO can resume castigating Israel, using U.S. funds to do so.

That is the nature of UNESCO, which is in theory devoted to culture and freeing the minds of mankind, but in practice makes room on its 58-member board for such anti-Semitic, authoritarian redoubts as Russia, China, Belarus, Cuba, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Venezuela, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Saudi Arabia,

and Syria (the last of which currently sits on UNESCO's human-rights committee).

If the U.S. waives its own laws in order to resume bankrolling UNESCO, there will be no more bar to the Palestinians' seeking full member-state credentials at every other U.N. specialized agency.

More than ever before, the U.N. would have every reason to regard U.S. money as an entitlement, guaranteed to gush in regardless of behavior. The implications of this go well beyond the further undermining of the beleaguered state of Israel at the U.N. Far from buying more influence for the U.S., \$233.8 million for UNESCO would signal that U.S. leaders are so desperate to remain "engaged" that they will overturn their own laws, abandon principle, and undercut their interests and those of their allies for the privilege of sitting at a table where they can pay the biggest share of the tab for the privilege of being outvoted. That presents real risks, not only within the comfortable confines of the U.N., but on the ground — where countries from China and Russia to Iran and North Korea are now sizing up the 21st century's new global order.

As for the "vital" role of UNESCO: Forget about it. America pulled out of the organization entirely from 1984 to 2002, in protest over UNESCO's corrupt and anti-American ways. Both America and UNESCO survived.

If UNESCO's officials, in their lavish Paris headquarters, need the money, why not tell them to go lobby the French? France was among the member states that voted in 2011 to admit the Palestinians. The Gauls' dues cover a mere 6.1 percent of UNESCO's core budget, or about \$20 million, compared with the 22 percent the U.S. was paying. Surely, if France appreciates UNESCO's contributions to world peace (and French jobs) so much, the Quai d'Orsay could scrounge up a few more euros?

For that matter, even the recently admitted authorities of "Palestine" could surely manage a little more than their 2012 assessed dues of \$13,060. Perhaps Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas could dip into his mad money for the cause? Maybe Yasser Arafat's widow, Suha, could be persuaded to chip in?

— *Claudia Rosett is journalist-in-residence at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and heads its Investigative Reporting Project.*