

Why Did the U.S. and Israel Leave UNESCO?

Written by Daniel Marwecki

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DANIEL MARWECKI, FEB 14 2019

The United States and Israel left the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) last December. The two countries opposed several anti-Israel resolutions passed by the UN-organization in previous years. However, it would be a mistake to view the American and Israeli decisions primarily as a response to those resolutions. Instead, Washington's current exit from UNESCO integrates seamlessly into a longer historical trajectory of instrumental engagement with the organization. Israel, the Middle Eastern junior partner of the U.S., has little choice but to follow suit.

Washington and Tel Aviv had declared their intention to leave the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as early as 2017. That the two countries only just left is due to regulations allowing for formal withdrawal only at the end of the year following that in which the decision was made. The UNESCO-secretariat of course deeply regrets Washington's and Tel Aviv's decisions. However, UNESCO's daily workings are unlikely to be impaired. Both the U.S. and Israel declared that they would continue their work in preserving world heritage sites in their countries, while Washington also made it clear that it will continue to play a role in the organization as an observer. More importantly, UNESCO has had to do without American funding since 2011, when the Obama administration froze financial contributions to the organization after UNESCO granted Palestine full membership as a state — the first UN-organization to do so. While this move led to harsh protests also from Tel Aviv, Israel remained part of the organization.

The current decision to leave came after a string of decisions that the U.S. and Israel perceived to be biased against Israel. In 2016, a UNESCO resolution initially proposed by Arab member states concerning occupied East Jerusalem ignored Jewish historical links to that part of the city: referring to the Dome of Rocks only by its Arab and Muslim name, al-Haram al-Sharif. In July 2017, UNESCO declared the old city of Hebron and the Tomb of the Patriarchs as a Palestinian cultural heritage. While the importance of Hebron as the resting place of Abraham/Ibrahim to all three monotheistic religions is mentioned, the declaration reflects a reading of history which has little place for Jewish religious and historical links to the holy site. One does not have to support Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories to find fault with such a declaration, yet one should also be mindful of the political context within which they are made. Indeed, in the zero-sum game of two national claims to the same territory, there seems to be little room for differentiation between historical and religious facts on the one side, and national narratives on the other. The reason for the American and Israeli decision to leave the organization, however, is not found in the texts of the recent UNESCO declarations alone. Rather, we have to look at the current state of both U.S.-Israeli relations and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Firstly, what does the American and Israeli decision mean for the Palestinian Authority (PA)? It could be seen as victory for Mahmoud Abbas, the PA's ageing president. After all, the recent UNESCO-decisions in favor of the Palestinians form part of the PA's strategy to internationalize the conflict: to seek recognition for Palestinian statehood in lieu of engaging in further rounds of fruitless negotiations over ever-shrinking territory for a Palestinian state. However, it is a diplomatic victory made mostly of hot air, as it is of no political or economic consequence to Palestinians living under occupation. In fact, the PA is criticized by most Palestinians as an institution that facilitates the Israeli occupation rather than working towards lifting it. According to the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995, the Authority was planned to be an interim organization until the impending realization of a fully-fledged Palestinian state. However, as the Oslo Process broke down in 2000, the PA has since turned into a seemingly permanent institution,

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administering and policing Palestinians in the high-density Palestinian population enclaves (Areas 'A' under the Accords). It is quite unlikely that diplomatic victories scored against Israel in the UN will greatly influence negative Palestinian perceptions of the PA for the better.

Why the U.S. Left — and Why Israel Followed Suit

The U.S. State Department justified the October 2017 decision to withdraw with “mounting arrears at UNESCO, the need for fundamental reform in the organization, and continuing “anti-Israel bias.” As we can see from this statement, the Trump administration had little interests in paying the debts piled up since the Obama administration froze UNESCO contributions in 2011. Secondly, it seems self-evident that the disdain for multilateralism expressed in Trump’s ‘America First’ foreign policy outlook partly explains why the U.S. left UNESCO. As Trump’s current security adviser John Bolton famously said in 1994: “if the United Nations Secretariat building in New York lost 10 stories, it wouldn’t make a bit of difference.” One cannot quite imagine Donald Trump and his ever-changing array of ministers to particularly care about world heritage preservation either.

With regards to accusations of “anti-Israel bias” by UNESCO, it is interesting to note that it was Washington, not Tel Aviv, who had taken the initiative to withdraw. According to a report by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, Washington officials did not even inform their Israeli counterparts of the decision in 2017. Of course, it would hardly have been possible for Israel to *not* follow a decision that was purportedly made in its favor and taken by its key ally. This speaks against the popularly-held opinion of American-Israeli relations as a case of the tail wagging the dog.

A little history helps to understand the American decision in more depth. As a *Time* article in 2017 explained, the current episode appears much like a déjà-vu. In 1974, U.S. president Gerald Ford froze payments to UNESCO after it recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Washington left UNESCO in 1983 under President Ronald Reagan. The decision was part of Reagan’s policy to quell real and presumed Soviet influence everywhere, a policy that included the backing of brutal dictatorships and a re-heating of the Cold War conflict. One can see why the often-drawn comparison between Reagan and Trump makes sense: Reagan’s fervent ideological battle against ‘communism’ mirrors the Trump-administration’s hatred of Islam.

Reagan justified his decision with UNESCO’s “hostility to a free society, especially a free market and a free press”. Thatcherite Britain followed two years later. The Reagan/Thatcher duo, today known for bringing unfettered neoliberalism to the world, sought to remove international obstacles to its economic and political revolution. Their struggle with UNESCO was a struggle with the Non-Aligned Movement of recently decolonized nations.

Indeed, as explained in the *Time* article cited above, when UNESCO was founded after World War II, it was basically a club of Western states, its cultural and educational work necessary for establishing a post-fascist, liberal order in Nazi-destroyed Europe. Trouble came to UNESCO, at least from an American perspective, when membership of ‘Third World’ countries surged in the course of the great waves of decolonization. The U.S. found that it was losing money to an organization over which it had limited influence and for which it had little purpose.

Ironically, it was not under the presumably more multilaterally-minded Democrat Bill Clinton, but under the Republican George W. Bush that the U.S. rejoined UNESCO almost 20 years after leaving it. This decision should not be misperceived as a renewed sense of cooperation. Most likely, the Bush administration sought to display a sense of commitment to multilateralism at the same time as it was preparing its invasion of Iraq, which stood in contravention to international law. In another irony, one should again remember the fact that it was the Obama-administration which paved the way for the current decision of the Trump government, by having frozen U.S. contributions to UNESCO already in 2011.

For the U.S., the present withdrawal from UNESCO is thus not too big a deal and smoothly integrates into prior history. The situation may be somewhat different for Israel. Israel had become a UNESCO member a year after it was founded in the 1948 war. While passing resolutions opposed to Israeli interests is nothing new to what UNESCO does, this is the first time Israel has left the organization. It is a move that puts the U.S. and Israel against the virtually global membership of UNESCO. Under the far-right government of Benyamin Netanyahu, Israel, for better or worse,

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is trailing along the not-so-easily predictable foreign policy course set by the administration of Donald Trump.

In conclusion, the current episode in the diplomatic drama of how the Israel-Palestine conflict unfolds on the stage of UNESCO needs to be seen historically and in terms of the changing American strategic and tactical outlook towards the UN. This allows for a much clearer picture than can be gained by only looking at the official Israeli or Palestinian rhetoric.

About the author:

Daniel Marwecki just completed his PhD at SOAS University of London, where he wrote about West Germany's Israel and Palestine policy. His PhD examines Germany's role in the early consolidation of Israel and its engagement with the Palestinian question, and the transformations of German postwar antisemitism in the context of relations with Israel. He is currently transforming his PhD into a book.