

A 21st-CENTURY UNESCO: IDEALS AND POLITICS IN AN ERA OF (INTERRUPTED) US RE-ENGAGEMENT

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How has UNESCO fared in the three years since Palestine's entrance and the accompanying halt in US funding? What has been the impact on institutional reform? On US interests?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has a tragic flaw, a more acute version of the UN system as a whole: its mission is to advance high ideals for global governance in a world of Machiavellian actors and distributional politics. UNESCO's multicultural bureaucracy is reluctant to admit the limits of its vast agenda or the resources required for its execution. It often scurries for new methods and funds as it implements plans to address ambitious challenges for humanity, including quality universal education, cultural treasures, inclusive human rights, global science projects, and ways of communication.

Two membership episodes in the twenty-first century provide a leitmotif for the organization's Wagnerian internal struggles and external pressures, and constraints for the future: the return of the United States to the organization in October 2003; and the vote on 31 October 2011 that admitted Palestine as the 195th member. Washington's re-entry was the heralded return of the hero whose ideals informed the organization's creation but also revealed the great power's strategic interest in the twenty-first century UNESCO. Eight years later, the Palestinian vote at UNESCO's General Conference was 107 to 14, with 52 abstentions. The vote drew condemnation from the United States and resulted in an immediate cut-off in funding. US legislation dating to 1990 and 1994 discontinues funding to the United Nations or its specialized agencies if they admit either "the Palestine Liberation Organization" (PLO named in the legislation) or another country

without recognized statehood as a member. The US budgetary share was about 22 percent, which had not been paid in 2011, which means the arrears now extend to four years (see Table 1).

Who governs? What do they govern? How do they govern? The bookends to the twenty-first century—provided by the entry of the United States and Palestine to UNESCO are analyzed in the context of the organization's dramatic past, which suggest two intriguing scenarios: the dysfunctional dystopia of global governance; or this is as good as it gets.¹ Nonetheless, UNESCO was doing better than either of these options until its reforms were disrupted with the Palestine issue.

WHO GOVERNS?

UNESCO has continually featured some colorful actors along with their politics and fancy ideals. It was created in November 1945 after three years of attempts, initially from education ministers of allied countries, to counteract Nazi propaganda—a poignant reminder of humanity's highest aspirations. The organization's preamble begins with words from US poet laureate Archibald MacLeish: "That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." UNESCO's workings, however, also reflect its members' Hobbesian instincts, devoid of idealism, to further their strategic interests.

The United States is straightforward, perhaps even brazen, in pursuing its national interests through UNESCO; indeed, recent

Table 1: US Contributions to UNESCO: FY2003-FY2012^{1,2}
(in millions of current US dollars)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Assessed	0.00	84.14	76.75	70.92	73.48	77.62	75.94	80.92	78.83	0.00
Voluntary	1.75	1.89	0.84	0.99	0.99	0.99	1.00	1.00	1.85	0.00

calls for refunding have been framed in terms of US security interests.² In the context of the Cold War, the media and an emphasis on individual freedoms guided the agenda. As a result the Eastern bloc hesitated to join. But when Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Soviet Union did so in 1954, they questioned Washington's agenda. For example, Luther Evans was effective as the US director-general (1953-58) but failed to check McCarthyism and the UNESCO witch-hunts of staff.

In the 1960s, the Eastern Bloc along with post-colonial countries countered the Western push for individual human rights; they also supported a burgeoning Arab agenda against Israel. Both moves rankled the United States. In 1966, UNESCO endorsed the "collectivist" International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The so-called Israel resolutions of 1968-74 followed the Arab-Israeli war in 1967. These resolutions called upon UNESCO to sanction Israel for damaging the heritage of the old city of Jerusalem through aggressive acts of war and irresponsible excavations. The 1974 General Conference condemned Israel for carrying out the excavations, and Israel found itself expelled from its regional group but admitted as a European state. However, Raymond Lamaire was the special representative to investigate the issue, who found that Israel had not damaged any heritage.

The 1970s also featured strident calls at the UN for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), and UNESCO's counterpart was the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Meanwhile, anti-Israel advocacy continued in UNESCO but also other specialized agencies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO). In 1976, Henry Kissinger noted that UNESCO and ILO were "heavily politicized," leading to Washington's withdrawal from the ILO (1977-80). The United States also complained of nepotism in hiring practices at UNESCO, especially under Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow (1974-87).

The United States cited anti-US and Israel advocacy, corruption within UNESCO, and NWICO in withdrawing from the organization in 1984, which lasted for 18 years. Two reasons were paramount in re-joining in 2003: Hollywood's pressures to dilute a UNESCO convention on cultural diversity that would have enabled restrictions on cultural exports from the United States, and pressures within the George W. Bush administration to put its best multilateral foot forward in the post 9/11 era.

By most accounts, the US return both shook up and revived UNESCO. Besides budgetary contributions, the United States sought to reform the organization from within while bringing support from important external actors, especially private resources and funding. Old politics persisted. In 2005, a 148-2 vote (only the United States and Israel against) approved the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Despite the overwhelming vote in the convention's favor, Washington managed to dilute many provisions in the first two years after its re-entry. As a developing country ambassador once told me: "Hollywood is an emergency!"

The Palestine issue returned in October 2011 and resulted in halting US funding and the accompanying loss of its vote. Despite these developments, the United States continues to play an important role in the organization, although that situation may not last. UNESCO insiders claim that the director-general continues to listen closely; and despite losing its vote, the United States serves on the 58-member Executive Board that meets every six months. For the organization's everyday functioning, it is more important than the General Conference and the Secretariat.

The interests of the United States are best served through staying in UNESCO. Since 2003, using its funding and partnership leverage, Washington had refocused on UNESCO's ideals while strategically advancing its own priorities. UNESCO's many education and gender programs are illustrative. Then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's eloquent and extempore speech in May 2011 addressed the organization's goals for the education of girls and women, and it is often cited by staff as one of the finest examples of US re-engagement,³ which boosted UNESCO's Education for All Agenda.

More importantly, before the Palestinian vote, UNESCO had rationalized many activities and rejuvenated many networks. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's announcement of the Global Compact to work with civil society and business organizations, and the inclusion of this partnership in the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), provided a mandate for innovation and fund-raising. Washington's re-engagement provided an effective lever, and UNESCO was specifically named the lead agency of MDG Goal 2: Primary Education. Proctor & Gamble's partnership in UNESCO is often mentioned as an exemplar of utilizing partnerships, specifically its project for girls' literacy in Senegal.⁴

UNESCO's influence over many networks is evident, but great power participation remains central. Intellectuals and experts have long been indispensable to UNESCO's mission. Some 350 nongovernmental organizations are formally affiliated, and UNESCO even helped create such well-known networks as the International Council of Museums and the World Wildlife Fund. Indeed, the original French concept for UNESCO had envisioned an intellectual organization similar to the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations; but Washington and London insisted on an inter-governmental body. While both have supplied legions of experts and intellectuals and helped mobilize international networks, when non-state actors (PLO) or networks (media supporting NWICO) are mobilized that the United States does not approve, the country has withdrawn funding (2011) or altogether (1986-2003).

WHAT IS GOVERNED?

UNESCO's elevated and idealistic sense of purpose—constructing "defenses of peace" in human minds—often does not translate well into a pragmatic set of goals and strategies. The broad mandate allows the organization to take on a variety of issues, often with little underlying connections and meager resources.

Some argue that the UN’s most colorful battles often land on UNESCO’s doorstep.

US reengagement has featured pressures to make UNESCO’s agenda both practical and streamlined—it could even appear to be corporate and unintellectual. Both directors-general Kochiro Matsuura (1999-2009) and Irina Bokova (2009-) are credited with initiating widespread reform. Matsuura’s internal reform halved the number of directors at UNESCO to 100 and reduced field offices from 79 to 58. An internal oversight report in 2009 recommended further changes to the staff, not implemented, but he is credited with introducing transparency and cutting nepotism.⁵

In 2009, the General Conference also authorized a comprehensive audit to explore: “How should UNESCO position itself to address the challenges of the 21st century and make the most of prospective opportunities?”⁶ In January-July 2010, an 11-member international team conducted an Independent External Evaluation and its September report found UNESCO’s mandate to be unwieldy and hard to achieve without field presence.⁷ Over half of UNESCO’s 2,100 staff were based in Paris while the other half were spread out over 58 field offices.

The report recommended strategic redirections, including focus, decentralization, and partnerships with civil society, businesses, and other UN agencies. Subsequently, the General Conference and the Executive Board agreed to an 86-point action agenda. UNESCO reported in March 2014 at the meeting of its Executive Board that the organization had completed 72 goals and initiated work slotted for completion on another 14 (see table 2).⁸

HOW IS IT GOVERNED?

The timing of Palestinian membership was unfortunate because reform was barely under way when the cut-off in US funding forced the organization into crisis mode, which left it scrambling for funds. The last three years are as remarkable for a sense of crisis as for continuing reform.

The termination of US funding has led to a complicated budgetary process by which the organization passes two budgets: one assumes that the United States is a dues-paying member, but the second

reflects actual staff and program appropriations. UNESCO’s annual reports continue to list US contributions though they are unpaid (see Table 3). UNESCO had a \$188 million shortfall in its \$653 million biennial budget (2011-13) and made up this shortfall through cuts for travel, consultants, and contracts. Approximately \$42 million of the \$188 million shortfall came from the Special Emergency Multi-Donor Fund that the director-general established in November 2011, which garnered \$74.9 million in contributions including from least developed countries.⁹

The director-general has spent considerable time before the US Congress unsuccessfully lobbying for renewed funding. The Obama administration’s poor relations with Congress and somewhat estranged relations with Israel played a role. Privately, insiders note that the funding might have been restored if Hilary Clinton had remained secretary of state. This counterfactual is hard to validate but does point toward political solutions. UNESCO staff also noted that rather than the director-general, Washington’s allies should have pressured Congress.

MOVING FORWARD

UNESCO’s importance to the world arises counter-intuitively from its two chief shortcomings. First, its vague norms on many of world’s most-important issues are a reminder of humanity’s strengths and limits in uplifting the mind through education, science, and culture. “The Preamble send chills up and down the spine,” said one UNESCO official “How prescient that if we believe in knowledge and implementation in five domains, we can stop killing each other.”¹⁰ Second, its knowledge is often unimplemented or not implementable, but as the preceding analysis shows, UNESCO has made great strides in this direction in the past decade. Now is not the time to stop funding UNESCO.

An unabashed assessment of UNESCO came recently from David Killion, US ambassador (2009-14): “UNESCO sometimes seems more like a three-ring circus than a platform for promoting US interests.” However, he noted that engagement with UNESCO is critical: “The US President should decide where we engage in the UN system, not Mahmood Abbas. There has to be a way that all of us in this room can come together and find a policy that serves America’s collective interests in a more positive way than the

Table 2: Progress Report on UNESCO’s Independent Expert Evaluation Process¹³

Recommended Strategic Directions and Number of Goals	Completed/Integrated into the ongoing systemic efforts	Open/Ongoing	Of which proposed for completion or integration into EX/4 at 194th session
Strategic Direction 1-Focus (20)	14	6	1
Strategic Direction 2-Field (17)	11	6	3
Strategic Direction 3-UN (8)	6	2	1
Strategic Direction 4-Governance (27)	21	6	1
Strategic Direction 5-Partnership (14)	12	2	2
TOTAL (86)	64	22	8

current one does.”¹¹ Reform processes at UNESCO had begun long before the Palestine vote that derailed them. The US return in 2003 brought energy and enthusiasm, whereas the funding cut-off in 2011 had the opposite effect.

The United States remains a powerful player in UNESCO for now. However, its leverage is diminishing, and UNESCO has not been brought to its knees. The DG’s Emergency Fund constitutes a

sizable amount. The British Parliament’s symbolic vote on 13 October 2014 to recognize Palestine 274-12 is also a precursor to other recognitions. The question is simple: will Washington or Palestine determine engagement with UNESCO or the UN?

Despite Wagnerian mischief, UNESCO is not headed toward *Götterdämmerung*. UNESCO will survive as a trimmed and restructured organization.

Table 3: Assessed Contributions to the Regular Budget: Top 25 Assessments, 2013¹⁴ (millions of US dollars)

		Scale Percentage	Amount
1	United States of America	22.00	71.83
2	Japan	10.83	35.37
3	Germany	7.14	23.32
4	France	5.59	18.26
5	United Kingdom	5.18	16.91
6	China	5.15	16.81
7	Italy	4.45	14.52
8	Canada	2.99	9.74
9	Spain	2.97	9.71
10	Brazil	2.93	9.68
11	Russian Federation	2.44	7.96
12	Australia	2.07	6.77
13	Republic of Korea	1.99	6.51

		Scale Percentage	Amount
14	Mexico	1.84	6.01
15	Netherlands	1.65	5.40
16	Turkey	1.32	4.34
17	Switzerland	1.05	3.42
18	Belgium	1.0	3.26
19	Sweden	0.96	3.13
20	Poland	0.92	3.01
21	Saudi Arabia	0.86	2.82
22	Norway	0.85	2.78
23	Austria	0.80	2.61
24	Denmark	0.68	2.20
25	India	0.67	2.17

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NOTES

- For a classic treatment of these two extremes, see Richard Hoggart, *An Idea and Its Servants: UNESCO From Within* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
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- All documents related to IEE audit and the follow-ups can be found at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/resources/independent-external-evaluation-of-unesco>.
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- UNESCO, *Annual Report 2013*, 125.

