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Political Implications of the Palestinian Accession to UNESCO

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Executive Summary

On 31 October 2011, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) accepted the Palestinian Authority's (PA) bid for full membership as a state. The bid received overwhelming support, with 107 member states voting in favour of membership. UNESCO is the first UN body to give the Palestinians recognition as a state.

A diplomatic victory for the Palestinian Authority

Admission into UNESCO is a public relations victory for the PA and a deliberate tactic of isolating countries opposed to its statehood bid at the UN Security Council—namely, the United States and Israel.

The move is part of the PA's campaign to join independent UN agencies as full members in order to create a moral and political momentum for its statehood recognition. As such, the popular support received for membership in UNESCO will make it harder for countries to oppose the statehood bid.

As a UNESCO member, the PA can—and has indicated that it will—apply for World Heritage classification for historic sites of cultural significance in the Occupied Territories. This would include landmarks which Israel has officially declared part of its national heritage, and which could complicate future final status negotiations.

Implications for Israel

Israel's response to UNESCO membership was negative. Israel views the PA's statehood gambit as a violation of mutually agreed upon parameters for peace negotiations and is considering "cutting all ties" and taking punitive measures against the PA, and is re-considering its ties with UNESCO.

Israel no doubt fears that UNESCO's ability to categorise World Heritage sites will be exploited by the

PA to claim ownership over contested religious and cultural landmarks in both the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Implications for the United States

The US rejected the UNESCO bid and has stated that the move "undermines" international efforts in trying to achieve peace in the Middle East. The US State Department announced that it would withhold \$60 million in financial support due to be given to UNESCO this month—nearly a fifth of its yearly budget

Despite financial cuts, the US has emphasised that its membership is not in question. UNESCO is valuable for American business and national security interests in developing countries.

Implications for UNESCO

Unless the shortfall is made up by other donors, the closure of some UNESCO operations around the world may be likely because of cuts in US aid.

With its strong commitment to freedom of expression and information, UNESCO may come under renewed criticism for its inclusion of the PA, which has a history of curbing journalistic freedoms in the West Bank and Gaza. If UNESCO fails to hold the PA to the same ethical standards as other members, the agency could be accused of double standards.

Introduction

On 31 October 2011, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) ratified the Palestinian Authority's (PA) bid for full membership as a state, bringing the number of full member states in UNESCO to 195. The Palestinian bid received overwhelming support, with 107 member states voting in favour of membership, 52 abstentions and only 14 votes against the motion.

This development comes one month after the PA submitted a formal application for full membership at the UN Security Council. The latter initiative provoked intense international controversy over whether or not it violates the letter and spirit of the 1993 Oslo Accords, which mandate that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be resolved by direct negotiations.

UNESCO is the first UN affiliate body to grant the Palestinians full membership befitting a sovereign and independent nation. The PA's motivations in pursuing UNESCO membership has been interpreted as a domino strategy of joining secondary international organisations to enhance their diplomatic momentum in advance of the Security Council's consideration of the the statehood bid—a process that could take months or even years. Both the United States and Israel are strongly opposed to the statehood bid and the US has threatened to block it by wielding its veto right at the Security Council.

The US also led the charge against the PA's UNESCO accession, describing the move repeatedly as “premature” and announcing that it would henceforth restrict its sizeable donation to the agency, which currently constitutes approximately a quarter of UNESCO's two year budget. Also voting against the membership were Israel, Canada, Australia, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. However, EU countries were divided, with France and Belgium voting in favour, while the United Kingdom, Poland, Portugal,

Denmark and Italy abstained. Brazil, Russia, India and China—all of which have signalled their willingness to vote “yes” at the Security Council on the Palestinian statehood question—voted in favour of accession to UNESCO, as did most African and Arab states.

The PA's membership admission met with cheers and applause at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris on Monday. One UNESCO delegate reportedly shouted: “Long live Palestine!” in French. The Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad al-Malki welcomed the decision as a way of “help[ing] erase a tiny part of the injustice done to the Palestinian people.”

A diplomatic victory for the Palestinian Authority

Admission to UNESCO represents a significant propaganda victory for the PA. Mahmoud Abbas, President of the PA, has reportedly stated: “accepting Palestine into UNESCO is a victory for (our) rights, for justice and for freedom.”

The UNESCO bid was another attempt to maintain the support from a Palestinian population eager to see progress towards independence. Such PR victories especially benefit Fatah, the party which dominates the PLO and leads the PA, given the fact that their political rivals, Hamas, received popular praise for their recent deal with Israel, which saw the kidnapped Israel Defense Forces soldier Gilad Shalit, in Hamas custody for five years, exchanged for more than a thousand Palestinian prisoners. Hamas has openly welcomed UNESCO admission, despite the fact that it previously criticised the PA for its September application at the UN.

UN Security Council members are very likely to split along the lines of the UNESCO members when the Palestinian statehood bid is debated on 11 November, and when the PA attempts to secure

full membership at any other UN agency. Other UN agencies the PA is expected to approach include the UN Industrial Development Organization; the World Intellectual Property Organization; the UN Conference on Trade and Development, which has reciprocal agreements that would allow UNESCO members in as full members; and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The overwhelming support the PA received for full membership admission to UNESCO will make it more difficult for countries to oppose Palestinian attempts to secure statehood recognition at the UN. Moreover, in future the PA could present any opposition to UNESCO recognition as an attempt to deny the Palestinian claim to a distinct and legitimate culture.

As a UNESCO member, the Palestinians can also now apply for World Heritage classification for their cultural sites in the Occupied Territories to legitimate and promote their cultural rights, which would be protected by the UN, and could also receive funding from UNESCO for preservation and restoration projects. These sites could include contested landmarks which Israel has officially declared part of its national heritage, such as Temple Mount in Jerusalem (where the Al-Aqsa mosque also stands), Rachel's Tomb and the Tomb of the Patriarchs, both of which are in the West Bank. If Israel were to damage any UNESCO heritage site in a military campaign, it would be in violation of international law and UNESCO member states would be obliged to take action.

Implications for Israel

The Israeli response to the PA's accession to UNESCO was swift and categorically negative: "This is a unilateral Palestinian manoeuvre which will bring no change on the ground but further removes the [peace] agreement." The Israeli Foreign Ministry has added that Israel would consider "cutting all ties with the Palestinian Authority," and senior officials have indicated that punitive measures against the PA should be expected, including a halt on the

FACT BOX



UNESCO's stated mission "is to contribute to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information." In accordance with this mandate, the agency works towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals—a set of global "benchmarks" adopted in 2000 by world leaders for advancing human development—everything from eradicating extreme poverty and hunger to promoting gender equality to combating deadly diseases. Founded in November 1945, UNESCO now has 195 member states, 50 field offices located globally, and is headquartered in Paris.

The preservation and restoration of culturally significant sites, designated as World Heritage sites, is one of UNESCO's most well-known and significant activities. Only member states can apply for World Heritage classification, and are eligible receive financial assistance and expert advice from the World Heritage Committee. Examples of World Heritage sites include: the Egyptian Pyramids, Great Wall of China, and the Acropolis.

UNESCO's budget is calculated on a two-year basis, estimated to stand at \$643 million for 2010-2011—\$321.5 million per year—and projected to be \$653 million for 2012-13—\$326.5 million

transfer of tax money that Israel currently collects for Ramallah—a measure Israel had temporarily imposed in early 2011 to penalise the announced “reconciliation” accord between Fatah and Hamas. Another statement by the Israeli Foreign Ministry suggests that it is also re-considering its ties with UNESCO: “Following the decision... the State of Israel will consider ongoing cooperation with the organization.” (Israel contributes approximately 3 percent of the organisation’s annual budget, money it has pledged to withdraw as well.)

Israel has long had a fraught relationship with the UNESCO. In November 2010, the cultural agency classified Rachel’s Tomb in the West Bank city of Hebron as a mosque, drawing the ire of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, which suspended relations with the UNESCO. The third holiest site in Judaism, Rachel’s Tomb is considered by Jews to be the resting place of the Biblical matriarch. However, the Tomb also has religious significance to Muslims and Christians. Nevertheless, the UNESCO board voted 44 to one—with 12 abstentions—to assign the “Bilal bin Rabah Mosque/Rachel’s Tomb” the status of national heritage site and to affirm that it was an “integral part of the occupied Palestinian territories and that any unilateral action by the Israeli authorities is to be considered a violation of international law.” Yet, as a study of the Palestinian school curriculum found in 2008, the PA reference to the “Dome of Rachel” persisted through 2001 when the name Bilal bin Rabah Mosque was suddenly bestowed upon the site in a new educational textbook.

The fate of Jerusalem is a crucial aspect of this debate. The PA claims the eastern half of the city as the future capital of a sovereign State of Palestine. A host of international bodies—including the UN—have affirmed the legitimacy of this claim, describing Israeli expansion into East Jerusalem as settlement building and therefore a violation of international law. Despite allowances from previous Israeli governments for the re-division of Jerusalem along the “1967 borders” the current Israeli government has repeatedly described an undivided Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.



per year. Administration costs of running field offices total approximately \$183.4 million, while \$118.5 million is spent on education programmes in developing countries, \$59 million is spent on natural sciences programmes, and \$4 million is utilised by the World Heritage fund. Programmes on Africa and gender equality are given top priority.

Freedom of expression and press is also prioritised and promoted by UNESCO as a “basic human right” and a prerequisite of democratisation. UNESCO provides advisory services on how countries can develop and implement systems which allow for the free exchange of ideas and information. In 2007, the UN agency awarded Anna Politkovskaya—the Russian journalist whose murder is widely attributed to her criticism of the brutal war in Chechnya—the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

At the close of the Six Day War in 1967, Israel prohibited Jews from praying at the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, and ceded its administration to the Waqf (Islamic trust) because it is also where the al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Sunni Islam, resides. In Islamic scripture, the Temple Mount is known as al-Haram ash-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary.

The twinned location of two monotheistic religions' holy sites has led to archaeological controversies—some of which have turned violent. In 1996, Prime Minister Netanyahu, then in his first term in office, allowed for the excavation of a tunnel that ran along the Western Wall alongside the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The tunnel emerged in the Muslim Quarter of that multicultural city, although some Israeli extremists attempted to dig upwards toward the Temple Mount. The Waqf responded by pouring concrete in to fill the hole. Rumours that the archaeological dig was an attempt to tarnish or reclaim the Noble Sanctuary caused a riot in which 75 people were killed and 1,500 more wounded.

Indeed, the politicisation of sacrosanct sites in Jerusalem has also long been a hallmark of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which the UN currently recognises as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” Under the original orders of former PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, there is a proscription on Palestinian historians against acknowledging that a Jewish Temple ever existed on al-Haram ash-Sharif. During the US-brokered the Camp David talks in 2000, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered Arafat control of all the Arab suburbs of East Jerusalem. Under Barak's proposal, the Old City would be demilitarised and patrolled by both states, but would remain under Israeli control. The Muslim and Christian Quarters as well as the Temple Mount itself would devolve to Palestinian “sovereign custodianship,” while the tunnels beneath al-Haram ash-Sharif would remain under Israeli control. Barak also conceded the Armenian Quarter in response to Arafat's demands. However, Arafat responded to these conciliatory measures by insisting that the Jewish Temple had never existed in Jerusalem at all, but rather on the Samaritan Mount Gerizim in Nablus. When he was later offered full sovereignty over the Temple Mount, with Israel retaining only symbolic ties to the Holy of Holies beneath the site, Arafat still refused to accept the deal. In 2002, Arafat began to deny that the Temple ever existed in historic Palestine

at all; a year later he briefed a delegation of Arab leaders and insisted that the site of the Temple was in fact in Yemen, which he claimed to have personally visited.

For Israel, the overriding concern now that the PA has been granted membership to UNESCO will be for the agency to re-engage with this “Temple Denial” by culturally certifying al-Haram ash-Sharif as a predominantly Muslim holy site. Any such determination would surely carry diplomatic weight in any final status agreement.

Implications for the United States

The US shares Israel's rejection of the bid and has stated that the move “undermines the international community's shared goal of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.” In response to the PA's admission, the US State Department announced on 1 November that it would withhold \$60 million in a scheduled disbursement due to UNESCO this month. The US currently contributes \$80 million per year to the organisation, the equivalent of 22 percent of UNESCO's annual budget.

Like Israel, the both the US and the UK have had a parlous relationship with UNESCO. The Reagan and Thatcher governments withdrew their countries from the agency in 1984 and 1985, respectively, following the publication of the New World Information and Communication Order, (also known as the MacBride Report) which argued in favour of nationalising media as a way to “democratise” the flow of information. The US and UK condemned the report as being opposed to freedom of the press and imbued with an anti-American and pro-Soviet bias. After a series of financial and doctrinal reforms, the UK rejoined UNESCO in 1997 and the US in 2002.

Two pieces of federal law obligated the State Department to cut its donation to UNESCO. The first law, passed in 1990, prohibited the disbursement

of funds “for the United Nations or any specialized agency thereof which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as a member state.” The second law, passed in 1994, enlarged the remit of the first to include “any affiliated organization of the United Nations which grants full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood.”

Crucially, in the midst of the current controversy, the State Department has emphasised that US membership in UNESCO is not again in question.

As former US Senator Timothy Wirth noted in the Los Angeles Times, UNESCO has proven to be a valuable tool for American business and national security interests. It has facilitated introductions for US companies such as Cisco, Intel and Microsoft to developing countries, leading to job creation. Wirth also noted the other benefits of UNESCO, for example, after the earthquake in Japan earlier this year, a UNESCO-coordinated tsunami warning system helped alert Californians of the possibility of a related natural disaster. In Afghanistan, the agency has helped educate a populace that will soon have to inherit and run a country without the assistance of American soldiers.

Implications for UNESCO

The rescission of US aid is likely to force the closure of some UNESCO operations around the world and lead to staff terminations, unless the shortfall is made up by other donors.

While it is possible that its programmes in developing countries could be negatively affected by the withdrawal of US funds, the extent of the impact remains unclear. If UNESCO can recoup the \$60

million lost, it is likely, given continued US membership in the organisation, that American interests will continue to be pursued, unless bureaucratic tensions or resentments within the organisation lead to the deliberate marginalisation of those interests.

UNESCO may face further controversies as a consequence of their decision to admit the PA as a member. The PA and Hamas are known to curb journalistic freedoms in their individually governed territories. A 2011 Amnesty International report found that both the PA and Hamas maintain “tight controls on freedom of expression, and harassed and prosecuted journalists, bloggers and other critics” in both the West Bank and Gaza. With its strong commitment to freedom of expression and information, UNESCO may face further scrutiny over whether it holds the Palestinians to these ethical standards; if it fails to do so, it will be accused of hypocrisy.

Moreover, UNESCO may find that its efforts to improve literacy, women’s education, and protect World Heritage sites may be held hostage to internecine Palestinian politics in the way other UN agencies have done. In one example, Hamas has condemned the UN for what it claimed were plans by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the body which tends to the humanitarian needs of Palestinian refugees, to incorporate the Holocaust in the Gaza school curriculum. (Hamas officials describe this historical event as a “Zionist lie.”) While the PA has gained full membership in UNESCO as a state, the West Bank and Gaza are governed by parties that are ideologically and practically divided in terms of security and local governance—a conflict which could cause problems for UNESCO as a whole.

Conclusion

Seeking—and now gaining—admittance to various UN agencies is the first step in a wider diplomatic campaign by the PA to secure a UN Security Council vote on Palestinian statehood. In fact, it appears to be a deliberate tactic to isolate those countries opposed to the statehood bid—chiefly, the US and Israel.

The PA's strategy may yield short-term dividends by refocusing media attention on what is destined to be a prolonged and intensely legalistic battle for a Security Council resolution, and in shoring up moral support for statehood. However, by antagonising Washington, the largest single funder to the PA's own budget which has already withheld aid in response to the UN gambit, President Mahmoud Abbas' strategy may prove counterproductive in the long-term: it still is not certain whether Qatar and Saudi Arabia, for example, will fill in the gap for funds that the US provided—an uncertainty which may leave ordinary Palestinians substantially worse-off.

As for the overall effects to UNESCO, there is no certainty that nations strongly supporting the Palestinian statehood plan are eager or willing to

compensate for the funds withdrawn by the US. The extent to which this withdrawal in funding will harm the organisation's educational and civil society development projects abroad remains to be seen. If other international bodies such as the World Intellectual Property Organization or the World Health Organisation follow suit in granting PA membership, this could lead to similar American rescissions of aid and consequent budget shortfalls.

The PA's recent success at UNESCO is a symbolic and diplomatic victory for Palestinian nationalism, but masks underlying crises of what kind of nation is being built. Hamas and Fatah, despite their reconciliation accord of May 2011, remain ideologically and practically divided in their visions of a desirable Palestinian society. As much as the Palestinians need and deserve an independent state, efforts such as the UNESCO gambit will only undermine any prospect for the resumption of peace negotiations with Israel, and the punitive measures taken as a result will negatively affect the Palestinian people.

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