Palestine vote: America the loser as it withdraws funding from UNESCO

Stephen Hill

University of Wollongong

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Abstract
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Worth $US60 million ($A56.6 million) the annual contribution provides 22% of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Member State levied contributions to its regular budget.

The announcement followed shortly after the UNESCO General Conference of its 194 Member States decided that morning to admit Palestine as its 195th Member by an overwhelming 107 in favor to 14 votes against – with 52 abstentions.

Lined up in favor of Palestine's admission were Russia, China, Greece, Turkey, Brazil, France, Belgium and Austria amongst many others. Against, were the US, Israel, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Poland and Australia along with seven others. Portugal, Colombia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the UK abstained as did 48 other Member States.

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Author

1. Stephen Hill

Honorary Professorial Fellow, School of Social Sciences, Media and Communication at University of Wollongong

Disclosure Statement

Stephen Hill, is Emeritus Professor of the University of Wollongong and Honorary Professorial Fellow, having retired from UNESCO at the end of 2005. In UNESCO he spent a decade, based in Indonesia, serving as Regional Director for Science for Asia and the Pacific and Representative and Director of the sub-regional ‘Cluster Office’ for all UNESCO activities involving Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Timor Leste and additionally served as Special Envoy to Singapore.

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**Statehood by stealth?**

The Palestinian Authority had earlier this year sought to gain entry to the United Nations through application for full UN membership via the UN Security Council.
Confronting an automatic veto from the United States, the Palestine Authority instead shifted focus in September to a “backdoor” entry point, that is, membership of one of the United Nations specialised agencies, UNESCO.

Through established “reciprocated agreements” between these Agencies, membership of one entitles the Member State to apply for membership of the others, for example, the United Nations Industrial Development Agency (UNIDO), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), the International Criminal Court (which the US does not financially support), the world telecommunications body (ITU), aviation (ICAO) and atomic energy (IAEA) organisations.

Entry to this wider field of UN Agencies is likely to be relatively unproblematic: already, 62% of the world’s Member States present in UNESCO’s General Conference voted for Palestine’s admission to UNESCO; after subtracting the Member States which abstained, 88% of the world’s UN Member States have voted in favour. So obtaining the required simple majority or, in some cases, two-thirds majority required for wider memberships appears readily achievable.

The American paradox

Continued Israeli settlement building is seen by many as a driver for the Palestinian push for statehood. AAP
No-one was surprised at the United States decision. The US Administration was bound by an Act of Congress passed in 1990 then refurbished in 1994 that forbids giving money to any UN body that grants membership to Palestine.

Meanwhile, as the funding is not forbidden by Congressional Law, the US continues to provide $(US)238 million, four times the allocation of its levied UNESCO contribution, to the largest UN program in support of Palestinians, the UN Relief Works Agency. This Agency is not a UN member-based organisation so US contribution is politically safe for it implies nothing about Palestine’s potential status as a UN Member State.

The decision in UNESCO does however fly directly in the face of President Obama’s commitment to a new policy for the US emphasising multinationalism.

As Matt Duss, Policy Analyst from the Center for American Progress stated, as but one example, the new commitment of the current government to re-engaging with the UN system has secured for the US intensified sanctions to isolate Iran and increasing awareness of human rights abuses in Iran.

Furthermore, as the UNESCO Director General pointed out in her last-minute appeal via the Washington Post, UNESCO has directly supported US interests in Afghanistan through preparing the government and communities for life after US withdrawal, providing literacy training of the national police and more.

Access to influence beyond its previous reach as a single super-power acting alone has therefore worked for the US - even in UNESCO.

Withdrawing from its UNESCO financial commitment has serious consequences for engagement with and influence over even non-controversial international programs such as a world-wide tsunami warning system, provision of clean water in developing countries, world heritage conservation, and so on.

Perhaps even more importantly, if the US is forced by its 1990/1994 Law to withdraw as Palestine continues to gather the momentum of expanding membership of the UN’s specialized agencies, the US will be seriously disadvantaged in areas that hurt very significantly eg: in absence from the conversations that form international telecommunications, copyright, patenting and trade agreements.

**American isolation**

The US has not withdrawn its membership of UNESCO – as it did in 1984 – a story I will return to shortly – just its money. Interestingly Israel did not follow the US lead and cut its funding to UNESCO (3% of the organisation’s regular budget contributions).

Even the UK, which left UNESCO in direct support of the US’s 1984 withdrawal, abstained this time and did not support the US. The Obama Administration is therefore isolated and, though facing a barrage of opposition from conservative Republican interests, is already seeking alternatives via negotiation with the US Congress “to ensure that US interests and influence are preserved”.
Politically UNESCO can tolerate non-funding by the US for a limited time although the US will be barred from voting, but eventually UNESCO will be forced to expel the US for not honouring its membership obligations.

Whilst other ways of paying UNESCO than the annual levy may be devised by the US they most likely will take the form of funding specific projects of greatest concern to the US. This potentially poses a serious danger to the core integrity of UNESCO – to act on behalf of the world and not be dominated by any one Member State’s interests.

The advantage of Regular Program funding is that it all goes into a pool and is allocated according to decisions by all Member States at the Agency’s bi-annual General Conference.

**The effect on UNESCO**

![Image of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem](image)

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem will be nominated by the Palestinians to UNESCO for possible World Heritage status. AAP

Inside UNESCO, the “house” as staff call it, the Agency will already be in panic mode. The overall budget for the Agency of $(US)631 million dollars is very small, around the level of a modern medium sized university.

A sudden loss of nearly 25% of Member State contributions to regular budget seriously constrains the organisation’s ability to operate and have any serious presence at all in the
international arena as the requirement to maintain core operating costs absorb an increasing percentage of the overall funds and funding of its activities is diminished.

It should be noted though that UNESCO’s influence is much wider than the limited $631 million funding level suggests - in “catalysing” initiatives subsequently picked up by much larger funding agencies, and in establishing world-wide cooperation agreements, for example, about oceans, environment, literacy, cultural and landscape heritage conservation and so on.

Seriously erode the core budget and the effect is to erode the organisation’s ability to raise “extrabudgetary funding” that is needed to complement its low funding base.

In the field we were constantly reminded that UNESCO is not a funding agency – like the World Bank for example – but it cannot even stimulate activity and help provide leadership to the world community in its specialised areas of expertise unless it has some flexibility in its core funding and can lay “some funding” on the table as partner with other better endowed agencies and countries.

In the field I had to raise four times the regular budget allocation to do the job, but ‘some’ UNESCO funding contribution was essential in maintaining the ability to take leadership and “call the shots” rather than have direction determined by the funder.

**Legitimacy is everything**

UNESCO influence fundamentally depends on the organisation’s perceived legitimacy and integrity, so US withdrawal hurts the organisation in another way.

UNESCO’s legitimacy as a world body is severely tarnished if one of its most influential Members does pull out thus threatening the organisation’s “universality”. On the other hand, if a US mechanism for providing funding is developed but only by funding specific earmarked projects, UNESCO is even more tarnished when it appears to be primarily following the interests of the most powerful nations rather than the world as a whole.

**Back to the future**

1984 saw the release of the movie Back to the Future - and the first American withdrawal from UNESCO. flickr/Eli Rutten
The United States did pull out before – back in 1984, that time in protest primarily against an emerging new World Communications Order – with reaction grounded still in prior cold-war politics. They were also legitimately concerned about waste and corruption within the organisation at that time under Senegalese Director General Amadour-Mahtar M’Bow.

One face of the corruption was demonstrably self-evident to Member States: M’Bow took over the entire 7th floor of the UNESCO building - with million dollar views over Paris to the Eiffel Tower, rent free, as his personal apartment, dislodging staff to lesser basements and remote buildings.

The US influenced the UK to follow suit and leave UNESCO shortly afterwards – with enormous impact on the core budget of the organisation, paralyzing for years many of UNESCO’s main mandated initiatives in education, media freedom and human rights protection, culture and world heritage, support by science for dealing with developing country problems and so on. Programs were having to be run at field level on a shoestring.

Reform and the return of the US

Under the incoming Director-General Koichiro Matsuura in 1999 UNESCO quite radically re-oriented its organization priorities and working methods – emphasising greater decentralisation and accountability.

I was directly involved in this for just over two years as Chair of the Director-General’s inaugural Task Force to Reform and Decentralise UNESCO. Matsuura placed top priority on reform and getting the US and UK back into membership – and finally succeeded with a great deal of politicking – by 2002.

The then-President’s wife, Laura Bush, led the US delegation – accompanied by a phalanx of dark-suited men with radio ear-plugs and sinister bumps under their jackets.

The fanfare did not quite pass the cultural sensitivity test however: the US offered a range of events promoting “cultural interaction and diversity” but in fact the events were singularly demonstrating the export of US culture to developing countries – black blues singers from New Orleans travelling to South Africa and so on – not exchange, not listening and valuing other cultures and the validity of their expression - continued assertion of a US bilateral political mind-set.

But, although under the conservative Bush Administration where it hurt national pride deeply to move beyond bilateral control of international affairs, they were back as a Member State.

The US could see key interests of their own, for example in influence in the Middle East, to be significantly enhanced by a relatively tiny (for them) investment in the Agency. The Director-General did not go on a spending spree however, but presided over zero-growth budgets and heavy targeting of funds – particularly to reforms.

America’s loss is Palestine’s gain
The American withdrawal of funding from UNESCO will hurt President Obama’s longer term goals. AAP

There is no question that its withdrawal of funding from UNESCO will hurt the US’s engagement internationally.

Inside UNESCO, the return of the US with a high percentage of overall budget came with the privilege for the US of having a relatively high quota of US nationals in staff positions in the organisation and particularly in key decision-making areas of the Agency – for example as Assistant Director General for Education, and then later, Assistant Director General for Science – two of the five sectors of the organisation. This ability to guide the Agency from within will be lost.

Meanwhile Palestine’s presence and influence within the multilateral system of the UN is highly likely to continue to grow as the Palestinian Authority, having now broken in through the side-door, is allowed admission to an increasing number of other specialised UN agencies.

The US is going to have to deal with this politically or it will be forced on a path of decline in international influence and legitimacy.

What may seem a relatively small deal in a small international organisation may have profound consequences in the international political arena for both the US and the middle-east.
Knowing the difference between cost and value

Furthermore the UNESCO resolution to admit Palestine is very important for UNESCO’s credibility. Even against the certainty of drastically reduced funding and massive impact on UNESCO’s viability, the Member States took the path of integrity, that is to pay attention to a disadvantaged people rather than be dominated by a superpower’s interests.

Without this integrity, UNESCO would lose its legitimacy and therefore ability to influence world events and development priorities.

UNESCO does however teeter on the edge of a precipice. So far the remaining nations have not mandated a serious increase in their own financial contributions to make up for the short-fall their decision has caused.

UNESCO’s survival depends now on the rest of the world picking up this responsibility, or the US finding a way around its 1990s legislation to provide funding for the organisation that is relatively free from direct bilateral interest. The US did not withdraw from membership.

An interesting signal is that, in spite of the Palestine question, the US was elected onto UNESCO’s Executive Board shortly before the open Plenary Session that admitted Palestine based on the Board’s recommendation.

What happens between the US and UNESCO over the next few months may well have quite profound consequences for both the Agency’s survival and the US’s international influence. Palestine’s future is also on the line as is the shape of its peace negotiations with Israel.