

United States National Statement
39th UNESCO General Conference, Paris, France
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Delivered by Chargé d’Affaires, a.i. Chris Hegadorn

Madam President of the General Conference, Madam Director-General, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen; it is an honor to represent the United States of America at this 39th Session of the UNESCO General Conference.

On October 12, the United States made public its decision to withdraw from UNESCO, effective at the end of next year. This decision was not taken lightly, and was the result of a lengthy review and a thorough consultation throughout our government.

As we have explained to the Secretariat and many concerned fellow Member States, our decision was based on both practical and policy grounds.

One key factor stems directly from this body’s decision to admit the Palestinians with Member State status in this organization. This act was premature, politicized, and distracted from efforts to promote Middle East Peace by seeking to prejudge issues that should be decided through negotiations between the parties.

This action also resulted in our inability to continue making contributions to UNESCO under provisions of U.S. domestic law.

As a result, the United States has accumulated arrears at UNESCO totaling more than 550 million dollars.

In addition, our decision to withdraw from UNESCO was influenced by persistent politicization and anti-Israel bias at UNESCO. Again, we have repeatedly expressed our concerns about this trend, publicly and privately, and undertook serious efforts to help the Organization return to consensus-based decision-making. But sadly, the past several years have only witnessed a parade of Member State decisions -- at successive Executive Boards, General Conferences and World Heritage Committee meetings -- that walked UNESCO further down an untenable political path.

Finally, this decision underscores our concern about inadequate urgency at UNESCO to adopt necessary management reforms and improve transparency. We all know that expenditure reporting, procurement, inordinately slow decision-making and service delivery in the field need to improve.

Meanwhile, UNESCO struggles to deliver effective programming within the scope of its core mandates because member states insist on expanding the organization's work outside that scope and into programmatic areas that are, and must remain, the domains of other UN agencies. We are also deeply troubled by the outcomes of the Working Group on Governance and the direction that group appears to be taking; these developments are likely to make governance worse, not better.

Nonetheless, the United States remains a determined advocate for the ideals under which UNESCO was founded, and will continue to be a global leader in investment, innovation, and collaboration on matters related to education, science, culture, and information.

Now, allow me to thank the outgoing Director-General Bokova and commend her strong efforts to advance peace, culture, and partnership across a broad array of issues. Her recognition and acknowledgement of significant American contributions in all these areas is deeply appreciated, and we wish her well in her future endeavors.

For Director-General-elect Azoulay, allow us to congratulate you on your recent election, and we wish you well in what will surely be a challenging moment.

We hope UNESCO will focus on a more manageable set of issues and programs where its contributions are quantitatively measurable, and its staff held accountable for results. Preventing violent extremism through education is among the most critical issues of our time; UNESCO has produced a teacher training guide and voluntary policy guidance on building resilience to terrorist ideology and radicalization. These practical resources should be operationalized via training workshops and other targeted and measurable steps to implement their recommendations. We also urge UNESCO to further operationalize its “digital literacy” initiative, which brings its education-based approaches to the internet and social media – where terrorists have been radicalizing young people around the world.

Rest assured, we will continue to work bilaterally and regionally on issues of relevance to this agency and its members. Such issues include saving lives through the “Tsunami Early-Warning System,” and preserving and protecting cultural heritage through our global Ambassador’s Fund. We will continue our vigorous actions to staunch cultural property looting and trafficking by implementing our obligations under the 1970 UNESCO Convention. We will also promote programs

that support basic education, literacy, gender equality, press freedom, and much more.

We will also continue to work with U.S. communities that engage with UNESCO at the sub-national level. In September, UNESCO Creative City Paducah, Kentucky hosted the UNESCO Creative Cities of Craft & Folk Art annual meeting, the first UNESCO Creative Cities meeting in the United States, and we were very pleased to hear the announcement by the Director-General during this General Conference, that Kansas City, Missouri; San Antonio, Texas; and Seattle, Washington will join the Network as Creative Cities for Music, Gastronomy, and Literature respectively.

As we emphasized at the time of our recent announcement, we intend to remain engaged while still a full member and later as an observer, and to support related international cooperation in educational, scientific, cultural, communication and information activities - in line with U.S. values and interests.

Thank you