

UNESCO votes to admit Palestine; U.S. cuts off funding

Colum Lynch

The U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) voted Monday to admit Palestine into the organization as its newest member, and the United States promptly responded by cutting off funding for the agency.

Acting under a legal requirement to cut U.S. funds to any U.N. agency that recognizes a Palestinian state, the State Department on Monday announced that the United States has stopped funding UNESCO because of the vote. Department spokesman Victoria Nuland told reporters that the Obama administration would not make a planned \$60 million payment to the agency due in November.

The vote at UNESCO's Paris headquarters follows a stalled effort by the Palestinians to seek recognition as a U.N. member state. It signaled that the Palestinians intend to pursue membership in a number of U.N. specialized agencies, which have their own rules for membership and where the United States does not have veto power.

U.S. and Israeli officials said the Palestinian membership bid would roil a U.S.-backed effort to restart a stalled peace process. The Palestinians maintain that they are prepared to return to talks if certain conditions are met, including a halt to Israel's expansion of settlements, and that they have every right to pursue membership at the United Nations.

The vote came amid a surge of cross-border violence between Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip and the Israeli military. Gaza militants fired several rockets into Israel on Monday after an Israeli drone strike overnight left two Palestinians dead, as Egypt continued its efforts to mediate an end to the violence.

The UNESCO membership bid, which required approval by a two-thirds majority of the agency's General Conference, easily passed by a vote of 107 to 14, with 52 abstentions.

Huge cheers erupted in the Paris meeting hall when the Palestinian membership was approved, news agencies reported. With 173 UNESCO member delegations present, 81 votes were needed to admit the Palestinians. France cast a surprise "yes" vote, drawing cheers and applause from the delegates, while the United States, Israel, Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany were among those voting "no."

The approval opens the door for the Palestinians also to gain membership in the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the U.N. Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which admit entities that belong to another specialized U.N. agency. The United States is not a member of UNIDO.

But UNESCO's decision also triggered a pair of U.S. laws from the early 1990s that prohibit the United States from funding U.N. agencies that recognize the Palestinians.

The United States provides UNESCO with more than \$80 million a year, covering about 22 percent of its budget and making any cutoff painful.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said she fully supports a cutoff of aid as mandated under U.S. law.

"Today's reckless action by UNESCO is anti-Israel and anti-peace," she said in a statement. "It rewards the Palestinian leadership's dangerous scheme to bypass negotiations with Israel and seek recognition of a self-declared 'Palestinian state,' and takes us further from peace in the Middle East."

"We hope that the United States will not take such a step," he said. "The world is changing, and the Arab region is changing as well, so it is better to move toward recognition of the rights

of the Palestinian people, rather than adopting the same old policies which have proven to be fruitless.”

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Ros-Lehtinen called on the Obama administration to “cut off funding to UNESCO immediately” and urged Congress to pass legislation to sever U.S. funds to “any U.N. entity that grants any upgraded status to ‘Palestine.’ ” She said this was the only way to deter other U.N. agencies from following in UNESCO’s footsteps.

“We recognize that this action today will complicate our ability to support UNESCO’s programs,” said David T. Killion, the U.S. ambassador to UNESCO, who characterized the Palestinian bid as “counterproductive” to pursuing peace in the Middle East. “There are other ways of promoting the cause of the Palestinian people that would not have involved seeking premature membership at UNESCO.”

“The United States remains deeply committed to UNESCO and its noble mission to build peace in the minds of men and women,” Killion added. “Despite the challenges ahead, we pledge to continue our efforts to find ways to support and strengthen the important work of this vital organization.”

U.N. advocates urged the Obama administration to work with Congress to find a way to continue funding UNESCO. They also voiced concern that Monday’s vote may set the stage for Palestinian membership in other U.N. agencies, including the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organization. Such moves would cut vital U.S. funding to organizations that are at the forefront of international efforts to restrain Iran’s nuclear program and to battle the spread of infectious disease, including avian flu, that can reach American shores.

“This is, in my opinion, just the beginning of an overall unraveling of the relationship between the United States and the United Nations,” said Tim Wirth, a former Democratic senator from Colorado, who heads the U.N. Foundation. “The U.S. government and the Israeli government and various other interest groups are going to have to get together and go to the Congress and fix this.”

Wirth said a law signed in another era is now demonstrating “significant unintended consequences that are very damaging to the United States, the United Nations and the rest of the international community.”

Brett Schaefer, a specialist on U.N. affairs at the Heritage Foundation, said such fears are overblown and that a U.S. decision to enforce a funding ban on UNESCO would deter the boards of other U.N. agencies from following suit. But he said the vote would nevertheless “encourage the Palestinians, and the Palestinian Authority, to believe that it can achieve legitimate recognition as a state without having to engage in direct negotiations.”

After the vote, the Israeli Foreign Ministry issued a statement denouncing the membership bid as a “unilateral Palestinian move which will bring no change on the ground but further removes the possibility for a peace agreement.”

The prohibition on U.S. funding of U.N. agencies that recognize a Palestinian state was included in two pieces of legislation that were signed into law by President George H.W. Bush in 1990 and President Bill Clinton in 1994.

The 1990 law was passed under the leadership of Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Dante Fascell (D-Fla.), who chaired the House Foreign Affairs Committee. It prohibits the appropriation of funds "for the United Nations or any specialized agency thereof which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as a member state."

In 1994, Congress expanded the ban under Pell and Fascell's successor, Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), to bar funding to "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." No waivers are included in the laws. The two laws were designed to halt a campaign by the Palestine Liberation Organization — which secured recognition of Palestine in the late 1980s as an observer, non-member entity in the U.N. General Assembly — to extend its privileges at the United Nations and other international organizations.

The latest Palestinian move comes at a time when congressional appropriators are looking for cuts in foreign aid spending and when the Republican-controlled House, especially the Foreign Affairs Committee led by Ros-Lehtinen, is keen to impose cuts on the United Nations for considering the Palestinian statehood drive.

Fearing cuts, UNESCO's director general, Irina Bokova, appealed to the United States not to punish her organization for the decision of the agency's executive board, which is comprised of representatives of UNESCO member states. In a letter to The Washington Post, she argued that UNESCO "supports many causes in line with U.S. security interests" from Afghanistan to Iraq, where "we are helping governments and communities prepare for life after the withdrawal of U.S. military forces."

"The issue of Palestinian membership should not be allowed to derail these initiatives, which go far beyond the politics of the Middle East," she added, citing UNESCO's work in tsunami early warning in the Caribbean and the Pacific. "None of this is in the interest of UNESCO. Nor do I believe it's in the interest of Americans."

In Israel, the army said Monday it had targeted a Palestinian rocket-launching squad in the Gaza Strip after it fired at Israel. Palestinian security officials said the bodies of two men were found after dawn, in uniforms of a splinter faction allied with Hamas, the militant group that rules Gaza.

Since Saturday, rocket exchanges and Israeli airstrikes have left 12 militants and one Israeli civilian dead. Most of the rocket firing has been carried out by Islamic Jihad, an Iranian-backed militant group.

Hamas has generally observed a cease-fire reached after Israel launched a punishing offensive in Gaza nearly three years ago to stop rocket fire. However, smaller militant factions have been less committed to the truce.

Hamas is awaiting the second phase of a prisoner release as part of a deal with Israel that freed Gilad Shalit, a soldier held captive by the group for more than five years. Hamas also has been in contact with Egypt to avert a broader escalation of violence that could jeopardize the deal.

Fonte: The Washington Post, Washington, 31 Oct. 2011, World, online.