Following in U.S.' Footsteps, Israel Announces Exit From UNESCO

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has instructed Israel's envoy to UNESCO to officially announce the country's withdrawal from the UN cultural and educational agency. Israel is joining the U.S., which announced in October that it will be quitting UNESCO due to its "continuing anti-Israel bias" and after amassing financial debt to the agency.

Netanyahu has asked Carmel Shama-Hacohen to submit an official letter of withdrawal by the end of the year. According to UNESCO's rules, a state's departure takes effect on December 31 the year after the letter was submitted. Therefore, even though the U.S. made its official announcement in October, both countries will leave the agency at the same time.

The decision was taken by Netanyahu after a series of discussions, at the center of which stands Israel's need not to leave the U.S. isolated in the move. Israel's withdrawal doesn't bar it from asking to serve as an observer in the future, as the U.S. announced it would do.

"The bottom line is that the U.S. is leaving UNESCO because of Israel, and it's our moral duty [to make sure] it's not doing it alone," Shama-Hacohen said on Thursday. "UNESCO, led by Arab states, has broken records of hypocrisy, incitement and lies against Israel and the Jewish people, while polluting its noble basic values with politicization and diplomatic terror that sometimes bordered on anti-Semitism."

Nevertheless, he said that Israel "isn't shutting the door" but "is inviting the agency's new leadership to stop being afraid of the same gang that had previously taken over it and to promote fundamental reform that won't allow for cynical abuse of the agency for politicization."

In July, UNESCO voted in favor of a resolution that recognized the Tomb of the Patriarchs and the Old City in Hebron as Palestinian heritage sites.

In October, after the U.S. announced its withdrawal, Barak Ravid reported in Haaretz that Israel was caught off guard by American decision. Senior Israeli and American officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said there was no coordination with Israel in the days before the decision was announced and that the Trump administration did not tell Israel beforehand.