**UNESCO has become an arm of Palestinian propaganda**

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Last week, the US announced that it was going to pull out of UNESCO in December 2018. The State Department accused the organization of ‘continuing anti-Israel bias’ and said that America would revert to being a non-member observer state. Israel announced shortly after that she was going to follow the US lead.

The decision is long overdue and represents a justified rebuke to a body that has become a willing arm of Palestinian propaganda. By adopting endless anti-Israel resolutions, UNESCO has strayed from its central purpose of defending cultural heritage with an impartial view to the historical record.

Some of the most egregious instances of bias have come in the last five years. In 2012, UNESCO added the Church of the Nativity to its list of World Heritage in Danger sites. It was added on an emergency basis, something that normally happens when a building is in imminent danger of destruction. Yet the iconic site merely needed some restoration.

The adoption of the Church was a well publicised Palestinian stunt to gain international recognition, especially following UNESCO’s decision a year earlier to recognise ‘Palestine’ as a member state. The irony is that while much of the Middle East’s religious heritage was dissolving at the hands of extremists, Israel was safeguarding holy sites, as it continues to do today.

In October 2016, UNESCO adopted a resolution which tried to blot out the Jewish connection to Jerusalem. The text of the draft resolution referred to the Temple Mount only by its Muslim name while the Western Wall was effectively renamed the ‘Al Buraq Plaza.’ Israel was referred to throughout as ‘the occupying power.’

Moreover, the resolution was entirely one sided and inverted the roles of victim and aggressor, denouncing Israeli ‘violence’ in Jerusalem even as the PA orchestrated stabbing intifada was claiming Jewish lives.

A year later and UNESCO went even further. Affirming ‘the importance of the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls for the three monotheistic religions,’ it described the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron and Rachel’s Tomb near Bethlehem as Palestinian heritage sites. Rachel’s tomb had earlier been referred to as ‘an integral part of Palestine.’

Yet these are revered places where Judaism’s founding patriarchs and matriarchs are believed to be buried. They are as holy to Jews as Mecca is to Muslims or Bethlehem to Christians. As President Rivlin tweeted at the time, UNESCO seems intent on sprouting anti-Jewish lies, while it remains silent as the region’s heritage is destroyed by brutal extremists.”

Some might argue that America’s withdrawal is an act of temperamental unilateralism by President Trump, on a par with his threat to leave a host of other institutions. Naturally, there is a great deal to criticise in his ‘America first’ language and his often hot headed approach to international diplomacy. He is currently winning no awards for international co-operation.

But unilateralism is not the issue here. There is no reason for continued membership in an organisation which has fundamentally betrayed its founding purpose. In the words of Nikki Haley, America’s ambassador to the UN: “US taxpayers should no longer be on the hook to pay for policies that are hostile to our values and make a mockery of justice and common sense.” Further, UNESCO’s “extreme politicization has become a chronic embarrassment.”

Moreover, Trump is not the first American President to argue against UNESCO’s bias. In 1974, after the body excluded Israel from a regional group, Congress suspended the American budget contribution. Ten years later, the Reagan administration withdrew from UNESCO, citing its ‘atrocious’ financial management as well as ‘pro Soviet’ leanings.

In 2011, the Obama administration curtailed America’s annual budget contribution to the organisation, protesting against its decision to admit ‘Palestine’ as a member state.

Finally, it scarcely matters that the new Director General, Audrey Azoulay, is a French Jewess with ties to Israel. After all, UNESCO’s decisions are made, not by executive staff, but by the representatives of member states. When enough of those states pursue partisan agendas and engage in bloc voting, you end up with a poisoned narrative on Israel and a malevolent twisting of history. Unless all this changes pretty quickly, UNESCO’s reputation will never recover.