Palestinian push hurts the Palestinian people and the UN organizations they join

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The Palestinian Authority, which calls itself the State of Palestine, has taken new steps in its drive to join as many United Nations organizations as possible. Even as it does so, it’s time for U.N. member states to recognize that this ploy does little or nothing to improve the lives of Palestinians or the prospects for peace, and will hurt organizations where the Palestinians have been accepted.

As of this week, the Palestinians have become official members of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, both relatively obscure U.N. bodies. This follows on its successful bid in 2011 to join the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and [subsequent accession](https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/report/provocative-palestinian-un-actions-require-strong-us-response) to a number of international agreements.

The Palestinians have pursued this strategy to bolster their claims of statehood without going through the process of negotiating a peace treaty with Israel. While intended to harm the U.S. and Israel, the real impact is felt by the U.N. organizations that grant membership to the Palestinians.

How will it hurt the organizations? Two U.S. laws passed in the 1990s prohibit providing federal funds to: (1) “the United Nations or any specialized agency thereof which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as member states” or (2) the U.N. or to any U.N. affiliated organization that “grants full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood.”

The impact of the law can be devastating for U.N. organizations because Washington is generally the largest source of their financial support.

Consider UNESCO. The Palestinians [gained UNESCO membership](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-unesco-usa-funding-newsp/u-s-halts-unesco-funding-over-palestinian-vote-idUSTRE79U69E20111031) in 2011. In response, the U.S., which paid 22 percent of UNESCO’s budget, suspended all funding and UNESCO had to [cut its budget and programs](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/brasilia/about-this-office/single-view/news/statement_by_the_director_general_of_unesco_on_withholding_o/) severely.

This has been an inconvenience to the U.S., which generally supports the mission of UNESCO, but the suspension didn’t harm important American interests. We can support our education and scientific interests bilaterally or multilaterally through other organizations.

Certainly, supporting Israel and pressing the Palestinians to engage in peace negotiations is more important than UNESCO membership, and so it is likely to be with almost every U.N. organization.

To end mounting arrears, the U.S. announced last year that it would [withdraw from UNESCO](https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/10/274748.htm) altogether at the end of 2018. Thus, in the end, Palestinian membership only damaged UNESCO.

So what does Palestinian membership portend for UNIDO and UNCTAD? Each case is a different.

For UNIDO, not much. The U.S. left the organization in 1996 under President Clinton and provides no direct funding.

Applying U.S. law to UNCTAD will be somewhat challenging because, in addition to U.S. voluntary contributions, it receives funds indirectly through the U.N. regular budget and other organizations.

This means that the U.S. will terminate all voluntary funding for UNCTAD and likely withhold its proportional share of U.N. regular budget going to the organization, which would be roughly $15 million (22 percent of [$68 million](http://unctad.org/en/Pages/About%20UNCTAD/Programme-Budget.aspx)).

The Palestinians also acceded to the Convention on the Prohibition, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons, which is supported by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, or OPCW. This is not specifically a U.N. organization and ties to the U.N. are even more tenuous than those of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change that the Palestinians joined in 2016.

In that case, the Obama administration [argued](https://www.dailysignal.com/2016/04/26/state-department-announces-plans-to-circumvent-u-s-law-in-order-to-advance-climate-agenda/) that the laws prohibiting U.S. funding did not apply. While the OPCW has a “[working relationship](https://www.opcw.org/about-opcw/)” with the U.N., the situation is less clear-cut than with UNESCO, UNIDO or UNCTAD.

What does withholding mean for U.S. interests? In the case of UNIDO and UNCTAD, nothing significant. UNIDO in particular is of questionable utility and a number of [European countries](https://www.unido.org/who-we-are/structure/member-states/former-member-states) have left in recent years. As with UNESCO, Washington is capable of advancing its interests as related to these organizations through alternative channels.

The U.S. does have an interest in supporting the OPCW and ending the use of chemical weapons. If it can no longer provide direct funding, it will need to be creative in its financial support for inspections, non-proliferation, and destruction of chemical weapons outside of the OPCW.

The Palestinian campaign thus far has been mostly nuisance. But other member states should consider carefully the potential impact of allowing membership in more important organizations.

While the U.S. has the resources and ability to protect its interests independent of most U.N. organizations, other member states depend on them. Even those countries that do not think kindly of the Trump Administration need to recognize that the Palestinian strategy does more damage to their own interests than it will ever do to Israel or the U.S.

The same goes for the Palestinians themselves. Their rulers’ efforts to evade serious bilateral negotiations and seek recognition by back-door means does nothing to bring peace, development, or real prosperity for a long-suffering people.

Indeed, it does real harm. Joining these organizations triggered provisions enacted in the [FY 2018 consolidated appropriations act](https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr1625/BILLS-115hr1625enr.pdf) that, unless waived, will suspend U.S. assistance to the Palestinians under the Economic Support Fund.

It’s time for a moment of lucidity, and a step back toward true peace in the Middle East. U.N. officials, as well as the U.S., should be trying hard to make Palestinians understand their ploy is another dead end.