Israel Drops Opposition to Renewal of U.S. Funding to UNESCO at Kerry's Behest

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has acceded to the U.S. administration’s request that Israel stop opposing a resumption of U.S. funding of UNESCO.

America stopped funding the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization four years ago, after it voted to admit Palestine as a member.

Senior Israeli and American officials said that Netanyahu’s change in policy, made at the behest of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, will likely persuade Israel’s friends in Congress to include renewed funding for UNESCO in the next foreign aid budget.

An old law enacted by Congress requires America to stop funding any UN agency that accepts the Palestinians as a full member state. Thus UNESCO’s vote to admit Palestine in October 2011 automatically triggered a funding cut-off.

This caused serious financial hardship to UNESCO, since the U.S. previously gave it over $80 million a year – about a quarter of the agency’s annual budget. But it also negatively affected America’s position at UNESCO, because the payment halt resulted in Washington losing its voting rights in the agency.

Without voting rights, the administration found it hard to push certain issues at UNESCO that it considered very important. Among other things, it sought to promote international education against anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia, education against religious extremism and education against terrorism. Kerry has made it his goal over the past year to renew funding for UNESCO, so as to regain America’s voting rights at the agency.

For several months now, senior administration officials have been trying to persuade their Israeli counterparts to stop opposing a resumption of funding, but the Foreign Ministry refused to compromise on the matter until recently.

A senior Israeli official said that Aharon Leshno-Yaar, head of the ministry’s division for the UN and international organizations, took an extremely hard line on the issue, arguing that any Israeli compromise would breathe new life into unilateral Palestinian measures against Israel at the United Nations. If Israel acquiesced to a resumption of American funding for UNESCO, Leshno-Yaar warned, both the Palestinians and UN agencies would take it to mean that such unilateral moves have no long-term consequences.

During a UNESCO conference in Paris in October, Kerry tried to persuade various countries to back America’s bid for election to the agency’s executive board. He also used the visit to ask Israel’s ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama-Hacohen, to inform Jerusalem that Washington wanted it to drop its opposition to renewed American funding for the agency and to make its lack of opposition clear to both its friends in Congress and the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC. Shama-Hacohen, who had backed the idea of a U.S. funding resumption even before then, declined to respond to Haaretz’s questions on the matter. But he did pass on the message.

The breakthrough, however, occurred a month later, during Kerry’s visit to Jerusalem, when the secretary of state met with Netanyahu and asked him to drop his government’s opposition to a funding resumption. Netanyahu initially demurred, but in the end, he acquiesced.

Essentially, what Netanyahu promised was that Israel wouldn’t oppose efforts to add a waiver to the new foreign aid budget, which is due to be approved in the coming weeks. The waiver would exempt the administration from complying with the law that bans U.S. funding to UN agencies which accept Palestine as a member, and would therefore allow it to resume funding UNESCO.

It is a major policy change for Israel, which until now has vehemently opposed the idea.

The administration hopes that Netanyahu will not just passively refrain from opposing the waiver, but will actively inform AIPAC and Israel’s friends in Congress – from both parties – about his new position.

The Prime Minister’s Office declined to comment on the issue, but did not deny the facts in this report.