Biden's expensive UNESCO folly

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As if President Joe Biden hadn’t created enough problems overseas, he is now accelerating efforts to rejoin the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Biden's State Department argues we should return to UNESCO to counter growing Chinese influence, but this is a misdirection play. In fact, the administration is pursuing a liberal Holy Grail, participating in multilateral bodies whether or not doing so serves U.S. national interests. Among many problematic U.N. agencies, UNESCO stands out. Rather than focusing on its core missions, it has repeatedly engaged in expensive, wasteful programs and destructive, highly politicized behavior.

Because of UNESCO's profligate spending, anti-American and anti-Western bias, rampant antisemitism, and general frivolity, President Ronald Reagan announced U.S. withdrawal in 1983, followed by Margaret Thatcher’s United Kingdom. Dismayed liberals tried to seize on George H.W. Bush’s interest in education to persuade him to rejoin but failed. Unfortunately, George W. Bush did reenter in 2003, hoping to dampen criticism of his administration’s "unilateralist" foreign policy, notwithstanding that UNESCO’s basic failures had not been cured.

Predictably, new problems arose.

The Palestinian Authority (formerly the Palestine Liberation Organization), pursuing its long-standing strategy to create "facts on the ground" in the Middle East through U.N. diplomacy, successfully targeted UNESCO in 2011. U.N. agencies permit only "states" to be members, and neither the PLO nor the Authority have ever met international definitions of "statehood." Nonetheless, the PLO hoped that persuading the U.N. to endorse its "statehood" would thereby force Israel to acquiesce.

In 1989, at the World Health Organization, overwhelming Third World support for PLO admission and European weakness necessitated strong American opposition. Secretary of State Jim Baker threatened publicly that he would recommend to President Bush eliminating all U.S. funding to any U.N. body making the PLO a member. Baker’s threat proved decisive, as ending America’s contribution would have slashed 25% of WHO’s assessed funding. Congress quickly locked Baker’s strategy into law with overwhelming bipartisan support, and the PLO/PA membership campaign disappeared for two decades.

Sensing President Barack Obama’s weakness, however, the PA seized on UNESCO in 2011. U.S. diplomats apologized for the statutory funding guillotine and said they would try to weaken the legislation, which merely guaranteed the PA’s victory. The law, however, still enjoyed massive support on Capitol Hill, forcing Obama to end American contributions. In 2017, the Trump administration, seeing no evidence of UNESCO reform, once again announced U.S. withdrawal, followed by Israel. Now, however, [reports from Jerusalem](https://www.jpost.com/international/article-695995) indicate that Biden, resurrecting Obama’s game plan, is pressing Israel not to oppose his efforts to rejoin UNESCO.

Biden’s argument that reentering is required to counter Chinese influence is fatuous. UNESCO is one of the least important U.N. specialized agencies. It is the depository for several important scientific treaties, but America is a state party to those treaties, fully capable of defending its treaty interests without UNESCO membership. If the White House is truly worried about China, and it should be, the U.N. Secretariat in New York, infiltrated today by China as the U.S.S.R. infiltrated it during the Cold War, should be its focus. Biden should clean house at more significant bodies, such as the World Health Organization, which aided and abetted China’s cover-up of COVID-19’s likely Wuhan laboratory origins.

Put simply, the China excuse is a dodge, an effort to distract attention from the administration’s real motivation, which is full U.S. immersion across the U.N. system. Biden’s "America is back" slogan means Washington must participate in all available international bodies, no matter how worthless or malign. Reelection to the U.N. Human Rights Council, a waste of oxygen if there ever was one, is yet another administration mistake. Returning to UNESCO, however, would also entail substantial financial costs, [well over](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-israel-will-not-oppose-u-s-return-to-%20unesco-report-says-1.10604055) $500,000,000 just to start. Under UNESCO rules (typical of U.N. system organizations), America would have to repay the arrears on its assessed contributions, accumulated since its most recent withdrawal, simply to become current and regain its voting rights. Thereafter, Washington’s annual assessed contributions would likely be around $100,000,000 (plus or minus) based on our current 22% share of regular U.N. agency budgets.

Unsurprisingly, the free-spending Biden administration sees no problem here, despite high and rising inflation and huge federal budget deficits. An alert Congress can still stop this relentless ideological crusade and save overburdened taxpayers large sums of money.