**U.S. to Pull Out of UNESCO, Again**

October 11, 2017

By: Colum Lynch

Foreign Policy

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/11/u-s-to-pull-out-of-unesco-again/>

The United States plans to formally withdraw from UNESCO, the U.N.’s Paris-based cultural, scientific and educational organization, to save money and protest what it views as the organization’s anti-Israel bias.

The move, which could be announced as early as next week, marks America’s further estrangement from an organization that it helped establish after World War II to widen access to education and ensure the free flow of ideas. The United States will maintain its presence at UNESCO as an observer state.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made the decision several weeks ago, and told French President Emmanuel Macron Washington was considering leaving during a meeting with President Donald Trump in late September on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly. Macron was seeking Trump’s support for a French candidate seeking the top job at UNESCO.

The State Department wanted to delay its departure until after UNESCO selects a new director general this week. The two front runners are the former French culture minister, Audrey Azoulay, and a Qatari diplomat, Hamad bin Abdulaziz Al-Kawari. China’s nominee and early frontrunner, Qian Tang, has seen his candidacy crater.

France is looking for more than just U.S. support for Azoulay: It also wants continued global engagement from an administration that has been reluctant to do so.

“We hope the U.S. will take the decision to stay within UNESCO,” France’s U.N. ambassador, Francois Delattre said in an interview Wednesday. “For us, it is important to have the United States on board, including at UNESCO at this critical juncture,” he added. “We consider the U.S. must stay committed to world affairs.”

The Reagan Administration decided to withdraw from the organization in 1984, at the height of the Cold War, citing corruption and what it considered an ideological tilt towards the Soviet Union against the West. President George W. Bush rejoined the organization in 2002, claiming it had gotten its books an order and expunged some of its most virulent anti-Western and anti-Israel biases.

“America will participate fully in its mission to advance human rights, tolerance and learning,” he said at the time.

But six years ago, the United States cut off more than $80 million a year, about 22 percent of its entire budget for UNESCO, in reprisal for its acceptance of Palestine as a member. The Obama administration said it had to cut funds because a 1990s-era law prohibits U.S. funding for any U.N. agencies recognizing Palestine as a state.

Despite the funding cut, the United States remains a member of UNESCO, and even has a vote on the executive board, which selects the new director general. But the United States has and it continues to be charged tens of millions in dues each year and has lost its voting rights in UNESCO’s principal decision-making body, which is known as the General Conference. That body approves UNESCO’s budget and establishes a range of programs dealing with education, science, and culture around the globe.

As a result of U.S. funding cuts, U.S. arrears have been swelling each year, surpassing $500 million that’s owed to UNESCO. Tillerson wants to stop the bleeding.

But the fundamental strain is over UNESCO’s approach to Israel. Last year, Israel recalled its ambassador to UNESCO in protest after Arab governments in the organization secured support for a resolution denouncing Israel’s policies regarding religious sites in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

And in July, UNESCO declared the old city in Hebron, a West Bank town that includes the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a Palestinian World Heritage Site, a move Israel claims negates Judaism’s links to the biblical town.