**Israel ‘to prepare’ for UNESCO withdrawal alongside US, says Netanyahu**

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Israel will begin preparations to withdraw from the UN’s cultural and education body now that the United States has made its decision to do the same, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday

“The prime minister instructed the Foreign Ministry to prepare Israel’s withdrawal from the organization alongside the United States,” Netanyahu’s office said in a statement, hours after the US said it is quitting the organization, citing its “anti-Israel bias” alongside financial considerations.

Netanyahu said he “welcomes the decision by President [Donald] Trump to withdraw from UNESCO. This is a courageous and moral decision because UNESCO has become the theater of the absurd and because, instead of preserving history, it distorts it.”

The US withdrawal is to take effect on December 31, 2018.

Earlier Thursday, Israel’s ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama-Hacohen, said his personal recommendation to Netanyahu would be to “immediately withdraw” from the organization.

Shama-Hacohen said that in recent years UNESCO has become “an absurd organization that has lost its way in favor of the political considerations of certain countries” and that his “personal recommendation to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is to follow suit and immediately withdraw [from UNESCO].”

The US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, said in a statement Thursday following the US announcement to withdraw that “the purpose of UNESCO is a good one,” but “unfortunately, its extreme politicization has become a chronic embarrassment.”

Haley cited UNESCO’s July decision to declare the Old City of Hebron in the West Bank, the site of the Tomb of the Patriarchs, an endangered world heritage site, as “the latest in a long line of foolish actions, which includes keeping Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad on a UNESCO human rights committee even after his murderous crackdown on peaceful protestors.”

“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,” she said.

Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations, Danny Danon, earlier praised Washington’s decision, saying UNESCO has become a forum for Israel-bashing and had forgotten its original purpose.

Danon said UNESCO was now “paying the price” for the “shameful” decisions it has adopted against Israel, citing “a new era” dawning at the UN in which “anti-Israel discrimination” has consequences.

Israel lost its voting rights at UNESCO in 2013, following its move to suspend dues to the organization over its decision to grant full membership to Palestine in 2011.

The US too lost its voting rights at the same time and has not paid some $80 million a year in dues since 2011.

The US previously withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 because Washington viewed it as mismanaged and used for political reasons, then rejoined it in 2003.

Israel this past year cited a UNESCO decision disputing Israel’s claim to Jerusalem as a reason to further reduce its the amount it pays annually to the United Nations. In May, Netanyahu said Israel would cut another $1 million from its payments to the UN, bringing the total cuts since December 2016 to $9 million.

It marked the third time in less than a year that Israel has reacted to UN resolutions it deems biased against it by announcing the slashing of its payments to the body. In December, after the Security Council passed Resolution 2334, Netanyahu ordered $6 million cut from Israel’s payment to the UN. And in March, after the Human Rights Council passed five anti-Israel resolutions, Netanyahu vowed to cut an additional $2 million.