**GOODBYE UNESCO**

By: Editorial Board

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Israel’s decision – along with the US – to leave the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on January 1 is extraordinary. It represents a loss for UNESCO as well as a global tragedy, demonstrating how world heritage has been manipulated by politics.

According to Israeli officials explaining the decision to leave the global organization, UNESCO is a deeply biased organization that sought to rewrite the history of the Land of Israel. “Israel will not be a member of an organization whose goal is to deliberately act against us, and that has become a tool manipulated by Israel’s enemies,” Israel’s Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon said.

Michael Oren, former ambassador to the US and outgoing Knesset member, applauded the move. “Today is the first day that the State of Israel is outside of UNESCO,” he said. It had joined a list of enemies of Israel, alongside the Assyrians, the Roman Empire and the ayatollahs in Iran, who deny the connection between Jews and Israel’s capital in Jerusalem, he added.

Across the sea, former US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley tweeted on January 1 that “UNESCO is among the most corrupt and politically biased UN agencies. Today the US withdrawal from this cesspool became official.”

The process has been more than a year in the making. The administration of US President Donald Trump made the decision to leave in October 2017 and Israel supported the US move. Since UNESCO granted Palestinians membership as a state in 2011, the organization has become increasingly hostile to Israel. The US and Israel wanted reform, but like too many things at the UN, instead of reforming, the organization has remained stuck in its ways.

The problem with many UN organizations that are governed by member states is that since many of those states are hostile to Israel, or even openly anti-Jewish, the UN as a whole gets hijacked to a far-Right extremist agenda and ends up operating more like an old-boys club of bullies, than what it is intended to as set forth in its founding principles.

UNESCO is supposed to develop educational tools to help people live as global citizens free of hate and intolerance, but the opposite has happened, especially in relation to Jewish sites. For instance, in 2017 the Palestinians put forward Hebron for inscription as a World Heritage Site. The Palestinians purposely sought to exclude the Jewish history of the site, focusing only on the period after 1250 and downplaying the significance of the city to Jews. The Cave of the Patriarchs was purposely downgraded in favor of the “Ibrahimi Mosque,” which was built atop the Jewish site.

UNESCO made the same manipulations in Jerusalem. In May 2017, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar and Sudan submitted a resolution seeking to distance Israel’s claims to Jerusalem. This is the method of UNESCO. Founded to work for peace, an alliance of mostly Islamic and Arab countries use the organization year after year to pass resolutions against Israel, and other countries do not do enough to stop them. It was in this toxic atmosphere that the US and Israel withdrew.

But things changed in the last year and UNESCO sought to respond to the bias. Leaving UNESCO may harm Israel’s ability to defend its interests there. The Palestinians want to name Qumran and other areas as World Heritage Sites. They will likely work wherever possible to remove any mention of Jews from the history of areas in the West Bank and Gaza.

One model for dealing with UN bias is to walk away from various organizations. Another model is to stay inside, attempting to influence and to build consensus. A recent vote on Hamas showed that a majority of countries were willing to condemn Hamas terrorism.

Israel has an interest in having more World Heritage Sites, and there were plans to propose early synagogues in the Galilee, Degania, Nahalal, Beit Shean and the White Mosque in Ramle. But Israel also needed to send an important message by leaving UNESCO – it will not be a member of a forum completely biased against the Jewish state. We hope UNESCO is listening.