US decides to rejoin UNESCO and pay back dues, to counter Chinese influence

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<https://apnews.com/article/unesco-us-rejoin-palestine-china-5b7849bd2cae966e4e9837380c0c094f>

UNESCO announced Monday that the United States plans to rejoin the U.N. cultural and scientific agency — and pay more than $600 million in back dues — after a decade-long dispute sparked by the organization’s move to include Palestine as a member.

U.S. officials say [the decision to return](https://apnews.com/article/us-unesco-un-83de7f132d9e9b45a20eec03b53171a8) was motivated by concern that China is filling the gap left by the U.S. in UNESCO policymaking, notably in setting standards for artificial intelligence and technology education around the world.

The move will face a vote by UNESCO’s member states in the coming weeks. But approval seems a formality after the resounding applause that greeted the announcement in UNESCO’s Paris headquarters Monday. Not a single country raised an objection to the return of a country that was once the agency’s single biggest funder.

The U.S. and Israel stopped financing UNESCO after it voted to include Palestine as a member state in 2011. The Trump administration [decided in 2017](https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-ap-top-news-israel-paris-64848c45d7184f309f44dd207be160a3) to withdraw from the agency altogether the following year, citing long-running anti-Israel bias and management problems.

UNESCO’s director general, Audrey Azoulay, has worked to address those concerns since her election in 2017, and that appears to have paid off.

“It’s a historic moment for UNESCO,” she said Monday. “It’s also an important day for multilateralism.″

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma submitted a letter last week to Azoulay formalizing the plan to rejoin. He noted progress in depoliticizing debate about the Middle East and reforming the agency’s management, according to the hand-delivered letter, obtained by AP.

The decision is a big boost to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, known for its [World Heritage program](https://apnews.com/article/zelenskyy-entertainment-politics-odessa-ukraine-government-51da3a402b343bdd9ae8c2587278cb2d) as well as projects to fight climate change and teach girls to read.

While Palestinian membership in UNESCO was the trigger for the U.S. fallout with the agency, its return is more about China’s growing influence.

Undersecretary of State for Management John Bass said in March that the U.S. absence from UNESCO had strengthened China, and ”undercuts our ability to be as effective in promoting our vision of a free world.”

He said UNESCO was key in setting and shaping standards for technology and science teaching around the world, “so if we’re really serious about the digital-age competition with China … we can’t afford to be absent any longer.”

The U.S. decision doesn’t address the status of Palestine. While it’s a member of UNESCO, on the ground, the Palestinians are further away from independence than ever. There have not been serious peace talks in over a decade, and Israel’s new government is filled with hardliners who oppose Palestinian independence.

The Palestinian ambassador to UNESCO didn’t comment on the U.S. decision. The only envoy who wasn’t gushing with praise was China’s ambassador, Jin Yang. He noted the negative impact of the U.S. absence, and expressed hope that the move means Washington is serious about multilateralism.

“Being a member of an international organization is a serious issue, and we hope that the return of the U.S. this time means it acknowledges the mission and the goals of the organization,” the ambassador said.

UNESCO director Azoulay, who is Jewish, won broad praise for her personal efforts to build consensus among Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli diplomats around sensitive UNESCO resolutions. She met with Democrats and Republicans in Congress to explain those efforts. Thanks to those bipartisan negotiations, she expressed confidence that the U.S. decision to return is for the long term, regardless of who wins next year’s presidential election.

“What’s happened over the last years meant that UNESCO matters,” she said. “And when you’re absent from that ... you lose something. You lose something for your influence in the world, but also for your own national interest.”

Under the plan, the U.S. government would pay its 2023 dues plus $10 million in bonus contributions this year earmarked for Holocaust education, preserving cultural heritage in Ukraine, journalist safety, and science and technology education in Africa, Verma’s letter says.

The Biden administration has already requested $150 million for the 2024 budget to go toward UNESCO dues and arrears. The plan foresees similar requests for the ensuing years until the full debt of $619 million is paid off.

That makes up a big chunk of UNESCO’s $534 million annual operating budget. Before leaving, the U.S. contributed 22% of the agency’s overall funding.

A UNESCO diplomat expressed hope that the return of the U.S. would bring “more ambition, and more serenity” — and energize programs to regulate artificial intelligence, educate girls in Afghanistan and chronicle [victims of slavery in the Caribbean.](https://apnews.com/article/france-slavery-documents-unesco-memory-56cf7ebcda1d9bb403f2921eafe179a8)

The diplomat said that the agency would also “welcome” Israel back if it wanted to rejoin. There was no immediate response from the Israeli government.

Israel has long accused the United Nations of anti-Israel bias. In 2012, over Israeli objections, the state of Palestine was recognized as a nonmember observer state by the U.N. General Assembly. The Palestinians claim the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza Strip — territories captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war — for an independent state. Israel says the Palestinians’ efforts to win recognition at the U.N. are aimed at circumventing a negotiated settlement and meant to pressure Israel into concessions.

The United States previously pulled out of UNESCO under the Reagan administration in 1984 because it viewed the agency as mismanaged, corrupt and used to advance Soviet interests. It rejoined in 2003.