UN U-Turn: Biden to undo Trump policy and return to agency accused of anti-Israel bias

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The Biden administration has signaled its intent to rejoin the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in order to potentially counter China’s influence over the group, reversing a major Trump-era policy decision.

Hugh Dugan, former senior director for International Organization Affairs at the National Security Council during the Trump administration, told Fox News Digital that the U.S. desire to remain involved in the group despite seeing little change in its operation shows a ‘juvenile’ desire for global acceptance.

A State Department spokesperson told Fox News Digital that the Biden administration ‘believes firmly that the United States must be present and active on the global stage wherever U.S. interests can be protected and advanced.’

Those interests include ‘expanding access to education, preservation of cultural heritage, protection of journalists, shaping best practices for new and emerging technologies, Holocaust education, and much more,’ the spokesperson said.

A delegation of U.S. diplomats last week delivered a letter to UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay seeking readmission to the group. Former President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from UNESCO, with U.S. envoy Chris Hegadorn citing an anti-Israel bias within the organization and opaque bureaucracy.

In a final speech before the governing body, Hegadorn urged UNESCO to consider significant reforms. He called on UNESCO to speed up spending decisions and do more to prevent violent extremism through education, notably on social media.

Anne Bayefsky, president of Human Rights Voices and director of the Touro Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust, told Fox News Digital that Biden’s decision to rejoin UNESCO was a ‘flagrant violation of the long-standing will of Congress.’

‘The idea that the United States has to pay the U.N., and its bodies and agencies that flagrantly violate American interests, in order to promote American interests on China or Israel or anything else turns logic on its head,’ Bayefsky said. ‘Given there are so many other more important means to counter Chinese influence if we wanted to, the China story here is a fig-leaf for the Biden administration slamming Israel.’

‘It's an absolutely shocking departure from decades of bipartisan congressional policy agreement that has constantly prioritized a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict,’ she added, stressing that rejoining UNESCO and paying ‘hundreds of millions’ to the group ‘upends American foreign policy and the long-standing view of Congress.’

The Biden administration made clear that it intended to rejoin UNESCO shortly after President Biden took office. The president plans to request an appropriation of $150 million from Congress for fiscal year 2024 to pay UNESCO, with similar payments to follow in ensuing years.

Azoulay delivered the letter to UNESCO member states on Monday, at which time Japan and other member states proposed the convening of an extraordinary session of the General Conference to consider the U.S. proposal, on which the State Department anticipates an answer ‘in the coming days,’ the spokesperson said.

‘UNESCO influences our shared international understandings on matters such as the evolution of artificial intelligence, the responsibility of nations to respect media freedoms, the immeasurable toll of the Holocaust, and protection of world heritage in ways both immediate and incremental,’ the State Department spokesperson added.

In the time since the U.S. left the group, China has grown into one of UNESCO’s largest donors, according to The Wall Street Journal (WSJ). The U.S. sees a return to UNESCO as a necessary effort to re-establish influence in the organization due to its growing role as a forum to develop guidelines for emerging artificial intelligence (AI) and other sensitive technologies.

The U.S. will also look to provide an additional $10 million in funding to support programs that focus on cultural preservation – specifically in Ukraine and education about the Holocaust.

Dugan, who has served under some 11 U.S. ambassadors to the world body, specifically criticized the Democrats for feeling ‘embarrassed or ashamed’ for publicly pursuing interests within these groups and caving to UNESCO’s financial requirements without getting back what the U.S. needs or wants from the group.

‘This idea that if we're not there, we're not popular, or that… we aren’t being loved by them – it's such a juvenile approach to our participation in these major institutions and that that our interests apparently are not important,’ Dugan said, adding that other countries feel free ‘to pursue their national agendas through these organizations.’

‘Somehow the Democrats and the administration don't believe that it's appropriate for the U.S. to promote its national interests in these organizations, and if we do so we're called out by others on it, then we feel embarrassed or ashamed, and we have to atone by basically participating without criticism, funding them fully and hoping that people like us,’ he concluded.