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Editorial Introduction: A Crack in the Diplomatic Armor: The United States and the Palestinian Authority's Bid for UNESCO Recognition

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Editorial Introduction

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Editors for Archaeological Heritage and Ethics

A crack in the diplomatic armor: The United States and the Palestinian Authority's bid for UNESCO recognition

On October 31, 2011, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) voted to accept the Palestinian Authority's (PA) bid for full membership as a state. One hundred and seven member states supported the bold move by the PA, 14 opposed, and 52 abstained from voting. Canada, the United States, and Germany were among the countries who voted against the bid, while countries like Russia, China, India, South Africa, and Brazil voted in favor. The PA will be admitted as the 195th member of UNESCO, with observer status, once it has signed and ratified UNESCO's Constitution. Perhaps realizing that efforts aimed at United Nations (UN) Security Council recognition were futile, the PA settled for UNESCO imprimatur. Asking the UN to "care" about Palestinian education, science, and culture was an excellent first step on the path to nationhood and international recognition. The PA expects to use achievements like this to bolster their struggle for statehood and their necessary eventual recognition by the UN Security Council. While membership in UNESCO does not provide any monetary benefits, it may enhance as well as jeopardize future diplomatic relationships.

As a result of this action by the PA, the United States has withdrawn funding (both assessed country dues and voluntary grants) from UNESCO. Over \$60 million that was supposed to be transferred to UNESCO (approximately 22% of UNESCO's operating budget) in November of 2011 will now be reallocated by the U.S. Department of State to other agencies and organizations. During the 1980s, the United States withdrew from UNESCO, accusing the agency of mismanagement and an anti-Western political agenda. President George W. Bush restored the relationship in 2002, citing wide-ranging reforms within the organization. Since that date, the United States has become an integral member of UNESCO, providing expertise, financial, and logistical support. The recent withdrawal of money was cast in stone back in the early days of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, when the U.S. Congress was not entirely

supportive of White House perspectives related to efforts aimed at Middle East peace (i.e., the Madrid and Oslo Accords). Congress passed legislation intended to block normalization of Palestinian relations and activities in the international community. Two aspects of federal law obligated the State Department to terminate its funding of UNESCO. The first law was passed in 1990 and prohibited the payment of funds "for the United Nations or any specialized agency thereof which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as a member state" (Public Law 101-246). The second law was passed in 1994 and extended the sphere of the first by including "any affiliated organization of the United Nations which grants full membership as a state to any organization or group does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood" (Public Law 103-236). It is the combination of these codes that resulted in the United States' cessation of funds to UNESCO, even as the State Department continues to emphasize that U.S. membership is not in question (Weiss and Ahmed 2011). While UNESCO membership may be secure, cutting 22% of UNESCO's budget means that the organization will be severely curtailed in carrying out its goals of "achieving universal education, supporting new democracies and fighting extremism" (UNESCO 2011). The lack of membership dues and voluntary contributions may also result in a weakening of U.S. influence in international diplomatic spheres.

The \$60 million could be used to support any number of scientific, educational, and cultural programs, including those directly related to archaeology and cultural heritage. These funds are used to foster relationships between hostile states under the neutral stance of UNESCO. Direct U.S. support of such initiatives, rather than through an international agency, may not be welcomed by some nations and may, in fact, be perceived of as propaganda and U.S. coercion. The cultural dialogue promoted by UNESCO forms a key part of the smart power (fostering good will through diplomacy) equation advocated by the U.S. State Department and the Obama Administration. U.S. participation in UNESCO has served as a visual display of a shared global concern for culture, education, and

science, rather than an aggressive military or financial focus that often pervades international perceptions of the United States. Investing in culture may not win wars, but it can go a long way in mending fences and building bridges. Withdrawing a vital element of the diplomatic toolkit may restrict U.S. participation in future efforts aimed at cultural understanding and peace making.

In the following essay, Lynn Meskell deconstructs the language and process of UNESCO through the lens of World Heritage and endorsement by UNESCO. Her essay is especially salient given the emphasis on the power associated with inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List and the 40th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention. Proposing sites to be deemed worthy of inscription on the List levels the playing field between countries with unequal GDPs, populations, land mass, or status. World Heritage inscription can and does result in increased financial gain through tourism, regional prestige, and improving national pride in the past. Meskell illustrates the not so subtle diplomacy, the behind the scenes negotiations, and the democratic processes involved with inscription.

The withdrawal of the United States from this sphere of international engagement may result in a lessening of its global influence in areas other than science, education, and culture. One can easily appreciate the loss of potential statecraft and alliance building for the United States in the aftermath of UNESCO's recognition of the PA.

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