

Washington Cuts off Financial Support to UNESCO in Reprisal for “Democractic” Vote on Palestine Membership

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The United States will stop paying \$80 million in dues and voluntary contributions to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in response to the body's vote Monday to grant membership to the Palestinian Authority.

UNESCO voted 107-14 in favor of granting status to the Palestinians, triggering existing U.S. laws that prohibit American support of U.N. agencies that accept them as members. The decision could have far-reaching effects for American technology companies that use UNESCO to open markets in the developing world and rely upon an associated entity, the World Intellectual Property Organization, to police international disputes over music, movies and software.

The administration had little choice: Even if the White House wanted Congress to waive the law so that UNESCO could be funded, there's almost no chance that a waiver request would be granted. Pro-Israel lawmakers mobilized pre-emptively last week, as Reps. Steve Israel (D-N.Y.), the chairman of the House Democrats' campaign committee, and Tom Cole, a former chairman of the House Republicans' campaign committee, wrote a letter to colleagues demanding enforcement of the funding prohibition.

“We cannot change this law and we hope you will join us in cosigning this bipartisan letter to stand by this policy,” Israel and Cole wrote. “Congress must send a powerful message that everything is done to block full membership of the Palestinian Authority to UNESCO, the UN Security Council, and other UN agencies. Such a move would be detrimental to Israel, our greatest ally in the Middle East, as well as UN programs around the globe.”

Israel and Cole wrote a similar letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urging her to do everything in her power to avert the admission of the Palestinian Authority to UNESCO. But the State Department's efforts to get the rest of the world to block Palestinian membership in UNESCO fell short despite a full-court press that included giving America's official position in capitals across the globe.

The potential consequences for American businesses are important enough that the State Department invited representatives of about two dozen technology and pharmaceutical companies and associations to participate in a discussion of the matter in Foggy Bottom Monday afternoon.

“Even as we approach this situation diplomatically, the Department of State and our U.S. Government partners would like to invite you to a discussion on the current state of play at UNESCO, as well as the ramifications of the Palestinian bid for membership,” reads a copy of the invitation obtained by POLITICO. Invitees include Apple, Google, Microsoft, the Motion Picture Association of America, PhRMA and the Recording Industry Association of America.

But while American businesses could suffer from the decision to cut off funding, it is unlikely that any of them will pick a fight with Israel.

“You could literally blow me over with a feather if one of those guys came out with a public position,” said one tech industry source.

Before announcing Monday that it would enforce the law, the State Department had delicately framed its position, leading some to speculate that there might be an effort to circumvent the prohibition or lobby Congress to repeal it.

“The concern is if this move in constituent agencies were to mushroom and you were to go on to agencies like the World Health Program like some of these others and the U.S. were put in a position of the legislation triggering and us not being able to participate anymore, you could actually have lives lost if these agencies were not fully funded,” State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said at a briefing last week.

Noticeably absent from the debate: Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), who is a leading advocate for both Israel and the entertainment industry. Berman, the top Democrat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, turned down POLITICO’s request to interview him on Friday, Saturday or Sunday. Berman is locked in a primary battle with Rep. Brad Sherman, another Jewish Democrat from Southern California who has worked to curb intellectual property piracy.

Berman’s counterpart on the committee, chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), is perhaps the top critic of the United Nations in Congress, and she is working to pass a bill that would apply new conditions for U.S. funding for the world’s diplomatic body.

“The chairman believes that the current law is clear in requiring a cut-off of funds to UNESCO if the Palestinians are granted membership, and she supports full implementation of that law without exceptions,” her spokesman, Brad Goehner, said. “She also has a provision in her UN Reform bill which would strengthen that law by requiring a cut-off of funding to any UN entity that grants full membership or any other upgraded status to the Palestinian mission.”

Former Sen. Tim Wirth (D-Colo.), the head of the UN Foundation, wrote an op-ed on the Huffingtonpost Website Monday afternoon arguing in favor of a waiver.

“Should the U.S. pull out of these organizations, it is not as if these organizations would stop functioning altogether. Rather, an agency like IAEA may have to reduce the number of nuclear inspectors it deploys around the world. Other countries, maybe even America’s global rivals, will step into fill the leadership void left by the United States,” Wirth wrote. “As long as these laws remain on the books, Congress is setting the stage for America’s waning influence over international affairs. From businesses interests to non-governmental organizations who care about America’s influence at the UN,

everyone must take a stand and urge Congress to give the President the flexible authority needed protect our national security and economic interests.”

But it’s clear that the folks who hold the purse strings in Congress have no such intention.

“I have been clear to the leadership of UNESCO, the Palestinian leadership, and to my colleagues in the administration that the path to Middle East peace does not run through the U.N.,” Rep. Kay Granger (R-Texas), the chairwoman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State Department and Foreign Operations, said after the UNESCO vote. “I expect the administration to enforce existing law and stop contributions to UNESCO and any other U.N. agency that enables the Palestinians to short-cut the peace process. From the start, my message has been consistent that in order for the P.A. to achieve the legitimacy of statehood they must return to direct peace negotiations with Israel.”

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