

'U.S. withdrawal is a loss'

The United States' decision to withdraw from the UNESCO is "a loss for multilateralism", said the UN heritage agency's Director General Irina Bokova.

"This is a loss to UNESCO. This is a loss to the United Nations family. This is a loss for multilateralism," Ms. Bokova said in a statement.

The U.S. State Department cited the agency's "anti-Israel bias" as one of the reasons for its withdrawal. "The United States indicated to the Director General its desire to remain engaged with UNESCO as a non-member observer state in order to contribute U.S. views, perspectives and expertise on some of the important issues undertaken by the organisation, including the protection of world heritage, advocating for press freedoms, and promoting scientific collaboration and education," State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert said.

U.S. laws bar funding to any U.N. agency that recognises the Palestinian state. Ms. Bokova said "despite the withholding of funding, since 2011, we have deepened the partnership between the United States and UNESCO, which has never been so meaningful."

Mission and values

In a lengthy statement exceeding more than 1,000 words, the UNESCO chief underscored that the mission of the body is consonance with the "values of the people of America", and listed a series of initiatives it has taken to combat anti-Semitism. "Together, we have worked to protect humanity's shared cultural heritage in the face of terrorist attacks and to prevent violent extremism through education and media literacy... This is why I regret the withdrawal of the United States," she said. The U.S. had earlier once withdrawn from the UNESCO, in 1984, under President Ronald Regan who accused it of favouring the Soviet Union. President George W. Bush rejoined the organisation in 2002.

Israel and UNESCO have a contentious relationship, and Israel recalled its Ambassador to UNESCO last year, accusing it of ignoring Jewish views of the heritage of the region. In a stinging attack on the world body in September, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu explained to the UN General Assembly the Israeli view on a recent UNESCO decision that triggered the U.S withdrawal from it.

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