

## Out of UNESCO

The U.S.'s decision to quit UNESCO is an attempt to reassert geopolitical influence in West Asia. But the withdrawal is, at best, a face-saver for President Donald Trump who has been unable to back his pre-election rhetoric on the Palestinian peace process with substance. In January, for instance, the Trump administration prepared orders to halt U.S. funding to global institutions that advocate membership for the Palestine Authority. In February, Washington blocked the appointment, at the eleventh hour, of a former Palestinian premier to serve in a senior UN position. These one-time decisions are doing nothing for the peace process. Moreover, Mr. Trump has been forced to defer the controversial relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and push for a pause in Israeli settlements, even as he prevaricates on the two-state solution.

### The U.S., UN and Palestine

The UNESCO, which designates world heritage spots, accorded recognition in 2011 to Palestine as its 195th member. Ever since, controversies over the historical status of the region's religious symbols, that have divided the Palestinian Authority and Israel, have come into sharp focus. Washington, long opposed to the admission of Palestine to world bodies until the question of its UN membership was resolved, promptly slashed funding, amounting to about a quarter of UNESCO's annual budget. The 2012 elevation to a non-member observer status at the UN came as a shot in the arm for Palestinians demanding separate statehood. In the meanwhile, Arab nations vested in decision-making positions at the UNESCO have sought to fast-track the designation of holy sites as endangered heritage sites, alleging Israeli attacks on their authenticity and integrity. Noteworthy is the agency's July declaration of the bitterly contested shrine in Hebron city as an endangered Palestinian heritage site. While most of Hebron is under Palestine administration, the core of the shrine is surrounded by Israeli military guards. A resolution last year condemned Israel for hampering access for the Palestinians to Jerusalem's holy places. Under a 2015 proposal, Arab members on the body's executive aimed to classify the Western Wall, one of the holiest spots of Judaism, as part of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City. A potential escalation was averted only because the Director-General prevailed against any attempt to reopen the status of this UNESCO heritage location. Israel has denounced these moves and deplored the distortions of the Hebrew context to these sites.

While Israel has also followed the U.S. lead, it would nevertheless be hasty to view Washington's exit from the UNESCO as a point of no return. The Reagan administration walked out of the body, objecting to its perceived Soviet slant, only for the U.S. to return during the presidency of George W. Bush, at the peak of U.S. world dominance. The election of Audrey Azoulay, former French Minister of Culture, as the UNESCO's new head comes at a critical juncture for the institution as it fights to regain its credibility. As globalisation accentuates the need among communities to amplify historical and cultural identities, the challenge could only intensify further.

The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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