Don't Fold on UNESCO

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When UNESCO voted in 2011 to admit the "State of Palestine" as a member despite the fact that there is no "State of Palestine," the United States suspended paying dues to the organization. This was done in accordance with U.S. law, because Congress had forbidden paying dues to any UN organization that admitted the PLO to full membership as a state.

The goal was to deter UN organizations from giving the Palestinians the diplomatic victory they wanted—being treated as a state—unless and until they negotiated a peace agreement with Israel. And it worked: since the U.S. move in 2011, other key UN organizations have not followed UNESCO down the PLO's preferred path. The United States pays about 22 percent of the budget of UNESCO and most other UN organs, so the threat of a loss of U.S. dues gets serious attention.

The old adage "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" would seem to apply here: the legislation is working. Were it to be repealed or waived, it's logical to expect other UN bodies to see that the Americans are bluffing—and to give the Palestinians full membership. Yet that is clearly where the Obama administration is heading, unless Congress blocks them.

Exhibit one is a letter the State Department sent on December 7 to Sen. Patrick Leahy, second ranking Democrat on the Appropriations Committee and ranking Democrat on its Foreign Operations subcommittee. State asks for $160 million to pay part of U.S. arrears (totaling $377 million) accrued since 2011 and $76 million to pay current dues. And it asks for new legislation giving the president authority to waive the "no dues payments" provision for UNESCO. The argument is that "failure to resolve our arrears issue is weakening our role at UNESCO" and this has "hampered our ability to safeguard both U.S. and Israeli interests." Previously the administration wanted the ability to waive the current law for all UN bodies, but it has given up on that.

The administration has lined up the Anti-Defamation League in its effort. The League's letters to Lindsey Graham (who chairs the Foreign Operations subcommittee of Appropriations) and to Leahy and House appropriators, make a similar argument. We hate the way UNESCO and other UN bodies are hijacked for use against Israel, says ADL, and UN bodies should not admit "entities not recognized as states by the United States." But the U.S. should be in UNESCO, where it can work to defend Israel.

Moreover, the government of Israel has decided not to oppose these moves. Why not? Most speculation is that Prime Minister Netanyahu gave this one to Secretary of State Kerry, in an effort to propitiate Kerry and Obama on this one issue while continuing to fight on matters he thinks more urgent. Given this Israeli position, AIPAC is staying out of the UNESCO fight as well.

Whatever one thinks of that Israeli decision, Graham and other Republicans should block this Obama/Kerry effort. First of all, the United States was out of UNESCO entirely from 1984 to 2003. Do you recall losing a lot of sleep over this? Can you name important world events that were affected by the American absence? Second, the administration's argument that this is a UNESCO-only waiver that will not affect other bodies is ridiculous. Every other UN agency will see who blinked: not the UN but the Americans. The deterrent force of the 1990 law that threatens to cut off US funding will be gutted.

The administration's answer is to combine its UNESCO waiver with another new provision saying the waiver would lapse if the Palestinians get full membership in any other UN body. This is senseless. If we collapse on UNESCO, it will be assumed in the UN that we will eventually collapse on any other UN agency that admits "Palestine." If it is important to stop UN agencies from admitting "Palestine," we have the ideal tool in the 1990 law and should simply enforce it.

Graham and all the Republican members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees should quickly reject this show of American weakness. Moreover, the Republican candidates for president should find this an easy item over which to agree. The position of the United States has been clear for 25 years: admit the PLO as a state with full membership and you lose U.S. dues. UNESCO's member countries decided to do it anyway, testing American resolve. The Obama administration wants to show that they were right: we fold under criticism and pressure. Congress should "just say no" and send a clear message to every other UN body: there will be no waivers.