Obama Administration Moves to Restore Funding for Anti-Israel U.N. Organization

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The Obama administration is waging a quiet effort on Capitol Hill to restore U.S. taxpayer funding for a United Nations organization that has long been accused of having an anti-Israel bias, according to State Department funding requests obtained by the Washington Free Beacon.

The State Department earlier this month petitioned Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), a member of the Senate’s appropriations committee, to consider restoring funding to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, otherwise known as UNESCO.

Taxpayer funding to the organization was [cut](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/08/us-unesco-voting-funds-palestine-decision) in 2011 after UNESCO accepted Palestine as a member state, a move that violated U.S. law barring the funding of any U.N. group that skirts the peace process by prematurely admitting Palestine as a full member nation.

The cutoff in U.S. contributions, which totaled around $80 million annually, brought UNESCO to the brink of financial collapse and sparked further consideration of actions deemed by critics to be anti-Israel in nature.

In its petition to Leahy, the State Department asks for a funding waiver in the 2016 appropriations bill that would allow the U.S. government to restart yearly payments of $76 million to UNESCO. The administration also is seeking authority to give the organization up to $160 million to help erase outstanding debts.

Julia Frifield, assistant secretary for legislative affairs at the State Department, claims in the letter that Secretary of State John Kerry got the okay to restart funding from Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israel.

“U.S. leadership in UNESCO is critical in combating anti-Israel bias, as was seen at the most recent Executive Board meeting in October where the United States was able to walk back the most odious elements of a resolution related to Temple Mount and secure more ‘no’ votes than is usual on such resolutions,” Frifield wrote, referring to recent efforts by UNESCO to [reclassify](http://www.kirk.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=1549) Jerusalem’s Western Wall as a Muslim holy site.

Denying U.S. funds “is weakening our role at UNESCO” and has “hampered our ability to safeguard both U.S. and Israeli interests,” the letter states.

The effort to start funding the organization has sparked opposition among some lawmakers who say this could be seen as an effort to reward bad behavior.

“The proposed language would undermine over two decades of U.S. policy against funding U.N. organizations that admit the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) or other non-state actors as members,” Sens. Mark Kirk (R., Ill.) and Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) wrote in a [recent letter](http://freebeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/20151211-Kirk-Rubio-Letter-to-Leader-McConnell-Speaker-Ryan-on-UNESCO-PLO-FY16-Omnibus-Corr.pdf) to the Senate and House leaders.

“The proposed language also creates a deeply troubling precedent,” according to the lawmakers. “U.N. organizations, which seek to follow UNESCO’s example and grant membership to non-state actors, may be encouraged to do so believing that the United States would eventually create another exception for them and restore withheld U.S. funding.”

Rep. Ileana Ros Lehtinen (R., Fla.) also took the House floor last week to [denounce](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgIy-FPToJY&feature=youtu.be) the administration’s effort to restart funding for UNESCO.

Kerry, she claimed, pressured the Israeli government into backing down from its support for the funding cutoff.

“Secretary Kerry has been pressuring the Israeli government to relent in its opposition to U.S. funding for UNESCO,” Ros-Lehtinen said. “It’s a shame Secretary Kerry isn’t using the full weight of his office” to hold the Palestinian government “accountable for their incitement violence and continued efforts to delegitimize and isolate the Jewish state at the U.N., while pursuing unilateral state recognition.”

Ros-Lehtinen insisted that U.S. law mandates that the administration continue withholding funding for UNESCO.