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Q10

'Too little cash, too much politics, leaves UNESCO fighting for life.' Discuss the statement in the light of US' withdrawal and its accusation of the cultural body as being 'anti-Israel bias'

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · GS II · 10 marks · India and its Neighbourhood

India and its neighborhood - relations.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the claim that too little cash and too much politics leave UNESCO fighting for life
- Do so in the light of the United States' withdrawal and its charge of anti-Israel bias

Revision summary

UNESCO depends on assessed contributions; the US share was critical.

After Palestine's 2011 membership, Washington froze funds and left in 2018 with Israel.

Too little cash followed too much Israel-Palestine politics in a cultural forum.

The anti-Israel-bias charge pointed to real drafting fights, but withdrawal also hit education and heritage.

Survival needs a wider funding base and a tighter technical mandate.

Introduction

UNESCO is the United Nations' cultural, education, and heritage body. It lives on assessed contributions and on a reputation for technical work. When the largest payer walks out, and when votes on Palestine and Israel dominate headlines, both the cash problem and the politics problem become the same crisis.

Body**Too little cash**

- The United States had long been among UNESCO's biggest assessed contributors; Washington froze funds after UNESCO admitted Palestine as a member in 2011, and then gave notice of withdrawal that took effect in 2018, with Israel also leaving.
- Loss of that share, plus earlier arrears, cut programmes in literacy, World Heritage, ocean science, and press-freedom monitoring.
- Other members did not fully replace the hole; extra-budgetary projects then follow donor politics, which is still a cash problem with a political face.
- A specialised agency that cannot pay field offices or heritage missions is, in that sense, fighting for life.

Too much politics and the anti-Israel charge

- UNESCO's Executive Board and General Conference became a second stage for Israel-Palestine disputes: occupied-territory language, Jerusalem heritage files, and resolutions

that Israel and the United States read as denying Jewish historical ties.

- The US accusation of anti-Israel bias was the public reason for leaving; critics of that exit said the United States was punishing a majority vote rather than reforming procedure.
- **Politicisation is older than one file:** Cold War media debates, and later culture-war votes, also pulled UNESCO off classrooms and conservation.
- When a cultural body issues territorial-sounding texts, losers call it bias and freeze cheques; that is the loop the statement names.

A balanced discussion

- Some resolutions were one-sided in drafting; that is a real governance failure, not only an American talking point.
- Walking out also weakens US influence inside the house and hurts apolitical work on girls' education and illicit trafficking of artefacts.
- India remained a member and has used UNESCO for heritage listings and education coordination; the lesson is to stay, pay, and argue, rather than to empty the till.
- The later US debate on rejoining shows that cash and politics are reversible if members ring-fence technical votes from capital-by-capital conflict.

Short way forward

- Protect World Heritage and education votes from bloc amendments where possible, publish drafting history, and widen the contributor base so one walkout cannot starve the agency.
- Keep Israel-Palestine issues in the political UN organs that own peace files, and let UNESCO staff run schools, science, and sites.

Flow diagram

Palestine membership 2011 -> US funding freeze
US funding freeze -> US Israel withdrawal 2018
US Israel withdrawal 2018 -> Too little cash
Israel-Palestine resolutions -> Bias accusation
Bias accusation -> US Israel withdrawal 2018
Too little cash -> Programmes at risk

Conclusion

UNESCO was fighting for life because the US withdrawal removed cash after a political clash over Israel and Palestine. The bias charge had a basis in heated resolutions, but exit punished literacy and heritage too. The agency survives if members fund it and put culture back above campus geopolitics.

Facts & figures

UNESCO

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; leads education, science, culture and World Heritage work.

Palestine UNESCO membership, 2011

General Conference vote that triggered US funding restrictions under American law and began the cash crisis.

US withdrawal effective 2018

The United States completed withdrawal (Israel also left), citing anti-Israel bias and politicisation; a later administration moved to return.

Assessed contributions

Scale of regular budget dues; loss of a large payer opens a hole that voluntary funds only partly fill.

World Heritage List

UNESCO flagship; Jerusalem and other contested sites became flashpoints when heritage language met sovereignty claims.

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