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One Hundred Eighteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

October 31, 2023

Secretary Antony Blinken
U.S. Department of State
Harry S. Truman Building
2201 C Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to express grave concern regarding the Biden administration’s decision to rejoin the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), an entity which promotes the interests of authoritarian regimes, has admitted “Palestine” as a full member, and has a long history of anti-Israel bias.

As discussed below, the Biden administration rejoined UNESCO without a detailed strategy setting forth how this action would promote the interests of the United States, including a plan demonstrating how – according to the administration – rejoining the organization purportedly would counter malign Chinese influence.¹ The Biden administration also rejoined UNESCO absent meaningful negotiations to reduce the \$612 million in arrears owed to UNESCO. This decision – like many other foreign policy decisions of the Biden administration – thus prioritizes token so-called “success[es]”² at the expense of vital American interests and taxpayer dollars.

¹ See Public Law No. 117-328, Section 7070 (providing that the President may waive UNESCO funding restrictions if doing so would “promote [] national interests of the United States”); U.S. Department of State, *Determination under Section 7070 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2023 (Div. K, P.L. 117-328) with Respect to UNESCO* dated 6 May 2023 (observing that waiving UNESCO funding restrictions “would . . . promote [] national interests of the United States”); Email from U.S. Department of State to HFAC dated 12 Apr. 2023 (“If the President invokes the waiver authority included in the FY23 Appropriations Act, the Department will develop a strategy in line with the priorities and concerns on which we have been consulting with Congress.”).

² The White House, *Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan* dated 31 Aug. 2021 (“Last night in Kabul, the United States ended 20 years of war in Afghanistan . . . The [mission was an] extraordinary success Twenty servicemembers were wounded in the service of this mission. Thirteen heroes gave their lives.”).

As you are aware, UNESCO has a marked history of taking actions adverse to American interests. The organization admitted “Palestine” as a full member in 2011, and its anti-Israel bias has, most recently, been carried forward through inclusion of an entire agenda item on “Occupied Palestine”³ during the UNESCO Executive Board session on May 15, 2023.⁴ The agenda for the Executive Board’s session beginning on October 4, 2023 contained the same item.⁵ As is stated in the United States-Israel Strategic Partnership Act, “[i]t is the policy of the United States . . . to reaffirm . . . the security of Israel as a Jewish state.”⁶ Rejoining UNESCO does not further this aim.

Indeed, on October 9, 2023 (two days after Hamas’ acts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against the Jewish people and the State of Israel), the UNESCO Executive Board issued a “progress report” “deeply deplor[ing] the *ongoing* military developments around the Gaza Strip.”⁷ And on October 13, 2023, “Palestine” gave a speech before the UNESCO Executive Board session stating that “the only way to reach peace and security is the end of the Israeli occupation.”⁸ This notwithstanding, President Biden – at a UNESCO reception at the White House on October 17, 2023 inexplicably asserted that “we’re glad to be part of your outfit. If you think I’m kidding, I’m not.”⁹ In such times, it defies understanding that the Biden administration continues to support an organization with such posture towards Israel.

Moreover, UNESCO has elected members of Syria’s Assad regime to its committees dealing with human rights,¹⁰ and Russia – which, among other horrific acts as part of its war of aggression against Ukraine, has destroyed historic buildings in Odesa – *remains* a member of UNESCO’s *World Heritage Committee*.¹¹ Further, the Chinese Communist Party uses UNESCO to “rewrite history” and to “legitimize the party’s rule over regions with large ethnic minorities.”¹² In this regard, the Biden administration’s need to pay \$612 million in arrears owed to the organization (to say little of the obligation to pay upwards of \$75 million in annual dues going forward)¹³ is an affront to the longstanding American tradition of supporting human rights and fundamental freedoms. Further, we had commitments last year from the State Department and UNESCO that the United States would not have to pay the full arrears amount.

To rejoin UNESCO, over my objections, the longstanding congressional funding restrictions to the organization arising from its admission of “Palestine” as a full member were waived. In this

³ UNESCO, Executive Board, Agenda for Two hundred and sixteenth session dated 15 May 2023.

⁴ UNESCO, Executive Board, Agenda for Two hundred and sixteenth session, Item 33 dated 11 May 2023.

⁵ UNESCO, Executive Board, Agenda for Two hundred and seventeenth session, Item 33 dated 11 Oct. 2023.

⁶ United States-Israel Strategic Partnership Act of 2014, Public Law No. 113-296.

⁷ UNESCO, Executive Board, Occupied Palestine dated 9 Oct. 2023, pg. 5 (emphasis added).

⁸ UNESCO, Executive Board, Speech by “Palestine” dated 13 Oct. 2023.

⁹ The White House, UNESCO Reception, Remarks by President Biden dated 17 Oct. 2023, at 10:58 (*available here*).

¹⁰ UN Watch, *UK announced bid to cancel Syria’s ‘abhorrent’ membership on UNESCO rights committee* dated 6 Jan. 2012; UN Watch, *55 MPs, rights groups & dissidents urge UNESCO to cancel election of Syria to human rights committees* dated 14 Dec. 2011.

¹¹ DW News, *Watchdog wants Russia out of UNESCO Heritage Committee* dated 26 July 2023.

¹² The Economist, *How China uses UNESCO to rewrite history* dated 21 Sept. 2023.

¹³ Questions for the Record Submitted to Assistant Secretary Michele J. Sison dated 13 July 2022, at 1.

regard, the Department stated that rejoining UNESCO “would unlock important opportunities for the United States”¹⁴ and determined that the waiver “would enable the United States to counter Chinese influence or to promote other national interests of the United States”¹⁵ Yet, apart from vague notions that the “United States needs to have a seat at the table” and that “the PRC’s efforts in UNESCO [must be] challenged through enhanced U.S. engagement,” the memorandum of justification for waiving the funding restriction wholly fails to explain *how* rejoining and refunding UNESCO would permit the United States to address malign Chinese influence.¹⁶ Such vagaries do not justify the Biden administration’s decision to spend hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to rejoin the organization. Rather, the only clarity provided to the Committee is that the United States (and the U.S. taxpayer in consequence) will be required to pay the entire \$612 million in arrears to UNESCO as a condition for rejoining the organization¹⁷ – which is inconsistent with statements made by the Department to this Committee that it would negotiate down the arrears.

Since this determination, the House Foreign Affairs Committee has requested information regarding the Department’s specific plans to leverage its position in UNESCO to counter Chinese influence and strategies regarding other national interests the United States will promote as a member of the organization.¹⁸ In response, the Department merely has continued to proffer hollow assertions, including that the United States needs to be “present to shape the discussion,”¹⁹ that “[r]ejoining UNESCO aligns directly with the Indo-Pacific Strategy’s goal of upholding freedom and openness,”²⁰ and that “the Department will develop a strategy in line with [congressional] priorities and concerns.”²¹ The Department has failed to provide a detailed strategy to this Committee for the United States’ reengagement with UNESCO.

We therefore request that the Department provide the Committee with a detailed strategy setting forth how U.S. membership in UNESCO will be used to effectively counter Chinese influence and promote other national security interests of the United States. This strategy should also specifically describe why contributing funding to UNESCO is the best possible use of taxpayer resources to

¹⁴ Questions for the Record Submitted to Assistant Secretary Michele J. Sison dated 13 July 2022, at 6.

¹⁵ *Determination under Section 7070 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2023 (Div. K, P.L. 117-328) with Respect to UNESCO* dated 6 May 2023.

¹⁶ *Memorandum of Justification for a Determination under Section 7070 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2023 (Div. K, P.L. 117-328) with Respect to UNESCO*, at 2.

¹⁷ Email from U.S. Department of State to HFAC dated 6 Oct. 2023.

¹⁸ See e.g., Email from HFAC to U.S. Department of State dated 10 Apr. 2023 (“Is [the Bureau of International Organization Affairs] developing a specific strategy for US reengagement with UNESCO that emphasizes countering CCP influence and advancing US priorities?”); Email from HFAC to U.S. Department of State dated 24 Apr. 2023 (“[I]t remains unclear how the IO Bureau is conducting outreach to other bureaus and offices about the issue of the US possibly rejoining UNESCO and how UNESCO fits into the administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and other planning documents related to countering the threat of the Chinese Communist Party.”).

¹⁹ Email from U.S. Department of State to HFAC dated 12 Apr. 2023 (“In Secretary Blinken’s March 2022 testimony before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee . . . [h]e [] noted that as the PRC increases its influence through its engagement in UNESCO’s work and assessed contributions to UNESCO, the United States is not present to shape the discussion.”).

²⁰ Email from U.S. Department of State to HFAC dated 10 May 2023.

²¹ Email from U.S. Department of State to HFAC dated 12 Apr. 2023.

promote U.S. efforts to “address . . . our global competition with China.”²² I believe there are better uses of such amounts of appropriated dollars. The State Department’s Countering Chinese Influence Fund is only \$325 million this fiscal year. Further, we want to know if you believe your using the funding restriction waiver was an error, and if so, what you will do to correct that error. We request that this information be submitted to the Committee no later than November 30, 2023.

Sincerely,



Michael T. McCaul
Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee

²² U.S. Department of State, Press Briefing dated 9 Mar. 2023 (“[R]ejoining UNESCO . . . will [] help us address a key opportunity cost that our absence is creating in our global competition with China.”).