

US & UNESCO

Why in news?

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US has recently announced its withdrawal from the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

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What are the recent developments in this regard?

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- **Palestine** - UNESCO, which designates world heritage spots, accorded recognition in 2011 to Palestine as its 195th member.

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- UNESCO is the first U.N. agency to do so.

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- This triggered controversies over the historical status of the region's religious symbols.

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- And this is also a continuing issue of contention between the already divided Palestinian Authority and Israel.

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- The 2012 elevation to a non-member observer status at the UN came as a boost for Palestinians demanding separate statehood.

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- **US** - The US had long had stronger ties with Israel and supported its settlements in Palestine.

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- Also, U.S. laws bar funding to any UN agency that recognises the Palestinian state.

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- Accordingly, the US had stopped funding the UNESCO since its 2011 decision, but the partnership with UNESCO continued.

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- It also opposed to the admission of Palestine to world bodies until the question of its UN membership was resolved.

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- **Holy sites** - Meanwhile, Arab nations at the UNESCO have sought to fast-track the designation of holy sites as endangered heritage sites.
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- They alleged Israel of making attacks on religious sites, affecting their authenticity and integrity.
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- **Hebron** - Notably, UNESCO declared a contested shrine in Hebron city as an endangered Palestinian heritage site.
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- While most of Hebron is under Palestine administration, the core of the shrine is surrounded by Israeli military guards.
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- Also, a resolution last year condemned Israel for hampering access for the Palestinians to Jerusalem's holy places.
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What does the US move signify?

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- Amidst the above developments, US has now decided to withdraw, accusing UNESCO of continuing its "anti-Israel bias".
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- With this, the actual withdrawal will take effect on December 31, 2018 and until then it will remain a full member of the body.
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- The decision reflects U.S's concerns with mounting arrears at UNESCO, the need for fundamental reform in the organisation, and continuing anti-Israel bias at UNESCO.
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- The decision is also an attempt to reassert its geopolitical influence in West Asia.
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What lies ahead?

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- It is to be noted that US has indicated its desire to remain engaged with UNESCO as a non-member observer state.
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- This is to contribute its views and expertise on some important issues

undertaken by the organisation.

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- It would be hasty to view US's exit from the UNESCO as a point of no return.
- Because, earlier in 1984, the U.S. had withdrawn from the UNESCO, accusing it of favouring the Soviet Union; nevertheless it rejoined the U.N. body in 2002.
- With increasing need for communities to stress their historical and cultural identities in globalisation era, UNESCO has a balancing role to play.

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Source: The Hindu

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