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The flag of UNESCO flies at the UNESCO headquarters, with the Eiffel Tower in the background, in Paris, France, April 17, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Abdul Saboor)

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The Trump administration on July 22 said the United States would withdraw from the United Nations' cultural agency UNESCO, a group that has partnered with the Holy See on human development and cultural heritage projects.

Mary Ellen O'Connell, a professor at Notre Dame Law School who specializes in international law and conflict resolution, expressed concern about the decision.

"Leaving UNESCO will deal another blow to the reputation of the United States as a world leader in what matters — peace, human rights, health, the environment, and now culture," she told OSV News.

"The organization works to protect the international community's cherished, fragile cultural heritage in all of its forms," O'Connell said. "How can we be against that? Cultural heritage represents humanity's greatest expressions of creativity and appreciation."

Among the agency's most well-known work is the UNESCO World Heritage Sites program, which recognizes significant historic and cultural landmarks for protection and preservation, including more than two dozen sites in the United States, such as Independence Hall, the Statue of Liberty, the Grand Canyon, and La Fortaleza and San Juan National Historic Site in Puerto Rico. Catholic sites and cathedrals, including Vatican City and Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, are among the World Heritage sites around the globe.

Tammy Bruce, the State Department's spokesperson, said in a July 22 statement, "Today, the United States informed Director-General Audrey Azoulay of the United States' decision to withdraw from UNESCO," effective on Dec. 31, 2026.

"Continued involvement in UNESCO is not in the national interest of the United States," Bruce argued, alleging the agency "works to advance divisive social and cultural causes and maintains an outsized focus on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, a globalist, ideological agenda for international development at odds with our America First foreign policy."

The Holy See has taken an overall positive view toward the Sustainable Development Goals, exhorting governments to put into concrete action their commitments to eradicating poverty in all its forms, while keeping the human person central, without leaving anyone behind. Pope Francis in a 2015 speech at the United Nations in New York called the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development "an important sign of hope."

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"UNESCO's decision to admit the 'State of Palestine' as a Member State is highly problematic, contrary to U.S. policy, and contributed to the proliferation of anti-Israel rhetoric within the organization," she said. "Continued U.S. participation in international organizations will focus on advancing American interests with clarity and conviction."

The Holy Land's Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and its corresponding pilgrimage route are among the sites in Palestine recognized by the agency. Israel, which formally departed UNESCO in 2019, is a non-member, but there are 9 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Israel, according to its website.

Asked about the Trump administration's objection to UNESCO's recognition of Palestine, O'Connell said, the U.S. "is abandoning this essential work for no gain."

"Palestine will not be forced to leave the organization, but the U.S. will lose all the positive influence it could have as a member," she said.

"Instead of taking this damaging step for no purpose, U.S. foreign policy officials could be using their time to end the starvation of Palestinian children," she said.

In a July 22 statement, Audrey Azoulay, director-general of UNESCO, said, "I deeply regret President Donald Trump's decision to once again withdraw the United States of America from UNESCO."

"However regrettable, this announcement was anticipated, and UNESCO has prepared for it," Azoulay said.

The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization was expected, as President Donald Trump's first

administration also did so in 2019. The U.S. rejoined the group in 2023 under the Biden administration.

"This decision contradicts the fundamental principles of multilateralism, and may affect first and foremost our many partners in the United States of America — communities seeking site inscription on the World Heritage List, Creative City status, and University Chairs," Azoulay said.

Azoulay added, "The reasons put forward by the United States to withdraw from the Organization are the same as seven years ago even though the situation has changed profoundly, political tensions have receded, and UNESCO today constitutes a rare forum for consensus on concrete and action-oriented multilateralism."

"These claims also contradict the reality of UNESCO's efforts, particularly in the field of Holocaust education and the fight against antisemitism," Azoulay said.

Catholic entities have a history of working with UNESCO, according to the Paris-based International Catholic Committee for Cooperation with UNESCO.

Upon the death of the late Francis in April, Azoulay remembered him as a "steadfast ally of UNESCO."

Francis called the organization "a privileged partner of the Holy See in the common service of peace and of the solidarity of peoples, of the integral development of the human person and the protection of the cultural heritage of humanity."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.