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UNESCO Funding Crisis: Cash, Politics and the US Withdrawal

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UNESCO Funding Crisis: Cash, Politics and the US Withdrawal

Practice: 6 MCQs
UNESCO is the United Nations body for education, science and culture. In July 2025 the US said it will leave again.

This lesson covers what UNESCO does and who pays for it. It then traces the US exits, the 2025 notice and India's link. It ends with a balanced answer to the 2019 question.

- **Born:** Constitution signed 16 November 1945; in force 4 November 1946.
- **US share:** 22 per cent of the regular budget before it left; about 8 per cent of the total budget in 2025. These are not like-for-like.
- **US exits:** 1984, 2018 and the notice of July 2025.
- **Next date:** the 2025 exit takes effect on 31 December 2026.
- **India:** the Moidams became the 43rd World Heritage Site on 26 July 2024.

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1. What is UNESCO, and why does it matter?

Think of a school, a science lab and a museum rolled into one world body. That is **UNESCO**. Its full name is the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**.

Its **Constitution** was signed in London on **16 November 1945**. It came into force on **4 November 1946**. The headquarters is in **Paris**.

1.1 What is its purpose?

The Constitution says UNESCO exists to **contribute to peace and security**. It does this through **education, science and culture**. The idea was born after World War II, to protect the world's shared cultural inheritance.

1.2 What is it best known for?

Most people know UNESCO for the **World Heritage List**. Sites such as the Taj Mahal, the pyramids of Giza and the Grand Canyon are on it. The agency also works on education and science worldwide.



UNESCO headquarters building, Paris. Photo: Eva Rinaldi, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Sources:

- Constitution of UNESCO (University of Oslo treaty library)
- US to withdraw from UNESCO again (AP via ABC17)
- United States rejoins Unesco (Bangkok Post, AFP)
- U.S. to leave UNESCO, again (PBS News, AP)

True or false: UNESCO's Constitution came into force in 1946.

2. How is UNESCO paid for, and why does the US share matter?

UNESCO has no income of its own. It runs on money from its **member states**. When a big payer walks away, the hole is large.

Here is the key number. Before the US left, its assessed share of UNESCO's **regular budget** was **22 per cent**. The AP calls this the US share of overall funding, but UNESCO and the Congressional Research Service describe it as the regular-budget share.

UNESCO's July 2025 statement says the US share is about **8 per cent** of the **total budget**. That total also includes voluntary funds. So the two figures use different bases and should not be compared directly.

- **Before:** about a fifth of the money came from one country.
- **Now:** UNESCO has spread its funding, so one exit hurts less.
- **Why it still matters:** a smaller budget means fewer projects.

2.1 How has UNESCO coped?

UNESCO says it has **doubled voluntary contributions** since 2018. Voluntary money is extra cash that donors give for chosen projects.

The agency also says it is **not planning layoffs** at this stage.

Sources:

- US formally rejoins UNESCO after five-year absence (AP via KSAT)
- US returns to UNESCO (Jordan News)
- U.S. to leave UNESCO, again (PBS News, AP) (section 2)
- US withdraws from UNESCO for 3rd time in history (Anadolu)

True or false: the US pays about 22 per cent of UNESCO's budget today.

3. Why did the US leave and return before?

This is the third time the US has chosen to leave. Learn the story as a short timeline.

3.1 1984: the first exit

The US left in **1984**, under President Reagan. It said UNESCO was **mismanaged and corrupt**. It also said the agency served Soviet interests.

3.2 2003: the first return

The US came back in **2003**, under President George W. Bush. Bush said UNESCO had made important reforms.

3.3 2011: the Palestine vote

On **31 October 2011**, UNESCO's General Conference admitted **Palestine** as a full member. The vote was **107 for, 14 against and 52 abstentions**.

The US and Israel then stopped financing UNESCO.

3.4 2018: the second exit

The US left again under President Trump. It cited **anti-Israel bias** and poor management. The exit took effect on **31 December 2018**.

3.5 2023: the second return

On **30 June 2023**, UNESCO members voted **132 for, 10 against and 15 abstentions** to let the US back. The US formally rejoined in **July 2023** as the **194th member**.

It also promised to repay about **US$ 619 million** of unpaid dues in instalments.



US membership, 1984 to 2026. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- U.S. to leave UNESCO, again (PBS News, AP) (section 3)

- US formally rejoins UNESCO after five-year absence (AP via KSAT) (section 3)
- US to withdraw from UNESCO again (AP via ABC17) (section 3)
- UNESCO votes to admit Palestine as full member (UN News)
- United States rejoins Unesco (Bangkok Post, AFP) (section 3)
- US returns to UNESCO (Jordan News) (section 3)
- US withdraws from UNESCO for 3rd time in history (Anadolu) (section 3)

Think it through: why did a vote on Palestine hit UNESCO's budget?

UNESCO admitted Palestine as a full member in 2011. The US and Israel then stopped financing it. The US had paid about a fifth of the money.

4. What happened in 2025, and when does the exit take effect?

On **22 July 2025**, the US told UNESCO's chief, **Audrey Azoulay**, that it would withdraw again. It said staying was "not in the national interest".

The US gave two reasons:

- UNESCO pushes "divisive social and cultural causes".
- Admitting Palestine in 2011 was "highly problematic" and fed anti-Israel talk.

4.1 When does it take effect?

The exit takes effect on **31 December 2026**. The US stays a **full member** until then.

The date comes from **Article II(6)** of the UNESCO Constitution. A withdrawal notice takes effect on **31 December of the year after** the notice. Dues owed on that date still have to be paid.

4.2 How did UNESCO reply?

Azoulay said she “deeply” regrets the decision. She said the US reasons are “the same as seven years ago”, though tensions have eased. She also denied the bias charge, pointing to UNESCO’s work on **Holocaust education**.

She added that the move “was anticipated” and that UNESCO “has prepared for it”.

4.3 How many times is that?

This is the **third** US exit. The earlier ones were in **1984** and **2018**.

Sources:

- The United States Withdraws from UNESCO (US State Department statement, mirror)
- US withdraws from UNESCO for 3rd time in history (Anadolu) (section 4)
- US to withdraw from UNESCO again (AP via ABC17) (section 4)
- Constitution of UNESCO (University of Oslo treaty library) (section 4)
- U.S. to leave UNESCO, again (PBS News, AP) (section 4)

True or false: the US exit announced in July 2025 took effect at once.

5. Is UNESCO’s trouble too little cash or too much politics?

The 2019 Mains paper asked exactly this. The honest answer is **both, and they feed each other**.

- **Cash:** the US paid about a fifth of the budget until it stopped in 2011. That left a gap.
- **Politics:** the Palestine vote caused the stop. The funding cut followed from the vote.
- **Today:** the US pays only 8 per cent, so the cash risk is smaller than before.

So the cash problem started as a political one. A fair answer should say that.

5.1 How do you write a balanced answer?

Use four steps:

1. Define the crisis with the **22 per cent** regular-budget and **8 per cent** total-budget figures, and say they are not like-for-like. 2. Give the dates: **2011, 2018, 2023** and **2025**. 3. Weigh the US charge against UNESCO's reply. 4. End with reforms, such as wider funding, and India's stake.

Sources:

- US formally rejoins UNESCO after five-year absence (AP via KSAT) (section 5)
- U.S. to leave UNESCO, again (PBS News, AP) (section 5)

True or false: the Moidams were India's 43rd World Heritage Site.
Think it through: why is the 2019 question a trap if you pick only one side?

The cash gap began with a political vote. So cash and politics are linked. A good answer shows how one led to the other, then adds reforms.

6. What does UNESCO mean for India?

India's best-known link is **heritage**. On **26 July 2024**, the **Moidams** of Assam became India's **43rd World Heritage Site**.

The World Heritage Committee decided this **unanimously**. It was meeting in **New Delhi**.

- **Moidams:** hollow brick-and-stone vaults that hold the remains of Ahom kings.
- **Age:** nearly seven hundred years old.
- **First for the North-East:** the first cultural site from the region, and the third overall after Kaziranga and Manas.

Sources:

- Moidams of Assam receives 43rd UNESCO World Heritage Site tag (Akashvani News On Air)

Your understanding checks

Your 4 quick checks Answered 0 of 4 · Correct 0
This score resets when the page reloads.

Practice: 6 MCQs

Practice MCQs

1. When does the US withdrawal from UNESCO, announced in July 2025, take effect?

A. 22 July 2025

B. 1 January 2027

C. 31 December 2026

D. 31 December 2025

See answer ↓

2. When the US announced its 2025 withdrawal from UNESCO, about what share of the organisation's regular budget did it provide?

A. 40 per cent

B. 22 per cent

C. 50 per cent

D. 8 per cent

See answer ↓

3. What did UNESCO's 2011 General Conference vote, 107 for, 14 against and 52 abstentions, decide?

A. To admit Palestine as a full member

B. To suspend Israel's membership

C. To readmit the United States

D. To approve a new World Heritage List

See answer ↓

4. In which year did the US formally rejoin UNESCO as its 194th member?

A. 2011

B. 2018

C. 2003

D. 2023

See answer ↓

5. The Moidams of Assam were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2024.

Which statement is correct?

A. They are a natural heritage site

B. They are India's 40th World Heritage Site

C. They are the second cultural site from the North-East

D. They are India's 43rd World Heritage Site

See answer ↓

6. Which US President was in office when the US first left UNESCO, in 1984?

A. George W. Bush

B. Joe Biden

C. Donald Trump

D. Ronald Reagan

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The answer is **31 December 2026**. Article II(6) of the Constitution says a notice takes effect on 31 December of the following year. Why the others fail: 22 July 2025 is the date of the notice. 31 December 2025 would be the same year as the notice. Memory hook: notice in one year, exit at the end of the next. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The answer is **22 per cent**. This is the US assessed share of UNESCO's regular budget. The US announced its withdrawal in July 2025, effective 31 December 2026. Why the others fail: 8 per cent is the US share of UNESCO's total budget in 2025, which includes voluntary funds. The two figures use different bases, so they are not like-for-like. 40 and 50 per cent are not US figures for UNESCO. Memory hook: 22 of the regular budget, 8 of the total. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The answer is **to admit Palestine as a full member**. The US and Israel then stopped financing UNESCO. Why the others fail: the US was readmitted in 2023. No vote suspended Israel. Memory hook: the 2011 vote started the cash cut. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The answer is **2023**. Members voted 132 for, 10 against and 15 abstentions on 30 June, and the US rejoined in July. Why the others fail: 2003 was the earlier return, under President Bush. 2018 was the second exit. 2011 was the Palestine vote. Memory hook: the US has rejoined twice, in 2003 and 2023. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** The answer is **they are India's 43rd World Heritage Site**. They are the first cultural site, and the third site overall, from the North-East. Why the others fail: they are cultural, not natural. Kaziranga and Manas are the natural sites. Memory hook: Moidams are 43rd and the first cultural site from the North-East. ↑ Q5
6. **D.** The answer is **Ronald Reagan**. The US called UNESCO mismanaged and corrupt. Why the others fail: Bush brought the US back in 2003. Trump took it out in 2018. Biden brought it back in 2023. Memory hook: Reagan out, Bush in, Trump out, Biden in. ↑ Q6

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