PARIS — Palestine became the 195th full member of Unesco on Monday, as the United Nations organization defied a threatened cutoff of American funds under federal legislation from the 1990’s. The vote of Unesco’s full membership was 107 to 14, with 52 abstentions.

The step will cost the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization one-quarter of its yearly budget — the 22 percent contributed by the United States (about $70 million) plus another 3 percent contributed by Israel. Unless that shortfall is made up by other nations, Unesco will have to begin closing offices and laying off staff.

Cheers filled the hall at Unesco’s headquarters here after the vote, with one delegate shouting “Long live Palestine!” in French. The Palestinian foreign minister, Riad al-Malki, praised the organization, saying that “this vote will help erase a tiny part of the injustice done to the Palestinian people” and will help protect world heritage sites in Israeli-occupied territory.

In a long speech that was met with applause, Mr. Malki said that “this membership will be the best step toward peace and stability,” insisting that the Palestinian request for membership in Unesco was “linked in no way to our request to join the United Nations.”

The Obama administration, which values its membership in Unesco, tried unsuccessfully to keep the vote from taking place, while Irina Bokova, the American-supported director-general of the organization, traveled to Washington to meet with congressional leaders and ask them to alter the law.

Legislation dating from 1990 and 1994 mandates a complete cutoff of American financing to any United Nations agency that accepts the Palestinians as a full member. State Department lawyers judged that there was no leeway in the legislation, and no possibility of a waiver, so the United States contribution for 2011 and future years will not be paid.

Addressing Unesco’s general conference after the vote, the American ambassador to the organization, David T. Killion, said that the United States “remains deeply committed to Unesco,” which he called a “vital organization.” But he repeatedly called the vote on Monday “premature” and said the United States would seek other means to support the agency, though he did not offer specifics.

Victoria Nuland, a spokeswoman for the State Department, said an expected November payment of $60 million to the agency would not be made.

The United States argues that Unesco should have waited to act because the Palestinians applied in September for full membership in the United Nations, and that application is still under study.

Washington also argues that Palestinian statehood should emerge from negotiations with Israel, not from acts by third parties or international groups, and it has been pushing the two sides to restart those talks. Otherwise, Washington has argued, U.N. membership will change little for Palestinians on the ground.

Arab diplomats say that the American position is a bit disingenuous, though, since Washington has promised to veto full Palestinian membership in the Security Council. At Unesco, no country has a veto.

In a statement, Mr. Killion said that “the only path to the Palestinian state we all seek is through direct negotiations.” He added: “There are no shortcuts, and we believe efforts such as the one we have witnessed today are counterproductive.”

Last week, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called the Unesco application “inexplicable.” Elias Sanbar, the Palestinian ambassador, said that in talks with Mr. Killion over the weekend, the American described Washington as “prisoners of this law.”

Both parties in Congress denounced the Unesco action on Monday. Representative Nita Lowey, Democrat of New York, called it “counterproductive,” saying in a statement that “Unesco is interfering with the prospects for direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians at a time when both parties have taken the positive step of committing to present comprehensive proposals on borders and security.”
Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the Florida Republican who heads the House foreign affairs committee, characterized the Unesco move as “anti-Israeli and anti-peace” and called for the group’s money be cut off promptly. “The administration must stop trying to find ways not to fully implement this law,” she said.

There has been some discussion of Arab nations contributing more to make up the budget shortfall, but nothing has been promised. And the Unesco bylaws seem to require that extra funds contributed to the group cannot be used for its operating budget.

Ms. Bokova, the Unesco director-general, said in interviews that she was concerned about immediate financial problems for her agency, and about American disengagement from the United Nations, which she said ran counter to America’s “core security interests” and which she hoped would be temporary. After the vote, she said that she was worried that “the universality and financial stability” of Unesco would be jeopardized.

The Israeli ambassador, Nimrod Barkan, said that Unesco has done “a great disservice” to international efforts to restart negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. “Unesco deals in science, not in science fiction,” he said, noting that a Palestinian state is not otherwise recognized by the international community. Unesco, he said, had acted on a “political subject, outside of its competence.”

Yigal Palmor, the Israeli foreign ministry spokesman, said the vote would not give the Palestinians “any advantage on the ground” and called the Unesco vote “a big diplomatic car crash.”

Ghassan Khatib, a Palestinian spokesman in the West Bank, urged Washington to provide the funds for Unesco regardless of the law. He called the action on Monday “a vote of confidence from the international community” and said it was “especially important because part of our battle with the Israeli occupation and what he called Israeli attempts “to erase Palestinian history or Judaize it.” Israel says it takes the obligation of protecting world heritage sites extremely seriously.

Palestinian officials on the West Bank rejected the notion that they had harmed Unesco and embarrassed Washington by pressing for the vote. “Washington has to look at these laws that should have been changed ages ago,” said Muhammad Shtayyeh, a close aide to the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas. “The P.L.O. is not a terrorist organization any more. It exchanged letters of recognition with Israel back in 1993.”

Unesco, perhaps best known for designating world heritage sites, is a major global development agency whose missions include promoting literacy, science, clean water and education, including sex education and equal treatment for girls and young women.

The United States rejoined the organization in 2003 under President George W. Bush, ending a boycott that began under President Ronald Reagan in 1984 that arose from charges that the organization then was corrupt, anti-Israel, anti-Western and had made efforts to impose licensing on the international press.

On Monday, the United States voted against Palestinian membership, joined by Germany, Australia, Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands and Israel, among others.

The European Union failed to come to a common position. Some European nations, including France and Belgium, voted in favor, joining China, Russia, Brazil, India and most African and Arab states. Many other Western nations abstained, including Romania and Latvia, which had earlier voted no in the executive council. Others abstaining included Britain, Poland, Portugal, Denmark, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Ukraine and Switzerland.

Earlier in October, Unesco’s 58-member executive board voted to put Palestinian membership on the agenda of the general meeting by a vote of 40 to 4, with 14 abstentions.

Unesco has a two-year budget of $643 million for 2010-11 and a projected budget of $653 million for 2012-13.

Isabel Kershner contributed reporting from Jerusalem, and Steven Lee Myers contributed from Washington.