Israel Suspends Cooperation with UNESCO over Jerusalem Vote

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Israel will suspend its cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) following its resolution [erasing the Jewish connection to Jerusalem’s holy sites](http://www.timesofisrael.com/unesco-backs-resolution-ignoring-jewish-link-to-temple-mount/), Education Minister Naftali Bennett announced Friday.

Bennett, who serves as president of Israel’s National Commission for UNESCO, said the organization, in its decision, was “giving a boost to terrorism” and denying history.

All meetings with UNESCO officials, participation in international forums and professional cooperation will be suspended until further notice, the statement said.

“Yesterday’s decision is a denial of history and gives a boost to terror,” Bennett said, adding that the resolution was a prize to jihadists and to “diplomatic terror,” which was particularly egregious in a week in which two Jews were murdered in a Jerusalem terror attack.

He added that such acquiescence to radical narratives should worry all of the Western world and not just Israel. “Whoever rewards jihadists… could be next,” he said.

“The next terrorist will feel legitimized by yesterday’s miserable decision,” he added. “Cutting Jerusalem off from Israel will produce a domino effect that will eventually hurt the entire Western world.”

The minister will meet in the coming weeks with fellow Commission members to discuss further actions.

Israel has reacted furiously to the UNESCO resolution, with some accusing the UN’s cultural arm of anti-Semitism on Thursday.

Lawmakers from both the right and left of the political spectrum said the decision, which refers to the Temple Mount and Western Wall only by their Muslim names and condemns Israel as “the occupying power” for various actions taken in both places, was ill-befitting of UNESCO.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the decision “absurd,” while President Reuven Rivlin called it an “embarrassment” for UNESCO. The Executive Board of UNESCO is next week set to approve the resolution, which passed Thursday at the committee stage.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu leads a cabinet meeting at the Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem, September 27, 2016. (AFP Photo/Pool/Atef Safadi)

Culture Minister Miri Regev slammed the resolution as “shameful and anti-Semitic,” and Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel called for Israel to increase the Jewish presence on the Temple Mount, a flashpoint site governed by a tense status quo, in response.

“To say that Israel has no link to the Temple Mount is like saying that China has no link to the Great Wall or that Egypt has no connection to the Pyramids,” Netanyahu said, adding that “with this absurd decision UNESCO has lost what little legitimacy it still had.”

He also said UNESCO was ignorant regarding the Bible, and accused the body of taking part in a “Theater of the Absurd.”

Twenty-four countries voted in favor of the resolution Thursday afternoon, six against and 26 abstained, though Ambassador Carmel Shama-HaCohen praised the diplomatic effort that [had changed several no votes in a similar resolution](http://www.timesofisrael.com/outrageous-as-it-may-be-unescos-jerusalem-vote-has-a-silver-lining/) in April into abstentions this time around.

It was “a significant accomplishment,” that countries like France, Sweden, Argentina and India, which had earlier supported the declaration, now abstained, he told Army Radio.

“It’s not pleasant, ”he said, “but I’m pleased by the decision, relatively, because it was clear the decision would pass but we didn’t know which countries would support it. We had the goal of gaining back French support and our friends in Europe,” he said.

(Voting in favor were: Algeria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chad, China, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Mauritius, Mexico, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan and Vietnam. Voting against were: Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, The Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States. Abstaining were: Albania, Argentina, Cameroon, El Salvador, France, Ghana, Greece, Guinea, Haiti, India, Italy, Ivory Coast, Japan, Kenya, Nepal, Paraguay, Saint Vincent and Nevis, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda and Ukraine. Absent were: Serbia and Turkmenistan.)

Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat said he was “outraged” over the decision “which denies thousands of years of Jewish connection to Jerusalem’s Western Wall.”

“Would UNESCO vote to deny the Christian connection to the Vatican? Or the Muslim connection to Mecca,” he said in a statement.

Opposition chief Isaac Herzog accused UNESCO of betraying their mission. “Whoever wants to rewrite history, to distort fact, and to completely invent the fantasy that the Western Wall and Temple Mount have no connection to the Jewish people, is telling a terrible lie that only serves to increase hatred.”

Labor party leader Isaac Herzog attends a party conference in Tel Aviv on July 31, 2016. (Tomer Neuberg/Flash90)

Fellow Labor Party lawmaker Eitan Cabel called it “anti-Zionist, shameful and embarrassing.”

“You can try and throw the innumerable testimonies (of a Jewish connection) into the trash, the evidence, the prayers and the archaeological discoveries. You can try and throw into the sea the millions of Jews who have touched this place with their hands and hearts,” he wrote on his Facebook page. “It won’t help you.”

MK Merav Michaeli, also from the dovish party, said the resolution was the result of Netanyahu refusing to appoint a foreign minister and holding the position for himself for political capital.

The left-wing Emek Shaveh organization, which says it seeks for archaeology to be decoupled from politics, said the resolution would only make a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more difficult.

“Now that an international, professional entity like UNESCO has disregarded the deep relationship of the Jewish people to the Western Wall and the Temple Mount, they’ve only made it easier for the Israeli right to convince the Israeli public that Jerusalem is in danger,” the group said in a statement.

Rivlin, speaking at an event before the vote, said UNESCO was making a mockery of itself with the vote.

“No forum or body in the world can come and deny the connection between the Jewish people, the Land of Israel and Jerusalem – and any such body that does so simply embarrasses itself,” Rivlin said at an event in his Jerusalem residence. “We can understand criticism, but you cannot change history.”