**UNESCO to fire another volley at Israel – on Independence Day**

May 1, 2017

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Times of Israel

http://www.timesofisrael.com/unesco-to-fire-another-volley-at-israel-on-independence-day/

The United Nations’ cultural agency is set to pass a resolution on Tuesday — Israel’s 69th Independence Day — that indicates rejection of the Jewish state’s sovereignty in any part of Jerusalem. The resolution also harshly criticizes the government for various construction projects in Jerusalem’s Old City and at holy sites in Hebron, and calls for an end to Israel’s blockade of Gaza without mentioning attacks from the Hamas-run Strip.

Submitted to UNESCO’s Executive Board by Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar and Sudan, the[resolution on “Occupied Palestine”](http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-may-2017-unesco-resolution-on-occupied-palestine/) will most likely pass, given the automatic anti-Israel majority in the 58-member body. Its wording as of Monday was slightly less harsh on Jerusalem than previous resolutions, in that it does affirm the importance of the city to the “three monotheistic religions.”

On Monday, Israeli diplomats were busy trying to prevent an European-Arab agreement that would see the council’s European members either vote in favor or abstain in exchange for a slightly softer text.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was said to be making phone calls to European leaders in a bid to convince them to reject the resolution.

According to Israeli officials, Germany was a driving force behind a deal that would see all EU states abstain in exchange for the removal of the most incendiary anti-Israel passages. But on Monday, Italy announced that it would vote against the resolution, apparently ending the effort to forge a European consensus.

“This [Italian stance] is without a doubt a positive development, which should tell the Germans that negotiating over a joint text with the Arabs is a mistake not just in Israel’s view but also in the eyes of several countries in the European Union,” Israel’s ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama-Hacohen, told The Times of Israel.

“Now we are focusing on our mission to make sure Italy will the first but not the last country to announce it does not want to be part of this deal with the Arabs and vote against the resolution.”

Jerusalem prefers to see Western countries vote against an outrageous resolution, even if it passes, than a consensus in support of a milder text.

Given that there no longer appears to be a European consensus, it is possible that Germany will also oppose the resolution. The Netherlands and Lithuania are also still on the fence, according to diplomatic sources who spoke to The Times of Israel on condition of anonymity.

The US is widely expected to oppose the resolution. “UNESCO is too often used as a vehicle for member states inclined to delegitimize the State of Israel, and [its resolutions] have become increasingly political in nature, in this case, questioning Israel’s basic claim to historic sites,” a US official told The Times of Israel. “These types of resolution are counterproductive to the core work of UNESCO and they do nothing to advance the goal of a two-state solution.”

The Arab group at UNESCO proposes similar anti-Israel resolutions twice every year, but after Israel cried foul last year over the fact that these texts provocatively ignored Jewish ties to Jerusalem’s Old City, a number of Western countries announced their intention no longer to support them. This development is likely behind the negotiations over an Arab-European compromise text, which would remove the most blatant anti-Israel elements.

As it stood on Monday, Tuesday’s resolution, unlike previous resolutions, does not refer to the Temple Mount only as Haram al-Sharif, or to the Western Wall Plaza only as al-Burak plaza, the respective sites’ Muslim names. In fact, these sites are not mentioned at all.

Furthermore, Resolution 201 EX/PX/DR.30.1 affirms “the importance of the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls for the three monotheistic religions.” It also notes that The Patriarchs’ Cave and Rachel’s Tomb in Hebron “are of religious significance for Judaism, Christianity and Islam” — though it calls them “Palestinian sites.”

However, the current draft of the resolution still contains many red flags for Israel. For instance, Israel is referred to throughout the document as the “occupying power,” indicating that it has no legal or historical ties to any part of Jerusalem.

The text stresses that “all legislative and administrative measures and actions taken by Israel, the occupying Power, which have altered or purport to alter the character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and in particular the ‘basic law’ on Jerusalem, are null and void and must be rescinded forthwith.”

[Basic Law: Jerusalem](https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic10_eng.htm), which was passed by the Knesset in 1980, declares united Jerusalem as Israel’s sovereign capital.

The current draft of the UNESCO resolution declares “everything Israel does in Jerusalem as illegal,” according to a [statement issued by the Foreign Ministry](http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2017/Pages/UNESCO-is-expected-to-vote-on-another-anti-Israel-resolution.aspx). The resolution also affirms previous UNESCO resolutions that “denied the connection between the Jewish people and Jerusalem,” the Israeli statement lamented.

The resolution also refers to UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which in December declared all Israeli settlements, including in East Jerusalem, illegal under international law.

Resolution 201 EX/PX/DR.30.1 declares as null and void Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem and “[r]egrets the failure of the Israeli occupying authorities to cease the persistent excavations, tunneling, works and projects in East Jerusalem, particularly in and around the Old City of Jerusalem, which are illegal under international law.”

The text further “[d]eplores the military confrontations in and around the Gaza Strip and the civilian casualties caused,” and urges Israel to immediately end its Israel’s “closure” of the Hamas-held enclave, arguing it “harmfully affects the free and sustained movement of personnel, students and humanitarian relief items,” but not mentioning attacks on Israeli civilians that emanate from the strip.

Turning its attention to the two holy sites in Hebron, the draft resolution slams Israel for ongoing excavations and the “construction of private roads for settlers” and the “denial of freedom of movement and freedom of access to places of worship.”

Israel officials acknowledged that the resolution to be passed Tuesday is somewhat easier to stomach than previous versions, but emphatically urged Western countries to vote against it. “We hope that the European countries will not fall into the trap of a softened text and vote against any effort to politicize UNESCO and hurt Jerusalem status Israel’s eternal capital,” Foreign Ministry spokesperson Emmanuel Nahshon told The Times of Israel.

#### **A somewhat positive trend**

Last October, 24 member states of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s General Conference backed a resolution entirely ignoring Jewish ties to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall and accusing Israel of a long list of wrongdoings. [Six countries voted against and 26 abstained](http://www.timesofisrael.com/unesco-backs-resolution-ignoring-jewish-link-to-temple-mount/), and the resolution was adopted by the UNESCO’s Executive Board a few days later.

Despite the stinging diplomatic defeat, that vote tally [turned out better, from an Israeli perspective, than a vote on the same matter half a year earlier](http://www.timesofisrael.com/outrageous-as-it-may-be-unescos-jerusalem-vote-has-a-silver-lining/), which similarly turned a blind eye to the Jewish connection to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall.

Seven countries that in April 2016 voted in favor of the resolution abstained in the second vote, among them heavyweights France and India.

While the number of countries voting against the draft remained low at six — the US, Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Estonia — this time around supporters of the resolution failed to garner an overall majority. In April, 33 states voted yes and 17 abstained. In October for the first time more countries abstained than supported the text.

Nonetheless, Israel protested furiously, with Netanyahu calling the decision “absurd” and President Reuven Rivlin deeming it an “embarrassment” for UNESCO. Education Minister Naftali Bennett vowed to cut all ties to the organization.

Several top UNESCO officials, including Director-General Irina Bokova, as well as a handful of world leaders, also criticized the text, affirming that Jerusalem’s Old City is holy to all three Abrahamic religions.

“The heritage of Jerusalem is indivisible, and each of its communities has a right to the explicit recognition of their history and relationship with the city,” Bokova said in a statement after the October vote.

Last week, she reiterated that message during a speech to the World Jewish Congress in New York: “The Al Aqsa Mosque / Al-Haram al-Sharif, the sacred shrine of the Muslims, is also the Har Habayit — or Temple Mount — the holiest place in Judaism, whose Western Wall is revered by millions across the world, a few steps away from the Saint Sepulchre and the Mount of Olives holy to the Christians,” Bokova said.

“To deny, conceal, or erase any of the Jewish, Christian or Muslim traditions runs counter to the reasons that justified its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list,” she stressed.

Statements such as these have further fueled Israeli protest against Tuesday’s resolution, even though it no longer uses exclusively Muslim names for Jerusalem’s holy sites.

“Instead of stopping UNESCO’s politicization as was promised to Israel, representatives of the European Union in fact support it by proposing their own draft resolution, including on the question of Jerusalem, when there is no connection whatsoever between them and UNESCO’s mandate,” the Foreign Ministry stated.

“Israel expects the member states to vote against this absurd resolution. The proposed resolution will not harm our determination to act in Jerusalem for the benefit of all its residents. It will, however, hurt the standing and the relevance of UNESCO.”