Palestinians to Claim Cave of the Patriarchs as World Heritage Site

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The Palestinian Authority (PA) is requesting from the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, whose annual meeting will take place on July 1 in Krakow, Poland, to register the Old City of Hebron—including its Cave of the Patriarchs—as a Palestinian World Heritage Site.

There are 1,052 UNESCO-listed World Heritage Sites in the world, nine of them Israeli, two of them Palestinian. The registration process and declaration of each site usually takes a number of years, but the PA want to take advantage of a clause in the regulations that allows to fast-track this procedure by claiming the sites are endangered.

The PA claims that the site is in danger of destruction by the "occupying force." Among other things, they claim that Israel carried out an exceptionally large concrete casting at the site, while Israel claims that it is only a small addition to the site, and that it was coordinated with the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf.

The Heritage Committee has 21 member countries, and its composition is very problematic for Israel: Finland, Poland, Portugal, Croatia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Tunisia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Angola and Tanzania—none of which is among the ten countries that voted for Israel on the UNESCO Executive Committee concerning Israeli conduct in Jerusalem and Gaza.

Each request is accompanied by the opinion of a professional assessment body that makes a recommendation. In the two previous sites inscribed by the PA in 2012 and 2014—the Church of the Nativity and the Battir terraces—the professional body's recommendation was negative, but the committee voted for its approval following pressure from the Arab-Muslim lobby.

The Israeli delegation to UNESCO, headed by Ambassador Carmel Shama-Hacohen, has already begun making efforts to stop the PA's plans about a month ago.

Israeli ambassadors in the member states joined, and given the sensitivity of the issue, it appears that the prime minister will be required to address the matter personally. In order to prevent the inscription, Israel must mobilize at least one-third of the voting countries in its favor—an almost impossible task. If the decision is made, the Palestinians will be able to claim that the control over the site should be transferred to them, which will bring international pressure on Israel.

"This is a clear continuation of the attacks and hallucinatory outrageous votes in UNESCO regarding Jerusalem, the Temple Mount and the Western Wall," said Shama-Hacohen. "Israel respects Muslim sensibilities and ensures freedom of worship, order, security, routine maintenance, and the development of infrastructure supporting the holy sites.

"Not only is the very essence of their claim outrageous, but also the way in which the Palestinians accuse the Israel with blood libel that never occurred."