UNESCO’S Hebron vote just the opening Palestinian salvo against Israel

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The inscription of the Tomb of the Patriarchs to the World Heritage in Danger list was just the opening salvo in what will likely be a new battlefront in the Palestinian Authority’s diplomatic war against the State of Israel.

Israel is already struggling to prevent the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization from erasing Jewish ties to Jerusalem’s Old City and the Temple Mount.

It now fears the fight to retain its historical legitimacy has extended itself to Hebron, a city that has had an almost continuous Jewish presence since the time of King David.

Both biblical sites are the two holiest and most historically ensconced in Judaism, but are precariously located from a geopolitical standpoint. They are located over the pre-1967 lines, which means that the Palestinians, with the backing of much of the international community, claim the sites as part of their future state.

In 1982, UNESCO inscribed Jerusalem’s Old City to Jordan when placing it on its World Heritage in Danger list. On Friday, in Krakow, it [registered Hebron’s Old Town and the Tomb of the Patriarchs](http://www.google.co.il/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwiv7dH3gfvUAhWGBcAKHZpZCpcQqOcBCCUwAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.jpost.com%2FArab-Israeli-Conflict%2FUNESCO-votes-in-favor-of-inscribing-Hebron-sites-to-the-State-of-Palestine-499059&usg=AFQjCNFRwV4Tdk7XlaJcXJcZNA-w-sCvKw) to the “State of Palestine” when adding it to the same list.

It’s the first time UNESCO has registered a significant Jewish religious site to the “State of Palestine.”

UNESCO evaluates its World Heritage in Danger list three times a year: at its annual World Heritage Committee meeting and at its biannual executive board meetings.

The placement of Hebron on the list means that three times a year, Arab states are now expected to submit resolutions on Hebron that question Jewish ties to the site and condemn Israel for its military control of the West Bank. Arab states already submit such triennial resolutions on Jerusalem.

These resolutions by Arab states on Hebron will be helped by the narrow scope of the PA’s inscription request that focused specifically on the Muslim influence under the Mamluk period starting in 1250. Tel Rumeida, where much of Hebron’s Jewish biblical history played out, was not included in the request. In addition, it is expected that the Arab states would use those resolutions to condemn Israel for its treatment of Palestinians in areas of Hebron under Israeli control.

Palestinian attacks against Israeli soldiers and Border Police in Hebron’s Old City would also be under increased UNESCO scrutiny, with requests for the international body to evaluate the validity of the IDF’s response to such incidents.

This will also intensify the international spotlight on Hebron, a city with over 220,000 Palestinians, which is already one of the most contentious hot spots in the West Bank.

At the end of the Six Day War, Israel celebrated the return of the Western Wall and the Tomb of the Patriarchs to Jewish control after 2,000 years. Jews could now pray at the wall for the first time in 19 years and at the tomb for the first time in 701 years.

But while Israel this year marks half-a-century of Israeli control over both sites, UNESCO holds that neither of these sacred areas belong to the Jewish state.

Since UNESCO recognized Palestine as a member nation in 2011, it has inscribed two sites — the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and Battir’s agricultural terraces — to its endangered list under the “State of Palestine.”

The two previous inscriptions were significant statements about Palestinian statehood. Neither of the sites have the same significant ties to Judaism as the Tomb of the Patriarchs, whose purchase by Abraham is recorded in the Bible.

The tomb is a particularly complicated spot because part of the building has Jewish sanctuaries and the rest of the space houses the Ibrahimi Mosque. At issue, however, is less the question of one more Palestinian victory toward statehood, but rather world recognition of Jewish history irrespective of geopolitical boundaries.

It was not incidental that Israel’s Ambassador to UNESCO Carmel Shama-Hacohen mentioned the Holocaust at the meeting in Krakow, Poland – a country where millions of Jews were killed in concentration camps in World War II.

Then the battle was for physical survival against the Nazis; more than 50 years later, Shama-Hacohen saw himself fighting for Jewish historical and cultural survival at UNESCO.

When the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee thanked the World Heritage Committee, it did not mention the words “Jewish” or “Christian” in connection with Hebron or the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Instead, it referred to the Herodian-era structure that houses the tomb as the 2,000-year-old Ibrahimi Mosque, even though Islam was not created until the seventh century.

In 2015 and 2016, the Palestinians submitted triennial resolutions to UNESCO that ignored Jewish ties to Jerusalem’s Old City, referring to the Temple Mount solely by its Muslim name of al-Haram/ al-Sharif and to the Western Wall as the Buraq Plaza.

This year, the resolutions were toned down and more neutral language was restored, but they still make reference to the previous texts. As Israel works to ensure that future Jerusalem resolutions reflect Jewish history, it must now prepare for a similar campaign with regard to Hebron.

US President Donald Trump might be working to push forward an Israeli-Palestinian peace process, but at UNESCO, the battle between Israelis and Palestinians for historical legitimacy is just heating up.