Unesco Writes Jews Out of Ancient Jericho

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Of all the ways to observe Rosh Hashanah, leave it to the United Nations to do so by negating Jewish history. As Jews welcomed the new year, the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization convened its World Heritage Committee in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. On Sept. 17, the organization voted to designate Tell es-Sultan—Ancient Jericho—as a “World Heritage Site” in the “State of Palestine.” That will undermine Unesco’s stated aim of respectful stewardship and reward the Palestinian Authority for its campaign of archaeological destruction.

According to Unesco, the designation is reserved for places of “outstanding universal value to humanity” that should be “protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy.” Ancient Jericho doubtless fits the bill. The site is home to the Battle of Jericho (1400 B.C.), where, the Book of Joshua recounts, Jews fought to enter the land of Israel. Centuries later, it’s where the prophet Elisha purified its waters and, as mentioned in three of the Gospels, Jesus visited. Palaces and burial caves from the Second Temple era can still be found in the town and its vicinity.

Unesco’s document explaining the nomination carefully strips this history of its Jewish connection. The authors avoid any mention of Jews, Israelites, Hebrews, Maccabees and Herodians in recounting Ancient Jericho’s significance. The proposal instead refers to the “Canaanite city-states in Palestine”—a geopolitical term for Judea only later applied to the area by the Romans.

This antagonism is nothing new for Unesco. It admitted Palestine as a member state in 2011, leading the U.S. to [cut its funding](https://archive.vn/o/kZhHW/https:/en.kohelet.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/KPF085_eBook-39_291118_F.pdf). Since then, it has approved resolutions denying a Jewish connection to the Temple Mount, Judaism’s holiest site. In 2017 Unesco put the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron—the burial place of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah—on the World Heritage List as a “Palestinian” site.

Such actions are why the U.S. withdrew from Unesco in 2018, citing systematic management problems and “continuing anti-Israel bias.” While bipartisan criticism of Unesco continues in Washington, the Biden administration apparently couldn’t bear not being a member of the Paris-based club. In its fiscal 2023 appropriations bill, Congress granted the State Department the authority to waive restrictions on funding the agency. The U.S. officially rejoined in July, claiming that the organization had reformed itself and praising its supposed “focus on decreasing politicized debate, especially on Middle East issues.”

The Jericho resolution proves the opposite. To earn Unesco’s special designation, a government must demonstrate that it will “safeguard” a site and its archaeological treasures. The Palestinian Authority shows no sign of doing anything of the sort. Its efforts to erase Jewish history on paper are coupled with an even more malign destruction of Jewish history on the ground.

Ancient Jericho is mostly under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, which has had oversight of the grounds for decades. The site and its surroundings include several Jewish antiquities, most notably a sprawling complex of palaces and government buildings built by the Hasmonean kings through the reign of Herod the Great.

On a visit this month, I saw firsthand what their stewardship looks like. The Palestinian Authority hasn’t merely neglected the area’s palaces, synagogues and ritual baths; it’s paved over them. Ancient Jericho is covered with recently constructed concrete private houses, interspersed with piles of garbage. Never mind that under the Oslo Accords the Hasmonean palaces and other sites in Ancient Jericho are explicitly identified as “archaeological” sites of “importance to the Israeli side” that the Palestinians are obligated to “protect and safeguard.” By contrast, the section of the complex under Israeli jurisdiction is meticulously maintained and features signs in Hebrew, English and Arabic.

Ancient Jericho isn’t a one-off. The Palestinian campaign against such sites is part of a pattern playing out throughout Judea and Samaria. As documented by Shomrim al HaNetzach (“Preserving the Eternal”) and Regavim—two Israeli groups dedicated to preserving Jewish archeology and open land—the Palestinian Authority is enabling the construction of a suburban subdivision on top of the 3,200 year-old Joshua’s altar in Samaria.

Also on the tentative list for Unesco’s historical destruction are [Har Greizim](https://archive.vn/o/kZhHW/https:/whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5706/)—the biblical Mount of Blessings—and the [Dead Sea Scroll caves](https://archive.vn/o/kZhHW/https:/whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5707/), which the Palestinian Authority has asked the agency to recognize as “Palestinian” sites. It’s no surprise that some international institutions want to turn Jewish heritage to dust. But it’s a shame that the U.S. is a party to the demolition. When Congress’s waiver for Unesco funding expires in two years, Washington should let it die.