UNESCO-affiliated scholars slam agency’s anti-Israel bias, plead for rethink

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A group of scholars affiliated with UNESCO criticized the agency for recent one-sided resolutions on Jerusalem, calling for a new approach to sensitive holy sites that takes into consideration everyone’s religious sensitivities.

“The UNESCO decisions on the holy sites in Jerusalem have failed to draw on expert scholarship and knowledge,” the scholars said in a joint statement, issued Thursday at the close of a conference in Israel’s capital.

“The reality in Jerusalem is complex. Complexity is the solution, not the problem. To understand the multi-layered situations and to avoid simplistic, inadequate and divisive responses that can, and do, have harmful consequences, scholarly expertise is required.”

The 15 scholars who issued the statement are members of UNESCO’s UNITWIN network for interreligious and intercultural studies. They include experts in intercultural studies from the US, Israel, France, Tajikistan, New Zealand, Russia and India.

Earlier this month, the US administration announced it was quitting UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Israel commended Washington for the move, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying UNESCO “has become a theater of the absurd” that distorts history instead of preserving it. He ordered the Foreign Ministry to “prepare Israel’s withdrawal from UNESCO in parallel with the US.”

A day later, former French culture minister Audrey Azoulay defeated a Qatari rival and was elected UNESCO’s new director-general. Given her Jewish background, Israeli officials have expressed hope for the organization to shed its anti-Israel bias. Azoulay has pleaded with member-states to get more involved, and not to quit, the organization.

“The director-general-elect seems to have the will to bring about transformation,” said Steven Shankman, chair for Transcultural Studies, Interreligious Dialogue, and Peace at the University of Oregon. “It is not enough to point out the faults in UNESCO procedures. We UNESCO academic chairs can critique, but we can also point the way forward. Our call is not only a voice of academic criticism; it is also a message of hope for the future of UNESCO.”

Titled “Naming the Sacred,” the three-day conference was convened to discuss a series of UNESCO resolutions that have ignored the Jewish people’s ties to Jerusalem and denied Israel’s claims to the city.

On May 2, for instance, UNESCO’s Executive Board p[assed a resolution on “Occupied Palestine,”](https://www.timesofisrael.com/on-independence-day-unesco-okays-resolution-ignoring-jewish-links-to-jerusalem/) which indicated that Israel has no legal or historical rights anywhere in Jerusalem. Submitted by Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar and Sudan, the resolution passed with 22 countries in favor, 23 abstentions, 10 opposed, and the representatives of three countries absent.

A few days before last week’s conference, on October 11, the agency’s Executive Board voted unanimously to delay two more anti-Israel resolutions, an unprecedented move hailed by Israel as a potential harbinger of positive change.

“Applying the power of political pressure to holy sites undermines UNESCO’S credibility,” said one of the statement’s signatories, Alberto Melloni, chair for Religious Pluralism and Peace University of Bologna, Italy.

The meet, co-organized by the Jerusalem-based Elijah Interfaith Institute, the Jerusalem Press Club and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, “was called to respond to recent UNESCO decisions and the crisis they have generated, a crisis that goes to the very heart of the UNESCO World Heritage process and the credibility of UNESCO itself,” the scholars said in their joint statement.

“In response to the present crisis we recommend the following: A new process be developed so that UNESCO maximize its resources and potentialities, especially by consulting its academic chairs with relevant expertise. Such consultation must precede decisions made by the organization to ensure decisions and recommendations are made in an informed manner, as befits UNESCO.”

Any situation as complex as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “must accurately reflect the multiple narratives of those involved,” the statement read. “To be effective, it must be based on all sides feeling they have been heard and for processes of understanding to emerge out of fair-minded, historically balanced presentations of all sides to a conflict.”

Past decisions have already damaged UNESCO’s reputation and efficacy, the scholars noted. Future harm to the organization can only be avoided if the concerns are taken into consideration, they argued. “Our statement is a voice of concern and hope for the future of UNESCO,” the statement concluded.

The Elijah Interfaith Institute’s Alon Goshen-Gottstein called the scholars’ statement a balanced text that does not take sides in the conflict.

“Rather than come out directly in favor of Israel, it tackles the topic from the perspective of the integrity of UNESCO, its reputation, all now highlighted through the crisis the organization is undergoing,” he told The Times of Israel on Sunday.

“The importance of this statement is that it does not come out in favor of one side or the other. It highlights the need for proper procedure, based on academic foundations, core to UNESCO’s mandate, that UNESCO failed to follow. Therefore, no one can impugn the statement on political grounds, preferring one side or another. It is a statement that goes to the core of what was wrong in UNESCO’s dealings.”