Arab States, Palestinian Authority Backtrack on UNESCO Resolutions Criticizing Israel

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A group of Arab countries, headed by [Jordan](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/jordan--1.477071) and the [Palestinian Authority](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/palestinian-authority-1.476790), have backtracked on their intention of presenting resolutions critical of Israel’s policies in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip at the [UNESCO](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/unesco-1.477678) executive board session in Paris this week. This would be the first time since April 2013 that resolutions were not presented on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

A senior official in the Foreign Ministry said the decision to withdraw the resolutions was made following quiet diplomatic talks last week between the UNESCO committee chairman, Michael Worbs, Israel’s UN ambassador, Carmel Shama Hacohen, and the Jordanian ambassador to UNESCO, Makram Queisi.

The senior official said a number of Western countries were also involved in the talks, primarily the United States. According to the official, Jason Greenblatt, U.S. President [Donald Trump](http://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/tags-1.679173)’s adviser on Israel, was personally involved.

The understandings reached included a decision that, instead of holding a vote on two resolutions – on East Jerusalem and the “status of occupied Palestine,” which were submitted by Arab countries and whose wording was identical to that of resolutions passed six months ago – Worbs would submit two proposals to delay the vote by six months, which would be accepted by consensus by all 56 countries that are members of UNESCO’s executive board.

A senior official in the Foreign Ministry said Israel had not pledged anything in exchange. According to the official, the Israeli position remained that political resolutions against Israel or the Jewish people had no place in UNESCO even if their wording was softened.

The senior official added that, together with talks on postponing the vote, Israel had worked with ambassadors of the member states in Paris as well as in the capitals of the relevant countries to ensure that the group of countries voting against such resolutions would grow.

The senior official said that at the UNESCO executive board meeting in 2014, only the United States had supported Israel and voted against resolutions on Jerusalem but in the vote last May, the number of countries supporting Israel reached an all-time high of 10.

According to the official, the increasing opposition of UNESCO member states to political decisions on Jerusalem is what persuaded the Jordanians and other Arab countries that they should withdraw the resolutions at the upcoming meeting.

“The Arab countries realized that every time there is a vote, the support is less and they simply did not want to be humiliated,” the senior official said.

Shama Hacohen said that despite the understandings, he was still prepared for the possibility of a vote on a resolution critical of Israel.

“Until I hear the sound of the chairman’s gavel, I won’t believe this is happening, and from my point of view I’ll write two speeches in response,” he said.

“At this point, we’ve decided to see this as a significant step toward stopping and completely erasing the resolutions. Withdrawing them and postponing them for at least six months are certainly encouraging compared to the obsessive persecution of Israel, but it’s not enough. Time will tell whether this is a tactical change or a change in approach and significant progress toward cleaning the organization’s table of politicization against us,” Shama Hacohen added.

Over the past four years, and more so in the last two years, the UNESCO institutions have held votes every few months on pro-Palestinian resolutions that criticized the Israeli government’s policies in the territories. In April 2015, five resolutions were passed by UNESCO institutions on the subject of Jerusalem, some of which did not recognize the link between Judaism and the Temple Mount. A resolution was also passed recognizing the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron as a Palestinian heritage site.

These resolutions caused a deep rift in relations between Israel and UNESCO, the freezing of some cooperative efforts with UNESCO, and a cessation of payments of Israel’s membership to the organization and a cut in Israel’s membership payments to the [UN](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/un-1.477098) in general.

The decision of the Arab states to withdraw the resolutions on Israel and the territories also comes in light of the fact that the election of a new director general of UNESCO is to be held at the upcoming executive board meeting this week.

The shortlist includes representatives from Egypt, Qatar and Iraq, and Jerusalem believes the postponement is also connected with the desire not to harm the electoral chances of one of the Arab candidates to become the next UNESCO chief.

Despite the fact that UNESCO has become a significant battleground for Israel, the Foreign Ministry has remained passive with regard to elections for the next UNESCO head.

Israel does not have voting rights, but public Israeli support for one of the candidates or a quiet campaign for a candidate could be significant. There had initially been support in Israel for the former French culture minister, Audrey Azoulay, who is considered a close adviser to Morocco’s king, Mohammed VI.

A senior official in the Foreign Ministry said it was eventually decided not to support her because of her critical positions toward Israel on the Palestinian issue.

The other candidate Israel had considered supporting is China’s Qian Tang, who has been assistant director general for education at UNESCO in recent years. Jerusalem considers him a man who wants to bring UNESCO back to its professional activities, and distance it as much as possible from political issues.

A senior Foreign Ministry official said Israel had wanted to support Tang, but then it discovered the United States was against the appointment.

Israel then decided to refrain from publicly supporting Tang and ceased its quiet campaigning for him as well.

“We were left in a position where the candidate we wanted to help we couldn’t, and the candidate we could help we didn’t want to,” the senior official said.