It Could Get Worse: Israel Frets ‘Islamic Troika’ May Take Helm at UNESCO

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Israel’s relationship with UNESCO is complicated, to say the least. But later this year, the organization will elect a new leadership, and officials in Jerusalem are fretting over a possible “Islamic troika” in three key jobs who would seek to further advance the UN cultural organization’s anti-Israel agenda.

Of the nine people [vying to succeed Irina Bokova as director-general](http://www.timesofisrael.com/un-shortlists-9-candidates-for-unesco-chief/) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, four hail from Arab states and one of them — a Qatar minister — is considered a frontrunner.

The leading contenders for the post of chairman of UNESCO’s General Conference hail from Saudi Arabia and Morocco, according to Israel’s ambassador to the organization, Carmel Shama-Hacohen.

And the sole candidate to head the UNESCO Executive Board is from Iran.

“Under certain circumstances an Islamic troika could be created, which would be liable to push the organization to new depths of anti-Israel politicization,” warned Shama-Hacohen.

Last week, the organization’s Executive Board [ratified a resolution](http://www.timesofisrael.com/unesco-ratifies-contentious-resolution-denying-israeli-links-to-jerusalem/) that, while softer than previous such texts, harshly condemned Israeli actions in Jerusalem, Hebron and Gaza, and [disputed the Jewish state’s claim to sovereignty](http://www.timesofisrael.com/on-independence-day-unesco-okays-resolution-ignoring-jewish-links-to-jerusalem/) in its capital. The resolution, which calls Israel the “occupying power” in Jerusalem, was decried by Israelis across the political spectrum. In the wake of its passage, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [ordered a cut of $1 million from the funds Israel transfers to the UN](http://www.timesofisrael.com/after-unesco-vote-israel-cuts-another-1m-from-un-budget/).

At the conclusion of the 39th session of UNESCO’s General Conference in November, delegates from all 195 member states — including the State of Palestine, which joined in 2011 — will vote for a new director-general. The leading candidates for the job are China’s Qian Tang, UNESCO’s assistant director-general for education; French Culture Minister Audrey Azoulay, [who is Jewish](http://www.timesofisrael.com/new-french-culture-minister-is-jew-of-moroccan-descent/); and Qatari Culture Minister Dr. Hamad bin Abdulaziz Al-Kawari.

Al-Kawari’s nomination has drawn the ire of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which two years ago complained about [anti-Semitic material featured prominently at a book fair](http://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-group-to-oppose-qatar-unesco-bid-over-anti-semitic-lit/) held under the auspices of the Qatari education ministry.

“I am very confident that once we communicate adequately the noble objectives of UNESCO at a large scale, the whole world will perceive its importance – today more than ever – in building peace in the minds of men and women,” Al-Kawari says in his campaign’s mission statement.

Another Arab contender, former Egyptian minister for family and population Moushira Khattab, cited her country’s 1979 peace treaty with Israel as something that uniquely qualifies her for the post.

“Don’t forget that we started peace with Israel,” Khattab told the Associated Press [in a recent interview](http://www.timesofisrael.com/un-shortlists-9-candidates-for-unesco-chief/). “Over decades, and despite the upheavals that we’ve seen in the very recent six years, we’ve still maintained the peace. Egypt is a country that … believes in dialogue.”

Khattab applied for the job in 2009 but lost to Bokova of Bulgaria, who is stepping down after two terms.

UNESCO has had directors-general from Europe, Asia, Africa and America, but never from the Arab world, prompting Arab nations to argue that their time has come.

In addition to Al-Kawari and Khattab, Saleh Al-Hasnawi from Iraq and Vera El-Khoury Lacoeuilhe of Lebanon are seeking the post, though their chances are regarded as very low, given their countries’ relative weakness on the international diplomatic stage.

“The State of Israel until today was busy with the battle for Jerusalem and therefore has not yet formed an opinion” on the candidates to succeed Bokova, Shama-Hacohen told The Times of Israel in an interview. Israel is not a member of the Executive Board and therefore cannot participate in the election, “but there is no need for debates in order to know who we really do not want to be elected,” he said.

Also in November, UNESCO will elect new chairs for its General Conference and its Executive Board.

The only candidate for the chair of the Executive Board is Ahmad Jalali, who is currently Iran’s ambassador to UNESCO.

A liberal-minded scholar, Jalali is widely respected within the organization. But since he hails from a theocratic regime sworn to Israel’s destruction, Israeli diplomats are uneasy about him assuming the position.

As the chair of the Executive Board, Jalali would direct the body’s biannual discussions, ensure the observance of rules of procedures, accord the right to speak, and rule on points of order.

“The Iranian ambassador is a veteran, experienced in the organization, and enjoys high personal popularity,” Shama-Hacohen said. “However, Israel is not the only country worried about the possibility of an Iranian heading the Executive Board,” he said, adding that there are behind-the-scenes efforts to find someone to compete against Jalali.

“It is not difficult to understand the possible ramifications,” said Shama-Hacohen. “Liberal as he personally might be, the man is an emissary of the ayatollah regime in Tehran, and to Tehran he is likely to return.”

For a start, Shama-Hacohen noted, “It’s no secret that it is entirely forbidden for him to meet or talk to me as Israel’s ambassador.”