Nikki Haley urges UNESCO against ‘wasted’ focus on Hebron vote

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US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley urged the secretary-general of the UN and the head of its cultural agency to oppose efforts to have the Tomb of Patriarchs in Hebron be inscribed as a Palestinian world heritage site.

On Friday, two days before the UNESCO World Heritage Committee’s conference started in Poland, Haley addressed a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, expressing her opposition to the Palestinian attempt to have the Old City of Hebron declared a “world heritage site in danger.” A vote on the issue is scheduled for this Friday.

“The Tomb of the Patriarchs, which is sacred to three faiths, is in no immediate threat. Such a designation risks undermining the seriousness such an assessment by UNESCO should have,” Haley wrote.

“Many precious sites — from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Libya to Iraq to Syria — are under real and imminent threat of destruction today. They urgently demand UNESCO’s full and immediate attention, which should not be wasted on this sort of symbolic action,” the ambassador wrote.

“As the United States is engaged in trying to increase the chances of a peace deal that is in the best interest of both Israelis and Palestinians, this effort at UNESCO… is particularly ill-timed and unfortunate,” Haley went on. “I hope you will join the United States in opposing this measure.”

UNESCO has come under fire by Israel, the US and other nations for a series of moves deemed anti-Israel, most recently in May, when its executive board ratified a resolution denying any Jewish legal or historical Israeli links to Jerusalem and calling Israel an “occupying power” in its capital.

That resolution also criticized the Israeli government for archaeological projects in the capital and in Hebron and lambasted its naval blockade of the Hamas-run Gaza Strip.

Guterres, who is considered a friend of Israel, is due in Israel next month. He has been critical of efforts to politicize UNESCO. Bokovo, who will end her term as the agency’s director-general later this year, also has spoken out in the past against anti-Israel resolutions that deny the Jewish people’s link to religious sites in the Holy Land.

Israel’s ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama-Hacohen, thanked Haley for her message.

“Ambassador Nikki Haley’s letter speaks for itself about the absurdity that is the persecution of the Jewish state in every international forum and especially at UNESCO,” he said. “Unfortunately, no new US ambassador to UNESCO has yet been appointed, and if only we had on our side here an ambassador who had the determination and the courage of Nikki Haley, the conditions of our battle would be entirely different.”

The UN cultural agency’s World Heritage Committee is expected to vote on the Hebron matter on July 7. Given the Arab nations’ automatic majority in international forums, the Palestinian proposal is likely to be accepted. The Tomb of the Patriarchs would become the third cultural site on UNESCO’s “List of World Heritage in Danger” that is registered as located in the “State of Palestine.” The other two are the birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem and the “cultural landscape of Southern Jerusalem,” around Battir.

Following the May vote, Israel announced it would cut another $1 million from its payments to the UN, bringing the total cuts since December 2016 to $9 million.

In December, after the Security Council passed Resolution 2334, slamming Israeli settlement activity and calling settlements illegal, Netanyahu ordered $6 million cut from Israel’s payment to the UN. And in March, after the Human Rights Council passed five anti-Israel resolutions, Netanyahu vowed to cut an additional $2 million.