

Author Of UNESCO's Nixed Israel Exhibit Decries 'Appalling Betrayal'

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Professor Robert Wistrich had bought a ticket to Paris to attend the opening of an exhibition he wrote about the Jewish people's connection to the Land of Israel, which was supposed to take place Monday at the headquarters of UNESCO. But after the exhibition was indefinitely postponed, without prior warning, due to Arab pressure, he canceled and decided to stay in Jerusalem.

Speaking to The Times of Israel, Wistrich – the exhibition's sole author – said it would be a “euphemism” to say he was unhappy about the sudden death of an exhibition that took him nearly two years of hard work to complete. It showed UNESCO's “contempt for the Jewish people and its history,” he said.

“This is such a betrayal. To do it in this way is so disgraceful,” fumed Wistrich, who directs the Hebrew University's Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism and is one of the world's leading authorities in the field. An “appalling act,” the cancellation “completely destroyed any claim that UNESCO could possibly have to be representing the universal values of toleration, mutual understanding, respect for the other and narratives that are different, engaging with civil society organizations and the importance of education. Because there's one standard for Jews, and there's another standard for non-Jews, especially if they're Arabs, but not only.”

UNESCO's decision to cancel the exhibit allows just one conclusion, Wistrich added: “That at the end of the day, their mandate, which is to be the United Nations' organization for the promotion of education, culture and science, is in fact subjected, entirely, to political considerations.”

‘What a mealy-mouthed piece of hypocritical double-talk’

Wistrich also claimed that UNESCO only agreed to host the exhibition to improve its image in the United States, hoping to get the administration to start funding the organization again, after it stopped paying when UNESCO admitted “Palestine” as a member. The historian also took aim at the Obama administration, suggesting the State Department was schizophrenic because it had refused to cosponsor the exhibition — invoking the same reasons that Arab member states used when working successfully to torpedo it — yet later condemned the fact that it was canceled.

How it all began

About two years ago, the Simon Wiesenthal Center approached Wistrich, a veteran professor of modern European and Jewish history, and asked him to author an exhibition called “The People, the Book, the Land — 3,500 years of ties between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel,” to be displayed at UNESCO headquarters. Wistrich agreed, and though he was skeptical whether a UN body widely accused of anti-Israel bias would really go through with such a project, he wrote 24 panels, of about 800 words each.

Working with UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, wasn’t easy, Wistrich said. “They insisted — and this is why they acted in such bad faith — that they would appoint their own scientific experts to vet, examine, scrutinize almost every word I wrote, every line, every paragraph, which is very unusual for something like that.”

Yet after an exhausting process, he eventually satisfied every single one of their demands and the exhibition — created by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, co-organized with UNESCO, and cosponsored by Israel, Canada, and Montenegro — was approved. Invitations to the grand opening ceremony, scheduled for Monday, 6 p.m. were sent out.

On January 14, Abdullah Alneaimi, the head of UNESCO’s Arab Group, which consists of 22 member states, wrote a letter to the organization’s Director General Irina Bokova expressing “deep concern” over the exhibition, arguing it would disturb the current Israeli-Palestinian peace

talks.

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Bukova quickly capitulated. There remained “unresolved issues relating to potentially contestable textual and visual historical points, which might be perceived by Member States as endangering the peace process,” UNESCO said in a press release published Friday. “In this context, regrettably, UNESCO had to postpone the inauguration of the exhibition.” In a letter to the leaders of the Wiesenthal Center, Bukova recalled her “very firm dedication to building consensus in all UNESCO decisions and resolutions taken by Member States on issues relating to the Middle East.”

“What a mealy-mouthed piece of hypocritical double talk that really is,” Wistrich said of the letter the Arab states sent to Bukova. “And the fact that the secretary general then, within the hour almost, announced that the exhibition was suspended, postponed, de-facto canceled, tells you a great deal of the really cringing capitulation of UNESCO to the first sign of any pressure.”

There was no consultation with the Wiesenthal Center, or anyone else, ahead of the exhibition’s indefinite postponement, according to Wistrich. “It was simply done in an arbitrary act of total cynicism and, really, contempt for the Jewish people and its history.” The thought of this exhibition being literally locked up in the halls of UNESCO in Paris, with no one permitted to look at it, is a symbolic encapsulation of how the international community as represented in the UN relates to the history of the Jewish people, Wistrich said. “This is something to be censored; no narrative that doesn’t fit the currently prevailing Arab narrative is to be permitted.”

UNESCO is fine with organizing Holocaust exhibitions, Wistrich allowed. “They love dead Jews. And they’re more than ready to be very accommodating in drawing the universal lessons of how this must never happen again.” However, the idea “that Jews are alive and well and fighting and struggling to determine their own fate in their own homeland is

something much more difficult to stomach, for political reasons that we know.”

Citing UNESCO’s “track record” of anti-Israel bias, Wistrich said he was skeptical from the very beginning about the organization hosting an exhibition that would surely displease the Arab members. In 2011, UNESCO admitted “Palestine” and since then Israeli and Palestinian officials have sparred about its work in Jerusalem. In June 2012, UNESCO approved a resolution slamming Israel over its Jerusalem policies.

Starting in 2011, the US administration, which hitherto had been the organization’s main benefactor, annually contributing \$18 million — 22% of its total budget — withdrew funding. “No doubt one of [UNESCO’s] major considerations when they initially agreed to this project, which goes so much against the dominant narrative at UNESCO and UN organizations, was that they thought that perhaps this would lead them back into creating a better image for themselves in the US and this might lead to the reversing of that decision.”

But Wistrich, who grew up in Britain before immigrating to Israel, also criticized the way Washington dealt with the situation. The State Department had been repeatedly asked to cosponsor the exhibition, and “after sitting on the fence for a long time they declined, using a very similar argument to that used by the Arab delegates,” Wistrich said.

Earlier this month, Kelly Siekman, the State Department’s director of UNESCO affairs, wrote to the Wiesenthal Center: “At this sensitive juncture in the ongoing Middle East peace process, and after thoughtful consideration with review at the highest levels, we have made the decision that the United States will not be able to cosponsor the current exhibit during its display at UNESCO headquarters. As a rule, the United States does not cosponsor exhibits at UNESCO without oversight of content development from conception to final production.”

“That makes the US, passively at least, complicit in the UNESCO decision,” Wistrich charged. “Because in my view UNESCO would not have felt that it could, with impunity, act in this way if the US had been a cosponsor.”

The State Department later condemned the exhibition's postponement, and said it had engaged with senior UNESCO officials to affirm its strong interest in "seeing the exhibit proceed as soon as possible."

"When one looks at it from the outside, one is tempted to see [the State Department's behavior] as an example of schizophrenia," Wistrich said. It is legitimate not to want to cosponsor an event, he allowed, but the State Department gave "a bogus reason, even if that's what they believe." The exhibition "has nothing to do with the peace process," he asserted. "If the US had agreed to cosponsor — which is not such a dramatic thing for it to do — then probably this would not have happened. You can't really have it both ways. This expresses something of the ambivalence of the Obama administration."

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After all, Wistrich said, the bottom line of the exhibition was stating that the Jewish people dwells in its homeland by right, because of the culmination of a long and intense attachment, and not by conquest, a sinister colonial project or because of the Holocaust. The US traditionally recognizes that, he added.

"But this administration seems to have a lot of difficulty with doing that, for all kinds of complex reasons, and that's why I think there's ambivalence."

If Obama and his advisers did not have any reservations about the issue they would have acted like the Canadian government, which immediately and without hesitation agreed to cosponsor the exhibition, Wistrich said.

Nevertheless, Wistrich still hopes that his work on the 24 panels was not in vain and that the exhibition will at some point be displayed at the UN headquarters in New York. But to anticipate that UNESCO would change its mind was like hoping the messiah would come tomorrow, he said wryly.

What does the exhibit actually show?

“Each panel is a very succinct slice not only of Jewish history, but more specifically of the historical connection between the Jewish people from the dawn of its history and the Land of Israel, up until the present time,” Wistrich said. “Viewers come away with a strong sense of the continuity of the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, the unique intensity of the spiritual, religious, national, historical and traditional centrality of the Land of Israel in the Jewish consciousness.”

The exhibition covers three millennia of Jewish history, starting with Abraham up until the State of Israel’s efforts to use its technological “prowess” to make the world a better place, Wistrich said. “The emphasis is not so much on what the different conquerors of the Holy Land did — although that obviously has to be described, because it’s the framework — but on what was happening to the Jews in each of these historic eras: where they were concentrated, what they were doing, what their occupations were, what were the spiritual connections.

“The multiplicity of the Jewish presence is astonishing when you examine it closely, even in the worst periods of persecution and discrimination against Jews and sometimes massacres of Jews in the Land of Israel,” he said. “There were always Jewish communities somewhere.”

Those communities and that history, however, will not now be represented by UNESCO.