UNESCO Panel to Vote on Controversial Jerusalem Resolution

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<http://www.timesofisrael.com/unesco-world-heritage-committee-to-vote-on-jerusalem-resolution/>

The UN cultural body’s World Heritage Committee is set to vote on a controversial draft resolution challenging Jewish historical ties to the Old City of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount and calling of a return to the “historic status quo” on the holy site. A similar resolution was adopted by the organization’s executive board in April, a move that infuriated Israel.

A revised joint Palestinian-Jordanian draft resolution on “the Old City of Jerusalem and its walls” was submitted to the 21-member committee which is convening for its annual meeting in Istanbul, Turkey. The text calls for a return of the Temple Mount and the al-Aqsa Mosque to “the historic status quo,” a status that existed before the 1967 war.

Jews consider the complex, the site of the two biblical temples, to be Judaism’s holiest site. Muslims regard the compound — which today houses the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock — as the third-holiest site in Islam.

While Jewish visitors are allowed to enter the site, Jewish worship is banned under arrangements instituted by Israel when it captured the area from Jordan in the 1967 war.

The site has been the focal point of violence wracking Israel and the Palestinian territories — including dozens of Palestinian stabbing attacks on Israelis — over the past several months, amid claims by Palestinian leaders that Israel plans to change the status quo on the Temple Mount. Israel has vehemently denied those charges.

In the UN document, Israel is repeatedly referred to as the “occupying power” while being accused of causing damage to the site, conducting illegal excavations and preventing the Jordanian Waqf, which administers the site, from conducting repairs and renovations.

Similarly to an [April resolution adopted by UNESCO’s executive board](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002443/244378e.pdf), the Jordanian-Palestinian document refers to the Temple Mount exclusively by its Muslim name, calling Israel an “occupying power” on the site. The text also also refers to the Western Wall Plaza in quotation marks, after using the Arabic Al-Buraq Plaza.

The Jordanians and Palestinians accuse Israel of “intrusive constructions, tunneling and underground excavations” and “aggressions against religious sites and prayer places.”

The revised draft is expected to be very similar in nature and language to the April resolution which criticized Israel for “excavations and works” in East Jerusalem, and urged it to stop “aggressions and illegal measures against the freedom of worship and Muslims’ access” to their holy site. The resolution also accuses Israel of “planting fake Jewish graves in Muslim cemeteries” and of “the continued conversion of many Islamic and Byzantine remains into the so-called Jewish ritual baths or into Jewish prayer places.”

The April resolution was approved by 33 states of the 58-member body, including Russia, Spain, Sweden, France and Brazil. The latter two have since backtracked, calling their respective votes a mistake. Seventeen countries abstained while six voted against — the United States, Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

The World Heritage Committee will also issue a decision on whether to keep the Old City on its list of World Heritage sites in danger, which it has been on since 1982.

The 21 members of the committee are Angola, Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Croatia, Cuba, Finland, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Tunisia, Turkey, Tanzania, Vietnam and Zimbabwe.

Israel’s ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama Hacohen, said in response to the Palestinian-Jordanian initiative that “anyone who thought that after the criticism voiced by Israeli and international Jewry against this decision, and the recanting of the heads of state and foreign ministers around the world following the last decision, that Palestinians would come to their senses, needs to come to their senses and internalize this complicated reality.”

“We have made a concerted diplomatic but the voting will be conducted by a secret ballot and the rules of the game are well known: Palestinians almost always have a majority,” he said.

The Israeli foreign ministry slammed the text as another malicious and dishonest attempt to harm” Israel’s ties to its capital.

Following the April resolution, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [reacted furiously, accusing UNESCO of seeking to “rewrite history.”](http://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-slams-unesco-resolution-ignoring-jewish-connection-to-temple-mount)

“This is yet another absurd UN decision,” he said at the time. “UNESCO ignores the unique historic connection of Judaism to the Temple Mount, where the two temples stood for a thousand years and to which every Jew in the world has prayed for thousands of years. The UN is rewriting a basic part of human history and has again proven that there is no low to which it will not stoop.”

After the fallout, [UNESCO chief Irina Bokova called for “respect and dialogue” with regards to the holy site](http://www.timesofisrael.com/after-angering-israel-unesco-urges-respect-and-dialogue/).

“Jerusalem is a Holy Land of the three monotheistic religions, a place of dialogue for all Jewish, Christian and Muslim people. Nothing should be undertaken to alter its integrity and authenticity,” Bokova said in a statement.

“Only respect and dialogue can build the trust we need to move forward.”

Last October, UNESCO dropped a Palestinian bid to declare the Western Wall a Muslim holy site amid widespread criticism but passed a resolution condemning ongoing Israeli archaeological excavations near the Temple Mount and elsewhere in the Old City.