Egypt-Qatar Face Off in Bid for UNESCO Leadership

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The ongoing feud between Qatar and Egypt took on global dimensions as Cairo announced July 19 that it had selected a candidate to challenge Doha’s pick for the next Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Cairo officially nominated Moushira Khattab, a former Minister of Family and Population at a festive cultural dialogue event held in the garden of the Egyptian Museum.

“UNESCO members will not be just choosing a director-general, they will be choosing a civilization,” said Khattab who was thronged by reporters and flanked by pharaonic era statues and obelisks in the museum’s grand courtyard abutting the capital’s historic Tahrir Square.  
“Facing the Mediterranean and connected to Africa, Egypt has long served as a key crossroads of global civilizations,” Khattab told The Media Line. “We have to admit that UNESCO has failed at its mission when we see the rise of religious extremism and xenophobia around the globe.

From the Middle Ages onward, Egypt had a history of bringing together Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scientists and scholars and that is what UNESCO needs to do.”

Regional rival Qatar announced its candidate Dr. Hamad Bin Abdulaziz Al-Kawari, the cultural advisor to the Emirate’s ruling sheikh at reception held at UNESCO’s Paris headquarters in March. Al-Kawari obtained his bachelor’s degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies from Cairo University and acquired a PhD in political science from the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Khattab initiated Egypt’s first efforts to end female genital mutilation during the Mubarak era and served as its envoy to Prague and Pretoria.

Six years ago Qatar effectively saved UNESCO from bankruptcy with a $20 million gift to compensate for a decision by the United States Congress not to pay an overdue assessment of approximately $60 million.

Washington is required by law to cut off funding to any U.N. agency if the Palestinian Liberation Organization is granted membership to that body and it immediately halted payments to UNESCO after its General Conference voted to accept Palestine as a member state.  
In the Middle East Qatar is known as a key backer of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party.

Now both Khattab and Al-Kawari will attempt to win the support of the seven Arab countries alongside the other 188 members that vote in the UNESCO General Conference.

For years, Middle East disputes have held up the scheduled rotation of UNESCO’s leadership to one of the Arab countries.

In 2009, Egypt nominated former Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni to the post but his selection fell though after numerous anti-Semitic statements made by him were publicized. Among the remarks which disqualified Hosni were comments saying that if he found any Israeli books in Alexandria’s UNESCO-supported Bibliotheca Alexandrina library, he would burn them.

Current UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova’s tenure has not been without its own controversy of matters of religion and politics in the Middle East.

In April a UNESCO panel resolution on Jerusalem that described “so-called” Jewish sites and put the Western Wall Plaza in quotation marks sparked outrage in Israel. “To deny or conceal any of the Jewish, Christian or Muslim traditions undermines the integrity of the site, and runs counter to the reasons that justified its inscription as a World Heritage site,” said Bokova, a Bulgarian diplomat who has served two terms as director general.

UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee was scheduled to consider an additional Palestinian-Jordanian resolution on “the Old City of Jerusalem and its walls” during a session scheduled for July 20 at its 10-day annual meeting in Istanbul, but the event was disbanded in the wake of the abortive Turkish coup.

Both Qatar and Egypt are campaigning for their candidates, especially among the African countries where both nations provide development assistance.

Kenya has announced it is backing Al-Kawari and the Egyptian press reports that Khattab has discretely visited several African countries to press her candidacy.

“Whatever the outcome, Moushira Khattab’s candidacy is a win-win for Egypt,” said a retired Egyptian diplomat told The Media Line. “If she succeeds, Egypt will be leading an important global institution and if she doesn’t most people will understand that the Qataris bought the post.”