UNESCO Backs Motion Erasing Jewish Ties to Temple Mount

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UNESCO adopted an anti-Israel resolution Thursday that disregards Judaism's historic connection to the Temple Mount and casts doubt on the link between Judaism and the Western Wall.

Twenty-four countries voted in favor of the decision while six voted against and 26 abstained while just two were missing from the vote.

The U.S., Britain, Germany, Holland, Lithuania and Estonia voted against the resolution.

A senior source said that the efforts of Israeli diplomats significantly changed the votes of European states, none of which supported the motion. Israeli efforts, he said, succeeded in swaying France, Sweden, Slovenia, Argentina, Togo and India to abstain from the vote.

The resolution, which condemns Israel on several issues regarding Jerusalem and its holy sites, was advanced by the Palestinians alongside Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar and Sudan.

The resolution asserted that Jerusalem is holy to the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. However, it includes a special section dealing with the Temple Mount, which says the site is sacred only to Muslims and fails to mention that it is sacred to the Jews as well. In fact, it mentions neither the Hebrew term for the site – Har HaBayit – nor its English equivalent, the Temple Mount. The site is referred to only by its Muslim names – Al-Aqsa Mosque and Haram al-Sharif.

Israel's ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama-Hacohen, said in response to the vote: "The Palestinians have lost all support in Europe, including France, Spain and even Sweden. Along with the shift of position of key countries such as India and Argentina to abstention, the vote constitutes a significant achievement [for Israel] compared to the opening conditions for prior votes."

The UNESCO executive board made a similar resolution at the organization’s previous conference in April. The resolution was passed with the support of a number of European states, headed by France. This caused an acute diplomatic crisis between Israel and France, which included a harsh telephone call between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and French President Francois Hollande.

The French president and other senior French officials promised after that incident that they would not support such resolutions in the future.

Chairman of the Zionist Union party and leader of the Israeli opposition, Isaac Herzog, urged UNESCO to withdraw the resolution, saying: "UNESCO betray their mission, and give a bad name to diplomacy and the international institutions. Whoever wants to rewrite history, to distort fact, and to completely invent the fantasy that the Western Wall and Temple Mount have no connection to the Jewish people, is telling a terrible lie that only serves to increase hatred."

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin said in response to the vote: "No forum or body in the world can say that there is no connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel and to Jerusalem.  A body that does so is simply humiliating itself." The president added that "we also understand criticism, but history cannot be changed."

For his part, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein said: "This decision is a message to inciters and rewriters of history working tirelessly out of hate."

**Israeli efforts**

In the past weeks Shama-Hacohen and Israeli ambassadors in dozens of capitals worldwide attempted to convince as many states as possible to oppose the resolution, or to at least abstain or not vote at all.

The Foreign Ministry issued a brochure with pictures of archaeological findings proving the historic affiliation between the Jews and Jerusalem in general and the Temple Mount in particular, as well as the existence of the Temple Mount at the site where the Al-Aqsa Mosque stands today.

One of the findings shown in the brochure is the Arch of Titus in Rome, on which images of holy artifacts that the Romans took as spoils from the Second Temple in Jerusalem are depicted. These include the Menorah, which is the symbol of the Israeli state today.

In a letter Shama-Hacohen distributed to the ambassadors of UNESCO’s executive board’s 58 member states, he wrote that without undermining other religions’ affiliation to Jerusalem’s holy sites, the archaeological facts and historical evidence presented by the accompanying brochure “leave no doubt…of the deepest and longest Jewish presence in Jerusalem since ancient times.”

He wrote that every attempt to distort history and undercut the Jewish people’s ties to Jerusalem “is an attempt to rewrite history in a dangerous, unfair and one-sided manner.”

A senior Foreign Ministry official said Israel received information over the past week that numerous Arab states, including those that signed the resolution proposal with the Palestinians, support it due to public opinion at home. “A number of Arab states have reportedly expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the Palestinians’ moves in UNESCO,” he said.

“They speak out sharply against the Palestinians and say they exaggerate and become more radical but stress they have no choice but to support the resolution out of domestic political considerations.”

Shama-Hacohen told Haaretz the move is a blow to UNESCO, as such acts are the reason for the United States’ continued suspension of its membership fees to the organization.

“The Palestinians’ persistence is costing UNESCO about 100 million euros in American membership fees,” he said. “Just a few days ago the American ambassador said in public for the first time at a debate in UNESCO that decisions about Jerusalem prevent the administration from obtaining a majority in Congress to approve the payment.

“Albert Einstein has already said that insanity is doing something over and over again and expecting a different result. The Palestinians and Arabs apparently disagree with him, and try time and time again in the same failed manner to sever the strongest tie between a nation and a certain location in human history,” said Shama-Hacohen. “There is no older, deeper and stronger connection than that of the Jewish people to Jerusalem in general and the holy sites in particular."