Palestinians Drop Bid to Name Western Wall Part of Al-Aqsa

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The Palestinians have withdrawn their demand that the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization declare the Western Wall an “integral part” of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, Israeli officials said Wednesday.

Israel’s ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama Hacohen, confirmed to Israel Radio Wednesday that the Palestinian delegation had proposed a new version of the controversial resolution, removing the clause that would have declared the Western Wall a Muslim site.

He said the initial proposal had met with opposition from a range of countries including Russia, China and even Cuba.

The resolution — which the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) executive board is scheduled to vote on Wednesday — still contains a request to recognize Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem and the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron as Muslim sites. Israeli diplomats said they would continue to fight the resolution, and try to get allied states to reject it.

In addition, the Palestinians seek condemnation of ongoing Israeli archaeological excavations near the Temple Mount and elsewhere in Jerusalem’s Old City, as well as of purported “aggression and illegal measures taken against the freedom of worship and access of Muslims to Al-Aqsa Mosque and Israel’s attempts to break the status quo since 1967.”

In an effort to garner support for the motion, some of the most incendiary language was removed or exchanged for less provocative terms.

All references to Jerusalem as “the occupied capital of Palestine” were withdrawn from the draft, as was a call for the international community to condemn Israel for urging “civilians to carry weapons whenever they leave their homes.”

Palestinians allege that a wave of Palestinian attacks in recent weeks against Israeli civilians and security personnel stems from Israel’s attempts to change the arrangements at the Temple Mount, where Jews are allowed to visit but not pray. Israel has repeatedly denied the allegations.

According to sources in Paris, where UNESCO’s executive committee was to vote Wednesday, negotiations over the final draft were still ongoing. Some European governments have not yet decided how they are going to vote.

The UK will vote against the new resolution, according to a senior official from the UK, despite the Palestinians’ removal of the most controversial segment.

“The language is unacceptable, and we don’t think it’s helpful to bring in a provocative motion at times of tensions,” the official says. “We regret that there wasn’t more time to discuss the motion.”

On Tuesday, the head of the United Nations cultural agency said she “[deplored” the proposal](http://www.timesofisrael.com/unesco-chief-deplores-bid-to-name-western-wall-part-of-al-aqsa/). The move, Irina Bokova warned on UNESCO’s website, “could be seen to alter the status of the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls and incite further tensions.”

The executive board had been scheduled to vote Tuesday on a resolution submitted by Arab states that would officially recognize the Western Wall as part of the Muslim holy site, but Bokova postponed the vote until Wednesday.

The chief of the UN’s education and culture agency, Irina Bokova of Bulgaria, gestures during an interview with The Associated Press at the Global Forum for Youth, Peace and Security, in Madaba, Jordan, Friday, Aug. 21, 2015. (AP/Raad Adayleh)

In a statement, Bokova called on the UNESCO board “to take decisions that do not further inflame tensions on the ground and that encourage respect for the sanctity of the Holy Sites.”

Speaking alongside UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who visited Israel on Tuesday in a bid to pursue solutions to the resurgent violence, President Reuven Rivlin said efforts to inflame tensions must be rejected.

“The United Nations and all its institutions have a responsibility to work against any escalation of the conflict. UNESCO must reject any attempt to deny the Jewish connection to the Temple Mount,” he said.

The Western Wall is at the base of Jerusalem’s most sensitive holy site. The hilltop compound is revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, the site of the two biblical Jewish temples. Today, it’s home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam’s third-holiest shrine and a key national symbol for the Palestinians.