Iranian front-runner loses race for influential UNESCO post

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A South Korean diplomat was elected on Thursday as the new chairperson of UNESCO’s Executive Board, surprisingly beating his Iranian colleague, who had long been favored to get the job.

Although set to quit the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Israel celebrated the vote’s outcome, saying an Iranian at the helm of the influential body would have detracted from Jerusalem’s ability to influence decisions taken there.

Lee Byong Hyun, South Korea’s ambassador to UNESCO, beat Iran’s Ahmad Jalali, who until recently was the only candidate in the race, in a secret ballot by 32 to 25, with one abstention.

“The Western efforts, especially by the US and Israel, to create competition for the Iranian and to stop Tehran’s control of the Executive Committee took place mainly behind the scenes and today had an impressive success,” said Israel’s ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama-Hacohen.

“Israel’s future at UNESCO is still unclear, but one way or another an Iranian chairman heading the body that discusses and decides on anti-Israel proposals would have led to a radicalization, accompanied by inaccessibility of the American and Israeli to the chair of the executive committee,” he added.

The chair of UNESCO’s Executive Board directs the body’s biannual discussions, ensures the observance of rules of procedures, accords the right to speak, and rules on points of order.

Just a few weeks ago, before the onset of UNESCO’s 39th General Conference in Paris, [Jerusalem feared an “Islamic troika” taking over the organization](https://www.timesofisrael.com/it-could-get-worse-israel-frets-islamic-troika-may-take-helm-at-unesco/).

“Under certain circumstances an Islamic troika could be created, which would be liable to push the organization to new depths of anti-Israel politicization,” Shama-Hacohen said earlier this year.

Besides Jalali, who was set to chair the Executive Board, Qatar’s Hamad bin Abdulaziz Al-Kawari had been the frontrunner for the position of UNESCO director-general, but was [narrowly defeated by France’s former culture minister Audrey Azoulay](https://www.timesofisrael.com/french-candidate-defeats-qatari-to-win-unesco-leadership/).

However, a Moroccan — Zohour Alaoui — has been unanimously elected president of the 39th session of the General Conference of UNESCO, for the term 2017-2019.

In addition, Bahrain, a newly elected member of the Executive Board, will host the 42nd session of the World Heritage Committee, which will take place in the summer of 2018. Headed by diplomat Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, it is expected to discuss two resolutions on Israel — about Jerusalem’s Old City and the Patriarchs’ Tomb in Hebron.

In October, the US announced its decision to quit UNESCO, citing financial reasons and the organization’s alleged anti-Israel bias, effective December 2018. Jerusalem [immediately declared it would follow suit](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israels-planned-withdrawal-from-unesco-unlikely-to-improve-anything/), though it has yet to formalize the move.