Five reasons the UNESCO Hebron decision matters to Israel and the world

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In a contentious secret vote, UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee [declared the Old Town of Hebron and the Cave of the Patriarchs](http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/UNESCO-votes-in-favor-of-inscribing-Hebron-sites-to-the-State-of-Palestine-499059) a Palestinian heritage site in danger.

The decision was condemned by Israel, but welcomed by the Palestinians. Palestinian Authority Foreign Ministry Riyad al-Maliki said that the world had “recognized our right to register Hebron and the Ibrahimi Mosque under Palestinian sovereignty and on the World Heritage List.”

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin tweeted “UNESCO seems intent on sprouting anti-Jewish lies, while it remains silent as the region’s heritage is destroyed by brutal extremists.”

The UNESCO decision has wider implications for Israel and the Palestinians, and for UNESCO as well. Here are five major impacts and issues that were raised by the vote on Hebron.

**Palestinians on a winning streak at UNESCO**

While the Palestinians have been thwarted on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza to create a state or remove Israel’s presence from areas they claim, they have been successful in international forums like UNESCO. The Palestinian Authority successfully sought membership in UNESCO as a state in 2011, as part of a campaign to join numerous UN agencies. It won membership in a vote of 107 to 14, presaging the vote on Friday in which 12 voted in favor of inscribing Hebron and three against. At the time, Israel’s ambassador to UNESCO, Nimrod Barkan, condemned the decision.

Since 2011, the Palestinians successfully got the Church of the Nativity and pilgrimage route in Bethlehem inscribed in 2012 and the “Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir” inscribed in 2014. UNESCO, which declared the Old City of Jerusalem and its walls a world heritage site in 1981 at the behest of Jordan, has frequently criticized Israeli actions in Jerusalem. On Tuesday, it [labeled Israel an “occupying power” in Jerusalem](http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/UNESCO-votes-Israel-occupying-power-in-Jerusalem-498755) and criticized archaeological excavations. Israel lost a vote in May at the UNESCO executive board that also [negated Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem](http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israel-ignores-UN-demand-for-end-to-settlement-building-UN-485137). This has been the routine for years. UNESCO, like other UN bodies, criticizes Israel’s actions, and it will continue to do so. Lobbying by Israeli allies or even whittling away at the automatic pro-Palestinian majority hasn’t worked. Palestinians will likely use the coming years to try to register more sites, especially those they think will undermine Israel’s rule in the West Bank. This could include campaigns regarding Rachel’s Tomb, or sites such as Nabi Samwil or even the monastery inside Ma’ale Adumim.

**Politicizing world heritage**

The votes at UNESCO, especially related to Hebron and Battir, have been more about politics and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians than a purely historical interest in preserving world heritage. Without Israel and the Palestinians being involved in Hebron, the site would still merit inclusion on a list of sites of extraordinary value in the region. With thousands of years of history, it is the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah of the Bible. The main building was built by Herod and is considered one of his best preserved structures. It was later used as a church under the Crusaders and additional Islamic elements were added to it in the 14th century that led to its present form. Declaring it and the area around it a unique site is no different from what UNESCO has done with parts of Mexico City or the historic center of Cordoba. However UNESCO notes at Cordoba that “in the 13th century, under Ferdinand III, the Saint, Cordoba’s Great Mosque was turned into a cathedral.” In Mexico City there is no attempt to deny the Aztec heritage. With Hebron, there is an attempt to minimize the Jewish connection to the tomb, as if thousands of years of Jewish connection and the fact that the current building was built as a Jewish site initially, is of less significance. An article in The Guardian on the UNESCO decision only mentions that the building was constructed as “the Ibrahimi mosque, also known as the Sanctuary of Abraham, in the 14th century.” The opposite terminology as that used to describe the Cordoba mosque that became a cathedral.

The same politicizing was done at UNESCO to get Battir inscribed. It was mostly pushed through to stop Israel from constructing the security barrier alongside the village. Battir is of no unique or special value in comparison to hundreds of other villages that are similar, yet it became a UNESCO site because of its dispute with Israel. Since its inscription, there has been no major investment in it and few tourists visit it. In addition, the Jewish connection to Battir, Beitar of the time of the rebellion against Rome, is erased from the site’s inscription, and it is said to be “representative of many centuries of culture and human interaction with the environment.” No mention of it being the site of the Bar Kochba revolt, or even the fact it is still called in Arabic “Khurbet al-Yahud,” meaning “the ruin of the Jews.”
 **Palestinians sites are always “in danger”**

The Palestinian Authority has exploited UNESCO to declare all three of its sites “in danger,” including Hebron, Battir and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The Old City of Jerusalem is also on the list of 54 UNESCO sites in “danger.” This puts Palestinian sites “in danger” up there with Libya, Mali, Iraq, Congo, Syria and Yemen. The other countries are undergoing vicious wars, and in Iraq and Syria sites have been totally razed by ISIS. ISIS demolished Hatra and [blew up parts of Palmyra](http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/ISIS-Threat/ISIS-destroys-famous-monument-in-Syrias-Palmyra-479221). Battir, Hebron, Bethlehem and Jerusalem’s Old City are not in danger in the way other sites UNESCO lists as “in danger” are. The decision to keep voting them onto the “danger” list is part of a Palestinian campaign against Israel, not an honest weighing of whether these sites face any danger. For instance, the Bethlehem sites are under the control of the Palestinian Authority, yet in “danger” ostensibly from Israel. This disproportionate claim of “in danger” is used as a tool to attack and undermined Israel’s rule in the West Bank and Jerusalem. Ironically sites like Sebastia, the important historical site of ancient Samaria, which is actually in danger after years of neglect, go unrecognized by UNESCO.

**Israel has nine UNESCO sites**

Israel has nine UNESCO sites, including Masada, the White City of Tel Aviv and the Necropolis of Beit Shean which was inscribed in 2015. Israel should recognize that, although it won’t win at UNESCO in any areas over the Green Line or in Jerusalem, all of which is not seen as part of Israel by the UN, Israel has ample opportunities to develop and register new UNESCO sites in other areas. In recent years, it has registered the Caves of Maresha at Beit Guvrin, for instance. Rather than arguing with the Palestinians at UNESCO, Israel might consider seeking to add more sites to its list.

**Will UNESCO be reformed?**

The Israel-Palestinian conflict playing out at UNESCO is not good news for archaeology or history. The concept of UNESCO was supposed to be a way for the world to acknowledge a list of sites, now numbering 1,052, that are of special cultural, historic, scientific or other significance. The sites would be protected, monitored and be a sort of “bucket list” of places in the world of supreme worth. Turning sites into part of a religious, ethnic or political conflict runs contrary to the purpose, but because of the way UNESCO is run, with countries represented and voting, the ability to prevent politicization is difficult. Sites such as Preah Vinear on the Thai-Cambodian border have also found themselves in the middle of national disputes. The difficulty of registering sites in Taiwan, which is seen as part of China, mean sites are less likely to be recognized there. Other international disputes or religious disputes or reluctance of countries to declare a place a UNESCO site because it means they should preserve it, all go against the ideal of UNESCO.  The dispute in Hebron could engender attempts to reform how sites are registered or shed a light on which sites are declared “in danger.”