Israel Claims Partial Victory as UNESCO Delays Vote to Erase Jewish Ties to Temple Mount

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The failed Turkish coup over the weekend delayed until October a UNESCO vote on Jerusalem that ignores Jewish ties to the Temple Mount.

The 21-members of the World Heritage Committee had been scheduled to vote on the matter in the coming days as it wrapped up its 40th session in Istanbul which had been scheduled to run from July 10 to July 20.

But in the aftermath of Saturday’s failed coup, the body cut the session short and debated only a limited number of items before concluding the Istanbul meeting.

The Palestinian delegation, along with Lebanon and Peru, pushed for the resolution to be heard on Sunday in spite of the condensed agenda.

But the European Union, which has four member states on the World Heritage Committee, backed Israel’s request for a delay.

“It is rare that our opinion wins out against the Palestinians and the Arab states,” Israel’s Ambassador to UNESCO in Paris said.

The unusual moment of partial victory came about from mixture of hard work and luck, he said.

Israel saw how the failed coup created a set of special circumstances by which it would be possible to delay the vote, Shama said.

Israeli representatives sprung into action early in the morning, catching ambassadors as they were eating breakfast to explain that such an “extreme and problematic” resolution did not have to be dealt with at this time.

The Turkish Ambassador to UNESCO and the Turkish chair of the committee were open to Israel’s suggestion and helped delay the vote, Sharma said.

Shama said he initially considered Istanbul to be a problematic place for the World Heritage Committee to meet.

At the time, Israel had not yet repaired its relationship with Turkey and it was assumed that country would be akin to a “home court” for the Palestinians, he said.

It’s ironic that this was not the case, he said.

But Shama cautioned that what Israel had achieved here was simply to gain time to combat the resolution will be raised this fall at a Paris meeting of the World Heritage Committee, which is under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

“This is just a time-out,” Shama said.

“There is no doubt that the Palestinians and the Arab nations will not refrain from battle. The subject of the Temple Mount and Jerusalem is the mainstay of Palestinian incitement against Israel,” Shama said.

The resolution had been initially submitted by Jordan and Palestine as part of the bureaucratic process by which the World Heritage Committee reaffirmed the placement of Jerusalem and its Old City ramparts on its World Heritage in Danger list.

As part of that confirmation process Palestine and Jordan introduced a text attacking Israeli actions, including its archeological digs within Jerusalem’s Old City. But although the Temple Mount is Judaism’s holiest site, it referred to it solely by its Muslim name of Al-Haram ash-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary).

As a member state of UNESCO since 2011. Palestine may submit resolutions to UNESCO bodies such as the World Heritage Committee.

On Friday, UNESCO Director- General Irina Bokova posted on the UNESCO website that Jerusalem’s Old City “is the sacred city of the three monotheistic religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam.”

Bokova charged that actions to deny the Jewish and Christian connection to the site undermined its status as a Word Heritage site. “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 in 1981,” she wrote.

Some 35 years later after Jerusalem Old City was inscribed at Jordan’s request as a World Heritage site, she added, “the role and commitment of the World Heritage Committee is precisely to uphold the spirit of this historic decision.”

UNESCO’s obligation to protect Jerusalem’s Old City is more important than ever, she said.

“I am concerned about the way physical violence is being associated with symbolic violence, as well as the will to erase history and instrumentalize culture. When these divisions carry over onto UNESCO, an Organization dedicated to dialogue and peace, it prevents us from carrying out our mission,” Bokova said.

Last October the Palestinian government began a UNESCO campaign to reclassify the Temple Mount, but failed to garner enough support for a resolution that would have formally declared the area as an exclusively Muslim shrine.

When UNESCO’s 58-member Executive Board met in Paris in April it adopted a resolution that spoke solely of Muslim ties to the Temple Mount. At the time, Bokova, also objected and spoke out against the politicization of UNESCO.