Israel fumes over ‘sad, pathetic’ UNESCO decision on Jerusalem

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Israeli officials angrily rejected a resolution by a UN body condemning its activity in East Jerusalem and the Old City, with the Foreign Ministry saying the move was irrelevant.

After the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization’s World Heritage Council on Tuesday evening passed a resolution denouncing Israeli activity in the Old City of Jerusalem, the Foreign Ministry responded by saying the decision cannot change the reality that Jerusalem is the capital of the Jewish people.

The Jordanian-sponsored resolution in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization’s World Heritage Council called Israel “the occupying power” in the Old City of Jerusalem and reaffirmed previous UN resolutions denying the country’s claims to East Jerusalem. Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem has never been recognized by the international community.

“Another bizarre and irrelevant decision by UNESCO, that is acting on behalf of the enemies of history and the truth,” the Foreign Ministry said in statement. “Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the Jewish people, and no decision by UNESCO can change that reality. It is sad, unnecessary and pathetic. It is worth noting that the decision didn’t even get a majority of votes.”

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’s Fatah movement welcomed the vote. Fatah spokesman in Europe Jamal Nazzal said it was “historic justice” and was “another reflection of the international position which opposes Israeli policy, and of our position which rejects recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of the occupation.”

Ten countries voted in favor of the text, which was significantly softer than previous resolutions. Only three member states — Jamaica, the Philippines and Burkina Faso — opposed the resolution, while eight abstained.

The resolution slammed “the failure of the Israeli occupying authorities to cease the persistent excavations, tunneling, works, projects and other illegal practices in East Jerusalem, particularly in and around the Old City of Jerusalem, which are illegal under international law.”

However, Decision 41 COM 7A.36 also stressed “the importance of the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls for the three monotheistic religions,” language not found in last year’s text and seen as a significant softening of the language.

It also did not refer to the Temple Mount compound solely by its Muslim names, “Al-Aqsa Mosque/Al-Haram Al-Sharif,” as the 2016 resolution did, defining it as “a Muslim holy site of worship.”

Despite the text lacking the bite of previous resolutions passed by the body, it was still met with angry denunciations by Israeli officials.

Jerusalem Affairs Minister Ze’ev Elkin lambasted UNESCO as “detached from reality” and said Israel would not halt excavations or other activity in the Old City.

“This body continues to demonstrate its partisanship and its denial of the history of the Jewish people,” saidd Elkin who is also Environmental Protection minister.

Education Ministry Naftali Bennett, who heads an Israeli committee dealing with UNESCO, said the UN body was failing in its duties to protect world heritage sites by focusing instead on Israel.

“UNESCO’s repeated fake claims do not change the Jewish connection to Jerusalem or reality on the ground,” said Bennett, who heads the Jewish Home party in the coalition. “Jerusalem was the capital of the Jewish people long before Islam was introduced to the world, and it will remain Israel’s capital forever.”

“Instead of protecting hundreds of sites destroyed by radical Islam, including the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul, UNESCO is acting against the only Middle Eastern country safeguarding all holy sites and granting worshipers religious freedom,” he said.

Israel’s UN envoy Danny Danon also condemned the vote outcome as “disgraceful.”

“Nothing is more disgraceful than UNESCO declaring the world’s only Jewish state the ‘occupier’ of the Western Wall and Jerusalem’s Old City,” Danon says in a statement. “Yesterday, I toured the City of David and the Old City with UN ambassadors from around the world and explained the deep and ancient connection between the Jewish people and the holiest sites of our nation. No faux ‘heritage committee’ can sever the bonds between our people and Jerusalem.”

Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Tunisia, Turkey, Vietnam, Cuba and Zimbabwe voted in favor of the resolution.

Angola, Croatia, Finland, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Tanzania and South Korea abstained.

The annual vote on a Jerusalem-themed resolution at UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee, which is currently meeting in Krakow, Poland, was originally scheduled to take place next week. But Palestinian diplomats advanced the debate, presumably to blindside Israeli officials who are currently busy fighting another Palestinian initiative at UNESCO regarding the West Bank city of Hebron.

A vote to inscribe the Old City of Hebron on UNESCO’s World Heritage List is scheduled for Friday.