Israel working to thwart Palestinian bid to join UN tourism body as member state

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Amid Palestinian threats to turn to international organizations if there is no movement on the diplomatic process, Israel is bracing for an expected Palestinian bid to seek full state membership next week in the United Nations’ World Tourism Organization, The Jerusalem Post has learned.

The Palestinian Authority’s Ministry of Tourism applied for membership for “Palestine” into the organization last year, and it is on the agenda at the meeting of the UNWTO General Assembly in Chengdu, China, which begins on Monday and runs through Saturday.

The Madrid-based UNWTO describes itself as the “leading international organization in the field of tourism,” and the UN agency “responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism.”

If the Palestinians do apply for membership, and the bid is successful, it would be the second UN organization, [after UNESCO](http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/UNESCOS-Hebron-vote-just-the-opening-Palestinian-salvo-against-Israel-499155), to which the Palestinians have full membership. A final Palestinian decision on whether to go ahead with the bid, or withdraw it, is expected shortly.

The US has reportedly asked Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to refrain from unilateral action in international fora for the next four months to allow the US to unveil a comprehensive diplomatic plan.

In order to be accepted as a state in the WTO, the Palestinians will need two-thirds of the votes cast -- abstentions are not counted. They are expected to garner the necessary majority, especially since countries who could be counted on to support Israel and vote against the move – such as the US, Canada and Australia – are not members of the WTO. The United Kingdom is also not a member.

“Israel has taken all diplomatic measures to block the request,” a Foreign Ministry spokesman said. “We are not expecting any negative impact on Israel or its continued activity in the organization - the expected damage will be to the organization itself.”

Israel's efforts to block the move have focused on the secretariat of the organization in Madrid, it's outgoing Secretary-General - the Jordanian diplomat Taleb Rifai - and on China, which is hosting the conference.

Israel has also involved the Americans, who have warned the Palestinians that their joining the organization could have consequences in their relations with the US.

The Foreign Ministry's spokesman said that Israel's position is that the “State Of Palestine” does not exist, and therefore it cannot be accepted as a state in the UN or in any of its affiliated organizations.

Moreover, he said, granting state membership to the Palestinians will lead to a greater politicization of the organization and a cut in funding.

Since the Palestinians gained full membership in UNESCO in 2011, a number of anti-Israel resolutions have been adopted in the organization, including resolutions erasing a Jewish connection to Temple Mount and declaring 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 world heritage site.

The US cut off funding to UNESCO after it accepted the Palestinians as a full member state because of a law prohibiting US funding of UN organizations that grant full membership to the Palestinians.