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Israel allows UNESCO mission into old Jerusalem



Israel has agreed to allow a mission from UNESCO, the U.N.'s cultural arm, to visit sites within the Old City of Jerusalem starting May 19, a small victory that carried big hopes for those hoping to end the deadlock between Israelis and Palestinians. Israel told UNESCO's executive board on Tuesday that it also has agreed to take part in a Paris meeting of experts next month on the Mughrabi Ascent, an entrance to the disputed holy site in Jerusalem's Old City revered by Jews and Muslims. In turn, the Palestinians will postpone five resolutions condemning Israel's occupation of the West Bank. The resolutions won't be revived until the next executive board meeting in September. The agreement represented a mini-breakthrough on cultural issues by two parties whose fierce differences have kept the world on edge. "It's a door that was opened," Israeli Ambassador to UNESCO Nimrod Barkan said later by telephone. "It's a move toward confidence building and an attempt to see whether there is forward movement." He also said it was a first step toward depoliticizing UNESCO "and resuming UNESCO's professional work in ... Israel, potentially." Palestinian Ambassador Elias Sanbar called the agreement "an achievement." The monitoring mission and meeting aim to safeguard the cultural heritage of the Old City. Bitter politicking has meant that since 2004 there has been no such mission to an area where ancient monuments have grown fragile. Cultural heritage became a flashpoint between the two sides even before the Palestinians became a member of the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 2011. Palestinian membership prompted the United States to cut off funds to the agency - \$80 million annually in dues, or 22 percent of UNESCO's overall budget - hobbling the organization. The Palestinians, using UNESCO membership in their bid for statehood, have since achieved observer status at the United Nations. The deal was brokered by an unlikely pair, the United States and Russia, with the help of UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. The deal "represents a critical step forward towards depoliticizing UNESCO and signals a major shift towards a more constructive approach to cultural heritage issues," U.S. Ambassador David Killion said in a statement. Killion praised Russia's "tremendous leadership" at an executive board session last fall in getting the five resolutions postponed. That led to a joint effort by the U.S. and Russia to get beyond politics on issues of culture, in this case sites dear to Muslims, Jews and Christians. "The last three years UNESCO was swamped with political denunciation of Israel," the Israeli ambassador said, "and the continued professional work on World Heritage sites became impossible." Sanbar, the Palestinian ambassador, said the five resolutions condemning Israel in areas from settlements to archeological excavations are "legitimate and fair resolutions" that are simply being postponed. Under the agreement, the resolutions can be aired at the executive board session to run Sept. 23 to Oct. 10.