

*Report by Witold Zyss*



The Executive Board of UNESCO held its 191st session from 10 to 26 April 2013. The Executive Board, which meets twice a year to supervise the implementation of the UNESCO programme, consists of 58 member states elected for four years, on the basis of distribution of seats among the regions of the world, by the General Conference which consists of all the 195 member states and meets once in two years.

The main subject on the agenda was the consideration of the Medium Term Strategy for 2014-2021 and of the Programme and Budget for 2014-2017 which will be submitted for approval to the next session of the General Conference, to be held in November 2013. This is a difficult task because of the withholding of the United States contribution (which amounts to 22 per cent of the budget) as a consequence of the decision taken by the previous session of the General Conference in 2011 to admit "Palestine" as member state of UNESCO (Israel has also decided to withhold its contribution).

While the US Ambassador, David Killion, announced that President Obama in his budget request to the Congress had requested the waiver of the suspension of the USA contribution to UNESCO, the approval of this proposal is by no means certain.

As it had been doing at each of its session for many years, the Board examined several items of special concern to Israel. These items were:

Mughrabi ascent in the Old City of Jerusalem;

Jerusalem;

The two Palestinian sites of al-Haram al Ibrahimy/Tomb of the Patriarchs in al-Khalil/Hebron and the Bilal ibn Rabah Mosque/Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem;

Educational and cultural institutions in the occupied Arab territories;

Report of the Director-General on the reconstruction and development of Gaza.

These items had been on the agenda of all sessions of the Executive Board for years and usually resulted in the adoption of strongly worded anti-Israeli decisions (the Board resolutions are known as "decisions") submitted by the Arab group, with USA voting against and several members abstaining. At its previous session (October 2012) the Board decided, on the proposal

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of Russia, to postpone these items to its next session. It came rather as a surprise, both the Russian proposal and its adoption by a majority vote.

From the beginning of the 191st session which ended on 26 April there were intensive consultations between Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian delegations, with the participation of a few other delegations, in particular the American and the Russian delegations, and with the assistance of the Director-General and the Chairperson of the Board. The three delegations concerned were in constant contact with their governments and the agreement reached reflects the consent of these governments.

The agreement was brought to the knowledge of the Programme Commission of the Board on 23 April by the Israeli Ambassador, Mr. Nimrod Barkan, who announced that, following intensive consultations with the Jordanian and Palestinian delegations and with the assistance of the Director-General and of a number of delegations, progress had been achieved on the following lines:



1. Israel is willing to participate, with Jordanian, Palestinian and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre experts, in a technical meeting on the Mughrabi Ascent, to take place in Paris in May 2013.
2. Israel will accept and facilitate a UNESCO technical mission to the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls (this is the name under which this monumental ensemble is inscribed on the World Heritage List), to start on 19 May 2013.
3. The reports of the mission and of the meeting will be submitted to the concerned parties on 1 June 2013 and to the 37th session of the World Heritage Committee (Phnom Penh, 16-27 June 2013).
4. Israel is committed to the above provided that the five agenda items are adjourned to the next session of the Executive Board (September-October 2013) and that the only item related to Jerusalem to be considered by the 37th session of the World Heritage Committee will

be the report and recommendations of the mission and the report of the Director-General on the expert meeting.

The Jordanian and the Palestinian delegates thanked the Chairperson of the Board and the Director-General for their assistance and emphasized the importance of World Heritage sites. The Palestinian delegate stressed that the agreement – reached only the day before after long efforts - was an achievement. He pointed out the positive attitude of Palestinian authorities which are committed to the success of the mission. The end of this exchange was greeted by applause.

The draft decisions on the five items were submitted to the Programme Commission the following day. On the proposal of the Chairperson they were adopted by consensus, without vote or discussion, followed by applause. The decisions are almost identical. They thank the Director-General for her good offices leading to an understanding between all concerned parties and decide to include the items on the agenda of the next session of the Board. The decisions concerned also acknowledge the commitment of the parties on an experts meeting on the Mughrabi Ascent and on the mission to the Old City of Jerusalem.

The five drafts were submitted to the plenary on 26 April, the last day of the session. On the proposal of the Chairperson, they were adopted, all of them together, by consensus. It is not usual for decisions on these items to be adopted by the Executive Board by consensus. After the adoption, statements were made by several delegations expressing satisfaction on the result achieved, considered by most of them as a major achievement. The Arab delegations insisted that the entire arrangement was conditional on the successful implementation of the expert meeting on the Mughrabi Ascent and of the mission to Jerusalem; otherwise, they made it clear, the issues would be reopened at the next session of the Board.

Another item of interest to us was the decision to enhance the status of B'nai B'rith at UNESCO.

The “Directives concerning UNESCO’s partnership with non-governmental organizations”, in their new version approved by the General Conference in 2011, provide that the NGOs in partnership with UNESCO (there are about 300 of them) are classified in one of the two categories: the consultative status which aims at “achieving a flexible and dynamic partnership in the definition and implementation of UNESCO’s programmes” and the more comprehensive associate status which “involves close and sustained cooperation in defining and implementing the Organization’s programme”. The consultative status is granted by the Director-General while the associate status requires a decision of the Executive Board, upon recommendation of the Director-General. When this system was introduced in 2011, B'nai B'rith was placed in the less prestigious consultative status category.

Last year we requested our upgrading to the associate status category, in view of our long and close cooperation with UNESCO in various fields. This request was very well received by the Director-General and the officials in charge of relations with NGOs and a recommendation to this effect was submitted to the recent session of the Executive Board. The conspicuous success of the Symposium “Permanence of Yiddish” which the B'nai B'rith representation to UNESCO organized on 12-13 November 2012 under the patronage of UNESCO and in the premises provided by the Organization was no doubt one of the reasons which prompted the

UNESCO Secretariat to make this recommendation (it was mentioned several times during the presentation of the item by Secretariat representatives). Another NGO was proposed for this upgrading: the Observatory of Cultural Policies in Africa, the seat of which is in Mozambique.

The subject was examined by the Executive Board Committee on Non-Governmental Partners (which consists of 23 out of the 58 members of the Board). The Committee spent the whole day on a general discussion on the relations between UNESCO and NGOs and on a discussion on the cooperation of UNESCO with NGOs in the field of water. No questions were asked about the Director-General's proposals concerning the upgrading of two NGOs. It was only late in the afternoon, after the discussion was finished, that the Committee proceeded to examine the draft decision the last paragraph of which (par. 8) would admit to associate status the two NGOs concerned.

It was not difficult to see that there would be trouble, as during the adoption of the first paragraphs of the decision there were intensive consultations between the Arab members, with the Deputy Palestinian Delegate going from one of them to another. When par. 8 was taken up, Saudi Arabia said that the information submitted on the NGOs concerned was insufficient to decide whether they deserved associate status and proposed that the issue be postponed until additional information was given (which in practice could mean only the next session of the Board in September-October). This proposal was supported by Egypt, by Venezuela and by a few African countries, including Gambia and Ghana. Uzbekistan proposed to dissociate the two NGOs – which was accepted by Saudi Arabia and would have no doubt meant the approval of the African NGO and the postponement or rejection of ours. Austria and France, supported by Italy, spoke strongly in favour of the immediate adoption of par. 8.

In this situation the Chairman decided to put to a vote the proposal to postpone the decision. Saudi Arabia requested a short break for consultations. It is understood that during the break a high official of the UNESCO Secretariat endeavored to obtain from the Arab group that they accept the adoption of the entire decision, including par. 8, arguing that the rejection of our upgrading would make a disastrous impression and would play into the hands of those that complain of excessive politicization of UNESCO. At the renewal of the meeting the Chairman announced that the Arab group decided to accept par.8. Saudi Arabia requested that the reservations of the Arab group be recorded and the draft decision was adopted without further discussion.

The report of the Committee came before the plenary on 26 April, the last day of the session. In the absence of the Chairman it was presented by the Temporary Chairman who happened to be the Saudi Arabian delegate. He recalled that there was a discussion on the upgrading of the NGOs and that the Arab group, in spite of its reservations, agreed in the interest of non-politicization of UNESCO, to accept the draft decision. Speaking on behalf of the Arab group United Arab Emirates recalled these reservations and requested that its statement should be included in the records. Otherwise the draft decision was adopted without a vote or discussion.

Now that we have this enhanced status it gives us additional responsibilities. We must reinforce our presence at UNESCO and strengthen our cooperation with the Organization in various fields.

## **NEWS : Recent decisions of the Executive board of UNESCO of concern to Israel and to B'nai B'rith**

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PS. With regard to the Symposium on Yiddish mentioned above your attention is drawn to the website recently opened ([www.permanence-du-yiddish.org](http://www.permanence-du-yiddish.org)). It includes most of the lectures and statements made during this meeting. It is available only in French, but the lectures are in their original language (English, French or Yiddish).