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Palestine nominates birthplace of Jesus in controversial UNESCO World Heritage bid

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in Foreign Policy - June 18, 2012 - 11:00pm
http://turtlebay.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/06/19/palestine_nominates_birthpla... [1]

Palestine, recognized last October as the 195th member state by the U.N. Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), recently launched its first initiative as a full-fledged government in the Paris-based agency, nominating the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem and a traditional pilgrimage route to be listed as an endangered site on the World Heritage List.

The fate of the Palestinian bid will be decided along with 35 other sites by a commission of 21 state parties to the World Heritage Convention at a June 24-July 6 conference in St. Petersburg, Russia. But the case has already become embroiled in controversy.

The Palestinian action, of course, has broader political significance, representing a new assertion of sovereignty in a place -- Bethlehem -- where Palestinians police the streets but Israel exercises control over what goes in and out.

And the move is clearly opposed by Israel and the United States, who have objected to the Palestinian effort to secure the rights of statehood through the United Nations, rather than through negotiated settlement with Israel.

But the initiative has run into problems that have little to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In its submission, the Palestinians argued that the supposed birthplace of Jesus Christ had fallen into disrepair as a result of Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands since 1967 and that internationally sponsored emergency repairs were needed to prevent the site from collapsing. Israel, the Palestinians claim, has also imposed limits on free movement that have undercut efforts to import basic supplies to maintain the building.

But the World Heritage List's own advisory body, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), has dismissed those claims, contending in a detailed review of the nomination that the site is not actually in such dire straits and that it does not require emergency care.

The most serious threats to the preservation of the holy places, according to ICOMOS, are unregulated tourism, rampant development, and the failure of the three religious denominations -- the Greek Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Armenian

Church -- that own separate parts of the complex to agree on a conversation plan.

"The main threats to the property are lack of conservation of the Church of Nativity and possibly lack of maintenance and repair of the wider complex," reads the ICOMOS report. "As [Palestine] acknowledged in the nomination dossier this has been partly to do with the lack of collaboration between the religious communities which have not been noted for their collaboration 'over the past thousand years.'"

Indeed, the three guardians of the site, **Theophilus III**, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, **Pierbattista Pizzaballa**, the Custos of the Holy Land, and **Torkom Manoogian**, the Armenian Patriarch, have written to President **Mahmoud Abbas** to say, essentially, thanks for thinking of us but no thanks.

"Allow us first to express our appreciation for the manner by which you considered the possibility of the inclusion of the Basilica of the Nativity in the World Heritage List of UNESCO," reads the letter, which was obtained by *Turtle Bay*. "The attention and respect that you have always demonstrated for the Christian community and for the Holy Places of this Country, especially in these circumstances, are for us a comfort and important source of support for our service as guardians of the Holy Places of Christianity.

"In our opinion, we do not think it opportune to deal with this request that the Basilica and its entire complex be included in the list of World Heritage sites, due to different considerations the minor of which is that the operating conditions required by the statutes of UNESCO, necessary to include it, do not exist. Thus we hereby reserve our decision on this matter. On the other hand we do not see any reasons why the rest of the Old City of Bethlehem cannot be added in the list."

The World Heritage List's advisory council acknowledges the universal historical and religious significance of the location, which has been recognized by Christians since the 2nd century as the place of Jesus Christ's birth, and which has served as a major destination for Christian pilgrims for more than 1,500 years.

But it wants the Palestinians to withdraw their request for recognition as an emergency nominee -- which would establish a fast-track path to the Heritage List -- and submit a normal request for membership, complete with a far more detailed plan on how to maintain and preserve the site. The council, meanwhile, has drafted a draft resolution recommending that the decision be postponed.

Despite the objections, the Palestinians have shown no indication that they are prepared to withdraw their bid, according to diplomats familiar with their nomination. The final decision will be taken by the Heritage Convention's 21 state parties: Algeria, Cambodia, Colombia, Estonia, Ethiopia, France, Germany, India, Iraq, Japan, Malaysia, Mali, Mexico, Qatar, Russia, Senegal, Serbia, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates.

The opposition to the bid has raised the diplomatic stakes for the Palestinians, who have already failed to secure sufficient backing for their quest for membership in the U.N. Security Council.

"This is unlikely to strengthen the Palestinians' hands diplomatically but it makes sense from a domestic political standpoint for individual leaders to be seen as asserting Palestinian identity" on the world stage, said Hussein Ibish, senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine.

But ultimately, he added, the diplomatic "costs" of nominating the church in the face of widespread opposition will probably "outweigh the benefits."

A U.S. spokesman, Payton Knopf, said the United States is "disappointed by the Palestinians intention to push through an emergency inscription against the recommendation of UNESCO's own experts and without thoroughly consulting all stakeholders. The site is sacred to all Christians and administered jointly by Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, and Greek Orthodox authorities. As 'custodians' of the Church of Nativity, these authorities should be properly consulted on the nomination process and the planning for the site's preservation as the normally-applicable process allows."

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