

Qatar-Egypt Rivalry at Heart of UNESCO Election

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Sep 15, 2017

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Joseph Hammond is a former Fulbright fellow and journalist who had reported extensively from the Middle East and Africa.



Brief Analysis

September 15, 2017

The most interesting election of 2017 may be its least transparent. In October, the United Nations will elect the next Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in a race as wild as any presidential or parliamentary contest. The next director will manage over \$500 million in donations to the organization over a five-year term and earns a highly-visible profile in the UN and international politics writ large. Last year, outgoing UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova came within a few votes of being voted Secretary-General of the United Nations.

The UNESCO executive board interviewed the nine final candidates to succeed Irina Bokova on April 24. Four of the candidates are from four Arab League countries (Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Qatar). Other candidates are from Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Guatemala, France, and China. The Arab bloc sees this as their race to lose as there has never been an Arab UNESCO director.

But the Arab bloc is hardly united and this contest is highlighting tensions in pan-Arab politics, especially the powerful rivalry between Egypt, which is backing former government minister Moushira Khattab, and Qatar, which is putting forth Hamad Bin Abdulaziz al-Kawari, who, until quite recently, was the nation's minister of culture.

In 2013, Egyptian general and now president Abdel Fatah el-Sisi deposed Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president. Morsi was a leader within the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization long supported by Qatar. Egypt has accused Qatar of supporting both the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorist organizations in Egypt. These issues came to a head on June 5, when Egypt joined with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in an embargo against Qatar.

How the Qatar crisis will impact UNESCO is unclear. It is likely one of several reasons why Qatar would like this crisis to be over quickly. Both Egypt and Qatar are members of the UNESCO Executive Board, which will decide the issue. Qatar is unlikely to win the support of Senegal, which severed ties with Qatar at one point over the crisis. It also will not be able to draw on Chad, which downgraded its ties with Doha as well. Sudan, however, will also vote in October and maintains strong relations with Qatar; Qatar has spent millions to help save the Sudanese pyramids and assisted with other projects in Sudan.

Qatar's al-Kawari, though, has used the country's wealth to criss-cross the globe to gather support. Prior to the

ongoing crisis, a Dutch diplomatic magazine labeled al-Kawari the front-runner.

However, al-Kawari's candidacy is opposed by Jewish groups due to the volume of anti-Semitic publishing in Qatar. Simon Wiesenthal Center's Europe Office wrote an open letter to UNESCO's Executive Board chairman claiming that Qatar's booth at the Frankfurt Book Fair peddled texts containing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Qatar has also supported UN resolutions denying Jewish ties to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall.

This isn't the first time anti-Semitism has marred the UNESCO Director-General race. In 2009, the lead Arab candidate faced challenges of anti-Semitism that ultimately doomed his candidacy. Hosni Farouk, who had served for twenty years as Egypt's Minister of Culture, was the obvious lead candidate for the role. Then it was revealed that the former surrealist painter had promised the Muslim Brotherhood that he would burn any Israeli books found in Egyptian libraries.

Farouk apologized in an op-ed in *Le Monde*, and even pledged to translate the literary works of two Israelis, Amos Oz and David Grossman, into Arabic. However, the damage was done and Bokova went onto with the 2010 UNESCO election.

Egypt's rich cultural heritage has been the centerpiece of Moushira Khattab's campaign. If UNESCO is known for anything, it is its list of World Heritage sites, of which Egypt has seven, including the pyramids and the endangered ruins of Abu Mena, which was once a major Christian pilgrimage site. Khattab announced her candidacy for the UNESCO position in front of Cairo's Egyptian Museum, which faces Tahrir Square and is home to the facemask of King Tutankhamun and other artifacts from antiquity. Khattab framed her campaign as a push for greater tolerance in the Middle East and the world, saying, "From the Middle Ages onward, Egypt has a history of bringing together Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scientists and scholars, and that is what UNESCO needs to do."

Egypt has unsuccessfully run a candidate in every UNESCO election since 1999 and sees Qatar as an interloper, trying to swipe a position that Cairo believes it has long deserved for itself. Qatar's wealth has allowed it, instead, to build a world class museum and feature exhibitions of famous artists like Damien Hirst. The opening of the Jean Nouvel-designed National Museum of Qatar is set to open next year 2018. Qatar only received its first UNESCO site in 2013, after years of politicking to have Fort Zubarah, which dates back to 1938, and some ruins in its vicinity added to the list. ❖

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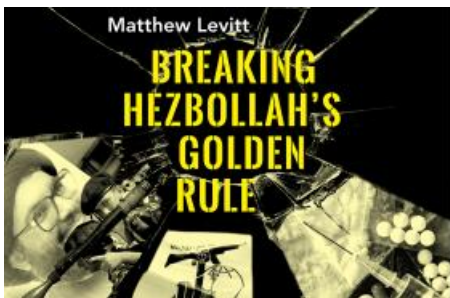
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