Israel’s Antiquities Chief Compares UNESCO to Islamic State

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The director of the Israel Antiquities Authority on Wednesday slammed UNESCO for its resolution on Jerusalem holy sites, comparing the UN cultural body to Islamic State jihadists.

Speaking at the opening of the new IAA headquarters in Jerusalem, director Yisrael Hasson said the resolution adopted last week and confirmed on Tuesday put the UN organization in the same league as IS jihadists who have destroyed and looted hundreds of archaeological sites in Syria and Iraq to fund their “caliphate.”

“Around us, world heritage treasures are being destroyed… They murdered Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad, who tried to protect heritage,” Hasson said recalling the 82-year-old retired head of antiquities in Palmyra who was beheaded by IS militants last year.

IS overran Palmyra — a UNESCO world heritage site known as the “Pearl of the Desert” — in May 2015 and used its ancient amphitheater for public executions.

The extremist group blew up temples and tower tombs as part of it campaign against pre-Islamic monuments it considers “blasphemous.”

“And recently UNESCO in essence joined this system of destruction by diplomatic means. This is essentially the same action by a diplomatic course,” Hasson said.

Damascus-born Hasson, a former Knesset member and deputy director of the Shin Bet, is the latest in a string of Israeli officials to slam the UNESCO decision, which Israel says ignores Jewish and Christian historical ties to Jerusalem’s holiest sites.

The resolution, passed Thursday in the committee stage at the United Nations cultural body, referred to the Temple Mount and Western Wall only by their Muslim names and condemned Israel as “the occupying power” for various actions taken in both sites.

The resolution was confirmed by UNESCO’s executive on Tuesday.

The IAA opened its new Jerusalem headquarters Wednesday despite the fact that the massive complex has yet to be completed.

Hasson and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke at a gala dinner replete with singers, dancers, weavers, potters and ethnic-garbed women handing out commemorative coins, but which was held amid exposed wiring, unfinished concrete floors and walls, and empty offices.

Part of the reason for showcasing the building, which is to house antiquities from across the country as well as the agency’s laboratories and offices, was to raise the additional funds necessary to finish construction.

Once completed, the IAA building will be the home for artifacts currently stored at various warehouses nationwide, as well as the Rockefeller Museum’s rare books library.

Since Israel’s capture of East Jerusalem in 1967, the Antiquities Authority has been headquartered in the Rockefeller Museum, situated near the Old City’s Herod’s Gate.

The IAA’s move into its new headquarters was not without controversy. Critics, including the left-leaning archaeology NGO Emek Shaveh, petitioned the High Court of Justice to prevent artifacts from the Rockefeller library being transferred from their East Jerusalem home to the new facility. The appeal was based on the claim that international law bans the removal of cultural property from occupied territories. The court rejected the petition.

Despite the court’s ruling, antiquities from the Rockefeller will remain at the historic 1930s building, while the library will be transferred to the new facility.