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Address by Irina Bokova,

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to the *Forum for New Diplomacy*

**“The Protection of Cultural Heritage in Times of Conflict: Challenges and
Threats”**

The Ismaili Centre, London, 27 October 2015

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here, at the Ismaili Centre London.

My gratitude goes to His Highness the Aga Khan for hosting this event and for all his work for dialogue and culture heritage preservation.

Let me thank Mr Farhad Mawani, Vice-President of the *Ismaili Council for the United Kingdom*, and the Ambassador Jean Claude Cousseran, Director-General of the *Académie Diplomatique Internationale*, as well as Mr Achille Tsaltas, Vice-President of the *International New York Times* for this timely initiative.

This is timely, because we are just beginning to grasp the full implications of increasing attacks against cultural heritage and diversity.

I recall speaking at the *Forum for New Diplomacy – Harvard Dialogues* in December 2012, on UNESCO's action to protect cultural heritage in situations of conflict.

I spoke then about the destruction of the mausoleums and mosques of Timbuktu by violent extremists.

I said then that attacks against cultural heritage were attacks against the identity of communities, against peace, against the humanity we all share.

When heritage is attacked, all cultures are attacked as there is no single culture. Any culture is the reflection of influences that have been shaped across time and decades.

Attacks on culture and cultural heritage are aimed at weakening the ground of identity, the social fabric of societies and eliminate all possibilities of renewal.

Almost three years later, attacks against cultural heritage and diversity are accelerating.

Cultural heritage has been attacked in the past -- to destroy sources of belonging, to weaken grounds for renewal.

We need only recall the conflicts in Southeast Europe and the deliberate destruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar.

What we are seeing today is new, in scale and nature.

And I believe this calls for new policies by States and the international community.

We all remember the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, ordered by the Taliban, in 2001.

The Times quoted Mullah Omar then as saying:

"Muslims should be proud of smashing idols."

Ten years later, in 2012, we saw violent extremists take control of Timbuktu and destroy the city's millennial mausoleums and mosques.

These mausoleums are UNESCO World Heritage sites. The concept of World Heritage, which represents cultural heritage of outstanding universal value, is a concept and label that stands for dialogue, that stands for building bridges, peace and reconciliation.

The French news agency AFP then interviewed a man said to be part of the extremist group.

“There is no world heritage,” the man claimed. *“It doesn't exist.”*

Today, we are no longer seeing isolated cases of destruction.

We see the deployment of a coherent strategy of what I call cultural cleansing, a strategy that has no respect for other cultures or religious and that seeks to eradicate ethnic and religious communities.

Never before in recent history have we seen such brutal and systematic attacks against cultural heritage and diversity, used as a tactic of war, to intimidate populations, to disseminate hatred, to weaken the grounds for peace.

This strategy is gathering pace.

On 30 August, the Temple of Bêl in Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage, was destroyed by explosives.

The museum of Mosul has been vandalised.

Parts of ancient Hatra have been bulldozed.

Nimrud has been dynamited.

The Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo has become a battlefield.

On 4 October, the Arch of Triumph in Palmyra was blown up.

In Iraq, two of four UNESCO World Heritage sites -- Hatra and Ashur – and at least nine other heritage sites have intentionally been destroyed.

In Syria, all six UNESCO World Heritage sites have been damaged by fighting -- four have been severely affected, including the Old Cities of Aleppo and Damascus.

Eight sites on the World Heritage Tentative list have been affected, destroyed or severely impacted by looting and illegal excavations, and at least six museums have suffered damage.

In Libya, at least eight religious sites have been damaged or destroyed, and many other sites remain threatened by looting and desecration.

In Yemen, we have seen the destruction of the Citadel of Taz, the Temple of Nakrah, in Barraquish and the Dhamar Museum -- the fabled Marib Dam and the Old Cities of Sana'a and Sada'a have been severely damaged by bombing.

Across the region, illegal excavations have taken on industrial scale, financing violent extremism.

Cultural cleansing is fuelled by a propaganda campaign, deployed on the Internet and through social media, targeting young people, to radicalise and create a sense of impunity for appalling acts.

An estimated 60,000 twitter accounts support Da'esh today, with an average of one thousand followers.

This hate campaign speaks to young people in a language they understand, and it is increasingly effective.

The number of foreign terrorist fighters increased by 70 percent between mid-2014 and March 2015.

There are today around 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters, from over 100 States, active in Syria and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen.

Cultural cleansing involves massive violations of human rights, the persecution of communities on cultural and religious grounds.

Muslims, Yezidhis, Shabaks, Assyrians, Christians...all are attacked.

Cultural cleansing involves the killing of all alternative voices of peace and dialogue – think of barbaric killing of the great scholar and humanist and great friend of UNESCO, Khaled Al Assad, in Palmyra.

Cultural, cleansing involves the destruction of schools, the horrendous killing of journalists.

It seeks to eliminate all sources of diversity and pluralism, to impose a single, exclusive vision of society and culture.

The history of this region is one of constant dialogue between different peoples and communities, across all cultural and religious lines.

It is precisely this history violent extremists are attacking -- to destroy symbols and voices of tolerance and diversity, to eliminate evidence that contradicts their exclusive and violent vision.

On the ground, cultural cleansing is tearing at the fabric of society in Iraq and Syria, weakening sources of identity, memory and belonging.

This is devastating for individuals and communities.

It undermines possibilities for future dialogue, reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Violent extremists do not choose between attacks against culture and those against people – they attack *both*.

Extremists are afraid of history as history delegitimises them.

This is why we need to defend both.

This is about protecting values from the past that are important for societies today and tomorrow, for reconciliation, for peace.

This is about culture as a force of resilience and resistance, to face adversity and rebuild.

This is why cultural cleansing is no longer only a cultural emergency.

It has become a security issue and peacebuilding imperative.

This calls for new ways of thinking and acting.

This means acting outside the “culture box”-- by building a broad coalition, including actors in the security and humanitarian sectors, crafting policies that connect the dots between humanitarian, security and cultural imperatives.

We have strong normative foundations to build on – including the UNESCO 1954 Convention, which prohibits targeting cultural heritage or using it for military purposes, the UNESCO’s 1970 Convention, to tackle the illicit trafficking of cultural property, the 1972 Convention on the Protection of the Cultural and Natural Heritage as well as the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Let me underline also the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which declares the intentional destruction of buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, when there is no military justification, as a war crime.

On 26 September, the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Ms Fatou Bensouda, and the authorities of Mali and Niger transferred the first suspect accused of such war crimes in Timbuktu, Mali.

This first case, strongly supported by UNESCO, breaks new ground because we should stand very firmly against impunity of such crimes.

We are working in the same direction for Syria and Iraq.

UNESCO is mobilising the world to stop the illicit trafficking of cultural objects.

Following the adoption by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199, which was a turning point as it explicitly made the connection between the cultural, security and humanitarian imperatives, UNESCO has acted with INTERPOL, the

United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime, to support Governments, to strengthen legislation, to build capacity, to stop this channel of financing of terrorism.

To date, 34 countries have sent reports to UNESCO on implementing Resolution 2199, showing how they have strengthened legislation, reinforced coordination among services, seized objects and shared information.

This international cooperation is vital, and we have good examples of success here, In United Kingdom – thanks to the Red List of Afghanistan Antiquities at Risk, published by the International Council of Museums supported by the United Kingdom Foreign Office, English customs officials at Heathrow Airport were able to intercept and confiscate 3.4 tons of stolen objects between 2007 and 2009, representing over 1,500 pieces.

I repeat: 3.4 tons of stolen objects.

The British Government, in cooperation with the British Museum, returned the objects to the National Museum of Kabul. And this is more than just returning objects: it is a part of Afghan national identity that has been restored that day.

On 27 April, I briefed the Members of the United Nations Security Council on the scale of the challenge and how to respond.

On 28 May, I spoke before the United Nations General Assembly in support of a Resolution, co-sponsored by Germany and Iraq, on “Saving the Cultural Heritage of Iraq.”

In July, at the World Heritage Committee in Bonn, Germany, with the Secretary of State Maria Böhmer, I launched a *Global Coalition for the Protection of Cultural Heritage*.

On 15 September, I spoke before the European Parliament, welcoming European legislation to combat illicit trafficking and calling for stronger import regulations.

On 27 September, I launched the new global initiative, *Protecting Cultural Heritage — An Imperative for Humanity*, with Italy and Jordan, as well as UNODC and INTERPOL, to strengthen action to protect cultural heritage in conflicts.

This is how we must respond – I believe our response should be to act across the board, bringing all actors together across the world, building capacity, strengthening legislation, stepping up coordination.

We must act also to counter the messages of violent extremism.

Some speak about a clash of civilisations -- I don't believe this.

People speak about a clash of religions -- we must reject this idea.

This is about those who defend humanity as one, who defend living together on the basis of equality and respect and those who reject the vision of humanity as a whole – including online.

People speak of a new generation of *digital natives* -- I believe we must foster a new generation of digital citizens.

This is why I went to the University of Baghdad last March, to launch a global social media campaign, *#Unite4Heritage* -- to counter hate propaganda and strengthen the narrative of shared values and common heritage.

This campaign has taken off across the world, engaging millions of young people.

This was how we heard the story of Syria's 'monuments men' who sandbagged the Ma'arra Museum, to shield it from future bombing attacks, and who buried cultural treasures to protect them from looting.

These are everyday heroes, risking their lives to save culture on the frontline.

This is our response to violent extremism.

This involves putting forward education as a force for peace, it also involves questioning ourselves how we teach history and culture in schools.

We must provide young people with skills to think critically and competences for dialogue across cultures.

I see this as the new frontline for hearts and minds across the world.

UNESCO feels a great sense of responsibility in this context.

We have spearheaded global citizenship education as Secretariat to the United Nations Secretary-General's *Global Education First Initiative*.

On 6 November, UNESCO is organising the first-ever *High-Level Conference on Countering Violent Extremism through Education*, with the United States and partners.

UNESCO is developing a *Teachers' Guide for Countering Violent Extremism*, to support educators across the world.

UNESCO brings all this to support education for Internally Displaced Persons and refugees, in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, with the backing of the European Union and the State of Kuwait.

This is why UNESCO is promoting the civic engagement of young women and men and youth initiatives in 10 countries across the Mediterranean.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My key message is that hard power will not be enough to defeat violent extremism.

We need soft power.

We need education, inclusion, freedom of expression, awareness of our shared values and heritage.

As you know, UNESCO was created seventy years ago, in London, at the Institute for Civil Engineering, after a devastating war.

Our Constitution opens with memorable lines:

Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.

Seventy years later, I believe the 'soft power' of UNESCO has never been so relevant.

The stakes are high -- but we can act, as we have in the past.

UNESCO helped save the temples of Nubia, in Egypt.

UNESCO rebuilt the old bridge of Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In 2013, I visited Timbuktu, at the invitation of President Francois Hollande, and promised to rebuild the destroyed mausoleums.

On 18 July, 2015, I returned to Timbuktu, to celebrate the rebuilding of all 14 mausoleums, with local leaders, workers and communities, with the Minister of Culture of Mali, H.E Rama N'Diaye Ramatoulaye Diallo.

This shows what we can do when we stand together, to defend the great heritage of Islamic culture, to protect a history that belongs to us all.

This is a lesson of solidarity, a lesson of humanity.

This is our response to violent extremism.

Thank you.