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Organización
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

at the Royal Institute of International Affairs

Cultural Heritage: Extremism's New Target

London, 1 July 2015

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you, Martin Roth. Let me underline the importance of our cooperation and the leadership of the V&A Museum, embodied also most recently in the London Declaration.

I am deeply honoured to be here.

Let me start by expressing deep condolences to the people and the Government of the United Kingdom for the tragic loss of life that followed the terrorist attack in Tunisia – this highlights the scale of threat posed by violent extremism.

This requires greater resolve, as well as sharper discussion on how to act most effectively.

This is the importance of research institutes, and Chatham House is unique here, exemplifying an idea taken up by think tanks across the world.

This is the idea that international politics prospers through informed debate, by crossing scholarship with policy-making.

This idea has never been so important.

These are turbulent times, when the need for innovative thinking has never been so vital.

I was honoured to speak at Chatham House in 2011 on UNESCO's role in fostering collective action on key public goods, in education, culture, the sciences, communication and information.

I spoke then about UNESCO's 'soft power' ... at a time of global economic crisis... when analysts were debating a 'G-zero world' and the need for stronger international leadership...

The world has changed since 2011.

The turbulence remains.

The turbulence of societies undergoing transformation.

The turbulence of poverty and inequality.

The turbulence of climate change.

The turbulence of enduring conflict.

All this remains -- and so does the importance of international leadership by States, bolstered by the United Nations, by an effective, multilateral order.

Saying this doesn't make it happen.

This requires bold thinking and audacity.

Audacity was the inspiration that gave birth to UNESCO 70 years ago, in the wake of the Second World War.

UNESCO is based in Paris, but it was born here, at the Institute of Civil Engineers, across St James' Park.

Our Constituent Conference took place on November, 1945, presided by Ms Ellen Wilkinson, Minister of Education of Great Britain.

The idea of creating such an organisation emerged in 1942, when the United Kingdom organised regular Conferences of Allied Ministers of Education.

I am always quite astonished by this.

These Conferences brought together ministers from governments-in-exile, from countries under occupation.

The war was far from won.

Nonetheless, despite everything, the United Kingdom was promoting cooperation in education as a force for a more lasting peace.

UNESCO was forged by this conviction that, when peace was won, new ways were needed to protect it.

UNESCO's 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.

The phrase is from Prime Minister Clement Atlee.

The Organization bears the deep imprint of this country's history and values.

Seventy years later, I believe the 'soft power' of UNESCO has never been so relevant, at a time when values have moved to the heart of conflict, when culture is on the front line.

Culture has always been the victim of war -- as collateral damage, from direct targeting, from looting.

What we see today is new.

It is new in scale and nature.

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

Think back to 2012, when rebel groups took control of Timbuktu in Mali and started to destroy its millennial mausoleums and mosques.

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

"There is no world heritage," this man declared, in reply to UNESCO's call for its protection.

"It doesn't exist."

This expresses the nature of the challenge from violent extremism, from visions of culture that are narrow and exclusive.

Since then, in Iraq and Syria, along with a humanitarian crisis, we see unprecedented attacks against culture.

We see systematic violations of human rights and the persecution of people on ethnic and religious grounds.

We see sustained efforts to eliminate the culture of coexistence that is the DNA of this region.

We see the intentional destruction of irreplaceable landmarks, and organised looting for illicit trafficking.

We see the destruction of schools, attacks on journalists.

All of this is part of the same strategy, which I call 'cultural cleansing.'

This strategy seeks to destroy identities by eliminating heritage and cultural markers.

It seeks to render the fabric of societies, by weakening sources of belonging and renewal.

It attacks pluralism, to impose exclusive visions of identity.

The museum of Mosul has been vandalised.

Parts of ancient Hatra have been bulldozed.

Nimrud has been dynamited.

The great Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo in Syria has become a battlefield.

Media reports say heritage landmarks at Palmyra have been rigged with explosives.

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

In Syria, all six UNESCO World Heritage sites have been damaged by fighting.

Eight sites on the World Heritage Tentative list have been damaged, destroyed or severely impacted by looting and illegal excavations.

At least six museums have been damaged and looted, and ten other heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed, along with private houses and collections.

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

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

These are attacks against the people of this region, against their history of diversity.

The Omayyad Mosque of Damascus was initially a Greek temple and then a Christian Church, until the advent of Islam.

Palmyra bears witness to constant dialogue between Greco-Roman influences, the Persian Empire and Arab culture.

All this shows there is no such thing as “pure culture” -- cultures are enriched through exchange and dialogue, and this is what extremists are seeking to destroy.

All this is taken forward in a region where State power is deeply contested, where conflict rages, where there are ‘shatter zones’ beyond control.

This is fertile soil for violent extremism, and it is fuelled by wider trends.

Across the world, societies are undergoing transformation, facing new questions about diversity, at a time of increasing migration and a revolution in communication and information, where the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ are blurring.

Cultural cleansing is built into a global propaganda campaign taken forward on the Internet, through social media, to destabilize societies and recruit foreign fighters.

The siren call of violent extremism is strong.

Some 50,000-70,000 twitter accounts support Daesh today, with an average of one thousand followers.

First analysis of this media campaign shows it is high quality, multilingual, and targeted to specific audiences, drawing on cultural references to major films, video games and music videos – creating ‘stars’ from extremists, creating a ‘cool’ image of extremism...

This campaign speaks to young people in their language, and it is effective.

On 29 May, the United Nations Security Council held a meeting on “Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts (Foreign Terrorist Fighters).”

According to the *United Nations Al-Qaida Sanctions Monitoring Team*, the number of foreign terrorist fighters increased by 70 percent between mid-2014 and March 2015.

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

The stakes are high.

Cultural cleansing is a violation of human rights for women and men, for communities.

It also undermines the possibility for future dialogue and peacebuilding.

Culture is far more than buildings and stones.

This is about identities and belonging.

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

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

This is why I believe safeguarding cultural heritage is a security imperative and peacebuilding imperative.

Violent extremists don't destroy heritage as collateral damage.

They target monuments and sites, to strike societies at their core.

They loot, to finance terrorist activities, to sustain oppression.

I believe we are witnessing a new form of conflict, in what is a global war for hearts and minds.

Just a few years ago, I remember UNESCO faced criticism for denouncing the destruction of heritage in situations of conflict.

People said:

...UNESCO is out of touch -- people are dying and they only care about stones

This has changed.

Violent extremists don't choose between attacks against culture and people – they are attacking both.

We must defend both together.

Cultural cleansing is a violation of human rights — it is also a war crime, according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and an attack against the humanity we all share.

It was the Abbasid ruler, Al-Mansur, who gave Baghdad the name Dar al-Salam – *House of Peace* – when it was a capital of the Islamic Golden Age.

This history belongs to all of us -- it is our responsibility to defend it from all challenges.

This is why I went to Bagdad and Erbil last November, to hand over the World Heritage certificate for the Citadel.

This is why I returned in March, to stand with the Government and people of Iraq for national unity.

In February, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2199, on the financing of terrorism, for which UNESCO strongly advocated, which recognizes the link between destruction and looting.

On 27 April, I briefed the Members of the 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.”

I spoke in Paris before the Small Ministerial Meeting of the global Anti-ISIL Coalition.

All this shows change is happening -- a change of mind-set, in the way we understand this challenge.

Hard power will not be enough to defeat violent extremism – this view is gaining ground.

We need soft power.

We need education, inclusion, freedom of expression.

This is UNESCO's work.

In Iraq, we are strengthening the education system and training teachers.

In Afghanistan, we are providing the police with literacy and empowering girls and women through skills and education.

In response to cultural cleansing, UNESCO is acting across the board.

First, to mitigate risks of destruction and pillaging, through monitoring and capacity-building.

Second, to fight illicit trafficking, working with neighbouring countries, and all international partners.

Third, to document what has been destroyed and prepare for reconstruction.

Fourth, to counter the propaganda of hatred, through new forms of communication.

We are working with the International Criminal Court, to ensure those who destroy heritage are brought to justice for war crimes.

This calls for intelligence sharing, satellite imagery, stronger cooperation.

UNESCO is finalizing an agreement with the *United Nations Institute for Training and Research Operational Satellite Applications Programme* – UNOSAT -- to monitor heritage through satellite images in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

I have launched comprehensive *Emergency Responses Plans* for Syria and Iraq -- with the support of Japan, the European Union, INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, ICOMOS, ICCROM, and others – and we are working with all partners, globally and in the region, including INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT), the World Customs Organisation and the International Council of Museums, to prevent illicit trafficking.

UNESCO has created a *Syrian Observatory of Cultural Heritage*, and I am encouraged by developments in Bosra (Syria) where fighters have agreed to prevent the destruction of the World Heritage Site.

UNESCO is leading implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199.

On 1 April, I convened key partners to UNESCO Headquarters to translate the Resolution into action.

Progress will be presented to the Security Council this month, with reports from some 25 countries so far.

Concretely, seizures and restitutions of looted artefacts are taking place every day, reconstruction plans (for Aleppo, for example) are being prepared, thanks to cooperation between national police, customs units, experts, architects, cultural heritage curators and UNESCO.

Two days ago, in Bonn, Germany, I launched a *Global Coalition for the Protection of Cultural Heritage* -- with the Minister of Tourism and Heritage of Iraq, Mr Adel Shershah, Minister of State of Germany, Ms Maria Böhmer, Executive Director of INTERPOL, Mr Tim Morris, President of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, Mr Gustavo Araoz, and Director of the Pergamon Museum, Mr Markus Hilgert.

Our goal is to join Governments, international organisations, with cultural institutions and NGOs across the world, to stand together against cultural cleansing.

I am determined to connect the dots between cultural, humanitarian and security professionals, so the protection of heritage is built into all emergency responses.

We must also respond to hatred campaigns.

When violent extremists say humanity is not a single community with shared rights and values -- we must respond.

When they say world heritage doesn't exist -- we must respond by showing that exchange and dialogue between cultures are the driving force of all history.

This is why I went to the University of Baghdad in March to launch a global social media campaign -- #Unite4Heritage -- to counter the propaganda of hatred, to strengthen the narrative of shared values and common heritage, and I invite all of you to join this campaign.

This is linked to our work on *World Heritage in Young Hands*.

These goals guide the new integrated framework of action UNESCO launched two weeks ago -- *Empowering Youth to Build Peace*.

Our goal is to equip young people with knowledge, skills and values to engage as global citizens, resilient to radicalization and violent extremism.

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, and I am going there in two days to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the reconstruction.

In Afghanistan, the Kabul Museum was restored and reopened despite a precarious security situation.

“A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive.”

These words were inscribed in front of the Museum in 2003 – this is what we are fighting for.

In Mali, UNESCO has almost finished rebuilding the fourteen mausoleums destroyed in 2012.

This happened with the participation of local communities, and it marks a milestone in the peace process.

The protection of culture has been integrated into the mandate of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Mali.

We are training peacekeepers on safeguarding heritage for resilience and recovery, and some 8,000 heritage passports have been distributed.

Mali may be the first time that the destruction of cultural heritage enters into the overall prosecution of such conflicts – this would be a milestone.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The importance of this work extends far beyond Mali.

This matters for all societies, for each of us – because cultural cleansing is an attack on the common humanity and heritage we all share.

Culture is what gives us meaning and strength, to live today, to look to the future, to resist, to recover, to join forces, for the good of all.

This is what we are fighting for in Iraq and Syria.

So, Ladies and Gentlemen, these are the stakes.

Heritage stands on the frontline of conflict -- it must be at the frontline of complex and multifaceted strategies for peace.

Thank you.