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Organización  
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para la Educación,  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
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联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Message from Irina Bokova,  
Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of opening of the exhibition “People, Book, Land, *the  
3,500 year Relationship of the Jewish People with the Holy Land*”**

*Delivered by Mr Francesco Bandarin, Assistant Director-General for Culture*

**Vatican, 2 December 2015**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honoured to read the following statement on behalf of Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General.

Professor Alberto Trevisol, Rettore Magnifico Università Urbaniana,

Excellency Zion Evrony, Ambassador of Israel to the Holy See,

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Associate Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center,

This exhibition has a special importance in these turbulent times.

These are times when violent extremism, fuelled by hatred and sectarianism, kills individuals and attacks the heritage of all cultures.

These are times, when 70 years after the Second World War, antisemitism is on the rise, fuelled by prejudice and ignorance.

Against ignorance and hatred, against racism and anti-Semitism, we must also respond with stronger knowledge and education.

Understanding history is the starting point for peace.

This is the spirit of this Exhibition on *People, Book, Land: The 3,500 year Relationship of the Jewish People with the Holy Land*, organised with UNESCO and the *Simon Wiesenthal Centre*.

This Exhibition is an invitation to explore the profound, unassailable connection between the Jewish people and the Holy Land.

It is an answer to all those who seek to distort history, to deny facts in order to fuel hatred and prejudice.

We launched this together, with the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, at UNESCO, in June 2014.

The Exhibition was opened at the United Nations Headquarters last March and at the United States Congress last week.

It was presented at the Knesset a few days ago.

It is a special honour to open the Exhibition today at the Vatican, in Rome, the "*città eterna*", in this city of which is a UNESCO World Heritage site and a point of cultural and spiritual convergence for billions of people, embodying a heritage held in common that we must defend together.

This city is a point of reference for dialogue among cultures and religions.

In turbulent times, we need our shared message of tolerance and respect to resonate loudly and clearly – across all cultures, and religions. And this joint message and dialogue can only thrive and last if it builds on mutual understanding and knowledge of history.

This resonates at the heart of this exhibition today.

This was also the strong message of his Holiness Pope Francis, with whom I had the honour to meet earlier on 2 March 2015, and to discuss intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

On that occasion, his Holiness declared that “*education and knowledge is an essential dimension of human dignity.*”

This message of education and knowledge was carried forward by His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness, at UNESCO’s headquarters, when he spoke of the role of education -- which should not be limited to reading and writing, but is above all an invitation to open our eyes on the beauty of this world, and the equal dignity of all cultures.

This spirit guides all UNESCO’s action to fight against racism, to counter Anti-Semitism, to advance Holocaust education – a unique programme in the UN System – and this helps us to combat and denounce anti-Semitism today, in whatever disguise it may take.

Violent extremists are seeking to destroy the heritage and the living traditions of *all* communities and religions in the Middle East -- Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Mosques are destroyed, churches are burnt, synagogues are targeted.

Against this violence, we must unite and offer another path, to shine light on the dialogue of cultures, to show the myriad connections among them that bind us together as a single family.

This is how we can build real peace in the minds of men and women.

This is the mission of UNESCO, founded 70 years ago.

And this is why this exhibition is so important.