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pour l'éducation,  
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Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

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**Address by Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the Kings College visit**

**“Culture under Attack – Responding to Violent Extremism”**

**Kings College, London, 3 February 2016**

Professor Theo Farrell,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Professors and Students,

This is a distinct honour.

Kings College London is one of the United Kingdom's most venerable institutions of higher education.

It is one of the world's greatest universities today.

... a university at the cutting edge of teaching and research...

....a university that has always engaged with society and politics, with the world.

I see this as the mission of higher education today.

To bridge learning with society.

To explore the challenges of today and tomorrow.

I know the Department of War Studies is very special in this respect.

One of the world's top departments, War Studies is unique in its approach to the study of conflict and security ... bringing historians and political scientists together – *this is already difficult!* – with sociologists, regional experts, scientists, intelligence and development specialists – all to understand the causes, conduct, experience and ramifications of war.

This has never been so important in a world that is increasingly turbulent, where conflicts are changing shape, frontlines are moving, culture is under attack.

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

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

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.

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

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

These are UNESCO World Heritage sites, embodying the concept that heritage carries outstanding universal value.

In 2012, the French news agency AFP interviewed a man said to be part of the extremist group controlling Timbuktu.

*"There is no world heritage,"* the man claimed.

*"It doesn't exist."*

This captures the challenge we face.

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

We see systematic violations of human rights, 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, horrendous attacks on journalists.

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

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

It seeks to render social fabrics, by weakening sources of belonging and renewal.

It attacks pluralism, to impose exclusive visions of identity.

Never before in recent history have we seen such systematic attacks against cultural heritage and diversity, as a tactic of war – and this is why it is so important that I am here, at the Department of War Studies.

Unfortunately, the strategy is gathering pace.

Last month, we confirmed the destruction of Monastery of Deir Mar Elia / St Elijah's, in Mosul, Iraq.

For 1,400 years, this Monastery was a place of worship, accepted by people of all faiths.

Last year, it was levelled – as part of a wider strategy that has seen Iraq’s Christian population drop from 1.3 million in 2000 to 300,000 today.

This concerns Christian and many other communities, with Muslims carrying the heaviest burden.

The two processes – attacking people, destroying heritage -- go together.

Following the destruction, Father Paul Thabit Habib from Erbil said:

*“Our Christian history in Mosul is being barbarically levelled. We see it as an attempt to expel us from Iraq, finishing our existence in this land.”*

These, indeed, are the stakes.

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

In August, Palmyra’s Temple of Bêl, UNESCO World Heritage site, 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.

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

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

In Libya, at least eight religious sites have been damaged or destroyed.

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

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

The Internet is one front in this struggle.

Violent extremism is fuelled by a global media campaign, targeting young people, to radicalise and recruit.

Some 60,000 twitter accounts support Daesh today, with an average of one thousand followers.

This campaign is high quality, multilingual, and well-targeted, drawing on major films, video games and music videos...

The siren call is alarmingly strong.

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

Today, there are 30,000 foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq, in 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 targeted.

Cultural cleansing involves the elimination of voices of peace – we all recall the barbaric killing of the great scholar, friend of UNESCO, Khaled Al Assad, in

Palmyra, killed because he refused to abandon the heritage he spent his life protecting...

The history of this region is one of dialogue across cultural and religious lines.

It is this history violent extremists are attacking.

As the Jordanian Foreign Minister said, they attack heritage, because they fear the power of history to de-legitimise their claims.

They attack culture, because they reject the message of dialogue it carries.

Let me be clear.

Culture is 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.

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

This is why I am convinced safeguarding cultural heritage is a security and peacebuilding imperative today.

I believe we face a new global war for hearts and minds.

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

Responding calls for new ways of thinking.

It means acting outside the “culture box” — by building broad coalitions, by connecting the dots between humanitarian, security and cultural imperatives.

First, we must fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural objects from Iraq and Syria.

We have strong legal foundations to build on.

This includes the UNESCO 1970 *Convention against the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property*.

One year ago, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199 broke new ground, banning cultural trade from Iraq and Syria, under Chapter VII of the Charter.

This is, in itself, a major step, linking cultural issues and security matters.

Tasked by the Security Council, UNESCO is supporting Governments to strengthen legislation, build capacities, deepen information-sharing.

We have brought together 36 reports from Member States on measures taken to reinforce coordination.

UNESCO is working with a board coalition of partners, including INTERPOL, the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime, the World Customs Organization, UNIDROIT, many others.

I will be in Italy this month to establish the first *Task Force Unite4heritage*, bringing together, for the first time, military and culture professionals, to intervene in situations of crisis.

With UNODC, we have launched a training programme for judges and prosecutors - - to connect the fight against illicit trafficking with that of money laundering and corruption.

There is a lot of false information circulating about the scale of illicit trafficking – we need better data, we need better research to identify trafficking routes, and this is the importance of information-sharing among States, as well as the work of such institutions as Kings College London – I am pleased UNESCO is establishing the

first *UNESCO Chair in Cultural Property Protection and Peace* at Newcastle University.

The United Kingdom is very active, including through the efforts of the *Art Recovery Group*, with its database of hundreds of thousands of cultural objects from Syria — scanning online platforms and auction houses to ensure none appear on the market.

This is why we need to bolster coordination among law enforcement agencies, experts, museums and auction houses – and we are working with the World Customs organization, to improve the *ARCHEO* communication tool, to facilitate the identification of cultural heritage fraud and suspicious items.

All this is bearing fruit.

Governments are adjusting and strengthening legislation, capacity-building and training have started, and I am determined to continue.

Antiquities from Syria and Iraq have been seized in Finland, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, the United States, as well as the United Kingdom -- this must continue, so they can be returned to where they belong.

Here in the United Kingdom – let me highlight our cooperation with the British Museum, as well as with the V&A Museum.

Thanks to the Red List of Afghanistan Antiquities at Risk, published by the International Council of Museums, supported by the Foreign Office -- British customs officials at Heathrow Airport were able to confiscate 3.4 tons of stolen objects between 2007 and 2009, representing over 1,500 pieces.

...3.4 tons...

The British Government, in cooperation with the British Museum, returned the objects to the National Museum of Kabul.



This is more than just returning objects -- this is about bolstering Afghan identity at a time when this is essential.

Just one more example.

Last year, the United States Ambassador to Iraq joined the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities, Mr Adil Fahad Shirshab, to return 700 objects recovered during a US Delta Force raid, on 16 May, 2015, on the Syrian compound of a senior officer of Daesh, Abu Sayyaf.

The objects included more than seventy carefully-wrapped antiquities and Islamic artworks, including pieces from the Mosul Museum, and antiquities from Syria itself.

This is proof of looting at archaeological sites in Syria and Iraq, and the connection to financing terrorism.

Second, we must reinforce preventive actions.

Today, in Iraq and Syria, ordinary citizens and museum professionals – modern-day ‘monument men and women’-- are risking their lives to protect their culture.

They need training and support – in Syria, Iraq, across the region, UNESCO is leading action to build capacity in preventive conservation, emergency risk management, improving inventories.

UNESCO has also shared with concerned State parties precise coordinates of each World Heritage Site, to prevent them from being targeted under the provisions of the 1954 Hague *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*.

Third, we must bolster international cooperation across the board.

Violent extremism is a global challenge -- we must act at the same level.

In this respect, 2015 was marked by key resolutions in the United Nations General Assembly, UNESCO, ISESCO, the European Union and other international bodies.

UNESCO has launched a global coalition to strengthen coordination between all core partners, including armed forces, INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, museums and the art market.

States must continue to strengthen cooperation, through intelligence sharing and joint action.

Countries like France have started to integrate the protection of heritage in training their armed forces, and this is an important step.

Let me also underline 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, 2015, 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 case, strongly supported by UNESCO, breaks new ground – we must stand against impunity of such crimes, and we are working in the same direction for Syria and Iraq.

Lastly, we must counter the propaganda of violent extremism.

When violent extremists say humanity is not a single community -- we must respond.

When they say diversity is dangerous, tolerance unacceptable – we must respond by showing dialogue between cultures as the driving force of all history.

Last March, I went to the University of Baghdad to launch a new global social media campaign -- *#Unite4Heritage* -- to counter hate propaganda, to strengthen the narrative of shared values.

The same goal guides UNESCO's action to fight radicalisation on the Internet, through youth engagement, media literacy.

Violent extremists promote fear and division.

We must respond with skills for critical thinking, opportunities for civic engagement, competences for intercultural dialogue.

No one is born a violent extremist.

Violent extremists are made, they are fuelled.

I see this as the new frontline today -- in conflict situations, in refugee camps, in societies across the world.

Education is the way to disarm processes that can lead to violent extremism, by undermining prejudice, fighting ignorance and indifference.

This guides all UNESCO's action to promote education as a tool to prevent violent extremism, working with countries across the world.

We held the first ever Global Conference of Ministers of Education last November on education to prevent violent extremism.

At the invitation of the President of the United States, I spoke on this at the *Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism*, last September in New York – and I recall well H.E David Cameron's words about the power of education.

This is why UNESCO is working to advance global citizenship education, to teach the history of the Holocaust and other genocides, to fight discrimination today and prevent new violence.

We must also act on the ground.

In Iraq, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Jordan, UNESCO is investing in education for young Internally Displaced Persons and refugees -- the world cannot afford to lose this

generation to violence, and this is the message I am bringing tomorrow to the Syria Conference, convened by the UK, Norway, Germany and Kuwait and the UN.

The same spirit guides the *UNESCO NetMed Youth* project, to support young women and men in 10 countries around the Mediterranean.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNESCO was created seventy one years ago, here in London, at the Institute for Civil Engineering, presided by Ms Ellen Wilkinson, Minister of Education.

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 impressed by this.

These Conferences gathered 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 lasting peace.

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.*

This is partly inspired by Prime Minister Clement Atlee.

Seventy one years on, I believe this vision has never rung so true.

'Hard power' is not enough for peace – we need 'soft power' also...education, freedom of expression, intercultural dialogue...

This is not a clash of civilisation.

This is a divide between those who reject living together and those who believe in humanity as a single community.

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.

Last year, on 18 July, 2015, I returned to Timbuktu, to celebrate UNESCO rebuilding all 14 mausoleums, with local leaders and communities.

This matters for the people of Mali.

This matters for each of us...

...because cultural cleansing is an attack on the humanity we all share.

... because culture is what gives us meaning and strength, to live today, to look to the future, to recover, to join forces.

This is what we are fighting for.

This is our response to violent extremism.

Thank you.