

Mr. President of the General Conference,

Mr. Chair of the Executive Board,

Madam Director-General,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor and a privilege to address the 39th General Conference of UNESCO. For decades, this organization has defended an inclusive vision for humanity and safeguarded a place for education, science and culture. Lebanon is proud to be one of its founding members.

Let me begin by sincerely congratulating Mrs. Audrey Azoulay on her election as Director General of this prestigious organization. Lebanon fully supports the Director General's program for the reform of UNESCO, which we hope will make this organization even more effective within the scope of its mandate.

-Mr. President,

Lebanon and UNESCO are bound by special ties. Our country is fortunate to be home to five UNESCO classified World Heritage Sites, and is seeking to add the Tripoli International Fair as a Modern Heritage Site. This fair, designed in 1963 by famed Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, is one of the largest exhibition centers in the world.

UNESCO occupies a privileged position among Lebanon's partners in the international community and our cooperation spans various fronts.

In the realm of education, UNESCO is working closely with Lebanon to provide primary and secondary education to all children by 2030. The Lebanese Government is committed to expanding access to free education for vulnerable children. Today one child in four in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee, displaced by war and deeply affected by conflict. The government has been able to waive school fees for this population, but the ongoing situation has strained our limited resources. We call on members of the international community to share this responsibility.

In the domain of social and human sciences, our collaboration with UNESCO has also been fruitful. We take pride in the choice of Byblos, a coastal city that was the cradle of the alphabet, as host city for the International Center for Human Sciences. This center promotes democracy and the culture of peace by sponsoring research on key issues around democratic transitions, with a particular focus on the role of young women and men.

In the realm of physical cultural heritage, Lebanon has made significant progress in fighting the illicit trafficking of cultural property and implementing international conventions, including the 1970 UNESCO convention. We have worked jointly

with UNESCO's office in Beirut to raise awareness and fight the trafficking of antiquities and cultural property.

We recognize that culture stands at the crossroads of social advancement and innovation and creates opportunities for economic development. To set a vision for Lebanon's cultural revival, we recently launched a five-year strategy and plan to support growth across various sectors.

In tandem with this plan, we are strengthening laws that protect ancient buildings and monuments, and establishing a national cultural policy on intangible heritage. Across these efforts, we look to UNESCO and our partners in the international community for their valued support and guidance.

-Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Without a doubt, the proliferation of extremist ideologies is one of the biggest threats facing our civilized world today. We are firm believers that positive exchanges in culture, education, and the arts are an important tool in this long and difficult war against radical extremism, which cannot be fought through military means alone.

We believe that UNESCO, which has, since its inception devoted itself to promoting understanding, dialogue and peace among the peoples of the world, has a central role to play in confronting extremism.

During the last UN General Assembly, the President of the Republic, General Michel Aoun, issued a call for Lebanon to serve as a center for dialogue among civilizations at a time when hatred and wars are ravaging countries. Lebanon is well positioned to host this exchange, as it provides a powerful example of religious coexistence and cultural diversity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In closing, I would like to remind you all of the horrendous images we have seen of historical and archaeological sites being destroyed throughout Syria and Iraq. Our region's cultural heritage is under attack, and our rich past is being systematically destroyed. It is painful to watch sites being decimated knowing that they represent our shared history and identity, and can never be replaced.

These horrors must come to an immediate end. As Lebanon reels from the spill-over effects of the war in Syria, we cannot but underline the urgency of finding a peaceful solution to bring stability back to the region. We call on all actors to

intensify their efforts in support of the UN-led political track seeking a solution to the conflict.

Lebanon stands ready to continue its collaboration with UNESCO to create a sustainable, equitable and peaceful community for all.

Thank you.