

18.05.2018 - UNESCO Office Brussels

## **UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture participates in the Third International Conference on the Victims of Ethnic and Religious Violence in the Middle East, Brussels**



**On 14 May 2018, UNESCO took part in the Third International Conference on The Victims of Ethnic and Religious Violence in the Middle East, co-chaired by the Kingdom of Belgium and the Lebanese Republic.**

Taking place at the Palais d’Egmont, Brussels, the Conference was co-hosted by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Kingdom of Belgium, Didier Reynders, and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants of the Lebanese Republic, Gebran Bassil.

The Conference gathered together Ministerial Representatives of 67 countries and a number of high-level representatives of regional and international organisations, and the European Institutions, as well as numerous experts on the issue and representatives of communities targeted with ethnic and religious violence. UNESCO participated in the Conference, under the representation of Ernesto Ottone, Assistant Director-General for Culture.

The main purpose of the one-day Conference was to evaluate the ongoing risks to ethnic and religious minorities in conflict areas in the Middle East and to identify urgent measures needed to ensure a continued, safe, dignified and sustainable return of displaced communities. The Conference aimed to act as a platform for targeted communities to express their views on actions taken so far towards their protection and rehabilitation and to discuss future long-term solutions.

Discussions also centred on further measures needed to strengthen institutions, inclusive participation, and the fight against impunity, and to ensure the preservation of ethnic and confessional diversity and the protection of cultural heritage to build lasting peace and security in the region. In particular, two panel discussions took place to discuss actions to be taken in order to achieve [SDG 16 ‘Peace, Justice and strong institutions’](#), with the first focussing on accountability and reconciliation and the second panel discussing inclusive participation and reconciliation.

During the conference, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture underlined the importance of culture and education in reconstruction efforts in the Middle East, stressing that in post-conflict situations the rehabilitation of cultural heritage facilitates a better understanding of the collective memory and shared history and values of the targeted areas and communities. The UNESCO ADG for Culture went on to highlight the flagship UNESCO initiative [‘Revive the Spirit of Mosul’](#), in cooperation with the Iraqi government and the International Community, which hopes to contribute to the dignified return and integration of

displaced communities through the reconstruction of cultural heritage, placing culture at the centre of Mosul's recovery process.

The Brussels Conference was organised as a follow up to the previous Paris Conference of 2015 and the Madrid Conference of 2017, each of which set out action plans to address the ongoing threats to communities who are targeted due to their religion and/or ethnicity. Building on the results of former international initiatives, the Brussels Conference reiterates the commitment of the International Community to stop and reverse the erosion of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity and to continue the fight against impunity.

The full programme and conclusions of the Conference can be found [here](#).

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