

Cultural Heritage: Extremism's New Target

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Martin Roth

I'm very grateful that I could be here today. It's a pleasure to be here and it's a pleasure to welcome you, Professor Bukova – Irina Bukova. The V&A has a strong interest in the security debate and security discussion. So I am here, if I may say so, for two different reasons. The first one is professional, and that's the security of museums, of our cultural heritage – what we want to do in the future, how we can work together. But Irina, if I may say so, also a very personal one. We met seven or eight years ago, six or seven years ago, several times. I had the great opportunity and privilege to show you the museums in Dresden. We knew already at that time that you have a very difficult job, a tough job. But I think the last five or six years made it even more difficult. We will talk about that later.

May I inform you in the beginning that everything will be held on the record. You can communicate with Twitter using #CHEvents.

You just came from Bonn, where you, as the director-general of UNESCO, launched the global coalition Unite for Heritage. It is a new strategy to combine different partners from the cultural field, from NGOs, from governments and much more. I'm sure we will talk about that. So we trust you are right now in the middle of the discussion and we are keen to learn more about it.

Irina joined the Bulgarian government in 1977. Irina started at the ministry of foreign affairs in Bulgaria and went on to assume such positions as the minister of foreign affairs, coordinator of Bulgaria-European relations, ambassador of Bulgaria to France, Monaco and UNESCO, and a personal representative of the president of the Republic of Bulgaria to the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*. Irina is a graduate of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and studied at the University of Maryland and the John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. She is the first woman and the first Eastern European to lead the organization. I think this is still extremely important to mention.

As director-general, she is actively engaged in the international efforts to advance gender equality, equality of education for all, and combat terrorist financing by preventing the illicit trafficking of cultural goods. Other fields of action include enabling scientific cooperation of sustainable development, such as early warning systems for tsunamis or transboundary water management and agreements, and global advocacy for the safety of journalists and freedom of expression.

I always admired you for your work endorsing the uses of dialogue, diversity, human dignity and human rights. A leading champion in the fight against racism and anti-Semitism. If I may say so, Irina Bukova also spearheaded UNESCO's activities on Holocaust remembrance and awareness.

Irina, thank you for being here today with us.

Irina Bokova

Thank you very much, Martin. Thank you for a very kind presentation and thank you for reminding me about our meetings, several meetings. As you just mentioned, we met and you were telling me that it's a challenging job protecting heritage, working widely in the area of cultural cooperation, identities, intercultural dialogue and tolerance. But I would say that if it was challenging at that time, as you just said, it really becomes nowadays one of the priorities of the organization. We have seen intolerance, violent extremism, what it is doing. Of course, the recent terrorist attack in Tunisia – and I would like also to express my condolences to the government, to the people of the United Kingdom for the loss in this

recent terrorist attack, which I think highlights the scale of the problem and the challenge we are facing today.

This also, I think, makes us even more convinced, even more prone to act, with a greater resolve. Also, I believe we have to go deeper into our discussion of why this is happening and what answer we have to give to some of these pressing challenges and questions. I think the importance of research institutes, of museums also, of think tanks, of universities, is extremely important – including Chatham House and including the recent conference that you, Martin, were so kind to invite me, the Victoria and Albert Museum with Yale University. Once again you adopted the London Declaration that we mentioned several times two days ago in Bonn, during the World Heritage meeting.

I think it is important because we need a debate. We need an informed international debate. We need more crossings between policy-making and research and scholarship. I think nowadays, when we live really in very turbulent times, we need also knowledge, information and innovative thinking, which is very much encouraged by UNESCO.

I remember I came here for the first time in Chatham House in 2011, to speak about UNESCO's role in fostering collective action on key public goods, in education, the culture, the sciences. You mentioned yourself some of them – communication, information, freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and how important it is for peace and for sustainable development. I spoke then about UNESCO soft power, at a time of global economic crisis, when analysts were debating a G-Zero world and the need for stronger international leadership. I think the world has changed immensely since 2011. The turbulent times, as we say today, are ever more challenging.

I think societies that are undergoing transformation create some of this turbulent. As we say, the turbulence of poverty, of inequality; the turbulence of climate change, of enduring conflict. All this remains but so does, and even more important, the international leadership by states, the importance of the United Nations and UNESCO in this particular case, because we are so relevant through our soft power to establishing an effective multilateral order.

So of course, saying all this does not mean that this is happening by itself. It needs thinking and research. It needs audacity. It needs also inspiration, which we draw in the birth of UNESCO 70 years ago, in the wake of the Second World War. UNESCO, as you know, is based in Paris, but it was born here in London, at the Institute of Civil Engineers, just across St James's Park. Our constituent congress took place in November 1945, presided at that time by Miss Ellen Wilkinson, minister of education of Great Britain. The very idea of creating such an organization emerged a little bit earlier, in 1942, when the United Kingdom organized regular conferences of Allied ministers of education. To be frank, I'm always astonished by this fact. I'm astonished because in 1942, to convene meetings of ministers of education to be strategic, to think ahead of how important it was at that time this international cooperation, to better the minds of people, when the war was far from won, was audacious, was new, was visionary. The fact that the United Kingdom was promoting this cooperation in education as a force for more lasting peace left a huge imprint on our organization, in our constitution, in all of our activities, these last 70 years.

So UNESCO was forged by this conviction that when peace was won, new ways were needed to promote and to protect it. Our constitution opens with these 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'. Nowadays we say 'men and women', naturally. I would say that the phrase from Prime Minister Clement Attlee was precisely inscribed – this is the phrase inscribed in our constitution. The organization since then, of course, evolved. But this imprint still stays in our action today.

So 70 years later, now that we celebrate this landmark anniversary – which is also the anniversary of the United Nations. UNESCO was created a little later; on the 16th of November, our constitution was signed. I do believe the soft power of UNESCO has never been so relevant. It has never been so relevant at a time when values have moved to the heart of conflict, when culture is on the front line.

We unfortunately know that culture has always been the victim of war, as collateral damage or from direct targeting and looting. What we see today though, in my view, is new. It is new in scale and in nature. I believe this calls for a new approach, for new policies, for a new type of cooperation, by all the international community.

If we think back in 2012, when rebel groups took control of Timbuktu in Mali and started to destroy its mausoleums and mosques – I remember that vividly, because I did visit Mali for ten days, invited by the French president, Francois Hollande. We went to visit and we went to Timbuktu to see the destruction of the mausoleums. We saw the burned manuscripts in Ali Baba Library that UNESCO had built before. There was at the time a report by the French press agency: they interviewed a man who was said to be part of this extremist group. He was saying there is no such notion as world heritage. There is no culture that is worth protecting. He was a direct reply, I would say, to our calls for protection. He says: this doesn't exist at all.

I believe this is a kind of expression of the nature of the challenge from violent extremism, this different vision or ideology of culture that is very narrow and runs counter to all of our 70 years of work and achievements. Since then, we have seen in Iraq and Syria that along with the humanitarian crisis, there was unprecedented attack – systematic, I would say – against culture. We see also the same systematic violations of human rights, persecution of people on ethnic and religious grounds. We see sustained efforts to eliminate the culture of coexistence that I believe for thousands of years has been the DNA of this region, an extraordinary region of cultural diversity. We see the intention of destruction of irreplaceable landmarks and organized looting for illicit trafficking. We see also the destruction of schools. We see attacks on journalists.

So all of this, I believe, 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 the sources of belonging and renewal. It attacks pluralism. It imposes exclusive visions of identity. The mausoleum of Mosul has been vandalized. Parts of ancient Hatra have been bulldozed. Nimrod has been dynamited. The great Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo, Syria, has become a battlefield. Media reports – and we have seen these images – 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 tentative world heritage list have been damaged, destroyed or severely impacted by looting and illegal archaeological 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.

But unfortunately, it is not only Iraq and Syria that is of concern to us. In Libya, at least eight religious sites have been damaged or destroyed. Many other sites have been threatened by destruction. All across the region, looting and illegal excavations have taken on, I would say, industrial scale, financing violent extremism. These, I believe, are attacks against the people of the region, against their history of diversity. Just if we remember that the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus was initially a Greek temple and then a Christian church, until the advent of Islam. Palmyra, the Venice of the desert – it's like a mirage in the

desert – precisely bears witness to constant dialogue between Greco-Roman influences, the Persian empire, the Arab culture and also some local cultures that were at that time endemic to the region.

All of this shows that there is no such notion, no such thing as a pure culture in human history. Cultures are enriched through exchange and dialogue. This is what I also believe 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 certain zones beyond control. Of course this is a fertile soil for violent extremism, and it is fuelled also by wider trends. Across the world, societies, as I mentioned at the beginning – and this is one of the challenges in front of us – are undergoing transformation, facing new questions about diversity at a time of increasing migration and a huge, unprecedented technological revolution, in communication, information, where the local and the global are blurring.

Cultural cleansing, I believe, 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, unfortunately, is quite strong. Some 50,000 to 70,000 Twitter accounts support Daesh today, with an average of 1,000 followers. This was explored during a recent UNESCO international conference that UNESCO organized, on the 16th and 17th last week, on internet and youth, fighting radicalization and extremism. The first analysis of this media campaign, as was testified to us by some of the academic research that is starting to be done, shows that this is very high in quality. This is multilingual. It targets specific audiences. It is drawing on cultural references also to some of the major films or video games or music videos. It creates an atmosphere of stars from extremists, creating some kind of, as young people would say, cool image of extremism. This campaign speaks to young people in their language and that is why it is so effective.

On the 29th of May, the United Nations Security Council held a meeting on threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts, or the so-called foreign terrorist fighters. According to the United Nations Al-Qaeda sanctions monitoring team, with whom we are working very closely nowadays, the number of foreign terrorist fighters increased by 70 per cent between only mid-2014 and March 2015. Today we know that some 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 states are active in Syria and Iraq, as well as in Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen. All this shows that the stakes are very high.

We, of course, are convinced that cultural cleansing is a violation of human rights for thousands, if not millions of women and men, for the communities. But it also undermines the possibility for future dialogue, peacebuilding and reconciliation, because we know that culture is far more than buildings and stones. This is about identities and about belonging. This is about protecting values from the past that are important today and tomorrow, for peace and for reconciliation. This is, as we say at UNESCO, about a force of resilience – culture is a force of resilience. It is a source of strength to face adversity and to rebuild.

This is why I believe safeguarding cultural heritage is a security imperative and a peacebuilding measure. Violent extremists don't destroy heritage as a collateral damage, they target systematically monuments and sites to strike societies at their core. They loot to finance terrorist activities, to sustain oppression. So I believe we're witnessing a new form of conflict in what is a global war for hearts and minds of people, and mostly for young people.

Just a few years ago, and I can share it now in a very sincere way, I remember UNESCO faced criticism for denouncing the destruction of heritage in situations of conflict. Some people were saying and we were criticized that UNESCO is out of touch – people are dying and you are talking, you care only about stones.

I think this perception, this understanding, has changed profoundly in the last years, because violent extremists don't choose between attacks against culture and people. They are attacking both, and we must defend both together.

Cultural cleansing is definitely a violation of human rights but it is even more: it is a war crime, according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and it is an attack against the humanity we all share. It was in fact 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 also to all of us and it is our responsibility to defend it from all threats and challenges. This was one of the reasons that I went to Baghdad and Irbil last November. I wanted to give to the prime minister of the autonomous region of Kurdistan the certificate of the inscription of the Citadel of Irbil, the first site which was put on the UNESCO heritage list, in order to give them a lot more of a sense of belonging, to have more strength of resilience in their fight against extremism.

This is why I went again to Baghdad, this time to the University of Baghdad, in March, to launch an important campaign in the University of Baghdad with the young students, Unite for Heritage. And also to share with Prime Minister Abadi our concern about the implementation of the protection of the heritage in Iraq, but also the implementation of Resolution 2199 that early in February the Security Council adopted, on stopping the illicit trafficking and the financing of terrorism, for which we advocated strongly and which recognizes the link between destruction, looting and the security of this region.

I was invited on the 27th of April to brief the members of the Security Council on the scale of the challenge and how to respond to it. Then the General Assembly of the United Nations, on the 28th of May, invited me also to support a resolution co-sponsored by Germany and Iraq, an extremely important resolution that had more than 90 co-sponsors, adopted by consensus, on the saving of the cultural heritage of Iraq.

All this work that UNESCO is doing, including the invitation to speak before the small ministerial meeting of the global anti-ISIL coalition in Paris, shows that change is happening, a change of mindset in the way we understand protection of heritage. We understand also the complex, multi-faceted response to it. I think the growing awareness that hard power will not be enough to defeat violent extremism is gaining ground. We need also soft power. We need education, we need inclusion, we need freedom of expression. This is UNESCO's work.

In Iraq, once again to come back to Iraq, we are strengthening the education system. We are responding also to the call of the prime minister during my last meeting in March, when he appealed to UNESCO to work more for cultural literacy, for understanding heritage, for more tolerance, for rebuilding society that is fragmented, and to reach out a dialogue that is vital for the future of this country.

In Afghanistan, we are also having the biggest UNESCO programme of providing literacy, but maybe what is very important also in this, we are not just reaching out to 600,000 – Phase III of our big literacy programme, targeting mostly illiterate women, giving them afterwards skills. But also we are providing police, because the vast majority of the Afghani police are illiterate, we are providing them literacy. We think it is vital also for the understanding and knowledge of how a society should work.

To come back to the question about the cultural cleansing, I think what we are trying to achieve now is, first, to mitigate the risks of destruction and pillaging through monitoring and capacity-building. The second, we are facing also the fight against illicit trafficking. We are working with a wide range of partners in implementing Resolution 2199 of the Security Council. We have established a joint platform with

Interpol, with the World Customs Organizations, with the International Council of Museums, with the International Council of Sites and Monuments, with the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime. By creating this international platform, we think it's important to do capacity-building, to exchange information and to continue our global advocacy against illicit trafficking. Of course then, what is very important is to document what has been destroyed and prepare for reconstruction.

Last but not least, I think we need to counter the propaganda of hatred through new forms of communication, through a new narrative, through a new language, addressing mainly the challenges of young people. We are working equally with the International Criminal Court to ensure those who destroy heritage are brought to justice for war crimes, because under the Rome Statute, deliberate destruction of heritage is a war crime. The way we have worked with the International Criminal Court in the case of Mali, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court was recently in Paris and we are in constant contact. I think she is finalizing all the preliminary work that she was supposed to do. She informed me that recently maybe she will go to court in order to start the court proceedings in the destruction of heritage in Mali.

I think all this work is complex. It needs a lot more partnerships. It calls for sharing of information, intelligence information, police information, satellite imagery. Strengthening the legal framework of what we are doing, more ratifications to the different conventions, UNESCO conventions. We are also finalizing a very important agreement with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research – operational satellite applications programme, the UNOSAT, to monitor heritage through satellite images in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. Also we have a wider support of partners. We are working also to start momentum in order to prevent illicit trafficking.

Let me just say that with the support of the European Union, we have set already a Syrian observatory for cultural heritage. I'm encouraged by some of our achievements. When we could agree, we invited – and of course, they agreed, the fighters agreed to prevent the destruction of the World Heritage Site in Bosra recently, when they took over this town. So this is also a way to say that this type of advocacy and global momentum is giving results.

So I would say that the implementation of Resolution 2199 concerns member states. It should be driven by governments. What we are doing is strongly encouraging them, accompanying them, in some of the capacity-building, in creating this platform of putting them closer together. I think that we see already a lot of movement in this area. We have invited our governments to give us national reports. We have received 25 reports, they are still coming. When we look at these reports, we see that practically all countries that are coming to us are taking some measures there. They are either ratifying some of the conventions, they are introducing in their domestic legislation some new provisions, they are strengthening their institutions. They are creating national mechanisms and reaching out also to the others, to the neighbouring countries, to exchange more [indiscernible] and information. I think this is extremely important and very encouraging.

Coming back also to the hatred language and the hatred campaigns, I think it is very important when we are speaking about putting the dots together between the security concerns, the humanitarian concerns, and the cultural concerns also, we were trying to put the professionals from these three levels together. By doing this, on one side we are working to prevent illicit trafficking, but we are also giving a response to this hate campaign, this hate strategy. I think global campaigns, like the campaign we launched in Baghdad, Unite for Heritage – which is taking ground in a social network campaign – the importance of such declarations like the London Declaration, recently adopted during this important meeting by the Victoria and Albert Museum and Yale University. We did organize also an important conference in Cairo

recently with an antiquities coalition from the United States, with the ten ministers of culture from the region. We have adopted now at the World Heritage Committee in Bonn, upon the initiative of Mrs Maria Böhmer, the minister of state of the federal ministry of foreign affairs and chair of the World Heritage Committee, an important Bonn Declaration and the global coalition. I think all this matters. All this is stirring initiatives, activities, on a very concrete level.

We want also, and we think it's our obligation, our responsibility, to work more with young people. We have a tool, World Heritage in Young Hands, which we think we have to be a little bit more concrete, more specific. We launched just two weeks ago a new framework of action, Empowering Youth to Build Peace. We think by this we will equip young people with knowledge, with skills, with the feeling of global citizenship. As I said, we think they should be resilient to radicalization and violent extremism. This is what we think, in this year of the 70th anniversary of UNESCO, is so important for us to do.

We have great examples of what UNESCO has done with the same message of tolerance, respect, united humanity. In two days I will be going to Mostar, in Bosnia, where we will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of the rebuilding of the bridge of Mostar. This is one of the very few cases on the world heritage list where a destroyed property has been rebuilt and then the World Heritage Committee agreed for it to be inscribed on the world heritage list although it's not authentic, because one of the criteria of the convention of course is to be authentic. It is done with this same message of this bridge as a bridge of tolerance, as a bridge of reaching out to others, with all the history behind it. I think this is also an important message.

We say very often, and I cite it very often and I'm very eager to mention it here, something that I noticed when I went to Kabul two years ago, to the museum of Kabul. The motto there – whoever visited this museum maybe knows these words. It is said: A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive. I think this is a very powerful message, especially when you see this motto on the Museum of National History in Kabul, in Afghanistan. I think this is a very powerful message. It's a powerful message that culture should be part of our response to violent extremism.

It is a message that culture should be integrated into the peacebuilding missions of the United Nations. We have achieved this with Mali, in MINUSMA – protection of heritage is part of the mandate approved by the Security Council. I think it is important and we did also, from the very first moment, prepare the small passport – like this – the passport of heritage for Mali, so that each of the soldiers and military personnel had in their pocket this small passport of heritage, knowing why it is important, where it can be found, in order to protect it. I think this is an important work that we are doing nowadays.

I think it extends beyond some concern of one particular moment or a monument or one country. I think what we are seeing, the new types of conflicts and the new violent extremism that is spreading, that can hit in three places at once in the same day – it can hit in France, it can hit in Tunisia, in Kuwait and others – requires us to be not only vigilant but to pinpoint and emphasize why heritage and culture matter. Why it is important that we protect it, why it is important to have it passed to the future, why it is important for the young people to resist, to recover. I think it is a very powerful message.

I think all this shows that culture and heritage nowadays is on the front line of conflict. We do believe that it should be the focus of putting the dots together between humanitarian concerns, the security and the cultural. It is one of the most important challenges that we have in front of us, which needs a multi-faceted and complex approach. But if we don't deal with it, I don't think we will achieve what is expected from us: to have peace and sustainable development. Thank you for your attention.