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**Address by Irina Bokova,
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*Roundtable "Culture on the Frontline: Protecting Cultural Heritage in Conflict
Zones"*

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Professor Stone, thank you.

I am grateful to Dr Patricia Lewis, Research Director of the International Security Department, for this invitation.

This is the third time I have spoken at Chatham House, and the first in a Roundtable format.

I look forward to our discussion, because the truth is the international community is only starting to grapple with the implications of attacks against culture.

We need as much debate as we can get, especially with experts, to clarify the nature of the challenge and how to respond.

It is symbolic that I am invited to address a meeting on this subject organised by the International Security Department.

This says something about the evolution of understandings of security since the end of the Cold War.

This says a lot about turbulence in international affairs today, where culture has moved to the heart of conflict.

Some will say culture has always been on the frontline.

Heritage and symbols have always been attacked, to destroy sources of belonging and renewal.

We need only cast our minds back and recall such cases as the deliberate destruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar.

Something is changing, and what we see today is new.

And this, I believe, calls for new policies from States and the international community.

Looking back, we can pinpoint early signs of change.

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

The Times quoted Mullah Mohammed Omar at the time:

"Muslims should be proud of smashing idols."

In 2012, we watched rebel groups take control of Timbuktu in Mali and destroy the city's millennial mausoleums and mosques.

The French news agency AFP then interviewed a man said to be part of the extremist group.

"There is no world heritage," he said. *"It doesn't exist."*

Today, we are no longer seeing individual cases, but an organised and coherent strategy of cultural cleansing.

Never before in recent history have we seen such systematic destruction of cultural heritage, used as a tactic of war, to intimidate populations, to impose oppression.

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

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

Eight sites on the World Heritage Tentative list have been damaged, destroyed or severely impacted by looting and illegal excavations.

At least six museums have suffered damaged and been looted, and some ten other heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed.

On 14 June, Syria's Ma'arra Museum, world famous for its mosaics, was hit by a barrel bomb.

In Libya, at least eight religious sites have been damaged or destroyed, and many other sites have been threatened.

All this is part of a wider strategy.

This involves the persecution of communities on cultural and religious grounds -- in an attempt to destroy the cultural diversity that has always been the hallmark of this region.

It involves systematic looting and illicit trafficking of cultural objects, to finance terrorism, with archaeological sites in the region riddled with thousands of looting holes.

This involves the destruction of schools and attacks against journalists.

Cultural cleansing seeks to eliminate sources of diversity and pluralism, to impose a narrow and exclusive vision of society.

This vision rejects the idea of tolerance.

It denies the existence of humanity as a single community, sharing rights.

All this is taken forward in a region where State power is deeply contested, where borders are nominal in some areas, where conflict rages, where there are 'shatter zones' beyond control.

The history of this region is one of constant dialogue between different peoples and communities, across all cultural and religious lines.

It is precisely *this history* violent extremists are attacking.

This is why the stakes of cultural cleansing extend beyond the region -- because this history belongs to all of us, because these are attacks against the very notion of civilized order, against the very idea of a common humanity.

On the ground, cultural cleansing is tearing at the fabric of society in Iraq and Syria.

This is devastating for individuals and communities – it also undermines possibilities for future dialogue and peacebuilding.

Cultural cleansing is built into a propaganda campaign deployed on the Internet, through social media, to destabilize societies and recruit foreign fighters.

Some 50,000-70,000 twitter accounts support Daesh today, with an average of one thousand followers.

First analysis of this media campaign shows it is high quality, multilingual, and targeted to specific audiences, drawing on references to major films, video games and music videos – creating 'stars' from extremists...

This campaign speaks to young people in their language, and it is effective.

On 29 May, the United Nations Security Council held a meeting on "Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts (Foreign Terrorist Fighters)."

According to the *United Nations Al-Qaida Sanctions Monitoring Team*, the number of foreign terrorist fighters increased by 70 percent between mid-2014 and March 2015.

Today, 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters, from over 100 States, are active in Syria and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen.

This is why attacks against culture are more than a cultural issue.

This is a security issue.

This calls for new ways of thinking and acting, to safeguard heritage.

This means reaching beyond the “culture box,” to build broad coalitions, to connect the dots between the humanitarian, security and cultural imperatives.

We have strong normative foundations to build on.

This includes:

- UNESCO’s 1954 *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflict*, which forbids targeting cultural heritage or using it for military purposes;
- UNESCO’s 1970 Convention, to tackle the illicit trafficking of cultural property; and its close complement in international private law, the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects;
- UNESCO’s 1972 World Heritage Convention, setting out the notion of heritage of universal value;
- UNESCO’s 2003 Convention to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.

Let me underline here 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.

In the case of Mali, UNESCO is working with the International Criminal Court, to ensure those who destroyed heritage are brought to justice.

On this basis, we are acting across the board.

This starts in the United Nations, with global advocacy and awareness-raising.

In February, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2199 on the financing of terrorism, for which UNESCO strongly advocated.

This Resolution links illicit trafficking and the financing of terrorism, and calls on UNESCO, with INTERPOL, to assist Member States in implementing a ban on trade of cultural objects from Iraq and Syria.

To prevent the illicit trafficking of cultural goods, UNESCO is working with INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT), the World Customs Organisation and the International Council of Museums, and all neighbouring countries.

On 1 April, I convened all key partners to UNESCO Headquarters to translate the Security Council Resolution into action.

Progress will be presented to the Security Council this month, including reports from some 25 countries so far, which indicate that objects illegally exported from Syria and Iraq have been seized in Turkey, Finland, Lebanon, Jordan, USA, UK and elsewhere.

We are gaining momentum.

On 27 April, I briefed the Members of the Security Council on the scale of the challenge and how to respond.

On 28 May, I spoke before the United Nations General Assembly in support of a Resolution, co-sponsored by Germany and Iraq, on “Saving the Cultural Heritage of Iraq.”

Two days ago, in Bonn, Germany, I launched a *Global Coalition for the Protection of Cultural Heritage* -- with the Minister of Tourism and Heritage of Iraq, Mr Adel Shershab, Minister of State of Germany, Ms Maria Böhmer, Executive Director of INTERPOL, Mr Tim Morris, President of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, Mr Gustavo Araoz, and Director of the Pergamon Museum, Mr Markus Hilgert.

Our goal is to join all forces, to stand together against cultural cleansing.

We are acting at four levels:

First, to mitigate risks of destruction and pillaging, through monitoring and capacity-building.

Second, to fight illicit trafficking, working with neighbouring countries, and international partners.

Third, to document what has been destroyed and prepare for reconstruction.

Fourth, to counter the propaganda of hatred, through new forms of communication.

UNESCO is finalizing an agreement with the *United Nations Institute for Training and Research Operational Satellite Applications Programme* – UNOSAT -- to monitor heritage through satellite images in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

I have launched comprehensive *Emergency Responses Plans* for Syria and Iraq -- with the support of Japan, the European Union, INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, ICOMOS, ICCROM, and many others.

UNESCO has created a *Syrian Observatory of Cultural Heritage*, and I am encouraged by developments in Bosra (Syria) where fighters have agreed to prevent the destruction of the World Heritage Site.

At the same time, we must respond to the propaganda that fuels cultural cleansing.

This is why I went to the University of Baghdad on 28 March, to launch a global social media campaign, #Unite4Heritage -- to counter the propaganda of hatred and strengthen the narrative of shared values and common heritage.

These goals guide the new integrated framework of action UNESCO launched two weeks ago – *Empowering Youth to Build Peace*.

Our goal is to equip young people with knowledge, skills and values to engage as global citizens, resilient to radicalization and violent extremism.

In just a few months, the #Unite4Heritage campaign has helped to mobilize action and share stories of local communities protecting their heritage.

This was how we heard the story of Syria's "monuments men" who sandbagged the Ma'arra Museum, to shield it from future bombing attacks, and who buried cultural treasures to protect them from looting.

These are everyday heroes, risking their lives to save culture on the frontline.

We must help them as much as possible – by acting upstream, by building capacity, by monitoring, by halting illicit trafficking, by raising awareness and standing up every time heritage is destroyed.

As I said, we are at the beginning of something new, and there is a way to go.

We need better information about the nature and extent of the illegal trade of cultural goods.

We need sharper monitoring of the destruction of sites and landmarks.

We need stronger cooperation to halt illicit trafficking.

This calls for new alliances, with Governments, across the United Nations system, with security actors, with police, border and customs and peacekeepers, along with customs houses, with civil society.

For all this, we need better research and analysis, and I take this opportunity to appeal for your support, to direct your focus to this challenge, to help define its scale and highlight ways to respond.

This is how we can succeed in countering cultural cleansing, by joining all experience and forces.

Thank you.