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Address from

Mr Francesco Bandarin,

Assistant Director-General for Culture of UNESCO,

on the occasion of the international experts meeting

**“Rallying the international Community to Safeguard Syria’s Cultural
Heritage”**

UNESCO, 26 May 2014

Mr Martin Griffiths, Head of the Office of the Joint Special Representative for Syria
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to welcome you to UNESCO today for this international experts meeting devoted to Syria’s cultural heritage.

At the outset, allow me to express my heartfelt thanks to all of you for responding favorably to UNESCO’s invitation to participate in this meeting. We are very fortunate to have among us today many of the world’s most eminent and committed specialists, who have dedicated their careers to the study and safeguarding of Syria’s heritage. .

I would also like to thank the Flemish Government for their generous financial support to this meeting, which is part and parcel of the Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage Project, funded by European Union.

From time immemorial, Syria has been renowned for its rich and diverse culture and unique contributions to humanity, including, the first alphabet in human history. It was also in present-day Syria that agriculture was practiced for the first time in the world. Syria’s multi-faceted culture encompasses the fields of archaeology, the arts, architecture, music, the applied arts, poetry, storytelling, cuisine, and many other expressions.

However, as we all know today Syria is mired in a devastating conflict with incalculable human tragedies. We deplore all the violence, death and suffering

endured by the Syrian people, and we strongly support all on-going efforts to build reconciliation and peace and promote lasting dialogue in Syria.

The humanitarian tragedy is inseparable from the cultural tragedy.

Too many of Syria's heritage sites have been destroyed or in great danger, its archaeological sites are illegally dug and damaged, its movable heritage is being looted, and many of its age-old traditions have come to a halt.

Today we are gathered at this house of the world's cultures as the caretakers of Syria's cultural heritage. The damage to Syria's heritage has suffered collateral damage in this conflict. The loss of this irreplaceable heritage concerns each and every one of us.

In these troubled times, it is our shared responsibility to do everything in our power to mitigate the risks of its destruction, prevent its looting and keep alive its traditions and practices.

Our essential message is that culture, understood in the broadest sense of the term is essential for building peace, dialogue and sustainable development.

In times of conflict, the protection of cultural heritage in all its forms is paramount. As Irina Bokova, UNESCO's Director-General eloquently declared: "Culture and heritage are not about stones and buildings – they are about identities and belongings. They carry values from the past that are important for the societies today and tomorrow. [...] We must safeguard the heritage because it is what brings us together as a community; it is what binds us within a shared destiny".

Although in time of war the protection of cultural sites, artifacts and practices may seem to be a luxury amidst destruction and the loss of human lives, one should not forget that "protecting culture is also protecting people."¹ Culture represents an anchor of stability, and it is the foundation on which countries and people can hope to rebuild their lives. When recovery time comes, cultural heritage often becomes a

¹ Address by Irina Bokova on "Protecting Culture in Times of War," Académie Diplomatique Internationale, Paris, 3 December 2012



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strong symbol and tool for the rebuilding of communities, helping them actively to break the cycle of violence.

History has demonstrated that symbolic acts such as the rebuilding of the Old **Mostar** Bridge, as well as the reconstruction of the Old Town of **Warsaw**, and the inscription of these two properties on the World Heritage List constitute genuine acts of reconciliation and help communities to come to terms with collective trauma.

Initiatives to raise awareness and to act in order to safeguard and protect **Mali's** cultural heritage represent just one of the recent example of the potential of culture in conflict situations.

Sometimes, cultural heritage has been the target of deliberate destruction such as in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and more recently in northern Mali. We have also seen that this has started to happen in Syria.

Willful destruction or persecution makes reconciliation between the conflicting parties much more difficult in the future, and they hold societies back from turning the page and working together to achieve lasting peace.

Protecting the cultural heritage from the risks associated with conflict situations, including when lives are at risk and humanitarian concerns are a priority, is therefore not a luxury, but a fundamental security issue. Conversely, in the recovery phase, the rehabilitation of the cultural heritage may help to contribute to healing the scars of war.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This International Experts Meeting has an ambitious agenda. We hope to exchange information, discuss technical recommendations for the implementation of actions to protect Syrian cultural heritage during the conflict and the recovery phase, agree on a modalities of cooperation for sharing information and documentation with international professional networks, improve coordination and avoid duplication among all parties working for the safeguarding of Syria's cultural heritage, and foster international partnerships to protect it in a sustainable manner.

For this reason, we have structured the meeting in three distinct parts dealing with built, intangible and movable heritage. In the plenary sessions we will tackle some

of the main issues. These will be chaired by three moderators: Mr. Amir Pasic, Head of the Architectural Department, at IRCICA, the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture of the OIC, Mr Chérif Khaznadar, the president of La maison des cultures du monde in Paris and of the Centre français du patrimoine culturel immatériel, and Mr Ridha Fraoua from the Swiss Federal Office of Justice, and an renowned expert in cultural heritage legislation.

In only two days of formal meetings, I hope that you can all appreciate that we cannot possibly cover all geographical areas, all sites, museums or address all of the challenges facing Syria's heritage. Allow me to take this opportunity to add that I deeply regret that certain parties have accused UNESCO of partiality as regards the participants and the topics to be discussed at this meeting. I feel compelled to respond to these accusations by underlining that we have spared no efforts to ensure that a wide range of voices will be heard at this meeting. In accordance with its status as an intergovernmental organization, UNESCO maintains a neutral stance; the experts present today are here in their personal and professional capacity. Our principal concern is the safeguarding of Syria's cultural heritage.

Our aim is to exchange knowledge, elaborate a common action plan and foster coordination.

The plenary sessions will be followed by three parallel working sessions that will enable us to enrich the common action plan and discuss our modalities of cooperation.

Lastly, I would like to remind you that this is a technical meeting, and by no means a political forum. We are here to work together towards a common goal: safeguarding Syria's cultural heritage and we must not let political and ideological considerations to enter into our discussions. In this connection, I must inform you that any participant who raises political issues will be kindly asked to leave the meeting.

Today, Syria's invaluable and irreplaceable heritage needs us.

It is our shared responsibility to work together to save it; beyond political disagreements, scientific dissensions, rivalries and personal ambitions. I thank you for your understanding and am confident that the outcomes of our deliberations will



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be fruitful and mark a positive step forward in our common objective to protect and safeguard Syria's precious heritage for many generations to come.

Thank you for your attention.