



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the Conference “Victims of ethnic and religious  
violence in the Middle East – Protecting and promoting plurality and  
diversity”**

**Madrid, 24 May 2017**

Excellency Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain, Sr Alfonso Maria Dastis Quecedo,

Excellency Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Mr  
Ayman H. Safadi,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I wish to express my condolences and solidarity with the people of Manchester  
and the United Kingdom following the barbaric terrorist attack that target a concert  
attended by mostly young people.

Two centuries ago, the poet Heinrich Heine wrote – *“when people start burning books  
and culture, they end up burning other people.”*

The recent history of ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East has shown this  
to be true.

Violent extremists target both heritage and human lives -- they target victims and  
minorities from all backgrounds, Shebak, Turkmen, Yezidis, Muslims, Christians...  
each of them, symbols of the pluralism they abhor.

They target schools, because they know the power of knowledge to counter their  
rhetoric drawing on false visions of faith and history.

They destroy culture, because they know it can foster dialogue and help people live  
together in their diversity.

We need 'hard power' to *respond* to violent extremism.

We need "soft power" also to *prevent*, through education, culture and information.

This is the role of UNESCO and the goal of the United Nations, its Counter-Terrorism Strategy in support of Member States.

This is the message I shared at the *Arab-Islamic-American Summit* last week in Riyadh on the prevention of violent extremism.

This is also the message embedded in the *Paris Plan of Action*.

When people are learning to hate – we must teach them peace, we must provide them skills to overcome mistrust and division, to build dialogue.

This is now a vital humanitarian and security issue.

This underpins all of UNESCO's action to prevent violent extremism through education for global citizenship, to bolster digital literacy and critical thinking.

This guides UNESCO's action for emergency education in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, in refugee camps, in host communities.

This drives UNESCO's work to protect and promote heritage.

A few weeks ago, UNESCO convened the *International Conference on the Safeguarding of Heritage in liberated areas in Iraq*, with a Plan of Action based on two key principles:

- First, to provide immediate protection to affected cultural heritage, fostering national ownership.
- Second, to harness heritage for reconciliation and peacebuilding between all segments of Iraqi society.

It is in this spirit that UNESCO went to Nimrud, Ashur, Mosul, Palmyra, Aleppo, to assess the destruction and start restoration.

This is why UNESCO will soon launch a regional initiative to teach the history of cultural diversity in the Middle East.

This is a story of constant exchange.

It is a source of pride.

It is source of wisdom, providing concrete skills to reject distortions of history or faith.

Every citizen should know this history.

This history has been neglected for too long, and this has weakened the foundation of societies.

We must bring it back in schools, to foster tolerant citizenship, based on human rights and shared values.

We must highlight cultural diversity in restoring cities like Aleppo or Mosul, as tangible evidence that 'living together' is possible.

Sharing this history can deepen belonging and support reconstruction efforts.

We must show that Palmyra is not just a beautiful field of antic ruins -- it is a millennial meeting point for peoples and ideas.

Babylon, Nineveh are not just fabled cities, but places that thrived precisely because of the diversity that defines the identity of the region.

Minorities are the bearer of this diversity – when they are persecuted or forced to flee, the entire social fabric is weakened.

This is what violent extremists want, and we must fight back. To succeed, the protection of people cannot be delinked to the transmission of their history, to build coexistence and stability.

This is a follow up to the Unite4Heritage campaign that I launched on the steps of the University of Baghdad, to engage young people in defending the values of tolerance and mutual understanding.

In this, I wish to pay tribute to the leadership of Spain, which has always ardently supported UNESCO's to foster inclusive cities, to harness the power of culture for cohesion and sustainability.

I am convinced we must invest far more in education and culture at the frontline of global security today.

This is UNESCO's commitment and my message today.