**Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the Middle East Context, and in the Old City of Aleppo in particular**

**18-19 June 2015**

**Room VIII - UNESCO Headquarters**

**7, Place de Fontenoy**

**75007 Paris, France**

**Paris, France**

### Background document

### *Nada Al Hassan - Chief, Arab States Unit – World Heritage Centre*

### The context

### The escalation of the conflicts in the Middle East since early 2011 has caused, and is still causing dramatic human suffering. Cultural heritage destruction has become an important and irreversible collateral damage in those conflicts; extremely rich and varied cultural heritage buildings, sites and cities in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya are either eliminated or severely damaged to the point of devastation, such as in the case of the Old City of Aleppo. Unfortunately, the destruction is unlikely to stop in the near future.

### In particular, the intentional destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and the persecution and annihilation of cultural and religious minorities have become a central element of the conflict and are used to win the media and psychological war, with shocking images that have accompanied our daily lives since August 2014. Targeting cultural heritage has become a strategic instrument in the Iraqi conflict, and it has caused the destruction of invaluable sites from ancient Mesopotamia to the classical era. Intentional destruction is also present in Syria and Libya, in addition to previous events of destruction of Sufi mausoleums in Tunisia and elsewhere.

### The unprecedented rate of destruction and the continuous targeting of cultural heritage in the current conflicts have prompted UNESCO to be a very active actor in protecting cultural heritage from destruction and looting. Building on previous experience and knowledge in conflict and post-conflict countries such as in ex-Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Palestine, and more recently in Mali, UNESCO is working along three main axes:

**The Diplomatic Axis** that Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, is working, leads at the highest levels, and in particular with the UN Security Council, contributes to raise the awareness of decision makers on the centrality of cultural heritage in the current conflict, and to step up political and diplomatic actions and include cultural heritage protection in humanitarian and security concerns. Such efforts have led to the adoption of UN Security Council 2139 Humanitarian Resolution on Syria, of UN Resolution 2199, which bans the commerce of cultural objects illegally removed from Iraq and Syria, and to the recent adoption of a UN General Assembly resolution entitled “Saving the Cultural Heritage of Iraq”, in addition to the UNSC hearing of UNESCO and INTERPOL on illicit traffic in Iraq and Syria, as well as to the adoption of several decisions at the level of the UNESCO Executive Board.

Thanks to this axis, the Parliament of the European Union and the Council of Europe have also adopted resolutions dedicated to Iraqi and Syrian cultural heritage referring to UNESCO’s mandate.

**The Statutory Axis** through which we enforce the implementation of the UNESCO conventions and in particular the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Through this axis we inform the States Parties to these conventions to abide by their obligations not to target or militarize cultural heritage sites and to actively fight and prevent illicit trafficking, in particular the countries involved in the armed conflicts, the countries of the regions concerned by the conflict, museums, foundations, countries auction houses and cultural institutions that are likely to buy and sell cultural objects from the Middle East.

Through the statutory axis we also consult, cooperate with, and coordinate the work of our institutional partners such as ICOMOS, ICCROM, INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization (WCO), the UN sister agencies, humanitarian NGOS and the civil society, and a wide range of other partners (universities, foundations, single experts, etc.) amid a constantly changing situation that requires a continual review and adaptation of our working methods.

**The Operational Axis** through which we implement concrete actions. Given that we cannot access countries in conflict, we have devised a series of measures that can be undertaken from outside the conflict zones, namely 1) monitoring and assessment, 2)preparing recovery actions through inventories and data bases of documents, experts and initiatives, 3)awareness-raising of the general public and military personnel (e.g. passport of heritage used extensively in Mali with the MINUSMA and foreseen for Syria, video clips on illicit traffic, etc.), and a global awareness-raising campaign, *#Unite4heritage*, launched by the Director-General at the Museum of Bagdad on 28 March 2015, 4) capacity-building training courses in the areas of cultural heritage first aid for built and movable heritage, emergency consolidation, training of border and customs police and other topics and 5) tracking and authentication of looted cultural objects in cooperation with INTERPOL and WCO.

### In addition, UNESCO seeks to coordinate as much as possible international and national actions to create synergies, avoid duplications, increase the effectiveness of heritage protection initiatives and harmonize similar initiatives.

### Recent UNESCO Post-War Reconstruction Experiences

### Some post-war, post-conflict reconstruction projects have been undertaken by UNESCO or with its participation, such as the rebuilding of the Mostar Bridge or the rehabilitation of the Bethlehem area. UNESCO has consolidated the niches of the Bamiyan Buddhas where intense discussions have taken place around their reconstruction or not; several proposals were made ranging from complete reconstruction using 3D laser techniques, to hologram reconstructions, to a memorial, or a permanent exhibition that leaves the niches with no reconstruction.

### In Ethiopia, UNESCO has reinstalled the Aksum Obelisk in its original location within the Aksum archaeological site, 80 years after Mussolini looted it and installed it at the entrance of his Ministry of Italian Colonies in Rome.

### In Mali, following the intentional destruction of the mosques and mausoleums of Timbuktu, UNESCO is rebuilding the damaged or destroyed constructions according to their original plans, with the participation of the local communities; this reconstruction is contributing to peace and confidence building following episodes of collective trauma.

### It is worth noting that contrary to the passionate discussions on the Bamiyan Buddhas’ possible reconstruction, the full reconstruction of the Timbuktu mausoleums *à l’identique* did not raise any controversy, and seems to have full consensus among specialists or stakeholders so far.

### Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the Middle East

### While UNESCO is sparing no effort can be achieved to protect cultural heritage during the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, it appears very important to reflect on the recovery phase a step further from what we are already undertaking, which consists of collecting databases of expertise and documentation on all significant cities, sites and buildings, defining priorities, ensuring international coordination.

### The large-scale destruction of urban centres by direct shelling, targeted explosions and street combats such as in the Aleppo and Homs city centres in Syria, and the Historic City of Saada in Yemen, the elimination of significant archaeological sites through intentional explosions such as in Nimrud in Iraq, the partial or full destruction of monuments as a collateral damage of conflicts such as at the Crac des Chevaliers in Syria, or the targeted destruction of religious buildings, regardless of their historical value, raise important questions that we wish to address in this meeting with a group of experts and UNESCO staff members.

### Reconstruction is an extremely complex field, which involves a wide array of parameters involving political, social, economic, ideological, symbolic, aesthetic, financial, and technical considerations. It also raises numerous challenges, such as international and national coordination during the recovery phase, short timeframes for decision making, involvement of the private sector and development pressures, new discoveries of archaeological remains, lack of documentation to guide restoration and reconstruction choices, brain drain of professionals, displacement of qualified workers, etc. Some of those challenges are linked to specificities of the Middle East countries concerned such as geo-political changes in the region, representation and participation of the diverse communities of the countries concerned in the reconstruction plan, large-scale destruction that requires large-scale and lengthy projects, insufficient urban regulations, lack of master plans, complex property legal frameworks, disappearance of cadastral documents, etc.

### Objectives of the meeting

The meeting is an opportunity to brainstorm on the issue of post-conflict reconstruction in the Middle-East context, and will include a dedicated session on the Old City of Aleppo. It will bring together a small group of multidisciplinary international experts who are knowledgeable about the Middle East from a political, social, urban, archaeological, architectural and technical point of view, and UNESCO staff whose daily work is related to cultural heritage protection in conflict. The meeting will address theoretical and deontological approaches, comparative historical overviews of post-war reconstruction since World War I, and several case studies. The aim of the meeting is to initiate a reflection on this topic and lay the foundations for an elaborated approach to post-conflict reconstruction in the Middle East.

### We would like to use the opportunity of this meeting to examine the issues at stake and attempt to ask the appropriate questions, with a view of continuing the reflection further in the process, refining our approach, and undertaking the necessary steps to tackle reconstruction.

### We are conscious that this meeting is a first and modest step to address very complex issues and that it will be necessary to broaden the reflection to include other partners, stakeholders and experts in the future.

### Themes of the Meeting

### The meeting is organised in four sessions. The first session will examine the reconstruction in Europe after World War II, and several case studies in Bosnia Herzegovina, Jerusalem and Beirut; it will shed light on the complexity of reconstruction, its evolving theoretical, ideological and practical frameworks, and on the involvement of the private sector. This session will also address the challenges of urban reconstruction, the crucial holistic and integrated approach that it requires, in addition to its role in re-building the urban environment of traumatised societies which social fabric has been irreversibly changed.

### The second session will analyse the existing theoretical framework and international charters in the area of conservation and their relevance in relation with reconstruction. Based on the presentation of two case studies, the reconstruction of Timbuktu and the discussions on the Bamiyan Buddha’s fate, and the other case-studies that will be presented earlier during the first session, the participants will undertake a comparative analysis of the different approaches, and discuss the need or not of a new charter or recommendation on the theme of post-war reconstruction, in particular in view of the intentional destruction of cultural heritage, and the different conservation, rehabilitation and reconstruction choices and values it may entail.

### The third session will be dedicated to the Ancient City of Aleppo World Heritage site, which historic centre has been very severely damaged, and many of its emblematic buildings - that are invaluable testimonies of the history of Islamic Architecture - erased or partially destroyed. As private sector entities have already started designing elaborate projects for Aleppo, it is important to understand how to address the reconstruction of a city which lost many of its World Heritage attributes, and reflect on a set of principles that refer to what Aleppo once represented.

### The fourth session will address the conclusions of the meeting, with an emphasis on the complexity of the reconstruction endeavour and the main issues at stake, in two distinct discussions: one dedicated to the Old City of Aleppo and the other to reconstruction as a whole, defining a way forward, and the agenda and the calendar of potential future activities related to theme of reconstruction.

### *The UNESCO World Heritage Centre wishes to thank the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage in Manama for funding this meeting and other initiatives related to the safeguarding of cultural heritage in the Middle East.*