

Speech: “What we’re witnessing is a systematic and corrosive assault on history, on religion, on the very fabric of identity”

Let me begin by thanking our briefers this morning, by welcoming the unanimous adoption of resolution 2347, and by paying tribute to France and to Italy for bringing this issue to the Council.

Today all our briefers, and all members of this Council, have really brought home the sheer scale of the problem that we face. Whether in Timbuktu, Palmyra or Bamiyan, this is an issue that goes beyond statues, beyond artefacts and beyond museums. What we’re witnessing is a systematic and corrosive assault on history, on religion, on the very fabric of identity. What we are witnessing are, in many cases, war crimes.

This isn’t just wanton pillaging and vandalism, this is a matter of international peace and security. Stolen statues in Syria and Iraq don’t just line the pockets of opportunists and looters, they provide a source of revenue for Daesh. And in the region, the destruction of religious and cultural sites is about more than just bricks and mortar; sectarian division can be fuelled by pickaxes and sledgehammers just as it can be by bullets and guns.

So let us respond to this cultural destruction with the same intensity and the same unity of purpose as any other threat to international peace and security.

Through this resolution today we have taken a step forward in doing so. This unanimous resolution shows the strength of our resolve and of our condemnation of such actions. It shows our commitment and determination to act against perpetrators so that we can combat terrorism, prevent conflict and protect vulnerable communities. But as with so many issues before this Council, implementation is now needed. The UK will do its utmost to do so.

That is why we have established a \$30 million Cultural Program Fund to support projects which help foster, safeguard and promote cultural heritage in countries affected by conflict.

These projects are helping complete the new museum in Basrah, helping protect heritage and traditional craft skills in Kabul, and supporting advanced archaeological techniques and technology for archaeologists across the Middle East and North Africa.

It’s an effort furthered by the British Museum who are training Iraqi heritage sector workers, so that they have the skills needed to assess and record the condition of their heritage sites and carry out “rescue

archaeology” as required. It’s already bearing fruit; a participant in the training has been appointed by the Iraqi State Board to lead the assessment of the site of Nimrud, recently released from Daesh control. And another participant is looking forward to returning to Mosul Museum soon.

But it isn’t enough to train civilians. It’s often the brave men and women of the armed forces who are at the frontline of the threat against culture heritage. That’s why the United Kingdom last year set up a Cultural Property Protection Unit so that respect for cultural property is further integrated into training and operations of our armed forces. This includes respecting domestic and international law, as well as the obligations of the 1954 Hague Convention and its Protocols, which we will shortly ratify.

The action we take as a Council or as member states will count for little unless we show there are real consequences for those who carry out these acts. Truly to rid the world of this scourge, we need to deter and punish, as well as prevent.

Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi was the first person convicted by the International Criminal Court for attacking protected sites, but he cannot be the last. If we are to deter others from following his path, we need to see more convictions, more consequences. His story should serve as a warning to all those who choose to attack cultural heritage; a warning that this Council must ensure is heeded.

Thank you.