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Intersessional Workshop on Cultural Rights and the Protection of Cultural Heritage
14 June 2021 | 3PM – 5PM (CEST)
15 June 2021 | 10AM – 12PM & 3PM – 5PM (CEST)

Distinguished Guests,

Protecting Cultural Heritage Can Protect Human Rights

For 4000 years, my city was a city of culture, coexistence, and life. The damage caused by its occupation by ISIS has been immense. Mosul was always a city with a big heart, a home to all of its children.

In their occupation of my city, ISIS followed a familiar pattern of violence and oppression. They recruited spies in the community so people stopped trusting each other. They weaponized history to advance their narrative. And then they took their terror to another level. They displaced Christians, enslaved Yazidis, killed Shia, killed Sunnis. They carried out the systematic destruction of Mosul's identity. When they forced the city's non-Muslim inhabitants to flee, they also destroyed their heritage in an effort to remove them from the city's history. Then came the destruction of ancient Assyrian and cultural sites. After this brutality against Mosul's non-Islamic history, they shifted to the Muslim community, where they began to systematically destroy Islamic archaeological sites, as well as museums, libraries and manuscripts. They destroyed the history and heritage of ALL of Mosul's communities in an attempt to replace it with their own version of history. They forced women into captivity.

Life in the Mosul I once knew came to a halt. We stopped playing music. Cultural activities were banned. We stopped asking questions, even to ourselves. And everything became black, like their flags. Color, beauty, local dress, the arts—all disappeared as residents were forced into submitting to the group's codes for appearance and society. ISIS aimed to smash apart the ancient bonds of coexistence between Mosul's communities, as they smashed apart ancient statues. They imposed new social classes based upon Jihadist loyalty and violence.

I was born in 1986, during the Iran-Iraq war, and grew up during the first Gulf War. I still remember the large cellar in our old house in the Old City that belonged to one of my grandparents; they said there was a war and we had to hide in it. My family and all my relatives lived in that cellar for one month; the families were separated from each other by curtains. There were many conversations that could only happen in such an intense period of life and death. I used to like listening to those of the old women. One of them spoke about the ordeal of the Mosul famine in 1917. With each of the conversations that I heard, my passion to know the history of my city grew. Mosul was destroyed several times throughout history.

For three years from 2014, Mosul was under the rule of terror. There were beheadings, whippings, heads broken by stoning, bodies thrown from buildings and horrific, medieval forms of torture in the prisons. I chronicled the brutality and destruction that took place, and one day will publish a history of what happened here, in all its horror. I shall call it "the horrible history of the occupation of Mosul by Da'esh."

The room where I wrote my journal online that became known to all as Mosul Eye was just one thin wall away from the house where a senior ISIS fighter lived! There I sat documenting the group's brutality to the world, close enough to the militants that it was possible to hear them speak. As a scholar, it was my mission to deconstruct their historical narrative, despite the great danger of doing so. Writing history under such a totalitarian ideology was an act of resistance to the group's destruction of Mosul's multicultural identity and heritage.

I come from a city where Jews, Christians, Yazidis, and Muslims of different sects once lived together in a unique coexistence, a city that was described centuries ago, and I was and am determined that it should remain and be recovered.

The revival of Mosul's heritage will reveal keys to humanity's resistance against violence and division. It will reveal that the only way to live together is by believing in diversity as a mosaic, where each distinct piece is integral to the revelation of the whole, where any missing piece will in the end rob all of their shared destiny. The protection *and* promotion of this heritage in contemporary culture will create safe spaces of communication

between diverse groups of people. When you feel your identity is protected, you will act in a responsible way before the entire community.

My battle since June 2014 has been to reverse what ISIS has tried to implant in the consciousness of Mosul's residents with the only weapon I have as a historian—writing history. The social, cultural and historical destruction wrought by the group will impact the city for centuries to come. Documenting history in such a context is a battle for knowledge: to develop the critical thinking capacity of the individual as a resistance to tyranny and to protect knowledge for the future. Now that ISIS has gone, I hope a more inclusive history of the city can be documented, one that's been missing for many decades.

Despite all the destruction, human and tangible, there are many green shoots, signs of hope among the youth, who, in many cases are for the first time exploring the history of their city and its surroundings, places they never knew of or even thought to visit before! They need concrete support to grow this yearning into tangible actions that progress their lives and safeguard a better future. This makes initiatives like UNESCO's Revive the Spirit of Mosul initiative especially unique in its possibility to rise to the challenge and build cooperation *directly* with the community in all its diversity, especially its young people.

Mosul always survives. As the medieval geographer Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217) wrote: "The city is a large and ancient one, fortified and imposing, and prepared against the strokes of adversity." This I can only attest to again and again, the resilience of my city.

From this virtual venue, which has brought together those who are dedicated to culture, education and heritage, and human rights, I invite you to visit my city of Mosul.