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Upholding Cultural Rights through the Protection of Cultural Heritage

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Excellencies, colleagues, ladies, and gentlemen, as the Mission Senior Advisor on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, I am glad to enlighten some points about the mission effort in protecting Iraqi National cultural property.

The European Union Advisory Mission is applying a vigorous effort in supporting local authorities in protecting cultural heritage since we are firmly convinced there is a vital link between Cultural Protection and Security.

Indeed, safeguarding cultural goods and properties is not simply a matter of cultural urgency.

The European Union Council underlined in 2021 that protecting and enhancing cultural heritage in conflicts and crises is essential for any strategy of peace, security resilience and social reconciliation.

To that end, EUAM is strengthening its activity in this area, supporting Iraqi authorities with specific advice in cultural heritage protection. EUAM Iraq is the first and only EU mission with a full-time expert in this critical sector.

The valuable contribution of the protection of cultural heritage in fulfilling the Mission's mandate in the Security Sector reform cannot be underestimated. Cultural heritage protection directly links with critical areas such as countering organised crime, violent extremism and terrorism.

I am sure there is no need to remind anyone how, in recent times, terrorist groups have exploited the destruction of national patrimony to reach their idealistic purposes with horrendous persecution of minorities, cultural diversities and other religious beliefs. Seldom is the devastation the result of random and irrational vandalism. We experienced cultural destruction as part of a complex and sophisticated strategy to affirm a group's radical ideology and assert their absolute domination over the population, including its social and cultural context.

Moreover, digging, looting, and pillaging have been a way to finance terrorism and organised crime gangs for ages. Due to the lack of official data, it is challenging to quantify the value of cultural looting. Still, according to some estimates, the illegal market of cultural artefacts is a source of unlawful financing that is second only to revenues from the weapon and drug black market.

EUAM is currently carrying out four courses of action:

The first is a publicity campaign that raises awareness among youngsters and police officers about the importance of cultural heritage protection, promoting a friendly image of service-oriented police in community policing cooperation. This project is implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Interior along with the Ministry of Culture.

The second involves the Ministry of Education and several Iraqi universities. The goal here is to create a "think tank" of law professors and legal experts to help to review the Iraqi law 55/2002 related to the protection of cultural heritage and make it more effective.

Thirdly, EUAM facilitates creating a national IT system that helps Iraqi Law enforcement agencies to investigate culturally related crimes, hinder international illicit trafficking, disrupt one of the most profitable funding sources for criminal or terrorist organisations, and eventually recover stolen goods.

Lastly, while mainstreaming the protection of cultural heritage in every Mission's activity as a fundamental cross-cutting issue, we are also engaging with local communities and civil society organisations towards the common objective of preserving Iraq's tangible and intangible cultural goods and properties.

The latter topic is the core of our workshop.

In line with the definition of cultural rights stated by the United Nations Special Rapporteurs, the national heritage needs to be protected worldwide to grant people the right to express their cultural rights. *Each person, individually and in community with others, as well as groups of people, must be able to develop and express their humanity, their world view and the meanings they give to their existence and their development through, among*

other things, values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, institutions and ways of life.

EUAM-Iraq is very well aware that the protection of cultural heritage is not only a matter of shielding buildings and goods from demolition or destruction. It is indeed not only a question of recovering relics illegally smuggled abroad.

Instead, the protection of cultural goods is strongly connected to the people's rights to access them.

Cultural inheritance cannot be preserved by isolating it, impeding people's access and denying their way to enjoying it. So, the preservation of items, buildings, sites, as well as public spaces and open areas, cannot impede cultural expression, organisation of cultural events, and conducting cultural practices. Moreover, safeguarding cultural legacy necessarily passes through valorising memories, narratives, symbols, traditions, and habits.

Today, we have the chance to collect essential contributions from relevant and prestigious representatives of civil society. The outcomes of today platform will constitute food for future thought and follow-ups.

I wish you the best for a fruitful and productive discussion.

Thank you.