

On October 9, UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova and General Director of the State Hermitage Museum of St Petersburg Mikhail Piotrovsky signed a memorandum of understanding for the protection and restoration of cultural property in conflict areas, notably in the Middle East, in the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. The ceremony was attended by Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov, Russia's Permanent Delegate to UNESCO Alexander Kuznetsov and Executive Secretary of the Russian Federation Commission for UNESCO Grigory Ordzhonikidze.

The memorandum provides for the implementation of UNESCO-Hermitage joint projects to facilitate the protection of cultural property in conflict areas, in particular, by assessing inflicted or potential damage, drafting operational plans to ensure their security or restoration, and relevant on-site training of personnel. The sides will sign a separate agreement in each case. They expect to present a number of such projects at the Sixth St Petersburg International Cultural Forum (November 16-18 of this year).

The signed agreement will become a landmark in the development of Russia's cooperation with UNESCO and interested countries of the Middle East, for instance Syria, in protecting cultural heritage in emergencies. Possessing abundant experience in this area (for example, the salvation of Abu Simbel temples in Egypt in the 1960s), Russia will be ready to use its expert capabilities to implement the goals of the memorandum and the decisions of the 199th session of the UNESCO Executive Council on UNESCO's role in ensuring the protection and preservation of Palmyra and other Syrian landmarks of World Heritage.