



MUNDP 2020
COMMITMENT TO DEVELOPMENT

RESEARCH REPORT

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC, AND
CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (UNESCO)

THE SAFEGUARDING OF CULTURAL HERITAGE
SITES FROM DESTRUCTION RESULTING FROM
REGIONAL CONFLICT

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Basic Overview of the Issue

In today's world, despite all of the effort, conflicts remain to have undeniable effects on societies, religions, human values, and cultures. Conflicts increasingly target cultures and the erasure of culture means the loss of cultural identity which is the biggest fuel for resistance. The destruction of cultural heritage may be done in an indeliberate fashion as well. Regardless of how it is done, the international community must take necessary action to improve the mechanism for the safeguarding of cultural heritage.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was established in 1946, right after the Second World War, as a specialized agency of the United Nations. It had the aim of waking up a new spirit of collaboration between countries. The Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO reads: "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed". Cultural heritage is crucial to societies as it provides a sense of unity and belonging while providing people an understanding of their previous generations and where they come from. In addition, cultural heritage plays an important role as an instrument for peace and reconciliation. The safeguarding and protection of cultural heritage can play a key role when it comes to rebuilding societies and defeating the sense of loss and displacement caused by the conflicts.

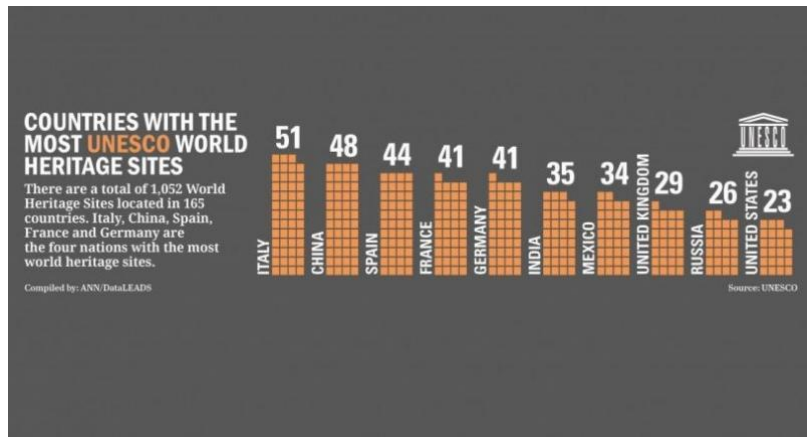
"Culture becomes the target itself to deny people's cultural identity, to deny people dignity and also to destruct their social fabric and social life. In the last decade, cultural heritage has been increasingly targeted," says Lazare Eloundou Assomo, UNESCO's director for culture and emergencies, referring to the entire international community as to how crucial it is to cooperate in order to address the issue. The Arab Spring would be a remarkable instance of what happens if not cooperated and for people to take lessons on how it is a must to coordinate and cooperate to strengthen unity.

Explanation of Important Terms



World Heritage Sites (WHS)

“World Heritage is the designation for places on Earth that are of outstanding universal value to humanity and as such, have been inscribed on the World Heritage List to be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy.” is the definition given by UNESCO about World Heritage Sites. These



Countries with the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites published by

sites are basically landmarks or areas that are selected by UNESCO and that have some form of significance; therefore is legally protected by international treaties. As of July 2019, there are 1052 World Heritage Sites that exist across 165 countries.

Cultural Heritage

In UNESCO's Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972, “cultural heritage” shall be considered “as monuments such as architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; as groups of buildings such as groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; or as sites such as works of man or the combined works of nature and of man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological points of view.”

Cultural heritage can be distinguished into three categories:

1. A built environment such as archaeological remains, buildings, townscape
2. A natural environment such as rural landscapes, coasts
3. Artifacts (often referred to as Intangible Cultural Heritage) such as documents, books, stories.



Buffer Zone

According to Paragraph 17 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, a buffer zone is defined as “... an area surrounding the property which has restrictions placed on its use to give an added layer of protection; the area constituting the buffer zone should be determined in each case through technical studies” (UNESCO February 1996: 5).

Buffer zones are generally zonal areas that lie between two or more areas by definition; in the case of the safeguarding of cultural heritage sites, they are used as tools to the conservation of these areas making them extremely important as it adds a layer of protection to the cultural heritage site that is trying to be protected. As it comes to the issue of the border of the buffer zones, they were decided to be differentiated by UNESCO; and in the end, three different layers were selected. These three layers are the primary, the near and the distant buffer zone. The primary buffer zone consists of the immediate environment of the authentic cultural landscape while the near buffer zone essentially includes parts of settlement areas that are close to the property mentioned. Lastly, the distant buffer zone is the largest and the most distant buffer zone of all. This zone covers the whole line-of-sight as seen from the railway line as far as the horizon.

Cultural Assimilation

Cultural assimilation is the name of the process done by countries in order to assimilate the culture and/or language of a certain group of people to those of another group of people. This assimilation process can be made gradually or involve a quick change depending on the circumstances. Full assimilation occurs when the new members of the group are indistinguishable from the new society that they are a part of or when they do not carry any characteristics of their former culture and background. Cultural assimilation might be the case for creating a sense of cultural unity and such; however, the destruction of cultural heritage may generally be about forced cultural assimilation.

Extremist Groups



An extremist by the definition in the Oxford Dictionary is “A person who holds extreme political or religious views, especially one who advocates illegal, violent, or other extreme action”. Extremist groups are undeniable parts of the oppressive and violent acts that have a finger on the issue.

The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring is a series of pro-democracy uprisings and rebellions that spread across most of the region in which most are Islamic countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain. Even though many of the rebellions were ended, the political, social and even cultural impact of these remains today. Even though the uprisings started out with peaceful demonstrations, it turned into violent action at one point. At its core, the protest movement set out to be an expression of the bottomless anger and resentment at the aging Arab dictatorships. “The debate about the relationship between Islam and democracy conclusively ended with the coming of the Arab Spring,” said Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in one of his speeches.

The Middle East is one of the most complex regions in the world. Countless armed militias and terrorist groups are spreading violence across borders, and the ongoing conflicts seem to cause the destruction of cultural identities as well as the actual destruction of cultural heritage sites. These destructions can have catastrophic consequences for both the current and future generations.

War Crime

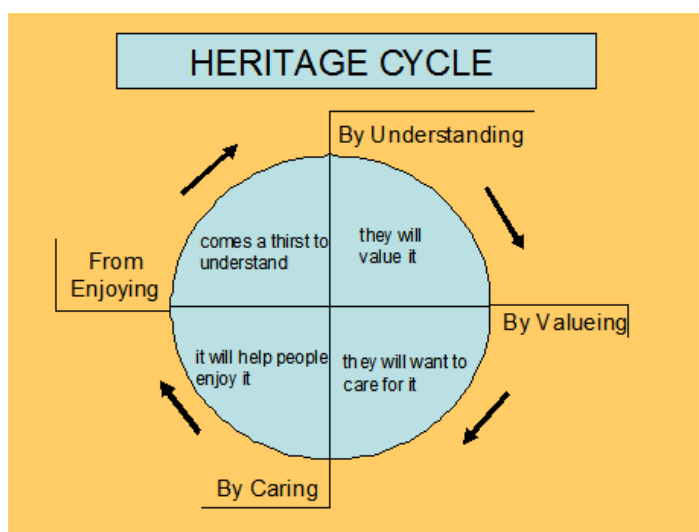
According to the International Criminal Court, war crimes include grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, such as willful killing, or causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health; torture or inhumane treatment. The importance of prosecuting those responsible for war crimes against cultural heritage was first echoed in the UN Security Council Resolution 2347, adopted in March 2017, the first ever to condemn the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage.



Detailed Background of the Issue

Cultural Heritage and Its Importance

Culture can make people feel connected with certain values, customs, beliefs, and religions; so, cultural heritage can naturally provide a sense of unity and allow people to get a better understanding of previous generations and where they came from. The Heritage Cycle diagram put forward by famous historian Simon Thurley gives the idea of how people can and



should make their past a part of their futures. Cultural heritage is considered to be built heritage, monuments related to cultures such as museums, religious buildings, ancient structures, and sites as well as less materialistic things such as stories, poems, and ceremonies. Although the issue at hand focuses on the destruction of built heritage, it is also tried to destroy intangible materials of cultures which are also undeniably remarkable

parts of cultures.

Why should societies protect and preserve cultural heritage? The ultimate reason goes parallel with the idea of how protecting culture today is essential for building a future tomorrow. There are plenty of reasons ranging from education to historical research or to provide a sense of unity and belongingness to societies. Cultural heritage reflects and shapes values, beliefs, and aspirations, therefore defining the national identity of societies. It is important to preserve our cultural heritage because it keeps our integrity as people. In times of war and conflicts, all monuments, buildings and such that are considered as symbols to culture, gain an increased amount of importance as they can become targets of extremist groups and violent action that seeks to destroy what is valued by the oppositions, such as their cultural identities in the case of the destruction of remarkable archaeological sites in Iraq, Nineveh, and Nemruh which will be discussed in the later sections of this report.



Reasons Why Cultural Heritage Sites Are Destroyed

It is crucial to interpret why cultural heritage sites are destroyed, especially if it is done deliberately in order to end the horror. Harm given to cultural heritage sites is rather a symptom or one of the side effects of war, and it is considered to be a war crime by UNESCO. Humanity has been witnessing numerous unprecedented attacks on the world's cultural heritage by extremists more and more every day. The brutal and systematic destruction of cultural heritage is being used as a tactic of war to threaten populations. It is increasingly getting indisputable that cultural property is not simply at risk from accidental harm, but is being deliberately attacked as part of cultural cleansing operations. Preventing attacks against the cultural property must definitely be a priority to the international community, but accountability should also be a focal point in the response of the international community to ongoing attacks.

Oppressive and violent action aimed at cultural heritage sites can be done in order to destroy cultural identities, the unity, and the belongingness that culture provides to society. Forces that attack or damage such sites have the aim of negatively affecting the political, social and cultural status of the country. They cause horror and fear within the country as they wish to remove not only the symbols of cultures, beliefs and such but also anything valued by the society to that effect.

The Effects of Cultural Destruction

Unfortunately, most of the results of the attacks made by extremist groups and of the violent action taken against cultural heritage sites seem to negatively affect the country as it is seen in recent history that these succeed to cause negative political, financial, social and cultural progression within the country and the international community. Moreover, in a smaller scope, societies get negatively affected when there is a loss of such authentic and unique sites in many ways such as the loss of their perception of what culture means and their traditions. The customs that are connected to cultural heritage such as mosques, churches get affected when they are under destruction. These customs connect the society together and they evoke the feeling of what it means to belong somewhere. This unity and even the sense of belongingness get disrupted this way. From an economic point of view, the country is largely damaged, considering the fact that most probably the cultural heritage sites are remarkable tourist attractions, especially if the site damaged is a part of World Heritage Sites.



Recent Examples

On January 20, Syrian authorities revealed that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), also known as Daesh, militants had destroyed part of the Roman amphitheater in the ancient city of Palmyra. Unfortunately, this wasn't the last time of the terrorist group's deliberate destruction of cultural heritage sites throughout the Middle East and North Africa. According to the Antiquities Coalition which is a "US-based organization that fights against the illicit global trade in antiquities", ISIS has destroyed over 150 sites between 2011 and 2015. In a recent interview with CNBC, which is a pay television business news channel, UNESCO director-general Irina Bokova confirmed that all of Syria's UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been either damaged or destroyed since the country's civil war began over six years ago.

ISIS is not the only terrorist group that is carrying out deliberate destruction of cultural heritage sites for its benefits. Another example is the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001. The two Buddhas of Bamiyan that were built in the 6th century were famous for their craftsmanship and size. The taller of the two Buddhas stood at more than 170 feet high, with the second statue at nearly 115 feet. They were once the world's largest standing Buddhas.

The idea of damaging cultural heritage goes way back to the World War II era. On December 29, 1940, German bombs destroyed the Christ Church Greyfriars in London. Furthermore, as another example, the Nazis destroyed almost each and every Warsaw building and deliberately demolished, set fire or stole a huge part of its cultural heritage.

International Response

Unfortunately, the ongoing dispute and conflict within the Middle East cause the international community to have a perception that it is almost impossible to interfere and ensure the safeguarding of the World Heritage Sites within the region. The reason why the international community thinks it is impossible to interfere is that, according to their point of view, the destruction of cultural heritage is basically being used as a war tool which leads the majority of the international community to avoid the conflict.

On the other hand, as the situation gets more and more violent, the media and people all around the world recognize the situations and conflicts as they are remarkably noticeable.



In the end, the awareness that is needed to be raised is being raised more and more every day because of the deniable increase of the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage all over the world, especially currently, the Middle East.

Major Parties Involved

UNESCO

The idea of a body which will have the aim of making the international community cooperate to protect heritage always existed. Therefore, emerging after World War I, the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation was found in 1922, making the later titled UNESCO the successor of itself. UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, a specialized United Nations agency established in 1945. The ultimate purpose of the agency is to contribute to promoting international collaboration in education, sciences, and culture to increase universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and human rights.

UNESCO has been working towards preserving and protecting cultural heritage sites for years and is the most related agency involved regarding this issue. UNESCO has five major programs in order to pursue its objectives and these programs are education, culture, social/human sciences, natural sciences, and communication. All these programs aim to contribute to the building of peace and the intercultural dialogue through each and every one of its objectives.

UNESCO plays a crucial role in getting the attention of societies all across the world on making the cultural heritage sites appreciated and raising awareness on the damage given to them because of destruction. UNESCO is conducting many projects in regions in the world, encouraging all Member States to sign international frameworks to ensure the protection of their natural and cultural heritage sites. Besides all of the projects that they are conducting and what is done in the World Heritage Center, UNESCO willingly offers to provide all Member States and all parties help in safeguarding World Heritage properties by providing technical assistance and professional training.



Syria

The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East still remain on the agenda even though they go back approximately 1,400 years. The main cause of this conflict was the disagreement on the question of who would take over the prophet Mohammad. This question caused Muslims to form two branches of Islam: Sunni and Shia. These two branches had theological differences depending on the interpretation of the Koran. Ever since then, the argument on who is the dominant branch and the problems that come with it remains within the country. However, the current conflicts are more about politics, power and land resources as well as sectarianism.

The Arab Spring is a key series of events when talking about the Middle East. Beginning in late 2010, the Arab Spring broke out, which led to protests that began as a response to oppressive regimes and low standards of living that the society was not happy about. The events in these nations reached their climax in the spring of 2011, giving the name to the uprisings. Although some protests were started out as peaceful protests, some turned out to be violent protests; notably in Syria. More than eight years later, an estimated number of 6.5 million people were displaced according to the UN while over 500,000 Syrians have died. The civil war became global and followed by the international community with the inclusion of Russia and Iran backing the Syrian president, Bashar al Assad, and his regime. The regime has brutally defended his power in the wake of the revolution. Europe and the United States also backed the rebels who are almost all Sunnis. ISIS, an Islamic militant group gained control of a lot of in the region using the civil war as a tool to further their cause.

ISIS' orchestrated theft and destruction of cultural property has become a tactic of war. One of the very well known examples to these in Syria would be the destruction of the Palmyra Temple. Another example could be ISIS destroying the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church complex in Deir Ez-Zor. In addition to these examples, there are hundreds of cultural heritage sites being destroyed by ISIS in the region even in the present.

Iraq

Iraq is also one of the countries that have been affected by the Arab Spring since the



spring of 2011. There is the wake of massive destruction of cultural heritage sites in Iraq which is acknowledged by the international community. UNESCO, on this ongoing issue, has stated: “According to Iraq’s Vice-Minister of Culture for Antiquities and Tourism Affairs, Qais Rasheed, violent extremists have wreaked severe damage to archaeological sites of world importance, destroying up to 70% of Nineveh and 80% of Nimrud. They systematically dug tunnels in Mosul and other heritage sites in the search for antiquities to sell on the Internet and black market. Mohammad Iqbal Omar, Iraq’s Minister of Education, stressed that “we must stop the trade in Iraqi antiquities, adhere to UN Security Council Resolution 2199 [banning all cultural trade from Iraq and Syria], and dry up Daesh’s money flow.”

Chronology of Important Events

Date	Description of Event
1922	The League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation was founded.
November 16, 1945	UNESCO was founded.
May 14, 1954	The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Properties in the Event of Armed Conflict was signed.
November 16, 1972	The World Heritage Convention was signed.
January 25, 2011	The first coordinated mass protests which started the Arab Spring are held in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt.



March 15, 2011	Pro-democracy protests began in Syria.
February 22, 2014	The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139 was adopted for what is happening in Syria.
March 24, 2017	The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2347 was adopted.
March 23, 2019	ISIS lost most of his territories in the Middle East, having been defeated in Iraq and Syria alongside with numberless loss.

Relevant International Documents

- [The Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land](#) (1899)
- [The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Properties in the Event of Armed Conflict](#) (1954)
- [The Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property](#) (1970)
- [The World Heritage Convention](#) (1972)
- [The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139](#) (2014)
- [The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199](#) (2015)
- [The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2347](#) (2017)

Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The issue of finding a way to safeguard cultural heritage especially in times of conflict has always been a problem. The protection of intangible and tangible heritage always mattered, even before both of the world wars. The Convention with Respect to the Laws and



Customs of War on Land, also known as the Hague Convention of 1899 considerably advanced international law and established the principle of the immunity of cultural property. According to Article 27 of the Convention “In sieges and bombardments all necessary steps must be taken to spare, as far as possible, buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals [...], provided they are not being used at the time for military purposes. It is the duty of the besieged to indicate the presence of such buildings or places by distinctive and visible signs, which shall be notified to the enemy beforehand.” Many more conventions were ratified, resolutions were adopted, treaties were signed after 1899 yet the issue still is relevant today. In the past, the destruction made wasn’t made deliberately; however, things have changed.

The number of escalating armed conflicts since the 1980s, first in Afghanistan, later in the Middle East and recently in Mali led to an undeniable increase in the destruction of historic sites by terrorist groups. “Immediately after the destruction in 2012, UNESCO alerted the international community and seized the International Criminal Court to ensure such crimes do not go unpunished,” explained Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO. For the situation in Mali, MINUSMA was created which was entrusted with “protecting from attack the cultural and historical sites in Mali, in collaboration with UNESCO”.

Solution Alternatives

As can be seen from the example of ISIS, the international community and the media play an undeniable role in the safeguarding of cultural heritage. The destruction of even small heritage sites such as small temples, customary villages, galleries, small mosques may affect the whole world; and that is why raising awareness among the Member States is as crucial as identifying effective national mechanisms to ensure safeguarding. Among the objectives is raising awareness, also in the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two protocols.

When it comes to international instruments, the conventions mentioned above are a solid basis to protect cultural heritage. Especially The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Properties in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) and its Protocols set further international standards to deal with the specific risks faced by heritage during conflict. In addition, the Statutes of the International Criminal Court have defined the intentional



destruction of historical buildings as a war crime. This provides firm ground to address impunity related to such attacks; so all Member States must keep in mind that the International Criminal Court can be applied if needed in such cases.

If there is a lesson taken from all the situations and traumas that happened in the past, it is how prevention must be prioritized. Member States should not wait for a crisis to come “rather than last-minute endeavors”. Communities and local professionals must be prepared in order to keep cultural heritage sites safe in times of crisis. This preparation can be made with more than many ways. Conferences can be organized, trainings can be made and many more. This is especially crucial in times of conflict, considering the fact that it is very difficult to take international assistance to reach affected areas.

When and where prevention and mitigation fail, constant monitoring and early assessment of damage is a priority to prepare a coordinated response for recovery and future rehabilitation of the cultural heritage damaged. Web-based international observatories can be created such as the one created for Syria and Iraq, to form international cooperation in order to protect the heritage of the country. Extremist and terrorist groups not only destroy or damage cultural heritage, but they also loot the archeological sites which are highly profitable in terms of illicit trafficking. To stop this, Member States can cooperate with notably The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), the World Customs Organization (WCO), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and the International Council for Museums (ICOM). Also cooperating with UNESCO in order to develop comprehensive strategies to build national capacities which will help to prevent the looting of cultural properties and such can be done by the Member States.

Last but not least, rehabilitating cultural heritage in order to build resilience and hope is crucial. According to UNESCO, the reason why it carries such importance is that “Culture is a bond that motivates people to work together for a better future. Cultural heritage is also essential for citizens’ to regain a sense of shared purpose and common identity when the conflicts are over.” To strengthen resilience and succeed, we must mobilize all stakeholders, national authorities, development partners, the culture professions, as well as customs, police and the art market to cooperate and make cultural heritage protection and management a priority.



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Committee: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
Agenda Item: The safeguarding of cultural heritage sites from destruction resulting from regional conflict

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Useful Links

- The Value of Heritage by UNESCO: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1_f-GqaHHo
- World Heritage and Buffer Zones: <https://whc.unesco.org/document/101967>
- Cultural Heritage in Armed Conflict: The 1954 Hague Convention and its two (1954 and 1999) Protocols by UNESCO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqdgj1aPHqs>
- Introducing UNESCO: <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco>
- The Arab Spring in 60 seconds: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3ZZWc8-1_o