



Topic:

Protecting Cultural Heritage in Conflict Zones

I. Introduction:

Cultural heritage represents humanity's shared legacy; the monuments, museums, religious buildings, traditions, languages, and artistic expressions that define communities and connect generations. During armed conflicts, this heritage faces increasingly serious threats, moving beyond accidental damage to become a target for intentional destruction used as a weapon against communities. Armed groups deliberately destroy cultural and religious sites to intimidate civilians, erase identities, and create lasting divisions in society. This approach has become a disturbing strategy in modern conflicts, where ancient cities and historic landmarks are systematically attacked as part of broader campaigns of violence. Beyond its cultural significance, heritage plays a practical role in economic development through tourism, supports education, and helps communities heal after conflict by providing a sense of continuity and belonging. The international community has recognized that attacking cultural heritage violates international law and can constitute war crimes, making protection efforts essential for SOCHUM's work in defending human dignity and preserving humanity's shared history.

II. Definition of Key terms:

- **Cultural Heritage:** The legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a society, inherited from the past, maintained in the present, and passed to future generations, encompassing tangible items (monuments, sites, objects) and living traditions (oral history, performing arts, social practices, crafts) that

give a community identity and continuity, reflecting historical, aesthetic, scientific, and/or social value.

- **Tangible Cultural Heritage:** the physical, visible, and touchable manifestations of a culture's history and identity, encompassing things like historic buildings, monuments, archaeological sites, artworks, artifacts, books, and significant landscapes.
- **Intangible Cultural Heritage:** the living traditions, expressions, knowledge, and skills passed down through generations, encompassing oral histories, performing arts, social rituals, traditional crafts, and understanding of nature.
- **Conflict Zones:** a geographical area with significant, ongoing violence, armed hostility, or severe political instability, disrupting daily life, essential services (like water, health, transport), and posing extreme risks to civilians, often characterized by fighting between militarized groups and breakdown of governance, leading to displacement and humanitarian crises
- **Cultural Cleansing:** deliberate and systematic destruction or removal of the cultural heritage and identity of a targeted group or population
- **Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property:** The illegal trade, import, export, or transfer of ownership of significant historical, artistic, or scientific items, involving theft, looting from archaeological sites, or illicit excavation, which strips nations of their heritage, fuels organized crime, and destroys irreplaceable knowledge
- **World Heritage sites:** Cultural and/or natural sites considered to be of 'Outstanding Universal Value', which have been inscribed on the World Heritage List by the World Heritage Committee.
- **Restitution:** the restoration of something lost or stolen to its proper owner.
- **Armed Non-State Actors:** organized groups or individuals using violence for political or other goals, operating independently from a recognized government's formal military or police, and lacking legal status under

international law, encompassing entities like insurgents, terrorists, militias, cartels, and even some private military contractors.

- **Blue Shield Emblem:** the international symbol for protecting cultural heritage (museums, sites, archives, etc.) during armed conflict or disaster
- **Post-Conflict Reconstruction:** Rebuilding a society after war, going beyond just fixing buildings to creating lasting peace by addressing security, governance, economic hardship, justice, and social healing, aiming to prevent relapse into violence through holistic, long-term efforts involving governments, civil society, and international aid.

III. Background Information

The destruction of cultural heritage during armed conflicts has existed for a long time, but its scale and purpose have changed in recent decades, it has primarily amplified. In the past damage to cultural sites was for the most of time unintentional, recurring due to the result of military actions, these include examples of siege of cities, aerial, naval and artillery bombing. Many historic structures like churches, castles, libraries and old city centres were frequently affected, although they were not usually the main targets. In contrast, in modern conflicts, cultural heritage is increasingly internationally and systematically targeted, showing a shift in military and ideological strategies. As a result of these changes, since the later 20th century, conflicts have involved more non-state actors, asymmetric warfare, and extremist ideologies, increasing the risk to cultural heritage. For example in countries such as Syria and Iraq, extremist groups deliberately destroyed temples, shrines and museums. These acts aimed to erase cultural identity, attract global media attention, and assert ideological dominance. These events that happened in Syria, such as the destruction of Palmyra, as well as the looting of the National museum of Iraq highlights how in this day and age, cultural heritage is a deliberate target of war. In addition, looting and illegal trafficking of cultural objects are also widespread in conflict zones now. Moreover archeological sites are often illegally excavated during periods of instability, to retrieve valuable goods that fall under the categories of cultural heritage goods. As a consequence, artifacts are smuggled through international criminal networks and sold on global markets. This trade provides financial gains, and financial support for armed groups, helping to prolong conflict and instability. Furthermore weak governance, porous borders, and limited law enforcement make recovery and restitution difficult. Finally, modern military tactics such as aerial, naval bombardment and

artillery increase the risk of damage to cultural heritage, in both urban and rural areas. Furthermore, prolonged conflicts also lead to neglect and deterioration of heritage sites as resources are prioritized for humanitarian needs.

IV. UN treaties/ Historical Events:

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict is the primary international treaty dedicated exclusively to safeguarding cultural heritage during wartime. It requires States Parties to respect and protect cultural property, whether movable or immovable, and is supplemented by two Protocols that reinforce its provisions.

The First Protocol to the Hague Convention (1954)

The First Protocol to the Hague Convention (1954) is an international treaty that specifically addresses the protection and restitution of movable cultural property in the event of armed conflict and occupation. It was adopted on May 14, 1954, and entered into force on August 7, 1956.

The Second Protocol to the Hague Convention (1999)

The second Protocol to the Hague Convention (1999) is a supplementary international treaty that strengthens and clarifies the provisions of the original 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. It was adopted on March 26, 1999, and entered into force on March 9, 2004.

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972)

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention, adopted in 1972, is an international treaty that aims to encourage the identification, protection, preservation, presentation, and transmission of cultural and natural heritage of "outstanding universal value" to future generations.

UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017)

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2347, adopted unanimously on March 24, 2017, was the first UN resolution to focus entirely on the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict as a matter of international peace and security.

International Criminal Court: The Al-Mahdi Case (2016)

The International Criminal Court (ICC) Al-Mahdi case in 2016 was a landmark trial that resulted in the first-ever conviction for the war crime of intentionally directing attacks against historic monuments and buildings dedicated to religion.

V. Main Issues

Protecting cultural heritage in conflict zones face multiple challenges, many of them which are linked to legal, operational, and social factors. Firstly the limited enforcement of international legal frameworks, while many conventions and resolutions exist, their implementation depends on state capacity, political will, and security conditions, which are often severely compromised during conflict. During active conflicts state institutions often collapse or lose control over territory, leaving these sites unguarded and vulnerable and as result, enforcement becomes nearly impossible. These enforcement mechanisms are particularly weak in areas controlled by armed non-state actors, since they do not recognize international law.

Furthermore the deliberate targeting by armed non-state actors. Often extremist and insurgent groups internationally destroy cultural and religious sites as a part of ideological campaigns, aimed at erasing community identities. Such attacks do seek to intimidate civilians, provoke outrage, and generate propaganda, thereby reinforcing their ideological narrative. These destruction often happening to shrines, temples, and historic monuments is calculated, which makes prevention particularly difficult without effective international intervention.

In addition illicit trafficking of cultural property during periods of instability, cultural heritage sites are looted, and artifacts are smuggled internationally, often through complex networks. These objects frequently end up in private collections or international art markets, far removed from their country of origin. The profit made from their trade can finance armed groups or criminal organisations, thus creating a vicious cycle in which heritage destruction fuels ongoing conflict.

Moreover, another issue is the risks from military operations themselves. Even without deliberate targeting, armed forces may accidentally damage heritage sites, because many lack proper training in cultural property protection. The damage can occur during airstrikes, ground operations, or occupation of historic buildings. In urban locations cultural sites increase their exposure during city-based fighting, and although international humanitarian law encourages precautions, military necessity often overrides heritage protection.

Additionally, the perception of heritage protection is seen as a secondary issue. Immediate humanitarian needs, such as saving lives and providing food or medical aid naturally take priority. In the short term focus, the neglect of cultural heritage is inevitable.

Finally, coordination challenges are another major issue. Humanitarian organizations, military actors, cultural institutions, and local authorities often operate independently, resulting in limited communication and shared strategy. The lack of coordination can lead to gaps, duplication, or conflicting priorities, which further reduces the effectiveness of protection efforts. Local communities, often the most invested in protecting heritage, are frequently excluded from decision making, therefore weakening the sustainability of protection measures.

VI. Major countries and agencies involved in the issue

Countries that are directly affected by the conflict:

Countries such as: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, Afghanistan, & Ukrain. They have ongoing conflicts, hostilities, displacement, and economic collapses, often limiting the capacity to protect and restore cultural heritage sites. These governments lack the resources or security needed to implement effective heritage protection measures. In this case local communities also provide a first area of defense against organization and people trying to steal.

Major market countries:

Many HIC countries such as the United states, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Switzerland play a critical role in addressing illicit trafficking of cultural property. Due to the high market value, cultural heritage people are very demanded. Strong import restrictions, requirements and cooperations between states, are essential to prevent the sale of cultural-heritage related artifacts.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

It serves as the leading international agency for cultural heritage protection. It coordinates emergency responses, documentation initiatives, and post-conflict restoration programs. They also provide technical assistance, support capacity building, monitor World Heritage Sites at risk, and mobilize international support during crises.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC):

It addresses cultural property trafficking as a form of transnational organized crime. It supports all Member States in strengthening legal frameworks as well as improving law

enforcement cooperation and having judicial responses. It emphasized the links between heritage destruction, organized crime and broader security threats.

INTERPOL:

Plays a crucial role in finding stolen cultural heritage artifacts. With cross border cooperation of national authorities and also between international police, the tracking and recovering of illicitly trafficked artifacts is easier and more efficient.

International Criminal Court (ICC):

Contributes to accountability by prosecuting the intentional destruction of cultural heritage as a war crime. Although its jurisdiction is limited, ICC rulings have strong symbolic and legal significance.

VII. Possible solutions

The protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones is one of the most pressing humanitarian and cultural challenges today. As armed conflicts continue to threaten both tangible and intangible heritage, it is essential for countries to cooperate through multilateral frameworks to create measures that are efficient, impartial and sustainable:

- Develop an international cultural heritage protection database, which could be managed by UNESCO in cooperation with INTERPOL and UNODC, where countries would share updated information on endangered sites, stolen artifacts and emerging risk assessments. This system could support early-warning mechanisms and improve international coordination during crises.
- Establish an international fund dedicated to the protection and restoration of cultural heritage in conflict and post-conflict settings, accessible to the country with approval from relevant UN bodies. This fund could support emergency stabilization, post-conflict reconstruction and capacity-building for local heritage professionals.
- Introduce and strengthen national and international legislation limiting military activities near protected heritage sites. (Hague Convention of 1954). These

measures could include clearer military guidelines, mandatory training for armed forces, and integration of heritage considerations into operational planning.

- Encourages the prevention and prohibition of deliberate attacks against cultural heritage by state and non-state actors through monitoring, accountability mechanisms and international judicial processes. Strengthening enforcement would reduce impunity and reinforce international norms against destruction.
- Reinforce and update the existing international treaties to ensure protection frameworks remain relevant to modern conflicts. This could involve revising legal definitions, improving enforcement mechanisms and extending obligations to address challenges from non-state actors and transnational trafficking networks.

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