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SOCIAL, HUMANITARIAN & CULTURAL ISSUES (SOCHUM)

Combatting the Impact of Armed Conflict on Cultural Heritage Sites

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Introduction

Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines cultural heritage as monuments, groups of buildings, and sites of Outstanding Universal Value, including architectural works, archaeological structures, historic settlements, and areas shaped by the interaction between humans and their environment.[1] While this definition was established in 1972, it has since been interpreted broadly through UNESCO's Operational Guidelines to encompass cultural landscapes, historic towns, heritage routes, and other diverse expressions of cultural heritage. It represents both tangible and intangible legacies of human civilization that reflect the historic, artistic, religious, and social development of societies.

Armed conflict poses one of the most significant threats to cultural heritage worldwide. Conflict zones, areas experiencing sustained armed violence involving state or non-state actors, expose heritage sites to deliberate destruction, collateral damage, looting, and prolonged neglect. Cultural heritage has historically been targeted during warfare as a means of erasing identity, asserting ideological dominance, or destabilizing communities. In contemporary conflicts, urban warfare, aerial bombardment, and the militarization of heritage sites have further increased their vulnerability, often resulting in irreversible physical damage and the disruption of cultural practices tied to these locations.

Beyond physical destruction, armed conflict undermines cultural continuity and facilitates the illicit trafficking of cultural property. Deteriorating security conditions allow artifacts from museums, archaeological sites, and religious institutions to enter international black markets, in some cases providing funding for armed groups and terrorist organizations. Despite international legal protections such as the 1954 Hague Convention, which mandates states to protect cultural heritage, challenges in enforcement and post conflict recovery persist.[2] This ultimately underscores the need for stronger international cooperation to protect and preserve cultural heritage in times of armed conflict.

Post-Conflict Restoration and Reconstruction

Foreign involvement in restoring and reconstructing cultural heritage in armed conflict zones shapes how nations recover not only buildings and monuments but also community identity and historical memory. When wars destroy towns and cities, the destruction of heritage sites often causes both physical loss and psychological trauma for the affected populations. In Ukraine, for example, UNESCO has verified damage to hundreds of cultural sites since the 2022 invasion, with over 150 sites partially or totally destroyed and 4,779 assets reportedly damaged across museums, religious buildings, and historic centers, leading to an estimated $3.5 billion in cultural and tourism losses so far.[3] These figures demonstrate conflict's immense impact on cultural heritage and how restoration needs far outweigh local resources. Efforts to rebuild heritage cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the affected state, particularly when economic and security conditions remain fragile.

In an attempt to remedy this problem, multiple international frameworks and foreign contributions have begun to structure many post-conflict recovery efforts. For instance, the 1954

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[1]UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Cultural Heritage - Glossary," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d., https://whc.unesco.org/en/glossary/224/.
[2] Ibid.
[3]"Ukraine: UNESCO Estimates the Damage to Culture and Tourism after 2," Unesco.org, 2024, https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-unesco-estimates-damage-culture-and-tourism-after-2-years-war-35-billion?.

Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict provides legal obligations for participating states to safeguard heritage and prevent damage, theft, and illicit trade during war and reconstruction. Under this treaty, marked cultural sites should be spared from attack and protected wherever possible under international humanitarian law.[4] Additionally, UNESCO's Post-Conflict and Post-Disaster Reconstruction and Recovery initiative assists nations in planning and financing restoration of World Heritage properties, drawing on expertise, funding, and coordination across multiple governments and institutions.[5] The European Union has also developed strategic foreign policy tools aimed at integrating cultural heritage priorities into peacebuilding and crisis responses, reinforcing the idea that rebuilding heritage contributes to broader social healing and stability. These frameworks signal a collective recognition that heritage restoration is a shared responsibility in a globalized world.

Illicit Trafficking and Smuggling of Cultural Artifacts

Cultural property is something that is shared in every culture and society around the world. They are markers of history, items that detail the lives of those who have long passed. These artifacts or antiquities tie the world of the present to that of the past, and allow people to gleam into history. However, in times of conflict, it is easy for governments to overlook the protection of museums, cultural centers, and historical sites from acts of violence or destruction. The targeting of cultural heritage is not a historic problem; it continues to be a feature of many recent conflicts[6]. Armed conflict creates conditions in which cultural heritage becomes especially vulnerable to destruction, looting, and illicit trafficking. In this context, the illicit trafficking of antiquities is the illegal excavation, theft, smuggling, and trade of historical artifacts, depriving nations of their cultural heritage, destroying archeological context, and often funding organized crime or terrorism.[7] During these periods of instability, war, occupation, the displacement of populations, and weakened governance, the breakdown of legal and security systems allows for illicit trafficking to occur across borders with relative ease. The United Nations, UNESCO, and SOCHUM are committed to protecting antiquities and the sites in which they reside.

The illicit trafficking of antiquities is not a rare phenomenon: many have looted the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs, with evidence of Roman graffiti dating back thousands of years. However, the business for stolen antiquities became significantly more lucrative and large-scale between the 18th and 19th centuries with the rise of Neoclassicism and wealthy collectors. Colonization in South America, Africa, and Asia at large facilitated the trafficking of artifacts by enabling mass looting, removing cultural heritage for Western museums and collections, and establishing systems that treated these items as curiosities or political tools, leading to cultural erasure in colonized nations.[8] Ultimately, this fueled the intense demand for 'new' artifacts, and it was not until the 1950s that the material volume and monetary trade of stolen artifacts had

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[4] UNESCO. 2022. "Cultural Heritage & Armed Conflicts." Unesco.org. 2022. https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts.

[5] Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. n.d. "Post-Conflict and Post-Disaster Reconstruction and Recovery." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. https://whc.unesco.org/en/reconstruction/.

[6] Nicole Winchester, "Targeting Culture: The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Conflict," House of Lords Library (UK Parliament, December 14, 2022), https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/targeting-culture-the-destruction-of-cultural-heritage-in-conflict/.

[7] "What Is Illicit Traffic? | Www.icom.museum," www.obs-traffic.museum, n.d., https://www.obs-traffic.museum/what-illicit-traffic.

[8] "Illicit Trade of Cultural Property: Who Owns African Art?," Columbia Undergraduate Law Review, n.d., https://www.culawreview.org/journal/illicit-trade-of-cultural-property-who-owns-african-art.

risen at an alarming rate. This craze for art and antiques has yet to slow down, and in recent years, the lucrative black market in works of art and antiquities has flourished thanks to the enthusiasm of buyers, the lack of legislation, the complicity of actors in the sector, the increase in looting in countries in conflict situations, and the development of online sales platforms.[9] The interest in these antiquities also represents a threat to the integrity of cultural properties. Consequently, the demand creates a development of a legitimate art market, and thus encourages theft from museums, private collections, and religious buildings and monuments.

The involvement of actors in the sector, that being dealers, auctioneers, museum curators, and individual buyers play a key role in the theft of goods. Stolen artifacts are often falsely documented, mislabeled, or laundered through private collections before appearing in auction houses or galleries in wealthier markets. The complicity of those who provide false papers and certificates of origin is an essential element of laundering. This also applies to organizations that make it possible to do so; in some cases, armed groups deliberately target cultural heritage, and these artifacts are then looted and sold on the international black market to fund military operations.

Case Study: Syrian Civil War

One of the most cited examples of extensive cultural heritage destruction in a modern armed conflict is Syria's civil war, which began in 2011 and has profoundly damaged the country's rich historical legacy. Syria holds six UNESCO World Heritage sites, including the Ancient City of Aleppo, Palmyra, the Crac des Chevaliers castle, Bosra, Ancient Damascus, and the Dead Cities, all of which have suffered varying degrees of destruction from shelling, bombing, looting, and military occupation. Satellite and field assessments show that more than 10% of historic buildings in Aleppo's Old City were destroyed, while another 51% were moderately damaged from intense urban warfare over years of fighting.[10] These impacts extend beyond major monuments to include museums, archaeological sites, and local craft traditions disrupted by displacement and insecurity.

In response to this widespread destruction, multiple restoration and safeguarding efforts have been implemented by both local authorities and international partners. UNESCO's Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage project, backed by the European Union, focused on monitoring damage, mitigating further loss, and preparing actions that could support post-conflict recovery, including training national stakeholders in inventory and protection of both tangible and intangible heritage.[11] Documentation initiatives have mapped damage and developed online platforms for information sharing among experts and communities, offering the crucial first step toward coherent restoration once conditions allow. Efforts have also targeted rebuilding key sculptures such as the Lion of Al-Lāt in Palmyra, which was dismantled after its destruction by armed groups and later reconstructed and conserved.[12]

Local and international collaboration continues to evolve under challenging circumstances, often balancing immediate security concerns with long-term conservation goals. In historic zones such as Al-Jdayde in Aleppo, joint surveys by Syria's Directorate General of

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[9] Ibid.

[10] News, A. B. C. n.d. "History Lost amid the Destruction of These Syrian UNESCO World Heritage Sites." ABC News.https://abcnews.go.com/International/history-lost-destruction-syrian-unesco-world-heritage-sites/story?id=37654762

[11] "UNESCO - Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage." n.d. Ich.unesco.org. https://ich.unesco.org/en/projects/emergency-safeguarding-of-the-syrian-cultural-heritage-00386.

[12] Ibid.

Antiquities and Museums and UNESCO helped to assess damage and guide emergency consolidation of structures, paving the way for later rehabilitation efforts that cleared rubble and stabilized fragile architecture.[13] These combined actions provide a framework for recovery, enabling communities to reconnect with their heritage and retain cultural identity amidst reconstruction. As this work progresses, comprehensive restoration remains an ongoing process dependent on peace, funding, and sustained global attention to safeguard cultural heritage for future generations.

There are several lessons to be learned from Syria. First and foremost is the value of documentation and local involvement. Projects that digitized collections, mapped heritage sites, and trained local experts helped preserve knowledge even when physical spaces were unsafe. Syrian archaeologists, curators, and volunteers played a critical role by recording damage, hiding movable objects, and sharing information with international partners.[14] Cultural heritage protection works best when it combines global resources with on-the-ground expertise. Second, the UN worked with member states to strengthen border controls and restrict the illegal trade in cultural property, recognizing that artifact trafficking often funds armed groups. While these actions raised awareness and improved cooperation, the Syrian case showed limits in enforcement and speed. Many sites were damaged before international mechanisms could fully respond.

Looking forward, the UN can build on these lessons by investing more in early-warning systems, rapid-response heritage teams, and permanent funding for documentation in high-risk regions. Stronger international legal frameworks and tighter art-market regulations could further reduce incentives for looting. The experience of Syria makes clear that preserving art is not a luxury; it is part of rebuilding societies, fostering peace, and ensuring that future generations inherit both history and hope.

Case Study: Afghanistan and Iraq

The restitution of cultural artifacts removed during times of war has become a central concern of international cultural heritage law and post-conflict reconstruction in the modern era. Two of the most significant contemporary cases: the looting of Iraqi cultural heritage following the 2003 Iraq War and the widespread heritage destruction and trafficking associated with Taliban rule in Afghanistan, illustrate both the challenges and evolving frameworks of restitution in post-conflict contexts.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq marked one of the most devastating episodes for cultural heritage in recent history.[15] In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Baghdad, widespread looting occurred at archaeological sites and cultural institutions, most notably the Iraq National Museum. Thousands of artifacts, many of them irreplaceable records of Mesopotamian civilization, were stolen amid the collapse of state authority and insufficient protection by occupying forces.[16] These losses were not incidental; they reflected broader failures to integrate cultural heritage protection into military planning and occupation governance.

[13] "Activities Supported by the Heritage Emergency Fund in the SYRIAN ARAB." 2026. Unesco.org. 2026. https://www.unesco.org/en/node/187368.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Joshua J Mark, "The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia," World History Encyclopedia, February 4, 2014, https://www.worldhistory.org/review/45/the-looting-of-the-iraq-museum-baghdad-the-lost-le/.
[16] Jocelyn Prasad, "Iraq Museum Looting: 15 Years On," The University of Sydney, 2018, https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2018/04/10/iraq-museum-looting--15-years-on.html.

Restitution efforts following the Iraq War have relied heavily on international legal instruments, including the 1970 UNESCO Convention and bilateral agreements restricting the import of Iraqi antiquities. Over the past two decades, Iraq has successfully recovered thousands of looted objects through cooperation with foreign governments, customs agencies, museums, and auction houses.[17] Countries like Japan, the Netherlands, Italy, and the United States were among the few that had returned cultural objects, which amounted to 17,000 tablets, seals, and cuneiform.[18] These restitutions underscore the growing recognition that cultural artifacts removed during conflict constitute stolen property, not commodities, and that their return is essential to restoring national identity and historical continuity.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's approach to cultural heritage differed in form but not in consequence. During their rule in the late 1990s and again after 2021, the Taliban presided over both the deliberate destruction of heritage, most famously the Buddhas of Bamiyan, and the illicit trafficking of antiquities.[19] Archaeological sites were looted extensively, often with artifacts entering international markets via regional smuggling routes. Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan's restitution efforts have been complicated by prolonged instability, limited institutional capacity, and the lack of consistent international engagement with Taliban authorities. Nonetheless, Afghan cultural artifacts have been returned through actions taken by foreign governments, museums, and international organizations operating independently of Taliban leadership. These restitutions are often framed not as diplomatic cooperation with the Taliban, but as adherence to international norms that prioritize cultural heritage as belonging to the Afghan people rather than any governing regime.[20]

Both cases reveal critical tensions in restitution practice. Legally, international conventions establish clear prohibitions against the illicit removal of cultural property during armed conflict. However, restitution in contexts involving non-state actors or internationally contested governments, such as the Taliban, raises complex questions. To whom should artifacts be returned when governance is unstable or unrecognized? How can the international community ensure that restitution benefits local communities rather than legitimizing oppressive regimes? These questions have shaped cautious, often indirect restitution strategies, emphasizing long-term safeguarding over immediate political confrontation.

Frameworks for the Modern Era

The examples of Iran and Afghanistan revealed a need for UNESCO to adopt strategic policies and operational mechanisms aimed at conflict-specific threats. In 2015, the UNESCO General Conference adopted a Strategy for the reinforcement of the organization's actions for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict with an associated action plan to strengthen Member States' capacities in prevention, mitigation, recovery, and integration of cultural protection into broader humanitarian and peacebuilding

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[17]"Despite ISIS Threat, Looted Antiquities Returning to Iraq," History, 2021, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/150324-iraq-artifacts-return-isis-baghdad-museum-islamic-state-archaeology.
[18]Adel Fakhir, "Twenty Years after the US Invasion, Where Are Iraq's Antiquities?," www.aljazeera.com, April 7, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/7/20-years-after-the-us-invasion-where-are-iraqs-antiquities.
[19]"Bamiyan Buddhas | Whose Culture?," Harvard.edu, 2015, https://whoseculture.hsites.harvard.edu/bamiyan-buddhas.
[20]"Afghan Museums Fear for Ancient Buddhist Artifacts amid Taliban Takeover - Buddhistdoor Global," Buddhistdoor Global, August 18, 2021, https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/afghan-museums-fear-for-ancient-buddhist-artifacts-amid-taliban-takeover/.

efforts. Under the Hague Convention's Second Protocol (1999), a Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict meets annually to supervise implementation, consider requests for enhanced protection, and administer the Fund for the Protection of Cultural Property to support emergency safeguarding and post-conflict recovery.[21] UNESCO has granted enhanced protection status to sites such as Angkor and, more recently, coordinated provisional enhanced protection designations for numerous properties in Ukraine in response to ongoing conflict damage.

SOCHUM and UNESCO's efforts have also intersected with UN Security Council action, which, though technically outside SOCHUM's direct mandate, has significantly reinforced the normative framework by linking cultural heritage protection with international peace and security. For example, UNSC Resolution 2347 (2017) condemned the deliberate destruction and trafficking of cultural heritage by armed groups and urged Member States to strengthen legal frameworks and support UNESCO's work.[22] Likewise, earlier Security Council measures such as Resolutions 2199 and 2253 targeted illicit trafficking of cultural property from conflict zones, bolstering enforcement against looted artifacts.[23] This multi-layered UN system, from treaty implementation and committee oversight to political declarations and operational support, illustrates evolving global governance aimed at mitigating heritage destruction.

Together, these frameworks, treaties, resolutions, and committee decisions reflect a gradual but concrete strengthening of international norms and cooperation over the past 20 years to protect cultural heritage in armed conflict.

Digital Humanities and the Future

Beyond international agreements, artists and academics have found another way to preserve heritage in the wake of conflict. The field of digital humanities plays a powerful role in preserving culture after conflict by ensuring that knowledge survives even when physical heritage does not. Scanning manuscripts, photographing artifacts, and creating 3D models of monuments allow texts and sites to be studied, shared, and reconstructed long after wars have damaged libraries, museums, or archaeological locations.[24] For regions affected by conflict, digital archives provide a form of cultural continuity, giving displaced communities access to their history and identity. Classical works, inscriptions, and ancient records that were once limited to a few institutions can become globally accessible, helping scholars and the public alike engage with endangered heritage.

Additionally, the digital humanities also promote recovery and accountability. Online databases help track looted artifacts, support restitution efforts, and reconnect objects with their places of origin.[25] Digital tools such as GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping and virtual reconstructions allow researchers to document damage, visualize lost sites, and plan

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[21] "Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict," Unesco.org, 2023,
https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/second-protocol-hague-convention-1954-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict.

[22] "S/RES/2347 (2017) | Security Council," Un.org, 2017,
https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/s/res/2347-%282017%29.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Carter Ellington, "Innovative Techniques for Digitizing Historical Artifacts | Farmingtonhistoricalsociety-Ct.org," WordPress, April 17, 2025,
https://farmingtonhistoricalsociety-ct.org/innovative-techniques-for-digitizing-historical-artifacts/.

[25] Ibid.

restoration projects more effectively. Just as importantly, these technologies democratize heritage by involving local communities, students, and volunteers in documentation and storytelling.

Conclusion

Armed conflict poses a unique and urgent threat to cultural heritage, jeopardizing not only physical monuments and artifacts but also the identities, histories, and collective memory of affected communities. The deliberate targeting of heritage sites, opportunistic looting, and the illicit trafficking of cultural property underscore the complex relationship between warfare, cultural identity, and crime.

From collaboration with the Security Council to UNESCO, preserving cultural heritage requires the United Nations and international organizations to come together in a meaningful way. Combatting negative impacts requires a multi-faceted approach that combines legal protection, international cooperation, community engagement, and proactive preservation strategies. The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Issues committee must formulate creative solutions on how to preserve cultural heritage sites while also addressing armed conflict.

Guiding Questions for Research
1. Has your country been impacted by armed conflict recently? If so, have there been any issues with looting of historical sites or illicit smuggling in your country?
2. Are there any communities within your country that are especially vulnerable to armed conflict? Has there been a trend of constant erasure of culture?
   a. If it is a minority group within your state, how has your state dealt with restitution to their communities?
3. How has colonialism affected your state's cultural heritage? Is it a negative or positive effect?

Guiding Questions for Debate
1. How can national governments strengthen domestic legislation to prevent looting, destruction, and illicit trafficking of cultural artifacts in conflict zones?
2. What is your country's stance on UNSC Resolution #2347? Should it be upheld, and if so, why?
3. What conventions or treaties can be revised to include measures for non-state actors and modern threats, like cybersecurity?