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

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

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Basic Overview of the Issue

Cultural heritage represents a community's identity and history, therefore it is critical to protect it during conflict. Cultural background helps communities safeguard their identity and history, therefore protecting it during war is critical. For example, political instability and conflict in Syria and Iraq jeopardize the integrity and protection of cultural assets. Thus, UNESCO accepted the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, as well as its two Protocols (1954 and 1999) in order to keep the heritage of communities safe from harm and destruction during conflicts. The 1954 Hague Convention, which paved the way for the development of other international cultural instruments, is a crucial international tool for conflict prevention, post-war recovery, and peacekeeping defenses.



Figure 1: A site destroyed because of the conflict in the Middle East

The ongoing armed conflicts in the Middle East have done significant harm to the region's cultural heritage. Despite the difficulties, local historical professionals and the international heritage community have worked together extensively. Such activities showcase innovative approaches to preserve cultural treasures in crisis zones and shed light on the future of more effective international cooperation.

It should also be noted that cultural heritage destruction during conflicts not only removes physical proof of a community's historical presence, but it also disrupts civilian life and undermines identity claims. Moreover, the destruction of cultural property has the potential to impair a post-conflict country's economic recovery; resulting in prolonged



instability, the need for lengthier military and humanitarian operations, and increasing human and financial costs, making the protection of cultural heritage more and more important for the region.

UNESCO has been working closely with the national governments of respective nations in an attempt to diminish the rates of illicit trade and trafficking in conflict-prone zones. Various agreements have been enacted by the organization such as but not limited to the 1970 Convention, which come through as a result of rigorous deliberations on preventing the rise of illegal artifact trafficking and safeguarding cultural heritage.

Explanation of Important Terms

Heritage

Features belonging to the culture of a society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings that were created in the past and still have historical importance. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024)

Militant

Active, determined, and often willing to use force. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024)

Illicit Trade

Illegal or disapproved of by society (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Pieces of artifacts being traded illegally against international or domestic laws by groups with lucrative motives.

Black Market

Illegal trading of goods that are not allowed to be bought and sold, or that there are not enough of for everyone who wants them. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024)



Cultural Artifact

Cultural artifacts are pieces of art, literature or music that are quintessential parts of a culture or national identity.

Detailed Background of the Issue

The protection of cultural heritage sites during regional conflicts is important as such places are often intentionally targeted in order to destroy them along with the loss of historical and cultural values that are impossible to replace. Protection of cultural property in conflicts became particularly relevant in the last two centuries. The two World Wars brought about colossal destruction of historic cultural property, both tangible and intangible. The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, of 1954, is the first global agreement enacted with respect to the subject. The Convention required the countries to create services on their territories dedicated to the protection of cultural property during hostilities.

Active and Past Armed Conflicts

In and around the Arabian Peninsula, many battles have been waged and many nations' infrastructures have been heavily damaged. Some of the most recent being the Syrian Civil War, The Yemen Civil War, The Iraq war, The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and many more.

Firstly, Syria lies on the ancient "Fertile Crescent", the birthplace of civilization. Syria is home to many different artifacts, those artifacts have been damaged by the decade long civil war and with the end of the war, plans have to be developed. Yemen is similarly home to many important artifacts as it lies next to the Red Sea, historically one of the most important areas of civilization on the entire planet.



Iraq is also a crucial area as it covers the area of ancient Mesopotamia. The original cradle of civilization which is where some of the most important civilizations ever existed. The Iraq civil war and the United States' intervention years ago have both deeply affected the states of the ancient artifacts in the area.

Lastly and arguably the most important, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has destroyed and wrecked some of the most religiously significant areas in the region and on the entire planet. Jerusalem is known as the home of all three Abrahamic religions, any damage to the area will deeply damage the cultural identity of the entire region. Together with the new ceasefire, the international community will need to come together in order to preserve all heritage sites in the entire region.

International Readiness

Despite these legal frameworks, the destruction of cultural heritage has grown sharply in recent years, especially in conflict zones like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. But perhaps most poignant among such sites is that which exists in Syria, with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) militants' likely intentional devastation of the ancient city of Palmyra (located in the eastern Levant that is now located in the heart of modern Syria), standing out among examples of damage to cultural heritage. In 2015, ISIS destroyed the iconic Triumphal Arch of Palmyra, a historic Roman monument, in a campaign to eradicate cultural monuments that they perceived were against their belief. Such an act of vandalism reduced a great archaeological site to dust and even robbed future generations of their connection with past human history. The destruction of Palmyra, as well as other important sites in Syria, underlines how cultural assets are vulnerable in conflict and highlights the pressing need for better protection in war zones. To counteract such threats, bodies such as Blue Shield International have been established.



Figure 2: A conflict zone (UNESCO World Heritage Center)



The Blue Shield, founded in 1996, works in close cooperation with the United Nations, UN peacekeeping, UNESCO, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. It is dedicated to the protection of the world's cultural heritage against risks such as armed conflict and natural disasters. The purpose statement of the Blue Shield is stated in its statutes, it is an international network of committees of concerned persons who are "committed to the protection of the world's cultural property, and is concerned with the protection of cultural and natural heritage, tangible and intangible, in the event of armed conflict and natural or man-made disasters."

Actions by the International Community

The international community remains concerned with finding new avenues to preserve cultural treasures. Such protection often requires expert and coordinated interventions, from peacekeeping forces to international diplomatic pressure. Some peacekeeping missions have included the protection of cultural heritage in their mandates, realizing that the safeguarding of cultural monuments is not only important for history but also crucial for long-term peacebuilding. For instance, UNESCO cooperated with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAWA) to protect heritage sites during the conflict in order to minimize further damage to the rich cultural heritage of that country. Such inclusions of cultural conservation into military and reconciliation efforts indicate how cultural heritage defines not only local but also global identity.

In addition, many sites that are in danger of cultural destruction because of conflict have tried to include their most endangered monuments in the UNESCO World Heritage in Danger list. Such a listing serves as a warning to the international community of the dangers facing such sites and calls for emergency measures to protect them. For example, UNESCO has placed several heritage sites in Gaza, Lebanon, and Sudan under special protection because of continuous hostilities that threaten their survival. These activities are part of the much wider international campaign for recognition of the importance of cultural heritage preservation and the



need for international cooperation during these dangerous events.

Major Parties Involved

Afghanistan

Afghanistan, the crossroads of civilizations, is home to diverse and rich historical heritages for multiple cultures. The destruction of these monuments have been particularly devastating as it affects both the region itself as well as the other communities around the world that see Afghanistan as a home to their historical background.

One of the most prominent acts of vandalism occurred in 2001 by the Taliban, when the Buddhas of Bamiyan that have been standing for over 1500 years have been destroyed as an act of statement against cultural diversity. This action provoked international outrage which once again highlighted the vulnerability and the importance of heritage sites of regions under ongoing conflict.

In order to protect the deep history of Afghanistan, the UN Peacekeeping forces and NGOs have been contributing alongside organisations like UNAMA and organisations like Aga Khan Trust for Culture which work to preserve the integration of cultural heritage into broader peacebuilding and development strategies. However, regardless of these efforts the preservation of heritage in Afghanistan remains a challenge considering the instability in the region alongside the fact that international forces have been withdrawing from the region. Many sites and monuments are now more vulnerable than ever as the conflict grows and further liabilities keep on occurring in the region such as the illicit networks smuggling artifacts to sell them on the black market.

Syria

Syria, specifically Palmyra, is a key historical region since it was a key cultural and trade center of the Roman Empire, featuring many monuments such as the Temple of Bel, the Arch of Triumph, and the Roman Theater. In 2015 the site was taken over by the ISIS



militants who intentionally destroyed the most notorious structures as a part of their campaign to remove symbols of religious and cultural diversity from the region. These acts, similar to the situation in Afghanistan, not only devastated the locals but also drew international condemnation.

Once again similar to the situation in Afghanistan the illicit trades to the black market, mostly to fund the militant operations, has further exacerbated the crisis making it even more complex than it already was.

Iraq

With the rich historical background of Iraq, much significance has been given to the preservation of cultural assets in the region, especially considering the enormous damage brought about by extended regional warfare. Being the site of some of the oldest civilizations in the world, Iraq boasts an incredible set of cultural treasures representing its historical importance. However, these have been under serious jeopardy due to decades of war, insurgency, and terrorist activity.

One of the most disastrous acts of cultural vandalism in Iraq was the systematic destruction of the ancient city of Babylon by the ISIS fighters. In 2015, the ISIS forces destroyed great landmarks in Babylon, including the famous Ishtar Gate, as part of their motivation to eradicate relics of the pre-Islamic Mesopotamian civilization. The deliberate destruction did not only eradicate priceless artifacts but also severed a tangible link with a glorious past.

Against these challenges UNESCO showed immense efforts to preserve and restore the rich history of Iraq. UNESCO has initiated various projects for documenting damage to Iraqi heritage monuments. Specifically, UNESCO started the Iraq Cultural Heritage Action Plan, which proposes the saving of threatened sites through detailed documentation, emergency conservation, and technical assistance.



The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL)

INTERPOL plays a vital role in combating illicit trafficking in cultural objects among concerns regarding the destruction of heritage sites during conflicts. The Works of Art Unit, a specialist entity within the organization, is responsible for assisting the tracing, recovery, and restitution of such property to its rightful owners with law enforcement agencies globally. This is particularly important in conflict zones, where artifacts are often traded across borders and sold to fund militant activities on the black market.

Probably the most valuable service that INTERPOL has contributed to the protection of cultural heritage is the establishment and management of the Stolen Works of Art Database. The database serves as a complete tool with full descriptions, images, and other identifying characteristics of stolen cultural objects that are very useful for law enforcement officials, customs officers, and the art market. It helps avoid thefts of cultural property and allows for the recovery of stolen artifacts through rapid access to information about the items. In recent years, updates to the database have allowed for more complex capabilities, including picture recognition technology, which enables the swifter identification of works that have been stolen.

Alongside its databases, INTERPOL facilitates the coordination of efforts for recovery globally. The initiative named Operation Pandora was started in 2016 to fight the illicit circulation of cultural products throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. The operation, carried out in cooperation with Europol, includes coordinated searches, inspections, and intelligence sharing among participating countries. Operation Pandora has recovered hundreds of these stolen artifacts, which range from antique coins to sculptures to paintings, and arrested some participants in the illegal trade over the years.

Chronology of Important Events



| Date | Definition of Event |
|------|---|
| 1954 | Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was established. |
| 2001 | The Buddha of Bamiyan in Afghanistan was destroyed. |
| 2003 | The Iraq National Museum was looted. |
| 2015 | ISIS destroyed cultural heritage sites in Iraq and Syria. |
| 2017 | UN Security Council Resolution 2347 was prepared to condemn groups like ISIS which destroy and loot heritage sites. |

Relevant International Documents

- Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 14 May 1954
- UN Security Council Resolution, 24 March 2017 (2347)
- UN Security Council Resolution, 22 May 2003 (1483)
- UN General Assembly Resolution, 9 December 2021 (76/16)

Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was the first international convention devoted to the protection of cultural property in the case of war. It set standards for protection and prohibited the exportation of cultural objects from the occupied territories. First Protocol (1954) continued this protection to also cover movable cultural property; the Second Protocol (1999) went further, introducing "enhanced protection" for a limited number of especially significant cultural property.



In 2003, the United Nations passed Resolution 1483 in response to specific issues. It dealt with the looting of Iraq's cultural property subsequent to the war. The resolution called for global cooperation to put an end to the illegal trading of Iraqi cultural property and return what had been stolen.

UN Security Council Resolution 2347 prepared in 2017 was another leap forward in which the destruction and illicit trafficking of cultural property by terrorist groups, most notably those affected by ISIS, were condemned. The resolution underlined that such acts may amount to war crimes and called for international cooperation to bring these to an end.

Lastly, in 2021 the UN General Assembly Resolution 76/16 recognized conflict protection of cultural heritage, with a particular focus on strengthening the fight against trafficking in cultural property.

The global culture and education body, UNESCO, has taken a more direct role in responding to conflicts and culture preservation studies due to the Iraq war, which was instigated in 2003. The initial efforts to preserve Iraq's most valued cultural properties after the war were established by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1483. However, many global bodies have incorporated programs aimed to understand the root causes of conflicts and respond to them with the aim of assisting in protecting cultural items. Such programs are helping guide governments that may be involved in conflicts over cultural issues.

Programs such as the one inserted by the 2011 UN Security Council Resolution 1970 have emerged as a response to the Civil War in Libya, which took place in the 2010s. Due to the efforts of international bodies, brazen acts of cultural property looting have ceased and the illegal trafficking of priceless artifacts has also declined significantly.

In the year 2015, the European Union implemented a regulation, ensuring the control of trade concerning unlawfully possessed cultural assets, and that was another important



achievement. This regulation stemmed from the concern of heritage trafficking, especially from areas with armed conflicts. It sought to improve the traceability of cultural objects, impede any illegal traffic of stolen art and antiquities, and render assistance to countries suffering the consequences of the destruction and the trade of their cultural heritage.

This step formed part of the campaign launched by international agencies and governments to fight the illegal trade of cultural property without the restitution of the stolen artifacts or the protection of the cultural sites being secondary objectives in international diplomacy. Moreover, in 2016 UNESCO initiated the “Blue Shield” movement aimed at preserving cultural heritage during armed conflicts. This organization aims to enhance international support for the protection of cultural property against armed conflict, natural disasters, and illegal trafficking. The Blue Shield seeks to carry out the protection on the ground, prepare for emergencies, and train local professionals to prevent the destruction of their cultural properties during the conflicts.

Furthermore, in 2016, UNESCO introduced the “Blue Shield” program, which focuses primarily on protecting cultural heritage in the event of war. This agency coordinates global efforts to shield cultural property against armed combat, natural catastrophes, and illicit trade. Activities undertaken by the Blue Shield include preparation for protection on the ground and in emergencies as well as royalty training to protect their culture in times of disasters. In addition, some international courts, including the International Criminal Court (ICC), have become more active in prosecuting people for crimes related to cultural heritage. One important legal case came in 2016 when Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi was prosecuted for the destruction of cultural heritage sites located in Timbuktu, Mali. He was the first person convicted by the ICC for the destruction of cultural property, which will influence many future cases where the destruction of a culture is deemed a war crime.



Solution Alternatives

A diversified strategy is needed to protect cultural heritage sites from destruction during regional conflicts. This can be accomplished with an enhancement of the international legal frameworks of protection such as the Hague Convention and its protocols, by increasing the number of its signatories, improvement in its enforcement possibly with the aid of UN sanctions, and international courts to try the individuals that damage cultural assets.

Secondly, there should be certain financing towards their protection and restoration of such sites from governments, corporate sectors, and cultural institutions. Complex technology, including 3D mapping and satellite surveillance, can be adopted to preserve and monitor the state of cultural assets when conflict areas are in operation, thus enabling real-time interventions and the digital preservation of key sites.

Moreover, international cooperation and cultural diplomacy should be established in order to push the states to perceive this matter as an international interest and not a national concern. Awareness through international campaigns or training of military and humanitarian personnel in cultural heritage protection may provide a certain safeguard during wars. Another important strategy is reinforcing the fight against illicit trafficking in cultural property and the restitution of stolen objects. These measures provide a comprehensive approach toward the protection of cultural heritage from conflict to protect the history of the region and communities.

However, the most crucial aspect of protecting these cultural artifacts that are quintessential parts of cultural heritage is to diminish the occurrences of conflicts altogether. The region of the Middle East is extremely prone to conflicts and armed interventions because of its geopolitical location and its natural resources. The petroleum reserves in the region have become the center of attention in international politics and the universal political stage, making it very possible for other countries to intervene in the region causing many unwanted conflicts. This quality of the region can only be diminished by international agreements that are followed by jurisdiction that dictates obligation to comply by the



agreements made. Historically, many nations such as China or the United States have been known to undermine international guidelines in politics and war, especially when it comes to their own countries interests. This can be considered because the region has highly valued resources that are primary oil based and can be targets to exploitation. Consequently, it is most effective to consider the outbreaks of war the root of the issue and address it urgently.

Useful Links

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Agenda Item: Ensuring the safeguarding of cultural heritage sites from destruction resulting from regional conflict



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