

Forum: General Assembly 3 (GA3)

Issue: Towards a global action plan to safeguard national heritage during times of war

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Introduction

Cultural heritage, including monuments, historical sites, artworks, and other intangible traditions, represents identity and other irreplaceable values within each society. Throughout history, armed conflicts have posed a big threat to cultural heritage, ranging from the [bombing of European landmarks during World War II](#) to other events that can also be traced back historically to the British Empire and its colonial period. During this period, the British destroyed and seized cultural artifacts and aimed to destroy the national heritage. These examples and loss of heritage reflect the importance of combating such issues since it is not only a loss for affected nations but rather a global tragedy as the world is made up of diverse heritage, each with its own special place, contributing to humanity's development. The protection of such artifacts as heritage during times of war requires coordinated response and international action, [legal frameworks](#), and other political strategies that require cooperation between member states. These acts must aim at the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage and the prevention of other illicit trafficking. The historical and legal context of heritage protection is identified as a major key factor and challenge, since a viable solution requires immense cooperation between all nations and all cultural and ethnic groups.

Definition of Key Terms

Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage refers to the preserved monuments, artefacts, or works of art representing ethnic groups or cultures that influence future generations. Other examples include buildings, oral tradition, rituals, or languages that influence the way the future generation sees the specific culture. For example, the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria is recognized as a [World Heritage Site by UNESCO](#).

Tangible heritage

Tangible heritage refers to the physical objects or sites that have a significant cultural impact, such as temples, museums, manuscripts, or other archeological sites. These structural sites or physical objects are often maintained or passed down to future generations to inspire them about their culture and its importance.

Intangible heritage

Intangible heritage refers to other non-physical elements, such as traditional ideas, rituals, language, or performing arts. It provides a sense of identity for different ethnic groups, thus promoting cultural diversity and mutual respect.

Illicit trafficking

Illicit trafficking refers to the process of trading or dealing with cultural artifacts obtained through illegal channels. These acts are highly illegal since smuggled items that are sold on black markets are harmful and disrespectful towards other heritages. Examples of illicit trafficking can be traced back to artifacts [looted from Iraq's museum in 2003](#). These actions not only fund criminal groups but also deprive other nations of their cultural memory and, most importantly heritage.

The 1954 Hague Convention

The Hague Convention for Protection of Cultural Property, which was adopted in 1954, was the first international treaty that focused on the protection of national heritage during times of war. This convention's articles were adopted after certain [mass destruction was committed in WW2](#), making cultural heritage vulnerable to extinction. This convention requires states to protect cultural properties, prohibit theft, and vandalism. Despite its importance, many states have not ratified it, leading to enforcement mechanisms that are flawed and not thoroughly implemented.

Background Information

Historical context of heritage destruction during conflict

The destruction of cultural heritage during times of war is not a recent phenomenon but

a [recurring tragedy deeply woven into human history](#). Cultural heritage — the physical, intellectual, and spiritual record of human civilization — has repeatedly been targeted as a means to weaken the identity, morale, and continuity of a people. In ancient times, invading armies would burn libraries, loot temples, and demolish monuments to erase the legacy of their enemies. During the colonial era, imperial powers such as British Empire plundered artifacts and attempted to suppress indigenous traditions, leaving lasting cultural scars on colonized societies.

More recent conflicts illustrate that the threat has not diminished. The destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra by [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\)](#) during the Syrian Civil War, the targeted shelling of Dubrovnik in the Croatian War of Independence, and the looting of the National Museum of Iraq in 2003 all show how heritage remains at risk in modern warfare. These incidents underscore the urgent need for stronger international cooperation and enforcement mechanisms to protect humanity's shared legacy.

Existing legal frameworks and their limitations

The first significant step toward global protection of cultural property came with the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. This landmark treaty [obligates states to safeguard cultural sites](#) during conflict and prevent theft, vandalism, and military use of such properties. It also established the distinctive “Blue Shield” emblem to identify protected sites. Despite its importance, the convention faces several challenges, including limited ratification, insufficient enforcement mechanisms, and lack of accountability for violations.

Subsequent treaties and protocols, such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property and the 1999 Second Protocol to the Hague Convention, have expanded the legal framework. These instruments address issues such as illicit trafficking and outline more robust protective measures. Yet, enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly in regions affected by non-state armed groups or where government institutions are weak.

Contemporary challenges and risks

Modern warfare presents complex challenges for cultural heritage protection. As conflicts increasingly occur within urban environments, cultural sites are often located near strategic military targets, increasing their vulnerability to collateral damage. Additionally, the rise of cyber warfare and digital looting — including the theft or destruction of digitized archives — presents new, less visible threats to cultural memory.

Illicit trafficking has emerged as a particularly [severe consequence of armed conflict](#). Looted artifacts often find their way into international black markets, funding criminal organizations and armed groups. According to Interpol, cultural property crime is one of the most profitable forms of trafficking worldwide, ranking just below arms and drug smuggling. Beyond the economic implications, this trade erases the physical evidence of cultural identity and history.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO plays a vital role in safeguarding different cultural heritage worldwide, particularly during times of armed conflicts. UNESCO was established in 1954, right after WWII, for its [protection of cultural property](#) in different events of armed conflict. For example, in 2003, they held the Convention to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage. These achievements of UNESCO highlight their vital role in protecting different cultural heritage.

France

France has emerged as one of the major leading advocates for global heritage protection. In 2017, France, alongside the UAE, founded the [International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas \(ALIPH\)](#). This organization has been a neutral third party for protecting different heritages. Nonetheless, France, alongside Italy, submitted Resolution 2347 protecting cultural heritage.

Iraq

Iraq as one of the major countries affected by heritage destruction in the past two decades, with ongoing conflicts, remains a key stakeholder in these international discussions. Different sites, such as [Mosul or Nineveh](#), have suffered extensive destruction during the occupation by ISIS. Iraq has been working with UNESCO on rebuilding cultural institutions and protecting heritage in active war zones.

Viable Solutions

Strengthening International Legal Frameworks

Member states should work towards revising and reinforcing existing international conventions, including the [1954 Hague Convention](#) for the Protection of Cultural Property in

the Event of Armed Conflict. This can include the establishment of binding enforcement mechanisms and clear consequences for violations, ensuring accountability for both state and non-state actors. States may propose the creation of a global registry of cultural property in conflict-prone areas to monitor and protect vulnerable sites. Encouraging wider ratification of [international treaties](#) and the implementation of standardized protocols for heritage protection can also be included in the resolution.

Rapid Response Units for Heritage Protection

Delegates can propose the establishment of [UNESCO-backed rapid response teams](#) composed of cultural experts, conservation specialists, and military liaisons. These units would deploy to conflict zones to protect endangered cultural sites, coordinate with local authorities, and prevent destruction or illicit trafficking. The resolution could also encourage regional cooperation agreements, allowing countries to share resources, expertise, and intelligence, ensuring swift and coordinated action when heritage is at risk.

Digital Preservation and Monitoring

Delegates may include measures for digital preservation and monitoring of cultural heritage as part of the resolution. This can involve 3D scanning, GIS mapping, and creating digital archives of monuments, museums, and historical sites to ensure that cultural knowledge is preserved even if physical structures are damaged. Additionally, satellite imaging and drone surveillance could be used to monitor at-risk sites in real time, helping prevent looting and destruction. The resolution can encourage member states to collaborate in sharing digital resources and creating an international database of cultural heritage.

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