

Forum: General Assembly 3 (GA3)

Issue: Preservation of cultural assets in conflict zones

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Introduction

According to UNESCO, cultural heritage is the “legacy of physical artifacts, traditions, and practices that are passed down through generations within a community.” This consists of both tangible and intangible assets, but this question of the preservation of cultural assets in conflict zones encompasses only the tangible cultural artifacts, such as ancient monuments, archaeological sites, historic urban centers, manuscripts, and archives. Internationally, multiple conventions have been signed to condemn and prohibit the devastation of such invaluable and irreplaceable assets, most notable of which is the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. (UNESCO, 2026)

Despite the introduction and enforcement of multiple international laws, treaties, and agreements prohibiting the destruction of cultural assets, sites of incredible cultural heritage are still subject to devastating destruction in current-day conflicts. Since 2022, the war in Ukraine has damaged 545 cultural sites; recent strikes in the Middle East have caused the Golestan Palace and Chehel Sotoun Palace in Iran to sustain interior infrastructure damage; Aleppo, one of humanity’s oldest cities, has had its priceless history and ideas lost to time through the relentless and violent Syrian Civil War. (UNESCO, 26)

However, this destruction is rarely collateral. Cultural assets are often targeted because of their connection to religious identity and sense of self; the demolition of such sites dislocates residents physically and mentally and dampens morale among troops. The most well-known form of such psychological warfare occurred during WWII, when the Nazis systematically obliterated and stole Jewish and Roma cultural assets in an attempt to permanently wipe out any traces of their existence in society and history. Furthermore, these sites are often looted by local militias, terrorist organizations, and armed groups for priceless cultural artifacts, resulting in an increasingly profitable and lucrative black market trade for looted art and antiquities. It is impossible to know how much this market makes, but the Museum Association estimates profits could be \$3 billion annually, while INTERPOL’s estimates are \$6 billion annually. These gains cost humanity irreplaceable data on human history and deprive communities of their identity. (Clack, 22)

Definition of Key Terms

Cultural Property/Assets

Objects that hold significant cultural value to a community. These could be artworks, monuments, archaeological sites, religious buildings, or manuscripts. (UNESCO, 26)

Cultural Heritage

The tangible, physical artifacts and intangible traditions and practices inherited from previous generations within a community. (UNESCO, 26)

Cultural Property Protection (CPP)

The duty to safeguard and protect cultural assets during conflict.

Military Necessity

The legal and ethical principle outlined in the laws of war to only take the measures necessary to achieve a legitimate military objective. This is often used as a legal loophole to justify the destruction of cultural assets. (Rowe, 24)

Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property

The illegal trade and sale of objects of significant cultural significance, whether they were obtained by looting damaged monuments or museums. This trade of illegal antiques generates substantial profit for terrorists and other criminal networks.

Provenance

The documented history of the ownership and origin of a cultural asset. This tracks past owners, how ownership was transferred, and locations, and helps determine if an artifact was looted or trafficked. (Rylance, 26)

Blue Shield Emblem

A distinctive emblem whose design and use are outlined in the 1954 Hague Convention. There are multiple variations, but it is an international symbol of a cultural property and establishes its immunity to attacks and armed conflict. Attacking a marked site constitutes a war crime and can lead to prosecution under the ICC.

Background Information

International Protection

The devastation during the first two World Wars, especially the genocide of the Jews and Roma people during the Nazi regime, demonstrated the need for stronger protections of cultural assets. The first measure of such was the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. This convention requires states to take preventive and protective measures for cultural assets during times of peace and to respect and avoid damaging cultural assets during conflicts. It established the Blue Shield emblem as a symbol of cultural property protected under the convention. The First Protocol was adopted alongside this convention and works to prevent the illegal trade of cultural items during times of conflict or occupation. It explicitly bans taking cultural assets out of their origin countries, specifies that occupying powers must return any exported cultural assets when the conflict or occupation ends, and that anyone who unknowingly buys a cultural asset that has been illegally exported has to return it to the occupying power for compensation. The Second Protocol was adopted in 1999 and amends the original convention to better protect cultural assets during modern conflicts. It also established a 12-member committee to oversee how the convention's rules are applied and manage a fund for emergency assistance. (UNESCO, 26)

Current Conflicts and Threats

Some examples of modern threats are: airstrikes, artillery, drone attacks, urban warfare, fires, military use of locations with cultural significance, and other forms of deliberate destruction. The most prominent example in the current day is the Russia-Ukraine war, which has already resulted in 545 damaged cultural sites, 156 of which are religious sites, 281 are buildings of historical and artistic significance, 43 are museums, 33 are monuments, 22 are libraries, 5 are archaeological sites, and 5 are archives. This showcases the limitation of current protections, as 545 sites with international legal protection were still vulnerable to conflicting militaries. (UNESCO, 26)

Looting and Illicit Trafficking

Armed conflicts weaken governmental institutions, police enforcement, and the security of museum and archaeological sites. This leads to looting, illegal excavation, smuggling, and black market trade of cultural assets. This is particularly prevalent in Sudan, as, due to its devastating civil war, its national museum, according to a UNESCO assessment, has had major exhibition galleries destroyed, artifacts systematically looted, and sustained severe damage to its infrastructure. One storage facility with an estimated 10,000 cultural objects was also confirmed to have severe structural damage, which has left it vulnerable to more theft and illicit trafficking. Furthermore, once these stolen cultural objects enter international trade markets, repatriation becomes significantly more logistically difficult because they can easily pass through several countries and owners, making location tracing far more challenging.

Ongoing Challenges

The current, ongoing challenge of modern conflicts is ensuring protections established in international law are properly implemented. For example, the 1954 Hague Convention requires countries to prepare protections during times of peace, such as logging inventories of cultural assets, making emergency plans for structural collapse or fires, and providing secure protection for assets that cannot be easily moved. However, these measures are effective only if member states have sufficient funding, trained personnel, transparent government institutions, and established plans before conflict begins. Although UNESCO provides states with appropriate training and resources, many still struggle to build the capacity to enforce international protections.

Legal Conditions

Whether or not countries have the capacity to protect cultural assets, military necessity further complicates enforcement. The 1954 Hague Convention allows obligations to protect cultural assets to be waived in cases of “military necessity” because cultural assets are used militarily or attacking the asset is necessary to achieve a legitimate military goal. However, the convention fails to mention when the situation is substantial enough to invoke military necessity and ignore its basic purpose. The 1999 Second Protocol introduced stricter restrictions, such as requiring that no feasible alternatives can achieve a similar military advantage, such decisions only being made by a senior military commander, and all involved parties taking appropriate precautions to minimise the damage to cultural assets. (ICRC, 21)

Practical Challenges

Despite the improvements, the feasibility issue persists. Commanders often have limited information and time to assess a cultural site and appropriate alternatives in fast-paced, armed conflicts, and opposing parties may disagree over the legitimacy of this military necessity. Moreover, the Protocol depends heavily on the state and armed forces’ interpretation and implementation, and the rules must be integrated into military doctrine, training, and law, issues the ICRC has continued to identify as a substantial execution gap. Consequently, the application of international law often remains difficult to regulate during armed conflicts. (ICRC, 21)

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Ukraine

The Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion in February 2022 has led to extensive damage to many cultural heritage sites and cultural assets from missile strikes, drone attacks, and other military operations. Recent attacks include strikes that hit the Saint-Sophia Cathedral and Related Monastic

Buildings in June 2026 and attacks on Odesa in August 2026 that left multiple sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List damaged and structurally unsound. UNESCO's director general visited Ukraine to help recovery efforts, but this is a prime example that internationally protected and recognized sites are still vulnerable today. Measures protecting cultural assets during large-scale warfare are far from enough, and Ukraine's situation raises questions on military necessity, international assistance, and the enforcement of conventions and agreements related to this issue.

Mali

Mali became a test of modern protection and accountability measures when it descended into a major conflict following a Tuareg separatist rebellion, a military coup in the capital, and a subsequent takeover by Islamist extremist groups in early 2012. This led to major attacks against historic and religious buildings in Timbuktu, the most prominent of which were attacks on 10 protected buildings directed by Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi, a member of Ansar Dine, an Islamic armed group linked to al-Qaeda. He became the first person convicted of the war crime of destroying cultural and religious heritage by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2016. ([UNESCO, 17](#)) This shows how the purposeful destruction of cultural assets to suppress cultural and religious practices is still a relevant issue, despite cases of individuals facing punishment for attacks against cultural assets.

Iraq

Iraq has some of the most culturally significant archaeological sites, many of which consist of remains from ancient Mesopotamia. However, the country has suffered from decades of warfare and political instability, exposing these sites to looting, trafficking, and other forms of deliberate destruction. ISIS's territorial expansion beginning in 2014 worsened this issue by engaging in systematic looting of museums and culturally significant sites and imposing taxes on looted objects. In response, the international community passed UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2199, condemning the destruction of cultural heritage and establishing legally binding measures to counteract illicit trafficking of cultural assets in Iraq and Syria, such as freezing bank accounts connected to relevant terror groups, stopping oil trade with ISIL (ISIS) and the Al-Nusra Front (ANF), and banning the buying and selling of stolen cultural assets from Iraq and Syria.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO is the primary UN agency responsible for cultural heritage protection. This agency has developed and administered crucial legal conventions such as the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its First and Second Protocols and the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. During ongoing conflicts, UNESCO also performs preservation work by

conducting damage assessments, using satellite imagery to document damaged sites, and supporting emergency protection of buildings and other assets. However, despite being connected to every aspect of cultural asset preservation, UNESCO doesn't have its own military enforcement to prevent attacks and instead depends on the cooperation of member states.

Viable Solutions

Better Preparedness

A crucial issue surrounding the implementation of essential protection measures outlined in the 1954 Hague Convention involves establishing plans before conflicts begin. These plans should include up-to-date inventories of important cultural assets, emergency procedures, secure storage for movable objects, and designated authorities responsible for their protection. UNESCO could also provide any additional funding, training, and technical assistance to states that lack relevant resources.

Preventing Damage, Looting, and Illicit Trafficking

States should develop extensive digital records of cultural assets by improving cooperation and information sharing with museums and relevant international organizations such as UNESCO and INTERPOL. Such records could be maintained by local governments and museums or by international law enforcement bodies such as INTERPOL or UNESCO. Digital records will make stolen cultural assets easier to trace once they enter the international black market and help identify high-risk sites during conflicts and other emergencies. How officials could use these is up for debate, but some options are secure apps that customs officers and police can access with identification, satellite monitoring, and public watchlists of repeat offenders to prevent the sale of looted items in pawn shops.

Restricting Military Necessity

Member states should include cultural property protection in military training and provide updated maps and lists of major sites. During a conflict, commanders should also be required to keep a written record explaining the invocation of military necessity and verify whether a cultural site is being used for military purposes and has no feasible alternatives before attacking a cultural site, while taking adequate precautions to minimize damage. After the conflict concludes, serious cases could be reviewed in an international or member state judicial system based on the written records. This is a stronger implementation of rules under the 1999 Second Protocol, but feasibility issues persist; modern conflicts are fast-paced, with the majority of decisions made under high pressure and insufficient time to follow these international regulations.

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