

The Destruction of Cultural Heritage Sites in the Middle East

Lauren Liotti

UN Temple of Understanding Internship Program

25 July 2016

Overview of the Situation in Syria and Iraq

The destruction of cultural heritage is a problem that is plaguing the Middle East as both a new war tactic and a problem for heritage that is caught in the crosshairs of the Syrian Civil War conflict. Destruction of these sites is most prevalent in Syria as a result of both the civil war and ISIL, and in Iraq, heritage sites are systematically targeted by extremist groups. The destruction of these sites, some of which date back to ancient civilizations and have had impacts on the development and trade of empires and civilizations such as Persia, Rome, and Greece, have been destroyed past the point of reconstruction (UNESCO). The destruction of these sites is not only the product of purposeful “cultural cleansing” (Bokova) but the unfortunate result of protracted conflict in an increasingly unstable region.

The conflict in Syria arose in 2011 after Bashar Al-Assad attacked peaceful Arab Spring protesters and within months, the conflict had escalated into a full blown revolution. Since then, the conflict has expanded to include four major groups: the Kurds, the Syrian government, the Islamic State (ISIL/ISIL) and the rebel groups (Vox). Many foreign backers, such as the United States, Iran, the Gulf States, and Russia have become involved in an increasingly multifaceted situation with many conflicts of interest overlapping and at constant risk of collision. Syria has become a proxy war where government’s international interests have also been spread thin due to the rise of ISIS in more recent years, leaving the question remaining especially for the United States: do we treat Assad or ISIS with priority (Vox)? In the midst of this situation and the great humanitarian crisis of Syrian refugees, culture and heritage sites have been brushed aside. However, the destruction can leave a long-term detrimental impact on societies and make reconciliation harder.

Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property arose in the aftermath of the destruction of World War II. Most of the countries in the world have signed onto this, and its several levels of protocol. It is the first international treaty that focuses solely on the protection of cultural property in times of conflict. It particularly focuses on artifacts and objects that cannot be moved, such as archeological sites, monuments, and art. Although Syria, Iraq and

Libya, another state facing similar problems with heritage but to a lesser degree, have all ratified this, it has not been enforced or upheld. Even in Syria, where the government is one of the actors in the conflict, there is a disregard for heritage, with a prime example in the city of Aleppo.

Motivations

ISIS's motivation can be drawn from many places. Specifically, the motivation is not only ideological, but fiscal, sensational, and of course political. The ideological motivation comes from ISIS's adherence to Salafism, an extremely conservative sect of Sunni Islam that focuses on a return to the ways of ancestors with a more fundamentalist approach to the religion. They use this to justify their destruction of world heritage sites because through this, they repudiate idol worship, or whatever they claim as idol worship or polytheism. They often see artifacts and statues as shirk, or polytheism, and seek to destroy them. Whatever is not destroyed is sold to finance ISIS and its terrorist activities (Gladstone and Saaman). ISIS also gains extensive free media coverage when they destroy an important historical or cultural site. In addition, the destruction of these sites allows for "cultural cleansing" (Bokova) and for ISIS to destroy what remains of past civilizations. In their place, they can implement their own ideology and act as if the other culture never existed.

Destruction in Iraq: Mosul

The city of Mosul in northern Iraq fell siege to ISIS after a six-day invasion. The burning of the library of Mosul was a tremendous loss not only for the people of Iraq, but for humanity. Additionally, higher education in the city is at risk when not in accordance with the laws of ISIS or when they deem it "un-Islamic" and the education of the citizens has been greatly affected as well as the work of the universities and colleges of the city (BBC). ISIS also released a video showing militants taking sledgehammers to ancient artifacts housed in the museum of the city.

Destruction in Syria: Palmyra and Aleppo

All six heritage sites have been damaged in Syria. Palmyra and Aleppo are both extremely important heritage sites and historical landmarks of the nation of Syria. Palmyra and

Aleppo are parts of the Syrian identity and their destruction should not be tolerated in the international community, especially for a population already at great risk for loss of identity with the large population of migrants. Palmyra has suffered the loss of the Temples of Bel and Baal, as well as its famed arch. In Aleppo, the Syrian civil war has caused intense damage to the citadel and the Great Mosque of the city.

Actions of UNESCO

The United Nations Organization of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) has been trying its best to prevent the loss of more heritage in the arena of the Middle East. The Director-General of the UN, Irina Bokova, has been particularly outspoken about this issue as far back as 2012, when she wrote an op-ed for the New York Times about protecting cultural heritage in the face of conflict (Bokova). A report was just released after the 40th session of committee at UNESCO headquarters in Istanbul covering the recent mission to Palmyra in Syria. This was as recently as last week when the findings of the rapid assessment mission were revealed (UNESCO). UNESCO leader Bokova has started the campaign of “Unite4Heritage” to engage youth and others around the world to take action against the destruction of global heritage sites and to raise awareness through the hashtag and social media. Sustainable Development Goal 16 is a large part of protection of global heritage sites as conflicts pose the greatest danger to these areas and monuments. Until peace and justice are achieved, these areas will always be at risk.

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