UNESCO Chair Report

Topic 2: Preventing the Destruction and Illegal Trade of Ancient Artifacts During Conflicts in the Middle East

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Personal Statements

Chair – Anna GlienkeChair – Anna Glienke

Dear Delegates,

My name is Anna Glienke, and I am currently attending 9th grade at the International School of Stuttgart, Germany. I am thrilled to be one of your chairs at this year's annual MUNISS conference.

My MUN-Journey started in 7th grade, at one of ISS's annual MUN-Days. I was intrigued to further participate in more conferences because they were so interesting, and I learned a lot. If somebody would have told me that not even a year and a half later I would have been in the Netherlands for LMUNA and FAMUN, our school for MUNISS and even Morocco for TMUN I would not have believed it.

Even if this is your very first conference, I am sure you will do great! I hope that I can help make MUNISS 2025 one of the best conferences you will ever attend. I am looking forward to a long weekend full of quality debates and creating lots of memorable moments with you all.

Deputy Chair – Abhinav Barua

Dear Delegates,

My name is Abi, a 9th-grade student at the International School of Stuttgart, Germany. I am honored to serve as your deputy chair at MUNISS 2025.

My MUN journey began in fourth grade in Singapore, sparking my passion for debate and global affairs. Since then, I have participated in multiple conferences, deepening my understanding of international relations and diplomacy. MUN has provided invaluable insights into global issues and the power of collaboration, fostering my public speaking and problem-solving skills.

For first-time delegates, stepping into MUN can be both exciting and daunting. Remember, every experienced delegate started where you are now. Approach the conference with an open mind, and know that the MUN community is here to support you.

I look forward to an inspiring weekend filled with engaging debates, innovative solutions, and new friendships. Let's make MUNISS 2025 a memorable and impactful experience together!

Warm regards,

 Abi

Committee Introduction

UNESCO stands for United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. The UNESCO committee was established on the 16th of November 1945 to promote international collaboration within the framework of education, science, and culture after WW2. One of UNESCO's greatest achievements is the World Heritage Sites Program 1972, in which they managed to create the World Heritage Convention that led to the preservation of over 1,000 cultural and natural sites worldwide. With this convention they managed to preserve well known sites such as the Great Wall of China and Machu Picchu. The committee has the power to influence policies and settle global norms, but they can't enforce laws meaning they are dependent on the collaboration of all member states.

Introduction

Ancient artifacts in the Middle East are not only an important part of history but also important parts of cultural identity. However, conflicts and political instability in the region have made these artefacts exposed to both deliberate destruction and illicit trade. War, civil unrest, and economic disputes have opened the door for looters and organized criminal networks to loot archaeological sites and smuggle priceless objects onto international markets (Aljoud et al.).

Efforts to protect these cultural artifacts have led to the development of international legal action, for example the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and other initiatives led by organizations like UNESCO (American Society of International Law et al.). Although these instruments are designed to protect heritage during times of conflict, enforcement remains challenging on the ground. For example, despite decades of legal protection, sites in Syria and Iraq continue to suffer from vandalism and rampant looting, underscoring the gap between international law and its practical implementation (United States Government Accountability Office)

In response, scholars and policymakers rally for a complex, well thought strategy that includes international cooperation, the use of advanced surveillance technologies like satellite imaging and digital documentation, and stronger local engagement to protect heritage. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local experts are important in helping this process. Approaches like these are important not only to stop ongoing destruction but also to disrupt the financial incentives that fuel the illegal art trade (European Commission).

Glossary

1954 Hague Convention: An international treaty obligating state parties to protect cultural property during armed conflict by prohibiting looting, vandalism, and destruction.

1970 UNESCO Convention: A treaty that aims to prevent the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property and requires states to enact measures against cultural trafficking.

Blue Shield International: A non-governmental organization dedicated to protecting cultural heritage during armed conflict, working with national committees and international bodies.

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a militant extremist group known for the systematic destruction and looting of cultural property in the region.

Looting: The illegal and often violent removal of artifacts or cultural property from archaeological sites or museums, typically during times of conflict.

Illicit Trafficking: The clandestine and illegal trade of cultural property, often linking organized criminal networks with extremist groups.

Repatriation: The process of returning stolen or illegally exported cultural property to its country of origin.

Due Diligence: The necessary research and verification process undertaken by collectors and dealers to confirm the legitimacy and lawful provenance of antiquities.

CPIA: The Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act, a U.S. law that restricts the import of cultural property that has been illegally removed from its country of origin.

No-Strike List: A list of designated cultural sites that military forces are instructed to avoid targeting during operations to prevent irreversible damage to cultural heritage.

World Heritage Site: A landmark or area recognized by UNESCO as having outstanding cultural or natural importance, which is subject to international protective measures.

Cultural Heritage : The legacy of tangible artifacts, monuments, and intangible attributes inherited from past generations, which together form a community's identity and historical continuity.

Vandalism : The deliberate destruction, defacement, or damage of cultural property; in conflict zones, this often occurs as extremist groups intentionally target heritage sites.

Customary International Law : Unwritten legal norms derived from consistent and general state practice that are considered binding, even without a formal treaty, including protections for cultural property.

Conflict Zones : Areas experiencing active armed conflict or political instability where the protection of cultural heritage is severely compromised.

Illicit Antiquities Market : The underground trade network that buys and sells stolen or looted cultural artifacts, often financing extremist activities and undermining legal markets.

Military Doctrine : The principles and strategies guiding military operations, which increasingly include measures to protect cultural heritage (e.g., by using no-strike lists).

Customs Enforcement : The efforts by government agencies to monitor and regulate goods crossing borders, including intercepting illicit cultural property and preventing its illegal trade.

Heritage Preservation : The practice of safeguarding, restoring, and maintaining cultural assets and historic sites to protect them for future generations.

Conflict-Driven Looting : The phenomenon of widespread, opportunistic theft of cultural property that occurs during or after armed conflicts due to a breakdown in law and order.

Social Cohesion : The bonds that hold communities together; the loss of cultural heritage weakens these bonds and can lead to increased social divisions.

Reconstruction Efforts : Programs and initiatives aimed at restoring and rehabilitating cultural sites and artifacts damaged during conflict, critical for both cultural recovery and economic revitalization.

Antiquities Trafficking : The illegal export, sale, and distribution of cultural artifacts, often carried out by organized criminal networks and extremist groups to finance further violence.

Issue Explanation

Ancient artifacts in the Middle East face a serious threat because ongoing conflicts expose them to purposeful destruction and theft. In countries like Iraq and Syria, extremist groups, most notably ISIS, have repeatedly vandalized and looted archaeological sites, museums, and places of worship. This loss erases evidence of past civilizations and weakens efforts to rebuild and stabilize these regions after conflict. Even though international laws such as the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1970 UNESCO Convention exist to protect cultural heritage, poor security, limited resources, and divided political priorities mean that these rules are rarely enforced effectively (United States Institute of Peace).

The humanitarian impact is significant. Cultural heritage is an important part of community identity and social cohesion, giving people a link to their history and a sense of belonging. When cultural sites and artifacts are destroyed or stolen, local populations suffer emotional and psychological harm. This loss of heritage further destabilizes communities already dealing with displacement, poverty, and violence, and it makes it harder for societies to heal and come together after conflict (Docherty and Human Rights Watch).

Economically, the illegal trade in antiquities drains money from local economies and funnels funds to terrorist networks. The black market for stolen artifacts not only lowers the overall value of cultural heritage but also reduces the potential for tourism, which many Middle Eastern countries rely on for economic growth. Without strong measures to stop this smuggling, legal markets will continue to be distorted, discouraging international investment and tourism ("Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in the Art and Antiquities Market").

Socially, the loss of cultural assets creates a "heritage deficit" that affects scholars, museums, and future generations who need these artifacts to understand their history. If nothing is done, entire communities could lose their historical narrative and identity, deepening social divides and eroding the cultural foundation that supports peaceful coexistence (Gerstenblith).

In short, if these challenges are not addressed, the ongoing destruction and illicit trade of ancient artifacts will lead to an irreversible loss of cultural heritage. This loss will impact local communities, national governments, and the global community by limiting economic opportunities, undermining social stability, and reducing prospects for lasting peace (Docherty and Human Rights Watch).

Perspectives of Parties Involved

Governments in the Middle East

Governments from the affected Middle Eastern countries, particularly Iraq and Syria, are concerned about the loss of cultural heritage that not only erases their history but also undermines economic development and national identity. In conflict zones, these governments struggle to enforce international legal instruments, such as the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1970 UNESCO Convention, amid ongoing violence and political fragmentation. They emphasize the need for stronger enforcement and international support to safeguard sites from deliberate vandalism and looting, which in turn also finance extremist activities ("Looting of Museums and Warehouses in Syria").

International Organizations

International organizations such as UNESCO, Blue Shield International, and INTERPOL stress that the preservation of cultural heritage is a global responsibility. These bodies argue that ancient artifacts and heritage sites are part of the collective memory of humanity and that their destruction not only deprives local communities of identity and cohesion but also jeopardizes tourism and economic opportunities globally ("Looting and Illicit Antiquities - Blue Shield International"). Their perspective is rooted in both humanitarian and security concerns, calling for enhanced global cooperation and robust legal frameworks.

Western Countries, Non-Governmental Organizations and Local Communities

Meanwhile, Western countries, including members of the European Union and the United States, view the illicit trade in antiquities as a dual threat that fuels terrorist financing while also inflicting irreversible cultural and economic damage. They support initiatives aimed at disrupting these black markets and providing technical and financial assistance for heritage protection. Additionally, non-governmental organizations, local communities, and academic institutions have voiced their opinions, advocating for community based preservation efforts that involve indigenous groups in the decision making process. They stress that protecting cultural heritage is crucial for social stability and long-term

peace, as it maintains the continuity of identity and memory for future generations ("Looting and Illicit Antiquities - Blue Shield International").

History of the Topic

The challenge of protecting ancient artifacts in the Middle East has deep historical roots that span from antiquity to the modern era. Over time, this problem has evolved along with shifting political landscapes, warfare, and the global antiquities trade, leaving an indelible impact on local identities, economic development, and regional stability.

The origins of the modern problem can be traced back to the colonial era when European powers extracted significant cultural treasures from the Middle East without much regard for local heritage. This period set a precedent for the illicit trade in artifacts, a trade that would grow in sophistication over time. However, as awareness of the value of cultural heritage increased, international legal instruments were established. In 1954, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict marked a milestone by obliging signatory states to safeguard heritage during war. This was further strengthened in 1970 with the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. These treaties represented early, hopeful steps toward a global consensus on heritage protection (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

The early 2000s also brought dramatic challenges to these frameworks. In 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq unleashed a wave of conflict that left the country's rich cultural aspect in danger. Museums were looted, and countless archaeological sites were left vulnerable to both opportunistic thieves and organized criminal networks. The National Museum of Iraq, in particular, became a symbol of the irreversible damage that can occur when state institutions collapse under the pressures of war ("Iraq Museum Looting: 15 Years On"). This period saw the illegal trade of antiquities reach unbelievably high levels, with artifacts disappearing from national collections and entering the black market, depriving local communities of an important link to their past.

A turning point occurred between 2013 and 2015 with the arrival of extremist terrorist groups like ISIS. In this dangerous period, purposeful and

systematic campaigns were launched against cultural heritage. In 2015, ISIS infamously destroyed large parts of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site renowned for its Roman-era ruins and other significant sites in both Syria and Iraq (McKirdy). This was not merely collateral damage from conventional warfare, it was a targeted effort to erase pre-Islamic cultural movements and to use destruction as a means to finance and legitimize their agendas. The violence in these regions not only led to the physical obliteration of irreplaceable artifacts but also severed the intergenerational transmission of historical memory, undermining community cohesion and national identity (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation).

Despite the establishment of international legal frameworks and restoration projects, the overall trend indicates that the problem is worsening. Prolonged conflict, political instability, and a range of different reasons continue to fuel both the destruction and the illegal trade of cultural artifacts. In many cases, the host country is unable to enforce heritage protection and is overwhelmed by the crisis. This causes local communities to lose not only economic opportunities linked to tourism but also the social stability that comes from a continuous connection with their cultural past.

Potential Solutions for the issue:

Potential solutions to protect cultural heritage in conflict zones have changed over the decades through a combination of legal, technological, and community based strategies. Many efforts in the past were built around international legal instruments and UN resolutions. For example, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property and the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property established early frameworks to protect heritage during armed conflict. In addition, UN Security Council resolutions such as resolutions 2199 and 2347 have made the unlawful destruction of cultural property illegal, reinforcing that such acts are not only war crimes but also crimes against humanity.

International organizations, including UNESCO, INTERPOL, and Blue Shield International, have been at the forefront of monitoring and intervening in heritage destruction. These groups have taken measures such as remote monitoring using satellite imaging, developing rapid response task forces, and training local security forces in heritage protection. For instance, UNESCO has spearheaded programs aimed at documenting and digitally preserving at-risk sites (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization), while Blue Shield International works directly with national governments and military units to ensure that cultural property is considered in military planning.

Another key potential solution is the support of community based heritage conservation. In many cases, local communities are the most effective hosts of their own cultural legacy. Allowing these groups through legal reforms that grant them greater decision making authority and by providing financial and technical support can help ensure that restoration and protection efforts are both culturally sensitive and sustainable. Such initiatives are already being tested in parts of the Middle East, where local NGOs work alongside international groups to rescue and rehabilitate heritage sites (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization).

Debates also continue around more interventionist measures, such as incorporating cultural heritage protection into the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework ("What Is R2P? - Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect"). While military intervention just for heritage protection remains highly controversial due to the potential for collateral damage and further loss of life it is suggested that targeted, non-lethal interventions such as UN peacekeeping missions equipped with specialized cultural heritage teams could play a role in post conflict stabilization and reconstruction.

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