



HIMOIC
Ankara

ICESCO

Islamic World
Educational, Scientific
& Cultural Organization



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. WELCOMING LETTERS

- 1.1 Letter from Secretary General.....3
- 1.2 Letter from Under Secretary General.....4

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMITTEE.....5

3. INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC.....5

4. SUBSTANTIAL GLOSSARY.....6

5. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION OF THE ISSUE.....7

6. CURRENT SITUATION OF ISLAMIC CULTURAL HERITAGE IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS

- 6.1 Cultural Assets in Conflict-Affected Areas.....11
- 6.2 Legal and Physical Protection.....11
- 6.3 AI and 3D Modeling in Heritage Safeguarding.....13

7. MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONSTRAINTS TO HERITAGE INTEGRITY

- 7.1 Erosion of the Ummah's Collective Memory.....14
- 7.2 Institutional Gaps in Enforcement.....17
- 7.3 Restricted Access and Security.....18
- 7.4 Illicit Trafficking and Cultural Looting.....19

8. REGARDING STATES ROLES.....20

9. GUIDING QUESTIONS.....25

10. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....26

11. FURTHER READING.....26

1.Welcoming Letters

1.1. Letter from Secretary General

I am Khalilullah Mohamed Bhathiya, an 11th grade student at International Prof. Dr. Mohammed Hamidullah Anatolian Imam Hatip High School in Ankara, and I would like to welcome you to the Hamidullah International Model Organization for Islamic Cooperation (HIMOIC) as its Secretary General.

I first became acquainted with Model United Nations (MUN) during my 9th grade and have actively participated ever since. As I participated in other conferences, including AYIMUN XI and AWMUN 18th, I witnessed the potential of diplomacy, cooperation and meaningful dialogue to solve problems. In addition, I had observed the difficulties many Islamic countries face as I developed my interest in international relations. This caused my teammates and I to develop a platform for youth to engage in these issues through diplomacy, dialogue and cooperation, ultimately creating HIMOIC based on the framework of Model OIC for students to participate in these discussions.

One thing that would make the conference a successful and exciting experience for me is having a group of dedicated delegates who want to come together to exchange ideas and solutions to some of the challenges we face today. Through our partnership with Islamic Cooperation Youth Forum (ICYF), the discussions and resolutions developed during this conference could help lead to larger discussions, and solutions, that extend outside the committee rooms. I hope every delegate has an academic learning experience, but also builds long-lasting friendships and creates wonderful memories over these three days of HIMOIC. If you ever wish for more information, please do not hesitate contacting me at khalil.bhathiya@gmail.com.

To conclude, I would like to extend my heartfelt welcome to you at HIMOIC, and I look forward to your wonderful contributions towards successful discussion!

Sincerely,

Khalilullah Mohamed Bhathiya
Secretary-General of the HIMOIC

1.2. Letter from Under Secretary General

Dear Esteemed Delegates,

It is with great honor and enthusiasm that I welcome you to the The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. As you step into this committee, you are not merely participants of a simulation, you are representatives of the future, individuals who hold the potential to shape the course of global dialogue and decision-making.

Our agenda item, “Protection of Islamic Cultural Heritage in Conflict Zones: Strategies for Survival and Resilience” stands as one of profound importance and urgency. The challenges faced in post-conflict regions are not limited to immediate recovery, but extend deeply into sustainable peacebuilding, humanitarian restoration, and regional cooperation. Your discussions, perspectives, and solutions will reflect the kind of leadership our world truly needs.

I encourage each of you to approach this committee with diligence, intellectual curiosity, and a strong sense of responsibility. Preparation will be your greatest asset. Understanding not only your country’s stance but also the broader geopolitical, humanitarian, and ethical dimensions of the issue will allow you to contribute meaningfully. Do not hesitate to think boldly, negotiate wisely, and collaborate effectively. Remember, diplomacy is not only about defending positions, but also about building bridges.

The skills you cultivate here, critical thinking, negotiation, and empathy, are the very foundations of impactful leadership. I sincerely hope that each of you leaves this committee not only as better delegates, but as more conscious and capable global citizens.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to our Academic Assistant, Ahmed Lyatim, for his dedication and valuable contributions to the preparation of this committee.

I look forward to witnessing your ideas, your debates, and your growth throughout this conference. The future is shaped by those who dare to engage...

Best regards,

Yusuf Emre Kaya

Under-Secretary-General of Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

2. Introduction to the Committee

The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO, formerly ISESCO) is a specialized organization that operates under the aegis of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). ICESCO was founded by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in May 1979. ICESCO consists of fifty-three Member States, along with three Observer States, out of the fifty-seven Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. ICESCO's objectives are "to strengthen and promote cooperation among the Member States in the fields of education, science, culture and communication; consolidate understanding among peoples inside and outside Member State; contribute to world peace and security through various means; publicize the true image of Islam and Islamic culture; promote dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions; encourage cultural interaction and foster cultural diversity in the Member States, while preserving cultural identity and intellectual integrity."

The ICESCO is concerned with fields of education, science, culture and communication in Islamic countries in order to support and strengthen relations among member states and stipulates that every full Member State of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) shall become a member of ICESCO upon officially signing the Charter, and having completed the membership legal and legislative formalities and informed, in writing, the General Directorate of ICESCO. A State which is not a full member, or is an observer member of OIC, cannot become a member of ICESCO.

3. Introduction to the Topic

The protection of cultural heritage in conflict and post-conflict settings has emerged as a critical area of concern, intertwining issues of security, identity, and human rights. As armed conflicts often lead to the destruction of historical sites, museums, and cultural artefacts, the ethical implications of safeguarding these assets become increasingly complex. While cultural heritage is frequently viewed as a universal good, its protection can raise significant dilemmas regarding the prioritization of heritage over human life, the potential for politicization, and the involvement of military actors in preservation efforts.

Today, across the Islamic world, heritage is more than a matter of historical preservation. It constitutes the foundation of cultural identity, collective memory, and geopolitical meaning. Over the past two decades, however, it has faced mounting threats from war, displacement, rapid urbanization, climate change, and ideological erasure. From the desecration of mosques and museums in Iraq and Syria to the gradual disintegration of ancient medinas in North Africa, these threats extend beyond mere physical decay or neglect; they are frequently the result of strategic violence, economic marginalization, and the erosion of local knowledge systems. In such contexts, heritage becomes both casualty and target, destroyed to erase memory while being selectively preserved to assert authority. The central question, therefore, is not simply how to conserve heritage, but how to safeguard it under duress in ways that are ethical, community-centered, and geopolitically attuned.

This recognition calls for an analytical framework that goes beyond technical preservation to include social, political, and moral dimensions.

4. Substantial Glossary

Islamic Cultural Heritage

Islamic Cultural Heritage refers to the collective material, intellectual, both tangible and intangible legacy produced by societies influenced by Islamic civilization since the 7th century. This heritage spans a vast geographic area, stretching from Spain (Al-Andalus) and West Africa to Central Asia and Southeast Asia. It represents a synthesis of diverse regional cultures, languages, and ethnic traditions unified by shared Islamic principles and artistic motifs. The term encompasses both tangible and intangible assets that reflect the history, beliefs, and artistic evolution of the Muslim world. Unlike purely religious heritage, Islamic cultural heritage includes developments in science, philosophy, trade, and daily life, all of which flourished within the framework of Islamic civilization.

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is a type of soft power that includes the "exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding". The purpose of cultural diplomacy is for the people of a foreign nation to develop an understanding of the nation's ideals and institutions in an effort to build broad support for economic and political objectives. In essence "cultural diplomacy reveals the soul of a nation", which in turn creates influence.

Collective Memory

Collective memory is the shared pool of memories, knowledge and information of a social group that is significantly associated with the group's identity. The English phrase "collective memory" appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. Collective memory can be constructed, shared, and passed on by large and small social groups. Examples of these groups can include nations, generations, communities, among others. Collective memory has been a topic of interest and research across a number of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, and anthropology.

UNESCO

UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) was founded in 1945 as the successor to the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. UNESCO's founding mission, which was shaped by the events of World War II, is to advance peace, sustainable development and human rights by facilitating collaboration and dialogue among nations. It pursues this objective through five major programme areas: education, natural sciences, social/human sciences, culture and communication/information. UNESCO sponsors projects that improve literacy, provide technical training and education, advance science, protect independent media and press freedom, preserve regional and cultural history, and promote cultural diversity. The organization prominently helps establish and secure World Heritage Sites of cultural and natural importance.

5. Historical Background and Evolution of the Issue

From the very origins of civilization, acts of genocide against an enemy population were inevitably accompanied by the destruction of the cultural heritage around which its identity was defined. Already in ancient Greece, the historian Polybius denounced in 212 B.C. the looting perpetrated by the Romans after defeating the city of Syracuse and the consequent destruction of the temples and their sacred images. Likewise, the premeditated destruction of the temple of Serapise in Alexandria ordered by Emperor Theodosius in 317 AD was the final blow to the pagan religion in the country through the elimination of the last remaining sanctuary. Much more recent examples, but of the same foundation and nature, are the bombing by Nazi Germany in 1943 after the so-called Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that razed the city to the ground and reduced its splendid palaces and churches to rubble, or the systematic destruction of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Muslim communities during the Balkan wars, both responding to an evident motivation of cultural and not only physical annihilation of the population.

Although tangible and intangible cultural property has always played a fundamental role in shaping the identity and collective memory of nations, it was not until after the Napoleonic Wars, when for the first time in 1815, a sophisticated body of international norms with specific provisions for cultural property was elaborated, that its conception as the property of all humanity became evident. The Lieber Code (1863) will be the first modern attempt to codify the laws of war, including in its articles 35 and 36 specific guidelines on the protection of cultural property during armed conflict, which will later be largely replicated in the Conference of Brussels (1874)¹ and the Hague Conventions I and II (the former ratified by 50 states). These provisions, which to a large extent reflect current customary law, make it the duty of the inhabitants to indicate cultural property by distinctive signs visible to the enemy and also prohibit the pillage and destruction of enemy heritage in the absence of imperative military necessity. The protection of cultural property is equated in these treaties with that of other civilian buildings such as hospitals and universities, without reference to its symbolic and emotional value not only for local communities but for all of humanity. This paradigm shift would not occur until 1954.

The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, adopted in The Hague in 1954 as a consequence of the massive destruction of cultural heritage during World War II, is the first international treaty with a global vocation dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict. In one of the fundamental premises of the text, the obligation to safeguard cultural property threatened during a conflict falls both on the state where it is located and on the invading state that is occupying the territory, also prohibiting plundering, pillaging and banditry and justifying the attack on sites of historical-artistic value only under criteria of imperative military necessity (2009); the lack of definition of this concept has unsurprisingly given rise to numerous criticisms and heated debate.

Protocol I of the Convention deals specifically with the protection of cultural heritage in times of occupation, establishing on the occupying army the obligation to prevent the illicit export of cultural property or its destruction, as well as to return cultural property confiscated during the conflict. The next steps in the normative framework for the protection of heritage materialized in Protocols I and II of the Geneva Convention in 1973, referring to international and domestic conflicts and signed by 93 and 44 countries respectively, in which the attack on cultural property or its use for military purposes is explicitly prohibited and the obligations for the protection of heritage are attributed to the attacker and not to the attacked party, and the massive destruction of property enjoying protected status is classified as a war crime.

After the brutal wars in the Balkans in 1999, however, the very limited framework of protection offered by the Convention in the case of domestic conflicts and the need to find a more precise definition of the concept of military security became evident. The effectiveness of the treaty was in turn severely hampered by the lack of a higher body to implement the decisions and with the capacity to convene meetings on a regular basis, as well as the absence of a robust system of sanctions for violators or of an administrative body to organize the proceedings; the implementation of the agreements on the protection of cultural property was therefore almost exclusively dependent on the political will of the States concerned. Accordingly, this second Protocol seeks to provide a more precise definition of military necessity, as well as to simplify the procedures for granting special protection status to monuments and buildings of heritage value and to provide for individual criminal responsibility for offences of attacks on cultural goods. Heritage property which by reason of its use has become a military objective may be attacked when there is no feasible alternative, but a commanding officer of a force equivalent to a battalion must determine whether or not military necessity is invoked, and an advance warning must be issued if possible; in the case of an asset enjoying special protection, its consideration as a target of strict military necessity must come from the highest command and the issuance of a prior warning will have imperative rank.

Compiling the basic rules within the legal framework for the protection of heritage during armed conflicts, the fundamental premise of these rules is the prohibition of attacking cultural property unless it would make a significant contribution to military action or its destruction would provide an effective military advantage. In no case is an attack on military objectives permitted if it cannot be carried out without damaging the nearby heritage in a way that is disproportionate to the military advantage to be gained, nor is the demolition of cultural property in the territory controlled by one of the contenders or its use for military purposes permitted unless there is an imperative strategic need. Classified as a war crime in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the intentional destruction of cultural heritage during an armed conflict will acquire the status of a crime against humanity if it is carried out systematically, with the obligation to safeguard the heritage falling, as mentioned above, on the occupying state. Protocol II of the Convention provides for the creation of an intergovernmental committee and a financial fund responsible for the elaboration and implementation of a coordinated protection strategy to achieve its objectives.

It is not difficult to imagine that the origin of all this body of law lies in the desire to hold those responsible to account individually for the massive destruction specifically aimed at cultural property that took place during the Second World War, when the well-known German Air Force Braedeker Brigades systematically bombed some of the most precious architectural treasures of the British Isles in cities such as Bath, Canterbury and Exeter, targets specifically selected for their cultural rather than military value in order to cause a greater psychological impact on the civilian population; the British then took revenge for these acts at the expense of the beautiful Hanseatic city of Lubeck, which was subjected on the night of March 28, 1942 to a massive air raid that devastated its historic center.

The advances made during World War II in the performance of explosives in bombing did not correspond to improvements in the precision of the range of the targets, and the volume of destruction of cultural heritage was consequently disproportionate and on a scale never seen before. It must be agreed, however, that most of this destruction was not contrary to the laws of war at the time, since it was property inevitably damaged in the context of an attack on military targets, a distinction extended, moreover, to almost all buildings. The current situation represents a decisive step forward insofar as legitimate military objectives will be only those that effectively contribute to military action and not to undermining the enemy's capacity to sustain the war effort.

While the II Protocol has brought notable improvements in the protection of buildings and monuments, as far as movable heritage is concerned it has been a resounding failure in view of the savage plundering and looting of movable heritage in Iraq's museums during the US invasion of 2003, being ultimately totally ineffective in preventing the destruction of the priceless archaeological sites destroyed by Daesh since 2014 such as Palmyra, Nineveh or Nimrod. The framework of protection offered by current international law is severely limited in a war scenario such as the Middle East, where most of the destruction of property takes place in a context of civil war or asymmetrical conflict involving numerous private, non-state actors, and whose compliance with international law is therefore disputed. The current legal framework, with all its complexity and extension, has often proved inoperative by creating situations that Lostal defines as legislative congestion (Lostal, 2015), in which in addition no treaty is able to build anything relevant on the foundations of the previous one. It is also opportune to point out that legal instruments by themselves have proven to be insufficient in many cases in the absence of a trained military corps to monitor and mitigate situations of cultural emergency in which a property is threatened and requires professionalized action for its preservation.

The growing number of attacks on cultural property in recent decades has mostly taken place in the context of noninternational armed conflicts in institutionally weak states, involving multiple state and private actors and with cultural property acting as a catalyst for politics of identity and nationalism, which, coupled with the proliferation of an illicit war economy, only

encourages further destruction of heritage. Current conflicts revolve more around different communities and their relations with the state than the direct confrontation between different states or their political objectives per se, precipitating phenomena such as the creation of sub-nationalist currents in which the narrative of identity and belonging is employed in the service of political mobilization. Such asymmetrical conflicts between different communities, which often take on an ethno-sectarian nature, are waged by warlords, mercenaries and terrorists, have no state resources and must therefore seek alternative sources of funding, of which the illicit trafficking of works of art is one of the most lucrative. In this sense, the traditions and history of nations play a crucial role in contemporary politics, in which cultural production is instrumentalized with the aim of structuring a collective memory and identity, since heritage, rituals, myths and common values ensure a certain degree of continuity with past generations and help to build that narrative and national identity.

6. Current Situation of Islamic Cultural Heritage in Conflict-Affected Areas

The state of Islamic cultural heritage in conflict-affected areas today is one of the most pressing concerns in international cultural policy. Across the Islamic world—from Syria and Iraq to Mali, Yemen, and Afghanistan—armed conflict, deliberate destruction, and the breakdown of state governance have placed irreplaceable cultural assets at extreme risk. This is not merely a matter of history being lost; it is a process through which the living identities of communities are being systematically erased.

According to UNESCO, all six of Syria's UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been partially damaged or destroyed as a direct result of the conflict that began in 2011. These include the Ancient City of Aleppo, the Ancient City of Damascus, the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, the Site of Palmyra, the Ancient City of Bosra, and the Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din. This scale of damage to a single country's World Heritage portfolio is unprecedented in the modern era. The Getty Conservation Institute further documents that in Mosul, Iraq alone—under ISIS occupation from 2014 to 2017—forty-one significant modern heritage sites were destroyed or severely damaged in the city, along with an additional 114 sites on the Nineveh Plain to the east. These were not accidental casualties of conflict; they were deliberate acts of erasure carried out as part of a coordinated ideological strategy.

Beyond the most visible cases of Syria and Iraq, Islamic cultural heritage continues to face serious threats across the broader region. In Mali, fourteen historical and religious sites in the World Heritage town of Timbuktu were destroyed in July 2012 by armed groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. In Yemen, the ongoing armed conflict has placed the Old City of Sana'a, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in grave danger. The International Review of the Red Cross notes that Muslim majority states have been particularly affected by the deliberate targeting of cultural heritage as a method of warfare, and that the urbanization of modern conflict has increasingly placed cultural sites in the direct path of combat operations.

6.1. Cultural Assets in Conflict - Affected Areas

The cultural assets at greatest risk in conflict zones fall into two broad categories. The first is physical heritage: Mosques, Madrasas, archaeological sites, museums, libraries, and historic monuments. The second is living heritage: oral traditions, religious practices, craft skills, and the knowledge passed down through communities. Both are under threat, and the loss of one almost always damages the other.

What makes the current threat particularly alarming is that cultural heritage is no longer being destroyed as an accidental consequence of conflict — it is being targeted deliberately. Armed groups across multiple conflict zones have used the destruction of mosques, shrines, archaeological sites, and manuscripts as a weapon: to intimidate populations, erase shared identity, and in some cases generate revenue through looting. The Getty Conservation Institute documents that across Iraq and Syria alone, hundreds of heritage sites were deliberately demolished or severely damaged between 2014 and 2019 — acts that were planned, executed, and in many cases publicly broadcast as propaganda. This pattern of deliberate targeting has equally been recorded in Mali, Yemen, Libya, and Afghanistan.

The destruction of physical sites also destroys the living traditions tied to them. The International Review of the Red Cross points out that when a shrine is demolished, the religious rituals, prayers, and community practices connected to that place are lost alongside the building. When communities are forced to flee, they take their traditions with them — but without a home to return to, those traditions often fade within a generation. This means the damage to Islamic cultural heritage is far deeper than what photographs of rubble can show. It is also worth noting that international attention tends to focus on UNESCO listed World Heritage Sites, which represent only a small portion of any country's actual heritage. The ICRC journal warns that local and national heritage — mosques, shrines, manuscripts, and community sites that appear on no international list — often matters far more to people's daily identity than any famous monument. In Syria, Iraq, and Mali, enormous amounts of this unlisted heritage have been erased with little international response.

6.2. Legal and Physical Protection

The Islamic world is endowed with a rich and complex cultural heritage that spans ancient settlements, medieval urban fabrics, sacred sites, living traditions, and intangible knowledge systems. Yet these resources are increasingly imperiled by overlapping and intersecting crises. ICESCO's 2025 analytical report indicates that more than half of the cultural heritage sites in the Islamic world face either direct or indirect risks, with several already classified by UNESCO as World Heritage in Danger.

Armed conflicts remain the most visible and destructive threat. Sites in Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine have witnessed the deliberate targeting of mosques, mausoleums, libraries, and urban heritage complexes, exemplified by the destruction of the Al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul. Climate change constitutes a parallel and intensifying risk. Rising temperatures, desertification, flash floods, and extreme weather events jeopardize fragile historic structures,

particularly those constructed from adobe, timber, or local stone. Urbanization, speculative tourism, and privatization further exacerbate the vulnerability of heritage. In historic medinas such as Fes, Tunis, and Cairo, neoliberal development agendas have frequently displaced local communities, thereby eroding intangible cultural practices such as traditional crafts, oral poetry, and ceremonial traditions. These processes underscore the intersection of heritage preservation with spatial justice, highlighting the urgency of governance approaches that safeguard both tangible and living heritage.

Since 2019, ICESCO has undergone an institutional transformation with the establishment of the Islamic World Heritage Center (IWHC), dedicated exclusively to safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage across its 54 member states. This restructuring combined a normative vision with operational action, enabling the organization to translate policy frameworks into concrete interventions. One of the earliest initiatives was the Heritage in Danger program, which dispatched expert missions to high-risk areas such as northern Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine. These missions carried out technical damage assessments, coordinated restoration projects, and organized capacity-building workshops for local heritage professionals. Between 2020 and 2023, ICESCO conducted more than twelve specialized training sessions in Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds; launched grant programs to restore historic madrasas and urban quarters; and supported youth-led digital archiving initiatives documenting oral histories, ritual practices, and local heritage narratives.

ICESCO's strategy also embeds climate-sensitive conservation as a central operational principle. Through anticipatory risk management, the organization promotes green conservation methods, climate impact assessments, and the integration of heritage into national disaster risk reduction strategies. These measures operationalize the theory of cultural resilience in practice, shifting heritage from a passive object of preservation to an active resource for community adaptation and sustainability. ICESCO's interventions have generated measurable results. Capacity-building initiatives have trained more than 200 local heritage professionals, while youth-oriented programs have created over 50 digital heritage archives. Grantfunded conservation projects have restored mosques, urban quarters, and traditional craft workshops, simultaneously strengthened institutional networks and fostered participatory governance. These achievements demonstrate that heritage interventions can preserve material culture while also reinforcing social cohesion and enhancing community resilience.

Despite these notable successes, several limitations remain. For heritage governance to be effective, strategies must bridge normative commitments with actionable practices. Establishing regional heritage risk observatories, expanding youth-led digital archiving initiatives, and integrating climate-sensitive conservation methods are key pathways to strengthen adaptive capacity. Policymakers and practitioners should foster inclusive decision-making, enhance regional coordination, and prioritize interinstitutional partnerships to ensure that heritage protection remains both ethically sound and operationally feasible. In doing so, heritage can shift from being viewed merely as symbolic or aesthetic capital to becoming a strategic instrument of cultural dignity, social cohesion, and climate resilience.

Evaluating the long-term impacts of youth engagement, digital preservation, and climate-adaptive interventions will be particularly valuable. By integrating participatory assessment frameworks with evidence-based monitoring, future research can enhance the responsiveness and relevance of heritage governance, ensuring that it continues to serve as a foundation for justice, healing, and inclusive futures in the Islamic world.

6.3. AI and 3D Modeling in Heritage Safeguarding

Cultural heritage sites constitute irreplaceable records of human history, illustrating the progression of our social, architectural, and cultural practices. Increasing threats from climate-related hazards, such as shifting rainfall patterns, escalating temperatures, and intensified extreme weather, combined with geological and physical risks like landslides, earthquakes, and erosion, render these sites increasingly vulnerable. Earth observation technology is pivotal in preserving cultural heritage by improving documentation, enabling more effective monitoring, and supporting proactive conservation strategies. Recently, with advances in technology, advanced 3D scanning and imaging techniques, such as laser scanning and photogrammetry, have captured precise digital records of cultural heritage sites, documenting and helping conservators measure changes over time and swiftly identify structural vulnerabilities. Remote sensing technologies, including satellite imagery, aerial photography and UAV-based surveys, allow for extensive site evaluations, reducing risks and costs associated with onsite inspections, especially in remote or hazardous locations. Methodological frameworks and technological developments, encompassing remote sensing, satellite and aerial imaging, digital modeling with laser scanners, photogrammetry, and participatory data collection, are creating fresh opportunities for proactive, evidence-based conservation. Data-driven tools such as sensor arrays and digital twin models enable continuous monitoring, where real-time structural and environmental information is integrated into predictive models to anticipate emerging threats.

The use of Mixed Reality (MR) and 3D modeling in cultural heritage preservation improves documentation while also revolutionizing interpretation and public participation. MR technologies enable users to delve deeper into history by viewing virtual reconstructions of cultural locations and artifacts in immersive digital environments. Individuals can use virtual reality experiences to travel back in time and obtain a better knowledge of historical circumstances, social dynamics, and cultural significance. Interactive features enhance the experience by allowing users to interact with virtual items, discover hidden details, and participate in hands-on learning activities. The utilization of 3D models, AR fused with advanced machine learning techniques, and computer vision holds significant promise for enhancing CH preservation efforts. These integrated technologies offer a multifaceted approach to not only digitally document and archive cultural artefacts and sites but also to proactively identify potential deterioration over time. By exploiting the power of machine learning and computer vision algorithms, patterns of degradation can be recognized and analyzed with accuracy and efficiency. This proactive approach enables stakeholders to anticipate and address issues before they escalate, therefore safeguarding cultural treasures for future generations.

Moreover, the integration of Artificial Intelligence into artifact preservation and conservation marks a fundamental shift in how we safeguard and interpret cultural heritage. This analysis shows that AI has developed from a basic digitisation tool into a highly advanced partner that improves every stage of the conservation process – from documentation and condition monitoring to restoration and public engagement. Through technologies such as computer vision, machine learning, and generative AI, we can now create precise digital twins of artefacts, detect tiny signs of deterioration invisible to the human eye, predict future preservation needs, and even reconstruct missing elements with remarkable accuracy. These capabilities not only enhance the efficiency and accuracy of conservation work but also enable proactive rather than reactive preservation strategies. Artificial Intelligence also acts as a bridge between technical conservation and public accessibility, transforming static collections into dynamic, interactive experiences through virtual reconstructions, personalised tours, and augmented reality applications. Although challenges persist regarding data quality, ethical implementation, and the necessity for human oversight, the evidence clearly shows that Artificial Intelligence is becoming an essential partner in preservation efforts. As technology continues to evolve, its potential to transform the way cultural heritage is understood, preserved, and experienced will only increase, ensuring that valuable artefacts endure and stay meaningful for future generations.

7. Multidimensional Constraints to Heritage Integrity

Islamic heritage today faces a multidimensional crisis: armed conflicts, ideological extremism, commercial redevelopment, cultural amnesia, and institutional neglect. The destruction of sites in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Kashmir, alongside the commodification of sacred architecture in some urban centers, raises urgent ethical and theological questions. What is the role of the Muslim community in safeguarding its historical legacy? What guidance does Islamic tradition provide on protecting the signs (āyāt) of its civilizational journey? Heritage preservation is not merely optional or aesthetic, but a religious and ethical mandate deeply rooted in Qur'anic commands to reflect upon history, honor sacred memory, and maintain continuity in faith and practice.

7.1. Erosion of the Ummah's Collective Memory

Heritage embodies the collective memory of the Muslim ummah, encompassing the architectural brilliance of Andalusia, the manuscript traditions of Timbuktu, the calligraphic aesthetics of the Ottoman world, and the ritual and devotional legacies passed across centuries. The neglect and destruction of heritage leads to cultural amnesia, detaching individuals and communities from their intellectual, spiritual, and historical roots. In such a vacuum, Muslim youth become susceptible to either extremist ideology or uncritical adoption of Western cultural hegemony.

The history of colonialism has left deep scars on colonized societies, not only in material conditions but in the psyche and collective identity of peoples. In the aftermath of colonial rule, newly independent nations have had to grapple with the collective memory of subjugation, violence, and resistance. This collective memory (the shared remembrance of a group's past) is profoundly shaped by trauma. Trauma in this context refers to the lingering psychological, cultural, and social wounds inflicted by the extreme violence and oppression of colonial domination.

On one hand, there is a moral and emotional imperative to remember the suffering endured under colonial rule. Acts of remembering include commemorating anti-colonial resistance heroes, memorializing victims of atrocities, preserving oral histories of survivors, and incorporating the history of colonialism into school curricula and national narratives. Such remembrance serves to honor those who endured pain and to acknowledge historical injustices. It also helps educate younger generations about the struggles that led to independence. How the past is remembered and interpreted plays an important role in the creation of group identities, linking past, present, and future in a shared narrative. By remembering colonial trauma, societies ensure that the causes and consequences of that trauma are not forgotten, ideally to prevent repetition and to demand redress or at least recognition. Memory can thus be a source of solidarity and collective pride (for example, pride in resistance movements or martyrs who fought for freedom).

On the other hand, there are strong forces that lead to forgetting or silencing aspects of the past. Collective forgetting refers to the deliberate or unconscious omission of certain events or interpretations in a group's memory. Often, newly independent states or certain political elites might find it convenient to forget divisive or embarrassing episodes of the colonial period or liberation struggle. For instance, if segments of the local population collaborated with colonial authorities or if there were internecine conflicts, these inconvenient facts might be downplayed in the official history in favor of a more unifying story of anti-colonial unity. Similarly, former colonial powers frequently engaged in systematic forgetting: archives were sealed or destroyed, atrocities were covered up or denied, and the narrative within the colonizing country often shifted to one of benign or civilizing colonialism, erasing the violence perpetrated. This "historical amnesia" is not accidental; it is often an intentional political strategy. As one analysis notes, collective forgetting involves states and citizens selectively remembering, misremembering, or disremembering in order to silence and exclude alternative views that counter the official discourse.. In other words, forgetting is used to produce a single, dominant narrative of the past – a narrative that usually serves those in power.

In the absence of (or alongside) official histories, cultural production has often been the vessel carrying the memory of colonial trauma in post-colonial societies. Literature, cinema, visual arts, music, theater, and monuments all play vital roles in representing, preserving, and sometimes reinterpreting the past. They provide imaginative and symbolic spaces in which the experiences of trauma and the acts of resistance can be narrated and remembered. Culture can thus act as a repository of memory especially for aspects of history that may be

marginalized by official discourse and as a means of working through trauma. Literature has been one of the foremost mediums for postcolonial memory work. Many writers from formerly colonized countries have used novels, poems, and memoirs to grapple with the legacy of colonialism and the violence associated with it. In the immediate post-independence period, authors often took on the task of rewriting history from the perspective of the colonized, effectively countering colonial narratives. For example, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) depicts the onslaught of British colonial rule in Nigeria from an Igbo community's viewpoint, illuminating the cultural disintegration and trauma inflicted by colonization. These kinds of works serve not only as artistic expression but as acts of memorialization, they keep alive the knowledge of what happened, in forms that can be passed to future generations.

Film and cinema have likewise contributed to postcolonial collective memory. Visual storytelling can be particularly powerful in societies with strong oral or visual traditions, or where literacy was limited. Films have dramatized colonial histories and the struggles of decolonization, making these past events vivid for later generations. One striking example is the film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), an Italian-Algerian production that re-enacts the Algerian War of Independence with gritty realism; it has served as a collective memory text for Algerians (and others) about the sacrifices and complexities of that anti-colonial war.

Other forms of cultural production also contribute to memory. Monuments serve as tangible focal points of collective memory – places where people can gather to commemorate independence anniversaries or pay respects to past heroes. They embed memory in the landscape, making history literally monumental. Music and oral performance (such as folk songs, dramas, storytelling sessions) have kept memories alive, especially in societies with rich oral traditions. Museums and archives established after independence can formally curate the history of colonialism for example, a national museum might have exhibits on the colonial era, displaying photographs, artifacts, and personal testimonies that educate visitors about the trauma and the struggle.

Collective memory of colonial trauma is not merely about the past; it is fundamentally about how a society constructs its identity in the present and future. In post-colonial nations, national identity and the project of nation-building have been deeply intertwined with memories of colonialism and the struggle against it. The way a country remembers its colonial past can legitimize political authority, foster unity (or sometimes division) among its citizens, and define the values and narratives that the nation holds dear. Thus, memory becomes a political tool as well as a cultural inheritance.

Let's turn to Libya as an illustrative case of memory in nation-building. After Libya gained independence from Italian rule (and a brief period of British/French administration) in 1951, its early monarchy under King Idris, who himself had been a leader of a Sufi order that fought Italians, maintained a relatively low-key remembrance of the colonial period. However, when Muammar Gaddafi came to power in 1969, he made anti-colonial memory a centerpiece of his regime's legitimacy. Gaddafi constantly reminded Libyans of the cruelty of

Italian colonization, positioning his revolutionary government as the vindicator of that historical injustice. He would rhetorically shout to crowds that “nobody cared about you” under the previous regimes and that only his rule gave justice after the Italian oppression. With these actions, Gaddafi tied his modern political project (an authoritarian, idiosyncratic form of Arab socialism) to the collective trauma of colonialism – implying that to oppose him was somehow to betray the martyrs of the past. He even timed certain political actions symbolically: in 1970, on the anniversary of Omar Mukhtar’s execution, Gaddafi expelled the remaining Italian settlers from Libya, dubbing it a final act of anti-colonial justice. This shows the explicit political use of memory: colonial history was used to consolidate Gaddafi’s national narrative and legitimize his policies. Yet, memory in Libya’s nation-building was not monolithic. When the popular uprising against Gaddafi’s regime occurred in 2011, the protesters and rebels themselves drew on anti-colonial symbols to bolster their cause – effectively reclaiming the national memory from Gaddafi’s exclusive control. In the early days of the 2011 revolution in eastern Libya, young protestors brandished images of Omar Mukhtar and evoked the memory of anti-Italian resistance, signaling that they were the true heirs to that legacy, not Gaddafi. By taking “the anti-colonial resistance heroes away from the regime”, Libyans asserted that the spirit of anti-colonial struggle was really about freedom from oppression, whether foreign or domestic. This is a compelling example of how collective memory can be repurposed in new political contexts: the same memory of colonial trauma that once legitimized the postcolonial state was later used by citizens to challenge an oppressive postcolonial government.

In conclusion, memory is a powerful force in shaping post-colonial national identities. The trauma of the colonial past is often transformed into a narrative of perseverance and liberation that feeds into patriotism. Political leaders harness this memory to legitimize themselves or delegitimize opponents, while citizens negotiate this legacy in their own quests for justice and democracy. The case of Libya, among others, demonstrates that collective memory is not static capital; it can be mobilized by various actors for nation-building or for political contestation. Ultimately, how a society remembers its colonial trauma – whether honestly and inclusively, or selectively and manipulatively – will influence the kind of nation it becomes. Cultural production is also indispensable to how post-colonial societies remember their traumatic past. Literature and art can often broach topics that official discourse avoids, giving voice to the silenced and humanizing historical events. Monuments and performances create communal rituals of remembrance. Through culture, the memory of trauma can be kept alive, transmitted, and also transformed as society’s understanding evolves. As one scholarly footnote succinctly puts it, popular culture in the form of literature, film, music, and monuments re-appropriates the past, making it a key arena in which memory and society intersect.

7.2. Institutional Gaps in Enforcement

A significant body of international law exists to protect cultural heritage, including the 1954 Hague Convention, the 1970 UNESCO Convention, and UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017). However, legal instruments alone do not guarantee enforcement. Many Member States in conflict-affected regions lack the specialized units, trained personnel, and functioning judicial systems needed to prosecute heritage crimes. Cross-border cooperation between law enforcement agencies remains inconsistent, and information-sharing between countries is limited.

The ICRC identifies a further structural weakness: most existing conventions were designed for conflicts between states, while the majority of today's heritage destruction is carried out by non-state armed groups that are far harder to hold accountable. To address these gaps, UNODC, UNESCO, and INTERPOL jointly launched the CATCH initiative in June 2023 to strengthen law enforcement cooperation. In 2024, a coordinated INTERPOL operation across 23 countries intercepted over 37,000 cultural objects, demonstrating what is possible when institutions work together, and how much is lost when they do not.

Enforcement is further weakened by the role that legitimate markets play in enabling the trade. Looted artifacts move from conflict zones into art markets, dealerships, and online platforms through falsified documentation that makes them appear legally owned. Sellers in many countries face no legal requirement to verify an item's origin before putting it up for sale, which means stolen heritage can circulate openly without triggering any legal investigation. Resolution 2347 (2017) addresses this gap directly, urging Member States to impose stricter controls on the import and export of cultural property and to require verified provenance as a condition of sale. Until these measures are adopted consistently and a shared international registry of stolen objects is established, the legal market will continue to serve as a gateway for looted Islamic cultural heritage.

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7.3. Restricted Access and Security

In active conflict zones, heritage professionals, international monitors, and conservation teams are frequently unable to reach the sites they are meant to protect. Without physical access, the extent of damage cannot be assessed, emergency measures cannot be taken, and documentation for future restoration is lost. UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017) explicitly recognizes landmines and unexploded ordnance as a distinct barrier to heritage access that persists long after active fighting ends.

When communities are displaced by conflict, an additional loss occurs. Local residents, craftspeople, and site custodians are the informal guardians of their own heritage. When they flee, the oversight systems that have protected local sites for generations disappear with them. UNESCO identifies community displacement as one of the primary ways intangible cultural heritage is permanently lost, as oral traditions, religious practices, and craft knowledge depend on living human transmission. In response, the international community has turned to satellite imagery and digital tools, though these remain insufficient substitutes for on-the-ground presence.

The consequences of restricted access are well documented across multiple conflict settings. In Syria, the ongoing conflict left most archaeological sites inaccessible to international

monitors for years, during which looting and destruction continued unrecorded. In Yemen, heritage teams have been unable to conduct proper damage assessments in active combat areas, meaning the full extent of losses to sites such as the Old City of Sana'a remains unknown. In Mali, the temporary loss of state control over the Timbuktu region in 2012 was enough for armed groups to destroy fourteen protected sites within a matter of weeks, with no international presence able to intervene in time. All three cases point to the same conclusion, which is that once access is lost, the opportunity to protect what remains is lost with it.

7.4. Illicit Trafficking and Cultural Looting

The illicit trade in cultural property poses a particularly severe threat to the Islamic world. OIC Member States affected by conflict, including Syria, Iraq, Mali, Yemen, and Libya, have experienced looting on a massive scale targeting mosques, archaeological sites, manuscript libraries, and museums, much of which feeds directly into international criminal networks. UNODC consistently ranks this trade as the third largest criminal trade in the world after drugs and arms, and confirms that a significant portion of trafficked cultural property originates from countries in the Muslim world that are experiencing armed conflict. The Islamic world is therefore not a peripheral victim of this trade. It is one of its primary targets.

The scale of losses within the Islamic world specifically is staggering. In Iraq, UNODC estimates that thousands of archaeological sites were looted during and after the 2003 conflict, with artifacts surfacing in European and North American markets years later. In Syria, UNESCO identified over 900 sites at risk of looting by 2015, with satellite imagery confirming illegal excavations across the country. In Mali, the looting of Timbuktu's manuscript libraries and historic sites following the 2012 armed group takeover resulted in the loss of thousands of irreplaceable Islamic manuscripts. In the Sahel region, UNODC reported in 2024 that armed groups are actively looting archaeological sites and moving artifacts across borders as part of wider criminal financing operations, a pattern directly linked to the funding of ongoing conflicts across West Africa.

Within the Islamic world, ICESCO has taken a leading role in responding to this challenge. In July 2020, ICESCO held an international conference on combating illicit trafficking in cultural property in cooperation with Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, bringing together ministers and heritage experts from across Member States. ICESCO also established a dedicated legal assistance unit to help Member States recover looted artifacts and set up an artificial intelligence unit within its Islamic World Heritage Center to track and account for smuggled objects. In December 2024, ICESCO launched a training workshop on documentation and preservation for heritage professionals from 13 countries. Most recently, in June 2025, ICESCO hosted an international conference on the role of customs authorities in combating trafficking, attended by ministers and senior officials. At the international level, Resolution 2347 (2017) formalized the global response by calling on all Member States to ban cross-border trade in cultural items from conflict zones, require proof of origin for all cultural property transactions, and strengthen legal cooperation to prosecute trafficking offenses. UNODC, UNESCO, and INTERPOL then launched the CATCH initiative in 2023,

training over 1,200 museum and customs professionals across 80 countries. Despite this progress, UNODC notes that once a site is looted and its original context disturbed, the historical information it holds is permanently lost, even if the objects themselves are eventually recovered.

8. Regarding States Roles

Palestine

Palestine consists of territories that hold cultural heritage of extraordinary historical depth, spanning over five thousand years of continuous civilization across Canaanite, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and Ottoman periods. Among its most significant sites are the Great Mosque of Gaza, the oldest and largest mosque in the territory; the ancient port of Anthedon; the Saint Hilarion Monastery, one of the earliest Christian monastic complexes in the world; the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, one of the most sacred sites in Islam; and numerous archaeological sites across the territory that document the full breadth of the region's civilizational history. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Palestine is home to 316 key archaeological and cultural sites. Together, these sites represent one of the most significant cultural landscapes in the Islamic world.

Important sites in Palestine have often been intentionally attacked, with damage specifically targeting places like mosques, tombs, libraries, and historic city centers. This destruction ruins more than just the physical buildings; it deeply hurts the local communities whose daily habits and knowledge keep their culture alive.

The cultural heritage of both Gaza and the West Bank has suffered significant damage as a result of the ongoing conflict. As of January 2026, UNESCO documented damage to at least 150 cultural and heritage sites in Gaza since October 2023, of which 140 were located in the Gaza Governorate. A World Bank estimate from February 2025 found that 53 percent of Gaza's cultural property is either damaged or completely destroyed. The Great Mosque of Gaza was destroyed in December 2023. The seventh century Omari Grand Mosque was severely damaged. The Church of Saint Porphyrius, believed to be the world's third oldest church, was struck and partially collapsed. The Rashad al-Shawa Cultural Center, which housed a library of over 100,000 books, was destroyed. Approximately 20,000 rare artifacts are estimated to have been looted or lost, including more than 17,000 formerly housed in the historic Qasr al-Basha site. In the West Bank, the United Nations Independent Commission of Inquiry has documented incidents of damage to cultural sites, and concerns about the management and oversight of archaeological sites in the territory have been raised at the international level.

Restoration and protection efforts in Palestine face serious obstacles due to the active nature of the conflict and severely restricted access to affected sites. UNESCO has conducted damage assessments primarily through satellite imagery and remote monitoring, as physical access to many areas has not been possible. Following the ceasefire declared in October 2025, UNESCO began conducting on-site assessments where conditions permitted.

ALIPH, the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas, increased its financial commitment in 2025, bringing its total funding to 1.5 million US dollars directed at emergency heritage protection measures. Within the Islamic world, the OIC has taken direct action. At its Emergency Executive Committee meeting held in Jeddah in July 2025, the OIC mandated its General Secretariat to work with ICESCO and IRCICA to compile a full record of damage to Palestinian cultural heritage, organize activities highlighting the historical and cultural significance of Palestinian sites, and convene a specialized workshop for international law and heritage experts from Member States to propose a concrete action plan. ICESCO separately met with Palestinian authorities in August 2024 and again in May 2026 to discuss cooperation programs including restoration training, the possibility of sending an ICESCO delegation to assess damage on the ground, and the establishment of a permanent exhibition dedicated to documenting five thousand years of Palestinian heritage for the world. The scale of destruction nonetheless far exceeds current resources, and UNESCO has stressed that the protection of cultural heritage is an obligation that applies to all parties under international humanitarian law.

Iraq

Iraq is often described as the heartland of human civilization. It is home to six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including Babylon, one of the most famous ancient cities in the world; Samarra, which served as the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate from 836 to 892 and contains the iconic Great Mosque with its spiral minaret; Ashur, the ancient capital of the Assyrian Empire on the banks of the Tigris River; Hatra, an ancient Parthian city of exceptional architectural value; Erbil Citadel, one of the oldest continuously inhabited urban centers in the world; and the Ahwar of Southern Iraq, the Mesopotamian Marshlands that sheltered the earliest agricultural civilizations and whose communities are considered descendants of the ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, and Akkadian peoples. Iraq holds more than 15,000 registered cultural and heritage sites. Three of its World Heritage Sites — Ashur, Hatra, and Samarra — appear on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger.

Between 2014 and 2017, armed groups occupied and controlled large areas of northern Iraq, including the city of Mosul. UNESCO estimates that 80 percent of Mosul's historic town was destroyed during this period. In Mosul alone, 41 major heritage sites within the city were demolished or severely damaged, alongside 114 further sites on the Nineveh Plain. The ancient city of Nimrud was razed using explosives and heavy machinery. The Mosul Museum, one of Iraq's most important repositories of antiquities, was ransacked and its collections destroyed on camera. Thousands of archaeological sites across Iraq were illegally excavated during this period, with artifacts trafficked across borders and sold in international markets, as documented by UNODC.

In response, UNESCO launched the Revive the Spirit of Mosul program in 2018, one of the most ambitious heritage reconstruction campaigns in modern history. Since 2019, multilateral institutions including UNESCO, UNDP, the European Union, and the World Monuments

FFund have raised nearly 150 million US dollars toward the restoration of museums, libraries, churches, mosques, archaeological sites, and heritage houses. The program restored three major landmarks: the Al-Nouri Mosque complex, the Al-Saa'a Convent, and the Al-Tahera Church, all of which were inaugurated by Iraq's Prime Minister on 1 September 2025. Over 12,000 tons of rubble were removed from the main project sites. 124 heritage houses were restored, providing homes to approximately 170 families. More than 2,800 people were trained in traditional construction techniques, including alabaster carving. The Mosul Cultural Museum is set to reopen in 2026, with restoration supported by ALIPH, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Louvre. The European Union and UNESCO launched a further phase of the Reviving Mosul and Basra Old Cities project in 2023, funded at 9 million euros and running through 2027.

Syria

Syria holds six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, all of which are currently inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. The Ancient City of Damascus, inscribed in 1979, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, with origins dating back to the third millennium BC. It is home to the Umayyad Mosque, one of Islam's oldest and most architecturally significant mosques. The Ancient City of Aleppo, inscribed in 1983, bears the influence of the Hittites, Assyrians, Mongols, Mamelukes, and Ottomans across its citadel, souqs, mosques, and madrasas. The site of Palmyra, often described as the Pearl of the Syrian Desert, was once a major kingdom and trading center whose ruins represent one of the finest examples of Greco-Roman and Semitic architectural fusion in the ancient world. Syria also contains the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, around 40 villages in Aleppo and Idlib that preserve evidence of rural life between the 1st and 7th centuries, and two major medieval fortresses, the Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din.

The armed conflict that began in 2011 caused catastrophic damage to all six of Syria's World Heritage Sites. In Palmyra, some of the ancient world's most extraordinary monuments were blown up one by one: the Temple of Bel, the Temple of Baalshamin, the Arch of Triumph, and the Tower of Elahbel funeral tower were all deliberately destroyed. The site's chief archaeologist was publicly executed for refusing to reveal where artifacts had been hidden.

In Aleppo, the medieval covered souqs, some of the oldest and largest in the world, were gutted by fire and shelling. The 12th century Citadel was damaged, and entire residential quarters of the Old City were leveled. Across Syria, UNESCO identified over 900 archaeological sites at risk by 2015, with satellite imagery confirming systematic illegal excavation taking place while the country burned. The February 2023 earthquake then struck sites already weakened by years of conflict, causing further structural collapse at the Crac des Chevaliers and across Aleppo. By the end of the conflict in December 2024, not a single one of Syria's six World Heritage Sites had been spared.

Restoration efforts in Syria have been led by UNESCO and ALIPH, often under difficult and restricted conditions. Since 2019, ALIPH committed 3 million US dollars to 18 projects across the country, including the rehabilitation of the Raqqa Museum and emergency repair

work at the 7th century Najm Castle after the 2023 earthquake. In Aleppo, four historic souqs reopened in September 2024 following extensive rehabilitation work, with restoration ongoing at three more as part of a broader plan to revive all 37 souqs in the Old City. International funding for Syria's six World Heritage Sites has been provided by Italy, the European Union, Germany, Austria, the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage in Bahrain, and ALIPH. The armed conflict formally ended on 8 December 2024, opening a new chapter for heritage recovery. On 26 January 2025, Syria's new government submitted its first state of conservation reports for all six World Heritage Sites to UNESCO, marking the official start of the post-conflict restoration process.

Mali

Timbuktu, Mali, has been inscribed on the World Heritage list since 1988 due to its outstanding universal value as an African intellectual and spiritual capital in the 15th and 16th centuries. Its three great mosques, Djingareyber, Sankore and Sidi Yahia, recall Timbuktu's golden age. Although continuously restored, these monuments are today under threat from desertification, management issues, especially concerning the involvement of the local communities, and lack of resources for site management and maintenance.

In 2012, several buildings in Timbuktu, including 14 of the 16 mausoleums which form part of the World Heritage site, were destroyed within the context of armed conflict and civil unrest. Attacks also targeted the Al Farouk monument, which was completely destroyed. An estimated 4,203 manuscripts from the Institute of Higher Islamic Studies and Research Ahmed Baba (IHERI-ABT) were burnt or stolen by armed groups. In 2016, the International Criminal Court convicted Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi for directing the attacks that destroyed the monuments.

In the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the monuments, and upon request from the Malian government, UNESCO and France defined an action plan to rehabilitate the city's damaged cultural heritage and ancient manuscripts. A team of local and international UNESCO experts worked in cooperation with community and religious leaders, national and military authorities, as well as the local population responsible for the safekeeping of cultural heritage in Timbuktu. The reconstruction was carried out by the local corporation of traditional masons under the supervision of the Cultural Mission, the management office of the site, the National Directorate for Cultural Heritage, the mausoleums' managers and the Management Committees of the mosques of Djingareyber, Sidi Yahia and Sankoré. Following reconstruction, the next steps will require the consolidation of the achievements by ensuring that necessary means for conservation and maintenance are allocated by national and local authorities, making a judicious use of this experience.

Yemen

Yemen's cultural heritage is as unique as it is universal, and those who value it most (often intuitively) are Yemenis themselves. It is the fingerprint of hundreds of thousands of years of human history and resilience, starting with the first waves of civilizations, to the megalithic

monuments, walled hilltop settlements, and desert necropolises of the Bronze Age (third–second millennium BCE), followed by the golden age of the Sabaean kingdoms (900 BCE–520 CE) which controlled the incense caravan routes, built the Great Marib dam irrigating the desert, developed writing and a legal system, and built pillared stone temples to their gods. It is difficult to rationalize destruction of cultural heritage in any context, and even more so in this land where the past, the present, and the landscape are intricately interrelated

The present war in Yemen has claimed nearly 400,000 lives and displaced millions, yet few acknowledge that the cultural devastation is almost equally catastrophic. Hundreds of heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed, with many of their treasures stolen, sold, or even exhibited in museums abroad. A striking example can be found at the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, where Yemeni artefacts are displayed, reportedly acquired as “gifts”, raising troubling questions about provenance and accountability. Reports indicate that the outbreak of the civil war in 2015 marked the start of the systematic looting of Yemen’s archaeological sites. Chaos spread, and the absence of state security turned the sites into an open playground for looters. Smugglers took advantage of the chaotic situation, and a wealth of inscriptions, statues, pottery, jewellery, and rare manuscripts were looted and sold at skyrocketing prices in international markets.

Despite all these negativities, there are also some initiatives aimed at preserving the heritage. Some local and international initiatives have emerged to try to curb the massive losses; in this context, steps such as digital documentation, restitution of artifacts, and awareness campaigns are being taken. Although these efforts remain limited, they reveal that the protection of Yemen's cultural heritage is a shared responsibility at both the national and international levels.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is uniquely situated as a thoroughway of cultures throughout its history due to its geographic placement in South Asia. Afghanistan's location lends porous borders to trade routes between the East and West, while the Silk Road providing a vector for Buddhism and Hellenistic culture and even Egyptian influences from the west, renders an amalgamation of culture and art.

The destruction of Afghanistan’s cultural heritage has been driven by a combination of ideological, military, and economic factors. Decades of armed conflict have caused widespread and often indiscriminate damage. Since the Soviet invasion, many archaeological sites have been exposed to bombardment, military occupation, and environmental degradation. Military use of heritage sites has further accelerated their deterioration, while landmines and unexploded ordnance continue to endanger both sites and conservation efforts. The weakening of state institutions enabled organized networks to exploit archaeological sites, extracting artifacts for sale on the international black market. The National Museum of Afghanistan suffered extensive losses, with thousands of objects destroyed or stolen. These processes demonstrate how cultural heritage in conflict zones can become both a casualty of war and a commodity within illegal economies.

Efforts to restore and preserve Afghanistan's cultural heritage have largely been coordinated through international cooperation, particularly under the leadership of UNESCO. Restoration efforts have also extended to movable heritage. Specialists have worked to reassemble fragmented artifacts and rehabilitate damaged collections, particularly those from the National Museum. These projects not only restore physical objects but also contribute to the reconstruction of cultural identity and historical continuity. Despite these advances, ongoing challenges, including political instability, limited resources, and security concerns continue to hinder long-term preservation efforts.

9. Guiding Questions

1. How can ICESCO member states reconcile immediate post-conflict reconstruction needs with long-term cultural heritage preservation objectives in fragile and conflict-affected settings?
2. What policy frameworks are required to support the integration of AI-assisted reconstruction techniques with 3D modeling in restoring partially destroyed or damaged cultural heritage sites while ensuring historical authenticity?
3. What steps can be taken to ensure that collective memory is preserved and passed on to future generations?
4. How can ICESCO member states strengthen domestic enforcement mechanisms to ensure the effective implementation of international cultural heritage protection conventions?
5. How can international cooperation frameworks ensure safe corridors or protected access zones for heritage professionals and conservation teams operating in conflict regions?
6. What coordinated strategies and national legal frameworks can be developed to more effectively criminalize and prosecute the illicit trafficking of cultural property?

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11. Further Reading

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