



# **Preserving Cultural Heritage Sites in Conflict Zones**

*United Nations UNESCO*

## **I. Introduction**

Cultural heritage sites are more than historical landmarks—they are the embodiment of humanity’s shared legacy, reflecting the values, beliefs, and achievements of civilizations across time. These sites, whether ancient ruins, places of worship, libraries, or monuments, are essential for maintaining national identity, fostering intercultural understanding, and promoting peace and reconciliation. Yet, in times of armed conflict, these irreplaceable symbols are often among the first casualties.

The deliberate destruction or collateral damage to cultural heritage in conflict zones is a growing concern for the international community. Armed groups may target heritage sites for strategic, ideological, or political reasons, seeing them as tools to demoralize local populations, rewrite history, or erase cultural identities. In many cases, the looting and trafficking of artifacts also fund ongoing conflicts, turning cultural heritage into a resource to exploit.

From the ancient city of Aleppo to the shrines of Timbuktu and the monuments in Ukraine, the international community has witnessed the devastating loss of cultural treasures. These acts are not only crimes against individual nations but affronts to global heritage. In response, UNESCO has mobilized legal frameworks, emergency response mechanisms, and international cooperation to protect heritage in danger. However, challenges persist, including limited enforcement capabilities, lack of access to conflict zones, and insufficient international coordination.

The urgency of this issue calls for comprehensive strategies that go beyond cultural preservation to include peacebuilding, legal reform, and technological innovation. As future diplomats, delegates must consider how to



strengthen international norms, support countries in crisis, and ensure that cultural heritage remains a bridge—not a casualty—during conflict.

## II. Historical Context

Attacks on cultural heritage are not new, but their scale and frequency have intensified in modern conflicts. **World War II** prompted the first major global efforts to protect cultural heritage, leading to the adoption of the 1954 Hague Convention. The destruction of cities like Dresden and Warsaw brought attention to the vulnerability of historic monuments and libraries during aerial bombardments. **The Balkan Wars** in the 1990s saw the deliberate destruction of religious and cultural sites, including the iconic Stari Most bridge in Mostar, Bosnia. The targeting of mosques and churches was used as a form of cultural and ethnic cleansing, signaling the role of heritage in deepening divisions. In **Iraq (post-2003)** and **Syria (post-2011)**, groups like ISIS engaged in systematic looting and demolition of sites such as Nimrud, Nineveh, and Palmyra. Notably, ISIS used videos of destruction as propaganda, making cultural erasure a weapon of ideological warfare. In **Mali (2012)**, Al-Qaeda affiliates attacked historic Sufi shrines and the Timbuktu manuscripts. These acts culminated in a landmark ICC trial—the first to recognize the destruction of cultural heritage as a war crime. **Ukraine (2022–present)** has seen extensive damage to churches, museums, and historical buildings due to military strikes, raising concerns over compliance with international law and the need for real-time monitoring.

## III. International Response

The protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones has long been a focus of international law and diplomacy. The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, along with its two protocols, was the first major multilateral treaty devoted to safeguarding cultural property during war. Later, UNESCO conventions, including the 1970 Convention on the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property and the 1972 World

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Heritage Convention, expanded the international legal framework. While these agreements set important standards, they are often hampered by limited enforcement and inconsistent state compliance.

In practice, UNESCO has developed emergency response units that work with local governments and international partners to assess damage, provide training, and deploy technical assistance. Satellite imagery and digital documentation, such as the work of the “Unite4Heritage” campaign, have become crucial tools for monitoring destruction in real time. The International Criminal Court’s ruling in the Timbuktu case set an important precedent by treating the destruction of cultural heritage as a war crime, reinforcing accountability under international law.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain significant. Political obstacles, restricted access to conflict zones, and the black-market demand for looted artifacts limit the effectiveness of international interventions. Many operations depend on cooperation with host governments or local actors, which is not always forthcoming. Moreover, funding for cultural heritage protection is often overshadowed by other humanitarian priorities, leaving response mechanisms under-resourced and reactive rather than preventive.

## **IV. Committee Mission**

The UNESCO committee must examine how to reinforce international cooperation, legal frameworks, and preventive measures to ensure the preservation of cultural heritage in times of war. Delegates are tasked with addressing both the immediate protection of sites under threat and the long-term resilience of cultural property once conflicts subside. This involves considering how to better enforce existing international conventions, how to expand monitoring and documentation mechanisms, and how to strengthen accountability for those who destroy or traffic cultural heritage.

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At the same time, the mission extends beyond preservation to questions of peacebuilding and reconciliation. Cultural heritage is not only a target during conflict but also a resource for rebuilding trust and social cohesion afterward. Delegates should reflect on how restored heritage sites can contribute to healing divided communities, how education can be used to promote respect for cultural diversity, and how international support can be mobilized without infringing on national sovereignty. By advancing policies that combine legal, technological, and diplomatic tools, the committee has the opportunity to reinforce the principle that cultural heritage is the common legacy of humanity and must be protected as such.

## V. Questions to Consider

- How can compliance with the 1954 Hague Convention and other international frameworks be improved in ongoing conflicts?
- What role should technology, such as satellite monitoring and digital archiving, play in protecting cultural heritage at risk?
- In what ways can international law ensure accountability for groups and individuals who deliberately destroy or traffic cultural property?
- How should the international community balance respect for state sovereignty with the urgent need to intervene in heritage protection during war?
- How can cultural heritage protection be integrated into peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction strategies?

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