Research Report

Leiden Model United Nations 2015
~ fresh ideas, new solutions ~

Forum: *General Assembly Third Committee*
Issue: *Preservation of cultural heritage in the Middle East*

Position: *President of the General Assembly*

Introduction

As Richard Kurin, a renowned American cultural anthropologist, proclaimed,

> "Heritage is not only about the past. Heritage is either forgotten and obscured, or articulated and valued in the present. It symbolizes how people think of themselves and others, including their predecessors and neighbours today. In that sense, cultural heritage teaches us about tolerance and respect for a diverse humanity. Saving heritage saves us from the foibles of arrogance, intolerance, prejudice toward and persecution of our fellow human beings. It reminds us of our better nature and like the standing bodhisattva, helps us all live in a more humane world."

The reminders of civilizations in the past embody knowledge. They are an important source of information about different times, and its cultures, economy, social interactions, craftsmanship, and religious ideals. Cultural heritage can inspire development and prosperity of entire societies, and can prove to be essential in healing a nation torn apart by war, through reminding people of their shared history and beliefs.

The Middle East, and certain regions of Northern Africa, has an extraordinary cultural heritage thanks to the unique combination of the religious and secular histories of the region. Powerful empires, such as the Ottoman and Umayyad Caliphates, further added to the rich history of the region, which is now under the scrutiny of a significant period of political instability. Militant groups such as the Islamic State are destroying elements of the cultural heritage of these countries, as they are blowing up buildings, temples, and relics of previous civilizations.

Another issue is that militants that make use of the chaos that dominates the areas of conflict are robbing museums frequently. They do this for the purpose of making money, as they sell the works of art on the black market. Furthermore, there are very few experts left in the region that can effectively take care of the cultural properties that belong to the countries in the Middle East. Many have fled, and some have been killed by the militant groups. This means that knowledge is lost in these areas, which further complicates the situation of preserving cultural heritage in the Middle East.

Definition of Key Terms

Cultural Heritage
"The legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations."

Islamic State
"A Wahhabi/Salafi jihadist extremist militant group and self-proclaimed Islamic state and caliphate, which is led by and mainly composed of Sunni Arabs from Iraq and Syria."

UNESCO World Heritage Site
"A place (such as a building, city, complex, desert, forest, island, lake, monument, or mountain) that is listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as being of special cultural or physical significance."

General Overview

Political instability has dominated the Middle Eastern region throughout the course of history. The resulting conflicts have more recently in history sparked concerns about the heavy toll that is taken by the cultural heritage of these regions. Historians, archaeologists and anthropologists have begun to call upon countries and international organisations to preserve such cultural heritage, reminding the world of its significance to knowledge and society. Most recently, numerous videos have been posted online that show members of the Islamic State destroying the contents of important historic museums, and wiping out entire archaeological sites. The era of the Internet has resulted in an increased awareness of what some deem cultural atrocities committed in the Middle East. Though IS is a large contributor to the issue, many more militant groups like the Al-Nusra Front and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, are to be held responsible for the destruction of artefacts, and should not be forgotten. The remainder of the general overview will focus on the issue in the context of Iraq & Syria, Yemen and Egypt, elaborating on the problems faced by the international community.

Iraq & Syria

The media has rightly focused on the humanitarian affairs that are playing out in the regions of Iraq and Syria. Millions of people have been displaced, and the conflict has claimed a large number of lives. Cultural violence has also increased. According to reports, all six UNESCO world heritage sites in Syria have been damaged, adding to the reports of museum collections in Hama and Homs being looted, and ancient tells being destroyed by shelling. Cities with important architecture are being obliterated by the externalities of war, and smaller religious minorities are discriminated against, often leading up to execution, threatening the continuation of their cultural practises. The Islamic State is largely but not universally responsible for the damage done to cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria. The organisation frequently destroys heritage, as it does not comply within their own beliefs, and their objective of establishing a large

caliphate. It also participates in illegal trade of these artefacts, which is a source of income for the group.

Yemen
Current violence between the Houthi rebels and forces loyal to the President, Hadi, has been of recent concern to UNESCO. The conflict has done serious damage to Sana, an old city that has been inhabited for 2,500 years, and is one of the four UNESCO world heritage sites in Yemen. Its unique architecture has been damaged, and the city is under a significant threat of more permanent damage. Shibam, another world heritage site has not yet sustained any damage, but many local tourism experts believe that it will not be long before the conflict will also take its toll on what is deemed to be the "Manhattan of the Dessert". At the most recent annual UNESCO committee conference in German, these concerns were affirmed, and promises were made to support Yemen to protect its cultural heritage, though experts are sceptical that it will make a significant difference.

Egypt
In Egypt, which is currently experiencing a period of relative political stability, cultural heritage is still being threatened. There have been car bomb attacks on museums in Cairo for example, that have done damage to artefact's part of the collection. Apart from the damage done to museum collections, there is another worrying development. With the recent frequent change of government, the government later in power has erased certain expressions of art from previous revolutions. For example, many graffiti works have been painted over by the current government, also essentially erasing a part of the history of Cairo, and its cultural heritage. In Egypt, where the tourism industry has been established, certain monuments are starting to dissolve due to the many visitors and the gradual damage being done by them. Though a different kind of threat, this remains significant.

Major Parties Involved

Apart from the countries mentioned in the general overview, there are certain non-member state parties also involved in this issue.

UNESCO
A specialised agency of the UN that aims to promote peace and security through promotion of international collaboration on the areas of education, science and culture. Its world heritage site programme recognizes places of significance to culture and heritage, thereby giving it a status that helps raise awareness about its importance. This draws funding in order to protect and sustain this place.

Tourism Industry
It is important to the tourism industry that cities and places of cultural importance remain undamaged, as it is an important source of revenue. Furthermore, people involved in the heritage of culture, such as directors of museums, that are not primarily concerned with revenue, play an important role in raising awareness and involving

civilians and governments to tackle the issue at hand.

Academics
Like the tourism sector, academics are essential in raising awareness for this pressing issue, and ensuring that the international community overcomes this issue. It can further take matters into their own hands, for example organising conferences and lobbying their standpoints.

Timeline of Events

16 November 1945	UNESCO is established as an agency of the UN.
16 November 1972	Convention concerning the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage is signed.
December 1979 to February 1989	Soviet-Afghan War, leading to decades of military and political instability in the Middle East.
August 1990 to February 1991	Persian Gulf War further increases American intervention in the Middle Easts, which is to lead to cultural heritage being destroyed.
March 2003 to December 2011	Iraq War, devastating regions in Iraq and parts of its heritage, also laying groundwork for the rise of IS.
May 2014 - Present	IS publishes videos online of cultural atrocities being committed.

Previous Attempts to solve the issue

Most recently, on February 12, 2015, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2199, which among other things banned the trade of antiquities removed from the country since the 15th of March 2011. This is to stop the looting of historical sites and museums, and to prevent incentives to do this for the eventual sale. The UN Security Council has further held numerous meetings, and heard multiple speakers from other UN member states and international organisations, on the issue. The Council recognizes the urgency of protecting religious minorities, and the cultural heritage of the region. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has promised to propose a plan of action in September, which will thus be published after the writing of this research report.

The involvement of UNESCO cannot be forgotten, as they have recognized numerous sites as world heritage sites, and provided funding and assistance in order to protect and conserve the heritage sites. Other NGO's have also gotten involved and raised awareness for the issue, and raising funds that can be used to protect the cultural heritage of the region.

Possible Solutions

As long as political instability dominates the region, it will prove difficult for the international community to effectively protect the entire cultural heritage of the Middle East. In the long run, it will thus require a solution to the conflicts in the Middle East. However, there are certain things to be considered in the short term. Firstly, any military intervention in the region by the Western forces such as the USA or UK, need to consider the cultural heritage of the region. The Western interventionist forces have also resulted in significant degradation of certain sites of cultural heritage, and it is important that these forces pay utmost respect to it. However, the military perspective is also not to be forgotten, and equilibrium should be found balancing strategic importance and the protection of culture.

Also to be considered is putting pressure on the local governments to stimulate a more responsible response to the threat to its cultural heritage. This can be done through funding for restoration and protection issues, as well as reminding it of its duty. Furthermore any trade of stolen goods in the region should be restricted, similar to resolution 2199.

Bibliography

Al Azm, Amr. "The Pillaging of Syria's Cultural Heritage." The Pillaging of Syria's Cultural Heritage. Middle East Institute, 22 May 2015. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <http://www.mei.edu/content/at/pillaging-syrias-cultural-heritage>.

Almutawa, Shatha. "Creating and Preserving Cultural Heritage in the Arab World." Creating and Preserving Cultural Heritage in the Arab World. N.p., Apr. 2014. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2014/creating-and-preserving-cultural-heritage-in-the-arab-world>.

"Enhancing the Preservation of Documentary Heritage in the Middle East and North Africa | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization." Enhancing the Preservation of Documentary Heritage in the Middle East and North Africa | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO, 22 May 2015. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <http://

www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/news-and-in-focus-articles/all-news/news/enhancing_the_preservation_of_documentary_heritage_in_middle_east_and_north_africa/#.Vb_I7Hhurwx>.

"Global Policy Forum." Destruction of Cultural Heritage. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <https://www.globalpolicy.org/humanitarian-issues-in-iraq/consequences-of-the-war-and-occupation-of-iraq/destruction-of-iraqs-cultural-heritage.html>.

Ihsan Adil Tarzi, Nazil. "How to save Iraq's Vanishing Heritage." Your Middle East. N.p., 24 Apr. 2015. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/how-to-save-iraqs-vanishing-heritage_31633>.

Kurin, Richard. "Why We Have a Civic Responsibility to Protect Cultural Treasures During Wartime." Smithsonian. N.p., 10 Apr. 2015. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/why-we-have-civic-responsibility-protect-cultural-treasures-during-wartime-180954887/?no-ist>.

Porter, Lizzie. "Destruction of Middle East's Heritage Is 'cultural Genocide'" The Telegraph. Telegraph Media Group, 23 July 2015. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/middleeast/11756540/Destruction-of-Middle-Easts-heritage-is-cultural-genocide.html>.

Rose-Greenland, Fiona. "Cultural Heritage and Violence in the Middle East." OpenDemocracy. N.p., 4 Oct. 2014. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/fiona-rosegreenland-fatma-m%C3%BCge-g%C3%B6%C3%A7ek/cultural-heritage-and-violence-in-middle-east>.

"Security Council Urged to 'Stop the Madness' as Terrorists Trample Cultural, Religious Diversity of Middle East | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." UN News Center. UN, 27 Mar. 2015. Web. 03 Aug. 2015. <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11840.doc.htm>.