Forum: General Assembly 3

Topic: On measures to preserve cultural relics in war impacted regions

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Introduction

Around the World, conflicts are prevalent, and, as a result, millions of lives, objects, and buildings are destroyed in such regions. In war-torn areas, such cultural relics are at risk, where competing groups assume possession of artifacts to sell for monetary gain while sacrificing a region's integral heritage. Artifact trafficking is nothing new, of course. Napoleon, the once infamous ruler of most of western Europe, pilfered nearly 700 artifacts and paintings from Italy, which is still a significant source of contention. In war-torn regions, such privilege to communicate with the pillagers is nil. That is, there is no established framework or panacea to reasonably recover trafficked relics. Thus, as the international community shifts its attention towards maintaining and preserving its cultural heritage and traditions, more efforts have been allocated towards this issue. Holistically, it is ultimately crucial for countries or nations to retain their cultural relics, for humanity stands to lose its cultural diversity and collective heritage.

Key Terms

Archaeological Excavation Sites- An area where archaeologists unearth and restore buried cultural relics.

Cultural Genocide – The action of deliberately trying to wipe out culture or the cultural heritage of a specific region through destruction of its symbols, essential sites and suppressing the inhabitants' ability to practice their cultural norms.

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) – A form of tourism aimed at benefiting disadvantaged groups through providing social, economic, or cultural opportunities.

Tangible Cultural Heritage – Physical components of culture, such as historical buildings, monuments, art, clothing, and other relics.

World Heritage Site – Sites designated by UNESCO for having cultural, historical, scientific, or another form of significance.

Militants, Terrorists, and Extremists – Organizations of militarized radicals, traditionally fueled by extremist religious or political beliefs, are prone to violent actions to carry out their extremist ideals.

General Overview

Deliberate Destruction

The intentional destruction of cultural relics could occur for a plethora of reasons. In active conflict zones in the World, extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), ISIL (Da'esh), and Al-Qaeda destroy relics with symbols or any relevant connection not per their religion. Recent destruction that has sparked a wildfire on social media was the destruction of Palmyra, a Tetrapylon, by ISIS. The militants surrounded the site with dynamite and live streamed the resulting explosion on multiple social media platforms to promote the radicalized ideals and gain international publicity. Hence, it served a dual purpose; not only did it remove religious symbols that ISIS considered to be heretical, but it also bolstered their recruitment prospects by increasing their social media clout. Similarly, other significant cases include the destruction of Timbuktu's ancient sites by Malian jihadists and the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban. Likewise, those two acts were also done for publicity, conveniently coupled with removing religious relics they deemed heretical- all three of these acts were carried out by Islamic terrorist cells to destroy religiously significant vestiges that they considered idolatrous. By eliminating other religions' symbols and constructs, the extremists sought to display absolute control and authority, dedication to their radical religious beliefs, and support radicalizing locals. An additional, and perhaps, more impelling reason for intentional destruction is to erase the cultural heritage to subdue its people forcibly. The destruction of cultural relics ostracizes and persecutes minority groups in regions encountering armed conflicts, especially those of an ethnic or religious minority. As former president Francois Hollande put it, the deliberate and systematic destruction of cultural objects is to "break what was there before in order to kill hope afterwards, to eradicate human and cultural diversity," or to act as a form of cultural genocide. By destroying the Bamiyan Buddhas in Timbuktu, the Malian jihadists successfully removed the most visible and culturally significant relic, prompting an exodus of Afghanistan's minority Buddhist

populations fearing religious persecution from the Taliban. In conclusion, intentional destruction could be attributed to religious or socio-political reasons.

Economics of looting

The looting and illegal trade of cultural relics in active conflict zones are highly systematic and often used to fund extremist and terrorist groups that intentionally destroy other cultural relics—an estimated $150 million raised by terrorist groups via illegal looting and its related sales. ISIS uses profits from selling off artifacts stolen from museums and archaeological dig sites to build its military presence in the region. More prominent relics quickly fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars on the black market. In extreme cases, some relics go up to a million dollars. The goods are first acquired from the numerous excavation sites, museums, and warehouses housing historical relics by scavengers in regions that ISIS exercise their dominion on. Upon procurement, an inspector from ISIS scours through the relics, destroying relics they consider to be heretical (any relics containing human-looking figures, which are considered sinful and idolatrous in the Islam) in thousands of pieces and demanding a certain amount of payment for the sales of the remaining relics. Should the relics travel along frequented routes, they are expected to pass through several transit points in Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt, before being sold to the final buyers. The latter pay large sums for the relics. Most of these buyers are in wealthier regions, especially Western Europe and Gulf countries like the United Arab Emirates or Kuwait. The middlemen who participate in the lucrative trade are usually not associated with militant or terrorist groups but were drawn into the work by the sheer profitability. The buyers may or may not fully understand the weight of their purchases; that is, their purchase fuels the growth of terrorism in the Middle East. Despite a Security Council resolution having recently passed in 2015, which bars all relics from active warzones to be transacted, the underground trade of looted relics persists. In conclusion, destruction and looting can rob a region clean of cultural relics, destroying everything above ground and destroying its rich cultural heritage.

Timeline of Events

1874   Signed by 15 European Nations, the Brussels Declaration was the first instance of recognition of the need to protect cultural relics during the war.

1899   The ratification of the convention concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land during the Hague Convention of 1899 reaffirmed the contents of the Brussels Declaration.

1954   The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was adopted.

Egypt decides to build the Aswan Dam.

1960   The Nubia project begins

1965   International Council on Monuments and Sites was established

1972   The 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage led to creation of the World Heritage List.

1980   The Nubia project concludes.

2007   Former Yugoslav navy officer Miodrag Jokić was tried and found guilty of the Intentional destruction of cultural heritage for his bombardment of the historical old town of Dubrovnik with mortars. Jokić's sentence was the first-ever conviction for the destruction of cultural heritage.

2015   Over 50 nations adopted UN Security Council Resolution 2199.

2016   The International Criminal Court (ICC) sentenced Malian Islamic jihadist Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi to nine years in prison for destroying ten religious sites in the historic city of Timbuktu, the first instance of the destruction of cultural heritage becoming a war crime.

2017   UN Security Council Resolution 2347 was passed, condemning the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, including religious sites and artifacts, and the looting and smuggling of cultural property from archaeological sites, museums, libraries, archives, and other locations, notably by terrorist groups.

2017   The International Alliance for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Zones of Conflict (ALIPH) was founded to protect cultural heritage at risk

2017   Six countries signed a Council of Europe convention outlawing the "blood antiquities" trade,

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

The first notable mention of protecting cultural heritage during armed conflicts stems from the Brussels Declaration of 1874, which signed by 15 European states, declared that all "willful damage" towards historical monuments and places of art and science be deemed unlawful and a

criminal offense. This marked the beginning of the ongoing endeavor to create global standards and systems to mitigate the loss of cultural heritage at wartime. Despite the efforts, the declaration was never ratified. Soon after, under the formal solicitation of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, the Hague Convention of 1899 was held to formalize the contents of the declaration. The product of this convention, the convention concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, became the first recognized multinational standard, though Ad-hoc, on the legal basis of the destruction of cultural objects in wartime, stating in Article 27 that "all necessary steps must be taken" to spare historical monuments and places of art and religion at wartime. Even though the two documents gave fundamental protection towards cultural relics, much destruction and looting occurred during the first World War. Down the line, progress on the issue was effectively halted as several nations were drawn into the two global conflicts. With the establishment of the United Nations towards the end of World War II, the international community was given a platform to heighten international cooperation in protecting and maintaining cultural heritage. Within a decade, in 1954, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict took the first steps towards international recognition of the rudimentary ideas formally established in the Hague Convention of 1899. The destruction of any cultural heritage was deemed to be an attack on the cultural heritage of humanity. It provided refugee status for those seeking to protect "moveable cultural property." In the same year, Egypt began planning the construction of the Aswan Dam, which would inextricably flood much of the upper Nile, resulting in numerous sites from the 3,000 years old kingdom of Nubia to be submerged. With requests from Egypt and Sudan, the United Nations formulated the Nubia project, an extensive program spanning two decades, successfully preserving thousands of Nubian relics and temples. With the unparalleled success of this sizable relocation program, the 1972 Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage culminated with more protective measures and, ultimately, the culmination of the World Heritage List. Half a century later, after discovering that extremist groups including ISIS used the profits from sales of looted relics to expand and fund military operations, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2199 in response. It aimed at attacking the black-market trade of cultural relics stolen from Iraq and Syria, creating the first practical framework towards ending the looting and illegal sales of cultural relics. The most recent primary resolution towards the issue, UN Security Council Resolution 2347, set up an independent fund to support cultural heritage preservation and a global system of safe havens for endangered cultural relics.

This resolution is the most systematic and comprehensive support network for international cultural heritage preservation efforts to date.

Possible Solutions

Solutions towards protecting cultural relics in war-torn regions should take multi-faceted approaches. With the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199, the United Nations received international acclaim and agreement to preserve cultural heritage via relics. With an idea of international and global participation in mind, pragmatic solutions should explore ideas such as expanding the scope of the present initiatives of the United Nations by incorporating more countries, and respective efforts, into the issue. The primary aspect that should be addressed is the further development of preventive measures against destruction and looting, such as task forces dedicated to relocating relics in active warzones or providing alternative yet economically viable resources to non-UN groups moving cultural property to safety on their initiative. Following the idea of a multi-faceted, yet pragmatic, approach, other areas which garner attention include means to mitigate the damage to and from the looting of cultural relics, such as global cooperation, especially among Middle Eastern nations to regulate the international black market for stolen cultural relics and calling for the reduced viability of bombardment tactics near cultural relics. More interestingly, however, is that providing humanitarian aid to such war-torn regions is not mutually exclusive with maintaining such relics. Quoting Mullah Omar, the de-facto leader of the Taliban, "I did not want to destroy the Bamiyan Buddha. Some foreigners came to me and said they would like to conduct the repair work of the Bamiyan Buddha that had been slightly damaged ... I thought these callous people have no regard for thousands of living human beings—the Afghans who are dying of hunger, but they are so concerned about non-living objects like the Buddha... That is why I ordered its destruction." In response to this situation, the delegates of Japan in UNESCO proposed various solutions to the issue, including moving the statues to Japan, covering the figures from view, and the payment of money. Though this attempt was eventually futile, such creative strategies are necessary if such critical relics are to be protected. The final part of this approach would be to harshen the punishment for the perpetrators of criminal acts relating to cultural relics and create a system that could effectively hold any such criminals accountable. Potential areas of interest outside of this dynamic approach include raising the standards of repairing destroyed or damaged relics. In collaborating with ETH Zurich, the Afghan government

has committed to rebuilding the destroyed relics, perhaps by anastylosis. However, given the current geopolitical tensions in Afghanistan, most work has stalled, and the state of the site will now linger as a question. To this day, many ratified resolutions have been focused mainly on preventing damage, yet there has been little collective effort from the international community in repairing or protecting damaged but salvageable relics. Furthermore, even in the case of restoring the Bamiyan Buddhas, construction has been halted long before the Afghan insurgency due to the repairs conducted by The International Council of Monuments and Sites being at odds with UNESCO policies. Another way to increase preservation would be to raise the standards of restorations. Another possible method for addressing the black-market trade of relics would be to advance the pro-poor tourism in cultural sites tied to minority groups, which would serve as a form of social awareness and make the trade-in looted relics less socially acceptable.

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