BACKGROUND GUIDE

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Table of Contents

Letter By Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

It is with great enthusiasm that we welcome you to this session of the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** committee. The agenda before us **"*Protecting UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Conflict Areas*"**,is not only timely but profoundly significant. As custodians of our shared cultural and historical legacy, you are entrusted with the responsibility to debate, deliberate, and devise solutions that transcend borders and ideologies.

We urge each of you to engage in comprehensive and critical research, delving into legal frameworks, technological innovations, case studies, and humanitarian implications. Understanding your country's stance and the global consequences of inaction will be key to formulating meaningful interventions.

Approach this committee not merely as a simulation, but as a space to develop empathy, diplomacy, and leadership. The destruction of heritage in war zones is more than a loss of monuments it is a silencing of voices and erasure of identities.

We look forward to witnessing your passion, intellect, and diplomacy shape the dialogue. Let this be more than a conference let it be a commitment to preserving humanity's past for the sake of its future.

Warm regards,
The Executive Board
UNESCO Committee

Committee Overview

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations, established on 16 November 1945, in the aftermath of World War II. Its founding vision was to foster peace and security by promoting international collaboration in the fields of education, science, culture, and communication. The organization operates on the belief that political and economic agreements between states are not enough to ensure lasting peace; instead, peace must be founded upon the "intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind."

UNESCO is composed of 193 member states and 11 associate members. Its mission encompasses a wide array of goals including:

- Promoting access to quality education for all.
- Supporting scientific research and ethical frameworks for technological advancements.
- Encouraging cultural diversity and artistic expression.
- Protecting cultural heritage and fostering intercultural dialogue.
- Defending press freedom and access to information.

One of UNESCO's most influential cultural mandates is established under the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, commonly referred to as the World Heritage Convention. This landmark treaty introduced the concept of World Heritage Sites—locations identified as having "outstanding universal value" due to their cultural, historical, scientific, or environmental significance. These sites are inscribed onto the World Heritage List, which currently includes over 1,100 properties across more than 165 countries.

To manage this mandate, UNESCO established the World Heritage Centre in 1992. This body serves as the Secretariat for the World Heritage Committee and is responsible for:

- Coordinating the nomination and evaluation process for new World Heritage Sites.
- Monitoring the state of conservation of existing sites.
- Facilitating international assistance for conservation projects.

- Mobilizing global awareness and stakeholder participation in heritage preservation.

UNESCO's protective efforts are not limited to peacetime operations. In fact, the organization recognizes that armed conflict and political instability pose some of the gravest threats to heritage sites. In conflict zones, cultural landmarks often become:

- Unintended collateral damage due to aerial bombings or artillery fire.
- Deliberate targets, especially in cases of cultural cleansing or ideological warfare (e.g., destruction by extremist groups).
- Militarized spaces, where heritage sites are repurposed for strategic advantage, violating international norms.

For instance, during the Syrian civil war and the ISIS occupation of parts of Iraq and Syria, numerous UNESCO sites like Palmyra and Mosul's Al-Nuri Mosque were either heavily damaged or destroyed. Similarly, in Timbuktu, Mali, extremist groups razed ancient shrines in an effort to erase cultural identity and religious heritage.

In response to such threats, UNESCO's mandate extends to:

- Issuing emergency appeals for the protection of cultural property.
- Deploying experts and field missions to assess damage and coordinate response.
- Cooperating with international legal institutions, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), to hold perpetrators accountable under charges of cultural destruction.

Despite these mechanisms, UNESCO's powers are primarily advisory and non-coercive. The organization lacks enforcement authority and depends heavily on member states for compliance, cooperation, and funding. This limitation becomes especially critical during wartime, where sovereignty concerns, lack of access, and political gridlock can impede heritage protection.

In the context of this committee session, delegates will be representing UNESCO's interests and capacity, while also considering broader collaboration with international bodies like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and regional actors to ensure the protection, restoration, and legal accountability for damage to World Heritage Sites in conflict areas.

Agenda Introduction

The agenda titled "Protecting UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Conflict Areas" addresses one of the most urgent yet often overlooked consequences of war and armed violence: the destruction of cultural heritage. As conflict proliferates across various regions—ranging from civil wars and foreign invasions to insurgencies and religious extremism—UNESCO-designated World Heritage Sites face a mounting risk of damage, desecration, or even total eradication.

These heritage sites are not merely physical structures; they are deeply symbolic repositories of civilizational identity, historical memory, religious significance, and cultural continuity. Their destruction, whether incidental or deliberate, constitutes an attack on the shared heritage of humanity. In many cases, cultural heritage is not collateral damage—but a direct target.

Such acts are often part of strategic campaigns of cultural cleansing, in which opposing forces seek to erase the cultural identity of a people, undermine national pride, or wipe out the historical legacy of rival factions. The consequences are not only tangible in terms of lost architecture or artifacts but also psychological and social, resulting in generational trauma, disrupted community identities, and weakened post-conflict reconciliation efforts.

Notable Examples of Destruction in Recent Conflicts:

1. Palmyra, Syria (2015–2017)
   During the occupation of Palmyra by the Islamic State (ISIS), terrorists systematically destroyed iconic structures such as the Temple of Bel, the Arch of Triumph, and various funerary towers. This UNESCO World Heritage Site, dating back to the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, was considered a fusion of Greco-Roman and Persian architectural traditions. The destruction was part of a broader ISIS campaign to erase pre-Islamic heritage and generate international media attention.

2. Timbuktu, Mali (2012)
   Islamist militants affiliated with Ansar Dine destroyed 14 of the 16 mausoleums in Timbuktu, a city long revered as a center of Islamic learning and culture. Manuscripts, ancient shrines, and Sufi religious sites were demolished in what UNESCO termed a war crime. The International Criminal Court (ICC) later prosecuted a commander,

Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, for his role in these attacks, setting a landmark precedent for the criminalization of cultural destruction.

3. Ukraine (2022–Present)
   The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in extensive damage to cultural infrastructure, including the historic centers of Kyiv, Lviv, and Kharkiv, all rich in Baroque, Renaissance, and Orthodox religious architecture. UNESCO has reported hundreds of damaged cultural properties, including churches, museums, and monuments, many of which are either inscribed or under consideration for World Heritage status. The use of explosive weaponry in civilian areas has raised global concern over the targeting of cultural heritage as a means of eroding national identity.

These examples reveal a disturbing pattern: cultural heritage is becoming a frontline casualty in modern warfare. Despite the existence of legal frameworks such as the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1972 World Heritage Convention, enforcement remains weak, and international responses often come too late.

Moreover, the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones raises complex legal and ethical dilemmas. Delegates will need to engage with the following tensions:

- Sovereignty vs. international responsibility: Should international actors intervene to protect heritage even if the host state objects?
- Peacekeeping vs. preservation: How can cultural sites be safeguarded without compromising military or humanitarian operations?
- Prosecution vs. prevention: Should the focus be on legal accountability after destruction occurs, or on preemptive measures and rapid-response interventions?

This agenda invites delegates to think holistically—balancing international law, humanitarian imperatives, diplomatic relations, and cultural policy—to develop actionable strategies that prevent the erasure of the world's shared legacy. The debate is not only about buildings and artifacts—it is about protecting the soul of civilization in times of its greatest vulnerability.

Historical Background

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage is not a modern phenomenon—it has been a tragic hallmark of human conflict throughout history. From the burning of the Library of Alexandria in ancient times to the looting of art during the World Wars, warfare has long been accompanied by the loss of cultural memory. However, the 20th and 21st centuries have seen an evolution in both the scale of destruction and the international response to it.

A. Early Examples of Cultural Destruction in War

- World War II was a turning point in the awareness of cultural devastation, with historic cities like Warsaw, Dresden, and Hiroshima obliterated, and Nazi plunder of art from across Europe on an unprecedented scale.
- The need for systematic protection of cultural heritage in times of war became a recognized global concern only after the war's end, when the world confronted the massive loss of irreplaceable cultural treasures.

B. 1954 Hague Convention

In response, the international community adopted the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict in 1954—the first international treaty aimed specifically at protecting cultural property during conflict. Key features include:

- A definition of "cultural property" covering monuments, works of art, books, and scientific collections.
- Obligations for state parties to safeguard and respect such property during both international and non-international conflicts.
- Provisions for marking important sites with a Blue Shield emblem.

However, enforcement has historically been weak, and not all parties to conflicts are signatories.

C. 1972 World Heritage Convention

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972, created the World Heritage List and laid out obligations for

signatory countries to protect and conserve sites of "outstanding universal value." While not conflict-specific, this Convention laid the foundation for:

- International cooperation in conservation.
- Technical and financial assistance to countries facing difficulties.
- The establishment of the World Heritage Committee and the World Heritage Fund.

Still, the convention lacks a robust mechanism for rapid response during times of war or disaster.

D. Post-Cold War and Early 21st Century Conflicts

The end of the Cold War and the rise of ethnic and religious extremism, asymmetric warfare, and terrorism saw a sharp increase in attacks targeting cultural heritage:

- Bamiyan Buddhas, Afghanistan (2001): The Taliban destroyed two giant 6th-century statues carved into cliffs, citing religious justification. The act shocked the world and prompted renewed international advocacy for heritage protection.
- Iraq War and Aftermath (2003–Present): The looting of the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad during the U.S.-led invasion and the destruction of archaeological sites in subsequent years revealed gaps in preparedness and legal accountability.
- Timbuktu, Mali (2012): Islamist rebels affiliated with Ansar Dine deliberately destroyed historic Sufi shrines, manuscripts, and mausoleums. The International Criminal Court (ICC) made history in 2016 by prosecuting Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi for war crimes related to cultural destruction—the first such case in international law.
- Syria and Iraq under ISIS (2014–2017): Sites such as Palmyra and Nimrud were razed by ISIS, who used the destruction both as propaganda and a form of ideological warfare. This prompted UNESCO to adopt a more proactive approach, launching emergency response mechanisms and digital preservation projects.

E. Legal Milestones and Developments

- 1999 Second Protocol to the Hague Convention: Strengthened the 1954 Convention by introducing enhanced protection measures and clearer obligations on parties in conflict.

- UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017): The first resolution exclusively addressing the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict. It condemns the destruction of heritage by terrorist groups and urges member states to take preventative measures, including ending illicit trafficking of cultural artifacts.
- Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998): Although not heritage-specific, it allows for the prosecution of intentional destruction of cultural property as a war crime, as demonstrated in the Timbuktu case.

F. Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age

The 21st century also introduced new preservation strategies:

- Digital documentation through 3D scanning and photogrammetry.
- Use of satellite monitoring to assess damage in real-time.
- International awareness campaigns to train local experts and create emergency inventories of movable and immovable heritage.

D. Gaps and Ongoing Challenges

- Lack of political will to prioritize heritage in peace negotiations.
- Insufficient training of military forces on respecting cultural property during operations.
- Limited funding for cultural preservation relative to other post-conflict reconstruction priorities.
- Absence of binding enforcement mechanisms—UNESCO's decisions are non-binding recommendations unless enforced by national or international courts.

Stakeholders and Bloc Positions

The preservation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in conflict areas involves a complex web of stakeholders ,sovereign states, international organizations, non-state actors, NGOs, and local communities, each with distinct motivations, capabilities, and limitations. For MUN delegates, understanding these diverse perspectives is key to crafting realistic and collaborative solutions.

A. Primary Stakeholders

1. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)

- Mandate: Coordination of global efforts to protect heritage; maintenance of the World Heritage List; technical and financial assistance.
- Limitations: Relies on member state cooperation and voluntary funding; cannot deploy enforcement mechanisms or military protection.
- Position: Strong advocate for preventive diplomacy, post-conflict reconstruction, and international cooperation. Calls for the depoliticization of heritage protection.

2. Conflict-Affected States

These are countries where World Heritage Sites are directly threatened due to war, occupation, or internal instability.

- Examples: Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya.
- Concerns:
    - Struggle to protect heritage amid broader humanitarian and military crises.
    - Sometimes lack resources, expertise, or political stability to take action.
    - May be sensitive to foreign intervention, viewing it as a violation of sovereignty.
- Position: Often supportive of international aid for heritage, but may resist external control or oversight.

3. Occupying Powers / Military Coalitions

These include foreign militaries or coalitions operating in conflict zones (e.g., NATO forces in Afghanistan, Russian forces in Ukraine, Saudi-led coalition in Yemen).

- Concerns: Avoiding collateral damage while achieving strategic objectives.
- Position: Often emphasize "unintended damage", and may or may not integrate cultural property protection in their rules of engagement.
- Opportunities: Can be encouraged to cooperate via training and cultural protection protocols (e.g., Blue Shield guidelines).

4. Non-State Armed Groups

Groups such as ISIS, Al-Shabaab, Houthis, or separatist militias.

- Concerns: Often intentionally destroy heritage for propaganda, ideological reasons, or financial gain (through artifact trafficking).
- Position: Frequently outside international legal frameworks, difficult to hold accountable.
- Challenge: No formal mechanisms to engage or sanction them directly through UNESCO or traditional diplomacy.

5. Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples

- Concerns: Loss of heritage is a loss of identity, tradition, and economic potential (e.g., through tourism).
- Position: Strong advocates for protecting and rebuilding cultural sites, but often lack political voice or security in conflict zones.
- Opportunities: Can play a vital role in heritage preservation, documentation, and post-conflict restoration if empowered.

6. International Legal Bodies (e.g., ICC)

- Mandate: Prosecuting war crimes, including destruction of cultural heritage (as in the Al Mahdi case).
- Position: Supportive of expanding legal precedents for cultural war crimes.

- Limitations: Jurisdictional challenges and enforcement issues remain significant obstacles.

7. NGOs and Civil Society

Organizations such as:

- Blue Shield International
- ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites)
- ALIPH (International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas)
- Global Heritage Fund

These groups provide expertise, technical support, and crisis response. Their roles are crucial in situations where state or international bodies cannot act swiftly.

B. General Bloc Positions

1. Western Bloc (EU, USA, Canada, Australia, etc.)

- Position: Strong supporters of UNESCO heritage protection. Advocate for proactive responses to cultural war crimes and funding for reconstruction.
- Actions Taken:
    - Many fund emergency programs.
    - Support prosecution at the ICC.
    - Promote digital preservation technologies and satellite monitoring.
- Divisions:
    - Some Western states are hesitant about infringing on state sovereignty.
    - The U.S. rejoined UNESCO in 2023 after previously withdrawing, which may affect continuity in leadership.

2. Middle Eastern and North African States

- Position: Mixed. While several countries (e.g., Jordan, Egypt) actively support heritage preservation, others (e.g., Syria, Yemen) are themselves conflict zones where implementation is difficult.
- Concerns:
    - Accuse international actors of double standards (e.g., failure to protect Islamic sites or disproportionate focus on Western-style monuments).
    - Support sovereignty-focused solutions and resist external military involvement in cultural protection.

3. Russia, China, and Strategic Sovereignty Advocates

- Position: Emphasize non-intervention, national sovereignty, and often accuse UNESCO of Western bias.
- Russia:
    - Accused of damaging heritage in Ukraine.
    - Opposes sanctions or special UNESCO missions unless coordinated through government consent.
- China:
    - Strongly supports heritage preservation, especially for tangible cultural identity.
    - Opposes any intervention deemed to threaten sovereignty, even for humanitarian heritage reasons.

4. Africa and the Global South

- Position: Generally supportive of UNESCO mechanisms but face capacity challenges.
- Concerns:
    - Unequal distribution of funding and attention (e.g., more focus on Middle East conflicts than on African heritage sites).
    - Want greater representation in UNESCO decision-making and technical aid for emergency planning.

5. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Pacific Nations

- Position: Less affected by conflict but concerned about climate-induced damage and rising tensions (e.g., militarization of Pacific islands).
- Support: Strong advocates for expanding the definition of "threats to heritage" to include environmental and strategic risks, especially in disputed maritime zones.

Challenges and Controversies

The task of safeguarding World Heritage Sites in conflict zones is fraught with legal, political, logistical, and ethical challenges. These obstacles not only hinder effective preservation but also complicate international consensus and response. Delegates must confront these issues head-on when drafting resolutions or debating interventions.

A. Sovereignty vs. International Oversight

- States often resist UNESCO intervention, fearing loss of control or external influence.
- UNESCO cannot act without consent, limiting real-time responses.
- Some nations deny damage reports to maintain national narratives.
  (*Research how international law balances sovereignty and collective heritage protection.)*

B. Deliberate Destruction by Non-State Actors

- Non-state groups (e.g., ISIS) use cultural destruction for propaganda, erasure, and funding.
- They are not bound by international treaties, making prosecution difficult.
  (*Look into legal precedents like the ICC Al Mahdi case and challenges of enforcement.)*

C. Militarization of Heritage Sites

- Using heritage for military purposes removes legal protections.
- These sites can then become targets during conflict.
  (*Explore how international law defines "militarization" and possible accountability mechanisms.)*

D. Lack of Funding and Rapid Response

- UNESCO relies on voluntary donations—unpredictable and politicized.
- No rapid-response heritage teams exist; delays often cost lives and landmarks.
  (*Investigate alternative funding models and emergency deployment options.)*

E. Uneven International Responses

- Some sites receive more attention due to geopolitics, media, or donor priorities.
- Heritage in Global South often neglected.
  (*Analyze how international aid distribution can be made more equitable.)*

---

8. QARMAs (Questions a Resolution Must Answer)

1. Enforcing Protection vs. Sovereignty

(*Can cultural intervention be pre-approved? Any legal models similar to R2P?)*

2. Prosecuting Non-State Destruction

(*Should universal jurisdiction apply?)*

3. UNESCO Rapid Response Teams

(*Who provides security? Should they work with peacekeepers or regionals?)*

4. Role of Regional Organizations

(*Can they act faster than global bodies? Any existing models (e.g., NATO)?)*

5. Militarization Voiding Protection

(*Should there be sanctions? How to assess if militarization occurred fairly?)*

6. Technology in Heritage Protection

(*Can tech like drones, satellites, and 3D scans help monitor or reconstruct?)*

Possible Solution

The following points serve as reference guidelines to highlight key solutions related to protecting World Heritage Sites in conflict zones. Delegates are encouraged to conduct in-depth research beyond these prompts to develop well-informed, innovative, and comprehensive solutions. We expect your active engagement and thorough preparation to enrich the committee's deliberations.

A. Peacekeeping for Heritage Protection

- Could there be a specialized task force that combines cultural experts and security personnel?
- Is there a precedent for deploying such teams under existing UN frameworks?
- What would be the legal and logistical challenges of placing UNESCO staff in volatile zones?

B. Strengthening Legal Frameworks

- Are all member states parties to the 1954 Hague Convention?
- What happens when the ICC lacks jurisdiction or political will?
- Could national courts be empowered to prosecute cultural crimes beyond their borders?

C. Community-Based Protection

- Who is usually first on the scene when heritage is threatened?
- Are there successful local programs or networks that already protect cultural landmarks?
- How might international actors support—but not dominate—community-led efforts?

D. Early Warning Through Technology

- What types of imagery or AI tools can detect damage or encroachment?

- How has satellite surveillance been used in Syria or Ukraine?
- What privacy or sovereignty concerns might arise with constant monitoring?

E. Sanctions and Accountability

- Can the Security Council impose sanctions for heritage destruction?
- Have any individuals been held criminally accountable for cultural war crimes?
- What are the risks of politicization in applying punitive measures?

F. Digital Preservation

- What does “virtual heritage” mean in the modern age?
- Are there examples of 3D models being used to rebuild destroyed sites?
- How can we make these archives secure, accessible, and respectful of cultural ownership?

Conclusion

The protection of UNESCO World Heritage Sites during times of armed conflict is more than a matter of preserving monuments or landscapes—it is about safeguarding the identity, dignity, and collective memory of humanity. These sites represent civilizations, spiritual beliefs, historic triumphs, and the shared stories of our global community. Their destruction—whether collateral or intentional—is a cultural tragedy and a humanitarian crisis.

In modern conflicts, cultural heritage has increasingly become a target of war strategy. The loss of Palmyra's temples in Syria, the mausoleums of Timbuktu in Mali, and the threat to Ukraine's historic cities illustrate how cultural destruction can be weaponized to demoralize, erase, or destabilize communities. Moreover, many of these acts fall into legal gray zones, making accountability difficult to achieve.

At the heart of this agenda lies a difficult but essential balancing act:

- Respecting national sovereignty while ensuring sites of global significance are not abandoned during crises.
- Acting swiftly without overstepping international boundaries or compromising neutrality.
- Mobilizing resources and technology without creating dependency or exclusion.
- Preserving the past while preparing for a resilient future.

Delegates in this committee must think legally and creatively, diplomatically and practically. They must ask:

- How can legal frameworks evolve to address the changing nature of conflict?
- What partnerships can empower local actors to protect heritage more effectively?
- How can technology be used to predict, prevent, and respond to threats?
- How can UNESCO remain nonpartisan while engaging in conflict areas?

Ultimately, the debate is not just about stones and statues—it is about whether the international community can come together to defend what defines us as human beings: our

culture, our history, and our right to remember. A successful resolution will not only protect the past but also lay a foundation for peace and reconciliation in the future.

References

Books, Articles, Reports, and Official Documents Consulted

1. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. UNESCO, 1972.
2. Stone, Peter G. *Cultural Heritage, Ethics and the Military*. Routledge, 2016.
3. Bevan, Robert. *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*. Reaktion Books, 2006.
4. International Criminal Court. *The Prosecutor v. Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi*, ICC-01/12-01/15, 2016.
5. United Nations Security Council Resolutions and Reports on Cultural Heritage Protection in Conflict Zones.
6. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). *Humanitarian Response and Cultural Heritage*.
7. Articles from *The Guardian*, *BBC*, and *Al Jazeera* on Palmyra, Timbuktu, and Ukraine Heritage Damage (2012–2023).
8. United Nations Satellite Centre (UNOSAT) Reports on Heritage Site Monitoring.
9. International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS). *Guidelines for the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflict*.
10. Scholarly articles from *Journal of Cultural Heritage* and *International Journal of Heritage Studies* on technology in heritage preservation.