

**Forum:** 2<sup>ND</sup> Committee (Environmental and Cultural)

**Issue:** The Preservation of Cultural Heritage in the Middle East

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## **Introduction**

The Middle East, as well as some Northern Africa regions, has an enormous number of Cultural Heritage sites as the history of these regions is very long and rich. Significant contribution to the Middle East Heritage was made by the powerful Ottoman and Umayyad Caliphates. At the same time, the Middle East has been politically unstable for quite long period of time, and this is causing historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists calling upon countries and international organizations to preserve cultural heritage, reminding the world of its significance to knowledge and society.

The elements of the cultural heritage of modern Iraq and Syria, and some other countries of the region are destroyed by the military groups, such as the Islamic State. The ISIS has even been posting videos of their members blowing priceless historical sites such as buildings, temples, and museums. The publication of these videos has immediately raised awareness for the issue.

Furthermore, the militants in the occupied regions are also robbing the museums in order to sale artifacts and exhibits on the black market. The number of experts in the region is also decreasing as a result of military conflicts, since some of them are killed and some have left the region for their own safety. All the above mentioned factors make the issue of preserving cultural heritage in the region a very serious and complicated task for the world community.

## **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.

### Middle East

A transcontinental region centered on Western Asia and Egypt.

## 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.

### **Background information**

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.

The Middle East cultural heritage has suffered serious loss within the last 25 years during several military conflicts. In August 1990 to February 1991, when Persian Gulf War took place due to the increase of American Intervention to the Middle East, many cultural sites were destroyed. Furthermore, during the Iraq War cultural heritage of Iraq has been severely damaged. Current political situation in the Islamic states, and especially the constantly growing activity of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, will eventually lead to the loss of many historically important objects.

This is in fact already happening. According to reports of the activist Facebook group *Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger*, all six UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria have been damaged, major museum collections at Homs and Hama have been looted, and dozens of ancient tells have been obliterated by shelling.

### **Major countries and organizations involved**

Apart from the states of the Middle East, UNESCO and tourism industry are interested in solving this urgent problem.

### **Relevant treaties and UN resolutions**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2015 the UN Security Council adopted resolution which among all banned the trade of antiquities removed from the country. UNESCO have recognized numerous cultural objects as world heritage sites, and have provided funding to protect some of them.

### **Previous attempts to solve the issue**

There are still no any widespread actions taken or considered by the UN or Member States. However, there are some more individual initiatives on the preservation of the

Middle East cultural heritage. For instance, *CyArk*, a non-profit organization that has digitally preserved scores of the world's most famous cultural sites, has recently announced a new Project Anqa – digital documentation of dozens of at-risk sites in Syria, Iraq, and the Middle East. *CyArk* uses 3D laser scanning, photogrammetry, and traditional survey techniques to create an online, 3D library of the world's cultural heritage sites before they are lost to natural disasters, destroyed by human aggression, or ravaged by the passage of time. Spurred by the Taliban's destruction of the 1600 year-old Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, *CyArk* was founded in 2003 to ensure that the world's collective heritage is available to future generations, while also making it uniquely accessible today.

### **Possible solutions**

First of all, in order to save all historical sites, the Middle East conflict needs to be solved. Moreover, governments and specialized organizations must unite in order to repair the damage. Last but not least, local governments need to be stimulated to have more responsible reaction to the threat, by raising money and awareness of the current situation.