

EDA WORKING PAPER

Executive Summary

The Soldier and the Curator: The Challenges of Defending Cultural Property in Conflict Areas

Dr Jean-Loup Samaan - Associate professor, UAE National Defense College

Jean-Gabriel Leturcq Advisor, Louvre Expertise, Musée du Louvre

- Over recent years, the wave of terrorist attacks against cultural artefacts in Mali, Iraq, and Syria has put the defence of cultural heritage on the diplomatic agenda. These destructions demonstrated that heritage was not a collateral damage of war but one of its ostentatious targets. As a result, on 24 March 2017, the UN Security Council released its first-ever resolution dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage.
- These developments triggered a momentum on the international stage to launch new policy initiatives. In particular, France and the United Arab Emirates jointly pushed in 2017 for the creation of an International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas – known by the acronym ALIPH.
- If the contemporary policy agenda has shed light on the necessity to prevent cultural destruction, the phenomenon is by no means unprecedented as monuments have been targeted throughout history. The notion of protecting cultural property appeared in the eighteenth century in the fallout of the French Revolution, with political thinkers considering this mission a collective moral duty.
- International norms emerged in the early twentieth century with the second Hague Convention of 1907 on Laws and Customs of War on Land mentioning, for the first time, the importance of protecting cultural property.
- The years following the Second World War brought a new momentum with the creation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1946 and the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, in 1954.
- In the current environment, ALIPH was conceived as a small entity to avoid the traditional problems plaguing international organisations. The fund aims to support programmes that cover the “entire heritage chain”: prevention by training and implementing emergency safeguarding plans; emergency protection during the conflicts; and conservation and rehabilitation of artworks following conflicts.
- Despite this contemporary momentum, major challenges remain such as the issue of governance between all the stakeholders, the cultural clash between curatorial and military communities, the applicability of the legal framework in the current security environment, and finally the operational complexity of defending artefacts in conflict zones.
- At the governance level, UNESCO may play a central coordinating role but its resources remain modest. Numerous non-governmental organisations such as the International Committee of the Blue Shield and Geneva Call are active in the domain but the existence of several parallel initiatives at the level of fundraising bring into question the risk of unnecessary redundancies and financial waste.
- Partnership with armed forces is critical but remains difficult due to profound cultural differences between these two professional worlds. Initiatives to train and raise awareness among the curatorial and military communities have proved to be effective but need to be reinforced.
- At the normative level, international laws to protect heritage are numerous but tend to be designed for scenarios that are not entirely relevant in today's environment. As the contemporary conflicts in Mali, Iraq and Syria evidence, today's biggest threats actually come from non-state actors, terrorist organisations that simply dismiss international norms.
- As a result, to be efficient, the protection of cultural heritage has to be factored in at the three main phases of the stabilisation efforts: before, during, and after the conflict. Establishing a process of governance that facilitates the coordination between armed forces, local authorities and museums, UN agencies, and NGOs should be the first priority. Additionally, training soldiers and local security forces to consider the protection of cultural heritage before, during, and after conflict, should become a norm ensured by national armed forces with the support of stakeholders such as curators.