



The Hague International  
Model United Nations

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**Forum:** General Assembly 6

**Issue:** Enhancing international accountability for destruction of heritage sites in armed conflict (e.g., under the Rome Statute)

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## Introduction

According to UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, cultural heritage is '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'.<sup>1</sup> Cultural identity is often carried through the collective memory of individuals in both an intangible and tangible manner. Blue Shield indicates the importance of cultural heritage sites in many ways, including political use, sustainable development, academic and scholarly use, and cultural and societal use.<sup>2</sup> UNESCO has identified a list of 1248 different properties that are defined as the "World Heritage List".<sup>3</sup> These different properties are then labelled with what type of property they are, whether it be nature- or culture-based, and if they are in danger or not. These sites include Independence Hall in the United States, the Tower of London in the United Kingdom, and the Kremlin and Red Square in Moscow.<sup>3</sup> There are currently around 40 cultural properties that are considered endangered at this very moment, most due to armed conflict and terrorism<sup>4</sup>. These sites include both well-known locations – the walls of Jerusalem, the Historic Centre of Vienna, and the Ancient City of Damascus – and others that remain less visible – the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan, Hatra in Iraq, the Square of Odessa in Ukraine, Timbuktu in Mali, and Hebron Old Town in Palestine.<sup>4</sup> Conflicts in these areas, save for Vienna, have

contributed to the destruction of these vital areas on a mass scale, contributing to the erasure of history, identity, and memory. The international community has frequently attempted to enhance accountability networks to prevent misuse and destruction of cultural property during armed conflict and continuously seeks improved solutions.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property**

A convention, for the purpose of establishing a post-World War II international framework to address the protection of cultural property in armed conflict. It involved developing protective measures and emergency plans for property, cultivating international property respect, and setting sanctions for a breach of protective measures.

### **1999 Hague Convention Second Protocol**

The succeeding convention created a category of 'enhanced protection' for the most valuable artifacts, increasing how responsive of global organisations were through more distinct sanctions, and implementing a 12-seat committee to oversee the use of this protocol.

### **Cultural Cleansing**

This is considered the removal and destruction of important cultural facets of a distinct cultural group. These facets may include the erasure of history and art, language, and collective memory. Cultural cleansing is used as a tool of harmful control

### **Cultural Heritage**

According to UNESCO, cultural heritage is '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'.

### **International Criminal Court (ICC)**

An organisation established by the Rome Statute in 1998, which aids in setting precedent for international law. Instead of litigating between state conflicts like the ICJ, this organisation prosecutes and brings to justice those accused of committing crimes against humanity.

## Rome Statute

This statute defines the ICC's level of jurisdiction over anything involving genocide, crimes against humanity, crimes of aggression, and war crimes. It further defined the procedure for court proceedings, trials, applicable law, admissibility, and international cooperation.

## United Nations Security Council Resolution 2347 (UNSCR 2347)

The first ever resolution by the Security Council actively condemning the actions of the destruction of cultural heritage. It called for additional protective measures from member states to enact protective protocols in their own nations while reaffirming actions by UNESCO and heritage funds.

## Background Information

Recognising the importance of addressing issues of cultural heritage site destruction during times of conflict, the United Nations, associated organisations, and other global organisations have adopted measures to handle this growing crisis. Heritage sites are at risk of destruction of important culture I artefacts and buildings, in addition to looting, theft, and illegal trade of artefacts. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has indicated a risk of illicit underground trade networks of stolen cultural property from these unique heritage sites.<sup>5</sup> It weakens local economies through a loss of tourism-related funds and also produces revenue for terrorist organisations, as it did with the ISIL organisation in Syria and Iraq.<sup>6</sup> Motives for cultural destruction vary across situations but are often related to the financing of terror, ideological terror, cultural cleansing, and the erasure of identity. Ultimately, current frameworks are not fully addressing this crisis, specifically in targeted areas such as Mali, Ukraine, Palestine, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of the issue, it is very important to recognise the connection between cultural cleansing and genocide. Used as a tool to control, humiliate, and finance terror campaigns, the erasure of identity has historically been used and is currently being used by many groups to control civilians. Governments are frequently unable to protect cultural sites due to active warfare and limited resources, leading to protective mechanisms that ultimately fail. Targeted cultural heritage sites are often chosen intentionally in order to promote ideological extremism and reflect a trend of using erasure as a tool of warfare.

## Major Countries and Organisations Involved

### United Nations and International Involvement

International law has attempted to address this issue in different capacities, including the 1954 Hague Convention, which made the destruction of cultural property illegal; the 1998 addendum to the Convention, Protocol Two, to strengthen these frameworks; and the Rome Statute, which created the International Criminal Court and international frameworks to address violent and cultural crimes. Additionally, the Security Council has passed one resolution (UNSC Resolution 2347) fully addressing their recommendations to member nations and one briefly mentioning the abuse by ISIS in Iraq (UNSC Resolution 2199).

### United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

UNESCO is responsible for researching, documenting, and aiding in the preservation of world heritage sites. They have created a database and information campaigns regarding at-risk cultural heritage and natural heritage sites. This database provides details on why these sites are at risk and why these sites are important to individual identity.

### Ukraine

As a primary victim of cultural heritage being damaged by active war, Ukraine has taken strong steps toward addressing the problem. Through their launch of the 'Postcards from Ukraine' campaign, the nation has attempted to raise awareness about the issue. The postcards show destroyed sites and detail the importance they played in Ukrainian culture, working to emphasize the impact this creates.

### Mali

Utilizing aid from UNESCO and France, following the ISIL and Al-Qaeda's destruction in the Timbuktu area of Mali, the government worked to reconstruct damaged mausoleums and ancient texts. Using international collaboration and locals, damaged buildings were fixed and rehabilitated, and the area is taking stronger steps to maintain internal security.

### Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
April 1954	The Hague Convention is hosted following the end of World War II and the significance of the destruction suffered. The Convention is aimed at developing a framework to address destruction.
May 1999	The second protocol to the Hague Convention is adopted, effectively

	tightening sanctions and fully establishing who oversees the implementation of regulatory measures.
July 2002	The Rome Statute fully enters force, establishing the International Criminal Court and developing a framework for how to address global crimes.
January 2013	The ICC initiates investigative proceedings into destruction and war crimes in Timbuktu, marking the beginnings of legal accountability.
March 2015	UNSC 2199 Resolution was adopted and it condemned the destruction of cultural property by terrorist organizations to include ISIS and fully indicated the level of this.
March 2017	The UNSC Resolution 2347 resolution was adopted by the Security Council, demonstrating the first resolution of its kind to specifically address the destruction of cultural heritage property.
2022-2023	152 cultural sites in Ukraine (according to UNESCO) were either partially or totally destroyed, leading to further damage and disarray. <sup>7</sup>
2023-Present	International efforts are ongoing for accountability and restoration of damaged areas.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

There have been a multitude of different attempts at solving the issue of enhancing accountability frameworks for the destruction of cultural heritage sites during conflict. These include the aforementioned Hague Convention, Rome Statute, and UNSC 2347.<sup>8</sup> The Hague Convention was a strong start to this because it officially developed the first framework. Ultimately, this was important because societies were beginning to understand the importance of these heritage sites in identity following mass destruction during World War II. Protocol II, in particular, created specific sanctions and a committee of 12 member states to review claims. The Rome Statute, while not specifically aimed at addressing the issue of cultural heritage site destruction, was important because it created a framework for prosecuting individuals accused of committing heinous crimes, not just states, as the ICJ does. This allows for an actual way in which to prosecute and punish individuals who disrespect international law. As for UNSC 2347, this was the first Security Council Resolution to actively address the destruction of heritage sites. This again was important because of the acknowledgement it provided to the issue and shed light on how member nations can better protect their interests. Ultimately, the commonality among these three solutions, though, is that they are either outdated and do not leverage modern techniques, or they do not have specific ways to address the issue.

## Possible Solutions

### Increase Transparency and Accountability

One avenue to resolving this crisis is by working with UNESCO and INTERPOL to keep an accurate and running database documenting states, non-state actors, and organisations accused of committing these crimes in an effort to more quickly bring them to justice.

### United Nations Peacekeeping Intervention

A possible solution to this issue would be setting specific thresholds for the level of destruction that can occur before UN Peacekeeping Forces intervene in a region. A designated committee would decide the degree of threat a cultural site is facing and determine the length of time it can remain at risk before intervention is required. If these conditions are met, peacekeeping forces would be sent to stabilize the situation.

### Increase Recordkeeping in Peacekeeping Missions

Oftentimes, one of the weakest points in increasing accountability and responsibility for this destruction is the limited amount of evidence. One of the most important issues is to work with volunteers and peacekeeping forces on the ground in UNESCO Heritage sites to improve documentation methodology on possible evidence that may help bring perpetrators to justice.

### Utilise Online Databases for Documentation

Technology has advanced to such a level that new types of documentation may be at play in preserving evidence of destruction. With United Nations support, taking satellite and virtual 3D mapping, original forms can be indicated. Furthermore, this enhances record-keeping abilities and can support eventual legal cases.

## Endnotes

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4. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. *World Heritage in Danger*. UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/danger-list/>.

5. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). “Explainer: What Is Trafficking in Cultural Property?” *UNODC*, Nov. 2025, [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2025/November/explainer\\_-what-is-trafficking-in-cultural-property.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2025/November/explainer_-what-is-trafficking-in-cultural-property.html).
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7. UNESCO. *Over 150 Cultural Sites in Ukraine Partially or Totally Destroyed*. UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-over-150-cultural-sites-partially-or-totally-destroyed>.
8. United Nations. *Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017)*. UN Documents, [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2347\(2017\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2347(2017)).

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