



# The Hague International Model United Nations

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**Forum:** GA 1

**Issue:** Protection of cultural heritage in armed conflicts and occupied territories

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**Position:** Deputy Committee Chair

## Introduction

The loss and devastation of cultural heritage due to armed conflicts have emerged among the most tragic yet, sadly, often neglected consequences of war. Representative of collective memories for communities and nations, cultural heritage sites consist of structures such as monuments, religious buildings, museums, archaeological sites, libraries, and archives. These locations might face many dangers, especially in times of war or occupation. Although incidental destruction is also likely, some of them are quite often also targeted for looting and destruction. This saddens a people's identity, erases the memory of history, and diminishes prospects for future reconciliations and recoveries.

The safeguarding of cultural properties against armed conflicts and occupying forces has lately been a serious concern of the international community. The security measures that are being taken are not only limited to physical structures, they also focus on intangible repositories of collective memory, social, and intergenerational identity. Given the recent spike in the number of violent global conflicts, especially the invasion of Ukraine, protracted hostilities in Syria, and similar regional conflicts, the question of heritage protection is a topic that must be approached urgently and logically.

The aim behind the creation of this report has been to highlight previous and ongoing attempts to solve the issue at hand and suggest feasible solutions. The hope is to inform delegates and thus guide recommendations for policy changes at forums like THIMUN The Hague 2026.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Cultural Heritage

Physical artefacts and non-physical attributes traditionally passed on to future generations are defined as cultural heritage. Examples of physical cultural heritage include but are not limited to monuments, religious buildings, archaeological sites, libraries, works of art, and museums. Non-physical heritage instead refers to traditions, languages, rituals, and collective memory associated with a

community's identity. In the context of armed conflict, "heritage" thus covers, for example, a medieval cathedral, a centuries-old library, an archaeological site, or a communal tradition.<sup>1</sup>

### Armed Conflict

An armed conflict is a condition of organised violence between state or non-state actors involving military operations. It can be international (between states) or internal (civil war). In this report, "armed conflict" includes wars, invasions, occupations, and civil wars, all of which can affect the security of cultural heritage.

### Occupied Territory

An occupied territory is an area that is actively controlled by foreign military fighters or any other occupying forces. This occupation must be done without sovereignty being granted by the state that the region originally was a part of. The risk of harm coming to cultural heritage is higher in such areas as weakened governance, looting, or deliberate destruction, all of which are likely to be present.

### Cultural Heritage Related Destruction, Damage, and Looting

- *Destruction* refers to the complete loss of a heritage asset, which can be exemplified by the bombing of a historic building until it is in an unrepairable state.

- *Damage* refers to damage that is open to being repaired. Structural harm, interior damage, partial collapse, or loss of relevant artifacts are all instances of this.

- *Looting* involves the illicit removal, theft, or trafficking of artworks, manuscripts, archaeological artefacts, and similar cultural objects from museums, churches, archives, or libraries, often for profit or ideological reasons.

### Background Information

A trend worldwide of systematic cultural heritage destruction was present throughout the 20th century. The most impactful events were notoriously the Second World War, and this situation led to the adoption of legal measures to protect cultural property in wartime by the international community. An important example of this was the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, adopted by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1954.

The Hague Convention was the world's first international treaty entirely dedicated to protecting cultural property in war. It reinforced the provision of the 1954 Hague Treaty by imposing on States Parties a duty to "respect" and "safeguard" cultural property, whether movable or immovable (e.g., monuments, sites, artworks, libraries etc). The Convention also met some of these recommendations with preventive measures, which included the establishment of preparatory inventories of cultural property marking a property with the internationally accepted Blue Shield; and issuing instructions for

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removing all movable heritage to safe places distant from urban centres, the Protocol on Cultural Property to the 1954 Hague Convention also recommended this action.

The Convention has been progressively complemented, over the years, by Protocols and new institutional architectures that not only enable to enforce protection but also support restoration as a successor process of rapprochement after the end of conflict. However, this legal system has not managed to mitigate mass destruction and loss of cultural heritage in various armed conflicts globally, which in turn represents a significant discrepancies between the norms on paper and as implemented in practice.

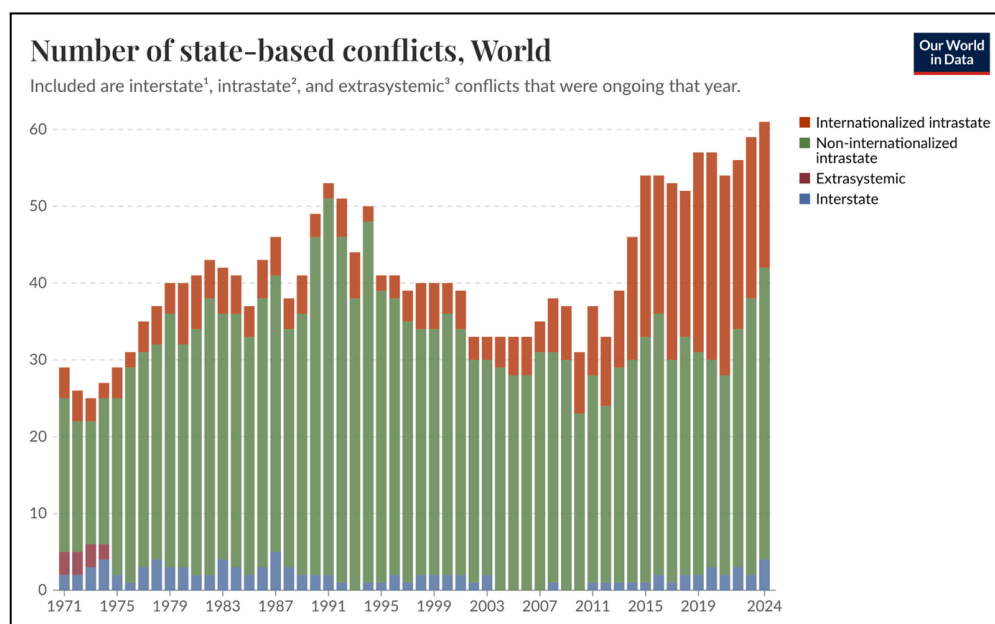
### Recent trends and the scale of the problem

Its culture and historical heritage, like much of the world, has been destroyed in wars by cities, modern warfare and air strikes slaughtering people like they were livestock. EWPA has long since caused permanent loss to such now-irreversible waves of destruction.

For one, there's the war going on in Ukraine. Before the invasion on February 2022 to date, losses to the country's heritage have been enormous. As of early 2025, the number of buildings that have been confirmed with defects by UNESCO had risen to 476 and included churches, museums and other historical edifices.

The cost to Ukrainian culture and tourism must have been enormous; it's estimated that the direct losses amount to \$3.5 billion and that the overall costs, including opportunity losses, amount to \$19.6 billion (UNESCO, February 2024).

Then there is this. It is just another pressure that will be there to keep going with wars in the Middle East. For several years, extremists like ISIS would destroy monuments, historic cities, archaeological sites, museums, and places of worship and abandon them by rummaging around in them for the purpose of erasing cultural history, particularly during the Syrian civil war. It goes back to the times of the most ancient history when such desecration receives this kind of focus.



Number of state-based conflicts worldwide(Our World in Data.org)

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### UN and International involvement

Since the early 1950s, UNESCO has been the primary inter-governmental organization for the protection of cultural property in armed conflict. The 1954 Hague Convention is still considered the major legal instrument at the international level to this day.

Coinciding with the 70th anniversary of the Convention in 2024, UNESCO has revived the UNESCO Civil Military Alliance Forum for the Protection of Cultural Property aimed at enhancing cooperation between civil heritage experts and military authorities. The aim of the Alliance is to strengthen preventive measures and inventories, risk assessments, and emergency planning, and to ensure that armed forces are better trained in the respect of and protecting cultural property in times of conflict.

UNESCO has been intervening on the ground in Ukraine and other contexts of recent conflicts: for example, in Ukraine, UNESCO has worked with national authorities to mark heritage sites with the Blue Shield emblem; provided technical advice to cultural professionals; identified shelters for movable objects; and bolstered fire-fighting measures to avert further losses.

With the development of technology throughout the years, new forms of collaboration for the protection of cultural heritage have also emerged. Working together with organizations including the UNITAR(United Nations Institute for Training and Research) and UNOSAT(United Nations Satellite Center), it has been enabled to monitor and solidify harm to heritage sites. Technologies used within this scope are satellite imagery, remote sensing, and geospatial analysis.

### Ukraine

Ukraine is one of the nations that is a signatory to the 1954 Hague Convention, and therefore, it is essential for them to act towards cultural heritage cases in accordance with international law. The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy directly falls under the Ukrainian Government, and since 2022, hundreds of heritage site damages and assessed losses have been documented by them. Collaboration with their international allies to protect endangered cultural sites has been one of their priorities throughout the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia. Movable heritage located in highly risky areas have also been evacuated or at least catalogued as much as possible. Ukraine remains a primary example of state-level commitment under extreme circumstances to heritage protection despite severe pressure and ongoing warfare.

### Syria

Just like Ukraine, Syria is a signatory to the 1954 Hague Convention, however its applicability in the nation has not been as effective as in Ukraine. Due to weakened and very long-term corrupted governance, along with prolonged internal conflict, effective heritage protection had remained in the background of almost all of the recently present armed actors. Since 2011, when the Syrian Civil War

began, 14 years of extensive damage inflicted upon the country's extensive cultural heritage has accumulated. The presence of fighting in historical urban areas, such as the cities of Aleppo and Palmyra, aerial bombardment, and the usage of cultural sites as a military base have led to the serious damaging of copious sites, which includes six UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Extremist groups such as ISIS present in the area have especially played a big part in this destruction, as they, quite ironically due to an ideological campaign of religious and cultural unification, intentionally destroyed monuments in Palmyra and other locations.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
14 May 1954	The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was adopted <sup>1</sup>
1972	Adoption of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Creating an international framework to identify, protect, and preserve cultural and natural heritage. <sup>2</sup>
2016	The International Criminal Court (ICC) convicts Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi for the destruction of cultural heritage in Timbuktu, marking the first time cultural destruction is charged as a war crime. <sup>3</sup>
24 Feb 2022	Full-scale invasion of Ukraine begins, triggering widespread threat to cultural heritage across regions. (Start of major documented destruction.) <sup>4</sup>
24 June 2022	UNESCO reports 152 cultural sites partially or totally destroyed in Ukraine (religious buildings, museums, historical sites, monuments, etc.). <sup>5</sup>
March 2022 onwards	UNESCO and partners undertake emergency protective measures: marking sites with Blue Shield, advising on packing/relocating movable heritage, reinforcing fire-fighting, and preparing inventories. <sup>6</sup>
2023–2024	Satellite imagery and remote-sensing analyses (by UNITAR-UNOSAT, cultural-heritage monitoring labs) verify damage to hundreds more sites (over 2, 100 potential damaged sites as of April 2024). <sup>7</sup>
14 May 2024	70th anniversary of the Hague Convention, launch of the Civil-Military Alliance Forum to strengthen heritage protection globally. <sup>8</sup>
14 February 2024	UNESCO estimates the total cost of damage and loss to Ukraine's culture & tourism sectors at nearly USD 3.5 billion; warns that around USD 9 billion will likely be needed for recovery over next decade. <sup>9</sup>
Ongoing (2023–2025)	UNESCO continues to monitor heritage sites, support national authorities, provide technical and financial assistance, and coordinate international efforts to document, secure and eventually restore damaged heritage. <sup>10</sup>

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

### International Legal Framework

The obligation of signatories to respect cultural property, especially those in danger, was the most significant attempt to establish an international standard in cultural-site protection, solidified through the 1954 Hague Convention. Although the main idea remained as a reliable root, additions were made over time in the form of protocols and measures, especially detailing different procedures for movable and immovable cultural heritage. This Convention, although not always fully effective, has resulted in the maintenance of heritage-site inventories, the enforcement of laws against illicit trafficking, and marking protected sites with the Blue Shield emblem.

### Preventive and Emergency Measures

Most nations have been fairly good in adopting precautions to protect heritage through the compilation of a comprehensive national inventory, an increase in the security of museum and archival repositories, constructing shelters for movable items, training military and security forces on heritage-protection obligations, and drawing up emergency response plans. These preemptive international cooperation measures were also supported by the actions of UNESCO and associated NGOs. The aforementioned development of technology, including satellite imagery enabling remote monitoring, documentation of damage, evacuation of movable heritage, the technical assistance provided to local cultural professionals, and fundraising for emergency stabilisation have been very useful in an environment of raging conflicts.

### Post-Conflict Restoration and Reconstruction

The latter had been initiated at different levels after the cessation of hostilities in various contexts. Monument rebuilding initiatives, art collection restorations, lost heritage documentation, and recovery have been the main initiatives organized by international donors. Still, slow recovery, faltered recoveries, or, at worst, fully impossible recoveries persist due to the extent of destruction in modern wars, insecurity, and funding followed by displacement and poor governance.

## Possible Solutions

### Strengthen International and Legal Frameworks

The main issue with the protection of cultural heritage sites is that enforcement remains consistently weak. Although legal measures are present through conventions such as the Hague 1954, states that have not ratified it should be required to have an international body in close contact with the UN, and that no state has control over to ensure no malicious intent is present in these cultural heritage sites. The states that ratify the treaty should instead be highly encouraged through tempting advantages

to integrate its provisions fully into national laws, with clear penalties for destruction or looting of heritage. Since these sites are essential to many people's lives, recognising their systematic destruction as war crimes by international tribunals could be a decision to be considered.

### Enhance Civil–Military Collaboration and Training

The UNESCO Civil-Military Alliance Forum and such programmes are essential to enlighten the public regarding how unaware or indifferent to the military actors within conflicts are towards their obligations to protect cultural-heritage. If global institutionalizations take place and the protection of heritage-sites are standardized in the eyes of the public, it will be easier to ensure resistance and accountability. Armed forces being knowledgeable is also crucial, and they should be regularly trained by experts on the essentials of heritage identification and protection. Outright prohibition of explosive weapon usage within close proximity of such sites should also be specified clearly in all military rules of engagement.

### Use Technology for Monitoring, Documentation, and Rapid Response

Although most developed countries have easy access to geospatial analysis, remote sensing, and such technologies assisting them in monitoring the issue at hand, some more economically disadvantaged states, especially those currently in a war or occupied, might have a difficult time acquiring these tools. The UNITAR/UNOSAT could focus its efforts on independent heritage-monitoring institutions within these regions, improving most methodologies of protection regarding these sites, providing quicker verification, and improved documentation. These operations are also very helpful in locations recovering from difficult situations, assisting in restoration and future accountability. To assist forensic matters, or other legal/reconstruction claims also fall under the same line, as 3D scans, and digital records of objects and sites can all hugely assist be established within the purview of significant heritage sites.



## Endnotes

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9. UNESCO. *Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment: Culture and Tourism in Ukraine*. UNESCO, 14 Feb. 2024, [www.unesco.org/en/articles/damage-assessment-culture-tourism-ukraine](http://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damage-assessment-culture-tourism-ukraine).
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## Appendix or Appendices

### I. Links to relevant statistics / charts / datasets

- UNESCO: Cultural heritage and armed conflicts, global overview (interactive). <https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts>
- UNESCO press kit on Ukraine damage estimates (2024). <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-unesco-estimates-damage-culture-and-tourism-after-2-years-war-35-billion>
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