

Culture on the Front Line of New Wars

Author(s): Irina Bokova

Source: *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 2015), pp. 289-296

Published by: Brown Journal of World Affairs

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24591015>

Accessed: 23-03-2023 19:37 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Brown Journal of World Affairs* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*

# Culture on the Front Line of New Wars

---

IRINA BOKOVA  
Director-General  
UNESCO

---

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF CIVILIANS have died in the conflicts and crises tearing apart Syria and Iraq. Several million more have either been displaced or become refugees in neighboring countries.<sup>1</sup> The consequences on individual lives and the societies of these countries are deep and will persist long after these crises end. This impact is exacerbated by the attacks on culture seen in both countries. The tragic loss of human life is accompanied by the persecution of individuals on religious and cultural grounds and the intentional targeting, damaging, trafficking, and destruction of cultural heritage and traditions. In Iraq and Syria, we are witnessing what can be described as “cultural cleansing” on an unprecedented scale.<sup>2</sup> This cultural cleansing is an attack on cultural diversity that combines the destruction of monuments and the persecution of people. In today’s new conflicts, those two dimensions cannot be separated. Violent extremism attacks human rights and dignity, seeking to destroy diversity and freedom in order to impose sectarian visions, a core aim of many of the new organizations rising up in different parts of the world, on societies that have always featured rich diversity, exchange, and dialogue across cultures.

289

The conclusion is clear: culture is at the front line of modern conflict. This requires us to rethink the importance of culture in peacebuilding. Protecting cultural heritage has become more than a cultural issue. In the new global war

---

IRINA BOKOVA has been the Director-General of UNESCO since November 2009 and was successfully reelected for a second term in 2013. She is the first woman and the first Eastern European to lead the organization. As Director-General, Bokova is actively engaged in international efforts to advance gender equality and quality education for all and combat terrorist financing by preventing the illicit traffic of cultural goods. A leading champion in the fight against racism and anti-Semitism, Bokova has spearheaded UNESCO’s activities on Holocaust remembrance and awareness and is the first Director-General of the organization to appoint a Special Envoy for Holocaust Education. She is a leading advocate for ensuring quality education for all and has championed gender equality, making this her own personal priority for the Organization.

---

Copyright © 2015 by the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*

FALL/WINTER 2015 • VOLUME XXII, ISSUE I

for hearts and minds, it is now a security imperative.

Heritage has long been seen as a secondary issue in armed conflicts, to be addressed after the conflict has been resolved and the dust has settled. This view, however, is changing. Culture is not attacked by accident, nor is heritage being destroyed as collateral damage: they are being targeted directly and specifically,

**Palmyra symbolizes everything that extremists abhor: cultural diversity, dialogue between cultures, and the encounter of peoples of all origins.**

and these attacks lie at the heart of the strategies violent extremists employ to spread their message and disseminate fear. These new destructions, which embody an expression of pure hatred and ignorance, show how extremists

are terrified of history and culture—because understanding the past undermines and delegitimizes their claims. Indeed, a city such as Palmyra symbolizes everything that extremists abhor: cultural diversity, dialogue between cultures, and the encounter of peoples of all origins in this caravan city between Europe and Asia. And this is why it is being targeted.<sup>3</sup>

290

Take also the example of Mali. When violent extremists pillaged the mausoleums of Timbuktu and burned the manuscripts of the Ahmed-Baba Library, they filmed their acts and posted them on social media, highlighting and even glorifying their desire to erase the memory of a community, to demoralize and terrorize its population.<sup>4</sup> The objective is not only to kill people; it is to eliminate pluralism and freedom, erase all sources of belonging and identity, and destroy the fabric of society.<sup>5</sup> This is why it is now essential to integrate a cultural dimension into all peacebuilding strategies and humanitarian actions. In order to accomplish this, we need to connect the dots between security, humanitarian, and cultural imperatives when responding to new wars.

### CULTURAL CLEANSING

The cultural heritage of Iraq and Syria belongs to all humanity; attacks against this culture harm us all in their attempt to destroy universal values. In the city of Mosul, Iraq, religious sites have been targeted, including the sanctuaries of Jonas and the prophet David and Sufi sheikh mausoleums.<sup>6</sup> The Green Church of Tikrit, dating back to the eighth century, has been attacked.<sup>7</sup> Syria's Aleppo souk, a UNESCO World Heritage site, has become a battlefield.<sup>8</sup> Monument after monument, Palmyra is falling apart—the Baal-Shamin temple, the Temple of Bel, the funerary towers, and the Arch of Triumph have all been bombed and their destruction flaunted on the Internet to disseminate fear with a creative

perversity.<sup>9</sup>

Sectarian persecution is an inherent part of cultural cleansing. The Nineveh region of Iraq is one of the most culturally diverse parts of the country, where Christians, Muslims, Kurds, Yazidis, and Shabaks have lived together peacefully for centuries.<sup>10</sup> For its diversity and history of coexistence, Nineveh became the first target of violent extremist groups, who are deploying sustained efforts to eliminate all of its traces. No form of heritage is immune to attack. In Nineveh, violent extremists are seeking to impose a narrow vision of identity by destroying sources of alternative belonging and heritage. In this, they are attacking the very history of Mesopotamia, which has featured constant dialogue between people of different communities, ethnicities, and religions since ancient times. The Omayyad Mosque of Damascus, a Greek temple and then a Christian Church until the advent of Islam, embodies this history of cultural and religious interaction. Today, it has been reduced to rubble by the Islamic State.<sup>11</sup>

The Omayyad Mosque's syncretic history shows that there is no such thing as a "pure culture"—cultures are enriched through exchange and dialogue, and this is precisely what violent extremists seek to destroy through actions that have no justification on religious or any other grounds. The purpose of abolishing relics is to recreate a historical and cultural record conducive to the imposition of narrow and sectarian political interests.<sup>12</sup> This requires the annihilation of all pillars of society that sustain diversity, critical thinking, and freedom of opinion—from education and journalism to cultural diversity and heritage.

Cultural cleansing is a tactic of war, used to destabilize populations and weaken social defenses. The destruction of heritage undermines wellsprings of identity and belonging, paving the way to social disintegration. Eliminating the layers of history, cities, and homes affects people's perceptions of the past and present and shadows their confidence in a future where their rights and dignity would be respected. Combine this with displacement and destitution, and the mixture is dangerously volatile. More than half of Syrian refugees are under 18 years old and have not been to school in years, leaving them vulnerable to the appeal of violence and extremism—an appeal strengthened by the loss of sacred places, libraries, museums, and other irreplaceable historic monuments.<sup>13</sup> The damage, culturally and socially, can be irreversible.

The impact is local, but the stakes are global. Violent extremists are seeking to indoctrinate and manipulate young minds and recruit them, spreading their

**Cultural cleansing is a tactic of war, used to destabilize populations and weaken social defenses.**

messages through the Internet and social media. These campaigns are savvy and ultramodern, drawing on the tropes of music, movies, and video games—and they are increasingly effective. There are up to 70,000 Twitter accounts today estimated to support the Islamic State, with tweets being written in English, French, and Arabic. The number of foreign terrorist fighters increased by 70 percent between mid-2014 and March 2015. Today, the UN estimates that some 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 states are active in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen.<sup>14</sup>

All of this explains why protecting cultural heritage and diversity is a strategic issue that carries key political and security stakes. Understanding this is the first step to responding. The exercise of hard power alone will not be enough to lessen the actions or the appeal of violent extremism. An effective response must involve efforts across the board, including promoting education, supporting freedom of expression, and protecting cultural heritage.

### STOPPING ILLICIT TRAFFICKING

292

The immediate step we must take is to halt the illicit trafficking of cultural goods from the region. Every day, irreplaceable and priceless cultural treasures including artifacts of Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Arab art are plundered from their places of origin in Iraq and Syria and traded illegally on the international art market. Estimates of the profits of such illicit trafficking vary, reaching as high as \$9–10 billion annually.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the precise figure, this trafficking is booming.

In Syria, eight sites on the World Heritage Tentative List have been damaged, destroyed, or severely impacted by looting and illegal excavations. Of the 10,000 archaeological sites in Iraq, over 2,000 are under the control of the Islamic State and have been heavily looted. Two of the four UNESCO World Heritage sites in the country—Hatra and Ashur—have been destroyed, while fighting has damaged at least nine other sites.<sup>16</sup> Satellite images from January 2014 show 300 people digging with heavy machinery and bulldozers at the archaeological site of Doura Europos.<sup>17</sup> Today, the Apamée site is littered with craters made by pillagers.<sup>18</sup> With its partners in Interpol and the World Customs Organization, UNESCO is piecing together a picture that shows that illicit trafficking, which contributes heavily to cultural cleansing, is a source of financing for violent extremism.<sup>19</sup>

This trafficking can only be halted through cooperation between national police, customs units, experts, architects, cultural heritage curators, and inter-

national organizations. This requires resources and political will.

With its partners, UNESCO is leading from the front. In February 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2199, which condemned the destruction of cultural heritage and adopted legally binding measures to counter the illicit trafficking of antiquities and cultural objects from Iraq and Syria.<sup>20</sup> UNESCO is fronting coordination for the resolution's implementation, working across the United Nations and with all member states to strengthen their capacity to safeguard sites, train conservation experts, and monitor damage on the field. This is how we can connect the dots between cultural, humanitarian, and security professionals, so that the protection of heritage is woven into emergency responses.

Over the past 60 years, UNESCO has built a strong legal foundation for all aspects of protecting heritage, including the 1954 Hague Convention for the protection of cultural artifacts in times of armed conflict, the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the struggle against the illegal trafficking of cultural artifacts, the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003).<sup>21</sup>

We need more states to ratify and implement these conventions. For instance, only four members of the UN Security Council have ratified the 1954 Hague Convention, and many others have not adopted national legislation to this effect.<sup>22</sup> Neither Iraq nor Syria has ratified the Rome Statute or the Second Protocol of the 1999 Hague Convention, thus severely limiting the potential involvement of the International Criminal Court.<sup>23</sup>

We need more training and capacity building, especially with armed forces and humanitarian staff, who are often not familiar with the conventions ratified by their countries and are unaware of the issues to be addressed in protecting heritage.

## **ON THE FRONT LINE OF PEACEBUILDING**

Violent extremists are using all tools, from propaganda and schooling to armed action, in their cultural-cleansing campaign. An effective response must be similarly multidimensional. This is why hard power should be combined with new efforts to support refugees and young people with quality education and learning. UNESCO provides accelerated learning and catch-up classes and builds secondary schools in displaced peoples' camps throughout Iraq. Education remains the best long-term way to tackle systematic violence and set communities

on the path to peace.<sup>24</sup>

We also need to focus on communication in order to counter the narrative of violent extremism and cultural cleansing. For this, we must harness the full power of social media to raise awareness, build new platforms for collective action, and protect humanity's common heritage. In March, I visited the University of Baghdad to launch UNESCO's new #Unite4Heritage social campaign to counter the hatred of violent extremists with a message of harmony and inspire young people to defend their heritage.

Tackling cultural cleansing requires an emphasis on cooperation among a wide range of actors who are not accustomed to joining forces. This is why UNESCO is working to build a broad coalition among states, as well as with lawyers, customs officials, experts, police, museums, and the art market. We must strengthen efforts at both the national and international levels to protect cultural heritage and diversity.


294

To these ends, UNESCO, with the support of the European Union, has launched emergency intervention plans for Iraq and Syria in order to monitor and assess the damage, build strategies for safeguarding cultural sites, and prepare for action on the ground. As soon as the situation allows, we will join all forces to rehabilitate, reconstruct, and restore collections in museums in order to reconnect people with their heritage. By training curators, we will work to repair and restore the antiquities and artifacts that have been pillaged or damaged in the wake of combat and occupation by violent extremists.

This is essential for peace. This is why UNESCO helped restore the Old Mostar Bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina, destroyed during war in the 1990s, as a powerful symbol of renewal.<sup>25</sup> In Mali, UNESCO has rebuilt the destroyed mausoleums of Timbuktu, working with local communities to build social cohesion and foster reconciliation.<sup>26</sup> In Iraq, the reconstruction of the al-Askari sanctuary was a major architectural event and a success story of cross-cultural dialogue, fostering intense exchanges between the heads of the Sunni and Shiite communities.<sup>27</sup>

Protecting culture must no longer be seen as a luxury to be left for another day. Culture is a catalyst of change, and there is no need to choose between saving human lives and preserving cultural heritage: the two are inseparable. Violent extremists do not choose between attacks against culture and those against people—they attack both, in order to hurt societies both in the short term and the long term. This is why we need to defend culture—a source of resilience and resistance, of belonging and identity—as a wellspring to rebuild and restore normality in societies in crisis. We need to nurture this power in

societies across the world in order to build the resilience of young people, particularly in resisting the call of violent extremism.

Despite their criminal relentlessness, violent extremists will never be able to erase history, nor silence the memory of cultural and archaeological sites that embody the unity and identity of humanity. Each new destruction should encourage us to share further knowledge of the significance of this heritage in museums, schools, and the media. This is part of saving our common heritage and fighting against the cultural cleansing that has plagued the Middle East. Written in the wake of the Second World War, the UNESCO Constitution opens with memorable lines penned by Archibald MacLeish: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."<sup>28</sup> Seventy years later, these words have not aged a day. 

**There is no need to choose between saving human lives and preserving cultural heritage: the two are inseparable.**

## NOTES

1. "Total number of Syrian refugees exceeds four million for first time," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website, July 9, 2015.
2. "State Secretary Kerry and Director-General Bokova Call for End to Cultural Destruction in Iraq and Syria," UNESCO, September 23, 2014.
3. UNESCO, "Director-General Irina Bokova firmly condemns the destruction of Palmyra's ancient temple of Baalshamin, Syria," news release, August 24, 2015.
4. Monica Mark, "Malian Islamists attack world heritage site mosques in Timbuktu," *Guardian*, July 2, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/02/mali-islamists-attack-world-heritage-mosques-timbuktu>.
5. Irina Bokova, "Opinion: Timbuktu tomb attack is an attack on our humanity," *CNN*, July 4, 2012.
6. UNESCO, "Heritage and Cultural Diversity at Risk in Iraq and Syria," news release, December 3, 2014.
7. Antonia Blumberg, "Islamic State Reportedly Destroys 7th Century Green Church In Tikrit, Iraq. One Of Middle East's Oldest Christian Sites," *Huffington Post*, September 26, 2014.
8. Emma Cunliffe, Durham University, and Global Heritage Fund, *Damage to the Soul: Syria's Cultural Heritage in Conflict* (Palo Alto, CA: Global Heritage Fund, 2012).
9. For satellite images of recent destructions, see: "Maps and Data," United Nations Institute for Training and Research website.
10. Mina al-Lami, "Iraq: The minorities of Nineveh plain," *BBC*, July 21, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140724024337/http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28351073>.
11. Ryan Lucas, "Umayyad Mosque Minaret Destroyed In Aleppo, Syrian Rebels and State Media Confirm," *Huffington Post*, April 24, 2013.
12. Irina Bokova, "Roundtable 'Culture on the Frontline: Protecting Cultural Heritage in Conflict Zones'" (Lecture, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, July 1, 2015).
13. UNICEF, *Under Siege: The devastating impact on children of three years of conflict in Syria* (Amman: UNICEF, March 2014).
14. Javier Lesaca, "On social media, ISIS uses modern cultural images to spread anti-modern values," *Brookings*, September 24, 2015.



IRINA BOKOVA

15. UNESCO, "Heritage and Cultural Diversity at Risk in Iraq and Syria."
16. Irina Bokova, "Roundtable 'Culture on the Frontline: Protecting Cultural Heritage in Conflict Zones.'"
17. UNITAR, *Satellite-based Damage Assessment to Cultural Heritage Sites in Syria* (United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 2014).
18. Ibid.
19. "Total number of Syrian refugees exceeds four million for first time," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website, July 9, 2015.
20. "Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2199 (2015), Security Council Condemns Trade with Al-Qaida Associated Groups, Threatens Further Targeted Sanctions," United Nations website, February 12, 2015.
21. UNESCO, "Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention 1954," May 14, 1954; UNESCO, "Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970," November 14, 1970; UNESCO, "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Culture and Natural Heritage," November 16, 1972; UNESCO, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," October 17, 2003.
22. UNESCO, "Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention 1954," May 14, 1954.
23. United Nations General Assembly, "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court," July 17, 1998; UNESCO, "Second Protocol to The Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict 1999," March 26, 1999.
24. UNESCO, "UNESCO and IRC open the first secondary school for Syrian refugees in Domiz camp," news release, March 4, 3013.
25. "Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar," UNESCO website.
26. UNESCO, "Director-General praises the people of Timbuktu for the reconstruction of the city's mausoleums," news release, July 19, 2015.
27. UNESCO, "UNESCO launches the reconstruction project of the Al-Askari shrine in Iraq," news release, June 26, 2007.
28. UNESCO, "UNESCO Constitution," November 16, 1945.

296