

**Forum:** GC4 – Culture

**Issue:** The protection of cultural heritage sites during conflicts with a special emphasis on Syria

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## **Introduction**

According to UNESCO, World Heritage is the designation for places on Earth that are of outstanding universal value to humanity and as such, have been inscribed on the World Heritage List to be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy. There are 1007 natural and cultural places that are described as a World Heritage such as Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, Ephesus and so on.

These heritage sites make up the living culture of our world and it is very crucial for us to protect them over generations. However, armed conflicts are big obstacles on protecting these sites as bullets, explosives and other ammunition can damage these sites. One of the countries suffering from this issue is Syria. There is a civil war continuing in the country for approximately 9 years now and many heritage sites are in great danger. With all these considered, a solution for protecting these sites is needed as soon as possible.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **World Heritage Site:**

World Heritage is the designation for places on Earth that are of outstanding universal value to humanity and as such, have been inscribed on the World Heritage List to be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy.

### **Civil War:**

Civil war, also known as intrastate war, is a war between factions or groups inside the same country. The civil war can occur because of the need of a government change, independence of a region or a group wanting to take control of a region. These wars may result in large number of deaths as the Syrian Civil War is considered the 2<sup>nd</sup> deadliest war in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some of the nations that suffered civil war are Somalia, Myanmar, Uganda, Angola and they all faced economic collapse. Civil wars seem to have an increase after 1945, causing the death of more than 25 million people and more being displaced. According to the United Nations (UN), the number of refugees displaced from Syria is 13.5 million, which is more than many countries' population.

## **Background Information**

Syria was ruled by many civilizations through history such as Eblaites, Amorites, Arameans, Phoenicians, Mamluks, Ottoman Empire, France and lastly Ba'athist Syria. Because of that, there are many cultural heritage sites in the region, carrying different cultures within themselves. There are six World Heritage Sites declared by UNESCO in Syria which are:

### **Ancient City of Aleppo**

The Ancient City of Aleppo is the historic region of Aleppo, Syria. The city was popular because of its cell-like quarters and districts made for countering unexpected and constant invasions to the city. These districts were different regarding their inhabitants and their religion and ethnicity. The ancient city was preserved since its construction started in 12<sup>th</sup> century until the Syrian Civil War.

### **Ancient City of Bosra**

Bosra, officially known Busra-al Sham is a town in southern Syria. The city takes its cultural importance from the Roman and Byzantine era. In that time it was administratively important until Ottoman era. Left from the Roman era, there is a Roman Theatre at Bosra from 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Besides the theatre, there are many sights in the city such as a village settled in the ruins, many Christian churches, mosques, madrasahs, Nabatean Gates and so on.

### **Ancient City of Damascus**

The Ancient City of Damascus is the historic region of Damascus, Syria. The old city has many archeological and cultural sites because of its precious historical background. The ancient city is surrounded by the walls left from the Roman era, covering many historical churches, mosques, hammams, souqs and madrasahs. The city was ruled by the Ottoman Empire for 302 years and Mamluks for 260 years, that's why these two countries had the most effect in the culture of the heritage site.

### **Ancient Villages of Northern Syria**

The Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, also known as the Dead Cities and Forgotten Cities, are abandoned villages in north-western Syria, locate between Aleppo and Idlib. The villages were abandoned between 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries and these villages are famous for their pagan temples, remains of dwellings, churches, cisterns, bathhouses and so on. The most famous sights are the Church of Saint Simeon Stylites, Serjilla and al Bara.

### **Krak des Chevaliers and Citadel of Salah Ed-din**

Krak des Chevaliers is located in the Talkalakh District, Syria, closer to the city of Homs. It is a well-preserved medieval crusader castle which is recognized as a World Heritage Site since 2006 with Citadel of Salah Ed-din. Citadel of Salah Ed-din is also a medieval castle. It is located in north-western Syria, closer to the city of Latakia. The castle was built in 10<sup>th</sup> century and now it is partially ruined.

### **Palmyra**

The ancient city of Palmyra is located in Tadmur, Syria. It is a Semitic city which carries its cultural importance from the Neolithic era. It is famous for its Valley of Tombs, Senate, Baths of Diocletian, Agora, Temple of Bel, Temple of Baalshamin, Temple of Nabu, Temple of Al-lat, Temple of Baal-hamon, Triclinium of the Agora, Walls of Palmyra and so on. We can say that the city itself is a cultural heritage site.

The Syrian Civil War started in 15 March 2011 because of the riots in the country against the Assad government. The war is considered as the second deadliest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The civil war actually started after the riots were violently suppressed by the Assad government. The main factions in the war are the Syrian Armed Forces led by Bashar al-Assad with Iran and Russia's support, the Interim Government (Free Syrian Army) with the support of Turkey, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and Rojava (Syrian Democratic Forces).

These cultural heritage sites carry an important role on our world's and Syria's culture. As we can see, they carry different information from different civilizations such as Byzantine, Mamluks, Ottoman Empire and the Roman Empire. However, six of these UNESCO recognized World Heritage Sites and other cultural heritage sites inside Syria are at risk of getting damaged or destroyed. If we look at the Ancient City of Aleppo, we can see that the city was preserved since its construction. But this was until the Syrian Civil War, as %30 of the Ancient City was destroyed during the civil war, according to UNESCO. That's because many sections in the city were damaged, such as the Al-Madina Souq, because of the fight between Syrian Arab Army and the rebel forces in 2012. In February 2014, many buildings were destroyed because of the Syrian Army, as they used these buildings as fortified bases and the Islamic Front destroyed these cultural buildings.

For example, the Citadel of Aleppo was one of the oldest fortresses in the world, however the war destroyed he surroundings and parts of the fortress; the mosque complex in the citadel was damaged because of the Syrian army using it is a base; the old bazaar in Aleppo was destroyed by the fights between rebel forces and Syrian Arab Army; the Ancient Temple of Bel was more than 2000 years old and it was preserved until the war broke out as the Islamic State bombed the central building, the cella and its sanctuaries; the Lion of Al-lat, the Temple of Baal-shamin, the Temple of Bel and the Tower of Elahbel was blown up or destroyed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

### **Timeline of Major Events**

Date	Event
1979	The Ancient City of Damascus was inscribed in the World Heritage List by UNESCO.
1980	The Ancient City of Bosra was inscribed in the World Heritage List by UNESCO.

1980	Palmyra was inscribed in the World Heritage List by UNESCO.
1986	The Ancient City of Aleppo was inscribed in the World Heritage List by UNESCO.
2006	Krak des Chevaliers and Citadel of Salah Ed-din was inscribed in the World Heritage List by UNESCO.
15 March 2011	The Syrian Civil War began with Assad government and the Syrian opposition.
27 June 2011	The Ancient Villages of Northern Syria was inscribed in the World Heritage List by UNESCO.
25 September 2012	The Battle of Aleppo between the Syrian Arab Army and the rebel forces of Jabhat al-Nusra, damaged many parts of the al-Madina Souq and different parts of the city.
2013	All World Heritage Sites in Syria were considered as endangered.
February 2014	The Islamic Front destroyed many historical buildings as they were used as bases.
23 May 2015	ISIL destroyed the Lion of Al-lat in Palmyra.
23-30 August 2015	ISIL blew up some parts of the Temple of Bel and the Temple of Baalshamin.
4 September 2015	ISIL damaged some parts of the Tower of Elahbel in Palmyra.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### **Syrian Arab Republic**

Syrian Arab Republic is a Middle Eastern country, bordering Turkey, Lebanon, the Mediterranean Sea, Israel, Jordan and Iraq. Syria has a diverse ethnic background with Syrian Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Turkmens and so on. Its official language is Arabic. Syria is a region that is ruled by many countries since now. A civil war has started in Syria in 2011. Before the civil war, neo-Ba'athist Bashar al-Assad ruled the country with an authoritarian regime that led the nation to riot. The civil war is going on for 9 years now and it has hurt the country and its values and also its people drastically. The conflict damaged all six of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the country such as the Archaeological Villages of Northern Syria, Bosra, Palmyra, the Old City of Damascus and the Medieval buildings in the Ancient City of Aleppo.

## **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**

UNESCO is a specialized body of the United Nations based in Paris, France. It focuses on science, education and culture all around the world. UNESCO has 193 member states with Cook Islands, Niue and Palestine not being UN members and without Israel, Liechtenstein and United States which are UN members. UNESCO aims to strengthen education and education facilities in member states and offer quality education for all, designates projects regarding culture, education and science such as World Heritage Sites and World Digital Library, encourages freedom of expression all around the world through the Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development and so on.

## **Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)**

Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamic State (IS), is a terrorist group that aims to create an Islamic state or caliphate in Iraq, Syria and in the region called the Levant. ISIL is a splinter group of al-Qaeda. They implement Sharia Law and are well-known for their mass public executions and terrorist activities. It is known that in 2014, ISIL ruled more than 30,000 square miles in Syria and Iraq, however the fights against the group made them lose %40 percent of their territory in 2016. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was the renowned leader of ISIL from April 2010 to October 2019, until he committed suicide in a raid conducted by the United States forces. After al-Baghdadi's death, the new leader was declared as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. Regarding the issue, the terrorist group is known to destroy many heritage sites in Syria, especially the artifacts and monuments in Palmyra.

## **Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

### **Resolution 2347 adopted by the United Nations Security Council**

United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution regarding the protection of cultural heritage sites on 24 March 2017. After the increase in terrorist attacks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, UNSC condemned the destruction and smuggling of cultural heritage by terrorist groups such as but not limited to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) and Al-Nusrah Front. By adopting this resolution, UNSC also welcomed the actions taken by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to protect cultural heritage sites in armed conflict.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is active in Middle Eastern region and also it is very active in Syria. In the light of this information, the adoption of this resolution by the United Nations Security Council is an important example of recognition of the issue in the international stage and also a resolution to consider regarding the issue.

## **1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict**

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was held in The Hague, Netherlands in 1954. The convention was held because of the massive destruction of cultural heritage regarding the World War II. It is known as the first international treaty on the protection of cultural heritage in the case of an armed conflict.

The treaty took some measures such as:

- Safeguarding missions such as emergency measures against structural collapse and fire,
- Punishments for any breach of the treaty,
- Special military units to protect the cultural heritage site,
- Making the members states refrain from any act of hostility directed against their cultural heritage and so on.

## **Possible Solutions**

- A protective task force can be found with the help of the United Nations Security Council and member states to protect the heritage sites specifically,
- The heritage sites can be protected more heavily with walls or different security measures,
- New implementations can be imposed regarding the factions in the Syrian civil war and warn them about not damaging the cultural sites, if they damage measures will be taken,
- Make negotiations with the Syrian army led by Assad government to not to use the heritage sites as bases for the war and take measures if necessary,
- A special group of experts can inspect these areas with the supervision of security forces and determine the weak areas in the heritage sites which should be protected,
- The heritage sites near conflict areas can be protected more carefully with more security forces deployed in the region,
- The 5-km radius of the heritage sites can be deployed with different security measures.

## **Useful Links for Further Research**

*UNESCO World Heritage Centre*

<https://whc.unesco.org/>

*Syria World Heritage Sites Report*

<https://unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/satellite-analysis-and-applied-research/chs-syria>

Damaged or Destroyed Heritage Sites by War (Worldwide)

<https://www.history.com/news/cultural-sites-heritage-wars>

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