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**COMMUNITIES AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN
TIMES OF CONFLICT**

*CASE STUDIES OF HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY
DESTRUCTION TO SACRED SITES AND PLACES OF WORSHIP*

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Preface

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INTRODUCTION: THE SITUATION OF PLACES OF WORSHIP

Places of worship offer believers the possibility of communing with the divine and achieving deeper insight into their faith. When these sacred sites are also of historic importance, they have a strong significance in the identity of the community.

Worship sites are particularly prone to conflict

The spiritual and cultural importance of these sites can lead to competition as religious groups seek to exclude rivals from practicing potentially sacrilegious rituals in the hallowed space and wish to assert their own claims. Holy places thus create the potential for military, theological, or political clashes—not only between competing religious groups, but also between religious groups and secular actors.

These sites are particularly prone to conflict as some ethnic groups seek to destroy places of worship to eliminate evidence of long-term settlement by other communities they have deemed to be a threat or enemy. There is a strong link between the systematic persecution and expulsion of ethnic and religious communities and the destruction of the cultural and religious heritage associated with the targeted community. We can also observe that extremists organise the deliberate destruction and/or misuse of religious heritage in order to incite further hostilities and propagate different conflict ideologies.

Massive destruction in contemporary period

Even if we contain our study to the contemporary period, it is almost impossible to have an exhaustive study of all heritage sacred sites affected by conflicts. The last and current centuries have been deeply affected by nationalist conflicts and civil war. These conflicts are sometimes characterized by ethnic cleansing or genocide, and often contain an element of cultural cleansing. It is not only about murdering a group of people, but also about removing the historical evidence of their occupation and their right to be in a particular place. An important step in liquidating a community is to erase its memory, often by destroying its books, monuments, and places of worship.

In Milan Kundera's words: "*the first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history.*"¹ Events show that the first immovable properties targeted are often places of worship. This report will investigate different examples of heritage sacred sites affected by conflict and explore the impact it can have on a community.

Community Impact

Sacred sites have a specific meaning and value for believers and attacks on them are particularly damaging to peace and harmony because of the centrality of religion. When they are also historical sites, the destruction of places of worship is of considerable importance because it irreversibly and deeply alters the identity of cultural groups and has significant long-term effects.

The destruction of material religious heritage also affects the intangible heritage of the community's identity. These buildings are the place of traditional practices and constitute the essence of a community's cultural heritage. Often, cultural heritage is identified by taking into account only the aesthetic and technical values perceived by experts, but not the symbolic aspects that it may represent.²

1 Milan Kundera, 1981, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

2 ICCROM, 2012, Marcela Jaramillo Contreras, *Beyond the protection of material cultural heritage in times of conflict*.

THE DESTRUCTION OF PLACES OF WORSHIP: EXAMPLES FROM HISTORY

Australia

In the more than 40,000 years that indigenous peoples have inhabited the Australian continent, it is estimated that as many as 600 indigenous cultures existed, with diverse systems of government, languages, cultural practices, religions and traditions, extending across different parts of the country.¹ For indigenous peoples, the value of heritage sites is inherently linked to the lands and waters in which those sites are located, and the ability to access and use those sites. Access to, and control over, such significant heritage areas are vital parts of the maintenance of indigenous cultures and traditional knowledge, including the ability to pass on culture and knowledge to the next generation.²

Aboriginal heritage was heavily impacted by colonialism. Since the 17th century, settlers established themselves and their culture and, as a result, a significant percentage of the sites were destroyed. Indigenous peoples and their cultures were seen as inferior. They were forcibly removed from traditional lands and policies of destruction and assimilation were implemented. Indigenous cultural practices, especially the use of indigenous languages, were discouraged or prohibited.³

In Dampier Archipelago, the largest rock art site in the world, with around one million petroglyph motifs, the local Aboriginal community considers the place sacred because of these petroglyphs, but today 25% of the petroglyphs have been lost.⁴ The sacred values of the petroglyphs were completely disregarded and neglected. They were not considered part of the Australian culture, but rather a product of Aboriginal culture, which was interpreted as a remnant of the past.⁵

Community Impact

Despite these losses, indigenous peoples have resisted and endured.⁶ Research in Western Australia has shown that the happiest and healthiest indigenous Australians, with low arrest rates and good educational attainment, are those who have been able to retain a strong attachment to their culture and have a strong aboriginal identity.⁷ Conversely, the psychologically adverse consequences of destruction of a people's familiar environment have been well-documented.⁸

On the other hand, interviews with people living in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales found that "the transformation of the environment to mining and power station activities was associated with significant expressions of distress linked to negative changes to interviewees' sense of place, well-

1 Schnierer E, Ellsmore S and Schnierer S, 2011, *State of Indigenous cultural heritage: Report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities on behalf of the State of the Environment 2011 Committee*, Canberra: DSEWPaC

2 Schnierer E, Ellsmore S and Schnierer S, 2011

3 Battiste, M. and Youngblood Henderson, J., 2000, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge*, Purich Press, Saskatoon

4 Bednarik, 2002, 2006, *Australian Apocalypse. The story of Australia's greatest cultural monument*. Occasional AURA Publication 14, Australian Rock Art Research Association, Inc.: Melbourne

5 José Antonio González Zarandona, 2012, *Heritage as a cultural measure in a postcolonial setting*, University of Melbourne, Art History Program

6 Schnierer E, Ellsmore S and Schnierer S, 2011

7 West Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, 2004, *Kalinga Research Network Report*,

8 Carmen Lawrence, 21 September 2012, *Development at any price? The case of Australia's Indigenous heritage* (available at <http://www.shapingtomorrowworld.org/lawrenceIndig1.html>)

being, and control”,¹ a phenomenon philosopher Glen Albrecht² has described as “solastalgia”, the loss of a sense of place.

France

During three and a half years of the First World War, the German lines remained 1,500 meters northeast of Reims, which suffered 1,051 days of bombing. The cathedral was hit on September 19, 1914. A huge fire engulfed the building, destroying the entire roof.

In town, the news spread quickly: *"The cathedral burns! They burned the cathedral!"* From the four corners of the city, the inhabitants started flowing towards the centre. They came out of the caves where they heard the muffled sound of explosions and waited in anguish for the end of the storm. They were unaware of whether there was a threat of further danger as the bombing might have resumed at any time. *"The look is terrifying, a witness says. On the left, in front, right rear, and even, it is a sea of fire. One cannot imagine such a sad sight, as poignant. The devastation is so great that many inhabitants can not stop crying. "*

Journalist Marc Blanc, also told of the huge fire: *"This firework changing colours: blue, green, orange as smelting, this huge column of smoke yellowish modelled as an oblique sun and, in the distance range by the wind, signed on sky background the German shame ..."*

Mr. Aubert, another witness, wrote: *"At half past five, the roof is completely burned. We can see through the windows of the nave, red lights assuming that within everything burns. It is hard to difficulty of this terrifying spectacle that will never leave our memories."*³

The monument would be damaged several times further, notably in April 1917 and July 1918. Overnight during the winter of 1918-1919 the vault of the prestigious Basilica of St. Remi, shaken by the shells for nearly four years, collapsed.

Community Impact

The destruction caused a painful stupor. The crowd wanted to kill the German wounded prisoners who were in the cathedral, who were saved thanks to the energetic interventions of priests. The destruction of the monument led to a strong wave of emotion across the country.

After the bombing of the Cathedral of Reims, Albert Londres said in "Le Matin": *"She is standing, but panting A horrible hand was flayed alive."*

The press exacerbated the feelings of the people: *"The Germans were suddenly plagued by vandalism fever... It is clear that all the shells that fell into this space were fired at the cathedral, the only target that the German gunners could clearly distinguish. Modern Vandals cannot give justification or excuse to their acts. We regret the arsenal of human laws did not provide an adequate punishment for such a crime."*⁴

The determination of the Germans to destroy Reims cathedral upset public opinion, making people believe the enemy was "barbaric" and soulless, and in its wake the bombing encouraged nationalism and exasperation.

1 Connor, L., Albrecht, G., Higginbotham, N., Freeman, S., Smith, W, 2004, *Environmental change and Human health in Upper Hunter communities of New South Wales, Australia*, EcoHealth, 1,

2 Albrecht, G., Sartore, G., Connor, L., Higginbotham, N., Freeman, S., Kelly, B., Stain, H., Tonna, A. and Pollard, G., 2007, *Solastalgia: The distress caused by environmental change*, Proceedings of the RANZCP Social and Cultural Psychiatry Creating Futures Conference, Australasian Psychiatry, 15 (Supplement): S95-8.

3 Pellus D., 2001,

4 Barlett F. A., 1914

Jerusalem

Constantine, the first emperor to identify with Christianity, built the original Church of the Holy Sepulchre, acting on the research of his mother Helena. When she identified the cave in which Christ was thought to have lain, her son ordered the bishop of Jerusalem to begin building: *"It will be well, therefore, for your sagacity to make such arrangements and provision of all things needful for the work, that not only the church itself as a whole may surpass all others whatsoever in beauty, but that the details of the building may be of such a kind that the fairest structures in any city of the empire may be excelled by this."*

In his biography of Constantine, Eusebius wrote, *"This monument, therefore, first of all, as the chief part of the whole, is the emperor's zealous magnificence beautified with rare columns, and profusely enriched with the most splendid decorations of every kind."*

The Persians destroyed the magnificent edifice in 614, but it was partly restored- only to be ruined again by the Caliph al-Hakim four hundred years later. In the year 1009, al-Hakim, the Caliph of Egypt, ordered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to be destroyed. Workmen obeyed, and Yahia ibn Sa'id, an Islamic historian, wrote: *"...the holy deed commenced on Tuesday, the fifth day before the end of the month of Safar of the year 400 of the Egira."*

The demolition of this site began with the empty tomb where Jesus had allegedly been buried, and continued with the dome. The destruction was not total, however, because as the high parts fell, rubble blocked the workmen from getting at the lower parts. For close to forty years, Christians were forbidden to visit the site.

A treaty between Byzantium and the Muslims allowed Christians to rebuild the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and pilgrimages were again authorized about forty years after al-Hakim's "holy deed." The new structure was much more modest than the original and the destruction had sealed a deep antagonism between the two communities.

In 1064, Seljuk Turks took Jerusalem and totally banned Christian pilgrims' access to the holy city and pilgrims' massacres took place.¹ This persecution of pilgrims and the souvenir of the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre would later become a strong argument for the crusade.

¹ Jacques Heers, 1995, *Libérer Jérusalem : La première croisade*, Paris, Perrin

RECENT CASE STUDIES OF DESTRUCTION

Afghanistan

The Buddha's of Bamiyan were two 6th century monumental statues of standing Buddhas carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamiyan valley in the Hazarajat region. Various Muslim leaders attempted several times to destroy the Bamiyan statues in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

In 1998, a Taliban commander operating in the area announced his intention to blow up the Buddhas. He drilled holes in the Buddhas' heads for explosives. He was prevented from taking further action by the local governor and a direct order of Mullah Omar, supreme leader of the Taliban. In July 1999, Mullah Mohammed Omar issued a decree in favour of the preservation of the Bamiyan Buddha statues, stating that: *"The government considers the Bamiyan statues as an example of a potential major source of income for Afghanistan from international visitors."* The Taliban stated that the Bamiyan Buddhas should not be destroyed but protected.

However, Afghanistan's radical clerics began a campaign to crack down on "un-Islamic" segments of Afghan society. The Taliban soon banned all forms of imagery, music and sports, including television, in accordance with what they considered to be a strict interpretation of Sharia law.

On February 26, 2001, the official propaganda medium of the Taliban movement, the radio station 'Voice of Sharia', started broadcasting the fatwa issued by the Mullah Omar to *"destroy all the idols"*.

UNESCO promoted a general mobilization to stop the destruction with several appeals to the Taliban to halt the destruction. A number of national and international delegations tried to reach Kandahar to negotiate with Mullah Mohammad Omar. Nonetheless, between March 6 and 7, 2001, while the peak of the diplomatic effort was taking place to persuade the fundamentalists to spare the statues, the systematic demolition of the Buddha's began.¹ Mullah Mohammed Omar stated: *"Muslims should be proud of smashing idols. It has given praise to Allah that we have destroyed them."*

International Impact

Afghanistan's Buddhist population no longer exists but the destruction deeply affected Buddhist countries and the Chinese, Japanese and Sri Lankan delegates were the most strident advocates for preserving the Buddhas.

All Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) states – including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, three countries that officially recognized the Taliban government – joined the protest to spare the monuments. Saudi Arabia and the UAE condemned the destruction as *"savage"*, while the Pakistani president said that it was un-Islamic and unprecedented.

The UN General Assembly strongly condemned the *"issuance of this despicable decree and the subsequent destruction of statues"*, which was considered *"definitely anti-Islamic, anti-cultural and anti-Afghan"*.²

The iconoclastic fatwa was issued in complete contradiction with a previous one that guaranteed respect and protection to all pre-Islamic art. The real reasons behind this sudden change were seen as an increasing influence of Arab fighters led by Osama Bin Laden. The Taliban were seen as moving from a regional agenda to ambitions for a global jihad against the entire non-Islamic world.³

1 Bouchenaki, M., 2011

2 UN 9 March 2011

3 La Piscopia, P., 2011

This destruction branded the Taliban as a symbol of barbarism. International opinion and many Muslims were ready for a war in Afghanistan to remove the Taliban, who did not share principles of common humanity, amongst them the globalising concept of 'cultural heritage'.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

During the 1992-1996 conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, there was widespread destruction of cultural and religious heritage. Of the 161 Ottoman-era and Austro-Hungarian-era mosques, more than 96 percent (155 mosques) were either heavily damaged or destroyed. Among the 71 mosques that were listed monuments, 18 were heavily damaged while 48 were almost or entirely destroyed. Only 5 of the 71 listed mosques survived the war lightly damaged. Virtually no minarets survived the 1992-1996 war intact in the parts of Bosnia controlled by Bosnian Serb forces. The damage to these monuments was clearly the result of attacks directed against them, rather than incidental to the fighting. Evidence of this includes signs of blast damage indicating explosives were placed inside the mosques or inside the stairwells of minarets; many mosques were burnt down.¹

As in the case of the mosques, Catholic churches of historic and cultural importance appear to have been disproportionately targeted. All but 1 of the 7 Roman Catholic churches that were under legal protection (due to being listed monuments) were heavily damaged or completely destroyed.²

Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka was built in the 16th century and was the second largest mosque in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Early in the morning of May 7, 1993, Bosnian Serb Army troops blocked the central streets of Banja Luka, which also surrounded Ferhadija and Arnaudija mosques. At around 3 a.m., these two mosques were dynamited. Arnaudija Mosque was reduced to rubble. Ferhadija Mosque was initially more strongly built than Arnaudija and further strengthened after the 1969 earthquake with reinforced concrete belts and iron bars inside the minaret. However, the troops piled more explosives onto what was still standing and also used pneumatic drills, reducing the 500-year-old monument to gravel.³

Community Impact

In 2005, UNESCO supported the initiative of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina to reconstruct three symbolic religious sites destroyed by war: the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral in Mostar and the Catholic Plehan monastery in the town of Derventa and the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka.

The town of Banja Luka had 16 mosques, all of which were destroyed. The townspeople grieved over the loss of all the mosques, but over Ferhadija Mosquemost of all. The Banja Luka inhabitants who survived the war carried the memory of their beloved Ferhadija through creative pieces of work such as essays, poems, drawings and paintings.⁴

But the Ferhadija Mosque rehabilitation is difficult and shows a deep division between the communities. On the day celebrating the cornerstone of the mosque being placed, more than 1,000 Bosnian Serbs broke through a police cordon and attacked people at a ceremony. Protesters chanted, "*This is Serbia*" and, "*We don't want a mosque*". The Serbs beat visitors and set Muslim prayer rugs on fire. To insult the Muslims, the Serbs chased a pig onto the site where the mosque stood. They climbed on top of the Islamic centre, burned a flag there and hoisted the Bosnian Serb flag.⁵

1 Riedlmayer A., 2002(a)

2 Ibid

3 Riedlmayer A., 2002(b)

4 ICCROM, 2012, Medina Hadžihasanović-Katana, *The reappearance of Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka*.

5 The New-York times,2001

China

In 1956 a rebellion against the Chinese occupation was led by noblemen and monasteries. Initially there was considerable success for Tibetan guerrilla fighters. In 1959, China's military crackdown on rebels and guerrilla warfare continued in the country for several years until, starting in 1956, in Kham and Amdo and, in 1959, in Central Tibet, monasteries were systematically looted of valuable artefacts, books were burned, and the buildings dismantled and destroyed. Teams came to extract precious stones and metallurgists arranged for the removal of metal objects. The walls were dynamited and wooden pillars and beams were removed. Ruined monasteries were turned into stables and pigsties.¹

By 1976 only some eight monasteries remained, most apparently having been destroyed between 1955 and 1961. Of the 6,259 monasteries in Tibet before the Chinese occupation, only eight remained in 1976.² Among those that were destroyed were Samye, Ganden, Sakya, Tsurphu, Mindroling, and Menri. The original Sera Monastery is a complex of structures founded in 1419 and was one of the largest in Lhasa. In 1959, the Sera Jey Monastery was destroyed in a bombardment, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of monks, as well as the destruction of ancient texts and the loss of innumerable, invaluable, ancient and antique works of art.

Drepung is the largest of all Tibetan monasteries and is located on the Gambo Utse Mountain, five kilometres from the western suburb of Lhasa. It was founded in 1416. About 40% of the old monastic town was destroyed after the Chinese arrived in Lhasa in 1951, though luckily the chief buildings were preserved.³

Founded in 1419, being the farthest from Lhasa of the three university monasteries, Ganden had a smaller population with some 6,000 monks in the early 20th century. It contained more than two dozen major chapels with large Buddha statues. The largest chapel was capable of seating 3,500 monks. Ganden Monastery was completely destroyed during the rebellion of 1959. In 1966 it was severely shelled by Red Guard artillery and monks then had to dismantle the remains.⁴

Community Impact

The Cultural Revolution that was launched in 1966 was a catastrophe for Tibet. Large numbers of Tibetans died violent deaths and most monasteries were destroyed. Tibetan resentment towards the Chinese deepened. Committed to their Buddhist heritage, Tibetans are rebuilding their monasteries and recommencing their traditions of pilgrimage. Almost all of the rebuilt or renovated monasteries were the result of the personal initiatives of Tibetans who contributed their own finances and labour.⁵

It seems that the destruction of monasteries is continuing after the cycle of protest and demonstrations by monks for Tibet's independence in 1988 following Chinese repression.⁶ In 1995, monasteries branded 'unpatriotic' were closed down and some were demolished, claiming that they had been constructed without permission. The authorities dismantled the Shongchen nunnery in Shigatse, Drag Yerpa hermitage and the Rakhor nunnery.⁷ Furthermore, Tibetan journalists recently reported that the Chinese authorities have begun demolishing the older buildings in the ancient capital of Lhasa, including one of the most important and holy Buddhist sites of the city, the Jokhang Temple.

1 Malville J. McKim (2001) *The Monasteries of Tibet: Tragedy and Heroism*, University of Colorado, (available at <http://www.colorado.edu/APS/landscapes/tibet/tragedyheroism.htm>)

2 Craig, Mary, 1993, *Tears of Blood: A Cry for Tibet*, INDUS, HarperCollins Publishers, Calcutta

3 Dowman, K., 1988, *The Power-places of Central Tibet*, Routledge & Kegan Paul

4 Ibid

5 Ibid

6 Central Tibetan Administration, Department of Information and International Relations, *Tibet under communist China-50 Years*, India

7 Yeshe Choesang, 09 May 2013, *China destroys the ancient Buddhist symbols of Lhasa City in Tibet*, The Tibet Post International

Croatia

During the 1992-1995 Croatian War of Independence, the country's religious cultural heritage suffered greatly. Historian Alex Bellamy reports that by as early as March 1992: "*119 Catholic sacral objects in the Franciscan province of Split had been destroyed or severely damaged. By June 1994, around 40% of churches in occupied Croatia had been destroyed or damaged and in 1995 the Church provided detailed evidence that 1,426 Catholic churches in Croatia had been severely damaged or destroyed.*"¹

But the war also affected Serbian heritage. The Church of St. Nicholas or Karlovac Cathedral is a Serbian Orthodox church located in Karlovac, in central Croatia. Construction on the original church (which was later destroyed in 1993) began in 1785 and was completed in 1787. It was then dedicated to Saint Nicholas.

The church was devastated during World War II, and then again in 1991 during the War in Croatia, when mines were detonated inside the church by Croatian forces. The church was repeatedly blown up and robbed until it was finally destroyed in 1993. In 2007, the church was completely renovated.

The church of Pentecost in Vinkovci is a Serbian Orthodox church in eastern Croatia. The original church was built in 1793. After war planes of the Yugoslav People's Army bombed targets in the centre of Vinkovci on 24 September 1991, they badly damaged the local Catholic rectory. A day later, in retaliation, the old Church of Pentecost was mined and razed to the ground after being robbed. The iconostasis and inventory was stolen and the church bells were missing for a long period of time. A parking lot stood in the church's place until the beginning of the reconstruction effort.

During the initial phase of negotiations on the renewal with the local authorities, a wooden cross was erected at the location of the old church. In 2007, the building of a new, identical Church of Pentecost began. The final blessing and reinstatement of functions happened in 2012. In the meantime, the church restored a part of its looted original iconostasis, and an anonymous source reported the location of the old bells, which were then re-installed.

Cyprus

In 1974, Turkey conducted a military invasion of the Republic of Cyprus and occupied nearly 40 percent of the island. Cyprus has remained divided by army forces since the invasion. The churches have been subject to violent and systematic desecration and destruction. Many Byzantine churches have suffered irreparable damage, and many cemeteries have been desecrated or destroyed.

It's difficult to give an exhaustive list of buildings affected by the conflict and population displacement, but according to the declaration of the European Parliament: "*133 churches, chapels and monasteries that are located in the northern part of Cyprus*" have been affected and "*more than 15,000 icons, have been illegally removed and their location remains unknown*".²

The Holy Monastery of the Prophet Elias, near the village of Ayia Marina Skyllouras in the Nicosia district, which was built in 1735, was bombed by the Turkish air force; it caught fire and was badly damaged in 1974. Ayios Procopios church, in the village of Synkrasi in the Famagusta district, from the 11th or 12th century, was desecrated after 1974 by Turkish occupation forces. The iconostasis was destroyed and portable icons were stolen. Bellapais Abbey is situated to the southeast of Kyrenia and

1 Alex J. Bellamy, 2003, *The Formation of Croatian National Identity: A Centuries-old Dream*, p.159 (available at http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/The_Formation_of_Croatian_National_Identity.html?id=T3PqrrnrE5EC&redir_esc=y)

2 Strasbourg: European Parliament, 2006

it is one of the most important Gothic monuments on the island. The small church of Bellapais was also looted.¹

The monastery of St. Panteleimon in Myrrou dates to the 18th century. The monastery's church was plundered and is now part of a military camp. The church of the monastery of Panagia ton Katharon near Larnaca tis Lapithou was plundered, as was the church of the monastery of Panagia of Tochni, near Mandres village in the Ammochostos District.

In 1989, it was reported that the Turkish army demolished the church of Panagia Avgasida, situated near the village of Aloa in the Ammochostos district. The church dated back to the 14th and 15th centuries. The monastery of St. Makar, situated near Halefka village, dates to the 15th century and was looted, vandalized and partially destroyed.^{2,3}

Community Impact

The government of the Republic of Cyprus denounces the continuous destruction of the Greek Cypriot cultural heritage in the island's occupied areas, describing it as “*systematic and widespread*”.⁴ Often these destructions are associated with denunciation of the ethnic cleansing of the Greek Cypriot community from northern Cyprus.⁵

But the dominant heritage discourse in Cyprus concerning preservation and destruction, and its implications for ethno-cultural identity construction and promotion, is more complex than commonly presented. Specifically, ethnic conflict has not only been responsible for heritage destruction but also for its preservation- an unintended consequence of ‘freezing’ development.⁶ Turkish Cypriot authors report that the destruction of churches was “*abandoned after the conflict*”.⁷ An English author even severely criticized the different reports describing the destruction of Cyprus' Christian heritage by the Turkish, saying that often “*witnesses were Apostles*” who presented Greek Cypriot propaganda as fact, using the terms of “*crimes against humanity*”, “*national elimination*”⁸ and “*genocide*”⁹ when his documentation elicited the accusation of encouraging genocide, and that the destroyed churches were “*abandoned buildings, or forgotten buildings*”.¹⁰

The issue of abandonment or deliberate destruction of churches was mentioned in several reports^{11 12} and is forming an important agenda in the case of the Cyprus conflict. Even if the numbers of buildings affected can be minimized, the vandalism and destruction are real according to the European Parliament which “*condemns the pillage of Greek Orthodox churches and monasteries and the removal of their ecclesiastical items*”¹³ and “*condemns the systematic policy of expunging the past and the Hellenic and Christian culture pursued by Turkey*”.¹⁴

1 Lefkios Z., Costas N., Miltiadou M., Mammidou, M., Coufoudakis V., 2012

2 Department of Antiquities, Republic of Cyprus, 2013

3 CCEAA and CCTA, 2005

4 Ambassador Nikos Emiliou, Cyprus' Permanent Representative to the UN, UN General Assembly, Wednesday, December 12

5 Lefkios Z., Costas N., Miltiadou M., Mammidou, M., Coufoudakis V., 2012

6 Constantinou, C. M. and Hatay, M., 2010

7 ICCROM, 2012, Yüceer H., Protection of abandoned churches in Northern Cyprus: Challenges for reuse

8 Nikephoros, Metropolitan Bishop of Kykkos and Tylliria, *Preface*, in Charalampos Chotzakoglou, 2008

9 Demetrios Triantaphyllopoulos *Prologue to Documentation of Atrocities*, in Charalampos Chotzakoglou, 2008

10 Hardy, S A., 2011

11 Grieboski and Porter, 2009

12 Jansen M., 2010

13 Strasbourg: European Parliament, 2006

14 Strasbourg: European Parliament, 1988

Nonetheless, the recognition and condemnation of violations of human rights against Greek Cypriots does not require the denial of violations of human rights of Turkish Cypriots, because denial distorts history, promotes misunderstanding and distrust, and thus prolongs conflict and injustice. In southern Cyprus, Greek Cypriot paramilitaries and local nationalist extremists demolished 11 mosques, for example completely destroying the Kutrafa Mosque.¹

Egypt

In August 2013, after the military crackdown, a monumental attack was made on churches throughout Egypt. Many Muslims opposed the violent response against Christians, and some Muslims in Upper Egypt even reportedly helped Christians to defend churches.

The Monastery of the Virgin and Abram church in the village of Delga in Middle Egypt are among the most important sites that were burned and looted. Located near the town of Deir Mouas in Minya, the monastery contains three churches.

Also very significant was the Church of the Virgin Lady. This church was built underground at the time of Roman persecution of Christians in the 5th century. The Church of the Virgin contained among the treasures an ancient church iconostasis and many ancient icons. The old church was looted before being burned along with two others, including various administrative buildings and festivities venues.²

Community Impact

The destruction in Dalga in the governorate of Minya in the south of Egypt had a strong impact on the Coptic community. Almost 5 million people reside in the governate, among them a little more than 2 million Christians. Already several families have left the city.

A French journalist, Jean-Louis Le Touzet, went to the city and collected the Coptic community's reactions after the destruction in Al-Minya.³

Peter, 25 years old, said: *"Until then, the Muslims Brothers humbled me as a Christian. It is almost a matter of habit. A game for them. This is the life of a Coptic: Put up and shut up."*

Zarif Boschara is the accountant of a burned Orthodox school: *"The people who did this want to separate us so that we withdraw into ourselves...I feel a break inside. There is something in me that broke ... I do not want to say more because I might regret it..."*

For Bishop Makarios, an Orthodox patriarch: *"If justice is not done, then the sense of impunity will rise... We are here; we are in the situation of the early Christians in the catacombs, persecuted Christians. But these attacks confirm our faith".* He concluded: *"It is not the loss of a church that hurts, we will rebuild it. But how do these people who have lost everything will rebuild their life? How will they be able to live again with their Muslim neighbours, some of which are inflammatory?"*

Father Mohsen from Cairo said: *"I fear that, as Christians, we are being plunged into a dark decade"*.

All these reactions reflect how the destruction of these buildings deeply affects the Coptics and profoundly affects their dignity. These destructive acts seriously endangered the 'living together' of Egyptian communities, creating barriers of misunderstanding, fear, anxiety and withdrawal. Father Magdy concluded: *"There is something in each attack ... that is irretrievably lost. As if this country every time lost a piece of itself."*

1 CCEAA and CCTA, 2005

2 Doaa Elhami, 2013

3 Le Touzet J.L, 2013

India

The city of Ayodhya in state of Uttar Pradesh is regarded by Hindus to be the birthplace of the God-King Rama and is regarded as one of India's most sacred and religious sites. In 1528, after the Mughal invasion, a mosque was built by the invaders, who destroyed a pre-existing temple of Rama at the site.

On 6 December 1992, Hindu fundamentalists organised a religious ceremony to reclaim the land and to symbolically start the building of a temple at the sacred site. About 150,000 people had assembled to witness the ceremony. The angry crowd soon stormed the site and attacked the structure. Using only hand-held implements, the crowd reduced the substantial structure to rubble. The 16th century Babri mosque was entirely destroyed.

Community Impact

The demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya traumatized the population and generated a wave of violence across India. During this wave of religious violence throughout the country at least 2,000 people were killed, mostly Muslims. The riots spread to cities like Mumbai, Surat, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Delhi and several others. The Mumbai Riots alone caused the death of around 900 people, and 60,000 to 150,000 people, mostly Muslims, fled Mumbai.

The international reaction in neighbouring Muslim countries criticized the Government of India for failing to stop the demolition and subsequent communal violence, but also included widespread retaliatory attacks on Hindus by Muslims in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Pakistan, strikes were held across the country while Muslim mobs attacked and destroyed as many as 30 temples in one day. In Bangladesh, Muslim mobs attacked and burnt down Hindu temples, shops and houses across the country. Ten people were reportedly killed, with many more Hindu women being raped.

Following the attacks, there was a rise in India of the development of groups linked to Islamic extremism: the Tablighi Jamaat and the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind (JIH). The demolition and the ensuing riots were among the major factors behind the 1993 Mumbai bombings and jihadists cited demolition of the Babri Mosque as a reason for conducting terrorist attacks.¹

A study of the history of India reminds us that the grief caused by the desecration of some shrines by fundamentalists, should not make us forget the immense benefits that India has learned from its generally cordial relations with Islam. As the present situation clearly shows, co-existence is not enough. Efforts are needed to get to know people of other religious beliefs and understand them in greater detail. To achieve this, inter-religious dialogue and cooperation for the common good are the most effective tools.²

Israel/Palestine

The destruction of Christian and Muslim holy places should be seen in the context of the wide scale destruction of more than 400 Palestinian villages inside the borders of the new Jewish state during, and for many years after, the 1948 war. In some instances, places of worship were destroyed along with private homes by Israeli army wrecking crews.

The Catholic church of al-Bassa, a northern Galilean village dating back at least 200 years, was a fine two-storey building in the Byzantine style. The second floor has completely disappeared into rubble, and the rest of the structure is in critical danger of collapse. No repair is permitted because the land is owned by the state and located in the middle of what is now an industrial estate.

1 Wendy K., 2009

2 Jackson P., 1993

In Sarafand, a destroyed village near Haifa, only the mosque was left standing. The building was approximately 100 years old and has been referred to as one of the best-engineered mosques in Palestine. Efforts by local Muslims to repair it were completed in 2000, but the authorities sent in bulldozers in the middle of the night on July 25, 2000 to raze the mosque entirely.

However, only a few holy places were entirely destroyed in 1948; most were left standing while the homes around them were destroyed. The fact that churches and mosques were treated differently than other buildings appears to be evidence that Israel recognised that places of worship had a different status. However, their treatment subsequently suggests that, while Israel may be aware of international sensitivities on this issue, it does not always abide by the consecrated nature of these sites.¹

In April 2002, Israeli tanks moved into Bethlehem. Two hundred Palestinians, some armed, fled to the Church of the Nativity, built around the cave where, according to Christian tradition, Jesus was born, and the nearby convent of Santa Maria. The Israelis then said that the Palestinians holed up in the Basilica were shooting at soldiers and imposed a siege of the church for 39 days. The Israeli soldiers broke down the back door of the basilica and fighting took place in the Franciscan convent against Palestinian militants, many of whom, contrary to widespread rumours, were Christian.²

During the siege Israeli President Moshe Katsav sent a message to Pope John Paul II which said: *"The State of Israel has the highest regard for all religious communities located within its territory. Therefore, in the present context, all members of the armed forces were ordered not to shoot and not to violate the sanctity of a church. For the particular case of the Church of the Nativity, the Israeli government takes great care that the Church does not become a hotbed of fighting. While operations are conducted in the vicinity, the Israeli Army has not violated the church"*.

After the siege, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was purified by a ritual liturgical "washing" which usually only takes place a week before Christmas.

During the same Israeli offensive the city of Nablus was bombed and shelled by Israeli military forces for eighteen days. The infrastructure and buildings of the entire city were affected, and the two-millennia-old historic core suffered the most. Al Khadra Mosque, the oldest mosque in Nablus (converted in 1187 from church to mosque) was largely destroyed.

In this case, the Israeli army didn't show any respect to Islamic religious heritage sites and mosques were destroyed *"without military necessity"* and it even *"frequently appeared to be wanton destruction"*.³ Although the World Cultural Heritage Committee meeting at UNESCO headquarters in April 11, 2002 regretted Israel's destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage sites,⁴ the destruction went largely unreported and unnoticed by the international media. The international response to the destruction of Nablus was felt to be lacking by most Palestinians.⁵

Iraq

In all parts of the world cultural property is seen as a symbol of the identity of an ethnic group or nation, and is endangered when others want to deny its existence or demonstrate its weaknesses. This was precisely the case in Iraq with the destruction of the Al-Askariyya in Samara shrine for Shiites a few meters from the temple of the twelfth Imam where believers come on pilgrimage.

Since 2007, Samarra has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Great Mosque of Samarra was built in the 9th century. In 2005, the top of the minaret was damaged by a bomb. Insurgents reportedly

1 The Arab Association for Human Rights, 2005

2 Zerrouky Hassane, Barbancey Pierre, April 6, 2002, *Nativity in turmoil*, L'Humanité

3 Amnesty International, 2002

4 ICOMOS Palestine, 2003

5 ICCROM, 2012, Sherin Sahouri, The destruction of the old city of Nablus in 2002

attacked the tower because U.S. troops had been using it as a lookout position. Anti-American insurgents had attacked the mosque to incite Sunni-Shiite violence and further destabilize the country.

Also in Samara, Al-Askari mosque is one of the holiest sites in Shia Islam. In 2006, the golden dome of the Al-Askari Mosque was destroyed by bombings. In 2007, suspected al-Qa'eda insurgents attacked the mosque again and destroyed the two minarets that flanked the dome's ruins. Later in the same year, the clock tower was blown up.

It has been noted that these attacks occurred during a string of bombings in 2007 against major Shi'ite shrines, including two car bomb attacks in Karbala: one near the Imam Husayn Shrine (which killed 36 people and wounded 168) and the other near the Imam Abbas shrine, the second-holiest site in Shi'ite Islam, which killed at least 58 people and wounded 169.

Community Impact

The consequences were severe for Iraq, with the attack causing many Shiite protests. Widespread violence followed throughout Iraq, in which thousands of people were killed and more than 170 Sunni mosques were attacked by Shia mobs.

The Shiite religious leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who rarely speaks publicly, called for calm and a week of mourning. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani condemned the bombing but called on *"believers to exercise self-restraint and avoid any vengeful act that would target innocent people or the holy places of others."* Sistani later condemned reprisal attacks on Sunni mosques, demanding a halt to such violence.¹

In the afternoon after the attack Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said: *"I call on all civilians, believers and clergy to talk to people about the necessity of self-control and wisdom to foil the scheme of those evil ones who want to make use of this crime for political reasons."*

Radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr vowed revenge against Sunni militants. *"We're not just going to condemn and protest, we will act against these activists. If the government is not doing its job in defending the people, we are ready to do so"*, reported one of his spokesmen.²

Sunni and Shiite clerics then agreed to prohibit killing members of the two communities and banned attacks on each other's mosques.

The attacks against mosques in Samarra were the beginning of an important religious conflict between Shiite and Sunni. Nearly 1.13 million Iraqis have fled their homes since 2006, especially during the sectarian war of 2006-2007.³

1 Sophie Bernier Ouellet, 2006, *Attentats à Samarra : La guerre civile couve en Irak*, Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines, Université de Sherbrooke

2 Ibid

3 Le Monde, 24.09.2013, *Irak : un responsable de l'ONU évoque un "nettoyage ethnique"* (available at http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/09/24/nouvelles-violences-en-irak-un-responsable-de-l-onu-evoque-un-nettoyage-ethnique_3483911_3218.htm)

Kosovo

In 1998-1999, local Albanian cultural heritage was targeted, looted and destroyed by Serbian forces. The large-scale destruction, in both urban and rural areas, resulted in the loss or damage to thousands of cultural heritage monuments and sites, among them more than 200 mosques, a dozen Catholic churches, and hundreds of others.¹ Many authors assert that *“the destruction of Kosovo’s non-Serb architectural heritage was a planned and methodical element of ethnic cleansing”*.²

In 1999, when NATO bombing began, several religious monuments were intentionally destroyed or damaged by the air strikes. Among them were: the Gračanica monastery; the Dečani monastery, and Peć Patriarchate.³ Some churches were also destroyed by Albanian rebels, such as the church of the Virgin Hodegitria.⁴

While Orthodox cultural heritage emerged relatively unscathed during the war, the situation changed for the worse after the war had ended, when an important destruction campaign against Serbian architectural cultural heritage began. Some of the most emblematic monasteries and Orthodox churches were the targets of the crowd. In Prizren, for example, all the Serbian Orthodox sanctuaries were set on fire: the diocesan house, the theological faculty, the 14th century Holy Mother Church of Ljeviska, the Holy Archangels monastery and also the Church of Saint Savior.⁵

In Musutiste, the 14th century church of the Virgin Hodegetria and the 15th century Holy Trinity Church were destroyed. The 15th century Orthodox monastery was "levelled with explosives". The St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in Prekoruplje was razed to the ground and 16th century icons from the church were lost. The Serbian Orthodox Monastery of the Archangel of Vitina, built in the 14th century, was burned. St. Elijah Orthodox Church, built in 1834 in Vucitrn, was blown up.^{6,7} The long-list seems difficult to establish as churches in rural areas abandoned by the fleeing Serb minority were easy targets for revenge.

Community Impact

This violence outraged Serbian newspapers and officials such as Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, who described the attacks as *“planned and coordinated ... this was an attempted pogrom and ethnic cleansing against Kosovo’s Serbs”*.⁸ Serbs accuse ethnic Albanian rebels of systematically destroying places sacred to Orthodox worshippers. The resentment of the Serbs was particularly strong because in several cases this destruction appeared *“under the noses of peacekeepers”*. Cultural heritage sites were protected by international forces, but it seems that they were also affected: the Church of St. Elias in Cernica was destroyed by explosives just 70 meters from an US checkpoint. The 14th century Church of St. Nicholas in Djurakovac was destroyed when KFOR troops from the United Arab Emirates were supposed to protect church property. Serbians accused KFOR, NATO, and US of complicity in the church destructions.⁹

Today, the situation is still complex. For the new Kosovo government, *“protection of cultural heritage has assumed a high profile on the political national and international agenda, with much attention paid to the protection of Serbian Orthodox churches. Damaged Orthodox monasteries and*

1 Kosovo Institute for the Protection of Monuments, 2007

2 Bevan, 2006, 85

3 ICCROM, 2012, Laurence Lepetit, *The UNESCO restoration project for St. Savior Church in Prizren*

4 Los Angeles Times, September 22, 1999, *“Christian Sites Being Decimated in Kosovo”*

5 ICCROM, 2012, Laurence Lepetit, *The UNESCO restoration project for St. Savior Church in Prizren*

6 Keston, July 28, 2000, *Kosovo: Dynamiting of Orthodox Churches Continues,*

7 Carl K. Savich, 2002, *The Systematic Destruction of Orthodox Christian Churches and Cemeteries in Kosovo-Metohija and Macedonia*

8 Anon, 2004

9 Abley Mark, 2000

churches have been repaired or reconstructed.” And the Kosovo government complains that “the other parts of Kosovo’s heritage remain neglected, in danger and in an alarming state of decay.”¹

Libya

Following the revolution in Libya a campaign of destruction of Sufi heritage was started by Salafists. In November 2011 the 15th century Sidi Nasr shrine in Tripoli was destroyed. In Derna, the mosque was bombed, destroying the grave of Zuhayr Ibn Qais Al-Balawi, a 7th century Arab commander,² and the Islamic Centre of Sheikh Abdussalam Al-Asmar from the 15th century in Zliten was subject to mortar fire.³

In Tripoli, security forces watched passively as militants with bulldozers levelled the shrine of al-Shaab al-Dahmani, a venerated Sufi saint, in broad daylight. In Benghazi, on the other hand, locals fought back, killing three of the militants who were assaulting a holy place.⁴

The protection of this heritage started to be seen as an important *“to restore national identity and to function as a binding factor for all tribes”* in chaotic Libya.⁵ In August 2012, when Sidi Sha'ab Mosque in Tripoli was bulldozed by Salafists Libya's Interior Minister resigned following criticism that he had not handled the attacks appropriately.⁶

Locals in the districts of Tajura, east of Tripoli, decided to set up neighborhood committees to protect the Sufi shrines in the area. The government started to tackle the issue saying that the government would not hesitate to take a firm position against the violence, and would subject the perpetrators to prosecution.

The government stated that the destruction of buildings with scientific, cultural, and historical importance and the desecration of Muslim cemeteries was not only *“an unacceptable, reprehensible and deplorable act”*, but also against religious custom and law.

The Libyan Fatwa Authority issued a letter in which the Mufti of Libya condemned the act of digging up graves, stating that such an act was not *“religiously permissible or decent”* because *“it violated the sanctity of the dead and their living families”*. The letter also stated that, *“The demolition of ancient graves and mosques is contrary to the sunnah of the Prophet”*.⁷

Finally in March 2013, when the 15th century mausoleum of Sidi Al-Andlusi was bombed, the attack was condemned by the head of Tripoli's council.⁸

1 ICCROM, 2012, Gjejlane Hoxha, The impact of conflict on cultural heritage in Kosovo

2 Libya Herald, 2012 (available at <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/07/09/breaking-news-derna-mosque-bombed/>)

3 Libya Herald 2012 (available at <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/08/24/major-sufi-shrine-damaged-in-fighting-in-zliten/>)

4 Richard Schiffman, *Why are they targeting the Sufis?*, (available at <http://newint.org/blog>)

5 ANCBS, 2011

6 Human Rights Watch, 2012 (available at: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/31/libya-stop-attacks-sufi-sites>)

7 Tunisia Live (available at <http://www.tunisia-live.net/recovery/libyan-political-and-religious-leaders-condemn-attack-on-sufi-shrines/>)

8 Huffington Post, 2013 (available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/28/libya-shrine-bombing-sufi-mausoleum_n_2971902.html)

Macedonia

When the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) invaded Macedonia from Kosovo in 2001, Orthodox churches were targeted for destruction and desecration. The 14th century St. George Orthodox Church in Golema Rechica was burned down. The St. Atanasije Orthodox Monastery in Leshok was totally destroyed with explosives by UCK troops. Built in the 13th century, then rebuilt in 1818, the Leshok monastery was one of the oldest Orthodox churches in western Macedonia and had been the cultural and religious centre of Macedonia. The church was on the UNESCO list of World Heritage sites.

The New York Times reported that the monastery, which “*is celebrated in Macedonian folk songs as a place of Christian resistance to the Ottoman Empire*”, was attacked with explosives.¹

Community Impact

The Orthodox community was devastated by the loss of this important monument. Macedonian Government Spokesman Antonio Milososki said about the event: “*This is barbarism.*” The Macedonian Ministry of Culture Press Officer, Oliver Sambevski, was quoted as saying: “*This is a great tragedy to Macedonian culture.*”

The bombing occurred at the end of August 2001, a few days before the September 11th attacks on New York City, and many commentators have then commented that in this attack the “*obvious connection between the destruction of the Buddhas and the Albanian attacks on Orthodox monasteries in the Balkans is the Muslim one*”.

This event was then seen for some commentators as tools to promote the incompatibility of civilizations and inevitable conflict with Muslim communities.²

Mali

In June 2012, Ansar Dine, a group of Islamic militants in Mali, started destroying Sufi architectural heritage: cemeteries and mausoleums of saints in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, several of which were on UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites.

They destroyed dozens of mausoleums, most notably in the cemetery of Djinguereber Mosque, at Sidi Yahya's mausoleum, one of the three "great mosques" in Timbuktu built in the 15th century. The militants also broke down the door to the shrine, which was not supposed to be opened until the end of days. In September 2012, Islamists destroyed the mausoleum of Cheik El-Kebir, which was venerated by people of the Kunta tribe.

Ansar Dine said that: “*The destruction is a divine order. It's our prophet who said that each time that someone builds something on top of a grave, it needs to be pulled back to the ground.*”

Community Impact

A source reported to be affiliated to a local imam was quoted as saying that Ansar Dine had “*raped Timbuktu... It is a crime.*”³

1 New York Times, 2001 (available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/22/world/explosion-wrecks-a-14th-century-monastery.html>)

2 Deliso Christopher, *Barbarism and the Erasure of Culture: The destruction of Sveti Anastasi*, 2001

3 Agence France-Presse, 1 July 2012, *Timbuktu's tombs destroyed by militants*

The Tuareg rebellion group, MNLA, released a statement saying that the destruction was carried out by foreign Islamist groups and that *"the perpetrators of these heinous acts, their sponsors, and those who support them must be made accountable"*.¹

The Malian government called the actions *"destructive fury"*² and *"war crimes"*.³

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference issued a statement that read the sites were *"part of the rich Islamic heritage of Mali and should not be allowed to be destroyed and put in harm's way by bigoted extremist elements."*⁴

Attacks on Sufis and Sufi sites have become routine, not just in Mali, but throughout the Islamic world. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University: *"Sufism is the most powerful antidote to the religious radicalism called fundamentalism, as well as the most important source for responding to the challenges posed by modernism."*

This pervasive influence may be why Sufis have been targets of the fundamentalists, who see their kinder, gentler form of Islam as a standing challenge to their own rigid orthodoxy.⁵

Syria

Under the current conditions of war, we cannot make an exact calculation of the monuments affected by the fighting, but the fact that UNESCO World Heritage sites were among the most affected areas gives an idea of what has occurred. The damage to Syria's heritage is clearly extensive, and the full extent will not be understood for years. World Heritage Sites, national heritage sites and small local heritage sites have all been damaged with equal irreverence.⁶

The destruction of cultural heritage has been committed (intentionally or otherwise) by those on all sides of this conflict, despite the ongoing efforts of the Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums.

In June 2013 the Syrian rebellion group the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented a total number of 1,451 mosques that have been targeted and damaged by the regime throughout the country, 348 of which were completely destroyed. SNHR reported only the destruction of 4 minaret mosques by the rebellion. The report also show video with a case of deliberate destruction of the Shiite mosque 'Hosseiniyeh in Jisr Ash-Shughur area by the jihadist group, Jabhat al-Nusra.

In July 2012, the conflict started in Aleppo when fighters from the surrounding countryside mounted a first offensive there. Since then some of the civil war's most devastating bombing and fiercest fighting has taken place in Aleppo. In the summer, autumn and winter of 2012 house-to-house fighting between rebels and government forces continued, and as of spring 2013 the Syrian army had entrenched itself in the western part of Aleppowhile the rebels stayed in the eastern part with a no man's land between them. As a result of the severe battle, many medieval buildings in the ancient city were destroyed, ruined or burnt in late summer 2012.

The Great Mosque, at the heart of the Old City of Aleppo, was founded by the Umayyad dynasty in 715 on the site of a Byzantine church. The mosque had to be rebuilt after being damaged by a fire in 1159, and again following the Mongol invasion in 1260. The oldest surviving part was the 45 metre

1 Swissinfo.ch, 2 July 2012, *Defiant Mali Islamists pursue wrecking of Timbuktu*

2 Agence France-Presse. 30 June 2012, *Mausolées de Tombouctou démolis: Bamako dénonce une furie destructrice*

3 Agence France-Presse, 30 June 2012, *Mali: au moins 35 morts dans les affrontements islamistes/Touareg à Gao*

4 BBC News, 2012-07-03, *Timbuktu's Sidi Yahia mosque 'attacked by Mali militants*

5, Richard Schiffman, *Why are they targeting the Sufis?*, <http://newint.org/blog>

6 Cunliffe E., 2012

tall minaret, which dated back to 1090. UNESCO describes the World Heritage-listed mosque as one of the most beautiful in the Muslim world.

The mosque fell into rebel hands in 2012, but the surrounding areas still contested. The rebels were reinforced with sandbags on top of the minaret in a sniper position.¹ In October 2012, the mosque was badly damaged by fire during heavy fighting, the minaret was destroyed and other parts of the mosque complex were badly damaged.

A report by the government agency Sana said fighters from the Jabhat al-Nusra group “placed explosive materials in the minaret and the mosque's southern door and set them off”. However, rebel sources said a government tank shell had “*totally destroyed*” the 45m minaret.

In June 2011, after large anti-government demonstrations, confrontations started between protesting residents and Syrian forces in Homs. In February 2012, Syrian government forces carried out a major attack to regain control over the city which was turned into an operation centre for the rebels’ Committees. On 1 March 2012, the Syrian Army had gained control over Homs while lesser clashes continued in other neighbourhoods. In Diwan Bostan neighbourhood, in the old city of Homs, Ottoman mosques, such as Khalid Ibn al-Walid, were destroyed or reduced to a pile of rubble. The Zenar Om, considered one of the oldest known churches was also destroyed.²

The city of Maaloula is situated 55 km northeast of Damascus and is famous for its cave shelters dating from the first centuries of Christianity. The rebels, including jihadists linked to al-Qaeda took control of the city on 9 September 2013. Three days later, the Syrian army entered Maaloula for hunting.

A Syrian officer reported: “*We continue to move slowly but it is very difficult because we cannot bomb this area because of the historical treasures it contains.*”³

Community Impact

The damage extends beyond the purely physical, and is drawn into the moral positions of those involved, either being used as tool to justify themselves or to denigrate the opposition. Some of those involved in the conflict use the damage as an ethical weapon, each side blaming the other, and claiming it is perpetrated in order to discredit them. Blame is traded, and the conflict becomes bitterer. This resonates across the wider global community affected by the conflict, inviting those who might otherwise remain detached to choose sides. It offers those who need little invitation the opportunity to further inflame the situation, both within Syria and throughout the world.⁴

The Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, wrote: “*Protecting culture is a security issue. There can be no lasting peace without respect. Attacks against cultural heritage are attacks against the very identity of communities. They mark a symbolic and real step up in the escalation of a conflict, leading to devastation that can be irreparable and whose impact lasts long after the dust has settled.*”

“*Attacks on the Syrian Heritage make reconciliation much harder in the future. They can hold societies back from turning the page toward peace. So protecting cultural heritage is not a luxury. We cannot leave this for better days, when tensions have cooled. To lay the ground for peace, we must act now to protect culture.*”⁵

1 D’après des photos de l’Association pour la Protection de l’Archéologie Syrienne

2 Association pour la Protection de l’Archéologie Syrienne

3 AFP, 18 September 2013, *Syrie: Maaloula, terrain de chasse des tireurs embusqués*, (available at

4 Cunliffe E., 2012

5 Irina Bokova, New York Times

Tunisia

Having always been esteemed and regarded with affection, Sufi architectural heritage in Tunisia is now threatened by planned acts of destruction which began shortly after the revolution of 2011. Destruction has focused on the “*zaouias*”, mausoleums housing the tombs of patron saints - which serve as important places of pilgrimage for communities.

The first attacks affected monuments in small towns, such as the tombs of Sidi Bou Mendel in Hergla, Sidi Abdelkader in Menzel Bouzalfa at the Cap-Bon and Sidi Bou Said El Béji in Sidi Bou Said near Carthage. Threats have since spread to the mausoleum of Saida Manoubia in the Manouba, near Tunis, and even to the mausoleum of Sidi Sahbi in Kairouan, which is at present under military protection.¹

These sacred places are being attacked by fanatical followers of a strict interpretation of Islam, which has always been foreign to Tunisia and its inhabitants, who have always lived in a spirit of great tolerance towards other religions and spiritual practices.

The Sufi heritage occupies a special place in the daily lives of Tunisian communities and represents an integral part of their identity and collective memory. Any damage to this heritage will harm the identity of this community and inflict irreparable loss to local spiritual and social values. The consequences could be disastrous both in terms of social cohesion and for the conservation of an important component of the immovable cultural heritage of the country.

Yemen

In 2004, the region's Zaydi revivalist movement denounced their marginalization in Yemen. The Zaydi is a Shia school of thought with theological similarities to Sunni Islam, whose members in this region are known as "Houthis", after their first leader, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi.

Government forces waged a war against the followers of the movement. Six rounds of on-and-off fighting continued, with the involvement of Saudi Arabia in the last war of 2009. A ceasefire was finally reached in February 2010.

The war resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars in damages and bombings to buildings, both in the city of Saada and surrounding villages. The Old City of Saada was tentatively placed on the list to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002. Once an impeccably preserved relic of medieval Arabia, the ancient settlement is now largely in ruins. Centuries-old homes lie wrecked, their mud brick edifices crumbling. Bullet holes pock-mark the walls of ancient mosques.²

The repressions and destruction of the historical city and the religious buildings transform the Houthi from a small religious group into an organization that becomes more powerful and more radical day-by-day. In 2010, the Houthis were among the first to join the uprisings against former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In a way, it was a battle they had been involved in for years. Through their armed uprisings, the Houthis have managed to gain control over all of Saada Governorate and parts of neighbouring governorate.³

In 2011, when the Gulf Initiative was set forth as a way out of conflict, the majority of political powers agreed on the Initiative as a middle-way solution. The Houthis did not accept it, and continued

1 UNESCO Press release, 11 March 2013

2 Benjamin Wiacek, 2012, *The scars of North Yemen's wars*, Al Jazeera (available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2012/06/2012630195727807952.html>)

3 Tik Root, 18 June 2013, Yemen's Houthi rebels defy years of war and repression, BBC news (available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22933234>)

to accuse Saudi Arabia and the United States of balking the revolution. Houthis remained in the squares after the withdrawal of other movements and exerted pressure by threatening to withdraw dialogue with the Yemen government.

The Houthi issue has also had an impact on other delicate Yemeni issues, such as the South Yemen Movement, which was peacefully launched in 2007. The government accused the southern Movement of trying to transform into an armed rebellion with the support of the Houthis.¹

¹ Farea al-Muslimi, 19 July 2013, The houthis in Yemen: more than a movement, less than a state, Al-Monitor (available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/yemen-houthi-movement-politics-national-dialogue.html#ixzz2fi6BGkd2>)

CONCLUSION

Religious buildings are associated with the common spiritual values of communities, and as heritage sites they possess great significance. In the case of armed conflicts between groups of different religious affiliations, they can become some of the first targets.

The destruction of important civic buildings and places of worship is often part of so-called 'ethnic cleansing' measures in violent conflicts, described as: *a deliberate attempt to erase any trace of historical continuity, to wipe the presence of the past clear off the map*. The victors systematically seek to remove the traces of the vanquished community in order to establish control over them.

The protection of cultural religious heritage is of high importance because the destruction of this heritage is, on the one hand, a great loss for humanity but also, on the other, because it can strengthen possibilities for peace and reconciliation, "*since heritage bears witness to the inexhaustible progression of civilizations and societies, all of which are precious expressions of a single humanity.*"¹

The destruction of the World Heritage Sites in Afghanistan and Mali highlight some of the limitations of international organizations in attempting to protect religious heritage using political solutions. These two examples show that if extremist groups are threatening heritage for religious reasons, political efforts would be ineffective and might actually increase the risk of an attack. In this case it is probably local experts who could more easily diagnose the problems, find the right actors and try to solve the conflict; perhaps finally succeeding in safeguarding the heritage.²

Religious heritage protection must first rise above conflict and it is of great responsibility to religions themselves. Religious leaders should promote dialogue and collaboration with other religious communities. Religions must be a channel of peace and a leading actor in fight against extremism, destructive nationalism and protection of minorities. They must fight against extremists in all forms and show no complacency with those who preach division and hate. It is the religious communities they belong to who must first condemn such acts and deviance.

This report focuses on heritage objects in times of conflict, but if the aim is to preserve cultural heritage in times of conflict, it is important not only to focus in the protection of objects, but also to safeguard collective memories and to promote a community's ownership of their cultural heritage.³

1 ICCROM, 2012, Stefano de Caro

2 ICCROM, 2012, Mohammad Beiraghi, *Risk Preparedness and heritage management in times of sociopolitical crisis: The role of experts*

3 ICCROM, 2012, Marcela Jaramillo Contreras, *Beyond the protection of material cultural heritage in times of conflict*.

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