# UNESCO Background Guide

## *AMBMUN '27*

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Dear Delegates,

We are honoured to welcome you to the 4th edition of AMBMUN, where you will be participating in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). As delegates representing different nations, you are entrusted with addressing an issue that extends beyond the destruction of historical buildings and monuments, touching upon the identity, history, and existence of entire communities in nations here today.

This year's AMBMUN focuses on preventing the destruction of cultural heritage as a tool of ethnic cleansing. Throughout history; cultural and religious landmarks, historical documents, and traditional practices have been specifically targeted in attempts to erase the identity and historical presence of particular ethnic and religious groups. This topic presents a challenge to the international community which is can a community truly preserve its identity when the physical evidence of its history is being destroyed?

As members of UNESCO, you will examine the responsibilities of governments and international organizations within not only your assigned nation, but amongst others upon the committee and worldwide. Protecting cultural heritage, strengthening international cooperation, preventing the illegal trafficking of historical artifacts, and holding those responsible for deliberate destruction accountable are situations you will also be expected to deal with and present resolutions towards.

This guide serves as your starting point for research and understanding of the topic. We strongly encourage you to be heavily educated your assigned country's position, examine the relevant international agreements, and develop realistic solutions that reflect your nation's policies and interests.

Regards: Dima Tannir and Muhannad Al Hariri

## *Topic: Preventing the Destruction of Cultural Heritage as a Tool of Ethnic Cleansing*

Cultural heritage is the history, traditions, beliefs and identity of communities. Including monuments, religious buildings, archaeological sites, museums, manuscripts, languages, traditional dances and cultural practices that are passed down through generations. These things are not just memories of the past; they help communities feel like they belong and keep their connection to their ancestors.

Cultural heritage is becoming more and more a target during times of political issues and tension between groups. In some cases, people intentionally destroy certain areas to weaken or remove the identity of certain groups. By breaking down their areas of worship and cultural records, those in power try to erase proof that these groups were ever there and make it harder for them to stay connected to a specific place.

This is especially concerning when it is part of a plan to evict people from their rightful homes. The destruction of heritage can happen with people being forced to leave being treated unfairly and being hurt; this makes it harder for these groups to keep their culture or go back to where they came from. The effects go beyond the buildings and objects that are broken. When important papers, monuments and places are destroyed it can be impossible to get them back. Impacting even generations after, children of these cultures might not get to learn about parts of who they truly are.

The world has attempted to deal with this issue through agreements and projects run through UNESCO, and the ongoing destruction shows that the protection in place is not always enough. It is hard to get things done because of rules disagreements, between countries, not enough money and the actions of groups that are not part of any government. Because of this UNESCO has to find ways to stop this from happening in the first place. They also need to get countries to work together and respect the rights of the countries they are part of. This committee has to think about not how to bring back what was lost but also how to stop it from being destroyed before it is too late for further reference in the future

# *Historical Background*

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage has existed throughout history, particularly during wars and conflicts between different ethnic and religious communities. Historical monuments, religious sites, and cultural institutions have often been targeted to weaken the identity of certain groups and remove their historical presence from specific territories. However, international recognition of the importance of protecting cultural heritage developed significantly during the twentieth century.

One important example occurred during the Bosnian War in the 1990s. On 9 November 1993, the Old Bridge of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina was destroyed following repeated attacks. The bridge was originally built in 1566 and was a symbol of Ottoman design and a link between the city's community groups. The bridge was damaged during the ethnic and religious conflict in the country and came to symbolize how cultural symbols can be deliberately targeted, but It was fortunately restored after the war with international aid and reopened in 2004. Today, the bridge represents an important symbol of reconciliation (UNESCO, Creating Reconciliation: Mostar Bridge).

Another significant incident took place in March 2001, when the Taliban destroyed the two large Buddha statues in Afghanistan’s Bamiyan Valley. The statues in Afghanistan stood as crucial symbols and icons  in history and culture. The international outrage that followed the statues' destruction drew the world's attention to the problems involved in preserving cultural property. In October 2003, the UNESCO Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage, made clear the obligation of States to protect cultural monuments from destruction. (UNESCO, 2003)

In 2012, several historical mausoleums and religious buildings in Timbuktu, Mali, were deliberately destroyed following the occupation of northern Mali by armed groups. Fourteen of the sixteen mausoleums forming part of the city’s World Heritage Site were damaged or destroyed. Thousands of ancient manuscripts were also reportedly burned or stolen. These attacks affected an important center of Islamic scholarship and African history. In 2016, the International Criminal Court convicted Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi for intentionally directing attacks against protected historical and religious buildings in Timbuktu. This was the first ICC case that dealt exclusively with destruction of cultural heritage (UNESCO; International Criminal Court).

From 2014 to 2017, the occupation of Mosul, Iraq, by ISIS left large parts of the city's cultural and religious heritage in ruins. Historic mosques, churches, libraries and archaeological sites were devastated and the historic city and the identity of its diverse communities was affected. When Mosul was freed, UNESCO began a campaign, "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" in 2018 to restore key sites of the city and provide support for its communities. Several key sites including Al-Nouri Mosque and Al-Hadba Minaret were reconstructed by January 2025 (UNESCO, Revive the Spirit of Mosul).

What these events show us is that cultural annihilation is not just the destruction of works of art or architecture. It can also deteriorate communities, inflict harm to their sense of self, and erase history. Although international protection has improved over the years, these incidents show that more preventative measures and international cooperation are still needed.

# *Analysis*

The main issue facing the international community is the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage to weaken or remove the identity of particular ethnic and religious communities. Although destroying a monument or religious building may appear to be an attack on a physical structure, its consequences extend much further. These places represent the history, beliefs, and traditions of the people connected to them.

A core issue is the impact of cultural destruction on forced displacement. The destruction of religious and cultural sites can severely undermine communities' sense of attachment to their land and lead to their separation from their homes. In addition to the violence and discrimination, it can lead to efforts to erase a community's historical presence.

It is crucial to preserve monuments, archaeological sites and manuscripts that record how different cultures have evolved through time. For minority communities, the destruction of this evidence can mean losing access to the stories and knowledge of their ancestors and traditions forever. These memories may be especially important to preserve for communities whose past has previously been neglected or suppressed.

Another challenge is international accountability. While international conventions set standards for safeguarding cultural property, breaches are still reported. UNESCO can and offers support and to promote nation-to-nation cooperation but it cannot initiate a prosecution against the offender for the destruction of cultural heritage. Accountability ultimately rests in the national judicial systems and the court for other courts and tribunals. The conviction of Ahmed Al Faqi Al Mahdi shows that targeted attacks against cultural heritage can lead to individual criminal responsibility.

Rogue transnationalism Illegal trafficking of cultural property can also be a problem. Once regional conflicts begin, historical artifacts are frequently ransacked from museums, religious institutions, and archaeological sites before they are smuggled across the border and sold on the black market. While this process deprives historic sites and objects from the peoples who created and cared for them, it also feeds money into the coffers of armed groups.

The 1970 UNESCO Convention is meant to address this threat, but much more international cooperation is required to stop artifacts from being stolen and transported abroad.

The damage to other cultural monuments and sites should not be ignored either. To rebuild destroyed sites and historical monuments is a way to revive the community's sense of identity and tradition. However, not all monuments may be rebuilt in exactly their former form, and rebuildings have to preserve the historical and religious significance of these monuments. The reconstruction of Mostar, and 3D reconstruction at UNESCO's office in Mosul illustrate the importance of international support, in cooperation with the local community.

In the end, stopping destruction of culture can go beyond restoring damaged monuments. It is crucial for the global community to safeguard historic sites, foster existing international conventions, combat illicit trafficking and bring perpetrators to justice. Consequently, UNESCO should urge Member States to take action to prevent destruction rather than simply face its aftermath.

# *International Legal Framework and Previous Actions*

Over the years, the international community has introduced several agreements to protect cultural heritage and encourage cooperation between countries.

One of the most important conventions was the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The convention established rules for the protection of cultural property in times of war. Participating countries promised to protect vital cultural property and avoid actions that made them a target. They also committed to creating inventories and procedures for tough sites. (UNESCO, 1954)

Another core convention was the 1970 Ways of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This Convention was issued with the intention of halting the illicit trafficking of cultural property. It urges governments to keep an eye on cultural property, to put appropriate safeguards in place, and to work together to recover stolen art. (UNESCO, 1970)

In 1972, UNESCO approved the World Heritage Convention, a global effort to define the criteria for judging some sites as having 'outstanding universal value' and to put in place a system to protect them. The Convention promotes measures to safeguard these sites and establish a system of international assistance for them in cases of serious threats. (UNESCO, 1972)

In October 2003, the Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage was adopted by UNESCO. The declaration identified that such intentional destruction may have adverse effects on cultural identity, human dignity and social cohesion and urged states to adopt relevant measures. (UNESCO, 2003)

In recent years, a new resolution (Resolution 2347) was unanimously adopted by the United Nations Security Council on 24 March 2017 (United Nations Security Council, 2017). The resolution condemned the intentional destruction of cultural heritage, especially by terrorist organizations, discussed illicit trafficking of cultural property and called for enhanced interaction between governments, law enforcement and international organizations.

The necessity of both agreements shows how much the protection of cultural heritage has become an essential part of international cooperation. But the two agreements will only be effective if the Member States are ready to and can uphold their commitments.

# *Important Questions*

A major challenge delegates will have to address is the inability to prevent the destruction of cultural property. Several countries lack a comprehensive inventory of sites or enough emergency measures in place to protect assets at risk in cases of armed conflict. But what can be done before a site is lost?

Another concern is the tension between national sovereignty and international engagement. Though UNESCO may support the protection of cultural property through technical assistance and by facilitating international cooperation, it is the government who must protect the cultural property. Delegates will need to weigh how international cooperation can assist the protection of cultural property without overreaching their authority.

In addition, the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage remains a significant issue. Historical buildings may be protected, but languages, practices and cultural expressions may still disappear through expulsion, discrimination or repression of cultural expression. Ensuring protection of cultural identities involves safeguarding of the tangible and intangible cultural expressions of the community.

Finally, delegates will need to look at how international accountability can be enhanced. There are legal protections in place but victims are not always investigated and prosecuted. Increased collaboration by the national authority, international courts, and international and cultural organizations could rectify this.

# *Legal Considerations*

When talking about such issues, delegates must distinguish between ethnic cleansing, genocide and war crimes. Ethnic cleansing is not classified as a crime under international law by the UN, but the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing have committed crimes such as war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity.

So, it's also worthwhile to know that destroying cultural heritage is not under the Genocide Convention alone enough to constitute the crime of genocide. The crime of genocide requires a specific intent to physically destroy, in part or in whole, a nationally, ethnically, racially or religiously protected group. Destruction of culture can be one of many elements of a campaign of persecution but is not the crime of genocide in itself. (United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention).

## *Questions That Need To Be Answered In Your Resolution:*

1. How can UNESCO improve on creating preventative measures for cultural protection in settings of ethnic or religious conflict?

2. What types of international mechanisms can be put in place to avoid destruction of and help save vulnerable sites?

3. What steps can Member States take to effectively implement existing conventions on cultural property?

4. What steps should be taken to curb the illicit trafficking of stolen artefacts?

5. What actions will UNESCO undertake to offer funds and technical assistance to countries whose cultural heritages were harmed or lost?

6. In what ways can NGOs ensure the perpetrators responsible for intentionally damaging religious and cultural sites are held responsible?

7. How should we empower our local communities for the preservation and reconstruction of their cultural heritage?

8. How does UNESCO safeguard elements of intangible cultural heritage, such as languages, traditions or religious practices, among populations displaced from their homes?

## *Starter resources:*

1. UNESCO – Cultural Heritage Protection
   Culture | UNESCO
2. UNESCO World Heritage Centre
   UNESCO World Heritage Centre
3. UNESCO – Fight Against Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property
   Fight Illicit Trafficking (1970 Convention) | UNESCO

4. International Criminal Court
   | International Criminal Court
5. United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention
   https://www.un.org/genocide-prevention/
6. United Nations Security Council
   Homepage | Security Council

## *Matrix:*

Iraq — Syria — Ukraine — Algeria — Lebanon — France — USA — United Kingdom — Egypt — India — Pakistan — Russia — China — Germany — Morocco — Libya — Palestine — Tunisia — Türkiye — Armenia — Serbia — Kosovo — Mali — Argentina — Ireland

## *References:*


1. UNESCO. “Creating Reconciliation: Mostar Bridge.”
   World Heritage Centre - Creating reconciliation: Mostar Bridge

2. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. “Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley.”
   Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley - UNESCO World Heritage Centre

3. UNESCO. “Reconstruction of the Destroyed Mausoleums of Timbuktu.”
   Reconstruction of the destroyed mausoleums of Timbuktu (Mali)

4. International Criminal Court. “ICC Trial Chamber VIII Declares Mr Al Mahdi Guilty of the War Crime of Attacking Historic and Religious Buildings in Timbuktu.”
   ICC Trial Chamber VIII declares Mr Al Mahdi guilty of the war crime of attacking historic and religious buildings in Timbuktu and sentences him to nine years’ imprisonment | International Criminal Court

5. UNESCO. “Revive the Spirit of Mosul: Heritage.”
   Revive the Spirit of Mosul: Heritage | UNESCO

6. UNESCO. “Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954).”
   Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention - Legal Affairs

7. UNESCO. “Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970).” Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property - Legal Affairs | UNESCO

8. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972).” Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage

9. UNESCO. “Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage (2003).” UNESCO Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage - Paris, 17 October 2003

10. United Nations Security Council. “Resolution 2347 (2017).” S/RES/2347 (2017) | Security Council

11. United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention. “Definitions of Genocide and Related Crimes.” Definitions of Genocide and Related Crimes | United Nations