

## **When Peace Breaks Out: The Peril and Promise of “Afterwar”**

AUTHOR(S): Hugh Eakin

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S):

**Hugh Eakin** is a senior editor at *Foreign Affairs*. He has written on cultural heritage and international politics for the *New York Review of Books*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *New Yorker*, and other publications. His work has been supported by numerous fellowships and grants, including the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, and the Fritt Ord Foundation. His book *Picasso’s War* will be published in 2022.

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## When Peace Breaks Out: The Peril and Promise of “Afterwar”

Hugh Eakin

On 17 November 2020, Catholicos Karekin II, the supreme head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, made an urgent international appeal. “One of the last remaining regions of our ancient culture,” he warned, “is at risk of destruction.” After weeks of fighting in the South Caucasus territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, several of the world’s oldest monasteries, along with hundreds of medieval churches, sacred sites, and *khachkars*—intricately carved cross-stones—had fallen into the hands of Armenia’s archenemy, Azerbaijan. The government of Azerbaijan had a history of destroying Armenian sites, Karekin II noted, and there was now an imminent danger of “cultural cleansing.”<sup>1</sup> Soon after, the Armenian patriarch’s warnings were echoed by Western scholars, with one asserting in the *Wall Street Journal* that “ancient national treasures” were “at risk of complete erasure.”<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, it was an all-too-familiar story of cultural destruction amid vicious armed conflict. Like other recent wars in which religious monuments have been targeted, the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh was an interconfessional struggle, with Christian Armenians on one side and Muslim Azeris on the other; it involved large-scale human displacement, with an estimated 130,000 ethnic Armenian inhabitants forced to flee to neighboring Armenia, and the potential return of equal or larger numbers of Azeris uprooted during an earlier war; and it was accompanied by telltale forms of ethnic violence, including reports of atrocities and heavily armed men ransacking towns. Even as Armenians were warning of deliberate Azerbaijani attacks on Armenian churches and monasteries, Azerbaijani officials and many Azeris, on social media and elsewhere, claimed that Armenians themselves had been vandalizing Azeri mosques and Muslim graveyards.<sup>3</sup> Once again, human populations and centuries-old

monuments—storehouses of culture, faith, and communal identity—had become twin casualties of the modern battlefield.

Yet there was a crucial difference: the war in question had already happened. Karekin II was making his plea more than a week after Armenia and Azerbaijan reached a cease-fire agreement. His concern was not the military confrontation between the two sides, but the uneasy peace that followed. In accordance with the terms of the truce, Armenia was turning over to Azerbaijan a series of districts around Nagorno-Karabakh containing numerous ancient Armenian sites; their survival would now depend on the goodwill of a government that was actively hostile to Armenia and for which the scars of war were still fresh.<sup>4</sup> Conceptually, then, the case of Nagorno-Karabakh poses a challenge to the conventional framing of cultural heritage in armed conflict: the crux of the problem is not ongoing military action or extremist activity, but rather a sovereign government taking control of territory to which it has a recognized claim. In particular, the problem concerns threats to cultural and religious heritage that arise once a military conflict has run its course.

Though the questions raised by the Armenian–Azerbaijani truce have been little studied, they are hardly unusual. In almost any conflict in which *de facto* or *de jure* boundaries are redrawn, the fate of religious and historical sites that fall within those boundaries is newly at stake. And what happens in the aftermath of war may be as important to determining their survival as the war itself. New threats can emerge as a victorious power consolidates control over a contested region, and local and national identities are forcefully redefined. And in the absence of open warfare, a sovereign government may have greater opportunity to desecrate, repurpose, or destroy the monuments of an unwanted group with little international scrutiny.

In many recent peacebuilding efforts, the extent of such threats has been downplayed. International stabilization missions in war-torn countries or regions tend to focus on economic redevelopment and basic security; cultural issues are regarded as secondary. At the same time, communities or nations emerging from war are frequently described as “post-conflict” societies, a terminology that may suggest that the struggle in question has ended, or that the overall risk of violent attack is lower than during “conflict” itself. Yet sacred spaces, monuments, and other cultural sites have often become the principal loci of conflict between groups once the shooting stops. In *Violence Taking Place*, a study of cultural heritage in Kosovo after the 1998–99 war, Andrew Herscher adopted the memorable term *afterwar* to describe this process, noting that “the violence of war did not so much end as shift its direction.”<sup>5</sup>

For contested cultural sites and monuments, the neglect of the afterwar problem is also a missed opportunity. While afterwar situations may pose serious new dangers to cultural heritage, they also offer unusual opportunities to save and preserve. Implicit in Karekin II’s warning about Nagorno-Karabakh was that the ancient monuments in question were for the moment intact; acts of destruction could still be prevented. Unlike in a hot war situation, moreover, foreign intervention in civil society is often not only

possible but expected. If the fighting has come to an end through a truce or a peace agreement, as in Nagorno-Karabakh, the terms of the peace typically depend on one or more outside guarantors, as well as the deployment of peacekeepers. In such circumstances, foreign governments, international donors, and private organizations may be able to build and enforce local safeguards for sites and monuments—even when those sites belong to an opposing group or confession.

Still, a cultural intervention in the aftermath of military hostilities may carry significant risks of its own. As with rescue actions during armed conflict itself, success almost always depends on the involvement of people who live around the sites in question. Without such cooperation, any foreign-supported safeguarding action may backfire. At the root of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and other similar situations, then, is the question of how local populations themselves relate to cultural monuments that do not belong to their own tradition. Whether or not threatened heritage can survive may depend on the extent to which international organizations can identify and harness effective local players to prevent new attacks from occurring, while also creating the ground conditions needed—in funds, expertise, knowledge, and even legal arrangements—for a new preservation ethos to take hold.

In recent years, innovative efforts have been made to extend the UN's responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine—the evolving norm that international forces have a responsibility to intervene when a population is threatened with genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or ethnic cleansing—to imminent threats against cultural heritage. The elaboration of these principles has helpfully reframed our understanding of such threats, bringing new global awareness that attacks on cultural sites are often directly connected to attacks on human populations. Yet the R2P approach has proven extraordinarily difficult to translate into meaningful action to protect heritage, whether in the face of full-blown armed conflict, such as the Syrian Civil War, or in a “peacetime” situation in which a sovereign government is firmly in control, as in China's devastating crackdown on Uyghurs. Nor does R2P offer a durable basis for the preservation of sites and monuments. Peacekeepers may pave the way, but ultimately it is local populations and local authorities who will be in charge. In confronting the limits of current approaches to heritage destruction, the afterwar problem suggests an urgent avenue of inquiry. If the long-term survival of sites and monuments almost always depends on the communities that surround them, then any effective approach to heritage protection must give central emphasis to people as well as property. Put another way, under what circumstances can an international responsibility to protect be converted into a local impulse to preserve?

### **The Flaws of War**

Over the past two decades, the international response to heritage destruction has overwhelmingly focused on wartime combatants, nonstate armed groups, and terrorists. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a broad consensus emerged

around the long-standing effort to establish rules of engagement to prevent cultural crimes during conflict. And with the rise of new forms of extremism in Africa and the Middle East, international bodies, including the UN Security Council and the International Criminal Court (ICC), have shown a growing commitment to holding extremist groups accountable for intentional attacks on historical and religious monuments. Yet until now, this two-pronged approach has had depressingly little effect.

The push to regulate the treatment of cultural sites by belligerents is founded on the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, a treaty spurred by the widespread destruction of museums, libraries, art collections, and historical monuments in Europe during World War II. Taking as its starting point the observation that “cultural property has suffered grave damage during recent armed conflicts,” the convention set rules of engagement designed to limit or prevent such damage by military forces. International support for the treaty grew slowly, with the United States and the United Kingdom delaying ratification until 2008 and 2017 respectively, well over a half century after its creation. At the time of this writing, however, the convention has acquired almost global membership, including by all five permanent members of the UN Security Council and all parties to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) except Iceland. Joining them are nearly every member of the European Union, twenty-seven countries in sub-Saharan Africa, twenty in Latin America, forty-four in the Asia-Pacific region, and sixteen in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the list includes most of the countries where military conflicts have taken place over the last three decades.

Significantly enhancing this regime, if less widely embraced, has been the convention’s 1999 Second Protocol. (The First Protocol was written at the time of the original treaty in 1954.) With the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia freshly in mind, the authors of the Second Protocol sought to strengthen the convention in a number of important ways. Among its noteworthy provisions, the Second Protocol tightened a loophole for “military necessity”; updated the treaty’s protections to apply to civil wars as well as international conflicts; added an “enhanced protection” regime for specially designated sites that are “of the greatest importance for humanity”; and set down procedures to prosecute parties or individuals for attacking, vandalizing, or looting cultural sites. Two decades after its writing, the Second Protocol has been ratified by more than eighty countries, though it continues to lack the support of the United States, Russia, China, India, Turkey, and Switzerland, among other states.

Since the early 2000s, the Hague principles have been supplemented by parallel efforts to address purposeful destruction by nonstate armed groups and terrorists. The widely publicized targeting of cultural sites by the Taliban in Afghanistan, Ansar Dine in Mali, and especially the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL or Da’esh) in Syria and Iraq has drawn unprecedented world attention to the problem. In recent years, international organizations and world leaders, up to and including the UN Security Council, have condemned such attacks as a threat to international security and,

significantly, begun to recognize them as a direct extension of crimes against human populations.

International alarm about extremist groups has also led to some important policy innovations. The ICC, established in 2002, has included attacks on cultural heritage among the crimes of war under its jurisdiction, and in 2016 the court convicted a Malian extremist for the destruction of mausoleums in Timbuktu. Western governments and international agencies have also devoted increasing attention to the protection of so-called movable heritage—including paintings, museum objects, and archaeological artifacts—that may be vulnerable to theft or destruction in regions of conflict or general instability. Interpol, working together with national law enforcement, has sought to crack down on the cross-border trade in looted artifacts from war-torn countries, while other groups, such as the Geneva-based International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH) Foundation, have established substantial resources for emergency rescue actions, including the creation of temporary safe havens for threatened artifacts. Coinciding with these developments has been the effort, explored at length by Thomas G. Weiss and Nina Connelly, to apply the R2P doctrine to cultural heritage threatened with destruction.<sup>7</sup>

Yet this growing international framework has failed to stop the accelerating destruction of cultural sites. By its own members, the 1954 Hague Convention has often been honored in the breach. The newly created Republic of Croatia, for example, ratified the treaty in 1992; sixteen months later, Croatian-backed paramilitary forces deliberately targeted and destroyed the sixteenth-century Mostar Bridge in neighboring Bosnia, in what has become one of the most infamous attacks on cultural heritage in recent decades.<sup>8</sup> In the Middle East, Libya (1957), Syria (1958), Lebanon (1960), Iraq (1967), and Saudi Arabia (1971) ratified the convention soon after its creation, yet they have all since been involved in wars in which deliberate or indiscriminate destruction of cultural heritage has taken place. Still more recent is the case of Ethiopia, which ratified the treaty in 2015. Amid a brutal offensive against rebels in the sealed-off region of Tigray in 2020 and 2021, Ethiopian government forces were accused of shelling and looting numerous cultural monuments, including several historical churches as well as the revered seventh-century al-Nejashi Mosque, which had previously been proposed as a UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site.

The American military has also been implicated in damage to heritage sites in the years since the United States joined the convention. For nearly six years (2015–21), US forces backed the Saudi-led offensive against Houthi rebels in Yemen with munitions, intelligence, logistics, and other forms of support. Though the US military has denied involvement in the selection of targets, US weapons systems were deployed in a Saudi air campaign that damaged or destroyed numerous Yemeni historical sites, including large parts of the old city of the capital, Sana'a, the medieval citadel of Kawkaban in the north of the country, and the ninth-century Mosque of al-Hadi in Saada, one of the oldest Shiite mosques on the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>9</sup>

Western leaders and international organizations have been even less successful in preventing acts of destruction by extremist groups. In the face of diplomatic and political constraints, nonconsensual intervention to protect populations from imminent attack has been extremely rare; for cultural sites, taking action has proven even harder. Even where concrete steps could, in theory, be taken, the odds of success are long. Often a threat may emerge only after an attack is already underway, or has been publicized by the perpetrators themselves. And in instances where imminent danger is apparent, international responses may make things worse. As the Taliban's dynamiting of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 and ISIS's destruction of the Temple of Bel and other ancient structures at Palmyra in 2015 suggest, international media coverage and/or verbal condemnation by world leaders has often seemed to provoke rather than prevent. Notably, many of ISIS's most devastating attacks on cultural sites in Iraq and Syria occurred months *after* the alarm was sounded by Western officials, including then US secretary of state John Kerry. Lacking a clear path to hindering or preventing such acts, international bodies such as UNESCO, Interpol, and the ICC have largely been limited to dealing with the consequences, whether by policing the trade in already-looted antiquities or seeking individual accountability for the perpetrators. In such cases, though, the damage has already been done.

At the same time, the war-and-terrorism approach to addressing cultural heritage destruction also tends to leave out the groups who are most affected: the people who live around the sites in question. Implicit in much of the policy discussion is an opposition between internationally recognized monuments and sites, on the one hand, and local combatants or extremists, on the other. Even as the Security Council and other international organizations such as UNESCO increasingly link attacks on cultural monuments to crimes against human populations, the prevailing framing often pits international "good guys"—Western governments, security officials, and law enforcement agencies—against local or regional "bad guys" who threaten to blow up temples and bulldoze monuments. However well intended, such an approach may appear condescending or tone-deaf to local communities, which are themselves often bearing the terrible human costs of war. While world leaders and the international media lamented ISIS's destruction of the uninhabited site of Palmyra, there was scant mention of the adjacent modern city of Tadmur, where the Syrian government had long kept a notorious prison for torturing political dissidents. As important, the overwhelming emphasis on sites and monuments, rather than the populations around them, may obscure the crucial part that these same host communities have long played in effective preservation—both during and after war.

### **Manuscripts in the Canoe**

In contrast to international action, local efforts to safeguard monuments and artifacts threatened by conflict and extremism have a considerable record of success. Much deserved credit for the recovery of displaced European art collections during World

War II has gone to the Western Allies, the Roberts Commission, and the “Monuments Men.” Yet their efforts were often made possible by years of daring work by local officials. In Nazi-occupied Paris, Rose Valland, the curator of the Jeu de Paume art gallery, secretly documented the location of more than twenty thousand looted artworks, allowing for their rapid recovery; in Italy, the museum curator Giovanni Poggi successfully hid many of Florence’s most important treasures and prevented their shipment to Nazi Germany. Particularly remarkable were the efforts of the so-called Paper Brigade, a group of Jewish residents of Vilnius, Lithuania, who, during the Nazi occupation, managed to rescue a large proportion of one of the most important collections of Jewish rare books and manuscripts in existence.<sup>10</sup>

For much of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), the National Museum of Beirut was on the front lines of battle, marking a frontier between opposing factions. Yet its director, Maurice Chehab, managed to save nearly all of its extraordinary antiquities collection by hiding it in sealed basement storerooms; monumental statues that could not be moved were encased in cement.<sup>11</sup> When the Taliban first took control of Afghanistan in the early 1990s, the director of the National Museum in Kabul was able to hide the Bactrian Gold, the country’s most important collection of ancient Silk Road grave ornaments, in a vault deep under the Afghan central bank. The rare artifacts came out of hiding more than fifteen years later, having survived years of war as well as a Taliban effort to destroy much of the museum’s collection with hammers. Six months before the Taliban retook Kabul in 2021, the speaker of the Afghan parliament suggested the Bactrian Gold be sent abroad for safekeeping, but no action was taken. In August 2021, at the time of the US withdrawal, the artifacts were believed to be in secure storage at the central bank, though their current status could not be established at the time of this writing.<sup>12</sup>

Even in the lethal conflicts in Mali and Syria, local activists were able to save artworks and artifacts from near certain obliteration, often at great risk to themselves. In 2012, as extremists seized control of Timbuktu, local archivists quietly hid and removed tens of thousands of medieval Islamic manuscripts threatened with destruction. The much-celebrated—if somewhat exaggerated—rescue operation involved rice sacks and even canoes to ferry the documents downriver to safety in Bamako, the country’s capital.<sup>13</sup> During the Syrian Civil War, activists in Idlib and Aleppo were able to protect the cities’ museums from destruction, even as surrounding areas, and the museums themselves, were hit by bombs. Youssef Kanjou, the director of the Aleppo Museum at the time, told me he had only \$2,000 to spend on sandbags and other protective measures, yet that was sufficient to protect immovable works from damage or destruction.<sup>14</sup> At one point, when a town in northwest Syria was captured by the al-Nusra Front armed group (now the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), a local archaeologist persuaded the group that the population would rebel if non-Islamic sites were attacked. At Palmyra, Khaled al-Asaad, the site’s distinguished eighty-three-year-old chief archaeologist, managed to evacuate many of the antiquities at the Palmyra Museum



before he was captured and killed by ISIS, in what became one of the most horrific episodes of the war.<sup>15</sup>

That local activists were motivated to risk their lives to defend Syria's museums and monuments may seem surprising. In the years before the civil war, the government of Bashar al-Assad had a poor record of caring for cultural heritage. Many ancient settlements, including, for example, the ruins of the Semitic city of Mari in the east and those of the Hellenistic city of Cyrrhus in the northwest, had been looted and neglected for years. Nonetheless, the country hosted more than a hundred foreign archaeological missions between the early twentieth century and the start of the war, helping to some extent build local knowledge and expertise about the country's rich archaeology and historical monuments. At the same time, there was a small but dedicated cohort of Syrian heritage professionals who were prepared to act with the limited resources available to them.<sup>16</sup>

Local activism can work both ways, however. In conflicts involving sectarian violence or an uprising against an oppressive government, there may be powerful social forces working against preservation. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein had long appropriated the country's ancient heritage in propaganda by his Sunni-dominated Ba'ath Party. Partly as a result, some Iraqi Shiites viewed looting the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and plundering archaeological sites as legitimate forms of retribution following the US-led invasion in 2003. Illegal excavations were finally curtailed not by international intervention but by the Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's highest Shiite cleric, who issued a fatwa or religious ruling against archaeological pillage. As in other cases, local authority proved far more important than international norms.<sup>17</sup>

Remembered today as one of the worst cultural heritage disasters since the Cold War, the US occupation of Iraq also highlights the strategic importance of protecting cultural sites in a volatile afterwar environment. Though there were incidents of carelessness by US forces during the invasion, the looting and destruction overwhelmingly occurred after Saddam Hussein's government had been defeated. At the time, a new local order, dominated by the country's long-oppressed Shiite majority, was taking shape under American suzerainty. The failure of US forces to manage sectarian tensions—and to provide adequate security at religious sites—led to growing violence, culminating in the 2006 attack by Sunni extremists on the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, regarded as one of the most sacred Shiite shrines in the world. In the violent civil war that followed (2006–8), numerous Sunni and Shiite religious sites were targeted while some seventy thousand civilians lost their lives. In the years since the US invasion, much has been said about what American forces might have done to secure Iraq's heritage. What is less often noted is the extent to which attacks on cultural heritage became a driver of new conflict.

If afterwar settings offer unique opportunities for international actors to intervene to protect and preserve heritage sites, the case of Iraq after 2003 shows how much can go wrong. When intercommunal and interconfessional tensions are allowed to fester, no

amount of external protection for sacred sites may be sufficient to neutralize continuing threats. And without buy-in from the communities themselves, any attempt to provide such protection may stir tensions further. The underlying challenge, then, is how to persuade local populations to respect and value the sites in question—or at least refrain from damaging them—until a more durable peace can be established. Though the task is a formidable one, recent history provides several examples of how it can be done.

### **A Strongman's Promise**

Few contemporary afterwar situations have presented as great a long-term challenge for cultural heritage as Kosovo. For a number of years after its 1998–99 war with Serbia, Kosovo served as a cautionary tale. As the latest installment in the brutal disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the war in the breakaway Balkan region played out as a struggle between ethnic Serbs, who are Christian Orthodox, and Kosovo Albanians, who are predominantly Muslim. During the sixteen-month conflict, hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians were forced to flee the region to neighboring countries, while Serbian forces devastated hundreds of mosques and Muslim sites in Kosovo, continuing the strategy of ethnic and cultural warfare they had previously undertaken in Bosnia. Sufi lodges were burned down, and libraries containing thousands of rare books and Islamic manuscripts, some dating from the Middle Ages, were destroyed.

With the entry of NATO forces into the war, however, the tables were turned. Following its victory, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) gained possession of a territory that contained dozens of Serbian Orthodox churches and monuments. Among them were several of Serbia's oldest monasteries, including the fourteenth-century Visoki Dečani, a domed, five-nave building featuring one of the largest surviving frescoed interiors from the Byzantine tradition. Having experienced the Serbs' vicious campaign against historical Muslim sites, Kosovo Albanians now had the fate of some of the most prized Orthodox monuments in their hands. Meanwhile, a large majority of the refugees who had been brutally uprooted by the Serbs were able to return. Although military hostilities had ended, the conflict had not.

At the time, Kosovo was nominally under the control of some twenty thousand peacekeepers from NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). While the peacekeepers were able to maintain general order, they were largely unprepared to protect heritage sites. For months after the war, former members of the KLA and other armed groups in Kosovo attacked Serbian historical and religious sites, mostly with impunity. In March 2004, a wave of anti-Serb violence, led by former KLA leaders, quickly spread across the country. Along with the killing of nineteen civilians, the riots culminated in a devastating series of attacks on Serbian houses, buildings, and religious sites. Faced with overwhelming numbers, KFOR troops put up little resistance. Some thirty churches were burned down, some of them hundreds of years old, while monasteries, graveyards, and hundreds of Serbian homes were vandalized and destroyed.<sup>18</sup>

The violence very nearly consumed Visoki Dečani, where there was also a minimal peacekeeping presence. In the end, the monastery was spared not because of KFOR but through the personal intervention of Ramush Haradinaj, a former KLA leader and local strongman. Shortly before the unrest began, then US senator Joseph R. Biden visited the monastery and was told by Serbian monks that there was a growing threat of attack. As Biden recounted in Senate testimony:

Knowing that the territory around Dečani is Mr. Haradinaj's political base, I sent him a confidential letter after I returned to Washington. In it I wrote that I was counting on him to personally guarantee and protect the Serbian Orthodox monastery I had just visited. In March of 2004, serious riots against Serbs and other non-Albanian minorities broke out across Kosovo. . . . KFOR proved unable or unwilling to prevent this destruction. In fact, in several cases, the outrages occurred while European KFOR troops stood by. One of the few venerable monasteries that remained untouched was Visoki Dečani. Mr. Haradinaj had kept his promise.<sup>19</sup>

If Biden's account is accurate, the revered Orthodox monument owed its survival in 2004 to actions taken within the community around the site: international pressure on a local figure of authority turned out to be far more effective than thousands of blue helmets. As in the case of the Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa against looting in Iraq, it was Haradinaj's resolve, not international forces, that proved decisive.

Coming shortly after the looting of the Iraq Museum, the Kosovo riots underscored the crucial importance of cultural heritage in postwar stabilization efforts. After the riots, KFOR peacekeepers deployed heavily around Serbian Orthodox sites. One result was a growing push by the United Nations to incorporate the protection of minority cultural sites directly into peacekeeping mandates, as was done in Mali beginning in 2013. In Kosovo itself, protection of minority heritage became one of the formal benchmarks in the country's path toward full independence. Drawn up in 2008, the so-called Ahtisaari Plan, the international framework for Kosovo's new constitution, spelled out specific rights and protections for the Serbian Orthodox Church, including the creation of forty special "protective zones" around Serbian cultural and religious sites. These provisions have since largely been incorporated into Kosovo law.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years, despite continuing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, the threat of violence against Kosovo's remaining Serbian community has largely dissipated and some of the churches damaged in the 2004 riots have been restored.<sup>21</sup> The heightened preparedness of NATO's KFOR peacekeepers has played a part. But equally crucial has been the gradual push, in tandem with Kosovo's statebuilding process, to transfer responsibility for heritage sites to local authorities. While Dečani remains under the protection of KFOR troops, other prominent religious complexes, including Gračanica and the Patriarchate of Peć, have been handed over to the jurisdiction of Kosovo's own police forces.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, as Kosovo continues to seek formal recognition from

numerous countries, its leaders have held up their efforts to safeguard Serbian heritage as a symbol of Kosovo's status as an emerging state based on the rule of law.

The complicated fate of Serbian Orthodox churches in Kosovo since the 1998–99 war raises important questions about international efforts to protect cultural heritage. How might the country's recent progress be replicated, while avoiding the terrible legacy of destruction that preceded it? If international forces alone are not sufficient to provide durable safeguards, including for monuments of enormous religious and historical significance, what other forms of international engagement might be most effective in supplanting them?

### **Sandbags and Glue**

Along with local activism, there has been another common ingredient in many successful interventions to protect museums and monuments in conflict zones: outside support. In Timbuktu in 2012, the difficult evacuation of Islamic manuscripts by local librarians was greatly facilitated by European cash. The costs of the rescue and subsequent storage were supported by an emergency grant of €100,000 from the Netherlands-based Prince Claus Fund, a €75,000 grant from the DOEN Foundation, and €323,475 from the Dutch foreign ministry.<sup>23</sup> Two years later, during the Syrian Civil War, modest foreign backing helped Syrian activists protect a series of threatened mosaics at the Ma'arra Museum in the opposition-controlled Idlib Province. With materials and financing provided by the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (SHOSI) Project—a US-based consortium that was itself funded by grants from the J. M. Kaplan Fund and the Prince Claus Fund—the activists were able to encase the mosaics in glue and fabric and line them with sandbags. Shortly afterward, the museum suffered a direct hit by a barrel bomb, but the mosaics survived.

Such rescue actions show that international support can play a decisive role in heritage protection in crisis situations where direct foreign intervention is impracticable. In light of these successes, other foundations have begun to support similar emergency efforts, including the US-based Whiting Foundation and the Gerda Henkel Foundation in Germany. By far the largest and most ambitious player is ALIPH, which was founded in Geneva in 2017 by the governments of France and the United Arab Emirates, together with large-scale private funders, and which has raised tens of millions of dollars for local emergency actions in countries experiencing or emerging from conflict. To date, it has funded projects in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, among other countries.

For Western governments and international organizations, supporting local efforts can carry important advantages over more direct forms of intervention. Local activists are far more likely to gain the trust and support of their communities, and even of hostile groups that may otherwise pose threats to sites. And by catering to the needs of people who are already on the ground, rather than bringing in outside experts, such an approach can avoid the waste and corruption of more traditional international aid

efforts. As SHOSI's backing of the Ma'arra Museum intervention demonstrates, small grants and provision of in-kind assistance may also go a very long way, and, when they can be delivered quickly, can be transforming. As a growing number of foundations and private funders have discovered, small-scale local rescue actions with limited, attainable goals may also stand a better chance of success than broader efforts to stop conflict-driven destruction. At the same time, foundations may be able to circumvent ordinary legal barriers to international involvement, for example in rebel-controlled regions of Syria. When successful, such targeted interventions bring important local buy-in and reinforce a new understanding of cultural preservation in the context of war. "Perhaps the greatest conceptual challenge for the archaeological community," the US-based Syrian archaeologist Salam Al Quntar wrote during the Syrian Civil War, "is to reimagine heritage protection as one of many humanitarian actions that offer direct support to populations in crisis."<sup>24</sup>

Despite some noteworthy achievements, however, targeted local interventions may have limited impact during major armed conflicts. Emergency funding alone cannot protect a temple or religious building from damage or destruction, and funders may be reluctant to risk resources—and lives—in a hot war situation. By contrast, in the immediate aftermath of military hostilities, or in a situation in which a conflict has become "frozen," such efforts can make a significant difference. Many recent projects funded by ALIPH, the Prince Claus Fund, the J. M. Kaplan Fund, the World Monuments Fund, and other foundations have been directed not at war zones per se, but at sites that are at grave risk as a result of recent war damage or regional instability.

Though they have received negligible attention in the international media, private funders have been particularly active in Yemen, supporting crucial rescue efforts of buildings and sites even as the conflict has continued to unfold in other parts of the country. Among these projects is the salvage effort for the Dhamar Museum, which housed one of Yemen's most important archaeological collections and was hit in an air strike in 2015, and the rehabilitation of the Old City of Sana'a, a World Heritage Site in a crucial urban center that has been damaged by both air strikes and frequent flooding. In such cases, private funders can fill critical gaps where mainstream aid programs, because of continuing conflict or other logistical limitations, may be unable to intervene.

For populations emerging from intercommunal strife, the rehabilitation of threatened religious sites and monuments can also serve as an engine of reconciliation. In Cyprus, for example, a long-frozen conflict has bitterly divided the island between its Greek population, who are predominantly Orthodox Christian, and its Turks, who are Sunni Muslim. (Cyprus also has smaller minorities of Armenian Orthodox, Maronites, Roman Catholics, and Jews.) Yet over the past decade, stewardship of the island's diverse cultural and religious heritage has become an important meeting point between the two sides. Peacekeepers have played a significant part: ever since the 1974 invasion, the UN has maintained a force on the island, one of its longest continuing missions in the world,

which has controlled a buffer zone between the two sides and ensured basic stability. But a larger cultural breakthrough came during a round of peace talks in 2012. Although the negotiations failed to make progress toward a political settlement, the parties agreed to establish a joint heritage preservation commission to strengthen relations between the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities. Called the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), the body was designed to include heritage specialists from both sides, and was given a mandate to restore and conserve endangered sites in both the Republic of Cyprus and Northern Cyprus.

Since then, the TCCH has proven remarkably successful. Its funding and support have come from traditional international sources—the European Union, which has provided close to \$20 million, and the UN Development Programme, which has contributed technical assistance. As with recent foundation-supported projects in other countries, however, the work has been driven by members of the two communities themselves. The mandate of the TCCH is particularly significant in view of the geography of the Cyprus conflict: when the island was divided in 1974, many Greek churches were stranded in Northern Cyprus, on the Turkish side, while more than a hundred Turkish mosques and religious schools were left in the south, on the Greek side. For the first time, local conservators and officials from both sides could visit and evaluate these sites. To date, the TCCH has restored several dozen historical mosques and churches, as well as Ottoman buildings, Venetian fortifications, and ancient sites, and its efforts have been generally embraced by both the Greek and Turkish populations. Coinciding with these projects has been a series of reciprocal visits by Christian and Muslim leaders to places of worship on both sides of the island.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, when a historical mosque that had been restored by the TCCH in the Greek city of Limassol was firebombed in 2020, the attack was quickly condemned by leaders of both faiths.

Although the achievements of the TCCH may be difficult to replicate among populations emerging from full-scale armed conflict, they show the extent to which cultural heritage can help bridge ethnic and confessional divides once a stable security environment begins to take hold. In Iraq and Syria, for example, an interfaith panel could support urgent interventions for war-damaged Muslim, Kurdish, Christian, and Yezidi heritage, as well as secular sites like historical marketplaces and old city centers. Such a confidence-building approach could do much to encourage displaced Syrians to return and communities to rebuild. In Serbia and Kosovo, even in the absence of formal relations, a bilateral, technical commission could support endangered Ottoman-era mosques in Serbia and Serbian monasteries in Kosovo, extending the progress on minority heritage that has already been made in Kosovo itself. With the achievement of greater stability and détente, in future years such an approach might also be possible with the handful of Muslim sites in Armenia and Armenian churches in Azerbaijan, as the Azerbaijani journalist and commentator Cavid Ağa has suggested.<sup>26</sup> As in Cyprus, any such effort will need robust outside financing and support, strong local leadership,

and the ability to produce meaningful results on projects of local and national significance. It will also need to coincide with other, more traditional forms of institution building and social reconciliation. Conceptually, though, the Cyprus model points to a crucial insight about contested religious and cultural sites: rather than engines of conflict, they can, under the right circumstances, become instruments of peace.

### **Conclusion: An Impulse to Preserve?**

In the months after Catholicos Karekin II's warnings about cultural cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan quickly evolved into an uneasy afterwar standoff. In an escalating rhetorical battle, each side continued to accuse the other of destruction of cultural sites, while a tenuous calm prevailed in the zone of conflict. For the moment, the most important Armenian sites were left undisturbed, with Russian peacekeepers deployed at Dadivank Monastery; in the spring of 2021, a group of Armenian pilgrims were allowed to visit the complex under the escort of Russian troops.

Yet the outlook for Armenian heritage in the territories newly controlled by Azerbaijan was grim. The Azerbaijan government denied repeated requests by UNESCO to inspect cultural monuments in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and there was scant information about the current status of many Armenian sites. In March 2021, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) investigation was able to confirm the destruction and razing of at least one Armenian church since the war.<sup>27</sup> Following a tendentious national historiography, Azerbaijan's leaders have also asserted that historic Armenian churches in the region were built by "Albanian Caucasians," distant Christian ancestors of Azerbaijanis, and were falsely appropriated by Armenians in later centuries. Since the 2020 cease-fire, Azerbaijan has used this unfounded theory to argue that Armenia has no legitimate claim to church complexes in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Alarming, in February 2022, Azerbaijan's culture ministry announced that it was establishing a commission to "remove the fictitious traces written by Armenians on Albanian religious temples," effectively declaring its intent to erase the thousands of inscriptions that adorn medieval *khachkars* and form a crucial part of historic Armenian church decoration.<sup>28</sup>

Such destructive acts might be prevented with the right kind of international pressure, though Armenian sites are widely scattered, and it would be difficult to deploy international peacekeepers at many of them. Amid the lingering hatreds of a brutal war, moreover, persuading local communities to defy their own government and preserve monuments that represent the culture of their adversaries seems unlikely, and the risk of further destruction remains high. Nevertheless, as the case of Kosovo suggests, the challenges of such a situation may not be insurmountable. The government of Azerbaijan has previously shown that it is not indifferent to international opinion and has long sought to promote itself as a secular, multifaith state with strong ties to

UNESCO. In early 2022, Turkey, long a supporter of Azerbaijan, also began direct talks with Armenia, holding out the possibility that Ankara could serve as a potential intermediary on fraught heritage questions. When tensions cool, the Azerbaijan government may find it more expedient to preserve these vital monuments than to vandalize or obliterate them.

The urge to destroy a defeated enemy's culture is as old as war itself. In 149 BCE, Cato the Elder advised the Roman Senate that a defeated Carthage needed to be razed to the ground. Since the end of the Cold War, the destructive drive has taken on horrifying new dimensions in violent interethnic conflicts, from the Balkans to Myanmar's Rakhine State. Yet equally old may be the impulse to preserve, an impulse that has often transcended confessional and ethnic boundaries. The survival of the Pantheon in Rome, perhaps the greatest pagan temple of antiquity, is owed in significant measure to its adoption by the Catholic Church in the seventh century, when much of the city was falling into ruin; the Byzantine Empire's Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, now Istanbul, was left standing through five hundred years of Ottoman history because it was highly prized by Mehmed the Conqueror. Of course these cases involved the conversion, and to some extent alteration, of the original structures, but the monuments themselves survived, despite being controlled for centuries by groups of a different faith. Notably, until its reclassification as a mosque by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2020, Hagia Sophia spent nearly a century as a secular monument and museum, an early recognition of the transcendent value of cultural heritage.

Nor are such examples of interconfessional preservation absent from conflicts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the Old City of Jerusalem, perhaps no sacred site is more contested than the Holy Esplanade, the complex that Jews refer to as the Temple Mount and Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif. With two of Islam's most revered shrines, the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, built on what is believed to be the site of the Second Temple, the area has been an inevitable flash point of intercommunal tensions. Notably, in the spring of 2021, the worst Israeli-Palestinian violence in years was set off, in part, by an Israeli police raid on Palestinian protesters at the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Less well known, however, is the remarkable peace that has held for decades at the Holy Esplanade, largely as a result of Israeli policies adopted after the 1967 Six-Day War. In its sweeping victory, Israel gained control over East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, including the Old City and its Islamic sites. Given their location on the Temple Mount, the dome and the mosque were particularly at risk of destruction. One hard-line rabbi proposed to Uzi Narkiss, the Israeli general who led the offensive, blowing up the Dome of the Rock with one hundred kilograms of explosives. Yet Narkiss, and Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan, resisted these efforts, and together with the Israeli government reverted management of the entire complex to Muslim authorities and prohibited Jews from entering the precinct. Most crucially, a few months after the war, dozens of leading rabbis declared that Jews should not pray on the mount because



the exact location of the destroyed temple was unknown. It was an ingenious solution. As Ron E. Hassner recounts in *War on Sacred Grounds*, Jewish Israelis overwhelmingly accepted the government's prohibition on entry to this sacred precinct because of the rabbinical ruling. The result was more than two decades of peace at one of the most contested religious sites in the Middle East, even as other, less significant religious monuments in the West Bank came under frequent attack.<sup>29</sup>

As the Israeli example illustrates, even in the aftermath of a violent conflict in which control over crucial sacred monuments is at stake, the heritage of the defeated adversary has often been spared harm. Sometimes, sites and monuments belonging to former or present antagonists are preserved for strategic reasons, whether as a means to long-term stability or as a way to gain international legitimacy. As often, though, they may survive because they speak to the people who live around them, regardless of the identity of their creators. Aided by a growing number of tools for action—whether in the form of diplomatic pressure, funding for local initiatives, positive recognition, or actual peacekeepers—international actors can contribute meaningfully to this preservation ethos. In afterwar situations in particular, they may be able to confront or contain the dynamics that lead to attacks on cultural heritage before the damage is done. As the record of recent conflicts amply demonstrates, however, successful intervention will nearly always require the primary engagement of local leaders and the local community. And it must be durable. In the long run, any effort to protect sites and monuments during armed conflict will stand little chance of success without a strategy to preserve them when the fighting ends.

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Charlie English, *The Storied City: The Quest for Timbuktu and the Fantastic Mission to Save Its Past* (New York: Riverhead, 2017).

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#### NOTES

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