



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Jssor Youth Organization, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 May 2016]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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## ISIS war on Heritage

The World Heritage Convention is not the only international tool that UNESCO has made available to support conservation. In fact, since its inception in the aftermath of the Second World War, UNESCO has given life to several conventions in the field of cultural heritage conservation, reflecting the growing concern of the international community for conservation, a concern justified by the threats and destruction – voluntary and involuntary – that have taken place in the past and are witnessed every day. The conventions are:

- a) 1954 Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (Hague Convention), and its Protocols of 1992 and 1999;
- b) 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Cultural Property; c) 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage;
- c) 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage;
- d) 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; and
- e) 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Following the intentional destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Afghanistan), in 2003 the General Conference of UNESCO adopted a Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage. This Declaration encourages states to become signatories to the 1954 Convention<sup>1</sup>. It also requests them to "take all appropriate measures to prevent, avoid, stop and suppress acts of intentional destruction of cultural heritage, wherever such heritage is located", in peacetime or in the event of armed conflict.

Article VI stresses in particular that "a State that intentionally destroys or intentionally fails to take appropriate measures to prohibit, prevent, stop, and punish any intentional destruction of cultural heritage of great importance for humanity, whether or not it is inscribed on a list maintained by UNESCO or another international organization, bears the responsibility for such destruction, to the extent provided for by international law".

ISIS is waging a campaign of destruction against the cultural heritage of Iraq and Syria, a theologically motivated rampage on a scale believed to be without precedent in modern history. Ancient churches and tombs are being demolished; irreplaceable statues are being smashed, has been justifying its destruction through religion, calling the targeted statues and shrines "false idols." But Cairo-based Al-Azhar, the leading religious authority on Sunni Islam, said ISIS's actions were "a major crime against the whole world." And the jihadist group has been selling some of these antiquities to private collectors, a lucrative trade and one that has nothing to do with religion.

The campaign against Iraq's cultural heritage isn't just a violation of international law, but a genocidal assault on the core of a civilization. Not only is there a legal precedent for calling ISIS's destruction a war crime, but also a historical one paved by virtually every genocide<sup>2</sup> of the 20th century.

Cultural cleansing, embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies, is also at risk in both Iraq and Syria, threatened by sectarian agendas and religious fanaticism. The modus operandi consists of an extremely coherent and violent attempt to "cleanse" the society from any form of diversity, as well as and from all its places and vectors of cultural practice and freethinking. This includes deliberate attacks on places of worship and memory, as well as the killing of journalists and teachers, and the revision of education curricula to foster hatred against the other. All of this is integrated into a conscious communication strategy, with a sophisticated use of the mass media, including through the Internet. As such, cultural cleansing is an instrument of warfare -- which Nordstrom described as

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/intentional/declare.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/isis-war-crimes-genocide-ancient-art/>

the destruction of “what military strategists conceive of as humanity. This form of terror is not directed at the destruction of life and limb, but against all sense of a reasonable and humane world.

## Syria

The crisis in Syria has triggered massive internal displacement of more than 6 million people. It has also resulted in more than 3 million Syrians seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.

The UN estimates a quarter of a million Syrian people have died in the five years of conflict the country has faced. Among the human tragedies, the landscape and cultural heritage of the country have also suffered badly.

The country once had six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, all of which are now either destroyed or severely damaged, according to UNESCO, the United Nations body responsible for identifying significant cultural landmarks.

Some sites have been blown up and shelled during conflict, while others have been deliberately pillaged.

### I. Palmyra

Palmyra thrived for centuries in the desert east of Damascus as an oasis and stop for caravans on the Silk Road. Part of the Roman Empire, it was a thriving, wealthy metropolis. The city-state reached its peak in the late 3rd century, when it was ruled by Queen Zenobia and briefly rebelled against Rome.

Palmyra’s 2,000-year-old archaeological site Arch of Triumph, once a top tourist destination, was destroyed by Isis in October after the group seized control of the area in 2015.

The group also destroyed the 2,000-year-old Temple of Bel. Other archaeological sites such as Ampamea in Hama, Tell Merdikh in Idlib and the Dura-Europos and Mari sites in Deir el-Zour have also been destroyed.

### II. Mar Elian Monastery

The Christian monastery was captured in August, when ISIS militants captured the Syrian town of al-Qaryatain near Palmyra. Dedicated to a 4th-century saint, it was an important pilgrimage site and sheltered hundreds of Syrian Christians.

### III. Apamea

A rich Roman-era trading city, Apamea has been badly looted since the beginning of Syria's civil war, before ISIS appeared. Satellite imagery shows dozens of pits dug across the site; previously unknown Roman mosaics have reportedly been excavated and removed for sale. ISIS is said to take a cut from sales of ancient artifacts, making tens of millions of dollars to fund their operations.

### IV. Dura-Europos

A Greek settlement on the Euphrates not far from Syria's border with Iraq, Dura-Europos later became one of Rome's easternmost outposts.

### V. Mari

Mari flourished in the Bronze Age, between 3000 and 1600 B.C. Archaeologists have discovered palaces, temples, and extensive archives written on clay tablets that shed light on the early days of civilization in the region.

## Iraq

In Iraq notably, major concerns about the safeguarding of the country's cultural diversity, already fragile from previous conflicts, have resurfaced, especially in light of last summer's wave of systematic persecutions of cultural and religious minorities in areas under the control of the ISIS and associated armed groups.

The persecution of Iraq's minority communities such as Yazidis, Christians, Fayli Kurds, Shabaks and Turkmen, as well as of Sunni communities, has included arbitrary killings and arrest, torture, slavery, intimidation and marginalization. For instance, homes in Mosul inhabited by Christians have been marked with the Arabic letter "nun". These systematic violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law may in some instances amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. These persecutions on the basis of cultural and religious identity have triggered a massive forced displacement of populations in Iraq from areas traditionally hosting a vast diversity of cultural minorities. To date, more than 2 million people have fled to other regions of the country, in particular to the Kurdistan Region.

### I. Hatra

Built in the third century B.C., Hatra was the capital of an independent kingdom on the outskirts of the Roman Empire.

### II. Nineveh

Ancient Assyria was one of the first true empires, expanding aggressively across the Middle East and controlling a vast stretch of the ancient world between 900 and 600 B.C.

### III. Mosul Museum and Libraries

**Reports of looting at Mosul's libraries and universities began to surface almost as soon as ISIS occupied the city last summer. Centuries-old manuscripts were stolen, and thousands of books disappeared into the shadowy international art market.**

### IV. Nimrud

**Nimrud was the first Assyrian capital, founded 3,200 years ago. Its rich decoration reflected the empire's power and wealth.**

### V. Khorsabad

**Khorsabad is another ancient Assyrian capital, a few miles from Mosul. The palace there was built between 717 and 706 B.C. by Assyria's King Sargon II.**

### VI. Mar Behnam Monastery

**Established in the 4th century, the monastery was dedicated to an early Christian saint. The holy site, maintained since the late 1800s by Syriac Catholic monks,**

### VII. Mosque of the Prophet Yunus

**Mosul's Mosque of the Prophet Yunus was dedicated to the biblical figure Jonah, considered a prophet by many Muslims.**

### VIII. Imam Dur Mausoleum

**The Imam Dur Mausoleum, not far from the city of Samarra, was a magnificent specimen of medieval Islamic architecture and decoration. It was blown up last October.**

While ancient sites in and around Iraq and Syria remain at risk, cultural heritage advocates now fear Libya could be ISIS's next target. In December, ISIS set up a training camp in the port city of Derna; in February were beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians, and last week were kidnapped nine foreign oil workers. The country also has a number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the archaeological sites of Cyrene, a Hellenic city, and Sabratha, an ancient trading post.

The international community has effectively outsourced the protection of cultural heritage to nation-states. As UNESCO declared in its 1970 Convention on cultural property, "It is incumbent upon every State to protect the cultural property existing within its territory against the dangers of theft, clandestine excavation, and illicit export" and that "the protection of cultural heritage can be effective only if organized both nationally and internationally among States working in close cooperation."

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