



# Contemporary Patterns of Terrorist Threats Targeting Cultural Heritage

Mapping Drivers and Trends of Terror Crimes against Cultural Heritage



**ITSS**  
International Team  
For the Study of Security  
Verona

**Published by ITSS Verona, Villafranca di Verona, Italy**  
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**Via Alessandri 84, 37062 Villafranca di Verona**  
**CF: 93285920232**

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### **Cite this Report**

Groppi, Michele, Julia M. Hodgins, Sonia Martínez-Girón, Alessia Maira, Leigh Dawson, Natalia Luers, Joseph Moses, Francesco Pagano, John Devine, Vendela Laukkanen and Ara Kheder. 2025. “Contemporary Patterns of Threats Targeting Cultural Heritage: Mapping Drivers and Trends of Terror Crimes Against Cultural Heritage.” International Team for the Study of Security Verona. <https://www.itssverona.it/research-projects>.

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# About ITSS Verona

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As former UN Secretary Kofi Annan famously stated, mankind increasingly deals with “problems without passports”. We are convinced that internationalising research and debate is paramount to tackling new security challenges and advancing policy.

This is why ITSS Verona unites outstanding professionals from governments, institutions, armed forces, civil society and industry with the intent to analyse the social, economic and geopolitical tensions affecting the world today. Counting on a scientific committee composed of more than 150 experts worldwide and more than 100 active members, ITSS Verona offers articles, podcasts, webinars, an International Security Magazine and courses such as ITSS Summer School. Our members appear regularly on renowned media outlets such as BBC or France 24.

# Editors and Contributors

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## Editors

Michele Groppi - Senior Lecturer in Defence Studies at King's College London, Defence Studies Department, President and Founder of ITSS Verona. [president@itssverona.it](mailto:president@itssverona.it).

Julia M. Hodgins - Project Lead & Lead Researcher for Culture, Society and Security Team. Master of Arts in International Affairs by King's College London. ITSS Verona's Deputy of Research, [julia@itssverona.it](mailto:julia@itssverona.it).

Sonia Martínez Girón - PhD candidate in Security, Universidad de Nebrija, Madrid, ITSS Verona Executive Director. [sonia@itssverona.it](mailto:sonia@itssverona.it).

## Contributors

Alessia Maira - Assistant Report Lead & Researcher ITSS Verona Culture, Society & Security Team. MA International Affairs & Cybersecurity King's College London.

Ara Kheder - Analyst ITSS Verona Culture, Society & Security Team. Political Analyst at KRG Council of Ministers / Office of the coordinator for international Advocacy.

Francesco Pagano - Researcher ITSS Verona, Crime, Extremism, and Terrorism Team, MA in International Security Studies, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies and the School of International Studies at the University of Trento.

John Devine - Researcher, Podcast Co-Lead, and UK Regional Manager at ITSS Verona, MA International Affairs specialised in Cyber Security by King's College London.

Joseph Moses - Researcher ITSS Verona, Military Strategy & Intelligence Team, MA International Relations, Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

Leigh Dawson - Former Co-Lead of Podcast Series, Australia Regional Manager & Researcher Culture, Society & Security Team, ITSS Verona. MA International Affairs at King's College London.

Natalia Luers - Researcher ITSS Verona Culture, Society & Security Team. MSc Candidate in International Security Studies Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies Pisa and University of Trento.

Vendela Laukkanen - Researcher ITSS Verona Artificial Intelligence, Cyber Security & Space Team. LLM International Law University of Cambridge.

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# Abbreviations and Glossary

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## Abbreviations

ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross

ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also referred to as Da'esh/ISIL/Islamic State)

ITSS Verona - International Team for the Study of Security Verona

MINUSMA - United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

UN - United Nations

UNCTED - United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNITAD - United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by ISIS

## Glossary

Aware of the myriads of definitions and conceptualisations of Cultural Heritage, we opted for the following working definition from UNESCO as starting point for interviewing subject matter experts:<sup>1</sup>

*“Cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance. It includes tangible heritage (movable, immobile and underwater), intangible cultural heritage (ICH) embedded into cultural, and natural heritage artefacts, sites or monuments. The definition excludes ICH related to other cultural domains such as festivals, celebration etc. It covers industrial heritage and cave paintings.*”

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, “Cultural Heritage,” [uis.unesco.org](https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/cultural-heritage), 2009, <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/cultural-heritage>.

# Executive Summary

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Amid the myriads of threats and attacks against cultural sites and, more in general, the erosion of cultural heritage as a whole, this project aims to explore the dynamics that may push terrorists to target cultural heritage. In particular, attacks on culturally significant sites and threats undermining intangible heritage perpetrated by terrorists result in a dual benefit for attackers, namely erasing history and identity while accruing financial gain and generating power. This research report delves into the motivations underlying such acts of destruction, as well as specific case analyses to identify prevalent trends and commonalities of contemporary relevance. The research encompasses both tangible and intangible dimensions, acknowledging the key role of intangible elements such as memory in shaping identity and societal relations, that are increasingly targeted in attacks of diverse nature. This document underscores the necessity for an innovative and comprehensive approach to the global protection of cultural heritage, which is responsive to contemporary dynamics.

One of the key findings of this research is that the concept of cultural heritage is dynamic and requires a multifaceted approach that addresses terrorism, illicit trafficking, and destruction. Critiques of how “cultural heritage” is described should prompt policymakers to reassess why and how they aim to protect heritage, in turn demanding the development of effective strategies, messages, and protocols. The latter demands establishing workable definitions that facilitate cohesive discussions, as criminals often exploit loopholes that jeopardise other aspects of protection mechanisms.

Furthermore, this report highlights the interconnectivity between cultural heritage and community resilience. The destruction or degradation of cultural heritage not only impacts the historical and cultural narrative but also destabilises communities, leading to long-term socio-economic and psychological repercussions. Protecting cultural heritage is thus not only about preserving the past but also about ensuring the stability and well-being of present and future generations. This calls for an integrated approach that involves local communities, international organisations, and governments working together to create resilient frameworks capable of withstanding various threats.

Additionally, the report emphasises the role of technology in safeguarding cultural heritage. Advanced technologies, such as satellite imaging, 3D reconstruction, and blockchain for tracking art provenance, offer new opportunities for monitoring, protecting, and restoring cultural sites and artefacts. These technological tools can enhance our ability to respond swiftly to threats, document and preserve heritage accurately, and create global awareness about the importance of cultural

heritage protection. Investing in and leveraging these technologies is crucial for developing robust strategies that can adapt to the evolving nature of threats.

Main findings:

- The complexity and fluidity of cultural heritage unfold in a myriad of vulnerabilities, warranting a dynamic concept and a multifaceted approach that encompasses terrorism, illicit trafficking of antiquities, and destruction of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
- The protection of cultural heritage is essential for maintaining community resilience and socio-economic stability and necessitates collaborative efforts from local, national, and international parties.
- Technological advancements play a critical role in monitoring and protecting cultural heritage, providing innovative solutions to contemporary challenges.
- Terrorists' motivation to attack cultural heritage is to destroy identity and disrupt the pace of life, as a means to the end of disarticulating communities and societies that are composed of a diversity of groups and individuals.
- The case studies, mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan, enlighten the complexity of the terrorist threat and how the attacks evolve into subtle and pervasive with the support of technology advancement.

# Acknowledgements

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Exploring cultural heritage vis-à-vis terrorist destruction has not been an easy task. Lack of resources, reach and knowledge have considerably limited what our Team could do. And yet, whilst our study may only offer indicative results, we humbly believe this to be a solid starting point - one which could pave the way to future research. Amongst the many great people who inspired us, we wish to thank Dr Scharia and his Team at the UN Counter-terrorism Executive Directorate (UNCTED) for their immense support, vision and, most importantly, friendship. If we were able to attract more than 500 people at the Gran Guardia conference in Verona in December 2023 and complete this report, we most certainly owe it to UNCTED.

The Senior Leadership Team at ITSS Verona also wishes to thank all of our 21 experts who took part in the study by sharing their infinite wisdom and experience, which have been the real added value of this study. Equally, we wish to thank all the editors and contributors for their tremendous, passionate effort.

Last but not least, the Senior Leadership Team at ITSS Verona wishes to thank Mrs Julia Hodgins. As the Lead for this project, Julia has proven to be an indisputable leader. Her enthusiasm, dedication, time-management skills, and entrepreneurial attitude were instrumental to the successful completion of this project, which we hope can fuel healthy discussion on an increasingly important issue affecting many countries wishing to protect their invaluable cultural heritage.

# Introduction

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*“A Russian collector bought a tile from Iran because he thought it was a historic tile from a shrine in Syria. There was a stamp in the tile showing that it was made in 1894 or 1895. He did not know anything and, basically, he did not care. He bought it maybe because it was pretty – because it was – but, seemingly, largely, he bought it because he wanted to convert his currency into a useful asset, and to show that he had power and reach. Not only that he got this thing, this beautiful historical object but that he was able to get it. His networks, his influence reach far enough to get something from a significant site in an active conflict zone. Even there you can see all sorts of motivations tied up together, if you see the profit as the primary one, which I think it is, one way or another, that encompasses this amassing of capital in all of its forms.”*

Dr. Samuel Andrew Hardy.<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by UN CTED's work, this research project has been designed by the ITSS Verona Culture, Society and Security Team to explore the protection of cultural heritage vis-à-vis terrorist destruction. The project recognises the proliferation of orchestrated and stochastic attacks against valuable sites of cultural relevance and the threats increasingly eroding the significance of intangible heritage, inevitably leading to destruction that results in a double profit for perpetrators, namely power and revenues, all to the detriment of individuals, communities, and nations.

This research has gathered a significant amount of qualitative data regarding terrorist acts against cultural heritage from multiple locations. Consequently, this report centres on the case studies that speak to each thematic area explored. Nonetheless, it is relevant to underline that many of the subject matter experts interviewed did not solely discuss terrorism, nor are they exclusively focused on this field. They also addressed other thematic areas and, most importantly, provided several insightful pathways for potential implementation, which, for the most part, were integrated into the recommendations section. ITSS Verona aims to contextualise suggestions within the case studies, bridging issues and solutions to holistically address the multifaceted challenges of protecting cultural heritage.

This research project evidences that such a noble goal of protecting cultural heritage requires an innovative and comprehensive approach to respond to contemporary trends. In this time of unabating technological innovation, which some experts call a *technopolar* system alluding to the undebatable influence of technology, attackers – whether terrorists or criminals – resiliently adjust

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel A. Hardy, Interviewed via Zoom on February 21, 2023 by ITSS Verona. S.A. Hardy is an Analyst at the Cultural Resilience Informatics and Analysis (Curia) Lab for the Ukraine Conflict Observatory, Associate Researcher for the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research on Destructive Exploitation and care of Cultural Objects, and Professional/Public Education for sustainable heritage management (DECOPE) under the Joint Programming Initiative on Cultural Heritage and Global Change – Cultural Heritage, Society and Ethics (JPI CH CHSE). <https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/>, <https://conflictobservatory.org>, <https://www.niku.no/en/forskningsprosjekt/decope/>.

their tactics, creating ways to expand their outreach and increase their profit while avoiding consequences based on the challenges to conclusively attribute and further prosecute. Identifying these threats and how they are addressed in the available literature and in contemporary politics and international relations is crucial in developing informed and effective strategies.

The more we delved into this research, the vaster and more complex this field seemed, in turn revealing the need to carry out this project.

# Methodology

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This short section outlines the ethical framework, the methodological approach, the sampling strategy, and the ad-hoc instruments employed for data collection and analysis. The research abides by ethical standards and regulations in vigour both in Italy and the European Union concerning the collection, storage, retention, disclosure, and post-completion destruction of the original data collected. These standards ensure the protection of participants' rights, confidentiality, and privacy throughout the research process and all its outputs.

## **Technical specifications**

This research is a baseline study that integrates two strands of information in the analysis:

- Original research, comprising a qualitative examination of expert opinion
- Secondary research, including a comprehensive review of literature, textual documents and other available resources

The main purpose is to enhance the understanding of threats against cultural heritage by highlighting contemporary factors that influence both the nature of attacks and their potential evolution. Central to our inquiry was the main question:

In the current global context, what are the underlying factors driving these visible actions against cultural heritage perpetrated by terrorists?

A preliminary identification of knowledge gaps guided us into disaggregating the above question into:

1. Strategic connection: do cleanse and profit interlink in a larger strategic intention? If so, how?
2. Is there any association between the rise of the destruction, the exploitation of cultural heritage, and the ever-growing cyber expansion?
3. As the unabating evolution of technology is a watermark of the 21st Century, what is its role and influence in this regard?
4. Are states' laws congruent to international regulations?
5. Are there self-threats posed by states themselves - whether by exploiting heritage or by undermining the exertion of cultural rights of the population or any subsets, namely minorities, vulnerable groups?
6. What undermines prosecution of looting and destruction? What enables impunity?

These questions guided the development of a semi-structured and problem-centred interview protocol.<sup>3</sup>

### **Sampling specifics**

Our sampling strategy collates several perspectives. The sample frame includes government officials, policymakers, and other subject matter experts from academia and journalism. The selection criteria focus on individuals possessing expertise and/or working knowledge in:

- Cultural heritage protection
- Defence/security within the context of - either - state level or international level policy

The sampling strategy includes states that are both signatory and non-signatory of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, in order to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives. Specifically, the selected countries include Italy, Japan, Sudan, Australia (signatories); as well as Syria, Afghanistan, and Macedonia (non-signatories).

The project intended to engage more member countries alongside a larger number of subject matter experts, to this end we mapped a total of eighty-five (85) potential interviewees fulfilling the criteria above and invited seventy-five (75) subjects to take part in the study. From the total contacted only twenty-three (23) accepted to participate in the study, with two interviews not being completed despite initial acceptance. Noteworthy, we found multiple experts unavailable due to security clearance limiting their participation, others simply declined, and a small group found it hard to factor the meeting within their busy schedules. The 21 interviews comprise a sample including both countries signatories to UNESCO WHC and non-signatories.

### **Original data gathered**

Resulting from a search of qualified opinion, twenty-one (21) subject matter experts were interviewed and later invited to a focus group to further the discussion. A total of twenty-one interviews were completed: seventeen (17) were recorded in video, four in audio, and one in writing. Fieldwork started in October 2022, interviews stopped in February 2024, the webinar took place in April 2024.

The Focus group followed a semi-structured adaptive protocol, participation was voluntary, and interviewees could withdraw at any point without explanation. Eleven (11) experts attended the webinar, three of whom were not initially interviewed thus not influenced by an earlier conversation in the matter, bringing a fresh perspective to the discussion.

To ensure free participation and avoid biases, both interviewees and attendees to the webinar could refrain from discussing any aspect or decline to respond to questions at their discretion. Video records are treated as privileged and subject to confidentiality measures.

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<sup>3</sup> See Interview Protocol in the Appendix.

## **Field Instruments<sup>4</sup>**

To facilitate data collection and analysis, three ad-hoc instruments were utilised:

- Semi-structured problem-centred adaptive interview protocol: this document provides a flexible framework for the conversation while ensuring key topics are addressed.
- Consent form: prior to the interview, experts willing to participate were provided with a consent form outlining the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their prerogatives. Some experts consented to be identified and quoted, others chose to discuss their identification, other experts decided to remain anonymous throughout the outputs and disclosure of results; in the last two cases, interviewees' identity is protected with a code alike "Country-Nr" (example: AFGH-01).
- Information sheet: attached to the email invite, participants received a document detailing the research purpose, objectives, methodology, and contact information for the research team, allowing them to make an informed decision about their potential participation.
- Semi-structured adaptive focus group protocol: a set of three questions were sent to confirmed participants in advance, for their preparedness. We aimed to probe the influence of gender, emerging technologies and corruption in terrorism targeting cultural heritage.

The focus group was held in April 2024 and recorded using Zoom. All interviewees were invited alongside eight others who initially declined to be interviewed. Eleven (11) experts participated in the focus group, three of whom were not interviewed but showed interest in contributing to the study.

Outputs of both the interviews and the focus group were analysed using a qualitative-interpretative analysis procedure to systematically review and interpret data gathered. This approach enables the identification of emerging themes, patterns, contrasts, and linkages, thereby facilitating the generation of meaningful insights upon them. By adhering to this comprehensive methodology, our research aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the issue surrounding cultural heritage protection against terrorist attacks and exploitation, and defence/security policies within the context of international frameworks and national perspectives.

## **Limitations**

This study does not aspire to grasp the very essence of cultural heritage or discuss the extent of its meaning, nor to prescribe authoritative voices or set predominant lenses to explore it. The value of this document consists of providing a sound starting point to sustain the pursuit of exploring in larger depth the motivations behind terrorist attacks and destruction of cultural sites, and most importantly the intangible heritage of communities targeted by those.

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<sup>4</sup> All field Instruments are available in the Appendix.

In theoretical terms, the main challenge is that expertise is generally focused on specific edges of the debate and the scope undertaken by this research. Whether in security such as crime and corruption; in defence such as peace, conflict or terrorism; in cultural affairs like museums, archaeology; in policy; or in law, regulation, and prosecution. Furthermore, academics and researchers either speak from their ongoing works, and have to face an unavoidable and unfortunate time lag in reference to the developments occurring in real life where the events happen. For research and literature to be available, published, it demands a strict peer-review, leaving events and phenomena that are newly adopted, unspotted, or anecdotal accounts out of the discussion, meaning that as criminals and terrorists enact new coveted forms to operate, these will not be referred and discussed until firstly detected, and significant data is collected to provide a sound study on the matter. This gap and its relevance both increase when aiming to delve in the underworlds of crime, corruption, conflict, and terrorism.

ITSS considers equally foundational to hear the voices and stories of local actors in the vicinity of cultural heritage sites, and communities, whether those see their artefacts being racketeered and/or their intangible legacy being eroded; and to map their needs to close gaps in the preservation efforts. However, our organisation, our team, and in particular this research project, do not have logistical means to travel to action fields guaranteeing safety for our research and analysts, for potential interviewees, and other parties participating in a potential research journey. We hope to sow inspiration for such endeavour, which would be conducive into integrative and long-term solutions.

## Part I: Literature review

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This literature review aims to explore the multifaceted concept of cultural heritage and its various definitions, the threats it faces, the underlying impact and motivations behind its destruction, and the efforts to address these challenges. The goal is to provide the reader with an essential context for the case studies that follow, which make up for the central part of this research report focused on the vulnerabilities of cultural heritage and its interlinkages with terrorism, violence and economical exploitation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The first section begins by providing the report's working definition of cultural heritage and its various dimensions, followed by a brief analysis of the general threats that endanger it. The next section deals directly with the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage by ideological and terror-driven motivations, as well as the exploitation driven by coping, conflict, or criminal economies. Lastly, the closing section will build the foundations for the last chapter of this report – policy recommendations – by assessing current approaches and highlighting possible gaps in the protection and preservation of cultural heritage, including issues relating to funding, national and international legal frameworks, and international discourse.

It is essential to acknowledge that the breadth and depth of these topics, along with their many ramifications, are vast and complex and assessing them comprehensively would require a more extensive investigation beyond the scope of this report. This brief literature review serves as a mere introduction, setting the stage for the specific instances of cultural heritage case studies that emerge as relevant from the field study piece.

### **Section I: Definition and threats to cultural heritage**

Cultural heritage stands as a testament to the collective memory of humanity, a bridge that supports the continuity between generations. Yet, this essence makes it a target for those seeking to sow discord and erase identities. Consistently depicted as holding historical and human value, this rich aggregation of experience and knowledge encompasses a diverse array of tangible and intangible elements that shape the human understanding of history and identity. As a consequence of this, the available definitions in the literature are many and present subtle variations.

According to UNESCO, “heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations.”<sup>5</sup> This broad definition includes both tangible and intangible elements, including monuments, buildings, and natural sites, as well as oral traditions, performing arts, and social practices. In its conventions, UNESCO classifies cultural heritage into three main

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<sup>5</sup> UNESCO, “World Heritage,” unesco.org, 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/en/world-heritage>.

categories: tangible heritage (physical artefacts and monuments), natural heritage (natural landscapes with cultural significance), and intangible heritage (practices, traditions, and expressions). The 1972 *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* definition specifically addresses the preservation of tangible cultural and natural heritage, identified respectively as monuments, groups of buildings, sites, and natural or geological features and sites of value.<sup>6</sup> The convention expressly addresses the significance of tangible heritage to humanity as a whole. The 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* focuses on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, which includes living traditions, performing arts, rituals, and social practices preserved via intergenerational transmission.<sup>7</sup> Arguably, the more recent 2003 Convention highlights the relevance of safeguarding intangible cultural practices and expressions with the same regard as their tangible counterpart, ensuring that those continue to be recognised and celebrated within communities. Put together, both Conventions - 1972 focusing on tangible sites and natural landscapes and 2003 centring on intangible traditions - provide a comprehensive approach to the diverse aspects of cultural heritage, its protection and preservation.

Most nations have their own definitions of cultural heritage, which are often influenced by international frameworks like those of UNESCO, but tailored to reflect their unique cultural, historical, and social contexts. For example, Italy defines cultural heritage through its Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape of 22 January 2004: in article 10, cultural heritage is identified as immovable and movable objects which are of artistic, historical and archaeological interest, and also intangible heritage of ethno-anthropological interest.<sup>8</sup>

Organisations such as Blue Shield International, founded in 1996 to protect cultural heritage during conflicts and disasters, are often found to underline the “invisible link between the protection of people and their cultural property,” highlighting the fundamental connection of the history that unites people and communities to identity and a sense of belonging, ultimately providing them with a reason to live: the linkage between past and present and the value it holds is evident.<sup>9</sup>

Definitions and efforts towards protecting cultural heritage are numerous, even from a surface-level literature investigation. Central to the working definition of this research report is that cultural heritage encompasses both tangible items that can be physically studied – such as artefacts,

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<sup>6</sup> UNESCO, “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,” [www.unesco.org](https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/), 1972, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>, 2.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, “Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2022 Edition),” [www.unesco.org](https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention), 2003, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Italy, “Legislative Decree of January 22, 2004, No. 42, Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape,” [www.normattiva.it](http://www.normattiva.it), *Official Gazette of the Italian Republic*, February 24, 2004, <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legislativo:2004-01-22>, Article 10.

<sup>9</sup> Peter G. Stone, “Protecting Cultural Property in Armed Conflict: The Necessity for Dialogue and Action Integrating the Heritage, Military, and Humanitarian Sectors,” in *Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities*, ed. James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022), <https://www.getty.edu/publications/cultural-heritage-mass-atrocities/part-5/31-stone/#fn:9>, 534.

antiquities, monuments, and historic sites – as well as intangible elements – such as languages, religious practices, traditional recipes, craftsmanship, and festivals. The combination of tangible and intangible heritage reflects the living culture of communities and is vital to their identity and history.

Despite its proven value, cultural heritage faces numerous general threats that endanger its preservation and continuity. These threats come from different sources, including natural disasters, environmental degradation, *anthropisation*, urbanisation, and conflict in all of its forms. Threats to cultural heritage extend beyond direct acts of terrorism and often manifest as indirect consequences of it, underscoring a complex web of challenges. Among these, the looting and illegal trade of artifacts are particularly devastating, stripping communities of their tangible heritage and erasing connections to their historical and cultural identities. Such activities are frequently driven by the economic incentives created in the aftermath of terrorism, where instability provides fertile ground for illicit markets to flourish. Political instability, weak governance, and insufficient legal frameworks exacerbate these challenges, creating an environment where cultural heritage becomes a vulnerable target for exploitation.

While other significant threats such as urbanization, modernization, and climate change contribute substantially to the degradation and destruction of cultural heritage, these factors, though undeniably relevant, fall outside the purview of this report. This report specifically narrows its focus to the threats that are directly driven by terrorism or fostered as a consequence of it. In this context, the deliberate targeting of cultural heritage by terrorist groups and the subsequent ripple effects, including the proliferation of artifact trafficking and the collapse of protective systems, are the primary concerns. This emphasis highlights the urgency of addressing the intricate relationship between terrorism and cultural heritage loss, providing a foundation for targeted strategies to mitigate these specific threats.

Cultural heritage often becomes an unintended casualty or a deliberate target in the context of military conflicts, reflecting one of the most significant drivers of its loss and destruction. Intentional and unintentional damage to cultural sites has far-reaching consequences, erasing invaluable historical landmarks and severing the vital connections between communities and their cultural identities. Examples that gathered high international relevance include the destruction of Palmyra, the Bamiyan Buddhas, and the Askariya Shrine. In times of conflict, cultural heritage is particularly vulnerable, whether due to deliberate targeting as a means to assert dominance or as a strategy to intimidate or suppress populations. Such actions result in the irreversible loss of shared history and identity, amplifying the broader impacts of war.

Historical examples demonstrate that cultural heritage sites can become embroiled in conflict for various reasons, including their perceived symbolic value or their unintended location within strategic zones. Deliberate actions against cultural sites can inflict psychological and emotional wounds on communities by targeting places of collective memory and significance, not to mention physical displacement. However, cultural heritage also suffers as a consequence of broader military engagements. Whether through collateral damage during hostilities or as a result of sites being repurposed for strategic uses, conflicts often leave a lasting impact on cultural landmarks. During the Iraq wars, many historical sites of cultural values were lost or partly destroyed as part of military activity by engaged forces. Reports of such cases highlight the complex interplay between military needs and the preservation of cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of balanced and sensitive approaches in conflict zones.

This issue transcends specific geographies and is not limited to particular types of actors; rather, it reflects the broader vulnerabilities of cultural heritage during times of unrest. Addressing these challenges requires heightened awareness of the risks posed to cultural sites in conflict settings and a commitment to safeguarding these irreplaceable elements of human history for future generations.

## Section II: terrorist targeting of cultural heritage

### TERRORISTIC DRIVERS

Terrorism poses a significant and immediate threat to cultural heritage preservation, inflicting wounds not only on physical structures but also on the soul of communities.<sup>10</sup> The deliberate destruction of cultural sites by terrorist groups is an intentional act of erasure, aiming to sever the connection between a community and their history. The Taliban's obliteration of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and the Islamic State's systematic attacks on cultural sites in Syria and Iraq stand as reminders of this impact.<sup>11</sup> These acts not only steal irreplaceable physical artefacts but also attempt to dismantle the fabric of cultural identity, severing the ties that bind communities to their past. Furthermore, terrorist organisations exploit the destruction of cultural heritage for propaganda purposes, twisting the narrative and amplifying the fear they seek to instil.<sup>12</sup>

### STOCHASTIC TERRORISM

Stochastic terrorism, where terrorist ideologies spread through online platforms, further endangers cultural heritage, as it motivates individuals to carry out unpredictable attacks against cultural symbols. A relatively new concept in literature, it is defined as the "idea that influential individuals

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<sup>10</sup> Sabine von Schorlemer, "Fighting Terrorist Attacks against World Heritage and Global Cultural Heritage Governance," in *Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities*, ed. James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022), <https://www.getty.edu/publications/cultural-heritage-mass-atrocities/part-4/26-von-schorlemer/>, 448-449.

<sup>11</sup> Schorlemer, "Fighting," 448.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 449.

may demonise target groups or individuals, inspiring unknown actors to take up terroristic violence against them.”<sup>13</sup>

In their work dedicated to “lone wolf” terrorism, criminologists Hamm and Spaaij underline the use of mass media as a key characteristic of stochastic terrorism, used as a means of instigating “random acts of ideologically motivated violence that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, unlike the kind of coordinated, mass attacks traditionally perpetrated by hierarchically structured terrorist groups, stochastic terrorism operates through a calculated manipulation of mass communication.<sup>15</sup> Extremist ideologies are disseminated through online platforms and social media, inciting individuals to commit random acts of violence.<sup>16</sup> In other words, online venues become echo chambers where individuals are radicalised and provided replicable models of violent acts.

The unpredictable nature of these acts makes them particularly challenging to prevent, more so when factoring how it enables replicas. Influential figures - online *influencers* - initiate an online crusade demonising communities that are ‘othered,’ arguably pursuing the promotion of violence. Often when violence shifts from cyberspace into the kinetic world, cultural sites become the target because they hold significance, whether religious or ethnic, and are highly visible, recognisable, and iconic for those communities. While the ultimate target is the community, its sites and monuments turn into vulnerable damage, and are consequently attacked, as means to an end.

Additionally, the very nature of social media, with its rapid spread of information and potential for anonymity, creates a breeding ground for extremist content, making it difficult to track and counter the threats it poses to cultural heritage before it is too late. This phenomenon also leads to a heightened risk for vulnerable young people, as it exposes them to terrorist propaganda on diverse online venues - many of which populate social media platforms - leading to potential recruitment in such groups.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the internet also functions as a new frontier for the illicit trade of cultural artefacts. Online marketplaces, some also hosted on social media platforms, and dark web sites have become key spaces where looted and stolen artefacts, alongside other cultural items, are liberally advertised and traded,<sup>18</sup> often under the threshold of prosecution. This digital black market

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<sup>13</sup> James Angove, “Stochastic Terrorism: Critical Reflections on an Emerging Concept,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 17, no. 1, February 3, 2024, 21–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2305742>, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7312/hamm18174>, 84.

<sup>15</sup> Angove, “*Stochastic*,” 23.

<sup>16</sup> Tim Stevens and Peter R. Neumann, “Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action” (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), January 28, 2009, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/ICSR-Report-The-Challenge-of-Online-Radicalisation-A-Strategy-for-Action.pdf>, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Schorlemer, “*Fighting*,” 455.

<sup>18</sup> Maxwell Votey, “Illicit Antiquities and the Internet: The Trafficking of Heritage on Digital Platforms,” *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 54 (2022), <https://nyujilp.org/volume-54-2021-2022/>, 659.

enables the rapid and less visible, when not anonymous, exchange of artefacts, making it increasingly difficult for authorities to trace and recover these invaluable pieces of history and identity.

## **RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM**

Another significant factor is religious extremism. A stark example of this is the high impact and the most infamous event of this type: the destruction of the “Buddhas of Bamiyan” by the Taliban, despite international protests.<sup>19</sup> An older declaration from Afghanistan’s supreme leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, served the Taliban as justification to destroy these colossal statues, that “the real God is only Allah, and all other false gods should be removed.”<sup>20</sup> The situation of the Taliban represents a complex definitional challenge regarding their classification as terrorist actors. Depending on their designation by different states, the Taliban’s classification has varied, particularly during their periods of power in Afghanistan, including their recent return to governance post-2022.

Furthermore, these attacks represent a form of historical revisionism, attempting to rewrite the past in support of a new or current agenda and propagate extremist ideologies.<sup>21</sup> Jihadist groups often view pre-Islamic cultures and religions as heretical. By erasing such symbols of dissenting pre-Islamic traditions, these actors aim to obliterate cultural diversity and impose their ideological interpretations of history. This destruction goes beyond physical monuments—it undermines the identities of targeted communities, erasing their historical and cultural ties and silencing voices that stand outside the purview of extremist narratives. The Buddhas of Bamiyan serve as a harrowing reminder of how cultural heritage, a cornerstone of human identity, becomes collateral damage in ideological warfare, threatening the preservation of history for future generations.

## **ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION**

In addition to deliberate destruction, terrorist organizations exploit cultural heritage for economic gain. Looting artifacts and selling them on the black market has become a significant funding source for terrorist operations. However, this economic exploitation transcends the immediate activities of terrorist groups, acting also as a byproduct of broader socio-economic and political insecurities in regions plagued by conflict. In contexts where acute socio-political unrest meets with economic instability, other threats emerge in the form of economic patterns derived from exploiting cultural goods. As shown in Brodie and Sabine’s study on Syria, three specific economic patterns emerge: families struggling with harshness develop a *coping economy*, terrorist groups sustain a *conflict*

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<sup>19</sup> Alberto Frigerio, “Heritage under Attack: A Critical Analysis of the Reasons behind the Destruction of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict,” Mulino.it, 2014, <https://aedon.mulino.it/archivio/2014/2/frigerio.htm>, section 4.3.

<sup>20</sup> Archaeological Institute of America, “Destructive Frenzy in Afghanistan: Comments by the Taliban - Archaeology Magazine Archive,” [www.archaeology.org](http://www.archaeology.org), 2001, <https://archive.archaeology.org/online/news/afghanistan/taliban.html>, citation n. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Kristy Champion, “Blast through the Past: Terrorist Attacks on Art and Antiquities as a Reconquest of the Modern Jihadi Identity,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297735>, 27, 31.

*economy* to fund their operations, and a *criminal economy* forms among networks that often include corrupted officers of the military or government.<sup>22</sup>

In areas under terrorist control, the systematic looting and trafficking of cultural artifacts may have two immediate functions. Naturally, on one hand, such actions grant significant profit to terrorists. On the other hand, trafficking stolen art may also become a coping mechanism for local populations grappling with poverty, displacement, and instability. Indeed, for many individuals residing in these regions, engaging in the illegal trade of cultural artifacts becomes a survival tactic in the absence of legitimate economic opportunities. The loss of state authority, coupled with deteriorating economic conditions, creates an environment where black-market economies thrive, often facilitated or orchestrated by armed groups. This dynamic underscores how the plundering of cultural heritage is embedded within the broader socio-economic challenges facing these areas, blurring the lines between victimhood and complicity.

In conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria, terrorist groups have systematically organised large-scale looting operations, recognising the economic value of cultural artefacts. For example, from 2015 onwards, ISIL developed administrative structures to manage these activities, complete with valuation systems and receipts for the “taxing” of the looted artefacts, an indication that the looting and smuggling of cultural artefacts has been organised on a large scale and as part of an important income stream.<sup>23</sup> The illicit trade in cultural property has prompted the UN Security Council (UNSC) to adopt measures such as the landmark Resolution 2347, which calls for both member states and private sector stakeholders to take specific actions to ensure that the arts and antiquities trading industry is capable of defending itself against the misuse of their framework to finance terrorism.<sup>24</sup> Adopted on March 24, 2017, the resolution:

*“Urges Member States to introduce effective national measures at the legislative and operational levels where appropriate, and in accordance with obligations and commitments under international law and national instruments, to prevent and counter trafficking in cultural property and related offences, including by considering to designate such activities that may benefit organised criminal groups, terrorists or terrorist groups.”*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Neil Brodie and Isber Sabine, “The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects: A View from the Ground,” *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 2018 Vol. 43, No. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2017.1410919>, 80-81.

<sup>23</sup> Hans-Jakob Schindler and Frederique Gautier, “Looting and Smuggling of Artefacts as a Strategy to Finance Terrorism Global Sanctions as a Disruptive and Preventive Tool,” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 26, no. 3 (August 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0940739119000225>, 332.

<sup>24</sup> Schindler, “Looting,” 331.

<sup>25</sup> UN Security Council, “S/RES/2347 (2017),” www.un.org, 2017, <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/s/res/2347-%282017%29>, 4.

However, implementing such measures faces significant challenges, including the lack of proper documentation for artefacts in conflict zones, which Schindler and Gautier identify as one of the main causes of the lack of prosecution against the illegal trade of cultural artefacts.<sup>26</sup>

### Section III: Efforts to combat the loss and destruction of cultural heritage

Today, international organisations recognise the relevance of cultural heritage as a human rights issue, and as former UN Special Rapporteur Karima Bennoune declared, “cultural heritage [...], viewed from a human rights perspective, is important not only in itself, but also in relation to its human dimension.”<sup>27</sup> However, while there is extensive literature and a strong presence of legal frameworks on the connection of human rights and culture, the issue is the actual application of the legal framework. A weak application of the existing frameworks could lead to cultural heritage being sidelined within the debate around human rights, leading to an evident gap in the effective enforcement of the existing protection strategies. In relation to this, Charlier and Mustafayev argue that International Humanitarian Law (IHL) “provides a solid system of protection for tangible cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict.”<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, the literature displays a certain degree of disconnection between cultural heritage, the human rights discourse, and actual law enforcement. This flaw results in poor legal frameworks that fail to protect cultural heritage despite being a critical aspect of human dignity.

Recognising the significant limitations in international law that contribute to the ongoing destruction of cultural heritage is important. In 1954, UNESCO members adopted the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, and, in 1999, a second additional protocol introduced a new regime of enhanced protection.<sup>29</sup> While these measures have led to notable improvements, reports of the destruction, looting, and damage of cultural heritage in wartime contexts persist.<sup>30</sup> The international community often struggles to react effectively to cases of cultural destruction, hampered by scarce resources, inadequate legal pathways for prosecution, and the tortuous process of reaching a conviction for crimes against cultural heritage.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to this, prosecuting cultural heritage crimes in conflict zones, particularly those committed by terrorist organisations, is fraught with obstacles. War-torn areas are often inaccessible, making it dangerous for investigators to gather evidence. This situation is exacerbated by the

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<sup>26</sup> Schindler, “Looting,” 336.

<sup>27</sup> UNESCO, “Karima Bennoune: Cultural Heritage Is a Human Rights Issue,” [www.unesco.org](https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1581) (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, October 26, 2016), <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1581>.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Charlier and Tural Mustafayev, “International Humanitarian Law and the Protection of Cultural Property,” in *Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities*, ed. James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022), <https://www.getty.edu/publications/cultural-heritage-mass-atrocities/part-4/22-charlier-mustafayev>, 381.

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO, “Making the Convention More Operational: 1999 Second Protocol,” [www.unesco.org](https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts/convention-and-protocols/second-protocol), May 28, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts/convention-and-protocols/second-protocol>.

<sup>30</sup> Frigerio, “Heritage,” section 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

destruction of physical evidence and the difficulties in building solid cases. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies tend to focus on immediate humanitarian crises, leaving cultural heritage crimes under-resourced and under-prioritised.<sup>32</sup> Initiatives such as the development of “battlefield evidence” mechanisms, like those used by UNITAD in Iraq, have shown promise in addressing these challenges.<sup>33</sup> However, these efforts are still limited by political intricacies and the lack of a coordinated international approach.

Concomitantly, the prosecution of individuals involved in the trafficking of looted cultural heritage poses significant challenges, especially given the transnational nature of these crimes. The illicit trade of cultural heritage is driven by a demand-oriented market, where artefacts are smuggled to private collectors, galleries, and museums through well-organised networks.<sup>34</sup> This often involves complex networks of smugglers, dealers, and buyers operating across multiple jurisdictions. This fragmentation complicates the tracing of looted items and the ability to hold perpetrators accountable. Furthermore, loopholes, corruption, and insufficient penalties in some legal systems fail to deter such crimes effectively. Efforts like the 1970 UNESCO Convention<sup>35</sup> and the UNIDROIT 1995 Convention<sup>36</sup> aim to address these challenges, but their implementation and enforcement vary widely across different jurisdictions, and the involvement of criminal networks exploit the gaps in enforcement, often hindering efforts to trace the origins of looted items and hold the perpetrators accountable.

The international discourse surrounding the loss and destruction of cultural heritage and the illegal trade of artefacts reveals significant shortcomings in addressing these challenges effectively. Brodie discusses the issue of cultural heritage destruction, especially in the context of Libya and Syria, vis-à-vis efforts to address the illegal trade of artefacts in international discourse, both currently and in the past. Brodie notes that, while the rise of the Islamic State and the destruction of cultural sites in Syria since 2012 have dominated international discourse, such focus has overshadowed the ongoing failure of the international public policy to effectively address the illegal threat on artefacts, which has been a significant driver of destruction of cultural heritage sites in West Asia and North Africa since the 1990s.<sup>37</sup> Despite intense media attention regarding the situation in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, followed by the plundering of the Iraq National Museum in 2003 and other

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<sup>32</sup> Charlier, “*International*,” 381.

<sup>33</sup> UN Press, “Significant Progress Made Gathering Evidence on ISIS Crimes in Iraq, but Domestic Laws Needed, Investigating Head Tells Security Council,” [press.un.org](https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15127.doc.htm), December 5, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15127.doc.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel A. Hardy, Interviewed via Zoom on February 21, 2023 by ITSS Verona.

<sup>35</sup> UNESCO, “Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property,” [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org), 1970, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural>.

<sup>36</sup> UNIDROIT, “Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects,” UNIDROIT, June 24, 1995, <https://www.unidroit.org/instruments/cultural-property/1995-convention/>.

<sup>37</sup> Neil Brodie, “Why Is No One Talking about Libya’s Cultural Destruction?,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78, no. 3 (September 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5615/neareastarch.78.3.0212>, 212.

instances of looting, the situation in Syria and other regions continued to deteriorate, especially after 2011. The illegal looting and trade of cultural heritage artefacts began to become more widespread, as individuals were also beginning to search and loot saleable artefacts to feed their families or buy weapons.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, Brodie highlights that, inadequate measures implemented by the UN and UNESCO failed to prevent the looting and sale of valuable artefacts in the aftermath of conflict in Libya.<sup>39</sup> Sadly, other efforts were not able to outweigh this undesirable result, efforts like the expert meeting in Paris in 2011 where strategies to protect Libya sites were discussed, and subsequent meetings financed by Italy in 2013. By 2015, the situation had worsened, with ISIS institutionalising the looting of artefacts from cultural sites in Syria and Iraq as a revenue source.<sup>40</sup> In Libya, the Civil War delayed the implementation of UNESCO's recommendations. Artefacts were being increasingly looted and trafficked for profit and the financing of terrorist groups.<sup>41</sup>

Those accounts show the complexities of protecting cultural heritage against lootings and acts of terrorism in times of war or political unrest. Brodie identifies four reasons why emergency action for protecting cultural heritage has been inadequate: (1) their emphasis on protection at source, (2) their implementation on a country-by-country basis, (3) their reactive nature, and (4) their emphasis on the recovery and return of stolen and looted objects.<sup>42</sup> He underlines that, currently, there is no strategy in place for tackling the demand side and reducing the volume of the destination market. As Schindler and Gautier highlight, the situation is also further exacerbated by the scarcity of specialised customs agents trained to detect and investigate these illicit activities, making it difficult to stem the flow of smuggled artefacts.<sup>43</sup> Brodie suggests that a more effective strategy could begin with implementing the UN General Assembly Resolution 69/196, which provides international guidelines for crime prevention and criminal justice related to the trafficking of cultural property.<sup>44</sup>

## **POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS**

From a risk assessment perspective, the involvement of terrorism in cultural heritage criminal activities can exploit various financial constraints and different political priorities faced by the cultural heritage sector in different states; preservation of cultural heritage assets faces significant challenges, particularly due to the persistent issue of insufficient funding, which hinders efforts to

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<sup>38</sup> Brodie, "Why," 212.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 213-214.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 214-216.

<sup>43</sup> Schindler, "Looting," 338.

<sup>44</sup> UN Security Council, "A/RES/69/196, www.un.org, 2014, <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/s/res/2347-%282017%29>, 3-11.

safeguard them against deterioration and loss.<sup>45</sup> An example of this challenge are economic austerity measures, with cultural preservation budgets among the first casualties,<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, political agendas, where decisions are driven by political priorities rather than the actual cultural or preservation needs. This influence can make it harder to ensure that resources are distributed fairly or used effectively to protect heritage sites. Such political limitations and financial constraints make awareness among civil society an essential strategy for the protection of cultural heritage, particularly in times of conflict. NGOs and civil society play a critical role in documenting crimes, for example those concerning cultural heritage protection and its illicit trafficking, advocating for policy changes, and assisting law enforcement agencies. During the Iraq War in 2003, there was considerable concern that military operations could damage or destroy heritage sites, such as the ancient city of Babylon.<sup>47</sup> Due to the advocacy efforts from cultural organisations and military planners, military personnel were deployed to safeguard Babylon from looting.<sup>48</sup> However, despite these efforts, the site still suffered significant damage, illustrating the limitations of awareness alone. These efforts must be accompanied by proactive planning measures, involving partnerships between military and civil entities to ensure adequate protection.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, addressing the demand side of the market is crucial, with education campaigns aimed at collectors and institutions about the ethical implications of acquiring looted artefacts. Addressing the demand side can result in shedding light on the supply side, which often has been a crisis area characterised by the involvement of terrorist organizations.

## **GENDER AND THE ROLE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTORS**

Finally, the lack of widely applied gender perspectives in cultural heritage preservation is a relevant gap in current approaches. Especially in certain contexts, terrorism also features a gender dimension, meaning that violence may be targeted at specific categories to re-state specific gender power-related dynamics. Cultural heritage is no different and, regrettably, terrorists may even hurt archaeological sites or attack intangible assets, such as memory, to target minorities or, for instance, hamper female emancipation.

Cultural heritage is a powerful tapestry woven from the threads of countless humans and their traditions. Yet, the narrative surrounding its preservation has arguably failed to encompass different voices. Integrating gendered perspectives into cultural heritage practices is needed to foster inclusive

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<sup>45</sup> UNESCO, "Cultural Heritage: 7 Successes of UNESCO's Preservation Work," [www.unesco.org](https://www.unesco.org/en/cultural-heritage-7-successes-unescos-preservation-work), June 16, 2022, <https://www.unesco.org/en/cultural-heritage-7-successes-unescos-preservation-work>.

<sup>46</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Shaping Investments to Safeguard Cultural and Natural Heritage across the World Results of the UIS Survey of Expenditure on Cultural and Natural Heritage (SDG Indicator 11.4.1)," *UNESCO Digital Library*, 2022, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382381>, 7.

<sup>47</sup> World Monuments Fund, "The Future of Babylon," World Monuments Fund, November 2023, <https://www.wmf.org/project/future-babylon>.

<sup>48</sup> Laurie Rush, "Working with the Military to Protect Archaeological Sites and Other Forms of Cultural Property," *World Archaeology* 44, no. 3 (November 15, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2012.722035>, 363.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

and equitable conservation efforts. Former UN Special Rapporteur Karima Bennoune also argued in support of a gender-focused approach to the protection of heritage which, according to her, should recognise the efforts of female defenders of heritage who might encounter gender-based discrimination and face challenges in accessing the heritage itself.<sup>50</sup>

This marginalisation stems from patriarchal frameworks that have shaped how we define, prioritise, and approach cultural heritage preservation. Monuments and artefacts deemed significant were often those associated with male figures and dominant narratives, overlooking the rich cultural heritage woven by women within communities. Recognising and amplifying women's roles in heritage production and preservation is not about correcting a historical oversight but rather about bringing a more holistic understanding of cultural heritage to the forefront.<sup>51</sup> Based on this patriarchal neglect, terrorists have largely exploited women and other non-gender-conforming communities to assert their power and amplify fear.

Furthermore, protecting cultural heritage defenders is another critical aspect of safeguarding the world's shared history, identity, and cultural diversity. These defenders, often archaeologists, historians, librarians, and activists, play a vital role in preserving and transferring history and traditions. However, their work frequently places them at significant personal risk, especially in regions plagued by conflict, political instability, organised crime, and terrorist attacks. To name a few examples, Aida Bururovic was killed in 1992 during the shelling of the University Library of Sarajevo while she was on her way home after working to save rare pieces from the library's collection; Anas Radwan was killed in 2013 while he was documenting architectural damage in the old city of Aleppo; or Khaled al-Asaad who died attempting to defend Palmyra in August 2015.<sup>52</sup> As highlighted by Former UN Special Rapporteur Karima Bennoune, many other continue to protect cultural heritage risking their lives, and "states must respect their rights and ensure their safety and security, but also provide them, including through international cooperation, with the conditions necessary to complete their work, including all needed material and technical assistance, grant them asylum when necessary and ensure that when displaced they are able to continue their work and take part in the protection and reconstruction of their country's cultural heritage."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> UNESCO, "Bennoune".

<sup>51</sup> UNESCO, "Towards 2030 and Beyond: Major Challenges and Opportunities" (Paris: UNESCO 40th General Conference, November 7, 2019), [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371398\\_eng](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371398_eng), 5.

<sup>52</sup> UNESCO, "Bennoune."

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

## Part II: Case studies

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Within the intricate patterns of threats against cultural heritage, which encompass challenges ranging from natural disasters to human activities and the deliberate targeting of historical sites and prized artefacts, the destruction of intangible heritage emerges as a poignant and devastating manifestation. This phenomenon carries far-reaching implications for societies, identities, and collective memory. The present chapter delves into the multifaceted influences that enable and support threats directed at cultural heritage, mostly perpetrated by terrorist acts, drawing upon insights sourced from original data, literature review, and other pertinent sources, such as conference proceedings. By synthesising this information, the report sheds light on the complex dynamics that underpin such acts of violence, offering a nuanced understanding of the forces at play.

Sections are structured to examine the following thematic areas: Economic motivations; Gender and diversity; Ideology and emerging technologies. Those experts who agreed to be named in the report will be mentioned.

### Case studies

#### **A. Economic motivations**

- ❖ Al Qaeda
- ❖ ISIS' department for dealing with looting and trafficking

#### **B. Other Motivations**

- ❖ The Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan: A threat to ideology
- ❖ The Taliban's approach to cultural heritage and potential inroads to heritage preservation

#### **C. Gender and diversity**

- ❖ Gender and Diversity in Afghanistan under the *Taliban 2.0*

#### **D. Ideology and emerging technologies**

- ❖ The Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan: a threat to ideology
- ❖ The Taliban's approach to cultural heritage and potential inroads to heritage preservation
- ❖ Stochastic terrorism, cultural heritage and emerging technologies
- ❖ The inability to police the rise of "stochastic terrorism"

## A. Economic motivations

Threats to cultural heritage are interconnected with illicit trafficking networks driven by the lucrative black-market demand for antiquities and artefacts. The vulnerability of these objects expands following the conflation of diverse motivations and economic patterns, including terrorism, financial sustainability, ideology, and desperation. Economic incentives for selling antiquities and attracting collectors exacerbate challenges. The looting of archaeological sites, illegal excavations, and illicit trade of cultural objects fuel shadow economies that exploit sites poorly - if at all - protected, for profit. Tangible heritage, due to its physical presence and potential monetary value on the black market, is particularly vulnerable as compared to intangible heritage. The link between the illicit trade of antiquities and terrorism financing, thus, economic motivations, has been formerly recognized by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199 in 2015 which claimed that:

*“ISIL, ANF and other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida, are generating income from engaging directly or indirectly in the looting and smuggling of cultural heritage items from archaeological sites, museums, libraries, archives, and other sites in Iraq and Syria, which is being used to support their recruitment efforts and strengthen their operational capability to organize and carry out terrorist attacks.”<sup>54</sup>*

Perhaps it is no coincidence that investigations have shown a possible linkage between the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, the 2016 suicide bombings at the Maalbeek metro in Brussels and cultural heritage. In particular, authorities have reasons to believe that Salah Abdelslam and Khalid El Bakraoui, perpetrators of the above-mentioned attacks, may have benefited from antiquities trafficking, as Belgian customs agencies seized illicit Syrian antiquities coming from the site of Mari (under the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’s control at the time) in route to Geneva’s gallery Phoenix Ancient Art.<sup>55</sup>

Previous linkages between international terrorism and economic motivations vis-à-vis cultural heritage first emerged in the 1980s, when drug cartels in Central America and warlords in Afghanistan reportedly began to trade cultural artifacts in exchange of weapons and as a means of money laundering. Control of terrorism on cultural heritage has historically emerged as oversight and management of the looting of archaeological objects, facilitating, aiding and taxing the transportation and smuggling of the antiquities within and between countries; finally, they can

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<sup>54</sup> UN Security Council, “S/RES/2199 (2015),” www.un.org, 2015, <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/sres2199-2015>, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Antiquities Coalition, “Brussels Linked to Illicit Antiquities Trade which Funds Terrorism,” November 1, 2016, <https://theantiquitiescoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Brussels-Linked-to-Illicit-Antiquities-Trade-which-Funds-Terrorism.pdf>

obtain known antiquities through violence or commercial purchase.<sup>56</sup> Concrete and most salient examples of terrorist involvement in cultural heritage have been reported about such as: the 9/11 attacker Mohammed Atta's unsuccessful effort in 1999 to sell Afghan relics to raise funds for the attack; the Irish Republican Army cell's efforts in the 1990s to trade stolen art for heroin; the discovery of antiquities among insurgent weapon caches captured in Iraq from 2003 to 2007, and the Islamic State's systematic management of antiquities' trade in Iraq and Syria.<sup>57</sup>

A wave of mass looting during the 1990–1991 Gulf War revitalized dormant trade routes; after the UN sanctions on oil, tribal communities and militant groups began to sell or barter stolen and excavated artifacts for hard currency, weapons, and other goods. Similar trends have been found in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion which increased the supply, with an estimated half-million artifacts stolen or illegally excavated from 2003 to 2005. Moreover, part of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Jaysh al-Mahdi, Hezbollah, and the Free Syrian Army, rebel and terrorist groups in Cambodia, Somalia, and Colombia have reportedly profited from trafficking in antiquities.<sup>58</sup>

**Case study 1 - Al Qaeda**

Al-Qaeda successfully sold stolen art and antiquities, mainly because most of the pieces were unknown to experts to have been stolen. The 9/11 Commission Report found out that Al-Qaeda has smuggled Afghan antiquities to fund jihadist activities, anticipating the freezing of their accounts after 9/11. Speculations emerged also of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb profiting from antiquities coming from Mali.<sup>59</sup> As suggested above, antiquities trafficking became an alternative source of financing within portfolio diversification. An example is Mohamed Atta, one of the 9/11 hijackers, who approached a German art professor to trade Afghan antiquities to finally finance the purchase of an airplane.<sup>60</sup> Afghan antiquities transferred to Pakistan as a primary exit benefited from narcotics smuggling routes with insurgent groups like Hezb-i-Islami and the Haqqani network operating the smugglings – within smuggled illicit commodities, they would be exchanged for arms in turn sold to the Taliban.<sup>61</sup>

The Taliban would not handle antiquities, but would profit from taxes paid from businessmen smuggling commodities through the collaboration between the Haqqani network and the

<sup>56</sup> Matthew Sargent, James V. Marrone, Alexandra T. Evans, Bilyana Lilly, Erik Nemeth, and Stephen Dalzell, "Tracking and Disrupting the Illicit Antiquities Trade with Open Source Data," Homeland Security Operational Analysis Centre operated by the RAND Corporation, 2020. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2700/RR2706/RAND\\_RR2706.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2706/RAND_RR2706.pdf)

<sup>57</sup> Sargent, "Tracking."

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Erik Nemeth, "Collecting Cultural Intelligence: The Tactical Value of Cultural Property," International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence 24, no.2 (2011), 217-238, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08850607.2011.519247>

<sup>60</sup> Peter B. Campbell, "The Illicit Antiquities Trade as a Transnational Criminal Network: Characterizing and Anticipating Trafficking of Cultural Heritage," International Journal of Cultural Property 20, no. 2 (2013): 127.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Taliban to operate safely.<sup>62</sup> However, this statement was contradicted by the interviewed (MA) who stated that Taliban concretely handled the antiquities, for instance in Helmand province in 2000 where they seized 2000 years sculptures illegally trafficked to Pakistan. From Pakistan, antiquities would have been moved to border towns and transported to major cities like Dubai with airlines and ships due to lack of regulations. The United Arab Emirates became an important transit port from illicit antiquities from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and territories neighbouring Turkey to internationally recognized markets.<sup>63</sup> Antiquities were then purchased by individuals with connections abroad, who collaborated with corrupt customs officials in order to export them<sup>64</sup> to traditional European transit countries like Switzerland and Germany, where antiquities had been laundered, to finally be sold to market countries like the United Kingdom, United States and Belgium.<sup>65</sup>

Iraq experienced a similar fate with the widespread looting following the military conflicts. According to US military classified documents revealed by WikiLeaks, different raids over major archaeological sites ended up with arrests and confiscation of looted artifacts, documenting the potential linkage between antiquities and insurgency and crime.<sup>66</sup> Similar stories have been shared by Iraqi Ambassador Mahmood Fadhlalla al-Khateeb and the Iraqi museum director Donny George who claimed that antiquities trafficking had been funding terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda to finance their operations, and insurgent groups<sup>188</sup> by funding weapons purchases.<sup>67</sup> Also, according to a description of a United States Marine Corps' raid in a terrorist bunker, illicit antiquities have been found with weapons and ammunition.<sup>68</sup>

## Case study 2: ISIS

One prominent example related to terrorism, financial sustainability, and ideology is that of ISIS's Diwan al-Rikaz, the department which oversees extensive looting and trafficking activities to fund ISIS's activities. Since its emergence, ISIS has generated revenues through diverse illicit means: looting and trafficking cultural heritage represented a key component of its financial ecosystem.<sup>69</sup> The department specifically dedicated to these activities, known as the Diwan al-Rikaz, oversaw the systematic pillaging of archaeological sites, museums, and ancient cities in territories under ISIS control. ISIS employed several strategies to maximize profits in a "comprehensive, sophisticated, and well-organized" manner.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Geoff Porter, "Crime and Insurgency in the Tribal Areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan," The Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, (2010): 36 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/crime-and-insurgency-in-the-tribal-areas-of-afghanistan-and-pakistan/181>

<sup>63</sup> Nasser Arrabyee, "Antiquities Returned to Yemen," Gulf News, 19 June 2008, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/yemen/antiquities-returned-to-yemen-1.112525>

<sup>64</sup> Campbell, "Illicit," 121.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew W. Terrill, "Antiquities Destruction and Illicit Sales as Sources of ISIS Funding and Propaganda" (US Army War College, April 3, 2017), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1293&context=monographs>, p. 17.

<sup>70</sup> Terrill, "Antiquities," xiv.

Firstly, the group prioritized the seizure and sale of high-value items such as antiquities, artwork, and precious metals. These items were often smuggled through established networks or sold on the black market to wealthy collectors, sometimes through intermediaries.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, by targeting irreplaceable cultural artifacts and historical sites, ISIS aimed to erase the collective memory and identity of affected communities, as a means to further ends. The systematic destruction and looting of cultural heritage sites intensified significantly after the seizure of northern Iraq in 2014.<sup>72</sup> Other groups besides ISIS were involved in looting sites in Syria and Iraq, but ISIS's actions have been recorded to be notably more destructive; to an extent that in early July 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) cautioned that ISIS's looting activities were occurring on a large scale akin to "industrial scale" operations.<sup>73</sup> As ISIS began to lose territory and face military defeats from 2017 onwards, their ability to systematically loot and traffic antiquities was significantly diminished.

When IS began to take control of territories in Iraq and Syria in 2011, (mostly) foreigners' commanders got in touch with existing gangs of looters and smugglers to profit from the plundering of archaeological resources. IS began to operate on pre-war routes through connections with local criminal organizations and with members of the Syrian's Regime security services and military apparatus.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, Hezbollah began to be involved in antiquities' trafficking through their criminal smuggling networks used to trade drugs and arms functioning as a channel for IS to Lebanon through established dealers linked to organized crime. At the same time, on one hand the Kurds dealt with intermediaries and networks in north-western Syria and southern Turkey, while on the other hand the Syrian opposition channelled antiquities through Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. According to a middleman interviewed by Simon Cox in 2015, and according to an archaeologist who had overseen the Syrian Antiquities Department of Damascus – IS used contacts abroad to sell pieces distributed through dealers from transit countries (like Turkey) easily accessible to Western Europe states (like Bulgaria and Romania) which ended up in market countries like Switzerland, Germany, United Kingdom, Spain and Gulf countries like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.<sup>75</sup>

Other routes used to finance IS's antiquities enterprise were: Asian countries like Thailand and Singapore from where the cultural goods would be imported to Europe due to special commercial agreements on circulation of goods; middle eastern countries like Egypt and Jordan to ship antiquities to the United Arab Emirates.<sup>76</sup> IS profited from the trade by running its own looting

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<sup>71</sup> Benoit Faucon, Georgi Kantchev, and Alistair MacDonald, "The Men Who Trade ISIS Loot," *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2017, sec. Arts, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-men-who-trade-isis-loot-1502017200>.

<sup>72</sup> Terrill, "Antiquities," xiv.

<sup>73</sup> Agence France-Presse, "Historical Sites in Syria Are Being Looted 'on an Industrial Scale,'" *The Guardian*, September 16, 2015, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/16/historical-sites-in-syria-are-being-looted-on-an-industrial-scale>.

<sup>74</sup> Campbell, "Illicit," 121. And WikiLeaks, "Materials Recovered by 2004-02-20"; WikiLeaks, "(Friendly Action) Detain RPT 2008-10-19"; WikiLeaks, "(Criminal Event) Smuggling RPT 2008-4-3."

<sup>75</sup> Simon Cox, "ISIS: Looting for terror" (British Broadcasting Corporation, February 17, 2015), [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/17\\_02\\_15\\_fo4\\_lootingforterror.pdf#:~:text=Simon%20Cox.%20PRODUCER:%20Paul&text=AHMED:%20The%20person%20who%20need%20to%20excavate,ISIS%2C%20and%20ISIS%20have%20people%20like%20inspectors,6](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/17_02_15_fo4_lootingforterror.pdf#:~:text=Simon%20Cox.%20PRODUCER:%20Paul&text=AHMED:%20The%20person%20who%20need%20to%20excavate,ISIS%2C%20and%20ISIS%20have%20people%20like%20inspectors,6).

<sup>76</sup> Campbell, "Illicit," 121.

and smuggling activities and by imposing a tax<sup>77</sup> on individuals engaging in the trade within ISIS-controlled territories. According to a Wall Street Journal report citing Western intelligence sources, looting became ISIS's second largest source of income, after illegal market oil.<sup>78</sup> Andrew Keller, a deputy assistant secretary in the State Department, testified before the Congress in June 2016 that ISIS's profits from the sale of antiquities were less than \$10 million.

According to Vitaly Churkin, a former Russian ambassador to the United Nations, IS's illicit trade in antiquities and archaeological treasures is estimated to be around U.S. \$150–200 million per year.<sup>79</sup> Lastly, in 2015 the US Special Forces raided the compound of Abu Sayyaf, head of the Daesh Diwan al Rikaz – the so-called Ministry of Natural Resources and Minerals and discovered that the Ministry had an Antiquities Division in charge of gathering and trading antiquities for the Islamic State,<sup>80</sup> to distribute permits for looting<sup>81</sup> and to regulate the antiquities market.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, a seized receipts' dossier (2014-2015) recorded \$265.000 tax revenue made from antiquities sales. According to Neil Brodie, such evidence would suggest that IS would have 1 made \$795.000 in a year.<sup>83</sup>

This case study presents a troubling yet clear example of the intersection between terrorism, economic drivers, and threats to cultural heritage. Economically, ISIS's involvement in trafficking undermines legitimate markets, perpetuates instability, and fuels conflict in regions where it operates. Moreover, the group's financial self-sufficiency enabled it to fund terrorist attacks, recruit new members, and expand its influence globally. The Diwan al-Rikaz exemplifies the organization's ruthless pursuit of power and profit at the expense of human lives and cultural heritage. It is worth mentioning that ISIS's motivations extended their actions far beyond mere financial gain: they were deeply ideological. In this context, the destruction and looting of cultural heritage aimed to erase the collective memory and identity to exert control, instil fear, and propagate extremist ideologies.

At the local level, the systematic looting of cultural heritage sites erased centuries of history and cultural identity, irreversibly damaging the shared heritage of affected communities in a foundational way. Indeed, as stated by the interviewee (HA), with ISIS in Syria, but also with the

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<sup>77</sup> Campbell, "Illicit," 121.

<sup>78</sup> Leila A. Amineddoleh, "Cultural heritage vandalism and looting: the role of terrorist organizations, public institutions and private collectors," *Santander Art and Culture Law Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 42, DOI: 10.4467/2450050XSR.15.012.4510

<sup>79</sup> Mark V. Vlastic, Jeffrey Paul DeSousa, "The Illicit Antiquities Trade and Terrorism Financing: From the Khmer Rouge to Daesh," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminal and Terrorism Financing Law*, edited by Colin King, Clive Walker, Jimmy Gurulé, 1170, Palgrave Macmillan, Springer International, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64498-1>

<sup>80</sup> Patrick Blannin, "Islamic State's Financing: Sources, Methods and Utilisation," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 5 (2017): 13–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351519>.

<sup>81</sup> Katie A. Paul, "How Daesh Turns Illicit Digs into Dollars," Antiquities Coalition, November 8, 2016, <https://theantiquitiescoalition.org/how-daesh-turns-illicit-digs-into-dollars/>

<sup>82</sup> Isber Sabine, Ristam Abdo, Neil Brodie, "Some New Evidence Documenting the Involvement of Da'esh in Syria with the Illicit Trade in Antiquities," *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 1, no. 2 (2022): 115–136. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5325/jeasmedarcherstu.10.2.011546>

<sup>83</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Neil Brodie, Batura, O., Hoog, G., et al., "Illicit trade in cultural goods in Europe: characteristics, criminal justice responses and an analysis of the applicability of technologies in the combat against the trade: final report," *Publications Office*, 2019, 114, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d79a105a-a6aa-11e9-9d01-01aa75cd71a1/language-en>.

Taliban in Afghanistan, part of the cultural heritage targeted was part of the population's daily life; thus, an attack against identity and propagandistic in nature, particularly against the international community which could not stop the phenomenon. Finally, the interviewee highlighted how legal justice pathways for populations suffering from cultural heritage destruction from terrorism are weak.

As envisaged by the expert and head of the working group against illicit antiquities trafficking at UNESCO, Christos Tsirogiannis, economic-financial crises (e.g. recessions) can be a significant mediator for the destruction of cultural heritage, marking the initial step in an illicit chain that ultimately brings cultural artifacts into other criminogenic layers. Socio-economic conditions vis-à-vis political instability played a pivotal role in increasing the value of looting, with possible spillover effects on the international trafficking of such cultural goods. For instance, in Iraq a range of actors, including local citizens trying to escape the poverty trap, exploited from looting; however, the “larger” trafficking of such antiquities has favoured Al-Qaeda in financing its operations.<sup>84</sup> Similar patterns happened in Syria, where across the different actors involved in looting, there was local population; however, the overall management of the trafficking was managed by ISIS, becoming a source of terrorist financing.<sup>85</sup> All the local, regional, and global actors involved will receive significant economic support: actors involved in the supply phase (i.e. suppliers, source dealers), actors involved in the transfer phase (i.e. smugglers), and actors involved in the demand phase (i.e. market dealers, traders, purchasers).<sup>86</sup> Moreover, cultural heritage is not often safeguarded in conflicts and may possibly finance terrorism.

In October 2013, a report warned that a warehouse with hundreds of cultural objects from the Heraqla archaeological site had been looted by an armed group. Artifacts made out of gypsum, mosaics, and pottery, with significant historical and scientific importance have been plundered.<sup>87</sup> From vandalism, and looting to bombing and destruction, museums have been a cause of concern since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.<sup>88</sup> The Raqqa Museum and Citadel of Jaabar, the Museum of Hama, the Museum of Folklore in Aleppo, and the Maarrat Museum are some of the seriously affected cultural emplacements by state and non-state actors. Heritage in Syria has been damaged broadly by all the parts involved in the armed conflict. Different motivations prompted domestic and foreign participants to perpetrate cultural property looting, but one driver prevails: accentuated economic instability. In addition, the lack of prosecution and absence of police enforcement on the ground during the last decade has only but increased such illicit operations

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<sup>84</sup> Campbell, “*Illicit*,” 122.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Siobhan Ni Chonaill, Anais Reding, and Lorenzo Valeri, “Assessing the Illegal Trade in Cultural Property from a Public Policy Perspective,” [www.rand.org](https://www.rand.org/pubs/documented_briefings/DB602.html), March 29, 2011, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/documented\\_briefings/DB602.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/documented_briefings/DB602.html).

<sup>87</sup> UNESCO, “Looting of museums and warehouses in Syria,” last update: April 27, 2023. <https://www.unesco.org/en/node/66288>.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Jazeera, “Report documents severe damage to Syrian heritage and museums” *Al-Jazeera*, June 8, 2020. Features: Arts and Culture, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/6/8/report-documents-severe-damage-to-syrian-heritage-and-museums>

despite the end of the conflict.

During the Syrian civil war, and throughout its aftermath, cultural heritage has been damaged at varying degrees by both state and non-state actors; nonetheless mafias coercing people into looting represents only one type of non-state threat against cultural heritage. The expert (IS) points out that among both domestic and foreign actors' motives for looting cultural goods and damaging worship sites, there is a common main driver: economic needs, poverty derived from the conflict and instability. In the case of domestic actors, a scholarly distinction<sup>89</sup>, suggested by the expert within the Syrian civil war context, identifies three distinct economies emerging in the wartime opium in Afghanistan. A *conflict economy*, supporting armed forces in the field fighting for a political objective; a *criminal economy*, composed of criminal businesses profiting from the conflict-torn economic deterioration; and a *coping economy* embodied by poor communities whose incomes had been shattered by armed conflict and were thus prompted to engage in illicit activities for survival purposes. Furthermore, the expert considers that looting cultural goods has increased in the last decade due to the lack of authorities monitoring cultural sites and enforcing the law.

To counter looting, the expert highlights civil society efforts to protect heritage by documenting the remaining pieces and building up a project to help protect museums. Foreign involvement is another element in the demand for looted cultural artifacts in Syria according to the expert (IS). The United States and many European countries provide markets that extensively facilitate the illegal trafficking of these goods. The enablement of this dynamic is attributed to lack - if any - coordination between policies and law enforcement bodies and to gaps in laws and regulations. Moreover, in the European continent, criminal groups and enterprises are trafficking human beings, drugs, and antiquities, often co-opting using trafficking means and routes, optimizing the smuggling of diverse commodities. Several operations run by Europol and Interpol confiscated drugs, arms, and relics found to be trafficked for money laundering purposes. Despite large investments from UNESCO devoted to education towards closing this gap, its reach is limited. The expert (IS) highlights two deficiencies in research efforts regarding the illegal trade of cultural objects. On one hand, the lack of a common criteria to measure how much money is involved, directly and indirectly, in criminal bands looting CH for economic purposes. On the other hand, the unidentified role of non-state actors and unclear responsibility in the destruction of cultural heritage.

### **Key takeaways**

Efforts to counter illicit activities against cultural heritage - both in conflict torn and conflict free zones - require a multifaceted approach, including targeted operations, international cooperation to disrupt financial networks, and initiatives to protect vulnerable cultural sites and resources. By

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<sup>89</sup> Brodie, "Excavation," 74–84.

understanding and addressing the root causes of crime against cultural heritage, the international community can diminish its ability to perpetuate illicit activities and instability. The case studies presented elucidate the complex and multifaceted nature of threats to cultural heritage, driven by a confluence of economic motivations, political instability, and conflict. Key takeaways highlight the intricate interplay between these factors and underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to mitigate the illicit trade and destruction of cultural heritage.

Firstly, the economic motivations underlying the looting and trafficking of cultural heritage are diverse and deeply entrenched in the socio-political fabric of affected regions. The case of ISIS's Diwan al-Rikaz demonstrates how terrorist organizations systematically exploit cultural heritage for financial gain, using the proceeds to fund operations, recruit members, and propagate their ideologies. The destruction and trafficking of cultural artifacts are not merely economic activities but are also ideologically driven, aiming to erase the collective memory and identity of communities. This dual motive of financial gain and ideological domination amplifies the impact of such activities, causing irreparable harm to cultural heritage and societal cohesion.

Secondly, economic crises and financial desperation significantly contribute to the looting of cultural heritage, as exemplified by the situation in Greece during the 2007-2008 financial recession. The increase in looting activities during economic downturns reveals a troubling correlation between financial instability and the rise of illicit trafficking networks. Individuals, often without prior criminal backgrounds, are compelled by economic hardship to engage in looting, which is then facilitated by criminal elements. This phenomenon underscores the vulnerability of cultural heritage in times of economic distress and the necessity for robust economic support mechanisms and stringent cultural property protections.

Thirdly, the case of Syria illustrates the compounded effects of armed conflict on cultural heritage. The destruction and looting of sites by both state and non-state actors, driven by economic needs and the absence of effective law enforcement, highlight the pervasive threats in conflict zones. The distinction between conflict economy, criminal economy, and coping economy within the Syrian context provides a nuanced understanding of the different actors and their motivations. The involvement of foreign markets in the demand for looted artifacts further complicates efforts to safeguard cultural heritage, necessitating international cooperation and stringent regulations to curb the illicit trade.

In conclusion, the case studies underscore the need for a holistic approach that integrates economic, legal, and cultural strategies to protect and preserve cultural heritage. By addressing both the immediate and underlying causes of looting and trafficking, the international community can foster a more secure and resilient cultural heritage landscape. This multifaceted approach not only protects

cultural assets but also contributes to broader efforts of peacebuilding and economic stability in vulnerable regions.

From a strategic scope, a key takeaway to consider, envisaged in the cases described above, and stated by (AF) is that Syria and Iraq, and later Libya, have been cases where terrorist groups demonstrated the economic gain from cultural heritage. Furthermore, to keep track of such a particular financing line, generating a huge and not well-known amount of money, professionalism is needed; and the amount of money generated is higher than the money invested by certain countries to fight the phenomenon; which is often extremely poor. However, as envisaged by interviewees (JCM and FP – to remain anonymous), it is difficult to assess the quantity of trafficking funding terrorism; other funding streams are assessed by data, for instance narcotics and weapons, while cultural heritage poses a grey area. Although it is difficult to stop this mechanism, the implementation of inventories seems a valid option. On this, an interviewee who preferred to be anonymous (FP), has stated that risks on cultural heritage often tend to come from source countries characterised by internal conflicts and/or crises; for instance, the security gap in which there is lack of concrete authority and non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, have power over the territory – and its cultural heritage.

Similar patterns happened in Syria, where across the different actors involved in looting there was local population; however, the overall management of the trafficking was managed by ISIS, becoming a source of terrorist financing.<sup>90</sup> All the local, regional, and global actors involved will receive significant economic support: actors involved in the supply phase (i.e., suppliers, source dealers), actors involved in the transfer phase (i.e., smugglers), and actors involved in the demand phase (i.e., market dealers, traders, purchasers).<sup>91</sup> Moreover, cultural heritage is not often safeguarded in conflicts and may possibly finance terrorism.

Brodie and Sabrine presume that terrorist funding is a matter of international security, pertaining to a subject of public and political concern.<sup>92</sup> Yet, first-hand testimonies of local individuals involved in the supply and transfer phases, and interviewed by the authors, acknowledge their work relationship with Daesh, confirming Daesh cultural heritage trafficking illegal organisation and fiscal control. Some participants indicated that they were among the 300 and 400 groups working at Dura Europos excavation, under Daesh control in 2014 to find coins, and later sell the found objects in Idlib Governorate. Specifically, some interviewees specified that Daesh employed 35 digging gangs, each composed of 45 members who worked on-site in ten-person shifts.

Several respondents close to ISIS officials highlighted that in 2014, 20% of any proceeds were taken by Daesh as sales tax, with the remaining 80% being divided between the excavators and the Daesh

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<sup>90</sup> Campbell, “*Illicit*,” 122.

<sup>91</sup> Chonail, “*Assessing*.”

<sup>92</sup> Brodie, “*Excavation*,” 74.

commander. Moreover, in a more detailed response, they explained that sales were arranged using WhatsApp and that material was transported out of Syria into Turkey on fuel trucks. The authors could identify three types of wartime economies in their research participants, during the Syrian Civil War, and throughout its aftermath: conflict economy, criminal economy, and coping economy. While other scholars and widespread media reporting have described Daesh's conflict economy, they argue the coping economy and the conflict economy, to some degree, are enabled by the criminal economy nurtured by the trading networks of established buyers.

## B. Other Motivations

In contemporary conflicts, the destruction of cultural heritage often transcends mere collateral damage, emerging as a deliberate strategy to erase historical identities, undermine community cohesion, and impose new ideological orders. Extremist groups such as the Taliban and ISIS have systematically targeted cultural heritage sites to advance their ideological agendas. This chapter explores the motivations behind such actions, mainly focusing on the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and their broader approach to cultural heritage in Afghanistan. By examining these cases, we gain insight into how cultural heritage destruction serves as a tool for ideological warfare and power imposition.

### **The Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan: A threat to ideology**

Terrorist organisations such as the Taliban and ISIS deliberately use force to create a new ideology. The biggest threat to the community's adoption of a new way of life is adherence to an old one. Over the past 20 years, the actors have been the same, and the mechanisms used have been almost identical. What has become more different is their professionalism.

The destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in March 2001 was the turning point for the international community to take action against the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage. While the destruction of historical icons and the plundering and selling of goods had been going on for centuries prior, this act in Afghanistan was motivated by an extremist ideology in a deliberate attempt to destroy culture and identity. This act of destruction was a message, a threat even, to fall in line with the ideology of the Taliban or else. Since Bamiyan, the world has witnessed similar acts in Syria, Iraq and Libya, whose sole motivation has been to destroy heritage and replace it with a new ideology.<sup>93</sup>

The case of the Buddhas of Bamiyan is evidence of intentional destruction as a means of psychological warfare. The site was targeted because it had symbolic value for those that the Taliban consider their enemy. In this case, it was a different ideology and another religious philosophy from theirs.<sup>94</sup> The Taliban used perceived threats to their culture and religion as justification for the intentional destruction of cherished objects and historical sites. Minority cultures continue to pay the psychological and physical price for these acts. The Bamiyan case was the catalyst for UNESCO's creation of the Declaration on the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage in 2003, and it raised awareness of the importance of the global community taking action to preserve

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<sup>93</sup> Expert respondent from Italy, interviewed via Zoom on May 25, 2023 by ITSS Verona.

<sup>94</sup> Italian Expert: ITSS interview.

their cultural identity.<sup>95</sup>

### **The Taliban's approach to cultural heritage and potential inroads to heritage preservation**

The Taliban's primary approach to culture has been one of exclusion, consistently exhibiting rejection of the acceptance and inclusion of the Shiites, the Baloch, the Hindus, the Tajiks and other ethnic, religious and non-Pashtun minorities.<sup>96</sup> While they were an Islamic nationalist group, as opposed to messianic insurgencies and militant groups, who are now a state actor, their approach to cultural heritage has not changed.

During the pre-2021 government's rule, Afghanistan's tangible cultural heritage was threatened primarily by foreign traffickers coming into the country, especially through Pakistan and Iran. The government had difficulty managing these borders despite their airports and ports being moderately under control to check and limit smuggling.<sup>97</sup> On this earlier timeline, being primarily fighters and having religious convictions, the Taliban did not appreciate the importance of cultural heritage. Their approach towards it was solely destroying anything dissenting "their culture".

In post-2021 Afghanistan, one of the biggest threats to intangible and tangible cultural heritage has been the Taliban's lack of understanding of the importance of heritage.<sup>98</sup> Having the reins of the state, the primary discussion between the Taliban regime and the international community is women's freedom to study and work, while other security issues, such as those revolving around cultural heritage, are not of priority. In addition, non-state threats to cultural heritage also included local commanders and residents who smuggled artefacts into neighbouring countries.

The Taliban's primary driver regarding tangible and intangible cultural heritage appears to be power imposition on collective populations and profit incentives. It takes many forms, such as destroying and outlawing cultural festival celebrations, banning food recipes, and destroying historic non-Islamic monuments, using religious grounds as the justification.<sup>99</sup> Their actions instead

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<sup>95</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Centre. 2021. "Commemorating 20 Years since the Destruction of Two Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. March 11, 2021. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2253>.

<sup>96</sup> Amit Kumar and Aayushi Malhotra, "Factoring Ethnicity in Taliban's Quest for Legitimacy," *Georgetown University Journal of International Affairs*, April 17, 2024, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/04/17/factoring-ethnicity-in-talibans-quest-for-legitimacy-an-anthropological-rewiring-of-the-power-structure/>.

<sup>97</sup> Janet Blake and Sayed Ali Naqi Masoumi, "From the Past to the Future: Protecting Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage - Progress, Fears, and Hopes," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 29, no. 3 (August 2022), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-cultural-property/article/abs/from-the-past-to-the-future-protecting-afghanistans-cultural-heritage-progress-fears-and-hopes/2CD9DAFD262B3347DD9C076EB30E91#access-block>.

<sup>98</sup> Melissa Gronlund, "New Threats to Heritage in the Taliban's Afghanistan," *New Lines Magazine*, December 6, 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/new-threats-to-heritage-in-the-talibans-afghanistan/>.

<sup>99</sup> Jim Shorthose, "Unlawful instruments and goods: Afghanistan, culture and the Taliban", *Capital & Class* 27, (2003), 9-16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030981680307900102>, 12.

suggest the pursuit of a broader goal of ethnic cleansing by undermining minorities' cultural practices.

State decisions of prioritising pressing concerns result in a relaxed approach to destroying cultural heritage. The efficiency of international pressure, globalisation, diplomacy, and conditional international aid to change the Taliban's approach to cultural heritage, both intangible and tangible, is still undetermined. While integration into the global economy could exponentially increase the smuggling of cultural heritage, it might hopefully lead to incepting a sense of appreciation amongst Taliban leaders and potentially swing protection and preservation of tangible cultural heritage, which yet remains to be seen.

### **Key takeaways from the case studies presented**

The case studies of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the broader actions of the Taliban and ISIS highlight several critical takeaways regarding the motivations behind cultural heritage destruction: ideological warfare is a primary driver behind that deliberate destruction. As discussed, groups like the Taliban and ISIS use such acts to impose their beliefs and erase any historical narratives that contradict or dissent from their ideology. This reality underscores the importance of understanding cultural heritage destruction, not just as acts of vandalism but as strategic moves within broader ideological conflicts.

The international community's response to such destruction is crucial in short- and long-term heritage preservation efforts. The adoption of international declarations and conventions, such as those by UNESCO, represents a collective acknowledgement of the need to protect cultural heritage. However, these measures must be accompanied by actionable strategies and resources to make them effective. The response to the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan illustrates how international outrage can be harnessed to strengthen global heritage protection frameworks.

The role of political entities in cultural heritage preservation is complex and often influenced by broader socio-political dynamics. In the case of the Taliban, their governance has consistently prioritised ideological conformity over cultural diversity, leading to systematic heritage destruction. This instance underscores the need for international diplomatic efforts to include cultural heritage preservation as a critical component of peacebuilding and humanitarian strategies.

Community engagement and local stewardship are essential in protecting cultural heritage. While international frameworks provide the necessary support, the involvement of local communities in preservation efforts ensures that heritage sites are protected not only as historical artefacts but as living symbols of cultural identity and resilience. Empowering local populations to safeguard their heritage can mitigate the risks posed by extremist ideologies and foster a more inclusive and resilient cultural landscape.

In conclusion, the destruction of cultural heritage by groups like the Taliban and ISIS is deeply rooted in ideological motives aimed at erasing historical identities and imposing new power structures by replacing cultural content with unfamiliar narratives invented ad hoc. The international community's response, through legal frameworks and diplomatic efforts, combined with local engagement, forms the pillars of effective cultural heritage preservation strategies.

## C. Gender and diversity

This section discusses terrorist actions and attacks targeting women and minorities, whose vulnerability is enhanced under the onset and growth of radicalization and extremism, depicted by the selected case study. Nonetheless, in less-radicalized contexts women's and minorities' agency and societal contribution largely relies on their access to information, in having opportunities to participate publicly, and in the right of being recognised as contributors to society. This section will review the basic concepts of cultural heritage as related to community life and relations, then move to review how women - and other minorities - participate in the process of producing and sustaining shared heritage, and why this is relevant to the threat that terrorism poses to cultural heritage.

Before illustrating how terrorists have targeted women's and minorities' legacy, it is important to understand the diverse dynamics connecting cultural heritage with the daily lives of people, half of whom are women, in the first place. Insofar, heritage protection intersects with gender and social diversity in profound ways, ranging from the diverse experiences and contributions that individuals across different identities bring to society, to the preservation of expression, opinion, and human rights. UNESCO's definition of cultural heritage gives a starting point:

*“Cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance. It includes tangible heritage (movable, immobile and underwater), intangible cultural heritage (ICH) embedded into cultural, and natural heritage artefacts, sites or monuments. The definition excludes ICH related to other cultural domains such as festivals, celebration etc. It covers industrial heritage and cave paintings.”<sup>100</sup>*

Concomitantly, on one hand George Halkos et al. argue that cultural heritage enhances and develops social capital which is of foundational significance for sustainable development:

*“Apart from natural, produced, and human capital, sustainable development also relies heavily on two other forms of capital: financial capital [...] and social capital, namely the networks and ties between individuals, groups, and organisations that are responsible for the generation of norms of trust, collaboration, and civic participation [...] One of the key elements of social capital is cultural heritage, as it contributes to a sense of identity and shared values.”<sup>101</sup>*

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<sup>100</sup> UNESCO, “Cultural.”

<sup>101</sup> George Halkos et al., “The Interconnectedness of Natural Capital, Social Capital, Produced Capital, and Cultural Heritage in Sustainable Development,” in *Transforming Our World: Interdisciplinary Insights on the Sustainable Development Goals*, ed. Phoebe Koundouri, SDSN European Green Deal Senior Working Group, 2023 <https://egd-report-2023.unsdsn.org/the-interconnectedness-of-natural-capital-social-capital-produced-capital-and-cultural-heritage-in-sustainable-development/>.

On the other hand, Monika Murzyn-Kupisz and Jarosław Działek find cultural heritage to be a key element of identity and shared values which should warrant further attention from policymakers.<sup>102</sup> Connecting cultural heritage to social capital is foundational for our research as daily and countless human interactions interwoven shape the social *tissue*, having cultural heritage as both their backdrop and source of reference that interplays inertially as individuals, families and communities relate to each other. These relational exchanges where daily life content is shared from person to person - as concrete as cooking recipes and as immaterial as religious beliefs - happen repetitively, ultimately configure learning loops that perpetuate the transmission of ideas, values, traditions, and practices from generation to generation. Such transmission and learning loops have elapsed for the most part across history in an in-person form where physical proximity, meaning geography, has been the tectonic lining *sine qua non*, thus far.<sup>103</sup> Vibrant, inclusive and culturally-rich communities can boost safety and cohesion, and reduce the likelihood of discrimination.<sup>104</sup>

As the relational basis of cultural heritage unpacks on daily interactions of communities and how they operate to survive and endure over the face of earth, it ultimately writes history whether intended or not: the aggregation of our living experiences - the social fabric - substantiates history, and cultural heritage with it. In this regard, one of the fundamental differences at the very core of community history is that made by gender. While gender roles are perpetually and dynamically morphing over time,<sup>105</sup> transmitting and preserving cultural heritage is essentially - and at large - a spontaneous process; content is passed intergenerationally in the form of values, norms, roles, beliefs starting at birth. Ergo, women - and care-givers - become custodians of cultural heritage *de facto*. That transmission is conveyed in the atmosphere, language, care and upbringing provided by parents regardless of gender; nonetheless childbearing has been historically expected and performed mostly by mothers. Also, creation of cultural heritage is equally spontaneous and as practical as resolving daily life challenges can be, therefore women and non-gender-conforming individuals are active agents of creation, as equal as men have been. Finally, the preservation of heritage - whether intangible or tangible - largely relies on community members, then what affects community life, namely gender roles - will also impact the shared heritage.

As ongoing gender disparities across the board take for granted women's and family caregivers' work, their role in society and in the transmission and custody of heritage have been equally overlooked when not intentionally erased. Consequently, any action that unfolds in the

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<sup>102</sup> Monika Murzyn-Kupisz and Jarosław Działek, "Cultural heritage in building and enhancing social capital", *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, 2013, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 35-54. <https://doi.org/10.1108/20441261311317392>

<sup>103</sup> The inception of cyberspace provides an additional environment for interactions where proximity has morphed into affinity of diverse sorts, still highlighting the foundational role of sharing content.

<sup>104</sup> UN, "Protecting the diversity of cultural expressions is more important than ever," World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, 21 May, 2022, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/cultural-diversity-day>. Also, Brouge, Natalia, "Exploring the Benefits of Inclusion, *Officely*, September 5, 2023, <https://getofficely.com/blog/exploring-the-benefits-of-inclusion>.

<sup>105</sup> UNESCO, Intangible Cultural Heritage and Gender, 2009, <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/34300-EN.pdf>, 3-4,6.

marginalisation of women and other diverse communities will affect cultural transmission and preservation, the reason why it is crucial to add a gender lens in this research. While the research on gender and heritage is nascent, by reviewing the key concepts of Androcentrism, the importance of a gender lens increases.<sup>106</sup>

*“Androcentrism is the evaluation of individuals and cultures based on male perspectives, standards, and values. The term refers to a male-centred worldview which does not necessarily present explicitly negative views of women and girls, but positions men and boys as representative of the human condition or experience and women and girls as diverging from the human condition. It is a complex, subtle, and often unacknowledged form of sexism, existing on a continuum which includes misogyny and patriarchal attitudes, but it is also informed by patriarchal cultures in which men are granted more power and influence, and thus the right to evaluate and interpret individuals and cultures. Androcentrism exists in all fields of study and cultural expressions, including the arts, sciences, medicine, law, fine arts, and media.”*

Alongside the traditional androcentrism, found cross-culturally, that has prevailed over centuries, social integration has seen significant advancements regarding policy and regulations - whether at domestic or interstate layers - during the last century.<sup>107</sup> Particularly, diverse and dissenting perspectives brought forward by individuals that are non-conforming to mainstream gender identities offer new insights and inputs that have challenged established viewpoints, enriching the social tapestry and fostering creativity and innovation. The United Nations Women’s agency has an online resource showcasing salient examples of women’s contributions that span across time and geography, this selection of cases watermarks the relevance of acknowledging, including, respecting and encouraging non-males to participate in co-creating communities and society, all which ultimately produces a shared intangible legacy of nuances and richness that fosters intellectual, scientific and humanistic boom.<sup>108</sup> In short, that social capital is the womb where intangible and tangible heritage are permanently re-produced to the benefit of societal ecosystems, the source of eternal human expression and evolution composed of human exchange. Germane to the last, the intangible nature of social capital makes it extremely more vulnerable to attacks of all sorts, as the following paragraphs depict.

Beyond acknowledging watermark examples, recent research emphasizes characterising as necessity to including women and minorities into foundational societal processes, and consequently into governance, by analysing the impact of their presence in peace-building and the durability of

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<sup>106</sup> Hibbs, C. (2014). Androcentrism. In: Teo, T. (eds) *Encyclopaedia of Critical Psychology*. Springer, New York, NY. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_16).

<sup>107</sup> It is not in the scope of this research to review historically and chronologically the prevalence of patriarchy and gender inequality; their presence and endurance are rather common knowledge. For reference see Tuuli Lähdesmäki & Ionela Vlase, “Mapping the research on gender, LGBTQI minorities and heritage across social sciences and humanities,” <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2220298>; and, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Our Androcentric Culture, or The Man Made World*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3015/3015-h/3015-h.htm>.

<sup>108</sup> United Nations, “Women’s Footprint in History,” multimedia resource <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/timeline/womensfootprintinhistory/en/index.html>.

agreements.<sup>109</sup> In addition, inclusive societies develop the needed resilience to overcome disasters of all types based on cohesion and on the application of integrative approaches.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, vast evidence supporting the benefits of having the societal ecosystem - organisations, networks, the private sector - composed of multiple identities highlights the linkage of galvanising inclusion and diversity in the social tapestry with productivity.<sup>111</sup> For instance, both the discussions held and the outcoming agreements of the World Summit for Social Development (March 1995) remark the correlation between respect of diversity and equal opportunity to participate with a stable and safe society, as it ensures to include “disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons.”<sup>112</sup> Increased safety elapses in a double loop galvanising inclusive growth and development.

Noteworthy examples of the effect of including women and other gender diverse persons in large-scale societal processes are the female vote movement that started in the United Kingdom in 1867, albeit coming to fruition firstly in New Zealand in 1893, that later sparked a worldwide wave of activism and female enfranchisement challenging laws and policies into change in favour of the female right to vote.<sup>113</sup> Another example is the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition who by connecting their experiences turned what was known as an ‘*armed patriarchy*’ into an inclusive political environment that led negotiations towards the Belfast Good Friday Agreement in 1998, a model of inclusive peace.<sup>114</sup> Evidence ratifies women and minorities as both receivers and producers of cultural heritage, ergo agents of social capital and changemakers in both the private and the public scenes, the latter traditionally guarded to only admit males.

Consequently, at this point of history propagating assumptions of females and other alterities as less capable - or incapable - of exerting agency, owning property, and participating in public life

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<sup>109</sup> Marie O’Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, *Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes*, New York: International Peace Institute, June 2015. <https://www.ipinst.org/2015/06/reimagining-peacemaking-womens-roles-in-peace-processes>.

<sup>110</sup> Charlotte Owen-Burge, “Here’s why inclusivity is at the heart of the Race to Resilience,” *Race to Resilience*, December 7, 2023, <https://climatechampions.unfccc.int/heres-why-inclusivity-is-at-the-heart-of-the-race-to-resilience/>. And, Daniel Aldrich, “Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery,” *Journal of Geographic Information System* 12:6, 2020. 10.7208/chicago/9780226012896.001.0001.

<sup>111</sup> OHCHR, “Power of Inclusion and the Benefits of Diversity,” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2017/03/power-inclusion-and-benefits-diversity>. Deloitte, Touche, & Tohmatsu, “The economic benefits of improving social inclusion”, August 2019, <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/my/Documents/risk/my-risk-sdg10-economic-benefits-of-improving-social-inclusion.pdf>, 19. Carter, Becky, “Benefits to society of an inclusive societies approach,” *GSDRC Helpdesk*, Research Report 1232. Birmingham, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08968e5274a27b200007f/HDQ1232.pdf>. And, “How can diversity and inclusion help build a more resilient organization?”, *LinkedIn*, Executive Management, undated. Collaborative article <https://www.linkedin.com/advice/0/how-can-diversity-inclusion-help-build-more-4regf>.

<sup>112</sup> UN-DESA, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Vision for an Inclusive Society” compilation brochure, 4 <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/compilation-brochure.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> United Kingdom Parliament, “Women and the Vote,” <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/elections/voting/womenvote/>, and Schaeffer, Katherine, “Key facts about women’s suffrage around the world, a century after U.S. ratified 19th Amendment,” *Pew Research Center*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/10/05/key-facts-about-womens-suffrage-around-the-world-a-century-after-u-s-ratified-19th-amendment/>.

<sup>114</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly, “Women Parliamentarians of Northern Ireland,” in *Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition*, undated. <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/visit-and-learning/women-in-parliament/northern-ireland-womens-coalition>, and Fearon, Kate and Monica Williams, “Swimming Against the Mainstream: The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition,” *Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security*, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/swimming-against-the-mainstream-the-northern-ireland-womens-coalition>.

constitute an attack to social capital. More subtle expressions, nonetheless equally pernicious in structural and long-term fashion, are denying females and other minorities the access to knowledge and education, to community life, to employment, disregarding the ultimate detriment of home economy and general wellbeing it will articulate. Such subjugation inevitably leads to the destruction of communities, with disastrous consequences and ramifications that will arguably harm the common intangible legacy of the family, the community, the country, and of the planet.

## Case Study: Gender and diversity in Afghanistan under the Taliban 2.0

Building upon the *tissue* metaphor, breakages and disruptions between *nodes* of the *social tissue* would lead into social dismemberment. This dismemberment becomes a reason why social capital and cultural heritage become targets for terrorists, who then particularly target persons of higher vulnerability, namely women and other minorities. Whatever attacks that happen threaten advancements achieved thus far, like those revised above, in the first part of this chapter. One of the most impactful examples of this disruption is what has been called by many the Taliban's *Gender Apartheid*,<sup>115</sup> and *War on Women*.<sup>116</sup> Under this regime, women cannot attend secondary education or university; go to the gym or participate in sports; work for an NGO; appear on TV entertainment; receive healthcare or travel 72+ kilometres without a male chaperone; show their faces, hands or feet in public; go to the park or to public bathing houses; and most recently they cannot hear other female's voices in public, which likely prevent them from holding any job that cannot be performed alone and communicating via email. In other words, women are forced to remain secluded and invisible, and are punished for the slightest deviation from these regressive norms.<sup>117</sup>

The Minister for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, Khalid Hanafi, issued an edict via an audio message where he classifies females' voices as *awrah*, something that must not be perceivable in public. Specific details as to what this policy really implies, including how to interpret infringements and punishment, are not clear. Yet, as reported by Amnesty International, it is precisely this kind of ambiguity that enables for arbitrary sanctioning and punishment by those in

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<sup>115</sup> See Naheed Farid and Rangita de Silva de Alwis, "Afghanistan under the Taliban: A State of 'Gender Apartheid'?" [https://spia.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2023-02/SPIA\\_NaheedRangita\\_PolicyBrief\\_07.pdf](https://spia.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2023-02/SPIA_NaheedRangita_PolicyBrief_07.pdf), the letter in <https://endgenderapartheid.today/>; also, UN Press, "Induce Taliban to End 'Gender Apartheid' in Afghanistan through All Available Means, Speakers Urge Security Council, Alarmed by Growing Oppression of Women, Girls," Releases SC/15421 26, September 2023 <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15421.doc.htm>; and "Afghanistan: An ongoing and urgent call for accountability," International Service for Human Rights <https://ishr.ch/campaign/end-gender-apartheid/>.

<sup>116</sup> Amnesty International, "Afghanistan: The Taliban's War On Women (2023)," <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/afghanistan-talibans-war-women-2023>.

<sup>117</sup> Amnesty International, "Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls under Taliban Rule," 2022, p. 17, 39, 52, 79, 83, 85, 92, 94. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/afghanistan-death-slow-motion-2022>; AI interviewed 90 women and 11 girls, from 14 to 74 years old living in Afghanistan, between September 2021 and June 2022. See also, United Nations, "Afghanistan: Rights experts alarmed over Taliban use of 'brutal' punishments," UN NEWS 11 May 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136562>. And, Ruchi Kumar and Rukhshana reporters, "Taliban edict to resume stoning women to death met with horror," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/mar/28/taliban-edict-to-resume-stoning-women-to-death-met-with-horror>.

charge of law and order.<sup>118</sup> In concrete terms, if women cannot hear each other's voices, they cannot hold any type of conversational exchange whether personal or related to the conduction of household errands outside the house, alike discussing children's wellbeing with female practitioners, negotiating prices for food, requesting services to female providers, or others tasks of more personal nature such as confiding burdens and concerns on each other, and building supportive networks. Potentially, women could not sing, alone or together, and their agency for praying is curtailed too, with the grim outcome of exponentially increasing their level of isolation and vulnerability. Whether this is the motivation or not remains in the terrain of speculation, but the effect of this prohibition is catastrophic. Firstly, the reproduction of social practices and ideas that take place in communal spaces shall be performed only by males. Secondly, the societal exchange foundational to cultural heritage production and preservation will miss the contribution of half the population. Thirdly, long term earned rights like education and employment for girls and women are destroyed.

UNESCO's report substantiates the latest when in September 2021 the indefinite postponement of return to school for girls over 12 years of age affected 1.1 million of them and by April 2023, 2.5 million school-aged girls and young women were not attending classes. Also, close to a third of Afghan girls never started elementary education as they should have in 2021.<sup>119</sup> Inasmuch Afghanistan saw efforts to revert inequalities during the time in between Taliban's regimes (2001-2021),<sup>120</sup> current policies restricting freedom of women and non-Taliban groups suggest the regime's will to morph a formerly pluricultural and multilingual country into a fundamentalist, misogynistic, and anti-diversity society at any cost. Hard-won advancements in gender equality and women's rights achieved during 2001-2021 that marked a recovery from the first Taliban regime are facing renewed threats with a stark reversion to unprecedented levels. This second Taliban regime displays a crusade of structural violence,<sup>121</sup> meaning that their policies harm people in an *unmanned* fashion, to use a military term. Such attacks avoid accountability by concealing the ultimate responsibility - the policy makers - and by normalizing the harming actions.

Following the above, to affirm that Afghan cultural heritage is under siege does not avail exaggeration, with direct harm to the progress and recovery of rights for women, insofar sociocultural norms crafted by the Taliban, namely restricting women's freedoms, prevent women from actively participating in the daily live operations of the cultural tissue they used to regularly partake on, such as taking children to the doctor, procuring household and nutrition goods, work,

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<sup>118</sup> "Taliban prohibits Afghan women from speaking to each other: 'System of gender apartheid'", *News.com.au*, World News, October 20, 2024, <https://nypost.com/2024/10/30/world-news/taliban-bans-women-from-speaking-to-each-other-system-of-gender-apartheid/>, and Yogita Limaye, "If we can't speak, why live?' - BBC meets women after new Taliban law," *BBC*, September 11, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20rq73p3z4o>.

<sup>119</sup> UNESCO, "Let Girls and Women in Afghanistan Learn!," News, 18 January 2023 - Last update: 20 April 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/let-girls-and-women-afghanistan-learn>.

<sup>120</sup> Freshta Jalalazai, "Afghan Women's Woes: Beyond and Before the Taliban," *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/afghan-womens-woes-beyond-and-before-the-taliban/>.

<sup>121</sup> Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research*, 6 Nr 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/422690>, 170.

study, volunteer, sports, leisure, going to the library for books or movies, producing goods for home use, business, or community support, worshipping.

Raziya Masumi, from the Genocide Watch, describes the females' situation in Afghanistan as a genocide by consistently attacking women and minorities,<sup>122</sup> where all and every expression deviating from the Taliban's version of Islam neither deserves a country nor bears rights to safety and protection.<sup>123</sup> The regime's agenda has gradually reached such extreme and unforeseeable levels of behavioural control by systematically issuing multiple decrees, Zohal Azra from the Australian Hazara Advocacy Network reports a total of 105,<sup>124</sup> Mona Chalabi notes 54 issued between 2021-2023 these latter ones specifically addressing women's agency.<sup>125</sup> This curtailing journey represents a drastic shift from what has been Afghanistan during the last century. The Canadian organisation Right to Learn in Afghanistan (RLIA), formerly "Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan," reports that during the 20th century the country has seen the emergence of self-driven intends to modernise legislation, with concomitant extension of rights and duties to all Afghan citizens, changes that emerged following regime changes. Counting among the earliest incremental changes are those by Abdul Rahman Khan (1880-1901), inspired by his wife Bobo Jan, who is depicted as "riding horses and training her maidservants in military exercises, [having] a keen interest in politics" and performing as mediator to conciliate conflicts between rivals.<sup>126</sup>

As a comparison yard to today's reality, by 1921 Afghanistan had its first school for women, and by 1923 females' freedom of choice in marriage became legal, which derogated a law - recently reintroduced by the Taliban - stating that women are to marry following menarche, their first menstruation. Also, in 1926 Emir Amanullah reformed the dress code allowing women to discard veiling faces, feet, and hands; his wife Queen Soraya also publicly preached the participation of women in building the nation. By mid-century Kabul's student body included women, and graduating classes of doctors, nurses and other professions did too. In the early 70s extremist fundamentalists' opposition intensified the countering of support for equal rights for both genders that the Soviet government exhibited.

Reportedly, by 1991 there were 7,000 women enrolled in higher education, about 230,000 girls were attending school, 190 women were professors, and 22,000 women taught in schools across the

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<sup>122</sup> Raziya Masumi, "The Taliban Genocide of Hazaras in Afghanistan", in *GENOCIDE WATCH, The Taliban Genocide of Hazaras in Afghanistan* ([genocidewatch.com](http://genocidewatch.com)).

<sup>123</sup> Raziya Masumi, Legal expert at Genocide Watch. Interviewed via zoom on January 12, 2024 by ITSS Verona.

<sup>124</sup> News.com.au, "Prohibits."

<sup>125</sup> Mona Chalabi, "Women in Afghanistan: From almost everywhere to almost nowhere," August 15, 2023, United Nations Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/08/women-in-afghanistan-from-almost-everywhere-to-almost-nowhere>.

<sup>126</sup> Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, "Afghan Women in History: The 20th Century," <https://www.cw4wafghan.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/pages/cw4wafghan-afghanwomenhistory-factsheet.pdf>

country.<sup>127</sup> Right after the civil war (1992) a reversion of women's achievements started with policies that regulated their agency and education. As the country collapsed into chaos and lawlessness, educated women and their families who had the means to flee to better destinations did, others were forced into refugee camps, and others - presumably with even less options - endured sexual exploitation.<sup>128</sup> The Taliban's emergence in Kandahar in 1994 brought this *Gender Apartheid* where girls' schools closed and women were forced to leave their jobs and stay at home. Punishment to those disregarding the mandate turned equally impactful with schools being burned and girls attacked with acid. By 2001 (the Taliban's ousting), less than one million Afghan children were attending school, from which all were boys, not girls.<sup>129</sup>

In this context, while in global terms the gender gap in literacy persists - in 2022 male literacy sat at 90.3% and female at 84% - in Afghanistan it is more pronounced, as reported by Education, Policy, and Data Centre estimated that less than 2 in 10 Afghan women over 15 years of age could read and write.<sup>130</sup> To enlighten this, according to UNESCO during the democratic regime in Afghanistan (2001-2021) there was a significant improvement in female enrolment in education, reaching a ten-fold increase at all levels, twenty-fold in higher education; by August 2021, 4 in 10 students in elementary school were girls. Females' ability to read and write grew from 17% in 2001 to almost 30% at the withdrawal of American troops and officers.<sup>131</sup> As a side note, under the light of these statistics, the prohibition for women to hear each other's voices conflates to perpetuate a regression of equality thus far achieved, and leads to a rapid increase in illiteracy as women cannot educate each other, transmit knowledge, ideas, feelings, values, or pray together, strangling their already minimal spaces for community sharing and social expression. The affirmation of cultural heritage under siege might seem an understatement.

The early millennium brought to Afghanistan the hope of recovering females' basic rights with the intervention of the international forces led by the United States in 2001, incepting a democratic regime that among others would support the return of Afghans who managed to flee, to rebuild their country together. During that time the participation of women in every aspect of society commenced to slowly retract to pre-Taliban status despite the harshness of weak - if existent - infrastructure which demanded more resilience from families and communities.<sup>132</sup> RLIA reports the presence of about 800 women's organisations by that time, providing services on health, education and employment, many of them connected in larger networks. Women's participation in

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<sup>127</sup> Chalabi, "Women."

<sup>128</sup> Canadian, "Afghan," 2.

<sup>129</sup> UNESCO, "Learn!"

<sup>130</sup> Education Policy and Data Center, "EPDC Spotlight on Afghanistan," 2012, <https://www.epdc.org/node/5947.html>

<sup>131</sup> UNESCO, "Learn!"

<sup>132</sup> Amnesty International UK, "Women in Afghanistan: The Back Story," undated, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>

policymaking saw fruition with 25% of the Lower House parliament seats occupied by women;<sup>133</sup> schools were available for girls and they also integrated athletic teams. This movement of self-empowerment has been supported by many women and families exiled, working from afar.<sup>134</sup>

As reported by our interviewee Raziya Masumi, “Women are arrested, tortured, and raped daily and without consequences.”<sup>135</sup> Working women cannot go to their workplace and are forced to stay restrained at home since Taliban forces are not “trained to respect them”<sup>136</sup> if they leave home. Thus, females’ reflective capacity, profession, and talents are punished and the consequences of their loss impact the household economics immediately. Females’ right to education is also violated in the bloodiest way, in Masumi’s words “In one of the secret female schools in West Kabul, 200 girls were executed,”<sup>137</sup> leaving survivors hopeless and terrified. By shaming females into powerlessness, families - foundational societal institution - are profoundly debilitated in multiple simultaneous ways; the consequence of this social agenda of invisibilizing women on societal operability seems daunting as the outcome is not only affecting women and girls, also transmits a deleterious message to boys, who are induced to perceive women in a monumentally limited way.

In words of UN-WOMEN, “*Male supremacy outside the household has resulted in changes within the home, creating a perception among men and boys that women and girls have neither the capacity nor need for social, political or economic opportunities, and reinforcing a belief that women and girls should remain at home in a position of servitude.*”<sup>138</sup> This panorama, as painful and cumbersome for individuals, will surely have effects on the country’s resilience when the agency of at least half of it - women - is limited, and erased from community life and public expression with a consequential and consistent deficit of talents, of survival skills, of nation- and identity-building. The risk is that the propagation of values, norms, and practices alongside the creation of new ones based on adaptation to new living conditions is restricted to male approval. Spontaneity, resilience from women and non-gender-conformity communities, essential to survival, seriously weaken.

Equally, the Taliban attack other minorities, making a point to target LGBTQ individuals that are very vulnerable as they do not conform to a binary vision of gender roles and identities. Attacking these individuals. In the last quarter of 2021 Human Rights Watch (HRW) interviewed sixty (60) LGBTQ Afghans, some in the country and others who had fled in search of safety. While this

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<sup>133</sup> Canadian, “*Afghan*,” 3.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Raziya Masumi, Legal expert at Genocide Watch. Interviewed via zoom on January 12, 2024 by ITSS Verona.

<sup>136</sup> Rob Picheta and Zahid Mahmood, “Taliban tell Afghan women to stay home from work because soldiers are ‘not trained’ to respect them,” CNN. Updated August 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/25/asia/taliban-women-workplaces-afghanistan-intl/index.html>.

<sup>137</sup> Masumi: ITSS Interview.

<sup>138</sup> UN Women, “Resolve of Afghan women in the face of erasure: Three years since the Taliban takeover,” August 2024, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/resolve-of-afghan-women-in-the-face-of-erasure-three-years-since-the-taliban-takeover-en.pdf>

community endures prosecution even before the Taliban with the 2018 law criminalizing same-sex sexual relations, their stances have worsened as HRW found. The current regime's hard line on Sharia Law and strong sentiment has fostered internal tensions between families, community and even same-sex partners, all fearing consequences of being related to a LGBTQ person. Schools, temples and workplaces have become discrimination scenarios. There is not only the risk of being identified and punished by authorities but enduring constant rejection and violence, but also, they struggle with not being able to escape or fleeing to neighbouring countries with similar anti-LGBTQ sentiment and laws.<sup>139</sup> Those who had conformed to conventional family roles and norms cannot easily uproot their families and leave. Lesbians cannot leave as they need a male chaperone, passport, and a clear travel plan including resources to flee. Noteworthy, interviewees concur on relocation as their only opportunity for safety.<sup>140</sup> These attacks weaken the cohesion of societies and raise the fear of being under threat should one do not conform to the prescriptions of the regime.

In terms of ethnic diversity, dominant groups are Pashtuns (42%) and Tajiks (27%). Known minorities are Uzbeks (9%), Hazaras (8%), Aimaq (4%), Turkmen (3%) and Baluch (2%); other ethnicities add up to 5%.<sup>141</sup> The language composition becomes complex as some groups speak various languages and dialects. In terms of religious diversity, the majority is Sunni-Islam Jihadists (Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami, al Qaeda and Islamic State), also Shi'a-Islam and Ismaili. Non-Islamic minorities are Hindu, Bahai, Sikh, and Christians, these latter mostly second generation converts; a small Judaist community disappeared following the attack on the Synagogue in 2005. Since most of the Taliban are ethnically Pashtun, their language - Pashto - has been reappropriated and made official by the Taliban, but their traditions and interpretation of Sharia are instead heterogenous,<sup>142</sup> presumably remaining unhonoured for the most part.

While the attacks on gender and other vulnerable groups perpetrated by the Taliban appeared to be inspired by religion, the ramifications they pose suggest otherwise a political agenda, attacks becoming means to the end of undermining women and vulnerable members of society like minorities and gendered-diverse persons. Our expert interviewee Raziya Masumi commented on those attacks.<sup>143</sup> Regarding Fawad Aidarabi Persian-speaking folk singer, executed by the Taliban in August 2021 shortly after 'forbidding' music,<sup>144</sup> Masumi argues that it responds to music sung in a different language as it represents ethnic diversity. Books confiscated upon allegations of negative

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<sup>139</sup> Sami Yousafzai, "Transgender Afghans escape Taliban persecution only to find "a worse situation" as refugees in Pakistan," *CBS News*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transgender-afghan-refugees-escape-taliban-find-worse-situation-in-pakistan/>

<sup>140</sup> Heather Barr, Lester Feder, and Walid Muhammadi, "Even If You Go to the Skies, We'll Find You," January 26, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/01/26/even-if-you-go-skies-well-find-you/lgbt-people-afghanistan-after-taliban-takeover>

<sup>141</sup> Benjamin Sawe, "The Ethnic Groups of Afghanistan," *World Atlas*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/ethnic-groups-of-afghanistan.html>

<sup>142</sup> "Pashtuns in Afghanistan," *Minority Rights Group*, undated, <https://minorityrights.org/communities/pashtuns>

<sup>143</sup> Masumi: ITSS Interview.

<sup>144</sup> Lee Brown, "Taliban execute folk singer days after saying music is 'forbidden,' family says," *The New York Post*, August 30, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/08/30/afghan-folk-singer-fawad-andarabi-killed-by-taliban-for-playing-music/>

propaganda or diverse to Taliban's Islam as reported,<sup>145</sup> Masumi has learned that they are replaced by other books written by Taliban scribes.

In addition, artefacts and intangibles are constantly banned, i.e., traditional foods, or unprotected, i.e., the Minaret of Jam left to erode,<sup>146</sup> and others expressly destroyed, i.e., Buddhists sculptures in Bamiyan, alleging idolatry.<sup>147</sup> In a strange tandem, ISIS-K has joined the Taliban in specifically targeting a maternity ward in 2020,<sup>148</sup> Masumi explains the selection of the attack related to the presence of Shiite clusters. While that attack would account for genocidal practices under international law, it does not constitute a crime in Afghanistan since "the Taliban have legalised attacking this minority," as Masumi explains. The Shi'a community, predominantly of Hazara ethnicity, are a minority within the Islamic groups.<sup>149</sup> The expert adds that "ISIS-K and Taliban share tactics like suicide bombing and have common targets, i.e., teachers, students, and healthcare workers."<sup>150</sup> The pursuit of "unfettered and unchallenged power drives the Taliban's anti-diversity agenda."<sup>151</sup>

The compound ripple effect resulting from the conflation of the above actions pokes holes in the social fabric and in the soul of a formerly multilingual and pluricultural state of many nations. The consequences of these policies will linger in Afghanistan for generations to come, inevitably fostering insurmountable challenges for future policymakers, regardless of the regime, due to the profound impact in social cohesion, inter- and intra-communities' dynamics, the disruption of social networks of trade, cooperation, support, assistance, all which would cost the country its own prospects for administrative continuity and identity sustenance. Find more about this in the takeaways following.

Concomitantly, the traumatic effect on the Afghan human tapestry is complex and comprehensive. First of all, attacks harm persons - women, LGBTQ, ethnic minorities - themselves, who are producers and carriers of cultural heritage while also being bearers of cultural rights. Following, the resonance these attacks have on their partners, on their growing family, and on their surrounding community is deep as it devastates their daily interactions of all sorts. Finally, the way it all sinks through the social pipelines in a country where women's suicide grows against the global trend,

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<sup>145</sup> AFP, "Taliban govt clearing 'un-Islamic' books from Afghanistan shelves," November 20, 2024, last updated November 24, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2580083/media>

<sup>146</sup> Amos Chapple, "In The Balance: Urgent Calls For Taliban, UNESCO To Safeguard Famed Minaret," *Radio Free Europe*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-unesco-minaret-of-jam/31576929.html>

<sup>147</sup> William Mao, "Conserving Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage Under Taliban Rule," *Harvard International Review*, January 29, 2024, <https://hir.harvard.edu/conserving-afghanistans-cultural-heritage-under-taliban-rule>

<sup>148</sup> Sophia Jones, "'They Came to Kill the Mothers.' After a Devastating Attack on a Kabul Maternity Ward, Afghan Women Face Increased Dangers," *Time*, May 19, 2020, <https://time.com/5838762/afghan-maternity-ward-attack-women/>

<sup>149</sup> "Hazaras in Afghanistan," Minority Rights Group, Updated December 202, <https://minorityrights.org/communities/hazaras/>

<sup>150</sup> Masumi: ITSS Interview.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

reaching twice the rates of men in most of its provinces,<sup>152</sup> at times compelled by their very own terrified families,<sup>153</sup> alas. Why is it that these actions seem to be unchallenged by male relatives of targeted women? Or may it be the case that support and collaborative efforts have not built enough power to push back against the misogynistic regime of Taliban 2.0? At the very least, those not directly targeted by the misogynistic policies - men, particularly young and impressionable ones – are either terrorised or co-opted to support mainstream culture, under intimidation and fear of punishment.<sup>154</sup> The dismemberment of communities is evident when one needs to take distance from vulnerable others to ensure their own survival.

### **Key takeaways**

This case illustrates with comprehensive eloquence how an elite articulates policy and narratives that attack in multiple ways the uniqueness of peoples and communities, in the pursuit of an agenda that benefits the attackers' own interests.

Specific narratives are built and amplified to be means to such an end. The inception and relentless advancement of those narratives become so pervasive that they re-shape the very tectonic layers of societal systems of belief, creating divisions within that society, fostering, articulating and strengthening inter- and intra-communities' tensions. The latter tensions activate an *us-vs.-them* dichotomy affecting community membership, then a person or a smaller collective is not welcome, not granted the same stance within the community. Social closure mechanisms are enacted by community members, the *other(ed)* endure discrimination, leading into rejecting unwelcome individuals from spaces where the community feels rightful ownership. Societal cohesion has been disbanded. This poses a direct threat to young children and newborns who will grow up in a context where history abruptly changed following a regime agenda of dominance, instead of a context where individuals in their vibrant diversity build together a social fabric.

We learned that attacking equity of women and minorities means attacking their agency, their power to act and express themselves freely, their capacity to operate, suggesting that the nature of the attack might be political as it attempts to control individuals' agency - women and other non-binary individuals. The attacks extinguish their ability to consume, produce, exchange, and transfer cultural content, ultimately precluding their capacity to leave cultural heritage available for the posterity. As the agency of at least half of a country is limited - and under constant threat of being erased from public expression talents, survival skills, and identity-building take a big toll. Creating and propagating values, norms, and practices developed as adaptation to new living conditions goes lost while waiting for male approval; spontaneity and resilience are undermined. The latter challenge

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<sup>152</sup> Zahra Nader, "Despair is settling in: female suicides on rise in Taliban's Afghanistan," *The Guardian*, August 28, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/28/despair-is-settling-in-female-suicides-on-rise-in-talibans-afghanistan>

<sup>153</sup> Masumi: ITSS Interview

<sup>154</sup> Barr, "Even".

turns into an existential threat when factoring the enhanced impact that climate-change could inflict in a country where social institutions and policy are subjected to strong revisionism on an ongoing basis. As the efficiency of traditional practices decreases due to new environmental conditions, women and minorities cannot spontaneously share concerns and try new practices. Should they find innovative resources, these latter ones may not be accepted due to the diminished status of the ones who provided those.

We learned that the Taliban have activated such narratives against women and the diverse communities that do not conform to their particular interpretation of Sharia and Quran are, one of which effects is to enable distance between person and groups who used to share the space in spite of their differences, sowing fear of each other and legitimating mutual betrayal based on fear, clearly perceived when banning women's voices to be heard in public; it is not forbidding to speak in direct words, but to hear their voices, then it is easy to imagine a woman scared when hearing other woman's voice to the point of betraying her if it means to save her own life. Also, the possibility to advocate and support each other is extinguished. Diverse reports above quoted mention the existence of secret schools for females, and of networks of support; the latest prohibition of hearing their voices will risk the integrity and live of a participant in one of those, also opening the door to voices of non-Muslim women, then the interviews conducted are a subversive if not criminal action that can trigger automatically a sanction entirely at the discretion of a Taliban officer or any man interested in controlling women.

Attacking women and minorities in such ways also means to attack their credibility, therefore undermining their capacity to exert influence. Finally, it means to attack their right to access resources of all sorts, limiting their ability to learn and resiliently remain part of the society by adapting themselves to changing circumstances. Particularly, the Taliban's impositions limiting women's agency make women's financial resilience impossible to attain on their own, and limiting the household ability to be financially stable only when fully supported by either a husband or the mother's direct family. Extending the analysis, an argument could be made about how mothers will be withheld - if not fully impeded - to transfer future resilience skills of children raised by them. This crusade of absolute dominance of the Afghan context diminishes the humanity of women and minorities. The unspotted consequence, however, would eventually undermine the attackers' own interest in the long run; not without first destroying whatever is not approved by them, first.

As a closing remark, the case study teaches us that terrorism - whether exerted by subversive groups or by state power like the Taliban - aims at destroying the social fabric of a society with no regard for their own future, only to pursue unlimited power, in turn supporting the argument that their crusade is political, neither religious nor cultural.

## D. Ideology and emerging technologies

In contemporary conflicts, the destruction of cultural heritage often transcends mere collateral damage, emerging as a deliberate strategy to erase historical identities, undermine community cohesion, and impose new ideological orders. Another motivation is the rejection and elimination of other belief systems and religions, expressed in actions such as the persecution of Christians in Afghanistan, the desecration of Christian graves, or erasing episodes from history.<sup>155</sup> Extremist groups such as the Taliban and ISIS have systematically targeted cultural heritage sites to advance their ideological agendas. This section explores the motivations behind such actions, mainly focusing on the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and their broader approach to cultural heritage in Afghanistan. By examining these cases, we gain insight into how cultural heritage destruction serves as a tool for ideological warfare and power imposition. In doing so, we will offer more general insights about the relationship between stochastic terrorism, cultural heritage and emerging technologies, with the latter functioning both as a threat amplifier and a means to counter terrorism.

### **The Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan: A threat to ideology**

Terrorist organisations such as the Taliban and ISIS deliberately use force to create a new ideology. The biggest threat to the community's adoption of a new way of life is adherence to an old one. Over the past 20 years, the actors have been the same, and the mechanisms used have been almost identical. What has become more different is their professionalism.

The destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in March 2001 was the turning point for the international community to take action against the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage. While the destruction of historical icons and the plundering and selling of goods had been going on for centuries prior, this act in Afghanistan was motivated by an extremist ideology in a deliberate attempt to destroy culture and identity. This act of destruction was a message, a threat even, to fall in line with the ideology of the Taliban or else. Since Bamiyan, the world has witnessed similar acts in Syria, Iraq and Libya, whose sole motivation has been to destroy heritage and replace it with a new ideology.<sup>156</sup>

The case of the Buddhas of Bamiyan is evidence of intentional destruction as a means of psychological warfare. The site was targeted because it had symbolic value for those that the Taliban consider their enemy. In this case, it was a different ideology and another religious philosophy from theirs.<sup>157</sup> The Taliban used perceived threats to their culture and religion as justification for the

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<sup>155</sup> See about Christians persecuted in Afghanistan <https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/countries/afghanistan/>, about Christians graves desecrated in Jerusalem <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/david-wasserstein-desecrated-graves-in-jerusalem/101855242>, and about how fascists erased history to control future narratives [https://www.youtube.com/live/-sVwjZ9H72M?si=eb\\_g7-a\\_D46Kx9of](https://www.youtube.com/live/-sVwjZ9H72M?si=eb_g7-a_D46Kx9of).

<sup>156</sup> Expert respondent from Italy, interviewed via Zoom on May 25, 2023 by ITSS Verona.

<sup>157</sup> Italian Expert: ITSS interview.

intentional destruction of cherished objects and historical sites. Minority cultures continue to pay the psychological and physical price for these acts. The Bamiyan case was the catalyst for UNESCO's creation of the Declaration on the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage in 2003, and it raised awareness of the importance of the global community taking action to preserve their cultural identity.<sup>158</sup>

### **The Taliban's approach to cultural heritage and potential inroads to heritage preservation**

The Taliban's primary approach to culture has been one of exclusion, consistently exhibiting rejection of the acceptance and inclusion of the Shiites, the Baloch, the Hindus, the Tajiks and other ethnic, religious and non-Pashtun minorities.<sup>159</sup> While they were an Islamic nationalist group, as opposed to messianic insurgencies and militant groups, who are now a state actor, their approach to cultural heritage has not changed.

During the pre-2021 government's rule, Afghanistan's tangible cultural heritage was threatened primarily by foreign traffickers coming into the country, especially through Pakistan and Iran. The government had difficulty managing these borders despite their airports and ports being moderately under control to check and limit smuggling.<sup>160</sup> On this earlier timeline, being primarily fighters and having religious convictions, the Taliban did not appreciate the importance of cultural heritage. Their approach towards it was solely destroying anything dissenting "their culture".

In post-2021 Afghanistan, one of the biggest threats to intangible and tangible cultural heritage has been the Taliban's lack of understanding of the importance of heritage.<sup>161</sup> Having the reins of the state, the primary discussion between the Taliban regime and the international community is women's freedom to study and work, while other security issues, such as those revolving around cultural heritage, are not of priority. In addition, non-state threats to cultural heritage also included local commanders and residents who smuggled artefacts into neighbouring countries.

The Taliban's primary driver regarding tangible and intangible cultural heritage appears to be power imposition on collective populations and profit incentives. It takes many forms, such as destroying and outlawing cultural festival celebrations, banning food recipes, and destroying historic non-

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<sup>158</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Centre. 2021. "Commemorating 20 Years since the Destruction of Two Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. March 11, 2021. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2253>

<sup>159</sup> Amit Kumar and Aayushi Malhotra, "Factoring Ethnicity in Taliban's Quest for Legitimacy," *Georgetown University Journal of International Affairs*, April 17, 2024, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/04/17/factoring-ethnicity-in-talibans-quest-for-legitimacy-an-anthropological-rewiring-of-the-power-structure/>.

<sup>160</sup> Janet Blake and Sayed Ali Naqi Masoumi, "From the Past to the Future: Protecting Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage - Progress, Fears, and Hopes," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 29, no. 3 (August 2022), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-cultural-property/article/abs/from-the-past-to-the-future-protecting-afghanistans-cultural-heritage-progress-fears-and-hopes/2CDCD9DAFD262B3347DD9C076EB30E91#access-block>.

<sup>161</sup> Melissa Gronlund, "New Threats to Heritage in the Taliban's Afghanistan," *New Lines Magazine*, December 6, 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/new-threats-to-heritage-in-the-talibans-afghanistan/>.

Islamic monuments, using religious grounds as the justification.<sup>162</sup> Their actions instead suggest the pursuit of a broader goal of ethnic cleansing by undermining minorities' cultural practices.

State decisions of prioritising pressing concerns result in a relaxed approach to destroying cultural heritage. The efficiency of international pressure, globalisation, diplomacy, and conditional international aid to change the Taliban's approach to cultural heritage, both intangible and tangible, is still undetermined. While integration into the global economy could exponentially increase the smuggling of cultural heritage, it might hopefully lead to incepting a sense of appreciation amongst Taliban leaders and potentially swing protection and preservation of tangible cultural heritage, which yet remains to be seen.

### **Key takeaways**

The case studies of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the broader actions of the Taliban and ISIS highlight several critical takeaways regarding the motivations behind cultural heritage destruction: ideological warfare is a primary driver behind that deliberate destruction. As discussed, groups like the Taliban and ISIS use such acts to impose their beliefs and erase any historical narratives that contradict or dissent from their ideology. This reality underscores the importance of understanding cultural heritage destruction, not just as acts of vandalism but as strategic moves within broader ideological conflicts.

The international community's response to such destruction is crucial in short- and long-term heritage preservation efforts. The adoption of international declarations and conventions, such as those by UNESCO, represents a collective acknowledgement of the need to protect cultural heritage. However, these measures must be accompanied by actionable strategies and resources to make them effective. The response to the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan illustrates how international outrage can be harnessed to strengthen global heritage protection frameworks.

The role of political entities in cultural heritage preservation is complex and often influenced by broader socio-political dynamics. In the case of the Taliban, their governance has consistently prioritised ideological conformity over cultural diversity, leading to systematic heritage destruction. This instance underscores the need for international diplomatic efforts to include cultural heritage preservation as a critical component of peacebuilding and humanitarian strategies.

Community engagement and local stewardship are essential in protecting cultural heritage. While international frameworks provide the necessary support, the involvement of local communities in preservation efforts ensures that heritage sites are protected not only as historical artefacts but as living symbols of cultural identity and resilience. Empowering local populations to safeguard their

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<sup>162</sup> Shorthose, "Unlawful," 12.

heritage can mitigate the risks posed by extremist ideologies and foster a more inclusive and resilient cultural landscape.

In conclusion, the destruction of cultural heritage by groups like the Taliban and ISIS is deeply rooted in ideological motives aimed at erasing historical identities and imposing new power structures by replacing cultural content with unfamiliar narratives invented ad hoc. The international community's response, through legal frameworks and diplomatic efforts, combined with local engagement, forms the pillars of effective cultural heritage preservation strategies.

### **Stochastic terrorism, cultural heritage and emerging technologies**

*Stochastic terrorism is the incitement of a violent act through the public demonisation of a group or individual.<sup>163</sup> Unlike more organized forms of terrorism, stochastic terrorism thrives on the amplification of divisive narratives that frame certain groups as threats, often reinforcing an “in-group vs out-group” dynamic.<sup>164</sup> This distinction is particularly relevant in relation to the previous section, which examined how extremist groups strategically destroy cultural heritage to erase identities, suppress alternative belief systems, and assert ideological control. Both forms of violence rely on the construction of in-groups and out-groups to justify exclusion, persecution, or erasure. In the context of this report, stochastic terrorism illustrates how ideological violence can be incited not only through acts of destruction, but also through language that normalises hostility and lays the groundwork for inciting targeted aggression.*

The cyber realm exposes cultural heritage to significant risks. For one, trafficking opportunities exponentially increase and benefit from plausible deniability. Also, it offers an unparalleled amplifier of content for power projection and for recruitment.<sup>165</sup> Germane to the latter, assaults on culture can materialise as manifestations of stochastic terrorism on the internet, thereby catalysing further destructive actions. Stochastic terrorism conveys the enactment of attacks intended to be amplified online as a means to foster new random attacks elsewhere.<sup>166</sup> In this regard, cyberspace proves to be the ideal tool. Perpetrators broadcast their attacks live over a social media platform, viewers watch while it happens live, or visit the venue asynchronously. This type of terrorism normalises violence, which directly erodes the intangible cultural heritage, and the tangible one when the attack targets valuable artefacts and/or site of significance for identity, history, and social cohesion.

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<sup>163</sup> Molly Amman and J. Reid Meloy, “Stochastic Terrorism and Incitement to Violence: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 5 (October 2021), <https://pt.icct.nl/article/stochastic-terrorism-and-incitement-violence-linguistic-and-psychological-analysis>, 3

<sup>164</sup> Amman, “Incitement,” 3.

<sup>165</sup> Kaarel Kalm, “Illicit Network Structures in Cyberspace,” in *5th International Conference on Cyber Conflict*, ed. K. Podins, J. Stinissen, and M. Maybaum (5th International Conference on Cyber Conflict, Tallinn: NATO CCD COE Publications, 2013), [https://www.ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/17\\_d2r2s4\\_kalm.pdf](https://www.ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/17_d2r2s4_kalm.pdf), p. 2.

<sup>166</sup> Amman, “Incitement,” 3.

Another instance is the case of encrypted messaging services, such as EncroChat, that have been instrumentalised as platforms for illicitly selling cultural artefacts, facilitating the clandestine trade and trafficking of valuable heritage items.<sup>167</sup> The proliferation of online forums and marketplaces dedicated to the exchange of stolen or looted artefacts provides a convenient and anonymous space for individuals to trade cultural items that lack proper documentation or provenance illegally.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, the anonymity afforded by the internet makes it difficult for law enforcement agencies to track down and recover these stolen artefacts, exacerbating the illicit trafficking of cultural heritage.<sup>169</sup>

Conversely, and fortunately, emerging technologies can also positively affect the protection of artefacts and the prevention of crimes against cultural heritage. Advanced surveillance systems, artificial intelligence algorithms for threat detection, and blockchain technology for secure digital documentation are examples of how emerging technologies could safeguard cultural heritage in the cyber domain. In this regard, digital literacy is a great tool to counter heritage trafficking and to halt toxic narratives online. Therefore, while the cyber realm presents formidable challenges to preserving cultural heritage, it also offers opportunities for innovative solutions to mitigate risks and enhance protective measures.

### **The inability to police the rise of *stochastic terrorism***<sup>170</sup>

The Christchurch Attacks (May 2019), and more recently the stabbing of an Assyrian Bishop and subsequent riot at a Sydney church in April 2024, are evidence of ‘stochastic terrorism’. Stochastic terrorism has no top-down or bottom-up hierarchical organisation. Rather, each participant is mainly anonymous and interchangeable – meaning attacks on cultural sites and icons occur suddenly and spontaneously – thus making them difficult for authorities to monitor. The internet also perpetrates stochastic terrorism.

The terrorist attacks on two Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in May 2019, which left 51 people dead,<sup>171</sup> highlight two challenges that authorities across the world have when monitoring and responding to attacks on tangible and intangible cultural elements. Firstly, the capacity for any terrorist attack to be streamed live on social media – often to like-minded audiences – and the absence of self-regulation protocols by social media companies, which allows confronting vision

<sup>167</sup> Europol, “Dismantling Encrypted Criminal EncroChat Communications Leads to over 6 500 Arrests and close to EUR 900 Million Seized,” Europol, June 27, 2023, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/dismantling-encrypted-criminal-encrochat-communications-leads-to-over-6-500-arrests-and-close-to-eur-900-million-seized>.

<sup>168</sup> Mark Altaweel and Tasoula Georgiou Hadjitofi, “The Sale of Heritage on eBay: Market Trends and Cultural Value,” *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 2, November 11, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053951720968865>, 3.

<sup>169</sup> Judith Aldridge, “Does Online Anonymity Boost Illegal Market Trading?,” *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 4 (April 11, 2019), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0163443719842075>.

<sup>170</sup> Kit Messhan-Muir, Professor of Art in Curtin University, West Australia. Interviewed on May 16, 2023 via Zoom, by ITSS Verona.

<sup>171</sup> Graham Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age,” *Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point* 12, no. 6 (July 18, 2019), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/>, 18.

to ‘go viral’ before authorities have the chance to respond.<sup>172</sup> Secondly, the inability of law enforcement to respond to an unfolding terrorist situation and potentially further attacks, as information, and sometimes disinformation, spreads online.

The Christchurch attack did not need a large audience to achieve the desired effect; it was an amplification of an unprecedented scale. Only 200 viewers watched the live video stream, some of whom then shared it in online boards such as 8chan’s/pol/ board and Facebook. The video had been shared around 4,000 times before Facebook acted, and the platform was not able to prevent another 1.2 million uploads.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, Australia’s online safety regulator recently lost a court case involving Elon Musk, owner of social media platform X (formerly Twitter), to remove videos of the terrorist attack at the Sydney church – which had been published on 65 other websites.<sup>174</sup> Authorities were acting to prevent further instances of mass radicalisation and religiously motivated terrorism. X has not removed the videos from its international platforms.

Further complicating matters for law enforcement, stochastic terrorism also coincides with a shift in motivation from terrorist groups, which makes response efforts even harder. The destruction of culture is means to an end; arguably, encouraging replicated attacks from followers seems to be the ultimate goal.<sup>175</sup> In this era of intense visual culture and online consumption where disinformation proliferates, the rise of identitarianism, particularly the weaponisation of historical narratives, is central to attacks on tangible (mosques, churches) and intangible (Islamic culture, language and religious tradition) culture, which Christchurch and Sydney attacks represent.<sup>176</sup>

There is an opportunity for world leaders to develop a coordinated approach, including intelligence and research sharing, to prevent these recurrent attacks on culture from happening in real time. Social media empires can and should be held to account by governments and international bodies, such as the United Nations, for leaving the door open to further attacks by impressionable actors.

### **Key takeaways**

In this section, the presented case underscores the significant threats posed by emerging technologies to cultural heritage and the potential these technologies hold for mitigating such threats. The loss of cultural heritage, whether tangible or intangible, has profound social implications. The erosion of cultural ties exacerbates feelings of isolation. Maintaining such connections is vital for cultural continuity and identity.

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<sup>172</sup> Messhan-Muir: ITSS Interview.

<sup>173</sup> Messhan-Muir: ITSS Interview.

<sup>174</sup> “Judge Rebukes ‘Clear Case’ of Government Overreach on Stabbing Video.” 2024. *Australian Financial Review*. May 14, 2024. <https://www.afr.com/technology/judge-rebukes-clear-case-of-government-overreach-on-stabbing-video-20240514-p5jdfv>.

<sup>175</sup> Amman, “Incitement.”

<sup>176</sup> Graham Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age,” *CTC Sentinel*, 12: 6, July 2019, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/>.

The concept of stochastic terrorism illustrates the unpredictable and decentralised nature of modern terrorist threats, particularly as they relate to cultural heritage. The attacks in Christchurch and Sydney exemplify how stochastic terrorism leverages the internet to incite and broadcast violence against meaningful sites and communities. These incidents reveal the difficulties that authorities face when pre-emptively trying to identify and respond to such threats, given the lack of a clear hierarchical structure and the spontaneous nature of the attacks. The use of live streaming and social media to disseminate acts of terror further exacerbates the situation, creating a rapid spread of extremist content severely challenging to contain and counter.

Nonetheless, perhaps the most damaging effect of stochastic terrorism is what it causes to the shared heritage: it creates an amplifying effect of hate, on real time and of unprecedented reach. We have asserted earlier the value of interactions and content as building blocks of cultural heritage, more so as they are shared and consumed ongoing. Stochastic terrorism makes the watching of hate-motivated attacks normalized, the posted videos become part of *pop* culture, another element of the news and social media landscape for daily consumption. Once seen, it cannot be unseen, feeding a culture where XRIRB actions are not *that far from normal life*.

In conclusion, the case study highlights the urgent need for a coordinated global response to the threats that technologies pose to cultural heritage. These should include strengthening international cooperation, enhancing technological capabilities, and fostering digital literacy among communities. By leveraging the potential of advanced technologies and fostering a collaborative international framework, the integrity and preservation of cultural heritage can be significantly improved, ensuring its protection for future generations. Preserving it is a matter of protecting physical artefacts and safeguarding the identity, history, and continuity of communities worldwide.

## Part III: Conclusion and recommendations

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Aiming to respond to the main research question “In the current global context, what are the underlying factors driving these visible actions by terrorists against cultural heritage?” the expert opinion and literature highlight as relevant both matters, on one hand the known drivers of long-term presence such as financial gains and undermining a perceived foe, and on the other hand an emerging issue, namely the search for validation via replication, otherwise known as stochastic terrorism. While both types of drivers may be traced back on their linkages to power pursuit - found across the board in the diverse contexts discussed by experts - the newest one at the same time instrumentalized the online platforms and the attacks carried away against tangible and intangible heritage. Said instrumentalisation of online platforms is not that different from looting artefacts, whether pursuing revenues or pursuing the debilitation of a perceived foe. Thus, the role of online platforms emerges as key, from the 21st century and forth, particularly to satisfy unfettered pursuits of power and attention.

Conversely, safeguarding measures that aim to thwart the ever-proliferating threats targeting tangible and intangible cultural heritage are of diverse nature and origin. In this line, so are the underlying motivations to illicit conducts mostly related to cultural sites destruction and cultural property looting. Yet, among the intangible heritage, memory is a crucial determinant in the formation of individual and collective identities while functioning as a catalyst for relations within societies and communities. In the last decades, across different geographies, presumably aware of the relevance of collective memory retain it as a target, reinforcing the necessity to innovate in a comprehensive approach sensitive to contemporary dynamics. Challenges facing recovery efforts in cultural heritage preservation stem from various sources, including the swift pace of technological progress, inadequate comprehension of social media's role in facilitating illicit activities, and lenient legal frameworks fostering an "impunity culture."

Economic drivers behind illicit activities against cultural heritage are multifaceted. Efforts to counter these illicit activities must be, equivalently, multifaceted and globally coordinated. Experts highlighted how targeted operations against trafficking networks, international collaboration to disrupt financial flows, and initiatives to protect cultural sites are equally crucial. Moreover, addressing the root causes, such as economic desperation and ideological extremism, is essential to diminish the capacity of criminal and terrorist organisations to exploit cultural heritage. The role of civil society and local communities in documenting and protecting cultural assets is equally vital, as grassroots efforts can provide a bulwark against the pervasive threats to cultural heritage.

The regime (re)imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan has become of genocide character by incommensurably attacking women and ethnic minorities such as Tajiks, Hazaras, Persians, Hindus, Pashtun, Bahai, and Sikhs. Consequently, the traumatic effects on Afghan social fabric harm women - producers of cultural heritage and bearers of cultural rights; their partners and their family prospects, to the extent of increased numbers of women suicide. Similarly, a formerly multilingual and pluricultural country has experienced the Taliban dismantlement through illegal operations targeting multiculturalism: language reappropriation, books and sculptures destruction and replacement, and the execution of Persian-speaking singers.

The intersection of emerging technologies and cultural heritage protection presents both challenges and opportunities. As discussed, the “two faced” nature of the cyber realm - as both a facilitator of illicit activities and a potential guardian of cultural heritage - necessitates a nuanced and multifaceted response from the international community. Advanced surveillance systems, artificial intelligence for threat detection, and blockchain technology for secure documentation offer promising tools to enhance the protection of cultural heritage. Digital literacy and cyber-awareness initiatives are crucial in empowering communities to safeguard their cultural assets and counteract the spread of toxic narratives online. These technological advancements, if harnessed effectively, can play a pivotal role in preventing the illicit trade of cultural artefacts and ensuring the integrity of cultural heritage preservation efforts.

Among the most relevant systemic topics regarding contemporary patterns of threats targeting cultural heritage and its relative protection, challenges related to prosecution, regulation and jurisdiction were widely mentioned during our qualitative research sprint. Prosecuting individuals involved in cultural heritage crimes poses significant challenges that only grow as the policy gap enlarges due to innovative developments, especially in active war zones and in locations where terrorist groups exert control and sound presence. Despite the seriousness of these offences, successful investigation and prosecution remain elusive due to a number of factors. These include the complexities of gathering battlefield evidence, difficulties and dangers for investigators in accessing active war zones, the subsequent lack of comprehensive investigations, the insurgency of other pressing humanitarian priorities in conflict-torn zones, political engagement, and the complexities of the international legal framework.

Based upon international treaties and regulations, States embark on specific strategies to protect cultural artefacts and safeguard manifestations of intangible cultural heritage. Either through awareness-raising campaigns among civil society or by deploying Blue Helmets for Culture in United Nations Peace-keeping Missions, States engage principally according to their nation’s tradition in a designed and purposed- set of actions. Persuasion of policymakers, military decision-makers, and the general public represents a concrete awareness-raising strategy prone to foster a

sense of “shared ownership” among citizens, with multiple positive outcomes: community involvement through monitoring and reporting suspicious activities, their active role as ‘agents of policies ideation’, and a consequential policy-wider support. Similarly, an innovative contribution to cultural peacebuilding was deploying specialised police-units for countering the illicit traffic of cultural property in an armed conflict context, known as the Task Force “Unite4Heritage”, assisting afterwards with the illegally removed cultural artefacts from the Leonardo database.

Other motivations behind the destruction and looting of cultural heritage include political and ideological reasons, as well as the intent to eradicate the cultural identity of a group, minority, or even nation. During conflicts, the destruction of cultural heritage can serve as a means to demoralise the enemy and assert dominance. Additionally, sites of cultural value are also often targeted for history or ethnic cleansing reasons, with the intent to erase the historical presence of a particular group. During our qualitative investigation, this tactic has been mentioned various times, where the destruction of cultural heritage is used as a weapon to undermine the existence and historical foundations of communities.

Protecting cultural heritage necessitates a multi-pronged approach.<sup>177</sup> International cooperation is crucial, fostering collaboration between nations to share intelligence, develop coordinated security measures, and implement stricter regulations on the illicit trade of cultural artefacts. While increased protection surrounding cultural assets is necessary, public access must also be prioritised, in order to foster a sense of shared ownership of cultural heritage. Finally, addressing the root causes of terrorism, such as poverty, social marginalisation, and extremist ideologies, turns vital to prevent future attacks. By tackling the underlying issues that fuel terrorism, we can create a more peaceful and tolerant world where cultural heritage is not a target, but a bridge that connects us to our shared past.

Our qualitative research highlighted that the protection of cultural heritage should be comprehensive and cover all risks to cultural heritage. Contemporary threats, drivers, and trends in crimes against cultural heritage must be analysed as part of a larger system, given that improvements in one thematic area can enhance changes across the entire system. In conclusion, in order to effectively address these obstacles, essential measures must be taken, focusing on different multidisciplinary categories: legal and policy frameworks (including state strategies, international cooperation, and the relevance of cultural heritage in political debate); technological advancements (such as forensic technologies, digital archiving, blockchain, and digital twin technology); socioeconomic initiatives (like promoting social stability through economic opportunities); cultural preservation strategies (adapting to evolving societal dynamics and promoting preservation techniques); and security measures (such as preventing online extremism and utilising battlefield evidence mechanisms). The emphasis lies on the necessity for global treaties, heightened awareness,

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<sup>177</sup> Campion, “*Blast*,” 36.

and proactive enforcement of national conventions to safeguard cultural heritage for future generations.

Violent attacks - stochastic or not - and looting in spite of the drivers would lead into equitable outcomes, not only stripping communities of their historical foundations and collective memory, but also fuelling illegal economies,<sup>178</sup> all which perpetuate cycles of violence and social divisions.

## Policy recommendations

In an era marked by rapid globalisation and profound cultural interchanges, safeguarding cultural heritage has never been more critical. It is within this context that ITSS Verona, based on the findings of this research, proposes a comprehensive set of policy recommendations aimed at preserving and promoting our shared heritage. These recommendations are rooted in a deep respect for the cultural fabric that binds communities together, recognising the significance of not only tangible heritage, but also experiential and intangible traditions such as festivals, culinary practices, arts, and music.

This framework seeks not only to protect the static relics of the past, but also to embrace the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of culture, which has never been more globalised than it is now. By advocating for increased state strategy and cooperation, including national inventories, global treaties, more stringent legal frameworks to combat illicit trafficking and a more focused gendered perspective, ITSS Verona wants to underscore the need for a robust, transnational approach. Raising political engagement and awareness is essential to elevate cultural heritage protection to the global agenda. Through the call for funding law enforcement, research and innovative technologies, these recommendations strive to confront modern challenges, ensuring that cultural heritage remains a vibrant and protected pillar of our global society.

***Increased state strategy and cooperation.*** National inventories, global cooperation, criminal legal frameworks, and regulations targeting trafficking through various means are crucial for safeguarding cultural heritage.<sup>179</sup> Establishing an international agreement to take action in preventing the trafficking of looted items across borders and repatriate under covered goods to their rightful owners, strengthening criminal legal frameworks and regulations targeting trafficking, and repatriating uncovered goods to their rightful owners are vital steps towards this strategy. A more robust transnational approach is necessary, emphasising the need for global treaties, heightened awareness, and proactive implementation of national conventions. Expanding the mechanisms

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<sup>178</sup> See the depredation of Pharaoh's tombs in Joshua Mark, "Tomb Robbing in Ancient Egypt," *World History Encyclopaedia*, 2017, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1095/tomb-robbing-in-ancient-egypt/>, and the stolen reliefs from the Parthenon in Lindsey Alison Moore, "The Case of the Parthenon Sculptures," in *The Osprey Journal of Ideas and Inquiry*, 2001, p 34, [https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1033&context=ojii\\_volumes](https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1033&context=ojii_volumes).

<sup>179</sup> Italian expert: ITSS interview.

already existing in international cooperation can enhance the effectiveness of measures aimed at protecting cultural heritage; nations must work in tandem to be each other's eyes and ears to prevent cultural destruction. i.e. look beyond politics and work towards the common good.

***Implement best practices and lesson learned mechanisms.*** Adopting best practices and mechanisms for learning from past experiences is crucial. This approach allows for continuous improvement in the strategies and methods used to protect cultural heritage. Databases of illegally removed cultural artefacts along with an integrated cultural component into the mandates of international interventions are fundamental to combat the illegal traffic of cultural objects and foresee the recovering movable cultural property operation. The expanded mission mandate operates effectively in conflict-affected environments embodying concrete duties for a context-specific deployment: conducting risk assessment, quantifying the damage to cultural heritage, arranging action plans following technical supervision, training local staff, and providing assistance for objects transportation.

***Encourage the use of “battlefield evidence” mechanisms.*** The prosecution of terrorist organisations that engage in crimes against cultural heritage is further complicated by the difficulties of gathering evidence in conflict zones and the political complexities of conflict-torn regions. Encouraging the use and further development of “battlefield evidence” mechanisms could help address these pressing challenges, which is crucial for holding perpetrators accountable. The collection and preservation of on-site forensic evidence can be used to support legal proceedings in international courts, improving the reliability of high- and low- profile cases.

***Promote an increased relevance of cultural heritage in political debate.*** Political engagement and awareness-raising are crucial to prioritise cultural heritage protection on the global agenda. Elevating the issue to the fore of political debate ensures that cultural heritage receives the attention and resources necessary for its preservation.<sup>180</sup> This involves encouraging policymakers to recognise the socio-economic and cultural benefits of preserving cultural heritage and integrating cultural heritage protection into broader political strategies and development plans, ensuring that new policies pose no alteration risk to heritage content, artifacts, and traditions. However, it is essential that this is approached with nuance, to avoid that cultural heritage is misappropriated or weaponised by extremist groups to legitimise exclusionary narratives or incite violence. To prevent such outcomes, political engagement around cultural heritage preservation must be grounded in inclusive, human-rights based approaches that acknowledge the plurality of histories and different identities. Additionally, raising public awareness through education, media campaigns, and community involvement can create a grassroots support movement that pressures political leaders into action.

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<sup>180</sup> Patrick Stevens, Rule of Law Director at International Justice Development. Interviewed via Zoom on February 1, 2024 by ITSS Verona.

***Adopt a more comprehensive approach.*** A comprehensive cultural heritage policy must encompass not only the preservation of cultural heritage vis-à-vis conflict and deliberate acts of terrorism, but also living traditions like festivals, culinary practices, and music, alongside tangible artefacts. This inclusive approach ensures that the dynamic and evolving nature of culture is recognised and preserved, reflecting the full spectrum of our shared heritage. In this context, Japan's approach to cultural heritage preservation is deeply rooted in a shared respect for tradition and reverence for the nation's history: culture is a central part of the Japanese identity, highlighting both the tangible and intangible elements in order to maintain a continuity between the two.<sup>181</sup> Acknowledging the evolving nature of culture is essential, and the Japanese holistic approach to cultural heritage through the preservation of traditional tangible and intangible practices is a great example. Policies should not only protect historical artefacts from damage, loss, or looting, but also support contemporary cultural expressions, ensuring that cultural heritage remains relevant and vibrant in today's globalised world.

***Incorporate gender-sensitive approaches into conservation projects.*** This approach tackles systemic inequalities that have long plagued this field. Women's perspectives offer invaluable insights into the everyday lives, traditions, and cultural practices that often leave behind a less tangible, yet equally significant, mark on history. When women are excluded from decision-making processes regarding the preservation of their own cultural heritage, it perpetuates a cycle of marginalisation. By ensuring that women's voices are heard and their perspectives valued, we can create a more equitable and inclusive space for cultural heritage preservation. Ultimately, integrating gendered lenses is not just about adding a missing piece, but about creating a richer, more vibrant tapestry that reflects the diverse experiences and contributions of all interested parties, ensuring a more complete picture of the past for generations to come.

***Foster social stability through economic opportunities.*** Cultural heritage practices, especially intangible ones that evolved through the centuries, are now inevitably intertwined with the socio-economic fabric of their communities and tourism influxes. Fostering the protection of cultural heritage art can positively impact its strength. The case of Patachitra scrolls in West Bengal illustrates how integrating traditional arts into the modern economic framework can bolster social stability by providing sustainable livelihoods.<sup>182</sup> By supporting such traditional practices, governments and organisations can create new income streams that not only preserve these traditions, but also empower marginalised groups, such as women. This approach is clearly opposed to criminal activities such as looting: investing in positive economic opportunities could serve as a catalyst for community development, enhancing local pride and cultural identity while ensuring the reverence and protection of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage and the transmission of traditional knowledge. Policies should therefore focus on creating platforms for global exposure, providing

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<sup>181</sup> Moira Luraschi. Interviewed in person on July 14, 2023 by ITSS Verona.

<sup>182</sup> Vincenzo Matera. Interviewed in person on November 24, 2023 by ITSS Verona.

financial incentives, and facilitating skill development, such as the Japanese Living National Treasures program, established to ensure that traditional skills are passed from generation to generation.<sup>183</sup> A crucial yet less obvious enabler of both awareness, and community-driven protection are programmes that from the earliest stages of school impart education about the value of artifacts and traditions.

***Promote adaptation and preservation strategies that align with evolving societal dynamics.*** Preserving cultural heritage while embracing change is a delicate balancing act.<sup>184</sup> As it is not possible to stop cultural change, initiatives that shift the focus towards preserving and documenting heritage for current and future generations are great tools for informative cultural heritage preservation.<sup>185</sup> Digitization projects like the Swiss based SAMARA, which focuses on disseminating Ticino's cultural heritage through a single gateway that provides access to all information sources maintained by archives, libraries, museums and other documentation centres in Ticino exemplifies efforts to make cultural materials accessible to everyone.<sup>186</sup> The state therefore plays a crucial role in supporting cultural initiatives at the regional level, and highlights the necessity of approaching the preservation of cultural heritage not only in times of war and against deliberate acts of terrorism, but also in the face of societal change and global advancements.

***Prevention of online extremism and stochastic terrorism.*** The intersection of technology and culture necessitates a systemic approach aimed at analysing and addressing threats comprehensively. In particular, the rise of stochastic terrorism, fuelled by online environments as an unintended - and undesired yet imminent - effect of the closing of both technology and connectivity gaps. Stopping this advancement or aiming to limit access would not only hurt humankind but is also unlikely to happen, adding that such control measures over citizen agency are the watermark of authoritarian regimes; thus, a long-term solution of good practices for online behaviour is in order. Technology and social media literacy matched with online connectivity hygiene are suggested to be put in the global agenda for education, from early ages up to higher education. This education should also remain consistently updated as technologies continue to advance more so when there is a persistent lag between technology, regulations and their enforcement.

The above, however, could not be completed without the participation of the most powerful actors on this stage, namely the private corporations that own, manage and profit from online venues that citizens access 'free of charge'. These companies have counter terrorism (CT), security and common vulnerabilities exposure (CVE) departments that could play a key role in raising awareness and supporting actions that enable the development of online resilience. Germane to this, governments

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<sup>183</sup> Moira Luraschi. Interviewed in person on July 14, 2023 by ITSS Verona.

<sup>184</sup> Roland Hochstrasser. Interviewed in person on July 6, 2023 by ITSS Verona.

<sup>185</sup> Hochstrasser: ITSS interview.

<sup>186</sup> Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, "Sàmara, the Cultural Heritage of Canton Ticino," Samara.ti.ch, 2024, [https://samara.ti.ch/primo-explore/search?vid=41CSI\\_V3](https://samara.ti.ch/primo-explore/search?vid=41CSI_V3).

must put the onus on social media companies to filter out material that is clearly unpinned by stochastic terrorism or inspire 'lone wolf' attacks, especially amongst minors; note the recent Australian legislation that seeks to ban social media access for those under 16 - that hopefully other governments are likely to follow.<sup>187</sup> As this measure aims at preventing harm propagation via online venues, focusing on a very vulnerable population - namely underage cyber users - its impact could counter attacks of stochastic terrorism and their deleterious consequences in the social fabric that nurtures their Australian cultural heritage. Also, creating advanced education programs focused on Common Vulnerabilities Exposure (CVE) to counter this phenomenon will further cement the development of this set of skills in the communities.

***Promote the adoption of innovative forensic technologies.*** To effectively combat the illicit trade of tangible cultural heritage, it is recommended that law enforcement agencies and cultural institutions globally adopt innovative forensic technologies. This investment ensures that those tasked with protecting cultural heritage are well-equipped and knowledgeable. One such example of technology is SmartWater, proven effective in protecting cultural heritage items from theft and illicit trade. By marking artefacts with this and similar technologies, law enforcement can more efficiently trace and recover stolen items, ensuring their return to their rightful place.<sup>188</sup> Implementing this technology in museums and other cultural institutions as a preventative measure can significantly reduce the risk of looting and aid in the preservation of cultural heritage, even if artefacts are fragmented during transportation.

***Overcome challenges in digital archiving and record-keeping.*** Digital archiving is critical for preserving cultural heritage, yet it faces significant challenges, particularly in resource-limited settings. To address these, governments and international organisations should prioritise funding and policy support for digital archiving initiatives.<sup>189</sup> Capacity building is essential; archivists need training in computer science and cybersecurity to manage digital records effectively. Legislative frameworks should be updated to integrate digital archiving into national digital policies, ensuring robust cybersecurity measures. Adoption of advanced technologies, such as blockchain, can enhance the integrity and security of digital archives. Countries like Korea and Estonia provide valuable models for implementing blockchain in archiving. By fostering international collaboration and sharing best practices, nations can better protect their digital heritage from threats such as cyber-attacks and ensure the longevity and integrity of digital records.

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<sup>187</sup> Associated Press, "A social media ban in Australia for children under 16 is first in the world," *NPR News*, updated November 28, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/28/g-s1-36142/australia-social-media-ban-children>.

<sup>188</sup> SmartWater is a forensic liquid which provides irrefutable evidence of their origin by marking artifacts as it contains a unique chemical that creates a fingerprint detectable under ultraviolet light, its application in high-risk areas demonstrates potential to safeguard artefacts even in conflict zones. See Sarah Hardy, "IAASF: Smart Water and Future-Proofing Syria's History," UK Registrars Group (UKRG), December 7, 2017, <https://www.ukregistrarsgroup.org/blog/iaasf-smart-water-and-future-proofing-syrias-history/>.

<sup>189</sup> Victoria Lemieux. Interviewed via Zoom on March 1, 2024 by ITSS Verona.

***Ensure integrity of cultural collections through blockchain and digital twin technology.***

Cultural institutions must adopt blockchain technology and digital twin systems to safeguard the integrity of their collections. Blockchain provides a secure, decentralised method for provenance tracking, ensuring each transaction related to a collection object is recorded with a cryptographic signature, thus verifying its authenticity.<sup>190</sup> Digital twins create virtual replicas of physical objects, incorporating essential information such as title, dimensions, and medium. Actions like ownership changes or scientific analyses are recorded and hashed on a distributed ledger, eliminating single points of failure and enhancing security. This approach addresses the vulnerabilities of traditional cataloguing systems, which are often fragmented and susceptible to cyber-attacks. By implementing these technologies, institutions can protect against cyber threats, ensure accurate provenance, and maintain the integrity of their cultural collections in the digital age.

## Further research agenda

In our exploration of contemporary patterns of threats targeting cultural heritage, we have dived into several critical aspects and drivers, including economic motivations behind the looting of cultural heritage; relevant gender dynamics; the fast-growing impact of emerging technologies; prosecution, regulation and jurisdictional issues; states' strategies; and other motivations - such as ideological ones - and the Taliban's approach to cultural heritage post-2021. Our qualitative approach to this matter also allowed us to draw specific insights on regional approaches to cultural heritage preservation in non-conflictual environments, enriching our understanding of positive examples and practices to safeguard heritage. Each of these topics revealed intricate layers of vulnerability and the multifaceted efforts required to protect it. As a cornerstone of our shared identity, history, and cohesion, cultural heritage embodies the collective memory of societies, groups, and individuals. Its preservation is crucial not only for maintaining historical continuity but also for fostering cultural diversity, social stability, and economic development. In our report we aim to highlight how the threats to cultural heritage underscore the need for increased public relevance as well as comprehensive and multidisciplinary research agendas that address both current issues and systemic challenges. It is based on this specific view that ITSS Verona argues for future research, focusing on the nuanced interplay between these factors and their implications, to achieve comprehensive protection strategies that not only address, but prevent contemporary and future patterns of threats.

Despite the existence of a significant amount of research into the economic drivers behind the looting and illegal trade of cultural heritage, continued investigation is crucial. Existing studies underline that market demand, poverty, and conflict are significant drivers of the illicit trade of

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<sup>190</sup> Subject Matter Expert from Canada. Interviewed on March 27, 2024 by ITSS Verona.

cultural heritage.<sup>191</sup> However, as current global markets and economic conditions evolve, new patterns of exploitation may emerge, necessitating ongoing research.

One of the matters that needs further research is how gender intersects other vulnerability factors in the midst of both looting tangible heritage, and eroding intangible one. Conversely, what role gender would play in the protection and preservation of that. Cases like Afghanistan highlight the macabre edge of gender's resonance, the risk of being either a woman or a non-binary person, leading to interrogating if gender is a mediator or a moderator of violence - or where is the threshold between both - how is the gender division of labour and of power, etc. Cases of 'less radical' gender polarization, where women and other non-conforming communities are marginalized to a less extreme level than the Afghan one, often remain not as relevant in the news and the public discussion, if not underreported. As a starting point, a mapping of *less pronounced violence* cases across the locations studied in this report will expand the awareness of how gender inequality impacts the production and preservation of cultural heritage.

Among all the thematic in this research, emerging technologies open the most avenues for further research. On one side, technologies such as 3D scanning, digital archiving, and blockchain for provenance tracking offer innovative ways to safeguard and protect cultural heritage, especially in conflict zones and in areas prone to natural disasters. Research could evaluate the effectiveness, accessibility, and cost of these technologies for potential application in diverse settings. On the other side, these same technologies can also facilitate the illegal exchange of looted items through online marketplaces and encrypted communications. In our increasingly technological society, enhancing AI-based detection systems could help quickly and proactively identify extremist content online, though engagement with the academic field is needed. This dual-use potentially requires further research into regulation, transparency, and prevention.

A crucial aspect that needs more efforts are the prosecution, regulation and jurisdictional areas: the overarching legal framework that governs the protection of cultural heritage. An up-to-date mapping and understanding of the gaps and inconsistencies in international laws and how they could be harmonised to provide better protection for cultural heritage. Further research should also explore the challenges in prosecuting those who loot or destroy cultural heritage, including the largely mentioned challenges and issues of jurisdiction, enforcement, information-sharing, and international cooperation. In doing so, examining successful case studies can provide insights into best practices, lessons learned and areas of improvement in all mentioned areas, with the aim to develop research-informed policies that are more robust.

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<sup>191</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "False Trades: Uncovering the Scale and Scope of Trafficking in Cultural Property. Knowledge Gaps and Future Directions for Research" (UNODC, October 14, 2022), 9, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/briefs/Trafficking\\_in\\_cultural\\_properties\\_brief.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/briefs/Trafficking_in_cultural_properties_brief.pdf).

Our qualitative research and insights from the literature show that the strategies employed by states to protect cultural heritage vary widely, and further research is needed to understand their effectiveness and limitations, not only at the general international cooperation level, but also at the regional level. For example, further research on the various available frameworks and role of governmental policies and funding of cultural heritage preservation could reveal best practices and innovative solutions. In addition to this, research should focus on exploring the impact of cultural protection policies on political, social and economic stability, especially in regions experiencing conflict, poverty, or political upheavals. Further research aimed at understanding how states can implement better informed strategies, improve and strengthen collaboration with international organisations, local communities, and the private sector will be essential for a comprehensive cultural heritage protection.

Lastly, the Taliban's approach to cultural heritage post-2021 offers a case study on how ideology influences actions towards both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These ideological motivations warrant deeper investigations on how ideological beliefs shape the policies and behaviours of groups towards cultural heritage, both destructively and proactively. A deeper understanding of drivers and trends can inform better and more encompassing strategies to engage with such groups to protect cultural heritage now and in the future. Additionally, exploring how local, national, and international narratives around cultural heritage are constructed and contested can provide further insights into the broader cultural and political dynamics at play.

In a broader sense, this research and other research topics, such as those listed above, need to be complemented and contextualized with the underpinning elements that affect women's and minorities' role in creating, custodying, and transmitting intangible cultural heritage, as well as in the protection of the tangible one. Certain societal factors frame and influence women's and minorities' agency, such as social norms - access to education, gender roles; inequality and economic pressures - self-reliant financial stability; political reach - extent of their participation in public action and governance; policy and social structures - invisible social forces constraining their agency; and, climate change - the more vulnerable the person or group, the larger the impact that alterations on environmental conditions will inflict on them. These social factors' interplay affects women and non-binary persons in an individually nuanced way, therefore equally influencing the social cycle of interactions and relations between society members, a cycle in which intangible heritage results and where it is preserved; understanding how their interplay unfolds will bring new light to the discussion.

In conclusion, this research shows the complex interplay of economic motivations, gender dynamics, emerging technologies, legal frameworks, state strategy and ideological motivations that

highlight the multifaceted nature of cultural heritage preservation. The path forward necessitates a collaborative effort. Ultimately, by recognizing the intrinsic value of cultural heritage and fostering a spirit of shared responsibility, we can ensure that the stories of the past continue to inspire and educate future generations. The current geopolitical environment added to innovations that expand relentlessly and at colossal scale facilitate the exponential growth of threats against heritage in all its forms. Articulating networks and modus operandi that challenge the reach of regulations and escape the capacity of generating prosecutable evidence results fairly easy to accomplish. Addressing these contemporary patterns of threats following an approach that comprises radical and foundational measures is crucial for developing an informed and effective strategy to protect our shared cultural heritage for future generations.

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# Appendices

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- Interview Protocol
- Focus group questions
- Information Sheet
- Consent Form

Study: Contemporary Patterns of threats targeting cultural heritage

Semi-structured interview

Experts

ITSS Verona - Culture + UN Project Teams

Opening:

Thank you so much for making the time to meet with me today. We are interested in delving about the linkages between the destruction of cultural heritage, trade, and cultural cleanse.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide (with potential probe questions):

Main Question/Area	Probe Questions
<b>1. Background Information</b>	State date, ask the expert to state his/her name. Thank him/her for agreeing to the interview
Tell me about your research interests in the topic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you participated in field work, including traveling abroad for research?</li> <li>• From the threats/risks/challenges/attacks on CH you have studied, which one is the one you consider the most salient (movable, architectural, intangible)?</li> </ul>
Tell me about [country] <b>[This section is not priority]</b>	<p>[Italy, United Kingdom, Mali, Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the country a signatory of UNESCO agreements?</li> <li>• How many sites are listed as CH needing protection?</li> <li>• How many sites are under consideration to join the list?</li> <li>• How many have been destroyed by means related to terrorism?</li> </ul>
<b>2. Patterns</b>  <b>(Expert to select focus between 2.a Movable or Architectural CH, 2.b Intangible CH)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the threats on CH of [country] arise from state actors or from non-state actors? Domestic or external?</li> <li>• Are those organized top-down (mafia, crime, or terror heads, states) or bottom-up (communal groups shaping small-mid-size operations)?</li> <li>• Do they target movable, architectural, or intangible heritage (i.e., immaterial heritage like music, literature, language, oral traditions)?</li> </ul> <p>2.a Movable or Architectural CH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How has the looting of cultural objects in [country] evolved during the last decade?</li> <li>• Any new patterns you can identify?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are those operational patterns conducted by the same actors or are there new ones?</li> <li>• What has driven the changes (salient driver)?</li> <li>• What is the role of political affiliation in this context?</li> <li>• What means are instrumentalized?</li> <li>• What social ramifications emerge through these operations?</li> <li>• Is there any estimation of the size of these operations (whether money, number of transactions, or volume of objects?)</li> </ul> <p>2.b Intangible CH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How have the attacks on intangible heritage in [country] evolved during the last decade?</li> <li>• Any new patterns?</li> <li>• Are those conducted by the same actors or are there new ones?</li> <li>• What has driven the changes (salient driver)?</li> <li>• What is the role of political affiliation in this context?</li> <li>• What means are instrumentalized?</li> <li>• What social ramifications emerge through these operations?</li> <li>• Is there any estimation of the size of these operations (whether in community disruptions, economic losses, or notable disservice to affected groups)</li> </ul> <p>[After responding Movable/Architectural or Intangible]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What potential developments could these new patterns prompt?</li> <li>• Would you share a reflection on the future evolution of these threats?</li> <li>• Are you aware of efforts emanating directly from civil society to aid in documenting, countering threats and/or rebuilding damaged heritage (whether movable, architectural, or intangible)? What barriers or consequences do they face?</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Laws: domestic and international</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think are the largest flaws in the way the threats to CH are managed, addressed, countered?</li> <li>• Considering that these threats are trans-state, how could they be thwarted? How can the policy gaps be addressed?</li> <li>• Many -if not all- of these threats have developed cyber operations as an efficient method to carry out their plans, also as a way to harvest approval, recruits, and build narratives. What would you recommend to address their cyber actions?</li> <li>• What is the influence of the freeports in the looting of cultural heritage?</li> <li>• Is it plausible to regulate freeports under the light of mitigating cultural heritage looting?</li> <li>• What is the role of cryptocurrency?</li> <li>• What about NFTs?</li> </ul>

<p><b>4. Strategic drivers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What is in your expert opinion, the hierarchy of drivers: profit, identity, or power (understanding this last one as ability to control human collectives)? Which one serves which?</li> <li>● Or, is there any larger driver(s) mobilizing those interests?</li> <li>● What are the motivations of groups, and sub-sects of groups, to destroy cultural heritage? Do they vary over time? What influences those motivations?</li> <li>● Is building a narrative a necessary step or is it an outcome of attacking cultural heritage?</li> <li>● Are those operations (looting, destroying, replacing, trafficking) connected by default or are those independent?</li> <li>● What role - if any - does the traffic and looting of CH fulfill in a context of narrative developments?</li> <li>● Would it play any role in Identity creation? What about cultural replacement?</li> <li>● How much of opportunism (whether derived from Covid and/or from cyberspace creating “low-hanging-fruits”, or any other prompter you could mention) is present within these threats? If we could see it as a cake and say a quarter is opportunism and the rest is not, how would you slice that cake?</li> <li>● Is the increase of freeports driven by the most pressing financial crimes, the proliferation of tax brackets, and/or the intensification of cyber operations affecting cultural heritage?</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Online actions and operations linked to the looting, destruction, and replacement</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How are the online venues used to pursue looting, destruction, and replacement of cultural heritage?</li> <li>● How does online life prompted by Covid impacted the patterns of looting, destruction, replacement of cultural heritage?</li> <li>● Are there examples we could find online?</li> <li>● How do operations online help the perpetrators to build identity?</li> <li>● How do operations online help the perpetrators to build a narrative?</li> </ul>

Thank you very much for your participation and insights.

## Focus group questions – April 12, 2024 03:00 PM Brussels

1. Our research has identified as highly relevant the role of emerging technologies (i.e., AI, access to Internet, NFTs, crypto-currency), whether in the looting and traffic, the destruction and replacement, or the protection and preservation of cultural heritage. The lag between technology and regulation challenges the counter of demand and fosters new threats. In your perspective and experience, are there grassroots actions that could enable the best use or provide ways to hamper the risks that these technologies pose to cultural heritage. What considerations would play a major role in this regard?
2. What are some of the strategies the international community could adopt to deter nations that are involved - or somewhat complicit in the trafficking of antiquities - to stop this activity? What strategies could be adopted to protect intangible cultural heritage - like memory and religion - from being ruthlessly persecuted by destructive groups and governments?
3. Scholars have said that one of the reasons behind the continued trade of illegal antiquities is that museums and collectors are still purchasing them. Policies are also reactive and there are no steps to prosecute offenders. Why is the UN moving so slowly to address this issue when lives and livelihoods of entire populations across the world are at stake? What proactive steps are needed to protect communities and punish countries and leaders complicit in this trade? Where do you see this problem being in the next 10-20 years?

## **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS**

### **Title of project**

Contemporary Patterns of Threats Targeting Cultural Heritage.

### **Invitation Paragraph**

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project. Before deciding whether you want to participate, you need to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

### **What is the purpose of the project?**

The purpose of the project is to understand this phenomenon better. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. First, approach how some countries deal with major dilemmas in the protection of cultural heritage vis-à-vis acts of terrorism.
2. Second, deepen the understanding on the current tactics and practices to protect the three types of Cultural Heritage: architecture, movable, and intangible, against terrorism and organized crime

ITSS Verona is conducting this research by invitation of the United Nations Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate. This organization will receive an analytical report aggregating findings only, raw data and identifiers will not be part of the deliverable.

### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You are being invited to participate in this project because of your expertise on the matter, your perspective will enlighten our analysis with meaningful information.

### **What will happen if I take part?**

If you choose to take part in the project you will be asked open-ended reflective qualitative questions in one (1) semi-structured In-Depth Interview. One example of question is:

“What do you consider are the largest challenges for policy and lawmakers deriving from arising patterns in terrorism that targets cultural heritage of any sort?”

Participation will take place for about 1.5 hrs and will be recorded in video, only the interviewer, the Project lead will have access to the raw video.

As part of participation you will be asked to provide an expert opinion based on your professional involvement with cultural heritage. It is NOT expected for you to disclose any personal or sensitive information about yourself or anybody else.

As stated above, recording in video or audio will depend on your preference.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation is completely voluntary. You should only take part if you want to and choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. Once you have read the information sheet, please contact us if you have any questions that will help you make a decision about taking part. If you decide to take part we will ask you to sign a consent form and you will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

### **What are the possible risks of taking part?**

There is no physical or psychological personal risk, discomfort, or inconvenience for you to participate in the study, neither feelings of distress after participation. To assure your confidentiality and anonymity, I will only record your name in the consent form and the invite email. Any personal identifier will be excluded from the report and verbatims. You will be referred with “an expert respondent” staff from “Your Organization or Your Country.” In the case that you work for yourself, you will be referred by the generic noun of your role (“an independent journalist/analyst/consultant/similar from OrganizationX, or CountryX”). Your organization’s name can be excluded if you prefer so.

Only potential risk relates to the possibility of directly attributable quotes being misconstrued by a reader of the outcomes of this research, that we will mitigate by quoting either organizationally or using generic noun or your role as stated above, avoiding any specifics.

In the case that you prefer to be referred by your actual name and position in the organization, or role as stated above, please email [Julia@itssverona.it](mailto:Julia@itssverona.it) stating said preference.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There are no benefits, rewards, or advantages from participating, aside from helping to expand the body of knowledge and raising matters to academic and policymaking attention.

### **Data handling and confidentiality**

Your data will be processed under the terms of Italian D. Legs 196/2003 and European data protection law GDPR.

- To assure anonymity and confidentiality: Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym “Expert Respondent Country-Number”. The only documents that will contain your real name, phone, and email are the consent form and the invite letter. These documents will be strictly guarded in a digital folder PASSWORD PROTECTED and accessible to me. My supervisor Julia Hodgins and our president Michele Groppi will have access upon request for a year according to the research ethical standards in Europe. In such case, these will be sent via email in a password protected way from my home computer to him, and not requested unless ethical scrutiny mandated.
- A hard copy of the email and the signed consent form will be stored under key at my home.

- You will have the original signed consent document in hard and digital copies, we suggest you delete the digital copy and store the hard one at your discretion in a safe place that only you have access.
- Raw data from this project will NOT be shared with any party that is not mentioned above (myself, Ms Hodgins, and Dr Groppi). ITSS Verona abides to the highest standards available for data transfer, storage, retention, and destruction, in compliance to the Italian D. Legs 196/2003 and EU's data protection law GDPR. If you have any concern or question please contact the project lead and Deputy of Research Julia Hodgins at [julia@itssverona.it](mailto:julia@itssverona.it) our President Dr Michele Groppi at [president@itssverona.it](mailto:president@itssverona.it) at your discretion.

### **Data Protection Statement**

If you would like more information about how your data will be processed under the terms of Europe and Italy data protection laws please visit the links below:

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection/data-protection-eu\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection/data-protection-eu_en),  
<https://www.garanteprivacy.it/web/garante-privacy-en>, and  
<https://www.garanteprivacy.it/web/guest/home/docweb/-/docweb-display/docweb/9042678>

### **What if I change my mind about taking part?**

You are free withdraw at any point of the project, without having to give a reason. Withdrawing from the project will not affect you in any way. You are able to withdraw your data from the project up until April 30, 2024 at noon (1200 hours CET), after which withdrawal from the study will no longer be possible due to the data being committed to the final report. If you choose to withdraw from the project we will not retain the information you have given thus far.

### **How is the project being funded?**

This project is self-funded by ITSS a non-profit and volunteer-based apolitical organization.

### **What will happen to the results of the project?**

The results of the project will be summarised in a brief report that will be analyzed as part of ITSS Verona insights, contrasting to relevant literature. The final draft will likely undergo editions and modifications to be suitable for publication, either in our website, our magazine, and at a conference held with the UN-CTED, always in an aggregate form. All data and personal identifiers will remain anonymised following your preferences as explained above. If you prefer to not let the name of your organization be mentioned in the report, I will identify any verbatim quotation by your selected option (role generic noun), as stated paragraphs above. In the consent form, field number 7, I will ask you to select between the options below:

- I agree to have the name of my organization publicly available,
- I do not agree to have the name of my organization publicly available, or
- I would like to discuss to have the name of my organization publicly available when ITSS Verona has a time and a specific outlet, please contact me then.

I commit to reach out to you and your organization with a copy of the published research. Kindly, if you change your contact signs (email, phone, postal address) let me know.

The dataset collected and anonymised with pseudonym will NOT be made available without your consent at any point. If anyone wishes to review it will be subjected to rigorous scrutiny from ITSS Verona, demanding the highest levels of data protection, all which will be shared with you before your consent is requested.

### **Who should I contact for further information?**

If you have any questions or require more information about this project, please contact my supervisor using the following contact details:

Interviewer : Full name, [Email](#)  
Project lead : Julia Hodgins, [julia@itssverona.it](mailto:julia@itssverona.it), 1-604-3023308  
ITSS President : Michele Groppi, [president@itssverona.it](mailto:president@itssverona.it), 39-333-446-2787

### **What if I have further questions, or if something goes wrong?**

If this project has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the project you can contact:

Project lead : Julia Hodgins, [julia@itssverona.it](mailto:julia@itssverona.it), 1-604-3023308  
ITSS President : Michele Groppi, [president@itssverona.it](mailto:president@itssverona.it), 39-333-446-2787

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.**

# CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH PROJECTS

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research

<b>Title of project:</b> "Contemporary Patterns of Threats Targeting Cultural Heritage."	
<b>Version:</b> 001-2022 – January 2, 2024	
	Check or initials
1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated <b>01/02/2024</b> for the above project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered to my satisfaction.	
2. I consent voluntarily and understanding that there is no reward or advantage for being a participant in this project. Also, I understand that I can refuse to take part and that I can withdraw from the project at any time, without having to give a reason, up until <b>April 30, 2024</b> (1200 hours CET).	
3. I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me in the Information Sheet. I understand that such information will be handled under the terms of data protection laws D. Legs 196/2003 in vigor across Italy, and GDPR in Europe.	
4. I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from ITSS Verona, for monitoring and audit purposes only.	
5. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and it will not be possible to identify me in any research outputs, should I request so.	
6. I agree to be anonymized with a pseudonym in any research outputs, as explained in the Information Sheet.	
7. I agree to have the name of my organization if any part when the final report is to be released in events, media outlets or publications.	
I do not agree to have the name of my organization publicly available when and if final report is to be published	
I would like to discuss to have the name of my organization publicly available when ITSS Verona has a time and a specific outlet for publication, please contact me then	
8. I confirm awareness that the dataset collected and anonymized with pseudonym will NOT be made available without my consent at any point. That if anyone wishes to review it, the request will be subjected to rigorous scrutiny from ITSS Verona founder members, demanding the highest levels of data protection in a signed agreement, all which will be shared with me before any consent is requested.	
9. I agree that the researcher/research team may access my consent form and collected data for the purposes of this research project ONLY, up until a year after the date of the interview.	
10. I consent to my participation in the research being audio recorded, accessible only to researcher, supervisor, and authorized staff from ITSS Verona, up until a year after the date of the interview.	

11. I consent to my participation in the research being video recorded accessible only to researcher, supervisor, and authorized staff from ITSS Verona, up until a year after the date of the interview.	
12. I wish to receive a copy of the final report.	
13. I agree to be re-contacted in the future by ITSS Verona researchers regarding this research project	
14. I agree that the researcher may retain my contact details so that I may be contacted in the future by ITSS Verona researchers or the researcher of this project who would like to invite me to participate in future studies of a similar nature.	

\_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Participant**                      **Date**                      **Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_

**ITSS Analyst**                      **Date**                      **Signature**