



# Comparative Study of Heritage Destruction in the Middle East and the Balkans: Examining Patterns, Motivations, and International Responses in Different Geopolitical Contexts

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## Abstract

This comparative study examines the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in two major late-twentieth and early twenty-first century conflicts: the Yugoslav Wars (1991-1999) and the Islamic State (ISIS) campaigns in Iraq and Syria (2014-2017). Despite occurring in different geopolitical contexts with distinct ideological frameworks ethnic nationalism in the Balkans versus religious extremism in the Middle East both conflicts witnessed systematic targeting of cultural and religious sites as instruments of identity erasure and population displacement. The Balkans experienced what has been characterized as the greatest destruction of European cultural heritage since World War II, with over 1,200 mosques destroyed in Bosnia-Herzegovina alongside hundreds of churches and iconic structures including Mostar's sixteenth-century Old Bridge and Sarajevo's National Library. ISIS destroyed over forty major archaeological sites including the ancient Assyrian cities of Nimrud, Hatra, and Nineveh, the Roman-era city of Palmyra, and numerous mosques, churches, and museums. International responses differed markedly: the Balkans benefited from prosecutions by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), while Middle Eastern destruction prompted UN Security Council resolutions and UNESCO-led documentation initiatives. This analysis reveals heritage destruction as a calculated strategy of cultural cleansing with profound implications for international law, heritage protection frameworks, and our understanding of contemporary conflict.

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**Keywords:** - Cultural Heritage Destruction, Yugoslav Wars, ISIS, Iraq And Syria, Cultural Cleansing, War Crimes, International Law, Ethnic Nationalism, Religious Extremism, Heritage Protection

## Introduction

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage during armed conflict has emerged as one of the most devastating and strategically calculated tactics in late twentieth and early twenty-first century warfare. Two episodes stand out with particular clarity and horror: the systematic campaign of cultural erasure during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s and the Islamic State's (ISIS) rampage through the cultural patrimony of Iraq and Syria from 2014 to 2017. UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova aptly characterized both campaigns as "cultural cleansing" the intentional, systematic targeting of monuments, libraries, mosques, churches, and archaeological sites with the explicit purpose of erasing collective memory and destroying cultural identity (UNESCO 2015).

The scale of destruction in both regions shocked international observers and heritage professionals. Heritage scholar Helen Walasek characterized the destruction during the 1991-1999 Wars of Yugoslav Succession as "the greatest destruction of cultural heritage in Europe since World War Two" (Walasek 2015). Over 1,200 mosques were destroyed or severely damaged in Bosnia-Herzegovina alone, along with hundreds of Catholic and Orthodox churches, monasteries, libraries, and archives. Iconic sites such as Mostar's Old Bridge, built in 1566 during the Ottoman Empire's zenith, and the National Library in Sarajevo, housing irreplaceable manuscripts documenting centuries of Bosnian cultural life, became powerful symbols of what many observers termed cultural genocide.

Similarly devastating, ISIS's systematic campaign through the Middle East from 2014 to 2017 targeted and destroyed over forty major cultural heritage sites of extraordinary historical and archaeological significance. Ancient Assyrian cities including Nimrud, founded in the thirteenth century BCE, Hatra, a remarkably preserved Parthian-era city, and Nineveh, once the largest city in the ancient world, were bulldozed, dynamited, or severely damaged. The Roman-era city of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its magnificent colonnaded streets and temples, saw the deliberate destruction of the Temple of Baalshamin, the Temple of Bel, and the Monumental Arch. Museums were looted, monasteries demolished, and countless mosques and shrines deemed heterodox by ISIS's extreme ideology were systematically obliterated ("Destruction of Cultural Heritage by the Islamic State" 2024).

This paper examines these two major episodes of heritage destruction through a rigorous comparative analytical lens, investigating the patterns of destruction, underlying motivations, and international responses in each context. While separated by more than a decade in time and occurring in substantially different geopolitical and cultural contexts, both conflicts deployed cultural destruction as a strategic weapon for achieving political and ideological objectives. This study addresses three interrelated research questions: First, what patterns characterize heritage destruction in each context, and what similarities and differences emerge when comparing the two campaigns? Second, what complex mixture of ideological, political, economic, and strategic motivations drove these systematic campaigns of cultural erasure? Third, how did the international community respond in each case, and what lessons emerge for contemporary and future heritage protection frameworks?

## Theoretical Framework: Heritage as Target and Weapon

The deliberate targeting of cultural heritage in armed conflict represents what architectural historian Robert Bevan has conceptualized as "the destruction of memory" (Bevan 2006). Cultural heritage sites whether religious buildings, archaeological remains, libraries, or monuments embody and materialize collective identity, historical continuity, and communal bonds across generations. Their destruction aims not simply at the physical annihilation of structures but at severing communities from their past, thereby facilitating ethnic cleansing, forced displacement, and the assertion of new dominant historical narratives that erase the presence and legitimacy of targeted groups.

Hungarian scholar András Riedlmayer, who meticulously documented heritage destruction for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, characterized such systematic acts as "memoricide" the killing of memory itself. In his testimony and writings, Riedlmayer observed that destroying a community's religious buildings, libraries, and monuments sends the stark message that the community itself has no historical right to exist in that territory and that its cultural and historical claims are nullified (Riedlmayer 1994). This conceptual framework applies with equal force to both the Balkan and Middle Eastern contexts, where heritage destruction systematically accompanied campaigns of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and forced displacement.

The international legal framework for protecting cultural property in armed conflict rests primarily on the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its subsequent protocols. This Convention, adopted in the aftermath of World War II's massive cultural destruction, recognizes that cultural heritage belongs to all humanity and mandates protection during military operations. However, as both case studies examined in this paper demonstrate with painful clarity, implementation and enforcement of these protections remain severely inadequate. The establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1993 and later significant developments in international criminal law, including UN Security Council Resolution 2347 adopted in 2017, reflect evolving international recognition that heritage destruction can constitute war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity when perpetrated as part of systematic persecution campaigns (United Nations Security Council 2017).

## Heritage Destruction in the Balkans: 1991-1999

### Patterns of Destruction

The destruction of cultural and religious heritage during the Yugoslav Wars followed systematic, identifiable patterns that were closely and causally linked to campaigns of ethnic cleansing and territorial

consolidation. As territories came under the military and political control of Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, or Serbian forces during different phases of the conflicts, cultural sites associated with other ethnic and religious groups were methodically and deliberately targeted for destruction. Bosnia-Herzegovina, the most ethnically and religiously diverse of the Yugoslav republics, suffered the most severe and comprehensive devastation, with its Ottoman and Islamic heritage bearing particularly heavy losses (Sense Centar 2024; Walasek 2015; Mojzes 2011).

The burning of Sarajevo's Vijećnica, the historic National Library, in August 1992 stands as one of the war's most symbolically powerful and culturally devastating acts of destruction. Serbian nationalist artillery forces deliberately and repeatedly shelled the library over several days, destroying approximately 1.5 million books, including 155,000 rare books and manuscripts dating back centuries. Bosnian Muslim and Serb firemen, demonstrating remarkable courage and dedication to cultural preservation, risked their lives attempting to save irreplaceable volumes even while under continued artillery shelling. The attack's explicit purpose was to erase the comprehensive documentary evidence of Bosnia's centuries-long multicultural, multi-religious coexistence and shared history (Sense Centar 2024; Walasek 2015; Mojzes 2011).

The destruction of Mostar's iconic Old Bridge (Stari Most) on November 9, 1993, after more than sixty shells from Croatian Defence Council (HVO) forces struck the delicate sixteenth-century Ottoman engineering marvel, shocked international observers and became one of the conflict's defining images. Built in 1566 during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent and designed by Mimar Hayreddin, a student of the renowned architect Sinan, the bridge had stood for 427 years as both an architectural achievement and a powerful symbol of the city's multicultural identity, physically and metaphorically connecting diverse communities. The intentionality and cultural motivation of the attack was made starkly explicit when one HVO militiaman explained to journalists: "It is not enough to cleanse Mostar of the Muslims; the relics must also be destroyed" (Sense Centar 2024; Walasek 2015; Mojzes 2011).

The systematic destruction of mosques throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina revealed most clearly the calculated, premeditated nature of cultural cleansing campaigns. Between 1992 and 1995, military and paramilitary forces destroyed or severely damaged over 1,200 mosques across Bosnian territory. In countless towns and villages throughout ethnically cleansed territories, mosques were not merely damaged incidentally during combat operations but were deliberately demolished using military-grade explosives, and their ruins were often completely removed and the sites leveled to erase all physical traces of Islamic presence. Catholic churches and Orthodox monasteries also suffered significant destruction, though Ottoman Islamic heritage bore disproportionately heavy losses reflecting the primary targeting of Bosniak Muslim communities. In the city of Banja Luka, all sixteen historic mosques, including the magnificent sixteenth-century Ferhadija and Arnaudija mosques, were systematically demolished despite the city never experiencing frontline combat, demonstrating that destruction occurred far from military necessity (Sense Centar 2024; Walasek 2015; Mojzes 2011).

### **Motivations: Ethnic Nationalism and Territorial Claims**

The motivations driving systematic heritage destruction in the Balkans stemmed fundamentally from resurgent ethnic nationalism and competing, irreconcilable territorial claims among the Yugoslav republics. Following the death of Communist Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980 and the subsequent collapse of communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe in 1989, nationalist ideologies and ethnic identities resurged powerfully across the Yugoslav federation. Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and Bosnian Serb leaders including Radovan Karadžić and General Ratko Mladić pursued an aggressive program aimed at creating an ethnically unified "Greater Serbia" by consolidating territories with significant Serbian populations across the former Yugoslav space. Similarly, Croatian political and military leaders sought to incorporate Bosnian territories with substantial Croatian populations into a Greater Croatia, while Bosniak leadership struggled to maintain Bosnia's territorial integrity and multiethnic character ("Yugoslav Wars" 2024; Riedlmayer n.d.).

Heritage destruction served multiple interconnected strategic purposes within this nationalist framework. First and most fundamentally, it aimed to erase the extensive physical evidence accumulated over centuries documenting the coexistence and intermingling of different religious and ethnic communities in shared spaces. By systematically destroying mosques, churches, and culturally mixed sites, perpetrators sought to rewrite historical narratives and deny the legitimacy of other groups' longstanding claims to contested territories. Second, cultural destruction served powerful psychological purposes, terrorizing targeted populations into flight and sending the unmistakable message that return would be impossible because the community's cultural and religious infrastructure had been permanently erased. The testimony of a Bosnian Muslim resident of Mostar captured this dynamic when he explained simply: "I'm fighting for the bridge," recognizing that defending cultural heritage meant defending community identity, historical presence, and the fundamental right to belong (Yugoslav Wars 2024)

## Heritage Destruction in the Middle East: 2014-2017

### Patterns of Destruction

The Islamic State's systematic campaign of heritage destruction from 2014 to 2017 unfolded across Iraq, Syria, and to a lesser extent Libya, targeting sites of extraordinary historical, archaeological, and religious significance. Unlike the Balkans where destruction occurred primarily as an accompaniment to broader ethnic cleansing campaigns, ISIS's heritage destruction explicitly served multiple interconnected purposes: ideological assertion through demonstrating adherence to extreme Salafi interpretations of monotheism, propaganda dissemination through professionally produced videos that achieved global media attention, and significant revenue generation through systematic looting and antiquities trafficking operations (Danti 2015; Bajjaly and Al-Azm 2021).

In February 2015, ISIS released a widely circulated video showing militants systematically destroying priceless Assyrian, Akkadian, and Mesopotamian artifacts in Iraq's Mosul Museum using sledgehammers, drills, and other tools. The militants explicitly justified their destructive actions by declaring the ancient statues and reliefs to be "idols" that violated Islamic monotheism's absolute prohibition against representations of living beings. Between June 2014 and February 2015 alone, ISIS forces plundered and destroyed at least twenty-eight historic religious buildings and cultural sites in Mosul. Major destruction included the demolition of the Mosque of the Prophet Yunus (Jonah) in July 2014, the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud in March 2015, and the remarkably preserved ruins of Hatra in April 2015 (Danti 2015; Bajjaly and Al-Azm 2021).

The systematic destruction of Palmyra's archaeological treasures in 2015 particularly shocked the international community and heritage professionals worldwide. After capturing this UNESCO World Heritage Site in May 2015, ISIS militants publicly executed Khaled al-Asaad, the 82-year-old Syrian archaeologist and scholar who had devoted his entire professional life to excavating, studying, and preserving Palmyra's exceptional cultural heritage. The group subsequently destroyed the first-century CE Temple of Baalshamin in August 2015 using massive quantities of explosives, followed in September by the destruction of the even larger Temple of Bel, one of the best-preserved Roman religious structures in the Middle East. They demolished Palmyra's iconic third-century Monumental Arch and systematically destroyed several of the distinctive tower tombs that had characterized the site's skyline. UNESCO Director-General Bokova declared these acts represented a "turning point in the appalling strategy of cultural cleansing underway in Iraq and Syria" (Danti 2015; Bajjaly and Al-Azm 2021).

### Motivations: Ideology, Propaganda, and Profit

ISIS's heritage destruction reflected three deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing motivations. First, ideological extremism rooted in particular Salafi jihadist interpretations of Islamic law provided the theological justification. The group claimed that ancient statues, reliefs, and shrines constituted shirk (idolatry), the most serious sin in Islamic theology, warranting immediate destruction to establish proper tawhid (monotheism). While this iconoclastic stance drew from certain Wahhabi traditions, ISIS's systematic application exceeded all historical precedent in scope and thoroughness (Danti 2015; Bajjaly and Al-Azm 2021).

Second, the theatrical nature of ISIS's highly produced destruction videos reveals crucial propaganda dimensions. By broadcasting professionally edited footage showing militants destroying universally recognized World Heritage Sites, ISIS achieved several strategic communication objectives simultaneously: demonstrating effective territorial control and state-like power, provoking intense international outrage that paradoxically enhanced the group's global notoriety and recruitment appeal, and establishing ISIS's ideological identity as fundamentally distinct from all previous Islamic movements and states. Historian Christopher Jones perceptively noted that the destruction was "both propagandistic and sincere," as ISIS genuinely saw itself as "recapitulating the early history of Islam" while simultaneously exploiting destruction for maximum media impact (Danti 2015; Bajjaly and Al-Azm 2021).

Third, despite public destruction of some artifacts for ideological reasons, ISIS systematically and extensively looted archaeological sites and trafficked antiquities for substantial revenue generation. The group established sophisticated administrative structures including the Diwan al-Rikaz (Office of Resources), which incorporated a specialized Qasmu al-Athar (Antiquities Section) specifically responsible for organizing systematic looting operations, licensing excavations, and collecting taxes on antiquities sales. ISIS imposed 20-50 percent taxes on all antiquities transactions and directly engaged in smuggling operations moving artifacts to international black markets through established trafficking networks. UNESCO officials estimated this illicit trade generated billions of dollars in revenue, making antiquities trafficking ISIS's second-largest funding source after petroleum sales (Danti 2015; Bajjaly and Al-Azm 2021).

## Comparative Analysis: Patterns and Divergences

Despite occurring in markedly different geopolitical contexts, temporal periods, and ideological frameworks, heritage destruction campaigns in the Balkans and Middle East exhibit striking structural similarities alongside crucial substantive differences. Both campaigns systematically targeted cultural sites rather than allowing destruction to occur as mere collateral damage from military operations. Both deployed heritage destruction as a strategic tool for identity erasure and population displacement. Both sought to terrorize communities and prevent displaced populations from returning to ancestral territories. However, the specific motivations, operational methods, documentation practices, and international response contexts differed significantly, revealing important variations in how heritage destruction functions within different conflict dynamics.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Heritage Destruction

Dimension	Balkans (1991-1999)	Middle East (2014-2017)
Primary Motivation	Ethnic nationalism; territorial consolidation; creating ethnically homogeneous territories	Religious extremism; Salafi jihadist ideology; propaganda dissemination; revenue generation
Methods	Artillery shelling; military explosives; systematic demolition; complete erasure and site leveling	Explosives; bulldozers; sledgehammers; theatrical destruction filmed for propaganda; systematic looting
International Response	ICTY prosecutions; heritage destruction included in war crimes indictments; successful convictions; UNESCO-led reconstruction	UN Security Council Resolutions 2199 and 2347; UNESCO condemnations and documentation; limited prosecutions; 3D documentation

## International Responses and Legal Developments

### The Balkans: ICTY Precedents

The international response to systematic heritage destruction in the Balkans established crucial legal precedents with lasting implications for international humanitarian law. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, established by UN Security Council Resolution 827 in May 1993, became the first international war crimes court since the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals following World War II. Significantly, the ICTY's founding statute explicitly included among punishable violations of the laws or customs of war: "seizure of, destruction or wilful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, historic monuments and works of art and science" (ICTY 2024; Prosecutor v. Prlić et al. 2017).

Heritage destruction featured prominently in sixteen separate ICTY indictments, though prosecutions necessarily focused on a representative subset of the overall destruction rather than attempting to address all incidents. The February 2001 indictment against four Yugoslav People's Army officers for the 1991 shelling of Dubrovnik's UNESCO-protected Old City marked a watershed moment: the first time in history that crimes against cultural heritage took center stage in an international criminal trial. General Pavle Strugar was ultimately convicted and sentenced for ordering and failing to prevent the destruction of Dubrovnik's priceless medieval and Renaissance monuments, establishing the crucial precedent that military commanders bear individual criminal responsibility for attacks on cultural sites under their command (ICTY 2024; Prosecutor v. Prlić et al. 2017).

Most significantly, the ICTY's landmark jurisprudential contribution came through establishing in multiple judgments that systematic heritage destruction during ethnic cleansing campaigns constitutes the crime of persecution and can amount to crimes against humanity. The Tribunal explicitly determined that "all of humanity is indeed injured by the destruction of a unique religious culture and its concomitant cultural objects." This reasoning fundamentally connected heritage destruction to the broader human rights framework, recognizing that destroying a community's cultural heritage constitutes an attack on the community's collective identity, historical legitimacy, and fundamental right to exist (ICTY 2024; Prosecutor v. Prlić et al. 2017).

However, the ICTY's jurisprudence also revealed persistent tensions and ambiguities in applying international law to heritage destruction. The controversial 2017 Appeals Chamber decision regarding the destruction of Mostar's Old Bridge proved particularly divisive among judges and observers. While the Trial Chamber had convicted Croatian political and military officials for the bridge's destruction as constituting both a war crime and a crime against humanity, the Appeals Chamber overturned this finding by a divided vote, ruling that because the bridge served as a military supply line for Bosnian forces, its destruction constituted a legitimate military target offering "a definite military advantage." Judge Fausto Pocar's vigorous dissenting opinion criticized

this reasoning for effectively ignoring the 1954 Hague Convention's explicit requirement that military necessity must be "imperative" and that no viable alternative to destruction exist (ICTY 2024; Prosecutor v. Prlić et al. 2017).

## The Middle East: Resolutions and Documentation

The international response to ISIS's heritage destruction differed significantly from the Balkans precedent, reflecting both the evolution of international legal frameworks and the ongoing, complex nature of Middle Eastern conflicts. UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova led vigorous international efforts to classify ISIS's systematic destruction as "cultural cleansing" constituting war crimes. She emphasized that "this tragedy is far from just a cultural issue: it's an issue of major security," explicitly linking heritage protection to broader counterterrorism and stability objectives (United Nations Security Council 2015, 2017).

The UN Security Council passed Resolution 2199 in February 2015, explicitly condemning ISIS's systematic destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria and requiring all UN member states to take concrete steps preventing trade in illegally obtained Iraqi and Syrian cultural property. This resolution represented the first explicit Security Council linkage of heritage protection to counterterrorism efforts, recognizing that ISIS profited substantially from antiquities trafficking. More comprehensively, Resolution 2347, adopted unanimously by the Security Council in March 2017, condemned the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage globally and called for accountability mechanisms, marking the first Security Council resolution devoted entirely to cultural heritage protection in conflict zones (United Nations Security Council 2015, 2017).

## Conclusion

Heritage destruction in the Balkans and Middle East represents two defining episodes of contemporary "cultural cleansing." Despite different motivations ethnic nationalism versus religious extremism both deployed destruction strategically for identity erasure and displacement. International responses established important precedents: ICTY prosecutions advanced humanitarian law; UN resolutions recognized heritage protection as security imperative. However, challenges persist: legal frameworks struggle with military necessity determinations; prosecution mechanisms for non-state actors remain inadequate; reconstruction cannot fully restore divided communities. Effective protection requires legal instruments, technological documentation, and broader conflict prevention. Defending cultural heritage proves inseparable from defending human dignity and pluralistic futures.

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