

UNESCO: PROTECTION OF CULTURAL SITES IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS ESSENTIAL



When it comes to protecting cultural heritage, it is important to engage the local communities in Iraq, Syria and other countries in the Middle East. The recent UNESCO's world heritage committee meeting held at the World Conference Center in Bonn, Germany, was not as festive as before because of the destruction of cultural heritage across the region, specifically the ISIL's demolition campaign in Syria and Iraq.

UNESCO director general Irina Bokova stressed the importance of protecting the intangible cultural heritage of Iraq in her opening address. In connection with this, a special issue of UNESCO's World Heritage publication on Iraq was also released. **Further, new sites were added to the ominous list of UNESCO's world heritage sites in danger during the course of the conference.**

The ancient Parthians' desert city Hatra has now been added to the UNESCO list which already had two cities of Iraq - Ashur, Assyrians' ancient capital, and Samarra, known for the spiral tower. Earlier this year, ISIL attacked Hatra. The attack coincided with the demolition of the ancient Nimrud monuments, including giant winged sphinxes and others. The organization even filmed the demolition of the Mosul Museum antiquities.

Adding Hatra and similar sites to the list may not be actually helpful in curtailing the destructive activities of ISIL. This is because ISIL will focus on Hatra, hitherto known only in academic circles, for propaganda advantages. Military action may not be helpful in stemming the destructive and systematic looting activities of the organization though the bulldozers used by them have been targeted during airstrikes. Therefore, UNESCO will have to explore different ways of reducing the losses.

Engaging local communities for the protection of heritage sites is an important proposition that UNESCO could consider. It is a straightforward strategy; it involves sharing the profits from the tourism activities in the region with the local communities, demonstrating the fact that incentives will be given to them to protect them from acts such as looting, destruction on the basis of ideology and unrestrained commercial development.

With the release of a policy paper in November 2014 and by stressing its importance at the Bonn conference, the cultural body of the United Nations has been spearheading the implementation of this strategy. The Department of Antiquities, Jordan, and the Egyptian Heritage Task Force, at the national level, have been taking action in support of the strategy.

ISIL captured Roman oasis-town Palmyra in eastern Syria in May. The organization has stated that it will not destroy the town, probably because of the apprehension of alienating the local communities in this strategic town. Palmyra's economy is dependent on tourism. Local communities still believe that they would be able to entertain tourists again one day. Therefore, destruction of this ancient site could result in them resenting ISIL.

With the ISIL mining the site around the ancient town, blowing a couple of shrines and smashing Palmyra Museum's plaster antiquity copies (officials had removed the originals ahead of ISIL's capture), the future of the Palmyra town looks bleak. On the other hand, it is also not wise to assume that ISIL will hesitate to alienate Palmyra inhabitants. However, having discarded or exhausted

several strategies, it seems as though community engagement holds the key as far as the future of ancient Middle East sites is concerned.

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