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## Monuments Under Attack: from Protection to Securitisation

Alessandra Russo and Serena Giusti



European University Institute  
**Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies**  
Global Governance Programme

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## **Abstract**

In recent times, terrorist and insurgent groups such as Al-Qaeda affiliates and the Islamic State have turned their violent acts towards cultural heritage. Historical artefacts, monuments, museums and archaeological sites have been attacked and destroyed. This paper seeks to analyse, through a discursive lens, the pathway that characterises the international protection of cultural heritage in crisis-torn scenarios, from politicisation, to criminalisation, and securitisation. We do so by mapping the narrative threads constructed by the main international actors in reaction to the recent attacks to archaeological sites (i.e., Palmyra) and historical artefacts. We seek to offer a tentative explanation of the assumed process of securitisation of cultural heritage.

## **Keywords**

International relations; Institutions and policy-making; European foreign policy.





## **Introduction**

Attacks on cultural heritage are not new. Cultural heritage has always been endangered by wars, conflicts and political violence. Historical artefacts, monuments, museums, archaeological sites and libraries have been destroyed, either as collateral damage in military operations or as deliberate targets of insurgents, criminals and terrorists. In the latter case, the purposes of such destruction range from exploiting the strategic position of historical buildings, to financing further operations by looting and smuggling antiquities, and erasing symbols of collective identities and memories.

The proclamation of the global caliphate by the jihadist militias of the Islamic State (IS), which controls an extensive territory containing several world heritage sites, has opened a new phase in the plunder of such sites. Not only there has been an increase in the number of destructive actions but also film footage of the events has been broadcasted worldwide as part of IS propaganda, triggering different reactions from a number of states as well as regional and international organisations.

Drawing on the construction of security in contemporary international politics as elaborated by the Copenhagen School approach and its further developments, this paper aims to show the increasing “securitisation” of cultural heritage and to explore its implications.

Over the past 50 years, the destruction of cultural heritage has been “criminalised”, especially via a number of legal instruments developed in the framework of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Yet the linkage between cultural heritage and unconventional security threats is a relatively recent phenomenon. This article seeks to shed light on this trend by considering discursive patterns related to threats and attacks on cultural heritage, premised on the assumption that security is a speech act and threats are socially constructed. Securitisation is seen as a process through which non-politicised or politicised issues are brought into the security realm and treated with urgency and extraordinary measures, often bypassing public debate and parliamentary oversight of the decision-making process.

After having briefly sketched the concept of securitisation and reviewed the emergence of an international regime on the protection of cultural heritage, the paper looks at how different actors (“multi-level securitization”, McInnes and Rushton 2013: 123-126) contribute to the construction of a security narrative around the destruction of cultural heritage. Unlike most cases of securitisation, which are processed within states, this phenomenon has been initiated and consolidated within multilateral settings (international and regional organisations). This peculiar genesis impacts on securitisation not only in terms of stakeholders’ material involvement in the process but also in terms of their international legitimacy.

IS’s partial destruction of the monumental ruins of Palmyra, north-east of Damascus, constitutes an example of securitisation in the framework of the internationalised conflict that has escalated from the Syrian civil war. In the case of Palmyra, the discursive escalation has generated a variety of actions and practices. In particular, Russia’s intervention clearly displays the critical implications of a shift from words to actions. Some of the practices that have emerged from that context were unexpected or previously unknown, and possibly question the very concept of securitisation as we know it.

## **Securitisation: a Manifold Concept**

This paper proposes to study the international protection of cultural heritage through the lens of securitisation. This approach is grounded in the writings of the Copenhagen School of security studies, in particular those of Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan. As early as 1980, Barry Buzan responded to the call to expand the concept of security by introducing the idea of “security sectors” (Buzan 1991), which extended the purview of security beyond the traditional conception of military security to

include environmental security, economic security, societal security and political security. The concepts of identity security, cultural security and, more recently, “ontological security” (Mitzen 2006) belong to this body of scholarship. Within this framework, the gamut of securitisable issues can be extended to include the protection of museums, archaeological sites and cultural artefacts.

Several years later, Ole Waever contributed to this wave of critical security studies with his seminal proposition that security is a speech act, that is, an utterance whose performative function and materialities come into being merely through its enunciation. From this perspective, security is inter-subjective (rather than objective), socially (and discursively) constructed, and gradually stabilises over time to the point where it has structural effects (Waever 1995).

The Copenhagen School suggests, on one hand, that multiple referent objects are considered to be under threat and, on the other hand, that securitising moves (such as emergency measures and extraordinary policies) create security issues. In other words, they are not only regulatory processes but also constitutive ones. Securitisation thus implies that non-politicised issues (those debated and treated outside the public space) or politicised issues (which are publicly debated and processed) can be re-framed as security issues by framing them within discourses that recall existential threats to the survival of a collective, i.e. the state. Complementing - and partly criticising - the Copenhagen School, Balzacq (2005) developed a sociological approach to securitisation, emphasising two aspects of the process. The first of these is the need to consider the context in which the process of securitisation unfolds, i.e. the setting in which the speech act is socially, culturally and institutionally embedded. Uttering a speech act *per se* does not change the external social reality: the utterance needs to resonate with its context. Secondly, Balzacq’s line complements the focus on the speech act with a more agentic approach, that is, one that is attentive to the agent level in relation both to the securitising actors (their power position and social identity) and the target audience. Therefore, securitisation rests on speech acts (not only words and texts, but also images and other communicative practices), as well as the activation of securitising actors and audiences (Williams 2003: 524-528).

Such a research agenda involves evaluating when, why and how elites label issues through references to security and when, why and how such a reference to security is acknowledged and legitimated by the domestic constituencies and/or the international community.

Since its emergence, the securitisation approach has triggered a normatively-informed debate that has questioned the positiveness/negativeness of securitisation both as a conceptual and a political tool. Aradau (2004), for example, has argued that securitisation has an intrinsically negative connotation: on the one hand, it institutionalises extraordinary politics and fast-tracking decision-making that endangers governments’ openness and accountability; on the other it produces exclusionary categories of others (us/them; friend/enemy). According to Roe (2012) though, the acceleration of legislative processes does not automatically lead to their relinquishment; furthermore, as emphasized by the sociological “variation” of the securitisation theory, the securitisation process is inter-subjective: accordingly, a role of resistance and contestation may be acknowledged to the securitising audience.

However, Huysmans (2002) also frames the normative dilemma in terms of a constantly needed critical engagement with studying security. Speaking and writing security also implies the invocation of a concept that articulates a specific rationality (Charrett 2009: 14) and the possible promotion of oppressive and discriminatory practices. In other words, being involved in the production of knowledge regarding a security issue, scholars are at risk of reproducing and reinforcing particular subjectivities of fear and order. In doing so, they might become part of the political technology used to manage it (Charrett 2009: 15).

In our attempt to unveil and understand the agendas of the actors involved in the process of securitization, we aim to problematize the process of securitization itself: is it desirable and/or effective when it comes to the international protection of cultural heritage in war-torn scenarios?

While moving from the premises of the Copenhagen School, this paper does not subsume the original understanding of securitisation, that implies assuming that language is constitutive of the social world; the securitising actor is enabled with the power and the authority to make a securitising move; the securitising move represents a specific issue as an existential threat to the survival of a community and leads to the imposition of extraordinary measures to protect that community; the audience accepts the securitising move. This paper, instead, premises upon a series of “relaxed” assumptions to account for a process of securitisation that has been initiated at multiple sites, not only at the state level and often above the national context, speaking to a specialist audience made of international officials, professionals and experts rather than the constituencies of a territorially-bounded political community (Baker-Beall 2016: 35-40).

Against this background, discourse and content analysis have proved useful tools for our inquiry. We adopted a rather conventional approach that points to the identification of keywords and semantic clusters that are likely to be linked to securitising moves - i.e. “survival”, “threat”, “danger” and other cognate items - presented in existential and ultimate terms as points of no return and absolute priorities for urgent action. Accordingly, we collected all items (news, transcripts and other publications) published by the aggregator database LexisNexis between 2011 and 2016 related to “cultural heritage” and corresponding to the above-mentioned keywords and semantic clusters. In other words, we conducted a qualitative contingency analysis of secondary materials.

In carrying out this analysis, we focused on some key actors who performed securitising moves related to the protection of cultural heritage on the international stage. As we explain in the following section, the norm related to international protection of cultural heritage has existed for several decades and has been codified in many international legal instruments and has undergone all the norm lifecycle stages (emergence, cascade, internalisation: Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). We argue, however, that some actors re-framed the existing norm, adding to it a securitarian twist.

Moreover, this paper considers the context and enactment of securitising speech acts as process-tracing techniques in order to determine the social mechanisms that underlie a phenomenon and explain why and when certain securitising moves succeed.

On the other hand, the present study is limited by the recency of the process under investigation, which restricts the ability to identify the reactions of the target audience to these discursive threads. As a result, the next sections do not seek to present an example of successful securitisation. They rather describe the attempt to securitise cultural heritage, identifying possible motivations of the speakers and “facilitating conditions” that may impact on the success of a securitizing move (Stritzel, 2007: 364-365).

## **The International Protection of Cultural Heritage: From Criminalisation to Securitisation**

Normative frameworks on the protection of cultural heritage have been developed over time using different approaches, gradually shifting from cultural nationalism to cultural internationalism (Merryman 1986). The first legal instruments on these issues date to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and featured a nationalistic orientation, that is, they focused on the protection of national cultural heritage from illicit export and trade. A well-known example is the “Editto sulle antichità e belle arti in Roma e nello stato ecclesiastico”, issued by Pope Pius VII in the wake of the Napoleonic raids. The document expressed for the first time a concern for the protection of monuments and historical buildings against potential threats from armed conflict. During that period, the rise of nationalistic fervour across European civil societies paved the way for a politically-motivated appreciation of those cultural artefacts that carried great symbolic power because they represented a common past and a shared history. Consequently, they were often classified as objects under public care. In 1931, the League of Nations organised a Conference on the Protection of World Cultural Heritage, while a half-way position was adopted by

the Council of Europe in the 1954 European Culture Convention. This document represented an advance on purely nationalistic interests, inviting the parties to regard their national cultural heritage as part of the common European heritage. At the same time, the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict can be considered as the embodiment of an internationalist attitude, that interpreted “objects of artistic, archaeological, ethnological or historical interest” as a common good of humanity, independently from their places of origin or present location, property rights or national jurisdiction (Merryman 1986). Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then, the protection of cultural heritage has come to be interpreted as an international concern and has been regulated accordingly.

In 1970, UNESCO adopted a Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which referred to moveable heritage objects. In 1972, the World Heritage Convention set forth cultural heritage as a global public good and decoupled the value of cultural property from its territorial dimension. The attribution of a universal status to cultural heritage, however, is associated with a somewhat “conservative” interpretation of states’ international obligations: The states parties are, ultimately, the actors responsible for the national and international protection and preservation of cultural heritage. They are also expected to provide for documentation and inventorying of the cultural heritage in their territories and to support the conservation of cultural heritage in other states upon request.

An innovative measure that introduced an embryonic element of securitisation was the “List of World Heritage in Danger”. Collateral damage from armed conflict was included among the possible sources of danger and, in urgent cases, the World Heritage Committee was entitled to add new entries to the list at its own discretion. In practice, however, the addition of cultural properties to the list has most commonly occurred at the request of the territorial state. The Committee’s initiatives were developed through consensus-building: No property can be included in the list without the consent of the state concerned. Consequently, states act as the ultimate protectors of their heritage, although they can demand assistance in protecting the heritage within their own national borders.

In parallel to the cultural nationalism/cultural internationalism divide, a further distinction characterises the international legal instruments providing for the criminalisation of offences against cultural property and cultural heritage in times of armed conflict. “General” protection is offered based on traditional humanitarian law (civilian-use approach), whereas, the delivery of “special” protection reflects a cultural-value approach. Whereas the former prioritises the safeguarding of civilians (the cultural property is protected as a means to protect civilians), the latter assumes that there exist historical buildings, monuments and works of art deserving protection “above and beyond their material dimension, precisely because of their cultural value both for the local community and for humanity as a whole” (Frulli 2011: 207).

Counterintuitively, the cultural-value approach, which was originally embodied in the 1954 Hague Convention, has long been eclipsed in favour of the civilian-use approach, which is enshrined in more recent documents such as the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). International cultural heritage regimes have gradually adjusted to the fact that cultural heritage, especially in post-colonial and post-communist contexts, plays an important role in the process of national identity formation and transitional justice. The Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the ICTY Statute and the ICC Statute all posited that attacks against cultural heritage can be considered international crimes and that individuals can be charged with criminal responsibility under international law for serious offences against cultural objects.

In 2001, the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the para-military forces of the Taliban government resulted in a gradual elaboration and opening up of the notions of “crimes against the common heritage of humanity” and “cultural terrorism” to criminalisation. The destruction of the Buddhas was not directly linked to any military operation; it was, rather, “carefully planned,

painstakingly announced to the media all over the world, and cynically documented in all its phases of preparation, bombing and ultimate destruction” (Francioni and Lenzerini 2003: 620). The clear aim was to eliminate the country’s pre-Islamic past and any sign of cultural diversity.

This new momentum eventually led to the adoption of the Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage by the General Conference of UNESCO in October 2003. Although non-binding, the document introduced the idea that destruction of cultural heritage could be considered beyond the conventional framework of armed conflict.

The ‘Bamiyanisation’ attitude has since strengthened. The proliferation of armed Islamic radicals in the MENA region intensified anger at cultural factionalism that targeted not only non-Muslim but also non-Sunni cultural symbols, especially in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mali, Niger, Iraq and Syria. At the same time, international responses to these attacks on cultural heritage shifted from the context of disaster risk management and their construction as offences against monuments and art sites within Statutes and case law of international courts and tribunals to that of new “securitising” moves.

All parties involved in the Syrian conflict have contributed to the damage inflicted on the country’s cultural heritage. For instance, the citadel of Aleppo and the castle of Shirkuh were already occupied by the regular Syrian army in 2011 and 2012, respectively (Guidetti and Perini 2015). However, until 2015, attacks on cultural heritage fell into the domain of international diplomacy, with UNESCO playing a prominent role. The adoption of Resolution 2199 by the UN Security Council in February 2015 represented a new step in condemning the destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria, particularly by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al-Nusra Front (ANF).

In the Resolution 2199, in fact, the Security Council:

15. Condemns the destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria particularly by ISIL and ANF, whether such destruction is incidental or deliberate, including targeted destruction of religious sites and objects;
16. Notes with concern 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;
17. Reaffirms its decision in paragraph 7 of resolution 1483 (2003) and decides that all Member States shall take appropriate steps to prevent the trade in Iraqi and Syrian cultural property and other items of archaeological, historical, cultural, rare scientific, and religious importance illegally removed from Iraq since 6 August 1990 and from Syria since 15 March 2011, including by prohibiting crossborder trade in such items, thereby allowing for their eventual safe return to the Iraqi and Syrian people and calls upon the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Interpol, and other international organizations, as appropriate, to assist in the implementation of this paragraph.

### **The Case of Palmyra: Words, Countermeasures, Hidden Agendas**

The change of institutional setting (UN Security Council) and the explicit association of looted and smuggled cultural artefacts to terrorism financing have contributed to move cultural heritage into the security realm. The process of securitisation has mainly been accelerated by the unprecedented spectacularisation that has accompanied the devastation of temples, statues and relics by IS militias. In May 2015, the world’s media reported the seizure of Palmyra by the Islamic State, followed by acts of plunder and public executions at Palmyra’s theatre.

Similarly to the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas, IS’s attack on Palmyra - one of the most important temple sites of the Roman Eastern provinces and a UNESCO heritage site - can be considered a further turning point in the emergence of a securitarian narrative on the international

protection of cultural heritage. Even though a number of initiatives, meetings and statements predate the destruction of Palmyra, the circulation of images and visual representations of the ruined site has facilitated the diffusion of a discourse of threat, danger and emergency, thus giving way to a process of securitisation (Williams 2003; Möller 2007). Mainstream media, as well as political figures from different institutions and countries, have narrated the destruction of Palmyra as a major attack on cultural diversity. Palmyra embodies the contamination of different architectural styles resulting from the co-existence of civilisations and groups in the same geopolitical expanse over centuries. Since then, several initiatives have followed, that have relied on securitizing discourses to define themselves, gain international acceptability and impact on donor politics. The end-product of Palmyrisation has been that the protection of cultural heritage can be achieved by deploying actual security instruments, that is, also through military means.

In March 2016, troops loyal to Bashar al-Assad, along with allies from Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, supported by Russian air strikes, regained control of Palmyra. The strikes came days after President Vladimir Putin ordered the withdrawal of most Russian forces from Syria. The rescue of Palmyra has ensured considerable returns in terms of reputation to both Syrian President al-Assad and Russian President Putin; on the one hand, it has allowed the Russian-Iranian-Syrian coalition to claim a significant win in the fight against IS and to present themselves as the champions of the new stage of the global war on terror; on the other hand, it has offered the opportunity to the Russian regime to rebrand the country around a topic - the protection of cultural heritage - that cannot create any international blame but prestige and plaudit.

Russia has further exploited the rescue of Palmyra to reinforce the symbolic value of its engagement in Syria. On May 5 (tellingly, a few days before the Victor Day commemorating the “Great Patriotic War”) Russia’s world-renowned Mariinsky Theatre orchestra gave a concert in Palmyra on the stage where IS had executed dozens of people. The concert was also dedicated to the memory of Alexander Prokhorenko, a special-forces soldier who was killed during the Palmyra offensive in March 2016 and later declared a Hero of the Russian Federation by President Putin.

In spite of Russia’s endeavours to present its actions in Palmyra as inspired by a legitimate and genuine concern to preserve a common good of humanity, several controversies arose around it. Not only the further militarisation of the location was criticised; but also the fact of placing Syria’s archaeological sites under the spotlight as strategic and symbolic places to fight for, have allegedly increased their potential as battlefields, as well as their exposure to the IS’s violence<sup>1</sup>.

### **From Bamiyanisation to “Palmyrisation”: International Responses**

Whereas the Resolution 2199 inaugurated a new international narrative on the protection of cultural heritage, then amplified by the events undergone in Palmyra, it is important to underline that the actions undertaken the Security Council have not occurred in a vacuum. Other international and regional organisations have recognised the political meaning of cultural heritage, especially in post-conflict scenarios or contexts where state and non-state actors engage in political and armed violence.

The gradual shift from criminalisation to securitisation of cultural heritage can be traced in evolving patterns of discursive practices, embodied in speeches, statements and declarations delivered by different actors, mainly addressing international audiences. Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO since 2009, can be identified as the leading figure in this development, able to draw other international officials and national elites into the use of recurring sets of words that link the protection of cultural heritage to the semantic constellation of security. In fact, Irina Bokova has introduced a number of lexes into the mainstream discourse around the destruction of cultural heritage in Mali, Iraq and Syria; these include “cultural cleansing” (in particular, the “fight against cultural cleansing”), “war

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<sup>1</sup> Authors’ personal communication with a Syrian expert of archaeology and renovation, June 2017.

crime” (and “crime against civilisation”) and “cultural terrorism”. On several occasions, Bokova has explicitly stated that the destruction of cultural heritage is “a security issue” and has framed it using terms that refer to actual processes of securitisation, such as traits “emergency” and “urgency” of action. The following quotes exemplify this form of discourse:

Protecting heritage is inseparable from protecting populations, because heritage enshrines a people’s values and identities ( “‘Stop the destruction!’ urges UNESCO Director-General”, 2013).

We have to act, we don’t have time to lose [...] because extremists are trying to erase the identity, because they know that if there is no identity, there is no memory, there is no history, and we think this is appalling and this is not acceptable (Niland, , 2014).

This attack is far more than a cultural tragedy – this is also a security issue as it fuels sectarianism, violent extremism and conflict in Iraq. This stands in direct violation to the most recent United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199 that condemns the destruction of cultural heritage and adopts legally-binding measures to counter illicit trafficking of antiquities and cultural objects from Iraq and Syria. This is why I have immediately seized the President of the Security Council to ask him to convene an emergency meeting of the Security Council on the protection of Iraq’s cultural heritage as an integral element for the country’s security (“Director-General requests UN Security Council meeting on destruction of heritage in Mosul”, 2015).

[...] cultural cleansing as a new phenomenon now [...] is emerging as a threat to security of the people, security in the Middle East (“UN General Assembly calls for an immediate halt to ‘wanton’ destruction of Iraq’s cultural heritage”2015).

Never before in recent history have we seen such brutal and systematic destruction of cultural heritage, used as a tactic of war, to intimidate populations, to disseminate hatred. As I have said many times, this is far from being only a cultural tragedy. It is also a security issue. This is a war crime. The destruction of Iraq’s heritage is used as a tactic of war, to terrorize and manipulate populations, to fuel the vicious circle of hatred and vengeance. These are attacks against the very notion of civilized order, against the humanity we share. This calls on us to review the means by which we seek to defeat violent extremism. To this end, over the past months, UNESCO has spared no efforts in seeking to mobilize all partners to join forces. We have convened experts to assess damages, to craft emergency responses, in close cooperation with networks and partners on the ground. We have brought together law enforcement professionals and technical agencies, to curb the illicit trafficking of cultural objects, working with INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, customs services, museums. We are working with armed forces, to share data and information, in line with the provisions of the 1954 Convention (“Address by Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO on the occasion of the Signature ceremony of the Funding Agreement for the project Conservation and management of the World Heritage site of Samarra Archaeological City Phase 1: Great Mosque and Al-Melwiyah Minaret, 2015).

Attacks on culture are war crimes; it is no longer a cultural issue but a security imperative; all of this is part of the same tragedy which I call ‘cultural cleansing’ ( “Culture is the identity card of one’s people’ declares Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to Culture Ministers gathered at EXPO MILAN 2015”, 2015)

Today, we are no longer seeing isolated cases of destruction. We see the deployment of a coherent strategy of what I call cultural cleansing, a strategy that has no respect for other cultures or religious and that seeks to eradicate ethnic and religious communities. Never before in recent history have we seen such brutal and systematic attacks against cultural heritage and diversity, used as a tactic of war, to intimidate populations, to disseminate hatred, to weaken the grounds for peace. [...] The museum of Mosul has been vandalised. Parts of ancient Hatra have been bulldozed. Nimrud has been dynamited. The Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo has become a battlefield. On 4 October, the Arch of Triumph in Palmyra was blown up (“Address by Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO to the Forum for New Diplomacy ‘The Protection of Cultural Heritage in Times of Conflict: Challenges and Threats’”, 2015).

It is worth noting that these terms, initially part of the new international discourse about the protection of cultural heritage introduced by Bokova in the framework of UNESCO’s activity, have been appropriated by other public figures and linked to the activities of other institutions and bodies. For

example, the term “war crime” has also been used by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon (“Secretary-General Outraged by Continued Destruction of Iraqi Cultural Sites, Calls for Swift International Action to Hold Perpetrator Accountable”, 2015)<sup>2</sup> and translated into an actual prosecution by the International Criminal Court, which has opened a case against Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi for the destruction of World Heritage sites in Mali. The ICC’s action has raised concerns that “overstretching” the category of “war crime” might devalue other types of offence such as torture or genocide. At the same time, however, Federica Mogherini (the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission) has explicitly equated Daesh’s mass killings and deliberate destruction of archaeological and cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq to a war crime (“Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the situation in Palmyra”, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

Many national leaders and representatives have also engaged in the process of securitisation of cultural heritage, identifying its destruction as a threat to identity and memory and, therefore, to the ontological security of people affected by conflict. This convergence of principles has informed initiatives that represent slightly different rationales and implications. Germany, for example, jointly drafted with Iraq a resolution that was adopted by the General Assembly on 28 May 2015 (69/281, “Saving the cultural heritage of Iraq”), thus choosing a conventional multilateral arena in which to deliver a message of condemnation and of support for the Iraqi Government in protecting Iraqi heritage. France has changed its approach over time. At first, it committed to supporting the process of reconstruction and safeguarding of Mali’s cultural heritage, in accordance with the wishes of Mali’s authorities (in 2012-2013 at the invitation of the Interim President Dioncounda Traore). Former President François Hollande declared at UNESCO’s 70th General Conference that his country was to introduce a “right to asylum” for endangered works of art in the Middle East. Such a proposal goes well beyond the traditional state-centric approach and Bokova’s proposals to create protected cultural zones *in loco*, around threatened heritage sites to advocate the displacement of Syrian and Iraqi cultural artefacts to Europe (Neuendorf 2015). Italy’s approach has also evolved over time. In September 2015, during the 70th session of the General Assembly, the Italian and Jordanian Ministers of Foreign Affairs presented the initiative “Protecting Cultural Heritage - An Imperative for Humanity”, which was supported by principals from UNESCO, INTERPOL and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as well as ministers from various Member States. A few weeks later, and shortly after the visit to Italy of Syria’s Director-General for Antiquities and Museums, Maamoun Abdulkarim, the Italian government proposed the launch of a UN-led mission of peacekeepers to protect world heritage sites and, in particular, the creation of a force of Blue Helmets to protect culture in crisis areas. It has also made available to UNESCO a task force, including the Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage and civilian experts in the fields of art, archaeology, and restoration. While this initiative involves close collaboration with the international body that is usually in charge of protecting cultural heritage, it introduces a novel element in the form of special units tasked with policing and interposing functions (Foradori 2016).

One of the most remarkable results of this discursive convergence, pointing to the securitisation of endangered cultural heritage, is the emerging liaison between the latter and the doctrine of

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<sup>2</sup> In another example, the Chair of the European Parliament’s committee on culture and education, Silvia Costa, adopted the terms “cultural cleansing”, adding that artistic and archaeological relics are being exploited as “improper weapons” (Komodromos 2015).

<sup>3</sup> A renewed concern for the protection of cultural heritage as a venue for cooperation and source of development was also enshrined in the “EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations” proposed by the European Commission in June 2016. The Strategy has recalled that the EU “has adopted restrictive measures towards Syria and transposed UN sanctions against Daesh/ISIL and Al-Qaida, as well as the UN sanctions regime for Iraq, [including] a ban on illegal trade in cultural and archaeological artefacts; that the Commission is committed to “combatting terrorist finance via illicit trafficking in cultural goods” and to contributing to “international efforts, led by UNESCO, to set up a rapid reaction mechanism for the protection of cultural heritage sites” (European Commission 2016).



“Responsibility to Protect” (R2P). Under R2P: (i) each UN member state is responsible for the protection of its population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity; (ii) the international community is committed to assisting states to exercise this responsibility, including by helping them build capacity to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and by assisting states under stress before crises and conflicts break out; and (iii) the international community is responsible for responding collectively, through the United Nations, where national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In November 2015, an expert meeting was organised by UNESCO “on the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ as applied to the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict”. The experts recommended that consideration be given to the use of tools such as “safe havens” (that is, refuges for movable cultural heritage) and “protected cultural zones” (that is, demilitarised zones for the *in situ* protection of cultural heritage) to operationalise R2P in the context of cultural heritage (UNESCO 2015).

The discursive escalation that has been mapped in this paragraph facilitated the unanimous adoption of the UNSC resolution 2347 (2017) condemning the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, religious sites and artefacts, and the smuggling of cultural property by terrorist groups during armed conflicts, affirming that such attacks might constitute a war crime and must be brought to justice.<sup>4</sup>

### **Looking for Explanations**

A number of factors explain the swift entry of various actors into the field of international protection of cultural heritage. As mentioned above, the destruction of heritage sites is an explicit element of IS’s propaganda strategy, which is based on the spectacularisation and mediatisation of violence not only against human beings but also against material embodiments of their collective identities. Not only have the reported number of attacks against historical sites and artefacts increased in recent times, but these events have also been extensively documented by their perpetrators. While the overwhelming display of violence has had some impact on IS’s recruitment capacity, it has provoked strong reactions from international organisations and states.

On one hand, IS engages in a re-territorialisation of its activity (control of borders and provinces) and, on the other hand, tends towards de-territorialisation by aspiring to a global caliphate. As a result, the destruction of cultural heritage satisfies a double objective: It sanctions control over a particular territory while annihilating transnational, cross-cultural and even global symbols and values represented by cultural heritage.

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<sup>4</sup> On that occasion (24 March 2017) Bokova addressed the public briefing of the Security Council, reiterating that attacks against cultural heritage are “a tactic of war to tear societies over the long term, in a strategy of cultural cleansing. This is why defending cultural heritage is more than a cultural issue, it is a security imperative, inseparable from that of defending human lives”. The Council was also addressed by Yury Fedotov, UNODC Executive Director, and Fabrizio Parrulli, Head of Italy’s Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage. The briefing by Director-General Bokova before the Security Council marked the first time a Director-General of UNESCO has been invited in this capacity. The briefing was held at the initiative of France and Italy and under the Presidency of the United Kingdom. It is worth noting that Italy’s activism in New York was followed-up in Florence, when the first G7 Culture Ministers’ meeting was promoted and hosted (30 March 2017). On that occasion, the “Florence Declaration” was adopted, recognizing the distinctive role of culture as an instrument for dialogue, reconciliation and response to emergency situations. “UN Security Council adopts historic resolution for the protection of heritage”, <http://en.unesco.org/news/security-council-adopts-historic-resolution-protection-heritage>; “#Unite4Heritage: G7 Culture adopts Declaration of Florence; UNESCO’s Bokova praises Italy’s leading role”, <http://www.onuitalia.com/2017/03/30/unite4heritage-g7-culture-adopts-declaration-florence-unescos-bokova-praises-italys-leading-role/>.

In order to explain the progressive securitisation of cultural heritage we need to consider both the material and objective dimension (instruments and modalities of actions) of the threat constituted by IS and the normative factors.

In relation to the former, it is sufficient to point to the increasing attacks by IS on cultural heritage sites and artefacts. Beginning in 2014, IS militias have used bulldozers and explosives to destroy mosques, shrines, churches, and ancient and medieval monuments in Libya, Syria and Iraq. Since July 2015, IS has taken control of a region across the Middle East that includes 20 percent of Iraq's 10,000 cultural heritage sites as determined by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. The rate of destruction has doubled in recent years, with 34 percent of the sites destroyed in 2014 compared to 66 percent demolished in 2015 (Ghorashi 2015). The attacks on artefacts have become more impressive because the endangered sites are well known worldwide and IS has used mass media and propaganda cleverly and effectively.

Moreover, IS commanders have gradually learned how to manage the resources on the territories under their control. First, they identify those items that cannot easily be moved (and are thus suitable for destruction for propaganda purposes) from those items that can be looted as a source of revenue (Donilon 2016). Secondly, they license or tax looters, smugglers and traffickers to demonstrate their institutional capacity, authority and control over local governance.

IS militias do not engage in looting archaeological sites themselves (al-Azm, al-Kuntar and Daniels 2014). Instead, it seems that they give permission to local inhabitants to carry out their own excavations, through licenses issued by IS's Department for Natural Resources, and then levy a tax on any antiquities discovered. By issuing excavation licenses, IS is effectively employing private contractors to search the land under its control for antiquities. Additionally, according to the 2015 report of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) on IS's finances, the terrorist group levies taxes on all cash and goods transiting territory under its control, which would include antiquities (Financial Action Task Force 2015). Through such a system, IS seeks control of territories and of the smuggling networks of "subsistence diggers" that have operated along the border regions since the early phases of the Syrian civil war (Campbell 2013: 121). Before the arrival of IS militias, these networks would have operated autonomously or under the control of powerful local families known to be involved in arms and drug smuggling and to have historical ties to the Syrian regime.

The second possible explanation for the increasing securitisation of cultural heritage draws on the literature on sociological institutionalism to examine normative and legitimacy-related variables that account for changing patterns of interaction at the international level. From this perspective, inter-state cooperation is not only established to counter an objective threat or to gain material advantage, nor does it necessarily proceed from strategic and rational costs-benefit calculations. On the contrary, the advancement of certain norms may be driven by the pursuit of international legitimacy, acknowledgement of leadership, or recognition of an actor's new position or role in the international arena. In particular, the promotion of new discursive patterns and the enactment of securitising moves in formerly non-securitised policy fields might have important implications for international consensus formation, coalition-building and package-deals creation. The concept of "framing" is very helpful for understanding this process:

Framing can be understood broadly as 'a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading, and acting' (Rein and Schön, 1993: 146). While frames have been criticized as shallow efforts to market policies and political ideas (Oliver and Johnston, 2000), they are also powerful tools for shaping the process of consensus building. If the framing of issues can have a significant impact on people's attitudes, their political behavior, and their policy preferences, there are ample reasons to believe that framing can have a strong effect on the formation of policy consensus. How an issue is framed, represented, and discussed can have a powerful effect on the likelihood of reaching agreement among actors who may have very different initial preferences and perspectives (Charnysh, Lloyd and Simmons 2015).

Framing the protection of cultural heritage as a security issue implies a renewed assertion of state prerogatives and authorities (*per se* and in the framework of institutions whose membership is state-based) vis-à-vis transnational threats such as the destruction of cultural artefacts by terrorist militias, as well as states' control over their material (territory) and symbolic (collective identities) resources. This aspect has been particularly evident in the engagement of border-guards, police officials and customs officials in the framework of cultural heritage projects.<sup>5</sup>

In relation to consensus, it is noteworthy that the protection of cultural heritage by security means has partly contributed to hidden tensions and disagreements among different members of the international community - most importantly, members of the UN Security Council – over whether and how to intervene in the hotbeds of North Africa, Sahel and the Middle East to contain and counter extremist armed groups and terrorist militias.

In spite of substantially divergent international political and military alignments, a heterogeneous group of states has come to embrace the securitising discourse about cultural heritage under threat. In March 2014, the conjunction of efforts was epitomised in the joint appeal issued by the UN Secretary-General, the UNESCO Director-General and UN-League of Arab States Joint Special Representative for Syria. Similarly, in March 2015 the UNESCO Director-General addressed the UN Security Council and the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court seeking their support in condemning the ongoing destruction and soliciting international action. On various occasions, a number of different actors have stepped up - the US (Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, House Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as Representatives from both the Republican and the Democratic parties); Russia (extremely visible in the case of Palmyra); and several European and Arab states.<sup>6</sup> The gradual sharing of responsibilities between UNESCO and the UN Security Council has led the latter to approve a series of important resolutions on the matter, and to organise (in April 2015) an important Arria-formula Meeting coordinated by France and Jordan, to which Bokova and the Interpol Secretary General were invited.

Nonetheless, it is pertinent to question the extent to which such a consensus has remained viable and sound over time. In other words, has the transition from words to deeds, from discourse to action, been consensual and shared? The gradual securitisation of cultural heritage has indeed involved elements of criticism and resistance, especially after Russia's intervention in Palmyra. Even before that, a "post-colonial" argument had been raised in relation to the proposed re-location of endangered art pieces from their original sites to "safe zones" in Western museums. Such proposals were seen as the most recent example of imperialistic appropriation of the resources and treasures of the Global South. Replication of monuments that have survived IS attacks has also been put forward as a means of protecting endangered cultural heritage, allowing tourists and visitors to enjoy them far from their native site in more protected locations, presumably in Western countries (Gayle 2015). The director of Getty Museum even suggested restoration of the practice of *partage* that was widespread in the 19th and 20th centuries, when archaeological finds were shared between foreign excavating parties and the

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Danti (director of two archaeology projects in Iraq and advisor to the U.S. State Department on preservation) and Amr Al-Azm (chair of the Syrian Interim Government's Heritage Task Force) advocated tighter border controls between Syria and Turkey. In February 2015, Syria's Cultural Minister, Issam Khalil, called for the international community to pressure Turkey to tighten the countries' shared border; the following day, Turkish troops conducted a raid into Syria to recover a 13th-century Ottoman crypt and evacuate about 40 troops who had been trapped there for months while guarding it (Guensburg 2015).

<sup>6</sup> For example, a meeting was organised in April 2015 in Qatar, with the participation of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, and the governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan and Oman agreed, during a ministerial conference in Cairo in May 2015, to unite their efforts against the trafficking, destruction and looting of cultural heritage (Cairo Declaration). An increasing number of summits, meetings and conferences have been organised in Uzbekistan, Iran, Ukraine, Russia, and China, to name a few, while regional organisations such as ASEAN and SAARC have begun to include the protection of cultural heritage from terrorist attacks on their agendas.

host countries. This practice provided the foundation of the collections in regional national museums, such as those in Baghdad and Kabul, and contributed to antiquity collections in Europe and North America; it also spread the risk of serious damage to antiquities over many locations (Cuno 2015).

These approaches, however, might be seen to imply that non-Western states are not capable of defending their culture, and that the protection of cultural heritage is a Western prerogative. Middle Eastern countries' need for Western intervention to rescue their cultural heritage can be interpreted as a concealed form of Orientalism, possibly leading to new forms of cultural protectorates. In this context, the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and former President of the German Archaeological Institute, Hermann Parzinger, reported that Syrian regime troops were themselves looting Palmyra, remarking that retaking Palmyra was "an important victory for culture ... But this victory has not made Bashar al-Assad and his backers the saviours of cultural heritage" ("Syrian Troops Looting Ancient City Palmyra, Says Archaeologist", 2016). The Syrian regime has reacted by emphasising that re-appropriation of the site is a means of reaffirming legitimate and sovereign control over territories previously occupied by IS militias.

As far as Russia's "liberation" of Palmyra is concerned, the Kremlin is thought to have a hidden agenda beyond that of protecting the archaeological site. Different sources report that Russian troops are constructing a new military base close to the site.<sup>7</sup>

This line of argument is in keeping with critical accounts of humanitarian interventions and the doctrine of R2P. The suspicion is that human security concerns and the need for civilians' protection (in this case, of cultural identity) are being manipulated to achieve military penetration into complex territories.

## **Final Remarks**

The paper has explored the ongoing process of securitisation of cultural heritage that was catalysed by recent IS attacks on significant archaeological sites in the Syrian war-zone.

The representation of cultural heritage in securitarian terms has been gradually propagated by different actors within the international community - organisations, institutions and states with quite different normative orientations and behaviours in relation to other international security issues (for example, humanitarian interventions and the global war on terror). In other words, the protection of endangered cultural heritage has been progressively recognised as a consensual ground for discourse, to such an extent that the deployment of police and military instruments for purposes of cultural heritage protection has been envisaged in addition to traditional mechanisms (workshops, training and coordination frameworks for archaeologists, art historians and museum curators).

Increasing numbers of attacks on cultural heritage, documented by IS militias and widely reported by the international mass media, have favoured the development of securitisation. In this respect, it is worth emphasising that the conceptual anchorage for effective analysis of securitisation involves taking an agentic (actor-focused) approach to investigate why securitising discourses have been conveyed and by whom they have been received.

As the securitisation of cultural heritage is acknowledged across several political fora as a legitimate process and enjoys international normative convergence (thanks also to the action of certain norm entrepreneurs), our sociological institutionalist hypothesis seems to fit the evidence. In

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<sup>7</sup> In May 2016 the Associated Press agency reported rumors about this, citing an "American heritage organization" and a "top Syrian archaeologist" as its sources, as well as satellite images that apparently showed construction (e.g. helicopter landing pad, fences) on the edge of the ancient site. The Russian Ministry of Defence has described this construction as a temporary camp for sappers to clear the site of mines laid by IS, without specifying how long the operation is going to take (ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives 2016). Russia's operations were later counterbalanced by IS's recapture of Palmyra (December 2016). In March 2017, the Syrian Army, backed by the Russian air forces, retook control of the area.

particular, emphasis on the universal symbolic value of monuments and heritage sites and on IS's alleged war against multicultural civilisations has mitigated the critical cleavages that have emerged among global and regional powers in relation to the Syrian war and the power of IS.

Although profound differences have long existed within the UN Security Council on how to intervene in the complex Middle Eastern scenario, the protection of cultural heritage from barbaric acts of "cultural genocide" has paved the way for unexpected interstices of consensus.

The legitimacy enjoyed by the securitisation of cultural heritage at the discursive level has resulted in renewed arguments to justify military intervention and innovative forms of humanitarianism, despite recurrent criticism of doctrines such as R2P. On the other hand, it has made new room for reasserting state prerogatives in the control of territories and borders. The case of Palmyra clearly demonstrates that the securitisation of cultural heritage can concurrently strengthen and weaken sovereignty.

A state's capacity to control or preserve cultural heritage is equated with its capacity to exert its sovereign power. If a state fails to protect its cultural heritage within its borders - because it is either unable or unwilling to do so - the responsibility shifts to the international community, opening up the possibility for external intervention in a sovereign state.

The securitisation of cultural heritage involves both on site destruction and cross-border smuggling and trafficking that feed the criminal market in antiquities. The identification of the latter as a source of finance for terrorism has led to accusations that states such as Turkey and Lebanon are not doing enough to counter the illegal trade in antiquities, implicitly suggesting complicity with terrorists.

The activation of a plethora of actors with contrasting interests and hidden agendas in defence of cultural heritage is very much in line with theories about securitisation. Recent events have given Russia the opportunity to rebrand itself as a defender of cultural heritage and the liberator of Palmyra and, thus, the authentic champion in the war against IS. What has been presented as a remarkable action in defence of monuments, however, could be turned into an opportunity to control (if not occupy) a strategic territory in Syria. Russia's military presence in the site has already alarmed some UNESCO officials as well as Syrian archaeologists. Although the securitisation of cultural heritage is a relatively recent phenomenon, the implications of which are still unfolding, questions about its normative dimension can already be raised.

Linking the protection of cultural heritage to doctrines such as R2P and concepts such as human security may expose the limits of the process of securitisation. Inasmuch as monuments and artefacts embody a significant symbolic value, their destruction *per se* can hardly be perceived as an existential threat, especially in comparison to other threats to which civilians in the same geopolitical region are exposed and to the endangering of international security.

The discursive construction of cultural heritage in securitarian terms has already produced outcomes in the form of security practices and technologies (deployment of military personnel and equipment, establishment of special agencies) that emerge in parallel with securitising discourses and through which the latter are materialised and routinized.

Further avenues of research might focus on how discursive patterns eventually contribute to the creation of securocrats in the field of cultural heritage management, and whether and how these developments could trigger elements of contestation and resistance (including transnationally) similar to those that have emerged in other securitised fields. In that respect, the integration of insights from other schools of critical security studies is to be considered our next research step.

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