**Synopsis**

**Topic #2:** Protection of World Heritage Sites in conflict zones

## I.       Background information

Despite constant efforts to bring peace, armed conflicts still cause a lot of damage to cultural monuments (World Heritage Sites) worldwide. It is important to realize that cultural heritage constitutes a significant part of the national identity and its destruction often causes not only the loss of testimonies of the past, but also leads to decreasing awareness of belonging to certain nationality with its cultural history. Indeed, maintaining and conservation of cultural heritage serves not only to preserve physical evidence, but it also has a social significance.

From the historical perspective, robbing, occupation or demolition of cultural property is a substantial problem in the international and local wars. The typical situation was stealing small cultural symbols as war trophies, occupation of cultural sites and their destruction as a sign of victory. We have not learned much from the past, because even nowadays attacks on historical and religious symbols of the enemy are not exceptional. Such behaviour wants to demonstrate the conquest and colonization of the territory, including its inhabitants.

The example could be the terrorist organization ISIS and other militant groups still expanding throughout the Middle East and other areas of unrest. These groups use their attacks on cultural monuments for media attention. They argue that these monuments must be destroyed because they do not correspond with their religious beliefs.

Even though the endangered cultural monuments are situated in different territories, their historical value requires more attention of international organizations that have more options to protect these monuments.

## II.       UN Involvement

Since this topic concerns the World Heritage Sites (WHS) it is handled by the United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its World Heritage committee. The first important document concerning this topic was the *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed conflict,* known as The Hague Convention 1954. This was created in light of the destruction of the cultural heritage during the Second World War. Acknowledging later conflicts in Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina the second protocol to this convention was established in 1999. UNESCO has been constantly trying to improve the protection of cultural property whist cooperating with other non-governmental organizations (NGO) such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM). ICOM's aim is to eliminate illegal trade of cultural goods as well as being prepared to safeguard the goods of cultural heritage in cases of emergency. This is expressed in the *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* from 1970.

UNESCO adopted The List of World Heritage in Danger, which should internationally inform about bad conditions of the property added to the World Heritage List and tries to encourage

corrective actions. As stated, the "*inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger should not be seen as a sanction, but as the acknowledgement of a condition that calls for safeguarding measures, and as a means of securing resources for that purpose".* While some countries are thankful to receive additional support from the World Heritage Fund, others may view it as dishonour. In some cases it can serve as a rebuke for conscious destruction of World Heritage Sites.

Other precautions are UN's Blue Helmets for Culture that has been recently signed up in Italy, the country with the largest amount of cultural WHS.

### III.    Bloc Position

**European bloc:** It is a priority for the rich culture of European continent to protect their WHS. However, that makes it even more vulnerable as the potential target of a fanatic terrorist organization. Interestingly, conservation of WHS is such an outstanding value for Europe, that the destruction of these Sites in foreign conflicts can lead to a humanitarian intervention for the endangered country.

**American bloc** is also strongly committed to the preservation of WHS, however, not to the extent as the European bloc. It is considered as a fundamental cultural issue that demands international attention.

**Middle Eastern bloc:**  It is the sad truth that the majority of armed conflicts occur in the area of the Middle East. However, they have called for the support of international community many times, both in order to minimalize the conflict and to protect the cultural heritage. They generally do not support the rescue of cultural artefacts through moving them to a foreign country, because they want to hold original objects. It should then become a bigger priority to rescue WHS in the area of the conflict.

The situation requires immediate attention especially in Syria, where a great range of cultural heritage is being destroyed during the civil war. The most recent example is the destruction of Palmyra.

**Rest of the World**: Almost all states are in favour to protect any WHS in danger or decay as they do not want to lose their cultural roots and heritage with historical and social values. Alternatively, the World Historical Sites can be a great financial source from tourism for the countries.

### IV.    Questions to consider
- How can the governments of countries, in which the endangered WHS are located, ensure that their history and culture is preserved?
- Are the peace troopers – Blue Helmets for culture beneficial to the nation?
- Which other UN organ or international NGO should or could take part in financing the protection of WHS?
- Should countries rely on international nongovernmental organizations or rather introduce measures to solve this issue by themselves?
- Which World Heritage Sites should be protected with highest priority, if any?

- Defensive systems that could help WHS in conflict zones.

## V. Possible sources for further research

UNESCO Basic information about Armed Conflict and Heritage
http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/armed-conflict-and-heritage/


Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed conflict 1954
http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13637&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html


World Heritage Centre
http://whc.unesco.org


World Heritage List
http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/


Other
http://en.unesco.org/news/karima-bennoune-cultural-heritage-human-rights-issue
http://www.difesa.it/EN/Primo_Piano/Pagine/blu.aspx
http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/newsletters/23_1/feature.html