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Threats to Destroy Cultural Heritage Harm Us All

Michael A. Di Giovine

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Trump's Twitter intimidation may have been politically expedient bluster. But, it threatened our collective cultural legacy, regional stability, and scientific inquiry.

When United States President Donald **Trump threatened to target Iran's cultural heritage sites**—a “**disproportionate**” response should Iran retaliate against the United States for **killing Major General Qasem Soleimani** in a January 2020 drone strike—the international community was horrified. The Metropolitan Museum of Art **tweeted**, “Our world knows precisely what is gained from protecting cultural sites, and, tragically, what is lost when destruction and chaos prevail.” Blue Shield International, founded in 1996 to protect material culture from armed conflict and looting, **pointed out the legal ramifications**. And the American Anthropological Association joined a coalition of 24 professional societies representing 50,000 scholars in the humanities and social sciences to condemn the threat as “**misguided and short-sighted,**” reminding us that the United States government has partnered with experts to protect these fragile sites in the Middle East for the past several decades.

Even if President Trump's threats were mere bluster, they are myopic and dangerous statements that weaken the moral stature of the United States and could further destabilize the region.



Image description: A brown adobe citadel rising up a hill. Archaeological excavations in the foreground. Arches and crenellated arches and turrets dominate the midground and background.

Caption: The Arg-e Bam is the largest adobe building in the world, located in Bam, Kerman Province, Iran. It is listed by UNESCO as part of the World Heritage Site “Bam and its Cultural Landscape.” Nando Pizzini/Flickr ([CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#))

The value of cultural heritage

Monuments simultaneously embrace two opposing phenomena: durability and vulnerability. They are durable in that they have withstood the test of time, but for precisely the same reason, they are also fragile, vulnerable, and thus in need of protection. This is the “Ozymandias effect,” as I call it after the [eponymous Shelley sonnet](#); heritage simultaneously references humanity’s hopes to transcend our inevitable death by creating things that can outlive us, but which are also [transient](#) and subject to uncontrollable elements. [Earthquakes](#) level monuments of great cultural and natural importance; [climate change and resource mismanagement threaten to submerge many coastal heritage sites](#) as the recent floods in Venice attest; and accidents such as the 2019 fire in Paris’s Notre Dame Cathedral produced a collective gasp of [“horror and disbelief.”](#) Yet, these events are [largely out of immediate human control](#); at best, they are collateral damage from the current unsustainable lifestyle that marks the so-called Anthropocene era in which we now live.

But Trump's tweet threatened a deliberate form of cultural heritage destruction, troublingly resonant of the actions of the Taliban and the Islamic State (ISIS)—enemies the United States (and Iran) has fought against, prosecuted, and decried as irreconcilable with universal human values.

We don't just protect our own heritage, but tend to see these remnants as possessing some sort of "universal value"—a concept articulated in The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) 1972 **World Heritage Convention**, which designates sites as the "heritage of humanity" irrespective of the geographic area in which they are located. The World Heritage Convention was drafted after UNESCO successfully mobilized the international community to protect two threatened cultural sites: the Egyptian **Temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel**, which would have been destroyed during the construction of the Aswan High Dam; and **Venice** after the severe flood of 1966 (**the latest flood nearly surpassed it**). To date, there are over 1,000 World Heritage sites in nearly all 193 countries that are signatories to the Convention (including the United States and Iran).

With its privileged location as a crossroads of civilizations, **Iran boasts 24 World Heritage sites** and 56 more on the Tentative List. As Qaisra Khan, an independent curator of Islamic art in London, explains, "Iran is full of glorious cultural heritage sites; it is part of the landscape, it is part of the culture and it is an inherent part of what makes the society so rich and wonderful." "Iranian civilization is one of the oldest in the world, home at different points in history to people of all the major religions, at times living in peaceful coexistence. The richness of its culture can be seen even today," concurs Ladan Akbarnia, curator of South Asian and Islamic art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Iranian World Heritage sites include the archaeological remains of ancient **Bam** and Persepolis, the Zoroastrian sanctuary of Takht-e Soleyman, the exquisite **Meidan Emam complex in Isfahan**, and an ensemble of Persian gardens spanning from the time of Cyrus the Great to the Islamic era.

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Equally vulnerable are smaller, portable artifacts such as small calligraphic manuscripts that testify to Iran's rich intangible heritage practices. Iran also boasts **nearly 15 inscriptions in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage**, including different forms of religious rituals, music, foodways, and artistic production whose legacies are encapsulated in many of these smaller tangible heritage repositories. The loss of these would also prove a significant loss of knowledge to our global community.

A World Heritage designation does not guarantee economic development, but the prestige often draws the attention of tourists, scholars, and preservationists. According

to the **United Nations World Tourism Organization's recently published statistics**, 2019 saw a four percent increase in tourism to the Middle East, despite ongoing hostilities in the region; this is on par with an overall increase of four percent worldwide. Adel Nikjoo, a researcher at the Institute of Tourism Research in Iran, points out that despite the **devastating effects** of the Trump administration's **sanctions on Iran's economy**, tourism is one sector that has not been significantly impacted. "Although Iran boasts natural attractions, cultural heritage is regarded as the most important driver of tourism in Iran, and both the public and private sectors promote heritage tourism," states Mohamad Sharifi, lecturer at the Art University of Isfahan.

Heritage sites bring more than economic value, however. They also carry great symbolic value, and through tourism can reintegrate countries within the international community. For example, in the last two decades, the promotion of Angkor Wat as a World Heritage site has **shifted perceptions of Cambodia** from a genocide-ravaged country to one of the great civilizations of the world, and draws nearly four million tourists per year. But Iran faces an uphill battle. "When we talk about destination branding, the first step is understanding the country's reputation," says Fabio Carbone, lecturer in international tourism management at Coventry University and special envoy to Iran for the Institute for Peace through Tourism. "Internationally speaking, the reputation of Iran isn't good, because for years the media has promoted Iran as evil. But, there are many other people, including Americans, who have visited the country and informally promote Iran as an amazing place online."



Image description: A large public square lit at night with pink, golden, and turquoise lights. A square pool dominates the foreground, surrounded by two-story arched arcades. The gateway, framed by two tall turquoise minarets, and dome of the Shah Mosque are in the center background. Buildings and lights are reflected in the pool.

Caption: The Meidan Emam public square and Shah Mosque in the center of Isfahan, Iran, at night. Along with Isfahan's Masjed-e Jāme' (the oldest Friday Mosque in Iran), the Meidan Emam complex is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Robert Pennoyer

The destruction of these heritage properties would deal yet another significant economic and symbolic blow to a people who are increasingly being squeezed by sanctions from the current US administration. "The Iranian people are already under great pressure," says Khan. "When I was in Iran, I was particularly struck by the level of dejection within the younger generations, who articulated in perfect English how they saw very little future for themselves. Destroying these sites targets an [already suffering populace](#)." Eliminating cultural heritage would eliminate not only an economic driver, but a means of cultivating a more positive imaginary of the country and fostering intercultural dialogue among tourists.

Legal ramifications

Although [critiques of looting and cultural destruction can be found in antiquity](#), the World Heritage Convention is the culmination of a centuries-long effort by the international community to ensure the protection of heritage sites during times of modern armed conflict—inspired, ironically enough, by President Abraham Lincoln’s [Leiber Code](#) protecting churches and other historic sites from bombing during the US Civil War.

In the twentieth century alone, [four Hague Conventions](#) and associated protocols (1899, 1907, [1954](#), and [1999](#)) progressively linked heritage protection with humanitarian law; looting was also associated through UNESCO’s [1970 Convention Prohibiting the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Cultural Property](#). The [1949 Geneva Convention and subsequent protocols](#) from 1980 and 1996 also forbid the attack on civilians or their heritage sites, and the moral impetus for preservation was reiterated after the 9/11 attacks through UNESCO’s [Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity](#).

Importantly, the [1954 Convention](#) and the [1996 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#) (ICC) criminalized the destruction of monuments outside of “military necessity.” To date, there have been two prosecutions: the UN’s [International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia \(ICTY\) convicted generals for the shelling of Dubrovnik](#), a World Heritage site, during the Balkan War; and in 2016 [Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi](#) of Mali’s Islamist insurgent group Ansar Dine—which deliberately destroyed UNESCO-designated Sufi shrines in Timbuktu—was sentenced to nine years in prison by the ICC.

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Despite these conventions, the twenty-first century has seen an uptick in cultural heritage destruction, beginning with the Taliban’s famous razing of the [Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan](#) shortly before 9/11 and culminating in ISIS’s brazen destruction of Yazidi and [biblical holy sites around Mosul](#), and the ancient [World Heritage site of Palmyra](#) in Syria. Although many understood [Taliban and Ansar Dine’s actions to be motivated by fundamentalist iconoclasm](#), they were deftly co-opting heritage’s valorizing and awareness-raising potential for their own ends. Spokesmen for the Taliban contended the [destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was a public protest against Western governments](#), who offered money to preserve the monuments but imposed harsh economic sanctions upon the Afghan people (much like the current US administration is doing to Iran). Just as the world was mobilized to help save Abu Simbel, anti-Western fundamentalists were mobilized to assist the Taliban’s iconoclasm, donating money, arms, and expertise ([Saudi engineers actually razed](#)

the Buddhas). Utilizing new forms of **social media**, ISIS carried out its rampage to **project a sense of power** that would draw foreign fighters to their cause, and also provide **cover for widespread looting of antiquities**.

The 2017 **United Nations Security Council Resolution 2347** states, “the deliberate destruction of heritage is a war crime; it has become a tactic of war to tear societies over the long term in a strategy of cultural cleansing.” Indeed, the destruction of heritage historically has been associated with other human rights violations (ISIS not only destroyed Yazidi shrines but sold Yazidi women into sexual slavery) and is a vehicle of genocide. As Robert Bevan shows in his book, ***The Destruction of Memory*** (which was turned into an excellent **documentary film** by Tim Slade), the Ottomans in Armenia, Nazis during the Holocaust, and Serbians in Bosnia all destroyed material culture to erase the memory of their victims. Raphael Lemkin, the architect of the United Nations’ **Genocide Convention**, explicitly advocated for a clause protecting cultural heritage, but the United States and other Allied powers demurred. Nevertheless, the United States has been at the forefront of cultural heritage protection, signing the World Heritage Convention, adhering to protocols regulating warfare, and helping local “Monuments Men” track down illicit traffickers.

The unifying power of cultural heritage

“The first consequence of this tragedy was the deterioration of the US image rather than the destruction of Iran’s heritage. If the United States destroys cultural heritage sites, the current and next generations would blame the United States and in fact, it would be a means of the government to unite the people against America,” says Sharifi.

Although Trump succeeded in riling the international community, his comments were also counterproductive politically, undermining the moral stature of the United States by putting us on par with our enemies. “Hearing a statement from an official of a country that hosts the UN headquarters is disappointing and it means that he wants to commit the same crime as the Taliban and ISIS have done,” remarks Abolfazl Siyamiyan, a tourism researcher from Tehran. “I can’t help but think that if it were ever to happen, it would cause a significant joint public outcry, the result of which may not be in anyone’s interests,” says Khan. “We only need to look towards the destruction of sites around the world and the dejection it causes to understand what the Iranians have to lose.”

In a country where anti-government protests are becoming more common—those **last year were the largest in 50 years**—the mere threat of destroying cultural heritage “may lead to the unification of Iranians, regardless of political or religious attitude,” says Siyamiyan. “Destroying cultural and historical sites are not just the destruction of a structure or a building; it means an attack on history, collective identity, the commonalities and distinctions of a *people*—not a nation-state.”

This is the “Ozymandias effect,” as I call it after the eponymous Shelley sonnet; heritage simultaneously references humanity’s hopes to transcend our inevitable death by creating things that can outlive us, but which are also transient and subject to uncontrollable elements.

Pointing out that the people rose against the cleric [Sadegh Khalkhali’s plans to destroy Persepolis](#) after the Revolution, Nikjoo believes Iranians have a deep appreciation for tangible and intangible heritage, but “Trump’s strategies against Iran can only reinforce radicalism and punish reformists who have long been fighting for a freer Iran, leading to the internal destruction of our tangible and intangible cultural heritage.”

As Iranian American anthropologist Jafar Jafari argues, any loss of these sites is a loss for all of us and for future generations, “How misguided are the views of some on heritage of mankind! We all are inhabitants of the same global village often divided by misconception or misinformation. While our collective cultural landmarks are spread widely, they still belong to mankind as a whole.” It is therefore up to all of us in the international community to ensure their protection.

To threaten the destruction of cultural heritage privileges political expediency over security, stability, scientific inquiry, and stewardship of our irreplaceable resources. In the end, it harms all of us.

[Michael A. Di Giovine](#) is associate professor of anthropology at West Chester University of Pennsylvania and director of its Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology. He is convenor of the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) Anthropology of Tourism Interest Group, and served on the AAA’s Task Force on Cultural Heritage. The author of [The Heritage-scape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism](#), Di Giovine has written and spoken widely on cultural heritage preservation and tourism. He keynoted the United Nations World Tourism Organization’s 40th Plenary Meeting in Hamedan, Iran, in November 2018.

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