IHSANTRAIN'25
23-24-25 MAY 2025

UNESCO
study guide

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Agenda Item

Preserving Islamic culture in occupied territories

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Table of Contents

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Letter from the Secretary-General

Welcome to Ihsantrain 2025!

I'm beyond excited to finally say those words. Ihsantrain 2025 is here, and trust me, this is going to be so much more than your average MUN conference.

This year, we're building something special: a space where bold ideas matter, where voices rise (respectfully, of course), and where the energy in each committee room will remind you why you joined MUN in the first place. Whether you're here to debate global policy, challenge perspectives, or just nervously step into your first session ever you belong here.

MUN is where I found my confidence, my people, and a surprising amount of late-night work sessions. I hope Ihsantrain 2025 gives you the same energy. Let this be the weekend you surprise yourself, where you speak up even when you're unsure, and where you find not just fellow delegates but lifelong friends.
So bring your passion, your curiosity, and yes your best fits (we all know the MUN fashion obsession is real). This conference is yours to shape.

On behalf of the entire team, I'm so glad you're here. Get ready to question, to grow, and to have an unforgettable time. And don't forget to balance the scales, bring your best arguments and your best vibes.
See you in committee!

With excitement and a lot of admiration,
Leen Almasri
Secretary-General
Ihsantrain 2025

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Letter of President Chairboard

Dear Delegates of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2025**. On behalf of the Secretariat and the Academic Team, I am honored to serve as your President Chair and look forward to three days of rigorous debate, critical thinking, and meaningful collaboration.

We have prepared a detailed **Study Guide** to assist your preparation and set the foundation for productive sessions. I encourage you to go through it carefully and come ready to engage —both with the content and with your fellow delegates.

For first-time participants, I understand that stepping into committee sessions can feel intimidating. Know that you are not alone, and the dais is here to support and guide you throughout the conference. For returning or experienced delegates, I anticipate strong, well-researched arguments and passionate contributions that will drive the quality of our discussions.

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This conference is not only a space for intellectual challenge but also a celebration of youth leadership, diplomacy, and global awareness. Take this opportunity to sharpen your public speaking, negotiation, and collaboration skills—all while enjoying the unique environment MUN offers.

Finally, while we maintain a high standard of professionalism and decorum, don't forget to enjoy the experience. The friendships you build, the memories you create, and the confidence you develop here will serve you long after the conference ends.

Wishing you all the very best for **IHSANTRAIN'25**. I look forward to meeting each of you and witnessing the exceptional ideas you bring to committee.

Warm regards,

SEGNI HUSSIEN HASSEN BAMIE
President Chair, UNESCO Committee, IHSANTRAIN 25,
bame.amado@gmail.com

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Letter of Deputy Chairboard

Dear Delegates of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),

It is with great enthusiasm that I welcome you to **IHSANTRAIN'25**. It's an honor to serve as your Deputy Chair alongside the other members of this elite chair board carefully handpicked by the brilliant Secretary General.

This year's agenda—Preserving Islamic Cultural Heritage and Values in Occupied Territories Affected by War, Conflict, and Foreign Control—could not be more timely or meaningful. As we explore how conflict disrupts not just lives but entire cultural identities, your challenge will be to think critically and diplomatically about the preservation of heritage, the politics of occupation, and the international responsibility to protect what war often tries to erase. We highly encourage you to dive deep into the historical context, current events, and ethical questions that surround this issue. You will be stepping into the shoes of those who advocate for justice, preservation, and peace in places where these values are constantly under threat.

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Throughout this conference, I'll be your abla helping you through any struggles you might face and making this experience a very smooth and memorable one for all.

P.S. Your Chair Board has your back—we're making this study guide super easy to follow and understand, making it very beginner friendly.

Warm regards,

NOOR ABUGHOUSH
Deputy Chair, UNESCO Committee, IHSANTRAIN 25,
noor.abughoush2007@gmail.com

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Letter of Deputy Chairboard

Dear Delegates of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),

I am pleased to introduce myself as the Academic Assistant for UNESCO at IHSANTRAIN'25, and am honored to be serving alongside my excellent chairboard to make this conference memorable for you all.

Although this year's conference was designed to be beginner-friendly, UNESCO's agenda regarding the preservation of islamic culture in occupied territories has some complex nuances that can be difficult for beginners to deal with when raising motions, writing their resolutions, or even participating in the General Speaker's List(if you don't know what im talking about, you might be cooked). Hence, I'll be taking it upon myself to assist all of you, whether first-timers or experienced delegates, with any procedures, tactics or questions that you have regarding solving our agenda.

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I want to make it clear to you all that there is nothing wrong with asking questions and being inquisitive. If anything, showing your interest in the conference makes a good impression on the chairboard and encourages your peers to participate as well, so feel free to ask as many questions as you like!
All The Best,

JAD ATALLAH
Academic Assistant, UNESCO Committee, IHSANTRAIN 25,
turkijad1234@gmail.com

Introduction to the Committee

WHAT IS UNESCO?

UNESCO, short for The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is dedicated to advancing peace and security by promoting collaboration across nations in education, science, culture, communication, and information. Founded on November 16, 1945, in the wake of World War II, UNESCO's mission was shaped by the desire to prevent future wars and build peace in human consciousness.

UNESCO seeks to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. This is embodied in an international treaty called the <u>Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage</u>, adopted by UNESCO in 1972. What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located.

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Culture and historical sites are most vulnerable during warfare between nations. Situations like these birthed the UN Agency and caused many treaties and resolutions to be passed and called to action with the expectations of protecting heritage, preventing conflict, and supporting site recovery. UNESCO's main concerns relate to contributing to building a culture of peace, eradication of poverty, and sustainable development, all of which are in the scope of this conference's agenda.

RELEVANT DOCUMENTS AND CONVENTIONS
Documents corresponding to cultural preservation:

1. **The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict(1954)**
The 1954 Hague Convention seeks to safeguard cultural property, including architectural monuments, historical sites, archaeological locations, artworks, manuscripts, books, and other items of artistic, historical, or archaeological significance, as well as scientific collections of any kind, irrespective of their origin or ownership.

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The convention acknowledges the vital role cultural heritage plays in shaping the identity and history of societies and emphasizes its protection during armed conflicts and wars.

Further details about the convention

2. **Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property(1970)**

The Convention on the Means of Prohibition and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property is an international treaty that recognizes the importance of interchanging cultural property among nations for scientific, cultural and educational purposes and how that increases the knowledge of the civilization of Man, as well as considering cultural property one of the basic elements of civilization and national culture, aiming to compel all states to protect the cultural property existing within its territory against the dangers of theft, clandestine excavation, and illicit export.

Further details about the convention

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3. UNESCO's World Heritage Convention(1972)

The World Heritage Convention, formally the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, is an international treaty signed on 23 November 1972 with the primary goal to combine the protection and preservation of both cultural and natural heritages. This includes archaeological sites, natural landscapes, monuments, and buildings of cultural importance.

Further details about the convention

4. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage(2003)

The 2003 UNESCO Convention emphasizes protecting intangible cultural heritage, including traditions and knowledge, recognizing its vital role in cultural identity and diversity. In the context of occupied territories during wars, it highlights the importance of safeguarding heritage at risk from conflict and resource scarcity, calling for international cooperation to preserve cultural practices and ensure they survive despite the challenges of war and occupation.

Further details about the convention

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Keywords

Cultural Heritage: Cultural heritage encompasses artifacts, monuments, building groups, sites, and museums that hold diverse values, including symbolic, historical, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological, anthropological, scientific, and social importance.

Occupied Territories: Areas such as the Gaza Strip and the West Bank that have been under Israeli military occupation since the 1967 Six-Day War.

Zionism: The movement for the establishment and support of a Jewish state in the land of Israel, which emerged in the late 19th century. It has been a central ideology in the founding of the State of Israel.

Humanitarian Crisis: A situation in which the essential needs of a population—such as food, water, shelter, and education—are not being met due to conflict, natural disasters, or other emergencies.

Conflict Zones: refers to areas affected by war or any conflict that disrupts essential services such as housing, transportation, communication, sanitation, water, education, and health care.

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Displacement: The forced movement of people from their homes due to conflict, violence, or persecution. Displaced individuals often struggle to access education in new locations.

Fragile State: A country with weak governance, oftentimes vulnerable to conflict and external influences.

A Provisional/Transitional government: a temporary government formed to manage a period of transition, often following state collapse, revolution, civil war, or some combination thereof.

Sect: a group of people with somewhat different religious beliefs (typically regarded as heretical) from those of a larger group to which they belong.

Cohesion: The ability of community or society to stay united and operate peacefully despite having differences.

Insurgency: an active revolt or uprising.

Separatism: the advocacy or practice of separation of a certain group of people from a larger body on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or gender.

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Introduction to Agenda

This committee's agenda addresses the importance of preserving Islamic cultural heritage in general regions, more specifically in occupied territories affected by war and conflict, acknowledging the threat of losing crucial artifacts, whether tangible or intangible, by the consequence of armed confrontations. Although the agenda is broad, the study guide includes specific case studies to show how cultural heritage is affected by armed conflict and how UN bodies respond to these situations. Islamic heritage can be defined by dividing the term into two categories; tangible and intangible.

Tangible heritage refers to architecture such as sacred sites and mosques as well as manuscripts like Quranic scriptures and scientific notations, All of which are most vulnerable to the destruction caused by warfare. Intangible heritage refers to languages, religious, and cultural practices, history, folk stories and bonds between land and its people that if lost, could bring an end to a whole culture.

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Being one of the three major monotheistic religions in the world, Islam is a very important part of history as well as modern civilization, contributing heavily to scientific, geographical, socio-political and economic development. Alongside these aspects, Islam has also developed a rich culture that flowed in different directions and spanned across many regions from the Middle-east and Northern Africa to Central and Southeast Asia, housing nearly 2 billion total Muslims in total around the world. Consequently, territorial conflicts and armed warfare have the likelihood of jeopardizing the identity, sovereignty, and dignity of indigenous Islamic communities.

The main question proposed by the agenda is to see how delegates respond to such crises in regards to protecting the histories and identities of indigenous peoples as well as preserving cultural heritage in war-torn nations or contested territories.

To get further insight into the goal of this committee, you are highly encouraged by the chairboard to watch this youtube video: Link

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Historical Context

Palestine

Before the 20th century: the battle for Jerusalem, otherwise known as the holiest place on Earth, has been going on for millennia(crusades), with each of the three major monotheistic religions; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, having claims and historical, cultural significance to the location itself, not just the holy city. Although the topic has sparked debate, it is documented that the first inhabitants of the land were a Semitic people known as the Canaanites and had resided there for nearly a thousand years, long before any monotheistic religions were formed.

It was not until King Solomon passed away that conflicts began to stir and the place had been in a constant state of war and conquest for centuries. Its longest period of peace had been under Ottoman rule from 1517 until the end of the First World War.

The rise of the British Mandate, Zionism and Nationalism(1917-1948):

In late 1917, British forces occupied Palestine and ruled it under their mandate. At the time of the British occupation in 1917,

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Jews formed less than a tenth of the population of Palestine. Nine-tenths were Arab, both Muslims (80 percent) and Christians (10 percent). The traditions, customs and language of the Arab Palestinians constituted the predominant culture of Palestine.

Zionist leaders worked for support from the British Government, emphasizing the strategic advantage of gaining a new ally that would help Guard the Suez Canal. The British, still seeking support in their war effort, reacted favourably. Accordingly, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour, addressed a letter on 2 November 1917 to the World Zionist Organization. This letter, which came to be known as the Balfour Declaration, stated that the British government was in favor of establishing Palestine as the national home for Jews.

Declaration of Israel's independence and the Nakba:

On May 14th, 1948, Israel declared its independence as British rule ended. Sparked by Israel's declaration of independence, the first Arab-Israeli War begins. Supported by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudanese and Yemeni troops, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, the Arab power invades Israel. The fighting continued until 1949, when Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria signed armistice agreements.

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Following this war, at least seven hundred thousand Palestinian refugees fled their homes in an exodus known to Palestinians as the Nakba(Arabic for "catastrophe"). As a result of the destruction, Haifa, a cosmopolitan center and a home to emerging Palestinian nationalism in the twentieth century, lost some 95 percent of its Palestinian inhabitants in the Nakba. The city fell under military rule, and the remaining Palestinians endured decades of marginalization, and lost a vast amount of cultural artifacts. While Israel had made an effort to assimilate the Palestinians into their community a decade later, the damage was already done.

First Intifada(1987-1993):

Over the next six years during the first uprising against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, roughly 200 Israelis and 1,300 Palestinians were killed. A Palestinian cleric named Sheikh Ahmed Yassin establishes the militant group known as Hamas as an offshoot of the Muslim brotherhood. Hamas endorses jihad as a way to regain territory for the Muslims; The United States designated Hamas as a terrorist organisation in 1997.

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Second Intifada(2000-2005):

Israeli politicians visit the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and the Palestinians view the visit as an effort to change the status quo at the holy site. Demonstrations turn violent and mark the beginning of the next uprising where around four thousand Palestinians and around one thousand Israelis die.

Ongoing conflict between Hamas and Israel(2006-present)

Israel begins a unilateral withdrawal of settlers and military forces from the Gaza Strip, the military remaining in control of Gaza's borders, airspace, and coastline. After Israel's withdrawal, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other smaller militant groups take control and start firing rockets into southern Israel.

Following the attack orchestrated by Hamas on October 7th, 2023, Israel has responded with mass attacks and bombings, decimating Gaza almost entirely and causing the deaths of over 40,000 Palestinians. The world has called for action to stop the active crimes against palestinians committed by Israeli military and has called the terrors clear demonstrations of ethnic cleansing and even genocide.

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Gaza has lost almost all cultural history due to its war-torn state, and places like the West Bank and the annexed East Jerusalem have undergone severe marginalization of the Palestinian people and the exponential erasure of their heritage and culture.

Syria

Before the 20th century: Syria was once a thriving hub of diverse merchant cities. During the Islamic Golden Age (from the eighth to the 13th centuries) the region that is modern-day Syria made notable contributions to the arts and sciences. Its strategic location on the Mediterranean has long drawn interest from, and encouraged meddling by, foreign powers.

French Control(1920-1921):

The San Remo conference puts Syria-Lebanon under a French mandate and Palestine under British control. King Feisal fled abroad ahead of French occupation forces the following month. Syria is divided into three autonomous regions by the French, with separate areas for the Alawis on the coast and the Druze in the south. Lebanon is separated off entirely.

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Uprising(1925-1943)

The nationalist struggle against French rule in Syria led to an uprising and the bombardment of Damascus. Efforts to draft a constitution were blocked by the French High Commissioner, sparking protests. Under growing pressure, France agreed to pursue Syrian independence but retained control over military and economic matters while keeping Lebanon separate.

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During World War II, British and Free French forces occupied Syria, and General de Gaulle pledged to end the mandate. Shukri al-Kuwatli, a prominent nationalist, became Syria's first president, leading the country to full independence three years later.

Founding of the Baath party(1947-1961)
Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar established the Arab Socialist Baath Party, but Syria's civilian government faced instability due to frequent coups. Shukri al-Kuwatli returned to power, advocating for stronger ties with Egypt, which led to the creation of the United Arab Republic under Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Nasser's dissolution of Syrian political parties, including the Baath Party, caused widespread discontent. Frustration with Egyptian dominance culminated in a coup by Syrian army officers, who seized control in Damascus and dissolved the union.

Rise with Assad(1963-1973)
Baathist army officers seized power, with Salah Jadid later overthrowing the civilian Baath leadership in an internal coup, appointing Hafez al-Assad as defense minister.

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During the Six-Day War, Israeli forces captured the Golan Heights and destroyed much of Syria's air force.
Hafez al-Assad eventually ousted President Nur al-Din al-Atasi, imprisoning Salah Jadid. His decision to remove the constitutional requirement for the president to be a Muslim sparked riots, which were swiftly suppressed by the army.

War with Israel(1973-1976):
Syria and Egypt waged war against Israel but failed to reclaim the Golan Heights lost in 1967. President Assad later expressed willingness to make peace with Israel in exchange for a withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories.
During the Lebanese civil war, the Syrian army intervened to maintain the status quo, bolstering its Maronite Christian allies' position of strength.

Uprising in Hama(1980-1984):
Following Iran's Islamic Revolution, Muslim groups sparked uprisings in Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. During the Iran-Iraq War, Syria supported Iran, reflecting its rivalry with Iraq's Baathist regime. Meanwhile, Israel formally annexed the Golan Heights.

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A Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama was brutally suppressed by the Syrian army, resulting in tens of thousands of civilian deaths. Israel's invasion of Lebanon led to clashes with Syrian forces, forcing their withdrawal from several areas, while Israel also targeted the PLO in Beirut. Despite Lebanon and Israel announcing an end to hostilities, Syrian forces remained in Lebanon, and President Assad promoted his brother Rifaat to vice president.

Returning to Lebanon(1987-1999):

President Assad deployed troops to Lebanon again to enforce a ceasefire in Beirut. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Syria joined the US-led coalition, improving its relations with Egypt and the US.
Syria participated in the Middle East peace conference in Madrid but failed to reach an agreement with Israel over the Golan Heights. Assad's son Basil, expected to succeed him, died in a car accident, and his brother Rifaat was dismissed as vice president. Meanwhile, negotiations continue to be made with Israel over the Golan Heights but are indefinitely postponed

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Assad Succession and tensions with the US(2000-2005):
Bashar al-Assad became president after his father's death
and released 600 political prisoners. The Muslim Brotherhood
announced its return to political activity after 20 years in
exile. Under pressure, Syrian troops withdrew from Beirut but
redeployed elsewhere in Lebanon.
Hopes for reform faded as pro-reform activists were detained,
with arrests continuing despite occasional amnesties. US
officials accused Syria of acquiring weapons of mass
destruction and supporting terrorism, leading to economic
sanctions. Tensions escalated after the assassination of
Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri, prompting international pressure
that led to Syria's full withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005.
President Assad sought to improve ties with Turkey during a
landmark visit, but relations later soured following the 2011
uprising.

**Diplomatic Overtures and conflict with Israel(2006-
2010):**
Syria and Iraq restored diplomatic ties after nearly 25 years,
and the European Union reopened dialogue with Syria. High-
profile visits followed, including US House Speaker Nancy
Pelosi and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice meeting
Syrian officials, marking renewed engagement after years of
estrangement.

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Israel struck a suspected nuclear facility in northern Syria, while President Assad's visit to French President Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris signaled the end of Syria's diplomatic isolation following Rafik Hariri's assassination. Syria also established diplomatic relations with Lebanon for the first time since their independence.

A high-level US delegation visited Damascus, reflecting cautious re-engagement, while Syria launched its stock exchange in an effort to liberalize its economy. However, US sanctions were renewed, citing Syria's alleged support for terrorism, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and provision of missiles to Hezbollah.

Nationwide uprising and Civil War(2011-2025):
The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 when protests against President Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime erupted across the country. Initially sparked by calls for democratic reform, the protests were met with brutal repression by Assad's government, leading to widespread violence and the formation of armed opposition groups. What began as a peaceful uprising quickly turned into a full-scale conflict, with multiple factions involved, including Islamist militants, Kurdish forces, and various rebel groups, each backed by different international powers.

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As the war intensified, extremist groups like ISIS took advantage of the chaos, capturing significant territories in Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, the Kurdish forces, with the support of the US, emerged as a crucial player in the fight against ISIS, controlling large swaths of northern Syria. In response, the Assad regime, bolstered by Russian military support and Iranian-backed militias, gradually regained control of key regions, including Aleppo and other urban centers.

Despite Assad's increasing dominance, the war remained complicated by foreign interventions, with the US-led coalition focusing on eliminating ISIS and Turkey launching operations against Kurdish forces. The conflict also caused immense suffering, with millions displaced and Syria's infrastructure decimated. By 2025, Assad's government had reasserted control over most of Syria, but the country remained deeply fractured, with ongoing struggles for political reform, rebuilding efforts, and international calls for accountability.

In Spite of the destruction caused and loss endured, International bodies seem incompetent when responding to issues regarding the reconstruction of Syria's facilities, especially their lost heritage.

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Afghanistan

Before the 20th century, the landlocked terrain of Afghanistan, often described as the "graveyard of empires," has seen the rise and fall of countless civilizations due to its critical position at the crossroads of Central Asia, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent. From early migrations and kingdoms to the conquests of Alexander the Great and the spread of Buddhism, the region was a hub of culture, religion, and trade. With the advent of Islam in the 7th century, Arab, Persian, and Turkic dynasties fought for influence. In the 18th century, the Durrani Empire laid the foundation of modern Afghanistan and through centuries, Afghan resistance to foreign occupation—from the British in the 19th century to the Soviets and Americans later—became a defining feature of its national identity.

Monarchy and Modernization

In the aftermath of World War II, the country slowly headed toward modernization. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, Afghanistan accepted financial aid and technical support from both the United States and the Soviet Union, leading to exacerbating political divisions. In 1973, Zahir Shah's cousin, Mohammed Daoud Khan, overthrew him and declared a republic, ending over two centuries of monarchy.

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Communist Era and Soviet Invasion

Afghanistan descended into political chaos after the 1978 Saur Revolution, when the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power. The regime implemented radical land reforms and aggressively suppressed disputes, leading to widespread revolt. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded to support the struggling communist government, marking the beginning of the decade-long Soviet-Afghan War. Backed by allies, Afghan mujahideen forces fought a brutal revolt. The Soviets withdrew in 1989, but the communist regime held on until 1992.

Civil War and Taliban Rule

With no unifying leadership, Afghanistan separated into zones controlled by rival mujahideen commanders and the country fell into a state of disorder. Infrastructure crumbled, and cultural institutions were looted or destroyed. Historic Islamic heritage in cities like Herat and Ghazni, including ancient mosques, mausoleums, and minarets, was severely damaged during this period. In 1996, the Taliban—a movement rooted in rural Pashtun religious schools and influenced by a rigid interpretation of Islamic fundamentalism—took control of most of Afghanistan. The regime imposed a strict version of Sharia law, enforcing widespread cultural censorship, public punishments, and restrictions on women.

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The Taliban also launched a campaign of iconoclasm: in 2001, they famously destroyed the 1,500-year-old Bamiyan Buddhas, drawing international outrage. Libraries, schools, and historical artifacts deemed "un-Islamic" were censored, closed, or destroyed.

U.S. Invasion and the Islamic Republic

After the September 11 attacks, the U.S. and NATO ousted the Taliban and established a new government in Kabul. Despite billions in aid, reconstruction efforts were hindered by corruption, insecurity, and the Taliban's comeback. In August 2021, the U.S. withdrew, and the Taliban retook Kabul, effectively collapsing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The collapse of this government shocked the international community. Since then, the Taliban have reimposed their strict policies, threatening Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

Uyghur Muslims in China

The Uyghurs are an ethnic group whose origins trace back to the 8th century CE, when they emerged as a nomadic group in what is now Mongolia. After the collapse of the Uyghur Khaganate (744–840 CE), many Uyghurs migrated westward to the Tarim Basin (modern-day Xinjiang), where they established a kingdom. Over time, the Uyghurs converted to several religions.

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By the 10th century, Islam became the dominant religion of the Uyghur people, with many embracing Sunni Islam, while also blending local Sufi traditions into their practice.

Qing Dynasty Rule and Republic of China
In the mid-1700s, the Qing Dynasty of China took over the region and began imposing harsh policies to suppress periodic Uyghur uprisings. Despite several revolts, Qing rule largely prevailed.

Following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, the Uyghurs sought independence, declaring two short-lived East Turkestan Republics. However, both were crushed by Chinese forces or absorbed under Soviet pressure, leaving the Uyghurs without a significant political foothold.

People's Republic of China
In 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) formally incorporated Xinjiang as part of its territory, promising autonomy to the Uyghur people. However, in practice, control over the region was rapidly centralized. During the Cultural Revolution, many Uyghur mosques and religious texts were destroyed, and practicing Islam was severely persecuted.

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Repression, Ethnic Cleansing, and Genocide

In the late 2000s, The Chinese government launched a "People's War on Terror," targeting Uyghur Muslims under the form of counterterrorism.

Since 2017, reports have emerged of mass internment camps in Xinjiang, where up to 1–2 million Uyghurs have been detained, according to the UN and human rights organizations. These camps have been described as "reeducation" facilities, but testimonies and satellite images show evidence of a large-scale operation of forced labor, sterilizations, and the destruction of Uyghur cultural and religious heritage— mosques, shrines, and cemeteries have been destroyed or repurposed.

The Chinese government claims that the camps were closed by 2019 and that they have not infringed on Uyghur rights. However, multiple international investigations, using satellite imagery, individual testimonies, and leaked documents, show that the system of mass detention continues. Uyghurs have been targeted for various reasons, such as attending mosque services, having more than three children, traveling to countries considered sensitive (like Turkey or Afghanistan), or even simply practicing their faith. Many have been branded as "extremists" for their religious practices, despite their only "crime" being their Islamic identity.

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The PRC's actions in Xinjiang have been marked by many as genocide and ethnic cleansing, with mounting evidence of human rights abuses against the Uyghur population.

Kashmir
Independence and Border disputes(1947-1949)
In 1947, British India left the state and divided the country into 2. Majority muslim, Pakistan, and the majority Hindu but secular, India. Among the princely states, some were given the choice to join either country. In most cases, the ruling monarchs followed the will of their people.
However, the state of Jammu & Kashmir was unique. It was right along the borders of pakistan and india, and it was muslim majority with a hindu monarch. The monarch decided to stay neutral and not sign the instrument of accession for either countries.
Fearing they will be part of India, tribal militias invaded J&K. Monarch signs the instrument of accession with India of military support and that marks the first Indo-Pak war over Kashmir. 2 years later, in 1949, the UN brokered a Line of Control(LoC) and divided Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

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Second and Third Indo-Pak Wars (1965 & 1971):

In 1965, the second Indo-Pak war began and thousands died on both sides. The line didn't change nor did the situation evolve. By the USSR intervention, the Tashkent Agreement brokered and that ended the war.

In 1971, another war broke out. This time the focus wasn't Kashmir, it was east Pakistan(yes, Pakistan was originally located in the west of India, then in the east but a small plot of land encircled by India). The war ends with Pakistan's defeat and a new nation, Bangladesh is formed within that same territory and Pakistan loses its eastern half.

Insurgency and Cultural Impact (1987–2003):

In 1987, allegations of electoral fraud in Jammu and Kashmir state elections by India sparked an insurgency against Indian rule. The movement, initially driven by demands for autonomy, increasingly attracted foreign militants, leading to heightened violence. Tensions kept rising from then on with major developments like both nations now becoming nuclear-armed nations, Pakistan introducing new militant groups that fought within India's Kashmir's borders for a pro–Pakistan Kashmir and India deploying up to 500,000 troops that assaulted militants and protestors.

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Kargil Conflict and Its Aftermath (1999):

In 1999, the Kargil War erupted when Pakistani soldiers and militants infiltrated Indian positions in the Kargil district. The conflict resulted in substantial casualties and further strained India-Pakistan relations. The war ended with a ceasefire. From this point onward, major developments were the 2001, and 2008 attacks by Pakistan, the latter derailing peace talks that initiated after 2003, India deploying more troops into Kashmir and shooting at unarmed protesters leaving thousands injured and tensions rising between both nations.

Pulwama Attack and Revocation of Article 370 (2019):

On February 14, 2019, a suicide bombing attack in Pulwama (Indian-administered Kashmir) claimed by the Pakistan-based group killed 40 Indian paramilitary personnel escalating tensions between the two countries. In response, India conducted airstrikes on Balakot, Pakistan

Later that year, on August 5, 2019, the Indian government **revoked Article 370**, a constitutional provision granting autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir. The state was reorganized into two union territories: Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. The move was celebrated in India but condemned in Pakistan and criticized internationally. The region saw a communications blackout, military lockdown, and mass detentions of local leaders and civilians.

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Current Conflict and Militarization (2020–Present):

In mid-2020, violent clashes broke out between Indian and Chinese forces in the Galwan Valley of Ladakh, a region that was part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. This marked the first deadly confrontation between India and China since 1975, with at least 20 Indian soldiers killed. The area remains heavily militarized, and both sides have increased troop presence along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Meanwhile, skirmishes between Indian and Pakistani forces continue along the LoC. The heavy military presence, frequent shutdowns, and restrictions on religious gatherings have raised alarms about the impact on Islamic cultural sites and local communities. Cultural preservation efforts remain difficult amid ongoing conflict and restrictions on movement and assembly.

Iraq
Saddam Hussein's Rise to Power (1979)

Saddam Hussein became the President of Iraq on July 16, 1979, succeeding Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr. Shortly after, he orchestrated a purge within the Ba'ath Party, known as the 1979 Ba'ath Party Purge, eliminating potential rivals and consolidating his authority. This move deepened the rift between Iraq and Syria, both led by different factions of the Ba'ath Party.

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Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988):
On September 22, 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, initiating the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam aimed to capitalize on post-revolutionary chaos in Iran and to assert dominance over the Shatt al-Arab waterway. The conflict lasted eight years, resulting in massive casualties and economic strain for both nations. Iraq employed chemical weapons during the war, leading to international condemnation.

Gulf War (1990–1991):
Facing economic difficulties post-war, Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, accusing it of overproducing oil and slant drilling into Iraq fields. The international community responded with Operation Desert Storm, a U.S.-led coalition that liberated Kuwait by February 28, 1991. The war devastated Iraq's infrastructure and led to severe sanctions.

U.S. Invasion of Iraq (2003):
On March 20, 2003, the U.S. and allied forces invaded Iraq, citing the presence of weapons of mass destruction and alleged ties to terrorism. Saddam's regime collapsed swiftly; he was captured on December 13, 2003, during Operation Red Dawn. He was later tried and executed on December 30, 2006, for crimes against humanity.

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Emergence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (2004–2006):

In the power vacuum post-invasion, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in October 2004. AQI targeted coalition forces and Shia civilians, aiming to incite sectarian conflict. Zarqawi was killed in June 2006, but AQI's tactics had already deeply destabilized Iraq.

Rise of ISIS (2013–2014):

AQI evolved into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and later expanded into Syria, becoming the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS). In June 2014, ISIS captured Mosul and declared a caliphate, controlling vast territories in Iraq and Syria. The group's brutal regime led to widespread atrocities and the destruction of cultural heritage sites.

Decline of ISIS and Ongoing Threats (2015–Present):

International military efforts have significantly reduced ISIS's territorial control. However, the group continues to pose a threat through insurgent activities and has inspired global extremist movements. The conflict has had lasting impacts on Iraq's cultural heritage, with numerous historical sites damaged or destroyed.

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Case Studies

Palestine
Demolition of St. Hilarion Monastery in Gaza(2024)

The St. Hilarion Monastery, dating back to the early 4th century, was a sanctuary dedicated to Hilarion and inspired by St. Anthony, it lasted for many centuries and held an expansive crypt filled with old tombs dating back to the 12th century BC.

A restoration project was launched in 2020 and completed in 2022, but ever since the Hamas-Israel war, all cultural heritage sites have been listed in Danger as well as all projects being halted as a safety measure.

St. Hilarion Monastery was listed in Danger in July 2024 after irreversible damage had already been done by Israel's constant bombardment of Gaza, and no recovery or restoration projects have been planned for the foreseeable future.

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Syria
Ancient city of Nimrud reduced to rubble by ISIS(2014)

The site of Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), near Mosul in what is today northern Iraq, has a long history—the earliest known settlement there dates to the sixth millennium B.C.—but it is most famous as the ninth- and eighth-century B.C. capital of the <u>Assyrian empire</u>. In this period, Nimrud was home to multiple Assyrian palaces and temples, all of which have yielded important discoveries, but the site is best known for sculptures excavated from its Northwest Palace.

When the Islamic State militant group captured parts of Northern Iraq in 2014, it declared war on the ancient city of Nimrud. Though reclaimed by Iraqi forces last November, the ruins have been forever changed, the victim of massive destruction. Special correspondent Marcia Biggs joins two archaeologists to see what's left of the 3,000-year-old city after only two and a half years under ISIS.

The UNESCO office in Iraq has led a rapid assessment mission to the Nimrud archaeological site, located in Nineveh Governorate, Iraq on 14 December 2016.

The objective of the mission was to assess the overall state of conservation of the site, in particular the extent of damage resulting from the deliberate destruction by ISIL/Daesh over the past 2 years. In addition, the mission aimed to identify emergency safeguarding measures that could be taken in order to prevent any further loss.

Iraq
Destruction of al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul (2017)
 The al-Nuri Mosque, built in 1172 CE, is an iconic symbol of Islamic history in Mosul and known for its leaning minaret ("al-Hadba"). It was where ISIS declared its so-called caliphate in 2014.
Conflicts damaged the mosque. In 2017, as Iraqi forces were retaking Mosul, ISIS blew up the mosque, claiming it was targeted by airstrikes (a claim refuted by Iraqi and UN officials).
Its destruction was a major blow to Islamic cultural heritage and UNESCO labeled it a war crime under conventions protecting cultural sites. The site is now undergoing reconstruction under UNESCO's "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" initiative, supported by the UAE and other international partners.

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Kashmir
Damage to Jamia Masjid Srinagar (2016 & 2019)

The Jamia Masjid in Srinagar, one of the most significant Islamic cultural and religious sites in Kashmir (built in 1394 by Sultan Sikandar Shah), has been a focal point of both faith and resistance in the region.
Conflicts damaged the mosque. In 2016, following the killing of Burhan Wani, mass protests erupted. The mosque was shut down for weeks, a rare event in its 600-year history. Again in 2019, after the revocation of Article 370, The Indian government imposed heavy security lockdowns. Jamia Masjid was barricaded, prayers banned, and religious leaders were placed under house arrest.

UNESCO itself hasn't listed the mosque yet, but organizations like INTACH and ICOMOS India have highlighted its architectural and cultural importance. Restrictions like these directly hinder cultural preservation, communal identity, and intangible heritage (Islamic rituals and sermons).

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Afghanistan

The destruction of culturally significant Islamic sites in Afghanistan has been a recurring issue due to prolonged conflict and political instability, particularly under the Taliban regime. One of the most tragic examples of this is the damage done to the Blue Mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif, one of the country's most important Islamic sites. During the years of conflict, the mosque and other religious structures suffered damage due to artillery fire and violent clashes.

The Taliban played a role in the destruction of Islamic sites that they deemed as symbols of Afghan culture that did not align with their strict interpretation of Sharia law. Under their regime, many mosques and shrines were either damaged or destroyed, and the Blue Mosque was no exception. The reason behind this destruction was primarily ideological. The Taliban enforced a version of Islam that rejected pre-Islamic influences and sought to impose uniformity over the country's rich religious diversity.

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Efforts to protect and restore Afghanistan's cultural Islamic sites, including the Blue Mosque, were led by both local and international groups. UNESCO played a critical role in the post-Taliban period in trying to restore some of Afghanistan's Islamic heritage. The Afghan government, with the support of UNESCO, initiated the Afghan National Heritage Protection Program, which focused on preserving religious and cultural sites that had been severely affected by conflict.

While some progress was made in restoring Afghanistan's culturally significant religious sites, many challenges remain. The ongoing political instability and the Taliban's return pose a continued threat to the future of these important religious and cultural landmarks.

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Xinjiang, China

The Uyghur Muslim population in Xinjiang, China, has a long history of cultural and religious practices, reflected in a rich array of mosques, shrines, and historical sites. However, these islamically significant landmarks have been subjected to systematic destruction and repression by the Chinese government for years. Under the guise of counterterrorism and security measures, the government has targeted religious and cultural landmarks across Xinjiang, particularly in areas like Kashgar, Hotan, and Urumqi.

Among the most significant sites affected are the Id Kah Mosque — one of the largest and most important mosques in the region in Kashgar—, Afaq Khoja Tomb, and several shrines and tombs in Hotan. These sites have been demolished, repurposed, or heavily damaged.
By targeting culturally significant religious sites, the government seeks to suppress Uyghur religious and cultural identity, which it views as a potential source of separatism. The destruction is part of China's broader policy of "sinicization," aiming to integrate Uyghur culture into the dominant Han Chinese identity.

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As a result, the destruction of these sites has led to a profound loss for the Uyghur people. The mosques and shrines are not just physical spaces but symbolic centers of Uyghur identity and religious practices. Their loss represents not only a material destruction but a cultural erasure, splitting the Uyghur community's connection from their history, religion, and identity.

International organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Uyghur Human Rights Project have condemned the destruction and documented it using satellite images, testimonies from Uyghur exiles, and leaked Chinese government documents. Despite their efforts, the Chinese government has consistently denied any wrongdoing, claiming the closures of mosques and the demolition of religious sites are part of necessary security measures. International bodies like UNESCO have called for the protection of Uyghur heritage, but efforts have been constrained by China's political and economic power.

The ongoing destruction of these mosques and heritage sites underscores the urgent need for international intervention to protect Uyghur cultural identity.

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Increased pressure from the global community, alongside enhanced documentation and preservation efforts by UNESCO and human rights organizations, is necessary to preserve what remains of Uyghur cultural heritage in Xinjiang.

Challenges to Preserving Heritage

- **War & conflict-** heritage areas challenges preserving both tangible and intangible culture because of military activity that includes airstrikes, displacement, and looting, making it that much harder to operate in those areas to preserve heritage

- **Foreign control-** UNESCO struggles to maintain the preservation and protection of Islamic Cultural Heritage due to the intervention of foreign control in certain areas under conflict.

- **Technological and financial limitations –** UNESCO's technological and financial limitations, such as a lack of digital archives or funding, in conflict zones pose a huge setback to its mission, as certain technology used to preserve and protect heritages cannot be sent to said areas.

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- **Political agendas interfering with cultural preservation-** UNESCO faces challenges in trying to preserve heritage when said heritage has political significance and is being used as part of a monopoly
- **Dilemma of priority for heritage over life-** UNESCO faces challenges trying to work in conflict areas since there are new victims that could've been rescued instead of heritage being protected
- **Corporations across different UN bodies-** UNESCO aims to address earlier mentioned challenges by working with other UN bodies like UNSC to resolve conflict as fast as possible to then preserve the heritage.
- **UNESCO's inactive role in places of urgency-** UNESCO is currently inactive in places that need urgent action and are being erased from the world, like the Uyghurs and Palestinians

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Focus Questions For Debate

- How can we balance state sovereignty with global protection of Islamic sites?

- How can UNESCO collaborate with local communities to preserve heritage?

- Should Technological interventions be implemented and how?

- Where are UNESCO emergency missions necessary, why and how to implement them?

- What measures can UNESCO take to manage multiple Heritage preservation efforts?

- What measures can UNESCO take to restore lost Heritage?

- What actions can UNESCO take to achieve more significant results to preserve heritage?

- What other UN bodies can UNESCO work with to achieve more significant results to preserve heritage?

- How can UNESCO work towards restoring the intangible parts of heritage lost or destroyed by conflict?

- How can UNESCO prevent conflict from damaging cultural heritage?

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