

Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Yemen: 2015 to the present

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Paper Abstract:

Since March 2015, Yemen, a Middle Eastern country located at the southwestern end of the Arabian Peninsula, has suffered a violent conflict. According to the UN, the conflict has induced an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, with large numbers of civilian deaths, and of people injured, internally displaced, and suffering from malnutrition. While Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of GDP, it is one of the richest in cultural heritage.

Since the conflict began, hundreds of archaeological, historical and religious monuments and sites, including four UNESCO World Heritage sites, and many Yemeni museums, have been directly hit, or collaterally damaged in air attacks using aircraft, missiles and bombs by a coalition of Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia. Added to this has been the dynamiting of ancient monuments by extremist Islamist groups, namely important tombs of Muslim saints, as well as damage to heritage sites as a result of ground fighting by local militias and rebel groups, among others. The island of Socotra, known as *the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean*, has preserved a unique ecosystem on our planet, and is also listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. As a result of the consequences of war and annexation, the island's natural heritage is heavily threatened today.

In addition to direct damage to heritage from aerial and ground assaults, a great deal of indirect damage to cultural heritage has also been incurred after eight years of a conflict that has isolated the country and made populations vulnerable to extreme poverty, malnutrition, disease and a lack of access to basic resources, supplies and infrastructure. The lack of funds and supplies to upkeep and protect storage spaces, museum objects, and sites has led to slow deterioration of monuments and materials, while looting of sites has

proliferated with a lack of security, and increasing poverty, feeding the lucrative international market in stolen antiquities. As in Socotra, Yemen's natural and intangible heritage is also at risk.

While Yemen, among other countries at war, awaits a peaceful resolution to a catastrophic situation, many organizations have dedicated funds to protecting and restoring cultural heritage in zones of conflict. Many of these organizations have begun to fund necessary projects to protect and consolidate the at risk or damaged cultural heritage in Yemen, some of them, ironically, with endowments funded by the same countries that were complicit in its destruction. In addition, a Red List has been prepared for Yemen by the International Council of Museums, and Interpol has developed a free application to register and help identify stolen works of art. These are meant to help authorities identify looted objects and cut off supply and demand chains. These major and long-awaited steps against looted antiquities are happening just as many major museums in the western world are choosing or being asked to retribute stolen collections back to their countries of origin, including those stolen from Yemen.