CULTURAL HERITAGE AND VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



From Fiona Rose-Greenland on openDemocracy

war encompasses the old things and places that make us who we are

Cultural heritage and violence in the Middle East.

Theatres of erasure: Syria and Iraq

The violence in Iraq has killed nearly 6,000 civilians since the start of 2014, according to the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq. In Syria, over 100,000 lives have been claimed and some two million persons displaced since the start of the civil war in March 2011.

Media coverage has rightly focused on the human dimension of suffering. With this essay, however, we want to reflect upon another important aspect of the violence: the systematic destruction of cultural sites and objects.

According to reports of the activist Facebook group Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger, all six UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria have been damaged, major museum collections at Homs and Hama have been looted, and dozens of ancient tells have been obliterated by shelling.

In Iraq, recent media stories recount ISIS fighters' use of antiquities to raise revenues. So-called blood antiquities function as cash-cows, fetching high prices from unscrupulous collectors and netting a handsome cut for ISIS.

As devastating as this news is, Syria and Iraq are simply additional chapters in the long-running story wherein conflict is characterised by a two-fold assault on humanity: human bodies themselves as well as the objects and sites that people create and infuse with cultural meaning.

Cultural violence is not a practice exclusive to Islamic groups or areas; rather, it is the nature of all radical ideologies, religious and national alike. They proceed with a predictable agenda: first to paint the world in black and white, and then to erase all shades of cultural practice from non-white to black.

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Cultural violence and genocide: a 20th-century hate story

The destruction of human communities is incomplete without cultural violence. This was the conclusion of lawyer and human rights advocate Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-born jurist who coined the term “genocide” and fought successfully for its recognition by international legal bodies as a crime. In Axis Rule in Occupied Europe (1944), he argued:

By ‘genocide’ we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group…[It signifies] a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves.

(Lemkin 1944: 80)

Among the “essential foundations” of the life of human societies, Lemkin argued, were cultural sites, objects, and practices. …



Historic minaret of the Great Umayyad Mosque destroyed in Aleppo.