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ARTICLE

# Beyond the Rubble: Civil Society Organizations' Emergency Response to Protect Cultural Heritage in Conflict Areas

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## Abstract

The increasing destruction of cultural heritage in conflict zones has exposed the shortcomings of current crisis response frameworks. Traditional, state-led mechanisms have struggled to address the complexities and rapid developments of modern warfare, leading to the emergence of more flexible, decentralized approaches. In this context, civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged as key actors, stepping in to address the shortcomings of national governments and international heritage institutions. This article explores the evolving role of CSOs in emergency cultural heritage protection, focusing on Heritage for Peace (H4P) and its interventions in Syria, Sudan, and Gaza. Through case study analysis, this research examines the logistical, ethical, and operational challenges faced by H4P, and presents a model of its strategic interventions in emergency contexts. This model illustrates the opportunities and constraints inherent in crisis environments, including mobility and safety risks, alongside structural challenges in cultural heritage protection, such as limited funding and short-term project cycles that hinder sustainability. The research advocates placing the local population at the center of emergency strategies, strengthening local partnerships, implementing proactive preparedness measures, and strengthening international cooperation mechanisms.

## Resumen

La creciente destrucción del patrimonio cultural en zonas de conflicto ha expuesto las deficiencias de los marcos actuales de respuesta en situaciones de crisis. Los mecanismos tradicionales liderados por el Estado han tenido dificultades para abordar las complejidades y los rápidos cambios de la guerra moderna, lo que ha dado lugar a enfoques más flexibles y descentralizados. En este contexto, las organizaciones de la sociedad civil (OSC) han surgido como actores clave, cubriendo las deficiencias de los gobiernos nacionales y las instituciones internacionales de patrimonio. Este artículo explora el papel cambiante de las OSC en la protección de patrimonio cultural en situaciones de emergencia, centrándose en Heritage for Peace (H4P) y sus intervenciones en Siria, Sudán y Gaza. A través del análisis de estudios de caso, esta investigación examina los desafíos logísticos, éticos y operativos que enfrenta H4P y presenta un modelo de sus intervenciones estratégicas en contextos de emergencia. Este modelo ilustra las oportunidades y limitaciones inherentes a los entornos de crisis, como los riesgos de movilidad y seguridad, junto con desafíos estructurales en la protección del patrimonio cultural, tales como la falta de financiación y los ciclos de proyectos a corto plazo que dificultan su sostenibilidad en el largo plazo. La investigación aboga por colocar a la población local en el centro de las estrategias de emergencia, fortalecer las alianzas locales, implementar medidas de preparación proactivas y reforzar los mecanismos de cooperación internacional.

**Keywords:** conflict; CSOs; cultural heritage; emergency response; local communities

**Palabras clave:** conflicto; OSC; patrimonio cultural; respuesta de emergencia; comunidades locales

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In recent years, the increasing destruction of cultural heritage in conflict zones has called for a fundamental shift in how crisis responses to heritage protection are conceived and implemented. The limitations of traditional, state-led mechanisms have given rise to a new landscape of heritage protection, one that is more dynamic and decentralized and that adapts to the volatile realities of armed conflict (Christensen 2023, 2024; Meskell and Isakhan 2024). At the heart of this evolving landscape are civil society actors whose ability to operate across borders, collaborate with local communities, and respond rapidly in crises has made them indispensable for safeguarding cultural heritage. Over the past decade, civil society organizations (CSOs) and, more generally, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) have become essential players in mobilizing resources and expertise to protect heritage under threat, filling the gaps left by national governments and international heritage institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which often struggle to respond swiftly and effectively to the complexities of modern warfare (Meskell and Isakhan 2024:36). A key challenge arises from the increasing role of nonstate actors, such as armed groups, militias, and terrorist organizations, that target cultural heritage as a tactic of warfare, to undermine the cultural identity, history, and resilience of affected communities (McCafferty 2023:9). This shift exposes major limitations in the international legal framework for heritage protection, which primarily governs state actors, leaving nonstate actors outside its jurisdiction and creating significant enforcement challenges, particularly in conflict zones with weak or contested state control (Cunliffe et al. 2016).

Many of the CSOs working in the heritage protection sector adopt the legal form of INGOs; however, in this article, the term CSO is used to distinguish them from larger, more institutionalized organizations, such as the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Unlike these INGOs, CSOs are often smaller, grassroots organizations that work closely with local communities. The rise of civil society engagement in heritage protection also signals a growing recognition that safeguarding cultural sites is not solely the responsibility of state actors but requires a collective, global effort that includes the voices and actions of local communities (Christensen 2023, 2024; Rufián Fernández and Sabrine 2024).

The aim of this article is to critically examine the role of CSOs in providing emergency responses to protect cultural heritage during armed conflicts. Focusing on Heritage for Peace (H4P), a CSO dedicated to heritage protection in conflict zones, this research analyzes H4P's three main emergency interventions in Syria, Sudan, and Gaza. Through these interventions, H4P has continuously refined its strategies based on past experiences, enabling more responsive and effective actions. These case studies reveal the diverse logistical, ethical, and practical challenges CSOs face in crises where rapid action is essential. By reflecting critically on H4P's on-the-ground practices, the article examines how CSOs navigate the limitations of state-sponsored frameworks and collaborate with civil society. The analysis culminates in a strategic model that synthesizes H4P's approach, making visible the strategies employed and shedding light on the contextual challenges and structural issues inherent in cultural heritage protection during conflict.

As conflicts continue to evolve, so too must the approaches to preserving heritage in emergency situations. This article underscores the urgent need for more effective emergency interventions and offers a model to help heritage professionals understand and navigate the strategies and challenges of emergency response in high-risk areas, while contributing to the growing body of research on cultural heritage protection in conflict zones by examining the specific role of CSOs, a critical yet often underexplored area, situating their work within the limitations of state-led and international frameworks.

## Emergency Responses to Protect Cultural Heritage

The growing threats to cultural heritage from both human-made conflicts and natural disasters have heightened scholarly and practical interest in emergency response management, which, as Rouhani and Romão assert, "should be a coordinated and organised effort to stop further damage and loss and to stabilise the situation until the long-term recovery phase can start" (2023:153).

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Major international heritage institutions, such as ICCROM and UNESCO, have established comprehensive guidelines for managing these emergencies, emphasizing the tools and expertise needed to prevent further destruction (International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property [ICCROM] 2006). These include *risk assessment and prioritization*, involving the identification of vulnerable heritage sites, often through satellite imagery and remote sensing technologies to monitor the condition of heritage sites that are otherwise inaccessible owing to ongoing conflict (Rufián Fernández et al. 2020); *physical protection measures*, such as reinforcing structures with sandbags, constructing temporary shelters around at-risk sites, and covering artifacts with protective materials to shield them from environmental exposure (ICCROM 2006:108–122); and *evacuation* to secure movable heritage when necessary (ICCROM 2006:77–87). When physical protection is not feasible, *documentation and digitization* through photography, photogrammetry, 3D scanning, or videorecording preserve records for future restoration (Rufián Fernández et al. 2020).

Despite significant theoretical and technical advancements, the practical implementation of heritage protection strategies often falls short in crisis environments, where multiple challenges hinder their effectiveness. The complexities of these settings, including logistical constraints, political barriers, and resource limitations, frequently disrupt efforts to protect vulnerable sites and artifacts (Danti 2015). For instance, strategies requiring rapid access to real-time data or supplies are often infeasible owing to restricted mobility, active conflict, or disrupted infrastructure. Additionally, political obstacles, such as restrictive state policies or competing sovereignty claims, may limit the involvement of international or civil society organizations in protective interventions (Rufián Fernández and Sabrine 2024). These issues underscore the need for a more resilient emergency response system that integrates a coordinated framework among governments, international heritage organizations, CSOs, and local communities, enabling a timely response to the threats posed by armed conflict and natural disasters. Such a framework would enhance agility in crisis response, prioritize the local context, and bridge gaps between strategy and practical application, ultimately strengthening cultural heritage resilience in volatile regions.

The emergency response system for cultural heritage has evolved significantly over the past century, primarily influenced by the devastation of wars and the growth of humanitarian initiatives (Rouhani and Romão 2023:212). While disasters and crises have always been a part of human history, only in recent decades have scholars begun to view disasters as social constructs, highlighting the vulnerabilities that shape how risks are managed and mitigated (Kelman 2020). As a result, modern emergency management for cultural heritage is grounded in well-established frameworks that assess risks, coordinate responses, and implement recovery strategies to minimize further damage.

In the modern era, particularly throughout the twentieth century, emergency response to cultural heritage has evolved as an essential aspect of heritage protection. Prompted by the devastation of wars and the influence of the humanitarian sector, these responses aim to prevent further harm, stabilize conditions postdisaster, and set the stage for heritage recovery and restoration (Rouhani and Romão 2023:212–230). International cultural organizations have increasingly worked to align heritage emergency responses with the humanitarian efforts of major organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). However, a significant challenge for the cultural heritage sector during crises is demonstrating the necessity of safeguarding heritage when human lives are also at risk (Price-Jones 2023; Rouhani and Romão 2023).

While both humanitarian and cultural heritage frameworks share common approaches and principles (ICCROM 2006), such as the emphasis on rapid response and the protection of vulnerable populations, humanitarian organizations often prioritize lifesaving efforts (providing food, shelter, and medical care), where cultural heritage is typically viewed as a secondary concern. This often results in its exclusion from emergency response strategies (Price-Jones 2023). The separation of these priorities can lead to the neglect of heritage during crises, even though cultural properties are critical to the identity and resilience of affected communities (Giblin 2013).

There has recently been a growing demand among heritage professionals and scholars for the integration of cultural heritage response into the broader humanitarian emergency system (Price-Jones 2023:242; see also the Blue Shield International's most recent work on cultural heritage protection

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and the humanitarian ecosystem; https://theblueshield.org/resources/chp-and-humanitarian-videos). This integration is considered essential for the holistic protection of communities affected by armed conflict and disaster. Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, serves as an anchor for communities experiencing traumatic disruptions. As such, its preservation aligns with the humanitarian objectives of restoring dignity, social cohesion, and psychological well-being in conflict and postconflict environments (Giblin 2013).

As noted by Rouhani and Romão (2023), institutions like the Committee for Emergency Response (CER; www.culturalemergency.org/) have advocated for the recognition of cultural heritage as a fundamental human need, deserving protection alongside basic necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care (Committee for Emergency Response 2006). Despite these calls, the humanitarian sector has largely ignored this perspective, owing to differing views on the role of heritage in crisis response (Price-Jones 2023). The divide underscores the challenges of integrating cultural heritage into emergency strategies, as humanitarian organizations prioritize immediate survival needs over long-term cultural preservation.

## The State-Supported Heritage Protection Landscape: UNESCO and the Legislative Framework for Cultural Heritage Protection in Conflict

In the aftermath of World War II, the immense destruction of cultural heritage across Europe prompted the international community to establish UNESCO in 1945. The organization's mission, rooted in the belief that safeguarding cultural heritage could serve as a powerful tool for promoting peace and reconciliation, was to rebuild societies and foster global tolerance (Meskell 2018:168). From its inception, UNESCO has been at the forefront of international efforts to protect cultural properties endangered by war and crisis, coordinating responses, advocating for protection frameworks, and providing technical and financial support through mechanisms like the World Heritage Fund (United Nations Security Council [UNSC] 1967).

UNESCO's leadership in establishing a global legal framework for the protection of cultural heritage has been pivotal, particularly through its role in developing key international conventions. The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was the first treaty specifically aimed at safeguarding heritage during wartime. The Hague Convention obliges state parties to take measures to protect cultural property during armed conflict, including prohibiting its use for military purposes and preventing acts of hostility against it (Cunliffe et al. 2016:7–8).

Another cornerstone of the international legislative system is the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which established the World Heritage List to identify and protect cultural and natural sites deemed to possess "outstanding universal value." This convention expanded the scope of international heritage protection by creating a system through which states, in cooperation with UNESCO, could preserve sites under threat from both conflict and natural disasters (UNSC 1967).

Despite the existence of robust legal frameworks such as the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the protection of cultural heritage during conflicts faces several limitations. The effectiveness of these instruments largely depends on the political will of state actors, who may deprioritize heritage in favor of military or political aims. Enforcement mechanisms are often weak, leading to violations, particularly in conflict zones such as the Balkans and the Middle East, where cultural sites are deliberately targeted (Cunliffe et al. 2016:17–19).

The World Heritage Convention has also been criticized for its focus on inscribing new sites rather than preserving existing ones. Political dynamics within the World Heritage Committee can delay urgent interventions, leaving heritage sites vulnerable to damage during conflicts (Meskell 2015). UNESCO's reliance on states for enforcement further exacerbates these issues, as many governments in conflict zones fail to prioritize cultural heritage protection. Moreover, UNESCO lacks the tools to address nonstate actors such as insurgent groups, which often target heritage sites as symbols of identity, as seen in the destruction by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) of religious monuments (Brosché et al. 2016). Furthermore, UNESCO faces challenges in overcoming bureaucratic barriers and lacks sufficient funding for heritage protection in areas affected by conflict (McCafferty 2023:28–33; Meskell 2015, 2018). UNESCO's secular, universalist approach often clashes with local cultural and religious practices, particularly in regions like the Middle East, where heritage is tied to religious identity (Joy 2016).

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Meskell and Isakhan (2024) highlight that external expert assessments can create tensions with communities that have different views on heritage preservation. Scholars like Rico (2019) and Allais (2020) have critiqued UNESCO's framework for prioritizing a Western model of heritage, often ignoring local traditions, leading to friction in postcolonial regions.

## The New Heritage Protection Landscape

Over the past two decades, the landscape of cultural heritage preservation, particularly in conflict zones, has undergone a significant transformation. While UNESCO remains a premier agency for safeguarding the world's cultural patrimony, its dominance has increasingly been challenged by a proliferation of INGOs that have stepped into the spotlight (Meskell and Isakhan 2024). These organizations, often motivated by dissatisfaction with UNESCO's perceived institutional inertia, are reshaping the field of heritage protection, particularly in areas affected by armed conflict and postconflict reconstruction (Meskell and Isakhan 2024). Museum actors, too, are expanding their roles beyond traditional boundaries, as institutionalized strategies for implementing heritage protection remain underdeveloped (Christensen 2023, 2024).

INGOs in this sector emphasize their ability to respond swiftly to crises and marshal significant funds, often highlighting their independence from intergovernmental bodies (Meskell and Isakhan 2024). The expansion of INGOs (and CSOs among them) has been driven by the increasing frequency of heritage destruction, particularly in the Middle East, where conflicts such as the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS have resulted in the deliberate targeting of cultural heritage. As INGOs have stepped into this space, they often collaborate with international donors, private foundations, and academic institutions, creating complex networks of partnerships that are able to navigate the difficult terrain of the conflict zone (Meskell and Liuzza 2022).

The growing involvement of CSOs in cultural heritage protection signals a notable shift in how emergency heritage responses are structured, particularly in conflict-affected areas. However, this expanding role also raises important challenges related to coordination, quality assurance, and the long-term sustainability of interventions, especially in contexts where national institutions are weakened or absent (Rufián Fernández and Sabrine 2024).

## Insights from the Battlefield

To comprehend the realities of operating within conflict zones for the protection of cultural heritage, this article examines the work of H4P, a leading CSO working in crisis situations. The analysis will focus on three emergency response initiatives conducted by the organization in distinct geographical, historical, and sociopolitical contexts, each presenting its own unique challenges and opportunities. The primary objective is to highlight the context-specific nature of cultural heritage preservation efforts, while also identifying shared threats and solutions faced by CSOs, heritage experts, and field operators working in conflict-affected areas.

The initiatives selected for analysis include three recent emergency situations: the earthquake along the Syria–Türkiye border on February 6, 2023; the Sudanese civil war, which erupted on April 15, 2023; and the Israeli military assault on the Gaza Strip, internationally referred to as the "Israel–Hamas war," which began on October 7, 2023. The damage assessment reports produced as a final result of these interventions have been used as the main sources for this analysis, complemented by the firsthand experiences and testimonies of the president and cofounder of H4P, the second author of this article. This dual-approach, documentary evidence combined with practical insights from the field, allows for a thorough examination of the on-the-ground realities, revealing both the obstacles and potential solutions in emergency responses for heritage protection. The ability to compare different projects in diverse settings, along with access to firsthand accounts, presents a valuable opportunity for reflecting on both the specific and general challenges encountered during heritage preservation in conflict zones.

### *H4P*

H4P, established in 2013 and based in Barcelona, Spain, is committed to the protection of cultural heritage as a means of fostering peace, resilience, and sustainable development in areas affected by

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**Table 1.** Emergency Situations and Responses by H4P in Gaza, Syria, and Sudan.

| Overview of the Case Studies | Gaza Strip | Syria–Türkiye Borders | Sudan |
|---|---|---|---|
| Geopolitical challenges | Israeli military assault on the Gaza Strip, ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories, characterized by recurrent military conflicts. | Ongoing civil war, with fragmented control across various regions and actors. | Ongoing armed conflict between rival military factions, political instability, and historical internal strife. |
| Main threaths to cultural heritage | Direct shelling of cultural sites, lack of protection under occupation, and systematic destruction. | Earthquake damage exacerbated by conflict-related neglect, looting, and unregulated excavations. | Deliberate targeting of cultural sites as part of ethnic conflict and political violence, coupled with poor legal frameworks. |
| Operational obstacles | Security concerns, restricted access, and direct targeting of cultural sites. | Divided control over regions (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Idlib, Assad regime), political fragmentation. | Insecurity, lack of legal frameworks, and poor infrastructure hampered efforts. |
| H4P's emergency response | Rapid damage assessment of cultural sites, documentation, and reporting on 104 affected sites. | Identification and documentation of 177 earthquake-damaged heritage sites. | Awareness-raising and documentation efforts in collaboration with the Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative to address the protection of endangered sites. |
| Results obtained by H4P | Increased international media attention and calls for global intervention, but limited practical outcomes on the ground. | Established a heritage center in Idlib and fostered community dialogue, integrating cultural heritage with humanitarian aid. | Raised international awareness on Sudanese heritage and gained media coverage but limited intervention, owing to ongoing conflict. |

conflict. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) operates by mobilizing the expertise of archaeologists, heritage professionals, and humanitarian practitioners to engage in various initiatives, including the assessment and documentation of heritage sites and artifacts that are under threat owing to crises. Among its core activities, H4P evaluates the conservation efforts of states, provides training to local communities and heritage practitioners, and advises civil society on how to safeguard cultural heritage during emergencies. The NGO also plays an advocacy role on both national and international levels, raising awareness of the importance of cultural heritage preservation in times of crisis. Additionally, H4P prioritizes collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, governmental agencies, NGOs, and academic institutions, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach to cultural heritage protection.

Like many organizations in the field of heritage preservation, H4P operates on a project-based model, with funding derived from various sources, such as cultural heritage funds, governmental programs for heritage at risk, and private donors. This structure enables the NGO to remain flexible, adjusting its operations according to the needs of each project. H4P relies on a combination of paid personnel hired for the duration of specific projects funded by international organizations such as ALIPH, the Cultural Protection Fund, the Henkel Foundation, and the CER, and a dedicated volunteer base composed of heritage professionals and enthusiasts who share the organization's vision. In the following section, the case studies will be presented in chronological order, the way they were experimented on the ground by H4P. An overview of the case studies can be found in Table 1.

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## Case 1: The Syria–Türkiye Border Earthquake: The Stratification of Emergency Issues

The Syria–Türkiye border earthquake presents a complex scenario for heritage preservation owing to a multilayered crisis: a decade-long civil war, widespread damage to infrastructure, and ongoing geopolitical tensions. Syria has long been a focal point for heritage preservation efforts, largely owing to its immense cultural wealth, including world-renowned archaeological sites such as Palmyra, Aleppo, and the ancient city of Damascus. However, these sites have faced targeted destruction and looting throughout the Syrian civil war (2011–2024), which has become emblematic of cultural destruction in modern conflicts (Munawar 2023). Both state and nonstate actors have been complicit in the damage, with groups like ISIS deliberately destroying heritage as part of their ideological war. This destruction has not only caused irreversible damage to global cultural patrimony but also led to profound identity loss for local communities (Sabrine 2022).

In the face of these challenges, many international institutions, such as UNESCO and ICCROM, have implemented heritage protection projects in Syria, alongside several CSOs. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of heritage protection interventions has often been compromised by insufficient coordination among the various actors involved, leading to overlapping efforts and, at times, redundancy. Meskell and Isakhan (2024) highlight Syria and Iraq as key recipients of funding and intervention for heritage protection in conflict zones.

Efforts to protect cultural heritage in Syria face significant challenges, many of which stem from the complex geopolitical landscape. The ongoing conflict involves numerous actors with conflicting interests, including foreign powers, militias, and insurgent groups, making coordinated heritage protection efforts extremely hard.

Additionally, international law, particularly the 1954 Hague Convention, has proved inadequate in the face of modern asymmetric warfare, where nonstate actors are not bound by the same legal obligations as state parties (Cunliffe et al. 2016). This legal framework also relies heavily on state cooperation and enforcement, which is virtually nonexistent in Syria's fragmented political landscape.

Consequently, CSOs have had to step in, utilizing more agile and flexible approaches to heritage protection, often working in secret or through local partnerships to circumvent the legal and political barriers that inhibit action from larger, state-bound institutions (Rufián Fernández et al. 2020). Despite these efforts, the destruction continues, underscoring the limitations of international law and government-led heritage protection mechanisms in conflict zones like Syria.

### *The Work of H4P on the Syria–Türkiye Border*

The damage assessment conducted by H4P in Syria serves as the first case in a series of emergency responses that have since been replicated in Sudan, Gaza, and, more recently, Lebanon (Heritage for Peace 2024). H4P's swift intervention following the earthquake on February 6, 2023, along the Syria–Türkiye border highlights its proactive approach to assessing and addressing damage to cultural heritage in crisis zones.

Between February 14 and March 3, 2023, H4P produced three comprehensive reports documenting the impact of the earthquake on archaeological sites in different regions of Syria: northwest Syria (Arab Network of Civil Society Organizations to Safeguard Cultural Heritage [ANSCH] 2023a), northeast Syria (ANSCH 2023b), and the Syrian coast (ANSCH 2023c). These reports, which include detailed pre- and postearthquake damage assessments, identified significant structural risks and the need for urgent intervention. Among the concerns addressed were unauthorized excavations, which were exacerbated by the earthquake's disruption, and the structural instability of heritage sites. The reports documented partial collapses, large fissures, and severe risks to the preservation of these sites (Figures 1 and 2).

The reports emphasized the earthquake's broader impact on local communities, drawing attention to the connection between heritage preservation and community resilience. H4P's call for swift international collaboration emphasized the necessity for coordinated rescue operations to prevent further damage and secure these endangered sites. The urgency of this call was particularly critical in the context of a protection system that remains fragmented and often lacks the coherence required for effective and timely response in crisis situations.

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**Figure 1.** Documentation of damages on Banqusa archaeological site, Idlib, Syria, following the earthquake on February 6, 2023.



**Figure 2.** Documentation of damages on Alshoqor Castle, Idlib, Syria, following the earthquake on February 6, 2023.

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### The Role of Local Networks and the Difficulties in Coordinating Volunteers in a Divided Context

The role of an established network of local volunteers and heritage professionals has proved crucial for effective emergency responses to safeguard cultural heritage in conflict-affected regions like Syria. During its 2023 intervention following the devastating earthquake in northeast Syria, H4P was able to leverage this network to facilitate a rapid response. This mobilization of human resources in a politically fragmented and volatile area is largely due to H4P's long-standing presence in the region, strengthened through previous projects, notably the Rafekatuna initiative (https://www.rafekatuna.org/) in Raqqa with the financial support of the Cultural Protection Fund of the British Council, which laid the foundation for civil society engagement and eventually became an independent CSO in the area. Similarly, H4P funded the Hierapolis initiative in Manbij (https://www.heritageforpeace.org/syria-culture-and-heritage/emergency-intervention-and-damage-assessment-in-manbij/), also in this case through the financial support of the Cultural Protection Fund of the British Council, supporting heritage preservation efforts in this border city between Türkiye and Syria. These foundational projects enabled H4P to rapidly organize local volunteers and professionals with in-depth knowledge of the region's cultural heritage, allowing them to document and protect 177 earthquake-damaged heritage sites across Idleb, Manbij, and Raqqa, spanning an area of approximately 7,000 $km^2$, with the financial support of the CER.

The success of H4P in coordinating emergency responses in such a complex environment underscores the importance of preexisting networks and relationships with local communities. These networks allow for the swift deployment of resources and personnel, facilitating assessments, documentation, and preservation efforts even in highly unstable conditions. Furthermore, these collaborations with local actors have allowed heritage projects to intertwine with humanitarian initiatives, promoting dialogue and fostering resilience within communities that have experienced both conflict and natural disaster (Rufián Fernández and Sabrine 2024).

However, managing volunteers and generally emergency actions in Syria presented numerous challenges, owing to the country's division into three politically distinct regions at the time of H4P intervention, before the fall of the Assad regime: the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib, and the regime-controlled central and southern areas under Bashar al-Assad. Each region presented different logistical and jurisdictional obstacles, creating barriers to the cohesive protection of heritage sites. NGOs like H4P had to negotiate with local authorities while remaining flexible in their operational strategies, relying heavily on trusted networks that can function across political boundaries (BertelsmannStiftung 2024).

In regions like Idlib, where Islamist factions maintained control, NGOs faced increased risks of violence, heightened security concerns, and bureaucratic restrictions that limited volunteer coordination. Despite these difficulties, H4P's sustained engagement with local civil society and heritage experts has allowed it to navigate these obstacles effectively. The recent establishment of the Syrian Center for Cultural Protection and Development in Idlib marks a significant achievement in securing future heritage projects in this volatile area, underscoring the importance of community-based approaches to cultural heritage protection (https://syrianheritageprotection.org/).

## Case 2: The Emergency Response to Sudan's 2023 Civil War

Sudan's geopolitical context is shaped by its long history of civil conflict, which has included the Darfur conflict, the Sudanese civil war, and more recently, the armed clashes between rival military factions in 2023. These conflicts have caused widespread destruction, displacement, and fragmentation of communities, leading to the direct and indirect degradation of cultural heritage. The volatile political situation, marked by a lack of central governance and deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions, further complicates efforts by international heritage organizations and CSOs to intervene effectively.

A central challenge for heritage preservation in Sudan arises from the deliberate targeting of cultural sites as part of broader conflict strategies. In many instances, cultural heritage becomes a victim of the same dynamics that drive the violence, such as ethnic cleansing or political repression. In Sudan, the destruction of monuments, religious sites, and archaeological artifacts has mirrored the fragmentation of the country's social fabric, making the preservation of heritage a difficult battle for international actors.

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### The Role of State-Sponsored International Organizations

While international organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the World Monuments Fund have established frameworks to advocate for cultural heritage preservation in conflict zones like Sudan, their impact is frequently constrained by the complex geopolitical realities on the ground. Chief among these limitations is the challenge of physical access and security in conflict zones where many of Sudan's cultural sites are located. In such regions, heritage professionals often face severe physical risks when attempting to document or protect endangered sites. Moreover, logistical challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited communication networks, and the presence of multiple armed factions, make effective intervention exceedingly difficult (Al Quntar et al. 2015).

Another pressing issue is the inherently unstable political landscape of Sudan. With frequent regime changes, ongoing military conflicts, and deep-rooted ethnic tensions, international heritage organizations must navigate a politically volatile environment that impedes long-term project planning (Mohamed and Pagnucco 2024). Furthermore, foreign involvement in heritage preservation is sometimes perceived through a neocolonial lens, especially in postcolonial countries like Sudan, where local authorities might view international organizations with suspicion. This mistrust can result in resistance from local actors, further reducing the effectiveness of these institutions (Winter 2014).

### H4P Emergency Intervention

Recognizing these limitations and strengthened by the experience gathered in Syria, H4P launched the Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative (SHPI) in May 2023 as an independent initiative, shortly after the outbreak of civil war in April. Unlike large international organizations that often face barriers owing to their institutional structures, SHPI operates as a grassroots initiative, including both Sudanese and international experts dedicated to safeguarding Sudan's diverse cultural heritage. SHPI's strategy emphasizes local empowerment and direct engagement with Sudanese communities, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliations (https://www.heritageforpeace.org/sudan-heritage-protection-initiative-shpi/). This local involvement enables SHPI to act as a mediator between Sudanese heritage professionals and the global community, promoting a coordinated and culturally sensitive approach to preservation that contrasts with the sometimes impersonal nature of international interventions. The initiative has produced three comprehensive reports, published in June 2023 (Hamid et al. 2023a), November 2023 (Hamid et al. 2023b), and August 2024 (Sabrine et al. 2024), which document the tangible and intangible losses to Sudan's heritage. These reports detail incidents like the destruction of the Mohamed Omer Bashir Center's library and archive (Figures 3 and 4), extensive damage to Khartoum's Natural History Museum, and the loss of artisans and venues integral to Sudan's cultural life. They emphasize not only the physical damage to sites but also the cultural and social losses felt by communities, such as the death of Ishraq Wadi, a master leather shoemaker, and the destruction of the Performing Arts Theatre in el Geneina, a venue for traditional Sudanese music, dance, and theater (Hamid et al. 2023b).

### SHPI's Approach to Vulnerable Sites and the International Response

SHPI's reports also highlight the vulnerable state of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Sudan, such as Gebel Barkal, the Napatan Region, and the Island of Meroe. Although away from active conflict zones, these sites remain at risk owing to their remote locations and lack of security. The displacement crisis further exacerbates the risks to these sites, as large groups of refugees increase the threat of looting and encroachment. Unlike international organizations, which often struggle to maintain continuous on-the-ground presence in conflict zones, SHPI's network of local volunteers provides a more sustainable monitoring mechanism that can respond swiftly to emerging threats.

Through targeted advocacy and documentation, SHPI has partially achieved its goal of raising international awareness about Sudan's cultural heritage crisis, an issue largely overlooked in global media. The initiative has garnered international attention, with representatives featured on the BBC World Service's *Newsday* and through the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Culture in Crisis: Spotlight on Sudan* series. Additionally, the *Irish Times* published an article detailing SHPI's mission and its relevance to safeguarding Sudan's cultural heritage in the midst of war (Hayden 2023).

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**Figure 3.** Documentation of complete destruction of Al-Omari Mosque, Jabalia, by direct shelling, as of November 7, 2023.

## Case 3: The Link between People and Land: Defending Heritage in Gaza

The Gaza Strip presents a unique and highly complex context for cultural heritage preservation owing to its geopolitical situation and ongoing conflict. Since the Six Day War in 1967, Israel has maintained control over the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), comprising the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, under the framework of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (UNSC 1967). As the occupying power, Israel is de facto responsible for the administration and protection of cultural heritage in these areas, according to international law (Taha 2024). Despite Israel's ratification of key international agreements, including the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1972 World Heritage Convention, it has not only failed to uphold its obligations to protect cultural heritage but has also been accused of deliberately targeting and destroying Palestinian cultural heritage. These actions are widely seen as part of a broader settler-colonial strategy aimed at erasing Palestinian cultural identity, consolidating control over the territories, and reshaping the historical narrative to legitimize Israeli claims (De Cesari 2010; Taha 2024).

The international protection framework has proved, at best, insufficient in safeguarding Gaza's cultural heritage. As of September 2024, UNESCO confirmed damage to 69 heritage sites since the conflict began on October 7, 2023 (www.unesco.org/en/gaza/assessment). Although international conventions exist, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, and UNESCO's response to the destruction in Gaza has been criticized for being passive. In her article titled "The Museum Sector as an Actor in Human Security," Christensen (2023) discusses the political hierarchy in which certain areas of cultural heritage are prioritized over others, and specific causes are advocated based on uneven geopolitical power relations. For instance, unlike its strong condemnation of Russia's attacks on Ukrainian heritage in 2023, UNESCO's response to the crisis in Gaza, together with such other international heritage institution as ICOMOS, involved only issuing statements urging respect for international law without

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**Figure 4.** Documentation of complete destruction of Al-Omari Mosque, Jabalia, by direct shelling, as of November 7, 2023.

directly condemning Israel for not complying with international humanitarian and cultural law (Taha 2024).

On December 14, 2023, UNESCO listed Tell Umm ʻAmr (an early Christian site in the Gaza Strip, comprising the remains of the Monastry of Saint Hilarion) as requiring additional protection, yet critics argue that more comprehensive actions are needed (Taha 2024). This inaction left CSOs and local actors to fill the protection void.

### *Cultural Heritage Safeguarding in Gaza: The Role of CSOs and H4P*

In the absence of an effective legislative framework, local and international CSOs have proved to be the most reactive actors in the emergency response. For instance, H4P has succeeded in coordinating emergency response efforts to document and assess damage to Gaza's heritage and to publish the results in a report named "Report on the Impact of the Recent War in 2023 on the Cultural Heritage in Gaza Strip—Palestine." H4P's response to the Gaza crisis was swift, with volunteers beginning to assess damage to cultural sites just weeks into the conflict. The damage assessment covers the period from October 7 to November 7, 2023, and includes detailed documentation of 104 affected cultural heritage sites (Figures 5 and 6). The report categorizes damage according to direct and indirect shelling and presents photographic evidence of the destruction. In addition to documenting damage, the report calls for urgent international action to prevent further loss of Gaza's cultural heritage.

The report highlights Gaza's rich cultural landscape, including mosques, churches, and archaeological sites, emphasizing the critical role these structures play in the cultural identity of the Palestinian people. It underscores the widespread destruction caused by Israeli military actions, which has targeted not only civilians but also the cultural fabric of Gaza.

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**Figure 5.** Documentation of damage to the Mohamed Omer Bashir Center at Omdruman Ahlia University.

The damage assessment report was made possible through the Arab Network of Civil Society Organizations to Safeguard Cultural Heritage (ANSCH; https://ansch.heritageforpeace.org/), an initiative of H4P involving heritage professional and volunteers from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Despite the severe challenges posed by the conflict (limited access, mobility restrictions, and safety concerns), H4P relied on an already established network of local volunteers, heritage professionals, and community members to conduct a swift emergency response.

However, as the conflict in Gaza escalated, on-the-ground heritage protection became increasingly difficult. The safety of volunteers and heritage professionals was compromised, and movement within the territory severely restricted owing to bombings and blockades. H4P asked its volunteers to stop the heritage assessment in the area. In such high-intensity conflict situations, remote monitoring technologies, such as satellite imagery, offer the only viable solution for assessing and documenting damage, but such technologies are often too expensive or unavailable to local CSOs (Rufián Fernández et al. 2020).

### *The Value of International Resonance*

Beyond the documentation of damage to cultural heritage, the true value of the report resides in its forceful request for international action to safeguard Gaza's cultural heritage. It calls for increased support and assistance from the international community to stop the indiscriminate destruction of a people and their most visible link to the land: cultural heritage.

Unfortunately, the request did not result in any actions by the international community to protect cultural heritage sites, or human lives, but the resonance on social media, online articles, and newspapers all over the world has been surprising. Coverage from major outlets such as the *Guardian* (Kaamil 2024), *Al Jazeera* (Saber 2024), and the *Middle East Eye* (Hussaini 2024) helped raise awareness of the deliberate targeting of Palestinian heritage. This media resonance, we argue, has contributed

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**Figure 6.** Documentation of damage to the Mohamed Omer Bashir Center at Omdruman Ahlia University.

to a broader discussion about the role of cultural heritage in the Palestinian struggle for identity and self-determination.

Edward Said (2000) argued that the struggle for Palestinian identity is, at its core, a battle over narratives. Making the world aware of the destruction of heritage is thus an essential step in preserving these narratives and ensuring that the history and culture of the Palestinian people are not forgotten. In the context of settler-colonialism, where the destruction of cultural heritage is part of a broader strategy to erase the identity and history of a people, raising global awareness helps to preserve that heritage in the collective memory.

H4P plays a crucial role in preserving Palestinian identity by raising global awareness of the destruction of cultural heritage in Gaza. This destruction is a deliberate act of settler-colonialism aimed at severing the cultural and historical ties of Palestinians to their land. Through detailed damage assessments, H4P highlights these losses, actively working to safeguard Palestinian narratives and ensure their enduring presence despite efforts to erase them.

H4P's approach prioritizes local collaboration, drawing on community knowledge to document cultural heritage and build resilience against such challenges. This grassroots, community-driven strategy strengthens the broader resistance to settler-colonialism, underscoring the importance of cultural heritage as a cornerstone of Palestinian identity and resistance. At a time when these issues have been largely overlooked in global academic and media circles, H4P has not only contributed to immediate preservation efforts but has also reframed the protection of Palestinian heritage as integral to the broader pursuit of justice and the recognition of Palestinian rights in the face of settler-colonial violence.

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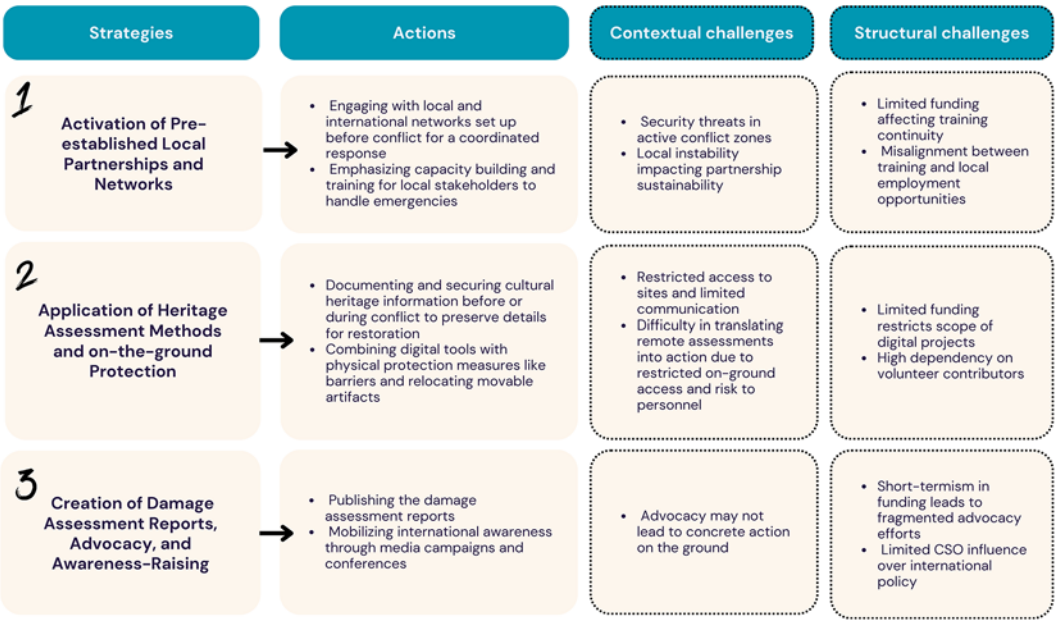


**Figure 7.** H4P's strategic model for emergency response in conflict settings.

## H4P's Strategic Model for Emergency Response in Conflict Settings

This section presents a model that synthesizes H4P's evolving emergency actions across Syria, Sudan, and Gaza, developed as a comprehensive reflection on the organization's real-time responses and the structural challenges encountered in diverse conflict settings. The aim of the model is to provide a clear vision of H4P's core strategies, and the primary contextual and structural challenges connected to these efforts, as displayed in Figure 7.

H4P refined and adapted its approaches based on insights gained from previous interventions, thereby enhancing its overall effectiveness in heritage protection. In Syria, H4P prioritized grassroots partnerships, conducting damage assessments and launching advocacy efforts to raise awareness of cultural heritage threats. In Sudan, these strategies were formalized, with an emphasis on rapid documentation and advocacy to draw international attention to the cultural risks. The Gaza crisis integrated all three strategies, focusing on comprehensive damage assessments and advocacy to gain global support, building on the lessons learned from Syria and Sudan. This model showcases the adaptability and refinement of H4P's approaches in response to the contextual and logistical challenges faced in each conflict.

The model developed through these cumulative experiences can be broadly categorized into three main strategies: (1) activation of local partnerships and preestablished networks; (2) application of heritage assessment methods and on-the-ground protection measures; and (3) creation of damage assessment reports, advocacy, and awareness-raising efforts. Each of these strategies, however, must navigate a range of specific contextual and structural challenges.

### *Activation of Pre-established Local Partnerships and Networks*

In crisis situations, the mobilization of local partnerships and networks is crucial to ensure that immediate responses are executed by actors who are already familiar with the context and physically present in the affected areas at the time of the crisis. This approach not only facilitates timely interventions but also fosters multivocality, empowering communities to actively participate in the protection of their own heritage. By collaborating with local civil society organizations such as the ANSCH, H4P can swiftly organize and deploy heritage preservation initiatives in the immediate aftermath of crises. Through this

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**Figure 8.** Damage assessment and documentation capacity-building in Munbij, Syria.

preexisting network, H4P has been able to establish direct connections with local experts and volunteers, coordinating efforts to conduct damage assessments in Syria and Gaza. These collaborations highlight the potential of localized expertise in safeguarding cultural heritage during emergencies.

A critical factor in these emergency responses is the necessity of well-established, preexisting networks, given the urgency of mobilizing resources and actors without delay. The foundation of such networks prior to the onset of a crisis is key to ensuring a resilient and effective response. Consequently, H4P places significant emphasis on capacity-building and training during noncrisis periods (Figure 8). Notably, H4P has invested substantial resources in training Syrian communities and professionals, as evidenced by such initiatives as the Rafekatuna project and the Syrian Heritage Law Training Project (SHeLTr). The SHeLTr initiative, developed in response to the widespread destruction of heritage sites in Syria, seeks to educate individuals in Idlib about their legal obligations under international, national, and Islamic law concerning heritage protection. Initiated by H4P in 2016, the project focused on creating educational materials and designing an e-learning platform. After eight years of development, the first training session was successfully delivered in April 2024. By enhancing local knowledge and preparedness, H4P seeks to empower communities to respond effectively to emergencies, ensuring that interventions are contextually appropriate and informed by legal frameworks.

### *Challenges Related to Capacity-Building and Training*

One of the major challenges in the capacity-building efforts for cultural heritage preservation is the short-term nature of many heritage protection programs, which are often constrained by project-based funding cycles. These programs typically focus on delivering rapid responses to urgent crises and prioritizing immediate outputs rather than fostering long-term sustainability. This short-term focus creates a disconnect between the temporary nature of these initiatives and the long-term impact that is necessary for effective heritage preservation.

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A key consequence of this short-term focus is the lack of sustainable employment pathways or infrastructure to support trained professionals. While capacity-building programs may successfully train individuals in heritage preservation, without stable employment opportunities, these trained professionals often find it difficult to apply their newly acquired skills in meaningful ways. As Rouhani and Romão (2023) point out, this diminishes the overall effectiveness of such programs. In regions like Syria and Iraq, as highlighted by Meskell and Isakhan (2024), CSOs have developed a skilled workforce that is often overqualified but underutilized, primarily due to the absence of stable heritage management jobs.

The economic challenges and ongoing instability in postconflict environments further exacerbate this issue. The lack of financial resources and infrastructure to support long-term heritage preservation careers contributes to the disconnect between capacity-building efforts and their practical application. Additionally, many external training programs are not aligned with local educational or vocational systems, which reduces their relevance and sustainability. In Syria, for instance, the continuing instability and widespread destruction have impeded investments in heritage management, deepening the frustration of skilled professionals who cannot secure meaningful employment in their field.

Ultimately, the short-term nature of many heritage protection projects not only weakens the long-term impact of capacity-building efforts but also exacerbates the broader issue of a lack of integration between these initiatives and the local context. Without a concerted effort to align training programs with the local socioeconomic realities and to create sustainable pathways for employment, the full potential of capacity-building efforts in cultural heritage preservation remains unfulfilled.

### *Application of Heritage Assessment Methods and On-the-Ground Protection*

Following the occurrence of a crisis, H4P mobilizes its network of trained cultural operators to conduct heritage damage assessments and, where possible, conduct physical protection measures, such as barriers and relocating movable artifacts. Utilizing documentation methods such as photography, digital technology, and satellite imagery, these assessments enable rapid evaluation of heritage damage and threats. The assessments are critical for prioritizing sites that require immediate intervention, thereby facilitating the efficient allocation of resources in resource-scarce conflict zones. Technologies like satellite imagery, in collaboration with organizations such as Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (https://eamena.org/), support the remote assessment of damage, which is particularly valuable when physical access to conflict zones is restricted. These digital tools empower experts to document the extent of destruction and prioritize endangered sites for potential intervention. H4P has also developed initiatives that integrate digital tools to safeguard cultural heritage in conflict regions—for example, the Pacton project (https://pacton.es/the-project/in) collaboration with the Milá y Fontanals Institution for Research in Humanities—Spanish National Research Council . The Pacton project exemplifies the use of digital tools to engage local communities in the monitoring and preservation of cultural heritage. By employing techniques such as mapping, crowd-sourced data collection, and digital advocacy, the project facilitates active participation from civil society in the protection of heritage sites. Central to the initiative is a mobile application designed to enable local volunteers and organizations to securely collect and transmit data on heritage risks. The app allows users to store and send images, videos, and alphanumeric information, offering a crucial means of communication even in areas with limited connectivity.

The Pacton project uses the mobile app to collect and transmit data on at-risk archaeological sites, creating a comprehensive database that is regularly updated and validated by international experts. This database could be shared with key stakeholders, including UNESCO, ICOM, ICOMOS, and law enforcement agencies, helping to combat illicit trafficking and support informed heritage management. In cases of severe damage, the data are also shared with the media to raise awareness of threats to cultural heritage. Pacton was tested as a pilot project in northeast and northwest Syria, engaging local communities in heritage protection through real-time data collection, expert validation, and strategic advocacy, thus bridging grassroots efforts with international heritage management frameworks.

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### *The Challenges of Innovation and Technology in Heritage Preservation*

Although remote technologies such as satellite imagery offer valuable insights into the extent of damage and risks to heritage sites, they do not, on their own, preserve or protect these sites. The critical question that follows data collection and analysis is: What concrete preservation actions will be taken? In many cases, identifying the damage is only the first step in a more complex and challenging process of safeguarding and restoration. Translating satellite-derived information into actionable measures on the ground is fraught with challenges related to logistics, security, and financial constraints, particularly in conflict zones.

After identifying damaged or threatened heritage sites through remote technologies, the next step is to implement physical actions to protect or restore them. However, in conflict zones such as Syria this transition from data collection to action is often obstructed by several factors. Armed conflict frequently renders certain areas inaccessible, complicating efforts by heritage professionals to carry out preservation or restoration work, even after the damage has been documented. When access to sites is possible, the continued threat of violence, unstable political conditions, and a lack of sufficient funding often limit the scope and effectiveness of preservation initiatives.

This reality highlights the limitations of relying solely on technological tools such as satellite imagery to safeguard heritage. Though these tools provide essential data, they do not guarantee action on the ground. The preservation of cultural heritage in conflict zones requires a combination of technology, on-the-ground intervention, and long-term strategies that address the security, logistical, and financial challenges involved in the restoration and protection of heritage sites.

## *Creation of Damage Assessment Reports, Advocacy, and Awareness-Raising*

Once the documentation phase is complete, H4P publishes damage assessment reports to raise awareness and advocate for the preservation of endangered heritage. These reports are created by both local volunteers and experts on the ground, as well as international volunteers who offer their assistance. H4P places significant emphasis on the dissemination of these reports and awareness-raising efforts. By sharing these reports globally, H4P aims to foster international solidarity, mobilize support, and influence policy decisions that prioritize cultural heritage preservation during crises. This goal is pursued through various methods, including organizing webinars and conferences. In the case studies examined, numerous such activities were conducted. For instance, various webinars and conferences were organized for raising awareness on Syria's cultural heritage, such as the online webinar on March 31, 2023, that focused on addressing the impact of the earthquake that struck Syria on February 6, 2023.The meeting brought together voices from Syrian civil society organizations and cultural heritage experts to analyze the challenges and explore options available for assessing and repairing the damage caused by the earthquake.

### *The True Value of Resonance*

A critical question that emerges in the context of advocacy and awareness-raising is: What tangible value does "resonance" hold if it does not lead to concrete outcomes on the ground? Although global awareness and media coverage may not always lead to immediate preservation or restoration, resonance remains valuable. It mobilizes international attention, fosters accountability, builds solidarity, and shapes cultural and political narratives that can inspire future actions, even if material destruction persists in the short term. This issue is particularly relevant for the scholarly community in heritage studies, as academics play a crucial role in raising awareness through research, public engagement, and information dissemination. By participating in global dialogues, scholars not only contribute knowledge but also influence public and policy discourse, highlighting the need to critically examine the extent to which their efforts lead to substantive heritage protection outcomes.

Resonance, in the context of cultural heritage preservation, refers to the ability to generate widespread attention and concern, often through media coverage, academic discourse, and international statements. Although it may not always lead to immediate, concrete preservation efforts, resonance can have long-term significance. One of the key functions of resonance is its potential to foster international solidarity, which is often a precursor to long-term advocacy efforts. By raising awareness about the destruction of

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cultural heritage, CSOs can help build a network of global actors, including scholars, activists, INGOs, and other CSOs, who may push for more substantive action in international forums. Though immediate, on-the-ground preservation might not always be feasible, the cumulative effect of these advocacy efforts can influence policy discussions and pave the way for future interventions. The global outcry over the destruction of Palmyra by ISIS, for instance, led to heightened international collaboration aimed at documenting and preserving what remains of Syria's heritage.

Resonance also plays a critical role in laying the groundwork for future accountability. The documentation of cultural destruction, coupled with international scrutiny, can provide the foundation for legal actions in the future. The destruction of cultural heritage has increasingly been recognized as a war crime by institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). A landmark case occurred in 2016, when the ICC prosecuted Ahmad Al-Faqi Al-Mahdi for war crimes related to the destruction of cultural and religious sites in Timbuktu, Mali (Ba 2020). While legal accountability for heritage destruction may seem remote in some contexts, such as Gaza, the ongoing documentation and awareness-raising efforts by CSOs like H4P create a record that could be used to pursue justice in the future.

In addition to fostering solidarity and accountability, resonance can also lead to indirect positive outcomes by influencing public opinion and political discourse. Awareness-raising efforts help shape the broader cultural and political narratives surrounding conflicts and the heritage under threat. In the case of Gaza, for instance, the destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage has become part of a larger narrative of resistance against occupation and colonization. Symbols of Palestinian identity, such as the keffiyeh, have taken on global significance as emblems of resistance and solidarity, as highlighted by Tawil-Souri (2011).

This cultural resonance can influence political landscapes, encouraging governments and international organizations to take more active stances on heritage protection. Moreover, as public awareness grows, the destruction of cultural heritage is increasingly recognized not just as an attack on historical artifacts but as an assault on cultural identity and memory. This understanding has prompted broader discussions on heritage as a human rights issue, with growing calls for the international community to protect cultural sites as part of the broader effort to safeguard human dignity and cultural diversity (Mucci 2024). In this way, resonance serves not only as a means of advocacy but also as a way of reframing the political discourse surrounding heritage protection.

## Context-Related and System-Related Challenges

H4P's emergency response strategies, while adaptable, face significant challenges in both specific conflict contexts and within the larger heritage protection system that cut across all strategies. These challenges are commonly linked to security risks, mobility constraints, funding issues, and political obstacles, making it difficult to consistently implement and sustain protection efforts in volatile environments.

### *Context-Related Challenges: Security and Mobility Constraints*

In conflict zones, safety risks are a major impediment to effective heritage protection. Security threats, including abductions, violence, and deliberate attacks on heritage sites, pose risks to personnel engaged in assessment and preservation efforts (Brosché et al. 2016; Sabrine and Cunliffe 2021). Balancing the mission of safeguarding cultural heritage with ensuring the safety and security of staff and volunteers presents a serious challenge for international CSOs operating in conflict and disaster zones, demanding careful management and consideration to prevent permanent heritage loss. For instance, escalating violence in Gaza halted assessments and preservation efforts in November 2023, while in Sudan, military occupation of the Al Khalifa Museum by the Rapid Support Forces restricted access to heritage professionals (https://www.heritageforpeace.org/sudan-heritage-protection-initiative-shpi/). Alongside security risks, CSOs and cultural operators must grapple with profound ethical questions in emergency situations. Key considerations include the moral obligation to prioritize the safety of staff and local communities while attempting to safeguard cultural heritage. This necessitates transparent communication about risks, informed consent from affected communities, and a commitment to their well-being throughout intervention processes.

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Restricted access to conflict zones and disaster-affected areas poses a significant obstacle for cultural heritage CSOs seeking to conduct damage assessments and implement emergency interventions. In Gaza, restricted access to the area poses significant challenges. The border blockade impedes, first of all, the delivery of critical resources such as food, medicine, and shelter, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis faced by the population. Additionally, restricted access hinders the ability of cultural heritage organizations and professionals to carry out preservation efforts and emergency interventions. In Sudan, safeguarding the Natural History Museum in Khartoum faces significant challenges primarily owing to its location within an area controlled by the Sudan Armed Forces, where civilian access is restricted. This restricted access impedes the ability of heritage professionals, volunteers, and other stakeholders to effectively monitor, protect, and preserve the museum and its valuable collections. In Syria, the situation is further complicated by the unpredictability of seismic activity, which poses additional risks for those engaged in damage assessments of cultural heritage sites. Moreover, the country's governance is fractured, with three separate authorities operating without any cooperation. This division severely restricts coordinated heritage protection efforts, adding to the already complex challenges faced by cultural heritage professionals in the region.

## *Structural Challenges: Limitations of the Funding System for Cultural Heritage Protection in Emergency Areas*

The funding system for cultural heritage protection in emergency areas faces several limitations that hinder timely, effective, and sustainable responses to the destruction of heritage during crises. Key challenges include bureaucratic delays, the short-term nature of available funding, and the misalignment of international donor priorities with the immediate and long-term needs of affected communities. Overcoming these obstacles necessitates a comprehensive understanding of how funding mechanisms function within the specific framework of cultural heritage preservation, particularly in conflict-affected and postdisaster environments.

### *Bureaucratic Procedures, Blocks, and Delays*

One of the most pressing challenges in securing funds for cultural heritage protection in emergency areas is the reliance on bureaucratic procedures. Although funding for heritage protection is often provided by international organizations, governments, and NGOs, these funds are typically subject to complex administrative processes and protocols. These procedures, which include lengthy application processes, stringent reporting requirements, and multiple layers of approval, can delay the delivery of funds. In the case of emergency situations, where immediate action is needed to prevent further damage or loss, these bureaucratic hurdles can prove to be a significant obstacle. As a result, by the time the necessary funds are released, much of the damage may already be irreversible, and the emergency response may be ineffective. In some instances, funding for CSOs and other institutions working in specific areas is restricted owing to sanctions imposed by certain states. A notable example is the case of the Syrian regime, which has faced cuts in funding from the European Union and the United States as part of broader sanctions (Rufián Fernandez and Sabrine 2024:310). These sanctions can limit the ability of local and foreign organizations to operate effectively in affected regions, hindering efforts to preserve cultural heritage and provide necessary humanitarian aid.

To overcome funding challenges, H4P has intervened in Syria, Sudan, and Gaza without external financial support, instead relying on the assistance of local and international volunteers. While this approach enabled a swift and immediate response in the short term, it highlights a significant limitation: relying on volunteers is not a sustainable solution in the long run. The lack of stable funding and institutional support means that the organization's ability to maintain and scale its interventions is constrained, ultimately undermining the long-term effectiveness of its efforts to safeguard cultural heritage.

### *Short-Term Funding and Lack of Long-Term Vision*

Another significant limitation of the funding system is its emphasis on project-based funding, which often leads to a short-termism that undermines long-term preservation efforts. Funding for cultural heritage protection is typically allocated for specific, time-bound projects that are expected to deliver

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concrete results within a set period, often without consideration for the broader, ongoing needs of the community or heritage sites. This project-based funding model creates an artificial deadline that may not align with the realities of heritage preservation, which is inherently a long-term, evolving process. The consequence of this short-term funding approach is that cultural heritage protection efforts are often fragmented, reactive, and disconnected from the long- term goals of sustainability and community involvement. As funds are allocated for individual projects, the broader strategy for safeguarding heritage may become neglected, resulting in piecemeal interventions that do not address the structural issues threatening cultural heritage. Moreover, the pressure to achieve quick results can sometimes lead to superficial or rushed interventions, rather than carefully planned and well-executed preservation efforts that take into account the complex historical, social, and environmental contexts of the sites being protected.

### *Prioritization of Donors' Interests*

A final significant limitation of the funding system for cultural heritage protection is the fact that most funds come from international donors, whose priorities are often shaped by political, economic, and strategic considerations rather than the actual needs on the ground (Christensen 2023; Meskel and Isakhan 2024). International donors such as governments and large NGOs tend to direct funds toward regions or projects that align with their foreign policy objectives or international agendas, rather than those that address the most urgent or pressing needs for cultural heritage protection. This can lead to misalignment between the funding priorities of donors and the real-time needs of communities facing heritage destruction. For example, donors may prioritize the restoration of iconic or high-profile cultural sites, such as UNESCO World Heritage sites, while neglecting smaller, less visible, yet equally important, heritage sites that hold significant cultural value for local populations. The prioritization of certain heritage sites or types of heritage, often based on their visibility or symbolic value, may overlook the more pressing needs of communities or the intangible aspects of cultural heritage that are crucial for community identity and resilience.

Furthermore, as articulated by Christensen (2023), international donors often align their funding with their respective countries' changing political agendas and interests. This alignment of funding priorities with political or strategic goals can skew resource allocation toward projects that fit a donor's geopolitical objectives, rather than those that address the most urgent heritage protection needs on the ground. As a result, cultural heritage sites or initiatives that do not align with these broader political or economic interests may struggle to secure the necessary support. This dynamic not only reinforces political power imbalances but can also hinder neutral, needs-based heritage conservation efforts in conflict zones or postdisaster settings, where the protection of cultural heritage should be prioritized based on its intrinsic value to local communities and cultural identities.

## Conclusion: Toward a Resilient Framework for Heritage Protection in Conflict Zones

The analysis of H4P's emergency response for cultural heritage protection in conflict areas, structured within a strategic model, reveals key insights that can inform both policy and implementation frameworks. H4P's experiences emphasize the indispensable role that CSOs play in safeguarding cultural heritage during armed conflicts. Often stepping in as first responders when institutional or governmental interventions are lacking, CSOs prove crucial not only for immediate preservation efforts but also for the long-term rehabilitation of heritage sites in postconflict settings.

A central finding from this study is the importance of leveraging local partnerships. H4P's experiences demonstrate that engaging with local actors who possess cultural knowledge and deep community ties is critical for effective intervention. These collaborations ensure that protection efforts are culturally sensitive and rooted in the community's needs, enhancing their sustainability and impact. Consequently, cultivating and empowering local networks should be a cornerstone of preparedness strategies.

Preparedness, as highlighted in this study, extends beyond reactive measures. It encompasses proactive efforts such as building local capacity, prepositioning resources, and establishing rapid-response protocols. However, these initiatives are often hindered by the limited and short-term nature of funding that many CSOs face. To address this challenge, international heritage organizations must play

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a more active role by advocating for flexible and sustainable funding models that prioritize cultural resilience as a core component of humanitarian action. These institutions can further support CSOs by leading advocacy initiatives, influencing policy frameworks that emphasize cultural heritage protection, and providing capacity-building programs tailored to the specific demands of conflict zones. By amplifying CSOs' efforts, ensuring resource access, and fostering robust local partnerships, international organizations can significantly strengthen the cultural heritage protection landscape.

Ultimately, the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones requires a collaborative approach. By aligning the efforts of civil society, governments, and local communities, and with strong backing from international institutions, it is possible to create a resilient framework that safeguards cultural heritage in the face of ongoing and future challenges. Such a framework would not only preserve the tangible markers of history but also uphold the cultural identity and collective memory of affected communities.

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