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INTERPOL

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CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN PEACE OPERATIONS: SECURITY CHALLENGES AND CRIMINAL THREATS

ITALIAN NAVY TRAINING SHIP
"AMERIGO VESPUCCI"

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*“Culture, in a sense, is like a great river:
It connects and flows through various regions of life and history, linking them
together; it allows us to navigate the world and embrace distant countries and
lands; it quenches the mind’s thirst, nourishes the soul and helps society grow.”*

Pope Francis,
speech delivered at the Faculty of Information Technology and Bionics
of the Péter Pázmány Catholic University in Budapest, 30 April 2023.



CONCEPT NOTE

1. The destruction of cultural heritage in conflicts is a millennia-old practice, often used by warring parties to erase the identity of their enemy, along with their history and collective memory. From antiquity to modern colonial and contemporary wars, the destruction of sites, monuments, and works of art has been a deliberate tactic of warfare, often described as “ethno-cultural cleansing.” There have been many examples of these destructive activities in recent history.

2. On 24 March 2017, the Security Council of the United Nations adopted Resolution 2347, a milestone in the global response to the destruction and trafficking of cultural heritage in the context of armed conflicts. Through the resolution, the Council affirmed the protection of cultural heritage as crucial for the maintenance of international peace and security.

An innovative aspect of Resolution 2347 was the establishment of a multi-level cooperation framework that extends beyond States to include non-state actors. This comprehensive approach encompasses international organizations, such as UNESCO, INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the UN Office of Counter Terrorism Centre (UNOCT), civil society and expert groups.

Another critical aspect of the Resolution was paragraph 19, which, for the first time, explicitly recognized that United Nations peacekeeping operations may be mandated to assist in the protection of cultural heritage, including from destruction, illicit excavation, looting and smuggling in the context of armed conflicts.

This provision marked a critical development in the evolution of international peacekeeping mandates, as Resolution 2347 formally integrated cultural heritage protection into the mandates of United Nations peacekeeping missions. In doing so, the Security Council institutionalized the protection of cultural heritage as a fundamental component of peacekeeping, essential to its final aim of maintaining peace and security.

Additionally, the Resolution acknowledged the links between the destruction of cultural heritage, including the looting and trafficking of cultural property, and the illegal activities of terrorist groups.

Multiple experts have argued that cultural heritage protection should be an integral part of the mandate of every peacekeeping mission, as well as of the force generation process for multinational operations. Not only may this integration increase the effectiveness of peacekeeping and the likelihood of long-term reconciliation, it could enhance the international political acceptability of UN military and police interventions in conflicts, as safeguarding the cultural heritage of humanity is widely regarded as an apolitical objective.

The urgent need to protect and safeguard global cultural heritage was also recognized by the UN General Assembly as one of the principles within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, under Sustainable Development Goal 11.4.



To date, the first peacekeeping mission authorized by the UN Security Council with explicit functions related to cultural heritage protection was MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), operating from April 2013 to December 2023.

In sum, integrating cultural heritage protection into the mandates of peacekeeping operations can have myriad positive outcomes. It enhances the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions and can be vital to building a long-term and sustainable peace. Its successful implementation requires the comprehensive and multidimensional training of all actors involved in the mission, clear mandates, the provision of adequate resources, as well as the design of structured and well-defined frameworks for cooperation.

3. Italy plays an important role internationally in the protection of cultural heritage, reflecting its exceptional cultural and historical legacy. Italy hosts the highest number of properties inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (61), as well as 21 elements recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, including, most recently, Italian cuisine.

Italy was the first country to establish a specialized police unit dedicated to this sector, with the creation in 1969 of the Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (TPC). The TPC works in Italy alongside law enforcement agencies and the Ministry of Culture to protect cultural heritage. It investigates cultural property crimes, monitors archaeological and UNESCO sites, oversees markets and auctions, ensures museum and archival security, and provides specialized training to magistrates, police officers, customs officials, and foreign cultural authorities interested in the Italian model of protection.

It also manages a database of stolen cultural property - with over 7.224.000 catalogued objects (approximately 1.342.000 to be recovered) and more than 1.117.000 images stored, it is the largest database in the world dedicated to illicitly stolen cultural assets.

Italy has also demonstrated leadership through initiatives such as its support for UNESCO's Unite4Heritage campaign and the establishment of the Blue Helmets for Culture Task Force, aimed at protecting cultural heritage in emergency situations and conflicts. Italy is currently a member of the UNESCO Executive Board, having been re-elected in 2023.

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, ratified by Italy together with its two Protocols, represents the primary international legal instrument for the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts. Adopted in the aftermath of the devastation caused by the Second World War, the Convention is based on the principle that damage to the cultural property of any people constitutes damage to the cultural heritage of all humankind. It requires States to adopt preventive safeguarding measures already in peacetime, including inventories, technical documentation, emergency plans, and the protection of movable and immovable cultural property. A particularly significant aspect concerns the integration of cultural property protection within military structures through the inclusion of specific provisions in military regulations and the training of specialized personnel tasked with cooperating with civilian authorities. The 1999 Second Protocol introduced the regime of "enhanced protection" for cultural property of the greatest importance to humanity, managed by the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed



Conflict, of which Italy is a member. A recent initiative in this field is the UNESCO Civil-Military Alliance for the Protection of Cultural Property, launched in 2024 to strengthen cooperation between civilian and military actors in the prevention, protection, and safeguarding of cultural heritage

4. As crimes affecting cultural heritage are often transnational in nature, an effective response requires strong international police cooperation. INTERPOL, as the world's largest international police organization, supports its 196 member countries to respond to cultural heritage crimes by facilitating information exchange, providing operational and technical assistance, and strengthening national capacities. Through its Works of Art unit, INTERPOL manages key tools such as the Stolen Works of Art Database, containing over 57.000 registered objects, and the ID-Art mobile application, which supports the identification of stolen cultural property by both law enforcement and the public. Through global operations and training activities, INTERPOL assists member states in preventing and disrupting trafficking networks, enabling countries to protect and recover their cultural heritage.

INTERPOL's mandate in this field has also been recognized in several United Nations resolutions, including UN Security Council Resolutions 2199 (2015) and 2347 (2017), as well as UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/79/133 and A/RES/73/130 of 2018. Also, the 28th Analytical Report of the Monitoring Team of the UN Security Council has reiterated the importance of using INTERPOL's stolen works of art database and the ID-Art Application as a key tools in the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural property internationally. More recently, through Resolution A/RES/80/229, facilitated by Italy, the UN General Assembly reaffirmed the importance of crime prevention and criminal justice responses to trafficking in cultural property, while emphasizing INTERPOL's key role.

Furthermore, INTERPOL is developing new global initiatives in this field. Following the 27th ICOM General Conference in November 2025 in Dubai (UAE)¹, INTERPOL and ICOM launched a joint operational initiative aimed at supporting museums worldwide in strengthening their security systems and reinforcing collective efforts to prevent theft and illicit trafficking of cultural property.

5. Recognizing that the damage, looting, trafficking, and destruction of humanity's cultural heritage in crises constitutes a serious threat to international peace and security, this side event aims to:
 - a. Examine the links between armed conflict, peacekeeping operations, and the protection of cultural heritage.

¹ The International Council of Museums (ICOM) General Conference was held in Dubai from 11 to 17 November 2025 under the theme "The Future of Museums in Rapidly Changing Communities", bringing together over 4,500 museum professionals, cultural leaders, and policymakers from around the world.



- b. Discuss strategies to better integrate cultural heritage protection as a key component of peacekeeping operations and related mandates.
- c. Explore practical approaches to safeguarding cultural sites and improving the traceability of cultural objects in peacekeeping contexts.
- d. Share best practices and national experiences in cultural heritage protection, in particular the Italian experience.
- e. Highlight the importance of international law enforcement cooperation, particularly the use of INTERPOL's tools and capabilities, in preventing and investigating crimes affecting cultural heritage.

Moderated by: **Mr. Richard Gowan**, Program Director, Global Issues and Institutions and Former UN Director at International Crisis Group

<i>Agenda</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Speakers</i>
Welcome remarks	15:30-15:35	Admiral Giuseppe Berutti Bergotto Chief of the Italian Navy
Opening remarks	15:35-15:45	H.E. Ambassador Mr. Giorgio Marrapodi Permanent Representative of Italy to the UN Mr. Darrin Jones INTERPOL Executive Director for Partnerships and Planning Gen. Salvatore Luongo Commander General of Italian Carabinieri
Keynote interventions	15:45-15:55	Mr. Eliot Minchenberg Director UNESCO Liaison Office to the UN
	15:55-16:05	Mr. Darrin Jones INTERPOL Executive Director for Partnerships and Planning
	16:05-16:15	Mr. Faisal Shahkar United Nations Police Adviser
	16:15-16:25	Brig. Gen. Antonio Petti Cultural Heritage Protection Unit Commander
The insights of UN Offices and Research Institute on Justice, Terrorism and Crime	16:25-16:45	UN Interregional Crime & Justice Research Institute Representative UN Office of Counter Terrorism Representative UN Office on Drugs and Crime Representative
Closing remarks	16:45-17:00	Mr. Jean-Pierre Lacroix Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations

