Protecting Cultural Heritage Under Conflicts

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BACKGROUND
The conflicts have been raging in the Middle East since 2011 and some of the region’s World Heritage sites were severely damaged; the affected countries are inaccessible to work in. Heritage professionals who were working in these countries did not know how to proceed. The international expert community was outraged by the damage to archaeological sites, cities and museums but was feeling helpless, as no coordination was taking place between the various initiators of timid activities.

PROBLEM
UNESCO has since its inception harnessed cultural heritage for building peace and contributing to dialogue. The question was: how can we address the situation of cultural heritage under conflict while contributing to international and national dialogue, and creating positive synergies instead of defiance, and isolated initiatives? What can we do concretely during the conflict to protect cultural heritage in the Middle East?

SOLUTION
I started working at the level of the Culture Sector with my colleagues in the various Conventions (1954, 1970, 2003 and 1972), to elaborate a joint action plan for the emergency safeguarding of Syria’s, Iraq’s, Yemen’s and Libya’s cultural heritage, which were endorsed by our key institutional partners.

Synergies between the Conventions were self-evident: we had the same problems, the same stakeholders, and we needed to address the issues in an integrated manner. We mapped the main actors who were knowledgeable about cultural heritage in the concerned countries or active in its conservation, at the national and international levels. We organized international expert meeting for each country where we gathered for the first time, the key experts that we mapped. These meetings jumpstarted a coherent operational phase where partnerships took off, and where UNESCO was asked to play a coordination role and instigate a series of actions and activities. UNESCO’s work was taken forward at three levels:

- At the international level in terms of advocacy: our work led to the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2199, and to more pronounced engagements at national and regional levels (e.g. France, United States, Italy, Germany, United Kingdom, Council of Europe, etc.)
- At the Statutory level: our work led to effective synergies between the culture conventions, and jumpstarted the elaboration of guidelines for built heritage restoration and reconstruction.
- At the operational level: we started implementing several projects, out of which the most comprehensive is the Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage, funded by the EU and implemented by the Beirut Field Office. This pilot project proved that we were on the right track conceptually; it is delivering real and tangible results. Its structure was therefore duplicated for our actions in Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

THE WAY FORWARD
The scale of the damages and the challenges that lie ahead in the Middle East are huge. Our activities are pilot activities. We need Member State’s support for UNESCO to move at a faster and more intense pace to face the humongous challenges ahead in this conflict.