Lost Sanctity: The Impact of Al-Askari Shrine Destruction in Iraq on Sectarian Conflict

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Abstract

Intentionally destroying cultural sites, especially those with religious importance, weakens communal unity and fuels conflict. The bombings of the Al-Askari Shrine in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 demonstrate these dynamics. This study investigates the consequences of the destruction of the Al-Askari Shrine on sectarian tensions in Iraq and evaluates the reactions of local and international parties. It also outlines the most effective methods for safeguarding religious sites as recommended by UNESCO. A comprehensive literature review was performed by searching databases such as JSTOR for publications published between 2001 and 2022 that addressed the research goals. Thematic analysis was conducted on papers, reports, and documents. The results indicate that the bombings increased violence, whereas reconstruction efforts facilitated reconciliation. The UN has created policy frameworks that prioritize security, education, dialogue, and cooperation between religious and state entities. The study concludes that effectively safeguarding religious heritage requires holistic, preventative approaches. By nurturing understanding and resilience in societies, cultural sites can be preserved to mitigate tensions and advance peace in periods of instability or conflict.

Keywords

Religious heritage sites- religious intolerance- intentional destruction- Al-Askari mosque

1. Introduction

Al-Askari mosque was constructed in 944 A.D. in Samarra, which is located 125 kilometers south of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. The mosque contains a mausoleum where the resting places of Imam Ali Al-Hadi and his son Hassan Al-Askari are. It is one of the world's most revered sanctuaries for Shia, who are the second largest branch of Islam after Sunnism (Ghaidan, 2008). Shiites believe that their last Imam, al-Mahdi, will one day come out of his "crypt" under the Al-Askari mosque and announce the end of the world and the salvation of people (Crowley, 2014).

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On the morning of February 22nd, 2006, a massive blast damaged the mosque and its stunning golden dome. No organization has claimed responsibility for the assault on the mosque. Former U.S. President George W. Bush said that the bombing was an al-Qaeda plan based on "evidence" (Hammer, 2009). Even though the bomb badly damaged the mosque, no one was killed (Knickmeyer, 2006). However, the al-Askari shrine explosion hit the core of Shiite symbolism and identity. Its goal was to offend, irritate, and, above all, push Iraq's Shiites into random acts of violence against their Sunni neighbors (Isakhan, 2016). Another attack occurred on June 13, 2007. Again, in the morning, the terrorists smashed the two surviving 36-metre-high golden minarets bordering the dome's remains. There were no deaths recorded (Bowley, 2007).

Al-Askari mosque is not the only example of intentional destruction of religious heritage during the time of war. Unfortunately, in a number of recent armed conflicts, especially since the 1990s, religious heritage properties have been the more direct targets of systematic and deliberate attacks (Van Der Auwera, 2012). Several religious heritage sites around the world have suffered destruction or damage in recent years by both governments and terrorists. For example, in 2001, the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, representing Buddhism, were demolished by the Taliban (Zúniga, 2010). In 2012, Libya's Sufi-Islam sites, including the Mausoleum of Sidi Abdul-Salam Al Asmar Al-Fituri and Abdullah Al-Sha'ab Mosque, fell victim to Islamic fundamentalists (Joffroy & Ousmane, 2016). The same year, Mali's Timbuktu Mausoleums, also connected to Sufi Islam, were damaged by the Ansar Dine armed Islamist group (Joffroy & Ousmane, 2016).

Syria's Aleppo's Umayyad Mosque, representing Sunni Islam, was damaged in 2013 due to a crossfire between the Syrian regime and armed rebels (Bassam, 2016). The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also destroyed Sunni-Islam sites in Iraq in 2014, such as the Mosque of the Prophet Jonah and Al-Nabi Jirjis Mosque (Hafiz, 2014). Additionally, Christian sites, including The Virgin Mary Church and Dair Mar Elia, were damaged or destroyed during the same period (Judd, 2020). In 2018, several Sunni-Islam mosques in Xinjiang, China, including the Kargilik Grand Mosque, Yutian Aitika Mosque, and Keriya Id Kah Mosque, were impacted by Chinese authorities (Grose, 2020).

As illustrated above, religious heritage sites are particularly susceptible to assault since they are easily accessible and often have few security measures in place. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (2019) clarifies that attacks on religious places that specifically target worshippers have social and political

effects and help spread the message of violent extremist groups and individuals. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the impact of the Al-Askari Shrine's destruction on religious harmony between Sunni and Shia communities and examine the measures taken by the Iraqi government and international community to address the situation.

By addressing these objectives, this research attempts to improve the understanding of the complex connection between the destruction of sacred sites, religious harmony, and the actions taken by the international community to save and maintain these sites.

2. Objectives

- Investigate the impact of the Al-Askari Shrine's destruction on the religious harmony between Sunni and Shia communities in Iraq.

- Examine the responses and measures taken by the international community, including governmental and non-governmental organizations, to address the destruction of the Al-Askari Shrine and mitigate its impact on sectarian tensions.

- Identify the broader measures proposed by UNESCO that can be adopted globally to safeguard religious sites from destruction and promote interfaith dialogue, understanding, and cooperation.

3. Methods

A systematic literature review was conducted to address the research objectives. Academic databases, including JSTOR and Google Scholar, were searched. Search strings utilized relevant keywords and subject headings such as "Al-Askari Shrine bombing," "religious site destruction," "Iraq sectarian conflict," "religious heritage preservation," "interfaith relations," and "United Nations response." Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, credible reports, and online documents published in English from 2001 onwards, directly addressing the destruction's impacts and international community responses. Key information from the selected sources was systematically extracted and organized thematically. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring themes, trends, and insights related to the impact of the Al-Askari Shrine's destruction and the measures taken by the international community. By employing this rigorous methodology, the study aims to provide a robust and comprehensive analysis of the available literature on the subject matter.

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4. Results and Discussion

Combining attacks against heritage and cultural variety with persecution of minorities, as seen in Iraq and Syria, becomes a sort of cultural cleansing that tries to remove the "other's" validity (Cesari, 2015). By specifically targeting minorities' religious heritage places and properties, the underpinnings of society are permanently destroyed, and social disintegration is exacerbated (UNESCO, 2015). These assaults are often aggravated by looting and illegal trafficking of cultural artifacts, which contribute to global organized crime and, in turn, feed armed conflict (Pauwels, 2016).

In general, supporters of the "heritage for peace" movement aim to utilize cultural heritage values as a means to promote peace (Haessly, 2010). They advocate for various strategies to achieve this goal, including respecting religious and cultural traditions, improving pilgrimage routes, protecting and developing sacred heritage sites, recognizing and preserving diverse cultural heritage sites and practices, and addressing factors that contribute to armed conflict and terrorism. By teaching people non-violent problem-solving techniques and collaborating with local groups to restore war-torn heritage sites, the movement seeks to eliminate the root causes of violence while fostering a peaceful environment grounded in cultural appreciation and understanding (Haessly, 2010).

The preceding points show that the international community recognizes the importance of keeping religious heritage sites safe and operational. The infringements on religious heritage sites cost a lot and put nations in a tough place. The importance of protecting cultural heritage sites, particularly religious heritage sites, in promoting peaceful coexistence has been reflected in a number of international collective agreements (Schildgen, 2008). For example, the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949), The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property (1954), The World Heritage Convention (1972), The Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (1985), The European Landscape Convention (2000), and The European Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) (Tsivolas, 2019).

However, the international community often fails to save cultural heritage sites, both during times of war and civil tensions and during times of peace (Auger, 2016; Hammer, 2018). Even when the international community strives to save cultural heritage via judicial supervision, the effort is often ex post facto, occurring after the cultural material has been lost (Hammer, 2018). Furthermore, the presence of non-state actors who are not bound by international treaties exacerbates the problems of cultural heritage protection.

Even more worrying is the fact that unless urgent measures are taken to protect religious heritage sites, the price is greater. The Al-Askari mosque is an example of how the deliberate destruction of religious heritage sites can hurt religious harmony between people of different faiths. The attack certainly unleashed the gates of hell in Iraq, as sectarianism reached unprecedented heights. Iraqis turned on one another like never before, with Shiites slaughtering Sunnis and Sunnis slaughtering Shiites (Hafez, 2014).

The first bombing in 2006 was met with retaliatory violence, with over 1,000 fatalities in the days that followed the explosion (Worth, 2009). In retaliation for the incident, more than 21 Sunni mosques were targeted. Shootings and arson were among the assaults. There was further frightening evidence of "ethnic cleansing" in and around Baghdad's once-mixed neighborhoods, which resulted in demographic changes in the country (Howard, 2006). Existing communal violence between Iraqi Sunni and Shia armed groups transformed into a full-fledged civil war (Knickmeyer, 2011).

Fortunately, in the second bombing in 2007, Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shiite religious leader, called for peaceful demonstrations. He claimed that a Sunni could not have carried out the attack. He believed that the US occupation carried it out to hit Iraq's unity. Sadr's reaction has been cited as one of the reasons for the lack of replication of the escalating violence that followed the 2006 attack (Ridolfo, 2007).

In 2007, an agreement was reached between UNESCO, the Iraqi government, and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki regarding the reconstruction of the Al-Askari Holy Shrine in Samarra (Harris, 2007). Koïchiro Matsuura, the director of UNESCO at that time, emphasized the significance of restoring the shrine as a crucial step towards national reconciliation. The estimated cost of the restoration project amounted to $8.4 million, with the Iraqi government committing $3 million and the remaining funds sourced from the UN Development Group Iraq Trust Fund (UN News, 2007). The completion of the shrine's reconstruction served as a powerful symbol of unity, as both Shiite and Sunni communities were involved in the process, sending a resolute message against terrorism and promoting peace among the Iraqi people (Ahmed, 2007).

A series of meetings between Sunni and Shia religious and tribal leaders took place in Samarra as part of UNESCO's reconstruction of Iraq's Al-Askari shrine. It was important for the shrine's long-term survival that both Sunni and Shia communities, as well as the government, agreed to its restoration without sectarian interference and promised to protect it in the future (UNESCO, 2015).

Before starting the reconstruction of the shrine, immediate precautionary measures needed to be taken to clean up the site, classify the decorative and architectural features and store them. In addition, training

programs to teach Iraqi architects and civil engineers were also included. The restoration effort has had a significant cultural influence, but it has also had a significant economic impact, employing more than 600 locals in various roles (Yekrangnia & Mobarake, 2015).

In April 2009, the shrine was reopened to the public (Schoppert, 2017). With the cooperation of UNESCO and Samara's municipal government, three years after the devastating bombing and one year into the rebuilding work, around 500 thinkers and religiously famous figures from different Shia cities in Iraq visited Samara to hold discussions with their Sunni counterparts. The mosque was reopened as a place of prayer, serving as a significant symbol of the ongoing reconciliation process (UNESCO, 2015). So, when the Al-Askari shrine was restored, it wasn't just to keep a piece of history alive. It was also to help people from different cultures understand each other and, most importantly, to help Sunni and Shia people live together peacefully (UNESCO, 2015).

As demonstrated in the preceding example, the deliberate demolition of religious and culturally significant properties is highly personal, fears communities, and generates long-lasting grudges that will inevitably lead to continued conflict (Thames, 2021). Therefore, the United Nations has expressed concern about the increasing number of terrorist attacks that target religious heritage sites. The United Nations enacted resolution 55/254 dated 2001, titled "Protection of Religious Sites," which stresses the need to combat hatred and sectarian violence, including the violation of religious sites (United Nations General Assembly, 2001).

In addition, the UN Statement of 2010 Emphasizes the need to protect religious and cultural heritage sites in light of the World Heritage Convention, and it helps Member States come up with broad recommendations on how to manage religious heritage sites (The United Nations General Assembly, 2021).

Building upon the previous work, in 2021, the General Assembly of the United Nations approved a noticeable resolution, "Promoting a Culture of Peace and Tolerance to Safeguard Religious Sites," calling attention to the importance of heightening international efforts to boost an international dialogue on the promotion of peace at all levels (Thames, 2021). The 2021 resolution also highlighted the categorical rejection of all acts or threats of violence and demolition targeted at religious and cultural heritage sites. This would require state members to adhere to all articles concluded by the "United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites." This plan indicates that states are mainly responsible for ensuring security

and protecting people and religious sites through a variety of normative frameworks and policy tools, such as national security policies (United Nations General Assembly, 2021).

However, the main focus of the "United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites" was to identify a preventative strategy that guides state parties to prevent the violation of religious heritage sites. Among the preventative approaches are fostering interfaith dialogue and valuing the sustained role of religious leaders in building trust. Along with religious actors, civil society, youth, women, local communities, and national parliaments may all play a critical role in recognizing possible threats to religious sites. Collaborations between these groups and religious leaders who run religious sites could also help build community resilience and what is called "multicultural competency." Both of these things are important for building global peace and social cohesion (The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, 2019).

The enhancement of education programs that encourage tolerance and respect and explain the importance and protection of religious heritage sites is a priority in the UN's prevention strategy for 2021. The strategy also focuses on hate speech, including online hate speech. The plan sets out a number of provisions that require parties and online service providers to undertake certain actions to address and prevent hate speech (The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, 2019).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the consequences of the intentional destruction of the Al-Askari Shrine and the actions implemented to mitigate sectarian tensions in Iraq. The literature assessment found strong evidence that the attack intensified existing Sunni-Shia communal tensions, leading to widespread retaliatory bloodshed and contributing to Iraq's plunge into civil war. UNESCO's rehabilitation initiatives, in collaboration with Iraqi authorities and religious leaders, were crucial for reconciliation. By repairing the holy site and promoting interfaith conversations, a calm climate for collaboration was fostered. Targeting religious heritage undermines social cohesion, whereas safeguarding these sites and traditions helps to mitigate conflicts. An in-depth examination of global frameworks showed acknowledgement of the importance of protecting cultural property rights and a developing comprehension of proactive tactics. The UN's comprehensive programs encompass conserving physical sites and tackling core issues such as intolerance through education. Challenges persist in enforcing regulations due to the involvement of non-state entities and intricate political dynamics in the region. This research provides detailed insights into the

complex relationship between religious heritage destruction, identity-based violence, and peacebuilding efforts. Restoration alone cannot eliminate sectarian barriers, but managing sacred areas in a culturally sensitive way shows potential for fostering religious tolerance.

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