

THE SECURITIZATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL DISCUSSION THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF ATTACKS OF ISIL/DAESH

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Abstract: *Cultural heritage often becomes a victim of armed conflicts either by collateral damage or by deliberate destruction and looting. As a consequence of the terrorist attacks of recent years – especially the large-scale and widely broadcasted iconoclastic destruction perpetrated by ISIL/Daesh in Iraq and Syria – their protection gradually became part of the international security policy agenda. Proving the symbolic significance of these attacks, they have been often claimed both as acts against the peaceful coexistence of different religions and cultures in the region and as an insult against Western civilisation and multilateral bodies which the meticulously drawn-up discourse of the terrorist group strongly underpinned. Using the securitization theory as a framework, the aim of this paper is to analyze through discursive means the reaction of different international political actors - especially France, Italy, UN and UNESCO - over the attacks of the terrorist organisation, arguing that a continuous securitization process has been taking place as regards the safeguarding of cultural heritage.*

Keywords: SECURITISATION, CULTURAL HERITAGE, COPENHAGEN SCHOOL, ISIL/DAESH, UNESCO

1. Introduction¹

Deliberate targeting of cultural heritage in armed conflicts is not a new phenomenon, as we have seen several examples during the Yugoslavian Wars. However by the acts of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Daesh – after gaining control over territories in Iraq and Syria from 2013-2014 profiting from the chaos [1] of the Syrian civil war –, we have been witnessing an unprecedented iconoclastic havoc over the large-scale destruction on sites of religious, cultural or historical importance staged by, and over its systematic application in the group's carefully built-up, socially mediated propaganda.

Through the global outcry after the devastating acts of ISIL/Daesh on cultural heritage, a process of securitization vis-a-vis cultural heritage protection can be well detected. This process opens the way for an enhanced international commitment for cooperation together with mobilization of money and personnel in the field through the establishment of a wider range of toolbox including military means and thus adding a new area to security policy research.

The wide and high-quality media footage of these terrorist attacks aimed to facilitate the dissemination of the group's ideology, as well as to serve as a physical testimony of their mark in history and as a visual representation of their triumph over values deemed evil by them. By providing spectacular and easily transmittable content for international media platforms, the organisation's purpose was to shock and make the target feel impotent, but also to facilitate its recruiting and advertising efforts. [2]

Howsoever barbarous and wanton these attacks may have been seen, they have been explicitly justified by and carefully built upon two key concepts deeply integrated in the group's propaganda. One is symbolic sectarianism: by attacking mosques and shrines of Muslim minorities, especially Shia and Sufi objects, ISIL/ Daesh aimed to purify its territory of contradictory visions, furthermore in a wider geopolitical context to insult Shi'ite regional powers. The other is pre-monotheistic iconoclasm: through assaulting ancient sites they wished to wipe out all the remainders of polytheistic cultures, but also to commit attack on object deemed valuable by Western civilisation. [3] On the other hand, these attacks have a though less spectacular but much more practical justification, namely the illegal excavating, looting and trafficking of artefacts, of which exact data can be hardly detected, but according to some estimations, it provided for the second largest source of income for the terrorist group after oil. [4]

The first chapter of this paper introduces the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School complemented with subsequent literature, supporting the view that social-cultural circumstances also need to

be considered in the analysis and emphasizing the role of the media in the framing process.

In the second chapter, by using securitization as a starting point of analysis, taking the two most prominent international organisations in this field – namely the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – as securitizing actors, the paper examines how the attacks on cultural and religious sites perpetrated by ISIL/Daesh have been reformulated through official discourse so as to position the destructive acts as security issues of international importance, thus urging for increased commitment and action.

The third chapter aims to shed light on the role of France and Italy in the international securitization process: by placing cultural diplomacy and the protection of global cultural heritage among their foreign policy priorities, the two countries proactively contributed to the justification of the need for the international community's mobilization. The paper primarily uses official statements and press releases published on the website of the respective organisations and the countries' permanent delegations to UN as a base of a discursive analysis.

2. Securitization – an efficient framework for analysing emerging security issues

The end of the Cold War and the windup of bipolar division built upon the nuclear threat brought to light a much wider range of issues which have challenged the traditional hard power-oriented security approach. Furthermore, many of the new emerging issues underpinned the inadequacy of the nation-state framework to efficiently handle them. One of the theories answering this need of widening and deepening the traditional frames of security studies was elaborated by the Copenhagen School. [5]

As a response of the widening issue, they have endorsed a sectoral approach introducing social, economic and environmental fields to the research of security besides the traditional sectors of military and politics. By conceptualizing the notion of security, they have launched a discursive approach explaining the process of securitization, claiming that practically any public issue can become a security issue only by staging it as an existential threat to the referent object by a securitizing actor, in order to gain legitimacy for passing emergency measures which would not have been possible otherwise. [(...) the utterance itself is the act. By saying it, something is done.] [6] According to this theory, the "speech act" itself – i.e. presenting something as an existential threat - is what raises a concern to become a security issue (securitizing move). The eventual condition of securitization is that the audience (the referent object) accepts it as such, endowing the securitizing actor (most often the political elite) with the power to decide about launching extraordinary measures to alleviate insecurity. Thus this two-phase process is intersubjective and socially constructed and, what especially needs to be underlined: based on a political choice. [7]

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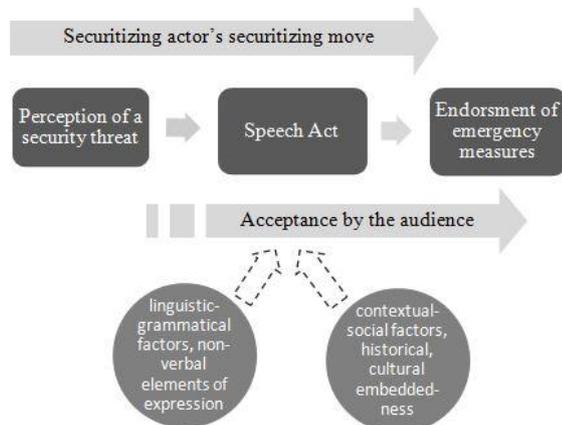


Fig. 1: Securitization process (ed. by author)

The key to successful securitization thus depends on two factors: a linguistic-grammatical (adequately built-up rhetoric) and a contextual-social one (securitizing actor disposing of authority, type of threat). [8] As Balzacq points out, the audience's role is central in the process as it provides both formal and moral support for the securitizing actor, who, in order to be efficient, must relate to the experience, feelings, fears and needs of its hearers. [9] Consequently, for analyzing a securitization process (Fig. 1), we have to take into consideration a number of aspects, starting from identifying the securitizing actor, the referent object(s), the issue(s) to be securitized, the motives of securitization, to perceiving the conditions (context) and the results of the process. [10]

Balzacq draws our attention to the importance of the relation of the discourse to the external reality – highly ignored by the Copenhagen School – stating that securitization is strongly embedded in a complex sequence of events and causes, thus influenced by its cultural and historical environment, also emphasizing the crucial role of timing for increasing the chance of winning the audience. [11]

Often argued against the concept of securitization as defined by the Copenhagen School that it only puts under scrutiny verbal elements of communication, excluding non-verbal expressions of security, like physical action or visual representation [12] – although the latter becoming more and more prominent (as we could see the immense role of media content about destructions in the case of ISIL/Daesh) with the increasing dominance of tele-/networked communication. Williams points out the impact of the shift in the medium of communication towards visual media to securitization theory, recommending to take into consideration the representative and influential role of images in the acceptability and sustainability of security policies and also indicating the need of an expanded institutional analysis involving communications institutions (i.e. the media) – which is working for slightly different goals (ex. market share, audience attraction). [13]

The role of the media has to be underlined here: as Vultee puts it, securitization functions on the one hand as an independent media frame by highlighting the existential threat of an issue and cuing affective and cognitive responses, and on the other hand, as an effect of media (as the media amplifies or quietens certain topics). How the news mediate about certain issues is already a reconstruction of reality by experts/ authorities, culturally influenced and can differ from the target audience of the given medium. [14]

As for cultural heritage, it is important to note that we can witness a multi-level securitization: it is not primarily the state actor who initiates and treats the securitization; however we will see that they play a great role in defining the international security agenda. [15]

3. Emergency measures endorsed? – The reaction of the UN Security Council and UNESCO

Since the blowing-up of the Bamiyan Buddhas by Taliban in 2001, a strengthened focus and a progressive securitization can be witnessed in the field of cultural heritage protection in conflict zones, although the first international normative document specifically addressing the safeguarding of cultural heritage in war-torn environment had been drawn up in the post-world-war era (1954 Hague Convention and its consecutive protocols). But the violent acts of ISIL/Daesh shed light on the insufficiency of effective tools on an international level to prevent such acts, thus intensifying international response in this regard.

UNESCO – as the only international organ with both a quasi-global membership and a mandate in the field of cultural heritage protection – has played a pivotal role in this process: in her statements, the then-Director-General of the organisation, Irina Bokova has systematically described the violent acts perpetrated by ISIL/Daesh against cultural property as *war crime* and an evidence of *cultural cleansing*, a term describing the intentional strategy aiming at destroying cultural diversity by deliberately targeting individuals on the basis of their cultural, ethnic or religious background [16]. By her discourse, Mrs. Bokova has been seeking to raise awareness on the issue and thus urge international mobilization both to fight against illicit trafficking of artefacts as a means of financing terrorism and to stop the strategic destructions of the terrorist organisation, furthermore to call for the prosecution of the perpetrators based on the precedent of Timbuktu,² also fostering the criminalization of the acts. [17]

Through her narrative, she has been consistently establishing a strong link between attacks against culture and cultural objects and against human lives, framing them as strategic acts against minorities in the region to wipe out all traces of their history, [depriving them of their cultural roots] [18], their identity and thus erasing their reason of existence. This narrative designated the inhabitants of Syria and Iraq in general, and the minorities living in the region in particular, and their identity as referent objects in the crossfire of attacks. It resonates with the discourse enounced by the terrorist organisation, often claiming to clear Islamic faith of any traces of polytheistic cultures and idolatry, [19] and often reported to link destruction of places of historical or religious importance and places of worship with expulsion or cleansing among certain ethnic or religious groups (Shi'ites, Yazidis, Kurds, Christians etc.) [20]

Irina Bokova termed the process of destructions as a [security issue, with terrorists using the destruction of heritage as a weapon of war, an instrument of propaganda and destabilization, and as a means of financing their operations] [21], arguing that cultural heritage [must stand at the heart of all efforts for peace building] [22].

This kind of rhetoric³ highly reflects the aim of UNESCO to put forward the issue on the international security agenda by integrating culture and cultural heritage protection within the top priorities of the peace enforcement/making measures of international community, which was soon backed by several states. Underpinning its commitment, at its 38th General Conference session in November 2015, UNESCO adopted by Resolution 48 a “Strategy for the reinforcement of the organization's actions for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict” proposing amongst others to incorporate the protection of culture into humanitarian action, security strategies

² In its judgment no. ICC-01/12-01/15, the International Criminal Court (ICC) convicted Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi, member of Ansar Dine terrorist group for war crime of attacking protected objects, namely 10 buildings of historical and religious significance in Timbuktu, Mali, 9 of them World Heritage sites, acknowledging the important role of cultural heritage in the identity of and links within the local community, being the first case convicting a defendant exclusively for the deliberately directing attacks against cultural properties. [41]

³ The present article examines press releases published by UNESCO on www.unesco.org and www.whc.unesco.org on the conflict in Iraq and Syria during the period of August, 2013 – June, 2017.

and peace-building processes [23], further underlining UNESCO's leading role in international cooperation in this field.

We can detect parallelism in the rhetoric of the official communication of UN and its organs⁴ condemning these attacks. The then-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon systematically designated the "destruction of our common heritage" as "war crime", "an attack on humanity as a whole", reiterating for the prosecution of the perpetrators and calling the international community for "urgent" action to halt the destruction and counter illicit looting in trafficking of cultural artefacts [24]. This discourse generalized much more the referent object, giving an impression that the international community as a whole is threatened.

Although the UN Security Council, responsible organ for maintaining international peace and security has long condemned the illicit trafficking of artefacts in a row of decisions, Resolution 2199 adopted on 12 February 2015, aiming to disrupt financial sources of ISIL, Al-Nusrah Front and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida, is the first one clearly affirming a link between plundering and smuggling of cultural heritage and terrorism financing as a means to support recruitment efforts and to strengthen operational capability [25], reflecting its place in the UN's counterterrorism efforts. [26]

The Secretary-General often denounced the protection of cultural heritage as "a political and security imperative", emphasizing the importance of strengthening the link between cultural heritage protection and peacebuilding efforts in his discourse [27], which is eventually well reflected by the landmark resolution 2347, unanimously adopted by the UN Security Council in 24 March 2017 – initiated by Italy and France – the first one fully dedicated to the destruction and looting of cultural heritage in conflict zones, emphasizing their impact of [undermining the security, stability, governance, social, economic and cultural development of affected States, its impact of undermining security], and amongst others giving green light to cultural peacekeeping. [28]

4. How protection of cultural heritage has been securitized – the role of France and Italy

France and Italy has been taking a very proactive role in promoting the inclusion of the protection of cultural heritage in the international security agenda and enhancing international cooperation.

Actively intervening in the conflict in Mali, France played an important role in the first-ever resolution of UN Security Council to decide about the inclusion of a cultural component in the mandate of a peacekeeping mission (UN Security Council Resolution 2100 on the mandate of MINUSMA) [29]. As for the fight against ISIL/Daesh, France highlighted its full commitment and readiness for mobilisation to halt the destruction and looting of the terrorist group, [a major challenge for international peace and security], underlining their common objective with Italy in this regard. [30]

Francois Hollande, the then-President of the Republic of France, has first addressed France's commitment to safeguard cultural heritage in Iraq in their effort to fight against terrorism on common visit and press conference together with Irina Bokova in Louvre Museum. [31] In his speech on the occasion of the 38th General Conference of UNESCO in November 2015, he drew up France's priorities in this respect: fight against illicit trafficking of cultural property, prevention of cultural property to fall in the hands of terrorists (for this purpose proposing a "right of asylum" for artefacts), and conservation of the memory of sites. Furthermore, he called for the creation of an international fund to support cultural properties in danger. [32]

In December 2016, together with the United Arab Emirates, France organised an International Conference on Safeguarding Endangered Cultural Heritage, built on two purposes: firstly, for the creation of an international fund enhancing the protection of cultural heritage in war-torn contexts and secondly, for the establishment of an international safe havens network for artefacts. As a result, a global cooperation, called ALIPH (l'Alliance internationale pour la protection du patrimoine dans les zones de conflit / Alliance for the protection of Cultural heritage in conflict areas) was created in March 2017 to finance preventive measures, emergency interventions and post-conflict rehabilitation projects, to which France has already contributed with 30 million euros. [We cannot distinguish the attacks committed against monuments from the massacres against people. The same purpose, the same objective: to smash what could exist before to kill hope after: eradicate the human and cultural diversity] – said Francois Hollande said on the occasion of launching the project. [33]

Some claim that France's strategic goal behind its active role in this field is to gain a leading status in international cultural protection thus enhancing its role as a soft power, which is well reflected by its discourse of cultural diplomacy and its proactive engagement in multilateral initiatives. [34]

Italy's role as a cultural superpower is well-known, cultural diplomacy in its foreign policy priorities is highly valorised and building on its longstanding expertise. [35] The country has played a very active and visible role in the process, especially in the promotion of the establishment of rapid mobilization forces for the protection of cultural heritage, which eventually got a legal force by Resolution 2347. On the adoption of the resolution, Enzo Amendola, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs claimed, that [integrating the cultural dimension into the prevention and settlement of conflicts is not only a moral obligation: it is also a political and security imperative] [36]

Along with Jordan and international organisations such as UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) and INTERPOL (International Criminal Police Organization), Italy presented the project "Protecting Cultural Heritage – An Imperative for Humanity" at a ministerial meeting at the UN Headquarters in September 2015, which launched a high-level partnership to enhance the protection of cultural heritage targeted by terrorists and illicit traffickers underlining the need to make the already-existing tools more effective. [37] Irina Bokova deemed the initiative as [an important step in all work to counter violent extremism, one of the most important threats to international peace and security today.] [38]

Underpinning its commitment in the field of cultural peacekeeping, in February 2016 Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNESCO on the establishment of the first national task force made up of Carabinieri personnel in the framework of UNESCO's Unite4Heritage global coalition and based on the above mentioned UNESCO General Assembly Resolution No. 48 to be deployed in case of crisis or natural catastrophe on the demand of any member state. [39]

5. Results of discussion

The paper intended to shed light on the main elements of the phenomena of securitization ongoing in the field of international cultural heritage protection. Through the examined press materials, a securitizing move could be identified from two perspectives: one is the construction of a link between illicit trafficking of artefacts and its role in financing extremist groups and thus feeding conflicts. The other is the denouncing of on-site destruction on cultural heritage as attacks on religious and ethnic minorities, or even against humanity as part of terrorist propaganda intending to erase certain parts of history and memories of a peaceful coexistence or to defy Western values.

⁴ The present article examines press releases and meeting coverages published by UN on <https://www.un.org/press/en> on the conflict in Iraq and Syria during the period of December, 2013 – December, 2017.

It is probably still too early to assess the success of the securitization process, but the paper drew up some of the main results and outcomes as a materialization of these discursive frames at an international level: a process leading to the drawing up of emergency measures can be detected by the integration of a cultural dimension in counterterrorism and peacebuilding efforts and by the mobilisation of extra funds for their protection. To be able to explore the phenomenon more comprehensively, a more detailed and quantitative research on the tendencies presented in this paper would be needed.

6. Conclusion

The power of discourse has an immense role in security, and is thus an essential aspect of analysis. An increasing awareness and commitment can be seen in the field of international cultural heritage protection fostered by the international outrage against the violent destructions and high-scale looting perpetrated by terrorist groups in recent years, especially by ISIL/Daesh in Syria and Iraq, but also al-Kaida affiliates in North-Africa, resulting in ground-breaking decisions and activities (judgment of ICC on Timbuktu, MINUSMA, Italian Task Force etc.), highlighting the harmful impact of such acts on international peace and security.

According to Meskell, decision-making power still rest with states in current world order, thus in international organisations. Hence, UNESCO (or UN) is only able to encourage certain types of behaviour through diplomatic channels without a capacity for intervention neither legally, nor financially. [40] Against this statement, this paper argued, it is exactly the diplomatic and coordinating role and the provision of multilateral platforms and frameworks for facilitating the coordinated action of Member States in which their real strength and potential lies.

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