

Israeli and American bombs damage Iran's cultural heritage

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15 March 2026

US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's invocation of "no rules of engagement" and fighting "to win" at all costs in the current barbarous assault on Iran are the hallmarks of a war of extermination. The Trump administration and its various accomplices at home and abroad not only regard civilian life and the basic functioning of society as expendable, but also seek to obliterate the culture and historical memory of the Iranian people.

To this end, the American-Israeli assault on Iran has not only murdered thousands of people, among them more than 150 schoolgirls in Minab, devastated essential civilian infrastructure including schools, hospitals, fuel depots and communications nodes, but is seeking to destroy the cultural legacy of the country and its historical memory. The imperialist barbarians have bombed cultural heritage sites, particularly in the ancient city of Isfahan, but also in Tehran and even in remote locations.

As David North noted at the recent emergency online meeting, the war on Iran is part of an effort by US capitalism "to abolish the 20th century—to wipe out all the consequences of the national democratic and socialist struggles of the 20th century, to act as if it was all somehow a big mistake, that colonial domination can be restored and imperialism can rule."

The destruction of Iranian antiquities and cultural heritage sites is part of this campaign. Historical monuments, museums and religious sites embody a people's memory and social cohesion. Attacking them seeks to demoralize and disorient the population, to cut it off from its own development and to undermine the social solidarity necessary to fight imperialism.

The bombings since February 28 have seen several notable attacks on Iranian cultural heritage:

— The Golestan Palace in Tehran was damaged by shockwaves from a nearby airstrike. The palace is a symbol of the Qajar dynasty's power in the 18th and 19th centuries.

"The bombing may not have targeted the palatial site, but the palace is close to the old bazaar and other important 19th-century buildings, including a mosque," Sussan Babaie, a professor of Iranian and Islamic arts at the University of London, told the arts journal *Hyperallergic* in an email. "Together they constitute the core of Tehran as it was built as the capital city in the late 19th century."

Babaie noted that the complex houses a large selection of artworks and one of the world's most important collections of Islamic manuscripts.

"These manuscripts, many of which include lavish paintings and illumination, represent the cultural, artistic, and intellectual heritage of Islam and Iran stretching back centuries."

Several UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage sites in Isfahan, an ancient city about 270 miles (434 km) south of Tehran, were hit by Israeli and American munitions. All sites displayed the UNESCO blue flag, marking them as protected sites.

— Chehel Sotoun (Forty Columns) Palace: Bombing has caused a large crack in the 17th-century fresco of Shah Tahmasp. The *Art Newspaper* notes that local media published photographs that "show scattered debris, shattered windows and broken wooden doors." Other reports note that there is debris scattered in the palace's Persian Garden.

— Masjed-e J?me (Friday Mosque): A blast wave, according to the *New York Times*, sent iconic turquoise tiles "crashing to the ground," and calligraphic panels were dislodged and shattered in addition to damage to the historic minaret area. The *Times* notes, "The mosque, with its brightly colored minarets and domes covered in Persian calligraphy, is renowned as a gem of Persian and Islamic architecture."

— Naqsh-e Jahan Square: Damage to multiple landmarks within the square, including Ali Qapu Palace (shattered doors/windows) and Jame Abbasi Mosque (tile damage).

— Rakib Khaneh Mansion: A Safavid-era pavilion originally used for royal equestrian equipment sustained structural damage and broken windows.

— Ashraf Hall and Timurid Hall: Both historic administrative/residential structures sustained damage due to their proximity to the provincial governorate building, which was targeted in an airstrike.

In the Khorramabad Valley in Lorestan, about 280 miles (494 km) southwest of Tehran in the Zagros mountains, damage to two ancient sites has been verified.

— Some of the five prehistoric caves dating back to 63,000 B.C., a UNESCO World Heritage Site, sustained damage from an American strike, likely with a huge "bunker buster" bomb,

on underground missile silos, caused structural fracturing, major fissure cracks and sedimentary collapse, and damage from explosive residue and dust.

UNESCO's webpage on this site notes that the archeology of the caves testifies to "the domination of the Neanderthals in the valley during the Middle Paleolithic. During the transition between the Middle and Upper Paleolithic periods, anatomically modern humans arrived in the valley, expanded their settlements and eventually supplanted the Neanderthals ... which shed light on the debate over human migration routes out of Africa into Eurasia."

— Falak-ol-Aflak Castle. This 1,800-year-old Sassanid-era fortress saw its perimeter hit March 8. The Sassanids were the great Persian rivals to the Roman Empire. While the main structure remains standing, adjacent archaeological and anthropological museums were destroyed, which housed many of the artifacts recovered from these caves, including 60,000-year-old stone tools and shell pendants.

Heritage sites in other areas of Iran have been struck as well, including:

— The Salar Saeed and Asef Vaziri Mansions. These 19th-century Kurdish heritage buildings suffered damage to their intricate stained-glass windows and decorative doors during the air campaign in Iranian Kurdistan.

In Lebanon, the violent Israeli onslaught, which has displaced at least 700,000 civilians and killed at least 773 civilians, damage to heritages sites has also been widespread. These include:

— Tyre: Museum windows have been blown out and brush fires ignited by bombing has spread to ancient ruins.

— Baalbek: Airstrikes have come within 448 yards (500m) of the Roman Temple complex and portions of the historic medieval city walls have sustained cracks or partial collapses due to nearby explosions.

— Sidon: The Sidon Sea Castle is being actively monitored for seismic shocks from blasts. The Old City market has sustained damage. Archives in a nearby Palestinian refugee camp that the Israelis have repeatedly bombed have been destroyed.

— Beirut: Bombing has erased local archives and cultural centers. Dozens of local "social and heritage" centers in Dahiyah, the huge suburban area to the south of the city, which house genealogies, oral histories and land deeds for displaced families, have been reduced to rubble.

All these attacks are breaches of international law. The 1954 Hague Convention and the 1972 World Heritage Convention form the legal backbone for protecting global culture during conflicts. Article 4 of the Hague Convention (Respect for Cultural Property) enjoins signers of the convention to avoid "any use of the property and its immediate surroundings ... for purposes which are likely to expose it to destruction or damage in the event of armed conflict." Israel, Iran and the United States are all signatories to this convention.

The 1972 World Heritage Convention, Article 6, states that countries signing the convention agree "not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage ... situated on the territory of other States Parties to this Convention." All three countries have signed this protocol.

Destruction of heritage sites can also constitute war crimes under Article 8(2)(b)(ix) of the 1998 Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court (ICC): "Intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, historic monuments ... provided they are not military objectives."

While none of the three countries have ratified the Rome Statute, it is possible that US and Israeli leaders could be brought before the ICC. South Africa sought to take officials of the Zionist government before the court in 2023 for genocide.

Both Israel and the United States left UNESCO in 2019, particularly since the former was enraged at the organization for identifying and seeking to protect Palestinian historical sites. The US rejoined under the Biden administration, and then the Trump government again withdrew in July.

The destruction of cultural heritage sites has been a goal of every American and Israeli action in the Middle East since 2003. The sacking of Iraq's National Museum took place under the eyes of US troops in April 2003, along with the repeated occupation of cultural and heritage sites in that country. In Syria, there were the anti-cultural crimes of the forces that "covert" American attempts to overthrow Assad unleashed in 2015. The ongoing genocide in Gaza has targeted numerous Palestinian antiquities, museums and archives.

The US and Israeli militaries know exactly what they are doing in setting out to destroy Iran's cultural patrimony. UNESCO said in a statement that "it has communicated to all parties concerned the geographical coordinates of sites on the World Heritage List as well as those of national significance, to avoid any potential damage."



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