Will Palmyra rise again? - War Crimes against Cultural Heritage and Post-war Reconstruction

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Abstract

The destruction of cultural heritage in North-West Africa and the Middle East beginning with the start of civil wars after the so-called 'Arab Spring' has been devastating. Centuries and millennia old archaeological sites and historic cities are demolished through combat, looting or wanton destruction. Thereby, the intentional destruction of cultural heritage is considered to be a war crime because of its severe effects on identity and cultural capital of a population. How dearly those lost cultural treasures are already missed, is shown in the almost instant debate whether or not destroyed heritage should be reconstructed or not with equally valid arguments on both sides. Many concerns are focused on practical issues such as the sheer financial costs of adequate reconstruction. However, one matter seems to be overrepresented within this discussion: authenticity of reconstructions or the lack thereof. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the role of authenticity of post-war reconstructions, explore ethical implications and discuss the potential of reconstructions as means of post-war regeneration.

Keywords: cultural heritage, iconoclasm, authenticity, identity, post-war reconstruction, Syria.

1 Introduction

The increased presence of Islamic terror organisations beginning with the so-called 'Arab Spring', created not only terror and violence against civilians but also against cultural heritage became a sad routine in the Middle East and many parts of Africa. From Sufi and Sheikh tombs in Mali and Egypt to entire World Heritage Sites such as Nimrud, Hatra and Palmyra – nothing seems to be safe from wanton destruction. These destructions are no petty crimes or unfortunate collateral damage. Access to cultural heritage is considered to be a basic human right (e.g. Article 27 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Silverman & Fairchild Ruggles 2007). This permanent deprivation of cultural heritage is therefore a violation of these human rights and considered to be a war crime.

Under Article 8(2)(e)(iv) of the Rome Statute and the 1954 The Hague Convention, the ICC's first cultural destruction war crime trial opened on 16th January 2016 in The Hague against Ahmad al-Faqi for destroying mausoleums in Timbuktu. Chief prosecutor Bensouda declared, that '[t]he charges. . . involve most serious crimes. They are about the destruction of irreplaceable historic monuments, and they are about a callous assault on the dignity and identity of entire populations, and their religious and historical roots" (Bowcott, 2016). This statement already illustrates the severity of those crimes towards the well-being of a population and the damage dealt to a country. Irina Bokova, director general of UNESCO, also remarked that 'the destruction of heritage is inseparable from the persecution of people' making it far more than just a cultural issue (Bokova, 2016).

Like the Bamiyan Buddhas before, Palmyra became a symbol for the vulnerability of cultural heritage, a memorial for cultural loss and a warning for us and future generations that cultural heritage should not be taken for granted and can be lost at any time. Because of this, Syria and especially Palmyra are chosen as representative examples to illustrate the motivations behind these destructions as well as potential counter measures. However, other countries such as Libya, Yemen, Mali and Iraq should not be forgotten and deserve as much attention and effort.

Figure 1: Screenshot from propaganda video that shows destruction of artefacts in the Mosul Museum.

Figure 2: Propaganda image released by IS that shows destruction of Baal'shamin temple in Palmyra.

This contribution will not approach this topic from a legal, but from a heritage studies perspective and will explore the practical and theoretical implications of intentional destruction of cultural heritage. Thereby, this paper will focus on the violations of human cultural rights through the theft of identity and future economic resources, but will also provide suggestions how to reclaim the destroyed cultural heritage for the benefit of the Syrian population and the international community.

2 A cultural genocide: The grand strategy of the IS

While the official motivation for cultural crimes of the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS) is the Islamic aniconism and laws against idolatry (Quran 5:87–92, 21:51–52), it would be too easy and monocausal to blame solely religious motivations for these crimes (Noyes, 2013). The IS developed a grand strategy that uses the cultural heritage of its enemies and stages acts of destruction with high media coverage (Fig. 1-2). The intention of this practice is obvious: it is used as means of propaganda to shock and demoralise their enemies, demonstrate power, and to distract from their own weaknesses such as the destructions of Nimrud and the temples of Baal'shamin and Bel in Palmyra show which followed times of great military losses (Nordland, 2015; Romey, 2015; Kaplan, 2015; Mamoun, 2015).[1] While those are only short-term motivations, the true severity reveals itself in the long-term consequences which can be regarded as one of the biggest violations of human cultural rights: the attempted obliteration of the Syrian identity and the sustainable destruction of cultural capital.

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[1] A detailed timeline of relevant military events as well as a list of destroyed cultural heritage can be found on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_ISIL-related_events; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destruction_of_cultural_heritage_by_ISIL
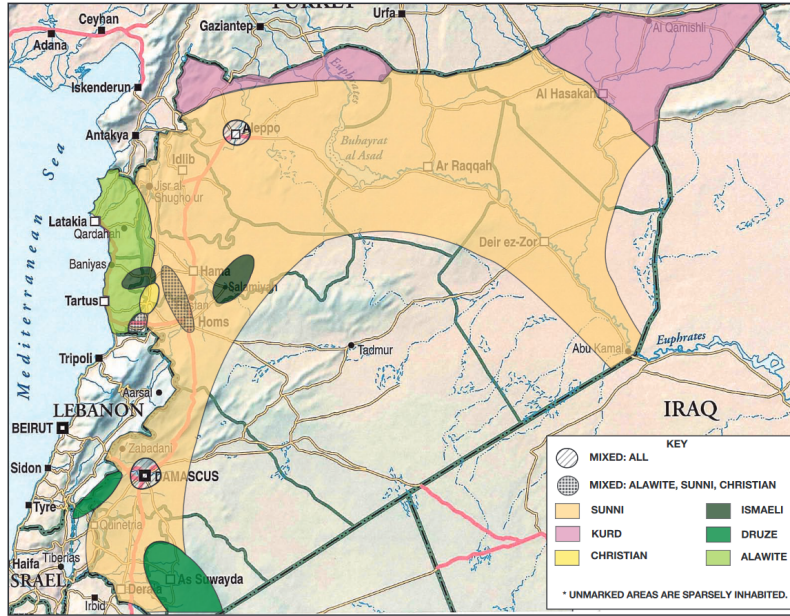
Figure 3: Map of ethno-religious composition in Syria before war (after Holliday 2011, Map 2)
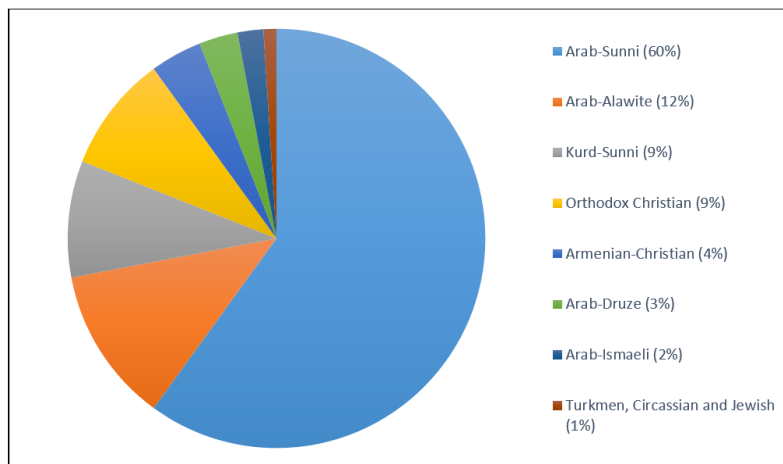

Table 1: Ethno-religious composition of Syria in 2011 (after Holliday 2011)

2.1 The destruction and re-creation of identity

The destruction of cultural heritage is a direct attack on the identity of a state and its population. People all over the world create their identity through their shared history, traditions and cultural heritage. Syria is a heterogeneous country with many different ethnic and religious communities (Tab. 1; Fig. 3). Especially in nations like this, there is need for a collective memory and identity to create a feeling of unity, national pride and belongingness (Halbwachs, 1992; Hall, 1995, p. 185). One way to achieve this was the usage of cultural achievements (Merryman, 2000; Smith, 2006, p. 18). Monuments can become physical representations of a nation and its achievements and trigger public memories and values, which the French historian Pierre Nora called lieux des mémoires, places of memory (Nora, 1989). Shared collective memories and identities are not only the principal force of legitimation in forming, constructing and maintaining a state (Graham, et al., 2005, p. 26) but also a way to find stability for people who lost the sense of social and geographical security and hold otherwise disparate groups of people together (Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 2004, p. 16).

However, these social processes are also the reason why places of shared memories make such good targets for destruction. Noyes (2013, p. 1) postulated that 'the destruction of religious and cultural icons has gone hand in hand with the political construction of the modern State'. The
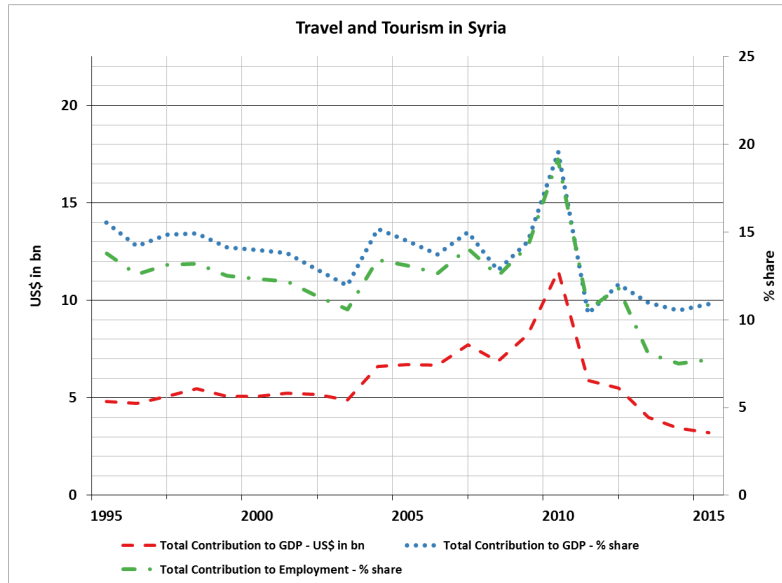
Table 2: Travel and Tourism in Syria from 1995 to 2015. Source: World Travel and Tourism Council

IS uses these social mechanisms to assert its homogeneous narrative and claim authority over the history and identity of conquered territories. Thereby, it robs the Syrian population of its identity and tries to erase their memory within and outside the newly created state. Nothing is allowed to exist before the IS and a new identity is forced upon its citizens. It is truly a 'cultural cleansing' as Irina Bokova described (Sehmer, 2015).

2.2 The destruction of the Syrian economy

It is undeniable that tourism is of outstanding economic value as it currently rises to the world's most profitable industry, with heritage tourism estimated to form half of the revenue (Bartel-Bouchier, 2013, p. 156). The presence of cultural heritage attracts tourism, generates income and is an important component of a countries economic and cultural capital (Thorsby, 2001). Therefore, damaging or destroying these resources would threaten this enormous economic value (Butler, 1991, p. 202). Before the war, Syria had the reputation to be one of the safest and culturally rich countries in the Middle East. Tourism was booming and the total contribution increased from 2.69 billion US dollars in 1995 to 11.50 billion US dollars, which represents 19.59 per cent of Syria's GDP of that year. Additionally, it provided employment for 18.9 per cent of the working Syrian population (Tab. 2).

Just between 2009 and 2010 Syria saw tourist numbers leap 40 per cent (Sands, 2011). However, many of those cultural assets of once flourishing tourist destinations lie in ruins: Aleppo is devastated from war, Apamea is riddled with holes from looting and many monuments of Palmyra have been blown up (Cunliffe, 2014; Porter, 2014). The IS knows of the value of these sites for the economic future of Syria and how they could help to stabilise the country. For this reason, it tries to 'sustainably' damage the economy to harm the country even in case of its defeat. Without the cultural riches and diversity, there will be little desire to visit Syria. Without this revenue, there will be no regeneration and no motivation for Syrians who fled their homes to return. Poverty could encourage radicalisation and new supply for terrorist organisations in the future.

3 Beyond rescue or is it renewable?

With the importance for the national identity and the economic value in mind, the question of how to deal with this destruction after the end of the conflict remains. While current measures are especially concerned with awareness-raising (http://www.unite4heritage.org/), monitoring (Cunliffe, 2014; Casana & Panahipour, 2014) or even establishing heritage task forces (UNESCO, 2016), these cannot undo destruction. But are destroyed monuments really forever lost? Or is it
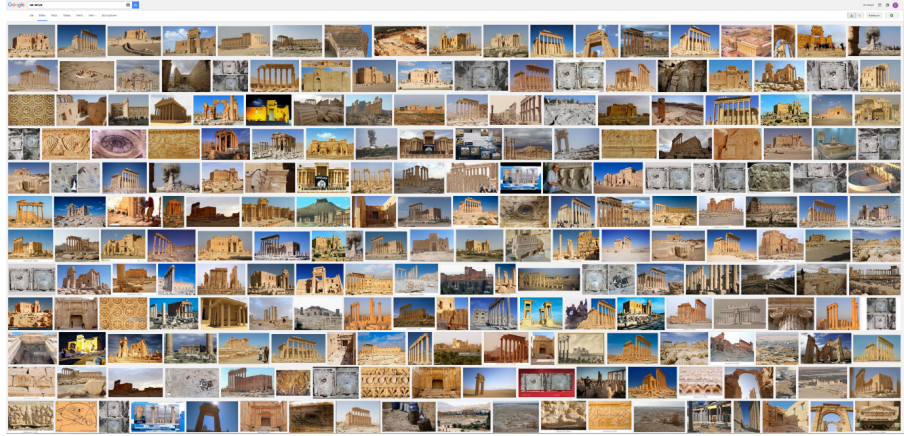
Figure 4: Google search for 'Bel temple Palmyra' © Google Inc.

possible to rescue them retroactively, recreate or let them live on in different forms? The following section will not provide any clear-cut solutions, but aims to illustrate several approaches that are currently under debate.

3.1 Reconstructions

That destruction does not necessarily mark the end of these sites is shown by the immediate discussion about possible reconstruction work.[2] It would not be the first time that heritage sites were rebuilt after being demolished in armed conflicts, the most famous being the Old Town of Warsaw (Ciborowski, 1969; Klekot, 2012) and the Old Bridge of Mostar (Armaly, et al., 2004). They have not only been completely reconstructed but were also inscribed on the World Heritage list. This illustrates that these reconstructions are considered as significant as the sites that still consist of their original fabric. How is this possible?

Three factors have to be taken into account when discussing reconstructions of cultural heritage:

- Internationally accepted guidelines and frameworks

- Authenticity

- Justification

While many of the early heritage charters (Athens 1931, Venice 1964) rule out reconstruction a priori, a change in the understanding of the nature of heritage led to more differentiated debate. The 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity and the 2003 Convention on Intangible Heritage took away the priority from materiality and gave intangible values equal importance (Jokilehto, 2006, p. 8). In the case of intentionally destroyed heritage, the 2000 Riga Charter on Authenticity and Historical Reconstruction in Relationship to Cultural Heritage provides an excellent basis for discussion.

While acknowledging the general presumption against reconstructions, it states that there are *'circumstances where reconstruction is necessary for the survival of the place; where a 'place' is incomplete through damage or alteration; where it recovers the cultural significance of a 'place'; or in response to tragic loss through disasters whether of natural or human origin[...].'* The only requirement is that reconstructions are without conjecture.

The quality and quantity of documentation for monuments like the temple of Bel is outstanding. There are detailed plans and drawings as well as an uncountable number of photos from professionals and tourists available, enough to create a one-to-one reconstruction without any speculation whatsoever (Fig. 4. 5).

However, a common objection is that reconstructions lack authenticity. Archaeological sites and objects are authentic and possess a distinctive aura, which fakes and copies supposedly do not have (Benjamin, 1968 [1936], p. 222; Holtorf, 2001, p. 286). However, studies have shown

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[2] Reconstruction is used as in the Burra-Charter: '*Reconstruction* means returning a place to a known earlier state and is distinguished from restoration by the introduction of new material' (Burra Charter Article 1.8.)
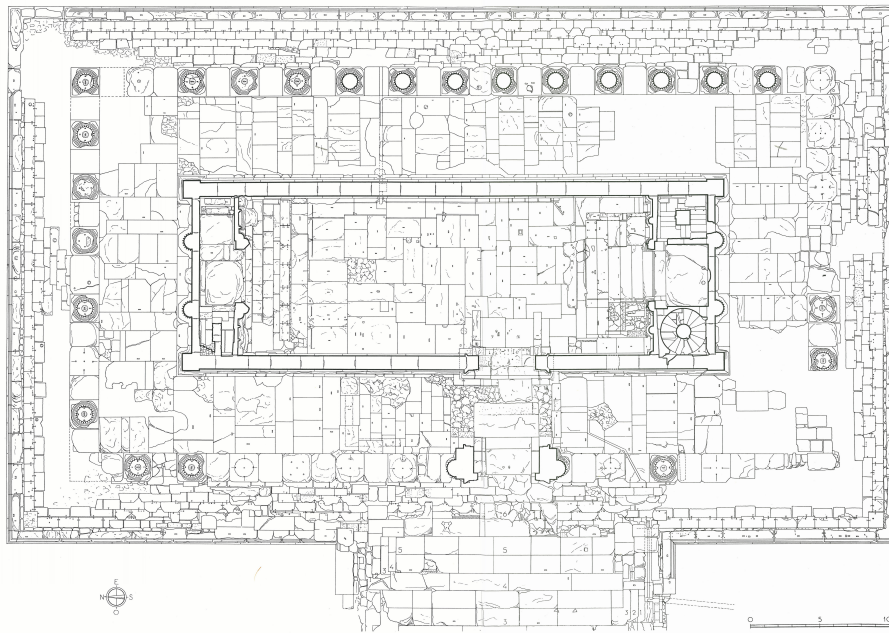
Figure 5:   Plan of Bel temple (Seyrig, et al., 1975, 2)

that 'aura' and authenticity can still be experienced in replications and reconstructions, even if observers are aware (Holtorf, 2001, p. 287; Lipe, 2002).

The question whether the value is bound to materiality is not a new concept but a philosophical question that has been discussed since Antiquity. Thereby, the ancient Theseus Paradox perfectly illustrates the premise whether authenticity is tied to the tangible or the intangible values attached to objects and monuments:

> The ship wherein Theseus...returned...was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same. (Plutarch, Vita Thesei, 22-23)

A practical modern application of this premise is the restoration work conducted on historic buildings and damaged parts are replaced block by block with new architectural elements and ultimately lose all of their original fabric. However, no one would argue that the significance of these monuments is diminished. Is there a difference whether a monument is replaced piece by piece or all at once?

Already Plato's concept of the ιδεα (idea) says that it is more important what something represents rather than what it factually is (Jokilehto, 1995, pp. 18-19; 2006, p. 3). The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1994) examined the relations between reality, symbol and society in his simulation theory and concluded that 'simulacra' that represent a lost original can fully replacing it without any loss of meaning. Modern research regarding authenticity acknowledges that the ability to appreciate the authenticity of the past depends more on the observer than the observed (Wang, 1999; Stanley-Price, 2009, p. 43). Thus, people can have transcendent experiences even with a reconstructed past (Lipe, 2002; Lovata, 2007, p. 17). This explains why well-visited facsimiles of cave art like Lascaux, Altamira or the 2015 newly opened Chauvet can still inspire visitors the same way as the originals do (Lowenthal, 1992, p. 124; Clottes, 2008, p. 15; Walter, 2014).

In the early 1900s, the influential Austrian art historian Alois Riegl identified several core values of monuments (e.g. Age, Art, Use, Historic) that give a monument significance (Riegl, 1903). Modern heritage research shows that there has to be at least one more value added: the symbolic value. A reconstructed temple might not represent some of its old values, but it surely

Figure 6: Local mason at Basilica A in Resafa, Syria © D. Kurapkat / DAISyria.

Figure 7: Reconstructed Mausoleum in Timbuktu © CRAterre / Thierry Joffroy.

can transcend the symbolic values for diversity, unity, and hope against extremism.

Reconstruction work could thereby help to turn this cultural catastrophe into an opportunity. Not only could reconstruction under use of experimental archaeology contribute to gain knowledge of ancient construction techniques, but also help to unite and stabilise local communities and sustainably revitalise the devastated sites. A close cooperation with the local authorities as well as financial and technical support would make it possible to train local workers and craftsmen as new generation of conservators who henceforth can be caretakers and custodians of their cultural heritage (fig. 6).

This would provide them with education, income, give them purpose and strengthen their cultural unity and identity. Through this work, not only important cultural symbols would be reconstructed but also new perspectives could be created.

This approach is already effectively applied in Timbuktu where the Mali population reconstructed several destroyed Sufi mausoleums with international funding under guidance of UNESCO (UNESCO, 2015; Fig. 7). A similar project for Syria is now in preparation by the DAI (German Archaeological Institute) with their 'Stunde Null' project (DAI, 2016; Brockschmidt, 2016). Both projects aim to culturally empower and unite the local population.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that reconstruction work is a polarising topic that has strong advocates on both sides of the discussion (Layton, et al., 2001; Schediwy, 2011). Those who oppose it see a falsification of history because the destruction is part of the monuments biography (Jones, 2016). Those who support reconstruction see it as an important symbolic act against wanton destruction and a message that the attempt of eradicating the heritage of a culture is

Figure 8:   The 9/11 Memorial & Museum © Ch. Doppelhofer

Figure 9:   Syrian artist Mahmoud Hariri creates a model of Palmyra using clay and wooden kebab skewers © Christopher Herwig/UNHCR.

futile (Shaheen & Graham-Harrison, 2016). Both opinions are legitimate for different reasons, however, the destruction should neither be completely undone nor should it be indulged because both approaches are destined to let the destruction fall into oblivion (Schediwy, 2011, p. 19).

3.2   Against forgetting

Jean Baudrillard wrote about the Holocaust that 'forgetting extermination is part of extermination' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 49). This statement can also be applied to the 'cultural genocide' that is happening in Syria. Therefore, the first and foremost task is to make sure that the destruction of cultural heritage will not be forgotten. While it will certainly not be possible to reconstruct every destroyed monument – if only because of the enormous costs that are involved[3] – those that are reconstructed, must show their dark moment in history. A compromise between reconstruction and remembrance has to be made by trying to incorporate as much of original material as possible, whereas missing parts are made from distinctively different coloured stones or concrete to visualise the damage.

Either way, whether it is decided to reconstruct certain monuments or not, it is indispensable to commemorate the destruction in form of museums, memorials or other means on site and in local museums. Maria Tumarkin postulated that there has to be a 'conversation about the enduring, tangible imprints that suffering and loss leave behind' and speaks of so-called 'traumascapes' which are 'a distinctive category of places transformed physically and psychologically by suffering'

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[3]Estimated costs for the reconstruction of the heavily destroyed Aleppo alone are in the billions (BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg, 2014, p. 25; Cunliffe, 2014, p. 243).
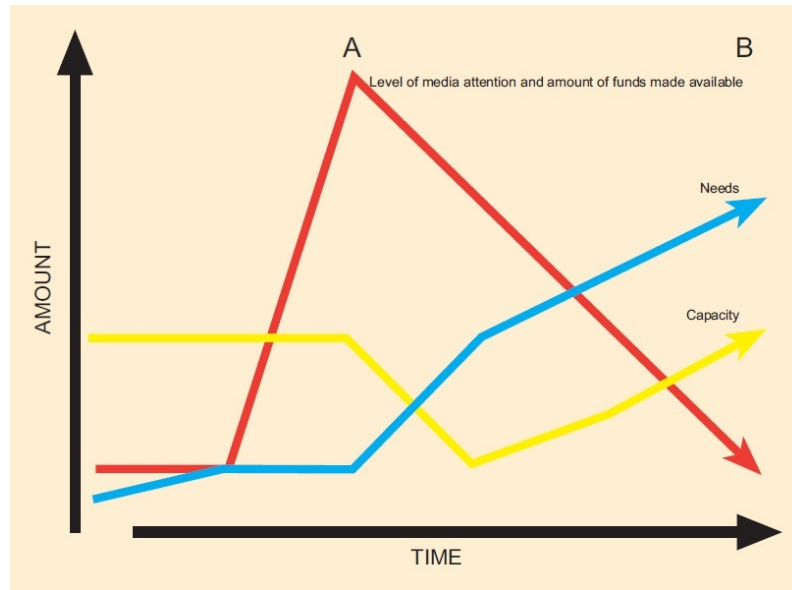
Figure 10: Relationship between media attention and ability/need to respond (Barakat 2005, fig. 14)

(Tumarkin, 2005, pp. 11-13). A modern example of such place is the 9/11 Memorial & Museum which exhibits photos, stories, artefacts and architectural of the destroyed World Trade Center and preserved the footprint of the Twin Towers in form of two dark, square pools (Fig. 8).

Another approach of commemorating destroyed and endangered heritage is shown by a group of Syrian artists living in Jordan's Za'atari refugee camp who built models of landmarks that embody Syria's long and rich history (Dunmore 2016; Fig. 9). New digital approaches such as photogrammetry, image based modelling and 3D-printing are also currently conducted. For example, the Rekrei Project tries to crowdsource photos of destroyed objects and monuments from the internet to create 3D models which are then publically available and can either be printed or 'visited' via virtual reality (http://www.rekrei.org).

4   Conclusion

No matter what future solution may be, it is vital that plans for rebuilding countries like Syria after the war include their cultural heritage. As shown above, cultural heritage is a powerful tool for long-term stability and unity of a country and its population as well as an important economic driver. Thereby, it is essential to plan ahead and come up with well-thought-out concepts beforehand because financial aid and the interest of media is usually only available for a short amount of time (fig. 10). Monuments and areas that are of particular significance for the identity of different groups of people, as well as once living multicultural environments such as Aleppo, must have priority. By supporting the Syrian population in re-vitalising their cultural landscape, the international community can help to counter an economically and culturally impoverished country and contribute to its future well-being and the restoration of their cultural human rights.

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