

Displacement and Forced Migration of Syrians and Iraqis: Cultural Impacts in the Middle East and Beyond

Dr. Salam Al Kuntar considers cultural heritage as a human right that defines who we are, our cultures, and the multilayered identities that we carry as people. While the destruction of culture in Iraq and Syria does not rank in the same order with the human loss and displacement, it is important to consider how the loss of heritage impacts human lives.

In the Middle East, many people live within ancient structures and there is continuity of crafts and culture within a community. In addition, there is great diversity of cultural and religious traditions. As an example, we may consider the Umayyad Mosque, or Great Mosque of Damascus which houses a shrine of John the Baptist and a reliquary of the Shia imam Hussein Ali.

Turbulence in the government of Syria and war in the region have driven migration and persecution of minorities with their associated loss of culture, history, and heritage. Dr. Al Kuntar reviews efforts to protect and recover damaged and endangered heritage. These include documenting the destruction through satellite imagery and photographs. Cultural heritage experts find that heritage loss creates a threat to the identity and cohesion of community. The disruption of daily life similarly breaks down the living traditions that define a society.

Initiatives that attempt to address these losses include exhibitions on the Middle East in the museums of Europe and the U.S. Dr. Al Kuntar curated *Cultures in the Crossfire*, on exhibit at Penn Museum through November 26, 2018, that aims to draw attention to the importance of cultural heritage and what is lost in its destruction. An interactive contemporary art project was used to engage the local refugee communities. Programs in Iraq and Syria aim to maintain and restore traditional crafts, intangible heritage, and community traditions, as well as conserve sites and museums.

Dr. Al Kuntar teaches Middle Eastern archaeology and cultural heritage at Rutgers University in the Department of Classics and through the university's Cultural Heritage and Preservation Studies program (CHAPS) in the School of Arts and Sciences.

She serves as co-director with colleagues at the Penn Cultural Heritage Center, of the consortium of organizations called Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (SHOSI), which partners with the Smithsonian Institute and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.