

UAI JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, HUMANITIES AND LITERATURE (UAIJEHL)



Abbreviated Key Title: UAI J Eud Huma Lit.

ISSN: 3049-3196 (Online)

Journal Homepage: <https://uaipublisher.com/uaijehl-2/>

Volume- 2 Issue- 1 (January- February) 2026

Frequency: Bimonthly



About the problems in UNESCO's activities in the field of preserving the cultural heritage of Arab countries

Alina Suleymanova

Master's degree from Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi

Corresponding Author: Alina Suleymanova

ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the issues and problems of the protection of unique monuments of world importance located in the Arab countries and the participation of UNESCO in this activity. The author explores the history and role of UNESCO in implementing the idea of international responsibility for the preservation of outstanding cultural and natural treasures in these countries. The article pays great attention to the status of Arab and Islamic monuments in the List of World Heritage Sites.

KEY WORDS: UNESCO, culture, Arab countries, cultural and natural heritage, protection of ancient monuments.

INTRODUCTION

UNESCO's work in the Arab world is based on the principles of international cooperation in the fields of culture, science, education and technology. The key task of the organization is to protect unique sites of global importance and ensure their preservation for future generations. To achieve this goal, UNESCO strives to bring together experts and interested countries through educational, cultural and scientific initiatives. The Organization has regional offices in Arab countries, for example, in Beirut and Cairo.¹

The organization's activities in the Arab region cover cultural and natural heritage issues, as well as science and education. The Organization considers the Arab countries as a region that has joined the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of World Heritage in 1972, which allows historical sites to be included in the World Heritage List. By 2025, there were 96 UNESCO sites in Arab

countries.² To coordinate work in the region, UNESCO has established a number of units, such as the Arab Regional World Heritage Center in Bahrain and the International Center for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Arab Countries in Sharjah (UAE).

The idea of international responsibility for the preservation of outstanding cultural and natural treasures arose in the 1960s, when the construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt threatened the flooding of Nubian monuments. It became clear that their loss would be irreparable for all of humanity, and saving them would be an impossible task for individual States. This is how the concept of World Heritage was born, based on universal responsibility.

UNESCO's regulatory work in this area began in 1973 with Bolivia's

²

<https://web.archive.org/web/20231207012112/https://ru.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/IOHECKO>

¹ <https://ru.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

initiative to adopt the "Protocol to the Universal Copyright Convention." In 1989, a "Recommendation on the preservation of folklore" was issued. A conference in Washington in 1999 under the auspices of UNESCO and the Smithsonian Institution led to the emergence of the term "intangible cultural heritage."

The completion of all this work was the adoption in Paris in 2003 of the Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This document emphasized the importance of recognizing traditional forms of culture and their fragility. The 2003 Convention defines the areas of intangible cultural heritage supported by UNESCO: oral traditions, performing arts, customs, knowledge of nature, and traditional crafts. This includes the material component, as well as cultural spaces. The UNESCO World Heritage List already includes 1,226 sites in 168 countries, and this list is updated annually. The absolute majority of these objects (955) are objects of cultural heritage. There are significantly fewer natural heritage sites – about 230. Also, a very small proportion – about 40 objects – are mixed.³

Accordingly, there are 88 sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List in Arab countries, which is about 8% of their total number. The largest number of cultural heritage monuments is located in the following countries: Tunisia -8 (including the ruins of Carthage, the Medina of Tunis and Sousse); Morocco -8 (the medina of Fez and Marrakech); Algeria – 7 (the ancient cities of Cemila, Tipasa, Timgad); Egypt -7 (*Thebes, Memphis, Nubian monuments*); Iraq – 6 (ancient cities *Hatra, Ashur and Samarra*).

There are similar monuments in other countries. For example, the World Heritage List included: the ancient city of Aleppo in Syria (included in the List in 1986); the ancient city of Bosra in Syria (included in the List in 1980, heritage includes theater, basilica, cathedral, mosque and madrasah); ancient Damascus in Syria (included in the List in 1979, there is a *Great Mosque* in the city).⁴

In 2008, Saudi Arabia added its first archaeological site, the city of Hegra, to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Two years later, in 2010, the second archaeological site of Saudi Arabia was added to the list — the area of *Al-Turaif in the city of Al-Dirya*. In 2014, the historic city of Jeddah was added to them, and in 2015—the rock carvings of Jubba and Shuwaymis in the southeast of Hail. Then - the oasis of Al-Hasa, and in 2021 — the Hima Cultural Zone in Najran, which became the sixth Saudi landmark on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In addition, in 2020, the as-sadu weaving technique was included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists. In 2023, such a natural heritage site as a nature reserve was included in the same List "*Uruk Bani Maarid*" in Saudi Arabia. The reserve is located along the western edge of ar-Rub al-Khali ("Desert Quarter"), covers an area of more than 12,750 square kilometers and is the only continuous sandy desert in tropical Asia. It provides a natural habitat for the survival of more than 120 native plant species, as well as endangered animals living in harsh environments.⁵

The Islamic architecture on the List is mainly represented by mosques, tombs, fortresses, apartment buildings and geometric gardens, each of which contains key elements that allow them to fit

³ <https://infoselection.ru/infokatalog/puteshestviya-i-otdykh/strany-i-lyudi/item/688-spisok-ob-ektov-vsemirnogo-naslediya-yunesko>

⁴ https://RussianFederation/List_of_objects_of_worldwide_inheritance_UNESCO_in_Arabian_countries

⁵ <https://www.unesco.org/en>

into this beautiful style. In addition to the structural integrity determined by the context of the place, a distinctive feature of Islamic design is the carefully crafted details in the interiors, such as delicate floral filigree, metal inlays, engravings, painted mosaics and sculptural art.

In the context of globalization, UNESCO's role as a consolidating mechanism is especially important in the Middle East, where political instability persists. UNESCO provides a platform for Arab States to interact and maintain stability in the region.

The addition of an object to the World Heritage List is a significant event for the State in whose territory it is located. In this regard, it is worth paying attention to the UNESCO program "Revival of the Spirit of Mosul" launched in 2018. This initiative is a key UNESCO project aimed at restoring the historical appearance of the ancient Iraqi city of Mosul, which suffered serious damage as a result of the military conflicts of the early 21st century. Thanks to the financial support of the UAE, the Al-Nuri Mosque, Al-Hadba Minaret, Our Lady of Chasa Monastery, Al-TaHER Church and other historical sites have been restored in the city. By the end of 2024, 124 houses have been renovated, allowing many families to return to the city.

It is important to note that the reconstruction of Mosul, as well as the city of Basra, is planned to be carried out simultaneously with the creation of jobs. This project is not related to an attempt to promote the ideology of Westernization of the Arab world and shows the international side of UNESCO's activities, independent of the promotion of national interests by individual Arab countries. UNESCO takes a neutral position here, the purpose of which is to organize cooperation for the preservation of cultural heritage.

The Arab Regional World Heritage Center, opened in Bahrain in 2012 under the auspices of UNESCO, plays an important role in preserving the cultural heritage of Arab countries, especially in conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. One of the priority areas of the center's activities is the expansion of the World Natural Heritage list due to the unique natural sites in Arab countries. For example, the ancient city of Zabid, which was the capital of the Ziadid state, was included in the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List on the initiative of the Center. The Center, with the support of the Bahraini Government, has undertaken a mission to restore it.⁶

The International Center for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Arab Countries in Sharjah (UAE) is actively cooperating with UNESCO. On his initiative, a number of natural sites of great historical value have been included in the World Heritage List or are being prepared for inclusion. These include national architectural monuments that have stood the test of time, preserving the UAE's past and culture. As of 2025, there are already two World Heritage sites in this country. The cultural sites of *Al Ain (Hafit, Hili, Bidaa Bint Saud* and oasis areas) became the first World Heritage Site in the United Arab Emirates.

The Al Ain Oasis, located in the vast territory of the Rub al Khali Desert, is today a prestigious UNESCO World Heritage Site in the UAE.. According to some reports, it was here that the founder of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, was born. This landmark is a 4,000-year-old settlement and is a symbol of the UAE's enduring heritage.

The Jebel Hafit tombs are known for their unique archaeological site, which attests to the beginning of the Bronze Age in the region.

⁶ <https://whc.unesco.org/ru/list/611>

These archaeological sites are unique, and some of them are more than 5,000 years old, and they provide a glimpse into the early history of the UAE. During excavations conducted by Danish archaeologists in 1959, ceramic vessels and copper artifacts were discovered in this tomb. During the archaeological excavations of the Bida Bin Saud tombs, artifacts were discovered that attest to the important role of Al-Ain in shaping the eastern region of Abu Dhabi. Notable archaeological finds include the 3,000—year-old Falaj irrigation system and the remains of an ancient public building.

The unique archaeological complex *Fayya* Paleolanshaft, located in the central part of the Emirate of Sharjah, was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2025. This complex became the first Paleolithic monument in the desert area to receive this status. The monument, which is over 200,000 years old, is one of the oldest evidences of human habitation in arid climatic conditions. 18 archaeological layers have been discovered here, formed at different stages of the region's settlement. The site has been studied for 12 years, with the participation of the Archaeological Department of Sharjah, the University of Tübingen and Oxford Brookes. The UAE and Sharjah authorities had previously approved a strategic plan for the preservation of the monument for 2024-2030.⁷

In addition to the sites included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, the Arab member States may maintain a list of sites that they are considering for inclusion in this List. Applications for inclusion in the World Heritage List are accepted only if the site was previously included in the tentative list. As of 2025 The United Arab Emirates has included sixteen sites in the preliminary list. Among them:

The Hili Archaeological Park in Abu Dhabi, located just 10 kilometers from Al Ain, contains finds dating back to the Bronze Age. The park contains monuments mainly from the period of Umm al-Nar, dating from 2500-2000 BC. Sharjah: The gateway to the Treaty States may be included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. They are also known as the "*Heart of Sharjah*", however, it is not only a modern facility, but also a place with a rich historical past dating back 125,000 years. *Khor Dubai*, also known as Dubai Bay, is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. *Khor Dubai* is, in fact, a natural bay with sea water that divides the city into two parts: *Bur Dubai and Deira*. In each of these parts, the influence of various cultures dating back to the Bronze Age, Stone Age, Iron Age and pre-Islamic period can be traced.⁸

All of the above suggests that the world community is paying more and more attention to the cultural heritage of Arab countries. However, in comparison with the representation in this list of countries from other regions of the world, primarily from the European region, the question arises about the status of Arab and Islamic monuments in the UNESCO World Heritage List. There are probably still some political and economic reasons that determine the still not very great Arab influence on the development of many global processes. But at the same time, we must not forget about the enormous influence of the Arab world on the history of all mankind. Therefore, it is perplexing that today the Arab countries account for only about 8% of all the UNESCO World Heritage Sites on the List. At the same time, there are about 70 Christian churches and cathedrals on this List alone, which is almost equivalent to the entire

⁷ <https://www.worldheritagesite.org/list/faya-palaeolandscape/>

⁸

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_World_Heritage_Sites_in_the_United_Arab_Emirates

number of monuments of Arab and Islamic heritage. Even the churches located in Arab countries are represented in it only by the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem.⁹

Let us emphasize that we are not talking here about the need for proportional representation in the List of individual countries and Regions, but about their place in world history. It is enough to recall such rich historical regions of the Arab East as Mesopotamia, Egyptian, Canaanite and Islamic civilizations. Therefore, a natural question arises - why are the cultural monuments of these regions still poorly represented in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites? Are they missing, have they not been preserved, have they no global value, are they not a universal human heritage? No, in our opinion. Most likely, there just continues to be a certain historical bias towards this region. To a certain extent, this is a reflection of the ideology of orientalism in which THEY and OTHERS existed.

As you know, orientalism is a cultural phenomenon that originated in Europe in the 18th century and has existed in various forms to the present day. Culturologists also call this period the era of orientalism. In the most general sense, orientalism is a worldview based on the study of the history of perception of the East by Western cultures (European and American), the study and understanding of the cultural heritage of the East, as well as all aspects of its history related to culture, art, economics and other aspects of social development.¹⁰

In the worldview of Orientalism, humanity was divided into Orient and Occident, based on which, for Europeans and Americans, the West has always been a subject, while the East has been and in many ways remains an object – a world that remains stagnant and stuck in the past for centuries. On the contrary, the West appears to them as a bearer of true knowledge and a vehicle for progress – a technological, dynamic, open and constantly modernizing world. In this way, orientalism creates cultural, spatial, and visual mythologies and stereotypes that are often associated with the geopolitical ideologies of governments and institutions. Historiography and political economy certainly played a special role in shaping such views and ideas.

Based on these assumptions, a new trend in the culture and art of Western Europe was born – orientalism, which promotes the description of life. A European artist who is not very familiar with this new civilization for him and is trying to copy its external features by hearsay. I must say that such a superficial approach had nothing to do with a true understanding of Eastern culture and was reduced, as a rule, only to various forms of exoticisation of the East. In a sense, there was also a political order here - to show the superiority of the West over it, its social and technological advancement.¹¹

And of course, the issue of money plays a big role here. The fact is that many Arab sites that can be classified as an unconditional universal natural and cultural heritage are in danger of destruction and their preservation requires a lot of money. To solve such problems, the Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the

⁹ <https://irsepi.ru/spisok-vsemirnogo-naslediya-yunesko/>

¹⁰ <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/orientalizm-v-evropeyskom-iskusstve-hviii-nachala-hh-vekov>

¹¹ <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/orientalizm-v-evropeyskom-iskusstve-hviii-nachala-hh-vekov/viewer>

World Cultural and Natural Heritage was established in 1972, consisting of 15 countries.

How is the recognition of a cultural object as part of the world Heritage? UNESCO has about 10 criteria, and it is enough to meet only some of them in order to classify a monument as an object of natural or cultural heritage and begin the procedure for its inclusion in the list of World Heritage sites. As an example, the Committee provides examples of facilities that meet one of the following conditions:

- Be the epitome of human creative genius (Sydney Opera House, Australia);
- Reflect the most important human values realized in the outstanding monuments of architecture and urban planning (historical city of Samarkand);
- Be a unique evidence of a cultural tradition or civilization that exists or has disappeared (the historical center of Macau in China);
- Represent an outstanding example of an architectural or technological ensemble or landscape illustrating an important stage in human history (Rideau Canal in Canada);
- Represent an outstanding example of the interaction between humans and the natural environment (the cultural landscape of agave plantations and ancient tequila factories in Mexico);
- Be directly or significantly associated with events or traditions that represent an outstanding global heritage. (Struve's Geodetic Arc was created under his leadership in 1816, and consisted of 265 triangulation points from the Barents Sea to the Danube Delta);
- Include unique natural phenomena or territories of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic significance (Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in Mexico);
- They are outstanding examples of reflecting the main stages of the Earth's history, including traces of ancient life (The Valley of the Whales of Wadi Al-Khitan in Egypt);
- Represent outstanding examples of the evolution and development of terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals (Atsinanana Rainforest in Madagascar);
- Include natural areas of the greatest importance and importance from the point of view of science and nature conservation (Socotra archipelago in Yemen).¹²

When a State or region requests UNESCO to include a particular site in the World Heritage List, an expert group is created to assess its compliance with the established criteria. Based on the experience of such procedures, it becomes obvious that, despite the appearance of an exclusively scientific and technical assessment, such examinations are inevitably influenced by the political situation and state interests. Thus, the authority of the applicant country in the international arena, albeit indirectly, may influence the decision to include the proposed facility in the prestigious List.

The resulting geographical distribution of World Heritage Sites shows that most of them are located in Europe. At the same time, the

Middle East, rich in monuments of global importance and meeting all UNESCO requirements, is clearly insufficiently represented on the World Heritage List. It is noteworthy that many monuments from Arab countries were added to the list relatively recently, after this issue was widely publicized in the media and became the object of active promotion by the Arab public.

For example, there is a clear bias towards Christian churches in the list of world Heritage sites, while the number of mosques remains extremely small. The gap in the number of religious buildings of Christianity represented in the list and Muslim mosques reaches a twenty-fold difference, despite the fact that the Islamic world is the cradle of many key events in world history.

A notable example of UNESCO's selective approach, which caused a mixed reaction in the world press, is the inclusion in the list in 2000 of the churches of the Chiloe archipelago in Chile, built by European missionaries in the XVII-XVIII centuries. The World Heritage Committee motivated its decision by the high historical significance of these buildings, seeing them as an example of the interaction of European and South American cultures. However, such an argument is controversial, given the disproportionate representation of different cultures on the World Heritage List.

In this regard, the question arises — why are Muslim sites of no less historical significance and almost a thousand years older in age not included in the UNESCO list? For example, at least the Cathedral Mosque of Kufa in Iraq, built in 636, or the Mosque of Amr ibn Al-Asa in Egypt, built in 642.¹³

Perhaps today it can be argued that in recent years, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee has increasingly shown a desire to distance itself from previously noted manifestations of bias and overcome prejudice regarding issues affecting the culture of the Arab world and its Muslim identity. This is especially true in connection with the increasing financial investments of Arab States in the activities of the United Nations.

At the same time, the current weight and influence of these countries in the organization has not yet reached the level necessary to fully reflect in its work the richness of the Arab cultural heritage, which is recognized as the universal heritage of mankind.

Bibliography

1. Sayamov Yu. About international relations and global processes. Bulletin of Moscow State University, series Globalistics and Geopolitics. 215, № 3-4.
2. Egorov V. On the issue of subjects of intercultural interaction. Ethnodialogues: a scientific and informational almanac. 2024, № 1.
3. Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Moscow, 1972
4. UNESCO: goals, structure, activities. Edited by Reuter V. M. 2002

¹³ <https://news.rambler.ru/other/44601534-noonpost-egipet-pochemu-arabskie-kulturnye-pamyatniki-vse-rezhe-vklyuchayut-v-spisok-obektov-vsemirnogo-naslediya-yunesko/>

¹² <https://news.rambler.ru/other/44601534-noonpost-egipet-pochemu-arabskie-kulturnye-pamyatniki-vse-rezhe-vklyuchayut-v-spisok-obektov-vsemirnogo-naslediya-yunesko/>

5. Aksenok A., Kuznetsov V. Conversations about the Arab world: politics, government, society. The RIAC NP. – 2024
6. Beda A. Protection of cultural heritage. M. 1999
7. Boguslavsky M. International protection of cultural values. M. International relations. 1999
8. Maksakovsky V. World Cultural Heritage. Moscow, 2002