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IMPACT OF CONFLICT DYNAMICS ON HERITAGE RECONSTRUCTION AND POST-CONFLICT RECOVERY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MOSUL, IRAQ, AND BENGAZI, LIBYA

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Figure 1. A conflict-damaged street in Benghazi's historic center. (Photo by Muftah Al Khashmi, 2018)

Cultural heritage remains a critical yet underrecognized factor in armed conflicts. Deliberate targeting, mobilization, and manipulation of heritage sites can exacerbate conflict dynamics and become early casualties of war. Since the Arab Spring, conflicts across the Arab Region have inflicted extensive damage on built heritage, a situation compounded by weak economies, prolonged neglect, mismanagement, and limited institutional capacity in the heritage sector. This paper examines how conflict dynamics—encompassing actors, methods, resources, environments, and both material and immaterial impacts—with the addition of the agency of heritage sites during the conflict, shape post-conflict governmental responses and reconstruction efforts toward heritage. Focusing on the comparative case studies of Mosul, Iraq, and Benghazi, Libya, we analyze conflict triggers, escalation patterns, resolution processes, emergent power structures, and international involvement that collectively influence post-conflict heritage recovery. Despite similarities in timeline, urban warfare, and the fight against ISIS, the divergent approaches to heritage management in both cities underscore the complex interplay between conflict outcomes and cultural memory. Contributing to academic discourse on post-conflict urbanism and heritage recovery in rebuilding cities affected by conflict, this research highlights the importance of understanding conflict dynamics and post-conflict contexts to better protect and recover heritage after war.

Introduction

The role of cultural heritage in armed conflicts remains significantly underestimated. When cultural heritage is deliberately targeted, mobilized, or manipulated, it can fuel conflicts, thereby becoming one of the initial casualties of war. Recent conflicts across the Arab Region, particularly since the Arab Spring, have caused extensive damage to built heritage. In Iraq and Libya, as in other Arab countries, the devastation has been aggravated by weak economies, prolonged neglect, mismanagement, and the limited institutional capacity of the heritage sector. The conflict dynamics, the conflict resolution, and the conflict outcomes influence the post-conflict reconstruction context, wherein heritage narratives are shaped by the hands of the emergent power. Effective postwar heritage reconstruction requires a nuanced understanding of local sociopolitical and historical contexts. The post-conflict efforts to redefine emerging national identities shape the narratives of belonging and exclusion with significant consequences for social cohesion.¹

In the Arab Region, decisions to forget or remember wartime crimes have often been controlled by authoritarian state officials responsible for curating public memories, cultural heritage, and national identities.² The handling of heritage during the reconstruction phase is a delicate matter that can lead to reconciliation and peace, prolong simmering conflicts, or create new ones. Conflict dynamics refer to the evolving and multifaceted nature of armed conflicts, influenced by changing relationships, power shifts, and societal structures.³

These dynamics unfold across five key dimensions: the actors involved in a conflict, the methods used, the resources sustaining conflict, the conflict environments, and lastly the conflict material and immaterial impact.⁴ For the purpose of this article, we propose a sixth dimension: the agency of built heritage during conflict. Through a comparative case study of Mosul in Iraq and Benghazi in Libya, we argue that conflict dynamics and post-conflict governmental and institutional landscapes substantially shape responses to post-conflict heritage reconstruction.

Mosul, a historic city in northwestern Iraq, has evolved over millennia as a pivotal center of multiethnic civilization. Its strategic location on the Tigris River has fostered cultural exchange and economic prosperity dating back to Mesopotamia. The historic city retains vestiges of the Arab Rashidun Caliphate and Umayyad, Abbasid, Seljuk, and Ottoman periods and served as the capital of Nineveh Province until 1958. Saddam Hussein's regime rose to power in 1979 following the coup d'état of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party in 1968. During Hussein's rule, the oil-rich city expanded, solidifying its status as Iraq's second-most important and third-most populous city. In 2003, the instability caused by the US invasion fueled ethnic tensions and the emergence of insurgent groups. In 2014, approximately 80 percent of the population was composed of Muslim Sunnis, followed by Kurds, Christians, Turkomans, Shabak, and Yazidis.⁵ The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) announced the establishment of its caliphate from Mosul's al-Nouri Mosque after capturing the city in June 2014. The Iraqi government launched a military offensive to liberate Mosul in June 2016 and regained control of the city in July 2017.⁶

Benghazi, the second-largest city of Libya, located on its eastern coast, dates back to ancient Greek settlements circa 515 BCE. It was subsequently ruled by the Roman and Byzantine Empires, followed by the Arab conquest in 643 BC. The city remained physically and economically modest through its fifteenth-century renaissance by Tripolitania merchants and the Ottoman period (1578–1911) until the Italian occupation in 1912. The Italian period introduced modern European city planning and architectural design, shaping the city's identity around its preexisting urban fabric. Benghazi gained prominence with Libya's independence in 1951. The city's growth was fueled by the discovery of oil and inward urban migration in the 1950s.⁷ The authoritarian rule of Ghaddafi commenced in 1969. His reign was characterized by political and economic instability and urban decay. Ghaddafi was overthrown in 2011 with the establishment of the Libyan chapter of the Arab Spring in Benghazi. What followed were years of political instability and a surge of power struggles between political parties and their supporting militias. In 2014, Benghazi fell under the control of extremist militias affiliated with ISIS. The result was three years of armed conflict in the city from 2014 until its liberation in 2017 (fig. 1).

This article highlights the importance of understanding the conflict dynamics and the emergent post-conflict societal and political contexts to better protect and recover heritage in the aftermath of conflicts. We examine the conflict triggers, actors, methods, and timeline, highlighting the role of heritage during conflict and the reasons for its destruction. We then consider the processes of conflict resolution, the conflict impact, emergent powers, international involvement, and media coverage. Subsequently, we analyze the

influence of those aspects in the approach to dealing with the emergent heritage in the post-conflict phase. We comparatively examine Mosul and Benghazi for their apparent similarities in the fighting of ISIS, urban warfare, and conflict duration, as well as the variables that led to their divergent responses to post-conflict heritage recovery. Our findings contribute to the academic discourse on post-conflict urbanism and heritage recovery.

Theoretical Perspectives on Conflict, Heritage Destruction, and Reconstruction

Contemporary regional conflicts as represented by the cases of Mosul and Benghazi are a paradigmatic shift from traditional warfare. In these conflicts, the fragmentation of state structures and economies gives rise to a multitude of state and nonstate actors vying for power and influence. Identity becomes a potent tool for political mobilization, as grievances stemming from economic or social deprivation are exploited to galvanize support for conflicting factions. The intentional and planned destruction of a city's memory through the destruction of its built environment is a systematic strategy in the reconfiguration of new national and social identities.⁸

Johan Brosché et al. delineate four primary motives for targeting heritage in contemporary armed conflicts. The first is to achieve political, territorial, or ideological goals by asserting dominance, consolidating or denying future claims to power, land, and legitimacy. The second is for military-strategic considerations such as gaining tactical advantages or undermining the enemy's social cohesion and unity symbols. A third motive is to signal the aggressor's commitment to telegraphing messages of dominance and power to the world. The fourth motive is as a source of funding for the conflicting parties.⁹

Ethnic or religious affiliations often outweigh national or regional ones during conflict, making heritage a useful tool for reinforcing group identity. The manipulation of cultural heritage often includes broadcasting heritage destruction for its symbolic impact on community identities.¹⁰ Heritage destruction is also utilized as an act of territorialization and for the purposes of ethnic cleansing through the erasure of history, identity, and culture.¹¹ Kalman terms this process "identicide," where the erasure of memory, history, and identity tied to places is the deliberate goal.¹² These motives highlight the instrumentalization of cultural heritage in conflict, serving strategic, symbolic, and psychological objectives.

Not only do the motives for targeting heritage influence post-conflict recovery, but how conflicts end influences the objectives and approaches taken in post-conflict heritage reconstruction efforts. Military victories and interventions, peace agreements, ceasefires, and conflict resolutions represent diverse approaches historically taken to resolve violent conflicts. International and regional stakeholders play pivotal roles as supporters and mediators of conflicts. Conflict resolution must address the root causes of conflict by involving transitional justice and reconciliation efforts to achieve sustainable peace.¹³ Since 2010, there has been a global decline in conflicts ending with international peace agreements and ceasefires, with an increasing number of internal conflicts deescalating without clear resolutions. A significant factor behind this trend is the associated complications of international negotiations in conflicts involving nonstate actors and Islamist groups such

as those seen in the cases of Mosul and Benghazi. Additionally, military victories that bolster authoritarian regimes have increasingly influenced conflict management, undermining previously effective conflict-resolution methods and promoting a top-down notion of peace.¹⁴

Reconstruction in post-conflict contexts extends beyond the physical rebuilding of cities and their heritage to include the reinstatement of sociocultural norms or the pursuit of transformative outcomes. The social, political, institutional, and economic dimensions of reconstruction are fundamental to long-term stability and the seeking of transitional justice. Neglecting these aspects risks perpetuating conflict.¹⁵ Heritage mobilized during conflict becomes a key element during conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. Heritage destruction, reconstruction, and recreation are leveraged in shaping future narratives of nations and societies, influencing aspects such as belonging, meaning, and integrity.¹⁶

Cultural heritage sites are active repositories of collective memory, reflecting positive and negative historical experiences. The ideological and political importance of these memories becomes evident in the crafting of national narratives.¹⁷ Heritage holds significant potential to serve as a vital catalyst for peace, social reconciliation, development, community healing, and even global security and poverty reduction in post-conflict contexts.¹⁸ Despite this recognition, cultural heritage in post-conflict urban reconstruction is often perceived as a material cultural object to be repaired through technical solutions while its symbolic significance and potential for societal repair are too often overlooked.¹⁹ As seen in historical contexts, like the Spanish Civil War, and contemporary ones, like Bashar's post-Arab Spring Syria, governments and external actors leverage post-conflict heritage reconstruction projects to bolster their image for political legitimacy, economic resources, and propaganda, potentially perpetuating inequalities and reinforcing power.²⁰ With this politicization of heritage reconstruction, the selection of heritage sites to be preserved or rebuilt, and the narratives constructed around them extends beyond physical rebuilding. They encompass reimagining a nation's past and future identity, reflecting and affecting broader societal shifts in attitudes and values. Both destruction and reconstruction are promoted by some scholars as tools to illuminate underrepresented histories and rectify past injustices.²¹ Heritage is created through intentional destruction and selective conservation resulting in reinterpretation and narration of history through what remains.

From Outbreak to Liberation in Mosul, Iraq and Benghazi, Libya (2014–2017)

In Iraq, sectarian tensions between diverse Iraqi community groups have long existed, many of which were instigated under Saddam Hussein by Baathist "Arabization" policies of the 1970s. In 2003, tensions escalated again following the US invasion, which fueled further sectarian violence and the proliferation of insurgent groups. By 2014, ISIS seized control of significant territories in Syria and Iraq. Capitalizing on the resentment of marginalized Sunni groups, ISIS grew in power after the 2011 US withdrawal and the regional political instability that was a consequence of the Arab Spring. In mid-2014, ISIS announced the establishment of a new Islamic State from Mosul's al-Nouri Mosque.²²

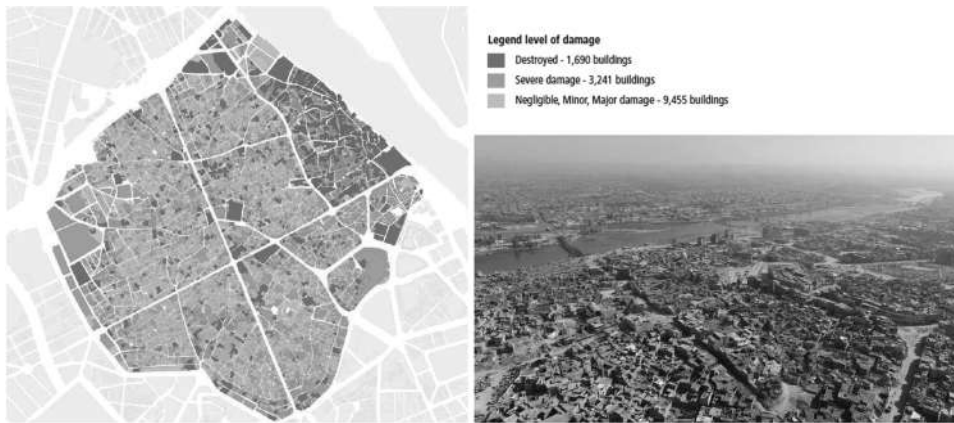


Figure 2. The extent of destruction in Mosul Old City. *Left*: Damage assessment. *Right*: Aerial view of the destroyed city of Mosul. (Image and Photo retrieved from *Initial Planning Framework for the Reconstruction of Mosul*, by UN-Habitat & UNESCO, 2019)

Over the next three years, waves of violence and destruction caused immense human suffering and the systematic destruction of cultural heritage, including twelfth- and thirteenth-century Mosul Architectural School buildings and other significant religious sites. Christian and Yazidi heritage was targeted, along with Islamic sites, comprising Shia mosques and Sunni shrines. To counter ISIS, in October 2016, the Iraqi government initiated a military campaign dubbed the “liberation.” The campaign began in east Mosul and advanced towards the Old City in the west. On July 10, 2017, former Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi announced the liberation of Mosul, the biggest stronghold of ISIS in Iraq.²³

ISIS fighters came from Mosul, the surrounding cities of Ninevah, and its rural areas, as well as from abroad. Most foreign fighters were from the Arab region and were generally motivated by religious and political ideologies. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), led by the Iraqi army, was the primary military force fighting the liberation campaign against ISIS. The Iraqi forces were assisted by the United States and an international coalition of sixty countries, each of whom provided different types of support. The Kurdish Peshmerga, a militia group from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, played a significant role in the conflict supporting the ISF, particularly in the early stages. The Popular Mobilization Forces, a militia group composed of Shia and other minorities, supported the ISF, impacting the later stages of the conflict.²⁴

ISIS fortified itself for urban warfare within the dense Old City of Mosul. Aerial bombardments caused significant destruction, particularly in the form of indiscriminate carpet bombing. In July 2017, Mosul was liberated with the defeat and withdrawal of ISIS fighters, and the city was returned to the Iraqi state governing authority. By the time Mosul was liberated, the city was in ruins, with 34 percent of its building stock destroyed or severely damaged (fig. 2).²⁵

The destruction of cultural heritage sites by ISIS was a deliberate and systematic effort to erase the city’s cultural identity, control territory, and carry out ethnic cleansing in an attempt to establish dominance and dismantle the historical multiethnic fabric of the

city. ISIS targeted the heritage of various religious groups, culminating in the destruction of the al-Nouri Mosque, as the group retreated on June 21, 2017. This mosque held historical significance and was considered a symbol of the city's identity. It was associated with Nur al-Din Zangi, a twelfth-century Sunni leader who initiated the first jihad against the Crusaders.²⁶ It was from here that the ISIS leader chose to declare the Islamic Caliphate three years earlier.

Whereas the destruction of religious sites was of primary significance to Iraqis, the destruction of pre-Islamic artifacts and archaeological sites was a source of international outcry among Western nations.²⁷ These attacks were used as propaganda, signaling ISIS's commitment to its ideology and making headlines around the world. The media coverage of the destruction sparked international empathy for the Moslawi community and ultimately achieved ISIS's goal of publicizing the group's cause and exerting global influence. Mosul was a major stronghold of ISIS, making its recapture a pivotal moment in the global fight against terrorism and a crucial victory for the Iraqi government and the US-led coalition. The war was extensively covered by military-embedded journalists who provided firsthand reports and images of the extent and nature of the destruction and human suffering, supporting the international efforts to liberate the city.²⁸

The armed conflict altered Mosul's social fabric. The rule of ISIS instilled fear and mistrust among the city's religious communities and induced their displacement, exacerbating what started with the sectarian violence that followed the US invasion. The city, previously organized into middle-class, elite, tribal, and working-class groups, emerged from the conflict with a new social hierarchy based on war affiliations. In postwar Mosul, the upper class represents anti-ISIS fighters, both local and foreign. Families of ISIS victims and other affected residents occupy lower tiers, while former ISIS affiliates and their families face exclusion, mirroring ISIS's prior treatment of opposing community groups.²⁹

In Libya, the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and the overthrow of Ghaddafi marked a period of prolonged instability. In this power vacuum, conflicts flared between Islamist and secular militias affiliated with diverse religious and political ideologies. Violent confrontations of armed fighting, kidnappings, and murders escalated in 2014 with the political division between the UN-backed Government of National Unity (GNA) in the west of Libya and the parallel government created by the House of Representatives (HoR) in the east. At that time, a coalition of Islamist and secular militias, supported by the GNA, united to confront the rising influence in Benghazi of the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by a renegade military commander from the Ghaddafi era and backed by the HoR.³⁰ The Islamist militias of the coalition joined ISIS, and in July 2014, they declared Benghazi an Islamic Caliphate.³¹ In October 2014, the LNA launched the Battle of Benghazi, otherwise known as "Operation Dignity," with the claimed purpose of recapturing the city from terrorist groups, eliminating extremist militias, and establishing stability.

The LNA was formed by a group of military units and supporting armed militias. Opponents of the LNA were a coalition made up of the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council, the Benghazi Defence Brigade, Ansar al-Sharia, the Libyan Shield Forces, and various other armed groups. With the support of factions in western Libya, the coalition sought



Figure 3. Damage to the Old City center buildings. (Left and middle photos by Bulifa, 2022. Photos on the right by Muftah Al Khashmi, 2021)

to maintain its influence and control over Benghazi. Local tribal groups lined up with either side of the conflict. International and regional actors also influenced the war by directly and indirectly supporting the warring parties. Among the countries supporting the LNA were Russia, the UAE, and Egypt, while Turkey notably supported the GNA.³² The LNA advance in Benghazi's periphery pushed the militia coalition toward Benghazi's Old City, which became a site of fierce combat and aerial bombardment. In July 2017, with the withdrawal of the surviving coalition fighters from the Old City, Benghazi was declared liberated. The LNA took full control of Benghazi and eastern Libya, thereby replacing the civilian government with military control.³³

War-borne destruction and the political alliances forged during the war had lasting effects on the city's physical, political, and social infrastructure. By 2017, 31 percent of the city's building stock had been destroyed or substantially damaged.³⁴ Although some heritage sites were targeted by extremist attacks in other instances, Benghazi's heritage sites were spared intentional destruction during the war. Any damage that occurred was a result of fighting rather than deliberate targeting (fig. 3). The displacement of local communities and the arrival of newcomers affiliated with the warring parties was a source of friction. The historic identities of place-based communities fractured and were supplanted by new identity groups, rooted in grievance and partisan narratives.³⁵ Tensions arose between supporters and opponents of the LNA and added to historical grievances between Benghazi citizens who traced their origins to the eastern or western regions of the country.

Operation Dignity received moderate to low international media coverage compared to Mosul and other regional conflicts, such as the Syrian War and the rise of ISIS. Despite the city's importance and the extent of its destruction, international media coverage was sporadic. Although media coverage highlighted the complexity of the political landscape in Benghazi, capturing the involvement of various militias and the split in Libyan governance, it failed to sustain a continuous spotlight on the extent of humanitarian and physical devastation there.³⁶

Heritage in the Post-conflict Recovery of Mosul and Benghazi (2017–Present)

The devastation of Mosul caused by the war on ISIS attracted global attention. The international community supported Iraqi authorities throughout the liberation into the post-conflict phase.³⁷ Recovery preparation efforts began before the final battle in Mosul's Old City. Periodic reporting and early damage assessments were prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), including a comprehensive multi-sector assessment of the city. In 2018, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched the "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" initiative at the Kuwait-hosted the "International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq." The Initial Planning Framework for the Reconstruction of Mosul developed between UN-Habitat and UNESCO in collaboration with local partners, constituted a multi-sector comprehensive reconstruction and planning approach for the greater Mosul area with special attention to the Old City. Several UN agencies contributed to rubble clearance and demining in preparation for reconstruction and the communities' return.³⁸ Intergovernmental bodies, aid agencies, and NGOs are leading Mosul's ongoing heritage reconstruction efforts in coordination with the Iraqi government and local authorities.

The international media has maintained its focus on Mosul, shifting from the conflict to post-conflict reconstruction efforts.³⁹ Much of the media's attention has focused on UNESCO's "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" initiative and its extensive international collaboration model, where fifteen key countries and organizations partnered for its implementation.⁴⁰ Reportage features the restoration of cultural and historical sites and emphasizes the symbolic importance of projects for the recovery and resilience of the city and its residents. Coverage often highlights the international agencies and NGOs in their provision of humanitarian aid and support to the people of Mosul.

The post-conflict reconstruction and recovery of heritage in Mosul aims to restore significant heritage sites to their respective communities with the hopes of encouraging the return of former residents who had fled or were displaced by war or ISIS policies countering the impact of ISIS acts. The UNESCO project is in its final stages, reconstructing iconic religious sites and high-value heritage houses, while other international agencies and NGOs are contributing to the reconstruction of other symbolic heritage buildings of the Old City. Between 2017 and 2022, the UNDP rehabilitated more than four thousand residential units of urban heritage in the Old City, classified as low heritage value, in the interest of the swift return of displaced communities.

International projects are coordinated through an online platform. They involve the local community through training and job opportunities with limited decision-making input. The role of local authorities varies from approval facilitators to decision makers. From the earliest stages of post-conflict recovery, projects have focused on facilitating the return of the displaced communities. Despite the framework guidelines prepared by UN-Habitat and UNESCO, on the ground efforts are largely driven by donor interests in coordination with local authorities.⁴¹



Figure 4. Aerial view of Old Mosul showing the advancement of the reconstruction of al-Nouri Mosque and its surroundings. (Photo by Younis Khalaf, Mosul Heritage, 2025)

Local residents, supported by local NGOs and donors, have focused on reconstruction in places where local authorities and international actors have been absent. Local residents have worked on the reconstruction and reopening of everyday mosques and souks in the Old City. There is a significant difference in the heritage conservation methodology and priorities of internationally led versus locally led reconstruction projects. International projects, guided by international standards and expertise, often prioritize facsimile reconstructions and infrastructural improvements for iconic buildings. Locally led efforts, with limited professional conservation expertise and resources, have focused on restoring the functionality of buildings. In the latter case, where internationally recognized conservation principles are secondary, the physical integrity of buildings and sites has often been compromised.⁴²

Internationally led reconstruction efforts in Mosul have faced criticism from scholars and local communities. Criticisms include the perceived international preoccupation with iconic monument reconstruction over humanitarian aid, neglect of locally symbolic sites and social reconciliation as a reconstruction objective, and limited community involvement in decision making regarding the Old City reconstruction.⁴³ Despite these complications, the rich heritage of Mosul's Old City is gradually being resurrected (fig. 4). This, along with increased provision of services and livelihood opportunities, has prompted the return of formerly displaced residents. As of August 2024, 82 percent of Mosul's Old City displaced residents have returned.⁴⁴

In Libya, a clear road for reconstruction is yet to materialize. This lack of clarity reflects ongoing political divisions and the narrow interests of the country's Eastern and Western powers who, thus far, fail to address the needs of the wider population.⁴⁵ Following Benghazi's liberation, the lack of organized national government reconstruction

efforts in the Old City has led to drastic consequences for the city's inhabitants and their heritage. The insecurity, political instability, competing claims to legitimacy, and threat of the return of violence have posed significant hurdles to the reconstruction process.

Since 2016, the leadership of the Benghazi reconstruction efforts has changed four times: from the Benghazi Reconstruction and Stabilization Committee and the Benghazi Reconstruction Fund in 2016, followed by the Fund for the Rebuilding of Benghazi and Derna in 2021, to the revamped Benghazi Reconstruction and Stabilization Committee formed through a decree from the Libyan Parliament in January 2023, to the Libya Development and Reconstruction Fund (LDRF) in February 2024. The LDRF, headed by a son of the LNA leader, is the agent responsible for all reconstruction works in the areas subject to LNA control. Since 2016, there has been a lack of political commitment and funding for the reconstruction of Benghazi's Old City, where displaced families continue to await news on reconstruction plans and promised compensation while they watch reconstruction happen in other parts of the city.⁴⁶

In the absence of government-led reconstruction plans, local communities, NGOs, and municipal bodies joined forces in rubble removal, street cleaning, and minor rebuilding. Individuals have begun to rebuild their homes and businesses, and communities have organized around the reconstruction of everyday mosques and souks. Amid these efforts, the city center remains dilapidated, having been abandoned for years. In early March 2023, unexpected demolitions commenced in the Italian section of the Old City, further displacing existing residents.⁴⁷ Local efforts to stop the demolitions were met with severe repercussions and detentions.⁴⁸ In June 2023, the Benghazi Municipality unveiled its master plan for the city, which focused on the redevelopment of the Old City and its waterfront, promising to preserve the city's identity and heritage.⁴⁹ Demolitions, carried out by military brigades, expanded to large areas of the Old City despite authorities' assurances regarding the intended reconstruction of historic landmarks and the rehabilitation of the Old City. The demolitions appeared to occur without clear criteria, thereby creating a perception of a disjointed reconstruction effort (fig. 5).

Demolitions have sparked debate among residents, with supporters advocating for modernization and opponents calling for the preservation of the city's history and identity.⁵⁰ To date, there is no clarity on the reconstruction timeline, funding, resolution of land ownership issues, or rehousing of displaced residents, leaving many perplexed about the future of the city and its heritage.⁵¹ Some attribute the rash of demolitions to the desire to secure business agreements before the next elections. Others suspect socioeconomic and tribal rivalries are driving efforts to erase the identity of "original" Benghazi dwellers and the LNA opponents with the end goal of creating new narratives for the re-composed post-conflict communities.⁵² Compared to Mosul's coverage, the media attention to Benghazi's post-conflict reconstruction has been relatively sparse. Reports have primarily highlighted efforts to restore essential infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, and schools, disregarding the humanitarian aspect or the irreversible loss of the Old City's heritage.



Figure 5. The start of the demolition of Benghazi's historic center. (Photo by Muftah Al Khashmi, 2023)

How evictions and demolitions were carried out will leave a lasting impression in the collective memory of Benghazi residents. In June 2023, following three months of demolitions in the Old City, the UN Human Rights Office contacted the HoR, the LNA, and the authorities in Tripoli urging them to cease and prevent further abusive destruction and human rights violations. The letter emphasized the need for accountability and procedural protections in the reconstruction process.⁵³ The letter suggested that investors from countries allied with the LNA had expressed interest in the currently vacant waterfront. Given the current capabilities of local authorities and their limited experience resulting from decades of underdevelopment and conflict, uncertainties remain about their capacity to oversee a project of this magnitude. Even though reconstruction efforts in other infrastructure projects are unprecedented and gaining popularity for the LNA among the wider Benghazi community, the lack of transparency in the Old City reconstruction has created mistrust among the local community regarding the reconstruction agenda. This mistrust has exacerbated existing post-conflict social divisions with the families who historically inhabited that area. Many displaced families have lost hope of returning. As a consequence, they are looking to relocate elsewhere in the country or abroad. The relocation of displaced residents results in dramatic demographic shifts in the historic city center.

The UN does not recognize the LNA as the official governing authority of Benghazi, a fact that has hindered positive engagement from international organizations. Furthermore, the weak state of civil society and local organizations, a result of Ghaddafi's authoritarian rule and post-conflict regulating policies, has left a dearth of potential local organizational partners for international collaboration. Adding to the challenge is the suspicious attitude

of local authorities toward international agencies and NGOs. The UNDP, with its historical network of in-country relationships, has been the sole international organization able to coordinate with local authorities on reconstruction projects. Following liberation, the UNDP worked with the Old City Management Office, the authority responsible for the safeguarding of the historic center of Benghazi, on the reconstruction of iconic heritage sites and is currently involved in the restoration of a few of the surviving historically significant buildings in the Old City. The UNDP works with local teams, which has led to concerns regarding sufficient professional expertise. Some of the UNDP reconstruction projects have not used best building restoration practices, leading to signs of premature and rapid decay. The lack of expertise has raised practical concerns regarding the long-term maintenance and historic integrity of the UNDP-restored heritage sites.⁵⁴

Conclusion and Discussion

The use of heritage in post-conflict reconstruction is closely intertwined with memory politics and power shifts. Post-conflict reconstruction is a critical process in shaping national identity narratives through selective commemoration and erasure. Changes occur through the attribution of new meanings to sites and past conflicts, and the selective conservation of the built environment.⁵⁵ Reconstruction in Mosul and Benghazi illustrates how decision making for the heritage recovery in post-conflict contexts is influenced by the dynamics of the conflict itself, and how the city's heritage and its destiny is intertwined with the interests of actors involved during and after the conflict.

Although the two case studies share apparent similarities, the peculiarities of each case have led to significantly different approaches to heritage conservation post-conflict. Both cities were subject to violent conflict from 2014 to 2017. In Mosul, the conflict was between the Iraqi state and ISIS, whereas in Benghazi, the conflict was between the LNA and a coalition of militias partially affiliated with ISIS. In Mosul, the ISIS militias comprised both local and international fighters, and the Iraqi state was supported by a broad coalition of local and international actors. At the end of the conflict, the Iraqi government regained control of the city. In contrast, the conflict in Benghazi was primarily between local militias and the eastern pseudo-government military of the Libyan National Army, reflecting power rivalries between Libya's east and west.

Both conflicts were influenced by the sustained support of international and regional countries. Whereas Mosul frequently made international headlines due to the involvement of the US-led coalition and the city's symbolic significance as an ISIS stronghold, Benghazi received little global attention. Attention on Libya focused on the implications for regional instability in the fight against ISIS. In Mosul, heritage sites were deliberately targeted by ISIS for their symbolic power. The historic center was damaged by the US-led coalition bombardment efforts to eradicate ISIS. In Benghazi, the historic center sustained its greatest damage through intentional demolition in the name of post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

In Mosul, significant international efforts led by organizations such as UNESCO have focused on heritage restoration and community return. Although some initiatives have been

criticized for prioritizing landmark buildings over local needs, there has been a concerted effort involving various international actors to reestablish a livable city for Mosul's communities. In Benghazi, the post-conflict recovery has been minimal and predominantly local, with negligible involvement from international organizations. These efforts have been marred by uncoordinated demolitions and reconstruction projects lacking transparency and community involvement, effectively disregarding the community's needs. In Mosul, the reconstruction effort is focused on reversing the harm caused to the community by rebuilding their cherished places and by promoting social cohesion. In Benghazi, the complex political environment and city governance hinder local authorities' vision for an overarching recovery, including a heritage approach that could bring healing, prosperity, and social reconciliation. Although locally led post-conflict recovery response is being promoted, the case of Benghazi highlights how localization must ensure that the actors on the ground are capable of and willing to produce holistic solutions.⁵⁶

The cases of Mosul and Benghazi highlight how, despite apparent similarities in the nature and timelines of their conflicts, post-conflict heritage recovery is influenced by a raft of variables. These include the role of local, regional, and international actors in the conflict; the instrumentalization of heritage during the conflict; the focus and coverage of the media; and the legitimacy of the victorious party to the local and the international communities. Understanding the political and social histories and conditions of the conflict and post-conflict contexts is crucial for developing tailored reconstruction strategies that address both heritage restoration and broader urban redevelopment needs in post-conflict settings. Effective reconstruction efforts require addressing underlying political tensions and implementing transparent governance structures. By leveraging heritage agency through inclusive approaches, these efforts promote peacebuilding, healing, and development of post-conflict societies while preserving their cherished heritage sites.

This research advances the understanding of post-conflict heritage recovery by examining the cases of Mosul in Iraq and Benghazi in Libya. Through the analysis of conflict dynamics, heritage destruction, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts, the study provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between armed conflict and cultural heritage legacy, highlighting the agency of heritage both during conflict and in post-conflict settings.

By understanding and formalizing the patterns of conflict dynamics and how conflicts are resolved, we could create a more proactive strategy for protecting and integrating heritage recovery into efforts aimed at rebuilding societies after war. In other words, learning from past conflicts and resolutions could help ensure that preserving cultural heritage is an active part of international peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery, rather than reacting when the heritage is forever lost.

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Notes

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