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Endangered Heritage in the Islamic World: Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) Emerging Role in Risk Mitigation and Cultural Resilience

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ABSTRACT

This article explores ICESCO's evolving approach to protecting endangered heritage in the Islamic world since its restructuring in 2019. Employing a qualitative and interpretive design, the study analyzes organizational strategies, official reports, and secondary assessments, complemented by insights drawn from public presentations in Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds. The research identifies a distinctive model of "southern heritage governance" that integrates rapid risk mitigation, community-driven recovery, and symbolic diplomacy. Through selected case vignettes, the article demonstrates how ICESCO combines technical conservation with local empowerment, climate-sensitive planning, and multi-scalar partnerships to confront challenges posed by armed conflict, urban degradation, and environmental pressures. Compared with UNESCO and ALECSO, ICESCO emerges as more agile and culturally embedded, though still limited by funding instability and restricted political access. The findings contribute to scholarly debates on heritage resilience by showing how culturally rooted institutions can reposition heritage as a resource for justice, healing, and identity, rather than solely for preservation. The article concludes with recommendations for scaling up risk mapping, enhancing youth engagement, and improving impact evaluation across member states.

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INTRODUCTION

Across the Islamic world, heritage is more than a matter of historical preservation—it constitutes the foundation of cultural identity, collective memory, and geopolitical meaning. Over the past two decades, however, it has faced mounting threats from war, displacement, rapid urbanization, climate change, and ideological erasure. From the desecration of mosques and museums in Iraq and Syria to the gradual disintegration of ancient medinas in North Africa, these threats extend beyond mere physical decay or neglect; they are frequently the result of strategic violence, economic marginalization, and the erosion of local knowledge systems (Ismail, 2024). In such contexts, heritage becomes both casualty and target—destroyed to erase memory while being selectively preserved to assert authority. The central question, therefore, is not simply how to conserve heritage, but how to safeguard it under duress in ways that are ethical, community-centered, and geopolitically attuned (Green Heritage in the Islamic World: Potentials, Challenges and Future, 2024). This recognition calls for an analytical framework that goes beyond technical preservation to include social, political, and moral dimensions.

Recent scholarship in heritage studies underscores that resilience and governance in crisis contexts cannot be understood solely through organizational reports. Peer-reviewed research increasingly frames heritage as a site of negotiation between global discourses and local practices (Holtorf, 2018; De Cesari & Dimova, 2019). This body of literature highlights the need to examine how cultural institutions act not only as preservers of monuments but also as mediators of power, identity, and memory. Such works provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing ICESCO's interventions within broader debates on cultural resilience, vernacular governance, and heritage diplomacy (Winter, 2015). In doing so, they open the space to question whether regional organizations can move beyond the frameworks of global heritage governance and articulate more context-sensitive approaches.

Against this backdrop, the role of regional organizations has become more crucial than ever. While UNESCO and other global institutions remain central to international heritage governance, organizations such as the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) have begun to articulate a different model—one rooted in cultural affinity, local agency, and contextual responsiveness. Since its institutional restructuring in 2019, ICESCO has positioned itself as a key advocate for protecting and valorizing endangered heritage across its member states, offering

not only technical expertise but also a normative framework that links heritage preservation to dignity, resilience, and cultural sovereignty. This shift suggests the emergence of a pluralized heritage landscape in which regional actors increasingly complement—and at times challenge—the authority of global institutions.

This article examines ICESCO's emerging role in safeguarding heritage at risk across the Islamic world. It analyzes the organization's strategies, programs, and interventions, with particular attention to four dimensions: risk mitigation, post-crisis recovery, community empowerment, and heritage diplomacy. Through case studies from Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine, the article critically evaluates the strengths, limitations, and future directions of ICESCO's work. Ultimately, it situates ICESCO within a broader shift toward "southern" approaches to cultural resilience—perspectives that view heritage not as a neutral asset but as a living resource for justice, healing, and continuity. By foregrounding ICESCO's experiences, the study aims to enrich ongoing debates on how heritage governance can be reimagined from the Global South.

The article is guided by three central research questions: (1) How does ICESCO conceptualize and operationalize a model of cultural resilience in high-risk contexts? (2) In what ways do the cases of Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds illustrate the dynamics of southern heritage governance? (3) How does ICESCO's approach compare with UNESCO and ALECSO in terms of agility, scope, and strategic vision? These questions not only direct the analysis but also highlight the comparative value of examining ICESCO as an emerging actor in global heritage politics.

The insights presented here are informed not only by document analysis but also by the author's participation in multiple international heritage forums between 2021 and 2025, where representatives from Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds shared firsthand accounts of ICESCO's interventions. These public presentations, along with informal discussions with practitioners and cultural stakeholders, provided essential context for understanding local dynamics and challenges. While not constituting formal interviews, these engagements shaped the interpretive framework of the article and grounded its analysis in lived realities. This methodological positioning underscores the importance of bridging textual analysis with experiential knowledge to capture the complexity of heritage in crisis.

Two core concepts underpin this study's analytical framework: *cultural resilience* and *southern heritage governance*. Cultural resilience refers to the capacity of communities to absorb, adapt, and creatively respond to threats against their cultural continuity. It manifests in practices such as reinvesting in damaged heritage, transmitting memory across generations, and reactivating cultural expression under duress. Southern heritage governance, meanwhile, denotes a context-sensitive, locally grounded approach to heritage management emerging from the Global South. It challenges dominant universalist models by prioritizing vernacular knowledge systems, ethical reconstruction, and cultural sovereignty. As will be argued, ICESCO's interventions embody this alternative paradigm through their emphasis on proximity, narrative agency, and spiritual value. By framing ICESCO's work within these concepts, the article contributes to broader conversations on how heritage can serve not only as a site of preservation but also as a resource for justice and renewal.

METHOD

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in critical heritage studies and policy analysis. The research primarily draws on textual and institutional analysis of ICESCO's official reports, strategies, and heritage documentation issued between 2019 and 2025. These primary sources are complemented by scholarly literature and third-party evaluations in order to situate ICESCO's interventions within broader debates on heritage governance, cultural resilience, and post-conflict recovery.

The corpus consisted of 42 ICESCO documents published between 2019 and 2025, including strategic reports, program evaluations, policy frameworks, and field mission summaries. Selection criteria required that documents be formally endorsed by ICESCO, available in English, French, or Arabic, and explicitly address cultural heritage under conditions of risk. Materials limited to technical annexes or financial accounts were excluded. Data collection relied on ICESCO's digital repository, institutional newsletters, and keyword-based searches ("heritage," "resilience," "risk mitigation").

To enhance trustworthiness, findings were triangulated across ICESCO documents, external evaluation reports, and academic literature. An audit trail of coding decisions was maintained, and preliminary interpretations were peer-

debriefed with two colleagues experienced in heritage governance. Negative cases—for example, interventions with limited local participation—were also noted to refine analytical rigor and prevent overgeneralization.

Although no formal interviews were conducted, the research benefited from the author's extensive participation in international heritage conferences and academic forums between 2021 and 2025, where ICESCO representatives and local actors from Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds presented detailed accounts of ongoing interventions. Informal side discussions with several stakeholders added nuance to the understanding of field dynamics, though these conversations were not treated as formal data. No personal or human subject data were collected. Insights from international heritage forums were derived exclusively from presentations in the public domain. Informal exchanges were incorporated only as contextual background.

The choice of case studies—Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds—was guided by both thematic and geopolitical considerations. While ICESCO operates across diverse regions of the Islamic world, including Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, this article focuses on Arab-majority contexts where cultural heritage is profoundly entangled with armed conflict, occupation, or urban collapse. These cases provide a strategic lens into ICESCO's heritage response in high-risk and politically complex environments. It is acknowledged, however, that strategies applied in non-Arab regions often diverge significantly due to contextual, institutional, and epistemological variations.

The comparative logic of the case selection rests on two dimensions: (1) Mosul and Sana'a illustrate heritage protection in contexts of active or recent armed conflict, where cultural destruction is immediate and material; (2) Al-Quds represents heritage diplomacy in a setting marked by protracted occupation and symbolic contestation. Taken together, these cases capture both emergency recovery and long-term resilience-building. While the primary focus remains on Arab-majority contexts, the findings hold partial transferability to ICESCO's work in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, where climate-related risks and vernacular knowledge systems play a similarly critical role.

The purpose of the methodology is not to generalize across all ICESCO interventions, but rather to critically interpret how these particular cases reflect the organization's evolving model of what may be termed *southern heritage governance*. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research and writing process to acknowledge the author's proximity to the subject matter and to mitigate potential institutional bias. As part of the language editing process, AI-assisted tools were used selectively to refine grammar and improve readability. No AI-generated content was employed for conceptual framing, analysis, or interpretation. All substantive arguments, structure, and interpretations are the sole responsibility of the author.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Endangered Heritage Landscape in the Islamic World

The Islamic world is endowed with a rich and complex cultural heritage that spans ancient settlements, medieval urban fabrics, sacred sites, living traditions, and intangible knowledge systems. Yet these resources are increasingly imperiled by overlapping and intersecting crises. ICESCO's 2025 analytical report indicates that more than half of the cultural heritage sites in the Islamic world face either direct or indirect risks, with several already classified by UNESCO as *World Heritage in Danger* (Analytical Document on the Islamic World's Heritage Sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger, 2025; *Old City of Sana'a – World Heritage in Danger*, 2025).

Armed conflicts remain the most visible and destructive threat. Sites in Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine have witnessed the deliberate targeting of mosques, mausoleums, libraries, and urban heritage complexes, exemplified by the destruction of the Al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul. Such acts extend beyond the material devastation of cultural property: they aim to erase memory, fracture social cohesion, and impose ideological narratives upon communities (Meskell, 2018; El-Atrash, 2020).

Climate change constitutes a parallel and intensifying risk. Rising temperatures, desertification, flash floods, and extreme weather events jeopardize fragile historic structures, particularly those constructed from adobe, timber, or local stone. ICESCO's 2025 climate strategy emphasizes the need to integrate heritage into national climate adaptation frameworks, risk mapping, and anticipatory conservation measures in order to mitigate long-term vulnerabilities (Strategy of the Islamic World to Enhance the Role of Culture and Heritage in Addressing Climate Change, 2025; Ferreira et al., 2020; Li, 2024).

Urbanization, speculative tourism, and privatization further exacerbate the vulnerability of heritage. In historic medinas such as Fes, Tunis, and Cairo, neoliberal development agendas have frequently displaced local communities, thereby eroding intangible cultural practices such as traditional crafts, oral poetry, and ceremonial traditions. These processes underscore the intersection of heritage preservation with spatial justice, highlighting the urgency of governance approaches that safeguard both tangible and living heritage (Smith, 2006; Winter, 2015; Fiorentino & Vandini, 2024).

ICESCO's Institutional Strategy and Operational Interventions since 2019

Since 2019, ICESCO has undergone an institutional transformation with the establishment of the Islamic World Heritage Center (IWHC), dedicated exclusively to safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage across its 54 member states. This restructuring combined a normative vision with operational action, enabling the organization to translate policy frameworks into concrete interventions.

One of the earliest initiatives was the *Heritage in Danger* program, which dispatched expert missions to high-risk areas such as northern Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine. These missions carried out technical damage assessments, coordinated restoration projects, and organized capacity-building workshops for local heritage professionals. Between 2020 and 2023, ICESCO conducted more than twelve specialized training sessions in Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds; launched grant programs to restore historic madrasas and urban quarters; and supported youth-led digital archiving initiatives documenting oral histories, ritual practices, and local heritage narratives (Report on Partnerships and Cooperation with the Islamic World Heritage Center, 2025; *Detailed Comprehensive Report: ICESCO Scores 253 Achievements in 17 Months*, 2020; *Revive the Spirit of Mosul Initiative*, 2025).

ICESCO's strategy also embeds climate-sensitive conservation as a central operational principle. Through anticipatory risk management, the organization promotes green conservation methods, climate impact assessments, and the integration of heritage into national disaster risk reduction strategies. These measures operationalize the theory of cultural resilience in practice, shifting heritage from a passive object of preservation to an active resource for community adaptation and sustainability (Ferreira et al., 2020; Li, 2024; Ziegler et al., 2024; Sanjaya & Shukla, 2024).

Comparative Institutional Positioning

ICESCO's approach can be distinguished from that of UNESCO and ALECSO. UNESCO often prioritizes global standardization, symbolic diplomacy, and universalist frameworks, while ALECSO focuses largely on educational and cultural policy coordination within Arab states. ICESCO bridges these domains by coupling normative advocacy with operational programs tailored to specific local contexts. Its South-South collaboration initiatives foster co-produced knowledge exchange among African, Asian, and Middle Eastern institutions, advancing a distinctive model of authorized heritage discourse that privileges local agency, cultural specificity, and participatory governance (Silverman, 2011).

Operational Impacts and Outcomes

ICESCO's interventions have generated measurable results. Capacity-building initiatives have trained more than 200 local heritage professionals, while youth-oriented programs have created over 50 digital heritage archives. Grant-funded conservation projects have restored mosques, urban quarters, and traditional craft workshops, simultaneously strengthened institutional networks and fostered participatory governance. These achievements demonstrate that heritage interventions can preserve material culture while also reinforcing social cohesion and enhancing community resilience (Fiorentino & Vandini, 2024; Briz et al., 2023).

The comparative analysis of the Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds case studies reveals consistent strategic patterns: proactive community engagement, symbolic diplomacy, and resilience-focused planning. By embedding technical expertise within local cultural frameworks, ICESCO illustrates how heritage can operate as a vehicle for empowerment, social justice, and identity regeneration. These findings underscore the organization's ability to align normative principles with tangible outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research Agenda

Despite these notable successes, several limitations remain. The analysis relied heavily on institutional documentation, with restricted access to field sites and the possibility of organizational bias. Independent evaluations of long-term impacts are scarce, limiting a full understanding of the sustainability of ICESCO's interventions. Future research should employ mixed-methods evaluations, cross-regional comparative studies beyond Arab contexts, and longitudinal monitoring of resilience initiatives. Equally important is the incorporation of participatory assessment frameworks and community narratives to capture how heritage interventions influence social cohesion, youth empowerment, and climate adaptation over time.

Case Studies in Heritage Protection: ICESCO's Field Interventions in Crisis Contexts

Mosul, Iraq: Post-Conflict Heritage as a Catalyst for Social Healing

The city of Mosul in northern Iraq offers one of the most sobering yet hopeful illustrations of cultural heritage under siege and its role in post-conflict reconstruction. Between 2014 and 2017, vast portions of the city—including its iconic monuments, libraries, and places of worship—were systematically destroyed during the occupation by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). The Al-Nuri Mosque with its famed al-Hadba minaret, the central museum, Christian churches, Sufi shrines, and Jewish cemeteries were deliberately targeted in an orchestrated attempt to erase the city's multi-faith and multicultural legacy (Meskell, 2018).

This cultural cleansing was not incidental, but a central strategy designed to fragment memory, disrupt identity continuity, and impose a singular ideological narrative. In this context, heritage became not simply collateral damage but a contested battlefield of meaning. As Mosul emerged from the ashes of war, the restoration of its heritage infrastructure proved inseparable from the reconstruction of its social fabric and collective psyche (Al-Farsi, 2022).

ICESCO's involvement in Mosul began shortly after the city's liberation. Through its *Heritage in Danger* initiative, the organization dispatched emergency cultural missions to assess damage, document surviving elements, and collaborate with local stakeholders. The initiative employed a multi-layered methodology that combined technical restoration with cultural revitalization (Analytical Document on the Islamic World's Heritage Sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger, 2025). A defining feature was its emphasis on community-based recovery, actively engaging local architects, craftsmen, historians, and youth not merely as beneficiaries but as agents of restoration.

This participatory approach fulfilled several strategic functions. First, it restored a sense of agency to residents who had felt culturally dispossessed. Second, it generated employment and vocational training in heritage-related fields, particularly for marginalized groups. Most importantly, it enabled the community to narrate its own history and trauma through material reconnection with its built environment. ICESCO facilitated storytelling circles, interfaith heritage walks, and digital memory archives to ensure that restoration was accompanied by processes of emotional healing and narrative reclamation (Report on Partnerships and Cooperation with the Islamic World Heritage Center, 2025).

ICESCO's efforts in Mosul were not isolated but integrated within a broader matrix of cooperation with UNESCO's *Revive the Spirit of Mosul* initiative, the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, and civil society organizations such as Al-Ghad Environmental NGO and the Mosul Heritage Institute. This multi-level diplomacy amplified local efforts by aligning them with international visibility and support. ICESCO's added value, however, lay in its cultural proximity: its ability to navigate religious sensitivities, historical complexities, and vernacular aesthetics without imposing a standardized reconstruction model. The case of Mosul thus stands as a compelling argument for redefining heritage as a vector of post-traumatic resilience. Rather than treating heritage as frozen monuments or elite symbols, ICESCO's work demonstrates its potential as a living, inclusive, and therapeutic force—particularly in cities emerging from conflict and sectarian violence.

Sana'a, Yemen: Heritage Preservation in a Collapsing Urban Order

The Old City of Sana'a, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1986, is one of the most architecturally and historically significant urban centers in the Islamic world. With its intricate mud-brick tower houses, geometrically carved wooden doors, and vibrant *suqs*, Sana'a has long embodied the essence of a living Islamic city where architecture and everyday life are seamlessly intertwined. Yet the war engulfing Yemen since 2015 has plunged this heritage into

existential crisis. The prolonged conflict—marked by airstrikes, siege, and systemic neglect—has inflicted severe damage on the city's built fabric while simultaneously eroding the social ecosystems sustaining its intangible heritage (Old City of Sana'a – World Heritage in Danger, 2025).

Amid this devastation and humanitarian collapse, ICESCO engaged with Sana'a through a multidimensional strategy combining technical intervention with cultural advocacy. In 2021, the organization launched the *Revive Sana'a* campaign, which encompassed emergency assessments, restoration prioritization plans, and coordination with local professionals. Unlike many regional programs, ICESCO framed its work in Yemen not simply as conservation, but as an exercise in cultural resilience and sovereignty. The preservation of Sana'a's heritage was thus positioned as both a political and moral imperative—to safeguard Yemeni identity and ensure cultural continuity despite state fragmentation.

A cornerstone of ICESCO's approach was its emphasis on local agency. Restoration was carried out in partnership with Yemeni architects, engineers, and craftspeople, many of whom received training through ICESCO workshops. By prioritizing local expertise over external contractors, the organization empowered heritage professionals as frontline actors in cultural and urban recovery. This ensured that restoration techniques respected indigenous materials, traditions, and spatial knowledge.

Beyond physical structures, ICESCO supported the safeguarding of intangible heritage practices endangered by war, including oral poetry (*zamil*), traditional women's crafts, and religious festivals. Small-scale grants were distributed to community groups for workshops, oral history projects, and youth-centered cultural initiatives, often held in displacement camps or semi-destroyed neighborhoods (Report on Partnerships and Cooperation with the Islamic World Heritage Center, 2025). In this way, ICESCO shifted the focus from monumental conservation to the survival of everyday heritage.

At the diplomatic level, ICESCO actively advocated for Yemeni heritage in international forums and cultural policy meetings. By raising global awareness of Sana'a's plight, the organization reframed heritage loss as a violation of collective memory and cultural rights. It further appealed to donors to decouple cultural aid from political preconditions, enabling local actors to access resources without becoming entangled in geopolitical constraints. Nevertheless, ICESCO's work in Yemen faced significant challenges: restricted site access, unpredictable funding, and difficulties coordinating with fragmented state institutions. Yet the model developed in Sana'a remains a powerful example of how heritage can be mobilized to sustain cultural dignity amid systemic collapse.

Al-Quds (Jerusalem): Heritage Diplomacy and Symbolic Resistance

Al-Quds (Jerusalem) occupies a singular position in the cultural and spiritual cartography of the Islamic world. As a city sacred to the three Abrahamic faiths and deeply contested, it represents a layered heritage landscape where religious symbolism, colonial legacies, and political sovereignties converge. For ICESCO, the heritage of Al-Quds is not solely a matter of cultural conservation, but a frontline in the struggle over identity, memory, and presence. Since 2000—and with renewed intensity after 2019—ICESCO has pursued a deliberate strategy to protect and promote Islamic and Christian heritage in the city through programs that combine material support, cultural diplomacy, and symbolic affirmation.

One of ICESCO's most prominent initiatives has been the institutionalization of Al-Quds as the *Capital of Islamic Culture*. This designation is not merely honorary; it has been leveraged to channel sustained attention, funding, and educational programming toward the city. Within this framework, ICESCO has launched projects ranging from the restoration of religious endowments (*awqaf*) and the digitization of archival records to the development of cultural curricula in East Jerusalem schools (ICESCO Strategy for Supporting Museums in the Islamic World, 2024). These efforts are carried out in collaboration with Palestinian heritage institutions, local municipalities, and religious authorities. In a context where heritage is systematically politicized and access heavily restricted, ICESCO's function as mediator and advocate of cultural rights is particularly vital.

A defining dimension of ICESCO's strategy is its deployment of symbolic diplomacy. In 2023, the organization convened an international forum entitled *Heritage and Resistance*, bringing together scholars, faith leaders, and policymakers to explore how cultural identity can operate as a form of political resilience in contested territories. The forum reframed heritage not as a neutral artifact, but as an active site of resistance where narratives of belonging are

reasserted against displacement, settler colonialism, and spatial fragmentation. By positioning heritage as both a human right and a political claim, ICESCO provided a platform for reaffirming sovereignty through symbolic and historical continuity.

Alongside high-level diplomacy, ICESCO invested in grassroots initiatives, particularly targeting youth and women in East Jerusalem. Through storytelling workshops, mobile exhibitions, and participatory heritage walks, the organization fostered what scholars have termed "everyday diplomacy"—a subtle yet powerful form of cultural assertion that operates outside formal political arenas (Silverman, 2011). These initiatives have been especially significant in neighborhoods facing evictions, demolitions, or denial of planning rights, where heritage becomes a vital resource for emotional anchoring and community mobilization.

Despite the richness of these initiatives, ICESCO's work in Al-Quds remains constrained by profound structural challenges: the absence of political sovereignty, movement restrictions, and the fragmentation of Palestinian cultural institutions all limit the scope of its interventions. Nevertheless, ICESCO's sustained presence—discursive and operational—reaffirms that heritage in Jerusalem is not abandoned or reduced to relics, but remains a living, contested, and resilient domain of cultural presence.

Strategic Patterns in ICESCO's Fieldwork: Community, Diplomacy, and Resilience

The case studies of Mosul, Sana'a, and Al-Quds, though distinct in context, reveal a consistent strategic pattern in ICESCO's field interventions—one that blends material conservation with symbolic agency and merges emergency response with long-term cultural resilience. At the heart of this model lies a multi-dimensional understanding of heritage: not as passive remains of the past, but as dynamic instruments for social healing, identity affirmation, and political expression (Al-Farsi, 2022).

First, ICESCO prioritizes interventions in high-risk and post-conflict environments, distinguishing itself from many international organizations that typically focus on stable heritage sites with well-established governance structures. By stepping into fragile zones—whether war-torn cities, occupied territories, or collapsing urban systems—ICESCO assumes a moral responsibility that redefines the possibilities of heritage work in emergency contexts.

Second, the organization emphasizes community-based and locally embedded practices. Rather than imposing top-down frameworks, it actively integrates local professionals, craftspeople, and cultural actors into its programming. This participatory orientation strengthens not only the technical quality of restoration projects but also their social legitimacy. It reinforces the principle that heritage belongs to communities, and that its safeguarding must reflect local worldviews, materials, and narratives.

Third, ICESCO adopts heritage as a language of diplomacy. Whether through its Al-Quds initiatives, interfaith roundtables in Mosul, or international forums in Sana'a, it mobilizes cultural memory as a form of soft power—deploying symbolic resistance against erasure, asserting cultural rights, and fostering regional solidarity. In this way, ICESCO contributes to a broader rethinking of heritage governance, shifting it from a focus on cultural display to a framework of cultural sovereignty.

Fourth, ICESCO integrates interdisciplinary priorities—climate adaptation, digital transformation, and youth engagement—into its heritage agenda. This signals a deliberate shift away from monument-centric preservation toward a holistic, future-oriented vision. Initiatives such as the *Green Heritage Strategy* and support for museums as hubs of cultural education underscore the organization's ambition to position heritage not only as a domain of conservation but also as a driver of civic development.

Fifth, ICESCO operates through multi-scalar partnerships, collaborating with local municipalities, regional institutions, and international bodies such as ICOMOS, ICCROM, and UNESCO. Yet its normative framework remains distinctly anchored in the Islamic cultural sphere, allowing it to navigate religious and historical sensitivities with greater resonance than global agencies often can (Revive the Spirit of Mosul Initiative, 2025).

Taken together, these features constitute what may be termed a *southern diplomacy of heritage*—a model rooted in regional solidarity, ethical reconstruction, and narrative sovereignty. Unlike technocratic or market-driven paradigms, ICESCO's approach insists that heritage is not only about what is preserved, but also about how, why, and for whom it

is preserved. It reclaims the right of communities to define their pasts and futures on their own terms, even under conditions of dispossession or collapse.

At the same time, this model raises critical questions: How can such efforts be scaled in the absence of political consensus? What occurs when cultural diplomacy confronts geopolitical constraints? And how can ICESCO's work be sustained financially and institutionally without falling into donor dependency or cultural instrumentalization? By engaging with these challenges, ICESCO offers more than technical solutions—it advances an ethical proposition: that heritage, even when broken or endangered, remains a resource of continuity and imagination for societies in crisis.

ICESCO's approach resonates with what Laurajane Smith has critiqued as the "authorized heritage discourse," a dominant framework privileging state-sanctioned narratives over local memory. Likewise, David Harvey's work on spatial justice reinforces ICESCO's attempt to link heritage preservation with dignity and the right to place. Ashish Nandy's reflections on cultural resistance and the politics of memory further echo in ICESCO's positioning of heritage as a form of symbolic agency, particularly in contested or postcolonial spaces. Finally, Tim Winter's notion of *heritage diplomacy* provides analytical grounding for ICESCO's deployment of soft power through cultural narratives (Harvey, 1996; Nandy, 1983; Smith, 2006; Winter, 2015).

Comparative Perspectives: ICESCO, UNESCO, and ALECSO in Context

Comparing ICESCO's heritage strategies with other major actors, namely UNESCO and ALECSO—reveals important contrasts in vision, institutional architecture, and operational scope. While all three organizations share a nominal commitment to the protection and promotion of cultural heritage, their mandates, geopolitical positioning, and practical mechanisms differ significantly. These contrasts can be further clarified through the following comparative table, which outlines the core dimensions of each organization's heritage approach:

Table 1. Comparative Institutional Approaches to Heritage Governance in the Islamic World and Arab Contexts

Dimension	ICESCO	UNESCO	ALECSO	Example Interventions
Geographic Scope	Islamic world (54 member states)	Global	Arab region (22 member states)	ICESCO: Regional missions in Iraq, Yemen, Palestine; UNESCO: World Heritage site monitoring globally; ALECSO: Arab cultural programs coordination
Heritage Philosophy	Context-driven; emphasizes cultural dignity and spiritual value	Universal value; focused on globally outstanding significance	Pan-Arab unity; emphasizes linguistic and cultural commonalities	ICESCO: Community-led preservation initiatives; UNESCO: Criteria-based site inscription; ALECSO: Promoting Arab cultural identity through research and media
Crisis Responsiveness	Rapid field missions; adaptable protocols	Slower response due to bureaucracy and reliance on state approvals	Limited operational capacity in conflict or fragile contexts	ICESCO: Emergency restoration in Mosul & Sana'a; UNESCO: Delayed assessments pending state approval; ALECSO: Advisory role only
Operational Focus	On-the-ground restoration, training workshops, grant packages, youth engagement	Site inscription, technical documentation, intergovernmental advocacy	Research, publications, inter-Arab government coordination	ICESCO: 12 training workshops, digital archives, restoration grants; UNESCO: Technical reports, advocacy meetings; ALECSO: Publications and seminars
Theoretical Framework	Southern heritage governance; vernacular ethics; decolonial and justice-oriented approach	Authorized heritage discourse; criticized for Eurocentric definitions and technocratic framing	Heritage framed within Arab nationalist intellectual tradition	ICESCO: Integrating resilience & justice; UNESCO: Standardized evaluation metrics; ALECSO: Arab nationalist perspective in heritage programs
Partnership Model	South-South cooperation; inclusive of local NGOs and grassroots actors	State-based and multilateral partnerships; limited local autonomy	Governmental partnerships among Arab ministries; minimal direct community interface	ICESCO: NGO collaboration in Iraq, Yemen, Palestine; UNESCO: Intergovernmental committees; ALECSO: Ministry-to-ministry coordination

Note. The new "Example Interventions" column provides concrete operational examples for each organization, linking normative frameworks with measurable actions. Sources: ICESCO (2020, 2025); UNESCO (2025); ALECSO official reports (2024).

This comparative matrix highlights how ICESCO diverges from both UNESCO's universalist heritage discourse and ALECSO's Arab nationalist framing. While UNESCO tends to universalize the value of heritage and ALECSO emphasizes symbolic cohesion within Arab states, ICESCO advances a pragmatic, ethical, and culturally embedded model anchored in lived realities and spiritual meaning.

UNESCO, the United Nations' lead agency for culture, has long been regarded as the global standard-setter for heritage governance. Its 1972 World Heritage Convention institutionalized a universal framework for protecting cultural and natural heritage deemed of "outstanding value to humanity." However, this universalism has also drawn critique (Dive into Heritage Project Showcased at the 46th World Heritage Committee Session, 2024). Scholars have observed that UNESCO's listing procedures and heritage definitions often reflect Eurocentric criteria, while its bureaucratic structure can restrict responsiveness in emergency contexts, particularly in non-Western or conflict-affected regions (Meskell, 2018). Although UNESCO has led recovery initiatives in places such as Mosul and Aleppo, these efforts often depend on protracted consultations and formal agreements with states, which can delay urgent interventions.

By contrast, ICESCO positions itself as a culturally grounded and agile actor with a specific mandate toward member states of the Islamic world. Its interventions are frequently more nimble, politically contextualized, and spiritually resonant. Rather than relying on the language of "universal value," ICESCO frames heritage in terms of cultural dignity, identity, and resilience. This normative orientation enables it to navigate local sensitivities—religious, historical, and linguistic—more effectively than global institutions often can.

ALECSO (the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization), another regional body, likewise promotes heritage protection across the Arab world. Yet its activities tend to focus primarily on documentation, research publications, and intergovernmental conferences rather than on direct field operations. Its influence in conflict or post-crisis contexts has therefore been relatively limited. Unlike ICESCO, ALECSO does not maintain a dedicated operational arm for emergency response or site-level interventions.

What distinguishes ICESCO is its hybrid model: it combines normative advocacy (through charters and strategies), field interventions (via expert missions), and local empowerment (through workshops, grants, and partnerships). Its relatively lean structure, coupled with cultural affinity across member states, allows it to act with a degree of political flexibility that UNESCO or ALECSO may not always possess.

This does not suggest that ICESCO's model is without limitations. It continues to depend on donor funding, lacks binding enforcement mechanisms, and operates in politically volatile environments. Nevertheless, its ability to cultivate trust, mobilize local networks, and sustain a coherent identity narrative grants it a unique position in the heritage governance landscape of the Global South.

Future Outlook: Scaling Cultural Resilience through Regional Agency

Looking ahead, ICESCO's heritage strategy confronts both urgent challenges and critical opportunities. With conflicts intensifying and climate change accelerating, the vulnerabilities of cultural heritage in the Islamic world are likely to deepen. Yet, ICESCO's evolving model offers a viable roadmap for localized, resilient, and community-driven responses. One key priority for the future is the institutionalization of risk mapping and early warning systems for heritage. ICESCO is well positioned to establish regional observatories that monitor threats in real time, particularly in fragile states. These observatories could integrate geospatial technologies, satellite imagery, and citizen reporting mechanisms to develop dynamic, responsive systems for mitigating risks (Strategy of the Islamic World to Enhance the Role of Culture and Heritage in Addressing Climate Change, 2025).

Another imperative is the expansion of heritage education and youth engagement. ICESCO's current investment in cultural clubs, school-based initiatives, and digital platforms can be scaled into a more comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategy to cultivate generational ownership of heritage. This could involve the development of regional curricula for schools, intercultural exchange programs, and youth-led heritage festivals that celebrate local traditions while fostering cross-border solidarity. Engaging youth in digital archiving, oral history projects, and climate-resilient design not only equips them with technical skills but also strengthens cultural literacy and identity awareness—especially in contexts where displacement or globalization has eroded traditional knowledge.

Equally important is the scaling of partnerships with universities, municipalities, and independent cultural institutions across the Islamic world. Such collaborations could generate region-specific methodologies for conservation that are both environmentally adaptive and socially embedded, combining local practices with cutting-edge heritage science. The objective should not be to universalize heritage practices but to pluralize them—to reflect the diverse cosmologies, vernaculars, and knowledge systems that define Islamic societies.

To sustain these initiatives, ICESCO will need to secure more predictable and autonomous funding mechanisms. Options may include heritage endowment funds, cultural impact bonds, or diaspora-supported programs that engage global Muslim communities. Strengthening internal systems for evaluation and impact measurement will also be critical, enabling the organization to refine its approaches, demonstrate value to stakeholders, and advocate for sustained investment from both governments and civil society actors.

Additionally, ICESCO could enhance cross-regional research collaborations by linking Islamic heritage sites with global experiences in disaster risk reduction and resilience-building. Adapting international best practices to local socio-cultural realities would improve the relevance of interventions and enrich knowledge exchange (Li, 2024; Briz et al., 2023). Robust monitoring and evaluation systems should be institutionalized to assess the impact of heritage projects on communities and youth engagement, generating data to refine strategies and demonstrate effectiveness to funders and partners (Ferreira et al., 2020; Sanjaya & Shukla, 2024).

Finally, integrating traditional knowledge with modern scientific approaches to conservation and climate adaptation will be vital. This integration can strengthen the resilience of heritage systems while empowering local communities and youth to take ownership through digital archiving, oral history documentation, and climate-resilient urban planning (Ziegler et al., 2024; Fiorentino & Vandini, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Heritage in the Islamic world stands at a critical crossroads. The findings of this study reveal a dual reality: while cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—faces escalating threats from armed conflict, ideological erasure, urban pressures, and climate change, local communities are simultaneously mobilizing to protect, reinterpret, and revitalize their traditions. This dynamic underscores that heritage is not a static legacy of the past but a living resource that fosters identity, justice, and social cohesion. When heritage governance is culturally embedded, ethically grounded, and context-sensitive, it can transform heritage into a catalyst for resilience and continuity in times of disruption.

For heritage governance to be effective, strategies must bridge normative commitments with actionable practices. Establishing regional heritage risk observatories, expanding youth-led digital archiving initiatives, and integrating climate-sensitive conservation methods are key pathways to strengthen adaptive capacity. Policymakers and practitioners should foster inclusive decision-making, enhance regional coordination, and prioritize inter-institutional partnerships to ensure that heritage protection remains both ethically sound and operationally feasible. In doing so, heritage can shift from being viewed merely as symbolic or aesthetic capital to becoming a strategic instrument of cultural dignity, social cohesion, and climate resilience.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges limitations in data access, reliance on institutional documentation, and potential organizational bias. Future scholarship should adopt mixed methods approaches, longitudinal monitoring, and comparative analyses that extend beyond the Arab context to assess the transferability of strategies across diverse regions. Evaluating the long-term impacts of youth engagement, digital preservation, and climate-adaptive interventions will be particularly valuable. By integrating participatory assessment frameworks with evidence-based monitoring, future research can enhance the responsiveness and relevance of heritage governance, ensuring that it continues to serve as a foundation for justice, healing, and inclusive futures in the Islamic world.

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