

## United Nations Human Rights – Geneva

On August 4 2020, at 6.08 pm, a large part of Beirut was entirely destroyed by a huge blast in the capital's harbor. A few weeks on, this was considered the 3<sup>rd</sup> biggest explosion in the world history in terms of its shock wave, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki...

Beirut's old city, the core of its heritage, got destroyed in a one minute shock wave. 208 people were killed and 3500 others injured... the level of destruction was extremely high. 650 historical buildings were damaged at different levels. Few days after the blast, coordination on the international level started taking shape with the aim of rescuing the historical city. The massive demand based came primarily from Lebanon's civil society and the Ministry of Culture... both aiming at the same target: save the city's history.

Lebanon's history was at major risk of being lost due to the destruction of old damaged buildings, which eventually would be replaced by new and modern ones... ultimately changing people's habitat. This reality was refused at different levels in Lebanon and abroad. A new narrative was quickly spread: the city's history has to be saved, historical buildings can't be demolished or sold. A ministerial decree was passed instantly. International pressure and international funding was pushing the decisions and narratives in this direction... saving historical buildings figured among the highest priority in funding Beirut, apart from humanitarian aid.

How was this possible? During the civil war and especially during times of reconstruction, the damage to Beirut's history was considered amongst the highest in the world but was treated as, just another casualty of war. What has changed so much to impose on the real estate sector in Lebanon a new dimension considering the identity of the city as a priority? How did heritage become part of the list of priorities? Especially that during the last decades the situation was just the opposite.

During the civil war that devastated Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, all sectors of people's life were destroyed, including their past. The damage to heritage was continuous. The sites were bulldozed, others were used for military purposes, others looted... Lebanon was a platform for illicit trade in antiquities and the national museum was a "killing field", located in the heart of the city at one of the major demarcation lines, it was the ultimate location for snipers to take refuge behind the thick walls... they slept on the floor of the museum, set fire under the statues to face the cold winter nights... and the opened holes in the walls to fire at people passing by in the streets nearby...

This reality was considered as a casualty of war. Heritage destruction was accepted as a sad reality among other sad realities taking place in the country... So what has changed today?

To better understand this shift in politics and mindset, we need to look closer on the changes in the last 20 years in the Middle East. What took place in Baghdad, Mossoul, Palmyra and Aleppo had major repercussions in Beirut. The looting of the Bagdad's museum had a major impact on the Lebanese who could understand and relate to the pain of their fellow Arab citizens... the looting of the archaeological sites in Iraq opened the wounds of those that took place in Beirut. As for the destruction of the old city of Mossoul and Aleppo... they were set by people as a fear limit: Beirut should not become another Aleppo

or another Mossoul... Destruction to cultural heritage is no longer a casualty of war but a target for people in search of their own ideology or financial interest. While robbing people of their past and attachments.

The level of destruction in Iraq and Syria was so high that it crystalized the concept that heritage professionals had been defending for years... Heritage destruction is a target during war times to alter people's minds and identity... The destruction of cultural heritage was another tool to shake and destroy the idea of preserving people's history and distinctiveness... and therefore cause massive damage to basic human right values...

The 8 seconds blast and 1 minute repercussion transformed Beirut's seafront and neighboring areas into an apocalyptic wasteland – it turned the city into an abandoned and destroyed terrain... Real estate agents were rapidly touring the city with bags full of cash willing, and aiming at buying as much old and traditional destroyed houses as they could. Their movement was strongly rejected and opposed by heritage professionals, campaigners and history lovers who used all means to fight this trend... and when their voices were heard by the international donor community, when safeguarding the history of the city was set amongst highest priorities, and a condition for accepting funding... a massive positive step was made. Of course it didn't kill the greed to buy up destroyed houses, ... but for now pushed this drive away and till today is saving the history of the city.

Almost a year on the blast, the road to safeguard Beirut's heritage, and people's identity and their right to living and knowing their own history is still far to reach,... but at least today there's a path... very sadly, it comes at the expense of this terrible blast that will stay in people's minds forever.