



FORUM: Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM)

AGENDA: Addressing Post-Colonial Restitution through the Repatriation of Stolen Cultural Heritage and Human Remains from the Middle East during the 19th and 20th Centuries

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Esteemed Delegates and Honorable Advisors,

It is my utmost honor and immense pleasure to welcome every single one of you to TTMUN'26.

Ever since its first session in 2015, TTMUN Conferences have been an undeniable portrayal of unity, collaboration, and resilience by the fellow members of the TTMUN Club. As the executive team of TTMUN'26, we have dedicated countless hours to organize the 11th annual session of TTMUN; while doing so, we have maintained the same passion and dedication with every step we have taken to sustain the quality of TTMUN. That being said, as the Secretary-General of TTMUN'26, I would like to thank my fellow executive team members and our remarkable advisor, Vesile Acar, whose support made it possible to organize this conference and host you here at our school on the 27th, 28th, and 29th of April. Yet, beyond its tradition, TTMUN'26 is shaped by its purpose.

Our mission in TTMUN Club is to foster mutual growth in a collaborative environment where we are not only discussing real-world issues but also work towards solutions. Therefore, in correlation with our mission, we have chosen the theme of TTMUN'26 to be "Bridging Divides in Human Rights". The significance of the theme lies in the unfortunate irony of the persistence of human rights violations. Today, our world is witnessing and turning a blind eye to human rights violations that the United Nations was initially established to ensure that the world would never witness and do so again. Acknowledging this, we, the youth shall not only wait for our turn to come tomorrow but shape it today. Hence, as the executive team, we hope for a fruitful conference where everyone, regardless of their role, contributes to the debates, lobbying, and discussions, bearing the urgency of our global reality in mind.

As we embark on this journey, this mission will be in action over the course of three days as the delegates will have the opportunity to be active in one of nine committees of TTMUN'26 with fifteen diverse agenda items that seek to solve the serious issues that our world is facing. While doing so, let's embrace the unparalleled value of collaboration, respect, and empathy for a better future. Finally, I hope that you have an incomparable MUN experience and once again as the Secretary General, I wholeheartedly welcome everyone to the TTMUN'26.

“All my hope is in youth!”

—Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Yours sincerely,

Derin Halatçı - Secretary General

INTRODUCTION

The Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee, (SOCHUM) is the 3rd committee of the United Nations (UN) which addresses a wide range of global issues including human rights, social development, and humanitarian issues. This committee is tasked with promoting universal freedoms and protecting vulnerable groups. SOCHUM emphasizes diplomacy, dialogue, and cooperation among nations. The success of the SOCHUM depends on the willingness of the member states to cooperate with one another in addressing the many challenges faced by the global community.



Archaeological excavations conducted in Middle Eastern Countries under colonial rule during the 19th and 20th centuries unearthed human remains, statues, and other significant historical artifacts. However, a large amount of these artifacts were moved to museums in Europe and North America by the foreign researchers conducting the excavations, due to the political and legal conditions of the time.

Today, many of these artifacts are located in major Western museums, leading to increasing debate over the ownership and restitution of cultural heritage. Many Middle Eastern countries argue that these objects represent a vital part of their national identity, history, and cultural heritage and therefore, should be returned to their countries of origin. Many museums emphasize that these artifacts were legally acquired under the laws in force at the time and highlight their role in exhibiting and preserving world heritage for a global audience.

Consequently, the issue of restitution has become a complex international debate involving questions of historical justice, cultural rights, and international law. International organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have attempted to address this issue through conventions and initiatives aimed at preventing the illegal transfer of cultural property and promoting cooperation among states for the restitution of cultural artifacts.

In addition to cultural artifacts, the removal of human remains has raised serious ethical and cultural concerns. Many communities consider the display and storage of human remains to be disrespectful to their cultural and religious traditions. As a result, calls for repatriation have increased in recent years, with governments, cultural institutions, and local communities advocating for the return of these remains and artifacts. Addressing this issue requires international cooperation, transparent provenance research, and dialogue between museums and countries of origin.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Middle Eastern Countries:

Middle Eastern countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt were major areas of archaeological excavation during the 19th and 20th centuries, all under European colonial influences. After the Sykes Picot Agreement -a secret agreement between Britain and France signed on 8th May 1916, dividing areas of Ottoman Empire influence-between them, Britain was in charge of areas like Iraq and Palestine, whereas France was in charge of Syria and Lebanon. These European nations



carried out archaeological excavations and established legal frameworks which allowed them to export artifacts to European museums, without proper consent from local authorities. Therefore, many artifacts were removed from their countries under unequal power dynamics, a situation that continues to be a source of restitution and emphasizing the legacy of colonialism on heritage ownership.

Colonial Rule: The control or domination of one country over another, which shaped the political conditions -such as colonial powers regulating excavation permits and property in their favor, with local people and government have nothing to say, local governments having limited opportunities to object or negotiate as they were subordinate to European powers-affecting the removal or the artifacts.

Human Remains: The physical remains of human beings in the form of bones or skeletal remains discovered during archaeological excavations. These have ethical and cultural implications since they are a product of the heritage and traditions of the people from whom they are obtained. The handling of human remains and possible repatriation of the same are considered a sensitive issue.

Artifacts: Objects of historical, cultural, or archaeological value discovered during excavations. These include tools, pottery, jewelry, and written texts discovered during archaeological excavations. These are of prime importance when discussing the concept of restitution since they are a product of the heritage of the people from whom they are obtained.

Statues: Sculptures of human beings, animals, or gods discovered during archaeological excavations. These were removed to foreign countries during colonial times when there was a lack of balance of power. These are of prime importance when discussing the concept of restitution since they are a product of the heritage of the people from whom they were obtained.

Cultural Heritage: Artifacts, monuments, human remains, or objects of any kind that are a product of the historical, artistic, or social heritage of a people or a nation.

Restitution: This is the process of returning cultural heritage or human remains to their country of origin after long years of stay in foreign countries. It is based on the principles of justice and the recognition of past injustices. It also focuses on the protection of cultural identity.

Repatriation: It is a process related to restitution but focuses on the return of cultural heritage or human remains to their countries of origin. This is a process that has been acknowledged as a way of addressing past imbalances caused by colonialism.

UNESCO: A body of United Nations that focuses on the protection of cultural heritage, the prevention of the trafficking of cultural goods, and the process of restitution and repatriation. It provides a framework of laws and conventions that are meant to ensure that cultural heritage is protected and that there is a process of return of cultural heritage and human remains.

Provenance Research: This is a process of investigation into the origin of cultural heritage or human remains. It is a process that has been acknowledged as essential for providing a basis for restitution or repatriation of cultural heritage.

Colonial Powers: States or countries that gain dominance over other territories, which may include political, economic, and cultural domination, for the exploitation of the resources, workforce, or strategic advantage. For example, the British and French domination in the Middle East during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Exploitative Practices: The activities or strategies that one group employs to exploit the workforce, resources, or cultural heritage of another group for their own advantage, even without the latter's knowledge or proper remuneration. The excavation of cultural heritage from Middle Eastern countries by colonial powers can be given as an example.

Indigenous People: The native populations of a region, who possess unique cultural, social, and historical identities, which may include the exploitation of the native populations by the colonial powers. For instance, the native populations of Iraq, Syria, or Egypt, whose heritage was exploited by colonial powers during excavations.

Post-Colonial: The era or condition that succeeds colonial rule, which may include the analysis of the social, political, economic, and cultural effects of colonial activities, along with the efforts for rectification, decolonization, and recolonization, like the recent discussions pertaining to the return of looted heritage to the Middle Eastern countries.

Colonial Expropriation: The expropriation of property, artifacts, cultural heritage from colonized countries by colonial powers without their consent or due compensation is referred to as colonial expropriation. It can be the expropriation of archaeological artifacts, human remains, or other resources through political, legal, or economic authority exercised by the colonial powers over the colonized countries.

Judicial Restitution: The judicial process of returning or restituting cultural heritage or human remains that were expropriated or stolen to their rightful owners or countries of origin is called judicial restitution. It is the legal process of seeking and making claims for the return of cultural artifacts such as statues or other through the enforcement of international law and due process to ensure the fulfillment of moral and legal obligations to protect cultural heritage for future generations.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Archaeological artifacts carried out in the Middle East throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, often under colonial rule, resulted in the wholesale removal of human remains,



statues, and other important cultural objects. These were often transferred to European or North American museums or into the hands of collectors. Though some of this activity may have been conducted with the intent of preservation and academic study, a significant proportion of the material was the result of

exploitative practices, including coercion, unequal exchange, or outright looting. After the

end of colonial rule, the newly independent nations and the Indigenous peoples themselves have sought the return of their heritage, with a focus not only on the return of the objects themselves but also the restoration of the sacred or ancestral connections that were severed as a result of their removal. A range of international legal agreements, including the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the 1970 Convention, and the 1995 International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT)



Convention, have established international norms with respect to the protection and restitution of cultural property. However, such instruments are largely non-retroactive, limited in scope, and often inadequate in addressing colonial expropriation. There are challenges in national courts, including differences in laws, limitations, differing definitions of ownership, and procedural limitations, which make judicial restitution unpredictable. There have therefore been many instances of alternative forms of resolution, such as voluntary returns, mediation, arbitration, and agreements, that have permitted moral, ethical, and cultural considerations to complement legal principles. Such instances include the return of cultural artifacts to Indigenous groups or communities, and co-ownership agreements that balance preservation with cultural access. The ongoing process of repatriation of Middle Eastern cultural heritage and human remains is an example of the interplay of law, ethics, history, and diplomacy, and the need for post-colonial societies to address historical injustices and restore cultural and spiritual continuities for affected communities.

CURRENT SITUATION

In recent years, the movement to redress the colonial removal of cultural heritage in the Middle East has gained considerable momentum in the form of legal, political, and

institutional interventions. Egypt has been active in launching coordinated repatriation drives. In May 2025, the Egyptian government successfully repatriated 25 items of cultural heritage from the United States after a long legal and political process. The items repatriated include Greco-Roman



portraits, golden coffin tops, and other valuable items that had been in illegal possession in the United States for decades. On the other hand, Iraq continues to repatriate looted and displaced cultural items due to decades of conflict and illegal trade. In February 2025, Iraq repatriated 37 historical items from Japan and Switzerland. The repatriation ceremony was marked by national events in Iraq, where government officials hailed the repatriation of Iraq's archaeological heritage and its return to its rightful owners.

Turkey, being one of the countries with extensive archaeological sites and being both a source and transit country for stolen artifacts, has also been actively involved in repatriation. In the last ten years, Turkey has repatriated hundreds of items, including 152 items sent to Egypt in February 2025, back to 4000 BCE and the 1st century CE. Additionally, Turkey has entered bilateral agreements with countries like Switzerland to prevent the illegal export of items and repatriate the cultural heritage of their countries in an organized manner. It is worth mentioning that in October



2023, Switzerland repatriated Urartian bronze items to Turkey, signifying the international

community's recognition of the need for collaborative work in the protection of cultural heritage.

Despite all these positive developments, the debate over the repatriation of certain high-profile items continues. Egypt has once again asked for the repatriation of the Rosetta Stone and the Nefertiti Bust, stating that modern-day facilities and technology in the country



are at par with international standards that were used to justify the stay of these items in foreign countries in the past. However, the request has not been accepted to date. The British Museum claims that it has not been officially requested by Egypt to return the artifacts and that, in accordance with the British Museum Act, it is not in a position to return the artifacts permanently, although it is possible to temporarily loan them.

Regarding the Bust of Nefertiti legally and that it is right for it to remain in the Neues Museum in Berlin. Moreover, the fact that the Bust of Nefertiti is fragile is cited as a reason for it not to be returned. This proves that despite the legal and ethical claims by Egypt, the institutions that are in possession of the artifacts are not enthusiastic about returning them, and that the issue of international heritage is complicated from a legal and ethical point of view. The repatriation in the region, therefore, indicates the use of both legal and ethical parameters, signifying how international society. The ongoing process of repatriation in the Middle East, with reference to cultural artifacts and human remains, is an example that reflects the complex relationship between law, morality, and diplomacy. This process reflects the idea that repatriation is not only about law, it is also about morality, with the aim of achieving historical justice, thereby re-establishing the social and cultural ties that were disrupted during the process of colonial appropriation.

MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED

Egypt

Egypt is among the main source countries that are actively involved in the recovery of its cultural heritage. The country is demanding iconic cultural objects such as the Rosetta Stone, Nefertiti Bust, and Greco-Roman portrait art, among others. The colonial era saw a number of these items being removed from Egypt. However, in May 2025, Egypt successfully recovered 25 stolen cultural objects from the United States through a combination of lawsuits and diplomacy. The recovered items included gilded coffin lids, statues, and other important archaeological relics. The move by Egypt to recover its cultural heritage underscores its commitment to reclaiming its historical and cultural identity.



Iraq

Iraq has also been actively involved in the recovery of its cultural heritage from other nations. In February 2025, 37 historical items were recovered from Japan and Switzerland and returned to Baghdad. The historical items included statues, cylinder seals, and other archaeological relics. The move by Iraq to recover its cultural heritage underscores its commitment to reclaiming its historical identity.



Türkiye

Turkey plays an important role in the Middle East region in terms of cultural heritage. Turkey serves as both a source and a transit country for Middle Eastern art.



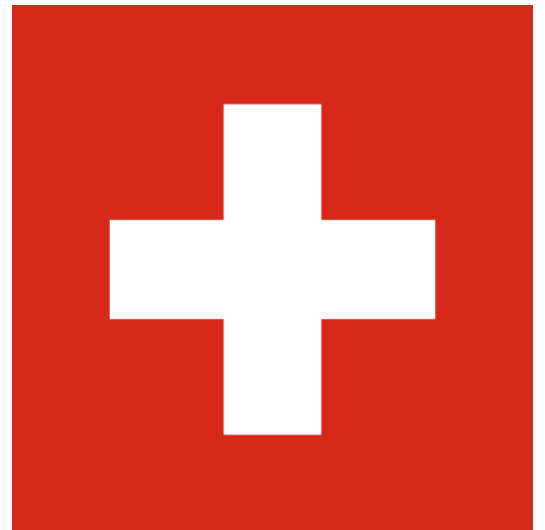
United States

The United States has also been a holding country for Middle Eastern antiquities. Some of these items were returned to other countries such as Egypt through a series of legal cases. This illustrates how the United States has facilitated the return of stolen cultural property to its country of origin while ensuring that international laws are respected in the process.



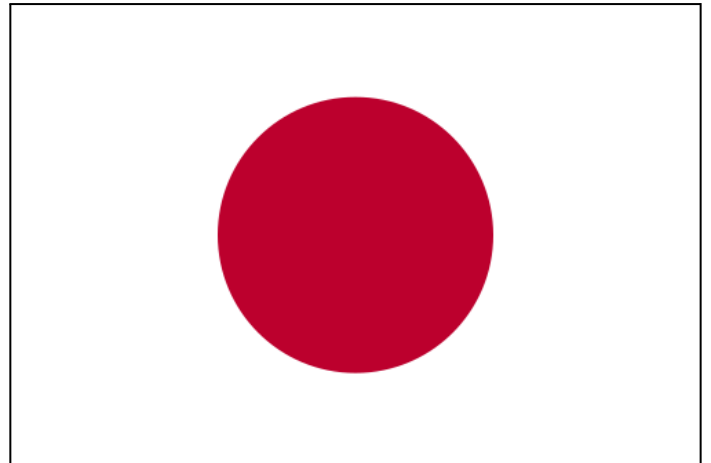
Switzerland

Switzerland has participated in the restitution of cultural property. The country has returned Urartian bronze items to Turkey and Mesopotamian items to Iraq. This illustrates how international laws regulating cultural property are being respected in facilitating the return of stolen items to their country of origin.



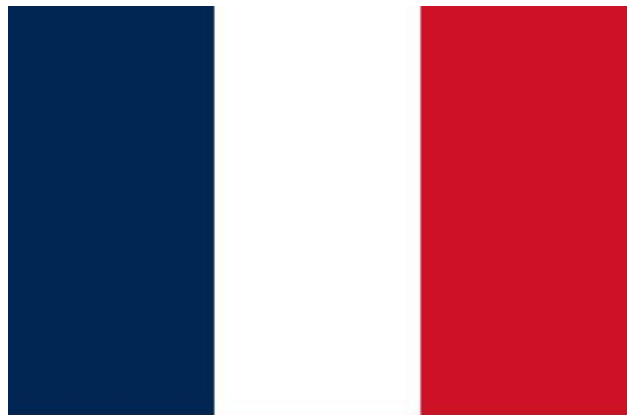
Japan

Japan has facilitated the return of Mesopotamian items to Iraq in 2025. This illustrates how international laws regulating cultural property are being respected in facilitating the return of stolen items to their country of origin.



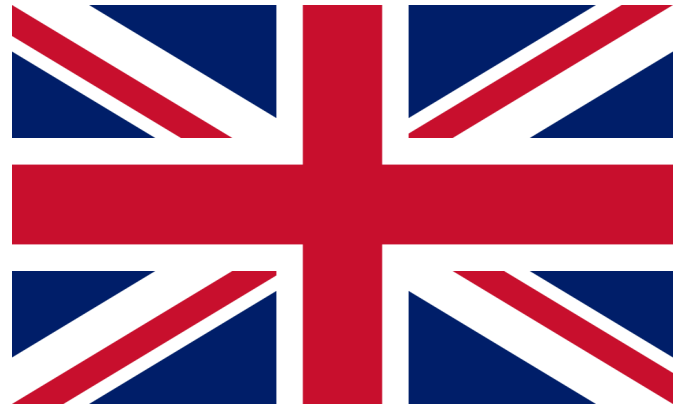
France

France, being a former colonial power, has a number of Middle Eastern antiquities in its various museums. For instance, there are a number of Middle Eastern items in the Louvre Museum in France. The museum acquired these items during the colonial era



United Kingdom

The United Kingdom also possesses considerable Middle Eastern artifacts within the British Museum, which were acquired over the 19th and 20th centuries under colonial rule. These artifacts are part of an on-going debate over their return.



RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTS

- Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954)

This is the first convention that specifically protected cultural property during the times of conflict. The convention sets out the responsibilities of states that are party to it, specifically for the protection of monuments, museums, and artifacts from harm and destruction during times of conflict. The convention also introduced the concept of special protection for cultural sites. This document is relevant as it sets out one of the first frameworks for the protection of cultural heritage, which is a foundation for modern-day discussion of the repatriation of artifacts that were removed during the conflict and colonialism.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts/1954-convention>

- UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970)

The 1970 UNESCO Convention sets out guidelines for the prevention of the illicit trafficking of cultural property. The convention encourages the repatriation of stolen and illegally exported artifacts back to their countries of origin. This convention is highly relevant for the Middle East, as many artifacts were removed during conflict and colonialism, and this sets out a guideline for their repatriation.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/legal-texts/unesco-specific-conv>

- **UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (1995)**

This convention is relevant to the issue of cultural heritage repatriation in the sense that it provides a framework that deals with the issue of gaps in national laws regarding cultural heritage repatriation. The relevance of this document to the issue of cultural heritage repatriation in the context of colonialism lies in the fact that it provide a framework for the handling of cultural heritage repatriation issues.

<https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280145bac>

- **Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907**

These conventions were the first to provide guidelines on the protection of cultural and public property in times of war. The relevance of this document to the issue of cultural heritage repatriation in the context of post-colonialism lies in the fact that it provides historical background information on the legal guidelines and frameworks governing cultural heritage repatriation, including cultural artifacts removed in times of colonialism.

<https://www.unidroit.org/instruments/cultural-property/1995-convention/>

- **Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO, 2001)**

This declaration of 2001 underscores the significance of cultural diversity and cultural rights of human rights. The declaration also underscores the ethical and cultural imperative of cultural heritage protection, preservation, and promotion. This declaration is pertinent in the sense that it widens the scope beyond legal obligation to cultural and ethical imperatives in

the repatriation of cultural artifacts to their countries of origin, particularly in the post-colonial context.

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000127162>

SOLUTION ALTERNATIVES

One possible solution for the issue is the creation of an international digital archive/sharing platform for cultural heritage. This would allow cultural artifacts, human remains, and other culturally significant objects to be digitally documented, preserved, and made accessible to their source countries, researchers, and the public. High-resolution digital scans, images, and information about their origins would ensure that the cultural, historical, and spiritual value of these objects is recognized, even if repatriation is not immediately possible. This would, therefore, be an alternative solution to repatriation, by providing a form of virtual restitution, allowing the source countries to access their cultural heritage while minimizing the risks associated with transporting fragile or valuable cultural artifacts. Moreover, an international digital archive would allow museums, governments, and research bodies to collaborate with each other, creating standards for access, documentation, and ethical use, thereby promoting transparency and trust.

Another possible solution to this problem is to develop transparent research on the provenance of cultural heritage. Museums and cultural institutions should carry out thorough research on the provenance of cultural heritage. This will help museums to identify cultural heritage that was removed under colonial conditions or through unethical practices. This will, therefore, help museums to make informed decisions on the return or repatriation of cultural heritage. Developing transparent research will help to build trust between museums and countries of origin.

Another possible solution to this problem is to enhance international cooperation and agreements between countries. International agreements can be reached between countries to return cultural heritage to its countries of origin. These agreements can be based on the sharing of cultural heritage for exhibition or temporary removal for research.

In addition, the issue of repatriation of human remains should be addressed with particular ethical concerns. The cultural and religious values of the source community should be respected. Ethical guidelines for museums and research centers should be set up to ensure that human remains are handled with dignity.

Overall, museum facilities and conservation infrastructure should be improved within the source countries. This will be helpful for the safe return and conservation of cultural heritage. International financing, training, and conservation efforts should be put in place to ensure that cultural heritage returned to the source countries is well conserved for further research and education purposes.

USEFUL LINKS

- **ICOM Standards and Guidelines for Museums and Cultural Heritage**

<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/>

- **UNESCO Database of National Cultural Heritage Laws**

<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-database-national-cultural-heritage-laws-updated>

- **Restitution and Repatriation News in The Art Newspaper**

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/keywords/restitution>

- **UNESCO Initiatives to Combat Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property**

<https://www.unesco.org/en/fight-illicit-trafficking>

- **UN Human Rights Resolution on Cultural and Heritage Rights (1993)**

<https://hrlibrary.umn.edu/resolutions/48/15GA1993.html>

- **UN General Assembly 79th Session Resolution on the Return or Restitution of Cultural Property to Countries of Origin**

<https://www.mfa.gr/en/the-79th-un-general-assembly-adopts->

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