

Threatening Culture In Trumpian Times

Trump has decided not to attack Iran's cultural sites, but is the world's cultural heritage any safer?

By: MARK LEVINE

In 1972 the World Heritage Convention, administered by UNESCO and ultimately signed by the vast majority of the world's states, was established to protect cultural and natural sites of "outstanding universal value ... so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity."

Even by the standards of Donald Trump's history of following bombastic threats with public or private backtracking, the reversal of the president's threat to attack Iranian cultural sites in the aftermath of his assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani was jarring.

To recap, when Iran threatened retaliation for Soleimani's killing, Trump tweeted that the US had "targeted 52 Iranian sites ... some at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture," which would be "HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD" if Iran struck back.

It was after Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo swatted down his threats by declaring that the US would, in fact, abide by the laws of war that Trump conceded to an astonished world, that "If that's what the law is, I like to obey the law".

Did the US president finally meet a law he does not feel comfortable breaking? Perhaps given his numerous international properties and business interests, he realised that committing indisputable war crimes would put a crimp in his post-presidential travel itinerary? Had the commander-in-chief bothered to read his own Defense Department's Law of War Manual, he might have noticed that the protection of "cultural property" is mentioned hundreds of times.

Who and what deserves protection?

For most of recorded history, the killing of non-combatants and destruction (and as often, looting) of cultural sites and treasures was a normal part of warfare. It was not until the American Civil War that the "wanton" targeting and/or mistreatment of civilians and the devastation of non-combat zones began to be explicitly prohibited during hostilities in the United States.

Similar prohibitions were elaborated in numerous international conventions and statutes focusing on the protection of civilians, private and public property and, most recently, sites of historic and cultural importance, most famously the 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions, the Nuremberg Principles, the Geneva Conventions and the statute of the International Criminal Court.

But these regulations have all included important exceptions that excuse the killing of civilians and destruction of property if such actions are justifiable by "military necessity" - a loophole literally big enough to fly a long-range bomber through, as evidenced by such mass atrocities as the Allied and Axis "strategic bombing" campaigns during World War II, including the Atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Naga-



saki, and the carpet bombing of much of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

The ravages of the colonial era and World War II led to a series of international conventions, Security Council resolutions, and codes of military conduct to more explicitly protect cultural sites. The early 1950s also marked the moment when the world, or at least international institutions, began to take the protection of cultural and historic sites more seriously.

In the 1960s, the threatened inundation of the major Ancient Egyptian sites of Abu Simbel as a result of the planned construction of the Aswan High Dam, led to the creation of the "World Heritage Site" as an officially recognised, protected and supported category of cultural and natural significance and the collection and disbursement of large sums of money from the world community towards that end.

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With such a legal regime in place, attacks on cultural sites, from the Serbian bombing of Dubrovnik in 1991 to the destruction of historic sites in Mali's Timbuktu by armed groups in 2012-13, have been prosecuted as war crimes. In 2017, the Security Council, including the US, unanimously passed Resolution 2347 condemning the destruction of cultural and religious sites by ISIL (ISIS) and al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq, and calling

for measures to protect them. Sadly, one year later, the US pulled out of UNESCO.

The darker side of heritage

It is hard for any humane person to argue with the importance of protecting World Heritage Sites, and we can only hope all these conventions, resolutions and laws continue to prevent Trump and other leaders from destroying any more of the world's material and built heritage.

But if we return to the event that led to the creation of the World Heritage list - the building of the Aswan High Dam - the darker side of this emphasis on protecting material, built and artistic culture and heritage becomes apparent. While the world came together to spend huge sums to disassemble, move and reconstruct Abu Simbel and Philae and created the political and financial infrastructure to protect other sites around the world, the tens of thousands of poor and marginalised Nubian Egyptians who lived for millennia in the area of the Nile flooded by the dam were unceremoniously driven from their homeland and are still suffering from the scars of their displacement and battling with the government to return.

It is the focus on the art and artefacts produced by people rather than the people producing them which is once again striking with the latest (thankfully aborted) violence. The same military commanders who likely informed Trump they would not bomb Shiraz or Yazd had no problem reducing much of Iraq's infrastructure to rubble and engaging in an illegal war that has cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilian lives, or more recently supporting the wholesale destruction of Yemen by the Saudis (never mind Israel's unending occupation or Egypt's imprisonment

and torture of an entire generation of its citizens).

Similarly, world leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau vocally objected to Trump's Iran threats. Yet they continue to do business with some of the world's most repressive and even murderous regimes. And let us consider how much of Syria's culture President Bashar al-Assad destroyed with Soleimani's - not to mention Russia's - help.

Redefining culture to protect humanity

As the great critic and novelist Raymond Williams explained in his seminal philosophical dictionary, Keywords, the root of "culture" lies in the Latin words cultura and colere, whose primary meanings were to "inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship". We see this original connotation in contemporary words like "cultivate" and "colony", which are directly related to the English and French term "culture" that emerged in the 15th century.

That is, from the start "culture" was "a noun of process: the tending of something". Not long after the connotation of cultivation expanded to include the process of human development and education. It was only in the later 18th and then 19th centuries that culture became more of an abstract noun, a product of human activity rather than the activity itself.

During this time, culture became associated (and confused) with "civilisation", a far larger, more static and essentialised entity, as in the "clash of civilisations" thesis popularised by neons like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington and all the damage associated with it.

If the kulturkrieg (cultural war) between the US and Iran and the tragic loss of life it has already produced are to have any positive consequence, it would be to remind us that threats to our greatest cultural achievements are even more so threats to the people without whom they could not exist, and who, as individuals and collectives, continue to create and perform culture anew, day in and day out.

As can be confirmed by anyone lucky enough to visit Iran's world heritage sites, spend time with ordinary Iranians of all stripes and experience the country's vibrant contemporary culture - including the culture of protest and dissent that remains unbowed a decade after the repression of the pro-democracy Green movement - Iranians are not just tending to some ancient past, but equally cultivating a future that surely must be held common if humanity is to meet the herculean challenges it faces.

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'They Should Have Thought Better Of Messing With A Poet': Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Grandson And Biographer

'It has always been understood that poets are in touch with something not visible or understandable to ordinary men and women.'

ALI MADEEH HASHMI

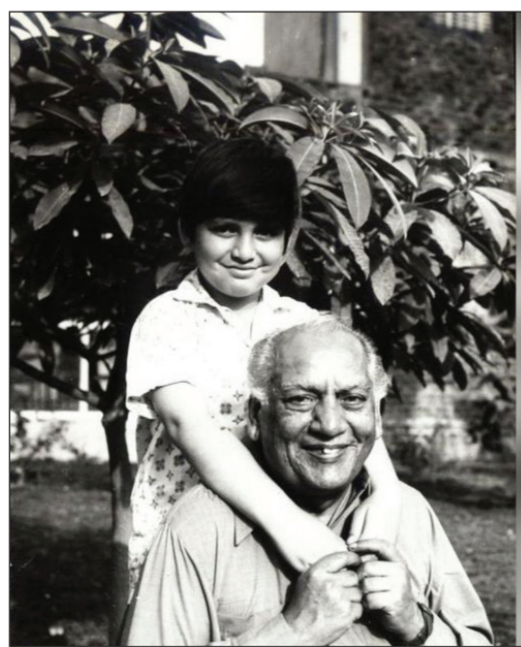
Who are these generous souls:
The golden coins of their blood
Go clink! Clink!
Into the earth's perpetually thirsty
begging bowl.
Now runs this bowl abrim, abrim.
Who are these youths, O Motherland:
These spendthrifts,
Pristine treasure of their flesh
Lies scattered in dust;
Shattered
In every niche and corner"
--- "For the Iranian students", Faiz Ahmed Faiz

In 2018, I wrote an article lamenting the way my mother, Moneeza Hashmi, the daughter of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, had been treated on a recent visit to Delhi. As usual, the article was my way of expressing the anger and pain I had felt, not just at the treatment meted out to her, but also at what India seemed to be becoming under Narendra Modi and his BJP government: a vengeful, hate-filled place so different from the India that I had encountered on my visits there in the preceding years.

My first visit to India was sometime in 1992 after my final MBBS exams, when my father persuaded me to go for a holiday. It was my first time travelling alone. I was 24 and slightly apprehensive but also excited. I stayed with some family friends in Delhi, a Sikh family who were very kind.

The two most significant memories that remain with me are the marks on their house's walls, a remnant of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in Delhi following Indira Gandhi's assassination, and the prodigious amounts of vodka that their son, who was about my age, and his friends could drink in one sitting. I stayed in Delhi for a few days, did the tourist round of Agra and Jaipur and had a great time.

After I returned to Lahore from the USA in 2010, I



visited Delhi several times, took my children on one trip to see the Taj Mahal, learned how to navigate around the shops of Khan Market and even found a favourite restaurant there (Mamagoto). The book that I am most proud of, my biography of my grandfather, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, was published by Rupa Publishers in Delhi.

Sadly, my visits to India ended abruptly in 2014 after Modi assumed power.

Getting visas became increasingly difficult and the news coming out of India did not help. I have not been back since, not even for an official launch of my Faiz biography. My mother and khala continued their periodic visits but those too, ended after what happened with my mother.

But despite Modi's attempts to turn India into a fortress where no outsiders are welcome, especially Muslims, the recent protests against the CAA-NRC are proof that India's democratic spirit is alive and well, especially in its young people. At our annual Faiz Festival in Lahore last November, as always, we welcomed students, workers and activists from political parties and groups that are given no space in the mainstream.

A video of students chanting slogans from Bismil Azeemabadi's iconic Sarfaroshi ki tamanna went viral on the internet and was seen around the world. Those students were raising awareness for a solidarity march to be held later that month but the poem, and the video, demonstrated the power of poetry to cut across class, ethnic, gender and national lines to unite all of us for a common cause.

When I heard that some at IIT Kanpur had found the chanting of Faiz's Hum Dekhengey "objectionable" and that a panel had been set up to "investigate" if the poem is "anti-India" and "anti-Hindu", I couldn't help but smile. Since I am a psychiatrist, that is the lens through which I view the world. And the founder of modern psychology and psychiatry Sigmund Freud had once said, "Everywhere I go, I find that a poet has been there before me."

While Freud is considered a visionary, a man ahead of his time, even he submitted to the authority of poets. In ancient Arabia, poets were revered as seers and fortune tellers; "Kahin" in ancient Arabia referred to Pre-Islamic poets and its related term in Hebrew, "Kohen", to priests. Which is to say that "poet", "priest" and "soothsayer" were interchangeable terms.

It is not for nothing that Ghalib has written "Aatay hain ghaib se yeh mazaameen khayal main" ("They descend from the heavens, these reflections/thoughts"). It has always been understood that poets are in touch with something not visible or understandable to ordinary men and women; something beyond the comprehension of the rest of us.

So Professor sahib at IIT Kanpur and all those

supporting him really should have thought better of messing with a poet; let alone one so widely loved in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz was revered and reviled in equal parts while he was still alive (he died in 1984). He received many accolades while alive, unlike many of his contemporaries and many who came before him and he was acutely aware of how much people loved him. He was also always guilty that he had not done enough to earn that love; that in exchange for the pedestal that people put him on, he should have done more.

His humility was one of the reasons why people, even his enemies, respected him. And while he was a humble, retiring, quiet man, his belief in his ideals was staunch and unshakeable. He would rather submit to an argument than to pick a fight but that didn't mean he agreed with you. Just that he valued you as a human being and as such, valued your opinion, even if it was diametrically opposed to his own. This appears to be a simple thing but often gets lost in the heat of an argument or a fight.

Faiz once revealed the reason that his poetry appealed to so many and it is a simple one. He said "what you say or write will only resonate with another person if it is in their heart too". And he quoted a verse from his ideal, Ghalib: "Main ne ye jaana ke goya yeh bhi mere dil main hai" ("I realised that this, too, is in my heart"). So when you write about love, freedom, justice, equality; how can it not move people? These are the ideals shared by all mankind, through all times, since the dawn of humankind.

I, for one, was not at all surprised to see students at Jamia, AMU and just recently at JNU reciting and chanting Faiz. I was surprised though, that India's current government would pick a fight with, of all people, a poet.

The writer is a psychiatrist and the eldest grandson of Faiz; he is the author of the biography 'Love and Revolution: Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the authorized biography'.

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