Protecting cultural heritage during armed conflict: the Italian contribution to ‘cultural peacekeeping’

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World cultural heritage is under systemic attack on several crisis fronts, most notably in Mesopotamia, where ISIS is practising a deliberate and highly sophisticated strategy of ‘cultural cleansing’. Through its newly established Task Force, Italy is leading the international community’s efforts to strengthen the protection regime by including a cultural component in the mandates of peacekeeping interventions. The Italian contribution distinguishes itself, thanks to its capacities and capabilities, in fulfilling the military, police and cultural tasks of ‘cultural peacekeeping’ and in meeting the needs of the international intervention in the crucial entry and exit phases. Moreover, Italy’s commitment to protecting cultural heritage fits perfectly with the distinctive features of Italy’s international identity and role while at the same time serving the country’s national interests by increasing its standing and visibility in world affairs.

Keywords: UNESCO; cultural heritage; security; peacekeeping; international interventions; Carabinieri

Introduction

The iconoclastic fury of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has sparked international outrage and rapidly elevated the destruction of cultural heritage to the top of the international security agenda. In the words of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the protection of cultural heritage has become a ‘political and security imperative’ that should be a ‘central component of peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts and humanitarian and development policies’. Responding to this appeal, in November 2015 the UNESCO 38th General Conference passed a resolution proposed by Italy to establish an international ‘rapid response force’ to defend monuments and archaeological sites in conflict zones, colloquially referred to as the ‘Blue Helmets for Culture’ (UNESCO 2015b, 41). As a direct contribution to the implementation of the resolution, the Italian government and UNESCO signed an agreement on 16 February 2016 for the creation of an Italian Task Force to be deployed ‘in favour of countries facing emergencies that may affect the protection and safeguarding of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism’ (Italian Government 2016, 1).

The aim of this article is to provide an initial appraisal of the Italian contribution to the new doctrine of ‘cultural peacekeeping’ (CPK) through its recently established Task Force. It will examine the specific features of this body and discuss its ability to meet the requirements of effective CPK and to serve as a model for other countries seeking to strengthen the international community’s efforts to protect world cultural heritage.

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This analysis is divided into two parts. The first sets the stage by briefly examining the reasons for cultural heritage destruction, focusing on the case of ISIS, whose unprecedented and systematic cultural damage and destruction in Syria and Iraq spurred the CPK initiative. With that background, the second part assesses the main objectives and requirements of CPK and demonstrates that the Italian Task Force has the necessary competences and capabilities – in terms of skills, training, experience, work ethos and motivation – to effectively fulfil the ambitious mandate of CPK. In the conclusion, however, it is argued that CPK presents major challenges that Italy should not underestimate: if it does so, it risks not only failing to achieve the mission’s objectives but also further diminishing security in the theatre of operations and beyond.

The emergence of cultural peacekeeping

The deliberate and systematic attack on world cultural heritage by ISIS has been described by UNESCO’s Director-General Irina Bokova as ‘cultural cleansing’ (UNESCO 2014). Since the summer of 2014, ISIS has bulldozed archaeological sites, smashed artefacts in museums, bombed shrines and tombs, and burned libraries and archives in several exceptional cultural sites, some of which are up to 6,000 years old, including Mosul, Niniveh, Nimrud, Khorsabad, Hatra and Palmyra.

ISIS iconoclasm is only the most recent example in a very long history of cultural heritage destruction dating back to ancient times. For centuries, the destruction and looting of cultural property were widely considered to be an acceptable and inevitable element of warfare, and disposing of ‘the spoils of war’ has been a longstanding practice among warring nations. Although discussing that history in detail is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to recall that the current regime of cultural heritage protection during armed conflict – with its institutions (such as UNESCO), norms and sensibilities – was established in the aftermath of the large-scale destruction and misappropriation of culture in the Second World War, and that it is based on the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (hereafter Hague Convention) and its 1954 and 1999 protocols.

The effectiveness of the regime, however, has been significantly limited, as evidenced by the numerous instances of cultural damage and destruction in the past several decades. The main problems include the lack of mechanisms for enforcing the provisions of the Hague Convention and the difficult balance between the objectives of cultural protection and military necessity. In addition, some have argued that the specific characteristics of the post-Cold War security environment have intensified the phenomenon of cultural heritage destruction, as witnessed in many conflicts of the recent past, from the Balkans to Iraq, from Cambodia to Afghanistan, and from Syria to Mali and Libya. As Sigrid Van Der Auwera aptly noted, ‘(...) some features of contemporary wars – their identity-bound character, the existence of illicit war economies, the prevalence in weak or failed states, and the involvement of multiple actors – are directly related to an increased incidence of cultural property destruction’ (Van der Auwera 2012, 50).

While the protective power of the Hague Convention was found particularly wanting in the conflicts in the Balkans and the Gulf in the 1990s and early 2000s, thereby drawing acute attention to the plight of the world’s cultural heritage, the unprecedented level of destruction by ISIS has triggered an even more urgent reflection on how to ensure the enforcement of the international protection regime. ISIS’s iconoclasm is not random and irrational vandalism. On the contrary, it is a complex and multifaceted tactic that should be interpreted as part of a well-planned, systematic and highly sophisticated ‘grand strategy’ that ISIS is pursuing with the objective of creating, consolidating and progressively expanding an Islamic state/caliphate. This goal will be achieved by affirming ISIS’s radical ideology and asserting its absolute domination over the population of
all territory that comes under its control, including the social and cultural context in which that population lives. In a cultural genocide-like fashion, the intention is to physically and culturally annihilate an alien or hostile community and to subjugate survivors after having stripped them of their collective and individual identities. In addition, ISIS’s attacks on cultural and archaeological sites aim to generate income from pillaging and trafficking stolen artefacts, to finance its activities and support recruitment (Arimatsu and Choudhury 2015; Mubaraz 2015; Noyes 2013).

In reaction to the progressive ‘securitisation’ of cultural heritage destruction and in consideration of the limited impact of the protection and recovery policies employed in the past few years, the UNESCO 38th General Conference in 2005 passed a resolution, proposed by Italy, aimed at reinforcing action taken by the international community to protect culture and promote cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict. More specifically, the resolution ‘supports the Director-General’s efforts aimed at embedding the protection of cultural heritage and cultural diversity in humanitarian action, global security strategies and peace-building processes, by means of all pertinent United Nations mechanisms and in collaboration with the relevant United Nations departments’ (UNESCO 2015b, paragraph 6). Building on the positive experience of the ‘United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali’ (MINUSMA), which was mandated to ensure the safeguarding of cultural heritage sites in collaboration with UNESCO, the resolution also adopts a six-year strategy whose key elements are to include a cultural component in the mandates of peacekeeping interventions and to create task forces of experts in the protection of cultural heritage (UNESCO 2015a).

As a direct contribution to the implementation of the strategy, the Italian government and UNESCO signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 16 February 2016 in Rome to establish an Italian Task Force to be deployed for the protection of cultural heritage at risk. The backbone of the fledgling Task Force is the Carabinieri Corps – a gendarmerie-like military unit and independent branch of the armed forces charged with both military and police duties – and, in particular, its specialised section, the Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale, hereafter Carabinieri TPC), established in 1969 to protect and safeguard the extraordinary Italian national cultural heritage. The Task Force will be complemented by civilian personnel, including art historians, restorers and archaeologists. According to the agreement, the Task Force can be rapidly mobilised in response to a request from a UNESCO member state.

The Italian Task Force

The Italian Task Force appears to be well suited to respond to the cultural mandate of an international peacekeeping intervention, for the following four reasons: 1) it is a hybrid and multi-tasking unit capable of performing military, police and civilian roles, all of which are crucial in the CPK context; 2) it is trained and equipped to be rapidly deployed and to operate in complex and volatile security environments; 3) it is sensitised, skilled and experienced in cultural valorisation, preservation and protection; and 4) it can rely on the support of a countrywide system – the Italian government, its political forces and general public opinion – which strongly values culture, cultural protection and promotion and places cultural diplomacy amongst its foreign policy priorities. Indeed, the political investment and diplomatic work of the Italian government in promoting the CPK initiative has been substantial, as acknowledged by UNESCO.

Table 1, which is examined in greater detail in the remainder of this article, summarises the favourable match between a mandate for CPK and the Italian Task Force’s potential contribution. It shows a positive correlation between the CPK tasks and phases (first column) – which have been divided for analytical purposes into military, police and cultural tasks, connected with an entry and
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exit phase for the activation and termination of the intervention – their operational requirements (second column) and the Task Force’s competences and capabilities (third column).

**Entry strategy**

The implementation of any international intervention is a technically difficult and politically sensitive undertaking, given the risks involved in the deployment of personnel in complex and hazardous contexts. Mobilisation of national contingents requires the firm and continuous support of domestic forces and of public opinion in the contributing country, which must have strong incentives to participate on the basis of its national interests, foreign policy priorities, values and principles. A clear and legal mandate, ideally on the basis of a UN resolution, is typically valued as an important prerequisite for any engagement in conflict and post-conflict interventions. Needless to say, the possession of appropriate capabilities is another indispensable precondition.

The Italian Task Force seems to satisfactorily meet those requirements by enjoying solid and widespread domestic political support and aligning with the country’s foreign policy objectives. First, CPK is a component of the broader doctrine of peacekeeping, and participation in this type of operation has become a distinctive feature of the international role and credibility of Italy as one of the most active and generously contributing countries in the post-Cold War security environment (Croci 2003; Giacomello and Coticchia 2007; Ignazi, Giacomello and Coticchia 2012).

Second, directly related to the specific cultural dimension of peacekeeping, culture is at the heart of the Italian national identity and plays a relevant role in shaping the country’s foreign and security policy. In the words of Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi: ‘We might not be an economic nor a military superpower but we are a cultural superpower’. The same point has often been underscored by the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paolo Gentiloni: he stated that ‘the cultural dimension of diplomacy, foreign policy, of the way Italy projects itself into the world is absolutely key … One could say Italy is a cultural superpower’. Cultural diplomacy is indeed a high priority within the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation (MAECI), for which ‘culture has a fundamental role in the foreign policy of our country and is one of the main instruments of its international projection’.

In addition, the deployment of national forces in a mandate that includes cultural heritage protection may help dilute the military connotation of an overseas intervention and thus better suit the ‘peace narrative’ that marks the Italian participation in international missions. Italy’s contribution has always been presented to the public and discussed and approved in parliament with an emphasis on its peaceful and humanitarian character, while downplaying the military dimension of the missions (Ignazi, Giacomello and Coticchia 2012).

Support for the country’s active and leading role in CPK is broad and uncontested across the entire spectrum of Italian political forces, as attested by the joint resolution of the Foreign Affairs and Culture Committees of the Chambers of Deputies of Parliament dated 5 August 2015. This resolution commits the government to promoting effective implementation of the 1954 Convention by supporting ‘the establishment of “protected cultural zones” and of a specialised task force which can ensure its effective protection on the basis of the model “blue helmets for culture” currently under discussion at UNESCO’ (Camera dei Deputati 2015, 27). Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini recalled, in the debate leading to the resolution’s approval, that the text was the product of work by members of the two committees, who co-operated in a very fruitful manner irrespective of their membership in the majority or opposition groups (Camera dei Deputati 2015, 25). Despite the severe economic crisis Italy has been experiencing in recent years, it is also worth noting that the financial resources made available to the Carabineri TPC have not...
undergone any substantial cuts. As the Commander of the TPC Corps, General Fabrizio Parrulli, noted, this can be interpreted as another concrete example of the importance that the Italian government attributes to cultural heritage protection both at the domestic and international level. In the latter case, cultural heritage protection represents, in the words of General Parrulli, ‘a distinctive and very valuable feature of the country’s foreign policy’.11

Notably, regarding the requirement for a clear and legally sound mandate, Italian engagement in the design and implementation of CPK has always occurred within a multilateral framework, particularly at the UN level. As already mentioned, the Italian Task Force was established on the basis of a UNESCO resolution and through an agreement that the Italian government signed with the Paris-based organisation. As the Memorandum foresees, the Task Force will act only ‘with the prior written authorisation of UNESCO’ (Italian Government 2016, 4).

Military tasks

As indicated in the first column of Table 1, the first task of CPK is military in nature, as it concerns the enforcement of the provisions of the 1954 Hague Convention. As explained in the previous section, cultural heritage is often a highly valued and militarily sensitive target that requires properly armed, equipped and trained troops for effective protection. CPK forces must be able to operate in crisis areas where security conditions can be precarious and volatile in order to secure sites and protect cultural properties with all necessary means, including coercive means when required. While war-fighting scenarios, such as active combat to free archaeological sites from iconoclastic adversaries, are not considered and are well beyond any possible mandate,12 CPK is designed for possible deployment as a preventative mission in precarious pre-conflict situations or in post-conflict situations even before complete stability has been achieved and actual fighting has ceased.

Necessary requirements to avoid gaps between the mandate and the reality on the ground imply three main elements (second column, Table 1). First, CPK entails resorting to ground troops for in situ protection if there is any chance of halting cultural heritage damage and destruction. Hence, a CPK force must have a military deployment capability that must also be rapid and which can be used in the initial phases of conflict before security becomes compromised, or early in a post-conflict situation as soon as security has been restored to a minimum level. Second, to operate in such potentially hostile and unstable environments, ‘cultural peacekeepers’ must possess adequate armaments, equipment and training and be proficient in the use of both lethal and less-than-lethal force as circumstances dictate. Third, as a component of a larger peacekeeping mission, CPK contingents should not be a liability or the weakest link of an international intervention; rather, they should be either logistically and operationally self-reliant or at least capable of full interoperability and integration with heavily armed military units of the same or different national contingents.

The Italian Task Force has the necessary competences and capabilities to meet the military requirements for effective CPK. The military connotation of the Carabinieri Corps is valid, as they can be deployed and can perform demanding military tasks in operations where security is volatile. As already mentioned, the Carabinieri is a paramilitary body that has been granted a particular combination of army and police authority, and thus it possesses both combat and police training and capabilities. While the police responsibilities of the Carabinieri will be discussed in the next sub-section, the military tasks assigned to the Carabinieri include the following:13

- defence of the nation, its institutions and resources in the case of a national disaster;
- participation in military operations in Italy and abroad;
exclusive function of security and military police for the armed forces;
functions of judicial military police for military justice bodies;
the security of Italian diplomatic institutions, including military institutions abroad;
assistance to military personnel involved in institutional activities in the national territory.

Founded by Royal Warrant in 1814, the military record of the Carabinieri is substantial, having actively participated in all major military events in the history of Italy since its baptism of fire in the battle of Grenoble against Napoleon’s army on 6 July 1815. Particularly since the mid-1990s, the Carabinieri have acquired a significant international dimension as part of peace and stability operations deployed overseas, especially within multilateral frameworks (i.e., UN, EU, NATO and OSCE) (Pasqualini 2001; 2002). The distinctive and highly valued role of the Carabinieri in missions abroad relates once again to its dual function as a ‘military’ and ‘police’ force, as best exemplified by the establishment of the Multinational Specialised Unit (MSU). This unit was conceptually and operationally elaborated on the basis of the ‘Carabinieri model’ and was first deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1998. Since then, the MSU has become a key element in NATO peace-support operations and a model for EU and UN missions in the form of the Integrated Police Unit (IPU) and the Formed Police Unit (FPU), respectively.14

The Carabinieri TPC also has significant experience in international crisis areas, where it has had a mandate to protect cultural heritage during armed conflict in accordance with the Hague Convention (Rush and Benedettini Millington 2015, 161–174; Carabinieri TPC 2008). The Carabinieri TPC operated in Kosovo (2002–2003) and Iraq (2003–2006), where it performed a range of cultural heritage protection activities, including census, monitoring and protection of cultural heritage sites threatened by post-conflict instability; investigation and recovery of looted artefacts; advising, training and institution- and capacity-building activities. Heavy duties of an explicitly military nature included, in both missions, in situ protection, monitoring, inspections and surveillance of archaeological sites, as in Kosovo, where churches, mosques and monasteries (such as that of Decani, now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site) were protected to avoid further looting and damages, or in Iraq’s Nasiriya province, where the Carabinieri TPC served as part of the peacekeeping mission ‘Ancient Babylonia’. In the extremely challenging Iraqi security context,15 the Carabinieri’s armed-force identity was especially useful, and they succeeded in significantly reducing damage and looting of the archaeological heritage in their area of responsibility during their deployment. As acknowledged by Professor John M. Russell, former deputy adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq and senior adviser to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, ‘during the period of the occupation of Iraq, the only Coalition force that made any significant effort to stop archaeological site looting was the Italian Carabinieri’ (Russell 2008, 34).

Police tasks

Beyond the military dimension, effective CPK necessarily implies a police component to prevent, investigate and repress criminal activities aimed at generating income from the illicit trafficking of stolen artefacts. While the military is proficient at applying force to an adversary to secure quick and decisive victories, ‘most soldiers are not trained or equipped to investigate crimes, secure evidence, make arrests, control crowds, direct traffic, ensure public safety, or conduct a host of other specialised police tasks’ (Stromseth, Wippman and Brooks 2006, 149).16 Only a police force has the skills necessary for ensuring the recovery and restitution of stolen objects, which in turn have an important impact in terms of prevention because they serve as a warning to the market that
the purchase of illegal artefacts is not without risks (Rush and Benedettini Millington 2015, 75). Policing is also key for generally ensuring public order and security and for strengthening the rule of law and thus addressing the root causes of social, political and economic disruption in which attacks against cultural property are likely to emerge. As Alex J. Bellamy notes, ‘in the long term, military peacekeepers are ill-suited to performing the policing tasks and capacity-building measures necessary to support the establishment of the rule of law’ (Bellamy 2010, 381).

As shown in the second column of Table 1, adequate training, equipment and expertise in policing on the part of intervening forces, ideally with additional specific competences in confronting cultural property crimes, are the fundamental requirements to fulfill those tasks. Fighting illegal trafficking and recovering stolen artefacts necessitate investigative skills to operate effectively not only locally, i.e., at the theatre of operations level, but also internationally, to confront the demand side of the destination market for stolen artefacts. The capacity to operate in partnership with local cultural heritage and law-enforcement agencies – and to contribute to their training, empowerment and reform – is also crucial, along with international and inter-agency co-operation. Moreover, intervening forces require appropriate skills and experience in conflict management, with the necessary discernment and sensitivity in complex situations in which damage and theft of cultural property result from a situation of generalised poverty and socio-economic distress caused by instability and prolonged conflict.

The Italian Task Force is given the necessary capacities and capabilities to meet those requirements. As a hybrid militarised police, the Carabinieri are essentially a police corps with related training and equipment. Beyond the military functions previously discussed, the Carabinieri are charged with responsibilities in the Italian territory for judicial and public order, security policing, guaranteeing of national civilian protection and continuity of service in disaster areas, and aid to the local population.17

On the international scene, the Carabinieri have developed significant experience in international policing, intervening over the past few decades as part of peacekeeping contingents especially within the UN, NATO and EU frameworks. The Carabinieri have been conducting both traditional SMART police tasks (Supporting human rights, Monitoring local policing, Advising the local police on best practice, Reporting on incidents to the UN, and Training local police on best practice and human rights) and the more complex, multidimensional and demanding ‘second generation’ tasks of ‘executive policing’ and promotion of the rule of law, which are crucial elements in the transition from war to stable peace (Hartz 2000; O’Neill 2008). For example, the Carabinieri units in Kosovo were involved in public security and order, patrolling and control of the territory, information gathering and intelligence, consulting and training of local police (as part of MSU-KFOR), intelligence and criminal analysis (as part of UNMIK), and the planning of the ESDP police mission (as part of the European Union Planning Team [EUPT] Kosovo).

Specifically concerning activities related to cultural protection, the Carabinieri TPC is widely praised for its excellence in the field and has been described as the ‘most effective military policing force in the world for protecting works of art and archaeological property’ (Rush and Benedettini Millington 2015, 1). Created to safeguard the extraordinary, rich Italian cultural patrimony, the TPC’s main duties include preventing crimes against cultural heritage; identifying and apprehending perpetrators of crimes against cultural heritage; recovering stolen cultural assets and artistic objects; combating counterfeiting; managing a database of stolen assets; monitoring and detecting violations of protected sites; and monitoring antiquities fairs, auction houses, restorers, and the web.

The effectiveness of the TPC’s prevention and repression capacity is demonstrated by the decrease in criminal art activities and the increase in recovered objects in the Italian territory.
A fundamental investigative instrument at the TPC’s disposal is the world’s most comprehensive database of stolen works of art, which documents items reported missing. Named ‘Leonardo’, the dataset contains descriptions of 5,862,203 items, including items from Iraq and Libya, with 400,000 digitalised images (Coppola 2015).

As noted, CPK can be effective in halting the looting and smuggling of cultural heritage only if in situ protection is combined with a more comprehensive action that addresses the demand side of the destination market – that is, a ‘market reduction approach’ (MRA) for subduing demand by increasing the risks involved for all parties engaged in illegal trading. To that end, investigative and legal co-operation at the international level is a distinctive trait of the TPC’s modus operandi, which collaborates closely with the world’s police and law enforcement agencies, including Interpol, the FBI, and New Scotland Yard, to trace the international routes of stolen cultural heritage and pursue their recovery and restitution (Mackenzie and Green 2009).

Those investigation tools, techniques and expertise have already been effectively utilised by the Carabinieri TPC in international interventions in conflict zones. For example, the TPC was stationed in Baghdad in 2003 to help with the inventory of items stolen during the looting of the National Museum.18 More than 3,000 ID description cards (ID forms) were compiled and sent to the database in Rome, and from there, they were shared with Interpol, UNESCO and other law enforcement agencies. The TPC was also instrumental in the recovery of several hundreds of looted items being sold in the Baghdad markets.19 In the south of Iraq, the TPC contingent deployed in Nasiriya was mandated to fight illegal excavations and conduct joint police investigations to combat the illicit trafficking of archaeological items. Its accomplishments included 90 missions performed, 60 sites inventoried, 24 helicopter missions completed, 302 objects recovered, 94 looters identified and 46 looters arrested (Russell 2008, 30).

Finally, compared with the military, which is given orders to contain and neutralise a threat and in which any deviation often leads to disciplinary action (Jackson and Lyon 2002), the Carabinieri Corps has the appropriate skills, training and sensibilities, including the necessary flexibility and adaptability, for conflict management. Trained as a community-based policing force in Italy, the Carabinieri is used to ‘listening and talking’ to people and is aware that one of its core functions is to provide a sense of safety and security to the community. Indeed, policing is largely a social, not a military function, as the police operate where other social institutions fail to respond to community and social problems (den Heyer 2011, 467). The experience gained by the Carabinieri during the community-based policing initiative in Nasiriya, despite the tragic ending with the 2003 terrorist attack against the police station, is again highly relevant.

Cultural tasks

Finally, CPK comprises a series of tasks related to the promotion, preservation and restoration of cultural heritage that has been damaged or is at risk. The role of specialised personnel in archaeology, art history, fine arts, restoration and similar sectors is of the highest relevance within any CPK mission. The tasks of advising and providing technical supervision, assistance and training to local authorities and international forces for cultural heritage emergency preparedness and protection are also key. Another major concern is the valorisation and prioritisation of culture vis-à-vis all opposing parties, including the international intervening forces. As the history of cultural heritage destruction of the Iraqi cultural patrimony after the 2003 US-led invasion teaches us, failure to protect is often due to ignorance, negligence and lack of prioritisation, co-ordination and training, even on the part of those responsible for protecting cultural heritage and pluralism during and after armed conflict.20
The accomplishment of such tasks requires CPK personnel to possess specific competences and sensibilities in the realm of cultural heritage. Training and experience in civil-military co-operation are also key elements for an effective intervention.

Once again, the Italian Task Force distinguishes itself and has the proper credentials for rising to the challenges of the cultural tasks of CPK. The Carabinieri TPC is composed of personnel who are highly competent and experienced in a wide spectrum of matters related to cultural heritage. These personnel are selectively chosen by the TPC Central Office, and they receive advanced training during a mandatory specialised course in cultural protection that lasts four and a half weeks. The selected personnel, who are fluent in two or more languages, are then assigned to specific units to receive field training with senior officers and attend additional college classes (Benedettini Millington and Rush 2011). This assignment follows a long and specialised professional practice in the protection of Italian cultural heritage at the Rome headquarters or in one of 12 regional branches, where they acquire additional competences and expertise in multiple sectors related to the analysis, prevention and repression of interrelated cultural criminal activities. In short, through personal disposition, education, training and professional ethos, the TPC develops distinctive attributes and priorities related to cultural appreciation, respect and protection. Notably, although those qualities and skills can be easily found among civilians, they are rare in military personnel.21 The value and uniqueness of the Carabinieri TPC are acknowledged by John M. Russell, who stated that in the highly complex context of Iraq, ‘the Carabinieri were the only members of the Coalition forces who actually understood the social and financial devastation caused by heritage plunder, and they were the only Coalition troops with expertise in dealing with the problem’ (Russell 2008, 34).

Italian competences in cultural protection result not only from its immense national cultural heritage but also from the experience acquired in cultural heritage activities abroad. The MAECI has a long history of support for Italian archaeological, anthropological and ethnological missions abroad, which numbered 170 in 2015. According to the Ministry, ‘these missions are not just a highly significant scientific and scholarly activity. They are also a precious instrument in the training of local workers and the transfer of technologies in a series of sectors such as archaeology, restoration and historic conservation in which Italy’s level of excellence is internationally acknowledged’.22

The Carabinieri TPC’s expertise in cultural tasks during and after armed conflict is substantial. As already mentioned, the TPC assisted the Baghdad museum staff with highly trained personnel in creating an inventory and documentation of objects stolen from the collections; in Nasiriya, it contributed to the mapping and documenting of the Mesopotamian cultural heritage in the region and to the reforming of the Dhi Qar archaeological system.23

When more specialised or additional skills are required, the Task Force can rely on civilian personnel, who can be embedded in the expeditionary mission. The civilian component is recruited from experts and scholars of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (MiBACT), and recruits include professional profiles such as archaeologists, preservation architects, restorers, cultural resource managers, museum curators, librarians, archivists and conservators. Participants in the first preparatory course for the newly established Task Force – held at La Marmora Barracks of the TPC and at the Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna of Pisa on 4–29 April 2016 – included 30 experts from MiBACT, including seven from the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro e la Conservazione del Patrimonio Archivistico e Librario (ICRCPAL), 16 from the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro (ISCR), five from the Opificio delle Pietre Dure di Firenze (OPD) and one from the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione (ICCD).24
The record of TPC collaboration with civilian authorities and agencies is extensive and continuous both in Italy and in operations abroad. As to the latter, the Carabinieri TPC worked in Iraq in close partnership with Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino (CRAST) to identify and catalogue looted artefacts (Parapetti 2008). In Kosovo, it worked with local official and academic authorities to facilitate collaboration with the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro (Coppola 2015). Moreover, the Carabinieri TPC also co-operates closely with numerous international organisations, such as UNESCO, ICCROM, ICOM, UNIDROIT and ICOMOS, in a variety of activities for the promotion of cultural respect and protection. Finally, the TPC is very active in training the personnel of police forces in countries that are committed to enhancing their own cultural heritage protection units. In previous years, the Carabinieri TPC officers conducted cultural heritage awareness and professional military education programmes in several countries, including Algeria, Turkey, the Philippines, Cyprus, France, the USA, Jordan, Greece, Poland and Palestine.

Exit strategy

Effective CPK must include an exit strategy that allows for the identification of the appropriate conditions and time for the withdrawal of CPK forces. This strategy implies the accomplishment of the mission’s mandate and the reasonable expectations that achievements are sustainable after the departure of the intervening forces. To this end, the requirements are that the situation has been stabilised and pacified to acceptable and supposedly durable levels and that local authorities are able to take over from the intervening forces so that ownership can be transferred back to them.

While pacification and stability are greatly dependent on other components of the peacekeeping mission – and especially its military, political and institution-building dimension – cultural heritage protection can actively contribute to these objectives and significantly impact the effective attainment of the mission’s broader mandate well beyond the specific cultural dimension. First, CPK can serve as a force multiplier for mission success, for example, by helping to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of the local population and increase their acceptance and support of international peacekeepers. Moreover, CPK can contribute to halting the funding generated by looting and selling artefacts, which, as observed, fuels and prolongs conflicts by providing revenues for armed groups and terrorists (Rush 2012).

At the end of hostilities, CPK can also help to ensure quicker recovery and stabilisation by promoting societal and economic regeneration for enduring peace. As noted by UNESCO, ‘the destruction of cultural heritage weakens a community’s capacity for resilience and recovery and makes post-conflict reconciliation much more difficult. Conversely, the rehabilitation of cultural heritage, in the post-conflict stage, may play a decisive role in rebuilding the fabric of societies and in creating the foundations for long-lasting peace and security’ (UNESCO 2014, 23). Again, the protection of cultural heritage can help local communities recover more smoothly and quickly, for instance, by contributing to post-conflict income generation and economic security via a return to tourism and related job generating activities, as at some stage could be the case in Syria (Foliant 2015, 15).

On the basis of its expertise, competences and capabilities, the Italian Task Force has the potential for performing well in fulfilling the assigned tasks and demonstrating progress towards a swift exit strategy. Training and capacity-building programmes to ensure the most effective and sustainable transfer of ownership back to local authorities and communities have always been key components of the Carabinieri tool box in peacekeeping missions (Pasqualini 2006, 83). In the case of Iraq (2003–2006), the Carabinieri TPC had a major role in supporting the development of
an Iraq site guard programme, assisting with training, weapons, uniforms and vehicles (Rush 2015, 170–171). The TPC was responsible for the training of the Iraqi Archaeological Special Protection force (ASP), charged with performing site surveillance and anti-looting police tasks, and of numerous Iraqi personnel of the Facility Protection Service (FPS), instructed to perform tasks such as protecting historical areas and constraining the illegal market of antiquities (Benedettini Millington and Rush 2011). The high value attributed to training by the Carabinieri is evidenced by the creation of the Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units (CoESPU) in 2005 in close agreement with the US State Department and under the aegis of the UN Department for Peace Operations. CoESPU is a major training and doctrinal centre based in Vicenza, Italy, where the Carabinieri train police officers of police/gendarmerie forces from throughout the world, with a particular focus on African countries, on the basis of the model they created during peacekeeping operations abroad. Activities include a wide range of aspects of police management in international crises, including the fight against international terrorism and military policing as well as the protection of cultural heritage. The Carabinieri Corps is the leading Service in the NATO Stability Policing Centre of Excellence (NATO SP COE), created in 2014 thanks to an Italian initiative and located in Vicenza. The Centre is involved in cultural heritage protection training and participated in two advanced research workshops supported by the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme on ‘Best Practices for Cultural Property Protection in NATO-led Military Operations’, held in Sarajevo (2015) and Turin (2016).

As an example of a capacity-building activity, the Carabinieri TPC contributed to the reform of the Dhi Qar archaeological system, which was later extended to the other 17 Iraqi provinces, thereby enhancing the capacity for cultural protection and intervention at the local level. Among other things, the TPC positioned repeaters to ensure adequate radio coverage for the archaeological province guards, installed more than 200 turrets in archaeological sites at risk, assigned 55 guns to the archaeological guards, recruited and trained more than 60 guards, and ensured the operative connection between archaeological guards and customs police (Coppola 2015). A telling example of an activity promoting societal reconciliation and economic recovery is the project led by an Italian reserve officer to renovate the citadel of Heart, Afghanistan, into a museum and a community centre (Rush 2015, 163–175; Croci 2011). Indeed, as Major Marseglia noted, ‘for the TPC, the best form of protection of cultural sites and goods is to let the local population understand the importance, also in economic terms, of their own cultural heritage’.

Conclusion

This article was intended to provide an initial appraisal of the Italian contribution to the emerging CPK doctrine, which has developed as an additional tool for strengthening the international regime for the protection of cultural heritage and cultural diversity, which are currently under severe and systematic attack by ISIS.

The article’s main argument is that the recently established Italian Task Force is endowed with the proper capacities and capabilities for fulfilling the requirements of the military, police and cultural tasks of CPK and for meeting the needs of international intervention in the crucial entry and exit phases. Evidence has indicated that the Italian Task Force has the necessary political support, training, expertise and professional ethos to play a leading role in this initiative and to thus become a model for other countries willing to contribute to protecting the world’s cultural heritage from damage and destruction.

The key characteristic of the Task Force is to be simultaneously a unit highly specialised in cultural protection and a hybrid militarised police force capable of performing civilian as well as
police and combat functions in complex and volatile security environments. Given its mixed nature, the Task Force has the potential to respond to the multiple requirements of CPK in the full continuum of a conflict and operate in a wide spectrum of hazardous and politically sensitive roles, including law enforcement, investigation and crime repression, cultural conservation and restoration as well as high-end military fighting. In addition, the Task Force can enjoy the support of the country’s political forces and public opinion, which strongly value the protection of cultural heritage both nationally and internationally. CPK perfectly suits the distinctive features of Italy’s international identity and serves its national interests by increasing its standing and visibility in world affairs.

However, CPK should be not be mistaken – or presented to the public – as a minor, light and inexpensive international intervention (in all senses, in economic terms and in terms of possible human losses). By contrast, CPK is an extremely complex and hazardous major politico-military exercise that can face serious challenges and risks of unintended consequences. As discussed, many cultural heritage sites are not ‘soft targets’ but represent highly valued and militarily sensitive objectives for the warring parties. Most importantly, CPK can entail the gravest risk of transforming from a ‘civilisation war’ to save the world’s cultural heritage into a ‘clash of civilisations’. If CPK is not well planned or if wrong decisions are made, a group such as ISIS could exploit the situation to its own advantage by presenting the well-intentioned protection of cultural heritage in terms of a war against Islam. Through a well-orchestrated propaganda campaign, ‘cultural peacekeepers’ could be depicted as ‘invaders’ if not ‘crusaders’ who occupy and violate the sacred soil of the Prophet. At the very least, CPK can risk the accusation of ‘mission civilisatrice’, especially if it involves Western contingents whose past history of colonial rule, imperial domination, and ‘colonial archaeology’ will be promptly highlighted by adversaries.28 However, Italy’s long experience in international peacekeeping and the main features of its Task Force discussed in this article bode well for addressing and preventing similar scenarios.

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Notes
2. See, among others, Bevan 2006; Miles 2008.
3. The Carabinieri Corps depends, through its Commander General, on the Defence Chief of Staff for its military duties and depends functionally on the Ministry of Internal Affairs for public order and security.
4. Headquartered in Rome, the TPC is staffed with 200 officers and is structurally part of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism; it comprises sections pertaining to Antiques, Archaeology, and Contemporary Art and Counterfeiting, with 12 regional and interregional detachments.
5. During the signing ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Director-General of UNESCO stated as follows: ‘I commend the leadership shown by Italy in promoting new and ambitious strategies to cope with the unprecedented challenge of
deliberate attacks on cultural heritage in conflict situations around the world.’ (http://www.novinite.com/articles/173150/UNESCO+Italy+Join+Forces+to+Protect+Cultural+Heritage+from+Extremists#sthash.acm70ldx.dpuf) (accessed 19 March 2016).

6. The material capabilities requirement will be addressed in the next two sub-sections.

7. This point was reiterated in all interviews that the author conducted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation (MAECI), the Ministry of Defence, the General Command of the Carabinieri and the Italian National Commission for UNESCO in the period of March–November 2016. In an interview with an official at the MAECI on 18 April 2016 it was mentioned that Italian activism in CPK was also part of the initiatives taken by Italy in supporting its bid for a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council.

8. This slogan has been used by the prime minister on multiple occasions, as in this case during US President Obama’s visit in Rome on 27 March 2014: https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/27/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-renzi-italy-joint-press-confe (accessed 22 April 2016).


11. Personal communication with General Fabrizio Parrulli, 4 November 2016.


15. On 12 November 2003, the base of the Italian mission in Nasiriya hosting 300 Carabinieri and 100 Romanians was attacked by a suicide bomb-truck that killed 21 Italians, including 12 Carabinieri, and injured more than 140 people, including 70 Italians. According to some observers, the attack was indeed intended to hit the Carabinieri for their activities fighting looting and illegal excavations in the province; see Brusasco 2013, xii.

16. For a discussion of the differences between police and military tasks, see also Heyer 2011.


18. For more on the looting of the Baghdad Museum, see Rothfield 2009.


20. This is, for instance, the case of the irreversible damage caused by the Coalition forces to the archaeological site of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, in which a major area was levelled to create a helicopter landing area (Forrest 2010, 62–63). Much of the extensive looting and damage suffered by the National Museum in Baghdad could have been prevented if the US forces had properly planned their protection before the commencement of the ground invasion.

21. On the differences between military and civilian personnel and, hence, on the challenges in their co-operation, see Kila 2012.


23. The reform of the Dhi Qar archaeological system is discussed in the next section.


27. Interview, Venice, 5 April 2016.

References


Italian summary

Il patrimonio culturale mondiale è sotto attacco in molte aree di crisi e in particolare in Mesopotamia, dove l’ISIS è impegnato in una strategia deliberata di ‘pulizia culturale’. Con la recente istituzione di una specifica Task Force, l’Italia si pone alla guida degli sforzi della comunità internazionale per rafforzare il regime di protezione culturale, attraverso l’integrazione di una componente culturale nei mandati delle missioni di peacekeeping. Il contributo italiano si contraddistingue per le specifiche competenze e i mezzi a disposizione,
potenzialmente in grado di realizzare i complessi compiti di polizia, militari e culturali degli interventi di ‘peacekeeping culturale’. L’impegno dell’Italia a protezione del patrimonio culturale mondiale ben si adatta inoltre alla distintiva identità e al ruolo internazionale del paese, conferendo prestigio e visibilità alla sua politica estera e di sicurezza.