Cultural heritage in the Middle East is under attack. Brutal civil wars and foreign interventions have inflicted tremendous direct and collateral damage on historic sites, monuments, and museums. The chaos has also facilitated the emergence of new identitarian politics wielded by groups operating outside the framework of the nation-state. Consequently, history and geography are being contested and reconfigured, while cultural heritage itself is being divided and reappropriated, and its ill-fated fragments captured by groups that do not recognize them as their own heritage, or as heritage at all, destroyed.

This apparently wanton destruction reflects a problem deeper than just a resurgent fundamentalist zeal against forbidden art. In fact, the selectivity of the destruction and looting, the indifference of a large percentage of the people whose presumed heritage is being destroyed, and the complicity of the dominant political powers in the illicit traffic in heritage artifacts indicate that not only the significance of preserving heritage, but the definition, meaning, and relevance of heritage itself are far from settled in this blighted region.

The ambiguity, however, is not new. Nor is it primarily cultural. Its roots are actually conceptual and political, and date back to the time when the notion of heritage was introduced, first in Egypt and then in other Middle Eastern countries, around the middle of the 19th century. Like other modern concepts dependent on the core notion of the nation-state, heritage was a Western import. Promoted first by European consultants of local rulers (especially in Cairo and Istanbul) as a sign of progress and membership in the club of advanced nations, heritage conservation was later picked up by colonial authorities as part of their so-called mission civilisatrice on the one hand, and as an aesthetic historicist exercise with touristic aims on the other hand. Thus, ancient sites were cleared of their inhabitants and their postclassical layers and turned into archeological parks or touristic destinations. Medieval monuments in historic cities were restored to what they were supposed to look like when they were first built and, in the process, cut off from their historically hybrid surrounding urban fabric. Meanwhile, a notion of the heritage that responded to the new geopolitical realities emerging from the fragmentation of the world order after World War I was developed through publications, museums, and conferences in the colonies but also in the colonial metropolis.

Postindependence national governments continued most of the colonial practices with a new zeal as a means to reinforce a notion of cultural identity in their newly formed nations. For a long time after independence, the compass of the heritage wavered between the Islamic (or pan-Arabic in most Arab countries) supranationalist scope and the strictly territorially defined frame, with Arabism holding sway when it was the dominant ideology in the 1950s and 1960s, and Islamism or nationalism rising to take its place after the startling defeat of the Arab nations in the 1967 war with Israel. But, like most modern concepts, the concept of heritage failed to shed its elitist and foreign
traits. It remained the domain of the educated, Westernized classes and did not penetrate
the more popular layers of society until the late 1950s when more socialist-leaning
regimes with populist agendas took over in several Middle Eastern countries. But,
despite the opening up of the ownership of heritage and its promotion across all social
classes through new media such as radio, television, and cinema, the actual conservation
practices were hijacked by two overlapping interest groups. First was the bloated and
corrupt bureaucracy, which controlled all cultural activities under the socialist-leaning
regimes. Second was a new class of opportunistic construction companies and real
estate developers that turned conservationists to benefit from the increasing international
funding earmarked for conservation in the late 20th century. This new class usurped
the bureaucratic hegemony in heritage preservation after the shift towards more market-
oriented economies in the formerly “socialist” states. This shift had a direct impact on
which heritage sites were restored or rehabilitated, which historic periods of heritage
were privileged and which ignored, and, the most revealing question, how were these
decisions made.

Part of the problem, however, was a lost-in-translation effect that went back to the first
encounters with the modern notion of heritage in the 19th century. The term heritage,
or more accurately the French patrimoine, which was the tradition first encountered
by the Arab pioneering modernists, was rendered in Arabic as turath, a noun derived
from the tripartite root, w-r-th, to inherit. The Arabic connotations of the translated term
are not too different from those of the original referent, for the underlying principle of
inheritance is of course blood relation, as when a parent bequests his/her legacy to the
children. Blood relation is, moreover, a prime symbolic definition of national kinship,
which has its roots in an imagined common tribal origin occupying a specific territory,
like the Gauls or the Germans who came from the east to what later became France
and Germany. The nation in this case, imagined as a cohesive group sharing the same
ancestry and the same land, could thus claim a common heritage, built or intangible, that
was bequeathed by those same ancestors. Thus the evolution of the notion of heritage
was tightly linked to the principle of the nation and dependent on its solid and stable
definition as a people sharing the same history and the same geography.

But in the hastily forged nations of the Middle East (with the exception of Egypt),
the definition of nationalism itself was unstable and fluid. The various groups that were
supposed to constitute the new nations carved out after the dissolution of the Ottoman
Empire did not have the time or the will to shed their old allegiances—religious, ethnic,
or simply regional and tribal—and coalesce around the new national identity. They had to
share the same national territory, imposed on them by the scheming winners of World War
I, especially France and Britain, as a solution to their colonial competition. Most of the
citizens of the new nations shared the same language (with various dialects) or the same
religion (with sometimes-divergent interpretations), which constituted the most tangible
aspects of their “national” unity. They also acquiesced to the new, shared national identity
and its territorial claims. But they kept their histories, their grievances, and the dreamed-
of trajectories to their futures distinct. At the first sign of discordance, they thus could
retreat into these separate histories and resurrect them as framers of their subnational or
supranational identities as happened in Lebanon during the civil war (1975–91) or in Iraq
after the defeat in Kuwait in 1991 and the momentary loosening of the regime’s grip on
the Kurdish- and Shi’i-majority regions. This deep-seated identitarian dissonance made
it rather easy for the new and vigorously ideological contenders to the collective identity that emerged after the failures of the Arab Spring revolutions, such as the Islamic State, to challenge, and ultimately reject, the national identity and everything that framed it, the national heritage included.

That radical rejection of nationalism, though expressed in traditionalist Islamic language that presents itself as epistemologically independent, has its roots elsewhere: the post–World War II rejection of modernity. The early, tragic, and painful shake-up of faith in the universality of modernity hastened by the rise of Fascism and Nazism that led to despair, had given way to more robust rejections of modernity’s social and moral claims after the devastating world war. Concomitantly and during the same time frame, anticolonial movements that arose in the colonized world used nativism and, in some cases, the more socialistically inclined Maoism and liberation theory as means to reject the “modernist” values of the occupiers. The United Nations’ charter and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 were last ditch efforts to maintain a semblance of universal ethics that was substantially weakened in the wake of the international organization’s failure to live up to the most modest expectations of neutrality, impartiality, and protection of the weak. The cruel and extremely exploitative world order, inherited from the spoils of World War II and concretized during the Cold War, hardened following the demise of the Soviet Union and its statist socialist model and the rise of globalization and late capitalism, before the onset of a new, overwhelming technological reality obsessed with representation and simulacra. It is probably no coincidence that this process was paralleled in the Middle East by the reemergence of rejectionist Islamist identity politics. Opportunistically deployed at first by the region’s despotic regimes as a tool of control and manipulation, such as when Anwar al-Sadat used an Islamist discourse in Egypt to counter the Left in the late 1970s, Islamism was invigorated by the triumph of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 before its widespread defiant adoption by various militant Islamic organizations ranging from the politically revisionist to the radically rejectionist.

These political developments framed a new discourse on heritage with a myopic and exclusivist view of history that repudiated the optimist modern and connected to the prenational, traditional myth of cultural autonomy. In its extreme form, adopted by radical, militant Islamism, this new discourse on heritage brandished an absolute rupture with modernity and its tarnished association to colonialism and Western hegemony. Its spiteful solution to the question of the “Islamically” unsanctioned heritage is of course to blow it up.

Clearly there are no silver bullets to rescue the currently threatened heritage. But a new conceptualization of heritage through the prism of civil rights may offer a method to countering the extremist attitudes toward heritage. Building upon the thinking that evolved in the last two decades on the right to the city, it is possible to formulate a “right to heritage” connected to the entire gamut of rights of citizens. Such a right to heritage will be an inclusive and egalitarian discourse that engages beside the functional and technical aspects of heritage a set of encompassing political, social, and cultural issues. In the long run it will empower citizens to defend heritage against popular neglect, capitalist commodification, bureaucratic calcification, and, most importantly, the kind of destructive extremist bigotry witnessed recently in Syria and Iraq that benefitted from the botched project of nation-building.