



# U.S. and Israeli strikes are damaging Iranian historical sites

World Updated on Mar 16, 2026 12:29 PM EDT — Published on Mar 12, 2026 11:24 AM EDT

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran have damaged at least four cultural and historical sites, including palaces and an ancient mosque, raising alarms about the impact of the widening war on protected landmarks that are important to Iranian identity and world history.

The speed and extent of the damage have so concerned Iran and Lebanon that they sent a request to the United Nations' cultural agency, UNESCO, this week to add more sites to its enhanced protection list.

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UNESCO confirmed that it has verified damage to the lavish Qajar-era Golestan Palace in Tehran as well as the 17th century Chehel Sotoun palace and the Masjed-e Jāme, the country's oldest Friday mosque, both in Isfahan. There also was verified damage at buildings close to the Khorramabad Valley, which includes five prehistoric caves and one rock shelter providing evidence of human occupation dating to 63,000 B.C.

At Golestan Palace, shattered glass from the mirrored ceilings blanketed the floors alongside broken archways, blown-out windows and damaged molding scattered below its glass-mosaic walls, according to Associated Press video taken March 3.

UNESCO said it provided all parties to the conflict with the geographical coordinates of the heritage sites ahead of time, "to take all feasible precautions to avoid damage."

The impact to cultural sites has not been isolated to Iran but has been felt across the Middle East and beyond, with UNESCO tracking damage to the White City in Israel, Tyre in Lebanon and elsewhere.



Collateral damage to such places has been part of the fabric of war for decades, including in conflicts between Russia and Ukraine as well as Israel and Hamas, in which dozens of sites have been damaged or destroyed.

## WATCH: Smithsonian and U.S. Army join forces to save works of art and culture threatened by war

Debris outside at the historic Golestan Palace after it was damaged by an Israeli and U.S. strike in Tehran, Iran, in March 2026. Photo by Majid Asgari (West Asia News Agency)

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of shared identity of a local community, which can often be important for bringing people together."



Debris at the historical monument Golestan Palace after it was damaged in an Israeli and U.S. strike in Tehran on March 3, 2026. Photo by Majid Asgaripour/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via Reuters

Arash Azizi, who grew up in Iran before moving to the U.S. as an adult, said that because his family couldn't afford to travel abroad when he was a child, they visited historical sites across the country. This, he says, is how he learned about his cultural identity and history.

"At times where school kids are killed, when human life is at stake, when the stakes are very high, people might think, 'What are a couple of broken tiles or broken glasses?'" the 38-year-old New York resident said.

"I think this is the wrong attitude," he added. "We need a cultural context. We need to know who we are, and where we come from, and what does it all mean?"

## Iranian American sees one damage site as deeply personal

For Shabnam Emdadi, a 35-year-old Iranian American also in New York, the damage to the Safavid-era Chehel Sotoun Palace in Isfahan is deeply personal. She traveled there with her dad a few years before he died.

"Those Iran trips with him were my most fond memories of him at his happiest, where he felt most at home and alive, and I'll never forget them," Emdadi said. "Which is why every day when I see the damage of these sites that are the core of my memories, I feel like I am also losing a piece of him."



Debris at the Chehel Sotoun Palace amid the U.S.-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Isfahan, Iran, in this picture released on [redacted] via social media via Reuters

It was unclear if it was U.S. or Israeli strikes that caused the damage. The Pentagon did not provide comment. The Israeli Defense Forces said it was "unfamiliar" with claims of damage to UNESCO sites.

One nonprofit group pointed to U.S. Defense Secretary **Pete Hegseth saying last week** that America's approach to the war would not include "stupid rules of engagement."

"That's an extremely important statement because it's those rules of engagement that embody international humanitarian law, which is not just the protection of cultural heritage, but the protection of all civilian populations and structures, including your hospitals, your schools, etc.," said Patty Gerstenblith, president of the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield, an international organization dedicated to protecting heritage in conflict, disaster and crisis.

## UNESCO's protections

Other notable land

The agency's World  
are in danger of de  
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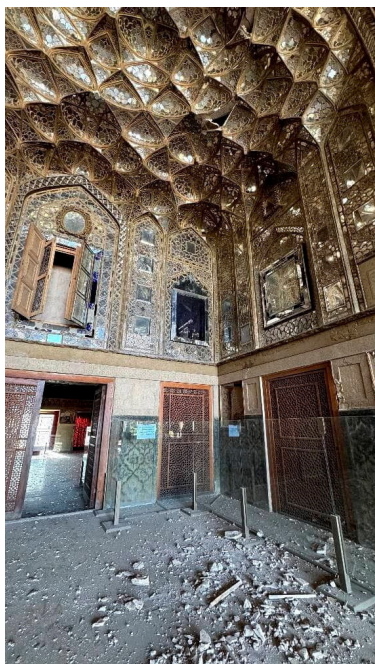
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Debris at the Chehel Sotoun Palace amid the U.S.-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Isfahan, Iran, in this picture released on March 9, 2026. Photo via social media via Reuters

The Trump administration **announced last July** that it would once again withdraw from UNESCO as it distances the U.S. from some international organizations.

The White House cited similar concerns as it did in 2018, saying it believes U.S. involvement is not in its national interest and accusing the agency of promoting anti-Israel speech. The decision won't go into effect until December.

*Associated Press writer Giovanna Dell'Orto in Minneapolis contributed to this report.*

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By — Farnoush Amiri, Associated Press

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