DIGGING IN AND TRAFFICKING OUT: HOW THE DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE FUNDS TERRORISM

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Introduction

Antiquities trafficking in the Middle East is nothing new, and even trafficking to fund terrorism has its precedents. During the Ottoman Empire, Iraqi archaeological sites were looted at the behest of wealthy foreigners.[2] After the first Gulf War, looting ancient treasures became a significant source of illicit revenue for impoverished tribal groups and revitalized criminal smuggling networks that specialized in antiquities.[3] These networks became increasingly entrenched in the Iraqi economy during the 1990s, as the UN-imposed sanctions created the need for a black market.[4] After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, looters pillaged 15,000 artifacts from the National Museum of Iraq, located in Baghdad.[5] As the security situation deteriorated, large-scale looting broke out at archaeological sites throughout Iraq; experts suggest that one-half million artifacts were looted between 2003 and 2005 alone.[6] By the time the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) conquered northern Iraq in the summer of 2014, the organization was already involved in trafficking antiquities. Indeed, just about every faction in the Syrian conflict was already trafficking in antiquities to help fund their activities, just as terrorists and insurgents had done previously in Iraq and Afghanistan.[7]

There is wide speculation and extensive debate about the extent of ISIL’s involvement in antiquities trafficking.[8] Much to the chagrin of researchers and policymakers, while terrorists are happy to pontificate on their goals and aspirations, they are not so forthcoming about their finances. Speculation about how much ISIL earns from antiquities trafficking to fund its caliphate ambitions runs the gamut from a superficial amount to billions of dollars.[9] Archaeologist Michael Danti, who is funded by the U.S. State Department, speculates that antiquities trafficking is ISIL’s second largest source of revenue, whereas a team of German investigative journalists has been unable to find definitive evidence of ISIL’s involvement in this trade.[10]

From our perspective, ISIL’s involvement in antiquities looting and trafficking is clear, based on satellite imagery, anecdotal evidence, documentation by concerned citizens, and the similar involvement of ISIL predecessors al-Qa’ida in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq.[11] Terrorists and looters are opportunists; given that ISIL derives much of its income from various illicit activities, it would be surprising if the group were not involved in what is believed to be the world’s third largest illicit market, particularly in a region that is home to some of the world’s oldest and most valuable antiquities.[12]

Unearthing Syria’s Heritage and Destroying Its Cultural Property

As Syria descended into civil war in 2011, the breakdown of civil society and the rampant lawlessness in most parts of the country had several unforeseen consequences. However, the looting of Syria’s 25 cultural museums and some 10,000 archaeological sites was predicted early in the conflict.[13] On July 11, 2011, then Syrian prime minister Adel Safar wrote to government officials warning that “the country is threatened by armed criminal groups with hi-
tech tools and specialized in the theft of manuscripts and antiquities, as well as the pillaging of museums.”[14] Safar recommended the installation of increased security measures, such as more secure doors, alarm systems, and surveillance cameras.[15]

At the time, archaeologists from the Syrian Heritage in Danger initiative found these suggestions rather odd, as no looting had yet occurred.[16] Safar’s directive nonetheless fits the narrative the Assad regime promoted almost immediately after the uprising began: that foreign conspirators and terrorists were behind the protests against his regime, despite no evidence of this at the outset of the revolution.[17] There was even speculation by some archaeologists that officials in the Assad regime would engage in the theft and resale of the country’s cherished relics, something that occurred “under President Assad’s father Hafez al-Assad.”[18] When an Aramaic statuette was stolen from the Archaeological Museum of Hama later in July, it appeared to be an inside job, as there was no sign of a break-in; the whereabouts of the statuette are still unknown.[19]

By 2012, opposition groups desperately needed money and arms, and they too turned to looting their own heritage to supplement their income.[20] Soon thereafter, fighters supporting the Free Syrian Army developed an “association of diggers dedicated to finding antiquities in order to fund the revolution.”[21] A known smuggler by the name of Abu Khaled said that even “the regime is dealing with antiquities, because they are collapsing economically. They need cash money to pay the shabiha [hired thugs].”[22] Indeed, “if you ask people from Syria, they would simply answer: everyone is trafficking antiquities. And, by the way, they have been doing this for decades, it just increased now dramatically, because of the political chaos.”[23]

Cheikmous Ali, a leading Syrian archaeologist who is president of the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archeology, documents the destruction of Syria’s cultural heritage. He explains that the actors involved in archaeological looting throughout Syria have different capabilities and four basic levels of sophistication:[24] (1) indiscriminate and random digging; (2) digging by thieves and specialists who focus on specific locations using sophisticated technology, such as metal detectors; (3) systematic digging using archaeologists’ methods; and (4) excavation with bulldozers and other heavy machinery, which causes extensive damage and has destroyed dozens of sites.[25]

Centuries-old smuggling routes that are well established across Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon have facilitated antiquities trafficking.[26] British and German reporters have come across people eagerly trying to sell millions of dollars’ worth of Syrian artifacts, which they obtained from antiquities trafficking networks operating in both southern Turkey and Lebanon, and which have ties to armed groups in Syria.[27] Many buyers are Syrian collectors who stockpile valuable antiquities in the country, while collectors from other Gulf States travel to Syria to buy directly from dealers.[28] The Turkish cities of Antakya, Gaziantep, Mardin, and Urfa have been identified as hubs for selling antiquities looted from Syria’s numerous archaeological sites, including Apamea and Dura-Europos, where heavy looting has been confirmed.[29] Some buyers allegedly come to Turkey from Western countries to purchase artifacts ranging from “$100, for . . . a Roman-era coin, and . . . as high as $100,000 for statues and rare manuscripts.”[30] Antiquities markets in Lebanon are also flush with freshly looted artifacts, which usually make their way from Syria to these markets through Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley.[31] Lebanese sources told Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, lead investigator of the looting of the Baghdad Museum in 2003, that Hezbollah is involved in this trade and even levies taxes on antiquities trafficked in Lebanon.[32]
Iraq after 2003: Pillaging the Cradle of Civilization

Bogdanos believes that trafficked Iraqi antiquities funded terrorism during the second Iraq war, but not to the same extent as funds realized from kidnapping ransoms and protection money extorted from local Iraqis.[33] Nevertheless, antiquities trafficking became an increasingly common source of income for the insurgency, as indicated by the illicit weapons and antiquities that coalition forces frequently found together during the Iraq war. This activity funded both Sunni and Shia militias, including al-Qa’ida in Iraq.[34] Even when the security situation in Iraq stabilized briefly, antiquities trafficking continued unabated. In 2010, the independent Iraqi news agency Aswat al-Iraq reported the recovery of “seven antiquities and documents belonging to what is called the Islamic State of Iraq armed group in Mosul” when Iraqi security forces raided a goldsmith’s store “after receiving information on financing armed groups.”[35] The Ninewa Operations Command arrested two wanted men and seized documents belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq.

In June 2014, after ISIL conquered Mosul, the group seized tens of millions of dollars from local banks and conveniently found itself controlling 1,800-4,000 of the country’s 12,000 archaeological sites.[36] On June 29, 2014—the first day of Ramadan—ISIL declared that it had reestablished the Caliphate and changed its name to the Islamic State.[37] By mid-July, reports began to emerge of ISIL looting in Iraq from such sites as “the grand palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II at . . . Nimrud,” where a “bas-relief that weighed more than 3 to 4 tons” was cut up and sold.[38] The director of the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage, which is located in Erbil, states that international antiquities “mafias” are informing ISIL as to what artifacts can be sold in a method akin to the “antiques wanted” section found on craigslist.[39] According to James McAndrew, a former senior special agent responsible for the Cultural Property, Art, and Antiquities Program of the Department of Homeland Security, intelligence sources suggest that significant pieces leaving Iraq will go to buyers in the UAE, Iran, Syria, and other Gulf States.[40]

Since the U.S.-led coalition attacked oil refineries under ISIL control—in Iraq on August 8, 2014, and in Syria on September 23, 2014—ISIL has increased its antiquities trafficking to make up for the loss of funds from oil revenues.[41] ISIL “clearly is involved and profiting at every level, from extraction to final sale and exit from [ISIL] territory.”[42] According to Willy Bruggeman, former deputy director of Europol, ISIL is now seeking even greater control by establishing a direct, one-on-one relationship with buyers in the West.[43] ISIL does not appear to have an official antiquities policy, but it appears to be pillaging and destroying cultural heritage sites in Syria and Iraq to support its overall mission for two main reasons:[44] first, to raise money to finance its operations, and second, to erase the cultural identity of minority groups and the ideologies that do not comply with its radical interpretation of Islam.[45]

ISIL exacts taxes on antiquities that are estimated to range from 12.5 percent to a 20 percent khums, a traditional Islamic tax, to as high as 50 percent for looted Islamic items.[46] Eyewitnesses in Manbij, a Syrian town near Aleppo, note that the way ISIL treats antiquities under its control depends on the local emir, who determines whether specific antiquities are destroyed, sold, or protected.[47] The emir offers local looters 700 Syrian pounds (US$ 3.87) per day, thus fulfilling his role as a “responsible” governing agent and providing ample employment opportunities.[48] ISIL, which opened an office in Manbij specifically to monitor looting activities, sometimes confiscates antiquities unearthed by locals and sells them to smugglers, one example being a Roman mosaic sold to Turkish traffickers. In the eastern Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor, the archaeological sites of Mari and Dura-Europos have been looted extensively since coming under ISIL control, according to recently analyzed geospatial...
imagery.[49] Bruggeman believes that pillaged Greco-Roman frescoes and masonry are among the most common antiquities stolen from an estimated 1,000 historical sites in Syria that are now under ISIL control.[50]

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**
Countries around the world are beginning to react to the destruction of ancient cultures and historical sites, and to reports of illicit trafficking of antiquities from Syria and Iraq, by implementing a variety of measures. In its latest resolution against ISIL, the UN Security Council banned all trade in antiquities from Syria and reaffirmed its ban on trading of Iraqi antiquities.[51] The EU—which includes several important European “market countries” known to purchase looted items—has reacted by putting stronger trade controls on all Syrian cultural property.[52]

In the U.S., a pending bill in the House would restrict the import of Syrian cultural property, and it also calls for a White House Coordinator for International Property Protection.[53] After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the FBI created an Art Crime Team to help other countries recover their stolen art and antiquities, and it has since collaborated with foreign police forces in numerous undercover sting operations that have helped recover antiquities worth millions of dollars.[54] The State Department is also helping the International Council of Museums with its Emergency Red List of Syrian Cultural Objects at Risk, which identifies cultural objects that might come from Syria and provides phone numbers and email addresses of people to contact if a suspected object turns up.[55] In February 2013, UNESCO held a four-day regional conference to develop an action plan to protect Syrian cultural property and build neighboring countries’ capacity to crack down on the smuggling of illicit antiquities.[56] Indeed, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have all recovered antiquities that were trafficked into their territory from Syria.[57]

Tackling the issue of trafficked antiquities needs to be part of an overall international effort to counter ISIL, and to resolve the Syrian crisis. The literature indicates that antiquities trafficking occurs in four stages: (1) looting, often by poor subsistence diggers; (2) trafficking by organized criminal networks from source to destination countries; (3) “facilitation,” where artifacts are laundered and given false provenance; and (4) entry onto the market.[58] Two-faced “Janus figures”—internationally connected antiquities dealers—are thought to be the links “between the licit and illicit trade.”[59] While the international community struggles to stabilize conditions in Syria and Iraq, it will not be able to halt the trafficking of illicit antiquities without an effective law enforcement presence in these war-torn countries. Ideally, policymakers would target the first and second stages of the illicit supply chain to prevent the supply of stolen antiquities. However, targeting the third and fourth stages creates the opportunity to curb the demand that is fueling this trade and causing the destruction of valuable cultural heritage.

Recent international efforts to counter illicit antiquities trafficking are a good start, and the need to protect cultural property is beginning to receive the level of attention that has long been called for by such acts as the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1970 UNESCO Convention.[60] Nevertheless, international law can only go so far. As public awareness of the trade in black market antiquities increases, nations around the world must take steps to stop it. Laws that have built-in enforcement mechanisms will be the most effective way to crack down on this illicit market. Specific “choke points” in the supply chain need to be targeted, such as transit countries and cities that are known hubs for selling illicit antiquities. Just as countries in the region have been called on to take a greater role in the anti-ISIL military coalition, they also must be more proactive in countering antiquities trafficking—particularly the Gulf States. Those who facilitate and benefit from this illicit trade, such as the Janus figures and transnational traffickers, must also be targeted. Finally, a public-private initiative that involves governments, museums, collectors, and archaeologists should be launched to help eliminate the purchase,
transfer, and sale of illicit antiquities, and to recommend further policy actions to reduce such activity. Efforts aimed at curbing the demand side of the market will help crack down on this lucrative market, but until this issue can be tackled from both ends by legitimate governments, these measures will not stop the surge of antiquities looting and trafficking taking place today in Syria and Iraq.

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[6] The Archaeological Institute of America also estimated that the Iraqi antiquities trade generated $10 million to $20 million per year; Rothfield, The Rape of Mesopotamia, p. 137.

In all interviews conducted for this article, this number was never considered accurate. Those who believe that antiquities are a major source of income cite unverified evidence from ISIL accounting records that were seized near Mosul in June 2014, which alleges that the group derived $36 million from antiquities smuggling in the al-Nabuk region of Syria alone. This evidence came from Martin Chulov, “How an Arrest in Iraq Revealed Isis’s $2bn Jihadist Network,” The Guardian, June 15, 2014; on issues pertaining to this $36M claim, see Sam Hardy, “German Media Corroborates $36M Islamic State Antiquities Trafficking,” Hyperallergic, November 28, 2014; for the source of the “second highest” and “second most common” claims, see Justine Drennan, “The Black-Market Battleground,” Foreign Policy, October 17, 2014; for issues related to Danti’s claim of “second highest,” see Jason Felch, “Danti’s Inference: The Known Unknowns of ISIS and Antiquities Looting,” Chasing Aphrodite, November 18, 2014; Sam Hardy, “Tax and Spend: Laissez-Faire Islamic State Capitalism for the Illicit Antiquities Trade?” Conflict Antiquities (blog), December 4, 2014.

The most extreme speculation came from a former Indian ambassador to Syria, Turkey, and the EU, who states that ISIL derives 30-50 percent of its two billion dollar revenue from antiquities trafficking—some six hundred million to one billion dollars. Rajendra Abhyankar, “Syrian ‘Blood Antiquities’ Proliferate Urgent Need for an International Agreement,” The Huffington Post, November 3, 2014.

None of the experts interviewed for this article could verify this statistic and did not find it credible. Justine Drennan, “The Black-Market Battleground,” Foreign Policy, October 17, 2014; Yassin Mursharbash, an author who was involved with this German investigation, explains in why antiquities were not part of the analysis, due to a lack of evidence, in “The ‘Islamic State’ and the Illegal Sale of Antiquities,” Abu Susu’s Blog, December 4, 2014.


Fisk, “Syria’s Ancient Treasures.”


[23] Author interview with journalist, specialist on the Middle East, ARD, German Public Broadcaster, February 15, 2015.


[27] Interview with journalist, specialist on the Middle-East, ARD, German Public Broadcaster, February 15, 2015; “Liban Tentative,” APSA; Hala Jaber and George Arbuthnott, “Syrians Loot Roman Treasures to Buy Guns,” The Sunday Times, May 05, 2013; Denecke, “Art Smuggling in
Syria.

[28] Author interview with Amr Al-Azm.


[31] Author interview with, Amr Al-Azm; interview with journalist, specialist on the Middle-East, ARD, German Public Broadcaster; Alice Fordham, “Smugglers Thrive on Syria’s Chaos, Looting Cultural Treasures,” NPR (blog).


[33] Bogdanos, “Thieves of Baghdad.”


[44] Interview with journalist, specialist on the Middle-East, ARD, German Public Broadcaster, February 15, 2015; interview with Sam Hardy, February 12, 2015.


[47] Author interview with journalist, specialist on the Middle-East, ARD, German Public Broadcaster, February 15, 2015.


