

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

Syria and Iraq's neighbours can help contain the looting

Securing the borders of the two war-torn countries could hamper the antiquities smugglers



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The humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq is of epic proportion and continues unabated as the international community remains mostly unwilling or incapable of helping. Also under threat are cultural and archaeological sites in both countries as the Islamic State (IS) perseveres in its efforts to establish a caliphate in the region. Despite some well-intentioned efforts in Europe and the US to help stop the destruction of the long and important histories of these nations, it is only when the countries neighbouring Syria and Iraq do more to halt the terrible destruction that progress will be made. In short, the Middle East must put its own house in order.

While there are many reports that IS, driven by its extremist ideology, is simply destroying archaeological sites, the terrorist organisation also appears to be profiting from the trafficking of moveable objects and numerous reports have emerged suggesting that the objects that survive the destruction are being taken to neighbouring countries and sold locally. To date, there has been no information, intelligence or proof that such artefacts are specifically destined for the market in the US or Europe. On the contrary, evidence suggests that objects pillaged in Syria and Iraq predominantly remain in the region.

In my former career as a senior special agent with the United States Department of Homeland Security, Homeland Security Investigations, I was responsible for the development and training of the agency's International Art and Antiquity Theft Investigations Unit. During and after the two Gulf wars between the US and Iraq, it was feared that hoards of looted objects stolen from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad would flood the ports of entry in the US and Europe. In fact, the only items seized at US ports were a few small parcels of trafficked material such as containers full of high quality Iraqi objects. There simply was no flood of Iraqi artefacts to the West.

I was responsible for the recovery in 2006 of the diorite statue of the



Sumerian king Entemena of Lagash, one of the most important Iraqi works looted from the National Museum. Although my office was in New York, I recovered this priceless object through an undercover investigation that led me to the southern region of Syria. The statue was being hidden on a farm and had never left the region.

During the Second Gulf War, US Customs agents working in Baghdad offered an amnesty to Iraqi citizens for the return of stolen and looted items. This programme was a success, leading to the return of many extremely important artefacts that were either stolen from the Baghdad Museum or looted from neighbouring archaeological sites. Once again, these items were all recovered locally.

This is not to say that eventually some small Syrian artefacts might not make their way to international markets, but compared with the extent of looting and site destruction in Syria, the large majority will have a different fate. When these objects go beyond the countries that border Syria, intelligence sources suggest that significant pieces will go to the Emirates, Iran, Syria and high-net-worth individuals in the Gulf states.

Looted artefacts can only enter



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The rubble of the Mosque of the Prophet Jonah in Mosul, Iraq, which was destroyed by IS in July. Left: the statue of Entemena, looted from National Museum of Iraq and recovered in 2006 in Syria

foreign markets when countries that border conflict zones fail to exercise their obligations as signatories to the 1970 Unesco Convention. Syria, Lebanon and Jordan have all ratified the convention. One of the core tenets of this agreement is to "recall the importance of international cultural co-operation, considering that it is essential for every state to become increasingly alive to the moral obligations to respect its own cultural heritage and that of all nations", while Article Nine states that parties to the treaty should undertake "to participate in a concerted international effort" to control "exports and imports and international commerce" of looted artefacts.

International coalition

The United Nations, in collaboration with Interpol, needs to establish protocols to recruit international resources to help the nations that border Syria and Iraq. Assistance should be given for increased border security, border

enforcement, and the discovery and recovery of looted artefacts before they leave the region. Punitive measures should also be considered by Unesco if any one of the countries neighbouring the conflict refuses to assist.

Any and all offers by international museum officials, archaeologists, scholars and academics are welcome and serve a specific purpose. Initiatives being put forward by the University of Pennsylvania's Cultural Heritage Center, as well as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, are critical to the overall objective, but private entities and the museum community must not shoulder the responsibility alone. To stop the spread of looted artefacts, action must take place at the borders of Syria and Iraq.

The best example of a pro-active effort is the now well-known story of the Monuments Men (and women), recently made into a film by George Clooney. During the Second World War the Allied forces were aggressive in their pursuit of stolen works of art and antiquities. It makes sense for an international coalition to proactively encircle Syria and Iraq's borders to intercept looted artefacts and stem the flow of the heritage of these beleaguered countries.