A general view shows the historical city of Palmyra, Syria, August 5, 2010. In August, ISIS destroyed the Temple of Bel as part of a large-scale movement to destroy and sell antiquities perceived as contrary to the group's ideology. SANDRA AUGER/REUTERS
The widespread looting, trafficking and destruction of antiquities from Syria and other parts of the Middle East by terrorist groups is not just a cultural crime.

“This is also a security threat,” said Irina Bokova, the head of UNESCO, noting that the Islamic State (ISIS) finances its militant operations in part from illegal sales of art and artifacts.

Bokova joined with U.N. officials and ministers from around the world Thursday morning in urging countries to adopt measures that will curb the market for antiquities coming out of Syria. Bokova called on governments to implement the U.N. Security Council’s resolution 2199, which was adopted in February and lays out serious penalties for the illegal importation of antiquities trafficked from regions under cultural threat.

“I think it’s great we have all these fantastic meetings,” said Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh. “But the time has come to [turn] words into deeds.”

The meeting he referred to took place at the Asia Society Museum on New York’s Upper East Side and brought together academics, U.N. officials, and members of the Antiquities Coalition.

Bokova told Newsweek that terrorist warlords have begun to organize illegal industrial scale archaeological “excavations” to provide a steady supply of precious antiquities for sale to black markets around the globe. These organized excavations could potentially produce millions of dollars in revenue for the militant group.

The assembled leaders urged countries to adopt the right language to describe the actions of ISIS. They referred to looting and destruction of archaeological material as “cultural cleansing,” an attempt to erase history
and clear the way for the establishment of a new, murderous ideology. Cultural cleansing as a recruiting tactic is a strategic concern in the war against ISIS, and many view it as a prelude to ethnic cleansing.

“Don’t call them extremists,” Judeh said. “Call them what they are. Murderers and criminals.”

“These terrorists are intimidated by history because history de-legitimizes them,” he added.

Bokova led the conference in a moment of silence honoring Khalid al-Asaad, an elderly Syrian archaeologist who was executed by ISIS militants for refusing to disclose the location of archaeological treasures in the town of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Kevin Rudd, former prime minister of Australia and current policy director of the Asia Society, called al-Asaad a martyr for the cause of protecting human culture.

Since its rise to prominence in 2014, ISIS has gained control of many iconic archaeological sites, including two UNESCO world heritage sites in Iraq, the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, and Leptis Magna, a monumental Roman city in Libya. The Temple of Bel in Palmyra had stood for thousands of years before it was dynamited by ISIS. The civil war in Syria started just five years ago by comparison. It may take many more years to squeeze ISIS out of its current territory. Before that happens, Judeh said, “we have to win the culture war.”
The Temple of Bel, pictured here from 2010, was one of the best preserved temples in Syria before its destruction by ISIS. SANDRA AUGER/REUTERS

As Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop explained before the Asia Society panel, “Fanatical mass movements break down communal ties.” The destruction of cultural heritage, she said, leaves communities without an identity, “empty and open in a cold world.” This erasure of heritage makes individuals ideal targets for conversion to anti-historical ideology.

“They do it because they want to draw people into their movement,” Bishop said.

Local communities everywhere in the world vie for influence over archaeological remains. Even in regions without civil wars or terrorism, there is often deep disagreement over who owns what, and which sites
should be considered important and spared from development or destruction. The Middle East is unique in being an archaeological palimpsest of overlapping civilizations, an array of sites and monuments ranging from prehistoric to modern Islamic times.

The idea of a shared cultural heritage promoted by UNESCO often runs into resistance from local claims. According to Bokova, the U.N. must make a concerted effort to educate young people about cultural heritage. She recalled an incident in which Tunisian teenagers asked her why they should care about antiquities to which “they felt they had no connection.”

Convincing people who are enduring poverty, violence and hardship to honor the remains of long-gone empires—especially when ISIS comes knocking—is extremely difficult. To a displaced farmer or villager, a looted statue or icon could also mean feeding family or saving enough money to escape the country.

More often it is ISIS militants who benefit. The market for illegal antiquities is global and the prices are often in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. UNESCO has organized a task force of archaeological experts to help track goods identified as coming from looted sites.

Judeh, from Jordan, took a more hardline approach, arguing that there should be an international “intelligence clearinghouse” for antiquities similar to the U.N.’s agency on nuclear proliferation. He also said military intervention may be necessary to protect threatened sites from terrorist encroaches.

Many countries, including the U.S., have more laws concerning the export of their own cultural goods than the import of trafficked antiquities from overseas, Bokova told Newsweek. “We need a much more focused international effort,” she said.

A bill creating provisions to prevent the trafficking of “international cultural property” into the United States., H.R. 1493, is currently in a committee of the Senate.
During her opening remarks, Bokova argued that international efforts against the black market were a success during the war in Iraq, and that local communities were able to successfully negotiate for the protection of cultural property in Egypt during that country’s conflicts.

But as long as ISIS still controls a large amount of territory, it holds a strong hand. As ISIS propaganda has demonstrated, the militants may be willing to simply destroy what they cannot sell. But Bokova rejected the argument that counter-trafficking measures could have the unintended consequence of more destruction.

“We have a moral, legal, and security obligation,” to prevent trafficking, she said.