Foreign Policy

ARGUMENT

Save Statues, Save Lives

Stopping the Islamic State's destruction of the Middle East's heritage and history must go hand in hand with defeating the extremist group.

BY MATTHEW BOGDANOS, TESS DAVIS, ATHEEL AL-NUJAIFI | JUNE 2, 2015

> At the height of the Roman Empire, the wealthy metropolis of Palmyra was a gateway to the riches of Persia, India, and China. An ancient city even in the first century, Palmyra had grown over the previous 2,000 years from a remote caravan station to a center of culture and trade containing some of the world's greatest artistic treasures. Its sculptures, temples, theaters, and tombs in the desert sands on the road to Damascus remain a source of pride for Syria, where Jews, Christians, and Muslims have together protected them for more than a millennium. Now it's all under threat.

After a weeklong offensive against the modern town of Tadmur, the Islamic State stormed Palmyra on May 21, raising its black flag over the ruins. Having survived the ravages of time and invaders for millennia, this iconic site may not survive this latest surge of ideological fanaticism. In an interview and a video report, the group has claimed it will allow Palmyra's ancient architecture to remain — even if the city's statues face destruction. But the group's recent history demonstrates a troubling pattern.

In July 2014, the Islamic State obliterated the Judeo-Christian tomb of Jonah in Mosul in northern Iraq and with it the Sunni mosque of the Prophet Yunus. Exploiting destruction as propaganda, the group posted a video this February of its black-clad thugs taking jackhammers to ancient Nineveh — once the world's largest city — and the colossal winged bulls that had guarded it since the 7th century B.C. The extremists then destroyed several priceless statues in the nearby Mosul Museum before turning their senseless wrath to the fabled cities of Hatra, Khorsabad, and Nimrud. In the Islamic State's latest archaeological snuff film, a slick production complete with soundtrack and slow-motion special effects, the

jihadis showcased their attempts to destroy Nimrud; the Old Testament palace of Ashurnasirpal was shown disappearing in Hollywood-style explosions.

Nothing compares to the horror of the Islamic State butchering aid workers, captured soldiers, journalists, and religious minorities, even children. The group has reportedly already started lining Palmyra's streets with the corpses of those who oppose them. The focus is, as it must be, on the human tragedy. But mourning these attacks against heritage does not change that focus.

As devastating as this destruction is, history warns us that worse is coming. Once you erase a people's historical identity, the next step is to erase the people themselves. The Holocaust followed the razing of old Warsaw; Cambodia's Killing Fields followed the destruction of churches, mosques, and pagodas. Stopping the Islamic State's devastation of the region's identity and ending the humanitarian crisis must go hand in hand.

For the Islamic State, death and destruction are inextricably interwoven: According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Islamic State recently executed 20 men in the famed Roman amphitheater of Palmyra, in a propaganda stunt redolent of the depravity of Joseph Goebbels. Because terrorists don't respect borders any more than they respect human life or heritage, this pattern should concern those far beyond the self-declared caliphate. It must be stopped.

But the biggest threat to cultural heritage is not iconoclasm. It is plunder-for-profit. For every masterpiece that the Islamic State destroys on screen,

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In February, the G7's Financial Action Task Force, a Paris-based intergovernmental body, reported that the Islamic State may "have earned as much as tens of millions" of dollars from looted Syrian antiquities alone. That same month, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2199, recognizing that the Islamic State and groups associated with al Qaeda are using "the looting and smuggling of cultural heritage" to fund "recruitment efforts and strengthen their operational capability to organize and carry out terrorist attacks." And just last week, the U.N. General Assembly passed Resolution 69/281, calling on all member states to help cut off terrorist financing from antiquities trafficking.

We welcome this recent condemnation, but it is long overdue. Col. Matthew Bogdanos, head of the investigation into the 2003 looting of the Iraq Museum and one of this article's authors, has been sounding the alarm for a decade. In the *New York Times*, in his book *Thieves of Baghdad*, and before the United Nations, Interpol, and British Parliament, he has argued that antiquities trafficking is financing the bullets and bombs that are killing so many.

In June 2014, Tess Davis, another of this article's

authors, cautioned in the *British Journal of Criminology* — based on years of on-the-ground work in Cambodia — that looted antiquities were funding criminals and terrorists. And earlier this year, while governor of Nineveh, the third author of this article, Atheel al-Nujaifi, warned the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that the Islamic State was "stealing valuable relics which they intend to sell." Like the Taliban in Afghanistan (who learned to finance terror with opium) and Charles Taylor in Sierra Leone (who paid for war crimes with diamonds), the Islamic State finances its campaign of death with antiquities.

Although publicly denouncing art as blasphemous, behind the cameras, the Islamic State's large-scale antiquities trafficking operation suggests that it cares less about idolatry than it does about dollars. A cozy cabal of academics, dealers, collectors, and museums turns a blind eye to the illicit side of the trade that is funding terror. In surprisingly few steps, an antiquity can travel from an Islamic State-controlled looter through a smuggler who sells it to a dealer or gallery owner, who then launders it with false provenance documentation and sells it at auction or privately to an individual collector or museum.

No one has hard numbers — the traffic in artifacts for cash for arms is too shadowy a phenomenon, and many investigations remain classified because of the terrorist connection. But a single cylinder seal — an intricately carved piece of stone the size of a piece of chalk — can sell for $250,000 and cross borders undetected by drug-sniffing dogs or metal detectors. Controlling more than 4,500 archaeological sites in the region, the Islamic State requires that any independent looters fork over one-fifth of their proceeds under the Quran's war-booty provision. It is

an income stream sufficient to allow any chief financial officer to sleep soundly.

As a result, the desert night is filled with the roar of bulldozers ripping into ancient mounds of clay that were once thriving cities, such as Palmyra, whose incomparable works of art predate the split between Sunni and Shiite. Many even predate the three competing traditions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — that have brought so much bloodshed to the Middle East. Through a universal and transcendent language, these relics remind us of our common beginnings.

Two weeks ago, Egypt, the Middle East Institute, and the Antiquities Coalition convened an emergency summit in Cairo to address the Islamic State's funding from antiquities trafficking. This historic event brought together the secretary general of the Arab League, ministers from 10 Middle Eastern and North African countries, the director general of UNESCO, and others, including Bogdanos and Davis. The result, announced in the Cairo Declaration, was a joint initiative to halt the supply of, and demand for, "blood antiquities."

The participating countries — Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates — agreed to establish a task force supported by an international advisory committee. By coordinating their efforts as a region for the first time, these countries have an unprecedented opportunity to take quick action against an illicit trade that frequently thwarts efforts at investigation by crossing borders.

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The Cairo Declaration is a sign that the region is finally ready to lead the fight to stop this threat to security and heritage. A bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives on Monday, which would restrict imports of archaeological material from Syria, is also a promising sign. But this is a global problem that requires a global solution. All countries — origin, transit, and destination points alike — must increase scrutiny at borders when coming across all antiquities, especially for those coming from war-torn regions.

The art world has responsibilities as well. In the last year alone, some of the world's most well-known auction houses, museums, and collectors have been linked to masterpieces that were stolen during the Holocaust and Cambodia's Killing Fields. Those who deal in antiquities — whether in a warehouse in Geneva, at an art gallery in Manhattan, or on the board of a museum — must require greater documentation of artifacts' origins and histories to ensure they are not purchasing the products of crime and conflict. Otherwise they are no better than criminals and war profiteers and should be treated as such, subject to criminal prosecution and

prison.

This responsibility will long outlast the Islamic State. That illicit art from World War II is just now being recovered demonstrates that this struggle will be measured in decades, not years. But the battle must begin today to stop the destruction before it is too late.

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