

## The race to protect antiquities in Iraq, Syria

Sarah Lynch, Special for USA TODAY 6:28 p.m. EDT March 18, 2015



(Photo: Antonio Castaneda, AP)

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CAIRO — The Islamic State's wanton destruction of priceless antiquities in the Middle East has triggered a global mobilization to safeguard these treasures, ranging from calls for airstrikes to special protections for untouched sites.

Iraq's tourism and antiquities ministry is demanding the U.S.-led coalition against the militants use warplanes to strike the group's machinery that is destroying relics in the region.

"This is human heritage, not Iraqi heritage, and the loss happening now is a loss for all humanity," said Qais Hussein Rashid, Iraq's deputy minister for tourism and antiquities. The coalition must "participate in protecting these historical places with whatever method they conceive suitable."

Experts from the [Louvre](#) will travel to Baghdad soon to preserve antiquities threatened by the Islamic State, French President [Francois Hollande](#) announced Wednesday according to the Associated Press.

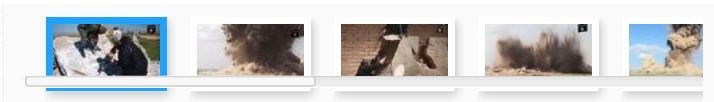
"We must do everything we can to preserve the treasures" of Iraq and Syria, Hollande said.

In Syria, a team supported by an international consortium called the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project recently put a layer of glue and cloth on Roman and Byzantine mosaics in the damaged Ma'arra Mosaic Museum — about 50 miles south of [Aleppo](#) — to protect them from further harm as a result of the nation's 4-year-old civil war.



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Another group, dubbed the [Monuments Men](#) after the team that saved treasures from the Nazis during [World War II](#), is working to document violations and damage done to historical sites in Syria and in some cases intervene to prevent damage, said Amr Al-Azm, an associate professor of [Middle East History and Anthropology](#) at [Shawnee State University](#).

"These are the men and women who put their lives on the line everyday to try and basically save what they can of Syria's cultural heritage," said Al-Azm, who oversees the team.



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Al-Azm said most activity to preserve cultural heritage in Syria has taken place in areas not under Islamic State control, where it is easier to work. He doesn't know if the efforts will make a significant difference, but "doing nothing is not an option either," he said.

"The scale of destruction is so massive, and we're barely touching the surface," he said. "While we do what we can, there is so much more to do and so little resources to do it with."



In this image made from video posted on a social media account affiliated with the Islamic State group on Feb. 26, 2015, which has been verified and is consistent with other AP reporting, a militant topples an ancient artifact in the Ninevah Museum in Mosul, Iraq. (Photo: Islamic State via AP)

Back in Iraq, the [UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ashur](#) is under threat. Founded on the west bank of the [Tigris](#) in Iraq in the third millennium B.C., the city may be in the Islamic State's cross hairs after bulldozers were reported to be moving in its direction last week, said Axel Plathe, director of the UNESCO Office for Iraq.

The Islamic State — also known as ISIL or ISIS — has targeted archaeological sites in a wave of destruction that dates back to June, when the tomb of prophet Younis, known in the Bible as Jonah, was bombed in the militant-held city of Mosul.

Since then, the group has destroyed religious antiquities and graves, burned manuscripts and waged a bombing campaign against monasteries and churches, Rashid said. The attacks are part of extremist backlash against objects they believe promote apostasy.

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The group also steals and sells artifacts to fund their activities, Rashid said. Now, UNESCO has alerted member states, the art market and cultural institutions worldwide to look out for illicit trafficking of cultural property from Iraq and Syria.

"We must unite with global intention to preserve our common heritage and resist ISIS' effort to steal not only our future freedom but also our history, the very roots of our civilization," Deborah Lehr, chair of the United States-based [Antiquities Coalition](#), said in a statement.

But the efforts are difficult to enforce since many looted artifacts crossing borders were not previously inventoried or were uncovered in illegal digs, meaning authorities trying to recover the items don't know what to look for. Many objects are also trafficked on the black market, further obstructing their recovery.



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### Islamic State destroying another ancient site in Iraq

The archaeological carnage may not stop anytime soon. In the past month, the Islamic State has bulldozed the 3,000-year-old city of [Nimrud](#) and the ancient ruins of [Hatra](#) and posted a video showing the destruction of priceless relics at the [Mosul Museum](#), Rashid said.

"I'm horrified and disgusted," said Jane Moon, an archaeologist working at a dig in southern Iraq. "But what can we do about it? I think the answer is nothing."



An image grab taken off a video reportedly released by Media Office of the Nineveh branch of the Islamic State on Feb. 25, 2015, allegedly shows a militant destroying the statue of Lamassu, an Assyrian deity, with a jackhammer in the northern Iraqi Governorate of Nineveh. (Photo: Islamic State via AFP/Getty Images)



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