

# Experts urge stop to ISIS funding through stolen artifacts

By [Tia Rinehart](#) - [Spring 2016](#) Apr 07, 2016



Tess Davis, executive director of the Antiquities Coalition, says countries can learn a lot about the trafficking of antiquities in the Middle East by looking at what happened during the Cambodian Civil War. SHFWire photo by Tia Rinehart

WASHINGTON - The Islamic State group receives millions of dollars by selling stolen, ancient artifacts from Middle Eastern countries to contribute to war expenses. Some of those artifacts end up on U.S. soil.

A group of archeologists and researchers met Thursday at the [Woodrow Wilson Center](#) to discuss the growing problem of looting and trafficking antiquities in the Middle East.

[Tess Davis](#), executive director of the Antiquities Coalition, has worked for years to uncover trafficking of antiquities in other countries. She said countries need to take responsibility and cut

off this trade.

“The [U.S. State Department](#) has warned that it believes that ISIS has made several million dollars of profits just since mid-2014,” she said.

U.S. Special Forces raided the villa of ISIS’s chief of financial operations [Abu Sayyafin](#) Syria in May 2015. Davis said Sayyaf was killed, but they discovered that over three months before his death, the Islamic State group had accumulated \$1.25 million in antiquity transactions.

“An AK-47 is going for, I think, around less than \$1,000 on the black market in that area,” she said. “That’s a lot of money to buy a lot of guns and bombs to attack the Iraqi and Syrian people.”

Davis worked in Cambodia for years and is working with the government to return all objects that were trafficked during the [Cambodian Civil War](#). She said a lot of this can apply to the current problem in the Middle East.

Stolen artifacts have ended up in the U.S. at some of the highest levels of the art market. Davis said trafficked objects have ended up at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), the [Denver Art Museum](#), the [Cleveland Museum of Art](#) and more.

During her time in Cambodia, Davis spoke to looters and traffickers. She discovered that not only were mafia groups trafficking artifacts, but also both the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia armed forces were selling antiquities when they needed money during the war.

“Even groups that were fighting each other on the battle field had no problem doing business with one another to get these pieces out of the country,” she said.

[Alexander Nagel](#) is a research associate at the [Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History](#). He said traffickers often sell fake artifacts.

Nagel gave the example of the [Persian Princess](#). He said in the fall of 2000 a wooden coffin showed up in the northern part of Pakistan with a mummified body of a young woman. The coffin was encrypted with the name Amytis Xerxes, Persian King Xerxes’s daughter. It went on the market for \$11 million.

Soon after being on display in Iran, research revealed the mummified body was a modern woman who died in 1996. Further investigation showed the woman was possibly murdered.

“So you see directly here, the link of what is being offered on the market actually to what desperate means antiquities dealers go to,” Nagel said.

Egyptian archaeologist Monica Hanna said the demand for trafficked objects is very high and looting now encompasses other crimes.

“Many of the archeological sights in the delta are being sold as land without doing proper excavation, and the contractors completely clean the site from its objects and then build sites so we then lose the objects and their context,” she said.

Although conditions in war zones are hard to control, Davis said objects should not be trafficked after they leave the war zone, but that is what is happening.

Davis said looting and trafficking is treated as a white-collar crime, if it is treated as a crime at all. She said the president needs to get involved.

“This is going to continue to be a problem long after [ISIS is] gone, and hopefully with the public attention this is getting we can enact some changes and pursue in more criminal investigations,” she said.

[The Protect and Preserve International Properties Act](#) was proposed 14 months ago and has been passed by the House. Senate committees have worked on the bill, which awaits floor action.

“But we can’t do a bill for every country that needs it. Yemen next, are we going to wait on

Congress to do a bill on Yemen? What about Libya what about Tunisia?” Davis said.