

# Looting and Trafficking of Antiquities in the Middle East

Four experts shared their analyses on the threat that looting and trafficking of antiquities from archaeological sites poses to the survival of cultural heritage.

On April 7, 2016, the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Goethe-Institut in Washington co-sponsored the event “**Looting and Trafficking of Antiquities in the Middle East**,” with **Tess Davis**, Executive Director of the Antiquities Coalition; **Iris Gerlach**, Head of the Sanaa Branch of the Oriental Department at the German Archaeological Institute; **Alexander Nagel**, Research Associate with the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History; and **Monica Hanna**, an Egyptian archaeologist who joined the conversation via Skype. **Henri J. Barkey**, Director of the Middle East Program at Woodrow Wilson Center, moderated the event.

Davis began by sharing the work she has undertaken to preserve Cambodia’s cultural heritage. With regard to understanding how to quell the looting and trafficking of artifacts in Iraq and Syria today, she stated that there are some valuable lessons to be learned from Cambodia’s history. Scandals in Cambodia revealed a major trafficking network, and with each year more stolen statues have been discovered in the art market. Unlike in many countries, though, the Cambodian government has made recovery of these stolen objects a priority, and Davis noted that it takes time to uncover the full story of the lootings. She predicted that even if conflict in the Middle East were to end today, trafficking would continue; Cambodia is still in recovery 40 years after the end of its civil war.

Gerlach entered the conversation by emphasizing the devastating collateral damage that antiquities looting has on a culture. The business of trafficking stolen cultural goods has become increasingly professional and looting is only continuing to blossom. She also noted that illicit excavations are not limited to the Middle East. Gerlach remarked that increasingly, unstable regimes create ideal situations for vicious circles of supply and demand of cultural goods to foster. She discussed how science suffers because it is not just the pieces that are removed but the context and location where they were found is also lost. Gerlach went on to stress the immediate need for the international community to act and for greater capacity building to happen in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. She concluded by saying there is still much to be done to protect cultural goods worldwide, and the preservation of our cultural heritage is at stake.

Hanna then remarked that Egypt seems to be a large supplier for Islamic art, especially given the recent high demand now in the GCC states. This has in turn created what Hanna termed as “gold digging fever” in Egypt. She noted that although there is less looting lately, she expects the market for goods to continue to fluctuate. She went on to discuss the different types of looters and focused her comments on organized gangs. These groups, she said, are coming into sites and looking for particular objects, often working for collectors or dealers. She noted, as did Davis, that looting is entrenched in other crimes and conflict. But Hanna ended optimistically, saying that she is hopeful for countries to work together to preserve the world’s deteriorating cultural heritage.

Nagel echoed the panelist’s prior comments in his discussion of violence related to the illicit trade of antiquities. He shared his recent work with the Department of Homeland Security and border control to train agents to be more successful at identifying artifacts. He commented on how inspired he was by the agents’ passion for this issue. Recently, he said, he has been working on the illicit antiquities market in Yemen, and suggested that better distribution of a catalog of Yemen’s missing museum artifacts could be a way to combat trafficking.

Barkey asked the panelists a number of questions, including what more can be done to enforce penalties for looting and trafficking. The experts were in agreement that stricter regulations would

be helpful, and Hanna suggested that there is an urgent need to promote global awareness of the issue. She added that the way to tackle looting and trafficking is through awareness, and to make it unpopular, to which Nagel echoed the effectiveness of public shaming. In the same vein, Gerlach noted the need for better relationships on the ground in these countries, to promote country-specific awareness projects, and that this long process will require us all to work together. Davis implored the audience to think about how the United States imposes standards that we cannot even meet ourselves, citing the loss of artifacts from Native American sites. She closed by saying what is needed is to attack the trafficking networks as an institution and use the laws already in place to the fullest extent.

**By Elena Scott-Kakures, Middle East Program**

### **Speakers**

- **Tess Davis**  
Executive Director, Antiquities Coalition
- **Iris Gerlach**  
Head of the Sanaa Branch of the Oriental Department, German Archaeological Institute
- **Monica Hanna**  
Egyptologist, social media activist, and SAFE Beacon Award Winner
- **Alexander Nagel**  
Research Associate, Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History
- **Henri J. Barkey**  
Director, Middle East Program