

Restoring Our Cultural Heritage in Syria

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“It was a place to connect to your history, to your identity and to tell others, who were not from Aleppo or Syria: “This is where we are from. This is who we are.” This is where you come to encounter your roots. It was a place that existed forever, a place we thought would exist long after we were gone. But we were wrong.” (Amal Hanano, Lessons from the Minaret, 2013)

For the past two months, since the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee amended legislative proposal H.R. 1493, known as the Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act, the key bill has picked up steam on Capitol Hill with bi-partisan support. This week (4/13/2016), the full senate passed the measure by unanimous consent. This important legislation, which is expected to become law in the coming weeks, given its strong support also on the House side of Congress, calls for emergency import restrictions on at-risk Syrian cultural property within 90 days of President Obama’s signature. Rather than establishing a rather controversial cultural heritage czar called for in an earlier version, H.R. 1493 now calls for an inter-agency executive committee to protect international cultural property by acting on US pledges at the United Nations Security Council more than a year ago to try to choke off the trade of so-called blood antiquities that the Islamic State, the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda and other groups use to help finance their military operations in Syria.

This observer has been advised by two Congressional sources that concerns for the restoration of our shared global cultural heritage in Syria, widespread relief that Palmyra has been liberated from ISIS iconoclasm, and American public support for the repair and restoration of Palmyra’s treasures, are major reasons for moving the tough new and most welcomed ban on Syrian cultural property forward. The White House spokesman, Peter Boogaard, issued a statement welcoming the Congressional action and pledging that the Obama administration is committed to “enhance our ability to identify and prosecute those who unlawfully acquire or sell precious historical artifacts.”

Still there are concerns about the widely perceived slow pace of Obama administration action in fulfilling US obligations under last year’s (2/2015) UN Security Council Resolution. According to last week’s report by the Antiquities Coalition, “The lack of required action has kept the United States market open to the import of Syrian antiquities, making it a potential source of funding for extremist organizations.”

The United States, as the task force’s report noted, accounts for 43 percent of the global art market, making it a potential leader in demand for illicit Syrian imports. While American law prohibits the import of stolen or looted objects, it does not specifically ban the trade in ancient art or artifacts, including from Syria, that were obtained before 1970, when an international convention against the trade of culturally significant objects took effect.



The Umayyad mosque in Aleppo, Syria was built between the 8th and 13th centuries and is reputedly home to the remains of John the Baptist's father. It is located in the walled Old City, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Heavy fighting during the Syrian civil war has ruined the holy site and toppled its minaret on April 13, 2013. Photo: Franklin Lamb

These concerns are global and being widely debated this spring, especially by archeological organizations. Among a growing number of diverse organizations that continue to monitor damage to Syrian cultural heritage and who are joining the debate and often voicing disparate and occasionally emotionally antithetical views with respect to our shared global cultural heritage in Syria are the following:

Aga Khan Trust for Culture the Co-coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA), The Antiquities Coalition, ASOR, Avaaz, , Heritage and development, International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), International Council on Archives (ICA), International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), International Council of Museums (ICOM), , Libraries without Borders/Bibliothèques sans Frontières, Peace Palace Library. Research Guide Cultural Heritage, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, Blue Shield International, Canadian Conservation Institute, Conservation Center for Art & historic artefacts, Conservation OnLine (CoOL), History of Historic Royal Palaces, Hornemann Insitut, IFLA's work on preserving cultural heritage, Image Permanence Institute, International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (ICC), International Red Cross and Red Crescent, Le laboratoire de conservation, restauration et recherches de Draguignan, Portal Euromed Heritage Digital Resources, ,Preserving History. How to Digitally Archive and Share Historical Photographs, Documents, and Audio Recordings, The Shirin NGO (www.shirin-international.org), The Getty Conservation Institute, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

There are many contributing to this rapidly expanding dialogue and sometimes boisterous and even accusatory debate.

Avaaz, is circulating a Petition against UNESCO and Russian plans to reconstruct Palmyra. It states in part: "We, the undersigned, urge the international community and its cultural organizations and academic institutions to help protecting the Syrian heritage and sparing it the political, ethnic, sectarian, or business agendas of the fighting groups in the Syrian conflict and their global backers. ...We regret that UNESCO Director General "reiterated her full support for the restoration of Palmyra" without first considering the ramifications of such a hasty statement...The intention of UNESCO and other organizations to engage in a

restoration and reconstruction process of the ancient site of Palmyra right now is both inopportune and unrealistic. Millions of Syrians are still suffering the enormous consequences of this bloody war. Among them are the people of Palmyra who have experienced and continue to experience loss of life, detention, displacement, and the devastating destruction of their homes and heritage.” But we firmly oppose any hasty reconstruction initiated by UNESCO and carried out by parties directly involved in the Syrian tragedy.”

Restoring Palmyra: Yes! Hastily: No!!!

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has made public its views “Against Rushing to Conclusions about Palmyra Damage.” ICOM warns against rushing to draw conclusions about the damage inflicted by ISIS terrorists on the world heritage site of Palmyra, ICOM’s director of Programs and Partnerships advised this week. “Assessment is what we need so far, because no official international mission has been there in a couple of years, we have not assessed the situation of heritage,” France Desmarais said advising that “There are three words that we need to remember when we talk about this – professionalism, independence and integrity, and we want to make sure that whatever assessment is conducted it should be of course done with national and international experts of diverse institutions and expertise and it needs to be done thoroughly. Any quick assessment that would be done for communication purposes would not be welcome.”

Other experts and academics are also skeptical, believing that the task will take many years and resources, that some sites are beyond repair, and that others might never be restored to their former glory. They argue as Syrian archeologist and refugee Mr. Azm has that “It’s still early days,” “This is all going to take a long time.”

The Shirin NGO (www.shirin-international.org) will soon release a blunt motion challenging a project of reconstruction of Palmyra, a result of recent talks between UNESCO Director General and the President of Russia. According to the Shirin-International Board of Directors, their motion, “written by professional archaeologists and Directors of excavations in Syria until 2010/11 will be sent to a large number of institutions and organizations, including to UNESCO and its satellite agencies, universities, press agencies, chancelleries.”

Recommendations included in the Antiquities Coalition Report noted above, calls on the US Pentagon to use airstrikes to protect sites, halt advances by the Islamic State to new territories or by striking heavy machinery used in the looting of places like Palmyra, which Syrian government forces reclaimed from the Islamic State last month. That recommendation prompted a dissenting opinion from one of the task force’s members, Emma Cunliffe, a researcher at Oxford University. Dr. Cunliffe believes that the use of military force is neither strategically nor ethically a legitimate response. “Military action may necessitate both a risk to the lives of the military force and the loss of the lives of those under attack, for what – to some – is no more than stone and so not worth any human life,” she wrote in a statement included in the report.

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Some inside and outside of Syria question whether limited government resources should be used restoring ruins while half of Syria’s population remains displaced, including thousands from Palmyra, and others are

killed in daily fighting and airstrikes that are hallmarks of its five-year-old conflict. They suggest that there is an international responsibility to preserve and protect our shared cultural heritage.

Karen Leigh, deputy Middle East bureau chief of The Wall Street Journal explained to this observer recently that some are advocating that while Palmyra was built with stone and mortar, it must be rebuilt with computers and drones and with the new technology. She wrote: “Some are urging UNESCO to use drones to get a bird’s-eye view of areas needing repair, not just at Syria’s six UN World Heritage Sites but at countless other sites around Syria. Three-dimensional reconstructions will aid precise repairs. Radar scanning will be used to view and assess any damage to underground structures such as the city’s Roman-era catacombs.

Francesco Bandarin, assistant director-general for culture at UNESCO. Opined, “A machine in one or two hours gives you a perfect reconstruction of an object, whereas before it would take weeks and weeks. But don’t expect Palmyra will be rebuilt in a day. This will be years and years of painful work,” he added noting that the continuing reconstruction at Cambodia’s Angkor, similar to some of Palmyra’s sites in scope, has taken decades after war and nature took their toll.

Stefan Simon, director of the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at Yale University, expresses the hope “that colleagues can travel to Syria with sophisticated equipment and scanners can go to Palmyra.”

Nasser Rabbat, director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology argues that strict views on conservation could impair Palmyra’s reconstruction efforts: Technological improvements aren’t a substitute for knowledge held by the generations of Syrian historians who lovingly restored the city’s columns and stones. It is not that we have lost things that have stood as they were for 2,000 years. What we have lost is the effort, the intellectual and labor effort, of generations of restorers who worked on this city.”

Shall we 3D print a new Palmyra?

The Institute for Digital Archaeology hopes 3-D models of Palmyra’s sites will result in their detailed reconstructions which helps produce a replica of Palmyra’s Arch of Triumph and other structures. Others criticize this approach and worry about creating ‘kitch antiquates.’ Many archeologists argue that 3D printing fails to capture the authenticity of the original structures, amounting to little more than the Disneyfication or McDonaldization of heritage. They also point out that the fighting is still ongoing: some estimates suggest that half a million Syrians are dead, millions are displaced, and perhaps 50%-70% of the nearby town has been destroyed. Given the pressing humanitarian needs, stabilization alone should be the priority for now.

The international community is also playing a role. Groups like UNOSAT, the UN’s satellite imagery analysts have used satellite imagery to monitor the damage. On the ground, Syrian-founded NGOs like APSA have linked with universities to assess the site. Groups such as NewPalmyra and Palmyra 3D Model are using the latest technology to create open-access 3D computer models from photographs.

Still others claim that rebuilding archeological sites fail to redress the loss caused by the extensive looting of the site, focusing only on the dramatically destroyed monuments. Raising questions, for example whether returning Palmyra to its pre-conflict state denies a major chapter of its history and suggesting that what is required is wide-ranging discussion on the priorities for the immediate future and the nature of any future reconstruction.

Some aver that at each repaired archeological site that there must be a memorial as a testimony to those beheaded in the arena, or tied to columns that were detonated etc because their stories are also part of Syria’s, history. Others insist that while Palmyra may hold great interest to the world, the final decision should belong to those who have lived in and around it, took care of it for centuries managed it, fought for it, and protected it for generations: the Syrian people.

Syria’s Director of Antiquities, Dr. Maamoun Abdul-Karim has recently urged that Palmyra must not just “rise again”, It must not be turned into a fake replica of its former glory. Instead, what remains of this ancient city

after its destruction by Isis – and that is mercifully more than many people feared –perhaps 80%, should be tactfully, sensitively and honestly preserved. DGAM Director Abdelkarim promised that 100 years of experience in conservation, including on the grand avenues and public buildings of Palmyra, would be put to immediate use but also called for international support. “We have to send a message against terrorism that we are united in protecting our heritage,” he said. “We will never accept that the children of Syrian and the world visit the site of Baalshamin and Bel and the victory arch while they are lying in ruins on the ground. We will rebuild them.”

The Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums at the Syrian Ministry of Culture is currently assessing the damage inflicted on the ancient city along with its museum in order to be able to set plans and visions for emergency and urgent intervention through adopting a clear and scientific method (the castle of Palmyra, the gate of the Temple of Bel, the structure of the museum, the damaged statues). In addition, the DGAM is preparing the architectural and constructional plans for our future restoration works within definite deadlines; this is because a large part of the architectural elements of the damaged monuments can be reused in restoration so as to retain the city’s originality and identity.

Wrote Dr. Abdul-Karim to this observer on 4/13/2016, “Some speculations and statements, made by some who do not belong to our institution, speak of our intention to rebuild the city utilizing 3D technologies as well as constructing modern buildings. These, unquestionably, are in complete contrast to our vision at the DGAM, which has been well-reputed for its scientific professionalism for almost 100 years since it was established. It has helped rescue the majority of artifacts under such exceptional circumstances in the past five years of war. It also carried out emergency restoration works in a number of Syrian ancient cities between 2014 and 2015, including the Ancient City of Homs, Maaloula, the Ancient City of Damascus, Krak des Chevaliers (after its liberation) and a number of other castles on the Syrian coast. Hence, we would like to emphasize that our plans and visions will be devised and designed in cooperation with our national and international partners taking into account international standards and conventions applicable worldwide.”

It has been reported that even after becoming refugees and leaving their beloved country, Syrians have worked to keep a detailed memory of the archeological sites alive. Syrian artists have created artworks depicting destruction in Palmyra and elsewhere. In a Jordanian camp, refugees made miniature models of the city and other cultural sites, even measuring out the number and position of Palmyra’s columns from available photos.

The intensifying international debate over how best to restore and protect our shared global cultural heritage in Syria is positive, relevant, essential and constructive.

And it is quite likely that this discourse will bring new safeguards for saving our past for our future.