

Senate Votes to Ban Imports of Syrian Art and Antiquities

By [STEVEN LEE MYERS](#) APRIL 13, 2016



Credit Bryan Denton for The New York Times

WASHINGTON — The Senate voted on Wednesday to ban the import of virtually all ancient art and artifacts from [Syria](#) to discourage the looting and trafficking of illicit objects by the Islamic State and other armed groups.

The Senate voted by unanimous consent, reflecting broad bipartisan support, but it did so after months of delay and debate over the legislation, which the House of Representatives passed last year. The bill's provisions would fulfill commitments the United States supported 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 and [Iraq](#).

The Senate's action, which closed a loophole in American law, came on the day that a task force of prominent advocacy organizations, museums and universities called on the Obama administration to take far more aggressive steps — including military operations — to halt the destruction and looting of cultural sites in Iraq and Syria.

In addition to calling on Congress to pass the legislation the Senate voted on, the task force's report, [titled “#CultureUnderThreat,”](#) urged the White House to appoint a senior director to coordinate the government's actions against blood antiquities and to increase resources for stricter enforcements by customs officials, the

Justice Department and the Internal Revenue Service.

“The U.S. response to cultural racketeering is currently decentralized and implemented on an ad hoc basis, with several agencies involved but no single agency coordinating the efforts,” the report said.

It went on to lament the slowness of enacting provisions that the United Nations Security Council had called for in February 2015. “The lack of 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 report said.

The report was coordinated by the Antiquities Coalition, the Asia Society and the Middle East Institute and it reflected broad frustration at the inability of the United States and other governments around the world to stanch the [rapacious looting](#) that has occurred since Syria’s civil war began in 2011.

The rise of the Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq has exposed dozens of ancient sites to destruction and looting. Although only some looted objects have surfaced so far — most have been seized by customs officials — experts say they believe that many have already made their way to markets in Europe and beyond using [well-established criminal trafficking routes](#).

Russia’s representative at the [United Nations](#), Vitaly I. Churkin, last month singled out the trafficking of objects through Turkey, whose relations with Moscow have been badly strained by Russia’s intervention in Syria. In [a letter](#) to the Security Council, Mr. Churkin cited specific companies, shops and websites in Turkey used by smugglers to get items from Syria’s war zones onto the world’s markets.

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 imports.

One of the most striking recommendations calls on the Pentagon to use airstrikes to protect sites, presumably by trying to 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. Ms. Cunliffe argued that the use of military force, by itself, was neither strategically nor ethically sound. “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.

The White House did not respond to the task force’s specific recommendations, but a spokesman, Peter Boogaard, issued a statement welcoming the Congressional action and pledging to “enhance our ability to identify and prosecute those who unlawfully acquire or sell precious historical artifacts.”

The legislation should soon move to the White House for a signature. It broadly mirrors a law adopted after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 that banned imports of culturally or historical significant objects from that country.

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 legislation includes an exemption that would allow some objects to enter the United States temporarily for safekeeping in instances where they might otherwise be destroyed.

The task force’s report called on museums, dealers and auction houses to be more transparent about the provenance of objects they buy or sell, including making public any records of previous ownership. It also said the I.R.S. should require the same before allowing collectors to take tax deductions for items donated to museums.

Deborah M. Lehr, the founder of the Antiquities Coalition and one of the leaders of the task force, said that

for all the genuine statements of concern about the looting — and the specter of its proceeds supporting the Islamic State’s nihilistic rule — the United States had not done enough to fight the trafficking.

“I think a lot of individuals are very committed to this,” she said, “but as a coordinated effort across the government, it just hasn’t reached that level yet.”

David Herszenhorn contributed reporting