

# Mapping How Terrorists Are Destroying The World's Cultural Sites

The scale of the destruction over the last five years has been immense. But mapping these activities can help stop and predict the next attacks.



Photo: JOSEPH EID/AFP/Getty Images

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How do you stop the deliberate destruction and looting of cultural sites by groups like ISIS? If military action can't stop terrorist groups from killing people and occupying territory, then how can it hope to protect an individual shrine? And should we even be bothering with protecting property when people are being killed or persecuted?

The [Antiques Coalition](#) thinks so, and its campaign starts the way most good campaigns start—with a good map.

ISIS and other groups have [not only destroyed entire temples](#) at Palmyra in Syria and Nimrud in Iraq, they have also destroyed Judeo-Christian and Sunni Muslim religious sites, says the Antiquities Coalition. The groups also steal artifacts and sell them to raise funding.





**Mallawi Museum. Minya, Egypt. See the interactive site [here](#). [The Antiquities Coalition](#)**

To combat this, the Antiques Coalition has convened activists under the Culture Under Threat Task Force. They have two strategies. One is to push the U.S. military to target strikes that protect cultural sites, as well as adding these sites to "no strike lists." The other is to limit the international sale of stolen artifacts, which will both remove a source of funding, and discourage further theft. This year, the U.S. enacted [The Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act](#). This, says Deborah Lehr, chairman of the Antiquities Coalition, will "restrict imports of Syrian antiquities so that the United States market will no longer be a destination of choice for conflict antiquities."

But how important is it to protect these sites?

"Cultural crimes represent much more than the 'destruction of property,'" Deborah Lehr, chairman of the Antiquities Coalition, says. "The destruction and looting of heritage sites are recognized as war crimes. The looting of heritage sites represents a significant source of financing for terrorist activities."

But these are just the short-term effects of the destruction. More important is the permanent loss of a shared history. When these sites are destroyed, the future culture of a society is also destroyed. Imagine if the 9/11 attacks had also hit the Statue of Liberty.

"The destruction of cultural sites," says Lehr, "is used to intimidate the diverse populations of the Middle East, especially religious and ethnic minorities, and historically have been both a precursor and component of ethnic cleansing and genocide."

To help keep track of the various attacks and visualize just how widespread they are, the Antiquities Coalition has built an interactive map, called the [Incident Analyzer](#). This map charts every reported incident, and can be filtered by date, by the group suspected to be responsible, as well as the kind of incident, or map feature (museums, heritage sites, terror-controlled areas, and so on).



**Mausoleum of Mohammad Bin Ali. Palmyra, Syria. See the interactive site [here](#). The Antiquities Coalition**

Perhaps the most important use of the map so far was by Lehr herself, who included it in her testimony on terrorist financing before the House of Representatives. Before, they would have only been able to display five years of destruction compiled on a static map. The timeline and graphing tool allowed them to discover and show the patterns of destructive activity across the region.

The data for the map comes from various sources, including news sources, social media, academic groups, and people in affected countries. It is [put together](#) using technology from Hexagon Geospatial. But they have to be careful not to create a map that helps terrorists or looters access sites they didn't know about before.





**Umayyad Mosque. Aleppo, Syria. See the interactive site [here](#). [The Antiquities Coalition](#)**

The map has thrown up a few surprises. For instance, it was assumed that almost no cultural sites were attacked on Fridays, a Muslim holy day, but this turned out to be far from true. And the map also acts as a crude tool to predict the locations and times of future attacks. "You can see past trends to anticipate future outcomes via time sliders, showing events/incidents and the movement associated with those across a city or a region," says Mladen Stojic, president of Hexagon Geospatial.

The world's collected artworks, religious sites and cultural artifacts are not just things we own. They're what we are. They're the sum of what we have achieved through our various histories. You could argue that a culture could never fully recover if such an integral part of it is destroyed.

"The director of National Museum of Iraq answered this question eloquently," says Lehr, "when he explained: 'Yes, they're just statues, but for us, they're living things. We came from them, we are part of them. That is our culture and our belief.'"