

The U.S. has a new weapon to stop black market trafficking in Syrian antiquities

By [Christopher Connell](#) - May 24, 2016



A statue destroyed by ISIS outside the Palmyra Museum in historic Palmyra, Syria (© AP Images)

Terrorists in Syria don't just take sledgehammers to ancient temples and sculptures at cultural heritage sites they have overrun: They sell them. They loot coins, statues, tablets and other priceless artifacts and peddle them on black markets in the Middle East and beyond.

A new U.S. law could help keep these treasures from entering the American art and antiquities markets.

By some estimates, the terrorist group known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or Daesh) has raised at least [\\$100 million](#) for its war coffers from the sale of [stolen antiquities](#).

[Palmyra](#), a UNESCO World Heritage site, is among the historic places hit hardest, including the destruction of the famed Temple of Bel. Although Syrian government troops recaptured the city in March, damage to culturally significant sites is severe.

"From the beginning of the rebellion against the Assad regime in March 2011, archaeological sites have been looted in Syria on an organized and industrial scale," DePaul College of Law professor Patty

Gerstenblith told Congress recently. Gerstenblith chairs a federal panel that advises President Obama and the State Department on protecting cultural heritage.

ISIL reportedly takes a 20 percent cut from prized artifacts stolen from archaeological digs, she added.

The [Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act](#) gives the U.S. president expanded authority restrict imports of archaeological or ethnological artifacts from Syria. A similar U.S. law helps protect and preserve [Iraqi antiquities](#).

The import restrictions will remain in effect until the crisis in Syria is resolved and the United States can work out with the future Syrian government ways to bar trafficking in these cultural treasures.

“The looting of antiquities is a direct threat to American national security and to humanity’s shared heritage,” said Deborah Lehr, an international business strategist who chairs the Antiquities Coalition.