

How can we stop ISIS and the trafficking of our cultural heritage?



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A bespectacled octogenarian archaeologist being tortured and murdered, reportedly to make him disclose the secret location of cultural treasures from the cradle of civilization. It sounds like a storyline from an Indiana Jones film but, tragically, it is what happened in Syria, days before [ISIS blew up an ancient temple at Palmyra](#), a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Such crimes come in stark contrast to the millions of people who spent their summer holidays honouring our past and those who preserve it, visiting world landmarks, monuments and museums such as the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids, Angkor Wat, Machu Picchu, Mount Rushmore, the Louvre, the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican Museum. Tourists from around the world didn't just take pictures, they also took pride in the cultural foundations that underly our common human civilization, that bring us a sense of belonging, history and knowledge.

And while the world's governments, institutions and scholars spend their energy and resources on preserving our

cultural history, ISIS is engaging in a propaganda campaign against ancient Mesopotamia. With methodical persistence, the extremist group is demolishing the culture and heritage of the people of Syria, Iraq and elsewhere.

Pillaging for profit

While many of us were visiting cultural sites on our summer holidays, ISIS murdered Khalid al-Asaad, the prominent Syrian historian and archeologist who spent a lifetime preserving Syria's culture. UNESCO and the FBI suspect ISIS of planning to profit from the looted antiquities, thus financing their reign of terror with treasures of the past. The 82-year-old Syrian scholar had dedicated his life to the study and care of the city of Palmyra, known for its beautiful Roman-era columns and rich history.

Just days after Asaad's murder, ISIS was reported to have blown up Palmyra's ancient temple of Baalshamin, built almost 2,000 years ago. This act against our collective cultural heritage follows the destruction of other important historical sites, including the ancient city of Nimrud and Jonah's Tomb (think whale), which now deprives future generations of seeing culturally priceless architecture, sculptures and scriptures.

ISIS is not only destroying these UNESCO-protected sites, but also plundering them. Since taking control of large swaths of Iraq and Syria last year, the extremist group has actively worked to establish a monopoly on the trafficking of artefacts. ISIS has even established a "ministry of antiquities" to administer the process. The Telegraph newspaper [claims to have obtained ISIS-stamped licences](#) from Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor allowing residents to "excavate" archeological sites for blood antiquities. Professor Amr Al-Azm of Shawnee State University reports that ISIS collects a 20-50% "tithe" on the proceeds of antiquities sales. Based on reports of looted antiquities being trafficked throughout Europe, and a recent warning by the FBI concerning efforts to sell such blood antiquities in America, it seems that ISIS's plundering of archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria has become a successful transnational business.

Billions in blood money

ISIS is a highly pragmatic and diversified criminal organization, which has systematically looted antiquities to finance death and destruction. According to UNESCO chief Irina Bokova, the black market for such blood antiquities [is estimated to be worth billions of dollars](#), and a recent report by the Wall Street Journal notes that for ISIS and its terrorist financing operation, looting is second only to oil.

Christopher Marinello, director of Art Recovery International, told the Times that [collectors stay away from highly valuable and unique items](#) because they could expose them to increased scrutiny. Marinello explains that the current trade consists of "middle-value objects that don't stand out".

After the destruction of Nimrud and antiquities at the Mosul Museum, one can infer that ISIS is pursuing a simple strategy: smaller antiquities are smuggled to raise money, while larger pieces (which are difficult to transport and would attract too much international law-enforcement attention, making collectors wary) are destroyed in a propaganda-film format, to create an international spectacle.

This mass-scale looting and destruction must be stopped before ISIS successfully obliterates all traces of Syria's cultural heritage. But as the international community is reluctant to send troops to the region, it should be quick to adopt practices to ensure that participants and consumers in the antiquities market think twice before indirectly assisting ISIS. While blood antiquities are being used to help finance killings in Syria and Iraq, the coordinated attacks in Tunisia, France and Kuwait demonstrate how this kind of terror is no longer contained within the borders of Syria and Iraq.

Cultural cleansing

World leaders have been vocal in condemning these acts. In response to Palmyra's temple destruction, UNESCO's Bokova observed: "The systematic destruction of cultural symbols embodying Syrian cultural diversity reveals the true intent of such attacks, which is to deprive the Syrian people of its knowledge, its identity and history." She added that those responsible "must be accountable for their actions". UNESCO has categorized the destruction of historical sights as "cultural cleansing" and a war crime.

In May 2015, the UN General Assembly, representing the world's governments, unanimously adopted a resolution to combat the cultural threat to Iraq. While this resolution is non-binding, it demonstrates that there is a broad international condemnation against cultural cleansing in Iraq and it signifies a turning point in the global effort to

combat the destruction.

The resolution, [Saving the cultural heritage of Iraq](#), “affirms that attacks intentionally directed against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art … or historic monuments, may amount to war crimes”. And since the resolution “stresses the importance of holding accountable perpetrators” who directly attack cultural property, it takes us another step towards possible prosecution of these perpetrators for crimes against cultural property.

Indeed, a month earlier, the UN Human Rights Office in Geneva called on the Human Rights Council to urge the UN Security Council to tackle “in the strongest terms, information that points to genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes”, and to refer alleged crimes committed in Iraq to the International Criminal Court for investigation. This call has been echoed by Deborah Lehr, chair of the Antiquities Coalition.

Lessons from history

Twenty years after the [Srebrenica genocide](#), there are lessons to be learned from the world’s belated response to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In *Prosecutor v Strugar*, a case dealing with purposeful destruction of historical sites during armed conflict in Dubrovnik, Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) affirmed that perpetrators would be held accountable for such war crimes in international tribunals.

The trafficking of blood antiquities needs to be addressed, through law enforcement, pro-active market regulations and collaboration. Collectors, archaeologists, museums, dealers, insurance companies, transport companies, freeports, governments and related parties should work together (perhaps through the World Economic Forum in Davos) to create a public-private initiative to help crack down on this lucrative illicit market.

In concert, public-awareness campaigns, stronger international/domestic regulations and cooperation between stakeholders may be able to create a positive momentum and make a difference, thereby helping save lives and our collective cultural heritage.