

Islamic State threatens ancient Syrian site with destruction

Gregg Zoroya, Rasha Faek and Riham Kusa, USA TODAY | 4:45 p.m. EDT May 21, 2015

AMMAN, Jordan — Dread swept through the archaeological world Thursday following the Islamic State's capture of Palmyra in Syria, placing one of the world's most treasured sites for ancient history at risk for looting or destruction.

"I am deeply concerned by the situation," said Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO, the United Nations directorate working to safeguard global heritage sites.

Palmyra is the site of an ancient Roman city astride the legendary Silk Road caravan route to the Far East. Ruins dating to the 1st and 2nd centuries and preserved by the desert climate include the Temple of Bel, built on an axis allowing the rising sun to fill the interior with natural light.

As a pagan site, it would be the prime target for Islamic State extremists, said Amr Al-Azm, associate professor of Middle East History and Anthropology at Shawnee State University in Ohio

The militants have declared creation of a new spiritual caliphate straddling the borders of Iraq and Syria and are committed to eradicating non-Islamic icons of the past. Members have destroyed captured antiquities, burned manuscripts and bombed monasteries and churches.

They've distributed video of fighters pushing over statuary that shattered into pieces. Fighters have also looted ancient sites, selling artifacts to raise money for the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

"It's a very powerful propaganda message," said Al-Azm. "What it says is that ISIS can act with impunity, that they are very powerful and at the same time, the other half of the message is that the international community is impotent."

The group has seized more than half of Syria, taking control of more than 36,000 square miles of the country and the "vast majority" of its gas and oil fields, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Capturing Palmyra, home to some 200,000 people, allows the Islamic State a more direct route to Damascus and the Syrian Coast.

The success by the militants comes just two days after Islamic State forces captured the provincial capital of Ramadi in Iraq, driving back government forces there.

Palmyra was given up to Islamic State militants by retreating and dispirited Syrian forces. White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest lamented the capture was a "setback" Thursday, but said the U.S., without ground troops in Syria, is all but powerless to intervene. "Our capacity there is limited. There is no doubt about that," Earnest said.

Scholars hold out little hope Palmyra will be liberated any time soon. "We think it's a horrific development," said Deborah Lehr, chair and founder of the Washington, D.C.-based Antiquities Coalition, a non-profit group devoted to fighting the destruction of heritage sites.

Lehr said destruction of the temples and tombs of Palmyra would rival, in the world's view, the dynamiting by the Taliban in 2001 of soaring Buddha statues in Afghanistan.

"Culture is a critical part of who we are as a people," she said. "The symbolism of it is an attack against us a people, and they're actually an act of war."

At least some of the antiquities were spirited away to Damascus, said Abo Adel, a Syrian rebel activist in Palmyra who has worked with other locals from the city to document the looting and the destruction at the archeological site.

"We're afraid over the columns, tombs and temples — they can destroy the tombs after getting them out of the ground," he said. "Nobody knows what their plan but I don't think they can damage the antiquities as they did in Iraq — there are not many statues (left)."

Maamoun Abdulkarim, director of antiquities and museums in Syria, said his department had lost contact with residents of Palmyra and cannot assess the risk to the antiquities.

"I feel panic when I imagine what could ISIS do in Palmyra? They will destroy the temples and tombs — Tamourian tombs have statues which ISIS will consider as idols (that) should be demolished," he said.

The towering structures of Roman-Greco architecture there have stood for centuries, safeguarded by previous conquering forces that recognized its historical value. But there was little hope this respect for ancient historical heritage would withstand destruction or looting by the militants.

Prior to the Syrian war that began four years ago, tourists by the thousands visited the remote desert location.

"Defending the archaeology sites from looting and destruction is a battle for of all humanity," the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Egypt said in a statement. "The destruction of humanitarian and cultural heritage is forbidden in Islam."

Zoroya reported from McLean, Va.; Kusa reported from Berlin. Contributing: Ammar Al Shamary in Baghdad.