

Uniting for heritage

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An international conference held in Cairo this week is spearheading efforts to protect and preserve the region's cultural heritage, reports **Nevine El-Aref**

Ever since antiquity, cultural heritage has been a casualty of crime and conflict. As long as there have been tombs, there have been tomb raiders and illicit excavations. As long as there have been civilisations, there have been enemy armies bent on plundering them.

As the value of antiquities continues to skyrocket, organised criminals, armed insurgents and terrorist networks have turned to cultural racketeering to fund crime and conflict around the world.

Recent videos on social media showing Islamic State (IS) militants destroying ancient artefacts in Iraq's museums and blowing up 3,000-year-old temples, destroying priceless heritage, have sent shockwaves through the archaeological community and international organisations.

In some of the videos, militants can be seen taking sledgehammers to the iconic winged bulls of Assyria and sawing apart floral reliefs in the palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Nimrud. Afterwards, the entire site was destroyed with explosives.

an attempt to stand up against such crimes and stop the destruction of ancient temples and artefacts in Iraq by the extremist IS group, as well as the looting and smuggling of antiquities in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya, a two-day conference titled "Culture Under Threat: the Security, Economic and Cultural Impact of Antiquities Theft in the Middle East" was held in Egypt this week.

It was organised by two US-based NGOs, the Antiquities Coalition and the Middle East Institute, in cooperation with Egypt's ministries of foreign affairs and antiquities and under the joint patronage of UNESCO.

Ten Arab countries attended the conference, including Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Sudan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Egypt. The aim of the conference was to step up international efforts to stop the illicit trafficking of cultural objects and antiquities as a means of

financing terrorism.

"Egypt holds a special place in UNESCO's history because it has defined the gold standard in international cooperation for safeguarding the common heritage of humanity — this is precisely the spirit we need to instill today," UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said at the conference.

She pointed out that the 1960s salvage campaign for the Nubian temples in Upper Egypt had embodied such cooperation. UNESCO played a major role in the relocation of the monuments.

She added that it is important to see the same cooperation between Egyptian NGOs and the private sector to protect the Middle East's cultural property and human heritage from looting and destruction, such as is now happening in Iraq and Syria.

Bokova highlighted Egypt's efforts to regain looted and smuggled artefacts. As she said, "Egypt has succeeded in proving to the whole world its capability to protect its cultural heritage. An example of this is when the public made a human chain to protect the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square on 28 January 2011."

"We need full cooperation between the security services and the antiquities authorities concerned, as well as to work on the regional and international levels in order to solve such problems," Bokova said.

"The destruction of cultural heritage is being used as a tactic of war, to intimidate populations, to finance criminal activities, to spread hatred," she added. The fact that ten ministers had gathered at the conference was "a strong symbol of our joint commitment to respond, and UNESCO is determined to live up to its responsibilities, because we believe the protection of heritage is far more than a cultural issue — it has become a security imperative," she said.

ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN: Speaking at the conference, Minister of Antiquities Mamdouh Eldamaty called for amendment of the 1970 UNESCO Convention that stipulates the return of all looted and illegally smuggled antiquities to their homelands. He asked that this be extended to include antiquities looted and smuggled before 1970.

Hamdi Loza, Egypt's assistant to the minister of foreign affairs for Africa, announced that over the last three weeks Egypt has recovered 5,000 artefacts from the United States, France and a number of other countries. Negotiations are underway to recover other artefacts from the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany.

Antiquities Coalition Chair Deborah Lehr said the organisation is making efforts to safeguard cultural heritage through advocacy, research and practical solutions as the militants' trade in artefacts smuggled out of Syria and Iraq is valued in the billions of dollars.

She called for the establishment of a special authority in Egypt to prevent the illegal smuggling of antiquities. The extremists, Lehr said, have been posting images of the destruction of heritage on the Internet to "intimidate those who enjoy beliefs that are contrary to their very narrow views and to fund their nefarious causes."

Lehr said that during the past four years of turmoil, following Egypt's 2011 Revolution, an estimated \$3 billion worth of antiquities were smuggled abroad, though it is impossible to put a precise value on the historical artefacts looted or taken from illegal excavations.

Libya, which has been in much worse turmoil since the revolution against dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, is thought to be suffering from the same problem, but there are no estimates of the value of the illicit trade in

antiquities in that country, she said.

“We must unite to preserve our common heritage and resist IS efforts to steal not only our future freedom but also our history, the very root of our civilisation,” Lehr told the Weekly.

“We need civilising forces now, more than ever, and must take steps to protect our priceless historical sites and constrict terrorists’ ability to profit from the sale of plundered relics,” she added.

Iraq’s Minister of Antiquities and Tourism Adel Fahd Al-Shashab spoke about the destruction that occurred at the palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Nimrud and at the Mosul Museum and called on the international community to support Iraq in its fight against terrorism and the loss of its cultural heritage.

He asked for concrete steps and a strategy to protect Iraq’s heritage and return the country’s stolen and smuggled antiquities. He also asked that UN Security Council Resolution 2199, passed in February 2015, be implemented. The resolution condemns the destruction of Iraqi heritage and seeks to prevent IS from profiting from this major financial source.

He also asked the international community to support Iraq in executing its emergency plan, launched in collaboration with UNESCO, to document museum collections and archaeological sites.

Six recommendations were made at the end of the conference as part of the Cairo Declaration. Among the most important was the recommendation to launch a working group to preserve archaeological and cultural properties in the Middle East and prevent smuggling. An international advisory committee should also be established to determine measures to fight against illicit looting and the trading of stolen antiquities.

Conference members agreed to begin discussions to draw up a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the region and between international partners to prevent trading in plundered cultural properties.

Establishing an independent agency to fight against antiquities laundering using fake identification certificates for stolen objects was another recommendation to be discussed with international agencies. A series of conferences and seminars on such topics will be organised.

UNITE FOR HERITAGE: During her stay in Egypt, Bokova paid a visit to the religious complex in Historic Cairo, included since 1979 on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a record of urban experience through history. The complex hosts the Coptic Hanging Church and Abu Sarga Church, Greek Orthodox St George’s Church, Ben Ezra Synagogue, and Mosque of Amr Ibn Al-Aas, the oldest mosque in Egypt.

It exemplifies how history, heritage and society can be enriched by dialogue among civilisations and interfaith coexistence. In cooperation with the Ministry of Antiquities, her visit also contributed to initiating discussion about the follow-up phase to the UNESCO project for the regeneration of Historic Cairo.

The third phase of the project was successfully completed in November 2014. The project’s conservation and rehabilitation strategy was based on a clearer definition of the World Heritage property. Its buffer zone aims to

preserve and enhance the site and its physical and socioeconomic environment. The project also proposes a management system for the site that includes contributions from the concerned local administrations and based on a new and more effective institutional set-up and legal framework.

Bokova also went to the Museum of Islamic Art to launch the second phase of the UNESCO campaign to renew the alliance between society, youth and heritage. The campaign, entitled #Unite4Heritage, was launched in March 2015 in Baghdad and last week in Egypt.

The museum was damaged after a car bomb exploded in January 2014 during the anniversary of the January 2011 Revolution. The #Unite4Heritage campaign, launched at the museum, began with an expression of solidarity against terrorism. Many young Egyptians took part, along with representatives of official and international bodies.

The campaign aims to mobilise international, regional and local efforts to protect and preserve threatened heritage and to stand up against sectarian propaganda campaigns on social networks and Internet.

Bokova made an inspection tour of the museum and reviewed the ongoing rehabilitation and restoration work. “I can hardly think of a better place than Egypt to deliver this message of peace that is embedded in cultural heritage,” she told the attendees.

“Cultural diversity is in Egypt’s DNA, from the Pyramids to this beautiful Museum of Islamic Art, one of the richest in the world. I have just visited the religious complex in Old Cairo, where the Coptic Church, the mosque and synagogue stand side by side, a few dozens of metres apart. What would Egypt be without the Sphinx or the Valley of the Kings? What would Egypt be without such diversity? This is precisely the message we need to share today, and I am more determined than ever to carry it forward,” she said.

UNESCO had extended a helping hand by giving an initial aid package of \$100,000 and gaining the support of the international community to restore the museum’s collection of Islamic heritage.

“The museum is the richest Islamic museum in the world because it houses exquisite Islamic objects from different Islamic periods,” Bokova said. Eldamaty described the event as “a defining moment for a unique museum.”

Many countries, NGOs and the private sector provided support when the Islamic Museum was damaged, including the Italian government which gave 800,000 euros; the United Arab Emirates, which took responsibility for rehabilitating the inside of the museum; the American Research Centre in Cairo, which will restore the museum’s façade; and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Germany and Austria have trained museum curators and restorers.

Alessandro Modiano, deputy Italian ambassador to Egypt, said that when the museum was damaged Italy was one of the first countries to offer help. Said Modiano, “Italy is very proud to be involved in the salvage operation, because it is not only helping to preserve cultural heritage, but the architectural design was also made by Italian architect Alfonso Maniscalco.”

The launch of the #Unite4Heritage campaign will be followed over the next two months by a series of initiatives, ranging from public stands in front of the Pyramids, participation in talk shows on television, and declarations by

prominent artists and public figures designated as “heritage envoys.”

Schools will also be involved, with children dedicating special days to the campaign and participating in youth forums and a logo design competition supported by social network initiatives.