

Authorization for Monuments Men in Iraq and Syria

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In many parts of this vast world, long departed civilizations left rich and enduring tributes to the way people saw their environment, themselves and their legacy. In a tragic twist of fate, many of these invaluable examples of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria survived numerous conflicts and unpredictable weather throughout the centuries only to crumble or disappear at the hands of members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and others involved in conflict in Iraq and Syria. These sites are in dire need of additional protection and the United States (U.S.) must increase its efforts. In addition to U.S. diplomatic initiatives and the enactment of the [Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act](#), the U.S. could fulfill its respective United Nations [obligations](#) and the mandates of [international law](#) by incorporating the protection of cultural property in any [Authorization for Military Force \(AUMF\)](#) passed by the U.S. Congress. The AUMF provides an opportunity to embed military operations authorized with the responsibility to identify, protect and track cultural property at risk for destruction or trafficking.

Military-sanctioned protection of historical sites and artifacts is not new. During World War II, approximately 345 museum directors, curators, art historians, artists, architects and educators from thirteen countries comprised the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives [program](#). These men and women have become internationally known as the “[Monuments Men](#)” and they worked to protect monuments and other cultural treasures from widespread destruction and looting. The Monuments Men risked their lives traveling with ground troops across war-torn Europe, committed to the concept that the future of peace rests in part on the preservation of the world’s heritage and culture. Today, a group of professors, archaeologists and undercover volunteers in Syria, known as the [Monuments Men of Syria](#), are working feverishly with help from institutions like the [Penn Museum and the Smithsonian](#) to catalogue treasures in the hope that the artifacts can be tracked down in the future. Other [reporting initiatives](#) are led by groups like the Antiquities Coalition, the Middle East Institute and the Asia Society. During World War II, the Monuments Men were able to be most effective because they were able to advise Allied commanders on how to conduct missions to avoid destruction of cultural property. Their place at the forefront of mission planning often gave them an advantage over subsequent civilian efforts to track down missing artifacts or restore already destroyed property.

In early February 2015, President Obama submitted a proposed [AUMF](#) to combat “ISIL or associated persons or forces.” In general terms, an AUMF is a President’s request to the U.S. Congress for authority to conduct military operations under certain parameters. Notably, the President’s 2015 AUMF currently contains a clause considered by many to constitute a prohibition of American boots on the ground. The AUMF is effectively tabled in Congress for the moment while debates rage about its operational scope, mission creep, and any time limits on the use of force. The White House has also [stated](#) that its current use of force in Iraq and Syria is still authorized under a 2001 AUMF, but that it seeks Congressional support in order to provide a signal of a united effort to degrade and defeat ISIL. Any AUMF passed by Congress that provides for some level of authorized military operation in the region should further be committed to and tasked with cultural property protection efforts. Unfortunately, the President’s AUMF has been effectively delayed in Congress and a new administration may take a different view on whether [an AUMF is even necessary](#).

Protecting the identity, pride, and cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria is integral to any rebuilding process after great physical and psychological devastation and the chaotic upheaval of homes and businesses. Moreover, the malevolent looting and destruction of cultural property in Iraq and Syria has also been a significant source of funding and propaganda tool for ISIL. A recent [Wall Street Journal report](#) noted that looting (after oil) is ISIL’s second largest source of financing. In 2013, the U.S. International Trade Commission showed that declared antiquities from Syria increased [134% to \\$11 million USD](#). The value of undeclared artifacts is estimated to be more than [\\$100 million USD](#) a year.

It is time to recognize the need for U.S.-supported Monuments Men in Iraq and Syria precisely because in the [words](#) of Paul Sachs, [director](#) of the Fogg Art Museum during World War II, “[i]f, in time of peace, our museums and art galleries are important to the community, in time of war they are doubly valuable. For then, when the petty and the trivial fall away and we are face to face with final and lasting values, we must summon to our defense all our intellectual and spiritual resources. We must guard jealously all we have inherited from a long past, all we are capable of creating in a trying present, and all we are determined to preserve in a foreseeable future.” In light of the continued, rampant destruction and looting in the region, an AUMF that authorizes military force in Iraq and Syria to combat ISIL should include resources, similar to the Monuments Men of World War II, committed to the protection of cultural heritage because Paul Sachs’ declaration still rings true today.