

Kirk Bill Creates Barrier to ISIS Antiquity Trade

Bill Prevents ISIS-Stolen Art and Artifacts, Used to Help Fund Terrorism, From Being Trafficked in the U.S.

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CHICAGO - U.S. Senator Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) last week introduced the Terrorism Art and Antiquity Revenue Prevention Act of 2016 (TAAR Act) to prevent ISIS-stolen antiquities from being trafficked into the U.S. This legislation is co-sponsored by Senators Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), Bill Cassidy (R-La.), Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.), Thom Tillis (R-N.C.), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.).

“The United States should take every possible step to ensure antiquities do not directly or indirectly fund ISIS,” said Senator Kirk. “This legislation will create a lasting barrier to ISIS’s antiquity trade in the U.S. and ensure the federal government has the necessary tools to combat ISIS’s vital antiquity revenue stream.”

NBC News reports “[a]ntiquity plundering - particularly from violence-riddled Syria and Iraq - fuels a \$7 billion black market, and some of that money lands in the pockets of terrorists, say archaeologists and international watchdogs.” In August, GAO disclosed there have been eighteen FBI cases opened related to ISIS antiquities in seven cities across the country.

In 2015, Congress passed the Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act (Public Law 114-151), which gave the President authority to create an import ban on all Syrian archeological or ethnological material. However, further action is needed to make these bans enforceable and ensure antiquities do not indirectly fund ISIS.

“The ISIS antiquity trade threatens the preservation of cultural art and artifacts that are at the core of civilization in the Middle East,” said Deborah Lehr, Chair of the Antiquities Coalition. “We support Senator Kirk’s efforts to ensure the cultural property of the Middle East can be used as a foundation to rebuild broken communities once stability returns to the region.”

Inspired by the successful legislation to combat blood diamonds in 2003, the TAAR Act creates a database and labeling program to provide law enforcement with essential data to identify ISIS-stolen antiquities. Specifically, the legislation:

- * Amends the National Stolen Property Act to include cultural property valued at \$50 or more.
- * Directs the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to create a labeling program to identify legal antiquities from Iraq or Syria. DHS will require buyers and sellers of Iraqi or Syrian antiquities to report where and when the items were purchased, in addition to documentation that proves the chain of custody.
- * Directs the Secretary of Commerce, through the Undersecretary of Standards and Technology, to create a scientific database of antiquities coming from Iraq or Syria in order to more easily identify illegal antiquities.

“Terrorists will use any means they can find to finance their crimes,” Senator Grassley said. “Shutting down markets for their looted property is an important way to cut off a source of their funding.”

“We must stop terrorists from funding their radical acts of destruction. Anything Congress can do to dry up ISIS’s revenue stream is a step forward and important to our efforts to take down the terrorist group once and for all,” Dr. Cassidy said.

“I support this legislation because a successful strategy to defeat ISIS must include a multi-faceted and aggressive campaign to eliminate any sources of their revenue—including any funding the terrorist organization attempts to accrue from plundered art and antiquities,” said Senator Ayotte.

“ISIS is at war with civilization,” said Senator Tillis. “On top of the human cost and devastation to once thriving towns and villages across the Middle East, ISIS is now pillaging Roman, Christian and Iraqi antiquities. Selling these ancient treasures is putting millions into ISIS’ coffers. The Terrorism Art and Antiquity Revenue Prevention Act will put the world on notice that America will not tolerate those who aid and abet ISIS, and will send the message that we will not stand by and watch the destruction of our common heritage.”

At a briefing hosted by Senator Kirk and Senator Chris Coons (D-Del.) in September, co-chairs of the Senate Human Rights Caucus, antiquity experts expressed the need to promote accountability for ISIS’s destruction of cultural heritage. They agreed the U.S. government must promote the rule of law to protect cultural heritage in conflict zones.