

# Brussels Linked to Illicit Antiquities Trade which Funds Terrorism

In an oped published by the Wall Street Journal in August, the Antiquities Coalition warned that Belgium was poorly prepared to combat the illicit trade in antiquities from Iraq and Syria, and this traffic could provide an easy source of revenue for the country's terrorist networks.

These concerns have now proved warranted.

In an exclusive article published after an extensive investigation, the French-language weekly Paris Match has exposed clear links between cultural racketeering and terrorist financing in Belgium—including the violent extremist network responsible for the deadly Brussels attacks on 22 March 2016.

The expose confirmed that a member of this terrorist network has been directly and recently involved in the illicit art and antiquities trade. While this individual is not identified by Paris Match, subsequent reports by RTBF name him as Khalid El Bakraoui, the suicide bomber at the Maalbeek metro station. Paris Match also claims that Salah Abdelslam—who was involved in the 13 November 2015 Paris bombings, and later captured during a police raid in the Molenbeek area of Brussels earlier this year—has ties to cultural racketeers. It is not yet known whether antiquities directly funded the Brussels or Paris attacks, or whether these terrorists were trafficking pieces looted by Daesh, questions that will hopefully be answered soon. Sadly, there is a high likelihood that it will be confirmed that the sale of antiquities has been funding terrorism.

The Paris Match report does reveal that illicit antiquities from Daesh-occupied areas are being smuggled into Europe, and specifically surfacing in Belgium. In January of this year, Belgian customs agents seized illicit Syrian antiquities en route to a prominent Geneva-based gallery, Phoenix Ancient Art (which has a sister gallery in New York City). These pieces were from the ancient site of Mari, which has been under Daesh control since June 2014, giving law enforcement reason to believe that Daesh profited from their looting and trafficking. Representatives of the Phoenix gallery deny any wrongdoing, but this is not the first time it has been tied to the illicit trade. The Lebanese brothers who own it, Ali and Hicham Aboutaam, have been convicted of related crimes in the past.

In light of these developments, and the real possibility that cultural racketeering is funding violent extremism, both Paris Match and RTBF joined the Antiquities Coalition in denouncing the Belgium government's decision to disband its internationally renowned art squad earlier this year.

We call again on Belgium to follow its EU partners—including France, Germany, the Netherlands, and UK—in cracking down on the illicit antiquities trade by strengthening its law and law enforcement. As we wrote in August, the EU capital should be setting the standard for the continent, not lagging behind.

"If the Belgian government fails to take action, much more than cultural heritage will be at stake."