

## Testimony before the Task Force to Investigate Terrorism Financing on “Preventing Cultural Genocide: Countering the Plunder and Sale of Priceless Cultural Antiquities by ISIS April 19, 2016.

I would like to begin by thanking the Task Force Investigating Terrorism Finance for inviting me to testify before it on a matter of such importance.

My name is Amr Al-Azm and I am an associate professor of Middle East history and anthropology at Shawnee State University in Ohio. I was educated in the UK, reading Archaeology of Western Asiatics at University College, London graduating with a doctoral degree in 1991. From 1999-2004, I was an official in the Syrian government’s antiquities department as Director of Science and Conservation Laboratories. I am currently actively involved with “The Day After Heritage Protection Initiative,” a collaborative effort to protect cultural property in Syria.

Since March 2011 Syria has gone through a traumatic and destabilizing process that has strained the ethnic, sectarian, and social fabric of the country—almost all that makes Syria a unified state with a people who share a common history, goals, and aspirations—to beyond the breaking point. Much of the country lies in ruins today, and its cultural heritage has been a deliberate casualty of the conflict from its earliest days.

The changing nature of the conflict in 2012 to one of armed confrontation between regime and opposition resulted in a power vacuum and breakdown of law and order in many parts of the country. This situation, coupled with the collapse of many basic services traditionally provided by the state, helped facilitate damage to Syria’s cultural heritage. A local population desperate for sources of income intensified looting at such sites as Apamea, Dura-Europos, and Mari, particularly early in the conflict. This has been clearly demonstrated in the before-and-after satellite imagery taken of the sites. The fighting has also damaged archaeological sites and monuments; ongoing military operations from both sides have left many in ruins. Much of the old city of Aleppo and the Crusader castle of the Krak des Chevaliers, UNESCO designated world heritage sites, have suffered severe damage.

Then there are the documented instances of deliberate, punitive destruction and looting of sites and monuments. This latest threat to Syria’s cultural heritage comes from the extremist group ISIS, which is iconoclastic in its approach to cultural heritage. Yet the picture emerging today from areas controlled by ISIS is far more complex than the simple narrative often portrayed in the media, as ISIS has a clear evolution in its approach to looting and destruction of antiquities.

When ISIS began to occupy the large swathes of territory it currently controls in Syria and Iraq in the latter half of 2013 and early 2014, it came upon an already-thriving trade in looted antiquities. Recognizing its potential value as a source of income, it initially permitted locals to continue looting these sites and imposed a 20 percent sales tax, also known as *khums*, on any transactions. Shortly afterward, ISIS began to increasingly take control of the process by regulating access to sites and threatening to impose penalties for non-payment of *khums*. By the summer of 2014 ISIS was issuing

digging permits or licenses and hiring contractors to loot sites in areas under its control.

In the fall of 2014, as part of ISIS's aggressive expansion into the illicit antiquities trade, the group established the Archaeological Administration (AA) under the Office of Resources, *Diwan Al-Rikaz*, to manage and organize the systematic looting of archaeological sites in the region. Through the AA, ISIS intensified its activities and became increasingly engaged directly in the looting, as opposed to earlier reliance on locals and contractors. The AA now organizes the sale and transfer of artifacts it acquires directly through its own digging operations and has established a network of approved dealers to whom the looted antiquities are sold, with middlemen facilitating the sales. They also routinely use earth-moving machinery, including bulldozers and trucks, to accelerate the digging and recovery process, which intensifies the amount and rate of destruction to archaeological sites. Many sites have been deeply scarred as a result of this highly aggressive practice.

In addition ISIS through *Diwan Al-Rikaz*, run a regular auction in the city of Raqqa dedicated to the sale of antiquities. Items, which are not sold within the agreed time, stipulated by the licenses issued to looters and those acquired by ISIS cadres are sold at the auction. Buyers of the antiquities include local dealers and representatives of foreign ones who regularly acquire material through the auction. In November 2015 operating procedures of the sale of antiquities at the Raqqa auction were reported to have changed due to the current air bombardments in Raqqa, and ISIS's uncertainty of battlefield developments. The catalyst for these developments had been the international response to the terrorist attacks in Paris. The changes included holding auctions up to three times a week. Concern over aerial bombardments has led to a concerted effort to empty ISIS warehouses in Raqqa of antiquities as quickly as possible.

This evidence indicates that the control and sale of looted antiquities is extremely lucrative, well worth the time and financial investment by ISIS. ISIS is clearly involved and profiting at every level from the illicit trade of antiquities—from their initial extraction from the ground to their final sale and exit from ISIS-controlled territory.

2015 heralded a darker and more sinister manifestation of ISIS's control and exploitation of cultural heritage, but this time in Mosul in neighboring Iraq. In what can only be described as cultural atrocities, ISIS very publicly set out to destroy the contents of the Mosul Museum and the archaeological sites of Nineveh and Hatra (most likely extensively looting them as well). These atrocities shocked the world, allowing ISIS to demonstrate its ability to act with impunity and illustrating the impotence of the international community to prevent the atrocities.

So when ISIS occupied the UNESCO-designated World Heritage site city of Palmyra in Syria May 2015, fears were raised as to what fate awaits these majestic ruins. Will they be pillaged for profit, fall victim to another cultural atrocity, or both?

The world did not have long to wait for its answer; in just ten days between the last week of August and the first week of September, two months after the ISIS seizes control of the city, the smaller temple of Baal Shamin, the grand temple of Bel and

three funerary towers from the necropolis were blown up in what has become the hallmark signature of ISIS's destruction of cultural heritage sites. All of which attracted enormous publicity waves of outrage and condemnation from the international community. This was followed shortly after by the destruction of another iconic landmark of Palmyra. The monumental arch, also known as the Arch of Triumph that stands at the entrance to the Grand Colonnade was blown up. The main arch with its two smaller arches flanking it was originally built in the second century by the Roman emperor Septimius Severus to commemorate his victory against the Parthians. From images secretly filmed by local activists, the top left side of the arch and the smaller arch associated with it have been completely destroyed. All that remains standing is the right half of the main arch and the smaller arch to its right. The colonnade fortunately was undamaged.

The question that looms large is why ISIS destroyed Palmyra's major cultural heritage landmarks. The answer lies beyond the simplistic narrative of an extremist Islamist group with an iconoclastic approach to cultural heritage generally portrayed in the media. ISIS commits cultural heritage atrocities to shock the world, allowing ISIS to demonstrate its ability to act with impunity and illustrating the impotence of the international community to prevent them. These atrocities along with others such as the very well orchestrated and public executions of Westerners in orange jumpsuits are part of a carefully crafted propaganda campaign by ISIS. The propaganda resonates well with ISIS's narrow base of supporters and help bolster morale by reinforcing the ability to act with impunity whilst shocking the world at large and drawing attention to ISIS's actions.

The atrocities are often committed as a response to challenges and or setbacks suffered by ISIS. So within the context of the explanation set out above, ISIS's accelerated destruction of the site of Palmyra should be seen through the wider lens of events taking place in Syria today and the need for ISIS to respond to them. In the fall of 2015, Russia launched its much vaunted air campaign in Syria and whilst most of its firepower has not been directed against ISIS targets, publicly the avowed objective of Russian intervention is to destroy ISIS. In turn ISIS feels compelled to respond to this and other challenges by destroying cultural heritage at sites like Palmyra.

ISIS is likely the wealthiest radical terrorist organization in contemporary history, with widely diversified sources of income. Stopping the highly lucrative illicit trade in antiquities is imperative not only because it is a major source of income for terrorist organizations like ISIS, but also due to the irreparable damage it is causing to Syria's cultural heritage.

The importance of this cultural heritage is clear when it comes to the issue of national identity, that is, what makes a Syrian a Syrian. Syria has a resilient sense of identity based on the concept of a shared citizenship around a common history, supported by a celebrated culture. Once the current violence ends, the people of Syria will need to find ways to reconnect with symbols that once united them across religious and political lines. The country's ancient past, represented in its rich cultural heritage, is key to this. Protecting and preserving Syria's history and heritage is thus also about safeguarding its future.