

**Preventing Cultural Genocide: Countering
the Plunder and Sale of Priceless Cultural
Antiquities by ISIS**

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COUNTERING THE ISLAMIC STATE'S ANTIQUITIES TRAFFICKING

Before delving into the issue of Islamic State (IS) antiquities trafficking, it is important first to clarify how the trade fits into IS's overall economic goals. One way to understand these goals is to look at some of the philosophical underpinnings guiding the group's actions.

One document which many experts¹ argue may have ideologically influenced IS's strategy for violence, brutality, and territorial control is an online book called *The Management of Savagery*.² Posted online in 2004 under the author's pseudonym Abu Bakr Naji, the book argues that Sunni jihadist groups must enter a period where they wreak immense violence within contested territories in order to facilitate the transition to a caliphate. IS's tactics today reflect this approach. The final chapter in the book deals with the role of wealth in this transition.

In that chapter, the author argues for jihadist groups to use wealth as a way to "unite the hearts" of target populations. The aim is to win over locals who may be on the fence regarding submitting to jihadist rule. This approach gives context to the antiquities trade in IS territory. Although exactly how much IS earns from looting ancient artifacts is difficult to assess, the group clearly encourages and facilitates the illicit trade within its territory. This appears to be part of IS's economic strategy; not just for funding the group itself, but for creating ways to bring funds to its subjected population, whose hearts and minds Islamic State is trying win.

¹ David Jones and M.L.R. Smith, "The Strategy of Savagery: Explaining the Islamic State," *War on the Rocks*, February 24, 2015. (<http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/the-strategy-of-savagery-explaining-the-islamic-state/>)

² Abu Bakr Naji, "The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass," Trans. William McCants, (Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, 2006). (<https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>)

Islamic State has been dubbed the world's richest terror army.³ And the illegal antiquities trade is one income stream which gives the group significant strategic advantage against existing counter-terror finance efforts. The trade's main target buyers are, ironically, history enthusiasts and art aficionados in the United States and Europe – representatives of the Western societies which IS has pledged to destroy. This poses several challenges to policy makers, as well as opportunities. This testimony explores how IS exploits this trade and offers suggestions as to how Washington and its partners may stem the flow of this important financial stream to the world's most dangerous terrorist organization.

A STRATEGIC REVENUE SOURCE

IS, in the midst of the collapse of state authority in Syria and much of Iraq, has made headlines through its destruction of heritage sites. While a casual observer might conclude that IS takes sledgehammers to every non-Islamic artifact, the group is in fact deeply involved in antiquities looting. IS has access to roughly 5,000 archaeological sites and probably has earned several millions of dollars from antiquities trafficking.⁴ Some of the looting appears to be conducted by local populations, who amid the economic devastation of war resort to combing archaeological sites for materials they can sell. Since gaining control of more territory in the region, however, IS has leveraged this black market and become a key facilitator in the looting, taxing, and marketing of antiquities.

The importance of the antiquities trade for IS lies not just in the funding it generates, but in the market's strategic and operational benefits. The illegal trade of artifacts does not generally risk provoking outside military disruption or a local rebellion. Unlike oil facilities, excavation sites are not likely to be targeted by missile strikes. Moreover, criminal and financial methods such as extortion, kidnapping, taxing, or the outright takeover of private and public establishments embitter locals in ways that antiquities looting typically does not.

³ "The World's Richest Terror Army," *BBC Two* (UK), April 22, 2015.
(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05s4ytp>)

⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Documenting ISIL's Antiquities Trafficking: The Looting and Trafficking of Iraqi and Syrian Cultural Heritage: What We Know and What Can Be Done," September 29, 2015.
(<http://www.state.gov/e/eb/rls/rm/2015/247610.htm>)

Antiquities trafficking is now more important to Islamic State, particularly as some of its other revenue sources have become more difficult to manage. For example, U.S.-led airstrikes have significantly squeezed IS oil profits since 2014.⁵

Although the earnings from antiquities are less robust than those from oil revenue, looting represents a stable, less capital-intensive revenue stream. With plenty of local knowledge and no shortage of civilians to dig for artifacts, the trade is rampant in the region. Even in non-IS-held territory, many unemployed locals excavate and sell antiquities to earn income.⁶

IS AND THE ECONOMICS OF ANTIQUITIES LOOTING

IS involvement in antiquities looting has evolved considerably since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. What was once primarily local, ad-hoc activity has increasingly come under the group's direct control. A growing body of evidence shows IS now uses four main methods to raise money from antiquities: licenses, taxation, direct looting, and direct marketing.⁷

Licenses

Islamic State administers its bureaucracy under various *diwans* (departments), one of which is the *Diwan* for Natural Resources. Documents recovered by U.S. Special Forces during a May 2015 raid on senior IS leader Abu Sayyaf reveal the existence of a formal antiquities division within that *diwan*,⁸ and sales receipts included the division's official seal. According to the documents, in late 2014, IS designated Abu Sayyaf as head of the antiquities division and prohibited anyone within the group's territory from excavating without a stamped permit.

⁵ Howard LaFranchi, "What Syrian antiquities reveal about Islamic State's billion-dollar economy," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 25, 2015. (<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2015/0825/What-Syrian-antiquities-reveal-about-Islamic-State-s-billion-dollar-economy>)

⁶ Wassim Bassem, "Unemployed Iraqis join in looting of antiquities," *Al Monitor*, March 28, 2016. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/iraq-archeological-sites-looting-protection.html?#>)

⁷ Kathryn Tully, "How to buy antiquities," *Financial Times* (UK), September 4, 2015. (<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d0784c78-50b0-11e5-b029-b9d50a74fd14.html>)

⁸ U.S. Department of State, "Documenting ISIL's Antiquities Trafficking," September 29, 2015. (https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/final_presentation_to_met_on_isil_antiquities_trafficking_for_das_keller_9.29.2015_.pdf)

Other reports show *diwan* management of antiquities revenue. In one example, the so-called *Diwan* of Bureaucracy issued a free excavation license to an individual who lived near the archaeological site of Mari on the Euphrates River. However, as part of the deal, he was required to give 60 percent of the proceeds to the department.⁹ A license or permit system also likely exists in Raqqa, the de facto IS capital, and IS “inspectors” monitor excavations, destroy human figurines which they consider idolatrous, and take a “tax” from what they do not demolish.¹⁰

Taxation and Antiquities Revenue

The most significant way that IS secures its stake in the illegal antiquities trade is through taxation. Taxing sales of illicit goods is a time-honored means for organized crime, and reports indicate that IS typically applies a tax known as a *khums* on the value of recovered goods. *Khums* means “fifth” in Arabic, but the tax can reach as high as 50 percent.¹¹

This tax probably offers Islamic State a significant stream of funding. An article from early 2015 quotes a middleman based in southern Turkey who claimed to have had a single item sold for \$1.1 million.¹² A 20-percent tax on a \$1.1-million sale would represent \$220,000 in passive revenue for IS, although it is unclear if the quoted price was the wholesale amount or retail.

Direct Looting

It is difficult to distinguish between looting that is licensed, taxed, and facilitated by IS and activity undertaken directly by the organization itself. Several reports suggest the organization is involved directly in some archeology sites, organizing equipment, and directing operations.¹³ A number of reports indicate that IS looted materials from Nimrud prior to blowing up portions of

⁹ “Al-Rikaz Department of ISIS Licenses Excavation Works in Exchange for Monetary Percentage,” *APSA*, accessed April 14, 2016. (<http://apsa2011.com/apsanew/al-rikaz-department-of-isis-licenses-excavation-works-in-exchange-for-monetary-percentage/>)

¹⁰ Simon Cox, “The men who smuggle the loot that funds IS,” *BBC Magazine* (UK), February 17, 2015. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31485439>)

¹¹ Amr al-Azm, Salam al-Kuntar, and Brian Daniels, “ISIS’ Antiquities Sideline,” *The New York Times* September 2, 2014. (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/opinion/isis-antiquities-sideline.html?_r=0)

¹² Simon Cox, “The men who smuggle the loot that funds IS,” *BBC Magazine* (UK), February 17, 2015. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31485439>)

¹³ Sangwon Yoon, “Islamic State Is Selling Looted Art Online for Needed Cash,” *Bloomberg*, July 28, 2015. (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-06-28/isis-has-new-cash-cow-art-loot-it-s-peddling-on-ebay-facebook>)

the site.¹⁴ It increasingly appears that the Islamic State does not haphazardly loot and sell artifacts at random, but prioritizes acquisitions according to worth. This indicates that the group's ranks likely include individuals with archaeological expertise who consult with the group willingly or under duress.

The scale of IS physical destruction of antiquities is subject to dispute. Some reports point to industrial-scale destruction including bulldozing archaeological sites.¹⁵ When the group released video footage of its destruction of statues in the Mosul Museum from the Hatra archeological site, however, observers noted that many were plaster replicas and that the group had stolen most of the originals with the intent to sell them.

Direct Marketing

A recent report indicates that IS is itself marketing stolen antiquities by organizing public auctions within its territory to sell antiquities.¹⁶ Several accounts suggest that IS may also be using social media applications such as Whatsapp to coordinate.¹⁷ Looters, smugglers, and middlemen use such platforms to exchange photographs of artifacts,¹⁸ and occasionally even sell them to journalists. It is unclear, however, whether official members of IS are themselves marketing, much less transporting, looted antiquities directly to dealers in the West.

¹⁴ "Islamic State B-movie of attack on Nimrud," *Conflict Antiquities*, April 12, 2015.

(<https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2015/04/12/iraq-nimrud-buildings-destroyed-site-not-bulldozed-islamic-state/>); "Isis extremists bulldoze ancient Assyrian site near Mosul," *Reuters*, March 6, 2015.

(<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/05/islamic-state-isis-extremists-bulldoze-ancient-nimrud-site-mosul-iraq>)

¹⁵ Charlene Gubash, "ISIS Looting Syrian Sites 'Into Oblivion'; Fear Mounts for Palmyra," *NBC*, May 16, 2015.

(<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/isis-looting-destroying-ancient-syrian-sites-industrial-scale-n359461>)

¹⁶ Richard Engel, Agelos Petropoulos, and Cheikh Omar, "Smuggler of Stolen Artifacts from Palmyra Speaks Out About ISIS' Illicit Operation," *NBC*, April 6, 2016. (<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/smuggler-stolen-artifacts-palmyra-speaks-out-about-isis-illicit-operation-n551806>)

¹⁷ Joe Parkinson, Ayla Albayrak, and Duncan Mavin, "Syrian 'Monuments Men' Race to Protect Antiquities as Looting Bankrolls Terror," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 10, 2015. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/syrian-monuments-men-race-to-protect-antiquities-as-looting-bankrolls-terror-1423615241>)

¹⁸ Mike Giglio and Munther Al-Awad, "13 Exclusive Photos of Looted (And Fake) Syrian Artifacts for Sale," *BuzzFeed*, August 5, 2015. (<http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/13-exclusive-photos-of-looted-and-fake-syrian-artifacts-for#.JaGMKbxld>)

IS Favors Artifacts from Particular Time Periods

Satellite imagery indicates IS looting has been heaviest at Ancient- and Islamic-period sites.¹⁹ Certain classes of artifacts found in Syria during the Ancient (roughly the fourth century BCE to the sixth century CE) and early Islamic periods (seventh to 11th centuries CE) are easily mistaken to originate from elsewhere. They share stylistic or artistic features with other regions of the Middle East and the Mediterranean away from the conflict. Misidentifying artifacts or attributing to them a generic origin lessens the scrutiny on the part of middlemen and buyers who want to avoid purchasing artifacts from IS-controlled territory.

Coins formed a significant portion of the collection of artifacts U.S. Special Forces recovered in the May 2015 raid on IS leader Abu Sayyaf.²⁰ They have also been featured in caches shown to journalists by middlemen.²¹ At least one scholarly book on classical coins was captured from an IS group by a Kurdish militia.²² Moreover, several coins have been offered for sale on eBay that are alleged to have recently come from Syria or Iraq,²³ although IS responsibility for them has been disputed.²⁴

Buyers and Smuggling Routes Still Poorly Understood

Numerous reports indicate that recently looted antiquities from Syria are appearing in art centers, including London²⁵ and Geneva.²⁶ Other reports suggest a rise in buyers in Persian Gulf states²⁷

¹⁹ Jesse Casana and Mitra Panahipor, "Satellite-Based Monitoring of Looting and Damage to Archaeological Sites in Syria," *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies*, November 2, 2014.

(<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/548047/pdf>)

²⁰ U.S. Department of State, "ISIL Leader's Loot," accessed April 14, 2016. (<http://eca.state.gov/cultural-heritage-center/iraq-cultural-heritage-initiative/isil-leaders-loot>)

²¹ Mike Giglio and Munther Al-Awad, "13 Exclusive Photos of Looted (And Fake) Syrian Artifacts for Sale," *Buzzfeed.com*, August 5, 2015. (<http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/13-exclusive-photos-of-looted-and-fake-syrian-artifacts-for#.laGMKbxld>)

²² "YPG confiscated a numismatic book from Turkish Islamic State fighters in Syria. Do you recognise it?" *Conflict Antiquities*, June 4, 2015. (<https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2015/06/04/ypg-confiscated-a-numismatic-book-from-turkish-islamic-state-fighters-in-syria-do-you-recognise-it/>)

²³ Jack Crone, "2,000-year-old artefacts looted by ISIS from ancient sites in Iraq and Syria are being sold on EBAY," *Daily Mail* (UK), March 14, 2015. (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2994538/2-000-year-old-artefacts-looted-ISIS-ancient-sites-Iraq-Syria-sold-EBAY.html>)

²⁴ "Conflict antiquities from Apamea do not finance the Islamic State – they finance the Assad regime," *Conflict Antiquities*, March 18, 2015. (<https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2015/03/18/syria-apamea-ebay-islamic-state-assad-regime/>)

²⁵ Rachel Shabi, "Looted in Syria – and sold in London: the British antiques shops dealing in artefacts smuggled by Isis," *The Guardian* (UK), July 3, 2015. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/antiquities-looted-by-isis-end-up-in-london-shops>); Daniela Deane, "Islamic State is selling looted Syrian art in London to fund its fight," *The*

and the Far East.²⁸ The pipelines that move antiquities to market invariably transit states bordering Syria and Iraq. Turkey and Lebanon are the best documented among these,²⁹ but Jordan has also served as an important conduit.³⁰

European border states also likely play an important role. These pipelines are well understood with regard to other illicit commodities, but less so in the context of antiquities. The “Balkan route” into Europe through Greece and Bulgaria is a known path for drugs and migrants.³¹ Press reporting shows that authorities have raided smuggling houses in Bulgaria and recovered ancient artifacts, some of which might have originated from Iraq.³²

RECOMMENDATIONS

The global annual trade in illicit art and antiquities is hard to stop. Unscrupulous antiquities collectors are dogged and markets are highly adaptive to crises. Looted objects are hidden away for long periods, false documentation on their provenance is routine, and transactions have proven difficult to track through traditional customs enforcement and financial intelligence. The challenges are great, necessitating new means to counter them. The following recommendations may help policy makers better address the illicit antiquities trade:

Washington Post, February 25, 2015. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/is-looted-syrian-art-showing-up-in-london-to-fund-activities/2015/02/25/785ab630-bcd0-11e4-b274-e5209a3bc9a9_story.html)

²⁶ “Following the trail of Syria’s looted history,” *CBS*, September 9, 2015. (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-looted-syrian-ancient-artifacts-black-market-us-and-europe/>)

²⁷ Nigel Morris, “Call for UK to take tougher action to save antiquities from Isis,” *The Independent* (UK), February 11, 2015. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/archaeology/call-for-uk-to-take-tougher-action-to-save-antiquities-from-isis-10039793.html>)

²⁸ Joe Parkinson, Ayla Albayrak, and Duncan Mavin, “Syrian ‘Monuments Men’ Race to Protect Antiquities as Looting Bankrolls Terror,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 10, 2015. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/syrian-monuments-men-race-to-protect-antiquities-as-looting-bankrolls-terror-1423615241>)

²⁹ Simon Cox, “The men who smuggle the loot that funds IS,” *BBC* (UK), February 17, 2015. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31485439>)

May Abboud Abi Akl, “Looters find path to export antiquities via Lebanon,” *Al Monitor*, July 30, 2015. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/07/middle-east-smuggling-antiquities-lebanon.html>)

³⁰ Taylor Luck, “Syrian rebels loot artifacts to raise money for fight against Assad,” *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2013. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syrian-rebels-loot-artifacts-to-raise-money-for-fight-against-assad/2013/02/12/ae0cf01e-6ede-11e2-8b8d-e0b59a1b8e2a_story.html)

³¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Drug trafficking,” accessed April 14, 2016. (<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/>); “Western Balkan Route,” *Frontex*, accessed April 14, 2016. (<http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/western-balkan-route/>)

³² Steven Myers and Nicholas Kulish, “‘Broken System’ Allows ISIS to Profit from Looted Antiquities,” *The New York Times*, January, 6, 2016. (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/world/europe/iraq-syria-antiquities-islamic-state.html?_r=1)

1. Impose terrorism sanctions on artifact smugglers and buyers

Despite the proliferation of artifact watch lists, highly publicized seizures, and the repatriation of looted objects, few sanctions have been applied to smugglers and buyers. The connection between antiquities looting and terrorism calls for stiffer penalties.

Applying terror sanctions by the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control, the European Union, and the United Nations against antiquities smugglers and buyers is long overdue. The museums and collectors who benefit from the market's opacity would undoubtedly oppose such moves. But even a handful of strategic designations imposed on the worst offenders would likely have a chilling effect on both sellers and buyers given the financial risks and fines associated with these sanctions.

2. Make antiquities looting an intelligence and law-enforcement priority

Despite the rise in antiquities looting, U.S. federal law enforcement has yet to indict anyone for supporting IS through the illicit trade. At present, it is unclear who in the U.S. government is even responsible for antiquities trafficking. To be sure, the State Department and FBI are involved, along with components of the Department of Homeland Security such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement. However, policymaking seems to be ad hoc, and coordination and intelligence sharing is lacking.

Reform can only come about by declaring antiquities looting and cultural property crime a national security priority. For the issue to avoid being lost in an interagency void or turf war, the White House must designate a lead organization, and provide adequate authorization and resources.

3. Incorporate cultural-property crime awareness into intelligence community and U.S. Special Forces training

Threat finance is already emphasized in courses taught at the Joint Special Operations University.³³ Despite the relevance of antiquities to the funding of jihadist groups, such courses do not appear to emphasize their financing role. The U.S. Joint Forces Command has a handbook specifically on integrated financial operations, highlighting the need to coordinate across agencies as well with nongovernmental and international partners, but it lacks any reference to antiquities.³⁴ Cultural-property crime has only begun to appear in the literature on counterinsurgency, but does not appear to have reached stability-operations doctrine.³⁵

A similar focus needs to be introduced within the intelligence community, where awareness of threat finance has grown exponentially over the last decade. Antiquities must be the next frontier.

4. Elevate antiquities trafficking as a focus in international AML/CTF monitoring

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) – an intergovernmental body that sets anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing standards – has acknowledged that IS uses antiquities trafficking for part of its funding.³⁶ However, FATF has not emphasized the illicit trade as a typology for terror finance to combat through effective legislation and enforcement tools.

FATF should be urged to research and highlight the global problem of antiquities trafficking, taking advantage of case studies which the organization's member states can provide. Such research will allow FATF to set appropriate standards and effectively monitor the countries that play a role in the antiquity smuggling pipeline.

³³ "Counter Threat Finance Course," *Joint Special Operations University*, May 25, 2015.

(<http://jsou.socom.mil/Pages/CourseInformation.aspx?courseName=Counter%20Threat%20Finance%20Course>)

³⁴ Defense Technical Information Center, *Integrated Financial Operations Commander's Handbook*, November 2, 2010. (http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/doctrine/jwfc/ifo_hbk.pdf)

³⁵ Christopher Jaspardo, "The Case for Cultural Heritage Protection as an Element of COIN," *The Future of Counterinsurgency: Contemporary Debates in Internal Security Strategy*, Eds. Lawrence E. Cline and Paul Shemella, (New York: Praeger Security International, 2015), pages 91-120.

³⁶ Financial Action Task Force, "Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL)," February 2015, page 16. (<http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Financing-of-the-terrorist-organisation-ISIL.pdf>)

5. *Expand registries of art and antiquities*

Registries of stolen art and antiquities are commonplace. But new technologies make it possible for art and artifacts to be tagged and tracked in real time. Molecular markers attached to artifacts, for example, can be scanned in real-time to determine the identity of an item.³⁷ An expanded registry initiative, unfortunately, will do little to halt current antiquities trafficking in Syria and Iraq. Over time, however, by tagging large numbers of objects with unique identifiers, a chain of custody will be created that will enable stolen or forged artifacts to be identified when sold or seized.

Tagging and registering objects is likely to be an expensive undertaking. But technological standards for markers are at early stages of development, as are credentials management for accessing databases. The endeavor should become more manageable as more countries participate.

These recommendations represent the first steps in what will undoubtedly be a long, complex, and multifaceted battle. Success will mean not only defeating a brutal and nefarious force, but preserving the past for humanity's benefit well into the future.

Law enforcement and intelligence officials should pay close attention to the antiquities trade emanating from Syria and Iraq, but not because they need to know precisely how much money IS brings in. What is important is that the trade itself reveals something about Islamic State's operational infrastructure, its links with partners and middlemen, and how the group is exploiting the local civilian population. All of this is critical to understanding how the U.S. and its allies may defeat the group militarily, financially, and ideologically.

³⁷ "What is i2M," *i2M Standards*, accessed April 14, 2016. (<https://www.i2mstandards.org/i2m/>)