

Syria official warns of trafficking in antiquities

February 13 2013, by Dale Gavlak



In this Tuesday, Nov. 6, 2012 file photo, a general view of a destroyed pottery shop inside the Old City of Aleppo, Syria, a listed UNESCO World Heritage Site that was gutted in October and which is now controlled by the Free Syrian Army. Syria's top antiquities official is calling for U.N. intervention and cooperation from neighboring countries to halt the illicit trafficking of its artifacts as the 23-month civil war rages on.(AP Photo/Monica Prieto, File)

(AP)—A Syrian government official warned Wednesday of rampant trafficking in antiquities from his country and appealed for U.N. help in

halting the illicit trade that has flourished during the nearly 23-month-long civil war.

Syria's turmoil has increasingly threatened the country's rich archaeological heritage but the issue of smuggling artifacts has taken a back seat to more dramatic images as some of the most significant sites got caught in the crossfire between regime forces and rebels.

President Bashar Assad's troops have shelled rebel-held neighborhoods, smashing historic mosques, churches and souks, or markets. Looters have stolen artifacts from [archaeological excavations](#) and, to a lesser extent, museums.

Maamoun Abdulkarim, head of the government's antiquities department, warned of the smuggling at a UNESCO-sponsored workshop in Amman, Jordan, which brought together regional antiquities directors, customs and police officials, as well as international protection agencies.

He expressed hope that the Security Council would issue a resolution that would ban trading in stolen antiquities from Syria, and underscored that his nation's [cultural heritage](#) must be preserved without taking political sides in the conflict.

"We want a united front to stop the destruction," Abdulkarim told The Associated Press on the sidelines of the gathering. "These acts are not only attacks on Syria's heritage, they are attacks on the world's heritage."

Among the artifacts stolen from Syria is an 8th century B.C. Aramaic [bronze statue](#) with gold overlay taken from the Hama museum and now listed by Interpol. Byzantine mosaics from the [Roman city](#) of Apamea near Aleppo were bulldozed and removed.

Meanwhile, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Culture

Francesco Bandarin said in Paris on Friday that he has "information that some (Syrian cultural) items are beginning to appear on the market . it has already been a few months." He did not elaborate.

Experts consider Syria home to some of the most important cultural sites in human history, with six of them designated World Heritage sites by UNESCO, the U.N.'s cultural and educational agency.

The Jordan workshop focused on a plan to help safeguard the Syrian antiquities, according to Anna Paolini, UNESCO's representative to Jordan. She said the plan included better training of antiquities and border personnel and coordination with the local community.

Paolini pointed to an archaeologist working via Skype and online with Syrian staff to assess damages, pack and label material for removal to secure spaces as a model that could be repeated to "mitigate damages and loss." She did not wish to name the archaeologist, because of security concerns.

Abdulkarim acknowledged that fighting between the regime and rebels has damaged some of the country's most iconic treasures.

World Heritage site Crak des Chavaliers near the Lebanese border, one of the most important military castles in history dated between 11th and 13th century, has been exposed to shelling and gunfire. Shelling also has reportedly caused extensive damage to historic houses in the ancient city of Bosra in the south, once the capital of the Roman province of Arabia.

Aleppo, one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, has witnessed some of the conflict's most brutal destruction. Its 12th century Ummayad mosque and 13th century citadel gatehouse have been caught in the crosshairs of the conflict.

These monuments can all be repaired, Abdulkarim said, unlike those seven ancient markets incinerated in Aleppo's storied centuries-old covered souk during fierce fighting last October. The fire burnt 500 shops, tearing through wooden doors and scorching stalls and vaulted passageways.

Because of the fighting, most Syrian museums have removed their priceless treasures, storing them in "safe places," Abdulkarim said, without elaborating.

Still unearthed treasures, however, are under constant threat because of the ongoing violence, he said.

The antiquities chief was careful neither to blame government troops nor rebels for looting, which ranged from what he called small-scale "tomb robbing" to the bulldozing of Byzantine mosaics in the Roman city of Apamea near Aleppo. He instead blamed "mafias" of sophisticated smugglers familiar with the location of the country's numerous treasures.

Abdulkarim praised Jordanian police for their recovery over the weekend of Syrian artifacts and called on other neighboring countries to tighten controls. He said the stolen items included clay pottery, figurines and other undated artifacts.

He also asked UNESCO to appeal to Turkey and Iraq to enact stricter measures to prevent the smuggling of artifacts across their borders. Turkey has strained ties with the Assad regime, while Iraq's porous frontier with [Syria](#) is difficult to monitor.

Abdulkarim warned against his country becoming like another Iraq, where the Baghdad Museum and many archaeological sites were plundered following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion which toppled Saddam Hussein.

"We don't want the world to go through the Iraq experience again,"
Abdulkarim said.

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