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## Culture Under Threat and Digital Libraries

By Charles Henry posted 3 days ago

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“Terrorists are afraid of history; history delegitimizes them,” Nasser Judeh, deputy prime minister and minister for foreign affairs of Jordan, said, quoting his son, a graduate student studying ancient Middle Eastern art. It was one of many memorable insights and observations at the well-attended symposium, “[Culture under Threat: The Security, Economic, and Cultural Impact of Antiquities Trafficking and Terrorist Financing](#),” held in New York City. Adjunct to the United Nations General Assembly, the symposium was cosponsored by the Asia Society, UNESCO, the Antiquities Coalition, and the Middle East Institute, and hosted high-level ministers from the Middle East and Northern Africa whose nations have been roiled by cultural terrorism: the theft and illicit sale of cultural artifacts, many of extraordinary artistic and monetary value. The cash generated by the smuggling and illegal sales is used by terrorist group such as ISIS to purchase weapons and ammunition, and to pay for recruiting more mercenaries. Our cultural heritage is thus exploited for murder.

In addition to His Excellency Judeh were Sameh Hassan Shoukry, Egypt’s minister of foreign affairs; Julie Bishop, Australia’s minister for foreign affairs; Ibrahim Al-Jaafari, Iraq’s minister for foreign affairs; Abdallah Y. Al-Mouallimi, permanent representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the U.N.; Chan Tani, Cambodia’s secretary of state; and Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO, among others. Presiding over much of the morning’s discussions was Kevin Rudd, former prime minister of Australia and president of the Asia Society Policy Institute. The seniority of the national representatives was itself testimony to the urgency of the meeting and its topic. Director-General Bokova articulated early in the proceedings the importance of the term “cultural cleansing.” ISIS and other terrorist groups methodically and strategically attempt to wipe out the cultural legacy of the Middle East, analogous to ethnic cleansings and the Holocaust of the twentieth century. Stone tablets, beautiful mosaic tiles, 5,000 year-old clay figurines, rare books and manuscripts, and built structures including churches, synagogues, and selected mosques are demolished or find their way piecemeal to upscale antiquities dealers in London, New York, or Hong Kong.

The ministers recounted some of the harrowing events in their region, and presented a more sweeping degree of destruction and theft than is commonly realized. Matthew Bogdanos, the assistant district attorney in Manhattan in charge of pursuing illicit antiquities sales and trafficking, spoke eloquently about the complexity of the “supply chain” of stolen art and the many international regulations that make prosecution difficult. One of the goals of the symposium was thus to raise awareness of this threat, to work together to confront the violation of our collective cultural legacy, and to staunch the loss.

The second half of the morning’s deliberations was opened to the invited guests drawn from a wide spectrum of organizations and perspectives; their comments and observations made for a nuanced, sophisticated conversation. This session was framed by the rubric “Innovative Solutions.” Recommendations included resurrecting the Allied Monuments Men corps that helped secure looted art in World War II; creating a brigade of Archeologists Without Borders, modeled on

Médecins Sans Frontières; designation of a nongovernmental organization to prepare risk assessments and emergency heritage planning for interested nations in the Middle East; deploying much stronger military force in threatened cultural sites; establishing an international relief fund; and various high- tech tracking and monitoring projects.

I argued for the formation of an international effort to develop a Digital Library for the Middle East, which would include high-resolution images, rich metadata, and tracking software for border control and inventory audits. A digital library at this scale would help reveal the region's cultural heritage as a means to inhibit the looting of objects that are currently unknown or untracked, and over time also encourage scholarship and interest in this rich, foundational culture for future generations once the crisis has passed. National and international funding agencies have expressed interest in the concept of a Digital Library for the Middle East, and CLIR and the Antiquities Coalition are pursuing those leads.

Representatives of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Smithsonian Institute, World Monuments Fund, and J. Paul Getty Trust; faculty members in international affairs, comparative literature, and classics; archeologists; staff from Christie's Auction House; a former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts: all combined to create a multifaceted interpretation of the crisis and to offer a spectrum of organizational and individual support to address it.

It was most gratifying to represent CLIR at this seminal event. As the meeting unfolded I thought about what the CLIR and DLF constituency can contribute to annul this regional upheaval and violent, ideological cleansing. We do not have guns, we do not wear blue helmets, and the gavel of an international court is beyond our reach. What we do have is an extraordinary depth of expertise in digital technologies and an appreciation of the inherent democracy of a well-designed digital library; we have an abiding commitment to the preservation of and access to our cultural legacy; and we share a belief in the integrity of history as a defining principle of our humanity.

*Chuck Henry is president of CLIR*

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