

Report on the conference “Fighting the looting of Syria’s cultural heritage”

Esper Sabreen.

Organizer: The conference is organized by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Sofia and the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research /NIKU/ under the patronage of UNESCO and in partnership with the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, the Embassy of the Republic of Cyprus

Date: September 16, 2005

Location: Sofia Hotel Balkan

First: introduction speeches: (the important points of the speeches)

H.E. Guro Katharina H. Vikør, Ambassador of Norway to Bulgaria

He did the welcome to this conference

Mrs. Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO

The role of UNESCO conventions on fighting the illicit traffic (1954,1970,1972,1995)

Bulgaria is a member state of UNESCO convention of 1970, there are 129 states ratified the convention, the efforts of UNESCO to unite the work of all institutions to fight the illicit traffic, the need for new legislation against the illicit traffic, the role campaign of UNESCO (Unit for Heritage)

Mrs. Roumiana Bachvarova, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior

The destruction of Palmyra is a war crime; this meeting is an opportunity to discuss the fighting against the illicit traffic, Bulgaria is a country to transport the artefacts, Bulgaria made a new law in 2009, the collaboration between Bulgaria and the others countries on fighting the illicit traffic

Mr. Vezhdi Rashidov, Minister of Culture

He talked about the Bulgarian experience, restitution of the Bulgarian artefacts from Canada, the collaboration of the Bulgarian government with EU, UNESCO to force the laws in Bulgaria, the agreements between Bulgaria, Turkey, Israel to fight against the illicit traffic, the training of the Bulgarian curators against illicit traffic

H.E. Stavros Avgoustides, Ambassador of the Republic of Cyprus to Bulgaria:

His speech was about his memories in Syria visiting the archaeological sites before the war and the importance of this meeting

Mr. Carsten Paludan-Müller, Director-General of NIKU

In his speech he confirmed that helping the Syrians fighting the looting of artefacts is a way to help the Syrians people during this tragedy

Second: keynote speeches:

Mr. Neil Brodie, Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research
University of Glasgow

Cultural property protection failure in Syria and its regional neighbours

Ms. Rubina Raja, Aarhus University, Denmark

Marketing illicitly exported cultural heritage objects. The case of Palmyra

Dr. Kheireddin Al Rifai, conservation architect

The reconstruction and rehabilitation of the damaged architectural and urban heritage in Syria

Ms. Tasoula Hadjitofi, “Walk Of Truth” Organization

Engaging the public to combat antiquities looting and trafficking

Mr. Maamoun Abdulkarim, Director-General of the Directorate General for Antiquities and Museums (DGAM):

he was not able to come - he gave a presentation via Skype, his presentation was on the most recent update of the Syrian Cultural Heritage and the measures done by DGAM

Mr. Andrei Mladenov, Head of Unit Trafficking of Cultural Goods, General Directorate for Combatting Organized Crime

Trafficking of Syrian cultural artefacts through Bulgaria and the Balkans. Challenges and efforts in the Bulgarian work to stop illicit trafficking of Syrian antiquities

Representative of the Ministry of Culture

The Ministry of Culture’s involvement in regional cooperation to fight trafficking of cultural artefacts from Syria

Later there was a workshop on these topics - looting, trafficking, facilitation and selling, damage and impact.

Eduard Planche, responsible for the 1970 convention at UNESCO, did a presentation on the ways UNESCO is fighting the illicit traffic from Syria:

- He gave an overview on UNESCO conventions
- The project of EU in Beirut
- The UNESCO campaign (United 4 Heritage)

In the workshop, the discussions were on those topics:

1. **Looting.** There are two main sources of illicit antiquities. One is from the buildings where archaeological excavation teams (often research institutions from abroad licensed by the Syrian authorities) have had their base and kept their finds before handing them over to the Syrian heritage authorities. Seizing and looting these buildings provide an easy harvest of antique objects, many of which are suitable for illegal trade. The other source is illegal excavations conducted on archaeological sites. These can be organised directly by the warring party in control of the territory, or it can be organised by locals surveyed by the warring group in control. The local population is motivated to take part in these illegal activities for lack of any other sorts of work and income through which to provide for their livelihood.
 - A. To what extent can we distinguish between different sources of origins of the objects illegally sold?

- B. Can we know if they all recently extracted, or can there be objects from pre-war lootings on the market as well?
 - C. Which actors, national and international are in a position to counter the looting?
 - D. What are our recommendations for their actions individually as well as coordinated?
2. **Trafficking.** Under the current circumstances the long Syrian borderlines are difficult to control for the authorities of the neighbouring countries. For those authorities it is even more difficult to control the smuggling of antiquities of which they may have little information. Many smugglers are working both ways, taking antiquities out of, and bringing weapons into Syria. However a lot of antiquities are smuggled out by refugees to whom they can bring important revenue to pay for their travel.
- A. What are the most important methods and routes for trafficking looted antiquities out of Syria, and how far do they reach?
 - B. What role do the refugees play in the trafficking? How do they purchase the objects, and how do they pass them on?
 - C. Which actors, national and international are in a position to counter the trafficking?
 - D. What are our recommendations for their actions individually as well as coordinated?
3. **Facilitation and Selling.** There is a huge interest for Syrian antiquities from art dealers in Europe, the Gulf Region, North America and South East Asia. Facilitation of the antiquities' access to the legal market is a very important next step, before putting the objects on the market. Facilitation takes place by providing the objects with false official documents stating their origin and granting a permission for their export. The facilitation for a large part takes place in Syria's neighbouring countries and in Bulgaria, but also elsewhere. Syrian artefacts with false documents are widely sold in European auction houses and by antiquities dealers. Collectors have a wide variety of options to choose from in order to find "legalized" objects that match their interest and budget. Recently looted Syrian antiquities have been introduced for purchase on the web.
- A. What do we know about where and how these facilitation centres operate?
 - B. Who is helping them and how?
 - C. Which actors, national and international are in a position to counter the facilitation?
 - D. What are our recommendations for their actions individually as well as coordinated?
4. **Damage and impact:** There are many different impacts from the destruction of peoples' heritage. The intended and systematic looting and destruction of the religious and symbolic heritage of minorities impact these groups and their sense of safety and belonging to the land. The destruction will impact their lives socially and spiritually (living collective traditions, sustaining common identity), now and in the future. The destruction of cultural heritage is not only used as a means of

demoralizing the enemy on the territory. It is also used as an instrument in the propaganda effort of IS to provoke reactions from the outside world that can confirm the IS in a position as leader in the war against what they depict as “non-Muslim values”. Another important impact is economic: In Syria tourism prior to the war was developing into an increasingly important source of income on both local and national levels. The destruction of Syria’s past is seriously damaging its future economic basis.

- A. To what extent can we rely on the information we get about the ongoing destruction inside of Syria?
- B. How can we keep our main perspective on the suffering of the Syrian people and avoid reactions against culticide that unintendedly support the propaganda efforts of IS?
- C. Which actors, national and international are in a position to counter the ongoing targeted destructions, and the related propaganda efforts?
- D. What are our recommendations for their actions individually as well as coordinated?

The Norwegian institute has created a document with the recommendations of the work shop