



USIPeace Briefing

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Iraq's Cultural Heritage: *Preserving the Past for the Sake of the Future*

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Synopsis

This *USIPeace Briefing* discusses the continued looting of Iraqi antiquities and measures that have been taken to recover and protect Iraq's cultural heritage. In addition, it highlights the value of international law and policing to prevent such crimes.

Introduction

The looting of Iraq's museums and archaeological sites is an overlooked consequence of the 2003 invasion. The loss of such precious history would be tragic for any nation or culture. As Iraqis struggle to redefine a sense of nationhood after five years of war, they will need to draw on that common heritage to reconstruct their communities. In the words of Donny George Youkhanna, former director general of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, "The oil will finish one day, but the antiquities will always be there." The most immediate priorities are to secure Iraq's existing heritage sites, recover stolen artifacts, and develop an infrastructure for their conservation. The question should also be asked: what can be done to prevent such looting in future conflicts?

On September 8, 2008 a panel of experts convened at USIP to address these issues. Matthew Bogdanos, a Marine Corps officer and New York City assistant district attorney briefed the audience on the ongoing investigation to recover Iraq's stolen items. Donny George Youkhanna highlighted the Iraqi response to the damage incurred to Iraq's museums and archaeological sites. Lawrence Rothfield of the University of Chicago addressed the U.S. military's failure to protect these sites and [Michael Dziedzic](#) of USIP discussed the role that the international community can play in protecting these sites in the future. Each laid out overlapping policy plans to respond to the crisis at hand and prevent future catastrophes. Their statements are summarized below.

The failure to protect

As multinational Forces entered Iraq, the country's museums and archaeological sites were marked as no-strike zones. In keeping with the 1954 Hague Convention Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the military successfully avoided causing direct damage to these sites. Yet, while Multinational Force-Iraq (MNF-I) pilots knew the exact coordinates of these sites, ground forces, quite literally, did not have them on their radar. Without direct orders to prevent looting, many of these sites were gutted of their prized possessions.

In retrospect it is apparent that military planners dismissed historical precedent and prior warnings. In the 1991 Gulf War, no security forces were assigned to protect regional museums in the no-fly zones; they were consequently looted. In the months leading up to the 2003 invasion, representatives of the archaeological community warned the Office of the Secretary of Defense's legal council, reminding the Pentagon of the earlier debacle. Yet, as troops deployed, the U.S. military and civilian agencies failed to identify and protect key heritage sites. Limited capacity compounded by poor planning left Iraq's most treasured locations wide open to pillaging.

An immeasurable loss

The world looked on in horror as images of empty shelves in the Iraq Museum, strewn with debris, reached the international media. In four short days, between the staff's April 8 evacuation and April 12 return, the Iraq Museum lost an estimated 15,000 priceless antiquities.

Less publicized—yet even more severe—was the looting of Iraq's archaeological sites. In the country, there are more than 12,000 recognized sites and potentially more than 100,000 which are undiscovered. Hence it is impossible to determine the actual number of stolen artifacts. Investigations using satellite imagery reveal that the area uncovered by looters is four times greater than that which had been excavated legally over the past century. Sites continue to be looted.

Amnesty, raids and a global investigation

On April 16, 2003, the U.S. military deployed a counterterrorism team to lead a global investigation to recover Iraq's stolen antiquities. The initiative began with the expansion of an amnesty law throughout the country to encourage the safe return of items with "no questions asked." As a result, from April to November of that year, Bogdanos claims, "almost 2,000 different pieces were returned to the Iraq museum from almost 2,000 different people for almost 2,000 different reasons." More stolen artifacts were recovered through raids. Weapons caches and antiquities are invariably uncovered together in such operations. Antiquities smuggling funds insurgent groups in Iraq.

International cooperation and information sharing was also encouraged with the assistance of eight countries. Jordan and Syria have proven to be two of the most cooperative of Iraq's neighbors in assisting with seizures, while Iran and Turkey have kept silent on the issue of cross-border smuggling. International cooperation has revealed a billion dollar global enterprise of antiquities smuggling involving smugglers, dealers, collectors, archaeologists and academics (without whom the items could not be authenticated). Ninety percent of the trafficking in Iraq antiquities travels through Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Geneva, Amman and Dubai to arrive at either New York, London, Paris or Tokyo.

Political stagnation while looting continues

Under the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), 18 provincial inspectors of antiquities are charged with protecting Iraq's 12,000 established archeological sites and 16 provincial museums. Faced with the challenge of protecting these sites, Youkhanna, then SBAH chairman, created the Facility Protection Service (FPS). Originally 14,000 strong, the U.S. supplied the FPS with vehicles, communication systems and weapons, while UNESCO provided related equipment.

The institutions designed to protect Iraq's cultural heritage have been exploited for political gain. Initially, the FPS secured sites under their jurisdiction. However, political infighting has inhibited this work. The SBAH is directed by two ministries: the Ministry of Culture—controlled by the Sunni-led Iraqi Accord Front—and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, controlled by the Shi'ite United Iraqi Alliance. Politically motivated efforts to cut FPS funding have rendered it virtually ineffective.

Lessons learned and policy options

The tragedy of Iraq's lost heritage is undeniable. However, policy options are available for protecting Iraq's remaining cultural heritage, returning lost or stolen artifacts and ensuring that this theft and mishandling never recur.

The immediate priority is to halt ongoing looting. There are several options in this regard. First, Iraqi capacity to protect cultural sites must be strengthened. The U.S. government should make it a priority to urge the government of Iraq to strengthen the SBAH. Second, a mechanism should be established to allow foreign governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations and academic institutions to "adopt" archaeological sites by providing funding, training, equipment and maintenance for security forces.

Two things can expedite the return of stolen artifacts. A public awareness campaign about antiquities trafficking should be undertaken to increase sensitivity to the issue. Second, the international law enforcement network, INTERPOL, should identify and track the movement of antiquities at border crossings.

The current situation must also be viewed as a learning opportunity. First, the international community should enforce the protection of cultural sites from civilian looters during armed conflict. The Hague Convention of 1954 should be reformed to reflect the booming international antiquities market and attendant increase in looting during international upheaval. Second, U.S. and international military doctrine should incorporate concern for cultural property through training and awareness campaigns. For example, the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned and the Archeological Institute of America have developed training courses for troops going to Iraq and Afghanistan. Playing cards portraying missing artifacts have been distributed to troops in Iraq to raise awareness.

Finally, an increase in deployable international police units would help to close the existing gap in civil law enforcement during a conflict and in post-conflict stability operations. Conventional military units are ill-trained and ill-equipped to deal with civil disturbances and illicit activities. U.N. Formed Police Units, U.S. Military Police, NATO Multinational Specialized Units and the European Gendarmerie Force are examples of the few existing forces that are prepared for such missions.



Ziggurat of Ur, the purported birthplace of the Biblical Abraham. Photo courtesy Rusty Barber, USIP.

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USIP's Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations aims to transform societies emerging from conflict by promoting stability, democracy, economic development, and social reconstruction. Daniel Serwer is vice president of the center.

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