

Testimony of
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Hearing: Ancient Communities Imperiled: ISIS's War on Religious Minorities
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
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Statement

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you on the impact of ISIS to the religious and cultural heritage of minority groups in Iraq and Syria.

Minority religious heritage sites throughout ISIS held areas of Iraq and Syria have been suffering enormous damage and face constant risk. The targeted extermination of religious minorities by ISIS results in mass death and also the erasure of the outward manifestations of the minority religious culture, threatening the continuity of their religious practices.

I study this subject as a Fellow with the Penn Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Pennsylvania Museum. But like others on this panel, I was in Erbil, Iraq in August 2014, when ISIS made its advances toward the Erbil plain. I was then serving as the Program Director for the Archaeological Site Preservation Program at the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage in Erbil, Iraq, where I was leading a course for heritage professionals from throughout the country—men and women of every religious creed—who were working together to preserve the country's cultural sites. This work was interrupted by ISIS, and we departed abruptly, shortly after airstrikes began. However, the desire of Iraqi cultural heritage professionals to protect the religious and cultural heritage of the country remains.

Based on my current research, my experience in Iraq, and my consultation with Iraqi colleagues over the past several years, I want to share some examples of ISIS's targeted and intentional damage to minority religious and cultural sites.

- According to media reports in July 2014, ISIS destroyed the shrine of Nebi Yunis, located in Mosul, Iraq and revered as the tomb of the Prophet Jonah. Subsequent analysis of satellite imagery by the American Association for the Advancement of Science's Geospatial Technologies Project, where I am a visiting scholar, demonstrated that this was indeed the case. However, this analysis also showed that ISIS went further, removing all evidence of the shrine by bringing in heavy trucks to clear the rubble and then grading the site flat. ISIS's activities erased the physical remains and memory of the Nebi Yunis' shrine completely, and likely damaged the buried remains of the site's earlier mosques, churches, and temples.

- Dura-Europos is often called the “Pompeii of the Desert” because this ancient archaeological site uniquely preserves ancient sacred architecture from the 3rd century BC onwards. Surviving structures include temples to ancient Greek and Mesopotamian gods as well as the world’s best-preserved ancient Jewish synagogue and one of the earliest known Christian house chapels. The chapel contains the oldest known depiction of Jesus Christ and dates to about 235 AD. This site has now been extensively looted and is currently under ISIS control. The before and after image analysis completed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s Geospatial Technologies Project demonstrates that some 76 percent of the site’s surface area within the ancient city walls has now been looted.
- Two months ago, I traveled to the Dohuk Governorate in Iraq, which is adjacent to the ISIS-held Nineveh Governorate. While there, I met with the director of the Dohuk Antiquities Department about the minority religious and cultural sites at risk. To the best of our present knowledge, a number of Yazidi shrines have been destroyed since ISIS took control of Mosul and Sinjar. It now appears that Lalish may be one of the only surviving Yazidi religious centers in the region and is identified by the Dohuk Antiquities Department as the cultural site most at risk.
- In recent weeks, ISIS has released two videos showing the defacement of a particular type of ancient sculpture called a *lamassu*. These sculptures are human-headed winged bulls or lions made during the Neo-Assyrian Empire between the 9th and 7th century BC. While these statues represented the power of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in ancient times, today, they often serve as important symbols to the modern Assyrian Christian population. ISIS’s defacement of a *lamassu* is therefore intended to terrorize the present-day Christian community while simultaneously destroying an ancient artifact.

In thinking about how we can address the intentional destruction of minority religious and cultural heritage, I would like to offer three recommendations of actions that can be taken now by the Committee and the U.S. Government.

- First, to the extent possible, we need to offer humanitarian assistance to religious and refugee communities as well as the displaced museum curators, librarians, archivists, and archaeologists who are working at great personal risk to protect religious and cultural heritage inside Iraq and Syria. In the near future, I will return to Erbil, Iraq with colleagues from the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the Smithsonian Institution, where we will be working with heritage professionals to determine what unmet emergency needs currently exist. We need more programs like this one to reach additional religious and refugee communities, and the U.S. Government should encourage new partnerships and collaborations to form in the non-profit sector on this issue.
- Second, this Committee should use its powers to inquire into the efforts by the Department of Defense to protect religious heritage and other cultural sites during action against ISIS. This Committee should further investigate as to whether the

proper protections for religious and cultural heritage have been integrated into training for the Peshmerga, the Iraqi Army, and the Free Syrian Army. There is a report that should shed light on these efforts, which was required by Title XII, Subtitle E, Section 1273 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015. This provision was sponsored by Mr. Engel, and the report due to be completed in June 2015. I recommend that this Committee scrutinize the report carefully for evidence that the Department of Defense has taken steps to avoid accidental air strikes on religious and cultural sites and incorporated protection measures into their advisory role with local stakeholders.

- Finally, there is bipartisan legislation on cultural heritage protection, the Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act, HR 1493, now pending in this Congress. Introduced by Mr. Engel, Mr. Smith, Mr. Royce, and Mr. Keating, the purpose of the legislation is twofold: first, it is designed to make the implementation of U.S. policies more effective by bringing together the various agencies that have an existing mandate to address international heritage protection; and, second, to eliminate the financial incentive for terrorist entities such as ISIS to loot religious heritage and archaeological sites by restricting the importation of such material into U.S. markets. I commend this Committee and its members for their bipartisan leadership in unanimously passing HR 1493, and I urge members of this Committee to advocate for its final passage into law.

I would like to thank the Chairman for convening this important hearing at a very critical juncture in the preservation of Iraq and Syria's religious and cultural heritage. I will be happy to answer any questions that you have.