

## **In an effort to bolster the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural goods from Iraq and Syria, INTERPOL, UNESCO and other international and national organizations met to discuss effective strategies to implement relevant international agreements.**

Seizing stolen cultural artefacts from Iraq and Syria, preventing their sale on the international markets and restituting them to their countries of origin were all topics on the agenda of a two-day meeting organized by INTERPOL in collaboration with UNESCO and held at the UNESCO office in Beirut on December 14 and 15, with the support of the Norwegian Embassy.

The aim of the conference was to assess the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2199/2015 for the protection of cultural heritage in the Middle East, one year after its adoption. Unlike previous UN Security Council resolutions on the matter, this resolution establishes a direct link between traffic of cultural goods in the region and the funding of terrorism. The resolution explicitly prevents trade with the Islamic State and other extremist entities and is binding under Chapter VII of the UN charter, which provides the framework for the Security Council to take enforcement action.

The purpose of this meeting is to share knowledge and expertise among the different organizations working together to support Iraq and Syria in regaining control of their cultural heritage.

The conference was an opportunity to grasp the full picture of illicit trafficking of cultural artefacts today by providing testimonies of experts and officials from national directorates of archaeology in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon and customs and police agencies to legal entities and international organizations. Representatives from the World Customs Organization, UNIDROIT, Blue Shield International, the Digital Heritage Lab of the University Cyprus, as well as experts from Romania, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, spoke of ways to increase cooperation among national actors involved in the seizure and restitution of stolen cultural artefacts.

“We need more information in order to analyse the tendencies of smuggling and its routes, and all information available at the national level of each concerned country should be put together to see the whole picture,” agreed the experts. They said that one of the main challenges facing the implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions is the lack of documentation on seized artefacts, an essential element for the identification and restitution of cultural artefacts.

Experts and officials from Syria and Iraq spoke about the difficulties of providing proper documentation for artefacts taken from archaeological sites during illicit excavations. They also evoked the difficulties they sometimes faced in the requests for restitution from destination countries.

“Heritage is like honour. With that slogan we collaborated with civil society all over Syria to save many archaeological sites,” said the head of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Syria. He stressed that the vast majority of looted artefacts seized do not originate from museums but from illegal excavations and other sources. He also spoke about the trend of the fabrication of and trading in counterfeit cultural artefacts, which constitute a large percentage of cultural goods spotted at the Syrian borders.

Following discussions, the conference’s attendees agreed on the importance of strengthening the legal framework for the seizure and restitution of cultural artefacts, as well as meeting effectively the demands of Syria and Iraq for restitution. Other recommendations included increased cooperation among national police and customs.