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## The Destruction of Syria's Cultural Heritage Who are the Real Culprits?

by EVA BARTLETT

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Much has been written about the destruction and looting of Syria's heritage sites. Syria's Directorate-General of Antiquities & Museums (DGAM), as well as UNESCO have documented the vast damage and looting as extensively as possible in this time of proxy-war-manufactured crisis. In July 2014, the DGAM issued a statement and plea regarding the critical situation of Syria's heritage under attack.

“A year has passed since we last sent an international call out to all those concerned with defending Syria's heritage. At the time, we warned against a possible cultural disaster that might be inflicted on an invaluable part of the human heritage existing in Syria,” the DGAM statement read. It noted, “Much of what we had feared happened... vast regions extending along the geography of Syria are now classified as ‘distressed cultural areas’ due to the exacerbation of the clandestine excavation crimes and deliberate damage to our historic monuments and cultural landmarks in those regions...”

As for UNESCO, it noted, “Syria's exceptional archaeological, urban and architectural heritage has been considerably damaged during the conflict, and has affected all six World Heritage Sites in Syria and eleven sites inscribed on UNESCO's Tentative List.”

The six UNESCO-recognized sites are: The Ancient City of Damascus; Palmyra; The Ancient City of Aleppo; Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah al-Din; and The Ancient villages of Northern Syria, many of which have suffered intense digging and looting, as well as various acts of intentional destruction.

Yet, in spite of DGAM warnings and UNESCO confirmations, as we near the start of year five of the war on sovereign Syria, the Axis-of-Interventionists continue to arm terrorists within Syria, and train and funnel still more terrorists into Syria — terrorists who are not only murdering Syrians and Palestinians, but destroying Syria's heritage, as they have been doing since the beginning.

### **The “moderate” heritage-wreckers**

Over the years, many corporate news pieces either outright blame the Syrian government and Syrian Army (SAA), or pin the blame almost solely on Da'ish (ISIS/ISIL/IS), obfuscating and/or justifying the crimes of the other militia factions who have plundered and destroyed Syrian heritage for the last four years.

Reports noting the thievings of the so-called “moderates” often follow with claims that it is out of deperate want of funding that they pillage. One such piece, a September 2012 Time Magazine article, both inserts the standard MSM talking points about an “uprising,” a “civil war,” etc. and also notably promotes the line of cash-strapped “rebels” giving into necessity and looting the country to fund a “revolution” against a “dictator.” Time Magazine inserts a sectarian flourish at the end, “Still, says the Sunni Muslim, who has committed to helping his co-religionists across the border, ‘sometimes you have to make a sacrifice. How else will we overthrow Bashar?’”

As with numerous other reports, conveniently overlooked is the amply-documented role of the NATO-Gulf-Zionist-Turkey alliance arming (and training and enabling the transit of) terrorists, from the so-called “FSA” to the Nusra Front to the Islamic Front to Da'ish themselves, including by air-dropping weapons on more than one occasion.

Rick Sterling's “U.S. Alliance with FSA and ISIL in Six Photographs” notes the US alliance with Da'ish. In just six photos, the link between so-called “moderate rebel” leader 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Okaidi and Da'ish and US politicians, is clear. The fourth photo, a still from a November 2013 video interview with al-Okaidi, quotes the “moderate” terrorist saying, “My relationship with the brothers of ISIL is good.” The US politicians include Former US Ambassador to Syria and Coordinator of the “Friends of Syria”, Robert Ford — shown in May 2013 with al-Okaidi — and US Congress members—including the repeatedly-illegally-sneaking-into-Syria, John McCain — shown meeting with al-Okaidi. [see also “Who is Ambassador Robert Stephen Ford? The Architect of US Sponsored Terrorism in Syria” and “Washington Admits: FSA Equals Fictitious Syrian Army” and “FSA Leader Defects to ISIL and Exposes FSA as a Saudi-Israeli Run Project”].

Maram Susli's (the “Syrian Girl”) December 27, 2014 article in the New Eastern Outlook, “US Armed Rebels Gave TOW missiles to al-Qaeda,” notes, “US supplied TOW anti-tank missiles have ended up in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's branch of al-Qaeda. The US provided the

missiles to CIA-vetted Syrian rebel faction Harakat al-Hazm in May. A video posted by al-Nusra shows the weapons being used to take over Syrian military bases, Wadi Deif and Hamidiyeh in Idlib province... Currently Harakat al-Hazm is united with Jabhat al-Nusra, in Handarat Aleppo, and are jointly fighting the Syrian Army. The militant employing the TOW missile in the video, shows clear proficiency in its use, indicating that he has directly or indirectly benefited from US training. In spite of this revelation, there is evidence to suggest the US is still arming the FSA with TOW missiles.”

The article goes on to explain these new revelations are only the latest in years of documented alliances between Western-sponsored “moderates” and Da‘ish. “In 2012 the Free Syrian Army (FSA), referred to as the ‘moderate rebels’ by the US State Department, fought alongside ‘Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham’ (ISIS) in Aleppo against the Syrian military for control over Menagh Airbase. The FSA head of Aleppo Military Council ‘Abd al-Jabbar al-Oqaidi, who has met with US Ambassador Robert Ford, was filmed with ISIS Amir Abu Jandal praising ISIS for helping take the base using a suicide car bomb. As late as September 2014, FSA commander Bassel Idriss said that they had joined forces with ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Qalamoun Mountain.”

Anthony Cartalucci’s November 28, 2014 article, “Germany’s DW Reports ISIS Supply Lines Originate in NATO’s Turkey,” further exposes Turkey’s blatant role in supplying arms to terrorists in Syria. “Germany’s international broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) published a video report of immense implications — possibly the first national broadcaster in the West to admit that the so-called “Islamic State” (ISIS) is supplied not by “black market oil” or “hostage ransoms” but billions of dollars worth of supplies carried into Syria across NATO member Turkey’s borders via hundreds of trucks a day. The report titled, “‘IS’ supply channels through Turkey,” confirms what has been reported by geopolitical analysts since at least as early as 2011: that NATO member Turkey has allowed a torrent in supplies, fighters, and weapons to cross its borders unopposed to resupply ISIS positions inside of Syria.”

Before she was killed in a highly-suspect car crash (days after stating the Turkish intelligence had threatened her), journalist Serena Shim had reported on World Food Organization trucks ferrying Da‘ish terrorists via Turkey into Syria. With the clearly-documented ties between the US (and its Axis-of-Destruction allies) and the numerous terrorist groups destroying Syria, the hollow concern that US figures and media sometimes voice is blatantly hypocritical.

In September 2014, the US Department of State urged “all parties in Iraq, Syria, and the international community to respect and protect archaeological, historic, religious, and cultural sites, including museums and archives. All those who destroy important cultural property must be held accountable.” American Secretary of State John Kerry topped this hypocrisy with his statement at a white-washing event in New York City, “Threats to Cultural Heritage in Iraq and Syria,” in September, 2014 that, “...no one group has done more to put our shared cultural heritage in the gun sights than ISIL. How shocking and historically shameful it would be if we did nothing while the forces of chaos rob the very cradle of our civilization. We are determined instead to help Iraqis and Syrians protect and preserve their heritage in peace.”

The sting of these hypocritical words is that Syrian patriots are trying to protect their heritage (in many cases give their lives while doing so), and that Da'ish's recruiters, trainers, and enablers continue to supply weapons and open borders while crying crocodile tears over Syria's destroyed and pillaged heritage. Had the Western-Zionist-Gulf alliance not cooked up this plan to attempt to destroy Syria, Syria's heritage would not be in peril — period (see Seymour Hersh's 2007 investigative report, "The Redirection" in The New Yorker).

In January, 2015, the US Defense Department said that "as many as 1,000 American troops and trainers would be sent to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to assist in the training of Syrian opposition groups," Sputnik News reported. According to the same report, crocodile-tears Kerry stated that in addition to so-called "moderate" Syrian rebels, "other nationals will also undergo special training to join the coalition in their fight against IS militants." You can bet the newest batch of terrorists will be just as respectful of Syria's heritage as all the terrorists before them.

### **Gleefully destroying the cradle of civilization**

When terrorists — no, not Da'ish, but al-Nusra and the so-called "FSA" — terrorized the ancient village of Ma'loula for eight months, they meted out considerable destruction and damage on this heritage site, as well as looted and burned the town's monasteries and historic buildings. They burned the shrine containing the remains of St. Thekla, stole her bones. They vandalized icons and frescoes in the church in the Convent of St. Thekla, and burned parts of the church itself. They shelled and looted icons from the Monastery of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus (see video report, "Syrian historical treasures and archeological artifacts destroyed or stolen by terrorist gangs").

In Homs, it was likewise not Da'ish but al-Nusra and the so-called "FSA" who not only stole the food and valuables of residents in the Old City, but also vandalized, blew up, and set afire historic buildings, like the torched Church of Um al-Zenar (St. Mary's Church), "built upon an ancient crypt cave with signs of Christian worship dating back to 59ce."

In both cases, it was the SAA, local volunteers in the National Defense Forces (NDF) and empowered residents who struggled to preserve and minimize damage to their heritage sites. And in both cases, once under control of the SAA and government, plans for restorations were immediately started.

Damascus, which UNESCO describes as "founded in the 3rd millennium BCE, ...one of the oldest cities in the Middle East," has also suffered damage to its heritage sites. Terrorists' car bombs and mortars, which have terrorized residents of the city, have also hit historic places. The 11th-century Citadel, the 8th-century Umayyad Masjid, the 13th-century Great Madrasah, al-Adliya, the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch in Bab Touma, and the Armenian Orthodox Church in Bab Sharqi, have all suffered, according to UNESCO's report. But some of the worst destruction and damage to cultural heritage thus far documented is in Aleppo, which UNESCO describes as "one of the (if not the) oldest, continuously occupied cities in the world with some 7,000 years of known settlement history."

The Aleppo section of UNESCO's latest "Damage Assessment Overview" is lengthy. Some of the assessment includes:

\* "At least 121 historical buildings have been damaged or destroyed — equal to 30–40% of the World Heritage property area — in addition to the destruction of more than 1,500 shops of the Suq.

\* "The 11th century Minaret, the prayer hall, and the main gate of the Omayyad Masjid have been destroyed. The masjid's courtyard and all of its decorative elements have also suffered severe damage, as did the surrounding neighbourhood.

\* "The wooden minbar has been dismantled and transferred to an unknown location.

\* "Damage to the gates of the city wall has occurred... to some of the most important Islamic architecture buildings... and to most historic houses of the Jdeideh quarter...

\* "The Waqifiyya Library has been damaged due to a fire."

YouTube videos and online images showed terrorists from the Islamic Front (Robert Ford's "moderates") gleefully exploding the 150-year-old Carlton Citadel Hotel in Aleppo's Old City in May 2014, the destruction and damage extending to the 13th-century Citadel facing the hotel. A report in the Independent cited the Islamic Front's Twitter account as claiming responsibility for destroying the Carlton. A video posted online shows the takfiris in a tunnel beneath the Old City, repeatedly stating their intent to blow up the hotel. Clearly, with over 23 tons of explosives, these Western-sponsored terrorists knew the detonation would mean extensive destruction to Aleppo's historic sites surrounding the hotel.

Yet, the corporate media noted the destruction with little-to-no condemnation. The Los Angeles Times reported blithely, "The explosion ripped through the Carlton Citadel Hotel, near the landmark medieval Citadel and Aleppo's walled Old City, both deemed United Nations World Heritage sites," carefully choosing their words to abstain from condemnation of the terrorist act. The Los Angeles Times additionally took the opportunity to plug the so-called "revolution," "'The attack came as a way to raise the morale of the people after the deal that happened yesterday,' said the pro-opposition activist..." Other headlines justified, rather than condemned, the calculated destruction. Reuters reported, "Syrian rebels blow up Aleppo hotel used by army." The *Guardian* said, "Syria rebels blow up Aleppo hotel used as barracks by government forces."

Conversely, the DGAM stated, "This criminal act is part of a series of similar acts targeting historic and unique buildings and landmarks in Aleppo, such as the incidents of the Police Headquarters and the Justice Court... This targeting has resulted in great loss in the components of Syria's archaeological heritage, which can be added to a long list of painful losses that cannot be replaced."

In early December, Islamic Front militants bombed a historic masjid in Aleppo's Old City. Al-Masdar News noted, "The militants from the Islamic Front (Jabhat al-Islamiyah) bombarded multiple historical sites in the Old City of Aleppo this weekend, destroying residential buildings

and the 900-year old al-Sultaniyah Masjid. According to a military source in Aleppo, the Islamic Front has destroyed numerous sites in the Old City, including the outer walls of the Aleppo Citadel.” Video footage shows terrorists bombing the Citadel area at the end of November.

On December 30, the DGAM reported further tunnel explosions in the Old City near the Citadel. “The Armed groups have detonated bombs in tunnels under the Aleppo old city, the bombs were reportedly placed in two tunnels running under historic parts of the city. The explosions caused severe damage to the market and the historical buildings in the area...” Other examples of the terrorists’ deliberate destruction of Syrian heritage include:

*March, 2013:* al-Nusra terrorists destroyed a Muslim shrine in Raqqa. PressTV reported, “Videos posted online show foreign-backed militants blew up the tomb of ‘Ammar ibn Yasir, who was one of the companions of Islam’s Prophet Mohammad (pbuh)... Anti-government militants have attacked and destroyed several holy sites, including Shia mosques, since the beginning of unrest in Syria.”

*May 2, 2013:* Syria News reported, “[Terrorists] destroyed one more grave in Syria, the Prophet’s (pbuh) companion Hijr ibn ‘Adi al-Kindi in Adra, Damascus Countryside. They took out his dead body, he died some 1,400 years ago and buried it in an unmarked place...”

*November, 2014:* The Independent reported that al-Nusra blew up an Armenian church in Deir al-Zor dating to 1846. “All of the church archives, dating back to 1841 and containing thousands of documents on the Armenian Holocaust, were burned to ashes, while the bones of hundreds of genocide victims, packed into the church’s crypt in memory of the mass killings 99 years ago, were thrown into the street beside the ruins,” the report noted.

*January 8, 2015:* Business Insider reported that al-Nusra blew up a 13th-century tomb near the Jordanian border.

*January 17, 2015:* DGAM reported that terrorists destroyed “the shrine of Shaykh Muhammad Nabhan in The Kiltawiye Masjid at Bab al-Hadid, the historical gates of the Ancient City of Aleppo, despite the appeals from residents and dignitaries of the region.”