

Saving Syria's Cultural Heritage

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The news from Syria is unbearable. Over 200,000 Syrians have been killed and the country's population has been largely displaced. Many of Syria's famous heritage sites have been seriously damaged or destroyed.

Most of us feel helpless in the face of such human tragedy. But when Salam Al Kuntar fled to the U.S. and asked for help protecting her country's cultural heritage, the Penn Museum's Penn Cultural Heritage Center and the Smithsonian Institution began working together to undertake a series of emergency efforts.

Al Kuntar was the Deputy Director of the Department of Excavations and Archaeological Research for Syria's Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums. A University of Cambridge-trained archaeologist, she fled Syria in 2012, when it became clear that her life was in jeopardy. Her idea was to establish a grass-roots program that would help Syrian museum professionals and archaeologists who were trying to save what they could within the country's war-torn areas.

We liked Al Kuntar's idea and contacted our colleagues who had been involved in the response to the Iraqi cultural heritage crisis a decade ago. Among them was Corine Wegener, who is now the Smithsonian Institution's cultural heritage preservation officer. Joining us was Amr Al Azm, an associate professor of anthropology and Middle Eastern history at Shawnee State University, who is active in the Syrian opposition. The American Association for the Advancement of Science's Geospatial Technologies and Human Rights Project offered their expertise in monitoring patterns of heritage destruction.

In June 2014, we hosted a workshop in southern Turkey, which brought together those individuals who were trying to safeguard museum collections in areas no longer under the control of the

Assad regime. The Smithsonian and J. M. Kaplan Fund provided the necessary financial support, and the U.S. Institute of Peace and The Day After Association assisted with the logistical arrangements. Even with all the preparations in place, we still waited with bated breath for our Syrian colleagues to come on the day of the workshop.

Arrive they did, although getting from Syria to Turkey was challenging. Most traveled in the dead of night, hoping to avoid the worst of the fighting. Fifteen stayed to discuss lessons learned from prior conflicts and how to secure museum collections safely during emergencies. We were also able to send conservation materials back with the participants. Perhaps most importantly, the workshop presented our Syrian colleagues with an opportunity to talk with each other about shared problems and strategies that they were using inside Syria.

At no point was the conflict ever far from anyone's mind, but there is a sense among our Syrian colleagues that the heritage of the country is worth protecting precisely so that future generations will have the opportunity to learn about Syrian history and understand what it means to be Syrian. We are continuing to support their efforts, as they continue their work under the most difficult conditions. ●

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