



U.S. COMMITTEE OF THE BLUE SHIELD

Committed to the Protection of Cultural Property Worldwide During Armed Conflict

PRESS RELEASE

Recent media reports, as well as first-hand reports from Syria posted to social media and other Internet sources, recount the killing and wounding of innocent civilians and the alarming destruction and looting of cultural heritage sites during the current civil war in Syria. Some of these sites are designated World Heritage Sites of outstanding universal significance under the 1972 World Heritage Convention. Other sites appear to be at imminent risk.

While admonishing all parties to the current Syrian conflict to respect cultural sites and prevent further damage, the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield seeks to remind the Syrian government of its obligations under the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, to which Syria is a State Party. These obligations include avoiding the targeting of cultural sites, unless excused by military necessity, and, more important, avoiding the use of cultural sites in such a way as to expose them to harm during armed conflict. It appears that these obligations have been violated through the use of cultural and historical sites, such as the Roman city of Apamea, the Crusader fortress at Crac des Chevaliers, and the archaeological site of Palmyra, as bases for military activities. This makes them a target for military attack and exposes them to significant danger. Inexcusable use of cultural sites could be the basis for war crimes violations and charges, as was seen in the criminal tribunals and convictions of former Yugoslav military leaders after the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

Also alarming are reports of large-scale thefts of cultural objects from archaeological and historic sites and museums and the reported sale of these objects on the international market. Those who would deal in such objects should be aware that existing legislation and legal mechanisms prohibit the trade in looted and stolen cultural objects. For example, legislation in two of the largest market nations, the United States and the United Kingdom, provide for criminal punishment of those who knowingly deal in such objects and for forfeiture of the objects themselves. These include the United Kingdom's Dealing in Cultural Objects Offences Act and the United States' National Stolen Property Act. In addition, U.S. sanctions put into effect against Syria state that "All property and interests in property that are in the United States, that hereafter come within the United States, or that are or hereafter come within the possession or control of any United States person, ... of the Government of Syria are blocked and may not be transferred, ... or otherwise dealt in." OFAC regulation EO 13582 of August 17, 2011, Section 1(a), http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/syria_eo_08182011.pdf.

The cultural heritage of Syria is among the most valuable in the world, spanning from the beginnings of civilization through the Roman, Crusader, Medieval Islamic and Ottoman periods. It is the duty of all nations and all people to protect and preserve this heritage for future generations. It is particularly the responsibility of both the Syrian regime and the rebel forces to honor international law and the interests of the Syrian people in preserving their shared cultural heritage.

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