



U.S. COMMITTEE OF THE BLUE SHIELD

Committed to the Protection of Cultural Property Worldwide During Armed Conflict

September 10, 2013

The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

As the United States prepares for possible military intervention in the conflict in Syria, the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield (USCBS) and the other undersigned organizations wish to:

1. Ask the President to issue an Executive Order requiring all federal agencies to encourage and enter into agreements with any allies and any rebel forces with which it coordinates, including the Free Syrian Army, to ensure protection of Syria's cultural heritage.
2. Ask the President to issue an Executive Order requiring all federal agencies, including federal law enforcement agencies, to utilize existing laws, to their fullest extent, to ensure that looted or stolen cultural artifacts from Syria do not enter the United States and that traders in looted or stolen cultural artifacts do not utilize United States resources.
3. Remind the United States of its obligations under the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (The 1954 Hague Convention) to protect Syria's cultural heritage.

Actions

1. *Executive Order on Coordination with Syrian Rebel Forces*: Syrian rebel forces are bound by international treaty, including the 1954 Hague Convention, and customary law to protect cultural heritage, among other international humanitarian law principles. In addition to avoidance of targeting of cultural sites, it is incumbent on such forces to prevent intentional destruction of cultural sites, including religious sites targeted as part of sectarian strife, and the looting of archaeological sites and museums which might otherwise be exploited to provide funds for their war efforts. As the United States engages in various ways with rebel forces, we ask that the President issue an Executive Order requiring all U.S. agencies to use any means possible to encourage, train and support the rebel forces in protecting and minimizing destruction of cultural sites and repositories.

We further call upon the United States, as a member of numerous international humanitarian and law of armed conflict conventions, to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, that all parties to the conflict in Syria, including members of the Free Syrian Army, members of other rebel factions, other allies, and all opposition forces observe these international humanitarian principles.

2. *Executive Order Prohibiting Trafficking in Looted or Stolen Cultural Artifacts*: Archaeological sites and museums have become targets for looting and theft with the economic

motive of selling cultural artifacts onto the international market. Looting and theft destroy the historical and cultural context of objects and diminish our ability to understand the past as well as to secure the cultural legacy of future generations. In order to reduce the incentive for looting and theft, we ask that you issue an Executive Order to direct all federal law enforcement agencies to enforce existing laws, including the National Stolen Property Act, to disallow dealing in Syrian cultural property consistent with E.O. 13582, and not to issue any special permits for importation of Syrian cultural objects. It would be against U.S. policy, expressed over the past decades and supported by our participation in international treaty regimes, to allow the United States to become a haven for cultural artifacts looted or stolen during a period of conflict.

3. *International Legal Obligations*: In 2009, the United States ratified the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. Paramount among the obligations imposed by this Convention is the responsibility to avoid the targeting of cultural sites, monuments and repositories, unless excused by military necessity. To assist in carrying out these obligations, lists of cultural sites and repositories have been formulated and submitted to the Department of Defense, defense agencies in other nations, and NATO by the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield, the International Committee of the Blue Shield, the Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield, the International Council of Museums, and the International Council on Monuments and Sites. We ask that you verify that these lists have been incorporated into planning for any military activity in Syria and that all efforts are taken to eliminate possible harm to such sites and repositories.

Background: Prior to the present conflict, Syria was known for the remarkable degree of preservation of its cultural heritage. Archaeological and historic sites in Syria date back to at least the Neolithic period with a continuity of civilization through more than six millennia. Lying within the northern reaches of the Euphrates River, Syria was one of the main trade routes from Mesopotamia to Anatolia (modern Turkey) and the Mediterranean. Among the civilizations represented in the Syrian cultural heritage are early Semitic cultures from the third and second millennia B.C. including the site of Ebla, where early examples of writing have been preserved, the Old Babylonian period of Hammurabi at Mari, the neo-Hittite period of the first millennium, and extensive remains of the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods.

Syria has six sites, which are recognized as embodying outstanding cultural significance and are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, including the historic cities of Aleppo, Bosra, and Damascus; the Crusader-period castles of Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din, and the ancient Roman city of Palmyra. An additional twelve sites await consideration for designation as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Syria is also the home to numerous religious groups whose religious sites, along with medieval and Ottoman structures dot the Syrian landscape. Syria's museums, archives and libraries contain seminal and irreplaceable cultural remains ranging from ceramics to sculptures and from ancient cuneiform texts to Islamic manuscripts.

The U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield and the other undersigned organizations represent hundreds of thousands of cultural heritage professionals and interested members of the American public who are concerned about preservation of the past for future generations. Syria's cultural heritage is not only a part of Syria's patrimony but also part of the world's shared cultural legacy. It is incumbent upon the United States, as a matter of both treaty and customary international law, to attempt to preserve this legacy for all our future generations.

Professor Nancy C. Wilkie
President, U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield

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Note: Government employees who are members of the board of these organizations did not participate in the formulation of this letter.

cc: Senator Robert Menendez, Chairman
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Senator Bob Corker, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Representative Ed Royce, Chairman
House Committee on Foreign Relations

Representative Eliot L. Engel, Ranking Member
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