

# Antiquities Trafficking in Syria

**SALAFISTS, TOMB RAIDERS AND "BURIED TREASURES"**

Olivier Moos

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## Abstract

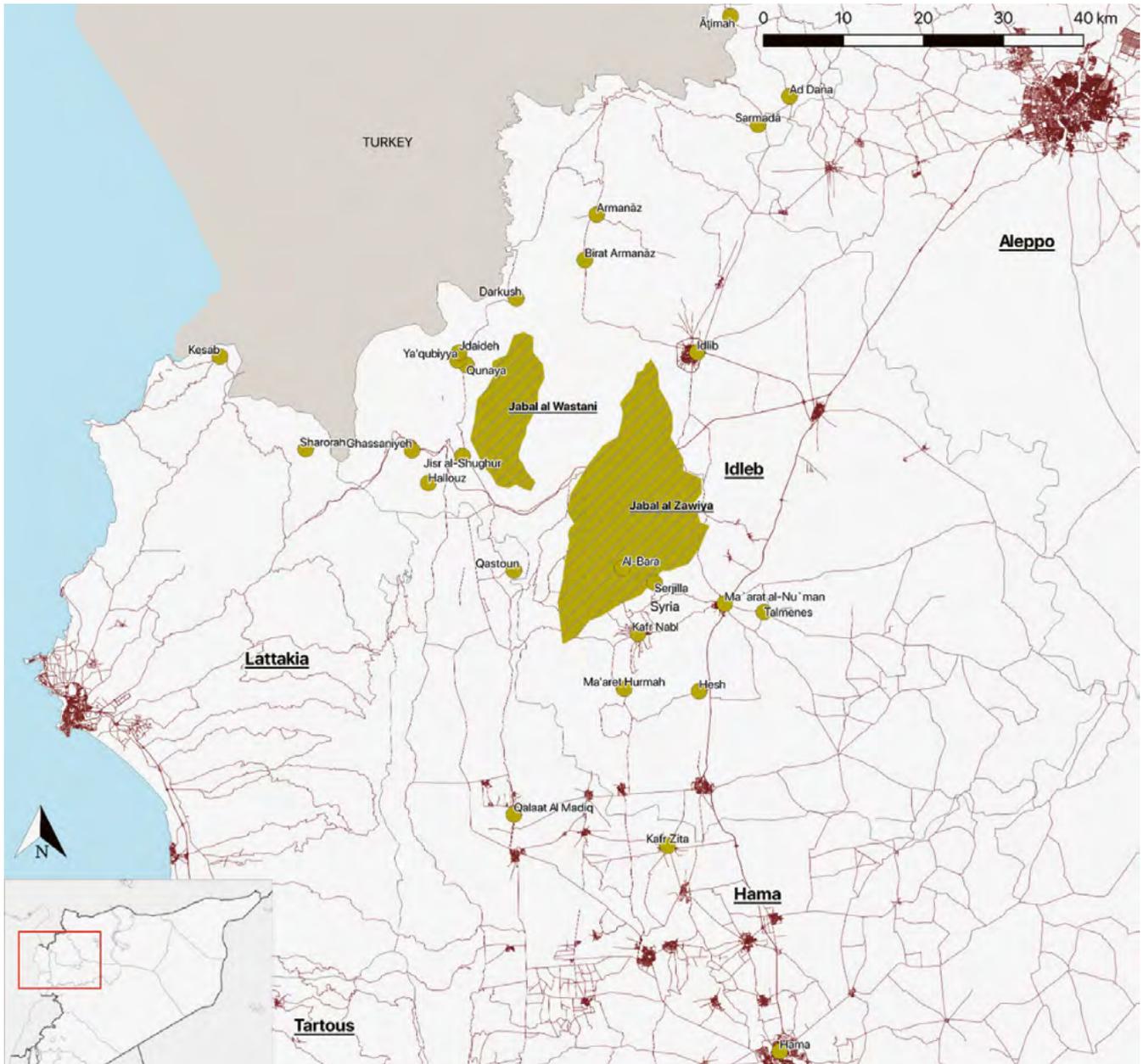
This paper investigates how Salafist groups conduct and manage the illegal trafficking of antiquities in south-west and north-west Syria, with a particular focus on Idlib Governorate. It provides details on the interactions among the actors involved (diggers, traders, armed groups and smugglers) and analyses the various kinds of interactions between religious beliefs and norms, on the one hand, and the illegal trade in cultural assets, on the other.

Key findings:

- The Salafist armed group Hayat Tahrir as-Sham (HTS) has been heavily involved in the looting of Syrian cultural assets in north-west Syria. To varying extents the same can be said of Islamist coalitions, small jihadi-Salafist factions, and groups still identified as part of the rather fluid grouping known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA).
- Economics dictates the overall conduct of the trade in cultural assets in territories controlled by Salafist factions. However, evidence suggests that religious norms partly constrain the behaviour of some individuals when they are dealing with certain type of artefacts. It is also clear that religious prescriptions inspire some of the rules governing the conduct of the trade in artefacts in territories under Salafist control.
- The way in which HTS manages the illegal trade in cultural assets mirrors that of Islamic State (IS), especially in terms of taxation. However, HTS is characterized by lower levels of bureaucracy and the absence of an iconoclastic policy.
- The looting and trading of cultural assets in Daraa Governorate have both continued after most of the region came once again under the control of government forces and their militia allies in 2018. Ancillary costs for local traders appear to be higher in regime-controlled areas than in Salafist-controlled areas.

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## Introduction

Between 2018 and 2019 Religioscope interviewed members of excavation teams, smugglers, traders, and officials from various local political organizations and armed groups with a first-hand knowledge of the illegal antiquities trade in Syria's Idlib, Hama and Daraa governorates.

Together with these interviews, we analysed the contents of two private Telegram accounts that have acted as digital clearing-houses used by a number of actors in the illegal trade in antiquities in Idlib and northern Aleppo to advertise and assess their

loot, share information about digging sites and excavation equipment, and identify potential buyers. These two chatrooms represent only a very small sample of the hundreds of online outlets involved in this trade throughout the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Our analysis of these accounts revealed some of the hundreds of archaeological items that were excavated and/or offered for sale (including many forgeries of varying quality) between 2018 and 2019.

Given the illegal nature of the trade and the difficulty of doing research in a conflict environment, our core samplings are unavoidably narrow and incomplete. The ebbs and flows of this kind of trade and the fluidity of the military situation on the ground make it particularly difficult to obtain a clear picture of the current state of antiquities trafficking and its actual scale in the regions that we investigated.

Most of the coverage of the looting of archaeological sites in Syria has consisted of surveys based on satellite imagery<sup>2</sup> or focused on the impact of the trade on armed groups' financial resources, with the greater part of the coverage focusing on IS at the peak of its power and influence (2014–17). Due to the hostile conditions on the ground, little research has been undertaken into the organization and inner workings of networks involved in antiquities trafficking and their relations with local stakeholders.

In order to start remedying this blind spot, in 2018 archaeologists Neil Brodie and Isber Sabrine published a paper entitled "The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects: A View from the Ground."<sup>3</sup> Their study is based on seven interviews conducted in the summer of 2016 with actors engaged in or with knowledge of the trade inside Syria. Their investigations revealed a great deal at the operational level about the pricing and types of artefacts being traded, the nature of interactions with local stakeholders, and so forth. The present paper follows in Brodie and Sabrine's footsteps and provides additional details about the illegal antiquities trade, especially how HTS manages and taxes it in Idleb, and the impact of religious beliefs on its conduct.

In order to protect both our researchers and our sources, their names are withheld.

<sup>1</sup> See Neil Brodie, "Virtually Gone! The Internet Market in Antiquities," in *Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Experts on the Return of Cultural Property* (Seoul: Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation, 2017), 190–204; Amr al-Azm and Katie A. Paul, with Shawn Graham, *Facebook's Black Market in Antiquities Trafficking, Terrorism, and War Crimes* (ATHAR Project, June 2019), <http://atharproject.org/report2019/>

<sup>2</sup> See, *inter alia*: Emma Cunliffe et al., *Satellite-Based Damage Assessment to Cultural Heritage Sites in Syria* (New York: United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 2014); J. Casana and E. Laugier, "Satellite Imagery-Based Monitoring of Archaeological Site Damage in the Syrian Civil War," *PLoS ONE* 12, no. 11 (2017): e0188589, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0188589>; Jesse Casana and Mitra Panahipour, "Satellite-Based Monitoring of Looting and Damage to Archaeological Sites in Syria," *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies* 2, no. 2 (2014): 128–51.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Brodie and Isber Sabrine, "The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects: A View from the Ground," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 43, no. 1 (2018): 74–84.

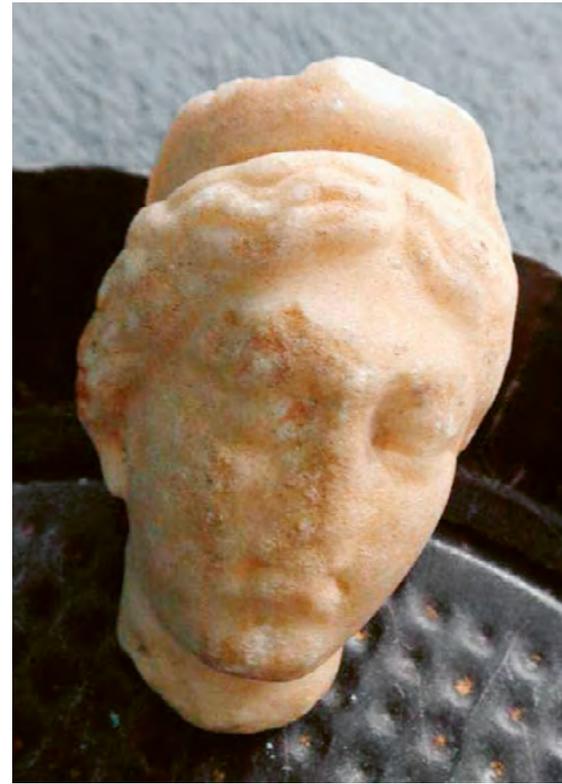
## A Salafist walks into an antique shop...

We were particularly interested in the potential impact of religious beliefs on the conduct of the trade in antiquities in territories controlled by Salafist armed groups, and more particularly by HTS, the “Organization for the Liberation of the Levant,” which is currently the leading powerbroker in Syria’s Idlib Governorate. HTS is a Salafist armed group that was formed in January 2017 by the merger of Jabhat Fatah as-Sham, also known as Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) (2012–16), which was rebranded after it and al-Qaeda amicably divorced in July 2016; the jihadist coalition Ansar al-Din Front (formed in 2014); the Islamist group Jaysh as-Sunna (2015); the collection of Islamist brigades active in Hama and Idlib governorates known as Liwa al-Haqq (2012–14); and the Islamist movement Nour al-Din al-Zenki (2011).

Religious values and norms affect the general behaviour of these groups, and our objective was in part to assess if and to what extent such values and norms constrain the way in which trafficking in cultural artefacts is conducted in areas controlled by organizations with a strong religious identity.

The dispute between the leadership of HTS, led by the Syrian Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, and the successor of Usama Ben Laden, the Egyptian al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, is one of these instances where the importance of ideological frameworks becomes evident. This dispute has mainly revolved around pragmatic questions of strategy, conduct towards allies and foes, and local governance, but these questions are nevertheless constrained by a specific set of norms and ideas, e. g. can one compromise and collaborate with non-believers or a secular state? What attitude should one adopt towards non-Sunni minorities? Does fighting “atheists” (e. g. the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK) justify collaborating with secular Muslims (Turkey)?<sup>4</sup>

Until recently, another major player in the illegal antiquity trade in Syria and Iraq was IS (2014–18).<sup>5</sup> Its millenarian brand of Salafism led the group to adopt counter-productive strategies, such as declaring war on every nation on earth, minting and trying to impose its own Islamic currency<sup>6</sup> or, more relative to our



Item advertised on Telegram, October 31, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with HTS members. See also Bailey Ulbricht, *Justifying Relations with an Apostate during a Jihad: A Salafi-Jihadist Group’s Relations with Turkey in Syria* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, March 2019), <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2019-03/Justifying%20Relations%20with%20an%20Apostate%20During%20a%20Jihad.pdf>; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda: Affiliates or Foes?”, *Fanack* (February 14, 2019), <https://www.aymennjawad.org/22351/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-and-al-qaeda-affiliates-or>

<sup>5</sup> IS had earlier roots in Iraq and has now reverted to being an insurgency group. The dates refer to the Caliphate period, during which IS was able to set up a proto-state across large parts of Syria and Iraq and was deeply involved in the looting (and destruction) of cultural assets.

<sup>6</sup> <https://english.religion.info/2018/12/23/the-return-of-the-gold-dinar-an-analysis-of-the-islamic-state-coin-production/>

subject, publicizing with great fanfare the destruction of monuments and artefacts. If, contrary to its estranged brethren of the Caliphate, the more pragmatic HTS leadership has proved to be willing to compromise to a great extent in order to secure its own survival and growth, these competing Salafist entities nevertheless share a similar religious mindset.

According to a number of sources in Idleb Governorate, all the major Salafist or Islamist groups (Jund al-Aqsa, Ahrar as-Sham, JAN, HTS, the Turkmenistan Party, etc.) that were or are operating in various parts of north-west Syria have been involved in and/or have adopted some sort of position towards the excavation and selling of cultural artefacts in their respective areas of control. While the primary incentive of these groups has always been to secure an additional source of income by selling their loot to art dealers in Turkey, for the most puritan of them this has also meant navigating an iconoclastic trend that has permeated Salafism since its onset.<sup>7</sup>

We know that a number of monuments bearing pre-Islamic or anthropomorphic symbols have been destroyed in Idleb. Sources confirmed that, since at least 2014, a number of structures perceived as relics of a pre-Islamic era have been intentionally destroyed, allegedly by members of various Salafist factions. On the other hand, however, according to a knowledgeable source within HTS, no Salafist or Islamist group in the region has officially called for the destruction of certain types of pre-Islamic artefact or monuments, at least not in the very public way that IS did at the zenith of its power in 2015. The most likely explanation is that particularly zealous individuals (or bored militiamen) have randomly carried out religiously motivated acts of destruction. Salafist armed groups, among others, have been involved in the destruction of various structures – notably museums, archaeological sites, mausoleums and churches – but neither JAN nor HTS has implemented the same iconoclastic campaign that IS so enthusiastically launched in Iraq and Syria.

<sup>7</sup> James Noyes, *The Politics of Iconoclasm: Religion, Violence, and the Culture of Image-Breaking in Christianity and Islam* (London: Tauris, 2013).

During our monitoring of exchanges on the two private Telegram accounts referred to above we observed comments like those of user Abu al-Abd al-Idlbi, who felt deeply offended by the open

offering for sale of four allegedly ancient Egyptian statuettes by a fellow member of the group. Al-Idlbi wrote in June 2018: "I will break them even if they cost a fortune." Indeed, "it is forbidden to sell idols even if they were made of gold," agreed another group member.

Since the aim of those operating the Telegram accounts was to assess the value of and find intermediaries and/or buyers for the items they possessed, these overly zealous members were expelled from the Telegram groups. Interestingly, one of the group members claimed that three HTS observers were monitoring these accounts' chatrooms: Abu Sulayman al-Homsi, based in Idleb; Abu Hamzah from Ma'arret al-Nu'man; and Al-Mu'tasim Billah Abu Inad, based in Ad-Dana (probably all pseudonyms). It appears that their job was to link members with traders and ensure that sales were recorded and taxed, and not to monitor the exchanges for their compliance with religious norms. Whatever the case, these three observers were not the ones voicing opposition to the sale of "idols."

Among the more traditionalist members of these online exchange groups, statues are predictably the most contentious items, given the importance of aniconism in Islam. How do Salafist antiquities dealers justify – when deemed to be necessary – the trading of idolatrous art pieces? According to a few individuals we contacted on the Telegram groups referred to above, gold or silver statues should be sold according to their intrinsic metallic value, or alternatively disfigured before the sale. By either denying their symbolic value or defacing the features that anthropomorphize them the most, both actions are designed to cancel out their blasphemous potency. This option is not available for stone idols, however, since disfiguring them would completely nullify their market value instead of simply reducing it, and consequently items such as these are exempted from disfigurement, as long as their sale is taxed to the benefit of the Islamist group controlling the area in which they were found.

Devising strategies to make the sale of "idols" conform with Salafist norms is one aspect of the religious dimension that can affect the conduct of the trade. Another way in which beliefs



The (fake) Egyptian statuettes that caused al-Idlbi's ire (June 29, 2018).

affect the looting process has to do with the special place that “buried treasures” and ancient ruins occupy in Islamic folklore: the locations of hoards of gold and archaeological sites are, respectively, hidden and visible sites traditionally perceived to lie at the intersection between our world and the supernatural. Treasures and ruins are often thought to be protected and inhabited by *jinn* (singular, *jinni*), which are ethereal creatures who are referred to multiple times in both the Qur’an and the Hadith, “created... from the smokeless flame of fire” (Qur’an 15: 26–27). Invisible to the human eye yet with the ability to interact with people, some *jinn* are Muslim and others infidel, and can assume different forms, either human or animal.<sup>8</sup> Belief in the existence of *jinn* is widespread in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

For instance, archaeologist Salah Hussein Al-Houdalieh of Al-Quds University has identified a large number of antiquities looters in the Palestinian Occupied Territories who rely on the services of *jinn* to identify the location of “protected” treasures.<sup>10</sup> Anthropologist Ian Straughn of the University of California highlights another long-standing belief in Islamic folklore that *jinn* often inhabit landscapes where pre-Islamic ruins are found:

➤ *Multiple accounts of the Prophet Muhammad relate that, in his travels through the Hijaz, he would scrupulously avoid the ruins of al-Hijr (Mada’in Saleh), as it was understood to be the traces (athar) of those people of Thamud so chastised in the Qur’an. The Prophet warned his companions that those ruins were inhabited by jinn and therefore unsafe.*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/669/viewall/world-of-jinn/>

<sup>9</sup> Pew Research Center, *The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity* (Washington, DC, August 9, 2012), 69, <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2012/08/the-worlds-muslims-full-report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Salah Hussein Al-Houdalieh, “Archaeological Heritage and Spiritual Protection: Looting and the Jinn in Palestine,” *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 25 no. 1 (2012): 99–120.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Straughn, “Spirits of Heritage, Specters of Ruins: Partnering with the Jinn in the Preservation of the Past,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 51, no. 2 (2017): 199.

On November 27, 2018 Saif al-Deen, the administrator of one of the Telegram accounts we monitored, posted two audio files in which he responds to the concerns and answers questions of members regarding the issue of *jinn* protecting archaeological sites (one of the group’s members had even posted a short video of a *jinni* manifesting itself in the shape of a snake at a site he was excavating):

➤ *Young men, those who want to dig in areas of antiquities should at least have prayed the salat al-Fajr [dawn prayers] in a group, have read the Adkhaar al-Sabah [morning remembrances<sup>12</sup>] and [unclear – possibly “be on their guard”]. When one goes to a place of digging, if it has any harm in the ground [meaning the presence of a spirit], [the jinni] will not be able to influence [the digger], but the buried treasure will remain concealed [due to the spirit protecting it]. If the place had no harm, and most places in Idleb and its countryside have no such presence, then the buried treasure is easy to extract, God willing.*

*Regarding the place, if the person who is digging feels that something is either wrong or unnatural, he should read the Qur'an if he can, or if he knows a friend who is an Islamic scholar, the friend can help to read it for him. Better, if he knows one of the mujahidin brothers who can read, then the brother can assist. There are the mujahidin of Turkistan [the Turkmenistan Party, affiliated to HTS] who dig after they are back from the ribat [i. e. guarding the front line], rest for a day, and go out to dig to finance themselves if they have the necessary experience in that field. Some mujahidin in the Hay'a [HTS] and other brigades try to finance themselves in the same way, maybe because they do not have another income source besides ribat, so they rest for a day and go out to dig for antiquities. This is acceptable and is called rikaz. All the Islamic sheikhs said that you give away a fifth [i. e. the tax on “buried treasure” – see next section], and if God wills, it is halal.*

Regrettably, al-Deen did not explain why the presence of a (literate) jihadist is a better deterrence<sup>13</sup> against *jinn*'s interference than an Islamic scholar, or why the antic real estate of Idleb is snubbed by these picky leprechauns. It is not impossible, however, that his advice has more to do with monitoring excavations than with countering the influence of local *jinn*.

<sup>12</sup> Repeating “In the name of Allah with Whose name nothing can harm on earth or in heaven, and He is the All-Hearing, All-Knowing” three times will protect the faithful against any harm from evil or jinn that may befall them. See <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/10513/protection-from-the-jinn>; <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/126587/adhkaar-for-morning-and-evening-that-protect-against-harm>

<sup>13</sup> See Ummah Welfare Trust, *Ruqyah: A Remedy for Illnesses, Evil Eye, Magic and Jinn from the Qur'an and Sunnah*, <https://uwt.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Ruqyah-Booklet.pdf>



That being said, there are good reasons to think that these theological and magical concerns are largely confined to the margins of the phenomenon. We did not find any evidence that HTS – or, indeed, any Salafist group in Idleb – has at any time encouraged excavation teams to disfigure any of their findings or required the sale of gold and silver statues according to their intrinsic value. As far as we know, no handbook<sup>14</sup> on how to deal with supernatural beings interfering with the looting circulates among the looters. It is, of course, possible that pious individuals have occasionally adopted these types of behaviour, but, overall, the evidence clearly points to a more pragmatic approach to the marketing of cultural assets.

The issue of selling artefacts for their intrinsic value is a good illustration of the ambiguous relationship between pragmatism and religious beliefs: when a team of excavators (i. e. a group often based on kinship rather than expertise) want to sell a gold or silver artefact, they generally have no choice but to rely on a few local traders with a reputation for reliability and having the necessary connections with regional intermediaries in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey. These well-connected traders basically control most of the local market and can consequently set prices more or less arbitrarily. The cheapest way for them to acquire such an item is to purchase it according to its weight and not according to its projected value on the international art market.

Theoretically, all sales must be registered with and taxed by the HTS Office of Economics (see below). It is therefore likely that a good number of sellers have a strong incentive to present a lower bill of sale in order to reduce the impost. The easiest way to do this while avoiding being accused of tax evasion is to present a receipt stating that the item was sold to a given trader for its metallic value. Since HTS's bureaucracy does not possess the resources to closely monitor the market, it has an incentive to tolerate a moderate degree of tax evasion (or potentially impious behaviour) in order to avoid encouraging more people to hide their discoveries and sales altogether. We know of several instances where HTS arrested teams of diggers with connections of their own and/or the ability to transport the items to Turkey who had sold or intended to sell a hoard of gold coins or mosaics without paying taxes on them.

<sup>14</sup> We refer here to the Egyptian *kutub al-mutalibin* ("manuals for treasure hunters"), which contained practical advice, but also magical techniques and strategies to find hidden treasure. The genre seems to have been exclusively Arabic and examples were probably already circulating in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. There was also a rich literature dealing with finding hidden hoards; see <http://www.thethinkersgarden.com/2018/12/magical-treasure-hunting-in-islamic-egypt/>

Basic economics can explain why gold or silver artefacts might be pragmatically sold and purchased for their intrinsic value, but such an explanation is not exhaustive. If financial incentives do indeed (predictably) prevail over religious scruples, it does not follow that an emphasis on financial rewards implies imperviousness to religious norms or traditional beliefs. And, conversely, it is not because an actor or a group professes a radical religious identity that economics does not matter. Religious motivations and economic incentives unavoidably affect and interact with each other.

For instance, even an organization as ideologically rigid as IS had to compromise between religious and financial incentives: blowing up monuments and smashing (mostly fake) museum artefacts answered the need to broadcast the group's Salafist piety,<sup>15</sup> while pocketing handsome sums of money<sup>16</sup> from the sale of archaeological "idols"<sup>17</sup> catered to the earthly imperatives pressuring the new Caliphate. Contrary to a common misconception about religious actors, compromise is not synonymous with hypocrisy, and the extent to which a religious group is willing to pragmatically negotiate its own norms does not necessarily correlate with its members' degree of piety.

HTS's strategic and tactical pragmatism coexists with an ideological commitment to Salafism and – to some extent – jihadism. The latter probably does not permeate all strata of the organization – a number of former FSA fighters joined the group because of the salaries it offered, while local loyalties can be based on other variables, and the group has demonstrated that it can depart from jihadist orthodoxy when this suits its own interests – but that ideology nevertheless remains the main value system available to HTS. Ideology is not only an identity, but also a resource for mobilization: in the case of HTS, it helps to unify the various strands within the movement and to avoid further desertions of the most committed jihadists in its ranks to Huras ad-Din,<sup>18</sup> its local Salafist-jihadist competitor in Idleb.

The Syrian archaeologist Isber Sabrine recently interviewed one of his sources in Idleb city who reported that when the city fell to opposition armed groups in March 2015, the Syrian government's

<sup>15</sup> See Olivier Moos, *Iconoclasm en Jihadië: une réflexion sur les violences et les destructions culturelles de l'Etat Islamique*, *Relioscope Études et Analyses* 35 (December 2015), [https://www.religion.info/pdf/2015\\_12\\_Moos.pdf](https://www.religion.info/pdf/2015_12_Moos.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> There has been something of a media frenzy around the amount of money IS is supposed to have earned from the trafficking of antiquities, but very little evidence has been presented to substantiate these claims. See Ben Taub, "The Real Value of the ISIS Antiquities Trade," *New Yorker*, December 4, 2015; Katherine Brennan and Kate Fitz Gibbon, *Bearing False Witness: The Media, ISIS and Antiquities*, *Committee for Cultural Policy Special Report* (December 1, 2017), <https://culturalpropertynews.org/bearing-false-witness-the-media-isis-and-antiquities/>

<sup>17</sup> As the Taliban before them, it is unlikely that IS leadership clearly distinguished between "secular" fetishism of archaeological artefacts and "religious" idolatry.

<sup>18</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Huras al-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria," *The Washington Institute*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/huras-al-din-the-overlooked-al-qaeda-group-in-syria>



propaganda highlighted the risk that the rebels might loot the museum, especially JAN. The staff concealed the museum's collections to protect them before the fighting started, but a Syrian Air Force bombing attack destroyed parts of the building and revealed where the artefacts were hidden. A group of former employees of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums<sup>19</sup> contacted Ahrar as-Sham, which brokered a deal with JAN to protect the collections from looting. A religious committee was formed to devise a solution to the issue. The employees pleaded with the imam who headed the committee for the preservation of the museum collections by invoking the historical precedent of the second caliph of the Rashidun Caliphate, Omar Bin Al-Khattab (c. 584–644 AD), a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and a respected jurist, whose armies did not destroy the monuments of the Sassanian and Byzantine cities that they conquered. The imam was convinced by their pleas and persuaded the committee's members<sup>20</sup> to ban the looting and selling of the museum's collections.<sup>21</sup>

This picture was posted on one of the Telegram accounts on January 27, 2019, enquiring about the sale value of the artefacts. Interestingly, the administrator of the account, Saif al-Deen, who knew the real owner, refused to provide an answer (which suggests both that the items might be genuine and that he is able to connect sellers to traders/intermediaries).

<sup>19</sup> Joe Parkinson, Ayla Albayrak and Duncan Mavin, "Syrian 'Monuments Men' Race to Protect Antiquities as Looting Bankrolls Terror," *Wall Street Journal*, February 10, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Although the bulk of the collections has been preserved, there are persistent rumours that a number of valuable items have nevertheless been sold on the international art market, which is probably an unavoidable outcome in such a volatile environment, with armed groups vying for resources.

<sup>21</sup> Isber Sabrine, correspondence with author, November 2019; Isber Sabrine, Emma Cunliffe and Greg Fischer, *The Extraordinary, Ordinary Syrian: Syria's Heritage Protectors*, forthcoming 2020.



Advertised on Telegram group, September 10, 2018.

## Nothing is certain except death and taxes

IS, JAN and HTS have all adopted a pragmatic approach to dealing with (marketable and removable) cultural assets, but did so within a traditional religious framework: they basically imposed a “religious” tax that was theoretically levied on the selling price of any archaeological items discovered in their territory. As the saying attributed to Benjamin Franklin goes, “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes”; this is especially true in areas controlled by Salafists.

Two senior members of the Salafist “revisionist”<sup>22</sup> group Ahrar as-Sham, an organization that has also been involved in antiquities trafficking, explained in the following terms the reasoning behind the taxation of the sale of archaeological objects: “What is found buried from the time of Jaahiliyyah [the pre-Islamic time of ignorance] is submitted to the religious tax, although there is room for compromise because the different Sunni legal schools differ on what falls under the category of *rikaz*: for the Shafi’i [Sunni school of Islamic jurisprudence], only gold and silver, and for the Hanafi, all minerals and archaeological treasures.”

A number of knowledgeable sources have confirmed that HTS is imposing a *zakat al-rikaz*, i. e. a tax of 20%, on the sales value of all items excavated on private lands. As an official representative of HTS in the Ariha district of Idleb Governorate told Religioscope in June 2019: “any archaeological finding, be it on public or private land, is the rightful property of Muslims,” i. e. of HTS as the legitimate ruler of the land in question.

The figure of 20% is not a random number: it is inspired by the *Sahih al-Bukhari* (c. 846 AD), one of the major Sunni Islam Hadith collections, which stipulates that a tax of 20% on “buried metals and product of the mines” should be applied: “There is no compensation for one killed or wounded by an animal or by falling in a well, or because of working in mines; but *khumus* (one-fifth) is compulsory on *rikaz*.”<sup>23</sup> According to this text, whoever finds buried treasure on his land must give 20% of its value to charity.

<sup>22</sup> <https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/ahrar-al-shams-revisionist-jihadism/>

<sup>23</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 2, Book 24, no. 575; quoted by several sources within or close to HTS and Ahrar as-Sham.

According to several local sources, the legal status of an archaeological item also depends on the status of the land where it was found: on private property, a tax of 20% of the selling price is applied; on public land, unless a contractual agreement was established beforehand, HTS confiscates the entire find. If HTS has officially hired the digging team or if it has applied for a permit, the distribution of the income will be one-third for the team and two-thirds for HTS, a similar distribution that JAN applied to its digging permits.

The division between private and public land has also likely been rationalized according to the model laid down in the *Sahih al-Bukhari*: “buried treasures” fall under the category of *zakat* if found on private property, and are therefore taxable for charity, and under the category of *fa'i* (booty) if found on public land, and thus belong to the state.

It is worth noting that any armed group that pledged allegiance to HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani is exempted from the *zakat al-rikaz*: such as, for instance, the Uyghur Salafist-jihadist group Turkistan Islamic Party, or the two Islamist groups Jaysh al-Islam and Failaq al-Rahman, which were formerly based in the outskirts of Damascus before moving to north-west Syria in March 2018 (bringing with them, according to a source in HTS, a trove of ancient books and parchments that were eventually sold in Idlib<sup>24</sup>). Interestingly, the al-Qaeda (non-official) affiliate Tanzim Huras ad-Din does not benefit from the largesse of HTS’s treasury because of its conflictual relationship with the HTS leadership.

On the right is a photograph<sup>25</sup> of a digging permit that JAN issued on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Rajab 1436 (April 26, 2015), together with a translation of the text.

Our investigation confirms that Abu Yussuf al-Hamwi is still a member of what is now HTS. This permit was issued to the head of the al-Rahhal family and extended to anyone under the patronage of Hajji Mahmoud al-Rahhal. According to a former senior HTS official, this deal might have been a form of cronyism: al-Hamwi – a pseudonym – is himself a member of the al-Rahhal family and a cousin of Hajji Mahmoud al-Rahhal. The agreement granted al-Rahhal’s excavation team permission to



In the name of God,  
To those who are concerned,  
We kindly request no interference or hindrances of the brother who is carrying this permit, Hajji Mahmoud al-Rahhal, who is requested by us to search for antiquities.  
With great thanks, Abu Yussuf al-Hamwi.

Stamp: General director,  
Jabhat al-Nusra, Hama branch.

<sup>24</sup> For a reference to the same story, see Bassem Mroue, “Jewish Artifacts Disappear from Damascus in Fog of Syria War,” AP News, June 18, 2018, <https://apnews.com/58077d7bfb9e4bc2b0d67c5cc95b8b0f/Jewish-artifacts-disappear-from-Damascus-in-fog-of-Syria-war>

<sup>25</sup> Al Arabiya, May 26, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/rr3385d>



search the area between Kafranbel (south of Idlib) and the outskirts of Hama, an area particularly rich in archaeological sites. The agreement, which expired in 2018, included a provision that two-thirds of the sale value of the antiquities discovered would be paid to JAN and one-third to the members of the excavation team.

Amr al-Azm and Katie A. Paul have also highlighted this issue in their report on the use of social media platforms in the trafficking of cultural property in the Middle East: several Facebook group administrators included a question for prospective members as to whether they would comply with a code of conduct that included a “finder’s fee,” referred to as *al-haq al shari’i*, otherwise known as a *khums* tax, “an obscure Islamic Sharia’a law interpretation dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD [which] requires all Muslims to pay one-fifth, or 20%, of the value of any buried treasure or wealth discovered, to the state (Caliphate).”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Amr al-Azm et al., *Facebook’s Black Market*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Keller, *Documenting ISIL’s Antiquities Trafficking*, US Department of State, September 29, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/e/eb/rls/rm/2015/247610.htm>

<sup>28</sup> See also Katie A. Paul, “How Daesh Turns Illicit Digs into Dollars,” *Antiquities Coalition*, November 8, 2016, <https://theantiquitiescoalition.org/how-daesh-turns-illicit-digs-into-dollars/>

As the translation of a receipt issued by the Antiquities Division of the IS Diwan of Natural Resources featured above indicates,<sup>27</sup> IS applied a similar logic to its taxation policy.<sup>28</sup>

## Managing the trade

IS seemingly instituted a Soviet-style form of bureaucracy,<sup>29</sup> with an Antiquities Division comprising five offices:<sup>30</sup> Marketing (al-Taswiq), Excavation (al-Istekhraj), Exploration and Identification of New Sites (al-Istekshaf wal Tahdid), Research and Investigation of Known Sites (al-Bahth wal Taftish) and Administration (al-Idara); HTS, on the other hand, seems to have a looser structure.

It is unclear how HTS monitors excavation activities. Some sources suggested that this might fall under the general purview of the group's Security Branch, without a specific department being dedicated to this task.

In early October 2019 one of our sources reported that an excavation team working for HTS discovered a hoard of over one thousand Ottoman gold coins on a small hill near Armanaz (north of Idleb city). The group's Security Branch immediately closed off the site, presumably to prevent unregistered looting. This information was confirmed on November 5, 2019 by an anti-HTS Facebook group called "the Snarler of the Syrian Revolution,"<sup>31</sup> which was apparently managed by an activist based in Idleb, and which published a post accusing HTS of looting Ottoman antiquities in a location north of Birat Armanaz (south of Armanaz). According to this activist report, Abu Esmail Bajo, Osama Al-Sha'ar and HTS member Thaer Suleiman were excavating a 75-acre area in a location called Tal Al-Haddadin in a search for gold and antiquities, in coordination with the HTS Security Branch's regional leader, Abu Islam Hudoud.<sup>32</sup> The land on which the find was made was originally intended for farming and the Salvation Government's Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf)<sup>33</sup> rented it out for 1 million Syrian pounds (SYP) per year.

Our assumption is that HTS's Security Branch has only been involved in monitoring sites on an ad-hoc basis (when, for instance, it was necessary to secure a specific location), while the day-to-day management of the antiquities trade falls under the responsibility of the Office of Economics.

<sup>29</sup> Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 117–29.

<sup>30</sup> Keller, *Documenting ISIL's Antiquities Trafficking*.

<sup>31</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/wjskuab>. The account seems to have been closed at the end of November 2019. Our last unsuccessful attempt to access it was made on December 5, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> This is an informal pseudonym referring to his function of head of border control. The formal title is Amir Qatea al-Hudoud.

<sup>33</sup> The Ministry of Religious Endowments, headed by Mouayyad Sahari, manages public and private properties either under dispute or whose owners are absent or unknown. The ministry rented out the Tal Al-Haddadin area for farming, but excavation work sanctioned by HTS (or at least by an authority within HTS) rendered it unfit for agriculture. This testifies to the complex relationship between HTS's sponsorship of the Salvation Government and the group's self-interest.

Two sources indicated that the Office of Antiquities Restoration (Markaz Tarmeem al-Athar), which was established in 2018 and based in Al Dana, was handling the bureaucratic side of the trade for HTS. However, our investigation revealed that the office in question is in fact located in the General Services Administration building, which is linked to the Salvation Government.<sup>34</sup> The latter is a political project sponsored by HTS that was formally established in November 2017 and is co-managed by non-partisan actors and HTS members. Two of the main functions of the Salvation Government are to provide political legitimacy to HTS in its bid to normalize its authority over the area under its control, and to streamline financial resources and services.<sup>35</sup> Given the overlapping nature of the two organizations, it is likely that a number of our sources would not always be able to clearly distinguish between the two governance structures.

An interview in November 2019 with a member of the Office of Antiquities Restoration has partly clarified this issue. Two competing bodies seem to deal with the looting/management of cultural assets in Idlib:

1. There is an intentionally informal structure within HTS itself, whose role is to issue excavation permits, collect bills of sale, assess the value of excavated items and determine the appropriate tax. Permits have been mostly handed out to trusted HTS members, affiliates or their kin, and taxation is generally not imposed according to the *zakat al-rikaz*, but is based on an income distribution agreement (one-third for the excavation team and two-thirds for HTS), in a growing trend that several sources have identified since the end of 2018.

HTS does not seem to have created any formal bureaucracy to deal with the issue of excavations/looting. The management of the process devolves to key individuals in the group's Office of Economics (Maktab al-Iqtisadi),<sup>36</sup> which has "branches" in every district. One of these key managers is Abu Dujana (a pseudonym), who is based in the inconspicuous Office for Tracking Antiquities (Maktab Motaba'at Al-Aathar) that lies between Bab al-Hawa and Sarmada and has no visible sign on the building's façade or front door indicating the office's presence.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Observation made in November 2019.

<sup>35</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, ICG Report no. 197 (Brussels and Beirut: ICG, March 14, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Our understanding of the inner working of the Office of Economics is unclear. For instance, it is possible that some sources might actually be referring to a subdivision of the Office of Economics, because locals tend to use the expression *Maktab al-Iqtisadi* as a general term to describe the part of the bureaucracy that is responsible for taxes, finance, etc. A source who has been conducting research on local councils in north-west Syria in the period 2016–17, during which such councils were formally under the umbrella of the Syrian National Coalition-backed Interim Government (2013), explained that the titles and some of the tasks devolved to each office seemed relatively interchangeable, and vary according to who is at the head of and the resources available in any given office. His assumption is that HTS's bureaucracy has probably reproduced the same kind of seemingly loose and personality-driven system (source interviewed in November 2019).

<sup>37</sup> About 4 km south of the Bab al-Hawa border gate on the M45 road to Sarmada.

2. There is also a formal and official structure under the umbrella of the Salvation Government, whose objective is the exact opposite, i. e. to protect the local historical heritage and ban excavations that are not directly linked to scientific research.

The Centre of Antiquities and Museums (Markaz al-Athar wa al-Matahef) based in Idlib city, which is under the supervision of Ayman Nabo and staffed by a handful of former archaeology graduates, is an independent centre created in 2015 whose relationship with the Salvation Government is unclear. It has genuinely tried to provide a blanket of legal and material protection for the local historical heritage<sup>38</sup> and has been especially active<sup>39</sup> in raising awareness among local communities. Isber Sabrine explains<sup>40</sup> that the “Save the Antiquities of Idlib” campaign (October 2018) is perhaps the most important initiative launched by the Centre of Antiquities and Museums, whose objective has been to draw attention to the threats facing archaeological sites in Idlib and to highlight the need to protect them. Conferences were also held in order to mobilize public opinion and sensitize local councils and other civil society representatives. Thanks to the work of Nabo and his colleagues, and with international support from several foundations (SIMAT, Kaplan), the Idlib Museum was reopened in August 2018.<sup>41</sup>

The Shaam News Network, a Syrian opposition media outlet, revealed that in April 2018 the Salvation Government issued a circular banning searches in and the excavation of any area that contains antiquities in Idlib Governorate. Circular No. 245<sup>42</sup> – issued explicitly in accordance with the Syrian Antiquities Law No. 222 of October 26, 1963 – forbids any types of excavation, except for scientific research (presumably to be undertaken by the Centre of Antiquities and Museums) and only after obtaining approval from the Culture Directorate (Mudiriyyat al Thaqafah). Jamal Shahoud heads the Culture Directorate, which is part of the Ministry of Local Administration and Services (Wazarat al Idarah al Mahalliyah wa al Khadamat) directed by Mouayyad al Hasan.

Despite the ban, HTS is only moderately motivated to enforce it and to renounce the tax income that excavation activities still provide to the group.



Administrative Order No. 126 dated May 2, 2018, issued and signed by the prime minister of the Salvation Government. It cancels a previous permit issued to “Abdulsalam Said” to alter a building on his property in Qaminas due to the fact that the land is located near an archaeological site in Tal Denit. It also rules that until a new antiquities law is issued, the applicable regulation in Syria is Antiquities Law No. 222 of 1963. Source: Shaam News Network.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/08/did-idlib-museum-open-too-early.html>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Idlib-Antiquities-Center-1070868956264699/>

<sup>40</sup> Isber Sabrine, correspondence with the author, November 2019; article to be published in 2020.

<sup>41</sup> <https://syriansforheritage.org/project-the-idlib-museum-project/>

<sup>42</sup> Shaam News Network, May 1, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/wybochl>



Picture taken in June 2019 at Al-Fasouq, Jabal al Wastani, where excavations were undertaken by HTS teams.

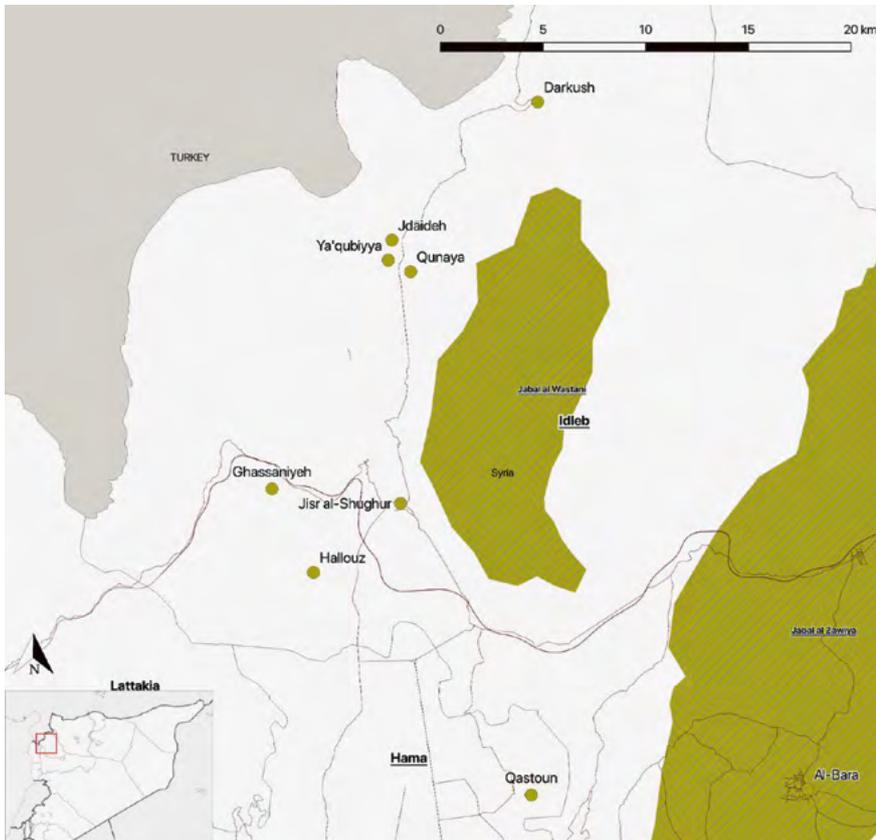
In May 2019 the Shaam News Network reported that excavations were continuing in the location mentioned in the ban, i. e. at Tal Denit, apparently in spite of protests from locals.<sup>43</sup> Our observations made during the summer of 2019 confirm the Shaam News Network's pessimism. Excavations are still ongoing in territories under HTS control, although we are unable to assess if the Salvation Government's ban on "illegal" searches for "buried treasures" has had any meaningful impact on the overall scale of the illegal antiquities business. Our assumption is that the enforcement of the prohibition on excavations depends on the relationship between a particular HTS political strategy and the gradual change in the material conditions in the province:

- 1.** HTS supports the Salvation Government as a way of building its own legitimacy and streamlining its resources while retaining effective control of most of Idleb Governorate.
- 2.** Turkey's border wall has limited smuggling<sup>44</sup> to small and portable items, thus reducing the income generated by the illegal antiquities business.

<sup>43</sup> Shaam News Network, May 1, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/wybochl>

<sup>44</sup> The slowdown in smuggling due to Turkey's strengthening of its border controls was observed already in 2016; see Brodie and Sabrine, "The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects," 77.

3. The relative exhaustion of easily exploitable archaeological sites has probably reduced the number of excavation teams to those more easily monitored teams that are able to mobilize the necessary expertise and/or heavy machinery.



For instance, in the Jabal al Wastani (where numerous ancient Roman cities are located), looting is ongoing and characterized by small digging teams that have obtained a digging permit from HTS.

According to a well-informed source, all major ancient churches, monasteries and cemeteries in the area controlled by HTS were flagged as belonging to the group (which means that their excavation is limited to teams that have a formal agreement with HTS).

Before 2010 Christian communities could be found in the cities of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur, and the villages of Qunaya, Ya'qubiyya, Jdaideh, Ghassaniyeh and Hallouz. Their numbers were very modest before the civil war (between 3,000 for the most populated communities and 200 for the smallest communities<sup>45</sup>) and the haemorrhaging of young Christians from these

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.etccmena.com/2010-04-15-15-15-01/>



This chalice and reliquary are part of a collection of liturgical items offered for sale in early 2018. Some members of the Telegram group where they were advertised expressed their displeasure at seeing religious objects being bartered in this way.

communities pre-dates 2011, but we can safely assume that the figures have further and substantially decreased during the last eight years.

The take-over of the region from 2015 (the villages were already under the control of opposition armed groups as of 2012) by various Islamist and revolutionary armed groups has driven out the bulk of what was left of these Christian populations and severely constrained their religious lives. While the Islamist coalition of Jaysh al-Fatah (2015–17) that dominated some of these locations in 2015 (Jisr al-Shughur and Idleb city as of April 2015) is rumoured to have been relatively respectful of Christian properties and religious practices, this has not been the case for JAN and HTS. Properties have been confiscated and looted, people were banned from returning to their villages by order of the Sharia court of Darkush in the summer of 2016, while what is left of these communities – mostly old people for whom exile is hardly an option – cannot display any form of religious behaviour in public or celebrate a liturgy. A source claimed that Christians are also subjected to the *jizyah* (a poll tax based on Qur’an 9:29 that is imposed on certain non-Muslim communities by which they acquire the status of *dhimmi*, i. e. “protected”), which should theoretically provide them with a degree of protection from arbitrary violence against



their persons or properties. Unfortunately we were not able to either confirm or deny this information.

Both the material and immaterial patrimony of these Christian communities is being destroyed.

Serjilla and Al-Bara (Jebel Ariha, 80 km south-west of Aleppo) are two of the best-preserved sites among the Byzantine Dead Cities abandoned in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD in north-west Syria. An excavation team working for HTS and equipped with metal detectors and heavy machinery was still searching these sites in September 2019. The chain of villages from Ya'qubiyya, Isaakiya and Qunaya to Darkush, together with the Jabal al Wastani, have been and currently are still being combed by small excavation teams that are either freelancing locals or contractors working for HTS or another armed group under the HTS umbrella operating in the area.

A partial view of the site of Serjilla, built in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD (80 km south-west of Aleppo). Source: Wikipedia.

## How much money are we talking about?

The extent of the gains from the illegal antiquities trade in Idleb is difficult to assess.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, we have only been able to gather a few estimates that seem reasonable and hint at the overall value of the antiquities trade in north-west Syria.

According to a former senior HTS member, two-thirds of the profits collected from excavation teams allowed JAN to secure a substantial additional income through the sale of antiquities, especially from teams working in the Jabal al Zawiya (a highland region in Idleb Governorate, west of Aleppo), an area which hosts several rich archaeological sites from the Byzantine period (Serjilla, Al-Bara, Wadi Martaoum, Mujleya, Shinshara, Rouweyha and Jerad). A knowledgeable source estimates that al-Nusra gained well over US\$ 6 million through the looting of the Jabal al Zawiya between 2014 and 2016.

During an interview in June 2019, an HTS member estimated that in 2018 the taxation on *rikaz* alone had generated over US\$ 500,000 for the group. If this estimate is correct, taxable antiquities – i. e. the cultural assets collected by teams not affiliated to HTS and registered by the group's Office of Economics – generated a total of around US\$ 2,500,000 in the territory under HTS control. If we assume that our understanding of the way in which the trade is structured is correct, this figure does not include income from the sale of antiquities by teams directly contracted by HTS, because they are not subject to *zakat al-rikaz*, and neither does it include the cultural assets excavated by tax-exempted groups affiliated to HTS.

We were not able to ascertain if or under what circumstances HTS's Office of Economics might have access to the revenues of groups affiliated to HTS. Interviews with local sources carried out in August 2019 indicate that currently the approach that HTS most commonly adopts seems to be that of issuing a digging permit to local teams. If this is true, it indicates that the income generated by *zakat al-rikaz* is a weak indicator of the total amount of money that HTS receives from the sale of cultural assets. A conservative estimate of the total revenues that HTS and its

<sup>46</sup> Regarding how to estimate the income generated by the antiquities trade in a particular region, see Fiona Greenland, Oya Topcuoglu and Tasha Vorderstrasse, "A Site-Level Market Model of the Antiquities Trade," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 26, no. 1 (February 2019): 21–47.

affiliates gained in 2018–19 through the trade in antiquities should therefore probably be closer to US\$ 5 million.

In the spring of 2019, near Qastoun village (halfway between Jisr al-Shughur and Ma'arrat al-Nu'man), three excavators discovered a pottery jar containing 42 24-carat gold coins of unknown origin. Forty of these coins were sold for US\$ 300,000 to a German client, who eventually sold all of them in an auction in the Netherlands. An HTS official confirmed that the buyer had sent a representative to Idleb to close the deal in person. Apparently, the group learned about the discovery and sale of the coins only after the excavators brought their dispute about the two additional unsold coins before the Dar Al-Qadaa' ("Abode of the Judges") in Darkush. The court detained the excavators pending the result of an investigation, because they had not declared their discovery to the tax office. During the hearings it was brought to the attention of the judges that the German buyer



Byzantine gold coins, possibly from the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, advertised by the Telegram group's administrator, Saif al-Deen, on November 21, 2018.

Byzantine trachea or “scyphate” (11<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century AD), possibly a forgery, that was advertised on a Telegram group on January 3, 2018 by a group member called Ahmad al-Aasi. Another group member estimated the price at between US\$ 125 and US\$ 275, according to the number of carats (i. e. what a local trader would pay for the coin in north-west Syria).



was claiming the two remaining coins as part of the original deal. At the time of writing the matter had not yet been settled. According to our sources, HTS collected US\$ 60,000 in tax on this sale (i. e. 20% of the price paid by the buyer) and confiscated the two remaining coins, seemingly with the purpose of selling them to the same client.

The price that the German buyer paid seems to be above the average values of ancient coins in the local market, but in the absence of more information about the precise details of the coins or the actual receipts, it is impossible to verify the reliability of the price that was reported to have been paid. The market value of ancient coinage looted in Syria has been stable and we have not observed any significant variation between the prices indicated by Brodie and Sabine in their 2016 investigation<sup>47</sup> and our 2018–19 sample from the two Telegram private chatrooms. Coins are easy to smuggle out of the country and disperse throughout a vast international market,<sup>48</sup> while identifying their true provenance is also particularly challenging.

For larger artefacts, however, prices tend to fluctuate greatly. Mosaics are a case in point. According to interviews undertaken by Brodie and Sabine, the value of mosaics appears to have collapsed by 2016 to as low as US\$ 100,<sup>49</sup> while some of the most valuable pieces offered in the online illegal antiquities market could apparently reach up to US\$ 40,000<sup>50</sup> a few years prior to that.

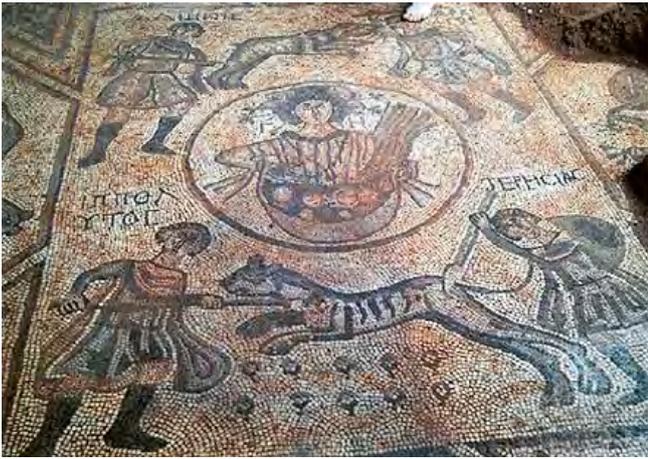
In the spring of 2018 authorities revealed the presence in California of a massive mosaic (5.5 m. x 2.5 m.) from the Byzantine era that

<sup>47</sup> Brodie and Sabine, “The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects.”

<sup>48</sup> See Nathan T. Elkins, “The Trade in Fresh Supplies of Ancient Coins: Scale, Organization, and Politics,” in *All the King’s Horses: Essays on the Impact of Looting and the Illicit Antiquities Trade on Our Knowledge of the Past*, edited by P. K. Lazrus and A. W. Barker (Washington, DC: Society for American Archaeology Press, 2012), 91–107.

<sup>49</sup> Brodie and Sabine, “The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects.”

<sup>50</sup> Kathryn Tully, “How to buy antiquities,” *Financial Times*, September 4, 2015.



was consistent with the iconography found in particular in and around the city of Idleb. The mosaic was imported into the United States with paperwork indicating that it was part of a shipment of vases and mosaics worth only about US\$ 2,200, but the owner later admitted paying US\$ 12,000 for the items. Preliminary estimated values for the mosaic are much higher.<sup>51</sup>

Interviews in autumn 2019 with two Syrians from Idleb with inside knowledge of the illegal antiquities trade suggest that the price of items such as these has indeed decreased to between US\$ 500 and US\$ 1,200. According to these sources the main factor explaining the extent of the price variations is the difficulty of transporting items into Turkey, although it is unclear if there is also a drop in demand. Smuggling bulky artefacts across the now heavily guarded and walled border is still theoretically feasible, but an Idlebi smuggler described the cost incurred because of the number of people that have to be bribed if a vehicle is to pass safely through the various Turkish checkpoints (army, police) in the border area as prohibitive (see below).

How local intermediaries estimate the authenticity and value of a given archaeological object that is devoid of intrinsic value is unclear. However, one way to authenticate cultural assets available to local actors is to rely on respected figures in the trade whose long-standing reputation and expertise are recognized by all parties.

In June 2019 Religioscope interviewed one of those senior local “experts” in Jisr al-Shughur. He came highly recommended by

According to an engineer involved in illegal excavation whom HTS hired to provide expertise between 2017 and 2018, and who resigned after his employer refused to pay him a percentage of the sale in addition to his salary (c. US\$ 55), the two mosaics featured above are part of a larger collection. They were excavated in Kesab (in the northern part of Latakia Governorate) in the spring of 2014 and in the vicinity of Ghassaniyeh (near Jisr al-Shughur). We were not able to accurately attribute their respective locations of origin. The engineer took the two pictures in 2014 in one of the warehouses belonging to Ahrar Jableh (a group associated with Ahrar as-Sham at the time), in Shararah, near the Turkish border, where they were stored pending their transportation to Turkey.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-06/priceless-antiques-looted-by-is-smuggled-into-western-markets/9833554>



A photograph possibly taken recently at al-Nabi Huri (the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine city of Cyrrhus in the extreme north-west of Idlib Governorate) by an excavation team that allegedly paid a large sum of money to a local FSA militia for the right to excavate the site.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2659103114156690&set=pcb.1323378767786061&type=3&theater&ifg=1>

<sup>53</sup> In 2016 interviewees referred to the location as one of the key places to trade artefacts; see Brodie and Sabrine, "The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects," 77.

<sup>54</sup> The pre- and post-2011 involvement of Syrian security and army officers is often stated as a well-known fact during interviews with Syrians knowledgeable about the antiquities trade. See also Brodie and Sabrine, "The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects," 77.

<sup>55</sup> A significant number of items we monitored on the two Telegram groups are forgeries. A certain number of them might also be copies of actual archaeological items illegally acquired by excavation teams in Syria and advertised online. In 2016, Maamoun Abdulkarim, the Syrian director general for antiquities and museums, estimated that 70% of the artefacts seized in Syria and Lebanon are fake; see <http://authenticationinart.org/pdf/artmarket/smuggled-wares-fake.pdf>; see also <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-31495042/fake-works-of-art-common-from-syria>

<sup>56</sup> Brodie, "Virtually gone!", 26–27.

several local sources and has been involved in excavation for about 30 years. He is often relied on to provide expertise and connections to middlemen with a network in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Before 2011 he had been involved in (presumably "legal") excavations in the Qalamoun Mountains and at various locations in the governorates of Daraa and Idlib. The trafficking of antiquities was flourishing in Idlib well before the region was taken over by revolutionary armed groups, he explained. Turkish, Lebanese, Jordanian, and European collectors and traders used to travel to Qalaat Al Madiq<sup>53</sup> in northern Hama Governorate near the ancient city of Apamea to negotiate the purchase of a vast array of ancient cultural items. The market for antiquities was reliable and steady enough to provide him with a decent income for over three decades.

The trade was relatively well regulated before the civil war, notably by the fact that a number of government employees in the police and security forces had a stake in the trade.<sup>54</sup> Forgeries were to be found, of course, but their impact on the Syrian illegal market for antiquities was somewhat limited. Traders, freelance excavators and corrupt government employees all had an incentive to preserve the reputation of the local trade.

Nowadays, however, all our sources agree that the market is flooded with forgeries<sup>55</sup> to the point of disrupting the trade. A well-connected source in Idlib told us in October 2019 that "the best way to ensure that a valuable item is quickly copied is to advertise it on one of the Facebook groups dedicated to selling antiquities." A sizable percentage of items being advertised are forgeries of various qualities, which creates an additional burden for both sellers and buyers to establish the authenticity of the artefacts, a problem that remains very difficult to solve even for auction houses.<sup>56</sup> The "expert" from Jisr al-Shughur provides a guarantee, not by assessing the authenticity of the object itself, but by providing trustworthy information about its exact origin and chain of custody. The intermediaries between buyers and sellers are therefore key to any sale of illegal cultural assets.

Brodie and Sabrine identified four main traders in the Idlib and Hama governorates in the villages of Talmenes (also known as

Tell Mannas), Qalaat Al Madiq, Kafr Zita and Hesh (or Hish).<sup>57</sup> Our own investigations confirm some of these locations: according to several local sources the key localities in north-west Syria are currently Talmenes, Hesh, Sarmada and Atmeh. It is no accident that the smuggling business has been booming in Sarmada and Atmeh. According to a smuggler from the region, the antiquities are carried by porters into Turkey along the same routes that people use to illegally cross the border. Adana, Konya and Istanbul are apparently the main transit points for these cultural assets.

The head of a small excavation team operating in Daraa Governorate<sup>58</sup> told us that he has no other option but to sell his products to a trader with the necessary connections outside the country. For instance, the hoard of 20 gold Byzantine coins he had the good fortune to discover were sold to such an intermediary in Daraa for SYP 50,000 (dates of discovery and sale unknown), a price indexed on the gold market value that was at least ten times below their value in Amman, he lamented. As a rule of thumb in the trade, middlemen are the real beneficiaries: on average, excavating teams realize only a very small percentage of the market value of the illicit antiquities that they find.<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly, the ancillary costs seem to be higher for local teams of excavators operating in Daraa, which is mostly under government control, than in Idleb under the Salafists. The latter have obviously no qualms about using brutal violence to assert their Allah-given dominance, but they tend – at least on principle – to frown on corruption and to value the rule of (Sharia) law. In relative contrast, reports by and testimonies of Syrians living in areas controlled by the motley collection of regular government and auxiliary forces indicate that corruption has reached stratospheric levels. The multitude of security services and auxiliary forces inflate the cost of operating an antiquities-related business in these territories by multiplying the stakeholders who have to be bribed. Moreover, several sources involved in the trade made it clear that high-ranking members of the regular army are directly involved in the looting of archaeological sites in the territory under government control and thus further reducing the options for freelancing diggers. For instance, in October 2019 a retired officer who had served under Major-General

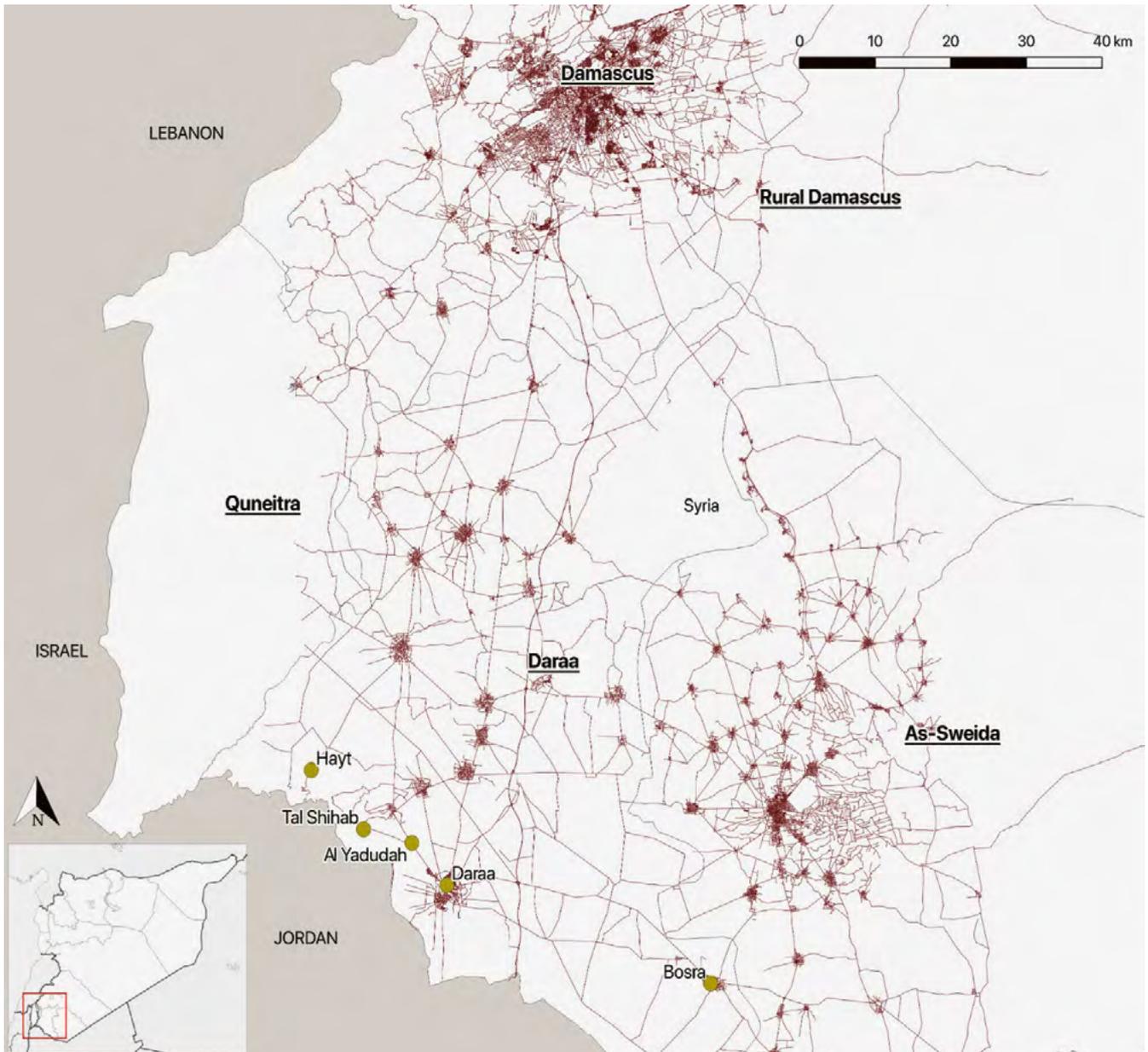


Items advertised on the Telegram group in November 2018 by the group's administrator, Saif al-Deen. He posted a large collection of archaeological objects (which he allegedly had in his possession) and complained that genuine traders were nowhere to be found in Idleb, only dishonest intermediaries.

<sup>57</sup> Brodie and Sabrine, "The Illegal Excavation and Trade of Syrian Cultural Objects."

<sup>58</sup> His team has been excavating Tal Shihab's archaeological sites and the area in and around the villages of Al Yadudah, Tal Za'tar, Hayt and al-Kuwayyah.

<sup>59</sup> Neil Brodie, "Pity the Poor Middlemen," *Culture without Context* 3 (1998): 7–9.



Shafiq Fayyad (who died in 2015) in the 3rd Armoured Division told one of our sources that Fayyad’s sons, following in the business footsteps of their late father, have been employing several teams and the expertise of at least one Syrian archaeologist to illegally excavate several sites north of Damascus. The excavated items are shipped to Beirut.

Since the end of 2018 the number of local freelance excavation teams and the overall trade in illegal antiquities in Daraa Governorate have steadily decreased. Additionally, Beirut has replaced Amman as the main destination for looted antiquities,



Possibly Roman funerary glass vessels advertised on October 28, 2018 by a Telegram group member named Firas.

giving an advantage to excavation teams and traders with family ties in Lebanon. This shift is probably due to a combination of factors: the depletion of easily accessible archaeological sites, the presence of new stakeholders who are able to easily cross the Syrian–Lebanese border, and the inflated operating cost for actors without the right connections. According to a Bedouin smuggler who transports goods between Syria and Jordan, the need to bribe security forces and border guards on both sides of the border accounts for about half the transportation costs.

The head a family business covering all phases of exploratory work, excavation and marketing, based in Bosra (a major World Heritage archaeological site close to the Jordanian border), explained that his business does not face the same problem. A member of the Shia minority living in the city, he has been shipping all his archaeological finds (mostly gold and silver coinage and Roman glassware) to Beirut thanks to the logistical support provided by Hezbollah members who are able to drive across the border without any interference from either the Syrian or Lebanese authorities.

## Smuggling the loot

In order to reach the three main markets – i. e. European and Russian clients for Greek and Roman items, and the Gulf countries and Israel, respectively, for Islamic and Jewish cultural artefacts<sup>60</sup> – Syrian traders are using the same networks that have been illegally transporting people or goods across borders.

Most of these networks pre-date the civil war, and the smuggling business has often been the trade of populations living on either side of national borders, such as Bedouins living in the Syrian–Iraqi border areas and to some extent Druze families in south and south-west Syria. Some new routes have been opened, however, either to bypass new restrictions or exploit new opportunities. For instance, several knowledgeable sources explained that the same routes used to transport drugs and weapons from Syria into Lebanon are currently being used to ship artefacts from Daraa to Beirut.

Religoscope interviewed several actors in the trade and smugglers in Daraa Governorate during the spring of 2019. The most enterprising smugglers are usually binational Bedouins with an unparalleled knowledge of the border areas. The additional income that can be earned through smuggling is substantial by local standards: according to an experienced trader from the province, the average price for smuggling a cargo of cultural assets from Daraa to Amman is between US\$ 2,000 and US\$ 4,000.

The transportation of antiquities across the border from north-west Syria follows a different pattern. According to several sources, since Turkey built its border wall in the summer of 2018 it has become very difficult and prohibitively expensive to transport items in trucks or vehicles. By far the most common transportation method is that of using individual couriers, a *modus operandi* that unavoidably limits the size of artefacts (such as mosaics) being sent to Turkey. Using a vehicle to smuggle antiquities through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing is not an option. We know of a few instances where rented ambulances were used to smuggle people through this border crossing, but several sources told us that shipping antiquities in this way was not

<sup>60</sup> A couple of traders in Daraa mentioned that Jordanian intermediaries have been repeatedly asking for Jewish cultural artefacts, and have even been offering a bonus for any valuable item meeting their criteria.

feasible, notably due to the high probability of being caught at one of the numerous checkpoints on the Turkish side of the border. As one source put it: “bribing an army officer to ascertain when and where to climb over or tunnel under the wall is one thing, but bribing entire police patrols is just not an option.”

A more reasonable alternative consists of paying US\$ 1,500–1,800 per person to cross the border through one of the tunnels that armed groups are using to smuggle people and goods in and out of Idleb Governorate. The Failaq al-Rahman group, for instance, acquired considerable expertise of this kind during the siege of the Eastern Ghouta,<sup>61</sup> a skillset that its members brought with them when they moved to north-west Syria. However, according to knowledgeable sources, it is unlikely that fragile or precious items are transported using the tunnels, given that the crossing often requires hiding and running from police patrols.

The more selective and well-off traders hire a guide/smuggler at a rate of US\$ 3,500 per person (apparently, group prices are also available). This amount is paid to the guide/smuggler, who then pays a percentage of the sum to amenable Turkish military officers who provide a location and time slot indicating where and when the border can be safely crossed. One of these professional smugglers confided that members of the Turkish gendarmerie (*jandarman*) units patrolling the border between Syria and Turkey are mostly indifferent to the issue of antiquities smuggling, and focus rather on apprehending individuals associated with IS or a Kurdish militia.

<sup>61</sup> Aron Lund, *Into the Tunnels: The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Eastern Ghouta* (New York: The Century Foundation, December 21, 2016), <https://tcf.org/content/report/into-the-tunnels/?agreed=1>



## Conclusion

Since the start of the civil war in 2011 the looting of cultural assets has followed a more or less similar pattern in various parts of Syria: the withdrawal of government forces and the collapse of the local economy led many groups – probably based mainly on kinship or communal village ties – to start exploring historical sites in areas near where they lived. These newcomers not only competed with the civilian, military and government actors who were previously involved in the trade in illegal antiquities, but also intensified the level of the looting that was taking place in a context where no authority had the resources to monitor – let alone control – the numerous sites, museums and monuments to be found in Syria. The proliferation of armed groups and militias multiplied the number of actors with a stake in this business. As these groups came to control more permanent fiefdoms across the country, this anarchic state of affairs gradually subsided in some regions and the illegal trade was (re)structured by the major armed groups, whose resources and organizational skills allowed them to impose rules and – especially – levy taxes.

The Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir as-Sham were/are two prime examples of powerbrokers with both a clear ideology and a political programme: IS broadcast spectacular images of the destruction of Iraqi and Syrian “idolatrous” monuments while simultaneously setting up a complex bureaucracy to manage the looting and marketing of cultural assets, while HTS astutely established a governance structure whose role is to officially oppose the same policies that the group unofficially implements. Together with these strong political actors who have provided some degree of predictability and order, two other pre-2011 networks have also contributed to the (re)structuring of the trade: traders with connections to regional intermediaries in Amman, Beirut or Istanbul, and experienced smugglers, both of whom are able to supply what is needed to sell an archaeological artefact from a conflict area, i. e. access to a niche market and the ability to illegally transport items across national borders.





