How 30,000 archaeological treasures were saved from imminent destruction during Syria's civil war

New research reveals how Syrian archaeologists defied the perils of civil war to save the invaluable collections of one of Syria's most treasured museums.



An ancient statue from the site of Mari, dating to the second millennium BCE. Credit: Yaarob Abdullah

SHARJAH, EMIRATE OF SHARJAH, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, September 19, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A new study sheds light on how Syrian archaeologists risked their lives to rescue approximately 30,000 priceless artifacts from the Deir ez-Zor Museum during the summers of 2014 and 2015 as the city faced the imminent threat of capture by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as Daesh.

Situated on the banks of the Euphrates River near Iraq's border, Deir ez-Zor is the capital of the province of the same name. The region contains some of Syria's most important oil and gas fields, turning it into a fiercely contested battleground during the conflict.

Maamoun Abdulkarim, Professor of Archaeology and History at the University of Sharjah and author of the study published in Museum Management and Curatorship, said the significance of the rescue effort extends beyond the number of artifacts saved.

The researcher presents the operation as a compelling case study in protecting cultural heritage during wartime, particularly in light of the damage inflicted on museums and archaeological sites across the Middle East, including in Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen.

According to Professor Abdulkarim, conducting a rescue mission amid active hostilities requires more than logistical planning. "It fundamentally involves decision-making, institutional resilience, trust, and the ability to adapt rapidly to changing circumstances," he explained. "There is rarely a perfect moment to act during an armed conflict; often, delaying a decision in search of greater

certainty poses a greater danger than acting under uncertainty."

At the time, the researcher oversaw the operation as the Director-General of Syria's Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM). Access to the city was severely restricted, with the museum connected to the military airport only through a narrow and highly vulnerable corridor, rendering the mission exceptionally dangerous.

Endangered heritage

There are no official estimates of the number of archaeologically significant sites in Syria, but the country's antiquities department is said to have a file of about 10,000 sites.

These, however, are primarily locations that have either been excavated or identified through visible archaeological remains on the surface. Modern-day Syria forms part of the broader Mesopotamian cultural sphere, where some of the world's earliest and most influential civilizations flourished.

Given that large areas of the country remain archaeologically unsurveyed, it is reasonable to estimate that Syria may contain tens of thousands of archaeologically significant sites.



An agate bead necklace from Tell Terqa, dating to the second millennium BCE. Credit: Yaarob Abdullah


Evacuation of boxes from a storage in the museum of Deir ez-Zor. Credit: Yaarob Alabdullah

Before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Syria was home to 35 archaeological museums spread across the country. Although not the largest among them, the Deir ez-Zor Museum ranked among the country's most valuable institutions.

Many of its priceless collections originated from renowned Mesopotamian civilizations and sites, including Halaf, Dura-Europos, and Mari.

In his study, Professor Abdulkarim does not provide a precise estimate of the number of artifacts that were looted during the civil war, which lasted nearly a decade and a half. Nor does he specify how many of the country's 35 museums escaped destruction or managed to preserve their collections intact.

He notes, however, that the period following 2014, when ISIS expanded its control over large parts of Syria and Iraq, represented "an important example of the sort of looting, destruction, and illicit trafficking of sites and museums that took place in this context."

"This period formed a critical juncture, as it coincided with the fall of Mosul in Iraq, the looting of its civilizational museum, and the destruction of antiquities from Nineveh and Assyria," he writes. "These occurrences compelled Syrian antiquities authorities to promptly reevaluate protection policies and expedite emergency measures in cities that were at risk of siege or collapse."

In those catastrophic circumstances, Professor Abdulkarim came to understand that leadership was not about making easy decisions but about having the courage to make the necessary decisions at the right moment, even when the personal and professional consequences could be severe.

"My foremost priority was the protection of cultural heritage, and I was prepared to bear whatever personal and professional risks and consequences those decisions might entail," he explains.

During his tenure as DGAM's Director-General from 2012 to 2017, approximately 300,000 museum artifacts were rescued and relocated to secure sites across Syria. "The artifacts accounted for the overwhelming majority of the country's museum collections," he said. "This included approximately 30,000 objects from the Deir ez-Zor Museum."

Lessons for future rescue missions

In his research, Professor Abdulkarim delivers an important message to professionals engaged in protecting archaeological heritage during wars and crises. For him, artifacts are far more than priceless objects. They embody the collective memory and identity of humanity, transcending the borders of the countries in which they are found. "We did not rescue 30,000 objects simply to save 30,000 museum pieces. We were protecting thousands of years of memory that war threatened to erase," he said.

"The 30,000 objects rescued from Deir ez-Zor represent more than just museum pieces; they hold thousands of years of human history and are part of the identity and memory of the communities in the Euphrates region."

Reflecting on the operation to remove endangered collections from one of Syria's most significant museums and relocate them to safety, Professor Abdulkarim emphasizes that timing is often the decisive factor in any rescue mission. Waiting for every uncertainty to be resolved, he warns, can mean missing the critical window for action.

"In a cultural emergency, waiting for perfect conditions can become more dangerous than acting under uncertainty," he stressed. "Heritage protection during war is not only about what we save. It is also about when we decide to act, whom we trust, and how quickly we are prepared to adapt."

He also highlights several other factors that are essential for safeguarding heritage in times of crisis, including competent personnel, effective institutions, meticulous inventories and documentation, and trusted colleagues on the ground.

"The most valuable resource during a crisis is not always money or technology," he noted. "Sometimes it is trust, the trust between colleagues who can make the right decision when there is no time left for normal procedures."

Perhaps most importantly, Professor Abdulkarim's research demonstrates that risk management should be embedded within everyday heritage management rather than introduced after a crisis has begun.

The rescue of one of Syria's most important archaeological museums offers a powerful lesson at a time when museums, archaeological sites, and cultural treasures across the region have repeatedly been subjected to destruction, looting, and illicit trafficking in the aftermath of wars and civil unrest.

"The relationships, documentation, professional capacity, and trust required for effective emergency action must be established during periods of stability," Professor Abdulkarim concluded. "They should not wait until a crisis erupts before taking action. These foundations cannot be built overnight."

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Leon Barkho
University Of Sharjah
+971 501654376
email us here

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