

INTERVIEW

Expert: Taliban will finance international terrorism by selling archaeological antiquities

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In 2001, the Taliban destroyed Buddha statues in the Bamiyan Valley (6th century AD) with anti-aircraft guns. © DR

[Helia Pevzner](#)

38 minutes

The sale of archaeological treasures will be added to the illegal drug trade that replenished the Taliban budget after their coming to power. This is the opinion of Louise Shelley, a researcher at the Center for the Study of Illegal International Trade, Terrorism and Corruption (George Mason University, USA). Answering RFI's questions, she noted that by buying stolen items, collectors not only destroy historical knowledge, but also finance international terrorism.

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RFI: You are studying illegal international trade and, in particular, the trade in art and archaeological property. Should we expect the plundering of the heritage of the Afghan people by the new authorities of Afghanistan and the flow of these treasures to the international market?

Louise Shelley: The National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul has recently been beautifully restored with the support of the international community. Aerial photography of all the most important excavations was also carried out, and well-known Western archaeologists, together with Afghan colleagues, identified the location of new sites for research. Unfortunately, today all this can serve as a map for those who intend to plunder and sell heritage. The fall of Kabul was so rapid that there was no time to hide the treasures, unlike the Bactrian treasures that were hidden during the Afghan civil war in the 1990s.

The Taliban are facing a loss of access to Afghan accounts abroad and will be stepping up their trade in antiquities. In other words, we should expect the flow of illegal Afghan antiquities to reach various global markets soon. A stream of Greek, Bactrian, Kushan and Gandharian ceramics, coins, jewelry, sculptures and bas-reliefs may soon emerge at major hubs in the vast global market for illicit antiquities, from Basel to Istanbul, Dubai and Hong Kong.

The scientific work that has taken place in Afghanistan in recent years has involved archaeologists, not experts in the illegal trade. They believed in a bright future for the country,

not in the return of the Taliban, and thought about how to learn more about the history of Afghanistan, this most important stage on the Silk Road.

At the same time, it was clear to experts in terrorism that there is a huge increase in terrorism in Afghanistan. More than 5,000 Taliban-related incidents have been reported in the past three years. Afghanistan ranks first in the world in terms of terrorism.

If there are sellers, then there are buyers? Are foreign collectors ready to buy stolen Afghan valuables?

It is not that simple. Our Center has carried out a project related to the archaeological values of Iraq and Syria. There we said that on websites selling valuables, the average hobbyist cannot see whether the items put up for sale have been stolen. Sometimes those who ask questions about the origin are given fake certificates. But most simply do not think about it, people do not have a question whether the thing was stolen. I want to own an old coin, for example. They buy either online or through intermediaries.

Or some artifacts are presented as originating from countries that are no longer on the map, such as Bactria, or vaguely defined regions, such as Central Asia. What does this mean, Central Asia? This is a huge region. Or the attribution may be very vague, such as "Indo-Greek pottery" or "coins from the reign of Alexander the Great."

The well-known chain of antique shops Hobby Lobby was at a very high level of purchases. The cuneiform tablets purchased for the Bible Museum had to be returned to Iraq. Millions of dollars have been paid for them.

Ten years ago I saw stolen Gandhara pottery in Maastricht. More than a decade ago, a documentary entitled "Blood Antiques" described a supply chain of antiques from Taliban-controlled territory to the elite antique shops of Brussels. Vendors at the annual Maastricht art fair displayed Gandhara sculptures stolen from Afghanistan. Ten - twelve years ago I also saw Gandhara ceramics in Moscow, in an antique shop. I tried to gradually figure out their provenance, but did not receive a clear answer, and this is typical for things with a vague origin.

Does a coin that is devoid of context and sold over the Internet lose its historical value?

Undoubtedly. Its scientific value has largely been lost, and this is a huge problem. The monetary value of illicit cultural exports is significant, perhaps hundreds of millions or even several billion dollars a year. However, the real value of these artifacts has nothing to do with money.

A thing devoid of context loses its historical significance. More than 2 million antique coins have been sold online in recent years, and this area has seen a huge increase in criminal activity. At the same time, archaeologists lose information about the history of civilization and trade. These

are coins from Syria, Iraq, but not only: archaeological values went on sale, for example, from Bulgaria. This problem is worldwide. But now we need to focus on Afghanistan because we can expect sales to grow. The Taliban will need money. All this money will go to finance terrorist activities that could destabilize neighboring countries.

Should we also expect the destruction of cultural values of the pre-Islamic period? Everyone remembers the explosion of the Bamiyan Buddha statues in 2001.

In the chaos that exists today, we need to think about all aspects of loss. But for now, people mostly think about how to survive, not how to preserve values.

Afghanistan has one of the oldest and richest histories of civilization among all Asian countries. Its legacy includes the ancient civilization of Bactria, the conquests of Alexander the Great, the Empire of Demetrius the Great, the Kushan Empire, the Gandhara civilization, and the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms. Islamist extremists do not attach importance to preserving the long pre-Islamic past of their country. All of the country's archaeological resources are now under threat, from the National Museum in Kabul, with its priceless collection of Bactrian gold, to the Herat citadel, built by Alexander the Great in 330 BC.

What can we living outside of Afghanistan do?

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We must pay attention to the origin and not buy an item if its origin raises questions. If we manage to destroy this market in the West, in Russia and in the countries of the Arab world, then the Taliban will not be able to trade the values of the Afghan excavations. Countries and people need to be aware of the fact that buying a stolen thing, they not only destroy history, but also finance terrorism.

Before the fall of Kabul, antiquities illegally excavated and exported from Afghanistan could be returned to the legitimate government on the rare occasions that customs agents in the West were able to locate them. This is no longer possible because the Taliban are not interested in pre-Islamic sites other than as a source of income.

One solution may be to store the seized artifacts in the largest museums in the West. Such a strategy would at least remove some of the looming stream of illicit antiquities from the market and allow scientists and scholars to study them. Another solution is to photograph and post them on the Internet for viewing, so that the great history of Afghanistan is available to its citizens and the whole world.

Our Center for the Study of Terrorism, International Crime and Corruption [Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center](#) (TraCCC) at George Mason University deals with

various aspects of this trade. We have worked with wonderful Russian colleagues for many years. I study the tendencies of terrorism and, in particular, I deal with the situation in Afghanistan. Our next book touches on the situation in Syria and Iraq, but it examines the methodology of the criminal market and the mechanisms for selling stolen valuables via the Internet, which also applies to Afghanistan. We held a webinar on our website and are preparing another one. Afghanistan today is a threat to the world.

Louise Shelley is Director of the Center for the Study of Terrorism, International Crime and Corruption (TraCCC) at the George Mason University School of Politics and Government (USA).