

# Egypt grapples with smuggling of artifacts

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CAIRO: Last week's foiling by police of an attempt to smuggle 269 artifacts out of Egypt was just the latest in a series of such incidents.

One such attempt that succeeded was in late 2018. Police in the Italian city of Naples said they had seized 23,700 smuggled artifacts, including 118 that were smuggled in a container from Egypt's port city of Alexandria to the southern Italian port of Salerno.

At the time, Shaaban Abdel-Gawad, director general of the Egyptian Retrieved Artifacts Department, said the artifacts were stolen as a result of illegal excavations.

Investigations revealed that the perpetrator was Ladislav Otakar Skakal, Italy's former honorary consul in Luxor.

In January, an Egyptian court sentenced him to 30 years in absentia, since he had already left the country.

Egyptian authorities also found many artifacts in Skakal's home in Cairo, as well as in a safe he was renting in a private bank.

At the same time, the Kuwaiti General Administration of Customs said it had seized a Pharaonic sarcophagus lid that was smuggled inside a sofa from Cairo airport.

In August 2018, the Antiquities Ministry said 32,638 artifacts had been lost in the last 50 years.

Egypt has retrieved 1,000 artifacts from 10 countries in the last three years, the ministry added.

Mohamed El-Kahlawy, head of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists, said the 2011 revolution in Egypt caused an unstable security situation that paved the way for more illegal excavations and thefts of artifacts.

From 2011 to 2014, Egypt lost \$3 billion from the theft of artifacts from archaeological sites, museums and places of worship, according to the Washington-based group Alliance Archaeology.

"Christie's auction house sells Egyptian antiquities in public," said Egyptian artifacts expert Bassam El-Shammaa.

Researcher Monica Hanna said Egyptian monument warehouses are "full of unregistered artifacts that are being sold."

Unregistered artifacts are impossible to retrieve. Egyptian artifacts can be purchased via online sites, including eBay.

Other sites display videos of Pharaonic tombs for those interested in taking part in excavation work. Such videos have hundreds of thousands of views.

Egypt's Law on the Protection of Antiquities stipulates 25 years in jail for those found guilty of smuggling artifacts. There is no statute of limitations.

Anyone found guilty of smuggling an artifact outside Egypt could be fined

between 1 million Egyptian pounds (\$63,380) and 7 million.

The tools, equipment, machines and cars used in the process, as well as the stolen artifacts, are confiscated by the Supreme Council for Antiquities. The law stipulates 10 years in jail for anyone who secretly carries out digging or hides an artifact or part of it with the intention of smuggling it.

It also stipulates imprisonment of between three and seven years, as well as a fine of no less than 500,000 Egyptian pounds, for destroying, deliberately damaging, mutilating or changing an artifact's original features, and deliberately separating parts of a transferred or permanently placed monument.



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# attack undermined by inquiry

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Sat, 2020-02-08 20:04

LONDON: Russian claims that the UN weapons watchdog manipulated evidence of a Syrian government chemical weapons attack have been undermined by an official inquiry showing that two former UN employees hailed as whistleblowers had little direct access to the evidence and exaggerated their roles.

The independent inquiry commissioned by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) shows that one of the two employees had never been on the team investigating the April 2018 attack in Douma and the other was only on the team for a brief period, according to report in The Guardian newspaper.

More than 40 people were killed in Douma on Apr. 7, 2018. The town, on the outskirts of Damascus, was held by rebels and besieged by pro-government forces at the time. Civilians claimed they were the victims of a chemical weapon attack.

A week after the alleged attack, US President Donald Trump responded with overnight air strikes on Syria backed by the UK and France.

Russia immediately launched a campaign to discredit the allegations, flying witnesses from Syria to the OPCW headquarters in the Hague to challenge the claim that chemical weapons had been used.

Following the US strikes, the OPCW opened an inquiry into whether chemical weapons had been used, but without attributing responsibility. It ruled in March 2019 that a banned toxic chemical containing chlorine was likely to have been used in Douma. The fact that chemical weapons were delivered through air strikes effectively meant the OPCW believed the Syrian air force was responsible.

Internal OPCW reports questioning whether chemical weapons had been used were leaked last May, raising questions about manipulation of the OPCW by the West.

However, an OPCW inquiry into the leaks published last week found the authors of the internal reports had only a minor supporting role in the Douma team. Fernando Arias, the OPCW chief, told the organization's member states on Thursday that the two individuals were "not whistleblowers," but rather "individuals who could not accept that their views were not backed by evidence."

He said that the two men, referred to in the report as Inspector A and B, had breached their commitments to the organization, adding that their behavior was even more deplorable since they had incomplete information on the investigation.

The official inquiry said: "Inspector A did not have access to all the documents, witness interviews, laboratory tests and analyzes by independent experts."

It also said he never compiled an official OPCW report, and only wrote a personal document created with incomplete information.



“Inspector B was by contrast on the fact-finding mission and did travel to Damascus in April, but never left the command post because he had not completed the necessary training required to be deployed on-site in Douma,” the inquiry added. “He left the OPCW in August, but continued to approach staff members in an effort to have continued access to and influence over the Douma incident. The majority of the fact-finding team’s work was carried out after he left the organization.”

The two men declined to take part in the investigation, which instead met with 29 witnesses between July 2019 and February 2020.

Both individuals may face legal action.



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# New 'mercy flight' leaves Houthi-held Yemen capital: WHO

Sat, 2020-02-08 16:07

SANAA: A second medical evacuation flight carrying 24 critically ill Yemenis left the Houthi-held capital Sanaa on Saturday, the World Health Organization said.

"The flight just took off from Sanaa headed to Amman," a WHO spokesperson told AFP.

The plane was carrying men, women and children in need of medical treatment, along with their companions, the spokesperson added.

The flight had been due to leave Sanaa on Friday but was rescheduled for "technical reasons," according to the WHO.

A first "mercy flight" evacuated seven children from Sanaa on Monday for medical treatment in Jordan.

The United Nations is eager to build the necessary confidence between the warring parties in Yemen to enable more such evacuations.

The WHO said Friday it was "committed and working very hard to ensure these Yemeni patients receive the treatment they need."

An Arab coalition that has been fighting in support of the Yemeni government has kept Sanaa airport closed to commercial flights since 2016.

But in November, the coalition announced that it was prepared to allow medical evacuations from the airport as a confidence-building measure to support UN peace efforts.

"This is the first of what we hope will be a number of flights in the medical air bridge," the UN resident coordinator for Yemen, Lise Grande, told AFP after Monday's flight.

The reopening of Sanaa airport is a key demand of the Houthi militia fighting the government and one of the issues being pursued by UN mediators as they seek to relaunch peace talks.



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## [Top Iraqi cleric slams attacks on protesters](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-07 23:13

KARBALA, BAGHDAD: Iraq's top Shiite cleric on Friday condemned recent deadly attacks on anti-government demonstrators, chastising security forces for not doing more to prevent violence in protest squares across the country.

Eight demonstrators were killed this week in attacks on protest camps by supporters of populist cleric Moqtada Sadr, including in Najaf – home to Iraq's Shiite religious leadership.

In his weekly sermon delivered by a representative, Grand Ayatollah Ali

Sistani condemned the bloodshed as “painful and unfortunate” and said state security forces are “indispensable” to keeping the country from “falling into the abyss of chaos.”

“There is no justification for them to stop fulfilling their duties in this regard, or for anyone to stop them from doing so,” Sistani said.

“They must bear responsibility for maintaining security and stability, protecting peaceful protesters and their gathering places, revealing the identities of aggressors and infiltrators, and protecting the interests of citizens from the attacks of saboteurs.”

Sistani’s sermon appeared to have buoyed the demonstrators in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square. “I was watching, afraid that he would be too general and it would allow for more suppression of the protests,” said one activist who gave his name only as Ali.

“But he was able to deliver a message: He accepts only the official security forces, no ‘blue caps’ or anyone else.”

In Diwaniyah further south, demonstrator Mohammad Al-Bulani said the sermon showed Sistani’s support for the protest movement. “He is the only one that has stood with our demands and defended us,” he said.

Nearly 550 Iraqis have been killed in protest-related violence since demonstrations erupted in the capital and southern cities in October, the Iraqi Human Rights Commission said.

Iraq’s Health Ministry confirmed the first protester shot dead on Oct. 1 but clammed up thereafter. The commission has since repeatedly complained that authorities declined its requests for information on deaths, injuries and arrests.

The commission, which is government-funded but operates independently, became the only source for death tolls until it too faced pressure last year to stop reporting.

It has resumed its public reporting and on Friday shared its latest statistics with the media, showing that 543 people have been killed since October, including 276 in Baghdad alone.

Seventeen members of the security forces are among the dead nationwide. The remaining are all protesters or activists, including 22 who were assassinated.

Up to 30,000 more have been wounded during the rallies, according to medical sources.





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## [UN, EU condemn Idlib bombings](#)

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LONDON: Military operations in northwest Syria have caused “unacceptable” human suffering and “massive waves of civilian displacement and major loss of civilian life,” the UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen told the Security Council on Thursday.

Hundreds of civilians have died and over half a million people have been displaced from their homes as fighting has intensified between Damascus and armed groups in the last rebel stronghold of Idlib in recent months. Airstrikes and ground operations in Idlib by Russian-backed Syrian regime forces, Turkish forces and various militant groups have all contributed to creating a nightmare scenario, Pedersen said, with over half a million people displaced by violence in just two months.



The UN's Central Emergency Response Fund announced that it was releasing an additional \$30 million in aid to help ease the crisis.

Pedersen said he could see no military solution to the situation on the ground, and if UN resolution 2245 –calling for a “nationwide ceasefire” – is not implemented, the region will descend into a “bloody and protracted last stand on the Turkish border, with grave consequences for civilians.”

The UN's Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Sir Mark Lowcock also addressed the Security Council, describing the situation in Idlib as a “humanitarian catastrophe.”

Sir Mark, who is also the UN's emergency relief coordinator, said civilians are in urgent need of assistance with so many being forced to flee in the depths of winter, and hundreds of millions of dollars are needed to provide basic things such as tents, plastic sheets, fuel, stoves and warm clothes. “We have seen chaotic pictures in town after town as vehicles line up in every direction trying to flee. People who have just moved cannot find adequate shelter,” he added.

“Tens of thousands are crammed into schools, mosques and unfinished buildings. Many others are in tents in the mud, exposed to wind, rain and freezing weather. What we have been warning you about is happening.”

The EU also called for an end to bombings in Syria, as well as the opening of a humanitarian corridor from Idlib to allow civilians to flee, as regime forces continue to advance on the rebel stronghold.

“Bombings and other attacks on civilians in northwest Syria must stop,” said the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Josep Borrell.

In a statement released jointly with European Emergency Response Coordinator Janez Lenarcic, Borrell said the EU stands ready to provide assistance to internally displaced Syrians facing “extraordinary human suffering.”

The statement also demanded “unimpeded” humanitarian access, respect for “humanitarian law” and the protection of Idlib's civilian population.

The Syrian conflict is thought to have claimed the lives of almost 400,000 people since its outbreak, sparked by a civil uprising against President Bashar Assad in 2011.

More than half the civilian population is said to have fled the country as a result of the war, with many residing in neighboring Arab states and Turkey. On Wednesday, regime forces backed by Russian warplanes entered the town of Saraqib, 15 km east of the city of Idlib.



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