

## PROTECTING ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE IN AN "OASIS OF STABILITY"

### Potential Threats to the Archaeology of the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven emirates on the southeast tip of the Arabian peninsula, prides itself on its record of rapid modern development and strong ties with western allies. Yet despite the apparent political and economic stability of the UAE, archaeological resources in the country are threatened by nearby violence and the country's role as a hub for illicit antiquities exported from countries in conflict. Although violent conflict in the UAE seems unlikely today, given the surrounding instability, it makes sense to be concerned about the potential for conflict there. For example, Iran's nuclear ambitions have strained its relationship with the UAE, especially regarding the long-standing dispute between the two countries over three small islands strategically located at the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz [\[1\]](#). Thus far historical and economic links between Iran and the UAE have ensured a peaceful *status quo*, but the issue is repeatedly raised by UAE officials and international bodies [\[2\]](#).

Territorial disputes in the Gulf have as much to do with access to resources as they do to claims of ethnic sovereignty. For example, Iran recently threatened to block flights over Iranian airspace that refer to the "Arabian" rather than the "Persian Gulf" on their in-flight monitors. This issue of nomenclature clearly goes to the heart not only of questions of borders and territorial rights, but also to ancient claims of Persian or Arab identity [\[3\]](#). Implicit here is the threat of nationalist and ethnic claims over disputed cultural resources. In a region where identity is often expressed via the display of symbols of the past [\[4\]](#), and where nationally and ethnically charged historical narratives are used to address disputes over territory, similar justifications could be used in disputes over archaeological resources.

Other recent events, such as the assassination of a high ranking Hamas commander in Dubai, suspected to be the work of Israeli agents, have shown that the mere proximity of the UAE to so many conflicts has the potential to draw the country into those conflicts. Indeed, the UAE military appears to be preparing for such an

eventuality. From 2005-2009, the UAE was the fourth largest importer of weapons in the world [5], and from 2001-2009, the defense budget of the UAE grew 700 percent [6], raising UAE's profile in a developing Gulf arms race [7].

Another reason to address the vulnerability of the UAE's archaeological resources involves the use of the UAE as a hub for illicit artifacts coming from countries at war. In the past several years, hundreds of looted items from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have moved through or been seized in Dubai and Sharjah [8]. The concentration of vast amounts of wealth in the UAE drives a thriving antiquities market, and the country's many antiquities dealers and collectors contribute to demand for illicit artifacts. For example, the online sale of antiquities of dubious provenance at souq.com, the UAE's answer to eBay, testifies to a clear demand for antiquities in the UAE, and also the lack of controls over commerce in such items.

One of the primary obstacles to ending the UAE's role in the illicit antiquities trade lies in a stalled process to devise a national antiquities law. As a result, only the emirate of Sharjah has a law preventing the buying and selling of undocumented artifacts. The lack of a national antiquities law that provides for monitoring of dealers and private collections, and explicitly prohibits illegal excavation and trade in illicit artifacts, combined with the high demand for antiques within the country, puts all archaeological sites at risk of looting.

To sum up the problem, despite the political stability of the UAE, there are reasons to be concerned about the security of its archaeology. The country is surrounded by states where violent conflict is ongoing, or threatens to break out, and the UAE has at times found itself drawn into those conflicts; the UAE is aggressively expanding its military capacity as the threat of a nuclear Iran rises; the country's ports have seen multiple attempts at smuggling illicit artifacts originating in conflict-ridden countries; there is no federal law restricting the access and sale of antiquities; and site security within the UAE is often lax. It is therefore critical that archaeologists begin to think now about how to protect the nation's archaeological heritage.

Ultimately, the goal of protecting the archaeological heritage of the UAE must go hand in hand with developing interest in pre-Islamic archaeology among local stakeholders. Steps are beginning to be taken in this regard, including the country's first undergraduate major in Emirati Studies, which will equip Emiratis to lead the UAE's archaeological and cultural heritage sector. This and similar programs will help

ensure Emirati participation in the stewardship of their ancient heritage and the protection of archaeological resources from potential conflict.

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- [3] e.g., F. Mehr, *A Colonial Legacy: The Dispute Over the Islands of Abu Musa, and the Greater and Lesser Tumbs [Sic]* (Lanham 1997) 24-26.
- [4] S. Blau, "Conscious Receivers: A Discussion of Museums and the Construction of National Identity in the United Arab Emirates." In D. T. Potts, H. Al Naboodah, P. Hellyer (ed.), *Archaeology of the United Arab Emirates* (London 2003) 28; S. Blau, "Observing the Present - Reflecting the Past: Attitudes Towards Archaeology in the United Arab Emirates." *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 6, no. 2 (1995): 116-28.
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- [6] D. Kenner, "Get Yer Anti-Ballistic Missile Shield Here." [Foreign Policy, 12 March 2010](#). Accessed March 24, 2010.
- [7] D. Moran, "The UAE Nuclear Debate." [ISN Security Watch, 6 March 2009](#).
- [8] e.g., G. McClenaghan, "Iraqi Antiquities Seized in Dubai." [The National, 26 November 2008](#). Accessed March 11, 2010; L. Morris, "For Sale: Iraq's Smuggled Heritage." [The National, 16 February 2010](#). Accessed March 11, 2010.
- [9] Blau, "Conscious Receivers" (fn. 4); D. T. Potts, *The Gulf Arab states and their archaeology*. In L. Meskell (ed.), *Archaeology under fire: Nationalism, politics and heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East* (London 1998) 189-99.

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