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May 31, 2014, 12:00 pm

Reclaiming Egypt's stolen history

By Mohammed Ibrahim

Nobody owns history. The artifacts and antiquities that tell the story of our ancient and common humanity belong to everyone, regardless of culture or border. Sadly, though, many of these priceless and irreplaceable objects— statues, carvings, vases, parchments, tombs and other relics from thousands of years ago— are being illegally plundered away from our common access for individual gain. They are bought, traded and transferred around the world, just so they can be displayed privately in wealthy individuals' collections or earn enormous profit for thieves, often sophisticated armed gangs looking to finance criminal operations.

Many of these black market items are, of course, of Egyptian origin. As Egypt's minister for Antiquities, it is my solemn duty to safeguard the artifacts that provide a window into the heritage of all civilization, as told through the events and peoples that have inhabited Egypt. From the ancient age of Pharaoh to the

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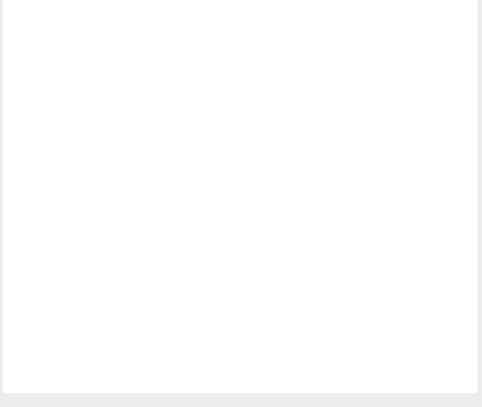
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Greek and Roman empires to the rise of Islam and the modern era, this prized heritage is now in extreme danger. Because of this large-scale looting, we risk losing the story of the achievements and accomplishment of a proud people that stretches back thousands of years. We risk losing the tourism and economic growth we in Egypt need to assure a proud future. And to turn back this tide, as vigilant and determined as the Egyptian authorities are, we cannot succeed without the help of the international community, particularly the United States.

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Since Egypt's January 2011 revolution, no site—whether museum, archaeological dig, ancient structure, storage facility or private residence—has been immune to raids. Systematic theft of Egypt's history, better termed "cultural terrorism," has already cost Egypt billions of dollars through decreased tourism. Meanwhile the profits from our stolen history are lining the pockets of criminal syndicates and sometimes even terrorist groups who kill Egyptians, undermine stability around the world and view both Egypt and America as their adversaries. And technological advances have only made this illegal trade easier and more efficient.

Who pays? The black market for Egypt's ancient relics stretches across the world. Billions of dollars pass through London, Hong Kong, Paris and

Moscow. However, the United States stands alone as the single largest conduit for stolen Egyptian antiquities.

A dangerous confluence of events—instability in Egypt, growing demand for these artifacts and the profits they bring, and new high-tech ways to transfer and trade them out of view—has meant a huge increase in Egyptian historical items being imported to the United States. Some estimates put the rise in America alone at over 100 percent since last summer's instability, the origin of which cannot be easily traced due to current customs law. Much of the growth is due to the proliferation of illegal markets for Egypt's ethnographic artifacts. Put simply, we are in the midst of the greatest threat to Egypt's ancient heritage in generations.

Egypt is taking bold steps. The government is pursuing relentless efforts to preserve and protect Egypt's cultural heritage, ranging from implementing large-scale projects for the restoration of monuments, to the development of security and protection systems for the archaeological sites and areas.

Additionally, the Egyptian government has also been keen on engaging the international community and profit from the expertise provided by some of the major institutions specialized in archaeology and ethnology. We have hence partnered with The International Coalition for the protection of Egyptian Antiquities on ways to prevent both onsite theft and illegal sales once items are stolen. Our joint effort includes teaching officials how to more effectively protect sites; better catalogues and inventories of excavation sites, including the first nationwide digital public antiquity database. Egypt has also stepped up security around museums and archaeological sites. Pursuant to our laws, as well as the 1970 UNESCO Convention, Egypt has long pursued objects smuggled out of the country illegally and succeeded, in the past year, in repatriating many artifacts from the United Kingdom, France and Germany, in addition to more than 90 artifacts that were displayed in an auction hall in Jerusalem.

But no domestic action will be enough. It is now time for the international community to offer assistance in those areas not already covered by native know-how. The situation demands international action and no entity is more central to the fight than the United States. That is why Egypt has submitted a request to the U.S. government to pursue a Memorandum of Understanding to address the illegal trade of Egyptian antiquities. The central component of this MOU would be to place emergency restrictions on the import of antiquities into the United States. Even though Egyptian artifacts are among the most highly regarded and valued on the black market, when brought to the U.S. they are not automatically seized and sent back to the country of origin if they lack proper documentation. This must change, and next week, the State Department will decide whether to add Egypt to the list of 16 countries that this emergency provision currently covers. I would urge them to do so. Putting import restrictions on at-risk Egyptian archaeological treasures would have a great impact on the ongoing campaign against Egypt's heritage that is causing irreversible damage to our history and our identity.

Egypt is at another pivotal point in its long and storied history. We are working to move forward on both political and economic progress. But protecting Egypt's cultural heritage will have great bearing on how successful we will be. If the United States can take the simple step of preventing the illegal trade of stolen Egyptian antiquities at its border, it will show Egypt how serious it is about helping to ensure a better future for the Egyptian people. Not only that, but the United States can show the world that it understands that when these items are stolen from Egypt, they are seized from all of us.

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Ibrahim is minister of Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

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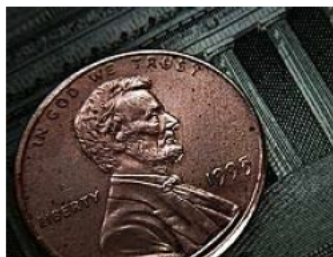
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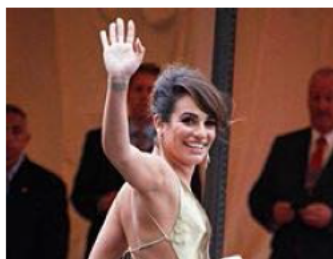
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Reid wants a vote as soon as the
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