

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-716](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The conflicts in Iraq and Syria that began in 2003 and 2011, respectively, have led to the destruction, looting, and trafficking of cultural property by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and others. The United Nations called these events the worst cultural heritage crisis since World War II and reported that ISIS has used the sale of looted Iraqi and Syrian cultural property to support its terrorist activities. Congress authorized and the President imposed import restrictions on archaeological or ethnological material of Iraq in 2008 and Syria in 2016. The act directing Syrian restrictions also includes a sense of Congress that the President should establish an interagency committee to coordinate executive branch efforts on international cultural property protection.

GAO was asked to review U.S. efforts to protect Iraqi and Syrian cultural property. This report examines (1) actions DHS and DOJ have taken to enforce U.S. laws and regulations involving restrictions on such property and (2) the extent to which CHCC participants collaborate to protect cultural property. GAO reviewed documents related to 17 DHS- or DOJ-led cultural property investigations, interviewed officials, and assessed the extent of CHCC collaboration using GAO's key practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State work with other CHCC participants to (1) develop goals, (2) clarify participants' roles and responsibilities, and (3) document collaborative agreement in the CHCC and its working groups. State concurs with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-17-716](#). For more information, contact Thomas Melito at (202) 512-9601 or melitot@gao.gov.

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IRAQI AND SYRIAN CULTURAL PROPERTY

U.S. Government Committee Should Incorporate Additional Collaboration Practices

What GAO Found

GAO's examination of 17 cultural property investigations shows that the Departments of Homeland Security (DHS) and Justice (DOJ) have taken a number of actions to enforce laws and regulations related to restricted Iraqi and Syrian cultural property. DHS's Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has taken actions such as monitoring shipments and detaining and seizing suspected items of restricted cultural property. CBP coordinates with DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which investigates objects; detains, seizes, and obtains forfeiture of items found to be in violation of U.S. law; and repatriates cultural property to its rightful owner. For example, ICE conducted an investigation into an Iraqi ceremonial sword for sale at an auction in the United States and then seized, obtained forfeiture of, and repatriated it to Iraq in July 2013 (see fig.). DOJ actions to address restricted Iraqi and Syrian cultural property include activities by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and DOJ attorneys to investigate and prosecute criminal violations, as well as actions related to the forfeiture and repatriation of cultural property items.

Ceremonial Sword Repatriated to Iraq by Department of Homeland Security in 2013



Source: Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. | GAO-17-716

The Cultural Heritage Coordinating Committee (CHCC), established in November 2016 with nine participating federal entities and led by the Department of State (State), has followed several of the key collaboration practices identified by GAO but has not demonstrated others. GAO has previously identified key practices for organizations to enhance and sustain their collaborative efforts. The CHCC has followed key practices of identifying leadership; including relevant participants; bridging organizational cultures, such as agreeing on common terminology; and addressing resource issues. Most participants also reported that the CHCC was a helpful forum for sharing information. However, the CHCC has not fully demonstrated other key practices for enhancing collaboration. First, the CHCC and two of its three working groups have not developed short- and long-term goals. Moreover, the CHCC has not clarified participants' roles and responsibilities on the committee or its working groups. Finally, CHCC participants have not documented agreements related to collaboration, such as developing written materials to articulate common objectives. Incorporating these practices could help participants work collectively, focus on common goals, and organize joint and individual efforts to protect cultural property as the CHCC continues its efforts beyond its first year.