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René Teijgeler , Secretary, Heritage *for* Peace
contact@heritageforpeace.org

TASK FORCE ON ANTIQUITIES AND MUSEUMS: THE INTERIM MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND FAMILY AFFAIRS

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Girona, Spain – After discussions with the Ministry of Culture and Family Affairs of the Syrian Interim Government in Gaziantep, Turkey Heritage *for* Peace was asked to design a ***Task Force on Antiquities and Museums*** with funding from The Dutch Government for the first phase of the project. The proposed structure for the Task Force by Heritage *for* Peace was sent to the Deputy Minister of Culture and Family Affairs on July 14, 2014, and is now under consideration.

The project is subdivided into 3 phases: Design, Evaluation, and Training. The design phase is now finished. Heritage *for* Peace has identified the need for 4 task groups that will make up the complete Task Force: Museum and Library Affairs; Archaeology and Site Management; Historic Buildings; and Legal Affairs. One Liaison Officer will coordinate with local authorities and a second will coordinate with the military council of the Interim Government. The Task Force will be chaired by a Director. Task Groups will be led by Task Group Managers, while the Liaison Officers will report straight to the Director. Whilst Phase 1 was financed by the Dutch Government, the Ministry is now looking for donors for the next 2 phases of the project i.e. Evaluation and Training.

The majority of threatened Syrian heritage sites are in areas under the control of the opposing forces, which is why cultural heritage is considered a major task for the Interim Ministry of Culture and Family Affairs. Protecting and safeguarding it is considered the first priority in the Ministry's general strategy, and in order to realize this goal the creation of a department for cultural heritage is vital. Furthermore, this project will strengthen the Ministry's capacity to effectively organize itself as one of the first ministries in the Interim Syrian Government. The director of the task force has already been chosen, and 40 staff are working for the Ministry inside Syria. They are doing whatever they can to stabilize or consolidate damaged historic buildings, save or hide museum and library collections, and mitigate the looting of archaeological sites. However, more staff needs to be hired to supervise and coordinate all these activities, which is a major role of the Task Force. In June, an initial 3-day general training course took place, but the need for further training remains high.

Governments, multilateral and international organisations, civil society, and other interested parties are called on to cooperate with the Task Force on Antiquities and Museums. If Syrian heritage is to survive at all, a great deal more needs to be done. Much has already been destroyed beyond repair and every day the devastation continues. If this situation does not change soon, refugees will have almost nothing left to return to when the conflict is over. How can the people of Syria rebuild their identity on ruins?

Heritage *for* Peace consists of volunteers who are leading Syrian and international experts comprising of academics, scholars, heritage professionals and independent advisors. For more information on Heritage *for* Peace and our activities, visit us online at: <http://www.heritageforpeace.org/>.

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