

Palmyra: has this ancient city suffered a fatal blow, or will it rise again?

Islamic State barbarians almost destroyed this World Heritage-listed site. Its wonders can be saved – so why is there such little international will to do so?

By **Chris Ray**

Updated August 31, 2019 — 1.00am, first published August 30, 2019 — 9.21am

"Your heart will break when you see Palmyra," says Tarek al-Asaad, looking out the window pensively as we cross the wide Syrian steppe on the road towards the ancient city. For Tarek, Palmyra represents a deep reservoir of sorrow that includes the public execution of his father Khaled, a renowned archaeologist and historian. Khaled had been instrumental in achieving Palmyra's UNESCO World Heritage listing in 1980. The world stood by, horrified, while the fanatics of Islamic State, also known as IS, took to its majestic monuments with explosives and sledgehammers 35 years later.

We stop at a roadside store, where a young boy with old eyes is gathering aluminium cans to sell for scrap. Inside, soldiers of the Syrian Army guzzle sugary vodka drinks and beer. It's May and the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, when Tarek eats and drinks nothing from dawn to dusk, but the young conscripts are on leave and in a mood to celebrate. Tarek buys supplies for his first night in Palmyra since he fled the city in 2015 for the relative safety of Damascus, Syria's capital.



Tarek's father, Khaled al-Asaad, was 83 when he was beheaded by IS. He had devoted more than 50 years to uncovering, restoring and publicising the remnants of this historic Silk Road hub that reached its peak in the third century. Tarek, one of his 11 children, grew up in the modern town of Tadmur next to the site. "Every day I would rush out of school to ride in the wheel-barrows and buckets that carried the soil from the diggings," he remembers. Khaled retired as Palmyra's head of antiquities in 2003 but stayed on as an expert much in demand. Fluent in ancient Palmyrene, a dialect of Aramaic, he translated inscriptions, wrote books and advised foreign archaeological missions. Meanwhile, Tarek, now 38, a nuggety, full-faced man with a ready smile, ran a successful tourism business.

We're travelling towards Palmyra from the western city of Homs, through undulating pasture sprinkled with crimson poppies. Bedouin herders, austere and watchful, graze flocks of long-haired goats and fat-tailed sheep. Soldiers hitch rides on passing trucks through concrete-block settlements edged with green rectangles of wheat and barley. Roadside military checkpoints mount extravagant displays of patriotism: the double-starred national flag is painted on concrete barriers, oil drums and blockhouse walls while banners depict Syria's president Bashar al-Assad looking resolute behind aviator sunglasses, or waving to crowds. Sentries who inspect identity papers are relaxed and happy to banter. "I hope the fasting is going okay for you?" asks a driver. "We're not fasting, we're kuffar [non-believers]," jokes a guard, alluding to the jihadist insult thrown at adversaries.

Further along, pasture gives way to stony ground studded with pale green tussock. Remnants of the war are more evident here; burnt-out trucks and tanks, toppled electricity pylons and fortified berms of rammed earth crowned with barbed wire. Near a military airbase ringed by radar stations the checkpoint is heavily guarded and businesslike.

A Russian tank transporter going our way is a reminder that IS still fights in the desert beyond Palmyra, where several Syrian troops were reportedly killed this month. While IS lost its last Syrian stronghold of Baghouz in March, small bands continue to mount guerrilla attacks. This is my first visit to Palmyra since a trip as a tourist in 2009, drawn by the mystique of its spectacular architecture beside a desert oasis. Two years later, Syria was torn apart by war. As we approach Palmyra through a gap in a low mountain range, one question is playing on my mind: has the remote and mesmerising site suffered a fatal blow, or can it rise again?

Palmyra's Grand Colonnade suddenly emerges out of a sandy plain. It is the city's still magnificent spine, a kilometre-long avenue of towering limestone columns that slowly turn from pale gold to burnt orange in the setting sun. We park near the ruins and set out on foot to take a closer look. At the Grand Colonnade's eastern end, the great temple of the Mesopotamian god Bel lies in ruins – though its portico somehow survived IS's explosives – and the ornately carved triumphal arch is a pile of massive blocks. The invaders also blew up the tetrapylon that marked the city's crossroads and the Baalshamin temple, a richly decorated combination of Roman and indigenous building styles. The theatre's finely chiselled facade is a pile of rubble along with several multi-storey burial towers that sat on a bare hillside.

On the crossroads of international trade, cosmopolitan Palmyra developed an unorthodox and pluralist culture reflected in its surviving art and architecture. That, along with its location between the Mediterranean coast and the Euphrates river, made it a tempting symbolic and strategic target for modern-day fundamentalists. Muslims lived at Palmyra for 13 centuries, establishing mosques in structures that earlier functioned as Byzantine churches and pagan temples, but the bigots of IS were scandalised by almost everything they found. Every act of vandalism was videoed for use in IS propaganda, its shock value aimed at attracting extremist recruits and intimidating opponents.



An Islamic State-released photo showing the destruction of Palmyra's 1900-year-old Baalshamin temple. AAP

IS occupied Palmyra twice: between May 2015 and March 2016, and between December 2016 and March 2017. During its first takeover, Tarek escaped, but Khaled refused to leave. "I phoned my father and begged him, 'Please leave; Palmyra has been lost to evil people and you are not safe,' Tarek says. "He answered, 'I'm glad you got away, but this is my home and I'm not leaving.'"

After six weeks of house arrest, Khaled was imprisoned in a hotel basement and tortured to reveal the location of hidden treasures that Tarek says never existed. After a month in the basement, the old man was beheaded with a sword in front of an assembled crowd. "He refused to kneel for the blade, so they kicked his legs out from under him," Tarek says. An online photograph showed his corpse tied to a traffic pole and his head, spectacles in place, positioned mockingly at his feet. A placard tied to his body labelled him an apostate who served as "director of idolatry" at Palmyra and represented Assad's government at "infidel" conferences abroad.

Before war broke out in 2011, tourism and agriculture supported more than 50,000 people in Tadmur. Only a few hundred have returned, burrowing into half-demolished buildings along streets that sprout giant weeds from bomb craters. Tarek is not among the returnees; he lives with his mother Hayat in Damascus, where he manages a cafe. Russian sappers have cleared Tadmur of IS mines and booby-traps and power and water is back on. Commerce has made a tentative

recovery, with a bakery, a hole-in-the-wall pharmacy and a simple restaurant. Its owner, Ibrahim Salim, 45, grills chicken on the footpath under a banner portraying President Assad and his Russian patron Vladimir Putin. Salim says he fled Palmyra after IS killed his wife Taghreed, a 36-year-old nurse, for the crime of treating an injured government soldier. “Security is good, so I can sleep peacefully in Tadmur now,” he says. “We hope the school will reopen soon, so more families will return.”

UNESCO has extolled Palmyrene art – particularly its expressive funerary sculpture – as a unique blend of indigenous, Greco-Roman, Persian and even Indian influences. As IS battled Syrian troops for control of Tadmur in 2015, Tarek rushed to save the most valued examples in Palmyra’s two-storey museum. With him were his archaeologist brothers, Mohammed and Walid, and their brother-in-law, Khalil Hariri, who had succeeded Khaled al-Asaad as museum director. They packed sculptures, pottery and jewellery into wooden crates and were loading them into trucks when mortars exploded around them. Shrapnel hit Tarek in the back and Khalil took a bullet in the arm. They got away with hundreds of pieces, but left many more behind. UNESCO has praised Syria’s wartime evacuation of more than 300,000 exhibits from the country’s 34 museums as “an extraordinary feat”.

We walk to Palmyra’s museum. Khaled’s former workplace is a desolate shell, its walls pockmarked by bullets, windows blown out and the foyer roof holed by a missile. Galleries that showcased the accomplishments of millennia are bare save for a few statues and bas-reliefs. They are minus heads, faces and hands – desecrated by IS cadres enraged by “idolatrous” objects, Tarek says, adding: “They even pulled the embalmed mummies out of their cabinets and ran over them with a bulldozer.”

I find only one intact exhibit – a portrait of Khaled (pictured) by Sydney artist Luke Cornish, a work that I and Cornish assumed had been lost. Painted onto a steel door, the portrait is propped against a wall and covered in a protective sheet of clear plastic. Tarek doesn’t know how it survived or who put it in the museum. “Someone must have hidden it from IS, because they would have destroyed it for sure,” he says.



No fewer than 15 employees of Syria's museum network have suffered violent deaths in the eight-year war, but only Khaled's murder made world headlines. The news prompted Cornish to pay him a remarkable tribute. Cornish makes art by spraying aerosol paint over layers of stencils. Twice a finalist for the Archibald Prize, his award-winning work achieves a near-photographic realism and carries strong humanitarian themes. In June 2016, he went to Syria to film a group of Australian boxers on a "hope-raising mission" led by a Sydney Anglican priest, "Fighting Father" Dave Smith, known for his use of boxing to help at-risk youths. Between bouts and training, Cornish held impromptu stencil-art demonstrations for children in war-ravaged places such as Aleppo, once Syria's biggest city.

"The kids were fascinated by the immediacy of the medium," he told me in Sydney. "Most were very poor and had never known anything but war, so it was great to see them having fun putting stuff like [cartoon character] Dora the Explorer on a schoolyard wall or along a bombed-out street. Even with soldiers around and artillery going off, we always drew a curious crowd."

Before leaving for Syria, Cornish prepared a stencil in the hope of painting Khaled's portrait somewhere in the country. He got the chance when the boxers went to Palmyra. They arrived more than two months after a Russian-backed offensive first expelled IS from the city, and a week after St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra played a concert there to celebrate – prematurely, as it turned out – Palmyra's liberation. The orchestra performed Prokofiev, Bach and Shchedrin in a Roman-era theatre that IS used as a backdrop for mass executions.

Cornish chose the door of the theatre's electrical room to paint the man he calls "a hero who sacrificed his life for what he loved". A [YouTube clip](#) of Cornish working on the painting led Tarek to contact him. "Luke's painting was a beautiful gesture and a very kind gift to our family. We think of him as our friend and brother," Tarek says.

But six months later, IS retook Palmyra, dynamiting the theatre and posting a gloating video of the damage. Cornish had assumed his painting was lost, too. "I'm used to having my work destroyed on the street, but having it blown up by IS is something else," he says.





A beheaded and mutilated statue in a Palmyra museum. GETTY IMAGES

Syria boasts six World Heritage cultural sites and all are on UNESCO's endangered list. Normally, World Heritage funds would be released to protect the threatened properties. In Syria's case, UN support has been limited to the restoration of a single Palmyrene statue, and training for museum staff. A UNESCO emergency appeal for \$US150,000 (\$222,000) to safeguard the portico of Palmyra's Temple of Bel has failed to attract support from potential donors. At the national museum in Damascus, white-coated conservators have begun the exacting job of repairing hundreds of Palmyra's damaged exhibits. It is an almost entirely Syrian effort, done on a tiny budget. "We hope for more international help because Palmyra belongs to the world, not just to Syria," says Khalil Hariri, the Palmyra museum director. He says the fallen stones of the triumphal arch, theatre and tetrapylon are mostly intact and can be put back together, but the museum service can't afford to employ workers and buy machinery. Says a Palmyra specialist at the Damascus museum, archaeologist Houmam Saad: "All the world talks about the damage to Palmyra, Aleppo and our other World Heritage sites, but hardly anyone outside Syria does anything to help."

More than two dozen European and US organisations have sprung up to promote Syria's imperilled heritage. They collect data, hold meetings and issue statements of concern. One such group spent £2.5 million (\$4.1 million) to erect a two-thirds-scale model of Palmyra's triumphal arch in London's Trafalgar Square, then repeated the exercise in Washington, D.C. Money raised for Syrian antiquities would be better spent where the damage was done, writes Ross Burns, a former Australian ambassador to Syria and author of four books on its archaeology and history: "Putting money into faux arches and 3D models vaguely mimicking historical structures does little more than salve the consciences of outsiders whose nations have encouraged – even funded and armed, then walked away from – the conflagration that grew to overwhelm Syria."

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Damascus museum archaeologist Houmam Saad

Syria is a nation of many faiths and ethnicities that emerged in its present boundaries only in 1945. Its rulers have popularised a shared history as a tool to promote national identity and social cohesion. In 2018, UNESCO's Director-General Audrey Azoulay acknowledged this heritage as "a powerful force for reconciliation and dialogue". She added a caveat: UNESCO would help rebuild Syria's historic sites "when conditions allow". That could mean a long wait.

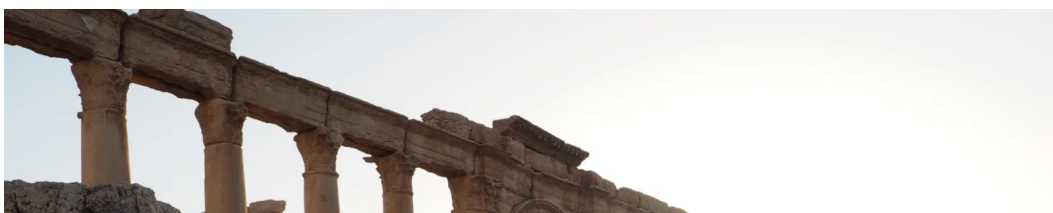
The UN has banned its agencies from providing reconstruction aid until a "genuine and inclusive political transition negotiated by the parties" is achieved.

The ban reflects the stance of the US, European Union and other nations which have imposed economic sanctions on Syria. The Australian government did the same in 2011 in response to what it called the “deeply disturbing and unacceptable use by the Syrian regime of violence against its people”. A year later, the Gillard government applied further sanctions and called for “intensified pressure on Damascus to stop its brutality”.

Luke Cornish ran up against the sanctions when he tried to send \$28,000 raised for Syrian orphans to SOS Children’s Villages International last year. Sanctions have isolated Syria from global banking and payment systems, so the charity advised him to wire the money to its German bank account. However, his Australian bank declined the transfer, Cornish says, adding: “I made the mistake of using the word ‘Syria’ on the transfer description.” The UN Special Rapporteur on sanctions, Idriss Jazairy, says the restrictions have “contributed to the suffering of the Syrian people” by blocking imports ranging from anti-cancer drugs and vaccines to crop seeds and water pumps. Though not endorsed by the UN, the sanctions have had a “chilling effect” on humanitarian aid and obstruct efforts to restore schools, hospitals, clean water, housing and employment, Jazairy reported in 2018.

What, then, are the prospects for restoring Syria’s endangered antiquities, including Palmyra? Answers may lie in an ambitious Russian-funded project to rebuild Aleppo’s Great Mosque. It’s a masterpiece of Islamic architecture and symbol of the city, which lies north-west of Palmyra and lost one-third of its famed Old Quarter in fighting which ended in 2016. The mosque’s 45-metre minaret stood for more than 900 years until it collapsed during fighting in 2013. Today, it is a thousand-tonne pile of limestone blocks overlooked by a towering crane. Putting the minaret back up is the job of an all-Syrian team of architects and engineers, stonemasons and woodworkers. They must also restore the badly damaged columns, ceilings and walls of the prayer hall and arcades surrounding the mosque’s vast courtyard. Project director and architect Sakher Oulabi, who showed me around the site, says the workers feel a heavy responsibility: “We all understand we are doing something very important for the soul of our city and our country.”

Driving the rebuild is the Syria Trust for Development, chaired by Asma al-Assad, the President’s wife – so the project has considerable clout. Nevertheless, its technical challenges are almost as formidable as Palmyra’s. The minaret’s 2400 or so fallen stones must be weighed and measured, strength-tested with ultrasound and photographed from many angles so that photogrammetry – the science of making three-dimensional measurements from images – can help to determine where every stone fits. Materials and techniques must be as close as possible to the original: “An expert may notice the difference between new and old, but the public must not,” engineer Tamim Kasmoo says. However, limestone that best matches the original is in a quarry outside government control, in Idlib province. As a senior US Defence Department official, Michael Mulroy, noted, Idlib harbours “the largest collection of al-Qaeda affiliates in the world right now”.





The Grand Colonnade, built in the second and third centuries; noted by UNESCO as an example of Rome's engagement with the East. ALEX RAY

Palmyra's giant stones are as white as old bones when we leave the site one evening at dusk. Tarek joins friends for iftar, the meal that breaks the Ramadan fast and begins with dates and water in line with a tradition supposedly begun by the prophet Muhammad. Our driver, Ahmad, has put aside the pistol he's been carrying in his belt. He insists there is no prospect of an IS comeback, but says he carries the weapon because local roads can be dangerous. All the town's hotels are destroyed, so we bed down in a private home and hear artillery fire throughout the night.

At dawn, a steady wind blows cold off the mountains. A road runs past the wreckage of a luxury hotel, where guests once dined while overlooking the ruins and below which Khaled al-Asaad was chained for his last 28 days, to the high perimeter walls of the Temple of Bel complex. From here, having sought the blessings of temple deities, ancient camel trains made the long desert crossing eastward to the Euphrates, with merchandise destined for markets as far away as China.

At the temple entrance today, a young soldier is hunkered down in a guard-post made from ammunition boxes and corrugated iron plastered with mud. "I was here all winter, but at least it didn't snow," he says. He apologises for having to inspect our papers and invites us to wait on plastic chairs while he clears our visit with a superior. I ask about the night's gunfire. "It was only the army practising," he says, pointing to a nearby mountain with a medieval citadel on its summit. A decade ago, I stood on its ramparts to take panoramic photos of Palmyra, but now it is an off-limits military zone.

Tarek and the soldier discuss welcome news: the spring that feeds Palmyra's oasis is flowing for the first time in 27 years. The source of the city's historic wealth, it has watered settlements here since Neolithic times. The spring's revival has come too late for Tarek's family orchard; its olive and pistachio trees have withered and died. But he takes it as a hopeful sign that enough of fabled Palmyra can be restored, for the prosperity of its people and the wonder of the world.

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