

ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Planning for Safeguarding Heritage Sites in Syria and Iraq¹

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August 2018 Monthly Report

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¹ This report is based on research conducted by the American Schools of Oriental Research Cultural Heritage Initiatives. Monthly reports reflect reporting from a variety of sources and may contain unverified material. As such, they should be treated as preliminary and subject to change.

Executive Summary

Military activity in Syria decreased during the month of June, with the majority of armed groups in Syria solidifying territorial claims and consolidating power. In Idlib Governorate, Syrian Islamist opposition group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) carried out an arrest campaign targeting Syrians suspected of being in support of reconciliation talks with Damascus. HTS also deployed military equipment to the frontline between Hama and Idlib Governorate, as pro-regime forces, including Russian forces, closed and reopened border crossings as talks of an upcoming military offensive began.²

ISIS continues to lose territory in Syria; however, the group carried out at least two attacks in Idlib and Suwayda Governorates against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Syrian regime respectively, indicating that it retains operational capabilities outside of its territorial control. Pro-regime militias began operations to oust ISIS from its territorial holdings in Suwayda Governorate after reportedly relocating hundreds of militants to from the Yarmouk Basin to Suywada.³

In Deir ez-Zor Governorate military operations continued in an effort to force out ISIS from the area. However, infighting between pro-regime forces, including Russian and Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, was reported. At the end of the reporting period, members of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Front reportedly clashed with SARG forces after deploying to al-Bukamal.⁴

Key Points

- Turkish-backed forces reportedly intentionally destroyed the Martyr Avesta Xabur Shrine and Cemetery in Afrin, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0158**
- Damage and looting was reported at Tal al-Ashari in Daraa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0155**
- Three tombs were discovered in the Middle Euphrates Valley in the Raqqa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0156**
- International Coalition warplanes hit the Khaled bin al-Walid Mosque in al-Marashda, Deir ez-Zor Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0157**

Report

ASOR CHI recorded six incident reports during the August 2018 reporting period.

Continuing instability in Syria has allowed for illegal excavations and theft at archaeological sites. In Idlib Governorate, Syrian media reported illegal excavation and theft at the site of Qunaya, Idlib Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0154**). Damage and looting was also reported at Tal al-Ashari in Daraa Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0155**).

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib/syrian-army-preparing-phased-idlib-assault-source-idUSKCN1LE25S>; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/09/syria-situation-report-august-6-28-2018.html>

³ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/09/syria-situation-report-august-6-28-2018.html>

⁴ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/09/syria-situation-report-august-28.html>

In Aleppo Governorate, Turkish-backed forces were accused of intentionally destroying the Martyr Avesta Xabur Shrine and Cemetery in Afrin (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0158**). Video footage showed heavy machinery present in the cemetery. ASOR CHI has previously reported on Turkish forces and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) vandalizing and carrying out intentional destruction of Kurdish sites in Aleppo Governorate.⁵

In Raqqa Governorate, Internal Security Forces discovered three tombs that had been looted at an unknown time (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0156**). Also, in Raqqa satellite imagery showed damage to a mosque as a result of explosives (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0159**).

In Deir ez Zor Governorate, US-led Coalition airstrikes reportedly damaged a mosque in the village of al-Marashda (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0157**).

⁵ For additional reporting on intentional destruction of Kurdish sites in Aleppo Governorate, see **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0072** and **SHI 18-0074**, in the **March 2018 Monthly Report**; **SHI 18-0092** in the **April 2018 Monthly Report**; **SHI 18-0016** in the **May 2018 Monthly Report**; and **ASOR CHI Incident Report Feature: Intentional Destruction of Religious Sites in Afrin** available at: <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/incident-report-feature-afrin-religious-sites/>