

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

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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

During the reporting period, the US government announced its intention to withdraw US forces from Syria in the near future due to the imminent defeat of ISIS.² The government did not provide a hard deadline for this withdrawal. Critics of the decision raised concerns about whether it would empower Iran in Syria and what would happen to the US's Kurdish allies, who are considered to be terrorists by Turkey.³ Following the announcement, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Coalition Envoy Brett H. McGurk issued their resignations.

Following the announcement of the departure of US forces the Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG) called on the Syrian regime to "assert control" in the city of Manbij after a Turkish buildup of forces in the area. The YPG is anticipated to open up discussions with the Syrian regime in exchange for protection from Turkey. Kurdish officials also are reportedly looking to Moscow for support against Turkey.⁴ At the end of the reporting period, US forces were still present in Manbij.

In the first weeks of the reporting period, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes, advanced into the town of Hajin, capturing the hospital on December 10.⁵ The SDF later captured the rest of the town on December 15. The United Nations reported that ISIS was using civilians as "bargaining chips" and executing others accused of supporting the SDF.⁶ Fighting continued for ISIS-held areas of Deir ez-Zor Governorate at the end of the reporting period.

Events during the reporting period indicate a thawing of relations between Syria and members of the Arab League, which suspended Syria's membership in 2011. December in Damascus saw the re-opening of the United Arab Emirates Embassy, a visit by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, and the first direct flight between Tunisia and Syria.⁷

Overall, ASOR CHI reported an uptick in damages across Syria with heavy damage as a result of ongoing military campaigns and aerial bombardment, lack of maintenance, looting, and vandalism.

Key Points

- Syrian-opposition forces militarized an archaeological site in Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0173**
- Satellite imagery revealed ongoing expansions of illegal excavations at Apamea, Hama Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0174**
- An Iraqi airstrike damaged a mosque in Deir ez-Zor Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0177**

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46623617>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/us-withdrawal-syria-hands-victory-iran/578962/>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/let-down-by-u-s-syrian-kurdish-leaders-look-to-russia-and-assad-idUSKCN10Q18E>

⁵ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/12/syria-situation-report-november-29.html>

⁶ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-un/islamic-state-executing-people-in-syrias-deir-al-zor-un-idUKKBN10418W>

⁷ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181227-tunisia-resumes-direct-flights-with-syria-as-uae-reopens-damascus-embassy/>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/sudan-bashir-arab-leader-visit-syria-war-began-181217005423314.html>; <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-emirates-idUKKCN10Q0PA>

- Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army members vandalized a cemetery in Tell Qurbê, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0178**
- The condition of a historic mosque deteriorated due to lack of maintenance in Raqqa, Raqqa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0185**

Report

During the reporting period, there was a marked increase in damage to cultural heritage sites across Syria. In Deir ez-Zor Governorate, ongoing aerial bombardment by the US-led Coalition damaged at least two mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0175** and **SHI 18-0183**). Video footage and photographs of mosques from Deir ez-Zor also showed the condition of four mosques likely damaged during ongoing US-backed SDF operations against ISIS (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0176**, **SHI 18-0179**, **SHI 18-0184**, and **SHI 18-0188**). Finally, an Iraqi airstrike against ISIS targets in Deir ez-Zor damaged a mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0177**).

In Aleppo Governorate, Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces reportedly vandalized a cemetery in the Afrin Canton region (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0178**). The targeting of cemeteries by armed groups in Aleppo Governorate has increased in 2018, marking a possible pattern of intentional destruction against other ethnic or religious groups. ASOR CHI has previously reported on Turkish forces and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) vandalizing and carrying out intentional destruction of Kurdish heritage sites in Aleppo Governorate.⁸

Reconstruction work also took place in Aleppo Governorate. In the city of Aleppo, pro-regime forces rebuilt damaged portions of the al-Akhal Mosque (**ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0189**). The mosque had previously been damaged by bombardment. In the city of Manbij, the Authority of Tourism and Protection of Antiquities (ATPA) cleaned a 4th–5th Century CE tomb that was previously looted by ISIS (**ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0187**). The ATPA also moved exposed archaeological materials to a more secure location in Manbij due to ongoing instability in the city (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0188**).

In Raqqa Governorate, ancient cultural heritage sites are suffering damage from neglect. New photographs from the city of Raqqa detail the condition of the archaeological sites of Tell Biaa and Qasr al-Banat (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0180** and **SHI 18-0181**). Present at both sites are evidence of looting, likely by ISIS, and evidence of neglect such as trash piling up. The condition of the al-Qadim Mosque, also located in the city, has also deteriorated due to lack of maintenance (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0185**).

In Idlib Governorate, satellite imagery indicates the militarization of an archaeological site in Idlib Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0173**). In Hama Governorate, satellite imagery

⁸ 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**; **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0163** and **SHI 18-0168** in the **June 2018 Monthly Report**; **ASOR CHI SHI 18-0158** in the **August 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/>

revealed the ongoing expansion of illegal excavation at Apamea (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0174**). ASOR CHI has reported extensively on illegal excavation at this site.⁹

In Damascus, media reported that a historic house had collapsed in the Old City of Damascus (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0182**). No cause for the collapse was given.

⁹ For more information on previous damage to Apamea, see **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 14-0024** in **Weekly Report 7**, **SHI 14-0085** in **Weekly Report 16-17**, **SHI 14-0108** in **Weekly Report 21-22**, **SHI 15-0130** in **Weekly Report 57-58**, **SHI 15-0141** in **Weekly Report 63-64**, **SHI 16-0093** in **Weekly Report 97-98**, and **SHI 18-0100** in **May 2018 Monthly Report**.