

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

S-JO-100-18-CA-004

June 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

During the reporting period, hostilities escalated in Daraa Governorate as the Syrian regime and its allies began operations to recapture areas held by Syrian opposition groups, including fighters from Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).² Hundreds of airstrikes have killed dozens of civilians in opposition-controlled areas.³ An estimated 45,000–50,000 people have fled the governorate.⁴

In Idlib Governorate, Russian airstrikes on the town of Zardana killed at least 44 people. United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres called for an investigation into the attack.⁵ Idlib remains host to thousands of displaced Syrians and opposition fighters who were relocated after their formerly-held territories fell to the Syrian regime.⁶ ASOR CHI remains concerned as to the humanitarian situation in Idlib Governorate.

Operations by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued against ISIS-held territory in Deir ez-Zor Governorate. Other armed groups, including pro-regime forces, also carried out operations in the governorate. In early June, the Iraqi Air Force conducted a cross-border airstrike against an ISIS command-and-control building.⁷ In addition, the Syrian regime and the Iraqi Shia militia known as the Popular Mobilization Front (PMF) accused the US of firing missiles at their positions near the Syria-Iraq border. The US denied the reports.⁸ These conflicting claims are symptomatic of a region in which multiple armed groups are operating.

Key Points

- Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army members militarized a cemetery and destroyed a shrine in Anqale, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0163**
- Unidentified perpetrators carried out a VBIED attack near a mosque in Idlib, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0170**
- Reported SARG or Russian airstrikes damaged a mosque in al-Ghariya al-Sharqiya, Daraa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0172**

² <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/187-keeping-calm-southern-syria>

³ <https://syriadirect.org/news/scores-of-daraa-civilians-killed-in-deadly-wave-of-syrian-and-russian-airstrikes/>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44641431> ; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/thousands-continue-flee-deraa-syria-assault-intensifies-180625115803218.html>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib/air-strikes-kill-at-least-44-in-syria-monitor-says-it-suspects-russia-idUSKCN1J40RH> ; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44437718> ; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/syria-scores-of-civilian-casualties-in-suspected-russian-air-strike-on-idlib/>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un/u-n-fears-for-2-5-million-in-syrias-rebel-held-idlib-as-fighting-escalates-idUSKBN1J70V7> ; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/06/1011862>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-syria-islamicstate/iraq-launches-air-strike-against-islamic-state-in-syria-idUSKCN1J30NL>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44519092> ; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/syrian-iraqi-forces-say-u-s-bombs-military-border-positions-u-s-denies-idUSKBN1JD11G> ; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/06/syria-situation-report-june-12-28-2018.html>

Report

During the reporting period, Turkish-backed forces were twice reported to have damaged cemeteries in Aleppo Governorate. In Anqale, Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army members built military installations on the Anqale Cemetery (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0163**). As a result of the militarization, the Ali Dada Shrine was destroyed. In another cemetery in Afrin, a local group shared photographs showing intentional destruction, reportedly by Turkish-backed forces, at an unnamed cemetery (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0168**). ASOR CHI has previously reported on Turkish forces and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) vandalizing and intentionally destroying Kurdish sites in Aleppo Governorate.⁹

In Deir ez Zor Governorate, ongoing military operations against ISIS reportedly resulted in damage to three mosques. SARG and pro-regime forces damaged two mosques in the town of al-Susah (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0165** and **SHI 18-0166**). A reported US-led Coalition airstrike reportedly damaged a third mosque in the city of al-Sha'fah; however, satellite imagery did not appear to corroborate the report (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0171**).

SARG, Russian, and pro-regime aerial bombardment and shelling damaged three mosques in Daraa Governorate. Reported SARG and pro-regime shelling damaged mosques in the towns of Kafr Shams and al-Hirak (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0167** and **SHI 18-0169**). SARG or Russian airstrikes also reportedly damaged a mosque in the town of al-Ghariya al-Sharqiya (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0172**).

In Idlib, unidentified perpetrators carried out a VBIED attack near a mosque, damaging the building (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0170**). In the town of Zardana, a reported Russian airstrike damaged a mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0164**). However, an ASOR CHI assessment of DigitalGlobe satellite imagery did not indicate any damage to the mosque.

⁹ 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/>