

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-led Coalition carried out dozens of airstrikes against ISIS targets in territory along the Syria-Iraq border, where the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continue military operations against the militants.² This aerial bombardment resulted in an uptick of reports of damage to cultural heritage, specifically mosques in ISIS-held towns in Deir ez-Zor Governorate. There were at least six reports of US-led Coalition airstrikes damaging mosques in the governorate, some resulting in reported civilian casualties.

At the beginning of the reporting period, Turkish state-run news agency Anadolu reported that heavy weaponry, including rockets, mortars, and missiles, had been removed from frontlines around Idlib Governorate. The withdrawal of the weapons was in line with a Russian-Turkish agreement reached in September to create a demilitarized buffer zone (15–20 km wide) separating opposition and pro-regime forces. The deadline for the removal of heavy weaponry was October 10; however, it remained unclear if all pro-Islamist opposition groups, often left out of such agreements, had complied with the withdrawal.³ On October 18, the United Nations announced that Russia and Turkey planned to extend the deadline for withdrawal. The international community continues to promote a non-military resolution to the status of Idlib Governorate, which houses approximately three million civilians, including hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians.⁴ It remains unclear what could happen in Idlib Governorate should Syrian opposition groups, designated as terrorists, refuse to comply. ASOR CHI remains concerned for civilians in Idlib Governorate. Any military operations in the governorate would undoubtedly result in high civilian casualties and heavy damage to civilian infrastructure and cultural heritage sites.

During the reporting period, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) reported on the growing trend of assassinations in Idlib Governorate that have targeted al-Qaeda-affiliated and Salafi-jihadist Syrian opposition groups Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Duras al-Din, and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.⁵ According to ISW, ISIS militants are the likely culprits, noting a similar assassination campaign conducted by the group in early 2018. Reports of a now similar campaign have raised concerns of growing ISIS influence in Syria.

On October 18, United Nations Senior Advisory Jan Egeland reported that the Syrian regime had withdrawn the controversial property law known as Law 10. The regime passed Law 10 on April 2, 2018. The law allows for the creation of “redevelopment zones” in the country that will be designated for rebuilding.⁶ The so-called “redevelopment zones” will be designated by decree, allowing only one week for local authorities to be provided with a list of property owners in selected zones. Residents in the zones must move out following a decree. Displaced Syrians and those who have fled the country have raised concerns that this new law does not allow enough time for them to claim their property, if they are even able to reach the proper government offices—an impossibility for most. Egeland cited Russia as announcing the act; however, according to *The*

² <https://www.yahoo.com/news/repels-us-backed-forces-east-syria-holdout-monitor-105220955.html>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45783491>; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/10/syria-situation-report-september-23.html>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45783491>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un/russia-and-turkey-give-more-time-for-idlib-deal-in-syria-u-n-idUSKCN1MS1MT>

⁵ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/10/syria-situation-report-september-23.html>

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law>

National the law remains in effect. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) asserts that there has been no statement by the Syrian regime or Russia confirming any repeal of Law 10.⁷

In mid-October, the United Nations Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, announced that he would be stepping down from his post. Mistura, who has held the post for more than four years, will leave at the end of November. According to the *BBC*, “the UN sees this as a major step in trying to end the seven-year civil war.”⁸

Key Points

- Illegal excavation continues at the archaeological site of Cyrrhus in Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0090 UPDATE**
- A US-led Coalition airstrike destroyed Ammar bin Yasser Mosque in Albu-Badran Neighborhood, al-Susah, Deir ez-Zor Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0121**
- Illegal excavations were reported at Shash Hamdan, a Roman tomb in Manbij, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0124**
- Illegal excavation exposed a Late Roman Mausoleum in Kafr Aleen, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0128**
- Cleaning efforts have begun at the National Museum of Aleppo in Aleppo, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0130**

⁷ <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/despite-un-reassurance-controversial-syrian-expropriation-law-still-in-effect-1.784012>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/19/protecting-syrian-property-rights>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45893986>

Report

During the reporting period, the US-led Coalition increased aerial bombardment over Deir ez-Zor Governorate in support of ongoing SDF military operations against ISIS. This aerial bombardment resulted in an uptick of reports of damage to mosques. ASOR CHI reported on five incidents in which airstrikes damaged mosques in the region (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0121, SHI 18-0122, SHI 18-0023, SHI 18-0025, SHI 18-0026**). SDF artillery bombardment of ISIS-held areas in Deir ez-Zor resulted in damage to two mosques in the embattled town of Hajin (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0118** and **SHI 18-0119**).

Illegal excavation and looting continues in Syria. During the reporting period, ASOR CHI documented three incidents of illegal excavation and looting in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates. In Idlib Governorate, illegal excavation exposed a late-Roman Mausoleum in the village of Kafr Aleen (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0128**). Unidentified looters originally exposed the mausoleum using heavy machinery, which damaged parts of the stone architecture. In Aleppo Governorate, video footage, photographs, and satellite imagery indicated that illegal excavation continued at the archaeological site of Cyrrhus (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0190 UPDATE**). The looting of Cyrrhus is part of the larger pattern of looting in Afrin and ASOR CHI is closely monitoring reports of looting in this area.

Another report of looting in Aleppo Governorate came from the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) who reported that illegal excavations and theft had occurred in and around Manbij, and at Shash Hamdan (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0124**). SANA accused the US-backed SDF of being responsible for the looting. However, through previous reporting by the ASOR CHI team and discussions with ASOR CHI sources, this claim was largely disproven. ASOR CHI continues to investigate whether these reports are part of a larger false-reporting pattern in Syria.

In some areas recaptured by the SARG and pro-regime forces, aspects of life appear to be normalizing. Syrians who have been able to return to recently captured areas, however, report a severe lack of infrastructure, including access to clean water and electricity. In some areas, locals and returnees have taken the initiative to clear debris themselves, often with limited equipment. In the city of Aleppo, local residents have begun cleanup and restoration efforts, reportedly with international support, at the National Museum (**ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0130**). Local residents in the town of al-Lataminah, which remains contested territory between the regime and Syrian opposition groups, cleaned at least two mosques in an effort to reopen the sites for use (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0129**).

In Rif Dimashq Governorate, the Syrian government appears to be engaging in major clearing operations of areas heavily damaged in fighting between pro-regime and Syrian opposition groups. Multiple sources reported on the destruction and clearing of mosques in Jobar and Harasta (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0120** and **SHI 18-0127**). At least one of these incidents was attributed to the implementation of Law 10.