

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

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December 2017 Monthly Report

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¹ This report is based on research conducted by the “Cultural Preservation Initiative: Planning for Safeguarding Heritage Sites in Syria and Iraq.” Weekly 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 Syrian regime and its allies continued to target opposition-held areas in Eastern Ghouta leading the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to issue a warning stating that life has become “impossible” for the 400,000 people “trapped” in the besieged area.² The Syrian regime has continued to recapture territory once held by Syrian opposition forces. On December 29, Syrian opposition forces left the town of Beit Jin in Rif Dimashq Governorate for Idlib Governorate.

Cultural assets in these hotly contested areas of Syria have already been heavily impacted, and the rate and magnitude of damage and destruction has again increased. As regions come under SARG control, cultural sites should become accessible to monitoring and inspection by the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums; however, the organization has been relatively silent on the status of Syrian cultural heritage since the departure of General Director Maamoun Abdulkarim, signaling a high-level SARG pivot away from engagement with cultural heritage issues. Syrian heritage had previously been a springboard for international engagement and cultural diplomacy for SARG when political outcomes in Syria were highly uncertain.

Idlib Governorate remains the final stronghold of opposition forces, however Syrian regime forces have pledged to recapture the entirety of the province.³ While likely anticipating future clashes with pro-regime forces, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has blocked ISIS offensives aimed at capturing territory in Idlib Governorate.⁴ Turkish forces continue to operate in Idlib Governorate. By the end of the reporting period, SARG and pro-regime forces had advanced into Idlib Governorate for the first time since 2015, when government forces were forced out by Syrian opposition forces.⁵

Aerial bombardment also continues over Deir ez-Zor Governorate, where ISIS has swiftly lost territory in its former stronghold. On December 3, the Syrian-Kurdish YPG fighters aligned with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced that they had “fully captured” the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor from ISIS with assistance from both Russian and US-led Coalition airstrikes.⁶ It was unclear from the report whether or not the US and Russian airstrikes were conducted with any coordination between the two groups. Cultural assets in the region remain at high risk.

Developments in December continue to raise questions as to the future of negotiations between Russia, Syria, and the United States. Russia accused the US-led Coalition of training former ISIS fighters in Syria in an alleged ongoing attempt to destabilize the country.⁷ Russia also confirmed, for the first time, the number of Russian troops engaged in military operations in Syria—48,000

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42394259>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-rebels-depart-enclave-in-south-as-army-gains-in-north-idUSKBN1EN10Z>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib/syrian-army-and-iranian-backed-militias-push-towards-idlib-province-idUSKBN1E500R>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-rebels-depart-enclave-in-south-as-army-gains-in-north-idUSKBN1EN10Z>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ypg/syrian-kurdish-ypg-says-seized-eastern-region-from-islamic-state-idUSKBN1DX0GB> ; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/12/back-to-west-russia-shifts-its-air.html>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-usa/russia-accuses-u-s-of-training-former-islamic-state-fighters-in-syria-idUSKBN1EL0KZ>

according to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.⁸ In addition, talks between the Syrian opposition and the Syrian government delegation stalled in Geneva. On December 29, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis stated that he anticipated a larger US civilian presence in Syria, including diplomats and contractors.⁹ The new arrivals, according to Mattis, would be tasked with supporting the restoration of services as ISIS continues to lose territory in Syria.¹⁰ Such a move by the US is likely to be met with ire by the Assad regime, which has already called the presence of US forces in Syria illegal. Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a terrorist, stating that it was “impossible” for Syrian peace talks to go forward with him in power.¹¹

On December 9, Iraq announced that the war with ISIS in Iraq had officially ended, holding a victory parade in Baghdad.¹² Muqtada al-Sadr urged the Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces under his control to return state-issued weapons to the government. However, pockets of ISIS militants remain active in the desert of Anbar and in the Diyala.¹³ There is little available funding to rebuild damaged areas like Mosul.¹⁴

The Associated Press reported that between 9,000 and 11,000 Iraqis were killed in the battle for Mosul—a much higher number than previously reported by Iraqi officials or the US-led Coalition.¹⁵ A US Army study of American military units that participated in the battle for Mosul against Islamic State militants found that operations were hampered by difficulties in sharing satellite imagery and because groups sometimes had different understandings of what was happening on the battlefield. This raises concerns about the military’s response to Islamic State’s drone threat, the use of private contractors, the Army’s training for urban warfare, and how American forces communicated with Mosul’s trapped residents. The unclassified report does not scrutinize the use of airpower, but asserted that there are “open questions” as to whether aerial bombardment and heavy ground weaponry were the most effective options “for targets in dense urban terrain.”¹⁶ The severe impacts on cultural heritage sites and infrastructure, particularly in Mosul’s Old City and, in eastern Mosul, on the campus of Mosul University, are now well known.

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-syria-military/russia-says-48000-of-its-troops-took-part-in-syria-campaign-idUSKBN1EG1EQ>

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/mattis-sees-larger-u-s-civilian-presence-in-syria-idUSKBN1EN1H8>

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/mattis-sees-larger-u-s-civilian-presence-in-syria-idUSKBN1EN1H8>

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkeys-erdogan-calls-syrias-assad-a-terrorist-says-impossible-to-continue-with-him-idUSKBN1ELOW5>

¹² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42291985> ; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-parade/iraq-holds-victory-parade-after-defeating-islamic-state-idUSKBN1E407Z> ; <https://apnews.com/18dca83bc4127ac0805ebc5d6be54/Iraqi-Shiite-cleric-urges-fighters-to-disarm-after-IS-defeat>

¹³ <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5793/The-Islamic-State-Group-Lives-On---In-Iraq%E2%80%99s-Deserts.htm>; <https://www.iraqnews.com/iraq-war/provincial-official-warns-new-islamic-state-threat/>; <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/insurgents-again-the-islamic-states-calculated-reversion-to-attrition-in-the-syria-iraq-border-region-and-beyond>; <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/down-but-not-out-isil-will-regroup-and-rise-again-1.690559>

¹⁴ <https://apnews.com/daf97af61a044eecb9c5f2a7b283ed00>

¹⁵ <https://apnews.com/bbea7094fb954838a2fdc11278d65460/9,000-plus-died-in-battle-with-Islamic-State-group-for-Mosul>

¹⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-army-study-finds-flaws-with-militarys-pivotal-assault-on-mosul-1513333800>

On December 17, gunmen assassinated the mayor of Misrata, Libya's third largest city, an indication of the state of security that remains particularly fragile in the western part of the country.¹⁷ That same day, Khalifa Hiftar, the commander-in-chief of the Libyan National Army (LNA), announced that he considered the 2015 UN-backed Libyan Political Agreement to have expired and that the LNA offers the only viable political future for a unified Libya, setting eastern and western factions on a course for further confrontation.¹⁸

According to Forbes Magazine's 2018 Doing Business report, Libya is the second worst place in the world to conduct business, ahead of only Afghanistan, due in large measure to the fact that it shares with Yemen the highest score for corruption and has no register of private property.¹⁹

Nevertheless, there have been important milestones in internal negotiations towards national reconciliation between rival factions in Libya, with the UN-backed government announcing its intention to facilitate the return of families displaced from Tawergha by Misratan forces in 2011.²⁰ On December 29, the Special Forces of the Libyan National Army announced that they had concluded their military operations in the Sidi Khrebiesh neighborhood of Benghazi, successfully clearing the area of opposition forces.²¹

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-mayor/gunmen-assassinate-mayor-of-libyas-biggest-port-city-idUSKBN1EB0WU>

¹⁸ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/new-risks-libya-khalifa-haftar-dismisses-un-backed-accord>

¹⁹ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/12/20/libya-second-worst-in-world-for-doing-business-forbes-magazine/>

²⁰ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-security-displaced/families-chased-from-libyan-town-in-2011-can-go-home-government-idUKKBN1EK1ED>

²¹ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/12/29/lnas-special-forces-announce-end-of-military-operations-in-benghazis-sidi-khrebiesh-area/>

Key Points

- Newly released photographs show the condition of the Raqqa Museum and its collection in Raqqa, Raqqa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0098 UPDATE**
- DigitalGlobe satellite imagery reveals damage to exposed architecture at Mari, Tell Hariri, Deir ez-Zor Governorate, Syria. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0224**
- Newly released photographs show damage to the British Cemetery in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0083**
- Newly released photographs show the condition of Hatra, Ninawa Governorate, Iraq. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0085**
- Newly released photographs show the stabilization of Qasr al-Birka in Benghazi, Cyrenaica, Libya. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0038 UPDATE**
- Illegal excavation is occurring at the Western Necropolis in Cyrene, Shahat, Cyrenaica, Libya. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0045**

Report

Syria

During the reporting period, reported Russian airstrikes damaged two mosques, one in Aleppo Governorate and one in Idlib Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0226** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0227**, on pp. 49–50, 51–54). A reported SARG or Russian airstrike damaged a mosque in Aleppo Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0225**, on pp. 47–48). SARG artillery reportedly damaged a mosque in the Rif Dimashq Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0232**, on pp. 76–77).

In Daraa Governorate a group cleaned up debris and removed explosives at Bosra al-Sham (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0230**, on pp. 67–71). During the reporting period, an improvised explosive device (IED) of unknown origin exploded in the village of Taldou in Homs Governorate, damaging the al-Kabir Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0233**, on pp. 78–79). The extent of the damage is unknown. As clean-up progresses, and airstrikes decrease, more of these incidents are expected to occur. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring such incidents.

Since the end of fighting in Raqqa, photographs and videos have been released showing the condition of various buildings and sites in the city and region (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0098 UPDATE**, **SHI 17-0114 UPDATE**, **SHI 17-0228**, and **SHI 17-0231**, on pp. 9–30, 31–35, 55–64, and 72–75). The Raqqa Museum was heavily damaged during the fighting, and the building is in disrepair. The interior of the building shows signs of vandalism and the collection has been ransacked and largely destroyed. The Authority of Tourism and Protection of Antiquities - Jazira Canton (ATPA) posted photographs of confiscated artifacts that were taken from the Museum, which are now being stored elsewhere. The ATPA also visited the site of Heraqla and published photographs of the DGAM's storage facility there. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery confirms the damage to the storehouses began prior to 2011 and, as of this past month, there has been limited rehabilitation. The warehouses were reportedly looted in 2013. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring reports of looted and recovered objects in areas subject to illicit excavation and looted museum collections.

The main theater of action during the month of December was in Deir ez-Zor Governorate, against the remaining ISIS fighters. Reported SARG airstrikes damaged three mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0222**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0223**, and **ASOR CHI Incident Report**

SHI 17-0235, on pp. 36–37, 38–40, 83–87). DigitalGlobe satellite imagery revealed damage to Mari and a mosque, both carried out by unknown perpetrators (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0224** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0229**, on pp. 41–46, 65–66). With the main fighting in the city of Deir ez-Zor ceasing during the reporting period, newly released photographs showed the condition of the Church of the Virgin Mary (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0234**, on pp. 80–82). The UNESCO World Heritage site of Mari was severely damaged, with standing buildings being leveled, possibly from an airstrike or explosives. No new illegal excavation is present, but neglect and weathering have damaged the site.

Iraq

In Ninawa Governorate, newly released photographs from Hatra show the condition of the site since its liberation (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0085**, on pp. 122–130). Damage from ISIS is still apparent in destroyed statues and columns. Damage from the elements and neglect of the site is also apparent in weathering of other carved designs. Hatra is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and ASOR CHI is committed to helping preserve and protect the site.

In Mosul, during the reporting period, the Eastern Preparatory School was re-opened (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0082**, on pp. 100–102). This school was heavily damaged during the fight against ISIS, and has been cleaned and stabilized. New photographs of the British cemetery in Mosul, which contains the graves of British soldiers, were released, showing bulldozing by ISIS and the building of modern structures. In July 2017, the structures were removed (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0083**, on pp. 103–117).

In Dohuk Governorate, unknown persons vandalized a Christian cemetery in Derbon, knocking over and damaging tombstones (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0084**, on pp. 118–121). These cemetery vandalisms follow similar damage reported in November 2017, possibly indicating a rising trend of sectarian vandalism of religious-affiliated sites. ASOR CHI will continue to monitor reports of damage to religious-affiliated sites.

Libya

In Benghazi, the Libyan Department of Antiquities (DoA) carried out further stabilization at Qasr al-Birka (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0038 UPDATE**, on pp. 134–136). The DoA also relocated items from the storeroom at Berenice to a more secure location, given the tenuous security situation in the adjacent neighborhood of Sidi Khrebiesh (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0041**, on pp. 137–139). A new photograph was released on social media showing damage to Qasr al-Manar, where Libyan Independence was declared in 1951, which was seriously damaged in the battle for Benghazi (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0036 UPDATE**, on pp. 131–133). Lastly in Benghazi, the DoA visited the Roman era site of al-Faakat to document damage to the site by urban encroachment (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0042**, on pp. 140–141).

Due to heavy rains in Ptolemais, a stone sculpture was uncovered (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0043**, on pp. 142–144). This sculpture dates to the Roman era and was found near an ancient cistern. The local Tourist Police were alerted, as was the DoA. The DoA excavated the sculpture, moved it to a storeroom, and plans to conduct further salvage excavations.

A photographer in Shahat visited the Western Necropolis at Cyrene and documented recent illegal excavation of the tombs. The photographer alerted the DoA and published the evidence (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0045**, on pp. 147–149). On December 24, 2017 LANA News reported that

two people were arrested for trafficking antiquities, possibly from Cyrene (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0044**, on pp. 145–146). The head of a Roman-era statue was recovered along with modern artworks. Cyrene became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982. ASOR CHI is committed to helping preserve and protect the site.