

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

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Michael D. Danti, Marina Gabriel, Susan Penacho, William Reynolds, Allison Cuneo, Darren Ashby, Gwendolyn Kristy, Jamie O’Connell, Nour Halabi, Kyra Kaercher

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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

2018 began with increased military activity in Syria, with the dramatic entry of Turkish forces into Aleppo Governorate, increasing aerial bombardment and territorial shifts in Idlib, Hama and Rif Dimashq Governorates, and high numbers of civilian casualties. The Syrian conflict seemed to have quieted slightly towards the end of 2017, but it dramatically escalated in January, and cultural heritage was severely impacted. We predict Syria will continue to experience high levels of cultural heritage damage, destruction, and deterioration in 2018.

On January 14, the US-led Coalition confirmed that it was training recruits for a 30,000-strong force composed mainly of Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in order to maintain security on Syria's borders with Iraq and Turkey, and along the Euphrates River Valley.² Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded to the US-led Coalition announcement by threatening to “strangle” the force in Syria “before it’s even born.”³ Shortly thereafter, on January 20, Turkey, backed by Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces, began a military offensive against YPG forces in Aleppo Governorate. The military operation, under the codename Operation Olive Branch, is reportedly aimed at extending a “buffer zone” that would sever YPG access to the Turkish border.⁴ Turkey considers the YPG to be directly linked to the PKK—a Turkish and US-designated terrorist organization that operates inside Turkey. Turkey has long voiced its concerns regarding increased Kurdish YPG presence along the border it shares with Syria. An FSA commander reported that 25,000 FSA fighters will join Turkish military operations in northern Syria, with the intention of expelling Kurdish YPG forces from Afrin, Tel Rifaat, and “sixteen Arab towns and villages” captured by the YPG in February 2016.⁵

Since January 20, Turkish airstrikes and shelling have pummeled northern Aleppo villages, including the main dam in Afrin known as the 17 April Dam, which provides electricity and water to hundreds of thousands of people in the area.⁶ Dozens of casualties have been reported on both sides. AirWars has begun monitoring civilian casualties from Turkish military actions in Iraq and Syria, tracking at least 41–55 civilian casualties likely caused by Turkish-backed forces. AirWars also reported an estimated 10–15 civilian casualties as a result of Kurdish counterfire.⁷ If Turkish and FSA forces continue to Manbij, it will put US forces, stationed in Manbij, on a collision course in Syria.⁸ US forces maintain a presence in Aleppo Governorate, carrying out “overt patrols near Manbij” and have been fired upon by Turkish forces, forcing them to return fire.⁹

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkish-president-threatens-todrown-us-backed-force-in-syria/2018/01/15/e7789850-f9e7-11e7-b832-8c26844b74fb_story.html

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/erdogan-we-will-strangle-u-s-backed-force-in-syria-before-its-even-born-idUSKBN1F41HI>; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/01/turkeys-erdogan-pivots-to-target-us.html>

⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cwar-after-isis%E2%80%9D-begins-turkey-attacks-america%E2%80%99s-anti-isis-partner>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-ria-turkey-rebels/fsa-commander-says-25000-syrian-rebels-back-turkish-force-in-syria-idUSKBN1FA00K>

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/turkish-forces-target-strategic-hill-near-syrias-afrin/2018/01/28/f869b25e-041c-11e8-aa61-f3391373867e_story.html

⁷ <https://airwars.org/news/turkey-civcas-2018/>; <https://airwars.org/news/turkish-assault-on-syrias-afrin-imperils-civilians-on-both-sides-of-border/>

⁸ <https://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-manbij/as-u-s-looks-to-rein-in-turkish-offensive-manbij-is-key-idINKBN1FB2UZ>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/24/turkey-to-extend-syria-campaign-to-kurdish-controlled-manbij>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/rabrowne75/status/954379535348322304>

On January 28–29, 2018 Hawar News and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that a Turkish airstrike had severely damaged the Early Iron Age temple at Tell Ain Dara, an archaeological site located approximately 5.8 km south of Afrin in Aleppo Governorate. Satellite imagery analysis by ASOR CHI indicates that between January 20–22, 2018 an attack took place at the site, causing heavy damage to the central and southeastern portions of the building. Metal fragments, including a piece that may be a stabilizing fin from the bomb or missile used in the attack were recovered in the area. ASOR CHI published an update on the site that is available on our website.¹⁰

Since the start of the new year, Russian aerial bombardment has dramatically increased over opposition-held areas of Syria despite Russia’s announcement in December 2017 that it would begin drawing back its forces from the country.¹¹ SARG aerial bombardment continued over areas supposedly protected under the Russian-constructed de-confliction zone. During the reporting period, Syrian rescue workers and monitoring groups reported the presence of chlorine gas in several attacks in Eastern Ghouta, Rif Dimashq Governorate, and Idlib Governorate.¹² The increase in aerial bombardment, backed by SARG and pro-regime advancements in Hama and Idlib Governorates, has led to the displacement of 100,000 Syrians.¹³ On January 11, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin and urged him to stop attacks on northern Syria. Turkey, Russia, and Syria have previously agreed on a “de-escalation zone” in Idlib Governorate and surrounding areas.¹⁴ The Syrian regime has defended its actions, stating that the groups it is targeting in Idlib Governorate are not party to the de-escalation zone.¹⁵ On January 12, 2018 aerial bombardment across Idlib and Hama Governorates caused multiple civilian casualties and damaged several mosques. Based on the number of casualties, it is likely that the strikes occurred during Friday prayers, when the mosques tend to be the most crowded. The UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect issued a warning against indiscriminate bombing in Syria.¹⁶

In Raqqa Governorate, efforts remain underway to clear mines left behind by ISIS.¹⁷ At the end of 2017, a “coalition team working with Syrian partners” constructed a steel bridge over the Euphrates River near the village of Hawi al-Hawa. The bridge will reportedly “enable the Raqqa Civil Council to increase required humanitarian assistance efforts and will improve vital access by improvised explosive device experts working to reduce threats to citizens.”¹⁸ On January 22, US government aid chief Mark Green and US Central Command General Joseph Votel made an

¹⁰ <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/update-ain-dara/>

¹¹ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/01/russia-maintains-airstrikes-despite.html>

¹² <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/01/syria-situation-report-january-10-24.html> ; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-chemicalweapons-france-usa/u-s-takes-aim-at-russia-after-suspected-syrian-government-gas-attack-idUSKBN1FC270>

¹³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42633845>

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-russia/erdogan-calls-on-putin-to-end-northern-syria-attacks-by-regime-forces-idUSKBN1F02D0>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-france/syrian-government-defends-idlib-campaign-condemns-france-idUSKBN1F0120>

¹⁶ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2018-01-18/note-correspondents-statement-adama-dieng-un-special>

¹⁷ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-legacy-of-isis-manufactured-mines-in-raqqa>

¹⁸ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1408234/coalition-engineers-erect-steel-bridge-in-syria/source/GovDelivery/>

unannounced visit to Raqqa. The US has increased efforts to stabilize previously ISIS-held areas in Syria to prevent them from falling into the hands of “other militants.”¹⁹

During the reporting period, unknown forces continued to carry out drone attacks targeting the al-Hmeimeem Air Base—host to Russian military forces in Syria.²⁰ On January 11, Russia announced that it was investigating what country was producing the explosives used in the drone attacks.²¹ Speculation continues as to what party is involved in the attacks.

On January 30, Russia hosted a diplomatic conference in the town of Sochi.²² According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), the dialogue was largely a failure in Russia’s efforts to “construct an agreement that would formally end the war on terms favorable to Syrian President Bashar al Assad.”²³ Meanwhile, conditions for Syrian IDPs and those living under siege remain increasingly dire.²⁴ During the reporting period, the bodies of nine Syrian refugees were found frozen in a “people-smuggling” area between Syria and Lebanon.²⁵ The death of these refugees, highlights the desperate choices Syrians continue to make as the conflict continues into its seventh year.

On January 15, representatives from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) met with US officials in Washington, D.C. The FSA urged the US to resume a suspended CIA program that provided military aid, citing the challenges posed by growing Iranian influence in Syria. According to some reports, the FSA representatives were not granted meetings with the Department of Defense or State Department, despite their request.²⁶ On January 20, the FSA officially began joint operations with Turkish forces in Aleppo Governorate under Operation Olive Branch.

In Iraq, parliamentary elections have been scheduled for May 12, 2018. Initial sessions to schedule the elections for this date, which was suggested by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, were delayed because of a boycott by Kurdish and Sunni parliament members, who wanted to allow more time for displaced Iraq citizens.²⁷ This election will decide the prime minister; Abadi is seeking reelection.²⁸ The Islamic Dawa party, led by Abadi, chose not to run in the election, allowing its

¹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usaid/u-s-aid-chief-makes-unannounced-visit-to-syrian-city-of-raqqa-idUSKBN1FB2L4>

²⁰ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/01/syria-situation-report-december-14.html> ; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/who-is-attacking-russias-main-base-in-syria-a-new-mystery-emerges-in-the-war/2018/01/09/4fdaea70-f48d-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042_story.html

²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-attack/russia-investigating-drone-attacks-on-syria-bases-ria-idUSKBN1F01SK>

²² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-congress-demist/u-n-syria-mediator-to-head-commission-to-draft-new-syrian-constitution-ifax-idUSKBN1FI0V1>

²³ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/01/putin-fails-to-secure-end-to-syrian.html>

²⁴ <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=82847> ; <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=82893> ; <http://www.un.org/app/s/news/story.asp?NewsID=58419> ; https://www.unicef.org/media/media_102458.html

²⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/refugees-frozen-lebanon-syria-border-180119180011632.html>

²⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/syrian-rebel-delegation-in-washington-seeking-revival-of-cia-aid-idUSKBN1F41ZV> ; <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/369037-syrian-rebels-make-pitch-to-restore-cia-program-report> ; <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/syria-opposition-washington-iced-out-white-house.html>

²⁷ <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/020120181>;

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/03012018>

²⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-election/iraq-sets-may-12-date-for-elections-to-be-contested-by-pm-abadi-iran-allies-idUSKBN1FB10G>

party members to form new coalitions.²⁹ PM Abadi has created a new coalition, “Nasr al-Iraq,” while current Vice President Nouri al-Maliki, also a Dawa member and critic of Abadi, aligned with the “State of Law Coalition.”³⁰

Overall, the number of incidents of violence increased in January from the previous month.³¹ ISIS continues to remain a threat in Diyala and Salahaddin Governorates.³² The most violent terrorist incident took place in Baghdad on January 15 when two suicide bombings, likely perpetrated by ISIS, took place in Tayaran Square in central Baghdad, killing at least 35 people and injuring 90 more. Post-conflict stabilization efforts press on at a steady and understandably slow pace. Although the number of Iraqis returning to their areas of origin has surpassed those who remain internally displaced, casualties are still being recovered from the rubble in Mosul.³³

In Libya, January saw brief skirmishes erupt in nearly every corner of the country as rival factions continue to vie for control of municipalities and regional influence. On January 15, the Presidency Council (PC) in Tripoli declared a local state of emergency following an attack on Mitiga airport by the 33rd Infantry Brigade, a militia based in Tajoura that was attempting to free prisoners held in a jail on the Mitiga compound.³⁴ The attack resulted in at least 20 casualties, damaged two Afriqiyah Airways jets, and closed the airport for five days. The PC-backed Rada Special Deterrence Force arrested 61 people in the aftermath of the attack.³⁵

On January 15, members of the Sudanese Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) killed six soldiers of Khalifa Hiftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) near the Jaghbub oasis in Cyrenaica.³⁶ In retaliation, the LNA launched operation Desert Fury, targeting an armed convoy of JEM near al-Kufra on January 22.³⁷ According to the LNA, some of this convoy was affiliated with the Chadian Front pour l’Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT).³⁸

On January 22, the Operation Dignity/Libyan National Army forces of Khalifa Hiftar continued to shell the city of Derna in the Cyrenaica. While the shelling did not result in any reported loss of life, it is a reminder that the ongoing siege of Derna has a violent edge.³⁹

On January 23, there was a double car-bombing outside of the Bayaat al-Radwan Mosque in the Salmani neighborhood of Benghazi, killing 33 people. Ahmed al Fituri, the chief of a special

²⁹ <https://www.arab48.com/-/الانتخابات-بقائمة-العبادي-والمالكي>

³⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/iraq-election-shiite-alliance-sectarianism.html>

³¹ <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2018/02/violence-up-in-iraq-jan-2018-2.html>

³² <https://www.iraqnews.com/iraq-war/provincial-official-warns-new-islamic-state-threat/>

³³ <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraqi-returnees-surpass-number-of-internally-displaced-for-first-time-since-2013-1.694972> ; <http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/22279/Civil-Defense-completes-recovery-of-bodies-under-rubble-in-Mosul> ; <https://www.voanews.com/a/mosul-workers-still-pulling-bodies-from-rubble-six-months-after-is-explusion/4227460.html>

³⁴ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2018/01/15/pc-declares-local-state-of-emergency-as-maetiga-airport-is-attacked-by-pro-terrorist-militia/> ; <https://www.libyaherald.com/2018/01/23/rada-arrests-61-connected-with-mitiga-airport-attack/>

³⁵ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2018/01/23/rada-arrests-61-connected-with-mitiga-airport-attack/>

³⁶ <https://warisboring.com/the-libyan-national-army-targets-sudanese-and-chadian-militants/>

³⁷ <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/airstrike-hits-sudanese-mercenaries-south-east-libya>

³⁸ <https://warisboring.com/the-libyan-national-army-targets-sudanese-and-chadian-militants/>

³⁹ <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/dignity-operation-shells-besieged-city-derna>

investigation unit, died in the first blast and appears to have been targeted.⁴⁰ While no party has claimed responsibility for these bombings, they are part of a general trend of violence that seems intended to disrupt the control that the LNA has established in Benghazi.

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) discussed the implementation of the UN action plan for Libya with Libyan leaders, and announced that financial support is now in place for nationwide elections at some point in 2018.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Khalifa Hiftar gave an interview with Jeune Afrique expressing his opinion that Libya is not mature enough to support democracy and that he intends to deploy his forces to secure the electoral process.⁴²

Despite this instability, the Libyan dinar has strengthened considerably in black-market trading against the dollar. While this improvement may reflect optimism surrounding planned elections or growing oil production at a time of increased oil prices, it may also be that there are so few liquid dinars left in the marketplace that the relative price of the dinar has collapsed.⁴³ For average Libyans who have limited savings in either foreign or domestic currency, this change does little to alleviate the ongoing liquidity crisis, though the price of some imported goods may decrease.

Key Points

- A reported Russian airstrike damaged al-Ma'arra Museum in Ma'arat al-Numan, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0002**
- A Byzantine tomb in al-Hasakah Governorate was restored in al-Farahia, al-Hasakah Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0007**
- Alleged Turkish shelling damaged Tell Ain Dara Temple in Ain Dara, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0028**
- Citizens decried the condition of Birs Nimrud (ancient Borsippa) in Babil Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0002**
- A Christian cemetery in the Wadi 'Ikab area was damaged in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0001**
- Heavy rains contributed to the collapse of a number of mud-brick buildings at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ghadames, Tripolitania. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0002**
- The grave of Sheikh Mahdi al-Sanusi near Kufra, Cyrenaica was ransacked. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0004**

⁴⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/libya-double-car-bombing-kill-33-benghazi-180124062921229.html>

⁴¹ <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/step-step-un-action-plan-successful-transition-takes-hold-libya>

⁴² <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/507758/politique/khalifa-haftar-la-libye-nest-pas-encore-mure-pour-la-democratie/>

⁴³ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2018/01/26/libyan-dinar-surges-to-4-80-against-the-dollar-a-black-market-traders-view/>

Report

Syria

Archaeological sites remain under threat in Syria. In Raqqa Governorate, the Authority of Tourism and Protection of Antiquities (ATPA) reported that the ancient site of Sura was bulldozed prior to its capture by the SDF (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0001** on pp. 12–16). The site has also been subject to illegal excavation. In Daraa Governorate, the Syrian Arab News Agency reported that illegal excavations are occurring in the ruins at al-Mataiya (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0026** on pp. 113–117). DigitalGlobe satellite imagery indicates that illegal excavation began in 2010 and increased between 2014 and 2015. Undated photographs show some ancient buildings have been repaired. Satellite imagery confirmed ongoing militarization and construction at the archaeological site of Qalaat Semaan, which started in October 2017, reportedly by the Turkish military (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0025** on pp. 108–112). Construction includes embankments along roads and inside the walls of the ancient site, as well as the shoring up of a modern wall on the eastern side of the site. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring such reports of damage to archaeological heritage in northern Syria.

Reported Turkish airstrikes also hit the archaeological site of Ain Dara and near ancient Cyrrhus in Nabi Hourri (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0028** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0033** on pp. 121–134, 154–159). DigitalGlobe satellite imagery confirms damage to the Ain Dara Temple occurring on or prior to January 22, 2018. Satellite imagery also shows possible militarization of the lower mound at Ain Dara, with earthen embankments, buildings, and roads constructed beginning in 2013. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery also shows that there have been several airstrikes west of the archaeological site Cyrrhus, and that the site has been militarized. In Deir ez Zor Governorate, reported SARG airstrikes damaged three mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0004**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0006**, and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0027** on pp. 45–49, 55–56, 118–120). The Othman Bin Affan Mosque in Deir ez-Zor has been hit multiple times during the conflict, as shown by DigitalGlobe satellite imagery. Khaled bin Walid Mosque in Buqrus Tahtani was reportedly attacked by SARG forces that burned the mosque and destroyed the contents.

Military operations across Syria damaged several heritage sites in Aleppo, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor, and Rif Dimashq Governorates. In Aleppo Governorate, reported Turkish shelling damaged a mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0030** on pp. 139–146) and a cemetery in Jindaris (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0029** on pp. 135–138). In Damascus Governorate, a missile strike, reportedly fired by opposition forces, damaged churches in the Bab Touma neighborhood of Damascus (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0009** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0010** on pp. 65–66, 67–68).

In Idlib Governorate, reported Russian airstrikes damaged eight mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0003**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0005**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0011**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0013**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0016**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0018**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0022**, and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0034** on pp. 30–44, 50–54, 69–72, 75–76, 80, 87, 94–98, 150–161). Reported SARG shelling and barrel bombing also damaged four mosques in Idlib Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0014**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0015**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0035**, and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0036** on pp. 77–78, 79, 162, 163–164).

In Latakia Governorate, a reported Russian airstrike damaged al-Tefahiya Village Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0008** on pp. 63–64).

A reported Russian airstrike also damaged the al-Ma'arra Museum in Ma'arat al-Numan, Idlib Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0002** on pp. 17–29). This airstrike caused severe damage to the museum's galleries, namely the west wing and gallery. Many artifacts displayed in the courtyard were moved following previous incidents of damage to the museum, and thus most of the damage was limited to the building itself. Several of the artifacts too heavy to move (including two Byzantine-era sarcophagi) were damaged in this incident. This museum has been hit by airstrikes multiple times in the past and is the focus of a joint ASOR-The Day After Heritage Protection Initiative project to conserve and protect the mosaics in the museum.

In Rif Dimashq Governorate, reported SARG shelling and airstrikes damaged five mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0019**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0020**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0021**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0023**, and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0024** on pp. 88, 89–92, 93, 99–102, 103–107). Al-Halima Mosque in Duma sustained the most damage, with the minaret collapsing onto the roof of the mosque. Arbin has been under siege for 26 days, and local people state that al-Kabir Mosque was hit by six missiles. Al-Rahman Mosque has been targeted multiple times during the conflict with some locals reporting the mosque has been used as a base for unnamed armed opposition forces. Also in Rif Dimashq Governorate, a Christian Cemetery in Harasta was vandalized by reported SARG forces before they were expelled by opposition forces (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0017** on pp. 81–86).

In Aleppo Governorate, a car bomb exploded near al-Fateh Mosque in the town of Manbij, damaging it severely (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0012** on pp. 73–74). No group has claimed responsibility. During the reporting period, a fire broke out at Kaab bin Malik Mosque in the city of Aleppo (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0032** on pp. 150–153). There have been conflicting reports regarding the cause of the fire, with one report stating that it was the result of a gas leak and another claiming that it began after an explosive was fired at the mosque.

In Hasakah Governorate, the ATPA published photographs of restoration work at a Byzantine tomb near the village of al-Farahia (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0007** on pp. 57–62). This included cleaning the interior and exterior of the tomb, restoring its floor and the roof, constructing a stone wall around the tomb, and installing a metal door at the tomb entrance.

In Hama Governorate, reports state that the Mar Gerges Church in the town of Maharda was ransacked, with thieves stealing the church doors, donations, and ceremonial cups (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0031** on pp. 147–149).

Iraq

In Ninawa Governorate, new photographs were released that show damage to the Wadi 'Ikab cemetery in Mosul (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0001** on pp. 193–203). Most of this damage is due to intentional destruction by ISIS militants, who destroyed and damaged tombs and headstones. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows that initial destruction at the site occurred between September 28, 2014 and March 6, 2016. In April 2017, military earthworks were built just west of the cemetery. The Wadi 'Ikab Cemetery has been described as the largest burial site of ISIS fighters since the group emerged in 2014. According to a video report by Al Aan Arabic Television published in February 2017, the cemetery holds the remains of nearly 3,000 militants, including

several important ISIS members. Nearby residents recently called on local authorities to repair the cemetery, which they can no longer access because of water-filled trenches dug by ISIS militants during the battle for Mosul.

In Babil Governorate, private citizens filmed a video of the site of Borsippa (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0002** on pp. 204–208). These citizens point out damage to cuneiform inscriptions, bricks, and ceramics at the site, and discuss the lack of government resources for site protection. Borsippa has not been damaged by military activity, but has been neglected and left to the elements since the beginning of the conflict. It is unclear when this video was filmed.

Libya

A twin car bomb detonated near Bayaat al-Radwan Mosque in Benghazi (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0005** on pp. 233–235). The mosque is thought to be a base for Salafi groups operating in the area. The external wall of the mosque was damaged. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. On January 24, 2018 photographs were released on social media showing executions occurring outside the mosque. Reports state that these executions occurred as revenge for victims of the bombings.

During the reporting period two shrines were intentionally damaged. Near Kufra, the grave of Sheikh Mahdi al-Sanusi was ransacked (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0004** on pp. 222–232). This was carried out by unknown armed assailants, but Al Jazeera reports they were members of the Salafi movement, supported by members of the Sibal al-Salam battalion of the Libyan National Army. The battalion has denied its participation. In Tripolitania, the Shrine of Sheikh Muhammad ibn Marbat in Misurata was destroyed, reportedly by Salafi extremists (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0001** on pp. 209–213).

Natural impacts also damaged two heritage sites in Libya during the reporting period. In Cyrenaica, a tree fell on the Department of Antiquities Library at Cyrene, damaging the roof (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0003** on pp. 219–221). Heavy rains damaged the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ghadames during the reporting period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0002** on pp. 214–218). The Department of Antiquities in Tripoli documented the damage, and noted collapsed mud-brick structures weakened by rains and lack of maintenance.