

# ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Planning for Safeguarding Heritage Sites in Syria and Iraq<sup>1</sup>

S-IZ-100-17-CA021

March 2018 Monthly Report — March 1–31, 2018

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<sup>1</sup> 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, violence in Syria continued to increase, taking a heavy toll on heritage sites as well as infrastructure and civilians.

In Rif Dimashq Governorate, SARG and pro-regime forces continued aerial bombardment and military advances against Syrian opposition groups, including Islamist groups, in Eastern Ghouta despite ongoing calls for ceasefires and civilian evacuations by the United Nations. Syrian opposition forces in Eastern Ghouta accused Syria and Russia of deploying a “scorched earth campaign.”<sup>2</sup> More than 1,700 civilians are estimated to have been killed in the violence since mid-February 2018.<sup>3</sup> By mid-March, Syrian opposition groups Ahrar al-Sham and Failaq al-Rahman agreed to Russian-brokered evacuation plans and ceded their controlled territory to the Syrian regime. On March 22–23, an estimated 1,400 fighters of the Salafi-jihadist group Ahrar al-Sham evacuated the town of Harasta, along with 4,500 local residents. On March 23–26, Islamist opposition group Failaq al-Rahman agreed to a similar evacuation deal and left the towns of Arbin, Ain Tarma, Jobar, and Zamalka, and another 13,000 local residents left Eastern Ghouta.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the reporting period, only the city of Douma remained under opposition (Jaish al-Islam) control.

The ongoing aerial bombardment has devastated civilian populations across the country. According to AirWars, an organization that tracks civilian casualties, Russian airstrikes in Hama, Idlib, and Eastern Ghouta killed between 380–715 civilians from March 5–18. One of the more devastating strikes took place in Kafr Batna, when a reported Russian airstrike struck a local market killing at least 55 civilians.<sup>5</sup> The reporting period also saw heavy displacement of people in Aleppo and Rif Dimashq Governorates. On March 16, the United Nations reported that 16,000 people had fled Eastern Ghouta while another 50,000 fled the town of Afrin.<sup>6</sup>

UN Human Rights Chief Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein slammed the UN Security Council, accusing them of failing to “defend human rights and prevent further loss of life.”<sup>7</sup> On March 19, 2018 Russia blocked a meeting of the UNSC that would have discussed the human rights situation in Syria. The Russian Deputy Permanent Representative explained the rejection stating that “human rights is not a subject on the agenda of the security council.”<sup>8</sup>

In northern Syria, Turkish and Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces continued to advance from the Turkish-Syria border into the region of Afrin Canton. On March 18, Turkish and FSA forces captured the city of Afrin, facing little resistance from YPG forces who withdrew to nearby areas. The fall of the city led to reports of widespread looting. Photographs by Turkish photographer Bulent Kilic appeared to show FSA forces looting homes and shops in Afrin.<sup>9</sup> Several photographs also showed

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-government-makes-ghouta-gains-turkey-steps-up-afrin-attack-idUSKCN1GF0L8>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43154146>

<sup>4</sup> <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/03/regime-gains-in-damascus-syria-march-12.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/1625357681040688/photos/a.1647723435470779.1073741828.1625357681040688/2032519230324529/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43427092>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-un-syria/human-rights-chief-slams-security-council-for-inaction-on-syria-idUSKBN1GW005>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un/russia-blocks-u-n-security-council-meeting-on-human-rights-in-syria-idUSKBN1GV2TQ>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-afrin-town/after-the-battle-aid-gunfire-and-looting-in-syrias-afrin-idUSKBN1GV2LG>

FSA forces towing civilian cars and motorcycles out of the city.<sup>10</sup> At least two statues dedicated to Kurdish figures were defaced and vandalized.<sup>11</sup>

During the Turkish-led operations, *The Washington Post* reported on summary executions by Syrian opposition forces participating in the Turkish-led offensive against the YPG in Afrin. Interviews conducted with Syrian opposition members indicated a desire for revenge harbored after Kurdish YPG forces targeted Arab villages in Hasakah Governorate during YPG offensives against ISIS.<sup>12</sup>

The fighting has also exposed archaeological and historical sites to potential combat damage, especially those located near modern settlements. On March 22, 2018 the Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) reported that Turkish and Turkish-backed forces had damaged archaeological remains at the site of Barad during fighting to capture the eponymous village situated within the ruins.<sup>13</sup> Barad is one of a series of sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2011 under the title “Ancient Villages of Northern Syria.” The DGAM reported that airstrikes had damaged the 5th century CE Church of Julianos as well as the attached Tomb of St. Maron, patron saint of the Maronite Church. At the time of writing, ASOR CHI has identified no combat damage to the Church of Julianos, the Tomb of St. Maron, or other remains at the site in available photographs, video, and satellite imagery. However, the condition of portions of the site, including a 6th century CE monastery located southwest of the village, remains undocumented. Evidence of combat damage may yet appear.

International reaction to Turkey’s actions has largely focused on the military campaign, causing Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to lash out at NATO and accuse the military alliance of failing to back a NATO ally.<sup>14</sup> Syria has demanded that Turkey leave Afrin, calling their claim of capturing the city “illegitimate.”<sup>15</sup> Since the start of the offensive known as Operation Olive Branch, the YPG has lost an estimated 600–900 fighters, while Turkey has lost an estimated 43 along with 250–350 Turkish backed militia fighters (including members of the Free Syrian Army).<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, Turkish aid groups began distributing aid after the capture of Afrin and Erdogan has vowed to rebuild the Afrin region and to allow civilians to return.<sup>17</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has called for access to the area to aid impacted civilians, stating that the Turkish Red Crescent, which is currently distributing aid, lacks credibility among Syrian Kurds. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 100,000 local residents have fled the area for Northern Aleppo during the Turkish-led operations in Afrin canton.<sup>18</sup> After capturing Afrin, Erdogan stated that Turkish forces would continue their offensive against the YPG in areas along

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bedirkhanali2/posts/10215069254870073>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-afirin-statue/turkey-backed-forces-pull-down-kurdish-statue-in-afirin-town-center-statement-idUSKBN1GU0CU>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-rebels-are-using-the-turkish-offensive-to-take-revenge-against-kurds/2018/03/06/85c36eea-1e2d-11e8-8a2c-1a6665f59e95\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-rebels-are-using-the-turkish-offensive-to-take-revenge-against-kurds/2018/03/06/85c36eea-1e2d-11e8-8a2c-1a6665f59e95_story.html)

<sup>13</sup> <http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=2384>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/erdogan-slams-nato-for-failing-to-back-syria-campaign>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-afirin-government/syrian-government-demands-turkish-forces-leave-afirin-foreign-ministry-idUSKBN1GV2A9>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/operation-olive-branch-status-update>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/18/world/middleeast/afirin-turkey-syria.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/03/syria-situation-report-march-6-march-20.html>

the Turkish border with Syria, including Manbij, Ain al-Arab (Kobane), Tal Abyad, Ras al-Ain, and Qamishli, and into northern Iraq if necessary.<sup>19</sup>

AirWars released a scathing report on the current conditions in the city of Raqqa, several months after its recapture by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>20</sup> The remains of those killed in airstrikes are still trapped under the rubble, and an estimated 80 percent of the city is uninhabitable. In addition, the investigation concluded that the number of Coalition-inflicted civilian casualties was far higher (approximately 2,000 killed) than previous official estimates. ASOR CHI continues to monitor the condition of Raqqa via open-source information, on-the-ground contacts, and satellite imagery.

As the March reporting period came to an end, the White House sent mixed signals as to the future of US involvement in Syria.<sup>21</sup> US President Donald Trump reportedly told his advisors of his desire for the full withdrawal of American forces in Syria. This announcement led to US military officials warning that any such abrupt departure could result in a possible ISIS resurgence. The current military operations by Turkey in northern Syria have distracted YPG and SDF forces from operations to recapture remaining ISIS-held territory in Deir ez Zor Governorate.

In Iraq, preparations continued for the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for May 12, 2018. As part of his campaign to retain the premiership, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has taken steps to strengthen his support among key constituencies. On March 8, al-Abadi issued a decree that formalized the inclusion of paramilitary units known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as a branch of the Iraqi military.<sup>22</sup> Although most PMF members come from Shia communities, the units also include many other ethnic and religious groups.<sup>23</sup> According to the decree, PMF fighters will be granted many of the same rights as military members, including equivalent pay, legal status, and opportunities to attend military colleges.<sup>24</sup>

Other Iraqi politicians are likewise working to improve their chances in next month's election. Following the creation of the Iraqi National Alliance Coalition in January 2018, Iraqi Vice President Ayad Allawi, a secular Shia, is positioning himself as a possible candidate for the premiership through the development of allies in Sunni, Kurdish, and reformist Shia political circles.<sup>25</sup> His opposition to Iranian involvement in Iraq and willingness to work with individuals from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds may make him an appealing alternative candidate for the premiership in the eyes of the United States and its regional allies.

Multiple developments in March highlight the difficulties that await whoever wins the premiership. The Iraqi economy has improved following the recapture of much of the country from ISIS.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aftrin-turkey/erdogan-says-turkey-may-extend-aftrin-campaign-along-whole-syrian-border-idUSKBN1GV14U> ; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43457214> ; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-threatens-new-attacks-in-syria.html>

<sup>20</sup> <https://airwars.org/news/raqqa-a-city-destroyed-then-forgotten/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43644633>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-iraqs-shiite-militias-formally-inducted-into-security-forces-2018-3>

<sup>23</sup> <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://sofrep.com/100569/hashdt-al-shaabi-to-become-official-iraqi-military-branch/>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ayad-allawi-sets-conditions-recreate-2011-premiership-bid>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21739759-islamic-state-defeated-new-sense-of-nity-prevails-it>

However, more than one-fifth of Iraqis still live in poverty.<sup>27</sup> In areas formerly controlled by ISIS, the poverty rate is more than twice the national average. A lack of investment in the short-term reconstruction of these areas has increased local dissatisfaction with the government, which may sow the seeds for future insurgency.<sup>28</sup> Dissent among the Shia communities of the south is also growing as economic woes persist and the unifying force of the fight against ISIS and Kurdish separatism wanes.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the recapture of land from ISIS in much of the country, the organization continues to launch attacks on government and civilian targets.<sup>30</sup> An uptick in the violence suggests that ISIS is regrouping.<sup>31</sup> During March, the area south and west of Kirkuk was particularly active. ISIS members used fake checkpoints to attack government forces and civilians.<sup>32</sup> The group also targeted religious buildings in the area.<sup>33</sup> Iraqi armed forces have initiated a new operation to clear the region of ISIS insurgents.<sup>34</sup>

Tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) eased following the end of the air blockade and the release of funds to pay state employees in the region.<sup>35</sup> However, the political situation in the KRG remains volatile in the aftermath of the region's failed independence referendum. Protests against unpaid salaries, austerity measures, and corruption took place across the KRG during the middle of March.<sup>36</sup> Kurdish authorities used the security services to break up these protests, which resulted in injuries to both protesters and journalists.<sup>37</sup>

Turkey's ongoing operations against the PKK have added an additional element of instability in northern Iraq. On March 8, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu reportedly asserted that Turkey and Iraq were planning a joint operation against the PKK that would begin sometime after the Iraqi parliamentary election on May 12.<sup>38</sup> Salim al-Jabouri, Iraq's Speaker of Parliament, voiced his support for Turkey's actions against the PKK, but did not go into specifics about how Turkey and

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/0ef23d96-30ca-11e8-ac48-10c6fdc22f03>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-mosul-official/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-defeating-islamic-state-iraqs-shiites-turn-ire-toward-government-1520856000>

<sup>30</sup> <https://apnews.com/d37e18adbb234678923911ec0c42f694>; <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-continues-to-terrorize-liberated-iraq-region-a-1198819.html>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5864/Extremists-Prepared-For-Their-Defeat-In-Iraq-Now-They%E2%80%99re-Re-Grouping.htm>; <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/isil-sleeper-cells-in-iraq-are-a-warning-sign-the-extremist-group-is-already-reforming-1.716800>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/06e46f70-631f-47cb-81b8-53c54bb08545>; <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/539c58a1-1fc6-4943-a6c6-7d5302e657bb>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/isis-terrorists-destroy-sufi-shrine-in-southern-kirkuk-photos/>; <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/9fc158cc-e3b6-41d0-b919-43f3f1715c59>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/7351dd95-04c5-44ef-bc65-88644b99696c>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.france24.com/en/20180313-baghdad-lift-air-blockade-iraq-kurdistan-erbil-independence-referendum>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds/iraq-sends-money-to-pay-kurdish-salaries-for-first-time-since-2014-idUSKBN1GV0T1>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraqi-kurdish-authorities-use-force-to-contain-public-discontent-1.716331>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/iraq-violence-against-protesters-and-journalists-in-kurdistan-region-shows-blatant-disregard-for-freedom-of-expression/>; <https://cpj.org/2018/03/tv-crews-assaulted-detained-covering-protests-in-k.php>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iraq-turkey/turkey-iraq-to-carry-out-joint-operation-against-kurdish-militants-in-iraq-turkish-form-in-idUSKCN1GK18A>; <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/turkey-iraq-ankara-considers-opening-new-front-in-kurdistan.html>

Iraq might cooperate.<sup>39</sup> Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi asserted near the end of the month that no agreement existed between Iraq and Turkey regarding joint operations.<sup>40</sup>

In the past few years, Turkey has conducted numerous airstrikes and ground operations against PKK positions in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. This fighting has intensified as Turkey has stepped up its attacks against the YPG in Syria.<sup>41</sup> Near the end of the month, Turkish ground forces pushed more than 10 km into KRG territory.<sup>42</sup> Turkish activities in the region coincided with an attempt to improve Turkey's relations with the KRG through the resumption of direct flights from Istanbul to Erbil by Turkish Airlines after a six-month suspension.<sup>43</sup>

Turkey also threatened to open a new area of operations against the PKK in Sinjar. Turkey is concerned about the use of Sinjar by the PKK as a base of operations from which to launch cross-border attacks into Turkey. On March 19, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Turkey might intervene in the region.<sup>44</sup> In response, PKK forces withdrew from the area of Sinjar.<sup>45</sup> Iraqi government forces and local Yazidi paramilitaries are now responsible for security in the region.<sup>46</sup> Despite the withdrawal, Turkey continues to threaten intervention if it deems it necessary for its own security.<sup>47</sup> The ongoing instability in Sinjar has exacerbated the difficulties faced by the Yazidis, who continue to suffer from a lack of food, adequate housing, medicine, and psychological services.<sup>48</sup>

During this reporting period, there were unusually strong signals of continued instability in Libya. Tripoli's mayor was briefly kidnapped from his home by unknown gunmen;<sup>49</sup> Musa Abu Dawoud, a high ranking al Qaeda leader, was killed in an airstrike by US forces in Ubari;<sup>50</sup> and fighting between the Tebu and Awlad Suleiman tribes continued in Sabha, displacing up to 870 families.<sup>51</sup>

While there are ongoing efforts to register voters for national elections that the UN hopes will take place by the end of the year, the continuing instability prompted Human Rights Watch to issue a

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<sup>39</sup> <https://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iraqi-parliament-speaker-backs-turkeys-anti-pkk-fight/1089755>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/27032018>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-strikes-pkk-positions-iraq-allied-forces-syria-near-key-objective-2111971665>

<sup>42</sup> <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1218661/turkey-pushes-10-km-deep-iraqi-kurdistan-territory>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-turkey-reconciles-erbil-maximise-military-gains-1420438260>

<sup>44</sup> <https://en.trend.az/world/turkey/2875549.html>

<sup>45</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/sinjar/why-did-pkk-withdraw-sinjar>; <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/3/23/kurdish-fighters-withdrawing-from-northwest-iraq-after-turkish-warning>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/pm-abadi-iraq-prevent-kurdish-fighter-attacks-turkey-180328065551475.html>; <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sinjars-yazidi-forces-gear-threatened-turkish-invasion-1438429563>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-turkey/turkeys-erdogan-says-operations-begin-in-iraqs-sinjar-region-idUSKBN1H10QX>; <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/turkey-iraq-sinjar-pkk-withdraw-from-yazidi-region.html>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/27/597390583/in-iraq-yazidis-are-trapped-and-starving-even-though-isis-is-gone>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-tripoli/mayor-of-libyan-capital-freed-after-gunpoint-abduction-city-council-idUSKBN1H51FC>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/03/american-forces-kill-senior-al-qaeda-leader-in-libya.php>

<sup>51</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/libya-sebha-rapid-situation-overview-27-march-2018>

statement describing Libya as a place that “couldn’t be further away from respect for the rule of law and human rights, let alone from acceptable conditions for free elections.”<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, Libyan authorities successfully intervened to prevent smuggling of antiquities in Shahat at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Cyrene and in Awainat, adjacent to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Tadrart Acacus.<sup>53</sup> In Spain, Jaume Bagot was arrested by Spanish authorities for the illicit trafficking of Libyan antiquities. Spanish authorities claim that the sale of Libyan antiquities by Bagot, which ranged in price from €30,000–50,000 for heads of statuary to €100,000 for more complete statues and mosaic fragments, helped finance groups affiliated with ISIS.<sup>54</sup> Given that the pieces in question appear to have originated in Cyrene, far from the territory once held by ISIS-affiliated groups in Derna or Sirte, this claim has yet to receive sufficient public substantiation. The Belgian researcher Morgan Belzic, whose work contributed to the case, suggested that because illicit excavations are ongoing in Libya, it would be a mistake to only focus on the purported involvement of ISIS.<sup>55</sup>

## Key Points

- Suspected Free Syrian Army fighters reportedly vandalized a Yezidi shrine dedicated to Kara Jorna in Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0071**
- Turkish and Turkish-backed forces allegedly damaged the site of Barad in Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0076**
- Volunteers renovated al-Kabir Mosque in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0078**
- New photographs show damage to the Malta Rock Reliefs (Halamata Cave) near Kifriki Village, Dohuk Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0005**
- ISIS militants reportedly destroyed a Sufi Shrine in Tell Hama, Kirkuk Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0010**
- Recent fighting damaged Sabha Castle in Sabha, Fezzan. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0016**
- Stabilization and restoration work has begun in the Souq al-Baladi in Benghazi, Cyrenaica. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0018**

## Report

### Syria

Archaeological sites in Syria continue to be at risk from continued instability and lack of protection. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery has revealed the extent of damage to the site of Batuta (**ASOR CHI**

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<sup>52</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-election/libya-should-resist-rushing-to-elections-this-year-human-rights-watch-idUSKBN1GX1T1>

<sup>53</sup> <http://almodawaset.com/2018/03/29/%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B4%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A8%D8%B7-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D8%AB%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A7/>; <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/attempt-smuggle-ancient-objects-outside-libya-thwarted>

<sup>54</sup> [http://cadenaser.com/ser/2018/03/28/tribunales/1522256076\\_610186.html](http://cadenaser.com/ser/2018/03/28/tribunales/1522256076_610186.html)

<sup>55</sup> <https://parismatch.be/actualites/132073/exclusif-traffic-dart-demantele-en-espagne-recherches-interview>

**Incident Report SHI 16-0160 UPDATE** on pp. 12–16). Between July 2015 and September 2016, all ancient structures at the site were removed. Batuta is one of the "Dead Cities" of Northern Syria, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that consists of hundreds of Roman and Byzantine-era towns and villages spread over several mountainous areas in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates.<sup>56</sup> The Dead Cities were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2011, and have been on the World Heritage List in Danger since 2013.

In addition, a Facebook user published photographs of artifacts from the Ain Dara Museum, showing items have been left outside of the museum and exposed to the elements (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0067** on pp. 41–44).

Ongoing aerial bombardment and violence across Syria damaged dozens of heritage sites during the reporting period. Alleged Turkish shelling damaged the Shrine of Yagmur Dada in Aleppo Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0068** on pp. 45–46). Turkish shelling was also alleged to have struck two structures at the Byzantine site of Barad (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0076** on pp. 70–82), but recently released video footage indicates that these sites are in good condition. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring damage to heritage in the Afrin region and will continue to monitor changes to the condition of Barad.

Following the capture of Afrin from the YPG, Free Syrian Army and Turkish fighters were photographed defacing the Statue of Rafiq al-Watani (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0072** on pp. 57–58). Photographs also emerged of a defaced and vandalized Statue of Kawa (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0074** on pp. 62–65). In the wider Afrin region, suspected Free Syrian Army fighters were filmed vandalizing the Yezidi Shrine of Kara Jorna (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0071** on pp. 54–56). In addition, photographs published on social media indicate the Shrine of Nebi Hourai was ransacked (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0073** on pp. 59–61). Reports from the area suggest that FSA fighters were also responsible for the damage to this shrine. Lastly, suspected Syrian Liberation Front shelling damaged al-Adnan Mosque in Urm al-Kubra (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0069** on p. 47).

In February, SMART News Agency reported that four people died when a section of an ancient building at Bosra collapsed (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0061** on pp. 22–26). Those killed were reportedly conducting illegal excavations under the structure, causing it to collapse. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery indicates that the collapse occurred at the site of the Roman Nymphaeum. ASOR CHI remains committed to monitoring instances of looting across Syria.

Russian and SARG aerial bombardment continued in Idlib Governorate. Reported Russian airstrikes hit a mosque and vegetable market in Harim, causing undetermined damage to the mosque and resulting in civilian casualties (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0077** on pp. 83–84). Despite the ongoing bombardment, local volunteers carried out reconstruction work at the 17th-century al-Kabir Mosque in Jisr al-Shughour (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0078** on pp. 85–88). ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring destruction to heritage in Idlib Governorate.

During the reporting period, Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently published photographs confirming reports of modern burials in the courtyard of al-Qadim Mosque in the city of Raqqa (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0110 UPDATE** on pp. 17–21). Burials at the mosque complex were first reported in June 2017.

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<sup>56</sup> Trombley



In Rif Dimashq Governorate, DigitalGlobe satellite imagery revealed damage to al-Khanshur Mosque, al-Radha Mosque, and al-Kabir Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0062, SHI 18-0063, SHI 18-0064** on pp. 27–33). Military activity by unknown assailants damaged al-Ayman Mosque and al-Kabir Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0066** and **SHI 18-0070** on pp. 38–40, 48–53). Reported SARG or Russian airstrikes damaged al-Sleiq Mosque and al-Mahmoud Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0065, SHI 18-0075** on pp. 34–37, 66–69). ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring destruction to heritage in Rif Dimashq Governorate.

## Iraq

During the reporting period, ISIS militants reportedly destroyed three religious sites in Iraq. ISIS activity has been on the rise in Kirkuk and Salah ad Din Governorates, where the group has taken advantage of security gaps. A Yarsani shrine dedicated to Sayed Rebar was reported to have been damaged by ISIS militants, but this claim could not be confirmed by ASOR CHI (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0009** on pp. 107–111). ISIS militants also reportedly destroyed a Sufi shrine in Tell Hama, Kirkuk Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0010** on pp. 112–115). ISIS media published images of militants placing explosives in the shrine. ISIS militants also reportedly destroyed al-Mustafa Mosque in Salah ad Din Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0007** on p. 98). This uptick in intentional destruction of religious sites by militants affiliated with ISIS or of unknown affiliation in Iraq is concerning. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring this destruction.

Vandalism and illegal excavation occurred at sites in Dohuk and Erbil. The Malta Rock Reliefs in Dohuk Governorate were vandalized by unknown perpetrators (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0005** on pp. 89–92). A large piece of one of the reliefs was removed, possibly to sell on the antiquities market. Vandalism and illegal excavation occurred at an Islamic Cemetery in Benawanok, Erbil Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0006** on pp. 93–97). Because of the remoteness of this region, there is no official protection for heritage sites. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring sites in these remote regions.

During the reporting period, Ziusudra Archaeological Organization installed gates to control public access to the grounds of the Nebi Yunus Mosque Complex (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0008** on pp. 99–106). This NGO is located in Baghdad and worked with the Nineveh Archaeological and Cultural Inspectorate to install the gates.

## Libya

During the reporting period in Cyrenaica, urban encroachment continued at al-Hamamah (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0013 UPDATE** on pp. 116–117). The encroachment was first noticed by the Director of the Department of Antiquities (DoA) in Shahat in February. The DoA in Shahat also conducted a campaign to remove vegetation from the Temple of Zeus at Cyrene (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0017** on pp. 129–131). Stabilization and restoration projects also began in the Souq al-Baladi in Benghazi (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0018** on pp. 132–137).

In Fezzan, recent fighting damaged Sabha Castle (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0016** on pp. 125–128). It was reported that the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) was

stationed at the castle, and subsequently was attacked by Tabu armed groups.<sup>57</sup> The Libyan DoA was not able to get close to the castle to document the extent of damage because of the ongoing fighting. ASOR CHI will continue to monitor reports of damage to the Sabha Castle.

In Tripolitania, illegal excavations were carried out at the Qasr al-Hajj Tombs and Watchtower (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0015** on pp. 118–124). An in-country source, and director of a local NGO, notified ASOR CHI directly as soon as his team discovered evidence of the illegal excavation. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery indicated that the excavation was carried out by heavy machinery. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring illegal excavation and working with NGOs and the DoA in Libya to protect sites.

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/sabhas-historic-castle-hit-rockets-tribal-tension-continues>