

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 “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 August 2017 reporting period, SARG and pro-regime forces continued to push Islamist and other Syrian opposition groups, as well as ISIS, from the Syria-Lebanon border area. The mass evacuation and relocation of these various forces to Idlib and Deir ez Zor Governorate has resulted in increasing Islamist opposition and ISIS presence in both areas respectively. In a move met with outcry by the US-led Coalition and Iraqi government, Hezbollah, the Lebanese Army, and the Syrian regime reached an agreement with ISIS, allowing the militants and their families to relocate from the Lebanese border area to Deir ez Zor Governorate. The US-led Coalition later targeted the highway being used by the convoy in Homs Governorate, stranding the group in the Syrian desert.

Operations to recapture the Syria-Lebanon border area ended in August 2017, with SARG, Hezbollah, and the Lebanese Army re-establishing control over former opposition and ISIS-held areas. The Syrian regime continues efforts to recapture opposition-held territory in Rif Dimashq Governorate—focusing on the surrounding Damascus-area of Eastern Ghouta—resulting in high casualties, including civilian deaths, and ongoing damage to infrastructure and cultural heritage sites.

Other areas of Syria, including Aleppo and Idlib Governorates, have been relatively calm as aerial bombardment has sharply decreased. The Syrian regime continues to re-assert control over Aleppo Governorate and the city of Aleppo; however, theft and looting are still common occurrences due to political vacuums and a lack of law enforcement at the local level. ASOR CHI reported on several instances of looting and theft in Syria that have occurred or worsened as a result of this ongoing political instability. Instances of theft have occurred inside the ancient city of Aleppo as well as in more remote areas in Syria where little-to-no security presence exists.

As the Syrian regime continues to facilitate evacuations of Islamist Syrian opposition forces, including elements of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), concerns continue to be raised over the growing al-Qaeda presence northwest Syria. HTS appears to be restructuring inside Idlib Governorate, as well as setting up a form of administrative government. On August 12, 2017 unknown assailants shot and killed seven members of the Syrian Civil Defense (aka the White Helmets), as they slept in their Idlib office. No group took responsibility for the attack. Affiliates of HTS carried out two bombings in the city of Aleppo, raising the number of the group's attacks in the city to seven in the current year.

Elsewhere in Syria, opposition groups continue to regroup and rebrand as alliances shift and territories are lost. In Daraa Governorate, groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) created a new alliance after suffering territorial losses. In Aleppo Governorate, Syrian opposition forces regrouped in the area of Afrin in order to fight what they called the growing "Turkish occupation" in the area.

In Raqqa, ongoing SDF and US-led Coalition military operations in the city have resulted in devastating damage to the city as well as high civilian casualties. Although the SDF has continued to make territorial gains, ISIS remains heavily embedded in the Old City, as well as other neighborhoods. According to REACH, residents in Raqqa have continued to flee, leaving most of the eastern and western neighborhoods of the city to be abandoned or nearly abandoned.²

² <http://www.reach-initiative.org/syria-ar-raqqa-city-offensive-continued-outflux-of-population-from-ar-raqqa-city-as-the-humanitarian-situation-keeps-deteriorating>

Russia continues to solidify its presence in Syria, holding a military parade in the coastal city of Tartus. Iran also appears to be following suit, as Israeli TV reports the country is building a “long-range rocket manufacturing facility” near the town of Baniyas.³

In Iraq, government forces launched an operation to recapture Tal Afar from ISIL. Iraqi forces involved in the battle include members of the Iraqi army, air force, Federal Police, the US-trained Counter Terrorism Services (aka special forces), and units from the Shia Popular Mobilization Front, numbering a total of 50,000 personnel.⁴ Major operations against ISIS in Tal Afar ceased after approximately one week of fighting, as ISIS militants retreated to the nearby town of al-'Ayadiya. On August 31, Iraqi forces captured the town of al-'Ayadiya from ISIS. With the recapturing of al-'Ayadiya, Iraqi forces cleared all of Ninawa Governorate of ISIS.⁵

In Libya, the Libyan National Army (LNA) tightened its siege on the city of Derna, raising concerns of ongoing critical shortages affecting residents of the city. Derna remains under the control of the Islamist militant group known as the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC).⁶ The LNA also clashed with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, as they work with the UN in sending Italian ships into Libyan waters to stop human traffickers. Khalifa Haftar, the head of the LNA, ordered naval bases in four Libyan cities to block any Italian ships from entering Libyan waters.⁷

ASOR CHI published an update on the Old City of Benghazi, detailing damage to the city's old quarter during three years of clashes between the LNA and the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries. The LNA recaptured the Old City on July 5, 2017. Demining operations continue in the city, after which the current conditions of the Old City will be better known. ASOR CHI will publish further updates on the Libyan Department of Antiquities when it becomes available.

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-iran-idUSKCN1AV2B4> ; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/08/syria-situation-report-august-8-23-2017.html> ; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41074830>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41095613>

⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41111521>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-derna/east-libyan-city-suffers-as-military-forces-tighten-siege-idUSKBN1AN1UR>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40812304>

Key Points

- A local council is conducting conservation projects on al-Shughour Castle in Shughour Qadeem, Idlib Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0147](#)
- A US-led Coalition airstrike destroyed al-Nour Mosque in Raqqa, Raqqa Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0145](#)
- The Day After Heritage Protection Initiative released a new report on damage to al-Daraj Historic Bath
- Yazidi inhabitants of Bashiqa rebuild 17 destroyed shrines in Ninawa Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0069](#)
- DigitalGlobe imagery shows damage to al-Kabir Mosque in al-'Ayadiya, Ninawa Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0072](#)
- A survey of archaeological elements in the Old City of al-Marj, Cyrenaica occurred. [ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0021](#)
- Security forces prevented a large hoard of coins from Tripoli, Tripolitania from being smuggled out of Libya through Mitiga Airport. [ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0015](#)

Syria

During the reporting period, the highest reports of fighting occurred in Raqqa Governorate, centering in the former ISIS-stronghold city of Raqqa city. During the reporting period ten mosques and a church were severely damaged or destroyed by suspected US-led Coalition airstrikes ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0111 UPDATE](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0114 UPDATE](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0141](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0143](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0144](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0145](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0152](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0153](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0154](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0157](#), and [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0158](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 23–29, 33–35, 39–46, 80–85, 102–112).

In Raqqa, the site of Qasr al-Banat, built in the 11th century, and reconstructed in 1977, has largely escaped damage, with only bullet or shrapnel holes in some walls and evidence of degradation due to lack of maintenance ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0111 UPDATE](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 23–27). New video footage was published of al-Qadim Mosque, one of the oldest mosques in Raqqa, built in 772 CE ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0157](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 102–107). Heavy fighting and airstrikes occurred in the area around the mosque during the past month. This military activity has left its mark on the building, and exposure to the elements and lack of maintenance has also damaged the building. Earlier reports stated that this site was used as a burial ground, but the new video footage and photographs provide insufficient data to evaluate this claim. The capture of the Othman bin Affan Mosque by SDF forces revealed a tunnel dug by ISIS militants ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0158](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 108–112).

Aerial bombardment by SARG and Russian forces continues to damage heritage sites in opposition-held areas of Syria. In Hama Governorate, a reported SARG-Russian airstrike destroyed the Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Mosque ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0148](#) in [Appendix](#) p. 67). In al-Khamisiyah, a reported SARG/Russian airstrike damaged a mosque on either August 7 or August 21, 2017, or the mosque was damaged on both of these dates ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0151](#) in [Appendix](#) p. 79). The most recent DigitalGlobe satellite imagery of the suite is from March, and as such is not helpful in narrowing down the date of the damage. ASOR CHI will further investigate reports of damage to al-Khamisiyah Mosque. In Rif Dimashq Governorate, a reported SARG airstrike damaged the al-Nour Mosque ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0142](#) in

Appendix pp. 36–38). The main building was damaged, and a crater is apparent in front of the building. In Lattakia Governorate, an unnamed mosque was damaged by an airstrike (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0159** in **Appendix** pp. 113–114). It is unknown who is responsible for the damage. In Hama, the Free Syrian Army raised a flag over the al-Omari Mosque in al-Herak (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0149** in **Appendix** pp. 68–71). Much of the al-Omari Mosque has been damaged and is collapsing. The majority of this damage occurred between April and August 2012. Reported SARG airstrikes hit Kafr Nasej, a 16th century monastery destroying up to 40% of the site (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0150** in **Appendix** pp. 72–78). The site has also been subject to illegal excavation and looting. In addition, new video footage shows damage to Qasr Ibn Wardan in Ibn Wardan (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 16-0175 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp. 14–22). SARG airstrikes damaged the site in October 2016, and the structure shows damage due to neglect.

In Aleppo Governorate, a security and political vacuum has allowed ongoing thefts in the Old City. During the reporting period, unknown parties stole water installations from a historic house named Beit Kubba (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0146** in **Appendix** pp. 47–59). These installations consisted of a multi-tiered, tiled fountain in a recess on one side of the courtyard and two features in the courtyard—a waterfall with channel and receptacle, and a second fountain in the middle of a square pond. After the cessation of hostilities in Aleppo, theft is on the rise in multiple areas. Local residents are concerned about theft in historic structures, leading to more civilian action in alerting authorities and publishing instances of theft on social media.

In Idlib Governorate, local councils are carrying out rebuilding projects targeting infrastructure. One council is attempting to protect and conserve the al-Shughour Castle (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0147** in **Appendix** pp. 60–66). As in the Old City of Aleppo, local citizens are concerned about local heritage, and are protecting and preserving cultural assets, often at risk to their own physical security. ASOR CHI is dedicated to monitoring these reconstruction efforts and aiding local partners in the protection of cultural heritage.

Reports continue to expose incidents of archaeological looting in rural Syria in areas lacking security. The site of Mari, a UNESCO Tentative World Heritage Site, located in Deir ez-Zor Governorate, has been subject to illegal excavation since the beginning of the conflict (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0140** in **Appendix** pp. 30–32). DigitalGlobe satellite imagery confirms that illegal excavation at Mari has continued to expand, particularly on the southern part of the mound. Between April 11, 2015 and January 23, 2017, the surface area affected by illegal excavation increased from approximately 0.1606 km² to 0.2069 km². Between January 23, 2017 and May 12, 2017, illegal excavation increased further, covering an area of 0.3127 km². Much of the continued damage during this more recent period consists of the expansion of previously excavated trenches.

The Authority of Tourism and Protection of Antiquities (ATPA) for al-Jazira Canton, a Kurdish led group encompassing most of Hasakah Governorate and parts of Raqqa Governorate reported on the status of Tell es-Sweyhat (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0155** in **Appendix** pp. 86–96) and Tell Munbaqa (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0156** in **Appendix** pp. 97–101). Photographs from Tell es-Sweyhat show most of the excavation areas are in poor condition, with exposure to the elements damaging many of the baulks. Minor looting has possibly occurred on the high mound. Reports state ISIS cleared the storerooms of the excavation house and ATPA documented the presence of some archaeological material and excavation equipment on the tarmac of the military airport in al-Tabqa. Tell Munbaqa has the same damage as Sweyhat, with excavation trenches suffering from exposure to the elements and minor looting. The storerooms were also looted,

reportedly by ISIS, and objects archaeological materials were documented on the tarmac of the military airport in al-Tabqa. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows little disturbance to either of these sites in recent years. The ATPA has been set up by the Kurdish authority to monitor archaeological and cultural heritage in the Kurdish regions of Northern Syria. They have been traveling around the region, mainly in Hasakah and parts of Raqqa, documenting the state of archaeological sites.

The Day After Heritage Protection Initiative (TDA-HPI) provided a damage report on the historic Hammam al-Daraj (CHI 13314). The site was heavily damaged in April 2017 as a result of a Russian airstrike (in **Appendix** pp. 115–122).

Iraq

During the reporting period, the continuing clean-up efforts in Mosul have led to the release of new video footage and photographs of damage to mosques, churches, and schools. New photographs and video footage showed damage to the interior of the al-Najjar Mosque, the al-Abbadi Mosque, and the Abdul Rahman bin Auf Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0036 UPDATE, ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0067, ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0068** in **Appendix** pp. 126–129, 147–155). A mall was reportedly being constructed over the ruins of the al-Khidr Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0066** in **Appendix** pp. 143–146). The mosque was intentionally destroyed by ISIS in February 2015, and the area was then bulldozed and leveled by unknown persons. Construction on the mall began between August 29, 2015 and March 6, 2015. ASOR CHI has noted a continued pattern of sites having been intentionally destroyed by ISIS, and later converted into new structures such as parking lots or malls.

More details continue to surface regarding the damage to and repurposing of other cultural heritage sites in Mosul including the Chaldean Catholic Church of the Virgin Mary and Kanisat al-Sa'a . On August 4, 2017 new footage was released showing that the dome of the church has been tipped onto its side, possibly as a result of military activity (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0050 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp. 130–132). The adjacent archdiocese has been destroyed by military activity, but the majority of the church is still standing, albeit with large holes in the front wall, and graffiti on the front of the church. New video footage of the Kanisat al-Sa'a provide new evidence as to the use of the church as a headquarters by ISIS (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0052 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp. 133–142). An ISIS fighter, 'Adil Ahmad, was captured by Iraqi forces and stated that the basement of the church was used as a headquarters during the fighting for Mosul. He goes on to state that ISIS used the basement as a training camp for newly enrolled ISIS members prior to the liberation. In the rubble there are signs that children and/or women were kept in the basement at some point as well.

During the reporting period, the fight for the liberation of Ninawa Governorate continued in the towns of Tal Afar and al-'Ayadiya. The Tal Afar Citadel was liberated on August 26, 2017 (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0073** in **Appendix** pp. 181–187). On December 31, 2014 Xinhuanet reported ISIS militants planted bombs in the northern and western parts of the Tal Afar Citadel, and detonated them. It was also reported that ISIS was tunneling into the site to gather antiquities. The Citadel was also used as a prison for women, mainly Yazidi and Christian women waiting to be sold to ISIS militants. Iraqi forces entering the Citadel after recapturing the site from ISIS found chains and other restraints used on prisoners. The soldiers liberating the area reportedly tried to do as little damage as possible to the citadel. Located near the Citadel, the al-Kabir Mosque also withstood damage due to military activity (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0071** in **Appendix** pp. 172–178). With the liberation of Tal Afar, reporters were also able to record damage to the Mosque of

Sheikh Jawad al Sadiq, intentionally destroyed by ISIS in 2014 (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 15-0013 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp. 123–125).

After recapturing most of Tal Afar, remaining ISIS members fled to the town of al-'Ayadiya. Fierce fighting, which Iraqi forces likened to the Old City of Mosul, has led to an increase in the number of airstrikes. On August 30, 2017 DigitalGlobe satellite imagery showed a hole in the roof of al-Kabir Mosque due to an airstrike (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0072** in **Appendix** pp. 179–180).

While fighting continued against ISIS in other areas of Iraq, areas previously recaptured in the Nineveh Plains are being slowly rebuilt by returning residents. Between January 2017 and August 2017, 17 Yezidi shrines in the villages of Bashiqa and Bahzani have been reconstructed after incidents of intentional damage allegedly perpetrated by ISIS (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0069** in **Appendix** pp. 156–163). Beginning in April, several videos show celebrations at shrines, while the *hillel*, or gilded orb has been re-installed and the shrines have been re-opened. Local Yezidi inhabitants are reportedly conducting all reconstruction at Bashiqa and Bahzani without government support.

Libya

During the reporting period, ongoing preservation efforts continued in Libya. In Cyrenaica, repairs were carried out at the al-Atiq Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0007 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp. 188–189). In July, a dome collapsed at this mosque due to lack of maintenance. Instead of reconstructing the dome from mudbrick, a flat adobe panel covers the hole. It is unknown if the dome will be reconstructed.

In Ptolmais, the Department of Antiquities (DoA) removed vegetation from the site (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0017** in **Appendix** pp. 194–197). Qasr al-Hakim, Qasr al-Amida, and Villa Munthir have all been damaged by rampant vegetation growth during the past years. The DoA removed the vegetation and stabilized portions of the mosaic floor in these buildings. With the personal private support of Paul Bennett, Director of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust, DoA also refilled excavation trenches in Haweh Fteah, an important Paleolithic/Neolithic site. Excavation on the site had been suspended and the stratigraphy of the baulk walls was protected by geotextile prior to reburial (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0018** in **Appendix** pp. 198–200). Lastly, with the support of Durham University and the British Council, DoA performed a survey next to the Old City of al-Marj in order to identify remains from Greek and Roman occupation (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0021**) in **Appendix** pp. 204–207). This area remains threatened by urban encroachment. Although the DoA is underfinanced and short staffed, in the Cyrenaica region, the DoA has been able to carry out multiple projects to protect, identify, and preserve cultural heritage.

In Fezzan, a new site was identified by a local landowner and the Department of Antiquities (DoA) was notified (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0019** in **Appendix** pp. 201–202). The DoA identified 42 round tombs dating to the Garamantean period (500 BCE–700 CE). DoA staff documented the site and recorded it. The Fezzan region faces the same problems as the Cyrenaica region, with staff spread thin over a wide geographical area and limited funding. The administrative structure of the Fezzan offices remains ambiguous, and functionally, DoA staff in the Fezzan report to both the DoA office in Tripoli as well as the DoA office in Benghazi. Nevertheless, DoA staff in the Fezzan are still able to survey sites in order to protect and preserve cultural heritage in the area.

In Tripolitania, two episodes of recovered artifacts occurred during the month. Spain recovered eleven Cyrenaican statues and are in negotiations to return them to Libya (**ASOR CHI Incident**

Report LHI 17-0020 in **Appendix** p. 203). These statues are reportedly from Shahat and Sousa, and were uncovered in illegal excavations. Dr. Hafed Walda, scholar of Libyan archaeology, travelled to Spain and verified that the style of the statues links them firmly to Roman Cyrenaica. Moving forward, this group will arrange a meeting with Spanish authorities in Tunis to present a formal request for repatriation.

Also during the reporting period, a Liberian national was caught with a hoard of 580 Roman and Greek coins at the Mitiga airport (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0015** in **Appendix** pp.). He admitted his intention to sell the coins abroad, as well as the fact he has smuggled artifacts out of Libya previously. With the ongoing conflict and political instability, much of Libya's heritage is at threat from illegal excavation, theft, and antiquities trafficking.

The Department of Antiquities (DoA) began conservation on the Villa Silin, a Roman-era villa west of al-Khoms (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0016** in **Appendix** pp. 192–193). Declining security conditions since 2014 have prevented the continuation of a project to record and conserve the mosaics and wall paintings. The DoA has decided to move forward with urgent repairs to the roof and mosaics of Villa Silin, using local expertise and technicians to carry out the works, with the financial backing of the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro in Rome. DoA staff will first protect the mosaics and wall paintings. A local contractor will then remove the existing concrete roof and replace it with a timber frame roof that will be both lighter and easier to repair in the future. Across Libya, the DoA continues to work hand in hand with international partners to protect and preserve their cultural heritage.