

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

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February 2017 Monthly Report

Michael D. Danti, Marina Gabriel, Susan Penacho, William Reynolds, Allison Cuneo, Kyra Kaercher, Darren Ashby, Jamie O'Connell, Gwendolyn Kristy, Katherine Burge

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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 February 2017 reporting period, extensive aerial bombardment continued over opposition-held areas of Syria as SARG and pro-regime forces, backed by Russian aerial bombardment, continued several campaigns to recapture opposition-held territory in Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Rif Dimashq, and Daraa Governorates. As the Syrian opposition continues to lose ground in long-held territories in Idlib and Aleppo Governorate, new alliances have been formed between groups including between Islamist and non-Islamist factions, raising concerns about the radicalization of forces.

In ISIL-held areas of Raqqa and Deir ez Zor Governorates, Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes, continued to advance and recaptured several villages. The US-led Coalition continues to support the efforts of the SDF to recapture the ISIL-stronghold of Raqqa but has yet to determine the extent of its planned efforts in Deir ez Zor.

Meetings in Geneva between the Syrian regime and opposition continued, with little positive development. Human rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch released reports raising the alarm about ongoing human rights abuses by the Syrian regime, including activity at a military prison in Sadnaya. Research organizations Atlantic Council and the Institute for the Study of War released reports detailing extensive damage to infrastructure in Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib, and Hama Governorates, including extensive damage to the city of Aleppo during SARG operations to recapture the city from opposition forces. ASOR CHI remains concerned about the targeting of civilian infrastructure and cultural heritage sites.

In Iraq, Iraqi forces continued to advance against ISIL in Mosul, recapturing several neighborhoods as well as the Mosul Airport. The US-led Coalition announced that 60 percent of the city is now under Iraqi control. In retaliation for lost territory, ISIL has staged several suicide bombings in Mosul, Baghdad, and Tel Afar resulting in civilian casualties.

Key Points

- Syria: Possible Russian airstrikes damage Shoaib Mosque in Idlib, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0018**
- Syria: ISIL created fortifications on Tal Bayjan in Tal Bayjan, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0024**
- Syria: Russian airstrikes hit Trajan's Palace in Bosra al-Sham, Daraa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0027**
- Iraq: Newly released photographs show damage to a Yezidi Cemetery in Bashiqa and Bahzani, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 16-0046 UPDATE**
- Iraq: Newly released video footage shows damage to Mar Ephraim Church in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0017**

Report

In Raqqa Governorate, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continue operations to move toward the ISIL-held city of Raqqa, launching a new phase in the battle to recapture the city. US-led Coalition airstrikes have backed the fighters, leading to infrastructure damage including damage to bridges. Russian forces have also targeted ISIL positions in the area with airstrikes.

SARG and Russian airstrikes continued to target opposition-held Idlib Governorate. US-led Coalition airstrikes have also targeted Idlib Governorate, striking the headquarters of a Salafi-Jihadist opposition group in the area. Infighting between opposition groups has killed hundreds of Syrian opposition fighters. Idlib remains a heavily bombarded area with high-levels of damage to civilian areas and infrastructure (see [SHI 17-0018](#) and [SHI 17-0028](#) in [Appendix](#) p. 9, pp. 50–51).

In Aleppo Governorate, SARG and pro-regime forces, backed by Russian airstrikes, continued to recapture opposition-held areas of Aleppo Governorate, including areas surrounding the city of Aleppo. SARG forces also captured the last major ISIL-held area of Aleppo Governorate. During the reporting period, ASOR CHI documented damage to four heritage sites in Aleppo Governorate as a result of this ongoing aerial bombardment and fighting (see [SHI 17-0019](#), [SHI 17-0021](#), [SHI 17-0022](#), [SHI 17-0023](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 10–12, 18–34). Evidence also emerged that ISIL militants created fortifications in an archaeological mound in order to defend themselves from SARG advancement (see [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0024](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 35–38).

Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces continue to advance in northern parts of Aleppo Governorate, while Turkish shelling from across the border reportedly caused civilian casualties. SDF Operations continue to recapture the city of al-Bab from ISIL. At least one heritage site has been damaged as a result of aerial bombardment and shelling (see [SHI 17-0020](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 13–17).

Both US-backed Syrian opposition forces and pro-regime forces continue their incursion into ISIL-held territory in Deir ez Zor Governorate, where ISIL militants maintain the majority of territorial control. Aerial bombardment and clashes damaged a cemetery in Deir ez Zor (see [SHI 17-0025](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 39–43).

In Rif Dimashq Governorate, SARG forces carried out an aerial bombardment campaign against opposition-held areas around the capital city Damascus. ASOR CHI documented damage to one heritage site in Rif Dimashq Governorate as a result of ongoing aerial bombardment and shelling or opposition-held areas (see [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0026](#) and [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0029](#) in [Appendix](#) p. 44, pp. 52–53).

In Daraa Governorate, Russian forces carried out several airstrikes targeting Syrian opposition positions in the city of Daraa after the opposition launched a new offensive against pro-regime forces in the district of al-Manshiyah. Russian aerial bombardment reportedly damaged a Byzantine-period site in Daraa Governorate (see [SHI 17-0027](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 45–49).

In Geneva, ceasefire negotiations between the Syrian opposition and the regime ended with the adoption of a ceasefire monitoring document. Despite this, February saw little decrease in aerial bombardment across the country. Instead monitors of the conflict noticed an increase in Russian and SARG targeting of civilian infrastructure sites. Syrian opposition forces have vowed to continue their fight, despite recent losses across the country.

In Ninawa Governorate, Iraqi forces continued to advance into ISIL-held areas of Mosul. Ongoing US-led aerial bombardment and targeted killings by ISIL snipers continue to plague civilians, resulting in high casualties. ISIL suicide bombers targeted Iraqi civilians in recently recaptured areas of the city. Meanwhile, as Iraqi forces have regained control of areas, new photographs and video footage detail the level of damage to heritage sites in Mosul and the surrounding Nineveh Plains (see [IHI 15-0092 UPDATE](#), [IHI 16-0046 UPDATE](#), [IHI 17-0017](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 54–76). ISIL militants continue to prepare for battle in Mosul’s Old City, where reports claim the militants are developing complex defenses within the neighborhoods’ narrow alleyways. Iraqi forces, backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes, continue to target ISIL throughout northern Iraq.

In Baghdad, supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr and Iraqi police clashed during protests, killing several demonstrators. ISIL suicide car bombings continue to target the city as the group loses ground in Mosul.