

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

Russian and SARG airstrikes continued in Rif Dimashq Governorate with a heavy concentration of aerial bombardment striking the Syrian opposition-held areas of Eastern Ghouta and Wadi Barada. The ongoing aerial bombardment in Wadi Barada disabled a major water source that supplies Damascus and surrounding areas. By the end of the reporting period, SARG forces had recaptured the Wadi Barada Valley, and hundreds of opposition fighters and their families were evacuated from the area. Damage was reported to four heritage sites in Rif Dimashq Governorate as a result of the ongoing aerial bombardment.

In Idlib Governorate, US-led Coalition airstrikes struck several sites affiliated with al-Qaeda linked opposition groups in the area. Syrian opposition forces, including Islamist groups, continue to clash in Idlib Governorate.

US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to advance towards the ISIL-stronghold of Raqqa, capturing the Jabar Citadel and advancing to the northern outskirts of the Tabqa Dam.

ISIL militants reportedly carried out three separate executions in Palmyra following the recapture of the area by the group in December 2016. The executions took place at the Roman Theater, previously the site of executions in 2015, outside the Palmyra Museum, and inside the recently abandoned Russian military base located inside the UNESCO world heritage site. Those killed by the group reportedly included Palmyrene citizens, SARG, and FSA fighters. New satellite imagery showed that intentional destruction, most probably by ISIL, had taken place at the Tetracylon and the Roman Theater at Palmyra. ISIL militants previously destroyed several structures within the world heritage site, using footage of the destruction in propaganda videos.

Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes, continued operations against ISIL in Mosul, capturing the city's east bank, including the ancient site of Nineveh, the shrine of the Prophet Nebi Yunus, and Mosul University. Reporting from the eastern bank showed extensive damage to Mosul University — some of the buildings were allegedly used by ISIL for weapons manufacturing and other military functions.

In the Nineveh Plains, Peshmerga forces recaptured the village of Tel Kaif from ISIL. Video reporting and photographs from the area show intentional destruction and the reuse of Christian heritage sites including churches, libraries, and a cemetery.

Key Points

- Reported Turkish artillery shells land near al-Iman Mosque in al-Bab, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0002**
- ISIL carried out executions in the Palmyra Roman Theater and destroyed the facade in Palmyra, Homs Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0012**

- Iraqi forces capture Nebi Yunus Mosque Complex in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate, exposing the extent of ISIL damage. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0005**
- ISIL militants reuse Mart Shmone Church in Tel Kaif, Ninawa Governorate as a military base and training camp. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0007**
- New satellite imagery and photographs show the level of destruction to Mosul University, Mosul, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0016**

Report

During the reporting period two mosques were damaged in Aleppo Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0002** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0011** in **Appendix** pp. 13–14, 31–33). al-Thanouyia Obeida Bin al-Jarah Mosque and educational institute was used by ISIL militants as a storage building for seized objects. A large pile of satellite dishes are present inside the mosque. ISIL militants previously seized satellite dishes from local residents to control the flow of information into areas under their control. ISIL is also known to take objects like satellite dishes from abandoned houses and bring them to a central area where they are then divided up and sold to ISIL faithful. During the recapture of Turkman Barih by a coalition of Turkish and US-backed Syrian opposition forces in early-October 2016, the mosque and institute were used by ISIL as a trash dump. As people worked to clear the building in January, an explosive hidden under the trash exploded and killed three people and wounded several others.

During the reporting period, reported Russian and SARG forces damaged the al-Eman Mosque and the Abi Thar al-Ghafari Mosque in Palmyra during the retaking of Palmyra from ISIL forces (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0004** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0005** in **Appendix** pp. 17–20). On January 19, 2017 multiple news outlets reported that ISIL militants carried out executions inside the ancient ruins of Palmyra, including inside the Roman Theater (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0012** in **Appendix** pp. 34–37), outside the Palmyra museum (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0013** in **Appendix** pp. 38–40), and inside the former Russian military base located within the archaeological site. ISIL executed four Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters at the Roman Theater, four Palmyrene citizens thought to be teachers and state employees outside the Palmyra Museum, and four pro-regime fighters at the abandoned Russian military base. These executions are reminiscent of the earlier executions carried out by ISIL in 2015 at the Roman Theater. With the retaking of Palmyra by ISIL forces in December 2016, the spots for these executions were carefully chosen. The Russians used the Roman Theater for celebrations after the first liberation of Palmyra. They then constructed the military base, reportedly to help with de-mining operations. ISIL chose these sites as backdrops for executions of soldiers to maximize propagandistic impact and to assail the intangible dimension of cultural heritage. These retributory acts serve to exert ISIL's dominance over Tadmor, showcase the group's recapture of the area, and serve as a warning to others who might resist or rebel.

On January 19, 2017 ASOR CHI obtained DigitalGlobe satellite imagery that revealed new damage to the ISIL-occupied UNESCO World Heritage site of Palmyra. ASOR CHI can confirm this damage occurred between December 26, 2016 and January 10, 2017. The imagery shows significant damage

to the Tetracylon and the Roman Theater, likely the result of destruction by ISIL; however, ASOR CHI has thus far been unable to verify the exact cause. Both sites were previously left unharmed by the group during their control of Palmyra from May 2015 to March 2016. The Tetracylon appears to have been intentionally destroyed using explosives, possibly in a similar manner to how ISIL militants destroyed the Temple of Bel, the Baalshamin Temple, the Triumphal Arch, and several tower tombs located within the Valley of the Tombs. Two columns of the Tetracylon remain standing, but the majority of the structure has been severely damaged and column drums and debris are visible on the ground around the structure. The Roman Theater has sustained damage to the stage backdrop (*scaenae frons*), primarily in the area of the *Porticus*. New stone debris is visible scattered across the center of the stage. ISIL has not released any photographs or video of the damage, like they did with previous episodes of intentional destruction.

In the Rif Dimashq Governorate, reported SARG airstrikes struck three mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0003, SHI 17-0007, SHI 17-0008** in **Appendix** pp. 15–16, 21–23, 24–25), and unknown forces another (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0018** in **Appendix** pp. 50–51). In Dara'a Governorate, reported SARG airstrikes struck one mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0009** in **Appendix** pp. 26–27). In Deir ez-Zor Governorate, reported SARG airstrikes struck two mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0015, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0016** in **Appendix** pp. 45–48), and ISIL footage showed ongoing fighting in a cemetery (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0017** in **Appendix** p. 49). In Idlib, reported Russian airstrikes damaged a local cemetery (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0010** in **Appendix** pp. 28–30).

In Iraq, the fight for Mosul continued throughout the month. During the reporting period, eight mosques and two churches were reported damaged by military activity (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0001, IHI 17-0002, IHI 17-0004, IHI 17-0009, IHI 17-0010, IHI 17-0011, IHI 17-0012, IHI 17-0013** in **Appendix** pp. 70–77, 81–84, 114–130). A video released by ISIL affiliated media Amaq News Agency, shows recruitment occurring inside an unknown mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0003** in **Appendix** pp. 78–80). As ISIL continues to suffer heavy casualties in Mosul, it is likely that recruitment activities will pick-up, targeting any able-bodied males, including children, in the near area.

New photographs and reports were released showing the condition of Mar Gorgis Monastery (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 15-0050 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp. 52–56) and the Chaldean Catholic Church, also known as the Ark Church (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 16-0033 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp. 65–69). ISIL damaged both of these Christian sites, removing Christian icons and symbols. The Grand Mosul Mosque was also damaged by military activity (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0010** in **Appendix** pp. 116–122). On January 22, 2017 Kurdistan 24 published a video report showing that the Grand Mosque of Mosul had been converted into a weapons facility for the manufacture of booby-traps and car bombs. In addition, the minarets and the mosque building were used as ISIL sniper positions, as well as a reported launch site for explosive drones. The Grand Mosque of Mosul was also used as a storage space for air conditioners confiscated from houses in and around Mosul. Most of these air conditioners are reportedly from Christian homes.

This mosque was still under construction when ISIL took Mosul, and as such was treated as a large storage/factory space rather than a mosque.

On January 16, 2017 Iraqi forces recaptured the Nebi Yunus Mosque Complex (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0005** in **Appendix** pp. 85–95). ISIL intentionally destroyed the site in July 2014. Nebi Yunus, a complex that was important to all Mosul, was intentionally destroyed by ISIL in July 2014. Reports also indicated that ISIL militants dug several tunnels under the site to search for artifacts.

In early January 2017, new satellite imagery and photographs became available detailing the extent of damage to Mosul University (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0016** in **Appendix** pp. 151–176). Mosul University was previously looted and vandalized by ISIL after the group captured the city. Later, US-led Coalition airstrikes targeted several campus buildings under the suspicion that the buildings were being used by ISIL for military purposes, including housing ISIL militants and building weapons. Digital Globe imagery from January 13, 2017 shows damage to the Mosul University Central Library. ISIL militants “set fire to the main library, which contained many rare books, manuscripts, and maps.” There are multiple holes in the roof from airstrikes, as well as likely fire damage from the military activity. The University Gate leading towards the library was damaged, with the southern edge collapsed. The Main Hall of the university, also known as the student center, shows possible damage due to the nearby airstrikes at the Library. Many buildings have been damaged by explosives and fire, likely as a result of airstrikes and subsequent clashes in the area between Iraqi forces and ISIL militants.

During the operation to liberate Mosul, a cache of artifacts was uncovered by Iraqi forces inside the home of an ISIL commander (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0015** in **Appendix** pp. 145–150). Iraqi National Security forces released photographs of clay pots, large vases, and a hand mill, among other smaller pieces. These pieces have been dated to the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and were likely dug up from sites near Mosul, and possibly from under Nebi Yunus as well. Also found inside the home along with the artifacts were documents recording each object and the anticipated sale price of each artifact. This documentation is more evidence of how the antiquities trade supports ISIL.

On January 19, 2017, the Iraqi Army recaptured Tel Kaif (Tel Keppe) and Fadhiliya north of Mosul. Tel Kaif is a predominantly Christian village that was taken by ISIL in August 2014. Churches in Tel Kaif contain Chaldean manuscripts dating back to the 16th century. The liberation by Iraqi forces has allowed journalists into the area who documented some of the damage to cultural heritage sites. Two churches, Mar Yousif and Mart Shmone, were intentionally damaged by ISIL, with Christian symbols being removed from walls and the buildings being repurposed (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0007** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0008** in **Appendix** pp. 99–113). Mart Shmone was converted into a mosque named al-Imam Malik Mosque. After liberation, crosses were re-erected over the top of both churches. The Sacred Heart Church, also in Tal Kaif was converted into a military headquarters that ISIL used to train new recruits, including children (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0014** in **Appendix** pp. 131–144). The video footage and other

photographs released by various media outlets show bullet holes in the church walls, possibly a result of target practice, as well as clear intentional destruction to religious icons and what appears to be fire damage to the interior of the church and courtyard. The library attached to the Sacred Heart Church has been destroyed by fire, and burned books are present in some of the photographs. Lastly, photographs and video footage show damage to the main cemetery of Tel Kaif (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0006** in **Appendix** pp. 96–98). Most of this damage seems to be due to military activity, with large craters from airstrikes apparent.