

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

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March 2017 Monthly Report

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Table of Contents:

Executive Summary	2
Key Points	2
Syria	3
Iraq	3
Appendices	

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 reporting period, the Syrian regime and Syrian opposition forces advanced against ISIL in several areas of the country. In early March, SARG and pro-regime forces, backed by Russian airstrikes, recaptured the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Palmyra from ISIL. ISIL had recaptured the site and the nearby modern town of Tadmor for a second time in December 2016. New photographs and video footage from the site shows the extent of damage to the Roman Theater and Tetrapylon, intentionally destroyed by ISIL between the months of December 2016 and January 2017. ISIL withdrew additional forces from previously held areas near Damascus and the Jordanian border, sending them instead to strongholds in Deir ez Zor and Raqqa Governorates.

The United States increased its number of deployed forces to Syria in anticipation of upcoming operations to recapture the ISIL-held city of Raqqa. The number of US forces also increased in Aleppo Governorate in an effort to deter clashes between Turkish and Syrian opposition forces near recently liberated areas. SARG and Russian aerial bombardment continued over opposition-held areas in Rif Dimashq, Idlib, and Hama Governorates, resulting in damage to several heritage sites. Targeted attacks occurred in the form of suicide bombings in the capital Damascus. Two suicide bombings struck Damascus, targeting a Shia pilgrimage site and courthouse, causing a number of civilian casualties.

In Iraq, Iraqi Security Forces continued their advancement into Mosul, capturing approximately one-third of the city's West Bank, including the Mosul Museum. Photographs of the museum show the extent of damage caused by ISIL intentional performative destruction. The museum has also been damaged by ongoing military operations around the site. New photographs and video footage has also been released from Nebi Yunus, an ancient site revered by Iraq's Christian and Muslim communities. According to reports, ISIL tunneling under the site has uncovered parts of the ancient palace of Esarhaddon. The site was last excavated in 1954. Reports from recaptured areas have revealed how other heritage sites inside the city of Mosul have been repurposed and militarized by ISIL. Concerns remain high for Mosul residents trapped in the fighting between ISIL and Iraqi forces. Iraqi officials have told the city's residents to remain in their homes, rather than attempt to flee the fighting. Reports have surfaced of ISIL militants using Iraqi civilians as human shields and the international community is becoming alarmed at the number of civilian casualties thus far.

Key Points

- Video footage and photographs show the condition of the Palmyra Citadel, Homs Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0030](#)
- Video footage and photographs show condition of the Roman Theater, Palmyra, Homs Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0032](#)
- Newly released photographs show condition of Tetrapylon, Palmyra, Homs Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0033](#)
- A reported US-led Coalition airstrike damages the Omar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque compound, Aleppo Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0038](#)
- New photographs and video show the extent of damage to the Mosul Museum, Ninawa Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 15-0034 UPDATE](#)
- More evidence of damage and new discovery at Nebi Yunus Complex, Ninawa Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0005 UPDATE](#)
- Conservators removed spray paint from the Malthai Reliefs, Dohuk Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0021](#)

Report

SARG and Russian forces re-captured the ancient site of Palmyra, and the modern town of Tadmor from ISIL forces on March 2, 2017. ISIL had recaptured the area from pro-regime forces in December 2016. On January 19, 2017 ASOR CHI obtained satellite imagery that showed new damage to the Roman Theater and Tetrapylon in the UNESCO World Heritage Site. This damage occurred between December 26, 2016 and January 10, 2017. With the recapture of Palmyra, new photographs were released showing damage to the structures. The facade and stage of the theater were severely damaged, possibly by ISIL militants attaching explosives to its columns (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0032** in **Appendix** pp. 20–24). Columns of the Tetrapylon have been knocked over, and the larger square bases have also been destroyed (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0033** in **Appendix** pp. 25–27). The Citadel that overlooks Palmyra was also retaken. Photographs show, evidence of militarization of the site, and extensive damage due to explosives including aerial bombardment. The Syrian Army is not stationed inside the Citadel as it is reportedly filled with improvised explosive devices, but it appears that ISIL used the castle as a stronghold while occupying Palmyra (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0030** in **Appendix** pp. 9–17).

SARG and Russian forces also carried out a series of airstrikes in the governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Rif Dimashq. From March 20–29, the airstrikes struck nine mosques across the four governorates despite negotiations of ceasefire agreements in several areas (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0039**; **SHI 17-0040**; **SHI 17-0041**; **SHI 17-0042**; **SHI 17-0043**; **SHI 17-0044**; **SHI 17-0045**; **SHI 17-0046** in **Appendix** pp. 65–83).

In Aleppo Governorate, a US-led Coalition plane struck the Omar Ibn al-Khattab in al-Jeineh village, causing extensive damage (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0038** in **Appendix** pp. 47–64). According to the Syrian Human Rights Committee dozens of people were killed and hundreds more were injured. Later reports stated that as many as 46 people were killed. US officials confirmed an airstrike in the area that targeted an Al Qaeda-affiliate meeting, but denied that their aircrafts had targeted a mosque.

Two suicide bombings struck the capital of Damascus. On March 10th, one attack occurred at the Bab al-Saghir Cemetery, killing dozens of civilians including 40 Iraqi Shia pilgrims who were touring the areas' shrines (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0036** in **Appendix** pp. 42–43). This attack was later claimed by Tahrir al-Sham, an alliance of jihadi groups. On March 14th, another suicide bomber detonated his device inside the Palace of Justice, killing over 25 people (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0037** in **Appendix** pp. 44–46). ISIL later claimed responsibility for this bombing on March 26, 2017.

The insecure environment throughout much of the country has allowed for the continuation of illicit digging and looting activities, as well as the reuse of ancient materials for modern building. A new report from DGAM shows one incident of this at the ancient site of Bakirha and another is documented at Tell Sabi Abyad (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0035** and **SHI 17-0047** in **Appendix** pp. 33–41, 84–88).

Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), backed by US-led Coalition Airstrikes continued their push to liberate Mosul from ISIL forces. During the reporting period, ISF recaptured one third of Mosul's West Bank including the Mosul Museum (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 15-0034 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp.

89–106). Journalists and locals entering the museum have documented extensive destruction to the site.

With the ongoing securing of the city's East Bank, Iraqi officials and archaeologists were allowed into the tunnels running under the destroyed Nebi Yunus Shrine (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0005 UPDATE** in **Appendix** pp. 107–114). ISIL tunneled into the mound for protection from airstrikes, and possibly to loot the palace of Esarhaddon. Large sculptures, including a winged lamassu and cuneiform inscriptions in stone, remain in the tunnel. A cuneiform inscription of Esarhaddon dating back to 672 BCE was also found in the tunnels. The Sunni Waqf (endowment) announced on March 18, 2017 that it is planning to rebuild the Nebi Yunus shrine and mosque, raising concerns that the palace will be covered without study. The Director of Antiquities of Mosul stated that excavation and preservation work of the objects uncovered by the tunneling would begin once security is restored to the area.

Two mosques in Mosul have also been reported as damaged in the ongoing fighting, however ASOR CHI has been unable to independently confirm these reports as well as the extent of damage to the sites (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0019** and **IHI 17-0020** in **Appendix** pp. 121–126). During the push for the liberation of Mosul, new evidence is appearing for the repurposing of churches by ISIL into militarized sites (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0018** in **Appendix** pp. 115–120).

Awareness of the ongoing damage to sites in Northern Iraq have led to clean-up efforts of the Malthai Reliefs located in Dohuk Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0021** in **Appendix** pp. 127–129). The site was previously damaged on multiple occasions by vandalism.