

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

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November 2018 Report

Michael D. Danti, Marina Gabriel, Susan Penacho, Darren Ashby, Kyra Kaercher, Gwendolyn Kristy

## **Table of Contents:**

Executive Summary	2
Key Points	3
Report	4

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<sup>1</sup> This report is based on research conducted by the American Schools of Oriental Research Cultural Heritage Initiatives. Monthly 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, a shaky truce in Idlib Governorate faltered following an alleged Syrian opposition chemical attack that struck an Aleppo neighborhood. Following the attack, which was first reported by Russian and Syrian state media, airstrikes targeted villages in opposition-held areas of Idlib Governorate.<sup>2</sup> The UN warned the uptick in violence in Idlib could ignite a “giant powder keg” in the heavily populated region, home to hundreds of thousands of civilians, including IDPs.<sup>3</sup> Tensions remain high in the governorate, where unknown gunmen killed the high-profile Syrian activist Raed Fares. Fares was a prominent critic of both the Syrian regime and opposition forces in Idlib Governorate. No group claimed responsibility for the assassination; however, the al-Qaeda-linked group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham had previously ordered Radio Fresh, the radio station Fares managed, to stop broadcasting music.<sup>4</sup> HTS-predecessor Al-Nusra Front had also previously detained Fares. There has been a growing number of targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and forced disappearances of medical workers, opposition leaders, and activists in Idlib Governorate.

International outcry against Law 10—the law that gave the Syrian regime the right to redevelop damaged or informal urban areas, allowing former residents only 30 days to claim ownership of property or receive compensation—led President Bashar al-Assad to issue Law 42, which allows ownership claims for one year and permits appeals.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, refugees and the countries that host them continue to worry that Law 10 will impede the ability of displaced Syrians to return. Furthermore, Syrian activists have accused the regime of arresting refugees and IDPs who have returned to Syria following statements by Assad and Syrian officials, as well as some host countries that encouraged return and, in some cases, promised amnesty. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 700 repatriates had been arrested since October—approximately 470 of whom were released as of mid-November 2018.<sup>6</sup> ASOR CHI continues to monitor developments related to Law 10.

The Syrian regime captured the final ISIS-held area in Suwayda Governorate. The remaining ISIS members reportedly withdrew to the Badia Desert. ISIS had utilized the hilly region to hide since the summer of 2018. In July, ISIS launched a string of suicide bombings and ambushes from this area, killing 215 Druze inhabitants in Suwayda city and surrounding villages—the deadliest attack in the region since the start of the war.<sup>7</sup> Democratic lawmakers in the US urged the Trump administration to address the situation.<sup>8</sup>

Another round of talks in Astana, Kazakhstan was deemed a “missed opportunity” by the outgoing UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura. According to De Mistura, there was no “tangible progress in overcoming the 10-month stalemate on the composition of the constitutional committee” that would reform the Syrian constitution and lead to elections.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/11/28/open-source-survey-of-the-alleged-november-24-2018-chemical-attack-in-aleppo/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/11/1027011>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46320355>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-property/syria-extends-time-for-post-war-property-claims-under-disputed-law-idUSKCN1NH1OD>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/activists-accuse-syrian-government-of-arresting-returnees-1.793166#>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46143750>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/lawmakers-raise-alarm-about-isis-attacks-against-syrias-druze-population/2018/11/07/333c5872-b360-495a-92af-f5ef6ef50a73\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/lawmakers-raise-alarm-about-isis-attacks-against-syrias-druze-population/2018/11/07/333c5872-b360-495a-92af-f5ef6ef50a73_story.html)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/un-syria-envoy-calls-astana-talks-on-syria-missed-opportunity-/29628886.html>

In Raqqa, civilians continue to recover the remains of victims who perished in the campaign to liberate the city from ISIS between June and October 2017. According to NPR, meticulous notes recorded by rescue workers detail significantly more civilian deaths than the US-verified 104 “unintended civilian casualties.”<sup>10</sup> The current estimate, according to the rescue workers, numbers in the thousands. Since January 2018, more than 2,600 bodies have been recovered. Slow rebuilding efforts have frustrated Raqqa’s residents as they return to a city estimated to be over 80 percent destroyed. ASOR CHI has funded multiple stabilization projects in the city, including at the Raqqa Museum and the Heraqla Archaeological Storage Facility and Brickyard. The brickyard continues to function, producing construction material and providing a source of employment.

Following a pause in operations, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) restarted operations against ISIS in Deir ez-Zor Governorate. The US-led Coalition continues to provide air and ground support for the offensive. Media sources report mounting civilian casualties. On November 17, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that airstrikes in the village of Buwan killed at least 29 civilians.<sup>11</sup>

## Key Points

- New video footage showed damage to archaeological tells in Achbach, Raqqa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0145**
- New photographs detailed the reconstruction of the Khalid ibn al-Walid Mosque in Homs, Homs Governorate. **ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0148**
- Reported SARG aerial bombardment damaged a mosque in Qatra, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0150**
- Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army members reportedly vandalized an Alawite shrine in Mobata, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0151**
- Funding from ASOR CHI helped sponsor the restoration of a brickyard in order to facilitate stabilization projects in the city of Raqqa, Raqqa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0152**

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/09/664360606/entire-families-wiped-out-u-s-airstrikes-killed-many-civilians-in-syria>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=106938>

## Report

ASOR CHI reported two incidents of cultural heritage damage as a result of aerial bombardment and shelling in areas subject to an increasingly fragile ceasefire between pro-regime and opposition forces. In Idlib Governorate, renewed SARG and pro-regime shelling reportedly damaged a mosque in Qatra (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0150** on pp. 51–52). Aerial bombardment in Aleppo Governorate damaged a mosque in Talafah al-Jadida, Aleppo Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0149** on pp. 47–50). In an attack by unknown perpetrators, a VBIED exploded in front of the al-Yakn Mosque, causing minor damage (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0153** on pp. 62–63).

Video footage from pro-regime and SARG forces that recaptured territory from ISIS in Rif Dimashq Governorate showed the heavily damaged Qabr Sheikh Hussein Tomb in al-Safa volcanic field (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0147** on pp. 32–37). We were unable to determine when the damage occurred. In Aleppo Governorate, Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army members reportedly vandalized the Alawite shrine of Af Ghiri in Mobata (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0151** on pp. 53–55).

Despite challenging conditions and poor infrastructure, rebuilding of heritage sites has begun in Raqqa. Local volunteers are cleaning and restoring the Raqqa Clock Tower—formerly the site of brutal ISIS executions (**ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0146** on pp. 29–31). In order to facilitate the rebuilding of cultural heritage sites in Raqqa, ASOR CHI has sponsored the restoration of the Heraqla Archaeological Storage Facility and Brick Yard (**ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0152** on pp. 56–61) as well as the Raqqa Museum. Elsewhere in Raqqa Governorate, cultural heritage is still threatened by the ongoing conflict. Along the Syrian-Turkish border, the continued militarization of two archaeological sites, Tell Bandar Khan and Tall Bandar Khan North, by the SDF exposes these sites to further damage (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0145** on pp. 24–28).

Reconstruction efforts continue in the Old City of Aleppo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In Aleppo, video footage taken by the Syrian Ministry of Tourism showed reconstruction efforts inside the ancient city. The footage included shots of the Bab al-Faraj Clock Tower and the Aleppo Citadel in various stages of clean-up and restoration (**ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0142** and **SHI 18-0143** on pp. 10–12, 13–16).

In the city of Homs, where hostilities have largely ceased, new photographs detailed the reconstruction of the Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque (**ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report 18-0148** on pp. 38–46). The reconstruction was criticized on social media: commenters questioned why the restorers had not replicated the site’s previous style.

In Hasakah Governorate, looters illegally excavated the archaeological sites of Abu Hafour and Abu Hujayrah (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0141** on pp. 8–9). Despite ongoing instability in the area, a local organization completed stabilization work at Qalaat Sukra (**ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0144** on pp. 17–23).