

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 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, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes, renewed their offensive against ISIS in the group's final holdouts in Deir ez-Zor Governorate, which include the towns of Hajin and al-Susah. ISIS reportedly retains control over "a system of tunnels and trenches" in the town of Hajin.² The US-led Coalition has conducted airstrikes in the area since 2014. Following the beginning of operations by the SDF in September 2017, ISIS has steadily lost territory in the governorate. Its zone of control is now limited to areas along the Syria-Iraq border.³

In Idlib Governorate, Russian forces restarted their aerial bombardment campaign in Idlib Governorate and portions of Hama Governorate.⁴ Idlib Governorate, which is largely controlled by pro-Islamist Syrian opposition groups, continues to host hundreds of thousands of Syrian IDPs. The governorate also has a rich cultural heritage, much of which has been heavily damaged in the conflict.

Reconstruction efforts in Syria dominated the reporting period with reports of work in Aleppo, Rif Dimashq, and Hasakah Governorates. Some of the funding for these projects comes directly from governments that are active militarily in the region. In areas recently captured by the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) has sponsored the rebuilding of local infrastructure and cultural heritage sites with a focus on mosques. This work has led some local activists and international experts to question the country's motives and accuse President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of attempting to increase Turkey's footprint in the country through rebuilding, particularly of religious sites.⁵

Key Points

- A suspected Russian airstrike destroyed a mosque in Hasraya Village, Hama Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0135**
- Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army forces vandalized and reused the Statue of the Nowruz Flame in Afrin, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0136**
- Reconstruction work continues at the al-Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0137**
- A third stage of reconstruction work took place at the ancient site of Tell Beydar, Hasakah Governorate. **ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0140**

² <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/09/syria-situation-report-september-13-26.html>

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-deir-ez-zor-situation-overview-and-sub-district-profiles-june-2018>

⁴ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/09/syria-situation-report-august-28.html>

⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/09/turkey-syria-religious-body-becomes-pillar-influence-tool.html>; <https://vdcnsy.com/2018/09/14/-/تركيا-تستغل-بناء-المساجد-في-شمال-سوري>; <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/the-ottoman-return-to-syria-100-years-on-1.2282658>

Report

Attacks by unidentified perpetrators continue to occur in both regime and opposition-held areas. One such attack took place in the city of Azaz, Aleppo Governorate, where an explosion resulted in civilian casualties and moderate damage to a mosque ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0131](#)).

Also in Aleppo Governorate, a brigade of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) vandalized and reused the Kurdish Statue of the Nowruz Flame in Afrin, turning it into a memorial to the FSA and Turkish forces who recaptured the area during Operation Olive Branch ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0136](#)).

Aerial bombardment by armed actors in Syria damaged at least two mosques during the reporting period. In Deir ez-Zor Governorate, US-led Coalition airstrikes reportedly damaged a mosque in the town of al-Susah during operations by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to recapture the area from ISIS ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0134](#)). In Hama Governorate, a suspected Russian airstrike destroyed a mosque in Hasraya Village ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0135](#)).

The future of Syria's damaged cultural heritage sites, and who bears the responsibility for rebuilding them, remains an open question. The cost of rebuilding historic areas of Syria, such as the Old City of Aleppo, is estimated to be in the billions of dollars. Turkey has recently directed some funding towards stabilization and reconstruction work in areas under its control. In the Summer of 2018, Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) published a document that detailed Turkish-funded efforts to repair mosques in northern Syria. The report highlighted the restoration of five mosques in Aleppo Governorate ([ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0132](#)). In addition, Turkey is reportedly supporting reconstruction work at the heavily damaged al-Kabir Mosque in al-Bab, Aleppo Governorate ([ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0133](#)).

The Syrian Ministry of Culture and Directorate-General of Antiquities have also been involved in reconstruction projects. During the reporting period, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) released a video report on the ongoing reconstruction work at the al-Umayyad Mosque, which was heavily damaged during the conflict. This project is reportedly being funded by the Chechen Republic's Akhmad Kadyrov Fund ([ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0137](#)). The Syrian Ministry of Culture has reportedly begun work to build a new museum dedicated to the Arab poet al-Mutanabbi in the Khan al-Wazir, located in the Old City of Aleppo, Aleppo Governorate ([ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0139](#)).

In other areas of Syria, local communities are leading reconstruction activities. In Maaloula, Rif Dimashq Governorate, an area known for its ancient Christian heritage, reconstruction work began at the St. George Church ([ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0138](#)). The funding for this work reportedly came from church parishioners and Syrian Christian communities. The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian experts also reportedly provided funds and advisement on the project.

In Hasakah Governorate, Antiquities and Tourism Protection Authority in the Jazirah Canton (ATPA) began the "third stage" of restorations at Tell Beydar ([ASOR CHI Heritage Response Report SHI 18-0140](#)).