



ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Safeguarding the Heritage of the Near East Initiative¹

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May 2017 Monthly Report

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¹ This report is based on research conducted by the "Safeguarding the Heritage of the Near East Initiative." 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 May 2017 reporting period, zones of military control in northern Syria and northern Iraq significantly shifted following heavy combat operations and intense aerial bombardment. SARG forces recaptured territory from opposition forces in Syria, while Iraqi Security Forces regained significant areas from ISIL. The intense combat kinetics resulted in damage to cultural assets, and the fluid situation complicated emergency response efforts across a large, heavily populated area. Ultimately, ISIL's diminishing operational capacities and territorial control will strengthen and enhance regional cultural property protection and heritage management efforts.

Iraqi Security Forces continued their push to reclaim the remaining ISIL-controlled neighborhoods in the city of Mosul, including the historically significant Old City. Civilian casualties in Mosul were significantly elevated, and media outlets and humanitarian observers revealed that ISIL fighters continued to target evacuating noncombatants. As ISIL has lost territory in northern Iraq, we have noted an increase in acts of retributory violence perpetrated by retreating ISIL extremists against the local population and cultural assets. Previously ISIL justified such actions through its extremist ideology, but such retributory acts expose the organization's intrinsic criminality.

In Syria, negotiations between Russia, Turkey, and Iran resulted in an attempted implementation of de-escalation zones. Despite this agreement, clashes and aerial bombardment continued in these same areas. In contrast, Idlib Governorate, which had been under constant aerial bombardment in previous months, was relatively untouched in May, with airstrikes focusing on opposition-held areas of Rif Dimashq Governorate. Opposition forces controlling Rif Dimashq were not included in the agreement. It is too soon to determine whether this agreement significantly reduced damage to cultural assets in Syria. The commencement of direct Russian military involvement in Syria in September 2015 directly correlates with consistently higher monthly rates of combat damage to cultural sites, especially religious sites, in opposition held areas. Airstrikes and other military explosives caused a high percentage of these incidents. In sum, the timing, targeting, and military capabilities linked to this elevated period of heritage damage implicate Russian forces.

In newly pacified areas in Syria and Iraq, returnees initiated independent cleanup and restoration efforts at ancient and modern heritage sites. Civilians in the Old City of Aleppo, with limited involvement from Syrian government authorities, started debris removal and stabilized compromised structures.

In Libya, the primary threat to heritage sites continued to be rapid urban development at a time when heritage laws cannot be enforced. The current security conditions have allowed new developers to tear down historic buildings to make way for new construction.

Key Points

- New video shows ISIL militants intentional destruction of antiquities in Deir ez-Zor Governorate, Syria. ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0081](#))
- An old house in Aleppo was purchased and is being dismantled for transport to Lebanon. ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0086](#))
- New photographs show damage to the Maltai Reliefs in Iraq. ([ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0026](#))
- New photographs were released of damage to the Mosul University Library. ([ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0016 UPDATE](#))

Syria

During the reporting period, SARG and Russian aerial bombardment campaigns continued over opposition-held areas in Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Rif Dimashq, and Raqqa Governorates. ASOR CHI documented destruction and damage to two mosques in Rif Dimashq (see [SHI 17-0082](#) and [SHI 17-0084](#) in Appendix pp. 35–36, 39–41), and one episode of damage to mosques in each of the other governorates (see [SHI 17-0083](#), [SHI 17-0091](#), and [SHI 17-0092](#) in Appendix pp. 37–38, 74–75). Local activist groups in Syria reported dozens of civilian casualties as a result of this aerial bombardment.

SARG forces continued to recapture territory from Syrian opposition forces. Following the May 20 final evacuation of opposition forces from the district of al-Waer, the Syrian regime now controls the entirety of Homs City.

ISIL continued to lose territory in former strongholds in Syria. The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) recaptured the strategic city of al-Tabqa. The territory recaptured in this operation included the Tabqa Dam. ISIL is believed to be redeploying its forces in Syria and Iraq to Syria's Deir ez-Zor Governorate where the organization controls large swathes of territory, including parts of the city of Deir ez-Zor.

As the SDF advanced toward the ISIL-held stronghold of Raqqa, US-led Coalition airstrikes increased over neighboring towns and villages. From May 1–6, five mosques were damaged in and around Raqqa (see [SHI 17-0077](#), [SHI 17-0078](#), [SHI 17-0079](#), [SHI 17-0080](#), and [SHI 17-0085](#) in Appendix pp. 18–29, 42–43). Most of these mosques were reportedly rendered inoperable. ASOR CHI is continuing to investigate these incidents in order to confirm levels of damage. Local activist groups in Syria have reported dozens of civilian casualties as a result of this aerial bombardment.

ASOR CHI documented three cleanup and reconstruction efforts at sites located in the Old City of Aleppo (see [SHI 17-0088](#), [SHI 17-0089](#), [SHI 17-0090](#), and [SHI 17-0093](#) in Appendix pp. 58–73, 76–79). Local residents spearheaded these recovery efforts. These locals report damaged sites, mainly sites in the process of collapsing, to the Aleppo City Government officials, who then send engineers and other professionals to stabilize the buildings. The current objective appears to be the emergency stabilization and strengthening of standing remains. In the case of Khan Uch Khan, a 1500 CE gate, the support of the Aleppo Directorate of Antiquities was sought to undertake the removal of sculpture from around the gate for conservation and off-site storage. The sculptures will be reinstalled following the intended restoration of the gate's facade. With regard to Aleppo's large number of damaged mosques, initial reports indicate local residents and craftsmen are donating time to help reconstruct and stabilize the buildings. In sum, these initial reports on Aleppo's revitalization highlight the important role of local stakeholders in emergency response and preserving cultural heritage.

One report may serve as an early warning regarding a growing trend of disassembling and selling historically significant private residences in the Old City of Aleppo (see [SHI 17-0086](#) in Appendix pp. 44–52). A Lebanese businessman recently purchased an historic house (ca. 1600 CE) within the UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to media reports, the businessman then began to dismantle a wood paneled room, possibly in order to transport the architectural elements to his residence in Lebanon. When neighborhood residents saw workmen dismantling the paneling and loading it onto trucks, they notified officials in the Department of Antiquities, who halted the shipment. The director of the Department of Antiquities informed the Syrian Prime Minister, who will decide if the wood panels may be taken to Lebanon. ASOR CHI remains concerned as to new development

threats and the removal of significant cultural property from UNESCO-protected sites in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. This case again demonstrates the crucial role of local stakeholders in preserving cultural heritage.

Iraq

Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes, closed in on the last remaining ISIL strongholds in Mosul. The neighborhoods on the city's west bank continue to sustain severe damage as a result of continuing aerial bombardment and on-the-ground clashes. This area contains a high density of historically significant sites. In the first half of May, ASOR CHI recorded seven mosques that were allegedly damaged by Iraqi and US-led Coalition forces (see [IHI 17-0025](#), [IHI 17-0029](#), [IHI 17-0030](#), [IHI 17-0031](#), [IHI 17-0035](#), [IHI 17-0036](#), and [IHI 17-0037](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 94–99, 113–118, 119–124, 156–161).

While military operations focus on retaking western Mosul, cultural heritage sites on the east bank and in surrounding areas are being cleaned and restored (see [IHI 17-0016 UPDATE](#), [IHI 17-0027](#), [IHI 17-0028](#), [IHI 17-0032](#), [IHI 17-0033](#), and [IHI 17-0034](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 80–89, 107–112, 125–155). The Mosul University campus ([IHI 17-0032](#)) represents one of the more significant areas of restoration. Constructed in the 1960s, Mosul University was one of the largest educational and research centers in the Middle East. After ISIL seized Mosul in 2014, they re-opened the university under their authority, mainly to train professionals in the medical, chemical, and engineering fields. ISIL also reused buildings and laboratories as headquarters and weapons facilities leading to the US-led Coalition targeting of university buildings in 2016. Following the liberation of the campus earlier this year, assessment teams and journalists were able to document the full extent of the damage to buildings, equipment, and collections. One of the hardest hit buildings was the Mosul University Library. The library contained 3,500 rare books, some dating back to the early 18th century. The library also contained 5,000 rare government publications dating back to 1921. Reports surfaced in February 2015 that ISIL had ransacked the library and burned 100,000 books and manuscripts. Recent photographs show the extent of this destruction with severe structural damage from both ISIL and US-led Coalition airstrikes, as well as charred books and fire damage to the majority of the structure. Local activist group Mosul Eye along with students from all departments are helping to clean the structure and to gather any remaining books. Libraries and universities from across the world have pledged support, materials, and books to help rebuild the library. In other university buildings, professors and students are working together to clean the buildings and repair what they can before classes resume in September.

Libya

Despite the alleged involvement of Libyan elements of ISIL in the Manchester, UK attack on May 22 and the Minya, Egypt attack on May 26, enough peace prevails in Libya that construction projects continue in many parts of the country. Private citizens and local real estate cooperatives have taken advantage of the lack of rule of law and are destroying heritage sites to make way for new development. During this reporting period, members of the Department of Antiquities in both the east and west of Libya reported three instances in which a previously recorded heritage site has been destroyed during a new building project without the consent of the local or regional authorities (see [LHI 17-0002](#), [LHI 17-0003](#), [LHI 17-0004](#) in [Appendix](#) pp. 162–168). At the time of reporting, neither the retaliatory airstrikes launched by the Egyptian Air Force on purported ISIL training camps in the hills to the south of Derna, nor the strikes of the Libyan National Army under the command of Khalifa Haftar on the Brak al Shati Airbase controlled by the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord appear to have damaged cultural heritage sites.