

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

During the June 2017 reporting period, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) officially launched operations to recapture the ISIL-held stronghold of Raqqa. Iraqi Security Forces advanced in Mosul, entering the Old City, and conducted clearing operations in recaptured territories. As this reporting period was ending, military activity in the Old City was increasing as the final meters of territory held by ISIL were coming under fire by ISF and US-led Coalition airstrikes. Thousands of civilians were trapped in Raqqa and Mosul, raising concerns about the risks of high noncombatant casualties as a result of ongoing military activity and aerial bombardment. Cultural heritage sites in these urban environments sustained significant damage, and additional damage incidents appear to be inevitable.

Efforts to recapture the city of Raqqa officially opened on June 6, following months of encircling efforts by the SDF. US-led Coalition Forces conducted extensive aerial bombardment in support of these operations, resulting in extensive damage and reports of dozens of civilian casualties. ASOR CHI documented at least 15 heritage sites in Raqqa damaged since early June 2017. ASOR CHI remains concerned about the widespread scale of destruction as a result of intense aerial bombardment.

In Iraq, operations to recapture Mosul continued to inflict heavy damage to much of the Old City. As Iraqi forces approached the iconic al-Nuri al-Kabir Mosque on June 21, ISIL militants detonated fixed explosive charges, leveling the mosque and destroying the leaning al-Hadba Minaret. ASOR CHI collaborated with National Geographic on a report regarding the site's importance, and what its destruction means to Mosul residents and other Iraqis. ASOR CHI also released an 'Update' on our website with a more detailed examination of the site's history, as well as reflections on the damage. For some Iraqis, the destruction of the mosque marked a turning point in which ISIL conceded defeat. Like most ISIL deliberate destructions, the act may be interpreted as highly symbolic: ISIL destroyed the famed mosque complex from which ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared his so-called caliphate. The destruction occurred just short of the three-year anniversary of this declaration of June 29, 2014. ISIL attempted to blame US-led Coalition airstrikes for the destruction, which is atypical of past ISIL intentional destructions. ISIL militants remained in the Old City as the reporting period ended, keeping Mosul civilians trapped amongst clashes and airstrikes. ISIL maintains a presence in several areas across Iraq, including Tal Afar, Hawija, and al-Qaim.

As other parts of Mosul's Old City were recaptured, ASOR CHI analyzed new video footage and photographs of damage to area's historic buildings, including several mosques and churches. In addition, a June 16 ISIL attack possibly further damaged the Mosul Museum. The building had already been heavily damaged by ISIL intentional destruction, aerial bombardment, and small weapons fire.

In Libya, ongoing clashes between armed groups continued to threaten heritage sites. Islamist militants opposed to the Libyan National Army (LNA) intentionally demolished several sites in Benghazi. Reports surfaced of damage caused by an Egyptian Air Force strike on an Ottoman period settlement located outside the eastern port city of Derna.

Key Points

- Islamic factions are firing on Syrian-Kurdish opposition forces from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Qala’at Simeon. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0112**
- Satellite imagery revealed damage to Syrian site of Heraqla concurrent with its recapture from ISIL by the SDF. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0106**
- Caches of artifacts were discovered in houses in Mosul. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0039**
- ISIL intentionally destroyed al-Nuri al-Kabir Mosque and al-Hadba Minaret. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0045**
- Satellite imagery and news reports confirm damage to the historic Libyan city of Benghazi. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0005**

Syria

During the reporting period, Islamic factions including the Sham Liberation Organization (formerly al-Nusra Front) and Ahrar al-Sham shelled the villages of Basoufan and Bashmara from areas included in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, Qala’at Simeon (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0106** in **Appendix** pp. 59–61). The Kurdish People’s Protection Unit (YPG) forces returned fire, possibly damaging the site. As part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Qala’at Simeon falls under the protection granted by the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its Second Protocol, signed in 1999. Qala’at Simeon has been damaged by military activity on multiple occasions since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. ASOR CHI will continue to monitor damage to, and the condition of, St. Simeon, as well as to other UNESCO sites in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

In Daraa Governorate, frequent clashes and heavy aerial bombardment continued in parts of the Old City of Daraa and surrounding towns and villages. SARG forces dropped incendiary barrel bombs on two mosques. Al-Omari Mosque in Daraa (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0102** in **Appendix** pp. 41–49), and al-Rahman Mosque in al-Naimah (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0118** in **Appendix** pp. 99–101) both sustained heavy damage to their roofs and courtyards.

In Deir ez-Zor Governorate, where operations continue against ISIL-held areas, SARG forces struck four mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0096**, **SHI 17-0103**, **SHI 17-0113**, and **SHI 17-0120** in **Appendix** pp. 17–18, 50–51, 79, 106), rendering all inoperable. On June 10, 2017, a US-led coalition airstrike hit a mosque in Mehairma (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0105** in **Appendix** pp. 57–58), rendering it inoperable.

As the efforts to recapture Raqqa began, the SDF recaptured four heritage sites previously under ISIL occupation (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0094**; **SHI 17-0106**; **SHI 17-0109**; **SHI 17-0117** in **Appendix** pp. 12–14, 59–61, 66–68, 92–98). In late May 2017, DigitalGlobe satellite imagery showed the destruction of the West Palace of the Abbasid Palaces in Raqqa by heavy machinery. This occurred between February 3 and March 30, 2017. The reconstructed East Palace is still intact. The exact reason(s) for this destruction remains unknown, but urban encroachment/unregulated development has been ongoing in the area since 2011.

The site of Heraqla, located outside the city, was also retaken during this period. The Raqqa Department of Antiquities/Raqqa Museum used structures at this archaeological site for the storage of antiquities — this material was looted in 2013. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows that the remains sustained damage between May 31 and June 11, 2017, most likely from aerial

bombardment. Haraqqa has also sustained looting damage since before the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Archaeological sites in regions under ongoing military occupation are susceptible to various forms of damage ranging from military damage to looting to development. With its rich history from Roman and Early Islamic periods, Raqqa is no exception to this rule.

With the start of the operation to recapture Raqqa, several mosques were damaged by airstrikes. US-led Coalition airstrikes damaged three mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0101**; **SHI 17-0104**, and **SHI 17-0119** in **Appendix** pp. 36–40, 52–56, 102–105), Syrian Democratic Forces damaged one mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0114** in **Appendix** pp. 80–83), and two mosques were damaged by unknown forces, but possibly Kurdish forces backed by US-led Coalition air cover (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0107** and **SHI 17-0108** in **Appendix** pp. 62–65). With the uptick in airstrikes, civilians are unable reach cemeteries located around the edges of Raqqa. As a result residents are beginning to bury relatives killed in the ongoing fighting in makeshift graveyards inside the al-Qadim Mosque as well as at Qasr al-Banat (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0110** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0111** in **Appendix** pp. 69–73).

Iraq

On June 21, 2017 ISIL blew up the historic al-Nuri al-Kabir Mosque and al-Hadba Minaret (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0045** in **Appendix** pp. 133–151) as Iraqi forces were closing in on the mosque, considered the center of ISIL’s caliphate in Iraq. ISIL was quick to post statements to its own media outlet that blamed the US-led Coalition for the destruction. The US-led Coalition and ISF both reported that there were no aircraft in the area of the mosque at the time of its destruction. Video footage released by the ISF shows the demolition of the mosque, with the explosion originating inside the mosque and minaret. Various independent reports note that ISIL had planted explosives in the mosque and minaret several weeks prior to the destruction. The mosque was officially recaptured by the ISF on June 29, 2017.

The ongoing fighting in Mosul has resulted in the liberation of more neighborhoods in the Old City, where many of the city’s churches are located. Four churches were reported liberated in the June reporting period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0046**; **IHI 17-0047**; **IHI 17-0049**; **IHI 17-0050** in **Appendix** pp. 152–164, 169–175). Many of the churches had been heavily damaged in the ongoing fighting, and some had sustained intentional destruction and vandalism by ISIL. Other churches were repurposed by ISIL and used as court buildings or prisons. New evidence suggests that Mar Ephraim Church was used as a detention center for Yezidi women and girls before they were sold into sexual slavery (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0040** in **Appendix** pp. 115–118). Reports claim that once ISIL had stopped using the building, they either sold it or were preparing to destroy it. New information on Mariam al-Azra Church shows that ISIL sold the church, as the group ran out of funds, and contractors began to dismantle it to sell the steel beams (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0038** in **Appendix** pp. 108–111). Other intentional destruction by ISIL appears to have been planned but never carried out inside the Church of Mar Thomas, where columns were marked to show where explosives would have been placed (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0047** in **Appendix** pp. 155–164).

As the ISF cleared houses in Mosul, they have uncovered caches of artifacts (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0039** in **Appendix** pp. 112–114). One such cache included material belonging to the Museum of Natural History at Mosul University, as well as a few books. An ASOR CHI in-country source hypothesizes that these books, as they are not from the museum, were brought into the house separately, and this house may have been used to store artifacts prior to sale/smuggling. Other reports from this period state that ISIL is leaving behind these caches of artifacts, either from

the Mosul Museum or local sites, as they flee Mosul. ASOR CHI continues to monitor the reports of discovered caches, and remains concerned as to the security of such artifacts in Mosul and the surrounding areas. We also would emphasize that such abandoned material represent “leftover” cultural property, antiquities, and art that has failed to sell during the ISIL occupation and was deemed too low in value for removal by ISIL operatives evacuating the city. We have noted similar caches of low-monetary value “leftovers” in other parts of Iraq and Syria. Concomitantly, such material is not representative of the cultural property, antiquities, and art that ASOR CHI has documented on the antiquities market linked to ISIL and other groups.

Libya

During the reporting period, the Libyan National Army (LNA) expressed its intention to rid the Souq al Hout neighborhood in Benghazi of militants affiliated with the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries during the month of Ramadan. In preparation for this anticipated attack, militants appear to have demolished the Benghazi Courthouse Complex, al-Ummah Bank, the Post Office, and the Souq al-Rabea to make the adjacent streets less passable and to secure their entrenched positions (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0005** in **Appendix** pp. 180–181). These buildings date from 1911–1947, and were some of the more notable sites in Benghazi. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery from June 10, 2017 shows the strategic demolition of portions of each of the buildings within the Souq al-Hout. The street-facing sides of buildings were destroyed, with debris falling into the street, in order to block movement by the LNA.

An Egyptian Air Force strike on May 27, 2017 struck the Ottoman period-fortified settlement outside Derna (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0006** in **Appendix** pp. 176–179). This strike was in retaliation for the death of Coptic Christians on May 26, 2017. Both the Libyan National Army and the Egyptian Air Force targeted this site in 2015. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows the site has also been damaged by large heavy machinery and an earthworks project occurring between October 8, 2016 and January 30, 2017. This site has been damaged both by military activity and development over the course of the Libyan conflict. This pattern is emerging across Syria, Iraq, and Libya — as places are liberated and life starts to return to normal, development encroaches on historical and archaeological sites. ASOR CHI will continue to monitor these patterns across the region.