

**ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI):  
Safeguarding the Heritage of the Near East Initiative<sup>1</sup>**

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**July 2017 Monthly Report**

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<sup>1</sup> 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, negotiations between the United States and Russia concerning de-escalation zones in Syria continued, with Russia taking the lead in the establishment of such areas. These discussions, as well as fluid cessation of hostilities agreements between SARG and Syrian opposition forces, resulted in a minor decrease in aerial bombardment of opposition-controlled areas, most notably in Idlib Governorate. SARG forces continued to target opposition held areas near Damascus. Heavy aerial bombardment continued ISIL-held areas of Syria.

Throughout the month, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced into the surrounded city of Raqqa from all directions, capturing dozens of neighborhoods. US-led Coalition airstrikes over the city resulted in extensive damage and high civilian casualties, raising concerns among reporting groups and local and international humanitarian organizations. The US-led Coalition confirmed at least one strike on a heritage site within the city of Raqqa. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that the SDF now controlled an estimated 40% of the city as of the end of the July reporting period.

While US-led Coalition operations continue despite contestations from the Syrian regime, Russia solidified its future holdings in the country. Russian President Vladimir Putin ratified an agreement with the Syrian regime that allows Russia to maintain Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia Governorate for the next 49 years with an option to extend. Russia has also sent its military personnel to police agreed-upon safe zones in opposition-held areas of Syria, despite several actors being involved in the agreement process.

Pro-regime forces captured additional territory near the Lebanese border in Rif Dimashq Governorate. Operations by pro-regime forces, including Hezbollah, forced Syrian opposition groups, including Islamist groups, from opposition-held areas along the Syria-Lebanon border near the Lebanese town of Aarsal. Opposition forces and refugees were scheduled to be evacuated to northwestern areas of Syria, most probably Idlib Governorate using a similar process as was seen previously when opposition forces and civilians were evacuated from areas of Aleppo and Hama Governorates. Syrian opposition groups, made up of dozens of variations of moderate and Islamist opposition parties, continue to hold Idlib Governorate.

Idlib Governorate has seen a respite from SARG and Russian aerial bombardment as a result of de-escalation agreements. However, Syrian opposition groups Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (an offshoot of Al Qaeda-affiliate Nusra Front) and Ahrar al-Sham clashed during July in Idlib Governorate, forcing the closure of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing linking Idlib and Turkey. There are preliminary indications of increased risk for cultural assets in Idlib Governorate. Islamist groups, the most powerful forces in the area, appear to be in control of key cultural repositories. As these groups with large numbers of extremist foreign fighters become more involved in local governance and extracting revenues, systematic cultural property crime will likely increase, as has been documented previously in ISIL-controlled territories where Natural Resource Departments were established.

In July Iraqi Security Forces backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes recaptured the remaining ISIL-held neighborhoods of Mosul's Old City. On July 10, 2017 Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi proclaimed Iraq's victory over ISIL. IEDs are ubiquitous in the city in homes, schools, mosques, and streets used by returning IDPs. Many IEDs are rudimentary, pieced together as homemade

explosives. This practice was previously used by ISIL in other recaptured areas including major cities such as Tadmor, Fallujah, and the towns and villages surrounding Mosul in the Nineveh Plains. Some experts estimate that the mines could take decades to clear. As the reporting period ended, civilians were still being found alive under the rubble of areas of the Old City. ISIL holdouts are still believed to be hiding in parts of the Old City.

The next objective for Iraqi forces will be the recapture of the ISIL-held city of Tel Afar, approximately 25 miles (40 km) west of Mosul. Iraqi forces are not anticipating as fierce a battle with the estimated 2,000 militants remaining in the city, as the militants are expected to be exhausted and discouraged as the group continues to lose ground in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> The liberation of Tel Afar will coincide with the release of much new information on the status of heritage sites in the area, as has been the case with Mosul. Cultural heritage sites in the city were targeted by ISIL for intentional destruction in 2014–15, particularly sites affiliated with the area’s Shia population.

In Libya, on July 5, 2017 Libyan National Army (LNA) forces declared victory after three years of fighting with Islamist and militia forces allied under the umbrella of the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries. While oil production has climbed to over 1 million barrels per day, a liquidity crisis continues to grip the country, and customers must wait in lines for hours to make the small withdrawals permitted by the banks. This liquidity crisis poses a major challenge for the cultural sector. Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj of the Government of National Accord and the commander of the LNA, Khalifa Haftar, agreed to a ceasefire during a meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris, and stated the intention to hold elections in 2018.

## Key Points

- US-led Coalition airstrikes damaged the city wall of Raqqa, Raqqa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0122**
- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham reportedly fired heavy weapons at Qal’at Harim, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0132**
- The battle for Mosul damages the Old City of Mosul, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0065**
- New photos show graffiti on the al-Hadba Minaret and al-Nouri Mosque in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0062**
- The aftermath of the Battle of Benghazi reveals severe damage to the Old City of Benghazi, including the Ottoman Municipal Building. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0013**
- A Torah scroll, purchased in Zintan, Tripolitania, was recovered from two smugglers in Tunisia. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0010**

## Syria

During the reporting period, US-led coalition forces carried out heavy aerial bombardment in Raqqa as the SDF captured dozens of neighborhoods from ISIL. The US-led Coalition confirmed that its aircraft intentionally struck two 25 meter-long sections in the ancient Rafiq Wall in order to create new access points into the Old City of Raqqa (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0122** on pp. 13–24). US CENTCOM asserted that the strikes would help preserve the rest of the wall by allowing the frontline to advance further into Raqqa’s Old City with lagging ISIL resistance. ISIL was believed to have taken up defensive positions behind the wall, which provided a convenient bulwark against

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-talafar-idUSKBN1AG1PT>

the SDF. Ground combat subsequently occurred along three axes following the airstrikes, including in the vicinity of the Bab Baghdad gate and Qasr al-Banat. The next day ISIL claimed responsibility for a car bomb that damaged Bab Baghdad gate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0127** on pp. 30–32). ASOR CHI remains concerned as to the use of heritage sites in the fight for the liberation of Raqqa.

As the fight for Raqqa intensifies, US-led Coalition and Russian airstrikes have damaged and destroyed mosques both in the city of Raqqa and on the city's outskirts (**ASOR CHI Incident Reports SHI 17-0126, SHI 17-0130, SHI 17-0138, and SHI 17-0139** on pp. 28–29, 37–38, 56–58). On July 25, 2017 DigitalGlobe satellite imagery showed the destruction of al-Safa Mosque due to explosives, likely the result of airstrikes (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0139** on pp. 57–58). Analysis of satellite imagery shows that this mosque has been completely destroyed. No reports of this destruction appeared in the media, and US-led Coalition air support was active on the western front on July 24–25. On July 31, 2017 a suspected Russian airstrike completely destroyed al-Rahman Mosque in al-Khamisiyah Foqani (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0138** on p. 56). It is estimated that 40 percent of Raqqa has been taken by the SDF forces backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes. As the liberation of Raqqa continues, ASOR CHI anticipates more damage to mosques and other religious heritage.

ASOR CHI released an Update Report entitled “Update: Damage to al-Rafiqah Wall in Raqqa’s Old City by US-led Coalition Forces.” The report details the damage caused by two US-led Coalition airstrikes that breached the Old City wall in Raqqa. ASOR CHI remains concerned as to the ongoing military operations around the al-Rafiqah Wall and will continue to monitor reports of damage.

SARG airstrikes reportedly damaged four mosques across Deir ez-Zor Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Reports SHI 17-0125, SHI 17-0129, SHI 17-0133, and SHI 17-0137** on pp. 27, 36, 45–46, 55). Most of the governorate has fallen under ISIL control as the group steadily lost territory in Syria and Iraq. Deir ez Zor will likely be the site of a major battle between the SDF, the Syrian Regime, and ISIL. On July 24, 2017 a SARG airstrike reportedly hit Sa’ad bin Mo’ath Mosque, damaging the mosque’s walls and contents (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0133** on pp. 45–46).

In Hama two mosques were damaged during the reporting period by reported SARG and SARG-Russian airstrikes (**ASOR CHI Incident Reports SHI 17-0123 and ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0124** on pp. 25–26). On July 4, 2017 reported SARG-Russian aircraft fired on a mosque in the village of Abu Dali, Hama Governorate causing severe damage (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0123** on p. 25). This incident has not been independently confirmed. SARG forces were engaged in an offensive against ISIL at the time of the incident.

On July 9, Russia and the US announced a ceasefire and proposed de-escalation zones in western Syria during the G-20 summit. The zones to be established include opposition-held areas of Eastern Ghouta in Rif Dimashq Governorate as well as areas in Idlib, Latakia, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates.

Despite the ceasefire announcements, damage to heritage sites continued during the reporting period. In Rif Dimashq, two mosques were damaged after the ceasefire was announced (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0131 and ASOR CHI Incident Reports SHI 17-0134** on pp. 39–41, 47–48). On July 25, 2017, SARG-Russian airstrikes damaged an unnamed mosque in Arbin, Rif Dimashq (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0134** on pp. 47–48). The strikes damaged the bottom of the

mosque's minaret and collapsed nearby structures. The area of Arbin has recently been under heavy bombardment, but the Russian government has denied firing on Arbin.

In Idlib Governorate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (previously known as al-Nusra) and Ahrar al-Sham, a more conservative group that broke from Tahrir al-Sham, were fighting near Harim. Jabhat al-Nusra posted video footage of gunfire from this fight hitting Qal'at Harim (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0132** on pp. 42–44). According to medieval Muslim sources, the citadel was founded by the Byzantines. Conquered in 1098 CE during the First Crusade (1096–1099 CE), it functioned as an important strongpoint for the defense of the Principality of Antioch, a newly-founded crusader state. Recognized as a national monument in 1959, the citadel received restoration from the Syrian government in 1989. The citadel has been damaged by the ongoing fighting, but no major evidence of damage or destruction was confirmed by ASOR CHI during this reporting period.

In Homs Governorate, the Palmyra Coordination Committee (PCC) posted a photograph of damage to the ancient Ain Afqa Spring at Palmyra (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0128** on pp. 33–35). The PCC blamed the damage on the Russian forces, but did not specify a date for the damage. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows the spring was damaged between January 9, 2012 and May 22, 2015. ISIL took Palmyra and the surrounding area from SARG forces May 15–30, 2015. Russia entered the conflict in September 2015, and as such Russian forces are not responsible for this damage. PCC seems to have assumed Russian forces were responsible because of the heavy bombardment to remove ISIL in 2016 and 2017.

In Damascus Governorate, the 16th century al-Sinayah Suq was damaged when it caught fire (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0135** pp. 49–52). The fire reportedly originated in a shoe store located inside the market, and the extent of the damage is currently unknown. During the conflict, multiple suqs in Damascus have been damaged by fire, usually as a result of faulty wiring, overloaded circuits, or other electrical problems. The cause of the fire has not as yet been determined, but it was reportedly not due to military activity. Sites such as al-Sinayah Suq in Syria, as well as similar sites in Iraq and Libya, remain at high fire-damage risks due to poor infrastructure such as faulty wiring and the lack of fire emergency services.

## Iraq

During the operations to recapture the western bank of Mosul, which officially began on February 19, 2017 and ended with the liberation of all of Mosul on July 10, 2017, much of the heavy combat was focused on the Old City of Mosul (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0065** on pp. 131–136). The United Nations estimates that 5,000 buildings were damaged and 490 were destroyed in the Old City.<sup>3</sup> As of July 12, 2017 ASOR CHI has assessed the damage to 64 heritage sites within the Old City of Mosul. We have noted 37 heritage sites that exhibit severe damage (60–100% damaged), 12 which have some damage (10–60%), 9 with minor damage (1–10%), and 6 with no visible damage (**ASOR CHI Incident Reports IHI 17-0020 UPDATE, IHI 17-0048 UPDATE, IHI 17-0051, IHI 17-0052, IHI 17-0053, IHI 17-0054, IHI 17-0055, IHI 17-0056, IHI 17-0057, IHI 17-0058, IHI 17-0059, IHI 17-0060, IHI 17-0061, IHI 17-0062, IHI 17-0063, IHI 17-0064, IHI 17-0066, and IHI 17-0067** on pp. 59–130, 137-142).

Emergency response and long-term reconstruction projects for historical and archaeological heritage may only move forward in lockstep with restoring basic human services and critical

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul-idUSKBN19Q1HG>

infrastructure. The United Nations has reported that of the 54 residential districts in the western half of Mosul, 15 are heavily damaged and at least 23 are moderately damaged.<sup>4</sup> An estimated 900,000 people of Mosul's 2 million person population remain displaced. Of those displaced, around 200,000 now lack housing.<sup>5</sup> Reconstruction estimates reach upwards of 100 billion dollars with a time-frame of ten years to return Mosul to the condition it was before the ISIL occupation.<sup>6</sup> The Old City, with buildings dating back to the 13th century CE, was one of the hardest hit neighborhoods on the Western Bank. This quarter contains a dense concentration of both Islamic and Christian religious sites — most have been heavily damaged or destroyed. Through July 31, 2017 ASOR CHI reported 38 individual incidents of damage to religious heritage in the Old City of Mosul including mosques (24 incidents), churches (11 incidents), and shrines (3 incidents). Of these reported incidents, 16 were intentional destructions carried out by ISIL on Muslim and Christian sites during the occupation of the city and the other 22 were due to military explosives, possibly from shelling, heavy artillery, or airstrikes.

After the official end of the Battle for Mosul on July 10, 2017 damage still occurred in neighborhoods that had pockets of ISIL insurgency. One such neighborhood is located in the Hayy Nebi Jarjis, surrounding the Sheikh al-Shut Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0064** on pp. 128–130). After the official end of the recapture, this neighborhood continued to experience clashes between ISIL militants and Iraqi forces as one of the last holdouts of the militants. The forces used all types of military weapons to remove or kill the remaining ISIL members. This led to the complete destruction of the neighborhood, including the mosque.



Sheikh al-Shut Mosque with the dome and central part of the mosque still intact after the conflict ended (DigitalGlobe NextView License; July 12, 2017)



Part of the dome still visible after demolition (DigitalGlobe NextView License; July 27, 2017)

With the cessation of major hostilities in the Old City, Iraqi forces are clearing neighborhoods of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines. These forces, as well as civilian visitors to areas, have begun marking buildings with graffiti. Heritage sites, including Kanisat al-Sa'a, al Hadba Minaret, and the ruins of the al-Nuri al-Kabir Mosque bear such vandalism, including the presence of sectarian graffiti (**ASOR CHI Incident Reports IHI 17-0052, ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0062** on pp. 71–79, 118–122).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40564159>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul-idUSKBN19Q1HG>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul-idUSKBN19Q1HG>

Mosul is a Sunni majority city, with multiple minorities consisting of Shia and Sufi Muslims; Orthodox, Catholic, and Assyrian Christians; a Jewish population; and a small Yazidi population all living in and around the urban center. The city has now been liberated by a mixed group of Shia and Sunni Iraqi security forces, Shia Popular Mobilization Front (PMF) units, and Iraqi-Christian militias. These groups control different neighborhoods in Mosul and the surrounding countryside, but the sectarian nature of some of these armed groups has caused worry among Mosul's Sunni population as reports emerge of retributory violence and expulsion and extrajudicial punishment of alleged ISIL conspirators. Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, has already cautioned that in order to keep "[ISIL] 2.0 from emerging, the Iraqi government is going to have to do something pretty significantly different" to avoid the same sectarian tensions that led to the fall of Mosul in 2014 and the rampant expansion of ISIL. UN special representative Jan Kubis expressed his strong belief that any reconstruction work must run parallel to a "robust political process to conduct elections and achieve national and societal reconciliation and rebuild the social fabric...The peace... must be based on solid foundations of unity, co-operation, justice, tolerance and coexistence starting at the societal, community and tribal levels to prevent falling back into the past and risk disastrous consequences." Mosul's cultural resources and cultural sector form integral and inextricable parts of such reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts.

ASOR CHI released an Update titled "**Mosul Post-ISIL: Heritage Destruction and the Future of the City.**" The report details the damage which occurred to Mosul during the liberation campaign, specifically in the old city. In all, ASOR CHI has recorded damage to 120 individual sites in Mosul, and the number is rising as more photographs and videos are released from liberated regions. The report also outlines the future of Mosul, including rebuilding as well as future ASOR efforts in the region.

## Libya

During this reporting period, the Libyan National Army (LNA) declared victory over the Islamist and Militia forces allied under the umbrella of the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries. The Old City of Benghazi was especially hard hit during the conflict (Satellite Imagery and Geospatial Analysis). Both the imagery and preliminary reports from Department of Antiquities (DoA) representatives on the ground suggest that the damage to cultural heritage sites in the Old City is some of the most severe that has occurred anywhere in Libya since the outbreak of the revolution in 2011.

With the declaration of victory on July 5, 2017, a DoA delegation was allowed back into Benghazi's Old City to start assessing damage to sites. The former headquarters of DoA is located in the Souq al Rabea, and the building was damaged during the fighting ([ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0012](#) on pp. 159–162). The staff assessed the damage and recovered anything of value in the building. The Benghazi DoA storeroom in the Souq al Hout, the primary repository of antiquities in Benghazi, was damaged by the fighting, but the collection of antiquities was recovered intact and moved to a safer location ([ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0014](#) on pp. 166–168). The last assessment carried out by the DoA in the Old City was to the Ottoman Municipal Building ([ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0013](#) on pp. 163–165). The left wing of the historic building collapsed due to the fighting. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring damage to historic buildings in conflict areas. The Old City of Benghazi is featured in the Satellite Imagery and Geospatial Section of the July 2017 Appendices (pp. 169–172).

Outside of the city of Benghazi, a mud brick dome of the al-Atiq Mosque in Awjila collapsed due to lack of maintenance (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0007** on pp. 143–145). This mosque is considered one of the oldest mosques in North Africa, and dates to the 12th century CE. With the ongoing conflict, resources and protection for sites is limited, and maintenance for sites is also limited. The eastern branch of DoA currently has no operating budget, but plans to dispatch a team of architects, archaeologists, and conservators to Awjila once transportation can be arranged and covered.

DoA continues to work with the public to protect Libyan heritage sites. Near the cave site commemorating the birthplace of Omar Mukhtar outside of Tobruk, a local citizen discovered a new site dating to the Roman/Ptolemaic period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0009** on pp. 148–151). The Tobruk field office of the DoA responded to the report, recorded the site, and recovered the movable objects found on the surface. However, with limited funds, the protection of this site along with maintenance and possible excavation will have to be put on hold. ASOR CHI is committed to helping to monitor and protect newly identified sites in zones where there is limited funding to help protect and preserve the site.

The Municipality of Ghadames, the Center for Archaeological Research and Studies at Omar al Mukhtar University and the Oberlin College Archaeological Mission to Libya hosted a three day workshop to combat the illicit trafficking of antiquities with the support of the U.S. State Department. Representatives of different law enforcement agencies including the Libyan Tourist Police and Customs and Border Control worked alongside members of DoA, participating in mock-crime scene scenarios and discussion of collaborative ways to protect Libyan heritage. ASOR CHI's program was presented as a platform that could support this growing network.

Meanwhile, looting and trafficking of antiquities continues at a brisk pace. During this reporting period, ASOR CHI received three reports of looted artifacts being recovered (**ASOR CHI Incident Reports LHI 17-0008, LHI 17-0010, and LHI 17-0011** on pp. 146–147, 152–155, 156–158). In al-Marj, local police found an ancient statue with modern modifications added to increase its value on the market (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0011** on pp. 146–147). The ancient portion of the statue was found in Awlad Amr and dates to the Roman Period. Currently there is no information on a wider network of smugglers or people adding modern elements to ancient statues, but the DoA and ASOR CHI are committed to researching this phenomenon.

On June 16, 2017 the Government of Libya requested the United States to place import restrictions on Libyan archaeological and/or ethnological materials dating from the prehistoric to the Ottoman period. On July 19–20 the Cultural Property Advisory Committee met to discuss the request, and are still deciding on whether to pass the request on to the State Department. However, this request started discussion surrounding Libya's Jewish population, many of which were forced to leave Libya in the 20th century, without taking their property with them. If this memorandum is passed, Libyan-Jewish-Americans will not be able to recover their property and transport it to the United States. The third episode of looting and smuggling in Libya this month included a Torah that was purchased in Zintan and smuggled into Tunisia (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0010** on pp. 152–155). The smugglers, who were Tunisian, were caught before they crossed the border. The Torah is considered to be more than 100 years old, and therefore subject to the existing cultural heritage protection laws in Libya. The smugglers anticipated receiving a sum as large as 1,000,000 Libyan dinars if sold on the black market. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring the looting and smuggling networks across Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

ASOR CHI released an Update titled “**Update: The Status of UNESCO World Heritage Site Leptis Magna.**” The report is the first such update since ASOR CHI began covering Libya as part of the new cooperative agreement with the US Department of State. Leptis Magna stands out as one of the largest and best-preserved archaeological sites in Libya. The site has largely escaped harm despite the ongoing conflict in Libya thanks to its geographical location and the protection of the local community. However, threats remain due to unregulated development and the ongoing liquidity crisis.