

ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Planning for Safeguarding Heritage Sites in Syria and Iraq¹

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Table of Contents:

Executive Summary	2
Key Points	5
Syria	6
Iraq	7
Libya	7

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. 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

On October 17, 2017 the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared victory over ISIS in Raqqa following four months of fighting. Questions have arisen as to the future governing of Raqqa Governorate, with concerns raised almost immediately after the disputed flying of YPG and Kurdish flags in Raqqa city center.²

In Deir ez-Zor Governorate, SARG and pro-regime forces captured the former ISIS-held town of al-Mayadin. al-Mayadin was once the former headquarters of ISIS “senior leadership and external operations.”³ The level of fighting between pro-regime forces and ISIS remains unclear, as fighting occurred over the short span of two weeks. According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), ISIS fighters may have abandoned the town prior to the advance of pro-regime forces.⁴ Video footage captured by pro-regime forces in al-Mayadin shows a deserted town.

As ISIS continues to lose territory in Syria and Iraq, various sources claim the group is massing forces at two of its final strongholds in each country — Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Governorate, and Rawah, Al Anbar Governorate.⁵ This area of the Middle Euphrates Valley contains numerous, significant cultural heritage sites, such as Dura Europos and Mari, and has been the focus of intense archaeological looting since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, particularly the period when the area came under the control of FSA forces (with elements of Jabhat al-Nusra) in 2012 and 2013 and later ISIS starting in 2014. Cultural sites have also been targeted for intentional destruction and vandalism, particularly by ISIS.

It is doubtful whether the increased zones of control of SDF and SARG in the strategic Euphrates Valley will quell cultural property crimes and facilitate preservation and protection efforts. In the absence of robust multilateral negotiations, potential clashes between SDF and SARG and their allies appear to be a likely outcome across the Euphrates Valley region from the Turkish border to the Iraqi border. An ISIS insurgent movement (akin to AQI operations ca. 2006) from surrounding remote desert regions also appears likely. Hence, a high degree of uncertainty in the operating environment will likely prevail for the foreseeable future for all relief efforts, especially heritage professionals.

During the reporting period, Turkish forces entered Idlib Governorate with the purported intention of “applying” a de-escalation zone.⁶ The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) argues that Turkey is positioning itself to launch operations against the Syrian Kurdish YPG in northern Syria.⁷ The entry of Turkish forces into Syrian territory occurred largely unhindered by the US-led Coalition, the Syrian regime, or Syrian opposition forces who hold the governorate. This increases the likelihood of continued instability, uncertainty, and conflict. Cultural heritage in this region remains at high risk.

² <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/10/isw-intelligence-summary-october-13-20.html>

³ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/10/isw-intelligence-summary-october-13-20.html>

⁴ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/10/isw-intelligence-summary-october-13-20.html>

⁵ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iraq/islamic-state-shores-up-last-stronghold-on-syria-iraq-border-idUSKBN1CW24X>

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/shells-fall-into-syrias-idlib-province-from-turkey/2017/10/08/591549f8-ac0f-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_story.html

⁷ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/11/turkeys-silent-al-qaeda-partner-in-syria.html>

Russia continued to exert its influence in the Syrian political process announcing plans to host a political conference called the “Syrian Congress on National Dialogue” on November 18 in Sochi. According to Russian media, the conference will include up to 1,500 participants representing all facets of Syrian political parties.⁸ Meanwhile, Russian military activity continued in Syria, with increased aerial bombardment taking place in Idlib Governorate, and continuous bombardment in Deir ez Zor and Homs Governorates.⁹

ASOR CHI released an update on the al-Ma’ara Museum project compiled by The Day After Heritage Protection Initiative (TDA-HPI).¹⁰ Site monitors and volunteers from TDA-HPI painstakingly reconstructed a deviated wall in a hallway at the museum. ASOR CHI is now seeking funds for a second project at the Khan As’ad Pacha Museum complex, damaged by clashes and aerial bombardment in 2015.

In Iraq, in the wake of the KRG Independence Referendum on September 25, diplomatic relations between Erbil and Baghdad have severely deteriorated, resulting in skirmishes between the Kurdish Peshmerga and Government of Iraq military forces in the disputed territories. Baghdad issued a number of punitive economic and diplomatic responses to the KRG, including an arrest warrant for members of the Kurdish region’s electoral commission. On October 16, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Iranian-backed Shia Popular Mobilization Units, Counterterrorism Services (CTS, aka the “Golden Division”), and Federal Police launched a joint military offensive to seize Kirkuk, a multi-ethnic city of Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs. The city was captured by Peshmerga forces from ISIS in 2014. By October 21 Iraqi forces had gained full control of local government offices, the K1 Military Base, the Kirkuk Airport, and Kirkuk’s oilfields, some of the most viable and productive in Iraq. PUK-affiliated peshmerga withdrew from their positions in Kirkuk after reaching an agreement with Iraqi forces, but PDK-affiliated units clashed with Shia PMF’s, resulting in casualties.¹¹ Kurdish Peshmerga forces also withdrew from Khanaqin and Sinjar, but clashed with Baghdad-supported forces in Makhmour, Rabia, and Fishkhabour. Early reports of looting, vandalism, and indiscriminate attacks against Kurdish and Sunni civilians by Iranian-Shia PMU forces in disputed territories has raised alarm, including a recent Amnesty International report documenting an incident in Tuz Khurmatu (see the Geospatial Section for analysis on pp. 136–141).

Iranian influence on the Kirkuk offensive has been highly visible — Iran reportedly deployed a dozen tanks with field artillery along its border with the Kurdistan Region days after the referendum and shut its border crossings. Qassem Suleimani, a senior commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), met with Kurdish officials in advance of Kirkuk, going so far as to attend the funeral of Jalal Talabani, founder of the PUK who died on October 3 after a long illness. Sumeimani was directly involved in the military operation.¹² Iran, like Turkey, expresses concerns that its own Kurdish nationalist movements might be inspired by the KRG referendum, and Israeli support of the Kurdish referendum provided Iran further motivation to act. Just days after US President Donald Trump disavowed the Iran nuclear agreement,¹³ the Kirkuk offensive placed the United States in an especially delicate position — the US trained and supplied both the Peshmerga

⁸ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/10/russia-seizes-syria-diplomacy-reins.html>

⁹ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/it-s-complicated-the-fate-of-idlib-with-hts-and-russia>

¹⁰ <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/update-asor-undertakes-humanitarian-heritage-work-in-idlib-governorate/>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/16/world/middleeast/kirkuk-iraq-kurds.html>

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kirkuk-fall/iranian-commander-issued-stark-warning-to-iraqi-kurds-over-kirkuk-idUSKBN1CP2CW>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>

as well as ISF and CTS, and Federal Police in the fight against ISIS, and those forces are now using their improved capabilities to fight one another, with some of the US military equipment falling into the hands of the Iranian-Shia PMFs. In an official statement, the US Mission to Iraq declared “We support the peaceful reassertion of federal authority, consistent with the Iraqi Constitution, in all disputed areas.”¹⁴

Intra-Kurdish relations were already tense as a result of PUK initial opposition to the independence referendum, but the loss of Kirkuk has further divided the PDK and PUK. The PDK has accused the PUK of treason for finalizing negotiations with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and, allegedly, PMF commanders to withdraw from its positions in Kirkuk without informing or including PDK leadership.¹⁵ PUK leaders reiterated that the independence referendum was a gross miscalculation and motivated by KRG President Masoud Barzani’s personal ambitions to solidify PDK’s and his own influence on the region and to distract its people from widening economic inequality and entrenched PDK political corruption.¹⁶ Political violence between supporters and opponents of Barzani has increased in the wake of resignation rumors.¹⁷ On October 29, KRG President Masoud Barzani, the primary figurehead of the independence referendum, announced he would resign from the presidency effective November 1, but will remain the head of the PDK.¹⁸

ISIS-controlled territory in Iraq continued to shrink as Iraqi operations liberated Hawija and advanced on al-Qaim and al-Rawa, located on the Euphrates River near the border with Syria. As in Syria (see above), ISIS territorial losses in Iraq are unlikely to result in significant reductions in risk to cultural heritage in many regions.

In Libya, the following pressures weigh heavily on the civilian population: food prices continue to increase across the country, oil output may have plateaued well below pre-revolutionary production levels, acute crises like the siege of Derna continue to produce violent confrontations without resolutions, and a sense of political stalemate prevails.

The Swiss NGO REACH has been compiling food prices around Libya since June 2017, and reported this month that prices have increased nearly 11% over that five month period.¹⁹ While Egypt began to pay back its \$1.5 billion loan from Libya this month with a \$250 million installment,²⁰ analysts believe that the National Oil Corporation is unlikely to achieve production levels that match the pre-revolutionary records in years to come due to ongoing security concerns,²¹ starving the country of

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/USEmbBaghdad/status/919890776909340673>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/22/kurds-bitter-defeat-iraq-reclaims-kirkuk> ; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kirkuk-fall/iranian-commander-issued-stark-warning-to-iraqi-kurds-over-kirkuk-idUSKBN1CP2CW>

¹⁶ <http://www.france24.com/en/20171020-interview-bafel-talabani-kirkuk-barzani-sulaymaniyah-puk-abadi-baghdad-referendum-turkey>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-the-kurdish-independence-referendum-backfired-/2017/10/20/3010c820-b371-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_story.html

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-attacks/kurdish-parties-opposed-to-barzani-report-attacks-on-offices-overnight-idUSKBN1CZ0E6>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-barzani/kurdish-leader-barzani-resigns-after-independence-vote-backfires-idUSKBN1CY0KR>

¹⁹ http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_lby_situation_overview_joint_market_monitoring_initiative_jmmi_october_2017.pdf

²⁰ <http://gulfnnews.com/business/economy/egypt-settles-turkey-debt-makes-libya-payment-1.2117914>

²¹ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/10/23/libyan-oil-output-nearing-ceiling-say-leading-oil-analysts/>

much needed potential income. The Libyan Central Bank expects that GDP for 2017 will be roughly \$12.9 billion, 17% of what it was in 2012.²²

On October 31, 2017, Derna, the only city in eastern Libya not under the control of the Libyan National Army (LNA), was hit by a round of airstrikes of unknown provenance, reportedly killing 17 people and wounding 30.²³ An ASOR-CHI source in Derna reports that while no cultural heritage sites were damaged, conditions in the city have never been worse during the siege that has now lasted more than a year.

The latest round of ongoing, UN-backed peace negotiations conducted by the UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salame ended in Tunis on October 21, 2017, having made limited progress towards establishing a lasting political solution between Libya's rival legislatures and armed factions.²⁴ In this unstable atmosphere, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations in conjunction with the U.S. military have continued to actively seek to prosecute individuals suspected of involvement of the 2012 attacks against U.S. compounds in Benghazi. On October 30, 2017, a Libyan suspect was reportedly apprehended by U.S. forces in the vicinity of Misrata and transported outside of Libya.²⁵

Key Points

- Syria: A new video shows a gunman destroying the remains of a Byzantine-era villa in Deir Sunbul, Jebel Zawiya, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0177**
- Syria: New photographs and video show the destruction of the Arslan Tash Lions in al-Rasheed Park, Raqqa, Raqqa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0191**
- Iraq: New video footage and DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows intentional destruction and looting of the Tal Afar Citadel in Tal Afar, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0073 UPDATE**
- Libya: Military clashes caused minor damage to several monuments at the archaeological site of Sabratha in the region of Tripolitania. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0022 UPDATE**
- Libya: Unknown parties destroyed a Sufi shrine dedicated to Sidi Abu Ghrara in al-Ghrararat, Tripolitania. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0035**

²² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-29/libya-central-bank-issues-revenue-warning-over-oil-disruption>

²³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/civilians-killed-air-strike-libyan-city-derna-171031072106626.html>

²⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-31/why-libya-requires-a-makeover-of-its-peace-accord-quicktake-q-a>

²⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/world/africa/benghazi-attacks-second-suspect-captured.html>

Report

Syria

On October 17, the US-backed SDF declared victory over ISIS in Raqqa after clearing the final militant holdouts in the city. ISIS fighters remaining in Raqqa, an estimated 275, and their families were reportedly allowed to leave the city, possibly to an area where they would be detained. As the reporting period closed, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad asserted that Raqqa would be considered “occupied” until the city was back under the control of Damascus.²⁶ Signs of a lack of planning are already evident in Raqqa, where in late-October members of the SDF fired on a civilian protest, in which residents of the district of al-Mashlab were demanding re-entry to their homes.²⁷ Concern continues to arise as to how current control over the city will be shared amongst elements of Kurdish and Arab groups slated to govern the area.

Video footage and photographs taken of newly recaptured areas illustrate the extent of damage to heritage sites in the city. Nearly every structure in the city sustained some damage, with not a single building on the city’s main road remaining fully intact.²⁸ ASOR CHI has identified many of these heritage sites and has been able to update multiple damage reports (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0121 UPDATE, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0153 UPDATE, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0162 UPDATE, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0165 UPDATE, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0189, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0190, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0191, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0192** on pp. 15–25, 74–89).

Military operations continued in Deir ez Zor Governorate where SARG, backed by pro-regime forces and Russian aerial bombardment, and US-led Coalition-backed SDF forces battled ISIS militants on separate fronts. As in Raqqa, civilians face dire conditions in Deir ez Zor Governorate and sources consistently report high civilian casualties as a result of ongoing aerial bombardment. Both SARG and SDF forces have captured territory from ISIS, including the strategic town of al-Mayadin. The ongoing clashes and aerial bombardment damaged eight cultural heritage sites (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0179, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0181, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0184, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0185, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0187, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0188, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0193, and ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0195** and on pp. 50–53, 57, 66–69, 71–73, 90–91, 95–96). In other areas of Deir ez Zor Governorate, natural impacts including neglect have damaged the site of Qalaat Rahba, already heavily damaged by militarization (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0179** on pp. 50–53). ASOR CHI remains concerned about the ongoing damage in Deir ez Zor Governorate and the lack of local cultural heritage capacities.

Military operations in Idlib Governorate increased as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) began new operations to curb the new alliance by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Russian forces provided aerial support to the FSA. As the FSA launched new operations, Turkish forces removed parts of the protective border wall between the two countries, entering Idlib Governorate in early October. SARG and Russian aerial bombardment in the governorate was reported, continuing aerial bombardment campaigns that re-started in September 2017. ASOR CHI reported on damage to two cultural heritage sites by armed combatants as a result of aerial bombardment and intentional

²⁶ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-analysis/assad-sets-sights-on-kurdish-areas-risking-new-syria-conflict-idUSKBN1D02CN>

²⁷ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/11/post-isis-insurgency-looms-in-northern.html>

²⁸ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/19/middleeast/raqqa-syria-isis/index.html>

destruction. In Idlib Governorate, a video released online showed an unidentified gunman destroying the remains of a Byzantine-era villa in Deir Sunbul, Jebel Zawiya (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0177** on pp. 30–37). Reported SARG aerial bombardment also destroyed a cultural center in Ma'arat al-Numan (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0180** on pp. 54–56).

Clashes and aerial bombardment damaged heritage sites in Aleppo, Hama, and Daraa Governorates. In Aleppo Governorate, pro-regime shelling reportedly damaged Abu Bakr al-Siddiq in Anadan (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0182** on pp. 58–60). In Hama Governorate, reported SARG artillery fire damaged Omar bin al-Khattab Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0186** on p. 70). In Daraa Governorate, Syrian opposition group Jaish al-Islam reportedly targeted military installations located on the archaeological site of Tell al-Jumou (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0194** on pp. 92–94).

In other areas, newly released photographs and video footage provided new details on the extent of damage to previously impacted heritage sites. In the city of Manbij, Aleppo Governorate, a previously unexcavated Roman tomb was found to have been looted and used as a trash dump during ISIS occupation of the city (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0176** on pp. 26–29). In Darayya, Rif Dimashq Governorate, new photographs show the extent of damage to the Shrine of Sayyida Sakina, likely damaged during ongoing clashes in the area (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0178** on pp. 38–49).

In other regions where fighting has largely ceased, restorations of heritage sites have occurred. In Hasakah Governorate, restoration work is currently underway at the archaeological site of Tell Beydar (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0183** on pp. 61–65).

Iraq

During the reporting period, continuing reporting from territories recaptured from ISIS has provided new information regarding damage to cultural heritage sites. In Mosul, a video report from Vice News shows extensive damage to a mosque in the az-Zanjili neighborhood (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0044 UPDATE** on pp. 97–101). In Tel Afar, new video footage of the Citadel further detailed ISIS intentional destruction and looting of the site that first began in 2014 (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0073 UPDATE** on pp. 102–105). Iraqi forces recaptured the city of Tel Afar in August 2017.

In Baghdad Governorate, a car bombing struck near the al-Imam al-Sadiq Mosque in the town of Husseiniyah. ASOR CHI was unable to determine whether the mosque sustained damage as a result of the attack (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0077 UPDATE** on pp. 106–107).

Libya

During the reporting period, heritage damage was reported at two sites in Tripolitania province. New photographs from the archaeological site to Sabratha show that clashes in mid-September 2017 between the Amu Brigade and the anti-ISIS Operations Room (AIOR) caused minor damage to several monuments (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0022 UPDATE** on pp. 108–112). A Sufi shrine in the province was also destroyed by unknown parties in a possible sectarian driven act (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0035** on pp. 133–135). The damage was reported by a local journalist.

In other areas less impacted by conflict, restoration and rebuilding efforts have taken place in cultural heritage sites. Cultural heritage authorities in Libya started projects at the historic Abu Rowee Mosque and the UNESCO World Heritage site of Cyrene (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0030** on pp. 119–123, **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0032** on pp. 126–128).

Other construction projects in the country have damaged cultural heritage sites, as the builders often to not consult heritage experts nor consider impacts on heritage sites (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0028** on pp. 113–115). To counter this particular pattern of damage, heritage authorities in Libya have carried out maintenance and protective efforts, including the installation of lights at archaeological sites and cleaning campaigns (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0029** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0031** on pp. 116–118, 124–125).

During the reporting period there were new reports of looting and counter-efforts in Libya, including the return of a historic sword to state authorities by a civilian (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0033** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0034** on pp. 129–132).