

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 reporting period, an increase in aerial bombardment and violent clashes led to high levels of destruction and civilian casualties in Syria during the month of September. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that September was the deadliest month this year with more than 3,300 people killed, including 995 civilians.² Idlib Governorate experienced a particularly high increase in aerial bombardment resulting in civilian casualties. Following an attack by Syrian opposition forces against SARG forces in Hama Governorate, Russian and SARG aerial bombardment targeted both civilian and Syrian opposition sites in Idlib Governorate, including several medical facilities.

Operations by pro-regime and Syrian opposition forces continued in Deir ez Zor Governorate, with both groups aiming at recapturing ISIS-held territory. ISIS continues to maintain control of Deir ez Zor Governorate, but suffered some territorial losses. A deal brokered by Hezbollah and ISIS allowed several hundred ISIS fighters to relocate to Deir ez Zor from the Syria-Lebanon border. Another agreement, brokered by the Syrian regime, allowed a reported 1500 ISIS fighters and civilians in Hama Governorate to relocate to HTS-held areas of Idlib.³

US-led Coalition aerial bombardment continued in Raqqa, resulting in extensive damage to the city, including heritage sites. US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) recaptured neighborhoods in Raqqa from ISIS, including the entirety of the Old City.

On August 31, 2017 Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced that Iraqi forces liberated Tal Afar, the last stronghold of ISIS in Ninawa Governorate.⁴ On September 21, 2017 government forces undertook military operations to recapture ISIS-held Hawija, one of the last two areas in Iraq still under ISIS control.⁵ Meanwhile, on September 25, 2017 the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held a referendum to determine if the Kurdistan Region of Iraq should secede from the Republic of Iraq and become an independent nation. The referendum was announced in early June 2017 by KRG President Masoud Barzani on Twitter. The move was met with support from Israel and criticism from neighboring Iran and Turkey.⁶ The United States urged caution, stating it was “ill timed and ill advised.”⁷ Voter turnout was estimated at approximately 72%, which includes voters from officially recognized KRG territory of Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah governorates, territory currently under the control of Peshmerga forces including parts of Ninawa governorate and Kirkuk, and Iraqi Kurds residing abroad, of which nearly 93% voted in favor of independence.⁸ In response to the referendum, the Iraqi Parliament (minus the Kurdish delegates) proposed a 13-point resolution to respond to the KRG, which included the deployment of Iraqi military forces to regions claimed by Baghdad but controlled by Peshmerga forces, such as Kirkuk, closing domestic and

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41460999>

³ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/09/syria-sitrep-map-september-14-27-2017.html>

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/31/middleeast/iraq-tal-afar-isis/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41346427>; <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1328658/isis-losing-on-all-fronts-oir-spokesman-says/source/GovDelivery/>

⁶ https://twitter.com/masoud_barzani/status/872496589868290049

⁷ <https://www.state.gov/s/seci/2017remarks/274148.htm>

⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdistan-referendum-results-vote-yes-iraqi-kurds-independence-iran-syria-a7970241.html>

international border crossings, and recalling all diplomats from Erbil to Baghdad and shutting foreign missions. The actions of this resolution would need to be approved by Republic of Iraq PM Haider al-Abadi for enactment.⁹ So far PM Abadi has stated on Twitter that “affirmed that federal authority in the Kurdish region will be restored through the constitution and law.” Flights in and out of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports have been restricted to only humanitarian and military air traffic.¹⁰ Additionally, Iran halted flights to the Kurdistan region ahead of the vote. Both Iran and Turkey launched military drills near the KRG border, and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan threatened to cut off the Ceyhan oil pipeline, which the KRG uses to export its crude oil from the Taq Taq oilfield in Kirkuk to the Mediterranean Sea.¹¹ This situation remains fluid and will likely be a key factor in domestic and regional military and political developments into October.

In Libya, recent clashes between the Amu Brigade and another militia supporting the Libyan National Army (LNA) spilled into Sabratha, one of the five Libyan sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Despite calls for a cease fire made by both local and international authorities, fighting continues in close proximity to the archaeological site.

Key Points

- Reported SARG-Russian airstrikes damaged Ebla, Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0167**
- New photographs show damage to the Raqqa Museum as well as historical sites in Raqqa Governorate, including Heraqla, Qasr al-Banat, al-Rafiqah Wall, and Bab Baghdad. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0098 UPDATE, SHI 17-0106 UPDATE, SHI 17-0111 UPDATE, SHI 17-0122 UPDATE, and SHI 17-0127 UPDATE**
- New video footage shows damage to al-Nour Mosque in Tal Afar, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0074**
- Ongoing fighting between two militias in Sabratha has damaged the theatre of Sabratha. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0022**
- Five historic buildings were illegally torn down and replaced by a new construction in the old city of Tripoli, Tripolitania. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0023, LHI 17-0024, LHI 17-0025, LHI 17-0026, and LHI 17-0027**

⁹ <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-kurdish-independence-referendum-20170927-story.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/world/middleeast/iraq-kurds-referendum.html> ; <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/humanitarian-military-flights-exempt-iraqi-kurdistan-ban-135637294.html> ; <https://twitter.com/HaiderAlAbadi/status/913033045594316800>

¹¹ <https://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2017/09/24/iran-launches-war-games-near-iraqi-border-ahead-of-krq-referendum> ; <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/09/25/world/middleeast/25reuters-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-turkey-oil.htm> ; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-wargames/iran-halts-flights-to-iraqs-kurdish-region-in-retaliation-for-independence-vote-idUSKCN1BZ09S>

Report

Syria

US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to advance against ISIS in Raqqa, capturing the Old City of Raqqa and the city's historic Great Mosque. New video footage and photographs taken in newly recaptured areas further revealed the level of damage present at heritage sites in Raqqa including in the Old City (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0098 UPDATE, SHI 17-0106 UPDATE, SHI 17-0111 UPDATE, SHI 17-0114 UPDATE, SHI 17-0122 UPDATE, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0127 UPDATE, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0153 UPDATE, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0157 UPDATE**, on pp. 19–55). US-led Coalition aerial bombardment has continued to damage heritage sites in the city, particularly religious heritage sites (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0162, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0164, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0165, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0169**, on pp. 66–67, 74–79, 96–97). The ongoing security vacuum in the area continues to leave sites vulnerable to theft and vandalism (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0175** on pp. 119–121).

SARG, Russian, and US-led Coalition airstrikes continue to damage heritage sites in Deir ez Zor Governorate as operations continue to recapture territory from ISIS (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0161, ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0168** on pp. 64–65, 94–95). With the support of aerial bombardment, SARG and pro-regime forces continue to advance against ISIS near the city of Deir ez Zor, breaking a three-year siege in an area held by Syrian military forces and surrounded by ISIS militants. In September, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) recaptured the Conoco natural gas field and the “industrial zone” outside the city of Deir ez Zor. US officials stated the SDF will not enter the city of Deir ez-Zor, minimizing the chances of clashes between the SDF and SARG forces.¹² Nevertheless, US officials reported at least two incidents in which Russian airstrikes fired on US-backed opposition forces in Syria.

After a long period of relative calm in Idlib Governorate, Russian and SARG aerial bombardment targeted several towns and cities following an attack by Syrian opposition forces against pro-regime forces stationed in Hama Governorate. Multiple aerial bombardment campaigns resulted in high civilian casualties and damage to heritage sites (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0166, SHI 17-0167, SHI 17-0170, SHI 17-0171, SHI 17-0172, SHI 17-0173, SHI 17-0174** on pp. 80–93, 98–118).

Civilians in Idlib Governorate continue to carry out reconstruction efforts to heritage sites, schools, health facilities, and roads in Idlib Governorate (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0172** on pp. 104–112). The ongoing security vacuum allowed for continued looting and theft as was seen at the archaeological site of Tell Danit (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0163** on pp. 68–73).

Additional incident reports include the reported militarization of the ancient Iron age site of Tell Qarqur (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0160**, pp. 56–63) and an update on damage to an Assyrian church in al-Hasakah Governorate demolished by ISIS in April 2015 (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 16-0032 UPDATE** on pp. 12–18).

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/shelling-on-syrian-presidents-hometown-kills-2/2017/09/25/660c9248-a1dc-11e7-b573-8ec86cfe1ed_story.html ; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-sdf-usa/u-s-backed-forces-not-planning-on-entering-deir-al-zor-city-idUSKCN1BP2H9>

Iraq

In Ninawa Governorate, video footage and photographs continue to emerge documenting the extent of damage wrought by ISIS and the military operations conducted to recapture Mosul and other cities held by the militants (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0074** on pp. 122–127). Compared to the Mosul Operation, there has been less open source information produced during the Tel Afar and Hawija offensives. This is likely due to the swiftness of the Tel Afar campaign and the emergent operations in Hawija, which have used smaller deployments and fewer airstrikes compared to the battle for Mosul. As a result, there appears to be fewer incidents of collateral damage. A possible bias, however, stems from the fact that fewer journalists are embedded with military units to document the situation as it unfolds, meaning less open-source documentation of real-time and past incidents of damage to cultural heritage sites in Tel Afar and Hawija. The closing of the Kurdish regional airports and need to report on developments related to the KRG independence referendum have resulted in fewer journalists being available to cover the campaign against ISIS.

Libya

Following the verification of a July report from the Department of Antiquities (DoA) concerning the illegal demolition of a series of historic properties in the Old City of Tripoli, ASOR CHI published a special update on the subject (see **ASOR CHI Update: Old City of Tripoli**). The incidents described in this report and in the individual incident reports included in Appendices attest to the broad problem that the DoA and Historic Cities Authority (HCA) have had enforcing legal protections for historic properties in Tripoli (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0023, LHI 17-0024, LHI 17-0025, LHI 17-0026, LHI 17-0027** on pp. 131–142).

Recent clashes between the Amu Brigade and another militia supporting the Libyan National Army (LNA) spilled into Sabratha, one of the five Libyan sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Most of the fighting has occurred in the modern town of Sabratha, but photos on social media indicate that the Roman theatre in the archaeological site has been damaged (see **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0022** on pp. 128–130). Despite calls for a ceasefire made by both local and international authorities, fighting continues in close proximity to the archaeological site.

The Egyptian air force struck a smuggling convoy preparing to cross the desert from Libya into Egypt, reportedly identifying the group of ten four wheel drive vehicles as an operation to smuggle weapons into Egypt.¹³ The Egyptian-Libyan border remains porous and is likely to serve as a smuggling route for cultural property as well.

U.N. Envoy Ghassan Salame announced a one-year stabilization plan for Libya, citing “sleeping institutions that need to be awoken, divided institutions that need to be united, and hijacked institutions that need to be rebuilt.”¹⁴ In the cultural heritage sector, the DoA is currently best described as a divided institution, with rival directors in Tripoli and Benghazi, and it would benefit from being united. The Historic Cities Authority may be best described as a sleeping institution that needs to be awoken to better execute its responsibilities.

¹³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-security/egyptian-air-force-strikes-arms-convoy-at-libyan-border-idUSKCN1C31LF>

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/u-n-launches-new-plan-to-end-libyas-post-revolution-turmoil-idUSKCN1C12QD>