

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

High levels of military activity were reported in Syria in November. SARG and pro-regime allies, backed by aerial bombardment, fought for control of ISIS-held al-Bukamal (Abu Kamal). Elements of Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqi Shia Popular Mobilization Front (PMF), and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) participated in the military operations.² This region of the Euphrates Valley contains significant ancient and modern cultural assets. Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, and especially since ISIS seized control of the area in 2014, cultural sites have been subjected to intense damage, deliberate destructions, and looting/thefts. The military operations did not result in significant increases in new data on the state of these cultural assets, and it is doubtful that a return to a loose system of regime control will significantly improve conditions in this remote, predominantly Sunni tribal region.

Aerial bombardment increased over areas purportedly covered under the so-called Astana de-escalation agreements, bolstering “skepticism from opponents of the Syrian government.”³ During the reporting period aerial bombardment increased in opposition-held areas of Eastern Ghouta, Rif Dimashq Governorate, and in areas of Aleppo Governorate. In the town of Atarib, in Aleppo Governorate, three airstrikes on a busy market killed more than 50 people. Airstrikes and an ongoing SARG-imposed blockade have led to high-civilian casualties — the majority of which appear to be from starvation and poor access to medical treatment in Rif Dimashq Governorate.⁴ At the end of the reporting period, the UN called for the humanitarian evacuation of 500 people from the area for urgent medical treatment.⁵

In recently recaptured Raqqa, Raqqa Internal Security Forces (RISF), made up of local volunteers, assumed security for the Mishlab, Jazra, and Tayar neighborhoods.⁶ With support from the US-led Coalition, the RISF “continues to expand and train new recruits, with the goal of assuming control of other sectors of Raqqa from the SDF.”⁷ The RISF establishes tasks for the Raqqa Civil Council (RCC), which currently focuses on demining, clearing rubble, and providing essential infrastructure services.⁸ Improvised explosives devices (IEDs), planted by ISIS, remain a major hindrance to the return of civilians to Raqqa, who have raised concerns regarding a lack of foreign aid to dismantle what are reported to be hundreds of IEDs.⁹ This information accords with reports from ASOR CHI

² <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=79021> ; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/11/syria-situation-report-november-7-20.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/18/world/middleeast/syria-de-escalation-zones-atarib.html>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42130478> ; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/24/syria-eastern-ghouta-siege-talk> ; <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/how-eastern-ghouta-residents-are-managing-to-survive-siege.html> ; <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2017/11/27/48946/>

⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42186064> ; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-military/more-than-400-u-s-troops-leaving-syria-coalition-idUSKBN1DU2AZ>

⁶ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1378234/internal-security-forces-assume-responsibility-for-raqqa-neighborhoods/source/GovDelivery/>

⁷ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1378234/internal-security-forces-assume-responsibility-for-raqqa-neighborhoods/source/GovDelivery/>

⁸ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1378234/internal-security-forces-assume-responsibility-for-raqqa-neighborhoods/source/GovDelivery/>

⁹ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/11/syria-situation-report-november-7-20.html> ; <http://syriadirect.org/news/raqqa-returnees-await-water-utilities-as-civil-council-announces-eastern-neighborhoods-%E2%80%98safe%E2%80%99-from-landmines/>

in-country assessment teams on the state of heritage sites in Raqqa. Meanwhile, according to the BBC, ISIS militants leaving Raqqa, particularly foreign fighters, have utilized well-established smuggling channels to move between Syrian governorates — others have used smugglers to enter Turkey.¹⁰

Foreign powers remain firmly in place in Syria, promoting their own interests and visions for the region's future. Iran continues to make its presence known, leading to a rise in concern by Israel regarding Tehran's influence in the region. The number of fighters sent by Iran has not been officially released; however, on November 21 Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared an end to ISIS, thanking "thousands of martyrs" killed in Iranian-organized operations to fight the group in Syria and Iraq.¹¹ Iranian media has also reported the deaths of Iranian forces, including key commanders in the fight to recapture areas of Deir ez Zor from ISIS.¹² The head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Qods Force, Major General Qassem Soleimani, reportedly led the battle for al-Bukamal "from the frontlines."¹³ Iranian Shia fighters often point to Shia heritage sites in Syria that require protection, including the Sayyeda Zeinab Shrine in Damascus, as the justification behind their entrance into the conflict.¹⁴ In early-November, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced his country's intention to take military action along the Syrian-Israeli border. Israel has previously targeted military installations and assets in Syria, including new missile sites that Israel accuses Iran of building.¹⁵

On November 20, Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted Syrian president Bashar al-Assad for talks in Sochi, where the two reportedly discussed moving forward with political processes in Syria.¹⁶ The visit was not made public until the following day. President Putin vowed to talk to other international leaders in the next 48 hours following talks with Assad. According to Syrian state media, a committee will be formed in an upcoming conference in Sochi that will discuss the current constitution.¹⁷ This was Assad's first public travel outside of Syria since another trip to Moscow in October 2015, following Russia's entry into the conflict.

The late-2015 entry of Russia into the Syrian conflict marked a turning point, providing the Assad regime with necessary air and military support to recapture territory held by Syrian opposition groups, Al-Qaeda affiliates, and ISIS. On November 17, Russia blocked (for the tenth time) a UN

¹⁰ http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-rouhani-islamic-state/irans-president-declares-end-of-islamic-state-idUSKBN1DL0J5>

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iran-syria/iranian-revolutionary-guards-commander-another-fighter-killed-in-syria-iranian-media-idUSKBN1DJ0N9> ; <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-syria-commander-killed-samadi/28862819.html> ; <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/iraqi-militia-publicizes-iranian-qods-force-chief-by-syrian-border-town.php> ; <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/israel-s-northern-dilemma-1480846473>

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-putin-assad/russias-putin-hosts-assad-in-fresh-drive-for-syria-peace-deal-idUSKBN1DL0D5>

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-rouhani-islamic-state/irans-president-declares-end-of-islamic-state-idUSKBN1DL0J5>

¹⁵ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-signals-it-is-not-bound-by-us-russia-ceasefire-deal-in-syria/> ; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel/netanyahu-signals-israel-will-act-with-free-hand-in-syria-idUSKBN1DD1MC>

¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-putin-assad/russias-putin-hosts-assad-in-fresh-drive-for-syria-peace-deal-idUSKBN1DL0D5>

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-government/syrian-government-welcomes-committee-to-discuss-constitution-idUSKBN1DR17U>

Security Council resolution to extend an international inquiry by the Joint Investigation Mechanism (JIM) into chemical weapons attacks in Syria.¹⁸ US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, accused Russia of undermining the international community's ability to deter the use of chemical weapons in attacks.¹⁹

In a shift in policy, Turkish officials announced that the US would be ending support for Kurdish forces in Syria. The US only confirmed a pending review of adjustments²⁰ and announced the withdraw of more than 400 marines from Syria following the recapture of Raqqa from ISIS.²¹

In Geneva, Syrian opposition and government representatives held separate meetings with UN representatives. The Syrian opposition continues to demand the removal of President Bashar al-Assad, to the ire of SARG representatives.

In northern Iraq, Iraqi forces expelled ISIS from its last remaining territory in al-Qaim and al-Rawa in a final rapid military operation. These towns, located on the border area with Syria on the road toward ISIS-controlled al-Bukamal, were a part of ISIS' "Euphrates Province." ISIS used this region to transfer fighters, weapons and goods between the two countries.²² According to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, Iraqi forces recaptured these towns in "mere hours."²³

More evidence of Iraqi civilian casualties resulting from the war against ISIS in Iraq was released. The United Nations published its *Report on the Protection of Civilians in the context of the Nineveh Operations and the retaking of Mosul City, 17 October 2016 – 10 July 2017*, which asserts that "...information gathered by UNAMI/OHCHR strongly suggests that international crimes may have been perpetrated in Iraq by ISIL."²⁴ At least 74 mass graves, holding the remains of ISIS victims, have been found across former ISIS territories in Iraq.²⁵ Furthermore, the UN report states that its investigations also recorded instances of "alleged violations and abuses of human rights" perpetrated by ISF and associated forces and "threats to families alleged to have ISIL-affiliated members and forced evictions." The report also states that 137,339 families (824,034 individuals) were displaced and identifies at least 4194 civilian casualties (2521 killed and 1673 wounded) as a result of the Mosul operations. According to the report "the tactics that caused the highest numbers of civilian casualties during the fighting to retake Mosul were: shelling (1421, of which 1357 caused by ISIL), airstrikes (1091), execution-style killings by ISIL (741), and attacks using vehicles laden with explosives by ISIL (233)" and "with respect to airstrikes, Operation Inherent Resolve, when reviewing incidents involving claims of civilian casualties, assessed a number of reports as credible

¹⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42020959>

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42020959>

²⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-turkey/pentagon-says-reviewing-adjustments-to-arms-for-syrian-kurds-idUSKBN1DR0P1>

²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-military/more-than-400-u-s-troops-leaving-syria-coalition-idUSKBN1DU2AZ>

²² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42026801>

²³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42026801>

²⁴ http://www.uniraq.org/images/factsheets_reports/Mosul_report%2017Oct2016-10Jul201731%20October%202017.pdf

²⁵ http://www.uniraq.org/images/factsheets_reports/Mosul_report%2017Oct2016-10Jul201731%20October%202017.pdf; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/17/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-islamic-state-executions.html>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/world/middleeast/mosul-atrocities-islamic-state.html>

that involved in the deaths of 295 civilians, 66 wounded and 36 remaining unaccounted for.”²⁶ Additionally, a *New York Times* report states US-led Coalition airstrikes in Iraq inflcited a far higher number of casualties than officially reported figures.²⁷ As former ISIS-controlled territories in Iraq are rehabilitated post-conflict, further reports of human rights violations, civilian casualties, and other atrocities are likely to emerge in the coming months.

There were active military strikes against extremist forces in Libya this month. On November 12, the Egyptian Air Force announced that it had destroyed a convoy of ten vehicles smuggling weapons and ammunition into Egypt²⁸ and on November 15, the Libyan National Army reported that it struck an Islamic State training camp outside of Sirte.²⁹ The U.S. military also launched airstrikes against Islamic State targets southeast of Sirte on November 17 and 19.³⁰

The deadly attack on a Sufi mosque in Sinai Egypt on November 24³¹ was echoed in Tripoli when extremists burned the Sheikha Radiya Sufi mosque on November 28, timed to coincide with the celebration of Mawlid an Nabi, a holiday that Salafists reject as un-Islamic.³²

Despite the tenuous security environment, some modest diplomatic milestones occurred during this reporting period. The British Embassy announced its intention to return to Libya³³ and in Tripoli, British diplomats hosted a reception in the Old City to honor Libyan recipients of its Chevening Scholarship.³⁴ On November 29, Wafa Bugaighis, who has served for the past three years as Libya's chargé d'affaires in the Washington D.C. Embassy, presented her credentials to President Donald Trump to become confirmed as Libya's ambassador the United States.³⁵

Key Points

Syria

- New video footage and DigitalGlobe satellite imagery show Turkish forces are establishing a third outpost in Deir Semaan in the Jebel Semaan, Aleppo Governorate damaging the site. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0212**
- Pro-regime forces liberated the Armenian Holy Martyrs Church and Museum in Deir ez-Zor, Deir ez-Zor Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0200**
- Artillery fire reportedly damaged al-Qadim Mosque in Hamouriya, Rif Dimashq Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0210**

²⁶ http://www.uniraq.org/images/factsheets_reports/Mosul_report%2017Oct2016-10Jul201731%20October%202017.pdf

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/16/magazine/uncounted-civilian-casualties-iraq-airrikes.html>

²⁸ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/11/12/egypt-says-its-warplanes-struck-new-terrorist-convoy-from-libya/>

²⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/libyan-forces-hit-islamic-state-camp-with-air-strike-commander-idUSKBN1DF32K>

³⁰ <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-airstrikes-in-libya-target-islamic-state/4128647.html>

³¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/world/middleeast/mosque-attack-egypt.html>

³² <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/11/28/sufi-mosque-attacked-in-tripoli/>

³³ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/03/c_136723945.htm

³⁴ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/11/15/uk-diplomats-back-at-historic-old-city-consulate-for-first-diplomatic-reception-since-return-to-tripoli/>

³⁵ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/12/01/wafa-bugaighis-formally-becomes-ambassador-to-us/>

Iraq

- An earthquake damaged the Sherwana Castle and Museum in Kalar, As-Sulaymaniah Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0079**
- Mart Barbara in Karamlish is undergoing restoration in Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0078**

Libya

- The Libyan Department of Antiquities has begun a campaign to conserve the mosaics of Qasr Libya, Cyrenaica. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0039**
- Islamic extremists damaged al-Sheikha Radiya Mosque in Sidi Khalifa, Tripolitania. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0040**

Report

Syria

Turkish forces may soon be expanding their military presence in Syria. During the reporting period, Turkish military forces were reported in Idlib and Aleppo Governorate. Areas under occupation include the archaeological site of Deir Semaan, where the Turkish military appears to be constructing an outpost in the Limestone Massif (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0212**).³⁶ Deir Semaan is part of the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria UNESCO World Heritage Site, and this militarization violates the principles of the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

In Aleppo Governorate, rebuilding efforts appear underway in the heavily damaged areas of the city of Aleppo, which was recaptured by SARG and pro-regime forces in December 2016. However, much of the reconstruction is reportedly being carried out without heritage experts and proper materials, leading to concerns regarding the integrity of preservation. During the reporting period, illegal construction damaged Bab al-Nasr (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0198** on pp. 43-44). Reconstruction is also occurring at al-Mashatiyya Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0213** on pp. 93-94). Outside Aleppo, reported shelling by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham damaged the Kafr Naha Village Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0207** on p. 75) and reported Russian shelling damaged the Burj Sabna Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0215** on p. 97).

In Damascus Governorate, a historic house known as Bayt al-'Ulabi collapsed due to unknown factors (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0197** on pp. 33-42). Photographs released by the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums show severe damage to the house. During the reporting period, reported shelling by Syrian opposition groups slightly damaged Abd ibn Rahwa Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0217** on pp. 102-104).

The ongoing fighting and aerial bombardment in Deir ez-Zor Governorate has damaged several mosques and two archaeological sites. SARG airstrikes damaged four mosques (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0196**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0201**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0205**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0216** on pp. 28-32, 52-53, 68-73, 98-101), reported Russian airstrikes damaged one mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0214** on pp. 95-96),

³⁶ www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkey-suggests-plan-to-extend-military-mission-in-syria-to-afrin-aleppo-idUSKBN1DS2MP

and unknown forces damaged four mosques ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0199](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0211](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0218](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0220](#) on pp. 45–46, 82–84, 111–113). Pro-regime forces liberated the Armenian Holy Martyrs Church and Museum in the city of Deir ez-Zor ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0200](#) on pp. 47–51). DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows new damage to the archaeological sites of Circesium and Mari ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0202](#) and [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0208](#) on pp. 54–59, 76–78).

In Idlib Governorate newly released video footage shows damage to two sites, including the UNESCO World Heritage List site of al-Bara ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0146 UPDATE](#), and [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0170 UPDATE](#) on pp. 13–17, 25–27). Internally displaced people continue to inhabit archaeological sites in Idlib Governorate and other areas of Syria, including in the ruins of al-Bariqa in Quneitra Governorate ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 16-0130 UPDATE](#) on pp. 18–22).

With the end of ISIS military occupation of Raqqa, photographs of the Imam al-Nawawi Mosque confirm damage seen by DigitalGlobe satellite imagery taken in September 2017 ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0169 UPDATE](#) on pp. 23–24). The mosque has been heavily damaged by at least one airstrike as well as from ground combat. The clearing of mines from parts of the city likely means that more photographs documenting the damage to cultural sites will appear. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring new photographs and video footage taken from Raqqa with a particular focus on collecting data pertaining to planned heritage site stabilization projects in the city.

In Daraa Governorate, DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows that damage to the Roman Theater has occurred intermittently since 2014 ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0219](#) on pp. 108–110). In Homs Governorate, reported SARG artillery damaged two mosques during the reporting period ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0204](#) and [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0206](#) on pp. 63–67, 74). SARG artillery also reportedly struck four mosques in Rif Dimashq Governorate ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0203](#), [SHI 17-0209](#), [SHI 17-0210](#), and [SHI 17-0221](#) on pp. 60–62, 79–81, 114).

The Day After - Heritage Protection Initiative (TDA-HPI) released four new reports detailing the condition of Apamea, al-Bara, al-Shughour - Bakas Castle, as well as preservation efforts at sites in Idlib and Hama Governorates (pp. 115–163).

Iraq

With the elimination of ISIS territory in Iraq, multiple preservation initiatives were started to repair cultural heritage sites damaged during the war. In Khidr Ilyas, the Monastery of Mar Behnam and Mart Sarah ([ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0081](#) on pp. 179–183), intentionally destroyed by ISIS in March 2015, is undergoing restoration by Fraternité in Irak. The reconstruction is being carried out by the local inhabitants, many of whom are Sunni Muslims, under the supervision of an archaeologist with support from the Syrian Catholic Bishop of Mosul and the Mayor of Khidr Ilyas. Original building materials are being recovered from the rubble and replacement bricks are being made by locals using traditional methods to keep the new reconstruction as authentic to the previous building. In Ninawa Governorate, the Mart Barbara Church, which was intentionally damaged by ISIS in 2016, is undergoing restoration in Karamlish ([ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI](#)

17-0078 on pp 164–170). The project plans to reopen the church on the feast day of Mart Barbara on December 4, 2017.³⁷

Two incidents of damage were recorded in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq during the reporting period. A severe 7.3 magnitude earthquake struck along the Iran-Iraq border south of Sulaymaniyah on November 12, damaging multiple towns in Sulaymaniah Governorate and the Kermanshah Province of Iran.³⁸ The Sherwana Castle and Museum in Kalar, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, was severely damaged by the quake (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0079** on pp. 171–173). Additionally, a Christian cemetery in Inishiki, Dohuk Governorate was vandalized by unknown perpetrators (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0080** on pp. 174–178).

Libya

Despite the ongoing liquidity crisis and the declining value of the Libyan dinar,³⁹ the Libyan Department of Antiquities (DoA) has managed to launch a number of site protection initiatives in Cyrenaica thanks to small grants from outside of Libya. DoA has started the first phase of a restoration project on Qasr al-Birka, Benghazi, Cyrenaica (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0038** on pp. 191–193) thanks to the financial support of the Prince Claus Fund, and has begun a campaign to conserve the mosaics of Qasr Libya (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0039** on pp. 194–195), a project supported by a grant from UNESCO.

DoA discovered a number of recent shallow burials in the archaeological site of Berenice in Benghazi, Cyrenaica. The bodies are thought to be those of militants opposing the Libyan National Army in recent skirmishes in the nearby Sidi Khrebish neighborhood (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0037** on pp. 188–190). Recovery efforts also continued in the Old City of Benghazi, where the Qasr al-Manar was given to the Libyan Department of Antiquities for reuse as a museum (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0036** on pp. 184–187).

In an alarming development, Islamic extremists damaged al-Sheikha Radiya Mosque in the Sidi Khalifa neighborhood of Tripoli, an attack that appeared to echo the deadly attack against a Sufi mosque in the Sinai region of Egypt (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 17-0040** on pp. 196–199).

³⁷ <https://twitter.com/iraqschristians/status/932355931173806080>

³⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-41972338>

³⁹ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/11/05/libyan-dinar-plunges-further-in-value-breaking-ld-9-to-the-dollar-mark/>