

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

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¹ This reports 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, aerial bombardment continued to increase over Eastern Ghouta as SARG forces pressed into the final opposition-held stronghold near Damascus. From February 17–20, aerial bombardment of Eastern Ghouta produced the highest civilian death toll in the Syrian Civil War since the 2013 Sarin Gas Attack in Eastern Ghouta.² The uptick in violence led to the UN calling for a 30-day ceasefire covering the entirety of Syria. A reported 393,000 Syrians remain in Eastern Ghouta, and according to the UN at least 272,500 inhabitants are in need of humanitarian assistance.³ As the reporting period ended, SARG aerial bombardment and shelling continued over Eastern Ghouta, as did shelling by Syrian opposition forces. As a result, humanitarian aid had yet to reach the estimated 393,000 Syrian civilians besieged in Eastern Ghouta.⁴

Turkish and Free Syrian Army (FSA) operations continued in the Afrin region of Aleppo Governorate. On February 26, Turkish and Turkish-backed forces captured the “final stretch” of the Syria-Turkish border in Afrin from the YPG.⁵ According to the Institute for the Study of War, Turkey’s next operational objectives are most probably to “isolate Afrin City,” thereby securing ground lines of communication to the Syria-Turkish border, and to capture Mennagh Airbase.⁶ Turkish advances in the region prompted SARG forces to enter the city of Afrin after reaching an agreement with the Syrian Kurdish YPG.⁷ This deployment increases the chance of direct clashes between Syria and Turkey. On February 28, Amnesty International reported that indiscriminate shelling by Turkish forces killed dozens of civilians in northern Syria.⁸

Russian aerial bombardment continued over Idlib Governorate where pro-regime forces advanced against territory held by former Al Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).⁹ However, the establishment of two Turkish outposts in northern Idlib Governorate led Russian aircraft to target southern areas of the governorate. Russian aerial bombardment dramatically increased after members of HTS downed a Russian aircraft on February 3 near the city of Saraqib.¹⁰

Russian and SARG aerial bombardment also continued over Hama Governorate, where on February 1 an airstrike struck al-Maghara cave hospital in the town of Kafr Zita, previously believed to be the most secure hospital in Syria. According to UOSSM, the hospital, which was serving a population of 50,000 and performing 150 major surgeries per month, was hit by five strikes causing major damage. Since the start of 2018, there has been a significant uptick in damage to Syrian medical centers.¹¹

² <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/02/syria-situation-report-february-7-21.html>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/more-bombs-fall-on-syrias-eastern-ghouta-before-u-n-vote-idUSKCN1G70XH> ; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43182854> ; <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/02/23/understanding-eastern-ghouta-syria> ; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/02/syria-situation-report-february-7-21.html> ; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43208705>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43208705>

⁵ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/02/turkey-clears-first-hurdle-in-northern.html>

⁶ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/02/turkey-clears-first-hurdle-in-northern.html>

⁷ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/02/syria-situation-report-february-7-21.html>

⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43228472>

⁹ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/02/russian-air-campaign-against-civilians.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42932616>

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42908711>

On February 7, US forces carried out airstrikes against pro-regime fighters following an attempt by the fighters to capture territory east of the Euphrates River, now under the control of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Syrian regime accused the US of aggression and vowed to file an official complaint with the United Nations. Later reports stated that as many as 200 Russian mercenaries were killed or wounded in the attack.¹²

Returnees to the former ISIS-stronghold of Raqqa continue to face huge risks to their safety due to the plethora of IEDs planted by the militant group. During the reporting period, the UN humanitarian coordinator for the Syria crisis, Panos Moutzis, reported that 50–70 returnees to Raqqa were being killed by unexploded ordnance every week.¹³ ISIS maintains an underground presence in Syria and conducted at least one attack during the reporting period in Hasakah Governorate, where a car bombing in the city of Qamishli killed five people.¹⁴

In an alarming development, a UN report released on February 27, 2018 alleged that North Korea had been sending materials used to make chemical weapons to the Syrian regime; approximately 40 shipments of such items were made between 2012 and 2017. According to the report, North Korean specialists have also been seen at weapons-making centers in Syria.¹⁵ During the reporting period, multiple chemical attacks were reported in Eastern Ghouta.

In Iraq, The Kuwait International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq was held February 12–14, where the Iraqi National Investment Commission (NIC) showcased 157 projects, including “rebuilding destroyed facilities like Mosul’s airport, developing the agricultural sector, rebuilding homes, hospitals, schools, roads, and modernising Iraq’s telecommunications network,” ready for investment.¹⁶ The conference hosted delegates from foreign governments, private sector companies and international organizations, raised 30 billion USD in pledges, mostly in loans, from investors.¹⁷ The United States did not invest any direct government assistance,¹⁸ which had been announced in

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces/2018/02/08/bab1502a-0cb4-11e8-8890-372e2047c935_story.html ; <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/18/middleeast/us-airstrike-killed-dozens-of-russians-in-syria-intl/index.html> ; <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/02/weak-us-response-to-russian-proxies.html>

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aid/u-n-syria-aid-chief-says-security-council-must-see-need-for-ceasefire-idUSKCN1G62BQ>

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-bombing/car-bomb-in-syrias-qamishli-kills-five-people-state-media-idUSKCN1G20TK> ; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/world/middleeast/syrian-kurds-isis-american-offensive.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43219614> ; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/27/world/asia/north-korea-syria-chemical-weapons-sanctions.html>

¹⁶ <https://gds.gov.iq/2018/02/12/iraq-open-business/>

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-reconstruction-ku/allies-promise-iraq-30-billion-falling-short-of-baghdads-appeal-idUSKCN1FY0TX>

¹⁸ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/kuwait-iraq-reconstruction-investment.html>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-reconstruction-ku/allies-promise-iraq-30-billion-falling-short-of-baghdads-appeal-idUSKCN1FY0TX>

advance of the conference,¹⁹ but instead extended a 3 billion USD line of credit through the Export-Import Bank of the United States.²⁰

Post-ISIS reconstruction is a high priority for the Government of Iraq, but the process to rehabilitate the most devastated areas will be arduously slow and will require more investment than what was pledged. Iraq sought 88.2 billion USD for reconstruction,²¹ but fell short of its goal at the Kuwait conference.²² The situation in West Mosul is dire. Civilians continue to remove out rubble, and water and electricity have not been restored.²³ Human remains, mostly of ISIS fighters, have yet to be removed from Mosul's streets, and the remains of civilians will need to be recovered from ruined buildings.²⁴ Environmental degradation and chronic health problems are rampant in areas where ISIS destroyed industrial and petroleum facilities when defeat was imminent.

Iraqis face many other challenges. Lingering domestic issues threaten to derail advances toward stability in liberated areas. Despite concerted efforts by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to weed out corruption, such practices remain ubiquitous.²⁵ A joint report published by the Danish Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee, and the Norwegian Refugee Council claims that Iraqis, despite the unresolved security situation and ongoing reconstruction, are being forced to leave displacement camps and return to their homes in Anbar ahead of the election.²⁶ As Coalition forces withdraw from Iraq, and tensions caused by ongoing Baghdad-Erbil disputes and the upcoming election continue, ISIS cells may regain a foothold in Iraq.²⁷ ISIS continues to threaten security and stability, particularly around Kirkuk. The February 19 attack on PMF forces outside Hawija is the most severe incident in a series of attacks undertaken by ISIS cells.²⁸ Despite the positive outcome of the Kuwait conference, stability and security in Iraq remains precarious.

In Libya, this month marked seven years since the beginning of the Libyan revolution of 2011. The anniversary was officially commemorated on February 17. While oil production in Libya apparently reached a five-year high at the beginning of the month, journalistic reflections regarding the aftermath of the revolution were largely pessimistic.²⁹

¹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iraq-conference-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-not-planning-to-contribute-money-at-iraq-reconstruction-conference-officials-idUSKBN1FS30L>

²⁰ <http://www.exim.gov/news/exim-signs-memorandum-understanding-iraq%E2%80%99s-ministry-finance>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-says-the-fight-against-the-islamic-state-is-far-from-over/2018/02/13/63876bfe-ea12-4cf9-83e2-ccde2dee07a4_story.html

²¹ <http://www.cabinet.iq/uploads/Iraq%20Reconstruction/Iraq%20Recons%20&%20Inves.pdf>;
<https://twitter.com/IraqDatabank/status/963703574982209536>

²² <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/kuwait-iraq-reconstruction-investment.html>;
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-reconstruction-ku/allies-promise-iraq-30-billion-falling-short-of-baghdads-appeal-idUSKCN1FY0TX>; <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/02/16/rebuilding-iraq-and-managing-expectations-lessons-from-the-iraq-rebuilding-conference/>

²³ <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/13/585299111/kuwait-conference-aims-to-raise-funds-to-rebuild-iraq-post-isis>

²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-mosul-bodies-insight/battle-over-bodies-rages-quietly-in-iraqs-mosul-long-after-islamic-state-defeat-idUSKBN1FP129>

²⁵ <https://www.lawfareblog.com/other-battle-iraq>

²⁶ <https://www.nrc.no/the-long-road-home>; <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/280220181>

²⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/kirkuk-iraq-kurdistan-islamic-state.html>;
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/kirkuk-iraq-kurdistan-islamic-state.html>

²⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-attack/islamic-state-kills-27-iraqi-militiamen-near-kirkuk-idUSKCN1G30YH>

²⁹ <https://www.upi.com/Libyan-oil-production-hits-post-Gadhafi-high/7911518088193/>; <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/north-africa/2018/02/17/قروئلا ن م سبنن 7 دعو>

There were signs of renewed diplomatic engagement with Libya as the Netherlands opened a diplomatic office in Tripoli and the French ambassador toured Benghazi with the city's mayor, evaluating the damage incurred during the battle for Benghazi (2014–2017).³⁰ The United States signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli on cultural property protection.³¹ While the UN continues to try to lay the groundwork for elections sometime in 2018, an internal report for the Security Council admitted that a lasting political solution remains “out of reach.”³²

Meanwhile, armed clashes between the Tebu and Awlad Suleiman tribes flared up in Sebha, and displaced residents from Tawergha and Benghazi continued to be denied the right to return to their homes.³³

Key Points

- Reported SARG barrel bombs severely damaged al-Nur Mosque in Eastern Ghouta, Rif Dimashq Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0057**
- Reported Turkish military construction encroached on the archaeological site of Tekla in Jebel Semaan, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0212 UPDATE**
- Heavy machinery destroyed the Khan Hamu al-Qadu in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0003**
- New photographs show illegal excavation at Tell Huwaish near Jirnaf, Salah ad Din Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0004**
- An IED damaged Saad bin Obadah Mosque in Benghazi, Cyrenaica. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0007**
- Reported armed extremists destroyed the Mosque of Sheikh Ahmed Barakat al-Ansari in Ajaylat, Tripolitania. **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0006**

Report

Syria

During the reporting period, DigitalGlobe satellite imagery showed further damage to the site of Tekla, located near the UNESCO World Heritage site of Deir Semaan (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 17-0212 UPDATE** on pp. 12–16). This damage is due to the construction of a Turkish military outpost in the area, as reported by ASOR CHI in November 2017.³⁴ Satellite imagery shows significant bulldozing along the modern road near the site, which damaged the western features of the archaeological area. In January 2018, al-Kabir Mosque in Anadan, Aleppo Governorate collapsed due to damage sustained in August and September 2016 (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0037**

<http://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/netherlands-opens-diplomatic-office-tripoli-ambassador> ; <https://libyaschannel.com/2018/02/28/موقتة قلوچر ل خاد بن دم> ; <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/flawed-diplomacy-in-libya/> ; <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/timeline-how-libya-s-revolution-came-undone>

³⁰ <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/netherlands-opens-diplomatic-office-tripoli-ambassador> ; <https://libyaschannel.com/2018/02/28/موقتة قلوچر ل خاد بن دم>

³¹ <https://ly.usembassy.gov/united-states-libya-sign-cultural-property-protection-agreement-february-23-2018/>

³² <https://www.apnews.com/3800f2393c8f4ef5861fa98fe9a28a9d>

³³ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2018/02/02/tribal-retribution-killings-in-sebha-raise-tensions/> ; <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-08/qaddafi-ties-halt-return-to-libya-ghost-town-in-peace-setback> ; <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lna-linked-groups-prevent-displaced-libyans-returning-benghazi-says-hrw-2007893709>

³⁴ <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/asor-chi-mr-nov-2017/>

on pp. 21–23). In Daraa Governorate, the DGAM reported that illegal excavations in Mzairib caused the collapse of an Ottoman-era mill (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0059** on pp. 79–84).

Reported Turkish shelling damaged two sites in Aleppo Governorate during the reporting period. Photographs show damage to at least one grave in Martyr Seydo Cemetery (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0042** on pp. 36–37) and video footage indicates that Bint Hamid Agha Mosque has been severely damaged by reported Turkish shelling (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0054** on pp. 63–64).

A report claimed that the Iranian-led Directorate of Endowments in Deir ez-Zor changed the name of al-Omari Mosque to al-Radwan Mosque after the completion of its restoration (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0043** on p. 38). ASOR CHI has been unable to confirm this claim.

During the reporting period, DigitalGlobe satellite imagery showed damage due to shelling and military activity at two sites (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0045** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0046** on pp. 41–46). Tell Sheikh Mansour was militarized between December 2017 and February 2018, with visible military trenching and earthworks on the mound. A shrine on the mound was destroyed in 2012.

An IED damaged al-Sarouji Mosque in Ma'arat al-Numan (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0039** on pp. 27–28). No group claimed responsibility for the attack. The region is currently controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In June 2017, HTS militants allegedly detained locals in al-Sarouji Mosque in order to prevent them from joining protests against the group. Al-Sarouji Mosque was previously damaged in November 2012.

Reported Russian airstrikes hit three mosques in Idlib Governorate during the reporting period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0038**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0044**, and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0055** on pp. 24–26, 39–40, 65–66). Reported SARG airstrikes also hit three mosques in Idlib Governorate during the reporting period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0040**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0051**, and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0052** on pp. 29–30, 60–61). SARG barrel bombs struck near al-Omari al-Kabir Mosque in January 2018, and new footage shows extensive damage to the interior and exterior of the mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0036 UPDATE** on pp. 17–20). In Rif Dimashq Governorate, SARG strikes damaged seven mosques during the reporting period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0041**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0047**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0049**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0050**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0053**, **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0057**, and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0060** on pp. 31–35, 47–49, 53–59, 62, 70–73, 85–89), two churches (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0048** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0056** on pp. 50–52, 67–69), and a cultural center (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0058** on pp. 74–78).

Iraq

During the January reporting period, video footage and photographs of two sites in Mosul were published (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 15-0078 UPDATE** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 17-0047 UPDATE** on pp. 90–105). The Bashtabia Palace in Mosul was reportedly destroyed by ISIS in April 2015, but new video footage indicates the site is in good condition, with some evidence of erosion. The Church of Mar Thomas was reportedly used as a warehouse and hideout by ISIS

militants during the battle for the liberation of Mosul. New photographs show the site has not been restored since the fighting ended last year.

Khan Hamu al-Qudu in Mosul was destroyed by heavy machinery during the reporting period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0003** on pp. 106–107). It was reported the khan was bulldozed as part of a rebuilding campaign. An ASOR CHI in-country source reported that half of the khan was destroyed during the war and that the Mosque of Hamu al-Qadu, located nearby, was demolished by ISIS on March 6, 2015. It is unclear who ordered the demolition of the remaining half of the khan. The demolition of historical buildings during rebuilding of cities has occurred across Libya, Syria, and Iraq. Similar destructions of heritage sites linked to redevelopment are imminent, particularly in the city of Aleppo, Syria. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring these episodes of destruction and raising public awareness of this threat.

In the Salah ad Din Governorate, a site visit to Tell Huwaish revealed damage from illegal excavation and natural impacts (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0004** on pp. 108–117). The site has never been excavated, but a site survey dates it to the Neo-Assyrian period. Illegal excavations were reportedly performed under the direction of ISIS. Erosion also damaged a wall and part of a gate on the northern portion of the site.

Libya

During the reporting period, an IED of unknown origin exploded near the entrance of Saad bin Obadah Mosque in Benghazi during Friday prayers (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0007** on pp. 124–129). No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring this situation.

In Shahat, an anonymous citizen returned three objects to the Department of Antiquities (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0008** on pp. 130–132). It is believed that these artifacts were likely discovered during ongoing illegal excavations at the necropolis of the UNESCO World Heritage site of Cyrene. The Department of Antiquities Tobruk office performed a restoration campaign to restore a Justinian-era wall (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0010** on pp. 137–139). At a time when there is no dedicated budget on either a local or national level for conservation works, the team used their personal savings to repair sections of the wall that had partially collapsed and cleared debris from the base of the wall.

Two incidents involving urban encroachment on archaeological sites were reported during this period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0009** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0013** on pp. 133–136, 145–148). Al-Bayda Office of the Libyan Department of Antiquities (DoA) reported a landowner was clearing portions of the ancient necropolis of Balagrae without permission. The police were notified, but were unable to immediately stop the activity. The DoA was also notified of damage to the site of al-Hammah by heavy machinery. The local DoA director visited the site and learned that the project began because the community wanted to take advantage of heavy machinery dispatched to the area to pave a local road. The DoA in Libya continues to function on a small budget. ASOR CHI is committed to helping the DoA preserve cultural heritage in Libya.

In Tripolitania, armed extremists used excavators and a crane to demolish sections of the Mosque of Sheikh Ahmed Barakat al-Ansari in Awjilat (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0006**). According to a local official, the tomb associated with the mosque was destroyed in 2012. During February, the Information Office of the Prevention of Organized Smuggling Department in Sabratha recovered a column capital in the area of Tijan Sabratha (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0014** on pp. 149–150), which was likely looted from UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sabratha.

Two tombs were destroyed by unknown perpetrators during the reporting period (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0011** and **ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0012** on pp. 140–144). The Tomb of Omar al-Faqi in Sabratha was demolished by heavy machinery. Comments on the Facebook post of the demolition expressed opinions that both supported and opposed this destruction. The Tomb of Aisha bin Niran was destroyed by explosives. The site was previously damaged in 2011, when the remains contained within the mausoleum were stolen. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring these incidents of destruction in Libya.