

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, the Syrian regime announced the full capture of areas around Damascus after the departure of ISIS from areas south of Damascus. Heavy fighting for the area began on April 19, 2018. Following an evacuation agreement with the Syrian regime, between 1,000 and 1,500 ISIS fighters were evacuated on May 19–21.² Former residents, many displaced for several years after fleeing the area at the arrival of ISIS, have already begun to return and are finding the area heavily destroyed and uninhabitable.³ Satellite imagery indicates extensive damage to the newly recaptured areas, including damage to cultural heritage sites—namely mosques and a cemetery. SARG and pro-regime forces have reportedly looted homes in the recently recaptured areas.⁴ Worry over new military offensives by the Syrian regime targeting de-conflicted opposition-held areas of Daraa Governorate have raised concerns among the countries who negotiated the ongoing ceasefire—Jordan, Russia, and the United States.⁵ Jordan shares a border with the governorate. On May 29, a pro-regime commander stated that the Syrian army had “completed preparations” for an “imminent” assault against opposition-held areas in Daraa Governorate.⁶

In Deir ez Zor Governorate, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes resumed military operations against remaining ISIS-held areas in the province. The SDF had previously paused operations in January 2018 when Turkey and Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces began a new military operation in the Afrin region of Aleppo Governorate.⁷ Between May 18–24, the US-led Coalition conducted 52 strikes in the border area between Iraq and Syria as part of the new so-called “Operation Roundup.”⁸ As of the end of the reporting period, the SDF had cleared the area of Baghuz of ISIS fighters. Preparations are in place for future clearing operations in the Dashiba area.⁹ ISIS continues to stage surprise attacks in Deir ez Zor Governorate, including attacks on pro-regime forces. At least one clash between the groups killed four Russian military personnel.¹⁰

The situation in Aleppo Governorate remains tense, with several foreign militaries operating in close proximity, including Turkey, Russia, and the United States. During the reporting period, the *New York Times* published an article detailing the presence of US forces in Manbij, a town threatened by Turkish and Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army forces (FSA).¹¹ The US base was reportedly built after Turkish forces launched “Operation Olive Branch.” At the end of the reporting

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/classic-apps/syrian-government-declares-capital-fully-under-its-control/2018/05/21/53313b10-5d2f-11e8-a4a4-c070ef53f315_story.html

³ <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/with-isis-gone-yarmouk-civilians-scour-the-rubble-for-homes-memories-1.733641#2>

⁴ <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/with-isis-gone-yarmouk-civilians-scour-the-rubble-for-homes-memories-1.733641#2>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jordan/jordan-confident-russia-will-preserve-southern-syria-truce-idUSKCN1IT16F>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-sirens/gaza-militants-launch-barrages-across-border-israel-hits-back-with-air-strikes-idUSKCN1IU0BX>

⁷ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1515213/coalition-partner-forces-look-to-deal-final-blow-to-isis-in-syria/source/GovDelivery/>

⁸ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1532602/operation-roundup-targets-isis-remnants-in-iraq-syria/source/GovDelivery/>

⁹ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1527434/operation-roundup-targets-isis-remnants-in-syria/source/GovDelivery/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/27/world/middleeast/russia-syria-isis.html>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/magazine/syria-conflict-manbij.html>

period, reports suggested that the US and Turkey had agreed on a “three-step plan” for the withdrawal of Kurdish YPG forces from Manbij.¹² Forced conscription by armed groups on opposite sides of the Syrian conflict continues to be reported. According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), the SDF began a “large-scale, forced conscription campaign through a series of arrests” after the SDF-affiliated Raqqa Civil Council and SDF military intelligence came to an agreement allowing for forced conscription of civilians in Manbij on May 19.¹³

Displaced Syrians and advocacy groups have voiced their concern over a law passed by the Assad regime. The new law, known as Law 10, will allow the Syrian regime to redevelop areas heavily damaged by conflict—most of these redeveloped zones were previously controlled by the opposition and were pro-opposition. Law 10 allows for those displaced to prove their ownership of property in “areas chosen for redevelopment and to claim compensation.”¹⁴ Syrians have only 30 days to assemble the proper paperwork proving their property ownership. However, the vast majority of property owners in the areas in question remain displaced and are unable to return to the areas to make a claim. Amnesty International has accused the Assad regime of redistributing property rights in order to push opponents from their former homes. According to the group, this law “could be used to implement a breathtakingly efficient feat of social engineering. Thousands of Syrians – mostly those in pro-opposition areas or who have sought refuge abroad – risk losing their homes because their documents are lost or destroyed. The law does nothing to guarantee the rights of refugees or displaced people who fled for their lives and fear persecution if they return to their homes.”¹⁵ Toward the end of the reporting period, the Syrian regime transferred ownership of a neighborhood in the Old City of Damascus to the investment branch of the Syrian regime known as ‘Dimashq Al Cham Holding.’¹⁶ The neighborhood has suffered from neglect, and many of its historic homes are in states of disrepair as a result of the ongoing conflict. However, ownership of the buildings remains disputed. ASOR CHI remains committed to following the development related to Law 10 as well as investigating how it pertains to cultural heritage sites.

During the reporting period, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo canceled a plan by his predecessor Rex Tillerson to close the Office of the Special Envoy to the Global Coalition. The office will remain an “independent entity” until at least December 2018.¹⁷

The most significant event in Iraq during the reporting period was the parliamentary election held on May 12. The Sairoon Alliance, a coalition of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr’s Integrity Party, the Iraqi Communist party, and a number of smaller parties, performed unexpectedly well, receiving 54 of the 329 seats in Parliament.¹⁸ The Fatah Alliance, led by Hadi al-Amiri, came in second with 47 seats. Current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi’s Victory Alliance finished third with 42 seats. The

¹² <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/06/syria-situation-report-may-2-29-2018.html>

¹³ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/06/syria-situation-report-may-2-29-2018.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-land-explainer/lawfare-syrian-development-plan-alarms-refugees-and-host-nations-idUSKCN1IQ2A1> ; <http://syriadirect.org/news/fate-of-opposition-era-property-records-uncertain-as-east-ghouta-transitions-back-to-government-authority/>

¹⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/syria-new-property-law-punishes-the-displaced-and-could-obstruct-investigation-of-war-crimes/>

¹⁶ <https://gulfnews.com/news/mena/syria/old-damascus-property-transfer-raises-ire-of-residents-1.2227885>

¹⁷ <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/us-office-overseeing-fight-against-isis-gets-reprieve-1.528147>

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/20/world/middleeast/iraq-election-sadr.html>

election occurred without any serious security breaches, despite pre-election threats made by ISIS against polling stations and electoral officials.¹⁹

Discussions to form the next government are ongoing. Al-Sadr, who is not eligible for the post of prime minister, has spoken in favor of a broad governing coalition focused on political reform and the improvement of infrastructure and public services in Iraq.²⁰ He has indicated his resistance to working with people and parties that are close to foreign entities, particularly Iran and the United States, though he has left the door open to their inclusion in the government under certain conditions.²¹

Evidence of intimidation and fraud has complicated the process of forming the government. On the night of the election, violence broke out in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk following claims of electoral fraud.²² Subsequent investigations into these accusations led the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq to annul votes placed at more than 1,000 polling stations.²³ The Iraqi government continues to assess how to resolve the disputes caused by voting irregularities. In the meantime, tensions remain high, particularly in Kirkuk, where some ballot boxes remain uncounted due to the opposition of local groups.²⁴

The formation of a new government will have significant implications for Iraq's cultural heritage. The new Minister of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities will inherit a difficult position. A study recently released by the World Bank estimated that Iraq's Cultural Heritage and Tourism sector needs more than 1.7 billion USD in reconstruction and investment.²⁵ With promised aid and investment still far short of Iraq's estimated overall need, the incoming minister will have to prioritize some projects and regions over others.²⁶ The politics and professional background of the new minister will play an important role in decisions on where to allocate resources.

In Mosul, Iraqi military, police, and intelligence members are reportedly using the ongoing clean-up activities as an opportunity to systematically loot abandoned properties.²⁷ Locations connected to senior ISIS commanders are considered to be of particular interest due to the presence of money, gold, weapons, and other valuables. Some of the finds, such as weapons, are sold on the black market.

¹⁹ <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/isis-targets-elections-in-afghanistan-iraq-and-libya.php>

²⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/meeting-abadi-sadr-government-inclusive-180520133713633.html>

²¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/05/26/614433787/after-muqtada-al-sadrs-surprise-win-iraqs-political-leaders-try-to-form-governme>

²² <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/3c7e9b77-e34c-43ef-9f7d-93c2ec8a6f60>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election-kirkuk/iraqi-election-commission-says-kirkuk-voting-stations-under-siege-staff-inside-idUSKCN1IH1YA>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/23/was-ira>

qs-recent-election-a-democratic-success-depends-who-you-ask/?utm_term=.e82a69bc7af6

²³ <https://www.alhurra.com/a/iraq-election/438716.html>

²⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/06/kirkuk-election-fraud-iraq.html>

²⁵ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/600181520000498420/Iraq-Reconstruction-and-investmen>

<t-volume-two-damage-and-needs-assessment-of-affected-governorates>

²⁶ <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/reconstruction-isn-t-just-about-rebuilding-iraq-it-is-an-exercise-in-nation-building-too-1.705753>

²⁷ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/mosul-iraq-looting-islamic-state-2043733495>

Further east, Turkey continued its operations against the PKK in northern Erbil Governorate. Turkish Armed Forces have made steady progress towards the location of the PKK's leadership in the Qandil Mountains. Turkish aircraft have facilitated this advance.²⁸ Iraq has warned Turkey against interference in its affairs, but specific criticism against Turkey's current activities has been limited.²⁹ Thus far, no reports of damage to cultural heritage attributable to Turkish or PKK forces have appeared. However, the ongoing instability continues to endanger heritage in the region through exposure and the restricted ability of access to sites by KRG heritage officials.

In Anbar Governorate, tensions increased between US troops and Iran-allied militias following the expulsion of ISIS from the major settlements along the Euphrates River.³⁰ These tensions may cause the security situation to deteriorate, allowing ISIS to strengthen its presence in the region. Continued instability in Anbar Governorate will inhibit stabilization and reconstruction activities in the governorate, particularly in the cities in Ramadi and Fallujah.

Internationally, controversy surrounding *The New York Times'* removal of ISIS administrative documents from Iraq continued to grow.³¹ The Middle East Studies Association, a professional organization, criticized the newspaper's acquisition and handling of the documents and called on it to return the files immediately.³² *The New York Times* has stated that it will digitize and make the archive publicly available through collaboration with an unnamed partner.³³ The original files will be returned to Iraq through its embassy in Washington, D.C.

An uncommonly vicious attack against civilians threatened to derail the UN-backed process to support nationwide elections in Libya before the end of the year. On May 2, ISIS-affiliated suicide bombers attacked the headquarters of the High National Election Commission in Tripoli, killing 13, in the deadliest attack that ISIS has mounted in Libya since they were expelled from the city of Sirte in 2016.³⁴ While Tripoli-based Prime Minister Fayez Seraj and Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) in Benghazi, endorsed a plan to hold parliamentary and presidential elections on December 10, 2018, they pointedly refused to sign it at the conclusion of the Paris summit on May 30.³⁵

On May 8, the LNA launched a renewed offensive in Derna (the only city in eastern Libya not controlled by the LNA) in an effort reminiscent of the onslaught that occurred in Benghazi during the month of Ramadan in 2017.³⁶ Over the course of the reporting period, reports of mounting civilian casualties led the United Nations and Human Rights Watch to issue statements of concern.^{37,38}

²⁸ <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/1513b433-5d93-4945-acb6-8910c5420f6b>

²⁹ <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/4d7d8eb5-f405-4821-992e-db710b7aff28>

³⁰ <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5916/>

³¹ <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/23/isis-files-podcast-new-york-times-iraq/>

³² <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2018/05/02/acquisition-and-unethical-use-of-documents-removed-from-iraq-by-rukmini-callimachi>

³³ https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/05/31/reader-center/isis_files_questions.html

³⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/isis-suicide-bombers-attack-libyan-electoral-commission-killing-12/2018/05/02/e39d4cf4-4e28-11e8-85c1-9326c4511033_story.html?utm_term=.6ec0859a4410

³⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/libyas-december-election-goal-faces-political-legal-security-hurdles-idUSKCN1V22J>

³⁶ <http://www.france24.com/en/20180508-libya-haftar-launches-offensive-seize-eastern-city-derna-terrorists>

³⁷ <https://www.libyaherald.com/2018/05/31/un-concerned-by-increasing-humanitarian-crisis-in-derna-and-calls-on-all-parties-to-respect-human-rights-and-conventions/>

Following a particularly violent battle during which Tebu fighters reclaimed the historic castle in Sabha from their rivals of the Awlad Suleiman tribe on May 12, fighting has subsided, though many residents of the city remain displaced.³⁹

The municipal government of Benghazi hosted a conference to discuss the rebuilding of the city on May 5–7. While the associated international reconstruction exposition was postponed to enable greater participation from foreign companies, delegations representing 14 different countries attended the conference.⁴⁰ Benghazi is the first city in Libya to successfully host such a gathering, seeking the outside partnerships that will be necessary to rebuild when conditions permit.

At the same time, as Francesca Mannocchi reported in *The New Arab*, there are increasing indications that the LNA's reliance on Madakhalist Salifist elements to exert control in eastern Libya has now become a pathway for the LNA to extend its influence in Misrata and Tripoli in the west, and for the Madakhalists to consolidate power nationwide.⁴¹ The utility of the Madakhalists to the LNA likely outweighs any concern about their implication in the destruction of historic mosques and Sufi shrines around the country, and such acts of destruction may well continue.

Some of those who have fled Benghazi due to ongoing violence claim that their properties have been seized by Haftar and redistributed to LNA loyalists.⁴² While these claims have been officially denied by the LNA, it is apparent that a substantial number of property disputes must be resolved as part of the process to rebuild and reconcile communities displaced by the war in Benghazi.

On May 24, a car bomb was detonated near the Tibesi Hotel in downtown Benghazi, killing seven.⁴³ Despite the presence of the LNA and the ambitions of the city to attract outside investment and rebuild, security remains tenuous in Benghazi.

Key Points

- Alleged Turkish army or Turkish-backed FSA fighters destroyed the grave of the Kurdish writer Nuri Dersimi and damaged Henan Mosque in Mesh'ale, Aleppo Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0116**
- Reported SARG forces recaptured the Jerusalem Mosque from opposition forces in Yarmouk neighborhood, Damascus, Damascus Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0104**
- Satellite imagery revealed ongoing illegal excavations at Apamea, in Qalaat al-Mudiq, Hama Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0100**
- Video footage shows graffiti at the Roman Theater in Palmyra, Homs Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0117**
- Satellite imagery and photographs show new damage to Tell Danit in Idlib Governorate. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0102**

³⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/14/libya-battle-city-endangers-civilians>

³⁹ <https://www.libyaerald.com/2018/05/14/tebu-seem-to-gain-upper-hand-on-awlad-sulieman-in-sebha-fighting/>

⁴⁰ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/06/c_137158556.htm

⁴¹ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2018/5/9/libyas-radical-madkhalists-are-the-latest-threat>

⁴² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-displaced-insight/benghazis-displaced-a-litmus-test-for-libya-idUSKCN1II0FZ>

⁴³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/at-least-seven-killed-by-car-bomb-in-benghazi-libya-idUSKCN1IP3XF>

- Satellite imagery revealed damage to Ibrahim Khalil Mosque in Hajar al-Aswad, Rif Dimashq Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0112](#)
- An unnamed group rebuilt the al-Juwayjati Mosque in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate. [ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0011](#)
- Satellite imagery reveals damage to Sabha Castle in Sabha, Fezzan. [ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0021](#)

Report

Syria

During the reporting period, ASOR CHI recorded damage to 19 cultural heritage sites in Syria focused in areas with ongoing military operations.

In Damascus Governorate, seven mosques and one cemetery were damaged during ongoing military operations by SARG and pro-regime forces against remaining ISIS-held territories. ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0099](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0104](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0106](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0107](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0109](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0110](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0111](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0113](#) on pp. 12–16, 36–41, 47–49, 50–55, 62–64, 65–66, 67–68, and 72–73).

In Rif Dimashq Governorate, three mosques were damaged during the same SARG and pro-regime campaign ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0112](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0114](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0115](#) on pp. 69–71, 74–76, and 77–78). DigitalGlobe satellite imagery indicates that the mosques were damaged due to ongoing aerial bombardment.

In Idlib Governorate, a reported Russian airstrike damaged Hamza bin Abd al-Mutallem Mosque ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0101](#) on pp. 26–27). Aerial bombardment by pro-regime forces continues over Idlib Governorate, where thousands of IDPs and armed opposition forces have been relocated from former opposition-held territories.

In Aleppo Governorate, alleged Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters vandalized the Shrine of Sheikh Zaid and the Yezidi Shrine of Sheikh Junayd ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0105](#), [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0108](#) on pp. 56–61). Also in the governorate, alleged Turkish Army forces destroyed the grave of Nuri Dersimi and damaged Henan Mosque ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0116](#) on pp. 29–81). These incidents are the latest in a series of attacks on Kurdish, Yezidi, and Islamic cultural heritage sites allegedly carried out by Turkish and Turkish-backed FSA fighters in northern Aleppo Governorate.

In Hama Governorate, SMART News Agency reported that illegal excavations at Apamea were ongoing ([ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0100](#) on pp. 17–25). DigitalGlobe satellite imagery indicates that between April 3, 2017 and April 29, 2018 illegal excavations continued at the site. The majority of the new illegal excavations are located on the eastern side of Apamea, near the Eastern Cathedral and the House of Consoles. The newer illegal excavations appear as long trenches and often further expand previous looting pits. Other affected areas include the central portion of the archaeological site and the southwestern quarter. The northwestern city wall has also been damaged, with at least two towers destabilized. The site has been damaged by illegal excavations since 2011. Also in Hama Governorate, a reported SARG airstrike allegedly damaged Abu Bakr al-

Sadiq Mosque (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0103** on p. 35). ASOR CHI has not been able to independently confirm this report.

In Homs Governorate, new video footage of the Roman Theater at Palmyra shows graffiti in black and green paint on several columns and on the background of the theater stage (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0117** on pp. 82–86). This graffiti is not present in video footage published in November 2017. The graffiti appears to have been left by pro-regime forces or possible visitors to the site.

In Idlib Governorate, the archaeological site of Tell Danit was damaged by bulldozing (**ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 18-0102** on pp. 28–34). Soil removal has increased on the northern and southern sides of the mound since July 2017. This soil is reportedly being sold for profit to farmers and to facilitate the illegal excavation of the site. ASOR CHI is committed to monitoring both damaged due to military conflict as well as damage to archaeological sites by local actors.

Iraq

During the reporting period, an unnamed group finished reconstruction and restoration efforts at al-Juwayjati Mosque in the city of Mosul (**ASOR CHI Incident Report IHI 18-0011** on pp. 99–110). DigitalGlobe satellite imagery indicates that the mosque was damaged during the battle for Mosul between between April 15 and April 26, 2017. Photographs indicate that the damage to the exterior of the mosque has been repaired. The minaret has not been reconstructed, but rubble around the exterior of the mosque has been removed.

Libya

During the reporting period, Fezzan Libya Org reported that Sabha Castle was damaged during recent fighting (**ASOR CHI Incident Report LHI 18-0021** on pp. 111–113). Reports state that clashes occurred between Tebu tribal forces and 6th Infantry and Alwad Sliman forces over control of the castle. Hafsa Abdul Hamid of the Libyan Department of Antiquities (DoA) in Sebha reports that she and her colleagues have been unable to assess damage to the castle due to ongoing fighting. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery confirms this damage occurred in May 2018.