

2018 began with increased military activity in Syria, with the dramatic entry of Turkish forces into Aleppo Governorate, increasing aerial bombardment and territorial shifts in Idlib, Hama and Rif Dimashq Governorates, and high numbers of civilian casualties. The Syrian conflict seemed to have quieted slightly towards the end of 2017, but it dramatically escalated in January, and cultural heritage was severely impacted. We predict Syria will continue to experience high levels of cultural heritage damage, destruction, and deterioration in 2018.

On January 14, the US-led Coalition confirmed that it was training recruits for a 30,000-strong force composed mainly of Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in order to maintain security on

On January 28-29, 2018 Hawar News and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that a Turkish airstrike had severely damaged the Early Iron Age temple at Tell Ain Dara, an archaeological site located approximately 5.8 km south of Afrin in Aleppo Governorate. Satellite imagery analysis by ASOR CHI indicates that between January 20-22, 2018 an attack took place at the site, causing heavy damage to the central and southeastern portions of the building. Metal fragments, including a piece that may be a stabilizing fin from the bomb or missile used in the attack were recovered in the area. ASOR CHI published an update on the site that is available on our website.¹⁰

Since the start of the new year, Russian aerial bombardment has dramatically increased over opposition-held areas of Syria despite Russia's announcement in December that it would begin drawing back its forces from the country.¹¹ SARG aerial bombardment continued over areas supposedly protected under the Russian-constructed de-confliction zone. During the reporting period, Syrian rescue workers and monitoring groups reported the presence of chlorine gas in several attacks in Eastern Ghouta, Rif Dimashq Governorate, and Idlib Governorate.¹² The increase in aerial bombardment, backed by SARG and pro-regime advancements in Hama and Idlib Governorates, has led to the displacement of 100,000 Syrians.¹³ On January 11, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin and urged him to stop attacks on northern Syria. Turkey, Russia, and Syria have previously agreed on a de-escalation zone in Idlib Governorate and surrounding areas.¹⁴ The Syrian regime has defended its actions, stating that the groups it is targeting in Idlib Governorate are not party to the de-escalation zone.¹⁵ On January 12, 2018 aerial bombardment across Idlib and Hama Governorates caused multiple civilian

unannounced visit to Raqqa. The US has increased efforts to stabilize previously ISIS-held areas in Syria to prevent them from falling into the hands of other militants¹⁹

During the reporting period, unknown forces continued to carry out drone attacks targeting the al-Hmeimeem Air Base host to Russian military forces in Syria.²⁰ On January 11, Russia announced that it was investigating what country was producing the explosives used in the drone attacks.²¹ Speculation continues as to what party is involved in the attacks.

On January 30, Russia hosted a diplomatic conference in the town of Sochi.²² According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), the dialogue was largely a failure in Russia's efforts to construct an agreement that would formally end the war on terms favorable to Syrian President Bashar al Assad.²³ Meanwhile, conditions for Syrian IDPs and those living under siege remain increasingly dire.²⁴ During the reporting period, the bodies of nine Syrian refugees were found frozen in a people-smuggling area between Syria and Lebanon.²⁵ The death of these refugees, highlights the desperate choices Syrians continue to make as the conflict continues into its seventh year.

On January 15, representatives from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) met with US officials in Washington, D.C. The FSA urged the US to resume a suspended CIA program that provided military aid, citing the challenges posed by growing Iranian influence in Syria. According to some reports, the FSA representatives were not granted meetings with the Department of Defense or State Department, despite their request.²⁶ On January 20, the FSA officially began joint operations with Turkish forces in Aleppo Governorate under Operation Olive Branch.

In Iraq, parliamentary elections have been scheduled for May 12, 2018. Initial sessions to schedule the elections for this date, which was suggested by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, were delayed because of a boycott by Kurdish and Sunni parliament members, who wanted to allow more time for displaced Iraq citizens.²⁷ This election will decide the prime minister; Abadi is seeking reelection.²⁸ The Islamic Dawa party, led by Abadi, chose not to run in the election, allowing its

¹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usaid/u-s-aid-chief-makes-unannounced-visit-to-syrian-city-of-raqqa-idUSKBN1FB2L4>

²⁰ <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/01/syria-situation-report-december-14.html> ; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/who-is-attacking-russias-main-base-in-syria-a-new-mystery-emerges-in-the-war/2018/01/09/4fdaea70-f48d-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042_story.html

party members to form new coalitions.²⁹ PMAbadi has created a new coalition, Nasr al-Iraq, while

investigation unit, died in the first blast and appears to have been targeted.⁴⁰ While no party has claimed responsibility for these bombings, they are part of a general trend of violence that seems intended to disrupt the control that the LNA has established in Benghazi.

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) discussed the implementation of the UN action plan for Libya with Libyan leaders, and announced that financial support is now in place for nationwide elections at some point in 2018.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Khalifa Hiftar gave an interview with Jeune Afrique expressing his opinion that Libya is not mature enough to support democracy and that he intends to deploy his forces to secure the electoral process.⁴²

Despite this instability, the Libyan dinar has strengthened considerably in black-market trading against the dollar. While this improvement may reflect optimism surrounding planned elections or growing oil production at a time of increased oil prices, it may also be that there are so few liquid dinars left in the marketplace that the relative price of the dinar has collapsed.⁴³ For average Libyans who have limited savings in either foreign or domestic currency, this change does little to alleviate the ongoing liquidity crisis, though the price of some imported goods may decrease.

A reported Russian airstrike damaged al-Ma arra Museum in Ma ararat al-Numan, Idlib Governorate.

A Byzantine tomb in al-Hasakah Governorate was restored in al-Farahia, al-Hasakah Governorate.

Alleged Turkish shelling damaged Tell Ain Dara Temple in Ain Dara, Aleppo Governorate.

Citizens decried the condition of Birs Nimrud (ancient Borsippa) in Babil Governorate.

A Christian cemetery in the Wadi Ikab area was damaged in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate

Heavy rains contributed to the collapse of a number of mud-brick buildings at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ghadames, Tripolitania.

Archaeological sites remain under threat in Syria. In Raqqa Governorate, the Authority of Tourism

In Latakia Governorate, a reported Russian airstrike damaged al-Tefahiya Village Mosque (on pp. 63 64).

A reported Russian airstrike also damaged the al-Ma arra Museum in Ma arat al-Numan, Idlib Governorate (on pp. 17 29). This airstrike caused severe damage to the museum s galleries, namely the west wing and gallery Many artifacts displayed in the courtyard were moved following previous incidents of damage to the museum, and thus most of the damage was limited to the building itself. Several of the artifacts too heavy to move (including two Byzantine-era sarcophagi) were damaged in this incident. This museum has been hit by airstrikes multiple times in the past and is the focus of a joint ASOR-The Day After Heritage Protection Initiative project to conserve and protect the mosaics in the museum.

In Rif Dimashq Governorate, reported SARG shelling and airstrikes damaged five mosques (, and on pp. 88, 89 92, 93, 99 102, 103 107). Al-Halima Mosque in Duma sustained the most damage, with the minaret collapsing onto the roof of the mosque. Arbin has been under siege for 26 days, and local people state that al-Kabir Mosque was hit by six missiles. Al-Rahman Mosque has been targeted multiple times during the conflict with some locals reporting the mosque has been used as a base for unnamed armed opposition forces. Also in Rif Dimashq Governorate, a Christian Cemetery in Harasta was vandalized by reported SARG forces before they were expelled by opposition forces (on pp. 81 86).

In Aleppo Governorate, a car bomb exploded near al-Fateh Mosque in the town of Manbij, damaging it severely (on pp. 73 74). No group has claimed responsibility. During the reporting period, a fire broke out at Kaab bin Malik Mosque in the city of Aleppo (on pp. 150 153). There have been conflicting reports regarding the cause of the fire, with one report stating that it was the result of a gas leak and another claiming that it began after an explosive was fired at the mosque.

In Hasakah Governorate, the ATPA published photographs of restoration work at a Byzantine tomb near the village of al-Farahia (on pp. 57 62). This included cleaning the interior and exterior of the tomb, restoring its floor and the roof, constructing a stone wall around the tomb, and installing a metal door at the tomb entrance.

In Hama Governorate, reports state that the Mar Gerges Church in the town of Maharda was ransacked, with thieves stealing the church doors, donations, and ceremonial cups (on pp. 147 149).

In Ninawa Governorate, new photographs were released that show damage to the Wadi Ikab cemetery in Mosul (on pp. 193 203). Most of this damage is due to intentional destruction by ISIS militants, who destroyed and damaged tombs and headstones. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows that initial destruction at the site occurred between September 28, 2014 and March 6, 2016. In April 2017, military earthworks were built just west of the cemetery The Wadi Ikab Cemetery has been described as the largest burial site of ISIS fighters since the group emerged in 2014. According to a video report by Al Aan Arabic Television published in February 2017, the cemetery holds the remains of nearly 3,000 militants, including

