



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.<sup>2</sup>

period, reports suggested that the US and Turkey had agreed on a “three-step plan” for the withdrawal of Kurdish YPG forces from Manbij.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.’<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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

---

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

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

<sup>14</sup> <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/>

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup> <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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent investigations into these accusations led the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq to annul votes placed at more than 1,000 polling stations.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.

---

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

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

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

<sup>22</sup>





S

Sadiq Mosque (independently confirm this report.

on p. 35). ASOR CHI has not been able to

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 (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 (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.