

During the reporting period, negotiations between the United States and Russia concerning de-escalation zones in Syria continued, with Russia taking the lead in the establishment of such areas. These discussions, as well as fluid cessation of hostilities agreements between SARG and Syrian opposition forces, resulted in a minor decrease in aerial bombardment of opposition-controlled areas, most notably in Idlib Governorate. SARG forces continued to target opposition held areas near Damascus. Heavy aerial bombardment continued ISIL-held areas of Syria.

Throughout the month, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced into the surrounded city of Raqqa from all directions, capturing dozens of neighborhoods. US-led Coalition airstrikes over the city resulted in extensive damage and high civilian casualties, raising concerns among reporting groups and local and international humanitarian organizations. The US-led Coalition confirmed at least one strike on a heritage site within the city of Raqqa. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that the SDF now controlled an estimated 40% of the city as of the end of the July reporting period.

While US-led Coalition operations continue despite contestations from the Syrian regime, Russia solidified its future holdings in the country. Russian President Vladimir Putin ratified an agreement with the Syrian regime that allows Russia to maintain Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia Governorate for the next 49 years with an option to extend. Russia has also sent its military personnel to police agreed-upon safe zones in opposition-held areas of Syria, despite several actors being involved in the agreement process.

Pro-regime forces captured additional territory near the Lebanese border in Rif Dimashq Governorate. Operations by pro-regime forces, including Hezbollah, forced Syrian opposition groups, including Islamist groups, from opposition-held areas along the Syria-Lebanon border near the Lebanese town of Aarsal. Opposition forces and refugees were scheduled to be evacuated to northwestern areas of Syria, most probably Idlib Governorate using a similar process as was seen previously when opposition forces and civilians were evacuated from areas of Aleppo and Hama Governorates. Syrian opposition groups, made up of dozens of variations of moderate and Islamist opposition parties, continue to hold Idlib Governorate.

Idlib Governorate has seen a respite from SARG and Russian aerial bombardment as a result of de-escalation agreements. However, Syrian opposition groups Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (an offshoot of Al Qaeda-affiliate Nusra Front) and Ahrar al-Sham clashed during July in Idlib Governorate, forcing the closure of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing linking Idlib and Turkey. There are preliminary indications of increased risk for cultural assets in Idlib Governorate. Islamist groups, the most powerful forces in the area, appear to be in control of key cultural repositories. As these groups with large numbers of extremist foreign fighters become more involved in local governance and

explosives. This practice was previously used by ISIL in other recaptured areas including major cities such as Tadmor, Fallujah, and the towns and villages surrounding Mosul in the Nineveh Plains. Some experts estimate that the mines could take decades to clear. As the reporting period ended, civilians were still being found alive under the rubble of areas of the Old City. ISIL holdouts are still believed to be hiding in parts of the Old City.

The next objective for Iraqi forces will be the recapture of the ISIL-held city of Tel Afar, approximately 25 miles (40 km) west of Mosul. Iraqi forces are not anticipating as fierce a battle with the estimated 2,000 militants remaining in the city, as the militants are expected to be exhausted and discouraged as the group continues to lose ground in Iraq.² The liberation of Tel Afar will coincide with the release of much new information on the status of forces are

the SDF. Ground combat subsequently occurred along three axes following the airstrikes, including in the vicinity of the Bab Baghdad gate and Qasr al-Banat. The next day ISIL claimed responsibility for a car bomb that damaged Bab Baghdad gate (on pp. 30–32). ASOR CHI remains concerned as to the use of heritage sites in the fight for the liberation of Raqqa.

As the fight for Raqqa intensifies, US-led Coalition and Russian airstrikes have damaged and destroyed mosques both in the city of Raqqa and on the city's outskirts (, and on pp. 28–29, 37–38, 56–58). On July 25, 2017 DigitalGlobe satellite imagery showed the destruction of al-Safa Mosque due to explosives, likely the result of airstrikes (on pp. 57–58). Analysis of satellite imagery shows that this mosque has been completely destroyed. No reports of this destruction appeared in the media, and US-led Coalition air support was active on the western front on July 24–25. On July 31, 2017 a suspected Russian airstrike completely destroyed al-Rahman Mosque in al-Khamisiyah Foqani (on p. 56). It is estimated that 40 percent of Raqqa has been taken by the SDF forces backed by US-led Coalition airstrikes. As the liberation of Raqqa continues, ASOR CHI anticipates more damage to mosques and other religious heritage.

ASOR CHI released an Update Report entitled “Update: Damage to al-Rafiqah Wall in Raqqa’s Old City by US-led Coalition Forces.” The report details the damage caused by tr

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Mosul is a Sunni majority city, with multiple minorities consisting of Shia and Sufi Muslims; Orthodox, Catholic, and Assyrian Christians; a Jewish population; and a small Yazidi population all living in and around the urban center. The city has now been liberated by a mixed group of Shia and Sunni Iraqi security forces, Shia Popular Mobilization Front (PMF) units, and Iraqi-Christian militias. These groups control different neighborhoods in Mosul and the surrounding countryside, but the sectarian nature of some of these armed groups has caused worry among Mosul's Sunni population as reports emerge of retributory violence and expulsion and extrajudicial punishment of alleged ISIL conspirators. Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, has already cautioned that in order to keep "[ISIL] 2.0 from emerging, the Iraqi government is going to have to do something pretty significantly different" to avoid the same sectarian tensions that led to the fall of Mosul in 2014 and the rampant expansion of ISIL. UN special representative Jan Kubis expressed his strong belief that any reconstruction work

ASOR CHI released an Update titled "

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