

## ASOR CULTURAL HERITAGE INITIATIVES

### The Recapture of Palmyra

Allison Cuneo, Susan Penacho, Michael Danti, Marina Gabriel, Jamie O'Connell,  
With contributions from Bisher al Issa, Bijan Rouhani, and Kyra Kaercher

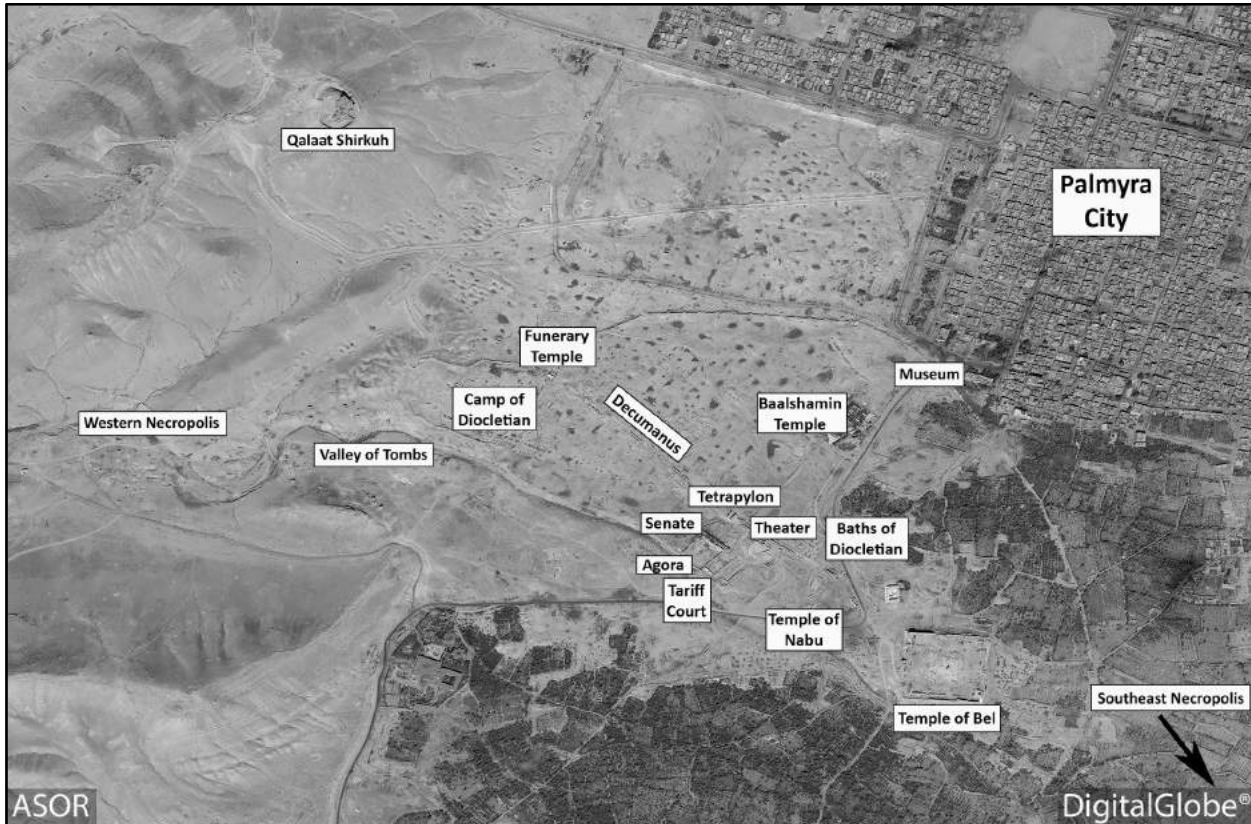


Figure 1. Map of Palmyra (DigitalGlobe; March 30, 2016)

The region of Palmyra and modern Tadmor was taken from ISIL militants by a coalition of Syrian, Russian, and Iranian military forces on March 24, 2016. This report will provide a summary of what is known to have taken place in the area since September 2015, including a synopsis of the humanitarian and military situation since then and the effects the conflict has had on the cultural heritage of ancient and modern Palmyra. This report is a preliminary analysis of a rapidly developing event, and initial findings may be subject to change as further information is revealed. For a more complete summary of the situation in Palmyra, please refer to the upcoming **Weekly Report 85-86** (reporting period ending March 29, 2016) and **Weekly Report 87-88** (reporting period ending April 12, 2016).

For more detailed information on the heritage and history of the ancient city, please review ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiative's [Special Report on the Significance of Palmyra](#) from June 2015. Additionally, please refer to ASOR CHI's second special report [Update on the Situation in Palmyra](#) from September 2015 for details on the intentional destruction of multiple heritage sites. Please also refer to [Palmyra: Heritage Adrift](#), published June 2015 by Cheikhmous Ali, for a summary of the collateral damage to the cultural heritage in and around Palmyra.

## Summary of the Current Situation in Palmyra

On March 27, 2016 Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG) forces with heavy support from Russia, Iran, and other foreign forces captured Palmyra and the Palmyra Airport in Homs Governorate after ISIL militants withdrew from the area.<sup>1</sup> Local residents of the city reported that ISIL militants planted hundreds of mines in the surrounding palm groves of the oasis city and in the archaeological site as they retreated.<sup>2</sup> These mines slowed the SARG advancement into the city and into the archaeological site. The Syrian regime and its allies began clearing operations and were reinforced by a team of Russian experts who arrived from Moscow on March 31.<sup>3</sup> Syrian Directorate General for Antiquities and Museum (DGAM) personnel have been able to reach the site, though their access has been limited due to the placement of the mines.<sup>4</sup> On April 1 a mass grave was found amongst the ruins. Independent reports indicate the grave contains the bodies of soldiers and civilians, including children executed by ISIL.<sup>5</sup>

Following the expulsion of ISIL militants from the region, video footage and photographs of the World Heritage Site have circulated widely, providing some of the clearest and most detailed images released since September 2015. To produce this report, ASOR CHI has analyzed the new photographic evidence, newly released DigitalGlobe satellite imagery, and recent open-source information pertaining to the ancient monuments — primarily the reports of the DGAM, military personnel, and journalists who have gained access to Palmyra. The ground-level photography focuses on the most well known monuments in the ancient city; at the time of publication no on-site photographs or footage were available for the Valley of the Tombs or the three Necropoli. ASOR CHI acquired DigitalGlobe satellite imagery released on March 30, 2016 that covers the ancient site, including these inaccessible areas. This imagery revealed previously undocumented damage to multiple tombs in the Valley of the Tombs, the Northwestern Necropolis, and the Southeastern Necropolis. This damage occurred between September 3, 2015 (previously the most recent images) and March 30, 2016 (the most recent image).

## Humanitarian Situation Since September 2015

The humanitarian situation in Palmyra has deteriorated rapidly since ISIL took control of eastern Homs Governorate in May 2015, and SARG forces have been actively waging a campaign to expel the group from the area. On September 30, 2015 Russia began its aerial campaign in Syria, and reports surfaced almost immediately of Russian airstrikes targeting opposition-held areas, including alleged civilian targets, and not areas held by ISIL, their purported objective. Syrian and international activist groups began reporting, with increasing frequency, the strikes hitting civilian sites such as hospitals and residential areas, which often inflicted high civilian casualties.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-syrian-iranian-coalition-seizes-isis-held-palmyra>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35888723> ; <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/world/middleeast/syria-palmyra-isis.html> ; <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/30/world/middleeast/isis-fighters-laid-mines-around-palmyras-ancient-ruins-before-retreating-syrians-say.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-syria-sappers-idUSKCN0WX0IX>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1962> ; <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=177&id=1961> ; <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1957>

<sup>5</sup> <http://sana.sy/en/?p=73453> ; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35950517> ; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/palmyra-mass-grave-containing-bodies-of-beheaded-women-and-children-found-after-isis-driven-out-of-a6964856.html> ; <https://www.rt.com/news/338101-palmyra-isis-mass-grave/> ; <https://www.yahoo.com/news/mass-grave-victims-found-syrias-palmyra-army-source-100142952.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://airwars.org/russia-dec2015/> ; <http://airwars.org/russia-nov2015/> ; <http://airwars.org/russia-oct2015/> ; <http://airwars.org/russia-sept2015/> ; <http://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Reckless-Disregard.pdf> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9o3v2JVUtAo> ; <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/02/07/18073/> ; <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/01/17/16586/> ; <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/12/17/15667/> ; <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/11/10/14411/> ; <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/10/09/13014/>

On March 10, 2016 the local activist group Palmyra Coordination released an urgent message via their

Facebook page that detailed the destruction of the modern city of Tadmor/Palmyra as a result of the ongoing Russian and SARG airstrikes. The group labeled the city as a “Disaster Area”. The Palmyra Coordination also reported that since the start of 2016, Russian airstrikes had “destroyed at least half of the city’s neighborhoods” as well as the “two local medical points in the city....most of [the] infrastructure and public buildings including schools, mosques, [and] the only church in the city.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, the group reported that as of March 20, 2016 only a quarter of the city’s original residents, approximately 15,000 people out of the original 50,000 inhabitants, remained in the city.<sup>8</sup> In the lead-up to the SARG offensive to retake Palmyra, Palmyra Coordination increasingly reported on Russian airstrikes occurring in residential areas.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 2. The main square in the city of Palmyra shows the impact inflicted by airstrikes and combat on the modern city (BBC; March 31, 2016)

On March 23, 2016, ISIL militants reportedly urged Tadmor’s remaining residents to flee the city as the fighting edged closer.<sup>10</sup> Few civilians were reported to be in the city when SARG-affiliated forces entered the urban area.<sup>11</sup> In a departure from typical ISIL defensive tactics, the militants apparently did not use the residents as human shields.

Since SARG and allied forces recaptured Palmyra, the Palmyra Coordination has reported instances of violence against some remaining residents perpetrated by SARG and its affiliates. Theft has also been recorded with instances of SARG and SARG-affiliated forces entering homes, stealing items, and reselling them to outside merchants.<sup>12</sup> SARG frequently accuses civilians residing in areas recaptured from ISIL of sympathizing or collaborating with ISIL, which is almost certainly linked to such retributory theft and violence. Reports of such retributory acts occurred in both Syria and Iraq. As a result, these individuals often face harsh treatment by the group that has recaptured the city. Despite this treatment, the Palmyra Coordination reported that the regime had issued orders for all evacuated citizens to return to the city on penalty of arrest in order to provide an image of security for an upcoming visit by government officials.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/photos/pcb.483939675064310/483939621730982/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/photos/pb.410518082406470.-2207520000.1459261934./483939621730982/>; <http://www.ibtimes.com/watch-syrian-troops-close-palmyra-isis-tells-civilians-flee-video-2342564>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jFwtq97dIA>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mDLwS5iKa0>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXHpy4xdVmA>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aAkadE4vTU>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuSVsqFDvIc>; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f07ybJkWy\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f07ybJkWy_8); <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=485136234944654>; <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/videos?ref=photo>; <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=45048>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syrian-army-seizes-hills-overlooking-is-held-town-of-palmyra/2016/03/23/8e152a78-f0e1-11e5-a2a3-d4e9697917d1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syrian-army-seizes-hills-overlooking-is-held-town-of-palmyra/2016/03/23/8e152a78-f0e1-11e5-a2a3-d4e9697917d1_story.html); <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35888723>; <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=45372&>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/world/middleeast/syria-palmyra-isis.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/syrian-government-regains-control-of-palmyra-from-islamic-state-1459096448>; <https://www.facebook.com/rferl/videos/10154144961534575/?pnref=story>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/?ref=nf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/posts/491661327625478>



## Military Developments

In October 2015, Russia deployed attack helicopters and artillery to the SARG front in Palmyra.<sup>14</sup> The move by Russia came shortly after it began its aerial campaign on September 30, 2015. On October 6, 2015, Russia denied that its airstrikes had struck the city of Palmyra after the state-run Syrian News Agency (SANA) announced that “20 vehicles and 3 weapons depots” had been struck.<sup>15</sup> Almost one month later, on November 2, 2015 activists in Palmyra reported at least eight airstrikes on the western outskirts of the ISIL-held city, sending smoke rising out of an area that includes the historic citadel.<sup>16</sup> The same day, Moscow’s Defense Ministry stated that a Russian “Su-25 jet hit a fortified Isis position in the [Palmyra] area of Homs province.” Russia did not explicitly say when the strikes took place.<sup>17</sup> On November 5, 2015 the Russian Air Force announced a series of airstrikes on ISIL militants in Palmyra.<sup>18</sup>

In January 2016, Syrian activists reported that Russia had deployed military advisers to the west of Palmyra.<sup>19</sup> The presence of such advisors became clear in the weeks leading up to the recapture of Palmyra as Russian special forces were reported to be calling in airstrikes for the Russian Air Force, as well as providing assistance to SARG forces and allied groups.<sup>20</sup>

In the first three weeks of March 2016, SARG forces and pro-regime allies, backed by SARG and Russian airstrikes, began their offensive to reclaim Palmyra from ISIL.<sup>21</sup> During the subsequent ground operations and unprecedented frequency of Syrian and Russian airstrikes, significant damage was inflicted upon the modern city of Palmyra as well as the archaeological site. SARG and pro-regime allies were reported to be within two miles of the city on March 23, 2016, having captured several strategic hilltops from ISIL.<sup>22</sup> On March 27, SARG forces and pro-regime allies, backed by heavy Russian and SARG airstrikes, recaptured the city of Palmyra.<sup>23</sup>

## Airstrike Damage to Cultural Sites in Tadmor

As recently released footage details, both residential areas and the archaeological site in the city of Palmyra have suffered extensive damage caused by Russian and SARG airstrikes. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has reported nine airstrikes by SARG forces that targeted mosques in the city of Palmyra. Eight of the nine airstrikes on the mosques occurred after the Russian intervention in Syria that began on September 30, 2015.<sup>24</sup> The local activist group Palmyra Coordination also documented several incidents of Russian and SARG airstrikes that struck the archaeological site of Palmyra as well as

---

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/russia-strikes-palmyra-syria-isis\\_us\\_56139b39e4b022a4ce5f50a6](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/russia-strikes-palmyra-syria-isis_us_56139b39e4b022a4ce5f50a6)

<sup>15</sup> <http://tass.ru/en/defense/826656> ; [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/russia-strikes-palmyra-syria-isis\\_us\\_56139b39e4b022a4ce5f50a6](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/russia-strikes-palmyra-syria-isis_us_56139b39e4b022a4ce5f50a6)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/11/02/world/middleeast/ap-ml-islamic-state.html> ; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34705128> ; [http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2015/11/02/story\\_n\\_8453954.html](http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2015/11/02/story_n_8453954.html)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/02/russias-air-force-bomb-isis-base-near-palmyra>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Nov-05/321811-russia-bombs-palmyra-eastern-syria-military.ashx>

<sup>19</sup> <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566448-russia-deploying-advisors-near-palmyra-rebel-media>

<sup>20</sup> <http://news.yahoo.com/capture-palmyra-shows-russian-forces-still-key-syria-163646487.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/03/russian-syrian-iranian-coalition-seizes.html>

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/syrian-army-seizes-hills-overlooking-is-held-town-of-palmyra/2016/03/23/8e152a78-f0e1-11e5-a2a3-d4e9697917d1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-army-seizes-hills-overlooking-is-held-town-of-palmyra/2016/03/23/8e152a78-f0e1-11e5-a2a3-d4e9697917d1_story.html)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-palmyra-idUSKCN0WT04R>

<sup>24</sup> For additional reporting on SARG and Russian airstrikes on mosques in the city of Palmyra after September 30, 2015 see **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0155** in **Weekly Report 69-70**, **SHI 15-0160** in **Weekly Report 71-72**, **SHI 16-0020** in **Weekly Report 79-80**, **SHI 16-0029** in **Weekly Report 81-82**, **SHI 15-0160** in **Weekly Report 83-84**, **SHI 16-0035** in **Weekly Report 83-84**. For additional information on the mosque targeted prior to September 30, 2015 see <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/08/16/government-forces-shelling-targeted-a-mosque-in-palmyra-in-august-16/>.

residential areas in the city.<sup>25</sup> Palmyra Coordination also reported that along with the mosques that had been damaged or destroyed in the city, the only church had also been damaged in airstrikes.<sup>26</sup> The following places of worship have been reported as damaged or destroyed in airstrikes since September 2015:

- **Uthman bin Affan Mosque**, severely damaged by a series of Russian airstrikes March 16, 2016.<sup>27</sup>
- **Bilal Mosque**, damaged by Russian airstrikes March 16, 2016 and by SARG airstrikes December 9, 2015.<sup>28</sup>
- **Al Sayeda Khadija Mosque**, partially damaged and rendered inoperable by SARG airstrikes March 9, 2016.<sup>29</sup>
- **Al Souq Mosque**, partially destroyed and rendered inoperable by SARG airstrikes February 16, 2016.<sup>30</sup>
- **Al Sadeiq Mosque**, partially damaged by SARG airstrikes February 2, 2016.<sup>31</sup>
- **Abi Thar Al Ghafari Mosque**, damaged by SARG airstrikes December 19, 2015.<sup>32</sup>
- **Al Furqan Mosque**, damaged by SARG airstrikes December 8, 2015.<sup>33</sup>
- **El Eman Mosque**, damaged by SARG or Russian airstrikes November 22, November 29, and December 6, 2015.<sup>34</sup>



Figure 3: Destruction to residential areas and the Uthman bin Affan Mosque in Palmyra (SANA Handout via Reuters; March 27, 2016)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mDLwS5iKa0> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXHpy4xdVmA> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aAkadE4vTU> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuSVsqFDvIc> ; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f07vbJKWy\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f07vbJKWy_8) ; <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=485136234944654> ; <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/videos?fref=photo> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOOQHUMacV0>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/photos/pcb.483939675064310/483939621730982/>

<sup>27</sup> New incident to be published in **Weekly Report 85-86**.

<sup>28</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0160** in **Weekly Report 71-72**; new incident to be published in **Weekly Report 85-86**.

<sup>29</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 16-0035** in **Weekly Report 83-84**

<sup>30</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 16-0029** in **Weekly Report 81-82**

<sup>31</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 16-0020** in **Weekly Report 79-80**

<sup>32</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0160** in **Weekly Report 71-72**; **SHI 15-0160** in **Weekly Report 83-84**

<sup>33</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0155** in **Weekly Report 69-70**

<sup>34</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0155** in **Weekly Report 69-70**

In the lead up to the recapture of Palmyra, local activist groups reported a dramatic increase in airstrikes on both the archeological site and the modern city of Palmyra.<sup>35</sup> Video footage released by several media sources showing military airplanes overhead and clear instances of airstrike explosions corroborated these claims.<sup>36</sup> In just one day during the offensive to retake Palmyra, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that at least “200 shells and rockets, in addition to 80 airstrikes” struck the city amid ongoing clashes between SARG forces and ISIL militants.<sup>37</sup> Palmyra Coordination released fourteen videos via their Facebook and YouTube accounts during this reporting period, which show the damage caused by aerial bombardments of the city.<sup>38</sup>

The airstrikes by Russian forces have been well documented by media coverage, local sources, and the Russian Ministry of Defense.<sup>39</sup> According to one Russian official, Russian forces carried out 2,000 airstrikes over the city from March 7 to March 27, 2016.<sup>40</sup> Airstrikes by SARG forces have been overwhelmingly documented by local activists, who like many other activists across the country, have become adept at identifying the culprit of each airstrike based on the aircraft used and the size of the subsequent explosion. Russia is known to use jets rather than helicopters and to possess heavier firepower, causing larger explosions. The Syrian Air Force is often characterized by helicopters, flying at a lower altitude, and dropping barrel bombs or firing missiles at close range. Although the aircraft can often be identified as either Syrian or Russian it is almost impossible to determine who is piloting the aircraft, and often the same airstrike has been attributed to both Russian and SARG forces. It is estimated 50 to 70 percent of total damage across the relatively small city is the result of airstrikes.<sup>41</sup>

It should be noted that the US-led coalition has reported previous airstrikes that targeted ISIL ‘near Palmyra’. However, there have been no reports of these airstrikes causing any damage to the modern city or the archaeological site itself. Only one airstrike was reported during the recapture of the city.<sup>42</sup>



Figures 4-5. Airstrike damage attributed to Russian forces (Palmyra Coordination; March 25, 2016, March 20, 2016)

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-palmyra-idUSKCN0WC26G> ; <http://slnnews.co/?p=41297> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aAkadE4vTU> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc6lGcbEC3s> ; [https://twitter.com/mod\\_russia/status/706780565870092288](https://twitter.com/mod_russia/status/706780565870092288) ; <http://www.globalpost.com/article/6744609/2016/03/10/syria-russia-strikes-kill-20-jihadists-palmyra> ; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-palmyra-idUSKCN0WD1GN>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEE4vClwEnk> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZBQHpYXXtg>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=45048>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcl6K4hzP7wAHIQczdoYdIA> ; <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/videos>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-palmyra-idUSKCN0WT04R> ;

<sup>40</sup> <http://tass.ru/en/defense/866318>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.gconew.com/world/273052/3d-printing-palmyra-what-it-means-to-recreate-a-city-destroyed-by-isis.html> ; <https://www.facebook.com/revo.palmyra3/photos/pb.410518082406470.-2207520000.1459520073./483939621730982/>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/703953/coalition-strikes-target-isis-terrorists-in-syria-iraq>



## Status of Monuments in the UNESCO World Heritage site of Palmyra

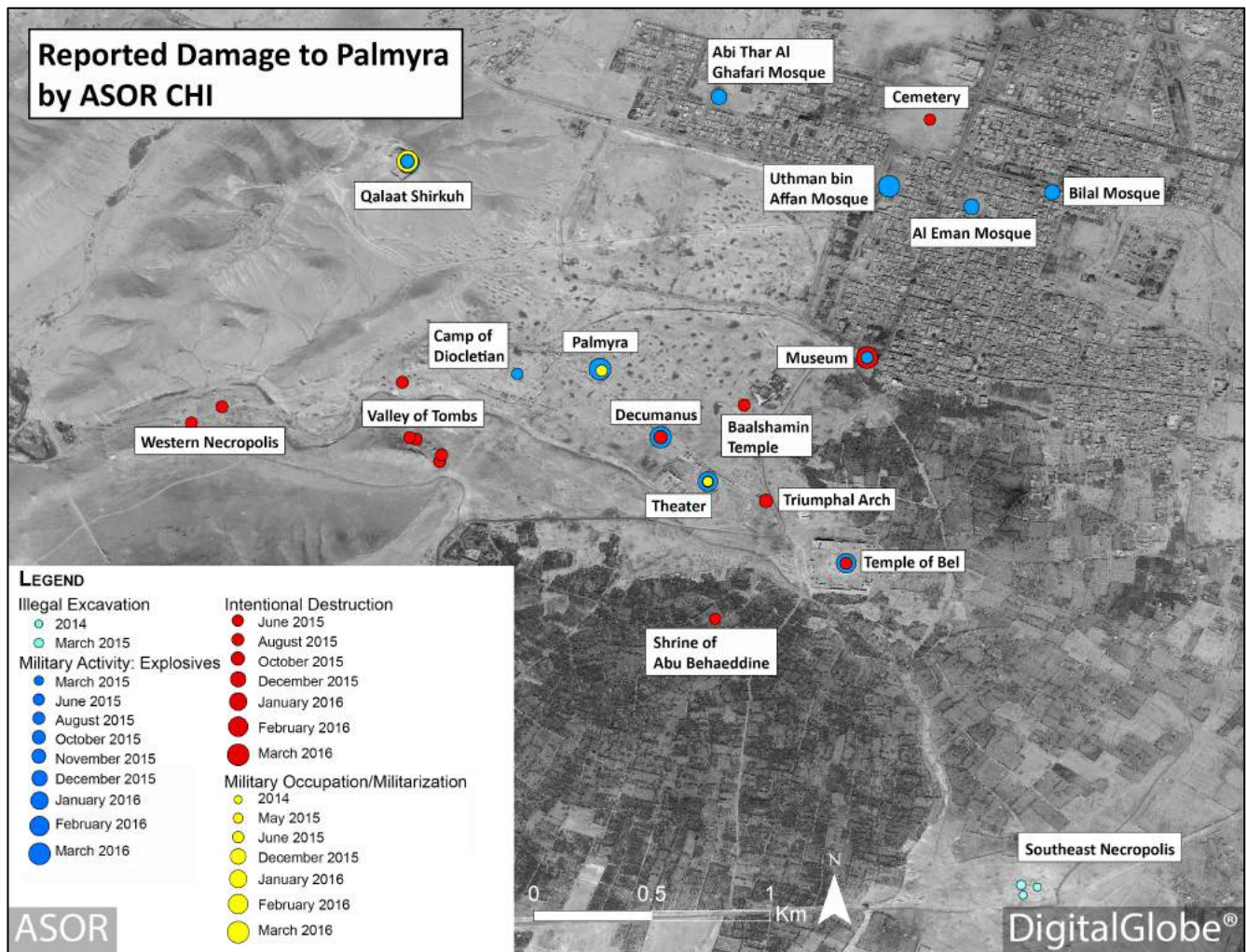


Figure 6. Reported damage to the Palmyra area since 2014. Larger circles indicate more recent events. Events are color coded based on type of damage. Map compiled by Susan Penacho (DigitalGlobe; March 30, 2016)

It has been difficult to monitor the condition of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Palmyra as the Syrian war escalated. Over the course of the conflict ASOR CHI has documented the extensive damage to Palmyra due to looting,<sup>43</sup> deliberate destruction,<sup>44</sup> execution,<sup>45</sup> military occupation,<sup>46</sup> and collateral combat damage.<sup>47</sup> After ISIL took control of the region in May 2015, little corroborated information on the

<sup>43</sup> For looting by SARG forces and civilians, see: [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 14-0023 in Weekly Report 4](#); [SHI 14-0027 in Weekly Report 6](#); [SHI 14-0073 in Weekly Report 13](#); [SHI 14-0086 in Weekly Report 16-17](#); [SHI 15-0103 in Weekly Report 20](#); [SHI 15-0058 in Weekly Report 34](#).

<sup>44</sup> For deliberate ISIL destruction, see: [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0086 in Weekly Report 42-43](#); [SHI 15-0101 in Weekly Report 46](#); [SHI 15-0104 in Weekly Report 47-48](#); [SHI 15-0124 in Weekly Report 55-56](#); [SHI 15-0125 in Weekly Report 57-58](#); [SHI 15-0127 in Weekly Report 57-58](#); [SHI 15-0128 in Weekly Report 57-58](#); [SHI 15-0138 in Weekly Report 61-62](#); [SHI 15-0142 in Weekly Report 63-64](#).

<sup>45</sup> For executions carried out by ISIL, see: [ASOR CHI Incident Report 15-0104 in Weekly Report 47-48](#); [SHI 15-0142 in Weekly Report 63-64](#).

<sup>46</sup> For SARG occupation, see: [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 14-0019 in Weekly Report 3](#); [SHI 14-0027 in Weekly Report 6](#); [SHI 14-0103 in Weekly Report 20](#); [SHI 15-0055 in Weekly Report 33](#). For ISIL occupation, see: [SHI 15-0058 UPDATE in Weekly Report 34](#); [SHI 15-0086 in Weekly Report 41](#); [SHI 15-0101 in Weekly Report 46](#); [SHI 15-0104 in Weekly Report 47-48](#); [SHI 15-0142 in Weekly Report 63-64](#).

<sup>47</sup> For damage from aerial bombardment, see: [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0055 in Weekly Report 33](#); [SHI 15-0086 Update in Weekly Report 42-43](#); [SHI 15-0096 in Weekly Report 45](#); [SHI 15-0114 in Weekly Report 51-52](#); [SHI 15-0116 in](#)

condition of the archaeological site has emerged given the lack of media presence in the area and the mass evacuation of civilians. As a result, we have had access to no visual evidence to verify and assess the extent of the damage as a result of these incidents until now. ASOR CHI has analyzed the photographs and video footage made available and has undertaken a preliminary status report on the ancient monuments recorded by the DGAM, military personnel, and journalists who now have gained access to Palmyra. These images focus on the most well known monuments in the ancient city, so for some monuments there was no visual evidence available at the time of publication. Additionally, ASOR CHI acquired DigitalGlobe satellite imagery released on March 30, 2016 that covers the ancient site. This imagery revealed previously undocumented damage to multiple tombs in the Valley of the Tombs, the Northwestern Necropolis, and the Southeastern Necropolis. This damage took place at some point between September 3, 2015 and March 30, 2016. The preliminary assessment of Palmyra is as follows:

**Triumphal Arch** — Poor-quality video footage released November 2015 appeared to show that the arches of the monument had fallen.<sup>48</sup> Images published by the DGAM on March 27, 2016<sup>49</sup> and March 30, 2016<sup>50</sup> confirm that the Triumphal Arch had been damaged. Reports suggest that ISIL militants detonated explosives around the monument in October 2015, causing major damage to the central and south gateways of the three-gate arch.<sup>51</sup>



Figure 7. Triumphal Arch (DGAM; January 15, 2013)



Figure 8. Triumphal Arch after it was detonated by ISIL militants on October 4, 2015 (DGAM; March 27, 2016)

---

**Weekly Report 53-54; SHI 15-0134 in Weekly Report 59-60; SHI 15-0145 in Weekly Report 65-66; SHI 15-0145 in Weekly Report 66-67; SHI 16-0016 in Weekly Report 77-78; SHI 16-0026 in Weekly Report 79-80; SHI 16-0035 in Weekly Report 83-84.**

For damage from shelling and other gunfire/light weaponry by ISIL and SARG forces see: **SHI 15-0086 in Weekly Report 41; SHI 15-0116 in Weekly Report 53-54; SHI 15-0134 in Weekly Report 59-60.**

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2015/11/02/story\\_n\\_8453954.html](http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2015/11/02/story_n_8453954.html)

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1955>

<sup>50</sup> <http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1962>

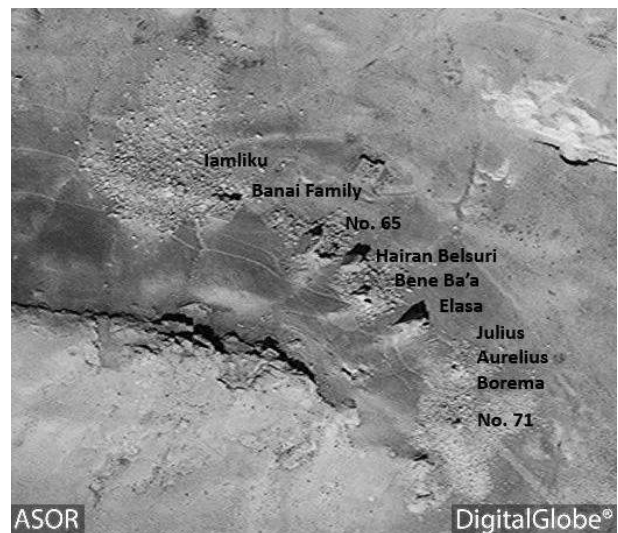
<sup>51</sup> <http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1823> ; For additional information on the destruction of the Triumphal Arch since September 3, 2015 see **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0138 in Weekly Report 61-62.**



**Valley of the Tombs — The Tower Tombs of Julius Aurelius Bolma, the Banai Family, Iamliku, and No. 71** were damaged or destroyed prior to September 2015.<sup>52</sup> The DigitalGlobe satellite imagery from March 30, 2016 shows no new damage to these tower tombs, though there is additional damage to other tombs in the western necropolis. The **Tower Tombs of Elasa, Bene Ba'a, Hairan Belsuri, and No. 65**, all located on the northern slopes of the Umm al-Belqis, appeared undamaged in the September 2015 imagery that revealed the destruction of the other four tombs. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery released March 30, 2016, however, shows these previously untouched tombs to be severely damaged. The tomb of Elasa appears to still be standing without damage, while the three to the east have all sustained various degrees of damage. Some walls are still standing but the large rubble piles at their bases illustrate some destruction from unknown causes. These do not appear to have been intentionally destroyed with large amounts of explosives in the same manner as other tower tombs in the area.



Figures 9-10. Satellite imagery of Tower Tombs. Left: No visible damage (DigitalGlobe; June 26, 2015), Right: Visible damage to Tomb of Iamliku and Tomb of the Banai Family (DigitalGlobe; August 27, 2015)



Figures 11-12. Left: Visible damage to Tomb of Julius Aurelius Bolma and Tomb No. 71 (DigitalGlobe; September 2, 2015), Right: Visible damage to Tomb of Bene Ba'a, Hairan Belsuri, and No. 65 (DigitalGlobe; March 30, 2016)

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/special-report-update-on-the-situation-in-palmyra/>

**Western Necropolis - Atenaten, Elahbel, Kithoth, and Tower Tomb No. 22** — The tombs of Atenaten, Elahbel, and Kithoth were all damaged prior to September 2, 2015. Tomb No. 22 is located in the western necropolis close to the previously destroyed tombs of Atenaten and Elahbel. In the March 30, 2016 DigitalGlobe satellite imagery, the tomb has been reduced to a pile of rubble, which indicates it was intentionally destroyed. No standing architecture is visible.



Figures 13-14. Left: No visible damage (DigitalGlobe; June 26, 2015), Right, Visible destruction of the Tomb of Atenaten (DigitalGlobe; August 27, 2015)



Figure 15-16. Left: Visible damage to Tomb of Elahbel. Tomb No. 22 remains intact (DigitalGlobe; September 2, 2015), Right: Visible damage to Tomb No. 22 (DigitalGlobe; March 30, 2016)



Figures 17-18. Satellite imagery of Tomb of Kithoth. Left: no visible damage (DigitalGlobe; June 26, 2015), Right, Visible damage (DigitalGlobe; September 2, 2015)



**Southeast Necropolis** — Previous reports of illegal excavation were detailed in August and November 2014, as well as March 2015.<sup>53</sup> This included specific theft and vandalism from the Tombs of Taibul and Artaban located in the Southeast Necropolis. The area had also been militarized between 2012 and 2013 with additional embankments and berms constructed within the necropolis. Recent DigitalGlobe satellite imagery from March 30, 2016 shows additional small looting pits within the necropolis since September 2, 2015. Funerary Temple S103 has also been destroyed since September 2015, apparently using explosives as only a few areas of exterior walls are still intact while the interior is reduced to rubble.



Figure 19. Southeast Necropolis with military berms built around the area. (DigitalGlobe; September 2, 2015)

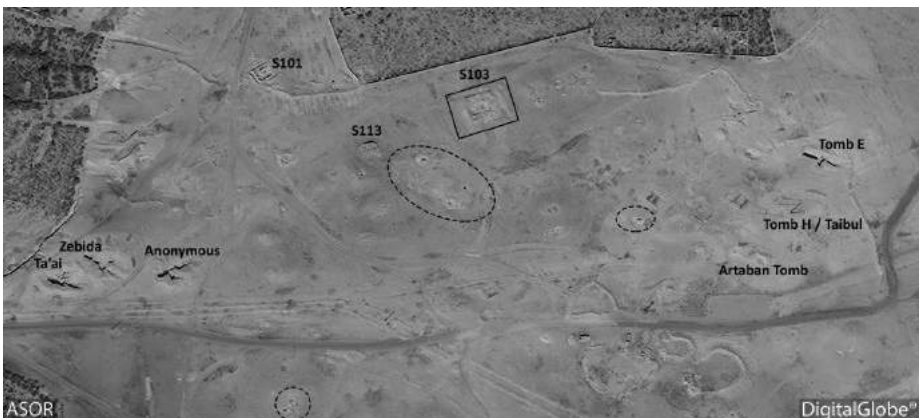
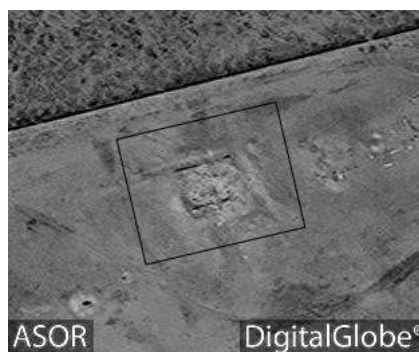


Figure 20. Southeast Necropolis with illegal excavation areas highlighted with dotted ovals and the destroyed Funerary Temple S103 outlined. (DigitalGlobe; March 30, 2016)



Figures 21-22. Funerary Temple S103. Left, No visible damage to Funerary Temple S103 (DigitalGlobe; September 2, 2015), Right: After destruction (DigitalGlobe; March 30, 2016)

<sup>53</sup> For additional information on the previous reports of illegal excavation and theft see [ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 14-0023 in Weekly Report 4](#); [SHI 14-0073 in Weekly Report 13](#); [SHI 14-0086 in Weekly Report 16-17](#); [SHI 15-0058 in Weekly Report 34](#).



**Qalaat Shirkuh** — Russia 24 published a drone video of the exterior of Qalaat Shirkuh on March 25, 2016<sup>54</sup> and Syrian News Channel published a video of SARG soldiers at the fortress on March 26.<sup>55</sup> Qalaat Shirkuh appears largely intact, although we have identified clear evidence of damage from airstrikes and other explosives to the fortification's curtain walls and interior, and there are several places where the battlements at the top of the walls have partially collapsed. ISIL allegedly detonated explosives around the main entrance of the fortress after abandoning the site, completely destroying the entranceway staircase.<sup>56</sup> DGAM photos indicate the northeastern curtain wall has suffered a major collapse.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 23. Eastern side of Qalaat Shirkuh (DGAM; undated photo)



Figure 24. Airstrike close to Qalaat Shirkuh (Qasioun News; March 26, 2016)



Figure 25. Airstrike damage to western walls of Qalaat Shirkuh (Valery Sharifulin/TASS; March 28, 2016)



Figure 26. Collapse of a portion of northeastern wall (CNN; March 27, 2016)

<sup>54</sup> [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x403jpk\\_drone-footage-shows-ongoing-battle-for-palmyra\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x403jpk_drone-footage-shows-ongoing-battle-for-palmyra_news)

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ms3KtTurcak>

<sup>56</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20160327133431/http://sana.sy/en/?p=72903>

<sup>57</sup> <http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1962>

**Temple of Bel** — In February 2016 SNHR reported that the temple had been struck by SARG airstrikes.<sup>58</sup> The Russia 24 drone video confirms the complete destruction of the *cella* of the Temple of Bel on August 30, 2015 by ISIL.<sup>59</sup> Several columns on the south side of the temple *temenos* appear to have collapsed since the destruction of the *cella*. The modern wall on the west side of the *temenos* to the right of the temple's monumental gateway has partially collapsed.<sup>60</sup> An image provided by Maher Al Mounes shows graffiti within the temple complex.<sup>61</sup> No new damage is seen in recent DigitalGlobe imagery.



Figure 27: The *cella* of the Temple of Bel before its destruction (DGAM; January 15, 2015)



Figure 28: The gateway of the Temple of Bel *cella*, surrounded by rubble (DGAM; March 30, 2016)



Figure 29. Rubble of the *cella* with graffiti (Maher Al Mounes/AFP/Yahoo; March 27, 2016)



Figure 30. The collapse of section of western wall of Temple of Bel compound (DGAM; March 27, 2016)



Figures 31-32. Satellite imagery of the Temple of Bel. Left: No visible damage (DigitalGlobe; June 26, 2015), Right: Visible damage (DigitalGlobe; September 2, 2015)

<sup>58</sup> <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/02/11/18241/>; ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 16-0026 in Weekly Report 79-80

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w>

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1955>

<sup>61</sup> <http://finance.yahoo.com/photos/graffiti-stone-near-remains-entrance-iconic-temple-bel-photo-195612346.html>; <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/205719-syria-troops-press-advance-after-blow-to-is-in-palmyra>

**Baalshamin Temple** — No new information has been released at the time of publication. ASOR CHI will continue to monitor the situation. Recent DigitalGlobe imagery from March 30, 2016 shows no change.



Figure 33. Baalshamin Temple before its destruction (DGAM; August 24, 2015)



Figure 34. Baalshamin Temple after ISIL militants detonated explosives in the structure on August 23, 2015 (DGAM; August 24, 2015)



Figures 35-36. Satellite imagery of the Baalshamin Temple. Left: with no visible damage (DigitalGlobe; June 26, 2015), Right: Visible damage (DigitalGlobe: August 27, 2015)



**Tetrapylon** — The Russia 24 and AP drone videos include footage of the Tetrapylon.<sup>62</sup> Photographers Maher Al Mounes and Valery Sharifulin also provided images of the monument.<sup>63</sup> No damage is readily apparent at this time.



Figure 37. The Tetrapylon facing east (DGAM; January 15, 2013)



Figure 38. The Tetrapylon facing west (Valery Sharifulin/TASS; March 28, 2016)

**Theater** — The Russia 24 and AP drone videos include footage of the Theater.<sup>64</sup> Images published by photographers Maher Al Mounes and Valery Sharifulin show a moderate amount of vegetation overgrowth on the Theater seats, orchestra, and stage.<sup>65</sup> No major new damage is apparent.<sup>66</sup> ISIL previously executed SARG soldiers in the Theater in May 2015 and released a propaganda video later in July 2015.<sup>67</sup>



Figure 39. The Roman Theater (Michael Danti; 2010)



Figure 40. The Theater suffers from vegetation overgrowth and was used by ISIL to stage executions (Valery Sharifulin/TASS; March 28, 2016)

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y53thid5DqQ&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/general-view-taken-on-march-27-2016-shows-part-of-the-news-photo/517773934> ; <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/ruins-in-the-ancient-city-of-palmyra-a-unesco-world-news-photo/517857878>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y53thid5DqQ>

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/general-view-taken-on-march-27-2016-shows-the-theatre-in-news-photo/517773942> ; <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/view-of-the-roman-theatre-in-the-ancient-city-of-palmyra-a-news-photo/517858020>

<sup>66</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 16-0026** in **Weekly Report 79-80**

<sup>67</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/07/04/ISIS-teens-execute-25-soldiers-in-Syria-s-Palmyra.html>

**Agora** — On March 25, 2016 the news agency Russia 24 released a video taken by drone of the archaeological site of Palmyra.<sup>68</sup> The video shows the present state of several of the main monuments of the western section of ancient Palmyra, including the Agora. No major damage is apparent.



Figure 41. The Agora via satellite imagery (DigitalGlobe; March 1, 2015)



Figure 42. Drone footage of the Agora (facing north) (Russia 24; March 25, 2016)

**Baths of Diocletian** — The Russia 24 drone video shows the present state of several of the main monuments of the western section of ancient Palmyra, including the Baths of Diocletian.<sup>69</sup> No major damage is apparent, though a DGAM photo shows some vegetation overgrowth at the site.<sup>70</sup>



Figure 43. Entrance to Baths of Diocletian (facing northwest) (Michael Danti; 2010)



Figure 44. Baths of Diocletian (facing southwest) (DGAM; March 20, 2016)

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w>

<sup>70</sup> <http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1962>

**Decumanus** — Drone footage published on March 25<sup>71</sup> by Russia 24 and March 27, 2016<sup>72</sup> by the Associated Press shows a large amount of debris on the Decumanus, probably from the collapse of the columns and entablature of the colonnade. This is confirmed by DGAM photos published March 30, 2016, which also show vegetation overgrowth.<sup>73</sup>



Figure 45. Colonnaded Decumanus (facing west) (Michael Danti; 2010)



Figure 46. Vegetation overgrowth and other minor damage to Decumanus (Valery Sharifulin/TASS; March 28, 2016)

**Funerary Temple** — Drone footage published by the Associated Press on March 27, 2016 indicates there is no damage to the Funerary Temple.<sup>74</sup>



Figure 47. Funerary Temple (facing northeast) (Wikimedia Commons; October 5, 2007)



Figure 48. Drone footage of the Funerary Temple (facing north) (Associated Press; March 27, 2016)

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y53thid5DqQ&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>73</sup> <http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1962>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y53thid5DqQ&feature=youtu.be>



**Senate** — The Russia 24 drone video includes footage of the Senate.<sup>75</sup> On March 27, 2016 photographer Maher Al Mounes published images of the Senate. No major damage is apparent, although there is some vegetation overgrowth.<sup>76</sup>



Figure 49. Senate building (facing west) (Roberto Piperno; July 2011)



Figure 50. Drone footage of Senate (facing northwest, bottom right) (Russia 24; March 25; 2016)

**Tariff Court** — The Russia 24 drone video includes footage of the Tariff Court.<sup>77</sup> No damage is apparent.

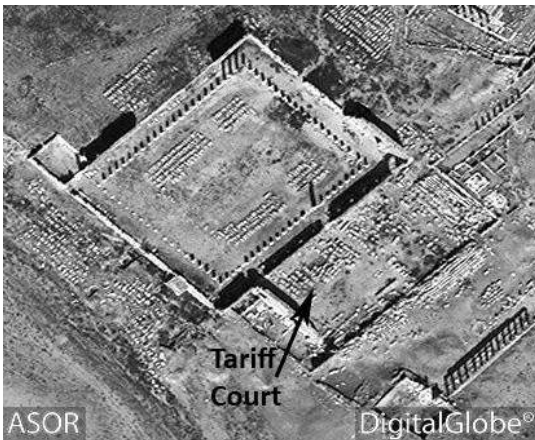


Figure 51. The Tariff Court via satellite imagery (DigitalGlobe; March 1, 2015)



Figure 52. Drone footage of the Tariff House (facing north) (Russia 24; March 25; 2016)

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w>

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/general-view-taken-on-march-27-2016-shows-part-of-the-news-photo/517773930>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w>

**Temple of Nabu** — The Russia 24 drone video includes footage of the Temple of Nabu. No damage is apparent.<sup>78</sup>



Figure 53. The Temple of Nabu via satellite imagery (DigitalGlobe; September 19, 2009)



Figure 54. Drone footage of Temple of Nabu (facing northeast, far right) (Russia 24; March 25; 2016)

**Camp of Diocletian** - RT reports claiming that the Camp was razed to the ground are incorrect.<sup>79</sup> DigitalGlobe satellite imagery dating to March 30, 2016 shows no visible change in status to the area.



Figures 55-56. Satellite imagery of the Camp of Diocletian. Left: No visible damage (DigitalGlobe; September 2, 2015), Right: No status change (DigitalGlobe; March 30, 2016)

These findings add to a growing list of damage to Palmyra. Over the course of the war the Palmyra Museum, eight mosques, and Islamic cemetery, a church, two Shia shrines, the Baalshamin Temple, the Temple to Bel, the Triumphal Arch, Qalaat Shirkuh, Funerary Temple S103, and twelve Tower Tombs have all been damaged or destroyed. Undoubtedly more damage will be uncovered as preservation experts assess the site in the future.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/zFHclm9F41w>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/337381-palmyra-liberated-first-photos/>



## Preliminary Assessment of the Museum and Its Collection

On March 27, 2016 Russia Today released video footage of the interior of the Palmyra Museum after the area was captured by SARG and pro-regime allies.<sup>80</sup> The video and subsequent photographs released by other media outlets show that the Palmyra Museum suffered heavy damage since ISIL's takeover of the city.

ISIL militants posted photographs of the site and a visitor center in a propaganda piece released on May 28, 2015 that allegedly showed the museum unharmed.<sup>81</sup> However, since ISIL took control of the area, the Palmyra Museum has been hit by airstrikes on multiple occasions.<sup>82</sup> ASOR CHI sources report that the Palmyra Museum had been hit by mortar shells as ISIL militants took control of Palmyra.<sup>83</sup> No photographs of the interior of the museum were available until now.



Figures 57-58. Temple of Bel Guest house (labeled as the “Welcome Center”) under ISIL control (ISIL propaganda; May 27, 2015)



Figures 59-60. Museum of Palmyra exterior damage following airstrike (DGAM; July 29, 2015)

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q16IRoWln9o> ;

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.net/photo/72049728-637f-4e03-b97c-65e107219785> (The photographs provided are likely a guest house behind the Temple of Bel.)

<sup>82</sup> For additional information regarding damage to the Palmyra Museum, see: **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0086 in Weekly Report 41**; **SHI 15-0086 in Weekly Report 42-43**; **SHI 15-0114 in Weekly Report 51-52**, **SHI 15-0116 in Weekly Report 53-54**.

<sup>83</sup> **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0086 in Weekly Report 41** (mid-May 2015); **SHI 15-0114 in Weekly Report 41** (mid-July 2015); **SHI 15-0116 in Weekly Report 42-43** (early-August 2015); <https://twitter.com/PalmyraPioneer/status/664217837838458881/photo/1> (November 2015).





Figures 61-62. Exterior damage to museum following expulsion of ISIL (posted by DGAM; March 28, 2016)



Figure 63. Damage inside gallery (posted by DGAM; March 28, 2016)



Figure 64. Damage inside gallery (Sputnik; March 28, 2016)

These recent photographs indicate that a substantial amount of the damage, particularly to the structure of the building, is a result of heavy and light weaponry, and some damage to the museum objects is the result of iconoclastic vandalism. Several damaged museum artifacts show indications of intentional defacement. This evidence strongly suggests ISIL militants engaged in iconoclastic activity while controlling the museum. The group has engaged in similar iconoclasm in other areas it has seized, including in the Mosul Museum, but no propagandistic media depicting an attack on the Palmyra Museum have been publicly released at the time of publication.



Figures 65-66. Left: Funerary Monument for a Priest from the Tower Tombs seen in 2008 (SANA/ALAMY/Reuters, Published by WSJ; March 29, 2016), Right: Funerary Monument for a Priest in 2016 (SANA/ALAMY/Reuters, Published by WSJ; March 29, 2016)



Figures 67-68. Left: Funerary Monument in 2007 (Brian McMorrow/WSJ Published March 29, 2016), Right, Funerary Monument in 2016 (Sputnik Media; March 28, 2016)

The **Statue of Athena** appears in images shared via online media sources. The head of the statue has been removed as has the right raised arm. The exact cause of the damage remains unknown but two scenarios seem likely. The first is that ISIL militants intentionally removed the head of the statue as well as the arm in an act of iconoclasm. The second scenario is that fallen ceiling panels, seen in additional photographs and video footage of the site, and likely caused by some sort of explosion, struck the statue and caused the damage to the head and arm. ASOR CHI will continue to investigate the damage to the statue of Athena.



Figures 69-70. Left: The statue of Athena prior to damage (Livius.org; Date Unknown), Right: The statue as it stands today (BBC, March 31, 2016)



Another well-known sculpture located at the Palmyra Museum is the **Lion of al-Lāt**. The lion was reported to have been destroyed by ISIL in July 2015.<sup>84</sup> Recent photographs show that the al-Lāt Lion was not destroyed but that it had been significantly damaged.<sup>85</sup> As the Lion of al-Lāt once stood in a pre-Arab/pre-Islamic temple dedicated to the goddess known as al-Lāt, its imagery is seen as idolatrous to ISIL. DGAM Director Maamoun Abdulkarim reported that prior to ISIL's capture of Palmyra, the Lion of al-Lāt had been "encased...inside a large metal box" for safekeeping as the object was too heavy to be moved.<sup>86</sup> However, the metal box was later pried open by ISIL militants and the lion inside was then intentionally damaged,<sup>87</sup> and it appears that the sculpture was forcefully toppled.



Figures 71-72. Left: The Lion of al-Lāt in 2010 (Michael Danti; 2010). Right: ISIL-inflicted damage to the Lion of al-Lāt (DGAM; March 28, 2016)

There are still a number of unanswered questions regarding the objects reportedly removed from the museum prior to the ISIL takeover of Palmyra. Prior to ISIL's takeover of the city of Palmyra, there were reports that Syrian officials had previously removed hundreds of artifacts from the museum and delivered them to an unknown location.<sup>88</sup> As ISIL entered the area in May 2015, DGAM officials declared that the office was "transferring [sic] the museum objects to more secure places,"<sup>89</sup> and that "hundreds of Palmyrene statues and museum objects have been transferred out from Palmyra to safe locations outside the city."<sup>90</sup> DGAM Director Maamoun Abdulkarim stated that "most" objects in the museum had been removed with the exception of many large items that were too heavy to move.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>84</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1725> ; <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/02/isil-militants-destroy-palmyra-stone-lion-al-lat>

<sup>85</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1957>

<sup>86</sup> <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/07/150710-palmyra-syria-isis-looting-museum-archaeology/>

<sup>87</sup> <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/07/150710-palmyra-syria-isis-looting-museum-archaeology/>

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/world/middleeast/ancient-ruins-at-palmyra-are-endangered-by-isis-advance-in-syria.html> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jFwtq97dIA>

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1696>

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1704>

<sup>91</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/isil-enters-palmyra-museum-150523124654003.html>

Activists added that “officials in Palmyra had removed the smaller artifacts from the state antiquities museum.”<sup>92</sup> Days later on May 23, 2015 this same activist reported that “militants smashed a statue in the museum's foyer — a replica that depicts ancient residents of Palmyra,” but Maamoun Abdulkarim, the head of the Antiquities and Museums Department in Damascus, countered that ISIL militants had entered the museum on Friday afternoon, locked the doors, and left their own guards in the premises. Abdulkarim stated the the museum artifacts had been previously moved to safety.<sup>93</sup>



Figures 73-74. Left: The prehistory diorama before (Michael Danti; 2010), Right: Vandalism of the exhibit (DGAM; March 28, 2016)

In a later interview in August 2015 with CNN, Abdulkarim offered the number of approximately 4,000 busts and statues that had been evacuated from Palmyra.<sup>94</sup> Shortly after the recapturing of the city of Palmyra, the Associated Press put the number of previously rescued artifacts at 400, again citing an interview with Abdulkarim.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, in a press conference on March 28, 2016 Maamoun Abdulkarim claim that the DGAM was “... working with 45 to 50 people inside the city in order to convince Daesh, with public pressure, not to destroy everything... Daesh saw that there would be a popular uprising against it if it destroyed everything. It didn't steal and it didn't destroy everything,” raising even more questions as to which, if any, artifacts benefited from this effort and the identity of these DGAM mediators.<sup>96</sup>

When the DGAM released photographs on March 28, 2016 from the Palmyra Museum, they made the following statement regarding the statues and artifacts in the museum: “[The DGAM] could evacuate (sic) about 400 statues or heads of statues, in addition to hundreds of exhibits at the museum, i.e. artifacts, transportable statues, storage boxes. The sudden invasion of terrorist militants of ISIS in May 2015 made it difficult to evacuate the larger statues and a few exhibited heads of statues fixed on the walls of the museum halls.”<sup>97</sup> It is unclear as to whether the DGAM is stating that it now intends to relocate these artifacts for restoration or the more likely scenario which is that they had already “evacuated” those 400 artifacts prior to ISIL’s entrance into the city.

To date, ASOR CHI has not been able to confirm the number of artifacts that were either removed, protected, or remained in the museum at the time of ISIL’s capture of Palmyra. ASOR CHI will continue to analyze the destruction to the Palmyra Museum in an attempt to confirm what artifacts remained in the museum at the time of ISIL’s takeover and which of those items have now been damaged.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>92</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/world/middleeast/ancient-ruins-at-palmyra-are-endangered-by-isis-advance-in-syria.html>

<sup>93</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/isis-enters-palmyra-museum-150523124654003.html>

<sup>94</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/19/middleeast/syria-antiquities-damascus/index.html>

<sup>95</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/syria-troops-recapture-ancient-city-palmyra-blow-37970886>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.yahoo.com/news/syrias-palmyra-restored-five-years-112751440.html>

<sup>97</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1957>

<sup>98</sup> For a more complete summary of the situation in the Palmyra Museum, please refer to the upcoming **Weekly Report 85-86**.

## Consequences of Retaking Palmyra

The capture of the city of Palmyra is a strategic victory for the Syrian regime.<sup>99</sup> Following the capture of the city, the Syrian army announced that they would use the city as a "a launchpad to expand military operations" against ISIL in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.<sup>100</sup> Palmyra's strategic location opens access to the ISIL-held northern town of as-Sukhnah and the southern town al-Qariatayn, likely the next objectives for the regime.<sup>101</sup> In addition the city of Palmyra lies on the road between the capital of Damascus and the city of Deir ez-Zor, where SARG has been battling ISIL militants.<sup>102</sup> The Palmyra Airport, now under SARG control, may again provide a new airbase for both SARG and Russian air campaigns against ISIL in Deir ez-Zor. As of March 28, 2016 the airport was reported to be "open to air traffic."<sup>103</sup>

The capture of Palmyra may be considered to be the first definitive victory for the Assad regime in the five-year conflict, and President Assad has cited this event as proof to the international community that his forces are able to combat terrorism in Syria.<sup>104</sup> Prior to the Russian intervention in Syria, the Assad regime had lost the majority of its territory, and SARG appeared to be on the verge of collapse.<sup>105</sup> Assad has now been able to reach out to the international community for congratulations on this victory and for assistance in rebuilding the ancient site of Palmyra.<sup>106</sup> Russia has also capitalized on this victory, restating its key role in the operation and publicly congratulating President Assad,<sup>107</sup> as well as offering its full assistance in rebuilding Palmyra,<sup>108</sup> with President Putin going so far as to discuss Russia's involvement in protecting the site with UNESCO Irina Bokova.<sup>109</sup>

Residents of Palmyra and critics of the Assad regime, however, may remember how in May 2015, ISIL militants entered the city relatively unchallenged by SARG forces.<sup>110</sup> As the group moved into Palmyra, the Assad regime chose to maintain its focus on opposition-held areas.<sup>111</sup> Prior to ISIL's takeover of the city, many Syrians were imprisoned and tortured by regime forces during the first uprisings in Syria. The city of Palmyra was also well known among Syrians for its notorious Tadmor Prison, where "thousands of critics" had been held in the four decades of combined rule of the current president and his late father, Hafez al-Assad.<sup>112</sup> The prison was later ransacked and destroyed by ISIL militants shortly after they captured the city.<sup>113</sup> A first-hand account describes the swift crackdown of protests by police officers that

---

<sup>99</sup> <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/03/russian-syrian-iranian-coalition-seizes.html>

<sup>100</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-palmyra-idUSKCN0WT04R> ; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0WW1Y0>

<sup>101</sup> <http://dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2016/Mar-29/344546-syria-govt-forces-advance-on-isis-town-near-palmyra-activists.ashx>

<sup>102</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35906568>

<sup>103</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-army-palmyra-launchpad-isil-160328113142725.html>

<sup>104</sup> <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/03/russian-syrian-iranian-coalition-seizes.html>

<sup>105</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/correction-islamic-state-story/2016/03/29/5cf319e6-f58c-11e5-958d-d038dac6e718\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/correction-islamic-state-story/2016/03/29/5cf319e6-f58c-11e5-958d-d038dac6e718_story.html) ; <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/03/27/Heavy-Russian-airstrikes-as-Syrian-army-fights-ISIS-in-Palmyra.html> ; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0WW1Y0> ; <http://www.wsj.com/articles/syrian-government-regains-control-of-palmyra-from-islamic-state-1459096448>

<sup>106</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/04/01/Experts-Palmyra-s-dynamited-temple-can-be-restored.html>

<sup>107</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-putin-assad-idUSKCN0WT0HA> ; <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/30/putins-attack-helicopters-and-mercenaries-are-winning-the-war-for-assad/>

<sup>108</sup> <http://tass.ru/en/society/851691> ; <https://www.rt.com/news/337497-palmyra-damage-restoration-challenge/> ; [http://rbth.com/multimedia/history/2015/12/16/state-hermitage-gathering-materials-to-help-reconstruct-palmyra\\_551503](http://rbth.com/multimedia/history/2015/12/16/state-hermitage-gathering-materials-to-help-reconstruct-palmyra_551503)

<sup>109</sup> [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/unesco\\_director\\_general\\_and\\_president\\_vladimir\\_putin\\_discuss\\_the\\_protection\\_of\\_palmyras\\_cultural\\_heritage/#.VwMGIsd4hFJ](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/unesco_director_general_and_president_vladimir_putin_discuss_the_protection_of_palmyras_cultural_heritage/#.VwMGIsd4hFJ)

<sup>110</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jFwtq97dIA> ; <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/islamic-state-group-fighters-seize-ancient-town-in-syria/>

<sup>111</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35906568>

<sup>112</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-palmyra-civil-war-unesco-world-heritage-site-assad-a6948706.html> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ErkZ9axHxo>

<sup>113</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/isil-syria-palmyra-prison-150530233411592.html>



killed tens of the city's residents.<sup>114</sup> In addition, reports surfaced of SARG forces causing damage to the archaeological site through militarization at least two years before ISIL entered the city.<sup>115</sup> Photographs also circulated online of SARG forces stealing artifacts from the archaeological site and the museum.<sup>116</sup> This prior record raises concerns regarding SARG's future treatment of Palmyra's residents and its stewardship over the area's cultural assets, particularly in light of its eagerness to reopen the site to the public as soon as possible.<sup>117</sup> However, the regime's victory in Palmyra now places it in a more comfortable position for the next round of peace talks scheduled to begin in early April, 2016 in Geneva.<sup>118</sup> If SARG forces are able to capture more ground in the coming weeks from their new base in Palmyra then their ability to negotiate becomes even stronger.

In contrast, ISIL has largely been on the defensive in Syria over the last several months, Palmyra being only one of the key areas that ISIL has lost in Syria. In February 2016, ISIL lost the town of Shaddadi as well as over 2,000 square kilometers to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) backed by US-led coalition airstrikes.<sup>119</sup> Following the intervention by Russia, SARG forces have consolidated their hold on much of Damascus. Kurdish People's Protection Units (PKK) have pushed ISIL militants out of much of northern Aleppo Governorate as well as portions of eastern Hasakah Governorate.<sup>120</sup> ISIL also continues to lose ground in Iraq, having been driven out of Sinjar, Ramadi, and surrounding areas. As of January 2016, the group had reportedly lost 40% of the territory it once held in Iraq.<sup>121</sup> As several of ISIL's key leaders have reportedly been killed by US-coalition airstrikes and US special forces over the past month, the loss of Palmyra may also prove to be a psychological blow for the group, particularly when added to major financial setbacks resulting in precipitous drops in pay (up to 50%) for ISIL militants. Already reports have surfaced from the ISIL-strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa of executions by the group of their own members charged with desertion.<sup>122</sup> Offensive operations are now underway to retake the city of Mosul, and ISIL has already lost several villages en route to their stronghold.<sup>123</sup> Should ISIL continue to lose territory in Iraq and Syria, its ability to recruit and maintain members will be compromised.

---

<sup>114</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/im-from-palmyra-and-i-can-tell-you-after-what-ive-seen-that-the-assad-regime-is-no-better-than-isis-a6961681.html>

<sup>115</sup> <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/dont-pretend-assad-will-save-palmyra-when-he-has-destroyed-rest-syria-1552279> ; <https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2015/07/03/palmyra-looting-rebels-regime-islamic-state-propaganda/>

<sup>116</sup> <https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2015/07/03/palmyra-looting-rebels-regime-islamic-state-propaganda/> ; <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/10/27/how-the-west-buys-conflict-antiquities-from-iraq-and-syria-and-funds-terror/> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yq1G9hUaPs> ; <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/about-us/who-we-are/director-general/news-and-activities/photo-galleries/events/photo-gallery-syria-palmyra/>

<sup>117</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?id=314&id=1950>

<sup>118</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-buoyed-by-a-win-over-the-islamic-state-dismisses-oppositions-demands/2016/03/30/bf6e81f6-f68a-11e5-958d-d038dac6e718\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-buoyed-by-a-win-over-the-islamic-state-dismisses-oppositions-demands/2016/03/30/bf6e81f6-f68a-11e5-958d-d038dac6e718_story.html)

<sup>119</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/01/world/middleeast/after-gains-against-isis-american-focus-is-turning-to-mosul.html>

<sup>120</sup> <http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-sanctuary-map-march-31-2016>

<sup>121</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/03/20/ISIS-suffers-blows-in-Iraq-Syria-still-fighting.html> ; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-sanctuary-map-march-31-2016>

<sup>122</sup> <http://aranews.net/2016/03/isis-removes-local-leaders-power-iraqi-mosul/>

<sup>123</sup> <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/4ff55a9a1e3942a8af9799bb47f11f13/iraq-says-its-launched-offensive-recapture-held-mosul> ; <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/03/24/Iraqi-army-starts-offensive-in-region-around-Mosul.html> ; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35889937> ; <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/24032016> ; <http://post.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iraq-situation-report-march-22-28-2016>

## **Conclusion: Palmyra Transformed**

The capture of Palmyra from ISIL militants does not necessarily safeguard the region's heritage. Palmyra suffered significant damage while previously under SARG military control, prior to ISIL's capture of the site in May 2015, and subsequently was subject to an extended aerial bombardment campaign by SARG and Russian forces to expel ISIL militants. The World Heritage Site and surrounding area are still occupied by armed forces actively engaged in combat, which continues to pose a significant threat to the region's heritage.

Over the longer term, the greatest threat to Palmyra is mismanagement stemming from prioritizing immediate and highly visible results, ultimately grounded in larger political objectives, and not guided by conservation best practices, community-based heritage management, and sustainability. The immediate (and politically expedient) reconstruction of the demolished Baalshamin Temple and Temple of Bel is currently an active topic of discussion amongst some scholars, politicians, and pundits. This not only poses an unfeasible and misguided heritage management solution, but it also fails to address the greatest threats to ancient Palmyra, let alone the needs of the modern community. The negative impacts of aerial bombardment, heavy weaponry, and light weaponry cannot easily be seen from a distance or may result in sub-surface, invisible structural damage. While it is tempting to immediately respond to the most glaring damage, a better use of resources would involve the implementation of a coherent emergency response plan and triage that prioritizes the intact monuments in need of repair and maintenance. The full extent of the damage will not be known until heritage experts are allowed full access to the site to completed a thorough and detailed assessment.

By contrast, at this point very little discussion has been devoted to what will become of modern Palmyra. The Syrian regime is eager to reopen the site to the visitors and residents, but this begs the question to what end if there are no residents to enjoy the site once again. Instead the conversation of reconstruction should focus on modern Palmyra. The modern city's population has been forced to flee and continues to be traumatized by the war. The most important priority is to assist with the rebuilding of housing, hospitals, houses of worship, schools, and other infrastructure, so that these civilians have an opportunity to eventually return to their community.

Finally, to the people of Palmyra the ancient site will be remembered as a place where their neighbors and family members were executed and buried. The restoration of ancient and modern Palmyra presents an opportunity to heal the local community, and so current and future managers are challenged to consider how to address Palmyra's difficult and painful modern associations. Palmyra remains, but its legacy is forever transformed.