

The Sayeda Zainab mosque and shrine is increasingly vulnerable in the ongoing conflict in Syria. It has been frequently targeted by rebel groups seeking not just to destroy the site but also to increase sectarian tensions. Located in the suburbs of Damascus in Syria, it is one of the holiest Shi'a sites in Syria and is the burial place of Sayeda Zainab, the Prophet Mohammed's granddaughter.

#### The Sayeda Zainab Mosque and Shrine

- The Sayeda Zainab mosque and shrine is located in the town of Sayeda Zainab, in the southern suburbs of Damascus, along the main road running from Damascus to the international airport. The town of Sayeda Zainab, while significant for Syria's Shi'a population, has a significant Sunni population.
- For most Muslims, the mosque is the resting place of Sayeda Zainab bint Ali, daughter of the first Shi'a Imam Ali and granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed. She is a member of ahl al-bayt (the household of the Prophet Mohammed) and is revered as a figure of sacrifice, strength and piety, who remained loyal to Imam Hussein after the Battle of Karbala, despite being taken as a prisoner of war by Yazid's forces, alongside other members of the ahl al bayt, mainly women and children. The mosque is a destination of mass pilgrimage and, by 2008, up to one million pilgrims visited the shrine every year from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and the wider Middle East.<sup>2</sup> The current mosque is a key example of Islamic architecture; it has a dome made of pure gold which sits directly above Sayeda Zainab's tomb.<sup>1</sup>

#### Threats to the Sayeda Zainab Mosque

- On September 27, 2008, seventeen people were killed in a car bomb explosion (fitted with 200k of explosives) near to the Sayeda Zainab shrine. It occurred near a security complex close to an intersection that leads to the shrine which was 8km (5 miles) away. At the time this was the single deadliest attack on Damascus since 13 March 1986.<sup>3 4 5</sup>
- Syria has been experiencing unrest since March 2011, with many sites of cultural and religious heritage being damaged by ongoing fighting and deliberate targeting, as well as thousands of civilian deaths and an enormous refugee exodus from the country. Rebels have often stated that as well as driving the Shi'a out of Syria they want to destroy the Sayeda Zainab mosque and shrine.<sup>6</sup> The religious significance of the shrine has galvanised Shia Muslims to form militias to defend it, such as the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade,<sup>7</sup> which consists of Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Iranian members. Iraqi recruits have also travelled to the shrine to defend it, as have members of the group Hezbollah.<sup>8</sup>
- On June 14, 2012, the shrine's windows shattered and fans fell from the ceiling after a suicide car bomb attack exploded in a car park used by shrine-goers. In July 2012 the town of Sayeda Zainab was taken back by the government from the rebels.<sup>9</sup>
- On July 19, 2013, the Sayeda Zainab shrine was targeted again in a mortar attack by rebel forces, which was condemned by, among others, the Pakistani President, who expressed concern that such actions fan sectarian strife.<sup>10 11 12 13 14</sup> The mortar attacks caused minor damage to the outside of the mosque structure.<sup>15</sup>
- On August 8, 2013 another mortar attack targeting the mosque occurred in which five people were killed towards the end of the holy month of Ramadan.<sup>16</sup>
- In April 2014 the New York Times reported that a minaret had recently been chipped by a shell, and that in March 2014 an unexploded shell had been thrown into the courtyard during prayers.<sup>17</sup>

#### Threats to Other Shi'a Muslim Sites

- Many other mosques, churches and centres of holy and religious significance have been affected by the conflict, either being caught in the crossfire of battle or deliberately targeted. In late March 2014 the Shi'a shrines of Ammar bin Yassir and Owais al Qarni were destroyed.<sup>18</sup> Ammar bin Yassir and Uwais al-Qarani are both revered by Shia and Sunnis alike. On 2 May 2013, the mausoleum of Hujr Bin Adi al-Kindi was attacked and his remains exhumed by an extremist group.<sup>19</sup> Al-Kindi was a revered companion of the Prophet Mohammed and Imam Ali. In February 2013, the shrine of Hazrat Sakina was partly damaged after a group of terrorists stormed the shrine to take cover from attack.<sup>20</sup> In December 2012, the Shia Mosque in the town of Idlib was burnt down by militant groups<sup>21 22</sup>.

*All six of Syria's UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been placed on the World Heritage at Risk list due to damage sustained in the ongoing conflict.*

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