

Submission to study on intentional destruction of cultural heritage

Response to call from UNOHCHR  
Proposal submitted by

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### I. INTRODUCTION

1. The following Submission supports a body of research that analyses both the ancient and modern history of Syrian Jewry, cultural heritage and its reception today. I offer a brief, 5-point proposal and enclose an academic CV with a list of relevant publications. I will happily provide forthcoming publications to UNOHCHR.
2. Polina Levina from UNOHCHR did indeed contact me in December of 2014 as part of a Syrian initiative.

### II. SUMMARY

3. Once home to a thriving Jewish population of approximately 30,000, Syria's Jews today number less than 20 individuals. Those that remain are elderly and childless. Within the next decade there will be no Jews in the Syrian Arab Republic and the remnants of this extraordinary community, which has existed for over 2000 years, will be lost.
4. In both the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, Jewish communal life reflected the diverse make-up of Jewish immigrants from Iraq, Imperial Spain, Northern Italy and

those of a local and ancient provenance. This is indicated in the names of synagogues devoted to specific communities such as Damascus' *Franji* Synagogue, named after the *Francos* or European traders from Italy, or the *Al-Raqy* synagogue for those Jews from Iraq.

5. Within the next few years the tangible remains of this heritage, approximately thirty existent monuments and cemeteries, will necessarily fall to others for their upkeep; that is, in the most optimistic of scenarios. Under the *Patrimoine syrien* such a situation was without precedent before the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The future remains unknown.
6. The destruction of tangible Jewish heritage bears directly upon intangible heritage, the memory of a Jewish past, as a multi-ethnic (and historically-tolerant) Syrian society fades into oblivion. This is further exacerbated by the complexity of Syrian history. In a highly censorious country which was at war with Israel from the latter's inception, Jewish culture was, at best, invisible to the educated populace under both the Assad regimes.
7. Ironically, as part of the *Patrimoine Syrien* and the autonomy bestowed upon the local Jewish community, the relevant authorities such as the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) was less informed about Jewish cultural heritage as might otherwise be the case.
8. Yet in the course of the current conflict, Jewish sites have, somewhat perversely, acquired a prominence they did not have before the hostilities (see: <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/jewish-sites-in-syria-are-the-latest-front-in-propaganda-war.premium-1.514481> .) Interest parties, which have included all the rival factions, have sought to implicate the other in the destruction of great sites such as the synagogue at Jobar. No other site, with the exception of the recent events at Palmyra, has acquired such a contentious place in the rhetoric of war. (See: "*Jobar- a case study*", below.)

9. The trauma of this war looms large. The psychological scars run deep. As part of the process of restitution and rehabilitation of a nation and its history, it is necessary to ensure that all minority voices are heard and not erased. In the case of Syrian Jewry, it is critical to document both the tangible heritage – to survey sites associated with Jewish expression in Syria – and to record the affection and or antipathy of its memory as manifest within a Syrian Jewish diaspora, other Jewish and faith-based communities and the popular press at large.

### III. BACKGROUND SURVEY

10. The land of Syria was where Judaism once flourished and where Judaism found its radical voice: it was here where the former Saul of Tarsus, later St. Paul of the New Testament's *Acts of the Apostles* and *Epistles*, fled along Straight Street – today's Madhat Pasha - in Damascus. It was also in Syria, in the remote border town of Dura Europos on the Euphrates River that the question of a Jewish art in the face of (perceived) aniconism, emerged.
11. The synagogue of Dura Europos is one of the oldest synagogues in the world and the only synagogue to display a rich tapestry of wall paintings. The murals may be found in the National Museum in Damascus, where the Hall of the Assembly has been reconstructed. However the synagogue's "foot print" and exterior atrium is now within IS-controlled territory. Recent reports indicate extensive looting and damage to the site of Dura Europos (<http://www.aaas.org/page/ancient-history-modern-destruction-assessing-status-syria-s-tentative-world-heritage-sites-7#Dura-Europos>). The site awaits World Heritage status (Tentative listing 1999).
12. The same tragedy, albeit by different offenders, applies to the site of Apamea. It too awaits full accreditation as a World Heritage Monument. Its ancient synagogue is no longer discernible as are the two Byzantine churches built over the original site. Nonetheless Apamea remains one of the most extensively looted sites in all of Syria.

Yet its misfortune cannot be traced back to IS. On the contrary, the site is and has always been within Regime-held territory.

13. There are as yet no confirmed reports as to the fate of Aleppo's Jameliah Synagogue or of the city's Great Synagogue. There is photographic evidence of rebel troops within the latter complex but nothing more. The mediaeval synagogue of Tedef, 28 kilometers from Aleppo, is currently in IS-held territory. Despite extensive aerial campaigns in the past 3 years, there have been no reports about damage to the synagogue. This may be on account of the fact that the monument, previously and wrongly understood to be that of a mosque, is set within several metres of debris. Other than two Hebrew inscriptions, it is largely unintelligible as a site of Jewish worship. This applies to even the most tutored of eyes.

14. Recent reports from Damascus indicate that the unallocated and abandoned houses in the Jewish Quarter or *Harat al Yahud* are now occupied. These buildings, which were held in trust by the State in the course of migration from 1947, 1967 and the large-scale emigration in the 1990's, are now home to many of the internally displaced who seek refuge in the capital. (No information has been provided about whether this extends to the 19 synagogues within Damascus or relates purely to residential dwellings.) Paradoxically, this may have the benefit of ensuring the structures continue to exist (as a necessity) even if this results in potential planning violations and stipulations accorded to the city as part of its UNESCO inscription.

15. The Synagogue at Jobar, is discussed below.

#### IV CASE STUDY: JOBAR SYNAGOGUE

16. The synagogue of Jobar (hereafter *Jobar*), which has garnered unprecedented news coverage, is a particular tragedy to those within Syria and further afield. Alarming, the antiquities markets have capitalised on *Jobar's* predicament and this has resulted in an inflated market for antiquities of dubious provenance (See: <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/damascus-hide-and-see-synagogues-and-sothebys/> .)

17. The synagogue was dedicated to the prophet Elijah: the Hebrew *Eliyahu Ha-Navi* or *Arabic al-Khodr*, and venerated by both Muslims and Jews. The ancient shrine, which sat beneath the main synagogue hall, was the scene of pilgrimage for the infirmed in search of the miraculous.
18. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century *Jobar*, well removed from the main centre of Damascus' Jewish life, ceased to operate as a congregational synagogue. Hidden behind several doors and a courtyard it was, until recently, one of many sites facing oblivion. Today, and for all the wrong reasons, the same can no longer be said.
19. *Jobar*, located in one of the most contested battlefields in the recent conflict, served the propagandist interests of the Assad regime and opposition; both defied the 1954 *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*. Both accused the other of the site's desecration and ultimate destruction on or around the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2014, that is, after *The Daily Beast* published four exclusive photographs which revealed the sheer scale of destruction. Questions remain as to the synagogue's last days, whether the artefacts will endure or whether they will reach the illegal antiquities market.
20. On 28 May 2014, three days after the initial reports of the aerial bombardment of the synagogue at *Jobar* (hereafter *Jobar*), the United Nations cultural agency announced that it would establish a Lebanese-based observatory "to monitor and access the state of Syria's cultural heritage" which the UN determined was "reaching the point of no return".
21. The decision followed from UNESCO's Paris conference of the same week, "Rallying the International Community to Safeguard Syria's Cultural Heritage", which was attended by more than 120 participants from 22 countries. Irina Bokova, the Directorate-General of UNESCO (the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Agency) addressed the damage to the synagogue. "The destruction of one of the oldest

synagogues in Syria is a new blow against its religious and cultural heritage,” she stated. “This synagogue bears witness to the cultural diversity of Syria’s history and the potential of peaceful coexistence among all communities in [Syria].” The synagogue also bore witness to a history of hatred which had seen the synagogue sacked during the Damascus Affair of 1840 and then as go-between in a Syria’s brutal civil war.

22. Jobar town had been the victim of an on-going assault. At some point before the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2014, artillery fire brought more than two-thirds of the synagogue structure based on the four photographs (of which two were close-ups and all taken from the same vantage point, 180 degrees in either direction). But *Jobar* was not inscribed as one of the six World Heritage Sites in Syria. Nor could it claim the veneer of protection as one of the thousands of monuments within the Old City of Damascus. It sat two kilometers outside the city in one of the most contested battlefields in the conflict to date and was footsteps away from where chemical weapons had been touted.

23. During the summer of 2013 and extending through the autumn there had been a very heavy campaign by the regime to strike the Jobar-Qaboun industrial area north of the Tora River. This was very much publicized in a series of Russian-dubbed videos released by the Syrian state’s news network. Yet this battlefield was still a distance away from the synagogue which was closer to the southern bypass: the large highway to the East of the town and heading north East and South West. It appears to be the case that any fighting beyond the Tora River, the de-facto front line, was unrelated to *Jobar’s* plight.

24. Whether *Jobar* fell on account of rebel occupation, collateral damage or a combination of both remains to be seen. Both parties, the opposition and the regime, defied the 1954 *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*. The former, had at some point, used the sacred site as a base. At the very least it had been occupied. (There is also evidence to show that some artefacts were removed at this time). At the other extreme, the regime had

targeted the synagogue. With every shell the synagogue garnered more news as it became drawn into war of weaponry and words.

25. *Jobar* first entered the discourse of war in March 2013 when rebel and regime alike capitalized on the responses which ensued. For a synagogue which was without a community and had, for the majority of individuals, fallen into oblivion, it was credited with a 2000 heritage and a peerage unsupported by textual evidence.
26. The synagogue has not been the subject of recent scholarly investigation unlike the synagogues of Dura Europos, Apamea or Aleppo's *Banadara* or Great Synagogue. Yet *Jobar* has had its admirers from famous Jewish itinerants such as Binyamin of Tudela to the English diarist Richard Pococke, who writing in 1745, likened the synagogue to a "Greek church" and intimated that such were its origins as perceived by the locals. (Given the fact that the synagogue follows a tripartite form akin to a basilica with side wings and a central nave, such a belief is not unreasonable to an English eye).
27. Two hundred years later in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> Century the collector and scholar David Solomon Sassoon swept through the synagogue's doors and recorded at least two inscriptions associated with the prophet Elijah, the namesake of *Jobar*, the *Eliahu Hanabi* synagogue. Today there is renewed interest in the synagogue as the perceived resting place of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century rabbinic sage Rabbi Samuel Elbaz-Abi-Hasira, of concern to Moroccan Jews.
28. That said, we do not even possess an up to date floor plan of the synagogue, bearing in mind that the synagogue complex has already ceded territory to the neighboring school. Such an exercise awaits and is hope that, when this can be conducted, the boundaries are not disputed.
29. For now, questions remain as to the synagogue's last days and whether the artefacts will endure or whether they will reach the illegal antiquities market. Equally for the more religiously inclined, there is the question of commemoration. Elijah is revered in all three Abrahamic faiths. The Catholic Church (the Carmelite order) celebrates a



feast day in July after the prophet. How, now, should we respond to the desecration of a site associated with Elijah and the destruction of a synagogue where memory and catastrophe are woven together?

## V. PROPOSAL

1. Reconciliation involves the results of educational and scientific endeavor to consider both the material history of Syrian Jewry and how it was understood by Jews and non-Jews alike.
2. First, there needs to be a comprehensive attempt to catalogue the Jewish sites. The last scholarly endeavor was in 1994 by the photo-journalist Robert Lyons. His survey remains incomplete. On two subsequent occasions members of the Syrian-Jewish community, with the support of the Assad regime and the American Sephardi Federation, conducted visits. The photographs have not been made available and there appears to be no intention to do so at any point in the future.
3. Photographic and video testimonies over the near 5 year period are helpful. They illustrate the consequences of abandonment and deleterious effects of the weather upon fragile structures, for example, as well progressive military engagement.
4. Where possible local accounts of the recent bombardment and atrocities need to support the above, particularly where there are allegations of deaths “in situ” (*Jobar, Jameliah*).
5. Ethnographic studies of how Jews and non-Jews react to desecration and preservation of Syrian cultural heritage, whether it is discrete (as some argue) or, as I maintain, a fully-fledged part of Syrian history, is also central to the debate. The above is vital for a post-war and reconstituted Syria. Only then can the Syrian stakeholders, be they a Syrian-Jewish diaspora in Brooklyn or a mixed Muslim and Christian population in the native land, serve to act as cultural-rights providers.

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