
Site of Palmyra (Syrian Arab Republic) No 23 Bis

1 Basic data

State Party

Syrian Arab Republic

Name of property

Site of Palmyra

Location

Province of Homs
Syrian Arab Republic

Inscription

1980

Brief description

An oasis in the Syrian desert, north-east of Damascus, Palmyra contains the monumental ruins of a great city that was once of the most important cultural centres of the ancient world. From the 1st to the 2nd century, the art and architecture of Palmyra, standing at the crossroads of several civilizations, married Graeco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

26 June 2017

2 Issues raised

Background

The Site of Palmyra was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1980 on the basis of criteria (i), (ii) and (iv). A retrospective Statement of Outstanding Universal Value was adopted by the World Heritage Committee in 2010 (Decision 34 COM 8E). Together with the other five World Heritage properties in Syria, the Site of Palmyra was included in the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2013 due to the dangers posed by continuing and severe conflicts since 2011 (Decision 37 COM 7B.57).

An updated map of the property boundary was provided by the State Party in 2016. It encloses a single area of 117.68ha that includes the main archaeological element; but excludes the necropolises and the remains of the Roman aqueduct which were situated outside the fortified walls. In 1980, the World Heritage Committee recommended that these should be included in the protected zone (CC-80/CONF.016/10). The property boundary coincided with the boundary of the archaeological park protected on the National Heritage List by decree in 1934.

At the time of the World Heritage inscription in 1980, no buffer zone was defined for this property. Although it was not presented to the World Heritage Committee for approval, a buffer zone was established in 2008 by the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums.

In 2016, the State Party submitted a proposal for the delineation of a buffer zone. The proposed buffer zone expanded and redefined the area as a cultural landscape, and aimed to provide protection of the setting of the property and important views, as well as identifying areas for research, education, tourism and recreation. 'Transitional zones' were also included around the archaeological site, oasis and the city. The total area of the proposed buffer zone was 225.66ha.

While welcoming the intentions to establish a buffer zone for this property, the World Heritage Committee (Decision 40 COM 8B.37) referred the proposed buffer zone back to the State Party in order to allow it to:

- provide greater clarity on the line of the proposed boundaries,*
- provide greater clarity on the protection offered by the various protective zones,*
- ensure that protection offered by the buffer zone in relation to the property encompasses not only visual parameters but recognises attributes that are related to Outstanding Universal Value such as palm-groves, Wāhat, underground water channels, Qanāts, quarries, remains of caravan routes and archaeological sites,*
- provide more details as to how the limits of urban development will be defined.*

Modification

This proposal was submitted after the deadline for the receipt of Minor Boundary Requests and has been evaluated by ICOMOS in response to exceptional circumstances.

Unlike the referred back 2016 proposal, the current proposal includes modifications to the property boundary itself, as well as the establishment of a large encircling buffer zone (in five zones with provisions for prohibited and permitted uses).

In relation to the property boundary, four new areas are proposed to be added, including:

- The museum area (0.6 km²), located between the archaeological site and the new town which includes the 1961 museum, constructed from Palmyra limestone and containing statues and objects excavated from the site;
- The south-eastern necropolises (0.1 km²), located in the east of the city close to the olive and palms oasis, consisting of Palmyrean graves (1st to 3rd centuries AD), burial grounds and other features, including the tombs of the Artaben, Zbaida, Pulla and Porfa families;
- The south-western necropolises (0.5 km²), consisting of several burial grounds, including the tombs of the three brothers (160AD), Malik (2nd century AD),

Mubarak (98 AD) and the Atantan family (3rd century AD);

- An adjacent area to the west of the previous property boundary (1.34 km²) which is not described in the material submitted by the State Party.

The delineation of the revised property boundary is described and mapped (although calculations of the area are provided in km² and differ slightly from previous documents for this reason). The State Party advises that the proposed revisions to the boundary have been drawn according to the extent of known archaeological remains, although ICOMOS considers that this is more evident in the documentation for the two necropolis areas than for the other two areas proposed to be added. The total area to be added to be property is 2.54 km², giving an overall size of 16.14 km².

A large area is proposed as a buffer zone that would entirely enclose the World Heritage property. The buffer zone is made up of five zones that total 168.0 km².

- 'Blue' zone (2.0 km²) is located immediately to the south of the inscribed property and separates the archaeological site from part of the oases and Al Mouh Sabkhat. It has been established to follow the southern property boundary at a width of 250 m.
- 'Green' zone (23.0 km²) is located to the south of the Blue Zone and contains a seasonal salt lake.
- 'White' zone (3.0 km²) is a narrow strip (250 m wide) to the north of the inscribed property. This is a 'transitional zone' located between the property boundary and the Yellow Zone. A residential area overlooking the archaeological site is located in this zone.
- 'Purple' zone (0.5 km²) is a small area located between the archaeological site and bounded on two edges by main roads. Most of this area is a plain with low to medium density residential development.
- 'Yellow' zone (139.4 km²) is a very large area located to the north, west and north-east of the World Heritage property. The boundaries of this zone are based on landscape and topographical considerations, and the zone includes mountain landforms, two Palmyran quarries, the Qanât-Umm al-Omi, and the historic town of Abu Al Fawares (which includes tombs, water supply elements and Qanâts). It is bounded by the highest peaks that overlook the World Heritage property.

The buffer zone does not incorporate an area of recent new development to the south-west, or the urbanised area to the north of the White Zone. ICOMOS suggests that the State Party develop planning and policy mechanisms to control the future developments in these areas.

The State Party considers that the proposed boundary modifications and buffer zone will enable:

- formal adoption of policies to protect the visual integrity of the property;

- protection of views and vistas from within the World Heritage site to the surrounding area, which was an important aspect of the Palmyra's design;
- consistent decision making by Planning Officers, and clarity for potential development proposals; and,
- planning consideration of a wider area and elements of the designed landscape.

The State Party has advised the conditions for the World Heritage property ('Red' zone or RZ) and the different zones that comprise the buffer zone, with approvals required from the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums. Briefly, these include:

- Prohibition of building, alteration and expansion of existing buildings within the property and buffer zone. Exceptions apply to buildings in the Purple Zone, and the White Zone. In these zones, there are restrictions that apply to the size, height and materials of new buildings.
- Constructions, reconstructions and restorations are permitted in the Oasis area for agricultural and environmental tourism facilities (specific restrictions and permissions are provided).
- Prohibited and permitted agricultural and industrial activities are identified within the property and buffer zone.
- Large-scale tourism facilities are prohibited within the property or the buffer zone, although some tourism facilities are permitted in the White Zone.
- Infrastructure development is prohibited in the property and the buffer zone, with the exception of some specified works in the Blue Zone.

In addition to these proposals, Annex 2 of the material submitted by the State Party details an intention to add two further areas to the south and south-west of the property (areas of 28.2 km² and 0.12 km²) to the Yellow Zone and/or to the World Heritage property itself. These contain a number of archaeological sites that are historically related to Palmyra (Al Bazouriya palaces, Khirbet Bakhra, Al Sukkariya palace and Khan al Hallabat). While these sites are clearly significant and deserving of protection, ICOMOS does not consider that a sufficient rationale on the grounds of the Outstanding Universal Value of Palmyra has been presented to justify incorporating these distant sites in the World Heritage property.

The proposed property boundary and buffer zone are protected by various municipal and national mechanisms. The 1962 Antiquities Act provides protection to designated sites. There is also a Ministerial decree that sets out the strategic policy for protecting World Heritage (but this has not yet been officially published). The decree will address the boundary of the Site of Palmyra, identify the features and limits of the ancient city, determine terms of reference for various land uses and investments, and ensure the protection of the archaeological areas and surrounding natural landscape.

The State Party advises that revisions to the Antiquities Law commenced in 2016 ('Law of Syrian Cultural Heritage').

The law is understood to be in its 'final steps', but has not yet been issued.

Legal protection of the buffer zone is currently provided by Ministerial Decision no. 380/A, dated 14 September 2003. A Sub-Regional Urban Development Plan for the City of Palmyra has been prepared by the Municipal Administration Modernization program funded by the European Union.

The Palmyra Municipality in coordination with the Directorate of Antiquities of Palmyra are responsible for the management of the property and its buffer zone.

The State Party considers that a management plan is needed for the Site of Palmyra. This is seen as a 'safety valve' for protecting the archaeological city and its natural setting in the context of increasing pressure from real estate development plans. The State Party has provided an outline of the objectives and contents of the Management Plan.

ICOMOS supports the need for a buffer zone for this site, and commends the State Party for its response to the 2016 decision of the World Heritage Committee. In particular, more detail has been provided about the attributes associated with the Outstanding Universal Value of Palmyra in the areas surrounding the current property boundary.

In relation to the proposed changes to the property boundary, ICOMOS considers that the inclusion of the two necropolis areas meets the past requests of the World Heritage Committee, and are supported. ICOMOS considers that the justification for including the museum area and the area to the west of the current property boundary have not been well-explained in relation to the values of the property; however, given the overall proposals for the property boundary and buffer zone, these can also be supported.

In relation to the buffer zone, ICOMOS considers that the multiple zones present a relatively complex approach, although the rationale for most of these is clear. ICOMOS considers that the large extent of the Yellow Zone (considerably larger than the area considered in 2016) has not been well-explained; and the provisions for constructions, infrastructure and other changes in the 'transition zones' will need further refinement.

For the most part, the reasons for the World Heritage Committee's decision to refer the proposed buffer zone back to the State Party have been addressed satisfactorily. Greater precision has been provided on the alignment of the proposed boundaries; and the attributes relevant to the Outstanding Universal Value located in the buffer zone have been identified.

While greater detail has been provided about the protection intended by each of the zones that comprise the buffer zone, ICOMOS notes that the Ministerial decree is not yet officially published; and that continued work is

needed on policies that apply to each of the zones, especially the 'transitional zones' with existing residential development, and in the areas that will be used for tourism purposes. While protection of the larger visual setting of the World Heritage property is commendable, ICOMOS considers that further work is needed on the prohibited and permitted uses and changes for all parts of the buffer zone to provide a workable long-term management and protection in these areas.

Finally, ICOMOS considers that the State Party has broadened the focus on the visual parameters of the proposed buffer zone to include some attributes that will be provided with greater protection.

3 ICOMOS Recommendations

Recommendation with respect to inscription

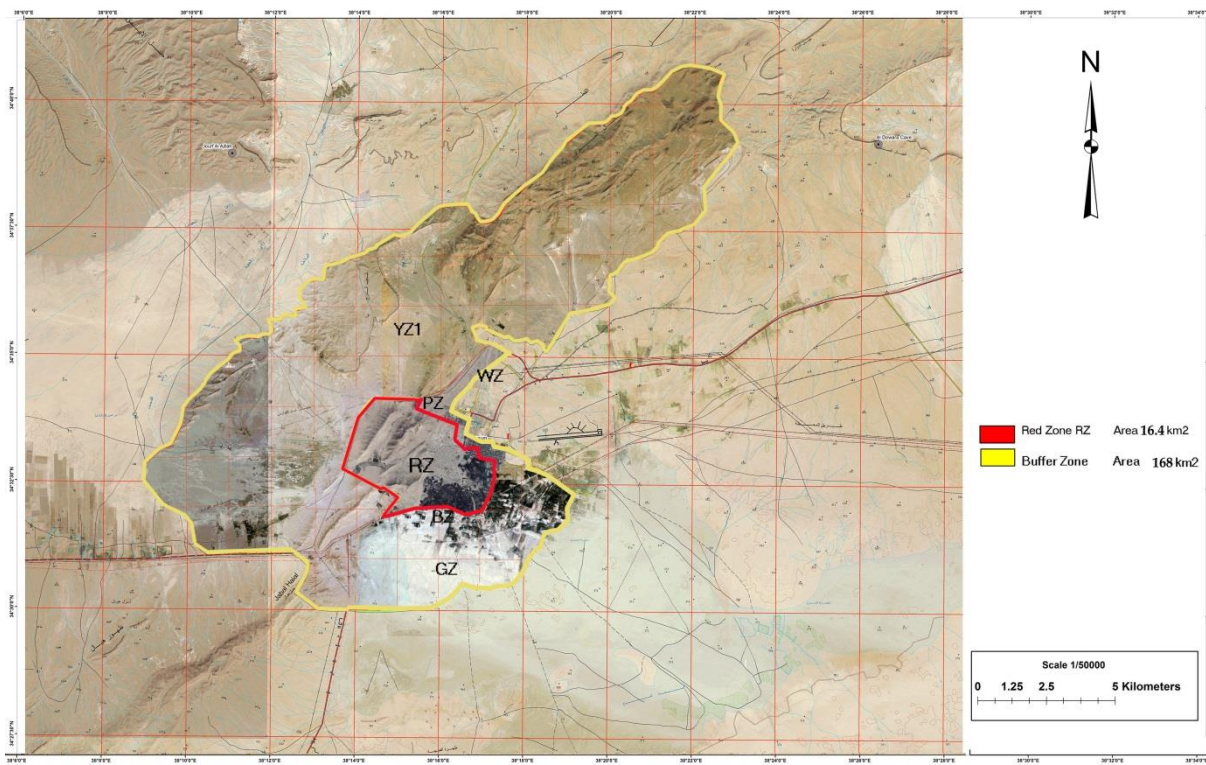
ICOMOS recommends that the proposed minor modification to the boundary of the Site of Palmyra, Syrian Arab Republic, with the exception of the archaeological sites mentioned in Annex 2, **be approved**.

ICOMOS recommends that the proposed buffer zone for the Site of Palmyra, Syrian Arab Republic, **be approved**.

Additional recommendations

To support the protection and management, ICOMOS recommends that the State Party take the following further actions pending the improvement in the situation of conflict that has affected this property:

- a) Further developing clear and workable objectives (including permitted and prohibited uses) for the various zones that comprise the buffer zone;
- b) Ensuring that the permitted and prohibited uses in the buffer zone clearly addresses the wide range of potential land uses that could impact on the archaeological materials, such as quarrying, energy infrastructure, water supply and drainage networks, and so on,
- c) Further developing planning and policy measures for the Ayn Fayad areas (south west of the property) and the Aamiryat urban area (north of the White Zone) to ensure that future developments do not pose intrusive pressures on the inscribed property,
- d) Developing the Management Plan for the entire property and its buffer zone,
- e) Finalising and implementing the Ministerial Decree that sets out the strategic policy for protecting World Heritage and the revised Antiquities Law as soon as possible,
- f) Continuing to improve the understanding and protection of the attributes associated with the World Heritage property located within the buffer zone and in the wider setting;



Map showing the revised boundaries of the property and its buffer zone