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How to Interpret ISIS’s Heritage Destruction

BENJAMIN ISAKHAN

Following its conquest of vast swaths of territory across Syria and Iraq beginning in 2013, the Sunni jihadist network known as the Islamic State (ISIS) began to impose its dark and austere vision. Holding to the strictest interpretations of sharia law, ISIS unleashed genocidal pogroms against minorities and mounted a sequence of geopolitical challenges to regional stability and global order. The group also commenced an unprecedented spree of mass heritage destruction: ancient archaeological sites were looted and blown up; religious sanctuaries were reduced to rubble; and state institutions such as libraries and museums were ransacked and desecrated. From the smallest relic of ancient Mesopotamia to the iconic landmarks of the modern state, ISIS was determined to destroy it all in its quest to create a new and monolithic state that would have zero tolerance for the region’s rich history and myriad worldviews.

Both the global media and the international community struggled to interpret and respond to destruction on such a scale. ISIS fighters were routinely portrayed as modern barbarians intent on wantonly effacing some of the world’s most precious relics. However, my colleagues and I have argued that the acts of heritage destruction committed by ISIS were far from random outbursts of barbarity and ignorance. Instead, these acts were not only very deliberate and carefully staged, but also had clear purposes which themselves reveal a great deal about the deadly ideology that drives ISIS.

An inquiry into those purposes can be framed with two interconnected questions. First, why would ISIS dedicate resources—human, financial, and military—to the active targeting of heritage

sites at a time when the group was deeply embroiled in the complexities of capturing and securing territory, imposing a new theocratic state, and fighting concurrent, asymmetric battles on several fronts? Second, why would ISIS dedicate further resources to methodically documenting this destruction on video and in photographs, and disseminating them to audiences around the world via digital media? I suggest answers along several key axes, but they are not intended to be an exhaustive or comprehensive list, nor should they be understood as mutually exclusive categories.

Despite the fact that ISIS has since lost most of its territory across Syria and Iraq, the answers to these questions remain relevant today. ISIS retains the capacity to wage sporadic attacks not only on heritage sites in both Syria and Iraq, but also across the territories they control farther afield. Various groups affiliated with ISIS have conducted recent iconoclastic attacks in Libya, Egypt, and the Philippines. ISIS has become the inspiration for global jihadist movements and it is likely that new movements will emerge and emulate its model, including attacks on heritage sites.

PRE-MONOTHEISTIC ICONOCLASM

Perhaps the most obvious and well-known way to interpret much of the heritage destruction perpetrated by ISIS is through the lens of religious iconoclasm. This explains why ISIS targeted the material remnants of polytheistic cultures and religions that inhabited the territories of modern Syria and Iraq before the advent of Islam, such as those of ancient Mesopotamia and the Greco-Roman world. This kind of animus is not unique to Islamist movements. Under strict interpretations of all three Abrahamic faiths, sites and artifacts from pre-monotheistic antiquity are considered heretical and blasphemous, and therefore ought to be destroyed.

Europe witnessed major waves of religious iconoclasm under Christianity, including during the

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Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and particularly where strict sects such as Calvinism were dominant. In Islam, this type of violent religious iconoclasm has been a central principle of the various staunchly puritanical reformist movements that have emerged across the Middle East since the eighteenth century. Perhaps the best-known recent example was the Taliban's destruction of two giant 1,700-year-old Buddha statues in central Afghanistan's Bamiyan valley in 2001.

In the videos and publications released by ISIS, spokesmen frequently celebrate heritage destruction and point to the religious iconoclasm that drives such attacks. Perhaps the best example can be found in a February 2015 video documenting the destruction at the archaeological museum in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul and at the nearby site of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh, which dates back to the ninth century BCE. Inside the Mosul Museum, several bearded members of ISIS are seen knocking several statues from their plinths before smashing them to pieces with sledgehammers.

Later, the video cuts to Nineveh where another militant, dressed head to toe in black, uses power tools to grind the face off a statue at the Nergal Gate, a key entrance to the ancient city. The gate is an iconic edifice of the Assyrian Empire, adorned with a colossal figure of a lamassu—a deity with a human head, the body of a bull, and bird wings. At one point, the militant pauses to justify the destruction:

Oh Muslims, the remains that you see behind me are the idols of peoples of previous centuries, which were worshipped instead of Allah. The Assyrians, Akkadians, and others took for themselves gods of rain, of agriculture, and of war, and worshipped them along with Allah, and tried to appease them with all kinds of sacrifices . . . Since Allah commanded us to shatter and destroy these statues, idols, and remains, it is easy for us to obey, and we do not care [what people think], even if they are worth billions of dollars.

SYMBOLIC SECTARIANISM

The iconoclastic agenda of ISIS extended well beyond the destruction of pre-monotheistic sites. The group also went to great lengths to destroy scores of sites of religious significance to various sects within Islam whose beliefs contradict its ex-

tremist doctrine. This is especially true of heritage sites, including mosques and shrines, revered by the Shia people of Syria and Iraq.

For groups such as ISIS, Shiism represents an unacceptable deviation from Sunni orthodoxy and is therefore considered heretical. In the Shia tradition the graves and tombs of major historical and religious figures are venerated. Shia shrines and mosques are considered objects of *shirk* (idolatry) by ISIS and its ilk because they allegedly obscure the oneness of God and encourage the worship of idols.

One prominent example is the gold-domed Sayyida Zaynab mosque and shrine in southern Damascus, which has come under repeated attack by various Sunni militant organizations (including earlier iterations and allies of ISIS) since at least as far back as October 2012. More recently, the shrine was targeted in sophisticated ISIS operations in both January and February 2016, the second of which took 120 lives. Shia Muslims believe the shrine houses the remains of an extremely significant female figure, Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

As such, the shrine is one of the most important Shia sites in Syria and draws pilgrims from across the region.

The repeated attacks on Shia heritage sites also have important but frequently overlooked political dimensions. Several Shia sites that have been attacked by ISIS, including the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, are relatively new structures that were built atop medieval Islamic tombs in the 1980s by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad with support from Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. The attacks on such sites are therefore not only an attack on the Shia veneration of shrines. They are also highly symbolic attacks on the Alawite Assad regime—led since Hafez's death in 2000 by his son Bashar—and its links to the regional powerhouse that is Iran's Shia theocracy. Indeed, the 2016 attacks on the Sayyida Zaynab shrine triggered a sudden influx of Iran-backed Shia militias, especially from Iraq, that have fought alongside the Assad regime and dramatically escalated the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict.

ERASING MINORITIES

In addition to its symbolic attacks on Shia holy sites, ISIS has also frequently targeted the religious sites of several vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities in Syria and Iraq. Starting in 2014 ISIS

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committed genocidal atrocities against groups like the Yezidis and Christians, subjecting them to mass executions, torture, and sexual slavery. Their suffering has been compounded by a sustained campaign by ISIS to erase the tangible manifestations of their heritage, which has resulted in the destruction of many of their most sacred sites.

In 2014, for example, ISIS obliterated all 17 of the Yezidi temples and shrines in the villages of Bashiqa and Bahzani in northern Iraq. Among them were shrines dedicated to important religious and historical figures, including the fourteenth-century shrines of Sheikh Bakir and Sheikh Babik, as well as the “Three Domes” monument, which housed the shrines of Sheikh Muhammad, Sitt Habibi, and Sitt Hecici. It also included the Pir Bub shrine, which was heavily damaged, and the Malak Miran shrine, which was blown to rubble by ISIS. According to Yezidi beliefs, Malak Miran is the angel who saved the Biblical prophet Abraham from King Nimrod’s furnace. The Yezidi hold an annual festival in September to commemorate Miran’s rescue of Abraham.

Photos in reports produced by the American Schools of Oriental Research make clear the scale of the destruction wrought by ISIS in Bashiqa and Bahzani. In one, a Yezidi man stands on a pile of rubble that was once the shrine of Sheikh Babik. Other images show blackened walls, collapsed facades, graffiti, looted halls, twisted debris, desecrated icons, smashed graves, and destroyed statues.

Christian heritage sites also have suffered heavy damage. ISIS fighters have destroyed hundreds of statues, defaced murals, desecrated cemeteries, taken sledgehammers to church facades, blown up ancient monasteries, and removed crosses from churches and replaced them with the black flag of ISIS before converting them to mosques or for other purposes.

One prominent example of this occurred in the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zour, where ISIS destroyed the Armenian Holy Martyrs Church in September 2014. Also known as the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church, it housed one of the world’s largest and most significant archives on the 1915 Armenian genocide. Thousands of Armenians traditionally gather at the church each year on April 25, the date denoted as the start of the genocide, which resulted in the deaths of as many as 1.5 million Ar-

menians. ISIS members filled the church with explosives and reduced most of it to rubble. Many of the materials in the church archives, including thousands of documents on the genocide and other items dating back to 1841, were turned to ash. The bones of hundreds of victims, packed into the church’s crypt in memory of the mass killings, were thrown into the street beside the ruins.

POLITICAL ICONOCLASM

Another frequently overlooked way to interpret the heritage destruction undertaken by ISIS is through an examination of their attacks on symbols of the state in Syria and Iraq. The inaugural issue of *Dabiq*, an online magazine published by ISIS from 2014 to 2016, features a transcript of a June 2014 speech delivered by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the Grand Mosque of Mosul in which he first announced the formation of the new caliphate. The self-proclaimed caliph warns: “The Muslims today . . . have a statement to make that will cause the world to hear and understand the mean-

ing of terrorism, and boots that will trample the idol of nationalism . . . and uncover its deviant nature.”

Here, the principle of iconoclasm is extended beyond the monuments of ancient civilizations, supposedly deviant Islamic sects, or persecuted minorities, to the “idol of nationalism”—the vast state-produced iconography of modern Syria and Iraq. The Baath Party regimes in both countries undertook exhaustive nation-building programs in which they used and abused the region’s rich heritage to build a collective national identity under authoritarian rule. A key aspect of this was the development of cults of personality. Like the kings of ancient Mesopotamia, dictators such as Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad sought to enshrine their rule through the production of a complex symbolic landscape in which the ruler’s image became synonymous with the state.

In Syria, ISIS destroyed countless statues, portraits, and murals depicting the Assad regime. In Iraq, there were similar acts of political iconoclasm: members of ISIS tore down Iraqi flags and destroyed images of revered historical and religious figures as well as those of contemporary Iraqi politicians.

ISIS has frequently used suicide bombers, car bombs, and other tactics to target symbols of the

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state including courthouses, schools, hospitals, political offices, police stations, and other government buildings. While such attacks are largely driven by broader strategic goals, many of the targeted buildings were significant national heritage sites, some dating back centuries.

This type of political iconoclasm is part of a broader narrative that featured prominently in *Dabiq*. Images of destruction were frequently juxtaposed against the construction of the new Islamic state governed by extreme interpretations of sharia law. In order for the creation of the caliphate to succeed, the first step was to purify the lands with a purge of any remnants of the Syrian and Iraqi states. At the same time that ISIS actively replaced existing state structures with its own institutions and infrastructure, the group also replaced symbols of the state with its black flag and other jihadist iconography.

LOOTING FOR REVENUE

The need for money was another key factor behind ISIS attacks on heritage sites. Across the territories it controlled, the group looted a number of important sites and trafficked valuables including precious antiquities, which were sold on the international black market. Museums, historic buildings, religious sites, art galleries, libraries, archives, universities, and other cultural institutions were ransacked. Perhaps most tragic was the systematic looting of several ancient archaeological sites. According to UNESCO, this pillaging occurred “on an industrial scale.”

One example is the Greco-Roman city of Dura Europos on the Euphrates River in eastern Syria. Dating back to the third century BCE, Dura Europos demonstrates in microcosm the rich diversity of the Middle East. It is home not only to several temples devoted to various polytheistic deities but also to the remains of some of the world's oldest Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. The destruction done by looters at Dura Europos was devastating. One report by the American Association for the Advancement of Science estimated that at least 38 hectares (roughly 75 percent) of the site was completely destroyed. Today, it resembles a lunar landscape pockmarked with thousands of looters' pits.

Although the exact profits made by ISIS from such looting operations are difficult to determine, one report by the US State Department estimated that ISIS took in at least \$1.25 million from the sale of items looted from just one archaeological site—

and that in the twelve months following its mid-2014 conquests, ISIS had “probably earned several million dollars from antiquities sales.” The funds generated from the looting of antiquities across Iraq and Syria were used by ISIS to finance its state, buy weapons and other equipment, carry out mass attacks on local communities, and strengthen its operational capacity to organize terrorist attacks across the world. Although recent crackdowns on the international black market have stanching the flow of antiquities to some extent, a shadowy trade network continues to fund various militant factions in both Syria and Iraq and is a significant problem across the Middle East.

PROPAGANDA FODDER

Watching the videos that ISIS released to document its attacks on key heritage sites across Syria and Iraq, one is immediately struck not just by the horrors of the destruction itself but also by the quality of the video production. From its inception, ISIS developed and sustained an enormous and highly sophisticated propaganda machine—replete with glossy magazines, Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, and slick YouTube videos—to disseminate its vision around the world. The many videos documenting the destruction at various heritage sites are among the most successful items of propaganda released by ISIS, judging from the views they have racked up and the virulent reactions they have elicited.

However, as with all propaganda, there is a distinct blurring of fact and fiction in these materials. A video released in November 2015 that purports to show ISIS destroying a monument at the UNESCO-designated World Heritage site of Palmyra is a case in point. The Syrian Desert city is home to a rare collection of majestic ruins that are a testament to its role as an important trading hub dating back to the first century CE. ISIS did a great deal of damage at Palmyra, most notably by blowing up the 2,000-year-old temples dedicated to two pagan gods, Baalshamin and Bel. But this video, purportedly showing the destruction of another of Palmyra's most famous ruins—the Tetrastylon, a Roman structure from the first century CE—turned out to be a fake.

The video has all the drama of a trailer for a Hollywood blockbuster, complete with voice-overs, suspenseful music, and captions to emphasize key points in the narrative. In one scene, an ISIS fighter dressed in military fatigues and holding a machine gun stands in a menacing pose and

stares into the camera. Beside him is the black flag of ISIS and behind him dark clouds roll over the Tetracylon. Suddenly, the site is reduced to rubble as a voice intones that ISIS has “demolished the *shirk* symbols of Palmyra.”

It is a powerful piece of propaganda designed to demonstrate the group’s capacity to destroy even the most important relics of the ancient world. The only problem is, ISIS did not destroy the Tetracylon until January 2017, more than 12 months after the video was released. The simulation of events and spreading of disinformation have long been the hallmarks of agitprop. They were further enhanced in this case due to the difficulty of safely gaining access to the site to verify the claims made by ISIS.

Such sophisticated propaganda is aimed at diverse audiences. One key audience is the host of young men and women who are susceptible to the recruitment drives of ISIS. Throughout its propaganda, ISIS repeatedly and explicitly calls on potential recruits to take up arms and fight its enemies. The propaganda videos that document heritage destruction serve as a powerful means of communicating the group’s mission and recruiting followers to the cause.

The appeal of a global jihadist network that would have the audacity not only to obliterate existing state borders and declare a new caliphate but also to boldly destroy what others consider sacred should not be underestimated. The number of foreign nationals who migrated from all corners of the globe to Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS was in the tens of thousands. Many were marginalized Muslims living in the West who joined as much for the camaraderie that they had struggled to find in their home communities as for religious reasons. Many of the recruits who served as the foot soldiers of the caliphate participated in heritage destruction. Participating in the destruction of ancient archaeological treasures served as a powerful initiation ritual for new members, binding them to their new jihadist community.

Many of the videos produced by ISIS appear to document highly ritualized events. This is just as true for those featuring horrific violence against people, such as the beheading of captives, as it is for those featuring iconoclastic attacks. In both, the men dress in very specific attire—full-body

black or white robes—and they sport the thick beards of traditional jihadists. Many are seen chanting passages from the Quran and invoking the actions of earlier Islamists. The men submit to a prominent leader who guides them through the ritual, often delivering a pithy sermon articulating the theological basis for their brutal actions.

The videos culminate in highly symbolic acts of group violence: in the iconoclastic videos, the men decapitate statues, detonate explosives rigged across archaeological sites, fire rockets at Shia shrines, or smash icons in a Christian church. Such ritualized violence against the monuments and icons of the past transforms the group from a collection of disparate individuals into a militant and iconoclastic community—a single entity mobilized to undertake campaigns of destruction against peoples and places in the name of the new caliphate.

REJECTING THE WEST

A final aspect of the targeting of heritage sites may be interpreted as a proxy for ISIS’s broader rejection of the “West.” Many of the group’s videos depicting its attacks on such sites across Syria and Iraq are in English (or have English subtitles) and are expressly

designed not for locals but for instant reproduction and dissemination by the global media. They are also specifically designed to shock, outrage, and intimidate Western audiences with apparently wanton destruction and callous disregard for ancient civilizations or religious iconography.

As well as retribution for the perceived sins of polytheism and idolatry, much of the destruction can be understood as an attack on the secular liberal values that are enshrined in institutions such as museums or multilateral bodies like UNESCO. In March 2015, UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova issued a statement denouncing ISIS’s destruction of heritage sites as a “war crime.”

Knowing that UNESCO was powerless to stop it, ISIS in the following month showed its disdain for such rhetoric in a propaganda video that documents the destruction it inflicted on the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hatra in Iraq. It shows ISIS militants using assault rifles and pickaxes to destroy priceless reliefs engraved on the walls of the ancient city, once an important trading hub that reached its peak during the second and third cen-

Iconoclasm extended beyond the monuments of ancient civilizations to the “idol of nationalism.”

turies CE. The video also features a bold riposte to Bokova:

Some of the infidel organizations say the destruction of these alleged artifacts is a war crime. We will destroy your artifacts and idols anywhere and Islamic State will rule your lands.

AFTER ICONOCLASM

The iconoclastic campaign of ISIS across Syria and Iraq has been devastating, targeting and erasing some of the world's most precious cultural heritage. It also bears close attention because it serves as a unique window into the ideology that drives this group. Far from being senseless acts perpetrated by barbarous savages, the heritage destruction has been carefully staged and sends clear and deliberate messages. Interpreting these messages remains of paramount importance as ISIS continues to attack heritage sites and inspire similarly iconoclastic movements across the world.

ISIS dedicated significant resources to the destruction of heritage sites for an array of reasons: its pre-monotheistic iconoclasm focused on destroying the supposedly blasphemous relics of religions that existed before Islam; its symbolic sectarianism targeted major Shia sites; its desire to erase minorities resulted not only in genocide against small ethnic and religious groups, but also in the destruction of the sites they hold most sacred; and its political iconoclasm led ISIS to tear down the symbols of the modern Syrian and Iraqi states before replacing them with an entire catalogue of jihadist iconography. Other motives for dedicating resources to destroying heritage sites across Syria and Iraq were more pragmatic, such as looting ancient archaeological sites for the purpose of raising revenue.

ISIS recorded and then disseminated its images of heritage destruction to local and global audi-

ences as part of its broader propaganda machine, which served to recruit and indoctrinate young men and women for the cause. These acts of destruction were used to bind them to their new jihadist fraternity through ritualized forms of violence. ISIS propaganda also used heritage destruction as a key part of a broader project to reject the "West" and its ideology of secular liberalism.

Interpreting the destruction of cultural heritage perpetrated by ISIS in these different ways helps us understand the complex ideologies and motives that drove the "caliphate" to carry out such shocking actions. It also sheds new light on the ways in which heritage sites are exploited by different political actors—a recurring phenomenon in history, particularly in the context of conflict, transition, and political instability.

The destruction wrought by ISIS raises further questions that need urgent attention. How does a society recover from such active targeting of its collective memory? To what extent does such destruction damage social cohesion and deepen divisions? What are the prospects for reconstruction and, more importantly, who decides what should be rebuilt, by whom, and for what purpose? Finally, how can we be certain that heritage reconstruction plays a role in peace-building rather than exacerbating existing tensions and contributing to renewed waves of conflict and destruction?

It is these questions that now confront Syria and Iraq, and answering them will not be easy. After the cataclysmic suffering inflicted by ISIS, there is an urgent need for a bold engagement with the past to help move toward some type of enduring peace. Heritage can and should play a role in this process, but it is all too often used and abused by autocrats and militants to further their own narrow agendas. ■